The Limits of Wisdom and the Dialectic of Desire

David C. Knauert
Department of Religion
Duke University

Date: ____________________

Approved by:

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James L. Crenshaw, Supervisor

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Ellen F. Davis

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Daniel M. Patte

____________________________
Kenneth J. Surin

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religion in the Graduate School of Duke University.

2009
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ABSTRACT

It is fair to identify the motive of this dissertation with the paradoxical formulation of Gerhard von Rad, to the effect that the essence of biblical Wisdom is disclosed where the sages articulate this wisdom as inherently limited. This coincidence of opposites has been widely embraced by commentators and read as evidence for the sages’ encounter with an infinite divine transcendence, to which they responded in humility, and by which their epistemological certitudes were rebuked. Proceeding from these assumptions, the interpretation of Proverbs has widely concerned itself with two nodal points: (1) the fear-of Yhwh as the central concept in Proverbs’ articulation wisdom as a finite human operation, conducted in the presence of an infinite divine; and (2) the figuration of this sublime experience in the iconic form of Woman-Wisdom.

The hypothesis of von Rad lends itself to another trajectory that prioritizes immanence over transcendence. On this reading, the limit of Wisdom lies not between its mere appearance for us (i.e. finite human subjects) and its essential being in itself (corresponding to a noumenal, divine beyond) but rather runs through the field of appearance, which cannot be rendered coherent by the sages’ discursive intervention. This non-symbolizable yet immanent check on the sages’ wisdom is analyzed in terms of Lacan’s Real, a kernel of being (in psychoanalytic terms, jouissance) entirely beyond the signified that nevertheless arises out of the operations of signification. If discourse is thus intrinsically self-defeating, the status of transcendence should re-evaluated with respect to “limit.” Transcendence is not the site that disturbs the Symbolic field, but rather the aporetic conditions of linguistic meaning rely on an externalizing process—what I have called a “poetics of making transcendent”—for a given discourse to maintain its own coherence, i.e. as that which would be coherent if not for the contingent, impossible object.

The fear-of Yhwh and Woman-Wisdom, whose importance no one disputes, are re-read from this perspective: the former according to Lacan’s concept of the Master-Signifier, the latter according to object (a), the object cause of desire.
For
Walter Brueggemann
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## I Proverbs and the Limits of Wisdom

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that scholars so well regarded would exert upon their students a not insignificant pressure to “fall into line.” Never was I burdened with this by a mentor possessed of profound humility and seemingly endless intellectual curiosity.

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\[ \text{gratitude}_{\text{son \rightarrow mother}}. \]

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Davis Hankins fits neatly in none of the categories above—or rather he fits equally in all of them. Each and every sentence of what follows reflects a partnership that has exceeded my most Utopian fantasies about intellectual collaboration. Davis, I will spare you such pieties as how I couldn't possibly repay your commitment to this project and to me. On the contrary, I look forward to paying back the uttermost farthing
CHAPTER 1

The poetics of making-transcendent

About the cockroach, Yehoahim has the following thoughts:

a) "Here's the cockroach."

b) There is a God on high.

c) Mercy. That is, the mercy God extends to his creatures.

d) Distance. That is, what stands between him and the cockroach forever.

e) The cockroach's nothingness. That is, the cockroach seen in the light of truth.

f) His own nothingness, from within which the cockroach reemerges as in "a) 'Here's the cockroach'."

Yoel Hoffmann

1 LIMIT-ESSENCE

That great importance has been and should be attached to the notion of Wisdom's limit, by the ancient sages but also by modern scholars, has been put most forcefully by Gerhard von Rad, who devoted an entire chapter to the subject in his seminal monograph, Wisdom in Israel.\footnote{Gerhard von Rad, Wisdom in Israel. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1972,} The chapter begins with von Rad's assertion the essence of wisdom must be perceived negatively, through its limit:
1. The poetics of making-transcendent

Our attempt to gain a minimal perspective on the essence (das Wesentliche) of what was constitutive for the thinking of the sages can be expanded further along a particular direction. Already in the course of previous considerations and in the texts brought into play there have been numerous occasions to ponder the determinate limits (gewisse Grenzen), which the sages' quest for knowledge, their instructions for the mastery of life and good conduct, came across. It is advisable to tarry further on this particular point, for it seems the entire instructional enterprise can scarcely be better grasped from any other perspective than from the sentences wherein the sages speak of the limit by which their wisdom is checked (an die . . . ist gestoßen). Indeed, Wisdom becomes communicative (gesprächig), in a curious and interesting way, precisely in such limit-situations.2

In my view, the renown of von Rad's wisdom book is largely attributable to his articulation and expansion of this idea.3 One should say, too, that the paradoxical identity of limit and essence does not lie hidden deep within the text, only to be uncovered, as it were, by eyes as exegetically sensitive as von Rad's. It is rather that the function of contradiction lies at the very center of Proverbs' pedagogical technique.4 A cursory reading of Proverbs reveals many variations of the theme: The person who is truly wise recognizes, attends to, even preserves a sense of their own foolishness:

chap. 6, Limits of Wisdom.


3It is telling that even the sharpest critics of Wisdom in Israel underscore the importance of von Rad's conclusions regarding Israelite wisdom and the limits of human knowledge. James Crenshaw, in whose detailed review several fundamental points of disagreement are registered, concludes nonetheless that Wisdom in Israel is a "masterpiece in two ways." He explains, "First, it represents [von Rad's] mature insights into the nature of knowledge, and second, he points to the ultimate mystery that shrouds every attempt to grasp the knowable" JAMES CRENSHAW, "Wisdom in Israel (Gerhard von Rad): A Review". In Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995, 309. We will have occasion to remark upon similarities and differences between von Rad's notion of limit and Crenshaw's of "skepticism."

Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
fear יהוה, and turn away from evil.

(3:7)

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes?  
There is more hope for a fool than for him.

(26:12)

The rich man is wise in his own eyes,  
but the poor who has understanding sees through him.

(28:12)

And indeed it is to von Rad's credit that he has rescued these proverbs and others following this logic from familiarity and the predictable dulling of perception that arises therefrom.

Our attention, at least initially, lies not with these koan-like aphorisms but with another dramatization of limit and essence, which we come across in Woman-Wisdom's notorious first speech (1:20-33), the notoriety arising from her palpable malice—or, more precisely, from the perceived split between our usual notion of Woman-Wisdom (the mytho-poetic idealization of Wisdom's essence, i.e. pure Wisdom) and her sadistic imagining of future calamities in store for the קָנָּה or "naive-ones."

This incongruity lies behind a series of exegetical impasses with which commentaries on 1:20-33 have been preoccupied for now more than 100 years, which in turn index larger questions of how to conceptualize and then operationalize ideas of limit and essence. Thus the first part of this dissertation has the following tasks:

1. to survey the prevailing descriptions of limit and essence as they have been understood in relation to the wisdom tradition as a whole;

---

5Van Leuwen (1997, 41) expresses the reader's outrage in pithy fashion: "The laughter of Wisdom is shocking." Murphy (1998, 19) characterizes Woman-Wisdom's speech as an "especially chilling kind of Schadenfreude." Walter (2004, 201) is more understated: "With passion, not with academic dispassion, she cries aloud."

1. The poetics of making-transcendent

2. to demonstrate, apropos of Prov 1:20-33, the inherent relationship between, on one hand, the prevailing conceptions of limit and essence and, on the other, a series of insoluble or "false" exegetical problems;

3. to undertake an analysis of these problems—the abrupt poetic shifts, the relation of the speaking subject of Prov 1:22-33 to Wisdom's essence, the question of who Woman-Wisdom addresses and, subsequently, what response does she desire—in light of a different conception of limit-essence.

The last point requires further elaboration and relates to the thesis of the dissertation as a whole. In the service of what end and in terms of which theoretical code shall we carry out this re-writing project?

2 To what end?

It is to recover a wisdom ethic and indeed a wisdom theology that rests sufficiently and exclusively on a plane of immanence. This is not to say that the sages were tout court thinkers of immanence, an argument that is patently unsustainable; it is to say, recalling von Rad's wording, that the limit "by which [the sages'] wisdom is checked," arises from and belongs to their speech and can be found nowhere else. Where the sages posit YHWH as an exceptional point beyond the capacity of human wisdom—this is not the encounter with a human limit but rather an example of this limit being exceeded in the sages' (mis)perception of the antimonies of their own thought as an inaccessible objective beyond.⁷

⁷The exemplary critique along these lines is Hegel's of Kant, in particular Kant’s conception of the Ding-an-sich as the altogether unknowable ground of human experience. As he puts it in the *Encyclopædia Logic*, "It is the supreme inconsistency to admit, on the one hand, that the understanding is cognizant only of appearances, and to assert, on the other, that this cognition is something absolute—by saying: cognition cannot go any further, this is the natural, absolute restriction of human knowing. Natural things are restricted, and they are just natural things inasmuch as they know nothing of their universal restriction, inasmuch as their determinacy is a restriction only for us, not for them. Something is only known, or even felt, to be a restriction, or a defect, if one is at the same time beyond it" (HEGEL, 1991, §60). Hegel's counterproposal, which is of immediate relevance to our argument, is not to claim that therefore the noumenal beyond is somehow accessible to rational inquiry but rather that its inaccessibility reflects an immanent, ontological inconsistency rather than the epistemological limit faced by human beings in the face of transcendence. Substance is always already split with respect to itself, inadequate to its own
We can clarify this crucial distinction with reference to two exemplary versions of sapiential modesty.

- Prov 27:1 and the failure of lack:

  Boast not in tomorrow
  for you know not what a day brings forth.

Here uncertainty arises as a function of time. The sage approaches the order of truth not knowing all of the elements in its set, which come to him as an inexhaustible diachronic series. This is not simply to say that the future is unknowable. It is a much stricter warning that the present is not fully knowable, because its meaning is determined partially by events in the future. Only at the end (ḥrgy) or in the sudden eruption of certainty (ḥtmw, ḫt) will the meaning of each action, each decision be determined. The limit of Wisdom is here understood as a lack in the (immanent) field of historical phenomena that is experienced as an impediment to intelligibility.

- Prov 16:9 and the failure of excess:

  The mind plans one’s way
  but YHWH directs its steps.

Disturbed knowledge in this scenario is not a lack but rather an exceptional element outside the set. Should the entirety of historical phenomena and the precise magnitude of their relationships all be known, still one cannot know in an absolute sense. Some non-phenomenal X—outside, transcendent to, the compass of human understanding—introduces a minimal degree of doubt.

---

**Notion.** And the Hegelian name for this inherent self-alienation of substance is, famously, “subject.”

The idea that the uncertainty of the future poses an intrinsic limit to wisdom thinking is a commonplace in wisdom scholarship, the poem from Qoh 3:1-8 being a classic reference point for such a notion. That this is not a feature particular to YHWH religion has been refuted by Frei and others. Collins (1980, 13), noting how time is thematized in both Mesopotamian and Egyptian wisdom literature concludes, “The variability of the times and uncertainty of the future imposes an inescapable limit on any wisdom based on experience, irrespective of its contact with Yahwism.”

8 Though with honey the lips of the Strange Woman drip, and smoother than oil is her mouth, her end (ḥšʾ rīḥn) is bitter like wormwood; sharp like a sword is her mouth” (Prov 5:4).

9 Of the fool, “Therefore suddenly (pšm) will his calamity come; suddenly (ptw) he will be shattered and there is no healing” (Prov 6:14).
1. The poetics of making-transcendent

What is the relation of each of these verses to von Rad's *Anstoß*—the check against which the sages' knowledge repeatedly runs aground? In the first sentence only do the sages tarry with the limit of their wisdom. In the second, they have gone beyond this limit just as Kant goes beyond the strictures of his own critical philosophy in asserting the *absolute* unknowability of the noumenal *Ding-an-sich*. We might say that the excess of 16:9 comes to fill-out a prior lack, whose account is given in 27:1.

In Proverbs (but not necessarily in Job and Qoheleth11) failures of the first type were characteristically displaced onto the field of transcendence, the lack in knowledge "filled-out" with a positive, exceptional term. But this already demands a description of Proverbs in terms of a temporal process, the filling out of an *ontologically prior void* by the subsequent positing of an *exceptional positive term*. For this reason, my argument weighs against the hermeneutic centrality of transcendence,12 a preoccupation that dulls our perception not only to the void that subsists on the plane of immanence but to Proverbs' poetic manœuvre of *making-transcendent*.

3 The Lacanian Real

To set out to recover an "immanent theology," evidently, is to run afoot of deeply ingrained habits of thought and consequently poses problems of representation.13

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11 In the concluding section of this study I will try to make some inferences from what is discovered about Proverbs to the canonical wisdom tradition as a whole, ¶ 103 on page 346.

12 Collins (1980, 10), who cites von Rad as his inspiration in this regard, epitomizes the hermeneutics of transcendence. "The limited and relative character of all human knowledge is in fact clearly acknowledged in the proverbs themselves ... Von Rad, especially, has noted that mention of God frequently occurs in connection with human limitation. Prov 21:30-31 may serve as an example: 'There is no wisdom, no understanding, no counsel against Yahweh. The horse is made ready for the day of battle but the victory belongs to Yahweh.' Or, in Prov 16:1: 'The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue comes from Yahweh' ... Von Rad rightly points out that these sayings do not 'simply stand as exceptions on the perimeter' (99). They point to limits which can be encountered at any time in life and that are intrinsic to the human condition." And it takes no particular effort to find many variants of this single figure: human versus Divine, appearance versus Essence, phenomena versus Noumena, particular versus Universal, and so on.

13 For a broader orientation to the question of immanence versus transcendence in theological discourse see Schwartz, Regina, editor, *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology*.
Apropos of Proverbs, the repeatedly staged chasm between human and divine spheres would seem *de facto* to demand an interpretative analytic of transcendence. One must begin with what is clear: *transcendence is produced*. Therefore, the demonstration of an immanent sapiential ethic, if it is not simply bunk, must be mediated by the sages’ (not altogether successful) indirection. We are giving an account of the emergence of transcendence—a chastened, “barred” transcendence whose truth is the contradictory field of the sages’ experience rather than an inaccessible domain transcendent to it. It is the appearance of this particular philosophical paradox that justifies the Lacanian coordinates of our argument, Lacan’s conceptualization of the Real straddling the philosophical concepts of immanence and transcendence by dint of a highly constructed ambiguity.

On a first reading, the designation Real, which we will gradually understand in relation to the Symbolic and Imaginary registers of experience, would seem to suggest the very quintessence of transcendence. However, for numerous, often, and well-rehearsed reasons no reader of Lacan can be satisfied with such a simplification, though the characteristics rendering the Real susceptible to such a description cannot be over-leaped.

Chief among these is Lacan’s elaboration of the Real in terms of *das Ding*, which refers to the Freudian Thing to be sure, but whose Kantian overtones are explicit and should not be overlooked. That is, the Freudian maternal Thing (the


14 A supervening exposition of Lacan’s Imaginary-Symbolic-Real scheme is not strictly necessary to understand the main points of this thesis, though, unavoidably the terms will come up. Rather than a long theoretical excursus, I will present the three domains “inductively” in the course of exegesis. I direct the interested reader to Lacan’s early *Ecrits*, The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis and The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience; and further the helpful discussion in FREDERIC JAMESON, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan”. In The Ideologies of Theory Essays 1971-1986, Volume 1: Situations of Theory Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.


16 Famous moments of critique notwithstanding (see especially Kant with Sade and Seminar VII, 188ff), Lacan marks his philosophical debt to Kant frequently, so that while Lacan’s thought goes beyond Kant’s, it is a beyond that seeks to further explicate the Kantian philosophical problematic.
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fundamental object in which the child’s love is cathected and from which it is sub-
sequently banished by the Father’s prohibition) represents the same radical alterity,
the same inhospitableness to representation as the Kantian Ding-an-sich. Moreover, Freud seems to lead us to the same understanding of the Real as prior-to the
Symbolic in so far as his ontogenetic account posits a stage before the onset of the
Oedipus problematic and the threat of castration: “...an infant’s body before it is
subjected to toilet training and instructed in the ways of the world...[before it is]
progressively written or overwritten with signifiers...[before] pleasure is localized in
certain zones, while other zones are neutralized by the word and coaxed into com-
pliance with social, behavioral norms.”

Furthermore, the period of unity Freud presupposes to exist between mother and child parallels Kant’s limit-idea of an intel-
lectual intuition—

objective knowledge unfettered by the subjective mediation of
categories or language. And finally, the analogy can be extended to the accounts of
two “falls”:
both the object of perfect love and the object of perfect knowledge are
irretrievably alienated from the subject as the price of entry into society. To put it
somewhat provocatively, we could say that ontology in Kant’s system holds a struc-
turally analogous place to incest in Freud’s. This is the transcendent, “Kantian”
image of the Real that we must now complicate.

For the Lacanian Real, as far as its philosophical antecedents, belongs less to the
figure of Kant than to the sequence Kant—Fichte-Schelling-Hegel. The latter three
stand together for the rejection of Kant’s dualistic scheme of appearance versus
essence, phenomena versus noumena, in-itself versus for-us, which they will seek
to correct, each in a more or less distinct way, by subjectivizing the noumenal Ding.
Without attempting to summarize the notoriously involved systems of the major
German Idealists, one can still indicate the point of identification between

• Fichte’s conceptualization of the “check” (Anstoβ)

18 GUYER (2000, 40-46) traces the multiple dualities in Kant’s system to a fundamental distinc-
tion between intuition and concept. It is this distinction, Guyer demonstrates, that the sub-
sequent German idealists and especially Hegel rejected.

19 Fichte’s formulation is particularly helpful for us, using the same language as the von Rad
passage cited at the head of the dissertation (¶ 1 on page 1). It is unclear to me how much von
Rad thought and spoke in the language of his antecedents at Jena, and therefore unclear to me the
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- Schelling’s genetic account of the Thing-in-itself,\(^{20}\) and
- Hegel’s analysis of the “supersensible beyond” in terms of “appearance \textit{qua appearance}”\(^{21}\)

extent to which, for him, the use of the German “\textit{Anstoß}” evokes Fichte, or (another example) if one of his most frequent phrases, “the dialectic of experience” (get von Rad’s German) is meant to recall Hegel. At any rate, Fichte describes the significance of the \textit{Anstoß} as follows: “We could not assume that the interplay, or a mere check (\textit{Anstoß}) occurring without any concurrence from the positing self, could impose on itself the task of self-limitation, since the ground of explanation did not include what was to be explained; hence it became necessary to suppose that this check did not occur without concurrence of the self, but took place, rather, in consequence of the latter’s own activity in positing itself; that its outward-striving activity was, as it were, thrown back (or reflected) into itself, from which the self-limitation, and thence every thing else that was called for, would then very naturally follow” (FICHTE, 1982, 191). The “check” like the “thing-in-itself” forms an absolute point of resistance for the subject, yet it is immanent to the subject insofar as it is posited by the subject; the check/thing “occurs to the self insofar as it is active, and is thus only a check insofar as there is activity in the self; its possibility is conditional upon the self’s activity: no activity of the self, no check. Conversely, the activity of the self’s own self-determining would be conditioned by the check: no check, no self-determination.—Moreover, no self-determination, no objective, etc.” (FICHTE, 1982, 191). Read as an empirical account of the object, Fichte’s notion of positing is understandably read as the solipsistic extreme of Idealism. Read at the transcendental level (specifically as a continuation of Kant’s transcendental deduction, in relation to which Fichte explicitly positioned his argument) Fichte’s project takes on an entirely different cast. The subject—not necessarily at the level of consciousness or intentionality, but at some level—recognizes its own mediating activity as the object’s condition of appearing. It is the ungroundedness of this free positing that the subject continually fails to evade in its experience of the object, an experience thereby marked as split, divided, unstable. The \textit{experience} of this \textit{Anstoß}, and this is the crucial point, is not of any Thing but of the subject’s abyssal freedom in positing \textit{X} as some Thing.

\(^{20}\)The thing-in-itself arises for [the subject] through an action; the outcome remains behind, but not the action that gave rise to it. Thus the self is originally ignorant of the fact that this opposite is its own product, and must remain in the same ignorance so long as it stays enclosed in the magic circle which self-consciousness describes about the self; only the philosopher, in breaking out of the circle, can penetrate behind the illusion.” F. W. J. SCHELLING, \textit{On the History of Modern Philosophy}. Cambridge University Press, 1994, 100.

\(^{21}\)The inner world, or supersensible beyond, has, however, \textit{come into being}: it \textit{comes from} the world of appearance which has mediated it; in other words appearance is its \textit{essence} and, in fact, its filling. The supersensible is the sensuous and the perceived \textit{posited} as it is in \textit{truth}; but the \textit{truth} of the sensuous and the perceived is to be \textit{appearance}. The supersensible is therefore \textit{appearance \textit{qua appearance}}. We completely misunderstand this if we think that the supersensible
in that each concept preserves the phenomenon of Kant’s *Ding-an-sich* (the way that the subject completely fails to apprehend it) but insists upon its *subjective* point of origin, the distinction between subjective phenomena and objective noumena residing wholly within the subject. In all three articulations of idealism, the experience of radical otherness is always *reflected*, i.e. posited by the subject as the *cause* of the inconsistencies in the phenomenal registers of perception, representation, and appearance. We arrive at a very paradoxical revision of causality, recast subsequently by Freud as “deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*)”\(^{22}\): the Real as primal “first cause” is posited by, *is an effect of*, the subject that fails to apprehend it.\(^{23}\) Thus, even staying within Kant’s own philosophical tradition, there is a radical recasting of the Real qua *Ding-an-sich*; the split between *subject* and *object*, *phenomena* and *noumena*, *for-us* and *in-itself*—this fundamental division is displaced from epistemology to ontology; in Hegel’s famous formulation “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*."\(^{24}\)

In other words, as S. Žižek has tirelessly argued, the Lacanian Real cannot be taken in at a glance but rather vacillates between perspectival poles.

In a first move, the Real is the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly but only through the lenses of a multitude of Symbolic fictions, virtual formations. In a second move, this very hard core is purely virtual, actually non-existing, an *X* which can be reconstructed only retroactively from the multitude of Symbolic formations which are all that there actually is.\(^{25}\)

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world is *therefore* the sensuous world, or the world as it exists for immediate sense-certainty and perception; for the world of appearance is, on the contrary, *not* the world of sense-knowledge and perception as a world that positively is, but this world posited as superseded, or as in truth an *inner world."* HEGEL (1977, 89).

\(^{22}\) See the discussion ¶ 79 on page 269.

\(^{23}\) This describes the temporal paradox of psychoanalytic cause, articulated by Freud as “deferred action” (*Nachträglichkeit*) and elaborated extensively by Lacan as the “retroversive effect” (*effet de retroversion*). In the logic of signification, what the signifier aims at and misses (the Real) is an effect of signification’s own operations. See ¶ 56 on page 200 and more substantially ¶ 79 on page 269.


This second moment of Lacan’s thought apparently succeeds in reconciling the Real with the plane of immanence, “the absolute inherence of the Real to the Symbolic,” but this articulation carries its own potential for misunderstanding. Žižek himself insists upon the misleading nature of such simplistic dichotomies as first Real versus second Real, early Lacan versus late Lacan, and especially transcendence versus immanence. Any resolution to one side or the other of these binaries fails to solve the key materialist question: if the Real has no subsistence of its own, if it is inherent to the Symbolic, how, then, are we to think the emergence-explosion of the Symbolic out of the pre-symbolic X. Is the only solution to naïve realism really a kind of ‘methodological idealism’ according to which, ‘the limits of our language are the limits of our world,’ so that what is beyond the Symbolic is strictly unthinkable?²⁶

The “methodological idealism” Žižek mentions should be read in the context of his persistent critique of postmodern theory and its reduction of subjectivity to a function of “the text.”²⁷ But how does Žižek’s “materialist” counterposition not simply throw us back onto a “naïve realism,” a conception of the Real as the inaccessible but nonetheless substantive Thing that underlies our symbolically mediated experiences (i.e., the reproach usually leveled at Hegel)? Žižek avoids this trap by his (profoundly dialectical) insistence that the Real cannot be situated on one side or the other of this materialist-idealist divide. On the contrary, it is characterized by an implacable and unsolvable ambiguity in its constitutive relation to the Symbolic, simultaneously the Thing to which direct [Symbolic ] access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing. More precisely, the Real is ultimately the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second.²⁸

²⁶ŽIŽEK, The Parallax View, 390, in a footnote appended to the preceding quotation.
²⁸SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003, Short circuits, 77. As is often the case with Žižek, the nuanced philosophical position is illustrated with a pedagogically oriented joke, which I pass along: “Is this shift not structurally analogous to the one in the Russian joke about Rabinovich from the late Soviet era. Rabinovich wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union for two reasons: “First, I’m afraid that, if the socialist order disintegrates, all the blame for the Communists’ crimes will be put on us, the
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We do not, therefore, hold the position that there's no such thing as a Real prior to and outside of the subject's Imaginary-Symbolic representations, but rather that the Lacanian Real disrupts the simple conception of before and after, inside and outside (which it why it develops from but does not fall prey to the critiques of Kant's noumenal Ding). Lacan's Real is external to the Imaginary-Symbolic world of meaning but inscribed therein and only therein as "an impasse of formalization." Lacan names the locus of this innermost exteriority—this "ex-timacy"—that causes the impasse of formalization objet petit a [hereafter object (a)]. In short, the Lacanian conception of the Real suggests that a certain Symbolic world of meaning, a certain discursive configuration, Wisdom let's say, is incapable of saying something true about the truth but only because its truth corresponds to this internal limit, impasse, or failure.

4. The Real as an Impasse of Formalization

The structure of discourse We have presented the Lacanian Real largely in the idiom of German idealism, the radical extension of Kant's transcendental turn undertaken by Fichte, Schelling, and especially Hegel. If the Kantian subject is taken as the quintessence of finitude—human understanding confined to the delusory appearance of the transcendent, eternal Real—Fichte-Schelling-Hegel invert this standard picture. Each in a more or less distinct way demonstrates how eternity itself is a mode of subjective apperception of time. None of the German Idealists posits the possibility of subjective-objective accord (as in the caricatures of a solipsistic Fichte or the metaphysically naive Hegel), but the discord cannot, in their view, be attributed to the gap between finite and infinite spheres, phenomenal and noumenal bases of experience, in short between the apparent Objekt and the real Ding. The latter (infinite, noumenal Ding) is preserved, but, in opposition to Kant's system,

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Notes:

it reflects a lapsus within the structure of the subject. "The very dimension [the eternal dimension of the Ding-an-sich] which, from within the horizon of his finite temporal experience, appears to the subject as the trace of the inaccessible noumenal Beyond, is already marked by the horizon of finitude—it designates the way the noumenal Beyond appears to the subject within his finite temporal experience."\(^{30}\)

Now, however, we must admit that for the most part Lacan does not speak in these terms but rather in those of structural linguistics, "of which the names Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson stand for its dawn and its present day culmination."\(^{31}\) In this transposition of Kant et al. and of course Freud, signification becomes the organizing paradigm for conceptualizing the Real. (This does not mean that Lacan jettisons the object and temporality as measures of the Real; these too—the object as object (a), time as the retroactive constitution of meaning in the scansion of a chain of signifiers—are reconfigured in light of signification.) The Real will come to be grasped as a beyond of signification that is nonetheless inscribed only as an impasse of formalization.

Seminar XVII, which outlines four possible structures of discourse (four "social links" as Lacan occasionally calls them), sets forth at the outset two theses.

1. First, discourse is structured according to distinct forms, the specificity of each form dictated by the way it arranges the impossibility of "true speech." These are structures, in other words, that strategically channel the traumatic disturbances of the Real.\(^{32}\)

The fact is that, in truth, discourse can clearly subsist without words. It subsists in fundamental relations which would literally not be able to be maintained without

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\(^{32}\)The logic of the seminar turns on language's split relationship to jouissance. On the one hand, language irreversibly splits the subject from the primordial jouissance of "pure life" (she is castrated in the passage through the "defies of the signifier"); on the other hand, language generates a surplus jouissance (a plus-de-joyer), which constantly threatens to undermine its signifying intention. "What's disturbing" notes Lacan, "is that if one pays in jouissance, then one has got it, and then, once one has got it it is very urgent that one squander it. If one does not squander it, there will be all sorts of consequences" (Lacan, 2007, 20).
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language. Through the instrument of language a number of stable relations are established, inside which something that is much larger and goes much farther than actual utterances [enunciations] can, of course, be inscribed. ... There are structures... namely, what happens by virtue of a fundamental relation, the one I define as the relation of one signifier to another. And from this there results the emergence of what we call the subject. \(^{33}\)

2. Second, of these four discourses there is a fundamental structure from which the others derive.

What am I up to? I am beginning to get you to acknowledge, simply through locating it, that this four-footed apparatus, with its four positions can be used to define four radical discourses. It's no accident that I presented this form \(\frac{S_1 \rightarrow S_2}{\exists \mathcal{S} \vee \alpha}\) to you as the first. There is no reason why I could not have begun with any of the others, with the second, for instance. But... this initial form—the one that we express by starting with this signifier that represents a subject with respect to another signifier—has a very special importance, insofar as, in what I am going to state this year, it will be singled out as being, of the four, the one that articulates the master's discourse. \(^{34}\)

Terms and positions  The complete form of the master's discourse is constituted as an arrangement of four terms,

\[
\frac{S_1 \rightarrow S_2}{\exists \mathcal{S} \vee \alpha}
\]

which are to be read according to a set arrangement of positions or functions

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{agent} \\
\uparrow \\
\text{truth} \\
\end{array} \quad \rightarrow \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{other} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{product}
\end{array}
\]

and a minimal narrative of a speech event: An agent \(S_1\) addresses an other \(S_2\), but the signifying intent of the speech is disrupted by an excess \(\alpha\), a fact which belies the agent's mastery, unveiling its true status as a barred, castrated subject \(\mathcal{S}\).


\(^{34}\)Lacan, Seminar XVII, 19-20.
We can think of the terms, to put it as generally as possible, as the elements by which discourse is manifest in the quickening of langue into parole. These elements "operate" in a certain way depending on how they are positioned in a particular circumstance of communication. For example we might consider whether the master is speaking or being spoken to? whether the subject is being hailed or questioning the hail–er from the stance of doubt? and so on. The positions are constant: the agent always addresses an other, animated by the truth which causes his speech, in relation to which this speech is always excessive or deficient. The terms, however, are dynamic, able to occupy different positions. In this sense, the Lacanian system "turns," an idea that though it will not concern us for some time (¶ 83 on page 281) makes it easier to grasp the interworking between terms and positions. Beginning with the master's discourse, four radical structures of discourse are derived by rotating the terms through the positions by a quarter-turn.

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{Master's} & \text{University} \\
\hline
S_1 \rightarrow S_2 & S_2 \rightarrow a \\
\overline{S} \lor a & \overline{S_1} \lor \overline{S} \\
\hline
a \rightarrow \overline{S} & S \rightarrow S_1 \\
\overline{S_2} \lor \overline{S_1} & \overline{a} \lor \overline{S_2} \\
\text{Analyst's} & \text{Hysteric's} \\
\end{array}
\]

Figure 1.1: The four discourses.

The primacy of the master's discourse  Apropos of the master's discourse, I draw our attention to two axes of relations—the "horizontal" relationship between the numerators (\(S_1\) and \(S_2\)) and then the "vertical" relationship between \(S_1\) and the subject (\(S\)). The arrangement that juxtaposes these relationships

\[
\frac{S_1}{S} \rightarrow S_2
\]

expresses nothing other than Lacan's canonical definition of the signifier—"that which represents the subject for another signifier"—which I will take the liberty of
paraphrasing, the subject is the truth of the master’s address. It will be helpful to approach this idea indirectly, through a parallel hypothesis, by which I do not mean to imply equivalent—

\[
\frac{S_1}{S} \rightarrow S_2
\]

the signified (S) is the truth of the master’s address.

Before we can define the logic of signification in these terms, there is a specific asymmetry to the dyad \( S_1 \rightarrow S_2 \) that must be disclosed. Rather than thinking of one signifier and a second signifier, we are to understand the One Master-Signifier \( S_1 \) and all the others that together constitute the field of knowledge \( S_2 \). The difference between the One and all the others is that between the grammatical subject (as in das Thema, the X we are talking about) and the aggregate of its predicates. We can say that \( S_1 \) intervenes in the field of \( S_2 \) and by doing so constitutes the latter (whose elements have heretofore been linked only in a diffuse, unarticulated way) as a determined totality, the predicates of \( S_1 \).

The enunciation of \( S_1 \) is thus a punctuation mark—what Lacan calls le point de capiton, the quilting point—whereafter the fateful particle as is affixed to every element of \( S_2 \). This structure is crucial in seeking to understand Proverbs, which does not simply catalog a variety of local virtues—this verse a celebration of modesty, that one of frugality, another on the merits of reticence—but rather seeks to apprehend such a multiplicity as Wisdom. M. Fox has stimulated our perception in this regard, noting that Proverbs’ preoccupation with Wisdom is actually quite remarkable and not an obvious feature of all wisdom literature. “The book of

35The logic is that of ideological hegemony, the structure of which relies upon the function of a Master-Signifier, whereby the subject can know how all the other signifiers are to be taken. In the ideological space float signifiers like ‘freedom,’ ‘state,’ ‘justice,’ ‘peace’... and then their chain is supplemented with some Master-Signifier (Communism) which retroactively determines their (Communist) meaning; ‘freedom’ is effective only through surmounting the bourgeois formal freedom, which is merely a form of slavery; the ‘state’ is the means by which the ruling class guarantees the conditions of its rule; market exchange cannot be ‘just and equitable’ because the very form of equivalent exchange between labor and capital implies exploitation; ‘war’ is inherent to class society as such; only the socialist revolution can bring about lasting ‘peace,’ and so forth. (Liberal-democratic ‘quilting’ would, of course, produce a quite different articulation of meaning; conservative ‘quilting’ a meaning opposed to both previous fields, and so on)” (Žižek, 1989, 102).
Proverbs, read as a whole, presents a main topic amidst its numerous and diverse maxims and observations. This topic, scarcely touched upon elsewhere in ancient near Eastern wisdom literature, is wisdom—not just wise behavior or wise teachings but wisdom itself, the human intellectual power, both as knowledge and as a faculty.\textsuperscript{36}

The consequences of this preoccupation, at the level of signification, are as radical as they are irreversible. No proverb is left untouched by this "as," for the locus of its meaning has been shifted to the totalized field constituted by Wisdom. Diligence during harvest time, to take an example (cf. Prov 10:5), is conveyed from a field we can hypothetically reconstruct—that of "good agricultural sense"—to that of Wisdom, its value now in play with such far-flung activities as justice (10:6), loquacity (10:10), pedagogy (10:13) and so on. Returning to our formula,

\[
\frac{S_1}{S} \rightarrow S_2 \quad \approx \quad \frac{\text{Wisdom}}{\text{diligence}} \rightarrow \text{justice... care-in-speech... discipline...}
\]

we can say the truth of diligence is a function of Wisdom as the totalized field of justice, care-in-speech, discipline... \(S_\infty\).

The subject of the signifier  Lacan's third term is not the signified (\(S\)), however, but rather the subject (\(S\)), so what is the relationship between the two? Is it possible to transpose the effect of meaning as such to the meaning of the subject? Let us initially approach the problem using the pristine form of the Master-Signifier—the proper name as the exemplary representative of the subject.

\[
\text{KNAEFPF} \rightarrow \text{me}
\]

The name represents "me" as an individual to the Symbolic network of meaning, wherein and whereby "I" am not the pure flux of my perceptual experiences, but "I" conveys something durable and intelligible; my activities and experiences in some sense constitute a stable and comprehensible project. Is this a feasible picture of subjective identity? of the individual's attachment to the Symbolic world of meaning?

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As with Lacan’s articulation of the Real, we must approach the problem of the subject (S) through a constitutive misrecognition (“a misrecognizing that is essential to knowing myself” [un méconnatre essential au me connaître])\(^{37}\), for its being surfaces only as the visible distortions on the field of imaginary-Symbolic perception. We can readily perceive this first “moment of truth” in our common experience of not being able to “capture someone in words.” No matter how lengthy or accurate or eloquent our description, in representing ourselves or someone else there is a gap between the want-to-say—a term we can use as a placeholder for pure subjective intention—and the said. Thus the pure “I” appears impossibly remote from and opaque to the operations of representation, just as the Real appeared in relation to the Symbolic. You may know and say a great deal about me, but that is not me!

Is the Lacanian subject (S) then to be understood as a term of unsymbolizable alterity, an ineffable thinking-thing\(^{38}\) that eludes the differential matrix of signification? Such a dense first-person substance does indeed hold a pivotal place in Lacan’s understanding of self-identity; it is what Lacan calls the ego, which he conceives precisely in opposition to the subject. If the ego “fills-out” the gap between the want-to-say and the said and by taking this position represents the

\(^{37}\)LACAN, Subversion, 808.

\(^{38}\)This is precisely Descartes’ move, to deduce the solidity of objective existence (ergo sum) from the purely formal punctum of “I think” (cogito). It is not Lacan but Kant (in this instance followed by Lacan) who found this conflation problematic. Kant’s critique is stated in felicitous terms with respect to Proverbs scholarship and the question of Woman-Wisdom’s identity as the “hypostasis” of Wisdom. “Nothing is more natural and seductive,” Kant allows, “than the illusion of taking the unity in the synthesis of thoughts for a perceived unity in the subject of these thoughts. One could call it the subjection of hypostasized consciousness.” IMMANUEL KANT, Critique of Pure Reason. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, A402. For Kant, the emergence of the pure I-think of apperception by which we experience the world as an objective reality is at the same time the banishment of the thinking-I to the out world of noumenal things. (This is in sharp contrast to Proverbs wherein the transcendental I-think takes the streets, inhabiting the media of image and language.) “At the ground of this doctrine [of the transcendental apperception] we can place nothing but the simple and in content for itself wholly empty representation I, of which one cannot even say that it is a concept but a mere consciousness that accompanies every concept. Through this I, or He, or It (the thing), which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thoughts = x, which is recognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates, and about which, in abstraction, we can never have even the least concept; because of which we therefore turn in a constant circle.” KANT, CPR, A346.
"real me," then the Lacanian subject is nothing but this impossible gap. The split Lacan represents with the slash (S) lies not between language and the individual but runs through the field of language itself. The unbridgeable chasm is thus not what separates the Master-Signifier and the individual, but rather that which runs between the one Master-Signifier (S₁) and all the others, its manifold predicates (S₂). Consequently, we must radicalize the commonplace notion that the signifier fails to apprehend the subject; it is rather that the signifier fails, and the subject is this failure. "Knauert" means only the failure of all the other signifiers to represent the "real me."

What then is the relationship between the subject (S) and the Real? Or, to put the question in a way less likely to lead to conceptual confusion, how is the Real subjectivized? Reminding ourselves of what we have already said—that the Real must be grasped as a relational concept rather than some unfathomable substance beyond Symbolic-Imaginary representation—the subject qua Real must be defined in relation to (1) the Imaginary "me" (how I perceive myself) and (2) the Symbolic "I" (the positional perspective from which I perceive all objects, including myself). The Lacanian subject will simply be the topological discord between (1) and (2), i.e. the impossibility of being the perspective from which I perceive the way I am.³⁹

Defining the first three terms of discourse  What I would like consolidate at this point are working definitions for the terms, laying aside for now the nuances of the four positions and their specific logical linkages (→, ↓, ∨, ↑).⁴⁰ We have covered significant ground regarding S₁, S₂ and S, and so here I simply collate and summarize what we have already said.

S₁—the master signifier  The enunciation of this signifier sutures the field of discourse as discourse on X. It is the punctuation mark whose utterance retroactively gives the other terms their meaning, the One term through which all the

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³⁹As with Wittgenstein’s famous illustration of the eye’s necessary absence from the visual field. "The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world. Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be found? You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do not see the eye. And nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye." LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. New York: Routledge, 2001, 5.632-5.633.

⁴⁰We take these up below. Cf. ¶ 83 on page 281.
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others are constituted in relationship to one another. This punctual moment of re-defining the field as a whole is clearly illustrated in Proverbs: *all the others* (the multitude of diverse, local sayings) are transformed into something singular and whole by the performative enunciation of the term Wisdom.\(^{41}\) As for what \(S_1\) itself signifies, this can only be approached negatively. Wisdom represents the way all the other signifiers are not in themselves equal to the task of signifying Wisdom.

\(S_2\)—the locus of knowledge “All the others” comprise the treasure trove of signifiers, articulated as a specific locus by the intervention of the Master-Signifier. This locus is identified with knowledge but a kind of knowledge distinct from what is eventually distilled in the master’s discourse. \(S_2\) is the field of know-how, *sauver faire*: the way farmers farm and courtiers court before they reflect on these activities as Wisdom.

This linguistic dyad that Lacan discovers in Saussure and Jakobson

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S_1 \sim S_2
\]

together constitute the Symbolic field Lacan calls “the big Other (*le grand Autre*)” which, if it is helpful, we can equate to an idea with more recognizable theological resonances, the *Logos*.\(^{42}\) In short, the big Other stands for the meaning constituted by a differential system, whether this system is understood as an underlying social structure (*à la* Lévi-Strauss’s elementary kinship structures) or the system of differential relations that constitute language (the battery of signifiers, but also their constituent phonemic or graphemic elements).

\(S\)—the subject of the signifier This subject, which must be differentiated from the individual body, is what “falls out” of the encounter \(S_1 \rightarrow S_2\). It is related

\(^{41}\) On the idea of Wisdom as a coherent whole and the distinctiveness of this idea within the broader category of ancient Near Eastern wisdom, see Fox (1997, 613) and the further remarks of this study on page 77.

\(^{42}\) Lacan himself makes this translation when he conveys the scope of his project to his brother, a Catholic priest: “Let it suffice for me to tell you that in Rome in September I will give the report for our Congress this year—and it is no accident what its subject is: the role of language (I mean: *Logos*) in psychoanalysis.” Cited in ELIZABETH ROUDNIECKO, Jacques Lacan: an Outline of a Life and a History of a System of Thought. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, 205-206.
to the individual insofar as the individual cannot "attach" to the Symbolic medium of speech without fundamentally disturbing this medium's "rules of use." (The smooth functioning of language is an ideal achieved only in systems without a subject, as with the cybernetic interface between hardware and software.) In a way of speaking that Lacan frequently returns to—the utterance (énoncé—the content of what is said) is never reducible to the enunciation (énonciation—the position of the speaker). Or, in slightly different terms, the moment I come to accept the linguistic nature of my reality, an irrevocable distance is introduced between my substance qua res cogitans and the empty point from which I view the world, the cogito. The Lacanian subject is neither one of these but rather the (impossible) traverse between them.

5 **THE OBJECT** (\(a\))

Having introduced these first three terms, we now note the fact of a fourth term (\(a\)), the designator of Lacan's object (\(a\)). As with Kant and the German Idealists alike,\(^{43}\) Lacan thinks that the subjective dilemma of representation is incoherent and in fact cannot be thought apart from an objective counterpart. If there is a fundamental impasse that afflicts the logic of signification, the argument goes, then some unrepresentable object must be the *cause* of this failure. This is indeed the implication of Lacan's most common definition for object (\(a\)), "the object cause of desire."

What is the usual view of the psychoanalytic object? Is it not conceived most readily as what comes prior to language, as what is lost when the infant is baptized in the Symbolic order of the paternal law? In this telling, the sequence of libidinal objects (the breast, feces, the genitals; to which Lacan adds the gaze and the voice) is governed by a substitutionary logic, each a pale simulacrum of a prohibited/impossible maternal *jouissance*. Thus the subject of language (the paternal interdict understood as the subject's first attachment to the Symbolic order of culture and language) as the subject of desire, forever trying (and failing) to recover something, it cannot say what. From this we deduce a subtractive relation between

\(^{43}\)Kant's critique of Descartes is again the point of reference. The I-think of transcendental apperception can in no way be reified or isolated from the experience *I think x*. See note 38 on
the signer and jouissance: the (castrated) subject of the signer equals the living
ing individual minus jouissance.

What Lacan clarifies (or perhaps revises) in his Seminar XVII is the relationship of this object to the surface structure of discourse,

\[ S_1 \rightarrow S_2 \]

a relationship he terms plus-de-jouir, the surplus enjoyment produced by the signer. As the incarnation (or better dis-incarnation) of this excess enjoyment generated by the signer, object (a) resists static identification with a primordial substance prior to discourse and the signer's cut. Rather, Seminar XVII's positioning of object (a) inverts this pattern of thought and the series of relations that derive therefrom: the Real transcendent to the Symbolic, truth transcendent to knowledge, the object transcendent to its representation. In each case the first term, heretofore conceived of as an excessively remote origin that the signer cannot capture, is reconceived as an excess material remainder that the signifying operation cannot contain. Jouissance qua "the stuff of the Real" is not external to the logic of signification but the material stain it leaves over, that which "serves no purpose" (La jouissance, c'est ce qui ne sert à rien) with respect to the signifying intention of any particular speech act. Lacan famously figures this dynamic of loss or waste through the model of entropy.

I defy you to prove in any way that descending 500 meters with a weight of 80 kilos on your back and, once you have descended, going back up the 500 meters.

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1. The poetics of making-transcendent

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Zupančič (2006, 153) emphasizes the discontinuity Seminar XVII introduces into Lacan's successive conceptualizations of jouissance: "Lacan's theory of discourses (or social bonds) is among other things a monumental and in many respects a ground breaking answer to the question of the relationship between signer and enjoyment... [before Seminar XVII] Lacan's conceptual elaborations were based on a fundamental antimony between signer and enjoyment. These two terms were either radically opposed (as in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis) or else positioned as two heterogeneous elements qualified by a certain structural homology (as in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis)... The theory of discourses is something else: it articulates the enjoyment together with the signer and posits it as an essential element of every discursivity." I have already expressed hesitations about dividing the Real (which is to say, jouissance) according to Lacan's early and late thought but agree with Zupančič that in Seminar XVII what had before been only an implicit possibility in the Lacanian paradigm is fully articulated.

Lacan, Seminar XX, 10.
with it is zero, no work. Try it, have a go yourself, and you will find that you have
proof to the contrary. But if you overlay signifiers, that is, if you enter the path of
energetics, it is absolutely certain that there has been no work. The point is that the meaning of a certain kinetic state \( U = mgh \) does not ac-
count for and cannot comprehend the meaningless output of cyclic motion, which
nonetheless has set us through our paces.

As to what this product might be in the context of speech (or more to the point,
in the context of Proverbs) we can here only suggest, via a specifically Lacanian
anecdote, where we might look for its traces. "In the middle of a battle there is a
cOMPANY of Italian soldiers in the trenches, and an Italian commander who issues
the command 'Soldiers, attack!' He cries out in a loud and clear voice to make
himself heard in the midst of the tumult, but nothing happens, nobody moves.
So the commander gets angry and shouts louder 'Soldiers, attack!' Still nobody
moves... He yells even louder: 'Soldiers, attack!' At which point there is a response,
a tiny voice rising from the trenches, saying appreciatively 'Che bella voce!'" The
short circuit here arises from an over-persistence of the voice, the effect of which
is to disclose a peculiar relationship between voice and meaning. Obviously the
voice contributes to meaning; it is the material medium in which the differential
Symbolic system is articulated, the manner by which the abstract totality of langue
is activated in particular instances of parole. On the other hand, as such the voice
must disappear from speech, so that the Symbolic ideality can come into view (lest
we, like the mesmerized soldiers in the story, get lost in its sonorous pleasures).

In this regard, as Mladen Dolar notes, the voice is not equivalent to the signifier
but rather strictly opposed to it. The signifier is the condition of meaning insofar
as it constitutes the collective and the universal. It

possesses a logic, it can be dissected, it can be pinned down and fixed—fixed in
view of its repetition, for every signifier is a signifier by virtue of being repeatable,
in view of its own iterability. The signifier is a creature that can exist only insofar
as it can be cloned. The voice, in contrast, is purely the effect of the individual; in our perception of it
we experience speech as particular.

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We can almost unfailingly identify a person by the voice, the particular individual timbre, resonance, pitch, cadence, melody, the peculiar way of pronouncing certain sounds. The voice is like a fingerprint.\textsuperscript{49}

The voice thus works in two directions: as irreducible substance (i.e. irreducible to the differential Symbolic network), it prevents any signifier from being a perfect clone and thus impedes meaning; yet as the only reliable carrier of particularity, the voice is speech's closest link to the subject who is almost (but not quite) occluded by the signifier. The profound consequence of this split in the voice is that the subject (\$)—the purely virtual position from which the world can be perceived as meaningful, as consistent, as objective—coincides with and finds its essence in the stain of jouissance that with every utterance blurs the crisp instantiation of Symbolic difference. The coincidence here of essence and limit reaches an absolute degree. "If the subject is to emerge, he must set himself against a paradoxical object that is Real, that cannot be subjectivized. Such an object remains an 'absolute non-subject' whose very presence involves aphanisis, the erasure of the subject; yet as such this presence is the subject himself in his oppositional determination, the negative of the subject, a piece of flesh that the subject has to lose if he is to emerge as the void of the distance towards every objectivity."\textsuperscript{50}

But perhaps here we reach an expository point of no return. The very complicated and non-intuitive "features" of \$ and object (a) turn back on the system itself, calling for a reconceptualization of \$\textsubscript{1} and \$\textsubscript{2}, which would necessitate further disquisitions of voice, ego, object and so on. The aim of the sketch is thus more modest with respect to the ideal of "thorough understanding" (much more modest about proving the Lacanian model true), but I hope at least two connections are here, at the outset, apparent. First, in Lacan's structure of discourse abides a notion of limit-essence that avoids two unsatisfactory commonplaces. Neither reducing the world (or as is undertaken with seemingly especial relish—\textit{reducing the subject}) to an effect of the endless and absolutely indeterminate play of signifiers, nor violating its own assumptions as when one states what is the case with that which is transcendent to human knowledge, what Lacan describes (though he never put

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{DOLOM, 22} \textsuperscript{50} \textit{SLAVOŽIŽIĆEK, The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and

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it in these terms) is a poetics of making transcendent. Second I would say that the particular configuration of the master's discourse—a Master-Signifier (S₁) that sutures a totalized field of knowledge (S₂), an ideological circuit whose coherence is nonetheless disturbed by an irreducible object (a), which leaves all who hear, read and speak this discourse in doubt as to what has been said, "barred" from its meaning (S)—is particularly relevant to Proverbs and in fact staged by Proverbs in dramatic fashion. Most dramatically of all, of course, in the figure of Woman, whose body is at one time the locus of Wisdom's subject and object, its universal truth and its insistent particularity, its symbol and its voice, its limit and essence.

6 The structure of the argument

Having made some requisite terminological introductions, we now move into the main body of the argument, which unfolds in three parts.

Part I situates the poetics of making transcendent first within a body of interpretation that more or less coincides with "modern" or "critical" scholarship on Proverbs, and second with reference to a particular text in Proverbs. Chapter 2 explores twentieth century interpretations of Proverbs' limit-essence, an account which is seldom told without reference to the wisdom tradition as a whole. After discerning the deadlocks one encounters in trying to adequately signify Wisdom as an objective essence (delimited by an equally objective limit), we make the (rather obvious) decision to pursue the question of limit-essence on subjective grounds, with attention to Wisdom's appearance in Proverbs 1-9 as Woman-Wisdom. Chapter 3 is preoccupied with Woman-Wisdom's first speech (Prov 1:22-33), which in dramatic fashion stages the coincidence of essence and limit. Our own analysis of the text suggests two features of the text that becomes the respective foci of parts 2 and 3: the fear-of YHWH in its function as the Master-Signifier, and the question of Woman-Wisdom's voice, which emerges as the ground of meaning (and so of an ethical response) in a text characterized by a high degree of Symbolic ambiguity.

Part II, further explores the function of the Master-Signifier across Proverbs' sharp generic divide. Chapter 4 concerns itself with Prov 10-29 and the logic of signification specific to the two-line parallelism that formally governs the collections

of sentence proverbs. The notion of the Master-Signifier is expanded according to
1. Adele Berlin's work on parallelism and the "poetic function" (R. Jakobson's con-
cept that Berlin develops with respect to biblical Hebrew), and 2. with reference to
A. J. Greimas and his unique contribution to our understanding of "the elementary
structure of signification." Chapter 5 expands the textual scale of chapter 4, moving
to analyze larger "clusters" of proverbs. At the same time, the chapter turns our
attention to the fear-of YHWH, arguing (along with many other) for the singular
importance of this signer to the book of Proverbs as the expression of a singu-
lar, totalized field of Wisdom. The basis of this status, I argue (now without the
consensus of biblical scholars) is a structural function that stands apart from the
irresolvable question of meaning.

Part III unpacks the literary phenomenon of Woman-Wisdom's voice in light of
Lacan's (difficult) conceptualization of object (a), the "object cause of desire." In the
course of our argument it will become clear that object (a) is closely linked with the
voice of woman as such, though it can be identified neither with Woman-Wisdom's
voice, nor with the competing voice of the Strange-Woman. Rather, to simply state
what must be worked out at length, object (a) is the "objective" difference between
these voices, insofar as this difference is impossible to ascertain. Chapter 6 is
a critical engagement with two important interpretations of the Strange-Woman—
Carol Newsom's now classic 1989 essay Wisdom and the Discourse of Patriarchal
Wisdom and Michael Fox's preeminent commentary on Proverbs 1-9, published in
2000. In both cases, I try to show how, when it comes to the meaning of the
Strange-Woman, these authors abandon the hermeneutic insights that govern their
overall approach to Proverbs. Chapter 7, the final chapter, contains an analysis
of Prov 7, wherein I coordinate the poetics of making transcendent to an ethics
of maintaining desire. The question that is raised at the end of the dissertation—
not answered, simply raised—is whether the twinned horizons of transcendence and
desire can account for the wisdom tradition as a whole. I suggest that it probably
cannot, that at least part of the tradition shifts its focal point from the horizon of
transcendence to the one of immanence; and in parallel fashion shifts its ethical
commitment, forsaking the preservation of an infinite desire, for the realization
of desire in the peculiar libidinal kinetics of psychoanalytic drive.
One further introductory remark, on the well-founded supposition of Lacan's anti-historicism, which nevertheless becomes a distorting when Lacan is overhastily assimilated to such post-modern slogans as écritoire, sheer-text, the endless play of the signifier. Undoubtedly Lacan's own style of writing lends credence to the idea that he is a thinker little concerned with the "practical" constraints of historical necessity. Though one should pause here, for it is evident that any intellectual project conceived as a "return to Freud" cannot but be centrally preoccupied with history, even if its scale must be recalibrated as befits the history of the analysand rather than such macro-systems as the nation or literary tradition. Though this distinction too will prove misleading unless its poles—global/political versus the clinical/subjective—are set into dialectical rather than binary opposition. The reply to the question,

Is it 'legitimate' to expand the use of the notions which were originally deployed for the treatment of individuals to collective entities, and to say, for instance, that religion is a 'collective compulsive neurosis'?

must displace the gap between individual and collectivity onto the problem of individuality itself.

The Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply on a different level from individual experience, but something to which the individual him- or herself has to relate, something which the individual him- or herself has to experience as an order which is minimally 'reified,' externalized. The problem, therefore is not 'how to jump from the individual to the social level'; the problem is: how should the de-centered socio-symbolic order of institutionalized practices/beliefs be structured, if the subject is to retain his or her 'sanity,' his or her 'normal' functioning? Which delusions should be deposited there so that individuals can remain sane?

Though the mediation between individual and collective history is likely not the first question that arises for the reader whose background is biblical studies, a field wherein the more absolute line of demarcation is drawn between literary theory and history.

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52 ŽIŽEK, For They Know Not What They Do, lxxii.
1. The poetics of making-transcendent

From that perspective this study will represent a theoretical approach whose three excursions into history—§ 35 on page 136, § 58 on page 203, § 98 on page 324—reflect a perplexing, if not ill-conceived, blurring of methodological approaches. For the interpreter committed to historicizing her textual objects of inquiry, these will seem to be inadequate prostheses to an argument that should simply admit its disregard for historical context. Alternately, for the practitioner of "pure literary criticism," the same sections will also appear misguided, representing points at which the argument illicitly seeks to ground its claim in the "referent." Confusing the situation further is the repeated recourse to Lacan's Real, which reserves for itself a position "beyond signification" (i.e. outside the text) even while it is evidently not something you could verify in an archaeological dig, a sociological model, or in the corpus of historically proximate literature. But it is the meaning of Lacan's Real, insofar as Lacan specifically opposes it to reality, that will explain 1. my dissatisfaction with the aforementioned split in biblical studies, and 2. the purpose of the three excurses, which describe what conventional historical criticism has called context.

For Lacan's opposition between the Real and Symbolic does not coincide with the one between context and text, which belong together to the same Symbolic field. This leads us to the undoubtedly paradoxical conclusion that the text does not arise out of nor is it spoken into a distinct context; rather the text simultaneously produces both itself and the Symbolic backdrop in whose frame its own meaning must be discerned. What have in the past been maintained as separate investigative procedures into separate objects of interpretation are less distinct than we thought and in fact equally a function of the same Symbolic order, what Lacan calls the big Other.

It is convenient for our purposes that the literary critic who has recognized this identity of opposites in the clearest and, to my eye, most compelling fashion is equally famous for his dictum to Always historicize! even while he situates History (like Lacan's Real) radically outside of signification. I therefore find it worthwhile to reproduce at length the crucial passage in Fredric Jameson's programmatic essay, "On Interpretation."

We need to say a little more about the status of this external reality, of which it will otherwise be thought that it is little more than the tradi-
nctional notion of "context" familiar in older social or historical criticism. The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext, it being understood that that "subtext" is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow "reality" to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at distance. It must rather draw the Real into its own texture, and the ultimate paradoxes and false problem of linguistics, and most notably of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext. Insofar, in others words, as symbolic action...is a way of doing something to the world, to that degree what we are calling "world" must inhere within it, as the content it has to take up into itself in order to submit it to the transformations of form. The symbolic act therefore begins be generating and producing its own context in the same moment of emergence in which it steps back from it, taking its measure with a view toward its own projects of transformation. The whole paradox of what we have here called the subtext may be summed up in this, that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction. It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never way any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage. One does not have to argue the reality of history: necessity...does that for us. That history—Althusser's "absent cause,” Lacan's “Real”—is not a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in
textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization. Thus, to insist on either of the two inseparable yet incommensurable dimensions of the symbolic act without the other: to overemphasize the active way in which the text reorganizes its subject (in order, presumably, to reach the triumphant conclusion that the “referent” does not exist); or on the other hand to stress the imaginary status of the symbolic act so completely as to reify its social ground, now no longer understood as a subtext but merely as some inert given that the text passively or fantasmatically “reflects”—to overemphasize either of these functions of the symbolic act at the expense of the other is surely to produce sheer ideology, whether it be, as in the first alternative, the ideology of structuralism, or, in the second, that of vulgar materialism.

Still, this view of the place of the “referent” will be neither complete nor methodologically usable unless we specify a supplementary distinction between several types of subtext to be (re)constructed. We have implied, indeed, that the social contradiction to be addressed and “resolved” by the formal prestidigitation of narrative must, however reconstructed, remain an absent cause, which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text. It seems useful, therefore, to distinguish, from this ultimate subtext which is the place of social contradiction, a secondary one, which is more properly the place of ideology, and which takes the form of the aporia or the antimony: what can in the former be resolved only through the intervention of praxis here comes before the purely contemplative mind as logical scandal or double bind, the unthinkable and the conceptually paradoxical, that which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought, and which must therefore generate a whole more properly narrative apparatus—the text itself—to square its circles and to dispel, through narrative movement, its intolerable closure.53

This allows me to say what is intended by the three excurses, which is not to make a minimal gesture to the conventions of historical criticism but rather to highlight three formal analogies between text and subtext, the latter understood as the historical situation Proverbs "takes up into itself in order to submit it to the transformations of form." I am arguing, in other words, that the structural and strictly a-historical exigencies of signification—the subject ($S$), the signifier ($S_1$), and the object ($a$)—are nonetheless semantically filled out with the raw materials of their time, materials which the sages undoubtedly encountered in the trauma of social contradiction, of which Proverbs' historical subtext is the ideological transformation. In other words, Proverbs the text never interacts directly with the Real but with the Real as it has always already been transformed, symbolized, into a reality. It is certain aspects of this Symbolic subtext that I have thought relevant and possible to describe as the historical problem to which Proverbs can pose itself as the solution. But the Real and what Jameson means by history, history as "what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis," remain as "beyond" in relation to the problem Proverbs raises as it is to the solution it provides.

\[\text{JAMESON, Political Unconscious, 102.}\]
Part I

Proverbs and the Limits of Wisdom
Chapter 2

The Limits and Essence of Wisdom

It seems to me that, in every culture, I come across a chapter headed Wisdom. And then I know exactly what is going to follow: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

L. Wittgenstein

Chapter 2

7 Rylaarsdam’s Trajectories

Von Rad is not the only scholar to have opened the corpus of wisdom literature to the kind of immanent, dialectical analysis of limit and essence proposed here. The wisdom literature has, in fact, evoked the same perplexity and ingenuity of thought through a long history of interpretation. Our decision to begin this chapter with J. C. Rylaarsdam is therefore as arbitrary as it is a testimony to the uniqueness and sophistication of his analysis.

The thesis of J. C. Rylaarsdam’s *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature,* ¹ must have struck his contemporaries as untimely. Writing close to the first elaborations of biblical wisdom in light of a common Ancient Near Eastern “sapiential stock,”² Rylaarsdam finds an altogether different point of identification between the

biblical wisdom tradition and its Egyptian/Mesopotamian counterparts.

The task of the wisdom movement of each nation—Babylon, Egypt, and Israel—is to possess wisdom, and understanding of the highest ends of life and of the means of attaining them. This task involves a natural human search and discovery through the use of human reason and an empirical analysis of experience. In each country, however, the wisdom movement also seems to point to a concurrent conviction that wisdom was a divine possession and it was ultimately the gift of the gods to men, whether by man’s use of the reason he possessed as creature or by supernatural powers and special gifts beyond the natural faculties and lying outside the compass of empirical verification. The relative emphasis placed upon the natural and supernatural ways of attaining wisdom in the main documents of Israel’s wisdom movement will be dealt with in a later chapter. Here we note very briefly that the same double emphasis existed in Babylon and in Egypt.\(^3\)

As with Würthwein, Zimmerli, Preuš, and the others we will shortly be taking up, Rylaarsdam highlights the structural similarities between the various national wisdom traditions. However, whereas the prevailing hypothesis posited Egyptian and Babylonian wisdom as the source of an alien ideology of cosmic order and confident humanism,\(^4\) Rylaarsdam claims wisdom as such, i.e. regardless the differences in

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\(\text{Rylaarsdam, 11.}^{4}\)

\(\text{Compare the following well-regarded summations of this view: Würthwein (1976) “Wisdom’s notion of God stands in extreme tension to that of the rest of the OT. It is quite clear that the God of the covenant, whose realm above all is history and before whom nations are like drops in a bucket (Is 40:15), is entirely different in his entire fundamental conception from the God of wisdom who acts as retributor in the life of the individual. This retributive God, in his activity, is clear, rationally comprehensible, calculable—so to speak, without being a puzzling enigma. However, the God who called forth one people from the circle of nations and dealt with them specially is ultimately incomprehensible in his purposes” (122-23). Zimmerli (1976) “The formulations universally show the anthropological position from which the question is put (tub ldm ytrun ldm) . It is a question of people whose human possibilities should be established. Further, it must be carried forward in an equally more clearly limited way: the question’s orientation cannot be raised above its anthropological point of view; it has its center of gravity in the individual or historic person toward whose good fortune it asks” (176). Preuš (1987) “In its wisdom literature, Israel (or rather a certain cultural stratum of this nation) sought to appropriate a part of the humanism of the ancient Near East, insofar as these notions were particularly at home among the educated classes. The attempt was made to progressively assimilate this humanism to the deism of Israel (Yahweh–faith and its specific character) above all after the crisis in wisdom thought, as it is discernible in}}\)
its various cultural-geographical instantiations, is preoccupied with its own lacking, divided character and thus with the *contingent* and *inexplicable*. "A second element in the wisdom literatures of Egypt, Babylon, and Israel showing a common cultural viewpoint is the keen awareness, expressed in all, that in this morally and rationally governed world man is a creature. He is finite, ignorant, and subject to moral failure." This idea animates the novel thesis of his book, which surely has affinities with our basic theme:

The central question [of Hebrew Wisdom Literature] has always been the problem of revelation. How did the men who produced this literature think that God and his ways became known to them? How could men come by an understanding of the nature of life that would enable them to see and attain its true significance?... the literature covers a period of about six centuries; yet all of it may be considered as relevant to a single debate on this question.  

I would like to suggest that this single question sends Rylaarsdam along two distinct lines of research.

1. On one hand, he stages a confrontation between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" versions of wisdom, whereby we learn not that they are *different* as that their differences belie a fundamental *sameness*.

The pessimist either doubts the existence of [the] rational and moral order or despairs of man’s ability to discover its nature sufficiently well to guide him to a happy end.  

But even the optimistic Hebrew wisdom writers are always mindful that man is a creature who depends upon his creator, and it is thus that they account for human frailty and ignorance. Man cannot plumb the motives by which he is judged (Prov 16:2); man’s hopes fail because he cannot see the end from the beginning; the very course of his life is already planned (Prov 16:25; 20:24). The divine purpose crushes his own (Prov 19:21; Ben Sira 6:2; 7:11). Man cannot control his environment (Ben Sira 27:1), since God’s status as creator makes it impossible for him to reveal all things (Prov 25:2; Ben Sira 1:1-3).

The wisdom discounted in Job and Ecclesiastes is the same as the wisdom in the oldest sections of Proverbs—it is natural human wisdom. Human reason, empirical observation through the use of all faculties, and objective judgment mark its process.

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Job and Qoheleth. But the wisdom literature remained within the Old Testament, just as its altogether different speech about God (YHWH) and his activity... indicates, wherein most of what is essential to the rest of the Old Testament does not appear, a relatively isolated phenomenon" (174).

5 Rylaarsdam, 15. 6 Rylaarsdam, ix. 7 Rylaarsdam, 47. 8 Rylaarsdam, 74.
of development in man. It consists of the accumulated lore of the centuries placed at the disposal of free and alert minds that share their findings, and gray-haired experience is its hallmark. Job and Ecclesiastes conclude that it is the only sort of wisdom available to man, while Proverbs’ sense is no need for any other sort. It is to be attained by means of natural endowment of man, not by a supernatural initiative supplementing creation.\(^9\)

In each case the fundamental structure of thought is the same: the “natural endowments of man” run up against something incomprehensible to reason. The fact of revelation, its persistence in patterns of sapiential discourse, is strictly correlative to a lack in human knowledge. The different evaluative postures taken vis-à-vis this lack—Rylaardsdam’s “optimistic” or “pessimistic” sages—reflect the available subject positions, given the strictures of the sapiential ideological field. It is crucial to see how both positions preserve the cogency of sapiential discourse, in that they circumscribe a zone whereupon wisdom tells us the truth, against the temptation to view pessimism as a threat or crisis to the wisdom tradition.

2. On the other hand, Rylaardsdam himself would like to organize the failure of wisdom alone, i.e. what is knowable on the basis of “the natural endowments of man”, along two distinct narrative trajectories, at the head of which stand “optimistic” and “pessimistic wisdom.” Rylaardsdam posits two diachronic series:

- Optimistic Wisdom → National Prophetic Wisdom → Rabbinic Judaism, and
- Pessimistic Wisdom → Eschatology → Christianity.

The former belongs to a valuation of the Law, the second of Spirit. Apropos this latter determination, Spirit as the telos of pessimistic wisdom, I want to point to a specific narration of the wisdom tradition, which, as we shall shortly see, has since been repeated over and over again. Its form is pure transcendence.

The real contribution of Job and Ecclesiastes was to help to smash the too limited, earth-bound arena of traditional Jewish eschatology, which the great prophetic movement had utterly failed to do. By their rigid analysis and merciless criticism of life in the light of the orthodox doctrine of rewards, the pessimistic writers paved the way for a new eschatology, in which the rewards of religion were more in keeping with a religion that made moral and spiritual demands. In it, too, the eschatological arena was more commensurate with the realm of the purposes of the universal and

\(^9\)Rylaardsdam, 87.
eternal God, to whom Judaism looked and in whose image it believed man to be created. This implied the introduction of a doctrine of immortality or resurrection. In making this contribution the empirical and rationalistic wisdom movement sealed its own demise.\textsuperscript{10}

It is the pessimistic literature that does finally precipitate the demise of wisdom, though not by announcing the failure of wisdom, rather by demonstrating the futility of its success.

8 Configurations of limit and essence

In what follows, I would like to do two things. First, to demonstrate the remarkable persistence over the last 60 years of this specific emplotment of wisdom’s limit. The impasses of wisdom are resolved when these sages are forced, by dint of existential crisis, to abandon their project of human autonomy. At this point of historical crisis (Qoheleth considered to be its most acute literary expression) the sage is thrown back onto the transcendence and freedom of YHWH. In what follows, we take up four exemplary contributions along these lines—Würthwein,\textsuperscript{11} Zimmerli,\textsuperscript{12} Preuß,\textsuperscript{13} and Sharp\textsuperscript{14}—exemplary in that each contrasts the aims of wisdom with those of “genuine” Israelite faith. This approach, we will show, splits the objective, substantial essence of wisdom from its equally objective, substantial limit and externalizes the latter with respect to the former. The constitution of wisdom’s inside/outside along these lines is the jumping off point for a reading that privileges the transcendent exception and leaves behind, occludes even, the locus of our intervention at the

\textsuperscript{10}Fylaarsdam, 89-90.


\textsuperscript{14}Carolyn J. Sharp, “Ironic Representation, Authorial Voice, and Meaning in Qohelet”. Biblical
inmixing of limit and essence. In these analyses, we could say, what we have called a poetics of making-transcendent is understood as simple reportage.

But second, to linger (perhaps longer than Rylaarsdam himself did) over the identical structure of “optimistic” and “pessimistic” wisdom, which we will perhaps discover is only another permutation of limit/essence dyad. The scholarly models for this kind of immanent analysis are much fewer, but nonetheless will serve as crucial jumping-off points for our own analysis. Specifically, we will consider the contributions of J. Crenshaw\textsuperscript{16} and C. Newsom\textsuperscript{16} in so far as their work resists the filling-out of wisdom’s structure by attending to the limit that persists from within, that in-sists, so to speak. In the end, the need for this dissertation may be seen in the ease by which even these interpretations can be appropriated for a purely transcendent conception of wisdom’s limit.

This priority on the negative term of limit is intentional, but does not absolve us from reflecting on the substantial, positive articulations of wisdom’s essence. Thus, the second half of the chapter takes up various approaches to the essence of wisdom in much the same way the first section analyzed approaches particularly oriented around wisdom’s limit, even if these many studies are inextricably intertwined. In this second section we will move from

- a short discussion defining what we mean by essence (and more specifically its relationship to meaning)
- to the terminology of the texts themselves (the relationship of the signifier “wisdom” to other signifiers from the same semantic field e.g., knowledge, instruction, discipline)
- to the various scholarly positions on the proper approach to wisdom conceived not so much as a Thing but rather as an overall understanding of the world (à la von Rad’s \textit{Wirklichkeitsverständnis}), wherein phenomena from disparate areas of life are shown to be analogous from the perspective of Wisdom.

\textit{Interpretation}, 12 2004 No. 1.

\textsuperscript{16}JAMES CRENSHAW, “The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel”. In \textit{The Divine Helmsman} New York: KTAV, 1980.

The goal of these sections is to situate this dissertation in terms of a difficult and ongoing debate that both precedes and follows von Rad’s signal identification of limit and essence.

9 A TRANSCENDENT LIMIT

E. Würthwein 1958 Following the lead of J. Fichtner’s 1933 study,17 E. Würthwein18 argued for a close connection between the biblical wisdom corpus and its Egyptian parallels, particularly The Instruction of Amenopé. Würthwein’s argument unfolds in three moments, the first two of which are closely interrelated: first, the Israelite sages (and so the literature that they produce) are deeply influenced by their Egyptian counterparts; second, the concept of or belief in Maat is the sine qua non of Egyptian wisdom; third, the character of Maat is therefore paramount to Egyptian and, by association, Israelite wisdom literature.

Würthwein goes on to distill the significance of Maat in a set of concise propositions.

1. Life proceeds according to a fixed order.
2. This order is teachable and learnable.
3. Man is thereby handed an instrument with which to determine and secure his way through life. Because,
4. God himself must pattern himself according to this order, this law.19

Würthwein’s representation of Egyptian wisdom, having insisted upon its fundamentally religious character,20 understands this particular form of religiosity as entirely contained by a “fixed order,” one that is furthermore amenable to human inquiry and graspable by human cognition.

18WÜRTHWEIN, Die Weisheit Ägyptens; WÜRTHWEIN, Egyptian Wisdom and the Old Testament.
20The view [of Egyptian wisdom qua secular] is not true to the actual content of the Egyptian instructions. More recent studies … have shown a thoroughly religious understanding of life and world stands behind the often utilitarian-sounding counsels […] Religion reached into every area and all things have a religious dimension. […] Actually, one misses the implication of many sayings if one does not sufficiently attend to their religious presuppositions.” WÜRTHWEIN, Egyptian Wisdom and the Old Testament, 117.
2. The Limits and Essence of Wisdom

When wisdom, first within courtly circles, was taken over into Israel, people may not have been conscious of its ideological and religious content. But it was there and it proved itself to be effective. What is remarkable in the entire process is not that some individual phrases were taken over from the Egyptian wisdom teachings, but rather that people grew up through them into the implicitly maintained understanding of existence. That people affirmed the possibility of securing human life and worked intensely toward its realization. Thus there developed a type of man who was new to Israel and whose self-confidence must have been offensive to the genuine-Israelite faith (dem genuin-israelitischen Glauben anstößig21), which prophetic criticism also confirms.22

Wisdom, on this account, functions as an ideological Trojan horse: a seemingly innocuous and by all appearances moral body of literature insinuates itself into a society that does not perceive the subversion of “genuine Israelite faith.” In this borrowing, what is specific and essential to Israelite religion—its historical and covenantal relationship to Yhwh—is undercut, irrespective the substitution of Yhwh for Maat. “It was a momentous alteration of this conception [the priority of the covenant] when wisdom aroused the impression that a person might be able to strive for and attain the divine blessing in and of himself and outside of the covenant. Perhaps that was Egyptian thinking, but not genuine Israelite (nicht genuin israelitisch gedacht).”23

The gap between “genuine” (genuin) and “alien” (fremd) constitutes, for Würthwein, the limit of Israelite wisdom, a limit that is dramatized in a predictable crisis of wisdom thought. “It is not surprising that [wisdom’s notion of God] came to controversy, founded as it was upon alien assumptions (fremden Voraussetzungen).”24 This controversy is evidenced in the wisdom tradition itself, namely in Job and Qoheleth insofar as they testify in different ways to the hubris and futility of wisdom’s core assumptions. These radical critiques of wisdom (and Judaism as a whole insofar as it had adopted wisdom as a legitimate mode of piety) attack the

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21If we compare the use of anstoßen here in contrast to that of Fichte and von Rad, the radical nature of von Rad’s thesis is evident yet again. Rather than wisdom being the Anstoß for something else, viz. genuine Israelite faith, and vice versa, von Rad identifies wisdom’s Anstoß with its essence.

22WÜRTHEIN, Egyptian Wisdom and the Old Testament, 120.


24WÜRTHEIN, Egyptian Wisdom and the Old Testament, 123.
crucial point of identity on which a cogent *Israelite* wisdom ideology must rest, that between the comprehensible sapiential order and the character of Yhwh. Qoheleth is the signal figure in Würthwein’s argument:

Above all ... Qoheleth conceived God entirely differently from the wise; he saw him in his power and sovereignty and in his wholly-otherness, which makes him completely unintelligible to man. To the extent that Qoheleth diligently emphasized this aspect of God, he showed that he had clearly perceived the weakest point—from the point of view of Israelite faith—in wisdom: the impotence of God. Thus, Qoheleth brought into play in his own sayings significant features of the OT view of God, and one can say on the basis of this observation that he has made himself the advocate of the OT belief in God.  

In essence Würthwein never speaks of the limit of wisdom as such, but rather the limit of biblical wisdom, a limit arising from the gap between two incompatible views of God. Wisdom understands god/Maat as beholden to an order (and so “impotent”), whereas normative Israelite faith is founded on the unfettered sovereignty of Yhwh. Qoheleth, speaking from within wisdom, sounds the death-knell of his own tradition and in so doing reaffirms the priority of covenantal religion. It is now conventional to say that these poles are reconciled under the sign of creation though the issue is perhaps not settled so easily. Würthwein’s positing of a “genuine Israelite faith” to which the wisdom tradition cannot be fully reconciled, though such an idea has come under criticism, remains a viable line of argumentation.

W. Zimmerli 1964 After Würthwein, wisdom scholarship has compulsively returned to the purported contradiction between (1) a binding cosmic order, and

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26 Murphy (1985) insightfully discusses wisdom’s particular appropriation of the creation tradition, having less to do with “beginnings” and more to do with an “arena of experience.” That is to say, wisdom can be linked to creation, apart from its connections with Genesis 1.
27 Preuss (1987, 178) has argued that wisdom’s valuation of order (its Ordnungstheologie, as Preuss has it) is to be strictly opposed to the Schöpfungstheologie found in Gen 1, the Psalms and the prophets. See ¶ 9 on page 44.

41
(2) Yhwh’s freedom/potency to act.  

A crucial synthesis takes place whereby these poles are reconciled under the rubric of *creation*. Of the many articulations of this idea, the one most suited to the theme of limit is W. Zimmerli’s 1963 article, “The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of Old Testament Theology.”

Zimmerli gives due regard to the likely influence of Egyptian sources on the Israelite wisdom tradition, but the burden of his argument, in contrast to Würthwein, is to explore resonances between the wisdom literature and other biblical *topoi*. Zimmerli’s starting point, however, is the discordance between wisdom and “the two central canonical parts of the Old Testament, namely, the Law and the Prophets.” Whereas these normative expressions of “the faith of the Old Testament” have as their essential content the related phenomena of election and covenant, the primary meaning of wisdom is captured in the idea of *tahbulot*: “Wisdom is *per definitionem* tahbulot, ‘the art of steering’, knowledge of how to do in life.” For Zimmerli, this implies an anthropocentric starting point unrelated, if not antagonistic, to the central theme of the Old Testament, i.e. the sovereign agency of Yhwh as it unfolds in the history of Israel. But, and this is Zimmerli’s main point, the sapiential regard for human initiative and competence is not without precedent in ancient Israel’s theological tradition. “Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation,” Zimmerli states, expanding further:

> In this concern we cannot here overlook what the primeval history in the Book of Genesis says. The Old Testament does not only speak about the encounter of Yahweh and Israel in the midst of history; beyond this, Yahweh who encountered Israel is also shown as the Creator of heaven and earth, who called man into life from the beginning and who dealt with man... Israel’s faith must understand the creation of man by God as an event in which God bestows on man a great gift.

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[29] The genealogy of this question can be traced back earlier than Würthwein, and in that sense (as with all “reviews of the field”) my starting point is somewhat arbitrary. Both Koch (1955) and Greeß (1958) figure prominently in this discussion, though, not wanting to be sidetracked by the issue of “retribution,” I have concentrated on other scholars.


Here we feel that the understanding of creation is deeply influenced by the manner of Israel’s encountering God in History. But in giving His gift to man God empowers him with a striking independence.  

This independence is specified by the priestly writer as a zone of dominion given to humankind as a gift, and within this zone the sage, in perfect accordance with “biblical theology,” affirms the power and rectitude of human knowledge.

But this bracketing of the specific historical encounter between Yhwh and Israel, which paradoxically allows both frames of reference to co-exist, comes at a cost to wisdom’s overall coherence. Zimmerli recognizes the traces of wisdom’s bifurcated thought throughout the canonical literature, though he emphasizes a logical movement from Proverbs to Ecclesiastes that we have seen before. So, for example, in Proverbs we find alongside exhortations to “Get wisdom!” a cautionary sub-current that “knows clearly that the reality to which it has access is always subordinate to God’s will.” It is, however, in Ecclesiastes that Zimmerli finds an articulation of wisdom that has fully come to terms with wisdom’s strictly relative merit:

I wish to look at Ecclesiastes. Here the inner problem of Wisdom in the setting of an Old Testament Theology openly arises and the limits of Old Testament Wisdom are clearly indicated.

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38 “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:28)
39 It is worth once again pointing out the degree to which the problems of biblical Wisdom are framed in the categories if not the specific images of Kant’s œuvre. Recall the rousing introduction to the transcendental deduction of judgment: “We have now not merely explored the territory of pure understanding, and carefully surveyed every part of it, but have also measured its extent, and assigned to everything in it its rightful place. This domain is an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth—enchanting name!—surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swift melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion” (Kant, 1998, B295, A236). This seems to me to have great resonance with Zimmerli’s description of wisdom in terms of a relative value, truth claims that hold in a circumscribed sphere.
Ecclesiastes does not speak about free election and grace in the history of God's dealings with Israel. But he knows also, that the creator sends man into the world to subdue it. But man's going out into the world 'in wisdom' is according to Ecclesiastes a fruitless pain, even a pain under a curse.\(^\text{42}\) In his attempt to master the world 'by wisdom', which means 'by knowledge and active life', he encounters the reality of the creator more clearly than any other Israelite wise man before him. Everywhere he meets with a reality that is determined and cannot be apprehended. Behind all this determination and all this ability not to be apprehended it is God, who cannot be scrutinized, who is free, who never reacts, but always acts in freedom.\(^\text{43}\)

In speaking like this Ecclesiastes returns unexpectedly to a genuine element of Israel's faith (\textit{zu einem genuinen Element alttestamentlichen Glaubens}).\(^\text{44}\)

Wisdom, which for Ecclesiastes elsewhere 'excelleth folly' (2:13), is possible when it is willing to enjoy the gift that God gives today and will not try to make God's promise an item in the calculation of man's life... Hence Ecclesiastes reminds Wisdom of its place before the creator.\(^\text{45}\)

Thus to translate Zimmerli's argument into von Rad's language of limit and essence: Ecclesiastes is the limit of wisdom, in the sense of being the edge, the "frontier-guard" beyond which "even the highest human wisdom can break down and become deep foolishness."\(^\text{46}\) It is also the \textit{essence} of wisdom insofar as it alone comes to terms with wisdom's proper "portion":

When wisdom appropriates only this 'portion'; then the Wisdom of the fear of the Lord will find its limit as well as its fulfillment.\(^\text{47}\)

\textbf{H. D. Preuß 1987}  Preuß represents the sharpest (and most sustained)\(^\text{48}\) polemic against a harmonious incorporation of wisdom into authentic \textit{Yhwh} religion. Like Zimmerli, Preuß has understood the biblical wisdom tradition to be resolutely an-

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thropocentric in its orientation. Like Würthwein, he emphasizes the unparalleled influence of ancient Near Eastern ideology, to such a degree that it cannot be integrated into other biblical theologies. And like Koch, Preuß considers the essence of this foreign ideology to be its belief in an inviolable world-order, expressed first and foremost in the *Tun-Ergebnis-Zusammenhang*. "What wisdom meant by order, above all else, was the deed-consequence-nexus, which, even within the Old Testament wisdom literature itself, would turn out to be unsustainable, precisely insofar as it was fundamentally threatened by Yēwḥ-faith."52

What is striking about Preuß's reading, given the widespread recovery of the wisdom tradition as a legitimate expression of Yēwḥ piety, is his unyielding insistence that the biblical experiment with wisdom was a failure that in no way could be integrated into mainstream biblical theology. This failure "is above all the failure of the root assumption of wisdom thinking, namely the theory and belief in the 'Tun-Ergebnis-Zusammenhang,' which was founded and to be maintained by God //Yēwḥ//."53 For Preuß wisdom's conception of *Weltordnung* imposed restraints on Yēwḥ that were diametrically opposed to the confession of Yēwḥ's *unrestrained* freedom that prevailed in "genuin JHWH-glauben."54 This gap between radically incompatible interpretations of Yēwḥ ultimately led to an irreversible "Krise dieses weisheitlichen Denkens ... das Scheitern dieses weisheitlichen Menschen und seines Glaubensansatzes."55

Significantly, Preuß does not allow us to read wisdom's preoccupation with order in concert with Israel's creation theology, but rather he poses *Weisheitstheologie* and *Schöpfungstheologie* in strict opposition to one another. He writes,

Is Wisdom theology not more a "theology of order" rather than a proper creation theology? Is Old Testament creation theology identical with a theology of order?

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49 In its wisdom literature...the attempt was made to progressively assimilate this humanism to the deism of Israel." PREUSS, Einführung, 174.

50 In origin, character and history the Old Testament wisdom literature evidences ancient Israel's strong connection with the ancient Near East, in this regard going far beyond what was customary in the other areas of the Old Testament. PREUSS, Einführung, 174.


52 PREUSS, Einführung, 182. 53 PREUSS, Einführung, 175.

54 PREUSS, Einführung, 190 and passim. 55 PREUSS, Einführung, 175.
2. The Limits and Essence of Wisdom

Does the biblical creation worldview want to present an understanding of creation as the order of a "Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang"? Such a relationship is, in the older proverbs, clearly posed... but should be applied neither to Gen 1 nor to Gen 2f, nor to the creation-psalms (though these may indeed praise the miraculous structure of creation) to say nothing of the creation speeches in Jeremiah or Deutero-Isaiah. In Job 38ff "creation" is raised as a critical objection against the sapiential view of God, but not as its foundation.56

The scholarly attempt to coordinate wisdom literature with the Old Testament creation tradition founders, in Preuß’s view, because it fails to see the potential for radical difference under the broad heading "order":

The question is, according to which order. What inviolable order can one ascertain from creation as clear, unambiguous and binding. What social order is for it inviolable and thus always to be re-established: is it communism, capitalism, a third order? Who determines in hybrid spheres of humanity or in the world sphere itself what order is? What wisdom meant by order, above all else, was the deed-consequence-nexus, which, even within the Old Testament wisdom literature itself, would turn out to be unsustainable, precisely insofar as it was fundamentally threatened by YHWH-faith.57

The opposition, in other words, is not between order and dis-order but between two competing and, in the final analysis, irreconcilable orders.

C. Sharp 2004 This last treatment of wisdom’s “canonical limits” will strike the reader as anomalous insofar as it is primarily about rhetorical strategies in Qoheleth and so at some remove from our immediate topic. Sharp’s conclusions, however, bear directly on the mediation that concerns us, that between limit and essence in the wisdom tradition. To put it simply, “Qoheleth”—the character in the book as opposed to the (ironic) message of the book as a whole—captures both, living out the exemplary sapiential life and finding that it leads to nothing but despair and cynicism.

The wisdom endeavor is thus skewed by the irony of the book of Qoheleth not via direct, polemical engagement, but in a way that is far more effective for its embodiment of the anti-hero and his own particular kind of unremitting toil. The book represents the sage as one who strives mightily but ultimately fails in the

56 Preuß, Einführung, 178. 57 Preuß, Einführung, 182.
dystopian habitat constructed by his proud epistemological autonomy. Even in his radical skepticism and despite his acute mental suffering, "Qoheleth" remains thoroughly committed to the traditional empirical method, ostensibly challenging but finally still embracing the conventional view of how the pursuit of wisdom can be lived in a flawed world.\(^{58}\)

Qoheleth (the anti-hero) represents the quintessential sage, who uses his empirical method to assert epistemological autonomy. This, for Sharp, is the essence of wisdom. Qoheleth (the book) dramatizes the failure of this ethos insofar as it can only lead to "skepticism" and "acute mental suffering." And that, for Sharp, is the limit of wisdom.\(^{59}\)

Thus the characterological depiction of Qoheleth as a kind of every-sage is matched by a judgment as to Ecclesiastes' role in the canon. For Sharp, it is the decisive punctuation mark whereby the rest of the tradition is unveiled as a disastrous repetition of humanity's fall from prelapsarian grace.

The metanarratological message of the book of Qoheleth inscribes the results of the sin in the Garden of Eden on the body of "Qoheleth," on the corpus of the text, and on any hapless interpreter who falls victim to its irony. The psychic wounds and final physical disintegration (chap. 12) of the despairing and cynical "Qoheleth" represent the self-inflicted wounds of an(y) Adam who tries to reenter the Garden of Eden and grasp again wisdom apart from obedience. The same disintegration is acknowledged by the Epilogue in the comments in 12:12 about the debilitating tediousness of books and study... The Epilogue flags the end of sapiential discourse itself (sōp dābār, 12:13\(^{60}\)) and thereby represents ironically that the book of Qoheleth ought never be used 'straight,' as a didactic manual.\(^{61}\)

The moment of truth in Ecclesiastes (and for Sharp I think it is fair to say the one moment of truth for the wisdom tradition as a whole) is the moment of its suicide, whereby the (non-hapless) reader is thrown back onto Torah-obedience as the only viable basis for a community of justice and, one presumes, a less depressing subjective outlook. "[Qoheleth's] final whisper carries across the centuries of the

\(^{58}\)\textit{Sharp, 60.}

\(^{59}\)Specifically marked as such in 12:13 with the phrase sōp dābār—"the end of the matter," or "the end of the word."

\(^{60}\)For an alternative interpretation of Qoheleth's resolution of sapiential see the concluding section of this dissertation, on page 351.

\(^{61}\)\textit{Sharp, 67.}
debris of human endeavor: Fear God, and keep His commandments. Hear this: It is only obedience that defines you...Hear, O Israel, and obey.\textsuperscript{62}

The Splitting of Essence and Limit What we have found again and again in our narrowly focused discussions of those analyses attending to wisdom's limit and essence is that the limit of wisdom is consistently externalized onto something foreign to its essence (i.e. rendered transcendent). Ultimately, the limit of wisdom is effaced and we are left with a full notion of wisdom limited by something other than its own immanent limits. Whether it is Israelite theology, divine agency, Job and/or, more often, Qoheleth as champions of an epistemology other than that which we find in Proverbs, we are consistently offered conceptions of limit created by the opposition of two unities, and not a limit immanent to the signifying field of each one. The resounding truth of von Rad's insight into the identification of wisdom's essence and limit has been repeatedly muffled by the splitting of one from the other so that both the one and the other have yet to be rigorously articulated. Rylaarsdam articulates the limit internal to the epistemology of all wisdom but, in the end, distinguishes not the limits of wisdom in, say, Proverbs from those in, say, Job, Qoheleth, etc., but rather the "solutions" to the limits of wisdom found in early Judaism from those in early Christianity (which too had their limits). How the essence of wisdom is spoken in Proverbs has yet to be formulated with adequate coherence among those interpreters we have considered thus far. How, we want to ask, are the limits of wisdom in Proverbs spoken by Proverbs and not by others posited as post-Proverbial developments e.g., Job, Qoheleth, Sirach, etc.? Until such a rigorous conception of the limits and essence of wisdom in Proverbs is formulated, the way Job, Qoheleth, \textit{et al.} change that limit cannot be adequately approached.

10 An Immanent Limit

As we said in the introduction, we now proceed from those studies that privilege an exception to wisdom's essence as its limit to those that, along with Rylaarsdam and von Rad discussed above, create the space for our dissertation by providing paths by which wisdom's limit and essence may be approached on a horizon immanent to its poetics.

\textsuperscript{62}SHARP, 68.
J. L. Crenshaw 1980 Against the backdrop of our critique of a “splitting,” essence from limit, the significance of Crenshaw (1980) is easily grasped. He provides what we might loosely call a phenomenological approach to the essence and limit of wisdom, disclosing their co-substantiality in the experience of sapiential skepticism. Crenshaw’s elaboration of skepticism, not surprisingly, resonates with von Rad’s notion of limit, not to discount important differences.

As they are respectively elaborated by von Rad and Crenshaw, limit and skepticism are so productive and vital to our understanding of wisdom’s essence, because they trace its borders. Distinguishing skepticism from pessimism and cynicism, Crenshaw writes

In my view, skepticism includes both a denial and an affirmation. The negative side of a skeptic’s mental outlook consists of the doubting thought, whereas the positive affirmation of a hidden reality indicates that it is altogether inappropriate to accuse skeptics of unbelief...the matrix formed by the disparity between the actual state of affairs in a vision of what should be both sharpened critical powers and heightened religious fervor. Doubt, it follows, is grounded in profound faith.\(^{63}\)

In addition to faith being the ground of doubt, Crenshaw makes skepticism the ground of belief when he calls it “religion’s handmaid,” without which belief becomes “hollow testimony.”\(^{64}\) The point of identification linking Crenshaw’s skepticism to von Rad’s limit \(^{65}\) consists of the “positive” ontological weight of these negative concepts, the way the negations occupy a necessary position in the quest for wisdom, which the sages, many times, equate to wisdom as such.\(^{66}\)

For our present purposes Crenshaw’s analysis of the conditions for the possibility of skepticism is particularly relevant. We referred to his approach as phenomenological above because he asks not only about the particular configurations of and

\(^{63}\) *Crenshaw, Skepticism*, 1.  
\(^{64}\) *Crenshaw, Skepticism*, 3.  
\(^{65}\) Crenshaw (1980, 7) himself notes the similarity.  
\(^{66}\) Under the section heading, *An Endless Search*, Crenshaw notes the paradoxical identity of the object with the question for the object. “In a sense, the characteristic feature of [the sapiential class] was its pursuit of insight, its search for the unknown. Indeed, the sages believed that God had hidden precious secrets from human eyes: God’s glory was to conceal things. Over against this fact, sages juxtaposed human striving for knowledge, especially a king’s attempt to fathom such a mystery.” JAMES CRENSHAW, *Old Testament Wisdom: an Introduction*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1998b, 46, emphasis in original.
thus challenges posed by different skeptical positions but also about how such a
consciousness of limit and essence could be experienced at all. What situation—
whether conceived theologically or philosophically—must pertain before one can
speak of skepticism? For Crenshaw the answer is clear; there is a particular prin-
ciple, a worldview, apart from which the notion of skepticism has no meaning, “the
first decisive breakthrough in our intellectual history”:

I refer to the principle of universality—the ideal of rationality according to which
no individual possessed the truth, the universe was orderly, and human beings were
spectators of a powerful drama which God directed toward a distant goal. The
assumption of order precipitated crises in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel, as is
well documented in the relevant literature.67

One need not, it seems to me, posit the kind of singular, world historical establish-
ment of “rationality” to validate what is essentially a thesis about the temporality
of skepticism. Namely, before the gap between the actual and the proper—if we can
define skepticism in these terms—can emerge, there must be an idea of the proper.

The hidden implication of skepticism’s historical emergence is a mythical period
of non-skepticism, untouched by the distortions of universality. But here we insist
upon the a-historicity (perhaps trans-historicity is better) of skepticism. For human
history itself, the history of creatures who speak, is founded on the constitution of
the Symbolic order whose truth is always located elsewhere.68 More specifically,
language as a trans-individual and universal system of differential elements that
refer, not to some reality existing outside itself, but rather to itself, involves the
elimination of the possibility that any individual element within the system might
intrinsically have a privileged relationship to the truth, despite particular, contingen
t claims otherwise. Continuing the comparison from linguistics, we could say
this gap Crenshaw posits as the fundamental precondition for skepticism is the same
gap defined by linguists as the one separating the signifier from the sign. This is
to conceive of the sign as an intimately unified signifier and signified (in which the
signifier represents the signified) but the signifier as a differential element, “posited

67 CRENSHAW, Skepticism, 3.

68 And whether, as Crenshaw notes, this elsewhere be conceived in the image of a God with-
holding his name at the very moment of self-revelation or in the exclusion of divine intention and
true wisdom from human reach or anywhere else is not our immediate concern. Cf. CRENSHAW,
only insofar as it has no relation to the signified,69 and which becomes significant by “stuffing the signified.”70 In terms already worked through in the field of biblical studies, a sentence or sense-unit always means more than the sum of its parts71 (think of any proverbial saying) and each part always means more on its own than it does qua the part of a sentence or sense-unit— whence also come the common occurrences in speech of slips, misunderstandings, puns, idioms, etc., and the necessary failure of any attempt at a purely interlinear translation.

In positing universality as the “decisive breakthrough” that leads to skepticism, Crenshaw renders particular and exceptional what is in fact the intrinsic property of both (1) language, which must emerge all at once in its universal form;72 and (2) the speakers of language, who are forced to mis-recognize themselves in an alien

Skepticism, 7

69 LACAN, Seminar XX, 32.

70 LACAN, Seminar XX, 37.

71 Such is the thrust, for example, of BARR (1961), over against the etymological procedures of such standard lexical works as Kittel’s TINT. More broadly, it is increasingly posited that meaning does not reside even in the broader structure of a sentence (Barr’s point) but rather flashes between multiple inter-texts. On intertextuality as a phenomenon inextricably linked to the composition of the biblical texts see MICHAEL FESHBANE, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

72 This is the consequential deduction of Lévi-Strauss from the structural revolution in linguistic theory. “Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually. [...] A shift occurred from a stage when nothing had a meaning to another stage when everything had meaning.” CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss. New York: Routledge, 1987, 59-60. The unthinkable gap between “when nothing had a meaning” and “when everything had a meaning” was uncovered (and rather quickly recovered) already by Rousseau in the Second Discourse. “Hence one has to state propositions, hence one has to speak in order to have general ideas: for as soon as the imagination stops, the mind can proceed only by means of discourse. If, then, the first Inventors could give names only to the ideas they already had, it follows that the first substantives could never have been anything but proper names.” A conclusion Rousseau finds repugnant and therewith breaks off his inquiry, “as for myself, frightened by the increasing difficulties, and convinced of the almost demonstrated impossibility that Languages could have arisen and been established by purely humans means, I leave to anyone who wishes to undertake it the discussion of this difficult problem.” Cited in FREDERIC JAMESON, “Rousseau and Contradiction”. South Atlantic Quarterly, 104 2005 No. 4, 698.
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In other words, skepticism (the gap or disparity) is not an exceptional state of affairs but is in fact co-eval with the subject of language; or, to put it in Crenshaw's more collective formulation, with "the first decisive breakthrough in our intellectual history...the principle of universality—the ideal of rationality according to which no individual possessed the truth." Taken to its extreme, we may conclude from this that the subject is fundamentally a skeptical subject.

At this point it would seem fruitful to offer several concise propositions to punctuate our engagement with Crenshaw's article.

1. The gap between the signifier and the signified is the precondition for skepticism.

2. Skepticism refers to that subjective position that attends to the gap created by a Symbolic order that negates any privileged association between an individual element of a system and truth; i.e., skepticism is a determined negation.

3. Such skepticism turned on itself searches in vain for the subject, which constantly fades under the chain of signifiers intended to represent it because, to paraphrase Lacan, when I speak of myself, I am never the same as the self of whom I speak. The skeptical position par excellence is the position that attends to this constant fading of the subject behind the signifiers (failing to) represent her.

4. Because such a gap is the necessary condition for the functioning of any Symbolic order (the Symbolic order being, as such, trans-individual), the skeptical

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73The concept of "alienation" is admittedly suspicious (having so many different senses) but I have in mind the distinctly non-philosophical meaning suggested by Jameson (1988): "Far more adequately than the schizophrenic or natural man, the tragic symbol of the unavoidable alienation by language would seem to have been provided by Truffaut's film L'Enfant sauvage (The Wild Child), in which language learning comes before us as a racking torture, a palpably physical kind of suffering upon which the feral child is only imperfectly willing to enter." As for the precise Lacanian concept "alienation," it arises from the impossibility of reconciling the I of the statement (le sujet énoncé) and the I who speaks (le sujet énonciateur). I can never be the place from where I speak.

74Reflecting on the impossibility of identifying (in the common usage of the word— I am that!) with Descartes' cogito, Lacan (1966, 517) writes, "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking. These words render palpable to an attentive ear with what elusive ambiguity the ring of meaning flees from our grasp along the verbal string. What we must say is: I am not, where I am the plaything of my thought; I think about what I am where I do not think.
position that accounts for that gap is necessary for the order’s existence, that
is, its organization of its subjects lives.

Having argued that Crenshaw’s formulation of skepticism is a necessary element for
the constitution of any Symbolic system and is, in fact, the fundamental position of
the subject as such (i.e., the subject of language; what Lacan will call the subject-
of-the-signifier), we should now be clear about what we are not arguing. We do not
mean to imply that every statement or discourse is organized such that they equally
render this skeptical nature of subjectivity—this inability of any Symbolic order to
constitute itself without some remainder or lack—visible.

This is where we may again pick up the thread of Crenshaw’s essay and formalize
his observations regarding magnitudes or scales of skepticism.

- Skepticism is always in relation to something. Rather than speaking of skep-
ticism as such we should specify, skeptical vis-à-vis some X. (Thus large-scale
expressions of skepticism such as those represented in Job are scalar magnifi-
cations of more local skepticism directed at modest objects: the promissory
note of a merchant or even the profession of love.)

- It may be the case that the signifying system that undergirds the coherence
of a society as a whole—rather than this or that element of it—is the object
of skepticism. This is to formally account for a situation Crenshaw intuitively
links to collective skepticism, namely revolution:75

Skepticism’s genesis in the universal-rational means that it refused to become
the exclusive property of an intellectually elite group of people. Admittedly,
breakdowns often fail to achieve decisive breakthroughs for lack of popular
support. Such aristocratic revolutions always abort because they do not suc-
ceed in capturing the imagination of common people. The mere presence of
potentially revolutionary thoughts cannot alter the human situation unless the

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75 Crenshaw points out the tenuous connection between skepticism and the elite literary class
of a society, a commonplace assumption in biblical scholarship. “Acceptance of this plausible
hypothesis about the authors of the sapiental corpus may permit one to make significant observa-
tions concerning Job and Qoheleth,” he allows, but then points out the very truncated view such
literature gives us. Instead we should assume that “the skeptical voice reaches far beyond these
dissenting cries.” CRENSHAW, Skepticism, 5.
idea seizes the minds of those who alone can implement lasting change.\textsuperscript{76}

To summarize this point: Crenshaw posits the principle of universality as the basis of skepticism: it is both the “truth” skepticism doubts and the medium by which it gains traction. We have suggested that the form of the universality is language and consequentially skepticism may be a resistance within the system, exerted upon a localizable element of it; or, on the other hand, skepticism may resist the system as a whole, the situation of revolution.

To our formalization of Crenshaw’s analysis we should add the gains from our linguistically focused analysis above so as to make explicit that the opposition skepticism/system is, in both cases, an opposition located within the system (i.e., the skepticism that resists the system as a whole can only arise from within the system or, in terms more akin to Crenshaw’s, the skepticism that poses a threat to belief as a whole must necessarily be spoken from the most faithful position). Recalling that a certain degree of skepticism is necessary for the smooth functioning of any Symbolic order, we must simultaneously recognize that, to a certain extent, a Symbolic order must always be in revolt against itself in order to provide place-holders for its immanent limit, failure, void (which usually happens by externalizing it as the result of a particular, contingent threat which could/should be eliminated). The task of our analysis in the rest of this section on the historical limits of wisdom can now be more specifically defined with respect to these polyvalent skepticisms. Our task is to delimit and analyze those manifestations of skepticism that sustain the limits or failures of the sapiential Symbolic order (and thus do not represent historical limits of wisdom insofar as their revolts merely circle round the same conceptual coordinates) and those that overcome these limits, opening possibilities for new historical subjects of wisdom.

\textbf{C. Newsom 1989} \ We can move forward quite rapidly on this task by attending to Carol Newsom’s 1989 essay,\textsuperscript{77} which approaches the problem from the opposite tack as did Crenshaw in three decisive matters.

1. Whereas Crenshaw suspends judgment as to the intrinsic soundness of wisdom so as to render visible the modes of skepticism that sustain its coherence,\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Crenshaw, Skepticism}, 7-8. \textsuperscript{77} \textit{Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom.}
Newsom takes for granted the flawed nature of wisdom qua universal, then analyzes the failures of Prov 1-9 to assimilate these flaws into its world of meaning.

2. If Crenshaw wants to show how, in the case of the Hebrew Bible, skepticism sustains the prevailing sapiential ideology (here we are to think of the neutral usage of this term, ideology as a theory of how to live in and understand the world), Newsom wants to determine the seams of ideological contradiction, its lines of fracture (and here we are to assume deprecatory sense of ideology, i.e. "false consciousness"), and, given that, how to smash it.

3. And finally, if Crenshaw wants to show us the diachronic workings of skepticism as a particular ideological response that proceeds from the establishment of the "transcendent universal," Newsom puts aside the "noisy sphere" of ideology to lead us to the "hidden abode" of historical antagonism as the ontologically prior contradiction upon which all ideologies founder.

Thus to Crenshaw's "skeptic" we may juxtapose Newsom's "critic," identifying their difference from one another in terms of the questions What? (Crenshaw's descriptive account of skepticism's mutual-imbrication with "truth faith") and Why? (Newsom's turn toward the non-symbolic Real of historical antagonism).

Undoubtedly this presentation remains overly schematic,\(^*$^8$ but it nonetheless shows us how Newsom's different aim confronts us with a new and momentous problem: how to get behind/under ideology when the primary body of evidence is a modest corpus of texts that, if not "authored" tout court by an elite sector of society, were at the very least collated, arranged and preserved by them. Which is to say, in terms of the psychoanalytic/Lacanian inflection of our argument, how do we critique the Symbolic domestication of the Real given the necessarily Symbolic habitation of our critique. On this point, Newsom's argument is explicitly psychoanalytic (Lacan's name conspicuous in its absence\(^*$^9$) in that it names sexual difference as

\(^*$^8$ The specific argument of Newsom's essay is taken up in detail in the final part of this dissertation, especially in chapter 5.

\(^*$^9$ It should be noted that, although Newsom's article does not name Lacan, it speaks from within a recognizable French-Freudian framework and works with a notion of the Real mediated by Louis Althusser (page, 117) and Julia Kristeva (page, 122, 131 note 5), both highly influential
the locus of the Real's appearance, but as such only accessible through the Symbolic register, at the points of its antinomic breakdowns.

From this connection between sexual difference and the Real, Newsom deduces the diagnostic importance of those texts that seek to contain sexual difference, writing it according to the opposition Woman-Wisdom// the Strange-Woman. (In this sense, Newsom's argument should be credited as the inspiration for the third part of this dissertation.) The symbolization of sexual difference as the Strange-Woman, Newsom shows, is a deeply ambivalent gesture, stabilizing Proverbs' version of Wisdom as an enclosed ideological matrix, even while it fatally undermines Proverbs' coherence.

The Strange Woman figures the irreducible difference that prevents any discourse from establishing itself unproblematically. That is to say, she is not simply the speech of actual women, but she is the symbolic figure of a variety of marginal discourses. She is the contradiction, the dissonance that forces a dominant discourse to articulate itself and at the same time threatens to subvert it. Those dissonances can no more be eliminated than can sexual difference itself. And their existence is the source of slow but profound change in symbolic orders.80

The parallels with Crenshaw's argument (skepticism as that which both authenticates and subverts faith in the universal) are readily apparent. The Strange-Woman is the signifier of that which disturbs the discourse's ability to be meaningful and yet must be signified for the discourse to function. The discourse's tendency to fail at the production of meaning was associated above with the effects of the signifier as differentiated from and prior to the sign. Skepticism, we said, was the subjective position that would attend to the structure of the signifier rather than that of the sign. Newsom's association of these dissonances with sexual difference both libidinizes the skeptic as a desiring subject propelled by a lost object (the Edenic time of harmony between the sexes) as well as makes sexual difference the ineliminable source of historical time, i.e., "the slow but profound change in symbolic orders."81

by Lacan's work

80 Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 122, emphasis added.

81 Lacan (1974, 30) refers to the same connection between the Real of sexual difference and the historical narrative that emerges therefrom: "The sexual impasse exudes the fictions that rationalize the impossible within which it originates. I don't say they are imagined; like Freud, I read in them the invitation to the real that underwrites them."
What Newsom and Crenshaw leave open to misunderstanding and, incidentally, Lacan tells us Freud did as well, is whether the non-symbolizable Real of Crenshaw's proper or Newsom's marginal lie external to or excluded from the reality to which they stand opposed. Neither Crenshaw nor Newsom sufficiently clarify this issue so as to prevent its misunderstanding which, for us, is decisive. An affirmation along these lines transposes the limit of wisdom to a transcendent beyond, and so halts the dialectic of limit and essence we have been at pains to draw out of their work.

11 Essence and the logic of predication

To speak of Wisdom's essence is to confront, directly, the structure of predication. We are trying to complete a certain sentence (Wisdom is . . . ), which draws our attention to the fact wisdom's essence cannot be conceived of as a singularity but minimally involves a subject and a predicate: S is P, which we will simplify further as the determination of one signifier by a second signifier.

\[ S_1 \rightarrow S_2 \]

The simplicity of this abstract, pared down structure belies an immensely complex problematic, which has to do with the radical asymmetry between the two terms.

Consider the so-called "prologue" to the book of Proverbs. The six verses following the epigraph include more than a dozen different wisdom words.

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:
   for learning wisdom and instruction,
   for understanding words of insight,
   for acquiring the discipline of success:
       righteousness, justice, and equity;
   to teach shrewdness to the simple,
       knowledge and prudence to the young,
   that the wise might hear and increase learning,
   and the discerning acquire skill;
   to understand proverb and epigram,
       the words of the wise and their riddles.

\[^{82}\text{LACAN, Seminar XX, 55.}\]
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The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; 
fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Prov 1:1-7)

About this prologue von Rad candidly asks,

How can an exegesis which takes words seriously deal adequately with this series of statements? What do the many individual terms mean? In what sense are they associated with each other, and in what sense are they differentiated from each other? It would only be with difficulty that one would conclude that the prologue to the book of Proverbs is mere empty noise. How, then, is one to proceed? Presumably a comprehensive term, for which there is no longer any handy word, can be constructed here for the reader by the fact that, to a certain extent, into this prologue a number of terms have been inserted so that by this cumulation [Kumulierung] the desired extension of the conceptual range is achieved... By the cumulation of many terms the text seems to aim at something larger, something more comprehensive which could not be expressed satisfactorily by means of any one of the terms used.\textsuperscript{83}

This constellation of issues (significance as a "cumulative" effect, the desire for a comprehensive term, the fact that no one signifier seems able to convey this comprehensive field) are central to the concerns of this dissertation and can be linked conceptually under the term metonymy—a term that is not everywhere defined in the same way or to the same analytic effect. Setting aside for a moment Lacan’s profound psychoanalytic mapping, we come across metonymy in a cluster of rhetorical figures that are easily confused (e.g., synecdoche, metaphor, irony\textsuperscript{84}). Even at this first shallow approach, some clarification is required.

12 The Metonymic Essence of Wisdom

Lacan’s complex elaborations of metonymy and metaphor are not original but derive from the work of R. Jakobson, who understood signification in terms of a bipolar function, operating between the respective affordances of metaphor and metonymy.

\textsuperscript{83} Von Rad, Wisdom, 13.

\textsuperscript{84} This is not to suggest that such slippage results from a theoretical failure; Lévi-Strauss regularly shows how “metaphors take over the mission of metonyms, and vice versa,” so as to solve conceptual problems in stories. Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966, 150.
The development of discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively.\textsuperscript{85}

What this conceptualization of metonymy brings into focus is a specific relational logic, which, in contrast to metaphor, proceeds on the basis of contextual proximity: a connection in realia rather than the iconic or symbol-laden mediations of metaphor. If metaphor reconfigures a standard signified by positing a startling equivalence, e.g. womb for spoil in Judges 5:30, metonymy evokes an essential whole with reference to a spatial or temporal adjunct, e.g. gate for city in Gen 24:60. "It consists in using for the name of a thing or a relationship, an attribute, a suggested sense, or something closely related, such as effect for cause ... the imputed relationship being that of contiguity."\textsuperscript{86} The effect of metonymy is to circumscribe something (some Thing) that eludes signification: by artfully displacing the signified’s locus from one signifier to another, the lack language inscribes in being is formalized (and thus hidden) by convention. No one assumes that the city consists of a solitary gate; we are nonetheless spared the impossible task of defining what a city really is. (The effect of metaphor is precisely the opposite, to stimulate our awareness of the constructed quality of meaning; the use of womb in Judges 5:30 produces a meaning very different than if the author had stuck with a conventional synonym for plunder.)

Returning to von Rad’s quote, we can discern therein a description of a metonymic movement that encircles but cannot fill the absence of an adequate “comprehensive term.” The conceptual range aimed at by the pile of terms is, obviously, the essence of Wisdom, which eludes each signifier in turn but somehow in-sists in the chain that links them together.\textsuperscript{87} The introduction of the trope of metonymy is useful here

\textsuperscript{85}ROMAN JACOBSON, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances". In On Language Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990b, 129, my emphasis.


\textsuperscript{87}Whence we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning insists, but that none of the chain’s elements consists in the signification it can provide at that very moment." JACQUES
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because it allows us to understand why no word is "handy" (handitches) enough to signify the essence of wisdom that Proverbs purportedly conveys, even though each of them more or less has the same signified and seems merely to displace the others. Thus does metonymy provide a conceptual framework for understanding a common notion in the field, most recently articulated by M. Fox,

A variety of words are used for wisdom and knowledge ... These words have their own nuances and syntactic constraints, and various scholars have drawn distinctions among them ... But the wisdom words are pragmatic synonyms, conveying basically the same ideas ... The wisdom words form a lexical group that as a whole conveys the concept of wisdom. 88

This returns us to the thesis advanced in the introduction of this section, that the essence of wisdom becomes communicative only as a beyond, beyond the signifying limit of these most important of wisdom’s terms, a limit which prevents them from being up to the task of signifying Wisdom on their own. In other words, the essential substance of Wisdom is conveyed here as a lack in signifying potentiality, a level of non-identity in the signifier that propels our search for its essence onward.

13 The Tautological Essence of Wisdom

However, as long as we attribute the prologue's lack of a comprehensive term to an empirical difference posited between, for example, “wisdom” and “shrewdness,” or “wisdom” and “success,” we miss the inherent and structural lack that splits the field of Wisdom. Paradoxically, the true dimension of metonymy can be clarified most easily when at the level of content subject and predicate, S1 and S2, are filled by the same signifier. Consider the following proverb:

The beginning/essence (rēašt) of wisdom is
—get wisdom’” (Prov 4:7).

Does this formula of pure identity, A = A, short-circuit the vicious cycle of metonymy? We intuit that it doesn’t, that here, in fact, we learn nothing of substance about wisdom’s essence. But we should momentarily suspend the question of substance


so as to learn something of the form of signification, i.e. what is the formal basis of our intuition that the tautologous equation $A = A$ fails at the level of truth?

We can approach the question in a very concrete way: Wherein lies the difference such that the subject (whose place is held by the first $A$, whose essence we seek) is not determined without remainder by the predicate (the second $A$ that fills out the character of the first)? This question has in fact already been asked of Prov 4:7. Fox (2000, 175) recognizes the nonsensical quality of the verse, at least for the reader who encounters it for the first time. "It is tautologous," he notes, "to identify the beginning of getting something with getting it, as this verse seems to do." And further he seeks to explain the verse's true meaning along the lines we just mentioned (i.e. positing a difference between $hokmāh$ the subject and $hokmāh$ the predicate). What grounds does he find for this difference?

The first $hokmāh$ mentioned is wisdom of the sort possessed by the wise individual, the second is the content of the knowledge being taught. In other words: the first step toward becoming a wise man is to imbibe the teachings, even before understanding and applying them. The possession of this knowledge is not fully wisdom, but it will start you on the way to intelligence and judiciousness in thought and action.

Thus the apparent identity of subject and predicate is based upon a failure to reckon with a diversity inherent to Wisdom's semantic range. Fox's paraphrase of the verse, "The first step toward becoming a wise man is to imbibe the teachings," makes use of Wisdom's ability to mean (1) an overall positive feeling about knowledge, and (2) the sum content of the same knowledge. But does the semantic ambiguity of $hokmāh$ justify a reading which makes of the form $A = A$ a merely apparent tautology, whose true form is the conventional and much more useful $A = B$?

Fox's solution is demonstrably inadequate in that one can find no reason for not simply reversing the interpretative decision. Why not say that first $hokmāh$ refers to "the content of the knowledge being taught," the second to "the wisdom of a wise individual"—by which I understand Fox to mean something like a respect for knowledge and a desire to learn?\footnote{Michael Fox, Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary. New York: Doubleday, 2000, 175.} I am not trying to defend this second as

\footnote{This second reading, pace Fox, has many significant proponents, not the least of which are...}
the "right" reading but to highlight the impossibility of persuading ourselves one way or another. Indeed, the more obsessively we stake out one position, the more obvious the reasonableness of the other must appear. And stepping back, there is a perfectly logical reason why this is so. The ambiguity that belongs to the subject \( A \), the fact that it really stands for a set of meanings \( A_1, A_2, A_3, \ldots A_n \), cannot be contained to one side of the *copula*. The multiplicity at the heart of *ḥokmāḥ* here confounds the meaning of subject and predicate *in the same measure*.

14 AMBIGUITIES OF \textit{rēšīṭ}

Fox’s response, I think, would be that I had illicitly bracketed what he takes to be Prov 4:7’s most important word, i.e. \textit{rēšīṭ}. For it is true that if \textit{rēšīṭ} means a temporal beginning point, as Fox says it does,\(^1\) then the predication is not reversible, but rather Fox’s reading—"the first step...is to imbibe the teachings"—is demonstrably better. (Of course the corollary is equally to be affirmed, if \textit{rēšīṭ} means something like "essence" or "foundation," then my proposed alternative is preferable.)

As Fox indicates, the *locus classicus* for this questions is the book’s motto-verse: "The fear of \( Y h w h \) is the \textit{rēšīṭ} of knowledge" (1:7).

There are three main ways of interpreting Prov 1:7a, depending on whether \textit{rēšīṭ} , 'first,' means (1) first in time; (2) principle, essence, chief part; or (3) the best part in quality and importance...The only commentators to understand \textit{rēšīṭ} in the temporal sense alone seem to have been a few medievals. For instance, Ps.-Ibn Ezra says, 'This means the fear of the Lord is the first thing to know, and afterwards one may learn and know everything else.' This, I believe, correct. Though the fear of God is undoubtedly excellent, at issue here is not qualitative superiority. Fear of God is not the best part of wisdom, because it is not part of wisdom, one component among many. The topic of the Prologue [i.e., 1:1-7] is the value of the book for study, which leads to and enhances wisdom.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Those platitudes that distinguish "authentic wisdom" from "book smarts." Walke (2004, 77) distinguishes between wisdom and knowledge along these lines: "A person could memorize the book of Proverbs and still lack wisdom if it did not affect his heart."

\(^2\) In 4:7, even more clearly than in 1:7, \textit{rēšīṭ} means 'first' (in time), 'beginning.' Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 175.

\(^3\) Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 68.
Thus both terms—rēšāt and the fear-of Yhwh—are qualified with respect to Wisdom: not really part of its field but rather marking the crucial propædeutic posture of the young student.

In my view, Fox’s premise—there are three possible meanings of rēšāt; one must choose the correct one—presents us with a false choice, that in fact rēšāt means to convey something of the paradoxical nature of “progress” in wisdom. However, rather than enumerate those scholars who have understood rēšāt in terms of “essence” or, on the other hand, as irreducibly multi-semantic, I want to point out a certain inconsistency in Fox’s overall account of the constellation Wisdom, the fear-of Yhwh and rēšāt.

Leaving aside momentarily the question of rēšāt in relation to Wisdom, we can say something much more definite about its relation to the fear-of Yhwh, for Prov 1:7 unequivocally equates the two: “The fear-of Yhwh is the rēšāt...” In perfect concord with what he said about rēšāt (i.e. that it means the temporal beginning point), Fox understands the fear-of Yhwh in this context as “a prerequisite of wisdom...its propædeutic, the discipline that prepares the way for it.” However, this reading will not do for the entire scope of Prov 1-9, as the crucial passage 23-5 demonstrates.

Indeed, if to understanding you call,
if to insight you raise your voice,
if you seek it out like silver,
and like hidden treasure you search for it,
Then you will understand the fear-of Yhwh,
and the knowledge of God you will find.

Here, the fear-of Yhwh cannot be understood as a propædeutic entry point; rather it is highlighted as the end of an arduous process.

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93 For example, J. Crenshaw notes how the fear-of Yhwh was both “the beginning of all knowledge” but equally “the crowning achievement in wisdom.” Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, 12. 94 Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 68.
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If you call, raise, seek-out, search-for, then you will understand the fear of YHWH.

Fox notes of the turning point in 5a: “This [then] is the apodosis of the three conditionals combined… Whereas we would expect the quest for wisdom to culminate in the finding of wisdom, this verse makes an even greater claim. It promises no less than religious enlightenment: the understanding of the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God.” Thus we are led into a kind of paradox: the “pre-requisite” and the “culmination” of Wisdom are carried by the same signifier. Fox’s solution, a second time, is to posit and control a split within the signifier “fear.”

Wisdom both begins with fear of God (1:7; 9:10) and leads to it. If the child does his part… his fear of God will move to a higher stage… The simple fear of divine anger that prompted the first, juvenile steps toward wisdom matures into a reasoned, cognitive conscience… The temporal Fear of God motivates the search for wisdom, which develops into a more sophisticated fear of God, one in which a moral conscience is fused with knowledge of his will.

One must be careful, for there are two distinct claims being made. On the one hand, Fox posits an inherent temporal relationship between two experiences of fear. The “culminating” fear is a repetition; one arrives at its meaning only by passing through the prior, propædeutic fear. But second, this difference in time is mapped onto a substantive difference at the level of content: a simple, juvenile fright versus the deeper cognition of a reasoned conscience.

I wholeheartedly endorse the first observation and just as wholeheartedly reject the second, which seems to me the very distinction Prov 2:3-5 seeks to erase. Indeed the insight at which this passage aims has to do with the persistence, the repetition, of fear: even after a life of calling, seeking, searching, etc. the fear is

95 Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 110. 96 Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 111, 113.
97 The temporal movement of the passage is carefully paced out by the conditional structure (’if’ . . . ’then’ . . . ’then’). Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 112.
98 On the meaning of “fear” in Proverbs see the extended discussion on pages 215–228.
there as it was in the beginning. So too with the רָשָׁת of wisdom, its function in Prov 1-9 is not bifurcated along lexical lines; it refers always to the same content, and why should it not? What changes in the passage from being-foolish to being-wise is not the thing being observed but the perspective from which it is observed. With respect to Wisdom one is always at the beginning, the רָשָׁת. The fool sees this position and its appropriate posture of humility as something to be overcome (or worse, something that has already been overcome), but the sage recognizes and embraces a lack that is proper to humanity.

15 THE IDENTITY OF IDENTITY AND NON-IDENTITY

Thus we must seek to understand the form of tautology on different grounds, and for this we will do no better than Hegel, who paradoxically analyzed the statement \( A = A \) under the rubric of contradiction.

If anyone opens his mouth and promises to state what God is, namely God is—God, expectation is cheated, for what was expected was a different determination...Looking more closely at this tedious effect produced by such truth, we see that the beginning, “The plant [or, God] is—,” sets out to say something, to bring forward a further determination. But since only the same thing is repeated, the opposite has happened, nothing has emerged. Such identical talk therefore contradicts itself. Identity, instead of being in its own self truth and absolute truth, is consequently the very opposite; instead of being the unmoved simple, it is the passage beyond itself into the dissolution of itself.\(^\text{100}\)

The Hegelian “identity of identity and non-identity” is thus grounded in rules of discourse, its temporality, whereby the nomination of a subject necessarily moves toward some determination of content more than the abstract identity of the subject. Thus the proposition “Wisdom is—wisdom” highlights the non-identity at the heart of Wisdom much more starkly than do statements such as those in the prologue, “Wisdom is—instruction,” for example. In this latter proposition subject and predicate are not identical simply because wisdom is more than instruction; the equation of instruction and wisdom leaves an unspecified remainder. This excess/deficit reflects the most fundamental structure of metonymy, and it inhabits\(^\text{100}\)

\(^{99}\) See for example Prov 26:12 or any of the references to those who are “wise in their own eyes.”\(^{100}\) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Hegel’s Science of Logic. Amherst, NY: Humanity
our speech whenever we try to specify something (wisdom) as something else (instruction). On the other hand, tautology, in the guise of a proposition that would circumvent the limitations of "something as...," confronts us with a much sharper version of non-identity—non-identity sharpened to the point of contradiction. It does this by saying nothing about wisdom (thus the tedious bore such statements inflict on Hegel).

The distinction between the subject wisdom and the predicate wisdom, to return to the question we raised above (on page 61), cannot be conceived as resultant to wisdom’s multiple connotations, a degree of variability that belongs only on the side of the predicate. Wisdom qua subject, in other words, is the name of the One universal we are speaking of, an entity which must transcend/include within itself all the variety of its particular manifestations. Wisdom qua predicate, on the other hand, is the set by which this degree of difference is concretized and forced upon us: "...yes, that too must be reckoned wise." The contradiction that we experience in tautology arises out of gathering of these two radically different entities—the One universal versus all of its predicates—under the same signifier.

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{wisdom} & \text{wisdom} \\
\text{the One wisdom} & \text{all of its qualities} \\
S_1 & S_2, S_3, \ldots S_n
\end{array}
\]

The repetition of the signifier wisdom, which amounts to the reappearance of the subject in the place of the predicate, suggests that wisdom's essence, wisdom considered apart from its contingent manifestations, can only be approached by superimposing the series of lacks, whereby each predicate has not quite given the precise measure of wisdom. Therefore we should say, in the sentence

"Wisdom is... wisdom"

"... wisdom" represents lack as such.

Finally, the strictly negative magnitude of "... wisdom" is further underscored when we maintain the active sense of the imperative that introduces the predicate, "Get

Bucks, 1969 [1812/1831], 415.
wisdom? The syntax conveys not only the logical non-identity of the two wisdoms but equally the inerminable activity that compensates for the eternal lack. Thus as a formal indication, admitting that the ground for such a move will only be visible after the analysis is underway, we might imagine the lack instated by the imperative as a place-holder for the non-identity of wisdom with itself. The proposition "wisdom is—get wisdom," if we allow the imperative "get" to stand as a sign of the negative, creates the possibility that the series of all particular instances of wisdom (which we named $S_2$ above) and the non-identity inherent to the universal category wisdom ($S_1$) are present in the statements through which the essence of Wisdom, to quote von Rad yet again, becomes communicative.

16 THE SHAPE OF WISDOM

On the whole, this problem—the impossibility of signifying Wisdom with a "handy word"—has not excessively inhibited scholarly disquisitions of its essence. For if Wisdom is not articulable in One comprehensive signifier, its essence is not thereby discredited but displaced to a higher level, whether this is conceived in existential (Wisdom as a worldview) or literary (Wisdom as a genre) terms. Exemplary proposals for this broader conception of Wisdom's essence include von Rad's notion of Wirklichkeitsverst"andnis,\textsuperscript{101} Whybray's "intellectual tradition,"\textsuperscript{102} Murphy's "shared approach to reality,"\textsuperscript{103} and most recently Van Leeuwen's plea for a

\textsuperscript{101} E.g., Von Rad, Wisdom, 7.

\textsuperscript{102} Whybray (1974, 69-70) describes what unites this tradition as follows "The common interest in these books is an interest in the problems of human life: not the political problems of the nation of Israel, which, though of gigantic and tragic proportions, are never referred to here, but the problems of ordinary individual citizens: their relations with one another and within their own communities in their daily lives, their concern about the present and the future, including the fate of their children and descendants, and about the justice or injustice of their personal destinies."

As far as our detection of this "common interest" Whybray deploys a mostly terminological investigation to "find, in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, an element of common vocabulary...and, to some extent, though less evidently, of forms and style appropriate to the expression of thoughts on this particular range of subjects" Roger N. Whybray, The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974, BZAW, 70.

\textsuperscript{103} Murphy (1978, 39) outlines the assured "theses" and more speculative "hypotheses" that animate the study of wisdom literature. The second hypothesis runs as follows: "The problem of the relationship between wisdom literature and other portions of the Old Testament needs to be
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"critical-realist approach" that eschews a terminologically oriented basis of description, instead treating Wisdom as a literary and ideological "kind," on analogy with "things given in nature such as stones, plants, animals, and stars." Van Leeuwen is not making the claim that Wisdom is obvious and empirically given. His point, rather, is to draw out the complexity of all determinations along the lines, *This is that kind of thing...*

Natural kinds and human artifacts (like a monarchy or minuet) embody a richness of features and functions 'out there' in reality to which our analytic acts of comparison, contrast, and classification respond more or less adequately and according to our various epistemological or practical purposes... Thus a tree may belong to the classes of objects combustible, economic, aesthetic, and sacred. The real properties of the tree make possible its various functions in human use, including epistemological use. It is not simply one or another 'kind' of thing, as we arbitrarily choose to name it, but potentially many things, if we rightly name the one tree in its diverse aspects. The problem of the metonymic slide of signifiers (driven by the pursuit of the One) falls away as we change our focus from "the one Wisdom" to "its diverse aspects."

In the case of Wisdom, van Leeuwen wishes to range this diversity under the rubric of a unified *function,* which, in turn, marks the originally dispersed in-reformulated in terms of a shared approach to reality ... It is not a question of the direct influence of the sages or of the wisdom literature, but rather of an approach to reality which was shared by all Israelites in varying degrees. The teachers were of course the experts... but the existence of experts even presupposes that the average Israelite shared to some extent in the sapiential understanding of reality (which was, without doubt, not alien to Yahwism for them). Such an understanding was not a mode of thinking cultivated exclusively by one class; it was shared at all levels of society that interpreted daily experience. It came to be crystallized in a recognizable body of 'wisdom literature.'"

104 Van Leeuwen describes this as follows: "Epistemologically, I reject a positivist or objectivist approach, which assumes object and definition or name wholly correspond, but I do assume that a careful, critical-realist approach may produce a hermeneutical 'spiral' that advances our understanding of the ancient texts and wisdom." RAYMOND VAN LEEUWEN, "Form Criticism, Wisdom, and Psalms 111-12." In The Changing Face of Form Criticism Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003, 66.

105 VAN LEEUWEN, Form Criticism, Wisdom, and Psalms 111-12, 66.

106 VAN LEEUWEN, Form Criticism, Wisdom, and Psalms 111-12, 66.

107 Van Leeuwen marks his difference from the conventional procedures of form criticism here, in
stances with a recognizable form. In the case of a "literary kind," i.e. a genre, we can expect that the form will be manifestly complicated, constituted by a concatenation of already complex kinds, but nonetheless controlled by the unified function.

Genres attach to life settings or existence in terms of a common human problem or function, broad or narrow, as the case may be. [Following from this... ] genres possess common features, such as (but not limited to) subject matter, ordering devices, patterns, tone, illocutionary stance, style, and rhetoric as a result of the rules of parsimony and tradition. Humans find and repeatedly use these patterns of speech that do a particular communicative job best, both on the macro-level, and on the micro-level of generic subunits or elements. A successful instance of a genre will relate all of its language elements to one another and to a human problem so that the whole and its parts work harmoniously and parsimoniously to accomplish the genre’s main function (and sub-functions) well... To accomplish a certain function, an artifact must have a certain "shape..." 108.

This apparently sets forth a programmatically different approach to define Wisdom’s essence in terms of its overriding function (presumably “to teach”) as this function is invested into any number of specific situations or institutional settings. What we are after, in other words, is not the Wisdom thing, but the Wisdom pattern, its shape. 109

108 Van Leeuwen, Form Criticism, Wisdom, and Psalms 111-12, 83.
109 Figurations of reality in terms of a “pattern” or “shape” (one could just as well add “network” or “matrix”—any of the currently prevailing spatial metaphors for the nature of reality) reflect the pervasive intellectual influence of structural linguistics and its overwhelmingly topological conceptualization of meaning. One can register this intellectual emergence in every zone of intellectual production, but perhaps nowhere so crisply as in science fiction writing and its very productive engagement with computer networks. I am thinking of Williams Gibson’s eccentric philosophe Gentry, “who was convinced that cyberspace had a Shape, an overall total form. Not that that was the weirdest idea... but Gentry had this obsessive conviction that the Shape mattered totally. The apprehension of the Shape was Gentry’s grail.” William Gibson, Mona Lisa Overdrive. New York: Bantam Books, 1989, 75.

When later a disciple inquires after Gentry’s uncanny knowledge of cyberspace, Gentry’s re-
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Scholars have sought this shape to varying degrees in a number of different spheres of experience upon which the sages reflected. A cursory review of the main situational topoi in whose terms the sages articulated their intellectual tradition immediately exposes the kinds of homologies Van Leeuwen has in mind.

Creation At the most macro-scale, the sage understood the universe itself to be a pedagogical object. The essence of Wisdom here is understood as an invisible underlayment to the manifold expressions of creaturely life. W. Zimmerli, who first articulated these themes in 1933,110 understood wisdom's driving question to be the “good of man,” but in this calculus the order of creation is the “final determining instant.” The question of human good is reducible to the question “How do I make use of the bounds fixed about me to my own advantage?”111 In a later articulation of the relation between Wisdom and creation, Zimmerli focused on the theological distinctiveness of Wisdom vis-à-vis the rest of the HB/OT.112 Whereas the latter, in Zimmerli’s view, is concerned chiefly with history and the outworking of Yhwh’s covenant with Israel, “Wisdom thinks resolutely in the framework of a theology of creation.”113 Zimmerli draws two consequences from this fact:

- **World** reflects or, better, expresses the character of the divine Creator.
- The role of humanity—*homo sapiens*—as made in the image of God means that the operations of Wisdom exceed the practices of naming or discerning an extant order; the responsibility of Wisdom is extended to the function of *establishing*, and even *ruling*.114 This order. Despite the infinite gap between the divine and human, “man knows that God authorizes him to go out into the world, to observe, to establish the things of the world.”115


111Zimmerli, Structure, 177.


114Decisive for Zimmerli’s reading is the Priestly benediction of Gen 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

Ethics The related fields of ethics, morality and character-formation naturally constituted a distinct sub-complex of the sapiential worldview, the primary metaphor for which was a categorical image of “two paths”: on one side, a straight path (2:13), a pure path (13:6), a just path (2:8), the path of life (6:23); on the other, crooked paths (2:15), a deviant path (14:2), a wicked path (4:14), the path of death (7:27).

On this path of life two distinct groups of pilgrims walked toward different goals. They were known as the *wise* and the *foolish*; all people fell into one or the other category. In the view of the sages, no middle ground existed for those who participated in folly, or in wisdom, only minimally. Moreover, an ethical understanding of the two categories prevailed. The wise were righteous and the fools wicked. This surprising conclusion arose from the operative assumption that anyone who strengthened the order upholding the universe belonged to God’s forces, while those who undermined this harmony were enemies of the creator.116

But for the sage, the sharp ethical binary does not lead, as in the prophetic literature to the valorization of “righteous wrath,” nor to any galvanizing political determination to unseat the foolish and/or wicked. On the contrary, it is the *fool* who does not perceive in the present configuration of the world the operations of a self-correcting domain of justice. Thus the *sine qua non* of sapiential ethics is the maintenance or, in an extreme case, re-constitution of an always-already existing order.

The counsel of the sages and the teaching of the elders or of the wise point to insight for living and to the formation of a balanced, good, and consequently successful life within the then recognized orders of the world that were to be actualized anew.117

Society Clearly related to the question of ethics is the sapiential ideal of an integral, harmonious *society*. W. Brown has argued against the common charge that the ethic of wisdom is reducible to instrumentality (Wisdom’s notorious eudæmonistic outlook). Brown does not deny the frequency of “instrumental or practical values”118 but reads their significance relative to the overarching value of the community’s well-being. What is *wise* is that which solidifies intra-communal connections; what is *foolish* is that which attenuates the same bonds.

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116Chesnash, Old Testament Wisdom, 66. 117Preuss, Old Testament Theology, 204.
118William Brown, Character in Crisis: a Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the
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This anti-community ethos is most graphically represented by the personified form of the “strange” or “alien” woman, to whom the reader is first introduced in 2:16-19. From the very outset, this outsider is described as the one who has severed and overturned the most basic of communal ties, the marriage covenant (2:17), an act that schemes to ambush the innocent in chap. 1. In either case, at stake is the very survival of the covenant community, on behalf of which wisdom and her arsenal of virtues wage their defense.119

Knowledge. Finally, and most reflectively, the sages delimited what constituted knowledge: history becomes not an opaque thing but a sign of a deeper intelligibility, revealing the operations of a “rational rule.”

‘Rule’ means something permanently valid, something by which one can reckon, on which one can rely. ‘Rational’ means that this rule is supported by general evidence which can be controlled and confirmed by the mind. That this validity and this evidence are not absolute, excluding any discussion from the outset, that conflicting questions are also possible, that, therefore, if need be the rule must be modified or, in the last resort, even replaced by a better one—all this is of the essence of the subject...

This definition, of course, already produces a deep gulf between the intellectual striving of the wise teachers on the one hand and that of the narrators, theologians of history, etc., on the other. And this is justifiable, for the intellectual activity of these two types was quite different, as were the subjects with which they were each concerned. In the one case, Hebrew man examined his sphere of life closely for reliable orders and gathered together whatever could be expressed in the form of rules. In the other case, he came upon Yahweh’s irreversible historical decrees, which certainly could not be expressed in the form of rules and which, at least at first sight, were actually unique in character. In the one case it was a question of stating what was eternally valid, of noting general, human experiences; in the other, of occurrences which established unique political and cultic facts.120

The quality of phenomena rejected by the sages (and it is precisely in this sense that the comparisons between the Hebrew הַוָּדָי and the Greek σοφία should not be dismissed in overly hasty fashion) is that of contingency—the “unique,” the opaque


119BROWN, Character in Crisis: a Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, 34.

120VON RAD, Wisdom, 289.
decree of the "political fact." What appears as such is either misapprehended or calls for a reconfiguration of the "rational rule" as it has been formerly understood. But in so far as the rule is articulated already to account for a large set of data, the reconfigurations will de facto take the form of "adjustments." What does not belong to this ethic, as von Rad here indicates, is the disruptive surging forth of the prophetic "thus says Yhwh . . .," i.e. the possibility of revolution. Such a radical reconfiguration of reality is inconsistent with the ontological commitment to the "permanently valid."

17 Order is...

Following Van Leeuwen, the essence of wisdom is not to be sought in one quidditative moment of its content—epistemology, for example, or creation as the purest expression of wisdom—but rather in the architectonic logic that binds all the moments together, constituting their differences as a harmonious whole. As M. Fox has put it more recently, "there is no prime axiom from which all ideas are spun out; the system itself is primary." And further, "an ideal of harmony is central to the system." The question of essence thus considered calls for a mapping of latent correspondences: the way a law of nature coheres with one of ethics, a singular principle subtends both the structure of knowledge and the structure of a community. "To be wise, one must acquire a sense of harmony, a sensitivity to what is fitting and right in all realms of attitude and behavior... a moral aesthetic."

To fill out these propositions, we should be able to describe this matrix, at least partially, by positing linkages between the four "local" wisdoms we have identified.

\[ \text{Wisdom} \equiv \{ \text{wisdom as creation, wisdom as ethics, wisdom as society, wisdom as knowledge} \} \]

In the form of a question: On what grounds are creation, ethics, society and knowledge rendered concordant?

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\[ ^{121} \text{Fox, Journal of Biblical Literature, No. 4, vol. 126, 2007, 677.} \]
\[ ^{122} \text{Fox, Journal of Biblical Literature, No. 4, vol. 126, 2007, 677.} \]
\[ ^{123} \text{Fox, Journal of Biblical Literature, No. 4, vol. 126, 2007, 681, emphasis added.} \]
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I suspect that the answer is not controversial, and we need only recite again the classical statements on these themes.

- **What does wisdom perceive of creation?** The order of the divine world.
- **How does wisdom judge an act ethical?** The right time and place for each deed or word.
- **To what social ideal does wisdom aspire?** The maintenance and governance of the community.
- **From the perspective of wisdom what is the form of truth?** The rational rule... something permanently valid.

A certain semantic field defined by such signifiers as order, propriety, harmony, permanence belongs to all domains of wisdom, to the extent that order as such, i.e. abstracted from any particular ordered content, comes to be identified as the *sine qua non* of wisdom. "The fundamental assumption, taken for granted in every representation of biblical wisdom, consisted of a conviction that being wise meant a search for and maintenance of order."  

At this point an uncanny re-doubling takes place.

1. Following Van Leeuwen we have posited the essence of wisdom is irreducible to a thing but rather must be apprehended relationally, a pattern or shape of thought—an order.

2. Seeking to apply this methodological dictum, we have discovered that the content of the various domains of wisdom— the diverse stuff out of which we are seeking a sapiential order—is order.

I am making the following point. The tautological contradiction adumbrated above—wisdom is ... acquire wisdom—is not banished when we render wisdom by a more complex relational algebra. Once again, we are left with the tedious form of $A = A$: the order of wisdom is ... order.

18 **WOMAN-WISDOM AND THE ESSENCE OF WISDOM**

The reader will at this point feel somewhat annoyed, as if all of this has been a pedantic exercise, for the Jewish sages frontally faced the problem of constituting

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124 CRENSHAW, Old Testament Wisdom, 11.
Wisdom as a totality. And was not their solution much more elegant than the cumbersome machinations of Hegel’s logic? And, fully granting the mythic nature of the sages’ solution, have we not by now learned better than to assume the superiority of “modern science” and “western thought” to the ingenious operations of *bricolage* and *la pensée sauvage*? How, at the level of poetics, did the sages transmute the multitudinous plurality of wisdom into a totalized One? It becomes at this point somewhat obvious that we have artificially delayed the signal contribution of Woman-Wisdom.

There are multiple scholarly accounts of what I would call Woman-Wisdom’s *synthetic function*, by which I refer to the way she condenses wisdom’s many predicates, meaning’s many significations, and history’s many vicissitudes by virtue of her embodied unity. I would say it is remarkable, given the divergent and frequently antagonistic interpretations of Woman-Wisdom’s significance, this function that constitutes from the many wisdoms to the One Wisdom is universally ascribed to her.

For example, von Rad conceives of Woman-Wisdom as a means of revelation alternative to the historical orientation of Israel’s normative intellectual production, couched in “Yhwh’s irreversible historical decrees, which certainly could not be expressed in the form of rules and which, at least at first sight, were actually unique in character.” In the case of Wisdom, as a contrasting mode of revelation, “a bearer of revelation intervenes in the dialogue between Yhwh and Israel, someone who has not hitherto been heard in this role”:

> the voice of primeval order, a voice which came from creation...a means of revelation of particular interest to the wise men...They were completely engrossed by the call of this voice and by the task of letting it be heard. There is no basis for the suggestion that, polemically and exclusively, they set this bearer of revelation

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125 On the formal difference between scientific and mythic thought see LEVI-STRAUSS, The Savage Mind, which in dazzling fashion demonstrates the profound levels of abstraction reached by “primitive” thought.

126 On the role of revelation in wisdom literature see ¶ 7 on page 34. At the conclusion of this study (¶ 98 on page 324) I will have the opportunity to discuss the important thesis of KAREL VAN DER TOORN, Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007.

127 VON RAD, Wisdom, 289.
up against all others that were thus far known in Israel. One may, rather, suppose that the voice of this revelation filled a gap and satisfied a theological need which had begun to be felt.\textsuperscript{128}

This gap, for von Rad, lies between the comprehension of a “rational rule”\textsuperscript{129} and the enigmatic contingency of history and the “unique event.”\textsuperscript{130} In his discussion of the “process of tradition from old practical wisdom to the doctrine of the self-revelation of creation,” von Rad writes,

The order which was formerly perceived in a vague and unthinking way and as existing in many different forms must have more and more become the object of thought (\textit{Gegenstand der Reflexion}). It was objectified as something which was uniform (\textit{etwas Einheitliches}) and which could be perceived in every separate experience (\textit{in allen Einzelfahrungen}), and it was conceptually determined (as ‘wisdom’).

Life, then, does not depend simply on wise behavior [as in the practical sentences], but on man’s ‘finding’ of ‘wisdom’... it is she, therefore, who brings order to the whole of life in God’s eyes (\textit{sie ist es also, die das ganze Leben vor Gott in Ordnung bringt}).\textsuperscript{131}

In her seeking and being sought, Woman-Wisdom punctuates the sages’ separate and diverse experiences. By this intervention the manifold is ordered and spoken as a reflection of the coherent theological order inscribed in creation.

But even in much less theological accounts of Proverbs, the form in which the problem of diversity is posed and considered to be solved by Woman-Wisdom follows the pattern described by von Rad. Thus Claudia Camp prefers to speak in terms of stylistics and “the [poetic] functions of personification.”\textsuperscript{132} The opposition she has in mind concerns not the distance between human and divine spheres (as with von Rad) but the tension in Proverbs between multiplicity and unity.\textsuperscript{133} The aphoristic

\textsuperscript{128} von Rad, Wisdom, 163-164. \textsuperscript{129} von Rad, Wisdom, 289. \textsuperscript{130} von Rad, Wisdom, 290.


\textsuperscript{132} Camp’s thesis as to the poetic function of personification has been broadly accepted and in some cases advanced beyond her 1985 statement. Schroer (20001, 26) (on whose furtherings see ¶ 35 on page 140) echoes, “In its literary-poetic function personification emphasizes the unity of the subject... At the same time personification generalizes multiplicity. From the widest variety...
sentences effect a sense of communal identity by their performative evocation of what is concrete and particular, "their reference to some one particular thing or idea with which all participants are familiar." But there is a conceptual risk in constantly ratifying the value of the particular. At a certain point, the proliferation of autonomous and even contradictory local truths creates an "aura of sheer randomness." Personification thus maintains the sense of the particular whereby the subject recognizes the way the world is being portrayed—for each hearer, it is a familiar world, marked by recognizable experiences—but at the same time protects the ideological field from disintegrating beyond serviceability to the social project it is harnessed to.

Personification involves a reduction of the ambiguous, multi-faceted and/or unique to the typical... The generalizing movement of personification sets a needed balance to the particularizing movement of the proverbs... The personification of Wisdom provides a unifying focus for the composition.

Despite their stark differences apropos method and, oftentimes, conclusions, Camp and von Rad are fundamentally united when it comes to the central, synthesizing function of Woman-Wisdom. Woman-Wisdom gives Proverbs' wisdom a unity (be it theological, existential, or literary) of which the sentence collections alone are incapable.

It is M. Fox who has developed this trope of unity out of diversity with the most sustained and vigorous argumentation.

In Proverbs, the authors of the personification poems in chapters 1-9 (1:20-33; 8:1-0:36 9:1-18) elevated the old wisdom of practical and moral counsels to the status of an eternal and transcendent power and personified it as a woman.

134 CAMP, 216. 135 CAMP, 217. 136 CAMP, 216-17. 137 I refer to Prov 10-29.
138 More recently Fox has characterized Proverbs as a working out of "centrifugal and centripetal forces," a formulation which accentuates equally the qualities of diversity and unity. MICHAEL FOX, "The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs". In Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996, 227. But even here, in his most nuanced discussion of this tension, Fox shows how the diversity inherent to the sentence collections is ultimately subsumed to the unifying work of the sages.
The wisdom of the mythos is atemporal, unbound by time and thus immutable. We cannot picture her growing or maturing as humans discover more truths or shrinking and withering if truths are forgotten or ignored. Her history is really ontology: She is at once a child to God and a patron to humans. The difference belongs to hierarchy, not development.140

The great principle of the wisdom interludes is that all knowledge proceeds from a single source beyond time and locale, communicating itself to human sages and through them. The personification interludes convey this idea through the mythos of a woman. Wisdom speaking wisdom. To use an analogy from modern linguistics, we might say that the limitless teaching that humans can shape, learn and transmit are generated from the transcendent wisdom in the same way as an infinity of possible utterances can be "generated" from the deep structure of language.141

Lady Wisdom symbolizes the perfect and transcendent universal of which the particulars of human wisdom are imperfect images or realizations. Like a Platonic eidos, the wisdom-universal exists objectively and not only as an abstraction or mental construct. It dwells in special proximity to God—"before him", present to his mind—while maintaining a distinct existence. As a universal, it exists in both the supernal realm (universal, atemporal, extramundane) and the human (time-bound, worldly, belonging to particular peoples, realized in specific words). This transcendent wisdom now and ever presents itself to humanity, meaning that the wisdom that people can learn, such are the wise teachings of Proverbs, are manifestations or precipitates of a universal, unitary wisdom.142

We carry this image of Lady wisdom with us as we enter the proverb collections that hold the wisdom of Solomon and other ancient sages. The image informs us that the sundry, often homely, Proverbs of the father/teacher, Israel’s anonymous sages, even of Solomon himself, speak with a single voice: wisdom’s own.143

We are thus faced with the possibility or even probability that the determination of Wisdom’s essence remains stuck as long as it takes the form Wisdom is... and then searches for the proper predicate (or combination thereof). The consensus as to the synthetic function of Woman-Wisdom144 suggests that we should proceed on the basis of an altogether different sentence, namely She is Wisdom.

144 This is not to suggest, as we will shortly see, an overall consensus apropos of Woman-Wisdom’s
meaning.
Chapter 3

The Subject and Object of Wisdom

Whoever takes joy at calamity—he will not go unpunished

Prov 17:5
anonymous sage

In your calamity I will laugh; I will jeer when your terror comes.

Prov 1:26
Woman Wisdom

19 Proverbs 1:22-33: text and translation

'ad-mātay 22a How long
pətāyim tē-ēhāḇā pett 22b Petayim1 will you2 love pett?
wēlēšm lāšon ḥāmā ≥ lāhem 22c —since3 scorners have delighted to scorn?
akēsilm yīsn c-a-dā′at 22c —while fools will hate knowledge?
tāšābā lītōkahī 23a Turn-back to my reproof.4

...
hinnēh 'abbēh lēkem rāhī 23b Look, I pour out to you my spirit;
chéřā bābāray etkem 23c I make my words known to you.

... 23d

ya’an gārātī wātēmāēnā 24a Because I called and you refused,
ntyy ydy wyn māṣēy 24b I stretched-out my hand but no takers,
wātētrēmā kōl-āśātt 25a you ignored all my advice,
wētōkāḥtī lōʾ ʾēbēm 25b and my direction you did not want—
gam-śānē bē-èdākmē yēšāq 26a for my part then, in your calamity I will laugh.
ēlāg bēbōʾ pāḥādēkem 26b I will jeer when comes your dread:
bēbōʾ kēšōāh pāḥādēkem 26c coming like a devastation, your dread,
wē-èdākmē kēsāpāh yēṭēh 26d your calamity, like a storm moving in,
bēbōʾ-ālēkem šārāh wēšāqāh 26e coming against you—distress and oppression.

... 26f

āz yāqōwunēn wēlōʾēnēh 28a Then they will call me and I will not answer.
yēšāh-śunēnān wēlōʾ yımšāwunēn 28c They will seek me but not find me.
tahāt kē-sānē ēdāt 29b For indeed they did hate knowledge,
wēyirat yhuḥ lōʾ bōḥāhrā 29c and the fear-of Yēhw they did not chose.
lōʾ-ābā lō-āśātt 30a They did not want my advice.
nō-āsā kōl-tōkāḥtē 30b They spurned my direction.

... 30c

wēyōkēlā tīmpārē darkām 31a So they eat the fruit of their way,
ūmimmō-āṣōtēhem yēšbāū 31b and by their own paths they will be filled.
kt mēšābat pētāyim tāhārmē 32a For the back-turning of the pētāyim kills them,
wēsāluw kēstām tēabbēdēm 32b as the ease of fools destroys them.
wēšōmē qē ḫēkōn-ētēh 33a But one who hears me will live confidently,
wēsānān mīppāhād rā’āh 33b untroubled by evil dread.

20 The inaugural speech

Having established the synthetic, unifying function of Woman-Wisdom with respect to the centripetal tendencies of Wisdom, scholarship has naturally paid a great deal of attention to the poetic interludes of Prov 1-9 wherein Woman-Wisdom directly
addresses her audience. In this chapter we turn our attention to the first such address, Prov 1:22-33, the interpretation of which is widely understood to be difficult. Two fundamental questions elude scholarly accord:

1. To whom does Woman-Wisdom address her message?

2. What ethical mandate, if any, is put upon this addressee?

Our thesis, to state here what must be worked out over the course of the argument, is that these problems arise directly from a presupposed image of Woman-Wisdom's identity, located at the intersection of two philosophical tropes: on one hand, the perfect Platonic form (¶ 18 on page 78), on the other, the Kantian Ding-an-sich, beyond the realm of objective appearance (¶ 3 on page 8).

In the following sections we take up these questions—whom does Woman-Wisdom address? what does she want?—showing how they remain unanswerable as long as Woman-Wisdom's own status as subject is not analyzed. Heretofore the speech's contradictions have been laid entirely at the feet of Woman-Wisdom's human audience, the objects of her speech. Our own constructive proposal aims to account for her role as a speaking subject and thereby clarify several exegetical impasses.

21 THE QUESTION OF CHARACTER (I)

That the identity of Woman-Wisdom's addressee poses any difficulty may strike some readers as odd insofar as she specifically names three groups in v 22—the pē-tāyim (which we will leave untranslated as pēt or pētāyim until a clear meaning emerges), the lṣynm [="scorners"], and the kṣylmḥ [="fools"]. It is problematic, however, to lump the three characters under Woman-Wisdom's singular ethical judgment, a problem arising from a hesitation around the term pēt. 5 In the context of Proverbs' fundamentally binary ideology—its rigid "two ways" of wisdom and folly in which "no middle ground existed"6—the pēt does not fit. Whereas the scorners and the fool are unquestionably culpable, the pēt is neither wise nor foolish, or better—not yet wise, not yet foolish. 7 Various translated in such instances

5In Prov 1:22 there is a confusing usage of pēt, which is used to convey the abstract sense of "simplicity" rather than the singular nomina agenticis, "a simpleton."

6Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, 66.

7Considering the Hebrew Bible as a whole, the ethical opposition between ḫkm and pēt can be
as "naive," "simple," or "gullible," the person disrupts the smooth functioning of Proverbs' discourse, even as it is its condition of possibility. Said another way, the person highlights a split between

1. the content of Proverbs: its repeated claim that people are either wise or foolish, and

2. Proverbs' position of enunciation: the pedagogical aim of forming the next generation of wise students as "fearers-of-YHWH." Thus, when the prologue (1:1-7) defines the purpose of Proverbs, "to give to the person prudence" (1:4), it undermines its own absolute demarcation between wise and foolish: Proverbs' raison d'être concerns a kind of person, a person, that is neither. If this is the sense of person being invoked here, then we must read the parallelism of v 22 as oppositional, though the opposition is not the usual one of wise/foolish but rather not-foolish/foolish, or not-yet-foolish/foolish.

constructed in two opposed ways. Just as wisdom can be read negatively—as scheming, calculating, hubristic, etc.—person can be cast in positive terms, as with Ps 116:6, "A guard of the simple (ptým) is YHWH." It is not clear that this ambivalence is resolved even when we restrict ourselves to Proverbs alone. Many interpreters find in Proverbs an appreciation of an earthly folk-wisdom, set over and against the abstractions of philosophical knowledge. Westermann (1990, 45), for example, sees Prov 10-29 as a monument to the sensibilities of a "simple people" (einfaches Leute). All of which are somewhat misleading insofar as they connote a meaning-content that pushes person in the direction of folly.

*Yoder, Fearers.

This split between the "subject of the statement" (le sujet énoncé—the I which functions as the grammatical subject of a given statement) and the "subject of the enunciation" (le sujet énonciation—the I who speaks) signals, for Lacan, the limit of structuralism as the philosophical death of the subject. What Lacan describes in structuralist terms as the epiphenomenal effect of an a-subjective structure—Lévi-Strauss's symbolic-mythic matrix, Foucault's episteme, Althusser's "process without a subject," Derrida's différance, etc.—is limited to the ego, the way the subject imagines itself to be as per the I of the statement (le sujet énoncé). But the ego is not the Lacanian subject, which emerges precisely where the (self-conscious) ego confronts/recognizes something deeply alien at its very core, something that speaks in the paraphrases of the analyst's speech and in dreams.

*This is Freud's term (Fehlleistung), which he used to denote actions dismissed as mistakes, which, on another level, were not mistaken whatsoever. The classic examples outlined in Psychopathology of Everyday Life are forgetting (Vergessen), slips of the tongue (Versprechen) and slips of the pen (Verschreiben).
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

In this particular passage, the odd status of the $p\text{̄}t\text{ā}y\text{im}$ is seemingly underscored by poetic and syntactic disruptions to Proverbs' "normal" modes of articulation—coincidentally, three such disruptions.

1. The trilinear construction of vv 22-23, though not unique, is exceptional against the standard of two-line parallelism. This violation is judged sufficiently suspicious to warrant textual emendation:

   A verse with three lines is surprising here and in verse 23 in a passage in which two lines are normal. Although it would be unwise to reject the Hebrew text solely because it has three lines and to try to force everything into a rigid mould of verses with no more than two lines each, the metrical difficulty has cumulative force where there are other difficulties. It is therefore understandable that some commentators have resorted to emendation.\textsuperscript{11}

2. The temporal orientation of the address is uncertain due to the peculiar dispensation of imperfect and perfect verbs: from the imperfect (v 22a), to the perfect (v 22b),\textsuperscript{12} back to the imperfect (v 22c).

3. Equally disorientating are the shifts in perspective that characterize Woman-Wisdom's discourse: from direct address—"How long, $p\text{̄}t\text{ā}y\text{im}$, will you love..." (v 22a), to indirect—"they will delight themselves...they hate knowledge" (vv 22bc), back to direct—"Turn (you) to my reproof" (v 23a).\textsuperscript{13}

   For all this, it is difficult to place the $p\text{̄}t\text{ā}y\text{im}$ entirely outside the ethical binary, for Proverbs itself often incorporates the $pt\checkmark\checkmark$ into the schema of two ways. Whereas the prologue seems to demand a reading of the $pt\checkmark\checkmark$ as a third position, outside the dyad wise-foolish, Proverbs frequently uses $pt\checkmark\checkmark$ (or related forms, i.e. $p\checkmark\checkmark$, $p\checkmark\checkmark\checkmark$, $pt\text{yw}t\checkmark$) to signify a kind of fool. In these cases the $pt\checkmark\checkmark$ is a particular species of the genus fool, still differentiated from other fools on the axis of potential but not in a way that redeems his foolishness, for it is in his character to squander this potential. The $pt\checkmark\checkmark$ may indeed discern a difference between sages and fools, but

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\textsuperscript{11}Emerton, 610.

\textsuperscript{12}The perfect of $hmdw$ is felt to be particularly awkward in light of the interrogative "How long?" (d-mty). See Emerton, 610.

\textsuperscript{13}The change from the second person in line $a$ to the third in lines $b$ and $c$, and then back to the second in verse 23, is harsh." Emerton, 610.
he constantly underestimates what is at stake in committing to Wisdom. This is the generally negative view of such verses as the following:

For the back-turning of the naive (p'tāyim) will kill them,
    And the complacency of fools will destroy them. (1:32)

The woman of folly is boisterous,
    She is naive (p'tāyyūt) and knows nothing. (9:13)

The naive (pett) believes everything,
    But the sensible man considers his steps. (14:15)

The naive (p'tāyim) inherit foolishness,
    But the sensible are crowned with knowledge. (14:18)

The prudent sees the evil and hides himself,
    But the naive (p'tāyim) go on, and are punished for it. (22:3)

A prudent man sees evil and hides himself,
    The naive (p'tāyim) proceed and pay the penalty. (27:12)

Thus there is no evidential procedure by which to settle the meaning of pett and so the precise character of Woman-Wisdom’s addressee. The usual lexical modes of analysis yield an inherent ambiguity to the term.

Perhaps the most elegant “solutions” to these features of the text can be found among those who posit the p’tāyim as the exclusive addressee of the passage and construe the reference to the scorners and fools either as a parenthetical aside, or, alternatively, a point of comparison.14 This is the direction taken by B. Waltke’s commentary, 15 which translates vv 22-23a as follows:

How long, you gullible, will you love being gullible—and mockers delight themselves
    with mocking and fools hate knowledge? Turn back [you gullible young people],

14We find this option preferable because it neither over-hastily amends the text nor does it prematurely obscure the ambiguity of the pett and its difference vis-à-vis the other groups mentioned in v 22.

15See also DeLITZSCH (1874, 70): “Intentionally, Wisdom addresses only the p’tāyim, to whom she expects to find soonest access.” Similar is Otto Plöger, Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia). Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

to my rebuke.\textsuperscript{16}

The parenthetical reference to the more reprobate fools functions to warn the peti about potential disaster.

Her aside comments about mockers and fools (1:22b \( = \) my 1:22bc) are not part of her call to repentance. She addresses only the gullible (vv. 22a, 23). Her aside, however, lumps the gullible [=the \( p^\prime t\acute{\alpha}yim \)] together with fools and mockers and implicitly warns them against a progressive hardening in apostasy; they, too, may come to hate her and even to covet the ability to mock her.\textsuperscript{17}

The remainder of Woman-Wisdom's undeniably harsh speech is read as an object lesson for the \( p^\prime t\acute{\alpha}yim \), a picture of the future should he not commit entirely and immediately to the path of wisdom.

Better still, in my view, is the proposal of S. Harris to understand vv 22bc as points of comparison on the basis of which the \( p^\prime t\acute{\alpha}yim \) are being rebuked.\textsuperscript{18} He translates:

How long, O simple ones, will you love simplicity? As [long as] babblers delight in babbling? As [long as] fools hate knowledge?\textsuperscript{19}

Here the semantic difference between \( p^\prime t\acute{\alpha}yim \), as well as the alternation between 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} person speech, are not "intrusive discrepancies" to be overcome on the way to understanding Woman-Wisdom's speech, for the dissonance they evoke belongs to the essence of what she is saying to the \( p^\prime t\acute{\alpha}yim \).

Understanding the various disjunctions as the basis of a comparison, in my view, equally illumines the aspeccual/temporal shifts, though this is not brought

\textsuperscript{16}WALTKE (2004, 198) explains the bracketed insertion in the text of his translation as follows: "The insertion clarifying 'you' refers to the gullible, not the fools and scoffers of the parenthesis."


\textsuperscript{18}Grammatically, this involves understanding the conjunction \( w- \) (22b: \( u\lambda y\gamma m \); 22c: \( w\kappa y\gamma \lambda y m \)) as a marker of comparison, a usage frequently attested in poetic texts. WILLIAMS (1976) cites Job 12:11: \( h^\prime l-z\acute{\nu} n\, m\acute{\lambda} y n\, t\acute{b}h n\, u\acute{\kappa} h\, k d\, y\gamma m^\prime - w = "Does not the ear test words as the palate tastes its food"; 5:7: \( k\acute{y}-d^\acute{m}\, l\acute{m} d\, y\lambda d\, u\acute{\nu} m\, r\acute{\acute{\lambda}} p\, y\acute{\kappa} b y h\, w^\prime w = "the human is born for trouble just as sparks fly upward"; 16:21: \( w\acute{y} w\acute{k}\, h\acute{g} b r\, m-t\acute{\nu} h\, u\acute{\nu} m-d^\acute{\acute{\lambda}} m\, l r-h w^\prime = "O that a man might plead with God as one with his neighbor", and Prov 25:2: \( k b d\, t h y m^\prime h s t r\, d b r\, u k b d\, m l k y m\, h q r\, d b r = "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, as the glory of kings is to search out a matter.""

out in Harris’s translation. For 22a, we may read the imperfect *thbw* “you love” as having no particular temporal value (the “ahistorical present”), referring rather to the habitual action of the *p’tāyim*.20 Verse 22bc conditions the rhetorical “How long?” posed by 22a, specifying Woman-Wisdom’s frustration in connection with the *durative* quality of the *peti*’s naivete. The shift from the past sense of the perfect *hmāw* “they have delighted” and the future imperfect *yśm̄* “they will hate” indicates the totality of time: from time immemorial to an eternal future.21 But here we should ask whether very clever grammatical solutions solve the inherent lexical ambiguity of *peti*. The fact that such cleverness is required seems, on the contrary, to highlight the ambivalent nature of the term, even strictly within the circumscribed textual horizon of Proverbs.

22 THE QUESTION OF ETHICS (I)

In such a case where the lexical value of a word is ambiguous, we must turn to the context to determine what the word means here, in this particular case. What is Woman-Wisdom’s posture vis-à-vis the *p’tāyim*? What does she want or expect them to do upon hearing her speech? (The implication is clear enough—in discerning Woman-Wisdom’s expectations, hopes, demands, etc. we will also understand the character of the *peti*, her addressee.) But again we run into problems. The context not only does not favor one reading of *peti* over the other, it rather seems peculiarly suited to highlight the divergence itself. On one hand, the *peti* is exhorted, “Turn-back to my reproof!” (*tšubw ltwkhty*). Such a warning implies, to be sure, an element of present waywardness on the part of the *peti*, a predilection for foolishness. But at the same time it opens the possibility of future redemption, a pure potentiality that marks the *peti* as distinct. For the defining essence of the scorners and the fool qua “hardened fools”22 is their incorrigibility, their *lack* of potential. On the other hand, the logic of the speech as a whole, its decidedly hopeless

20 See IBHS §31.3e.

21 Thus Davis (2000, 33) makes the apt distinction between the “morally neutral” quality of being simple—“the condition natural to the young”—and the morally blameworthy one of “cultivating simplicity,” i.e. preserving over time that which properly belongs to a specific and limited developmental stage, youth.

22 Walterke (2004, 203) calls the scorners “the worst category of fools.”
perspective, moves directly against the logic of potential: the time for turning is past; it is too late for fools, *pētē* included. What we took, on a first reading, as an exhortation ("Turn to...?") turns out to be a dismal prediction about the future: "You will always turn from..."

R. Murphy’s argument as to the proper addressee of this speech gives us a way out of this conundrum. Like both Waltke and Harris, Murphy believes that only the *petē* is being addressed by Woman-Wisdom. In contrast to Waltke and Harris (and in this sense, Murphy’s reading has certain affinities with those who would excise vv 22bc as late glosses), Murphy understands the rhetorical ‘*d-mtū* to govern not only v 22 but also 23a:

> How long will simpletons love simplicity?

> ...  

> How long will you turn aside from my reproof?

Thus, while Murphy does not insist on excising vv 22bc on text-critical grounds,23 he does feel that their inclusion muddies the crux issue of the text, namely the meaning of *tšwbw liwkhty*. "The shift from second to third person in v 22 has obscured the correlation of *d-mtū* and *tšwbw*. “24 That *tšwbw liwkhty* be understood as the continuation of a question, as opposed to its normal imperative rendering, is crucial for Murphy. Why? It is the same issue that was raised above: the difficulty in understanding the whole of Woman-Wisdom’s speech as a call to repentance or attention. As Murphy writes,

> The tenor of Lady Wisdom’s words in vv 24-32 shows that an invitation to listen to her reproof (as some would understand v 23) does not make sense. One does not issue an invitation to heed a reproof by describing past infidelity (vv 24-25), which is the reason for the statement of joy in the actual destruction of those addressed (vv 26-27), and finally be a justification of the destruction (vv 28-33).”25

The speech assumes throughout that the time for repentance has long since passed; it is *too late* and so Woman-Wisdom’s harsh judgment comes as something ineluctable.

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23 Murphy, Wisdom’s Song: Proverbs 1:20-33, 457, n.2.
24 Murphy, Wisdom’s Song: Proverbs 1:20-33, 459.
25 Murphy, Wisdom’s Song: Proverbs 1:20-33, 460.
This identification of a logical gap between v 23a (insofar as it is read as an invitation to change, turn-back, repent, etc.) and vv 24ff is widely recognized and accepted, but it does not absolve the reader, of course, from dealing with ṣwbw ltwhty. Murphy’s solution is perhaps overly ingenious. His translation—“How long...will you turn away from my reproof?—takes the ʾl- in ltwhṭy as a lamed of specification, i.e. “with respect to my reproof.” Thus there is no imperative to change or repent, only Woman-Wisdom’s unchanging indictment of human indifference. The logical disconnect between the “positive” address (vv 22-23) and the harsh judgment that follows (vv 24-33) turns out to be a false problem; the former never existed.

It is a neat solution but rests entirely on the viability of Murphy’s translation of ṣwbw ltwhṭy. Certainly the preposition ʾl- can be used to specify the object in the way Murphy suggests, but not with the verb ṣwb, the meaning of which, like many verbs, is determined by the preposition that follows. Thus ṣwb ʾl- “to turn to” is distinct from ṣwb mn “to turn from.” It weighs heavily against Murphy’s argument that nowhere in the Hebrew Bible, apart from the verse under consideration, is ṣwb ʾl- readily understandable as “to turn from.” In my view we cannot sidestep the awkward gap between Woman-Wisdom’s call (for attention, for change, for repentance, for something) and the imminent judgment that is beyond any of the subject’s actions.

23 AN ALTERNATIVE TOPOLOGY

We have to this point established the fundamental undecidability of two crux issues: (1) the characterological status of the peti vis-à-vis the (poetically) parallel scoffers and fools; and (2) the ethical mandate (if any) he is summoned to take up. In our survey of commentaries, the inconsistencies giving rise to such interpretative

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26See BD, 997; HALOT, 4:1328. Both of the recent major commentaries—Waltke (2004) and Fox (2000)—disallow Murphy’s translation on the same grounds. Waltke writes, “ṣwb + ʾl- = ‘to turn oneself toward’ and ṣwb + mn = ‘to turn back from,’ disallowing ‘how long will you turn away at [=from] my reproof’ (pace NAB and R. Murphy),” 198. And Fox concurs, “ṣwb means ‘turn from’ only in combination with a preposition meaning ‘from’ (mn, mḥṛy)… The idiom ṣwb ʾl- means ‘turn back toward’ (literally or metaphorically). ṣwbw ltwhṭy is a call for attention to the reproof,” 99.
uncertainty have been contained or displaced in various ways, but in each case the coherence of Woman-Wisdom, her *transcendence* to the confusing situation represented by the text, has been preserved. This axiom of understanding Proverbs has two further ramifications: the transcendence of wisdom’s limit to its essence as well as the transcendence of wisdom’s essence to human experience. As long as these notions provide the backdrop to interpretation, there is no room for an analysis of the poetics of *making transcendent* such as is proposed here.

To be sure, many of the interpretations discussed here link the difficulties of Prov 1:22-33 to wisdom’s limit, but their notion of limit is restricted to the field of human perception, intuition, and understanding in accordance with a metaphysics we have called Kantian: *limit* correlates to what is phenomenal, apparent, and human; *essence* to the noumenal, real, and divine. Our wager is that the “solution” lies in a different direction, specifically with a different configuration of essence and limit, terms we have heretofore analyzed in isolated abstraction but which we now must put into play, each in light of the other. We are thus pushed to discover the perspective from which two seemingly contradictory statements are disclosed as concurrently true:

- Woman-Wisdom represents the universal form of Wisdom’s essence.
- This essence, insofar as it is “speakable” (*gesprächig*), is co-substantial with its limit.

Our proposal is to transpose the burden of limit, at least initially, from the poem’s hapless object to its speaking subject.

24 **Prov 1:22-33—from Object to Subject... and Back**

The determination to explore Woman Wisdom’s dimension as “subject” draws our attention to one of the poem’s most distinctive features, which has nonetheless not been analyzed as such. (This, I assume, reflects the same hesitation to read Woman Wisdom as a “real” woman but rather as a hypostatized abstraction of mythic women.) I refer to Woman Wisdom’s grammatical status, which shifts

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27 The tendency in the search for the origin(s) of Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Folly in Proverbs 1-9 is to trace Woman Wisdom to female goddesses or abstractions but Woman of Folly to ‘real’ women... The implicit assumption is that negative female figures are derived from real
abruptly at v 28 from the nominative I to the accusative me, breaking the poem into two roughly symmetrical panels.

1. In vv 22-27 Woman-Wisdom speaks as an I directly addressing her audience as a you. The rhetorical “How long” (v 22a) and the phatic “look” (v 23a) establish a direct relationship between interlocutors. Thereafter, the content of Woman-Wisdom’s speech unfolds as a series of her actions that hope but ultimately fail to elicit the appropriate response from the p$t\ddot{a}ym$. Thus v 23 gives indication of present hope:
   - I will pour out.
   - I will make known.

V 24 narrates failures of the past:
   - I called.
   - I stretched out.

Vv 26-27 imagine a calamitous future:
   - I will laugh.
   - I will jeer.

2. In vv 28-33 Woman-Wisdom speaks of the p$t\ddot{a}ym$ indirectly as a they. This they becomes the dominate subject of the poem; Woman-Wisdom, on the other hand, is objectified—no longer an active I but rather an impactive me. The temporal sequence is exactly reversed. V 28, a calamitous future:
   - They will call me; I will not respond.
   - They will seek me.
   - They will not find me.

Vv 29-30, a failed past:
   - They hated knowledge.

\footnote{Women whereas positive, powerful female figures are not. That is, women may be that ‘bad’ but not that ‘good’, that substantial, unless they are deities or abstractions.” Christine Roy Yoder, \textit{Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31: 10-31}. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001, BZAW, 11.}

\footnote{On the phatic function see note 29 on the next page.}
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

- They did not choose.
- They did not consent.
- They spurned.

Vv 31-33, timeless principles:

- They will eat the fruit of their way.
- By their own paths they will be filled.
- The back-turning of the p‘tâyîn kills them.
- The ease of fools destroys them.
- But the one who hears me lives confidently.

As a general interpretative heuristic, then, we read this poem according to its two angles of approach to the dialectic of essence-limit: the subject of Wisdom (vv 22-27) and its object (vv 28-33).

25 Modes of Subjectivity

In vv 22-27 Woman-Wisdom is the predominate subject—the grammatical subject but also the chief actor. Throughout this section she speaks as an I directly to her heedless interlocutor(s). What is entailed in reading Woman Wisdom as a subject in relation to a “who” that is nonetheless, at least grammatically speaking, written as an object? We can isolate two, perhaps three, distinct nuances of “subject” that seem to belong to these verses.

Verses 22-23 have a phatic function,\(^{29}\) indicating the direct axis of communication Woman-Wisdom seeks to establish, and of course indicating that this channel of contact has been for some time broken. The last word of these lines, ṭōkaḥîṭ

\(^{29}\) This is to be understood in the context of R. Jakobson’s analysis of speech acts in terms of six semi-independent variables: “the addressee sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to, seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a code fully, or at least partially, common to the addressee and the addressee; and finally, a contact, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addressee and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication” ROMAN JAKOBSON, “Linguistics and Poetics”. In Style in Language Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960, 353. The “phatic function”, accordingly, refers to that which establishes the nature of the contact between speaker and hearer.
25 Modes of subjectivity

, fixes the originary moment of proper sapiential communication on the side of Woman-Wisdom. I take the negative connotation of the word—"punishment", "reprimand", i.e. not simply "teaching"—to be less important than its derivation from the verb יָדָה —"to decide", "to judge." These roles, assumed here to belong to Woman-Wisdom, constitute her subjectivity in terms of autonomy, freedom, and the right to move-first.

Immediately following is a litany of violations of Woman-Wisdom's proper subjective dominion (vv 24–27). Neither her gestures of willingness

- I called (24a)
- I stretched-out (24b)

nor the content of her communication

- my-advice (25a)
- my-reproof (25b)

elicit the proper response from those whose place is to-be-subject to her.

Woman-Wisdom's charge against the פְּדָיִים , to make a distinction whose significance will become apparent in vv 28ff, attacks their lack of responsiveness, the negative magnitude indicated either by the verbs themselves or the particles that nullify the proper response.

- you refused (24a)
- no-one listened (24b)
- you ignored (25a)
- you did not consent (25b)

Throughout, Woman-Wisdom's subjectivity is attested by means of a prevalent syntactical construction, Woman-Wisdom as the subject of the verb.\footnote{Cf. 23b, 23c, 24a, 24b, 26a, 26b.} I mention here W. Brueggemann's Theology of the Old Testament,\footnote{WALTER BRUEGEMANN, Theology of the Old Testament. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.} which considers the syntactical construction יְהֹוָה-Verb-Object to constitute the "core testimony" of the Hebrew Bible. The biblical witness,\footnote{Brueggemann, in constructing his biblical theology on the basis of Israel's "witness" or more} in other words, will approach its subject
matter via grammar rather than metaphysics: "... full sentences, governed by strong verbs, dominated by the subject of the verbs who is an active agent effecting changes in various direct objects."\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Mutatis mutandis}, in these verses it is Woman-Wisdom who pours-out, makes-known, calls, and extends; who, when her majesty is not recognized in these actions, laughs and sneers in the moment of reckoning.

It is worth pausing over a confluence between Brueggemann's analysis of \textit{biblical testimony} and a similar line of argumentation found in Elizabeth Johnson's classic articulation of feminist hermeneutics,\textsuperscript{34} wherein Woman-Wisdom is prominently featured. Johnson's account of Woman-Wisdom focuses upon her dynamism, her propensity to \textit{act}. Each of her sustained speeches (1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-6) is rendered accordingly.

[on Prov 1] Sophia strides into the Book of Proverbs with a noisy public appearance (1:20-33). She is a street preacher, a prophet who cries aloud in the market and at the city gates a message of reproach, punishment, and promise. On her own authority she proclaims that whoever refuses to listen will be struck with calamity and destroyed, whereas the one who does listen will dwell secure without fear of evil.\textsuperscript{35}

[on Prov 8] This passionate self-description of Sophia who loves, hates, demands, promises, all in the interest of the ways of justice, truth, and life already evokes connotations of Israel's unnameable YHWH who speaks through the prophetic oracle. We note too that it is far from the stereotypical feminine so beloved by

\textsuperscript{33} BRUEGGEMANN, Theology, 144.


\textsuperscript{35} JOHNSON, 87.
patriarchal anthropology.\textsuperscript{36}

[on Prov 9] In Sophia’s last appearance in Proverbs, the street preacher, life-giver, agent of justice, architect of creation, and God’s darling, becomes simultaneously a construction worker, butcher, vintner, sender of prophets, and compelling hostess (9:1-6).\textsuperscript{37}

The significance of these verses, on such a reading, lies with their conveyance of Woman-Wisdom’s potency apart from the strictures of male desire. In short, her freedom.

As to the quality and significance of this freedom, Johnson pushes its absoluteness very far indeed. After rehearsing four “solutions to the puzzle of [Woman-Wisdom’s] theological significance”\textsuperscript{38}—Woman-Wisdom as the embodiment of (1) cosmic order, (2) the whole scope of Israel’s wisdom, (3) a particular divine attribute; or (4) Woman-Wisdom as a “quasi-divine” hypostasis mediating between God and the world—Johnson argues that her status as divine should not be read as a diminutive version of YHWH’s divinity.

What she does is already portrayed elsewhere in Scriptures as the field of action of Israel’s God under the revered, unpronounceable name YHWH. She fashions all that exists and pervades it with her pure and people-loving spirit. She is all-knowing, all-powerful, and present everywhere, renewing all things. Active in creation, she also works in history to save her chosen people, guiding and protecting them through the vicissitudes of liberating struggle. Her powerful words have the mark of divine address, making the huge claim that listening to them will bring salvation while disobedience will bring destruction . . . Whoever loves her receives what in other scriptural texts is given by God alone.\textsuperscript{39}

On this reading, the syntactical coincidence between Israel’s “core theological testimony” and Wisdom’s primal address to humanity

Subject-Verb-Object

marks a real identity between YHWH and Woman-Wisdom, even under the strict mandates of Jewish monotheism: “Israel’s God in the language and gestalt of the goddess” to quote a concordant (with respect to Johnson’s) appraisal of Woman-Wisdom’s situation.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36}Johnson, 88. \textsuperscript{37}Johnson, 88. \textsuperscript{38}Johnson, 91. \textsuperscript{39}Johnson, 91. \textsuperscript{40}E. S. Fiorenza, In Memory of Her. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983, 133.
26 THE SPECTER OF DEPENDENCE

There are two formidable lines of argumentation that go against this straightforward identification of Woman-Wisdom and God qua autonomous. My hypothesis, stated provisionally, is that these counter-arguments are fundamentally related, though, for the sake of clarity, I present them initially as independent factors. The first has to do with the observation, frequently remarked upon, that Woman-Wisdom's existential situation vis-à-vis humanity is one of desire. The second refers to a specific exegetical conclusion, derived from a reading of Prov 8 and subsequently generalized (with perfectly good justifications for doing so) to Woman-Wisdom's character as a whole, that understands Woman-Wisdom's constitutive role in the world as one of mediation.

Recall M. Fox's characterization of Woman-Wisdom along the lines of eternal and transcendent universal, as entirely whole—"The wisdom of the mythos is atemporal, unbound by time and thus immutable. We cannot picture her growing or maturing as humans discover more truths or shrinking and withering if truths are forgotten or ignored." We must ask how this extreme image of plenitude fits in with another, apparently contradictory, characterization that follows immediately thereupon in the course of Fox's argument.

Common to all [portrayals of Woman-Wisdom] is a surprising fact of Wisdom's personality: she wants human attention. That is why she is furious when men ignore her (1:23-27) and why she excoriates fools not exactly for their folly or sins but rather for their mulish resistance to her call...Wisdom needs humanity. Or,

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41 This additional specification, "qua autonomous," indicates my lack of interest in proving or disproving Woman Wisdom's divinity. We say only that to the extent Yhwh, and from a broader perspective, God, are understood in the traditional theological categories of omnipotence and omniscience, the equation of Yhwh and Woman-Wisdom is ill-founded. On the other hand, there is no reason a parallel investigation of God as "barred subject" would not prove to be a fruitful point of reference.


we may say, before people came on the scene, she could only frolic before God, waiting for her real mission to start. In the absence of humans, wisdom is, after all, static... Wisdom realizes her potential only through human activity.  

In short, the absolute completeness of Woman—Wisdom—unchanging, unchangeable, without lack—must be qualified on account of her desire, which perforce indicates a lack, something missing.  

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45This is a convenient point to address G. Deleuze’s critique of desire, which encompasses Lacan, psychoanalysis as a whole, and other philosophies of transcendence/dualism—a pattern of thought Deleuze seeks to overcome: “Dualism is what prevents thought. Dualism always wants to deny the essence of thought, namely that thought is a process.”

Deleuze’s critique of Lacanian desire runs as follows: (1) Desire is fallaciously linked to lack. “The first malediction of desire, the first malediction that weighs on desire like a Christian curse, and goes back to the Greeks, is that desire is lack.” (2) The measure of desire becomes the pleasure of discharge. (Deleuze, in other words, discounts Lacan’s vigorous distinction between pleasure and jouissance.) “The second malediction is: desire will be satisfied by pleasure, or will be in an enunciable relation with jouissance... I am thinking notably of a distinction dear to Lacan, but I’m not familiar with it, the distinction between jouissance and pleasure.” (3) The troika of desire-lack-pleasure by necessity resolves itself as a problem of transcendence. Desire’s satisfaction will be something alien to it, imposed upon it. “If we add the third arc of the circle: desire-lack, all that always concerns desire which is directed toward transcendence. In effect, if desire lacks something, it is like intentionality aiming at what it lacks, it is defined as a function of transcendence, in the same way that it is measured as a function of a unit that is not its own, which will be pleasure or the orgasm, which assures its discharge.” (4) Deleuze’s construction of desire will run along lines of immanence and process that, predictably, suggest a different model of ews. It is instructive to note the justification Deleuze provides in suggesting that Taoism provides an alternative (to “transcendent,” “dualistic,” “psychoanalytic”) structure of sexual desire. “What’s different [about sexual life in ancient China] is the way desire is experienced in a totally different manner: it’s not related to any transcendence, it’s not related to any lack, it’s not measured by any pleasure, and it’s not transcended by any jouissance, under the form or myth of the impossible. Desire is posited as a pure...  

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5Transcendence and dualism are synonymous for Deleuze, set over against univocality. This thesis is profoundly worked through in the programmatic work Difference and Repetition, but equally in a series of projects that aim to recover a philosophical tradition of immanence, whose genealogy Deleuze meticulously traces from Duns Scotus to Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, and Nietzsche.
9DELEUZE, Contretemps 2001, 96.
This facet of Woman-Wisdom's existence, as I mentioned, has been recognized, and explanations of the tension between her plentitude and her lack have been proffered. A common motif in these analyses is the positing of an erotic economy—Woman-Wisdom as not only \textit{desirable} but equally \textit{desiring}\textsuperscript{46}—manufactured by the sages and pressed into pedagogical service. Thus the sapiential emphasis on sexual ethics redoubles upon itself: not only is the sexual virtue of fidelity portrayed process. Concretely, this means that it is not at all the orgasm; their problem is not at all the Western problem, which is: How to extract sexuality from genitality. Their problem is: How to extract sexuality from the orgasm? Then, broadly speaking, they say: You understand, pleasure or orgasm, that's not the achievement of the process, it is either its interruption or its exasperation, or the twomoment to the same thing, and it's completely deplorable! No doubt, that has to happen, but then one has to perceive these moments of suspension as veritable suspensions that allow the process to once again be set in motion."\textsuperscript{a} It is possible, though not necessary, to refute Deleuze's refutation with reference to the diachronic development of Lacan's thought, i.e. the difference between early and later Lacan. Lacan's later emphasis on the economy of \textit{drive}, negates Deleuze's critique entirely—\textit{drive} describing the subject's endless, "processual" circulation around its goal, the circulation rather than the attainment of the goal being drive's aim. In other words, Deleuze's celebration of Taoist sexuality amounts to nothing more than a cartoon illustration of the Lacanian drive.

As I mentioned, however, such a reference is misleading to the extent that it leaves intact Deleuze's critique of Lacanian desire, which, in fact, is an edifice constructed entirely on the distinction Deleuze dismisses: "a distinction dear to Lacan, but I'm not familiar with it, the distinction between \textit{jouissance} and pleasure."\textsuperscript{b} Always what the Lacanian subject desires, against the overwhelming proximity of \textit{jouissance}, is the space to desire. The opposition between \textit{jouissance} and desire as well as the opposition between \textit{jouissance} and enjoyment run throughout Lacan's oeuvre but perhaps can be most clearly illustrated in clinical case studies of psychosis, wherein \textit{jouissance} is not averted. For Lacan, the direct encounter with \textit{jouissance} is one and the same with the implosion of subjectivity as such. "\textit{Toute formation humaine a pour essence, et non pour accident, de réfréner la jouissance.}"\textsuperscript{c} Sexual satisfaction, in other words, does not reside as a "beyond" to the "actual sexual relationship," alienated as it is by cultural inhibitions; rather the socio-symbolic obstruction is the \textit{only} space wherein sexual desire is constituted and enjoyed as compensatory "slivers of \textit{jouissance}" (\textit{les lichettes de la jouissance}), i.e. the only form of \textit{jouissance} one can stand.

\textsuperscript{46}Murphy (1988, 602), for example, notes the reciprocity of the erotic dimension of Wisdom: "The youth's ardor is reciprocated by Lady Wisdom, who proclaims openly, 'Those who love me I also love' (8:17). Like the woman in the Song of Songs (Cant 2:9; 5:4), she describes her lover as 'watching daily at my gates, waiting at my doorposts' (8:34). The pursuit of Wisdom is clearly erotic."

\textsuperscript{a}Deleuze, \textit{Contretemps} 2001, 96-97. \textsuperscript{b}Deleuze, \textit{Contretemps} 2001, 97. \textsuperscript{c}Jacques Lacan, "Discours de clôture des journées sur les psychoses". In Maud Mannoni,
as a quintessential trait of the wise, but crucially “unless Lady Wisdom is pursued as the beloved, all the advice of the sage is in vain.”

One need not, however, suppose that self-conscious pedagogy exhausts the meaning of an eroticized Woman-Wisdom (and this leads us to a related but I think distinct explanation), for it has long been considered that Woman-Wisdom refracts, albeit through a distinctly Israelite lens, the goddess motifs of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Accordingly, the vicissitudes of desire and particularly sexual desire are explained with reference to these non-Israelite mythologies. Worth mentioning in this regard are the Egyptian Isis and the Babylonian Ishtar [=the Sumerian goddess Inanna]—each of whom has been considered a likely “source” in the literary development of Woman-Wisdom—in whose portrayal images of, on one hand, abstract perfection and, on the other, erotic desirousness are juxtaposed in quite exaggerated fashion. “Inanna/Ishtar often appears as a sexually attractive being, but she remains unsatisfied and is constantly ‘injured’, striving and contentious...she behaves as if she were incomplete.”

*Mutatis mutandis*, by the time of the New Kingdom, Isis bears distinct associations with both erotic love/fertility (corresponding loosely to Woman-Wisdom’s desirousness) as well as the cosmic order represented first and foremost by the Pharaonic kingship (corresponding to Woman-Wisdom’s absolute plentitude).

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48 For an overview of Woman-Wisdom’s textual antecedents and contemporaries, see Camp (1985).


50 The inconsistent characterization of these goddess figures is reminiscent of the Lady in the poetic ideal of courtly love, which we can locate between the mid-11th through the 12th century in Europe, a period one would hesitate to associate with the historical liberation of women. It is not coincidental that Lacan elaborated his rewriting of *sublimation*—Freud’s triangle of neurosis, eroticism and poetics, which strikes me as relevant here—a propos of this other (indescribably beautiful, ineffably remote) Lady. “The poetry of courtly love, in effect, tends to locate in the place of the Thing certain discontents of the culture. And it does so at a time when the historical circumstances bear witness to a disparity between the especially harsh conditions of reality and certain fundamental demands. By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner.”

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Briefly considering these hypotheses as causal explanations of Woman-Wisdom’s desire, the second, while quite plausible at the level of empirical discovery, only displaces the question of desire one degree further from the immediate interpretation of Proverbs. The question remains: why should the larger scribal/sapiential institutions or literary traditions of the ancient Near East consistently punctuate their respective ideological constructions with the figure of a goddess, thus inscribing the inscrutability of sexual difference into what may safely be described as “patriarchal discourse.”

Neither does the first explanation really explain the function of Woman-Wisdom’s desire, for while eros unquestionably plays a role in the education of youth, the conflation of desirable and desiring obscures the very question we are trying to understand. That the womanly figuration of eternal and transcendent Wisdom should be written as desirable requires no special analysis. That she should herself desire is an altogether different matter. And so our question remains, why?

There is an alternative set of assumptions, really an interpretative truism that, while not explicitly (as far as I know) connected with the question of Woman-Wisdom’s desire, nevertheless situates us in a better position from which to analyze its cause.

I am speaking of Woman-Wisdom’s designated role to mediate between two spheres, divine and human. “Wisdom as presented in Proverbs is a two-side coin; there is the human side and there is the divine... the figure of Wisdom provides a bridge that links the two.” The idea of a “bridge” names a trope used throughout Proverbs’ history of interpretation: it lies behind von Rad’s “voice of primeval order”; it is

The Lady is never characterized for any of her real, concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence, or even her competence. If she is described as wise, it is not because she embodies an immaterial wisdom or because she represents its functions more than she exercises them” (Lacan, 1992, 150-151). This formulation strikes me as pre-eminently relevant to the historical and ideological function of Woman-Wisdom, not the least of which is a parallel model of limit = essence, the latter arising strictly as an ideologically palatable anamorphosis of the former.

51 As Newcomb (1997, 116) has succinctly put it, “men, preoccupied with speech, talking about women and women’s speech.”


53 In the opinion of the teachers, Yahweh had at his service a quite different means, besides priests and prophets, whereby he could reach men, namely the voice of primeval order, a voice
the meaning of Murphy's "divine communication", the substance of R. E. Clements "inalienable bond", and the basis of B. Waltke's designation "mediatrix." But, were one to agree to this characterization the question remains: where, in the crease of which seam, do we locate the cause of desire?

27 A brief comment on Prov 8

The text that most famously dramatizes this structure of mediation is Prov 8, which portrays a kind of ideal triangle.

![Diagram of Woman-Wisdom, Humanity, and Yhwh]

Figure 3.1: Prov 8: the position of Woman-Wisdom with respect to two "Others."

The top position refers to the passage's central preoccupation, i.e. the figure who links, as it were, two estranged introducees.

...The voice of this revelation filled a gap and satisfied a theological need which had begun to be felt." Von Rad, Wisdom, 163-164.

54 It matters not whether one terms [Lady Wisdom] the divine will or any other divine attribute. There is movement here, a divine communication, which is also necessarily a revelation of some kind." Roland Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation." Journal of Biblical Literature, 104 1985 No. 1, 10-11.


56 In particular Waltke finds this role appropriate for Prov 1:20-33: "The sage personifies wisdom, the abstract sum of his teachings, under several personae: as a hostess (9:1-6), as a child playing in primordial time (8:22-31), as a 'sister' (that is, a bride) (7:4), and as a guide (6:22). The lecturer aims to demonstrate that she spoke as a mediatrix close to Yahweh in 1:20-33." Bruce K. Waltke,
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

My aim here is not to engage the passage at length but rather to rehearse non-controversial conclusions that are relevant to the question of Woman-Wisdom’s desire. In particular, I am interested in those formal features of the poem that underscore the theme of mediation. Following the meticulous reading of M. Gilbert, the coherent, central body of the poem contains three movements, focused respectively on (1) vv 4-11 Woman-Wisdom’s address to a collective human interlocutor; (2) vv 12-21 a first person monologue wherein Woman-Wisdom speaks primarily of herself; and (3) vv 22-31 Woman-Wisdom’s narration of her own birth as a primal moment of solidarity with Yhwh. To say that the structure reduplicates formally the ideational content of mediation is simply to analyze the constitutive nature of Woman-Wisdom’s medial position: between, filling the space of an otherwise abyssal gap.

We can further specify the structure of this emblematic picture of divine-human communication by isolating its directional component (it’s difficult to fault those who insist upon naming it revelation), having eternally the same addressee and the same addressee. Roman Jakobson’s model of communication, which expresses speech as a ray passing through various media, is instructive in this regard, easily lending itself to the task of representing the passage’s movement.

![Diagram of Jakobson's Model of Communication]

Figure 3.2: Jakobson’s Model of Communication.


Recall von Rad’s account of Wisdom’s emergence as a response to a theological gap, to which the sages became increasingly attuned. See note 53 on the preceding page.

Jakobson, Linguistics and Poetics.
The Origin is held by the inscrutable freedom of YHWH, so that Woman-Wisdom’s function is founded on “the discursive act of recounting creation. Wisdom witnesses. She uncovers creation by recounting its story to her audience.” What the poem as a whole testifies to is Woman-Wisdom’s singular suitability to this act of translation. One the one hand, she speaks in the plainest human vernacular (8:9) and lends herself to the fundamental structures of human society (vv 15-16, 18). On the other hand, her perspective is not from within time but of time’s beginning (vv 22-29); her relationship to YHWH includes a unique proximity and intimacy: next to God, God’s own delight, laughing in God’s presence (v 30). This vaunted perspective does not diminish Woman-Wisdom’s regard for the human world. Rather, v 31 directly equates Woman-Wisdom joy before God to her joy in the human world.

Rejoicing in the settled-world of YHWH’s earth, my delight is with humankind.

Both the symmetry of the poem (its balanced attention to each of the three parties and their interrelations) and its portrayal of a perfectly consummated axis of communication are disturbed by the last verses (32-36).

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60 BROWN, Ethos, 277.
61 The parallel is underscored by the repetition of šqg. Her rejoicing before YHWH (m’sāhevet l’hānây) corresponds to her rejoicing in the dimension of God’s creation that is distinctly human (m’sāhevet b’tēbêl wargō).
62 “Settled-world” is awkward, but I am trying to accent the contrast between tēbêl and ereq.
On my reading, the axis of their difference is that of human versus divine. The LXX renders tēbêl with kai̱dûc (very much in agreement with my reading) but does not follow the parallel constructed by the MT.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

But now, children, listen to me,
for blessed are they who keep my ways.
Obey discipline.
Be wise.
Do not be negligent.
Blessed is the one who obeys me,
ever wakeful at my gates,
guarding the posts of my doors.
For whoever finds me, he finds life.
He has gained favor from YHWH.
But whoever wrongs me injures his life.
All who hate me, they love death.

The return or better repetition of the wisdom–human dyad is introduced by a
disjunctive "but now...," (wכַּתַּה) transporting us from the situation of primordial
bliss to the messy and painful experience of history. The string of imperative
warnings⁶³ and the final reference to death⁶⁴ indicate that in history the message
has not been fully grasped. This is to assign desire a determinate location on the
circuit that runs between Woman-Wisdom and her human addressee.

![Diagram showing the relationship between Yhwh, society, Wisdom, Woman Wisdom, signifier, and humanity.]

Figure 3.4: Desire in the context of divine–human mediation.

28 THE BIG OTHER

Both Jakobson’s model of communication as well as our observations regarding the
prominence of mediation provide a suggestive but incomplete backdrop against
which to theorize Woman-Wisdom’s desire. We turn again to Lacan, aiming to
avail these data to a more robust account of desire’s immanence to the Symbolic

⁶³סִימְע (v 32); סִימְע, הַכַּמְע, וָל-תִּפְרַד (v 33). ⁶⁴ קְלוֹ-מֵסְתָּאָה יָהָּבָה מַּטֶּה (v 36).
order, the articulation of which will explain not only the jarring imperatives at the end of Prov 8 but the measure of Woman-Wisdom's subjectivity as it unfolds in Prov 1:22-27. It will suffice here to skip over Lacan's brilliant and rewarding analysis of (Freud's brilliant and rewarding analysis of) the dream of the butcher's wife and head straight to the conclusions to which he, Lacan, is led in his seminal 1958 paper. Lacan is responding to Freud's scandalous assertion that the analytic import of dreams is not diminished by the inaccuracy with which they are recounted to the analyst—"the fact that dreams are distorted and mutilated by memory is accepted by us but in our opinion constitutes no obstacle; for it is no more than the last and manifest portion of a distorting activity which has been in operation from the very start of the dream's formation." In other words, it matters not what the analysand actually dreams but only how he elaborates the dream in speech. (And is this not precisely the situation of Woman-Wisdom, whose vivid and intimate experiences of God must undergo the defilement of human language and human society for their truth value to be realized.)

Lacan draws three interrelated conclusions from Freud's discovery. (1) The lack which gives rise to desire is instated by the requirements of language. "Desire is an effect in the subject of the condition—which is imposed on him by the existence of discourse—that his need pass through the defiles of the signifier." (2) There must be a site of Otherness such that this Other is "the locus of speech's deployment." (3) It follows that "as a characteristic of an animal at the mercy of language, man's desire is the Other's desire." This conception of linguistic Otherness safeguards us against a compelling misunderstanding.

One is tempted, on the basis of Jakobson's neat elaboration, to link this Other, and so the cause of Woman-Wisdom's desire, with one of the two O's that sit like

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68 Lacan uses the capital O (A in French) to distinguish this Other—le grande Autre—from the object a (le petit objet a).


3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

dumbbells at the ends of the bar she must lift. This is certainly correct at the level of a phenomenological description: the inner-experience of mediation perceived as an arduous process of coordinating incommensurable entities. At the level of cause, however, Lacan's conception of the Other describes neither the addressee nor the addressee but rather what we find in the middle of Jakobson's ray—the message, the code, and the context—to which Woman-Wisdom qua mediator is unavoidably pinned.

Having said this, we must be cautious not to identify this triad with the view of communication we de facto employ on a daily basis; i.e., a message (the signified) arises by linking an element of code (the signifier) to an objective context (the referent). As has been sufficiently drilled into our collective philosophical unconscious over the course of the last century, the referent does not belong to the linguistic system; on the contrary, "In language there are only differences without positive terms."\(^7\)

Context and code, in other words, are two sides of the same trans-individual matrix that vouchsafe the significance of the message. They refer to the irreducible duality inherent to the chain of signifiers as such (i.e. not the opposition commonly posited between the signifier and the signified), which must be apprehended as

- a collection of marks or sounds, whose sole function is to support
- the combinatory rule by which these elements are set in differential relationship.

But even grasping this revolutionary linguistic/philosophical axiom, we have yet occluded something crucial. For the combinatory law of the Other cannot itself be comprehended as a unity; rather it presents two irreducible faces:

- the various axes of linguistic difference (i.e. phonological, syntactical, semantic) are themselves upheld only by
- a social collective that incessantly and unconsciously validates their significance.

The Other thus turns out to be a complicated and layered zone of analysis—imperceptibly shifting back and forth between a linguistic system susceptible to

various tabulations and statistical analyses and the social law whose bearer and
primal articulator, in Freudian thought and Proverbs alike, is the Father. Woman-
Wisdom, who must become an “animal at the mercy of language” to be at all, also
must submit herself to the impositions of this Father, to which indignity is added
the fact that he, like the signifier that would finally settle the meaning of this end-
less chain, does not exist. It will not do any harm to simply state here the final
lesson of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is not the fact of the Other’s ultimate
inaccessibility but of its nonexistence.

- It does not exist as a coherent linguistic structure.
- It does not exist as an empirical fact.
- It can not exist as an Oedipal return.

This is to construe “subjectivity” on an altogether different level than the rhetor-
ical glamorization paid to the subject-of-the-verb; at the very least we should attend
to the ambiguity of the designation subject, whose possibilities vacillate always be-
tween the sovereign subject and the abject subjectus. The poetic device that
gives Woman-Wisdom voice (and in so doing gives the scattered field of “wise teach-
ings” a specular image by which to conceive of its unity) at the same time fixes
Woman-Wisdom to the Symbolic order; she becomes, to use Lacan’s shorthand, une
parlêtre, a being of language. And what is the risk? If she is misunderstood by fools,
so what? Everything is at risk; insofar as her essence is to mean, there can be no
distinction between her being for-herself and her being for-fools. “A world made
of discourse,” observes C. Newsom, for which we here substitute, a Woman made
of discourse, “symbolic order, an ideology exists only by consensus. If it cannot
recruit new adherents and if those whom it reinterprets do not recognize them-
selves in its hailing, it ceases to have reality. Wisdom may threaten the recalcitrant
with destruction, but the inverse is also true: enough recalcitrance and Wisdom

72 “Let us begin with the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. No authoritative
statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for
the statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus. I
formulate this by saying that there is not metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically,
that there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law)
comes forward to make up for this, he does so as an impostor.” LACAN, Subversion, 813.
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ceases to exist. Although a Woman made of discourse in short, now returning to a long suspended observation about Woman-Wisdom’s freedom to act: the autonomous subject-of-the-verb will at the same time be the castrated subject-of-the-signifier, condemned to circle around the constitutive lack that inhabits her speaking.

29 Who, then, is the subject?

It will be helpful here to review our findings, listed here as a series of propositions, from the point of our determination to read Woman-Wisdom against the backdrop of a more robust notion of subjectivity than has heretofore been granted her.

1. The process of apprehending Woman-Wisdom as subject draws our attention to a dramatic syntactical difference between the first (vv 22-27 wherein Woman-Wisdom is the grammatical subject) and second (vv 28-33 wherein Woman-Wisdom is the grammatical object) panels of the poem.

2. This grammatical subjectivity, when it is identified, is correlated with multiple implications, which nonetheless are loosely clustered around such related themes as freedom, autonomy, agency, dominion, perhaps divinity. We noted how in a particular feminist appropriation of Woman Wisdom all of these meanings are gathered up under the heading of liberation.

3. We qualified the equation of subjectivity with autonomy with our observation that (a) Woman Wisdom is portrayed not only as desirable but equally as herself desiring; and (b) the function of mediation is fundamental to the Bible’s account of her “birth” and ongoing function vis-à-vis human society. We sought to correct an unjustified depiction of Woman-Wisdom as autonomous by connecting (a) and (b), i.e. explaining her desire as arising from this mediating role, which is of her very essence.

4. We sought to understand the relationship of desire to Symbolic mediation by way of the Lacanian formula, “Desire is the desire of the Other.” This refers to a production of desire that is immanent to the Symbolic order in the sense that desire arises from the Other’s lack as such, which is not the same as saying the Other’s lack in relation to some other “Other,” God and Wisdom qua

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73 Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 119-120.
noumenal essence being the favorite candidates for this transcendent, remote point of difference. This lack in the Symbolic Other, we said, can be described in two ways. When language is understood in terms of a social institution, the lack in the Other is a lack of a valid authority by which to judge the “truth” of the linguistic network. This lack, insofar as the Law has been understood as a paternal function (both in psychoanalysis by means of the Oedipal complex and in Proverbs through the dominant voice of the father/sage). On the other hand, when language is understood as the battery of signifiers, the lack in the Other is a lack of a positive, substantial signifier that would stop the endless, metonymic deferral of meaning that belongs unavoidably to the differential network.

Recalling the complex of interpretative knots that suggested this line of inquiry at the outset, we now must return to the two exegetical problems we found to be insoluble while Woman Wisdom was protected from the vicissitudes of the subject. Whom is Woman-Wisdom addressing? What is she demanding from them?

30 THE QUESTION OF CHARACTER (II)

We have thus far made two claims as to the identity of Woman-Wisdom’s addressee, and these seem to be at some distance from each other.

- On the one hand, we have said that we prefer those readings of Prov 1:22 that read the ḫāqm as the sole addressee,\footnote{\textsuperscript{74} ¶ 21 on page 82.} the remaining signifiers functioning to locate peti according to the opposition not-wise versus not-yet-wise.

- On the other hand, we have said that she addresses the big Other,\footnote{\textsuperscript{75} ¶ 28 on page 104.} Lacan’s term for the social-symbolic matrix that acts in and through language.

Granted that Woman-Wisdom does not appear to address herself to two distinct groups, a question arises with no immediately obvious answer: How do we or could we understand the convergence of the peti with the Lacanian big Other?

Thus far we have emphasized the neither-nor status of the peti. Neither wise nor foolish, he stands with respect to Proverbs’ ethic of “two-ways”\footnote{\textsuperscript{76} ¶ 22 on page 87.} in a kind of no-man’s land. In this sense, the peti sticks out as an exception: conceived in his naivete or youth (below the age of accountability) he is temporarily out of joint with...
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

Proverbs ideologically mapping—as we said, not yet wise and not yet foolish. On the other hand, the position of the peti is read as an ethical (i.e. not developmental) position, which, while not entirely abandoning sapiential values, refuses to commit wholeheartedly to them. Both of these understandings of the peti describe a characterological position that is exceptional to Proverbs’ foundational categories of wise and foolish.

To this reading of the peti as exceptional, however, we must consider an equally valid reading of the peti as the representative of the Everyman: naivete, gullibility, simplicity—these taken as the definitive marks of humanity with respect to Wisdom. In fact, there are at least two compelling reasons to speak of the universal status of the peti.

1. From a literary perspective P. Trible emphasizes the universal scope of Woman-Wisdom’s message. The Other she addresses is society as a whole, the collective in whose consciousness and nowhere else Saussure posited the existence of langue. The p’tāyim stand for this Other in so far as “all are unwise when wisdom begins to speak.”77

2. Leo Perdue, whom we did not mention in our review of difficulties posed by vv 22a–23a, also favors a reading that distinguishes the p’tāyim from the lēštām and k’estām.

The audience Wisdom primarily addresses is the “simple,” those youth who have yet to take up the sages’ course of study. Two other groups of people typically reject Wisdom’s invitations (v 22): “ scoffers,” who are unteachable (Prov 13:1) because of their arrogance and contentiousness (Prov 21:0:24 22:10), and “fools,” who do not restrain either their emotions… or their speech… Because they lack the discipline of wisdom, both of the latter groups create discord that threatens and even disrupts a community’s harmony and well-being (Prov 15:18).78

This is the same argument we have seen with B. Waltke and S. Harris (and one could list others), though Perdue indicates a socio-economic (rather than

ethical) basis for the pesētāyim’s universal status in the eyes of the wisdom tradition.

More than likely, the simple comprised intelligent young men and women from the very few well-to-do families (cf. Sir 28:24) in Judah who could provide their offspring the opportunities for advancement through education and did not need them to remain at home in order for families to survive economically as households.79

Perdue’s class analysis of the pesētāyim suggests an explanation of Woman-Wisdom’s frustration along lines more familiar to us from Jeremiah, whose harshest judgments fall upon the Jerusalem elite, those who by their office are explicitly responsible for safeguarding the virtue and well-being of the whole community.80

Trible’s and Perdue’s readings of the pesētāyim—in both cases the pētī understood as the exemplary human vis-à-vis Wisdom—resonate with the social/institutional embodiment of the Other: the collective which sustains both Saussure’s langue and Lacan’s big Other. The lack whose contours we equated to Woman Wisdom’s desire comes with the fact that this Other doesn’t exist; Woman Wisdom can’t find a social-institutional embodiment of Wisdom.

It seems to me, beyond these important observations, that the Other’s semiotic substance—not the “locus of the treasure trove,”81 not the social institutions of language but “the synchronic and countable collection in which none of the elements is sustained except through its opposition to each of the others,”82—is conspicuously raised in these verses. Admittedly it seems somewhat gratuitous to point out linguistic difference as an exegetical feature of a text: it is, of course, a feature

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79 PERDUE, PROVERBS, 82.
80 See for example Jer 28. “The priests did not say ‘Where is YHWH,’ and those who deal with the law do not know me. The shepherds have rebelled against me, and the prophets prophesy by Baal.” The suggestion that the elite have not fulfilled the obligations of their office is met, in Jeremiah, with scornful incredulity. Thus, in 18:18 Jeremiah reports, “Then they [the people of God] said, ‘Come, let us plan plans against Jeremiah, for the law will not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor a word from a prophet.’”
81 On these two distinct faces of the Other see the earlier discussion on page 106.
of *every* text. So, to be worthy of remark, the linguistic workings of a particular discourse—the dialectic of identity and difference—would have to be staged in such exaggerated fashion so as to override the "content" of what was being said, drawing our attention to the mechanisms by which meaning is born.

But here we can point to a the poetic techniques of defamiliarization such as those elaborated by Viktor Shklovsky\(^3\) (astranonie) and later Bertolt Brecht\(^4\) (Verfremdungseffekt), in whose theorizations of artistic literature the techniques of production are overtly brought to the surface as the subject matter. This "baring of the device," once analyzed as such, manifests itself to quite different effects—from Laurence Sterne's disorienting confusions of authorial versus diegetic time ("It is about an hour and a half's tolerable good reading since my uncle Toby rung the bell, when *Obadiah* was ordered to saddle a horse, and go for Dr. *Slop*, the man-midwife;—so that no one can say, with reason, that I have not allowed *Obadiah* time enough, poetically speaking, and considering the emergency too, both to go and come;—though, morally and truly speaking, the man perhaps has scarce had time to get on his boots."\(^5\)), to the highly elaborated and technical virtuosities of "unadorned" joinery in shaker furniture. Of Woman-Wisdom's address, I am saying, the semiotics of identity and difference are on display in a peculiarly exaggerated fashion.

What do I mean? Resituting the question of Woman-Wisdom's address, i.e. shifting our focus away from the characterological distinctions between *pēt*, *lē* and *kṣyl*, we can see that the opening lines of the speech proper (vv. 22a-23a) contain three propositional statements. Subtracting the initial rhetorical question and transposing each statement into the same 3rd person plural perspective we are left with the following: (1) *pētāyim* love *pēt*; (2) Scoffers delight-in scoffing; (3) Fools hate knowledge. This arrangement clarifies the source of Woman-Wisdom's frustration: not three varieties of fool but rather the incorrigible relationship each entertains towards a certain object. Formalizing the statements one degree of abstraction further, we note that in each case the subject is some form of *nomina agentis*, and the predicate is the corresponding *nomina actionis*. (The third equation differing

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only in that a negative sign is distributed across both the copula and the predicate, i.e. \( a \neq \text{not-}a \).)

\[
p^{\text{tâqim}} \rightarrow \text{pett}
\]
\[
\text{iṣym} \rightarrow \text{iṣun}
\]
\[
\text{ksylm} \rightarrow \text{dt}
\]

Immediately obvious (recalling our Hegelian analysis of “Wisdom is... get wisdom”) is the tautological nature of each formulation. The strictly differential determination of the signifer sets Woman-Wisdom on a path of endless signifying possibilities, for there is no autonomous, monadic signifier possessed of a proper signified as with a code.\(^{86}\) Apart from some point of anchorage (which, in this case, is lacking both in

\(^{86}\) The split between language and code is absolute for Lacan, who in this matter distances himself from at least the terminology of Jakobson (cf. figure (3.2) on page 102). In Lacan's usage, "code" refers to a series of \( \text{indices} \), each of which relates to one and only one \( \text{referent} \). (Examples abound: Morse code, the honeybee's waggle dance, pheromonal activations, etc.) The linguistic series, in exact opposition to this, is constituted as the set of \( \text{signifiers} \), which of course do not relate bi-univocally to a particular \( \text{signified} \). Meaning insists in the chain of signifiers, yet no signifier contains it; meaning "flashes between two signifiers." It is worth being somewhat repetitive to point out that it is this dimension of lack or slippage—the insurmountable \( \text{impediment} \) to signification—that allows for the signifying structure as such, apart from which we would not be subjects but pure objects, \( \text{subjected} \) to a positive network of causes and effects. Lacan underscores this point in two differentiations he repeatedly makes. (1) The subjective of the signifier versus the psychotic subject, who \( \text{does} \) in fact receive his message in the form of a code—"Code message and message codes separate into pure forms in the psychotic subject." Lacan, Subversion, 807. (2) The human as the \( \text{parlêtre}, \) "an animal at the mercy of language," and the animal of pure instinct, who lives in an \( \text{immediate} \) relationship to its environment, radically excluded from the related domains of meaning or truth, to which we might add the domain of Wisdom. "Without the dimension of Truth (\textit{sic}) it constitutes, the deceptiveness of Speech [the impossibility of squaring the circle of signification, the slippage we just referred to] would be indistinguishable from the feint, which in fighting or sexual display, is nevertheless quite different. Deployed in \textit{Imaginary} capture [i.e. in the immediacy of the dual relationship apart from the Symbolic Other], the feint is integrated into the play of approach and retreat that constituted the first dance, in which these two vital situations find their scanion, and the partners who fall into step with it find what I will dare to write as their 'dancity.' Moreover, animals show that they are capable of such behavior when they are being hunted down; they manage to throw their pursuers off the scent by briefly going in one direction as a lure and then changing direction... But an animal does not feign feigning. It does not make
society and in the battery of potential signifiers), Woman-Wisdom is unable to close on anything certain in the Other’s locus. Her utterance is reduced to compulsive permutations of repetition, whose fundamental form is a self referential circuit:

\[
\text{מִי}
\]

Figure 3.5: The tautological return of the \textit{peti}.

31 \textit{Generic reevaluations}

The subject who seeks for what she cannot find is not without generic implications, an observation that draws our attention to a long-standing form-critical conclusion, namely that Woman-Wisdom here speaks a prophetic oracle of judgment.\footnote{Oesterley (1929) “The general tone of this section recalls the utterances of the prophets; like the prophets of old Wisdom goes out into the broad places of the city with denunciation and the prophecy of doom” (10). Genzser (1963) “Geschichte gehört der Abschnitt zu den jüngeren Formen der Weisheitsliteratur, wobei lyrische und prophetische Stilformen endringen... Er hat die Form eines prophetischen Schel- oder Drohwortes...; besonders sind Berührungen mit den Stilformen Jeremia und des Deuteronomiums vorhanden” (23). Kayatz (1966) “Einen ganz andersartigen Charakter als in Prov. 8 hat die Rede der Weisheit in Prov. 1,20-33...Diese Rede der Weisheit hat den Charakter einer Schel- und Mahntradition...Diese Rede der Weisheit fordert, wie die angeführten Parallelstellen zeigen, zum Vergleich mit prophetischen Redeformen heraus.”}

I have tracks who deceptiveness lies in getting them to be taken as false, when in fact they are true—that is, tracks that indicate the right trail. No more than it effaces its tracks, which would already be tantamount to making itself the subject of the signifier.” \textit{Lacan}, Subversion, 807.
no intention to deny robust inter-textual connections between Prov 1:20-33 and various prophetic passages (on the connection with Jeremiah see below). On the other hand, there are good reasons to read the vv 22-27 as a lament, a desperate and ultimately failed attempt to secure a presence that would guarantee a certain determinacy/consistency to Woman-Wisdom’s meaning, which we have claimed is the same as saying Woman-Wisdom’s essence, for her essence is to mean.

Lamentation and the travail of absence. To avoid the typological abuses associated with the classificatory schemes of form criticism (A lament has these parts; it makes use of this lexical range; it comes in pristine and degraded forms, etc.), I would like to highlight between the lamenter and Woman-Wisdom a structurally analogous dilemma, namely the absence of that which would guarantee her place at the level of meaning. In understanding the decisive function presence and absence play in the lament psalms, I am indebted to the work of Fredrik Lindström\(^{88}\) who,

3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

apropos the question of suffering in the psalms, sought to undermine a pronounced tendency to answer in the categories of retribution.

The strong emphasis on individual retribution as characteristic for the individual lament psalms’ interpretation of the religious dimension of sickness has influenced scholars’ understanding of the psalms’ theology and anthropology as well as their notion of God and piety. This situation is visible in the common inclination to understand the psalms so that the basic component in man’s relationship with God is the individual’s guilt and innocence respectively. The present study is intended to criticize this understanding.89

Lindström’s argument against retribution as an appropriate category of interpretation for the lament psalms is suggestive for the way we read Woman-Wisdom’s speech in Prov 1:22-33.

What his sustained reading of the psalms demonstrates is the element of incalculability that belongs to suffering, which the psalmists do not hesitate to connect to the equally incalculable, and so inconceivable in the category of ethics, alternation of God’s presence and absence.

The interpretations of the religious dimensions of suffering in the individual complaint psalms indicate that according to the temple theologians, man’s relationship with God is not constituted of his sin or innocence. Rather, the foundation of the individual’s relationship with God is comprised of YHWH’s freely given foundational gifts of existence by which the threatened person is received into the saving presence of God. The divine presence . . . becomes, with this perspective, just as surprising, uncalkulateb, and irrational as YHWH’s sudden absence. Just as little as absence is interpreted through a negative idea of retribution, just as little presence is understood through such a positive idea.90

The evidence Lindström gathers in support of his thesis is not only impressive in its comprehensive learnedness, it has profound implications for liturgical and pastoral praxis. Without attempting to do justice to his nuanced argumentation, I nonetheless flag his central finding as to the basically singular origin of suffering in the lament psalms.

[The] characteristic ambiguity concerning the relationship between the different aspects of suffering and their joint action in becoming a total threat receives an adequate explanation by the assumption that the descriptions of affliction intend

89LINDSTRÖM, 429. 90LINDSTRÖM, 435.
to express the consequence of something else, something completely decisive, that is, the loss of the divine presence.\textsuperscript{91} It is on the basis of this gaping absence—analogous I am arguing to the absent (or at least lacking) Other who would secure Woman-Wisdom's place in the Symbolic network—that I would press the appropriateness of the lament genre as an interpretative access point for Prov 1:22-27. In this connection, we are making explicit what Lindström implies throughout: the traumatic situation of absence as well as the redemptive reemergence of presence are opaque not only to the calculus of ethics but to meaning as such.\textsuperscript{92} Meaning comes to be only in the ongoing situation of divine presence wherein events and experiences are calculable within the horizon of Yhwh's righteousness (š'daqāh) and trustworthiness (mwnah). Only with these in place can one speak of justice (mišpāt) or its perversion, of truth and its distortion.

\textbf{Lamentation and the recovery of meaning}  W. Brueggemann's categories\textsuperscript{93} will be of help in clarifying this crucial distinction. Psalms of disorientation (which would include the lament form we have been speaking of) and psalms of re-orientation (including hymns of praise, thanksgiving songs, and the enthronement psalms) articulate a dimension of relatedness to Yhwh that is beyond intelligibility. On this dimension these are alike in their opposition to psalms of orientation (psalms of retribution, the Torah psalms and, ironically, the Wisdom psalms) that “describe a happy, blessed state in which the speakers are grateful for and confident in the abiding, reliable gifts of life that are long-standing from time past and will endure for

\textsuperscript{91}Lindström, 458-499.

\textsuperscript{92}Brueggemann (1984, 93) explicitly connects all three dimensions of suffering, absence, and meaninglessness. "The problem of the situation may indeed be sickness, enemies, or death. But such experiences finally concern formlessness, the collapse of categories in which experience can be experienced in a universe of meaning. In Israel, the formlessness of the experience centers in the presence of Yahweh who need not do anything but be there." I take up Brueggemann's more systematic organization of the psalms presently.

\textsuperscript{93}For the development of Brueggemann's "typology of functions" in connection with the Psalms, see Walter Brueggemann, \textit{The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary}. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984; Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology}. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; Walter Brueggemann, \textit{The Psalms and
time to come. Life, as reflected in these psalms, is not troubled or threatened, but is seen as the well-ordered world intended by God. They approximate a 'no-surprise world' and consequently a world of 'no fear.' They do not report on an event, a happening, or an intrusion. Rather, they describe how things are and indeed always are."

With Brueggemann's oppositional terms in mind—orientation versus disorientation—we can quickly establish what is at stake in this disputation of a conventional generic conclusion.

1. Reading Prov 1:20-33 as an oracle of judgment, whose main theme is retribution, identifies Woman-Wisdom with the transcendent essence of wisdom insofar as her timeless, inexorable message lies beyond the comprehension of mortal intellect (for, as Trible has noted, before Woman-Wisdom all of us humans are ṭāyim ). Thus the wise understand that though Woman-Wisdom cannot be fully comprehended (some nuance or depth of her call always remains unnoticed), she is a sure point of orientation for human intellection, a commensurate image of the "orderliness, goodness, and life." The manifest violence and negativity in her speech, on this reading, is strictly a human problem, the inevitable consequence of foolishness.

2. If we say, on the other hand, that here in her first speech Woman-Wisdom laments, this is to disclose a rather different kernel of Wisdom's essence. Underlying the sapiential apprehension of the "world as order" is the obscene, shrill insistence that the "world order" is radically dysfunctional, "an utterance...that the system has broken down and will no longer be honored." The citation is worth citing in full, in so far as it illumines the unreasonable demands of the big Other, and the restless subjectivity that calls it to task. "The lament psalms, then, are a complaint that makes the shrill insistence that: (1) Things are not right in their present arrangement. (2) They need not stay this way and can be changed. (3) The speaker will not accept them in this way, for the present arrangement is intolerable. (4) It is God's obligation to change things. But the main point is the first: life is not right. It is now noticed and voiced that life is not as it was promised to be. The utterance of this awareness is an exceedingly dangerous moment at the throne. It is as dangerous as Lech Walesa or Rosa Parks asserting with their bodies that the system has

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BRUEGGEMANN, The Message of the Psalms, 25.

BRUEGGEMANN, The Psalms and the Life of Faith, 10.

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32  The question of ethics (II)

We have suggested ways in which Woman-Wisdom's speech arises from her experience of absence. This absence, whether it is inflected in social or semantic terms, relates to the impossibility of communication and therefore disrupts the core Woman-Wisdom's being, which is bound to the vocation of mediation (¶ 27 on page 101). Further, we judged that the form of speech befitting this absence is lament and not judgment. This generic determination, as we elaborated with the help of Lindström and Brueggemann, was not arrived at by comparing Woman-Wisdom's speech with a typologically pristine lament psalm and subsequently discerning an adequate number of shared elements. Rather the resonance with the lament form arises out of a shared preoccupation with the absence of that which would secure meaning. That said, once such a judgment is made, it will illumine our reading to see how the terminology of Prov 1:22-27, which has long been read under the ethical rubric of prophetic judgment, resonates with the psalms of lament. Two aspects of these verses are of particular relevance as we wrestle with the unanswered question of Woman-Wisdom's ethical demand: (1) the sequence “How long... turn?” in vv 22-23, and especially (2) the expressions of Schadenfreude in vv 26-27.

33  How long... turn-back

   How long, O pētāyım, will you love pet不了解?

broken down and will no longer be honored. For the managers of the system—political, economic, religious, moral—there is always a hope that the troubled folks will not notice the dysfunction or that a tolerance of a certain degree of dysfunction can be accepted as normal and necessary, even if unpleasant. Lament occurs when the dysfunction reaches an unacceptable level, when the injustice is intolerable and change is insisted upon.” Brueggemann, The Psalms and the Life of Faith, 105.

97As with John Collins' treatment of apocalyptic literature, which has become a normative statement as to the procedure for determining a biblical genre: “This common core of constant elements permits us, then, to formulate a comprehensive definition of the genre: Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendental reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” John Collins,'Towards the Morphology of a Genre'. Semitea 1979, 9.
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Insofar as Woman-Wisdom’s speech as a whole is interpreted under the sign of judgment, her first words—*How long?*—are invariably read as an expression of incredulity that has turned to rage. “Her exasperated question, ‘How long,’ along with her following denunciation (vv 24-27), posits a historical past between wisdom and these overgrown, gullible youths, perhaps a reference to their rejection of their parents’ teaching in the home.”98 In the context of lament, however, *How long?* implies not exasperation but desperate yearning. The sense of rejection is not that of the parent rejected by an impudent child, but of the child rejected by its parent, now living under deep existential threat. As Claus Westermann notes, “The question ‘How long?’ just as the question ‘Why?’ asks about the absence of God.”99 Thus in terms of mapping this rhetoric onto a specific affective dimension, we should shift our frame of reference from the kind of prophetic/divine indignation expressed by Hosea—

> Your calf is rejected, O Samaria.  
> My anger burns against them.  
> *How long* will they be incapable of innocence? (Hos 8:5)

—to the pathos of the lamentor.

> My life is exceedingly terrified  
> but you, O YHWH, *how long*? (Psa 6:4)

The sense of disorientation described by Brueggemann (¶ 31 on page 117) has no part in Hosea’s rhetoric, as the terms of exchange—YHWH’s anger and Israel’s idolatry—are commensurable. Hosea’s prophetic indictment follows a meaningful logic: persistent idolatry gives rise to divine wrath. This is quite different than with the psalm where logic *as such* is absent from the situation. The double (or triple) entendre of *nepes* [= life, throat, neck, breath] suggests a level of dread that penetrates down to the act of enunciation itself: the psalmist chokes on her complaint. The break-down in relationship between pray-er and God is one and the same with the break-down of speech and signification, which in turn has to do with the absent Other. The lamentor’s cry is *stricto sensu* meaningless during the period of YHWH’s absence. Only in *being heard*, will it have become100 the “cry of

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100 On the significance of the future anterior see the citation on ¶ 56 on page 200.
injustice”, “the critique of status quo”, etc. The pathos of the psalmist thus lies not (primarily) with the “real” (physical, emotional, etc.) significance of her suffering but rather with Yhwh’s absence and the consequent impossibility of determining significance as such.

*Turn-back to my reproof.*

The generic assignation of lament equally shifts our reading of šwb, which has been read until now either as a call to repentance (Waltke, Fox—note 26 on page 89) or a statement of judgment (Murphy, Clifford—¶ 22 on page 88) in both cases, the imperative is conditioned by the longstanding ethical depravity of the pțmyśl. The significance of šwb, in either case, assumes the ongoing operation of a prophetic analogy, but once again this is not necessary, for the speech of lament is equally preoccupied with turning. Continuing with the example of Psalm 6,101 after the pathos of How long comes the imperative Turn.

Turn (šāḇāḥ) Yhwh!
Save my life (napșî). (v 5)

Apropos Woman-Wisdom’s utterance—How long? ... Turn!—we have been barred from reading these verses as an expression of pathos by a kind of Kantian insistence on the plentitude of the noumenal Ding. It is considered that the wholeness of this divine entity/personality cannot be impinged upon by the folly of “overgrown, gullible youths.”102 Of course the psalmist perceives herself to be lacking with respect to the Other; the Other is Yhwh—inscrutable, divine, beyond the compass of human understanding, but Woman-Wisdom ... . The analogy is absurd! But, we have seen and tried to understand how the risk of annihilation by the absent Other haunts not only the pett but equally Woman-Wisdom. For without ratification by the Other—on one hand, the scribes, the Judaean ruling class, the priests; on the other the signifier that would escape the continual slipping away of metonymy—she ceases to exist. It is this interminable slippage and the dawning realization of absence that evokes Woman-Wisdom’s plaint, How long? ... Turn!

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101 The imperative "Turn!" (šwb) is a common feature of lament psalms. See Ps 80:15, 90:13, 126:4.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

34 Retribution, or the Hystericalization of Woman-Wisdom

For my part then, in your calamity I will laugh
I will jeer when comes your dread:
Coming like a devastation, your dread,
Your calamity, like a storm moving in,
Coming against you—distress and opposition.

From vv 24-25, Woman-Wisdom is acutely aware of the failure of her partner to receive her. The harmonious intercourse of call (qē) and response (qāb) that would allow Woman-Wisdom to co-exist happily within the social world of the city cannot be found. The verbs in vv. 24-25 describing humanity’s (in)action cover a range of dispositions—rejection, inattentiveness, ignorance, and dissension—which together testify to the failure of mediation that constitutes the very core of Woman-Wisdom’s essence.

Woman-Wisdom’s reaction to this breakdown of relationship (vv 26-27) is the site of a peculiar interpretative split. On the one hand, her imprecations against the pētāyim are taken as an exemplary working out of Proverbs’ core ethos.

Wisdom, it is important to note, does not cause the disaster, which simply ‘comes.’ Wisdom simply withdraws when it does come. According to the poetic justice operative in the book, Wisdom does not answer her clients, just as they did not answer her.103

Or in a similar vein,

Lady Wisdom does not threaten to execute the retribution herself. She will not do anything to the sinners, not even by means of an intermediary. Rather, she will respond to the fools with an attitude matching their own: scorn for scorn, rebuffing them when they need her, or, more precisely, when they finally realize that they need her.104

What is emphasized in readings along these lines is the lack of explicit agency assigned to Woman-Wisdom. She does not cause the terrible misfortunes but knows

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104 Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 105.
of them and revels in their inexorability.\textsuperscript{106}

On the other hand, a few interpreters (I include myself in this group) find it implausible to understand Woman-Wisdom’s malice as exemplary in any sense. These readers detect a great distance between Woman-Wisdom’s glee (\textit{ēshāq} I will laugh; \textit{ēlāq} I will jeer) and the objective progression of the cosmic order as it is ideologized by the sages. Murphy (1998, 10) notes in these verses a kind of \textit{Schadenfreude} that is “especially chilling.” Similarly Oesterley (1929, 12) finds that “the attitude of the personified Wisdom here does not appeal to us, being neither dignified nor wise, according to our ideas.” These few indications notwithstanding, the commentary on the viciousness of Woman-Wisdom’s rhetoric is too muted, a fact which, in my opinion, underscores the category error with respect to \textit{genre}.

For the perspective that consoles itself with such a calamitous fantasy is neither that of righteous indignation (as befits a prophet of judgment), nor that of the level-headed sage,\textsuperscript{106} but once again is aligned with the hysterical subjectivity of the lamentor. It is in the prayers of lament that we consistently find pleas for vengeance unmatched in the Bible as to their intensity. “The appeals to God to do something to or against persons who persecute and oppress the individual crying out in the psalmic prayers are many and varied. \textit{They probably outnumber any other single category of petitions.}\textsuperscript{107} And these appeals, as with those spoken by Woman-Wisdom in the verses under consideration, are very far indeed from the cool application of calculated justice or even the “triumph of right.” On the contrary,

It is clear that [the speech of lament] tends to be regressive, i.e., it moves into unguarded language that in most religious discourse is censored and precluded.

This is the voice of resentment and vengeance that will not be satisfied until God works retaliation on those who have done the wrong.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{106}So Waitke (2004, 307): “Wisdom does not laugh at disaster, but at the triumph of what is right over what is wrong.”

\textsuperscript{106}Prov 17:5, cited in this chapter’s epigraph, makes explicit the sages’ reproach against those who enjoy the pain of others.


\textsuperscript{108}Brubachmann, \textit{The Message of the Psalms}, 55.
What animates the imprecations of the lamenter, we have followed Lindström in saying (¶ 31 on page 115), is the deep threat posed by the absent Other now brought to speech—a form of catharsis in no way endorsed as a sapiential ideal. Since it is in this raw, overwrought manner that Woman-Wisdom speaks, we find the subject position of the lamenter a more fitting access point to the culminating lines of Prov 1:23-27 than the conventional assignation of prophetic judgment.

**Symbolizing lack** How, then, are we to take the final two verses, which shift from bitter complaint about the past to a sadistic fantasy of the future? If the word hysterical has been used several times in this paper simply to describe this speech as a kind of outburst, we can correct this imprecision in terms of

- Freud's clinical discovery of hysterical neurosis, but especially
- Lacan's structural elaboration of the hysteric's discourse.

To make short work of Freud's discovery and elaboration of hysterical neurosis I want simply to pose the question: what did Freud learn from the hysterical conversion symptom, wherein the symptom is connected to its cause by a "false connection"? At the core of his emerging theory was the mechanism of displacement, which as to its substance was the displacement of desire—*der Wunsch*. The Freudian hysteric is someone possessed by *inarticulable* desire, who seeks endlessly for the situation, the word, the relationship that would give this desire an outlet for (conscious) meaning. The hysteric does not seek for the satisfaction of desire—precisely what would bring the hysteric to a point of crisis—but the transformation of unhinged desire into desire for.... "The desire of the hysterical subject is to have an unsatisfied desire," summarizes Lacan.

Lacan complicates Freud's theory of hysteria in several ways, not all of which concern us here. It is important for us that Lacan introduces a degree of ambiguity

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109 Cf. Prov 21:23: "Who guards his mouth and his tongue guards his soul from troubles." Or Prov 25:15 on the superiority of "forbearance" (שֵׁרָע רֵא מַעֲשֶׂה) and a "soft tongue" (לֶשֶׁנָא רָקָה).  
110 There seems to be a necessity for bringing psychological phenomena of which one becomes conscious into causal connection with other conscious material. In cases in which the true causation evades conscious perception one does not hesitate to attempt to make another connection, which one believes, though it is false. It is clear that a split in the content of consciousness must greatly facilitate the occurrence of 'false connections' of this kind.” FREUD, S. E., II:67.
about the terms desire, preserved in his standard definition of the term: *Desire is the desire of the Other*, the Other here being some privileged representative of the big Other. There are two ways to read this. I desire the Other as the object of my desire. *The Other is what I desire.* Or, my desire corresponds to the Other’s desire. *What the Other desires, I too desire.* There is no objective solution; rather the way desire is constructed tilts towards either obsessive or hysterical structures of subjectivity. For the hysteric, it is the second understanding of desire that predominates.

The Other is the desiring subject in the hysteric’s fantasy—usually a partner (lover or spouse) who desires when and how the subject sees fit. Indeed, the hysteric orchestrates things in such a way as to ensure that the Other’s desire remains unsatisfied... The Other as desiring subject is but a puppet: it is the Other whose desire is kept unsatisfied by the hysteric in order for the hysteric to be able to maintain her role as desired object, as desire’s lack.111

Herein lie the grounds for a well known and not unfounded caricature of the hysteric’s love life. The hysteric undertakes relationships as projects; she finds a diamond in the rough whose lack she is uniquely qualified to remedy, whose (potential) virtues only she can perceive and, in fact, only she can bring out. What happens if or when the Other actually exhibits the virtues? The hysteric is repulsed and the relationship is over.

But if the hysteric’s being is determined by the various ways she ensures that the Other is lacking, her meaning depends upon the integrity of the Other, the Other’s legitimate claim to possess knowledge. Here the hysterical structure of desire redoubles upon itself. We had initially distinguished hysterical (versus obsessive) desire as the desire for what the Other desires and furthermore to be that object of desire. But, putting ourselves in the hysterical mindset, a question occurs to us, the shadow of doubt. *Is the Other desiring me for who I really am? Or, am I just being slotted as an object in the Other’s fantasy?* If the Other is revealed as impotent or a fraud, then the hysteric must admit there is no (legitimate) ground of being in this Other’s desire. Thus the hysteric’s fundamental fantasy must negotiate a logical contradiction: on the one hand there must be (the potential of) a fully

potent Other whose desire corresponds to the essential being of the hysterics, on the other hand, every (actually existing) representative of the Other must be found lacking, this lack being the ground of any being whatsoever. Thus, the consistency of the hysteric's position relies on a vicious cycle of constituting in potentiality that which must be destroyed in actuality. The hysteric is "sustained [in the Other's desire] only by the lack of satisfaction she brings him by slipping away as object [of his desire]." 112

A lack gone lacking On a first reading there is no obvious connection between the hysterical subject who tries to find or even provoke a lack in the Other and, on the other hand, the lamenter who on all accounts suffers too much lack. However, these two lacks—that which the hysteric must produce and the "too much lack" experienced by the suffering lamenter—are not on the same level.

Recalling the insights gleaned from Lindström/Brueggemann, we said that the situation of the lamenter is of one whose suffering is without meaning. This, actually does not go far enough, for the lamenter endures a multiplicity of suffering, a vicious circuit113 that nullifies the possibility of any meaning whatsoever. In Lacanian terms, the overwhelming Real of hurt threatens the subject's overall identification with the Symbolic matrix of the big Other. (It is telling that so many lament psalms refer to banishment from the temple,114 which we can read as an architectural placeholder for the Jewish big Other in its different aspects: the center of Jewish communal and liturgical life, the sign of justice and stability in the cosmos, the unique point of access to God's presence.) Lindström's crucial point, to reiterate, is that it is not suffering but detachment from meaning that constitutes for the lamenter "a total threat"—a threat Lacan calls jouissance.

112LACAN, Subversion, 824.
113The descriptions of suffering clearly present the experience of how the different aspects of suffering, physical, mental, social, and spiritual are intermingled like circles and where there is continual feedback. Together these comprise a total threat to the existence of the sufferer." LINDSTRÖM, 458.
114Psalm 42, for example, holds up the memory of temple worship as the counterpoint to current suffering. "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'where is your God?' These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude
Lacan’s theory of the hysterical subject gives us new insight into the function of lament. What is crucial for the hysteric, as we have said, is to uncover a lack in the big Other, a hitch in the Symbolic universe that can serve as the point of her own relationship to it. The subject rent from her social-symbolic world on account of suffering, can re-attach at the point where the social-symbolic world itself is rent by inconsistency and contradiction. “Without [a lack] in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation . . .”—i.e. the lamentor’s situation is not in any way contingent but the cosmos is ordered for the purpose of her unbearable suffering; there is no way out, no possibility of hope—

...So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of ‘de-alienation’ called by Lacan separation: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated for ever from the object by the barrier of language, but that the object is separated from the Other itself, that the Other itself ‘hasn’t got it’...that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring.  

Thus the “lack” of the lamentor must be conceived as a lack of lack—the lack of distance from the Real that is the precondition of (non-psychotic) subjectivity. “Lack” in other words is the essence of the subject’s being; the subject is a manque-à-être that disrupts the unrent, undifferentiated, seamless plentitude of the Real. “What am I? I am in the place from which ‘the universe is a flaw in the purity of Non-Being’ is vociferated.”

Once we are sensitized to think in these terms, it is clear that the lament psalms regularly employ a poetic device that subverts the normal standards of coherence. I refer to the temporal phenomenon of suddenness: the moment or moments when the lamentor abruptly shifts from sorrow to joy, a shift that occurs in situ, apart from any change in the lamentor’s circumstance. But even if we, in some phenomenological sense, privilege the time of the moment over the space of the system, we do not thereby simply escape the system. The passage of time must be evoked through the system. The movement away from the interminable present—and indeed we must speak of a revolution: for the lamentor what is required is an

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34 Retribution, or the hysterization of Woman-Wisdom

116 LACAN, Subversion, 819.
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epochal shift—is availed only by the staging of an impossible or at least illogical semantic juxtaposition.

For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing;
   my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.
I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors;
   an object of dread to my acquaintances;
   those who see me in the street flee from me.
I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
   I have become like a broken vessel.
For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!
   as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.
But I trust in you, YHWH;
   I say, “You are my God.” (Pss 31:11-15)

Not only is the lamentor a “broken vessel”; the liturgical form that gives shape to his suffering is itself broken, an impossible chasm of non-sense running between the poignant account of abuse and the confident assertion of trust. We might say the impossibilities of the sufferer’s present are vanquished by the presence of an impossibility in the lamentor’s speech.

But this seems like a profitless exercise. The prayer’s suffering constitutes a total threat in so far as it endangers what were the stable reference points of meaning. Why turn to a poetic form whose most characteristic feature is the unhinging of stable reference points. One is tempted to underscore the crucial difference between the erasure of meaning and the production of non-meaning, and we will indeed have an opportunity to dwell on this transfer at length. This is, however, not the most relevant factor here, because the lament psalms do not leave Symbolic antinomies such as misery → trust without a context. The logical-structural impossibility at the heart of every lament\textsuperscript{117} is recast narratively, as a problem to be solved in time. We must thus complicate the conventional wisdom about the catharsis of symbolizing trauma. It is not enough to translate concrete contradictions into symbolic ones, but the subject must go further and situate herself in relation to point of symbolic fracture via a narrative, the Lacanian term for which is \textit{fantasy}.

\textsuperscript{117}Psalms 88 is signalled out as a lament psalm that never makes the turn from complaint to praise. The fact of its uniqueness underscores the point we are making.
Thus the turn from complaint to praise (vv 13-14), which initially is perceived as non-sensical, is recovered as sensible with reference to a future scenario that will retroactively justify it.

My times are in your hand;

deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

Let your face shine upon your servant;

save me in your steadfast love.

Do not let me be put to shame, YHWH, for I call on you;

let the wicked be put to shame;

let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. (vv 15-17)

The present impasses (both at the level of the Real—the lamenter's meaningless suffering; and at the level of the Symbolic—the logical antinomy at the heart of the psalm) are corrected by justice that works in time. For the lamenter, the quintessential ground of faith is, "My times (הָעָתֹנַי) are in your hand." And what is highly relevant to our analysis of Proverbs is the frequency of vengeance as the psalmist's preferred horizon of retrieved meaning. And this is true of both levels of contradiction that have been raised. Restoring the integrity of the poem, vengeance turns unfounded exuberance into gratification for redemption; restoring the subjectivity of the lamenter, the unbearable immediacy of the Real is rerouted through an experience of suffering that carries meaning.

The topsy-turvy world of (imagined) jouissance In both cases we have described—the Freudian/Lacanian hysteric and the sufferer who gives voice to the biblical laments—the threat of losing one's place in the big Other rests on a logically anterior disconnect between the Real and Symbolic registers of experience. The Lacanian Real offers no support for its representation as an ideologically coherent experience, and so the subject's relation to the big Other is necessarily contingent and fragile. But how does this relate to the speech of Woman-Wisdom, regarding whom the a priori division between Real and Symbolic doesn't make sense, at least not in the same way? It is not obvious, in other words, how we will speak of the Real of an entity whose being is so purely linked to language and speech. I am not making the pedantic point that Woman-Wisdom is a literary figure, but rather that even when we entirely suspend our distance from Proverbs qua literature, when we immerse
ourselves in its world, the being of Woman-Wisdom is radically encompassed by the Symbolic function. This raises a familiar question, now from the new perspective of the hysterical structure, as to the origin of Woman-Wisdom’s lack since it evidently does not emerge as a gap between the Symbolic and the Real.

We have noted on more than one occasion how the essence of Woman-Wisdom is bound to her role as a mediator. In von Rad’s well known account of how this came to be, Woman-Wisdom was “born” the moment the Judaean intellectual class perceived “a gap…a theological need” (note 53 on page 101). And what field does this gap impinge upon? It is a gap in meaning, for which a new mode of revelation is found necessary. “A new phenomenon in our texts is that a bearer of revelation intervenes in the dialogue between Yhwh and Israel, someone who has not been heard in this role … more than the greatest of the prophets, [she is], indeed, the mystery inherent in the creation of the world.” Implicit in this discovery is the inadequacy of history as a medium of revelation. In history, the specter of contingency (i.e. meaninglessness) continually unsettles Israel’s fundamental coordinates of meaning. “Yhwh’s irreversible decrees, which certainly could not be expressed in the form of rules and which, at least at first sight, were actually unique in character.” The irreversible decree lays down the law, to be sure, but there is no distance between the law and its bearer. What von Rad suggests when he speaks of Israel’s search for a “rational rule” is the requirement of an absolute order to which both Yhwh and Israel are situated in a fixed if not equal relation. It is to play the role of mediator that the sages conjure Woman-Wisdom; she was to be the third term whose intervention would disclose “from the chaos of events some kind of order in which man was not continually at the mercy of the incalculable.”

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118 Von Rad, Wisdom, 163.
119 Von Rad, Wisdom, 289.
120 This notion of an absolute order to which Yhwh also is beholden drives the background assumption that the wisdom tradition does not fit easily with the rest of the Hebrew Bible. See Presuss, Einführung and the discussion above ¶ 9 on page 44.
121 It is instructive that Job, whose experience of contingency was radical, also seeks restoration through the function of a mediating third. Cf. Job 9:33.
122 Von Rad, Wisdom, 308.
The forced choice of alienation  Does this mean that Woman-Wisdom stands in the same relation to Symbolic castration as the human infant, who must learn quickly to couch its desire for the mother according to the culturally appropriate law of the father? Not exactly: for we cannot say that Woman-Wisdom undergoes this castration, that she passes through the defiles of the signifier. Rather, she is nothing but this undergoing, this passage from Real to Symbolic, from jouissance to desire. Shifting our perspective momentarily to that of the sages, the failure to be wise is only misrecognized as the failure to represent (or learn, or obey) a transcendent, noumenal, pre-discursive object. The truth of wisdom lies in the much more uncanny insight that wisdom coincides with this failure of representation.

The economy of desire is thus much more radical to Woman-Wisdom's identity than is allowed by those who emphasize only the pedagogical function of eros (see note 42 on page 96). It is true that Woman-Wisdom is written so as to transfix the desire of (male) students, but much more significant is desire's role as the a priori condition of Woman-Wisdom's existence. Desire, in other words, is the consequence but equally the condition of the subject who speaks in Prov 1:22-33. Herein lies the dilemma for Woman-Wisdom. Should the desire of the sages—the gap between their experiences and the religious resources they found at hand to render them meaningful—remain frustrated, then Woman-Wisdom has failed to live up to the role of mediator for which she was brought forth. On the other hand, should the desire of the sages be sated, then the very ground of Woman-Wisdom's being would disappear. Woman-Wisdom's subjectivity, in other words, is structured around the same hysterical bind between meaning and being; the fulfillment of the former cancels the latter in a stroke of self-obsolescence. Thus to be—to persist, to outlive the spasmodic outbreaks of pure desire (i.e. desire that has not settled on any particular object)—Woman-Wisdom must position herself on a knife's edge vis-à-vis sapiential satisfaction, like the hysteric “sustained only by the lack of satisfaction she brings desire by slipping away as its object.”

The fundamental and structural character of Woman-Wisdom's lack yet does not clarify the connection we want to make with the lament form, whose problematic is disconnect between bodily suffering and the Symbolic order of meaning. It is only in relation to the immobile solidity of the body—for example the need to communicate, to understand someone else—that Symbolic contradiction is experienced.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

as a crisis. How is it that Woman-Wisdom is subject to this particular limitation? To answer this we must revisit the poetic function of personification, whose overt function is not without an unintended side effect.

Recall from above (¶ 18 on page 74) our discussion of personification in terms of a synthetic operation whereby the dispersed field of wisdom-discourse can be perceived by and identified with the concrete experiences of an individual. Apropos of Woman-Wisdom, Claudia Camp described the poetic function of personification in terms of a paradoxical double movement: on one hand rendering the chaotic multiplicity of things-that-are-wise by means of a universalizing metaphor, on the other particularizing this universal metaphor in the form of an embodied subject. “Personification combines a clear, literal subject with a metaphorical predicate.”

But we must assume that personification works not only on the dispersed positive elements in the wisdom set, but in the same measure personification universalizes/condenses the structural impossibilities of wisdom. In short, the inherent deadlocks of the Symbolic field of Wisdom are mapped onto contingent antagonisms bound up in the non-differential substance of a body. Non-differential in what sense? — in that here Woman-Wisdom does not stand for something else but rather asserts her own full and heavy presence. We should think of this solidity in terms of escape channels shutting down one by one; there is no place left for impossibility to fade into the background.

For bodies who take to the street and speak cannot teleport along the combinatorial and substitutionary axes of signification. The body is susceptible neither to the vertical displacements of metaphor, nor the horizontal ones of metonymy, along whose pre-ordained routes pure lack is rendered determinate, absence is sublated as representation, desire is given its proper coordinates. Returning to the specific quality of the lamenter’s suffering: the one who prays in this way is stuck; or, more precisely, the deprivation and absence wrought by the order of words is stuck inside of her. This is how we should read the urgency of lament, as a response to the

\[123\] See Camp, 216-17 and on page 77.

\[124\] This corresponds perfectly with Slavoj Žižek’s (Lacanian) theory of ideology, which posits punctilious obedience to the “letter” of hegemonic norms as much more threatening to the ideological edifice than “subversions” of these norms, which are always already inscribed within the big Other.
unbearable material presence of the signifier qua meaningless. Thus such prayer comes almost violently, with the force of mounting pressure as in Jeremiah’s final lament:

Indeed, the word of YHWH has become for me as disgrace and derision all day. But if I say, “I will not mention him, nor will I speak again in his name.” Then in my heart is a burning fire—shut up in my bones, and I am weary of holding-it-in, and I cannot. (Jer 20:8-9)

In so far as mediation is entirely immanent to Woman-Wisdom’s being (at an even more radical level than with the prophets) the word is indeed “shut up in her bones.”

**The temporal vicissitudes of the fantasy** I have contrived a symmetry between Woman-Wisdom and the lamenter, whereby they traverse the same path in opposite directions. The suffering lamenter, overwhelmed by jouissance, transposes a lack of Symbolic mediation onto a Symbolic mediation of lack. This refers to the sudden, unexplained turn(s) characteristic of the lament form: in the case of Psalm 31 from a recital of longstanding abuse and neglect (“I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel.” [v 12]) to the declaration of confident trust (“But I trust in you, YHWH; I say ‘You are my God.’” [v 14]). On the other hand, the poetic device of personification transforms the structural-linguistic antinomies of Wisdom—that which in the sages’ discourse is typically hidden by the subterfuges of metaphor and metonymy, the convenient vagueness of the signifier, the perception-numbing effect of repetition—into the conspicuous frustration that animates Woman-Wisdom’s embodied speech. Two questions remain unanswered?

1. What is accomplished in the two versions of displacement? How do they provide some measure of relief in the psychic economy of the afflicted?

2. If the trajectories go in opposite directions, how is the thematic of vengeance to be understood as a point of identification?

I will try to answer both questions of both texts, turning first to the lament psalm proper and then to Woman-Wisdom’s speech.

In response to the first question, is there not in the gesture of lament—in so far as it does not resolve but simply displaces the discomfiting lack—a futile and self-undermining logic at work? We have linked the situation that gives rise to lament to the question of signification. The prayer’s suffering constitutes a total threat
in so far as it endangers what were the stable reference points of meaning. Why turn to a poetic form whose most characteristic feature is the unhinging of stable reference points? One is tempted to underscore the crucial difference between the erasure of meaning and the production of non-meaning, and we will indeed have an opportunity to dwell on this subtlety at length. This is, however, not the most relevant factor here, because the lament psalms do not leave Symbolic antimonies such as misery → trust without a context. The logical-structural impossibility at the heart of every lament\(^{125}\) is recast narratively, as a problem to be solved in time. We must thus complicate the truism regarding the cathartic benefits of symbolizing trauma. It is not enough to translate concrete contradictions into symbolic ones, but the subject must go further and situate herself in relation to the point of symbolic fracture via a narrative, the Lacanian term for which is \textit{fancy}.

Thus the turn from complaint to praise (vv 13–14), which initially is perceived as non-sensical, is recovered as sensible with reference to a future scenario that will retroactively justify it.

> My times are in your hand;  
> deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.  
> Let your face shine upon your servant;  
> save me in your steadfast love.  
> Do not let me be put to shame, YHWH, for I call on you.  
> The wicked will be put to shame;  
> they will wait in Sheol.  \(v\ 15-17\)

The present impasses (both at the level of the Real—the lamenters\' meaningless suffering; and at the level of the Symbolic—the logical antinomy at the heart of the psalm) \textit{will have been} corrected by justice that works in \textit{time}. For the lamenters, the quintessential ground of faith is, "My times (\textit{qittōtāy}) are in your hand."

What is highly relevant to our analysis of Proverbs is the appearance here (and throughout the psalter) of vengeance as the horizon of retrieved meaning. Why would this be so? First, it is undoubtedly the case that the requital of evil is at the center of questions of meaning in a discourse like the Bible's—discourse that is preoccupied with justice. "That God practices vengeance is one way the

\(^{125}\)Psalm 88 is signalled out as a lament psalm that never makes the turn from complaint to praise. The fact of its uniqueness underscores the point we are making.
Bible has of speaking about moral coherence and moral order in which God is actively engaged.”

To the extent that the lamentor perceives injustice in present suffering, the particular satisfactions of an imagined payback are self-explanatory.

Second, and what is crucial to the temporality of fantasy, the scenario of vengeance is peculiarly suited to the irreal modalities of future and jussive verbs. “The wicked will be put to shame.” Or, alternatively, “Let the wicked be put to shame.” In this way, the assurances of a vengeance-to-be offset the Symbolic antimony (the abrupt turn to trust) and by doing so restore suffering to a coherent Symbolic context. We can, thus, complete our analysis of the psalm as a construction of two attachments. The encoding of Real suffering as Symbolic non-sense is supplemented by a fantasy scenario from whose perspective non-sense is retroactively given meaning.

An ethics of pure desire Recall R. Murphy’s rationale in refusing to read $swb$ in the sense of “repent.”

...an invitation to listen to her reproof (as some would understand v 23) does not make sense. One does not issue an invitation to heed a reproof by describing past infidelity (vv 24-25), which is the reason for the statement of joy in the actual destruction of those addressed (vv 26-27), and finally be a justification of the destruction (vv 28-33). One can only agree with Murphy that the sequence contains a vexing contradiction, and it is for this reason understandable that some interpreters go to great lengths to make her message mean something quite other than what it says. Woman-Wisdom issues her imperative to turn but seems to extinguish the possibility that such turning could ever be anything other than in vain, a turn that will only be met by an obscene and cruel laughter.

As the fundamental fantasy that sustains Woman-Wisdom’s being, however, it serves its purpose admirably. As we have pointed out multiple times, the Symbolic contradictions inherent to the discourse of Wisdom are condensed in the poetics of

126 WALTER BRUBBERMANN, Praying the Psalms. Winona, Minn.: St. Mary’s Press, 1993, 63.
127 The three verbs in question—$yēḇōšā, yiddē’ā, tēḏāmnāh$—are morphologically ambiguous regarding the modal distinction.
128 Murphy, Wisdom’s song: Proverbs 1:20-33, 460, cited above on page 88.
personification. Subjectified in the person of Woman-Wisdom, the antimonies of Wisdom’s meaning are transposed onto a crisis of being. If the Other (the sages, Israel, the world’s petayim) does not heed her call then she has failed in her central vocation of mediation. If the Other heeds her call then the vocation of mediation is rendered obsolete. What Woman-Wisdom exhibits here is a kind of theatrical “acting out” of this impossibility in a way that nonetheless preserves her integrity at both the level of meaning and being even if her being will be to some degree “unfulfilled.”

- At the level of meaning, the structure of mediation is affirmed as a possibility. The summons to turn and the categorial designation of petayim—the not-yet wise or foolish—underscore the logical possibility of Woman-Wisdom’s success. It is not a foregone conclusion, in other words, that they will not turn.

- At the level of being, the consummation of the “turn” is precluded, but only from the perspective of the future. There is thus a crucial difference between “will not turn” and “will not have turned.” Woman-Wisdom’s being is secured in that the turn is affirmed only at the level of possibility, never at the level of actuality.

What is so crucial about vv 26-27, then, is not the magnitude of the violence but the manner in which they so carefully convey violence in a state of perpetual imminence: the absolute suddenness of calamity, terror, and storm suspended in a perpetual state of to-come.

in its coming

in its coming

moving in

when it comes.

35 Excursus 1: Woman-Wisdom and the Women of Yehud

How are we to understand the schizophrenic nature of Woman-Wisdom’s presentation, that she is both the perfect embodiment of the cosmic order and the hysterical subject for whose insatiable desire no object is adequate? Does she reflect the “authentic” perspective of Jewish women? Alternatively, is she a (male) phantasm
pressed into the service of patriarchy? We are thus thrown back onto the question of Woman-Wisdom’s historical origins, a famous issue in Proverbs’ scholarship whose proposed solutions are by now familiar. (1) She is the Hebraicized version of an Egyptian goddess, Maat or perhaps Isis (see the discussion on page 99). (2) She is the idealized “agglomeration of [women’s] roles and activities,”129 overlayed with a sheen of eros so as to counter the alluring but ultimately fatal summons of the Strange-Woman.130 (3) She is the hypostasis of a divine attribute, a piece of YHWH cut off to conduct a more or less autonomous role in the creation and maintenance of the universe. (4) She is the revelatory potential of the world, turning “towards men to give order to their lives.”131 And for each of these theories, we could imagine a corresponding genealogy of neurosis: the goddesses have always been hysterics, pathos is part of her erotic appeal, split from the primal maternal object (i.e. YHWH) she compulsively pursues substitute love objects, etc.

But here we follow Christine Yoder in noting a peculiar and surely symptomatic feature of wisdom scholarship.

The tendency in the search for the origin(s) of Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Folly in Proverbs 1-9 is to trace Woman Wisdom to female goddesses or abstractions but Woman of Folly to ‘real’ women. The implicit assumption is that negative female figures are derived from real women whereas positive, powerful female figures are not. That is, women may be that ‘bad’ but not that ‘good’, that substantial, unless they are deities or abstractions.132

Suspending for the time being the determinations of good, bad, or substantial, we can unreservedly affirm the validity of Yoder’s thesis—that the textualized Woman-Wisdom bears the traces of empirical women—and note with her how the realia of Persian period Yehud elucidates certain aspects of Woman-Wisdom’s heretofore enigmatic character.

1. The literary images of Woman-Wisdom reflect the economic roles specifically associated with (upper class) women in Persian period Yehud. The numerous references to Woman-Wisdom’s “worth” (cf. Prov 1:33; 3:13-18; 4:4, 7; 8:11) snap into historical focus when considered against the backdrop of Persian period marriage contracts and the high dowry prices a desirable bride might bring. The celebrated

129Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 339. 130Murphy, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, No. 4, vol. 50, 1988, 601. 131Von Rad, Wisdom, 156. 132Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 11.
home economy of Woman-Wisdom and the “woman of substance” reflect the important managerial roles women held in affairs both royal and industrial.  

2. The economic productivity of women directly enabled the sapiential “lifestyle,” funding the leisure-time necessary for (male) literary production. Women’s work is a source of male “booty” (Prov 3:11); womanly attentiveness frees up the men from the grind of daily chores—a prerequisite for the intellectual life.  

3. The economic potency of women is perversely alienated in so far as it furthers the patriarchal tendencies of wisdom qua ideological and institutional project. This was surely a source of frustration for the sages’ well-heeled matrons to whom, Yoder is arguing, Woman-Wisdom bears a striking resemblance.  

Whence the hesitation, given the cogency and thoroughness of Yoder’s reasoning, about her sharp comment on the implicit scholarly assumption, i.e. “women may be that ‘bad’ but not that ‘good’”? It is based only on the difficulty of linking the woman who speaks in Prov 1:22-33 to “goodness” in any of the senses Yoder has raised: a good wife, a good value, a good name, a good teacher, good in bed. Apart

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133 Yoder (2001, chap. 3) argues on the basis of lexical and thematic parallels that the “woman of substance” of Prov 31 is not a different literary character than Woman-Wisdom, as some have argued. “The women who frame the book of Proverbs, essentially coalesce as one figure” (113).

134 Royal women...managed properties directly and through subordinates, authorizing transactions with their own seals, ordering the movement of commodities, employing and issuing rations to workers, and paying taxes to the crown. They could also lease and sub-divide their properties for profit. In short, ‘women’s work’ in the Persian period was multifaceted and appears to have permeated all sectors of the royal economy.” Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 113.

135 Women and girls were often well represented in the work force, doing both skilled and unskilled labor. In numbers equivalent to or greater than those of men, women labored alongside men and boys and in predominantly female groups such as the psap and the harrinup.” Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 86.

136 Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 78, 93-101. Cf. Sir 38:24–39:11. “The wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure; only the one who has little business can become wise. How can one become wise who handles the plow, and who glories in the shaft of a goad, who drives oxen and is occupied with their work, and whose talk is about bulls?” (vv 24-25 NRSV).

137 In the end, it is the ambivalence of Woman-Wisdom’s position that Yoder underscores. Thus the last sentences in her book, “It is her visage that elevates and theologically legitimates women’s activities as the embodiment of what it means to be wise and a fearer of YHWH. It is, at the same time, her image that is painted in brush-strokes to reflect and promote male objectives. Taking her stand in the streets and squares, she is a mesmerizing sight—at once the veneration and
from the hysterical defense of desire that runs through her accusations in vv 24-25—no one has attended, no one is adequate to his Symbolic mandate. about every face in the street, This is not that!—we are left with vv 26-27, wherein Woman-Wisdom’s voice shifts from dejected to sadistic. In stark contrast to wisdom’s robust definition of the good—the carefully reticulated networks of “righteousness, justice, and equity” (1:3), the solidity of cosmic temporality “before the founding of the earth, the establishment of the heavens” (3:19), the comfort of “length of days” and a “sated treasure-house”—Woman-Wisdom stands here as a spree of violent jouissance.

Do we then conclude that Yoder’s connection between ‘history’ and ‘text’ is too direct—that there is obviously a much more complicated mediation at play, that the historical role of (elite) women could not have been as substantial or valued as Yoder makes it out to be, and that the situation Yoder gleans from the archive is either exceptional (i.e. specific only to Elephantine or Marâš, or, on the other hand, to a very small elite minority) or simply a misreading? On the contrary! If anything Yoder doesn’t press her historical point far enough. It is not, in other words, that the idealized figurations of Woman represent one facet of women’s lives but there is another (darker, repressed, negative, patriarchal) reality that is obscured in the text. Nor is it adequate (though it is certainly true) to explain how women in the ideological matrix of the sages are split: what is found convenient about women is fetishized in the figure of Woman-Wisdom, while the inconvenient dimensions of her existence (inconvenient to patriarchy—her claims to agency, her assertion of rights, her unfathomable difference from male subjectivity) are demonized in the figure of the Strange-Woman. For, in Prov 1:22-33, the woman who speaks is neither ideal nor demonic, she speaks from the position of the subject split between the two: a woman put upon the highest pedestal, designated by the purest signifier of sapiential excellence, and yet she cannot find even one who will respond as if it is so.

I want to conclude this train of thought with reference to Silvia Schroer’s study of Woman-Wisdom. She asks and then goes on to answer the crucial question about the literary and ideological function of Woman-Wisdom.

objectification of women’s lives and work.” YODER, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 114.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

It is not enough to establish that here and there Hokma takes on a mediating role between the distant YHWH and the people. This phenomenon calls for explanation. Why does this mediating figure appear precisely in the image of a woman and precisely in the post-exilic period, and what exactly does she mediate?\footnote{Schroer, 17.}

To the first question (why in the image of a woman?) she answers as follows: Hokma is not simply the personification of Wisdom, but instead personifies women’s wisdom—that wisdom that would have given an Israelite woman her identity and acted as her life’s security—in a special and significant way through the image of a woman... Personified Wisdom is unthinkable without the “wise women” in the literature and history of Israel.\footnote{Schroer, 24,25.}

This is exactly right, though it leaves open the specific character of “women’s wisdom.” I would say that it is not enough to list the positive contributions that actual women make to post-exilic wisdom: in their roles as teachers, as recognized religious authorities, at the center of the community economy; or, on the other hand, whose potency in hitherto male domains is reflected/expressed in family religion, in the (female) image of a goddess.\footnote{Schroer (2001, 33) cites the prophetic polemic against worshipping the Queen of Heaven (cf. Jer 7:16-20) as evidence that 1. in the exilic and post-exilic periods the influence of national religion waned while that of family religion waxed, and 2. at the center of family religion was a radical reconsideration of the masculine norms of YHWH religion.}

In vv 28-33 Woman-Wisdom no longer speaks as a subject. Instead she becomes in her own speech an impossible object—that which the poem’s new primary subjects (the pšṭāyim, now referred to in the 3rd person) cannot find. “I will not answer” (v 28a) marks the last appearance of Woman-Wisdom as the “subject of the verb”; henceforth she is, syntactically speaking, inert. But even here we can see that she

\[138\] Schröer, 17. \[139\] Schröer, 24,25.

\[140\] Schröer (2001, 33) cites the prophetic polemic against worshipping the Queen of Heaven (cf. Jer 7:16-20) as evidence that 1. in the exilic and post-exilic periods the influence of national religion waned while that of family religion waxed, and 2. at the center of family religion was a radical reconsideration of the masculine norms of YHWH religion.
has already been “objectified”—that is, her one act of agency in this poetic panel is to declare the cessation of her agency: “I will not answer” (lō· Dzięki neh). What follows is a litany of their failures to apprehend Woman-Wisdom qua object.

This brings into relief a curious omission with respect to the avowedly feminist interpretations of this text, a methodological inconsistency. Following Brueggemann (with respect to the form of biblical theology) and then the classical statements of Johnson and Ruether (who attempt to appropriate this form for feminist aims), the Bible’s message is carried by the positional dispensations of Subject–Verb–Object. Correspondingly, feminist (or, more generally, liberationist) analyses of texts have attended more to the strictly syntactical questions Who is acting? Who is being acted upon? than to those of content, i.e. that which constitutes any given narrative’s surface.\(^{141}\) Where patriarchal oppression operates smoothly, we can predict that women are regularly objectified; as M. Althaus-Reid has concisely put it: “Women have become things in life and the divine pantheon alike, and male ideas...have become people.”\(^{142}\) Whether put on a pedestal or raped, the Woman-Thing holds a stable place in the male fantasy gaze. The Woman-Person (i.e. autonomous, taking initiative, active), on the other hand, threatens to undermine the patriarchal status quo.

Thus the redemptive possibilities feminists have discerned of Woman-Wisdom are bound up with her capacity to act apart from the initiative of men. Recall E. Johnson’s appreciation from above.

Sophia strides into the Book of Proverbs with a noisy public appearance (1:20-33).

She is a street preacher, a prophet who cries aloud in the market and at the city gates a message of reproach, punishment, and promise. On her own authority she

\(^{141}\) The difference becomes especially clear in those texts that “glorify” women as objects worthy of men’s love. Phyllis Trible’s analysis of 2 Sam 13 and the rape of Tamar is exemplary. It is clear enough that Amnon, the rapist, treats Tamar as a mere object. The point is, at the level of syntax, so does Absalom, Tamar’s fraternal defender/avenger. Crudely and violently appropriated as the object of Amnon’s sexual desire, or subtly and tenderly objectified as the motivating device whereby Absalom displaces his older brother in the line of succession—either way Tamar’s own desire falls out of the equation: “Brother opposes brother through their sister Tamar.” PHYLIS TRIBLE, \textit{Tests of Terror: Literary-feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives}. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, 52, emphasis added.

\(^{142}\) M. ALTHAUS-REID, \textit{Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics.}
proclaims that whoever refuses to listen will be struck with calamity and destroyed, whereas the one who does listen will dwell secure without fear of evil (cf. ¶ 25 on page 94).

But we should be careful here, extremely reluctant to de-link the dry, chitinous formulae of grammatical syntax from the Bible’s steady patriarchal undercurrent.

Christine Yoder disclosed a Woman-Wisdom who is split, hystericized, in whose visage are reflected both the image of women’s autonomy and agency and the instrumentalization of this autonomy for the objectives of men. Her subjectivity, her desire, is circumvented by a purpose/project in whose machinations she is only an object. A pedagogical object—she is “the model of religious piety for young men in the gôlah community.”143 An economic object—“the Woman of Substance is a desirable spouse because she guarantees the financial well being of her husband.”144 The deep ambivalence with which Yoder concludes her reading of Woman-Wisdom as a woman of substance arises precisely in the rendering of women’s subjectivity qua object.

It is her visage that elevates and theologically legitimates women’s activities as the embodiment of what it means to be wise and a fearer of YHWH. It is, at the same time, her image that is painted in brushstrokes to reflect and promote male objectives. Taking her stand in the streets and squares, she is a mesmerizing sight—at once the veneration and objectification of women’s lives and work.145

37 Repetition and difference

I mention a “curious omission” to feminist interpretation of this text because the change in Woman-Wisdom’s grammatical status has been under-interpreted, or at least has not been submitted to the kind of rigorous feminist critique it merits. (The exception is Trible, whose analysis we take up momentarily.) Mainly, vv 28-33 are read in terms of repetition. The structure of the poetry, so the argument goes, mirrors Proverbs’ overall ethos of retribution.

- Murphy summarizes vv 28-30, “The talion law is applied: now they call, but receive no answer, because they had failed earlier (v 24) to heed the call

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143 YODER, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 107.

144 YODER, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 78.

145 YODER, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 114.

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of Wisdom... V 30 is almost a total reprise of v 25.\textsuperscript{146} And then of the concluding three verses he writes, "The closure to the speech continues the sapiential language ... the word translated as 'defection' (m\textsuperscript{š}w\textsuperscript{bh}) is a kind of inclusio to the "turning away" of v 23.\textsuperscript{147}

- B. Waltke holds the same opinion, noting both the pedagogical function of repetition—"to underscore the certainty of their judgment, Wisdom essentially repeats in v. 30 the accusation of v. 25\textsuperscript{148}—and the poetic inclusio formed by šub.

- M. Fox is even more blunt in conveying the lack of dynamism in the passage: "All that Wisdom does is to summon people, praise her own excellence, and react to people with emotions corresponding to the way they respond to her."\textsuperscript{149}

P. Trivle's rhetorical analysis also accents the poetics of repetition – the chiastic pattern she discerns being the form of repetition par excellence—though stricter attention to form leads her to the insinuative movement of difference that sets the poem in perpetual motion.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
A & INTRODUCTION —an appeal for listeners 20-21 \\
B & ADDRESS to the untutored, scoffers and fools 22 \\
C & DECLARATION of disclosure 23 \\
D & REASON for the announcement 24-26 \\
\ldots & \\
E & ANNOUNCEMENT of judgment 26-27 \\
\ldots & \\
D' & RESULT of the announcement 28-30 \\
C' & DECLARATION of retribution 31 \\
B' & ADDRESS about the untutored and other fools 32 \\
A' & CONCLUSION —an appeal for a hearer 33 \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textbf{Figure 3.6: Trivle's analysis of Prov 1:20-33.}

\textsuperscript{147} Murphy, Proverbs, 11. \textsuperscript{148} Waltke, Proverbs 1-15, 212.

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3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

What is repeated, i.e. that which follows the chiastic hinge $E$, is different by virtue of being a repetition and not an initial occurrence, a change leaving, according to Trible, two traces in the text.

After this climactic utterance, however, she uses only the third person in reporting the Result. Thereby she re-establishes distance from the people, and this distance she keeps. These many interlocking relations among Reason, Announcement, and Result secure internal structure as well as external design. The poem continues by completing the circles begun in vv. 20-23. Since completion is progress, however, wisdom returns to her beginnings with differences.¹⁵⁰

Difference is traced in the text's shift in directness (from direct second-person to indirect third-person speech) and the progress inherent to its completed circles.

Trible concludes, given the universality of Woman-Wisdom's invitation,¹⁵¹ that the mode of discourse she employs does not include some and exclude others, but rather reflects fluctuations of desire/apathy, pleading/rejection, engagement/disengagement (i.e. affective realizations of proximity/distance). Woman-Wisdom's proximity—underscored, as Trible and others have pointed out, by her location in the busiest, most public parts of the city—is not an invariable constant, but it wanes with the unresponsiveness of her audience; she becomes, for the persistently foolish subject, less available, a distance we could read as "aloofness" or a lack of desire. About the third-person focalization of verse 23's lēštîm and kəsāĪm she notes,

Wisdom fluctuates in her relationship to people. First she speaks to them directly:
'How long, untutored ones, will you love immaturity?' Then she switches to the third person: 'How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?' Ambivalent about the public, wisdom exchanges proximity for distance.¹⁵²

Here again the substantive difference between the petāyım vis-à-vis the lēštîm and kəsāĪm is underscored. The you addressed to the former, according to Trible's logic, bespeaks a nearness or even intimacy that has not (yet) been abused by the long-term apathy of the latter. Proximity and distance correspond to a continuum of affect, from Woman-Wisdom's more sympathetic view of the young and unschooled, to a hard and even despairing reception of the persistently foolish.

¹⁵⁰Trible, Wisdom Builds a Poem, 517.
¹⁵¹"The call of wisdom is inclusive. All people wherever they are, may listen to her words." Trible, Wisdom Builds a Poem, 511.
¹⁵²Trible, Wisdom Builds a Poem, 512.
But this straightforward connection between affect (Woman-Wisdom’s affections towards her human interlocutors) and proximity (that which varies with direct or indirect discourse) is impossible to sustain throughout the passage.

The justification for our objection is easily perceivable in Trible’s treatment of vv 24-30 (which constitute the central section of her chiasmic scheme) where her rationale is more difficult to follow. Trible comments,

Wisdom’s ambivalence about the people surfaces again in these verbs. The change from the second to the third person in the Reason [vv 24-25] is a waver between proximity and distance. Full involvement returns with the Announcement [26-27], which is completely in the second person. Proclaiming calamity, wisdom speaks directly. After this climactic utterance, however, she uses only the third person in reporting the Result. Thereby she reestablishes distance from the people, and this distance she keeps.¹⁵³

On one hand, the interruption of prevailing direct discourse by ṭ₃ṭb (“and not one attended”) (v 24b) reflects the negative pole of Woman-Wisdom’s ambivalence vis-à-vis her universal mission; by it she reflects the tragic dimensions of her failed outreach and, consequently, (re)establishes her affective distance from humanity. On the other hand, the second person focalization of the Announcement cannot be understood as a return to proximity or intimacy; or, if one takes the view that her cold expressions of Schadenfreude are a form of proximity, this “proximity” carries a starkly different affective value than Trible has heretofore led us to believe. Finally, it is difficult to understand what Trible means by Woman-Wisdom’s “reestablishment of distance” after the “climactic” announcement of judgment. We here run into what I take to be the central difficulty with Trible’s thesis—namely, that the directness of discourse (you versus they) corresponds to the quality of affect. Whereas the shift from direct to indirect discourse unambiguously occurs at v 28a, there is no corresponding shift on the axis of affect. Rather, throughout the body of Woman-Wisdom’s speech (vv 24-31) her relationship to humanity is consistently and relentlessly characterized as irredeemably broken. Nevertheless, the problem Trible stumbles upon is in its own right most illuminating; the failure to coordinate affect and proximity/distance is in fact the ground upon which our own reading of this text stands.

¹⁵³TRIBLE, Wisdom Builds a Poem, 516-17.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

Let us now take up Trible’s notion of progress which inheres to the completion of the text’s circle. This second trace of difference in repetition we fully endorse. She says what she means, it seems to me, with great care and our interpretation of it insists on reading it literally, à la lettre.

Beginning with wisdom crying out for listeners, the pericope concludes with wisdom speaking about the one who hears. The contrast is between expansion and retrenchment. The two full lines of the introduction and the one final line of the conclusion move from plural invitation to singular acceptance. In other words, wisdom’s meaning is the number of her lines and the number in her verb-form. At first all listen; at last one hears. The poem ends much closer to a whimper than to a bang. Remnant is the manner, matter, and meaning of this ending.\textsuperscript{154}

Trible describes the effect of the progress inherent to the circle’s completion as a retrenchment. Proverbs 1:20-33’s circle proceeds from an address to many—expansion—to the response of one—retrenchment. Trible says that the totality of this trenchant One—its “manner, matter, and meaning”—is remnant. “At first all listen, at last one hears.” It is the case, I assume, that Trible means to link the singular “one-who-hears” (דומע, v 33) with the rich semantic resources of remnant. This is an altogether remarkable assertion recalling as it does the entire apparatus of the Davidic covenant, the promise of a Messiah, YHWH’s inviolable regard for Jerusalem, i.e. that which is supposedly absent from the wisdom tradition.\textsuperscript{155} However, one wonders if, even at this late moment in the poem, it is still premature to say “one hears.” The movement of the poem, as Trible herself point out, carries Woman-Wisdom further and further from her initial posture of availability; she is ever more alienated from the human interlocutors she at one point vigorously sought.

But there is much to commend in this specification of the progress of Woman-Wisdom’s encircling speech as a retrenchment. Retrenchment, an admirably duplex image: on one hand the act of cutting-off, on the other a two tiered defensive fortification—a ditch that hems in a parapet. Woman-Wisdom ends up, we are saying, cut off; a trench is dug between her human interlocutors and the parapet

\textsuperscript{154} Trible, Wisdom Builds a Poem, 518.

\textsuperscript{155} It seems likely to me that Trible is here subtly and deeply criticizing the view of Wisdom as an “alien corpus.” See especially the earlier discussions of Preuss (¶ 9 on page 44) and Sharp (¶ 9
that conceals her presence. Behind the parapet? We are only told of security, a
peace far from terror of evil. The object, hidden, secure, unknown, the effect of
her speech and the cause of desire. The sage's desire is to desire this hidden object
which, because it is hidden, frustrates this desire, that is, it is the name for the lack
which fuels desire.

We may here return to the text to see the locus of this objectal lack revealed.
This objectal nature of lack—as opposed to the object that would fill it—Lacan
calls the object (α), an object unlike all the others. It is in the latter half of the
poem (and indeed we will start with the last proverb pair—vv 32-33) that we can
begin to trace its path through our text.

38 Turning-back versus back-turning and other confusing
proximities

We are after the message of the poem here, what is to be done? The enframing of
the poem by šub (vv 23, 32) has long been noted as a crucial feature of Woman-
Wisdom's speech. With few exceptions (Murphy, Clifford, etc.) the pair has been
understood as oppositional:

- Woman-Wisdom calls to the p'tāyım"Turn-back" tāšābā.
- They tragically miss the urgency of her command and in the end are killed
  for their "back-turning" mšwbh.

The rhetorical point would seem to be, there is a thin (but crucial!) line between
redemption and wreckage. In more prosaic terms, the ethical shortcomings of the p'-
tāyım are best grasped as a form of misrecognition (rather than defiance): What the
fool took for "turning-to" was, seen through the clearer eyes of wisdom, a "turning-
from."

It is instructive to make some comparisons with Jeremiah 3, wherein the pair
šub/mšwbh are the leitmotifs of a series of oracles and subsequent midrashim.\footnote{The interpretative tradition connecting Prov 1:22-33 and Jeremiah is longstanding. For a summary account see Fcx, Proverbs 1-9, 104.} In both cases (Jer 3 and Prov 1:20-33) the issue is an apparently unsalvageable
relationship: as Woman-Wisdom laments her rejection at the hands of urban society,
so Yhwh laments Jerusalem’s infidelity to the covenant that once bound them. The pathos filled rhetoric and the plea for reconciliation in the form of a *turn* are parallel.

If a husband sends his wife away
and she leaves him
and becomes another man’s
will he yet return to her (*hē* yāsūb ʿēlēhā)?
Will not that land be utterly defiled —
you, having whored with many neighbors?
Yet, return to me (*wē* šōb ʿēlay).

(Jer 3:1)

How long *pētāyim* will you love *peti* ...?
Turn to my instruction (*tāšūbā lʾtōkāhṭī*)
Look, I will pour out my Spirit for you.
I will teach you all my words.

(Prov 1:22-23)

We are confronted in each text with the same paradox. The quintessential embodiments of the Other sacrifice their own integrity vis-à-vis the Other’s Symbolic order—Yhwh with respect to Deuteronomy’s law of divorce,\(^{157}\) and Woman-Wisdom with respect to the sapiential ideal of controlling the passions and in particular the tongue\(^{158}\) —to effect a reconciliation between this order and the *socius* who is called to bear it. In both cases, as we know well, the heroic gesture goes unnoticed and the time for *šub* expires.

Have you seen what turncoat Israel (*mē* šūbāh yāsrāʾēl) has done—gone-up upon every high hill, beneath every leafy tree and whoored there. And I said, ‘After she has done all these things, she will return to Me’ (*ʾēlay tāšūb*); but she did not return (*wē* lōʾ-šūbāh), and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And

\(^{157}\)The pertinent passage is Deut 24:1-4: “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled, for that would be abhorrent to Yhwh, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that Yhwh your God is giving you as a possession.”

\(^{158}\)Cf. Prov 17:5.
I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel (מְשֻׁבָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל), I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and whored as well. (Jer 3:6-8)

They hated knowledge, and the fear of YHWH they chose not.
They consented not to my advice; my reproof they disdained. (Prov 1:29-30)

Indeed the back-turning (מְשֻׁבָּה) of the p'tāyim will kill them. (v 32)

To underscore a point made earlier, the critique raised by YHWH and Woman-Wisdom is specifically aimed. The object of contention is misplaced desire, this understood in two ways.

- The p'tāyim love pett; and the lēšûm love lāšôn; mutatis mutandis Israel and Judah pursue their adulteries (3:8,9) and whoring (3:6,8) with great gusto.
- But after this “blatant” treachery, after its disastrous consequences have been played out, after the Other’s command to turn, after Judah and the p'tāyim have already turned to the one who addresses them, a much subtler critique of desire remains.

In Proverbs, the “turn” to Woman-Wisdom is rejected on the grounds that it is not timely: “Then [i.e. after the calamitous wake-up call] they will call me, but I will not answer; they will seek me, but not find me” (1:28). What is striking are the temporal paradoxes that come into play. Recall Woman-Wisdom’s overriding plea at the outset of her address: “Turn!” Verse 28 describes perfectly, does it not, what such a turn would involve: the previously slack p’tāyim earnestly and urgently commit to finding Woman-Wisdom. But it is too late, why? Their late decision to “turn” is tainted in so far as its motives are suspect. Their regard for Woman-Wisdom is obviously not pure (i.e. arising out of a recognition of her merits) but is incited by fear. The sudden attention of v 28 is nothing more than a knee-jerk reflex to the calamities of vv 26-27. In Jeremiah we find a parallel situation, though the basis of rejection is a lack of authenticity. “But even with all this, treacherous sister Judah did not turn to me with all her heart (בָּכֹל-לִיבָּה), but rather falsely (קִי-עֲמֶ-בְּשֶׁגֶר)” (Jer 3:10). Thus the ethical mandate implied by šub is more complicated than it at first appears. One must turn on-time and with a pure heart.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

The juxtaposition of Jeremiah and Proverbs adds one more twist to the ethical opposition *turn-back/back-turn*. Given the historical proximity of the composition of these texts (i.e. post-exilic Jerusalem\(^{159}\)) how do we read them as intertexts? In a very general approach, we can affirm what Newsom (2004, 4) emphasizes about this period and its literature as to the heightened or even hyper attentiveness to discourse of identity. "One can treat the diverse cultural phenomena of Second Temple Judaism as a protracted discussion of the question, ‘What is it that really constitutes Israel?’ Not every society is so preoccupied with a discourse of identity, but the peculiar historical circumstances of Second Temple Judaism brought that issue to the fore.” Given the intensity of this discussion, should we conclude (as for example does S. Harris\(^{160}\)) that the parallel warnings—prophetic and sapiential versions of the insistence *Turn-back! Don’t back-turn!*—reinforce each other, thus bringing together under one “sacred canopy” formerly disparate intellectual traditions? Well, this line of thought would seem to imply a latent but essential moral identity to

\(^{159}\)On the post-exilic composition of Jer 3:6-11 see Holladay (1986, 116-118). It is widely held that vv 6-11 are a “midrashic” interpretation of earlier oracles, in particular the phrase šābāh m"-ṣubāh yīsra’ēl—which original sense is ambiguous: “Turn-back back-turning Israel”, or “Turn a-turning Israel”—embedded in the exilic oracle of 3:12. The post-exilic provenance of Prov 1-9 is indicated by linguistic evidence, i.e. vocabulary and grammatical structures characteristic of late biblical Hebrew. For a detailed discussion see Yoder (2001, chapter one). Two further possibilities of historical proximity are notable. (1) Both Prov 1-9 and the post-exilic Jeremiah traditions have abandoned the ideological-institutional complexes of temple and monarchy as viable pathways to the restoration of Judah/Jerusalem; and (2) as an alternative to these “traditional” guarantors of Jerusalem’s well-being, both emphasized a pedagogical mandate to rebuild a Jewish society (if not a Jewish state) on the foundation of proper teaching.

\(^{160}\)Harris’s argument, alluded to earlier, goes the farthest in specifying the prophetic dimensions of Prov 1:23-32. “By paraphrasing Jeremiah and by setting it in a context of direct discourse, the refrain in effect looks back to the generation which refused to heed the words of the prophet. The alterations in tense and person thus . . . set the context of wisdom’s speech and the perception of that speech in the historical situation which recall the words of Jeremiah to the pre-587 generation at Jerusalem” (Harris, 1995, 95). Later in his argument, Harris emphasizes the combining of distinct traditions in a coherent synthesis, “Our analysis of Prov 1:20-33 isolates a number of editorial devices for combining, in this case, prophetic speech in a sapiential context. [. . .] The narrator introduces wisdom in vv 20-21 by calling attention to her forthcoming speech in vv 22-23. Wisdom then adds another stratum of speech by introducing paraphrased prophetic speech from Jeremiah 7 and 20 in Prov 1:24-31. . . . Traditions from Judah’s history are reutilized in a sapiential context” (Harris, 1995, 108).
which the determiners “sapiential” and “prophetic” stand as stylistic overlays. But if this is so, what is it? What is its content? What will the willing and capable hearer do upon receiving the message?

To the extent that she counts each text to be equally authoritative, she can only be paralyzed; in terms of an ethical response, stopped dead in her tracks. For the entirety of Proverbs’ and Jeremiah’s ethical message can be reduced to the question of fidelity. Everything pivots on hearer’s responsiveness and loyalty to the speaking Other.

- Yhwh excoriates Israel and Judah for “whoring” after substitute gods, whose avatars are typically objects of sexual desire.

- Woman-Wisdom—blatantly written as an object of desire—pleads for the people to respond to her advances (from the street corner no less). When they ignore her, reject her, turn away, do not consent, she spews rage and vengeance.

That is, the image of šwb from the first matches precisely the image of mšwbh from the second, and vice versa. Pace Harris, the textual echoes do not harmoniously reinforce but rather undermine each other; these texts should be kept far apart (difficult in the tiny province of Yehud) lest their meeting precipitates a signifying catastrophe.\textsuperscript{161}

The ethical impasse arising at this conjuncture is not insignificant, especially if some kind of historical proximity can be established between the composition and/or reception of these texts. At the very least, it is a complex case of Israel’s

\textsuperscript{161} The pivotal significance (in both the Proverbs and Jeremiah passages) of šwb, coupled with its contested usages, suggests its important position in the identity discourse of Second Temple Judaism. In this regard it might be grouped with a handful of terms—“torah,” “remnant,” “fear-of Yhwh,” “Israel”—that are nodal points in the ideological struggle to define Israel. The crucial question, raised throughout this study (see for example ¶ 57 on page 203 and in the sustained readings of Prov 14:16-27 and 10:22-27), relates to meaning of such terms as these. How do they mean? How is it that seemingly contingent and certainly particular names or objects come to stand for the fullness of the universal field. The Lacanian (and truthfully Hegelian) insight that is born out in Proverbs is the purely negative magnitude, the strict absence of meaning that coincides with these freighted terms. What Lacan calls the Master-Signifier (S\textsubscript{1}) represents the failure of the universal to constitute itself, so that hegemonic discourse and the community constituted around such discourse finds its consistency in a shared ignorance, though an ignorance determined by the function of a particular signifier.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

identity being negotiated on a newly textualized field,¹⁶² whereupon "literary works, religious movements, new social institutions, emerging symbols... ceaselessly suggested ways of answer that question."¹⁶³ Our interest in the indeterminacy of šwb /mšwbh, however, lies in a different direction. The form of "ethical impasse"—here grasped in the juxtaposition of inter-texts—forces us to re-evaluate Prov 1:20-33 as a contained passage. Is it possible to pinpoint—even if localizable to just this one speech—an ethical distinction between šwb /mšwbh.

39 Further indistinctions

Perhaps, however, we have let the mšabḥ of v 32 distract us from what Fox calls the Conclusion/Capstone of Woman-Wisdom's lecture (vv 32-33).¹⁶⁴ Do we receive the "Apothegm" in these verses that would put all this ambiguity to rest? Waltke rightly notes the unified form of 32-33 as a "quatrains that contrasts the beneficent fate of the wise with the baneful end of fools"¹⁶⁵ but also goes into great detail about the ambiguity of this contrast at the level of the quatrains’s content. What is it that differentiates these two fates the verses aim to contrast?

The remnant “lives confidently and remains at-ease” whereas “the uncomprised of fools destroys them.” Each of the words here — unconcern šmn, confidence bth, at-ease šlwḥ—belong to the same general semantic field but none holds any immediate connection to “real” versus merely “apparent” security.¹⁶⁶ Thus for each word the

¹⁶²See the fuller discussion of textualization in ¶ 98 on page 324.
¹⁶⁴Fox (2000) makes the form critical distinction between the “lectures” of the father/sage and the “poetic interludes” wherein Woman-Wisdom speaks. This is a perfectly cogent way of understanding Proverbs’ units of composition, but (and Fox is not saying otherwise) the literary distinction cannot always be maintained. On the merits of its rhetorical structure, the “poetic interlude” contained in Prov 1:20-33 is best analyzed as a “lecture” by Woman-Wisdom—parallel to father’s initial lecture in 1:8-19. (cf. WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 212). Fox notes many similarities between the first Lecture and this Interlude and suggests “Interlude A is probably by a later author who knew Lecture I and built on it” (Fox, 2000, 96). Their shared rather than contrastive structure govern his interpretation of the successive units. Compare the Introduction, Lecture, and Conclusion/Capstone of Interlude A (Fox, 2000, 103-4) with the Exordium, Lesson, and Conclusion/Capstone of Lecture I (Fox, 2000, 92).
¹⁶⁵WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 212. ¹⁰⁰See the discussion in WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 213.
sense of well-being may be well-founded—šnn: Isa 32:18; bth: Prov 28:1; šlw: Prov 17:1—or misguided—šnn: Amos 6:1; bth: Prov 28:26; šlw: Jer 22:21. We presume Woman-Wisdom intends the values misguided—well-founded—well-founded, respectively, but we seem only left to wonder about the basis on which any hearer may discern the authenticity (or not) of his security, which is to say, whether anyone who “hears” Woman-Wisdom would be able to maintain any sense of security worthy of the name.

Although Woman-Wisdom may leave us insecure, her final comment promises that the one “hearing” her will be far away “from the terror of evil.” Thus Waltke rightly suggests, “she holds out this promise as a parting appeal to other rebellious young people, who might hear or read her reflections, to give up their alternative lifestyles to wisdom.” The evocation of “alternatives,” however, is entirely disingenuous, insofar as it is taken to mean Woman-Wisdom has offered us a clear ethical choice. For our ethical dilemma does not come when Waltke says it does (i.e. in the decision to hear). It comes on the contrary after or even in the moment of hearing, in the interval between hearing and understanding: I hear (m̄ Šm), and yet I do not understand (m̄ l· šm). It would seem that the final and most overtly ethical meaning of šm ("to obey") becomes something of an impossibility.

The reversal that inhabits this text, formulated elsewhere in more grandiose fashion (Prov 1:7 and 9:10, for example) is the transmutation of this impossible alternative into the thing of obedience itself. The offense that Woman-Wisdom condemns in v 29, “They did not choose the fear-of YHWH,” is precisely a refusal to take up Wisdom’s impossible ethical demand, whose very contours this passage has been tracing: to turn so as to stop turning, to live securely so as to stop living securely, and to fear so as to be far from fear. The impossibility refers to the zero degree difference between the first and second terms, the determination of which is, at the same time, the very condition for the possibility of any wisdom whatever.

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167 Most interesting for this discussion are Amos 6:1, Isa 32:9, 11, and 18, which name the šnn and the bth as the paralleled objects of the prophets’ indictments or, in the case of Isa 32:18, blessing, and Job 12:5-6, an admittedly difficult passage in which it seems clear that the sage complains about both the šnn and the bth, who live at-ease (šlh) even though they provoke God.

168 WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 213.
3. The Subject and Object of Wisdom

40 Subject, signifier, object

Moving towards a summary of our work to this point, we divided the poem according to Woman-Wisdom's grammatical position: in vv 22-27 as subject, in vv 28-33 as object. This division, it turns out, corresponds to another one vis-à-vis the overall theme of signification—the move from problem to solution.

- In the first panel, signification is presented as a problem defined by an inherent lack in the socio-symbolic matrix of meaning to which she is bound qua mediator. We defined this matrix in terms of Lacan's big Other, a two-faced conceptualization of language, meaning both collective and unconscious maintenance of a particular Symbolic network as well as the set of signifiers in whose material network of differential relations meaning insists. Thus we noted that Woman-Wisdom's lack has a social basis (she is unable to recognize herself an actually existing form of sapiential institution), though we focused on the deeper structural lack of a signifier (the semiotic field of Wisdom missing that element which would anchor Woman-Wisdom to something fixed). This double-bind was expressed, we said, in the pathos of lament, in escalating registers of desire and then revenge.

- In the second panel, the problem of Woman-Wisdom's Symbolic identification is solved. How is this so, given the intrinsic and structural impediments we had just uncovered apropos the fixation of a signified? Two elements play a crucial role.

1. The lack of a "proper" signifier (the one that by its thick connection to a referent would ground the rest of the system) is remedied, in v 29, through a signifier that functions on a different level than the set of which it is nonetheless a part. This can be seen even within the local series of vv 29-30: the rejection of Wisdom amounts to the rejection of knowledge da'at, advice ēsāh, reproof tōkaḥat, and the fear-of Yhwh yīrat yēhw. With this last term—the fame of which should not blind us to its peculiar negative magnitude—the impossibility of signification is reflected into the actual meaning of Wisdom. In aphoristic form, we move "from the lack of a signifier to the signifier of lack." As Wisdom's very condition of possibility there must exist a certain nodal point that stops the endless production of Symbolic equiva-
lences/equivocations. But, and this is the crucial feature of Lacan’s Master-Signifier, this One ($S_1$) does not counteract the previous failings of Symbolic representation, it rather represents this failure of representation as such and so stands outside the infinite differential calculus of all the others ($S_2$). “It is not only that every Symbolic system is a system of differences with no positive substantial support; it is crucial to add that the very difference between the (self-enclosed) Symbolic system and its outside must itself be inscribed within the system, in the guise of a paradoxical supplementary signifier which, within the system, functions as a stand-in for what the system excludes: for what eludes the system’s grasp…a signifier whose very presence marks the constitutive absence of the feature in question.”

It is thus, strictly speaking, impossible to define the fear-of YHWH in terms of meaning (as is commonly done when it is taken to represent the qualification of knowledge by piety); within the ideological field of Wisdom its role is wholly structural, holding the place of the impassable bar between signifier and signified, conveying no signified of its own.

2. The determination of the place, within the Symbolic field, of the impossible void of representation does not in itself explain the most conspicuous feature of the poem, namely Woman-Wisdom’s embodied voice, through which the sage encounters Wisdom as a concrete, public object to which he must respond. Our analysis of the passage shows this voice to be strictly correlative to the fear-of YHWH, as if this signifier of impossibility must be incarnated in some material content, that which eludes my grasp and thereby prevents me from fully attaining Wisdom and thus ensures that I continue to fear. It is crucial to avoid theorizing Woman-Wisdom herself in terms of object (a), which is not the object that if finally attained would fulfill desire. Lacan’s designation “object-cause” indicates that which provokes desire, frustrates the consumption of whatever. How do we understand this in terms of Woman-Wisdom’s voice? As the material, bodily “remnant” of linguistic signification, the voice perceived as the voice of serves as a guarantee of presence that cuts through

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Zizek, For They Know Not What They Do, xxi.
the differential logic of signification. The sheep follow the good shepherd, "because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." In Prov 1:28-33, according to a structure we highlighted by means of an inter-text from Jeremiah, this immediate form of recognition without understanding is precisely what is evoked as that which does not exist. Though (in analogous fashion to the negative measure of the Master-Signifier) the non-existence of object (a) takes on a specificity dissimilar to the dispersed vacuity of nothingness. This no-thing is like Merleau-Ponty's "constitutive void" whose place we have defined in phenomenological terms: the indistinguishability between turning-back and back-turning, fear and terror, ease and unconcern.

These discoveries provide a program of research for the remainder of our dissertation. This entails, first, an account of the fear-of YHWH in its function as the Master-Signifier, not only in the chronologically later chaps. 1-9 (wherein both the import of the fear-of YHWH and the presence of a "master" as the palpable presence of an authoritative father/sage are foregone interpretative conclusions) but across the sentence literature, whose unified testimony vis-à-vis Wisdom remains a problem to be solved. And second, how does Proverbs continually evoke and confront us with the material, objective grounds for the indissoluble lack the sages experienced with respect to Wisdom. In this regard, our analysis of Woman-Wisdom's voice will not be abandoned, though of course there is a much more obvious and important foil than what we discovered in Jeremiah. We can say confidently, even at the very outset, our analysis of object (a) will involve a careful account of two voices: the manner in which the father speaks through Woman-Wisdom and the Strange-Woman so as to teach the son in the ways of Wisdom.

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170 On the voice as the quintessential incarnation (or, we should say, dis-incarnation of object (a) see the extended discussion in ¶ 79 on page 269 and ¶ 97 on page 316. )
171 John 10:4
172 "The very plenitude of the present reveals itself upon examination to be our constitutive void carried to the second power." M. MERLEAU-PONTY, The Visible and the Invisible. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968, 54.
Part II

The Fear of the Lord
Chapter 4

The Poetics of Binarity

In later texts, the insight of ἔκκλησι extends to the intellectual understanding or "decoding" of messages... not the method or ability to interpret, but the purport or message communicated by the text

Michael Fox
Words for Wisdom

41 The Structure of Authority

In part 1 we offered a proposal for conceptualizing the specific coordinates of Prov 1-9's Symbolic world and we suggested that many of the interpretive difficulties associated with Woman-Wisdom's first speech arise from the unwarranted assumption that Woman-Wisdom somehow escapes or transcends (generally) the impasses of Symbolic mediation and (specifically) the contradictions inherent to Prov 1-9's form of discourse. Though most commentaries do not conceptualize this literature at the level of abstraction introduced by the Lacanian discourses (especially when it comes to interpreting Woman-Wisdom), the basic idea that Prov 1-9 speaks from the perspective of a "Master" is by no means absent from many if not most readings of these chapters. Thus, most interpreters find it relevant to acknowledge that Prov 1-9's wisdom is presented as the teachings of an authoritative father figure.

It is not, of course, the authority of the father/sage/lecturer to which Proverbs, in the last instance, appeals. The father holds the place of, represents a divine authority he himself lays no claim to apart from his office. Here we should think...
about representation in terms of a double function, whose difference is given in German according to the senses of Darstellen and Vertreten.\textsuperscript{1} The father represents (darstellt) in the sense of depicting the authority of God in the content of his teaching. This is the aspect of sapiential thought and pedagogy von Rad saw fit to equate with “the whole Israelite theory of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{2} Under this mode of representation we would include the famous “motto-verses” of 1:7 and 9:10—“The fear-of Yhwh is the beginning of wisdom”—but equally determinations of the fear-of Yhwh in other terms: “By the fear-of Yhwh is the turning from evil” (16:6) and so on. On the other hand, the father represents (vertretet) as a substitutionary point of reference the authority of God, a fixed perspective wherefrom the inexperienced son learns and internalizes the ground from which all sapiential precepts gain their derivative meaning. We can see this dynamic of representation throughout Prov 1-9 whenever the father exhorts the son towards his own teachings, using rhetoric indistinguishable from what befits religious obedience. “My son, forget not my teaching (tôrât) and may your heart guard my commandments (mîswôtây).” (Prov 3:1).

We would be mistaken to suppose, however, that the important differences between Darstellen and Vertreten correspond to opposing views of wisdom; they do not. Rather, they highlight an identical assumption, one which was eventually normative for the biblical wisdom tradition, that wisdom is learned not by simply observing patterns in the world but by setting these patterns in relation to the fixed, even if invisible, reality of God. The qualifier “eventually” is of course not accidental but refers to the relatively late stage at which point the wisdom literature is thought to have assumed this more authoritative tone.\textsuperscript{3} Whether the diachronic

\textsuperscript{1}It was SFIVAK (1988) who famously exploited this particular German precision apropos of “representation” in her signal essay: Can the Subaltern Speak?.

\textsuperscript{2}VON RAD, Wisdom, 67.

\textsuperscript{3}The central point of reference for this question of “authority” is Zimmerli’s 1933 article “Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom.” Zimmerli, whose aim was to distinguish legal and sapiential modes of authority, nonetheless had to account for a (logically) prior split within the wisdom tradition, which he accounted for in terms of a developmental shift from proverb to admonition. “One may speak of a formal development of the mashal from Prov 10ff. up through Prov 1ff.: a stylistic change to the admonition, to the ‘commandment-saying.’” ZIMMERLI, Structure, 182. Zimmerli’s conclusion that this formal shift does not register a reconception of sapien-
trajectory is understood in terms of a “theologization” or an “overarching pedagogical movement,” the function of a Master is posited only of Prov 1-9.

In this second part of our argument, as our analysis heads into the sentence literature, an important question arises: are the chronologically earlier collections in Prov 10-29 spoken with a different structure of discourse than the Master’s discourse of Prov 1-9? The authoritative tone of Prov 1-9 is sometimes taken as a good way to differentiate these chapters from the teachings in Prov 10-29, which seem less reliant on authority to legitimate its knowledge.6

Recently, Brown (2002) even described chapters 10-29 as the moment Prov 1-9’s addressee, the “son,” is thrown into the world of competing and contradictory claims, without recourse to the paternal figure present in chapters 1-9, so that the child may gain his own proficiency with wisdom and become the bearer of the father’s Symbolic authority for a new generation of sons/students. Although we may perhaps want to reserve judgment on Brown’s particular narrative as the best way to account for the book as a whole, we can set out to conceptualize the perception on which this narrative is based, i.e., that Prov 10-29 lacks the kind of “Master” Prov 1-9 relies upon to give its wisdom a consistent meaning.

Perhaps we could state this difference more succinctly by simply suggesting that the book of Proverbs as a whole teaches the reader that there are two ways in the world, one wise and the other foolish; Prov 1-9, on the one hand, provides a paternal figure who promises to know and be able to teach the student how to tell the one from the other whereas Prov 10-29 lacks this third reference point. An initial problem, then, is to determine if this formal distinction (ternarity versus

4 Von Rad, Wisdom, e.g., 54-55.
5 Brown, Character in Crisis: a Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, 152.
6 Greenson (1995 [Orig. pub. 1980]) has already problematized a neat distinction that sets in opposition the instructional imperative to the sentential indicative, noting the diverse shapes
binarity) can be sustained exegetically. A related but not necessarily dependent line of inquiry concerns the extent to which these two sections of text in Proverbs may be said to project versions of wisdom that differ with respect to stability and clarity. In other words, we want to ask (1) whether 1-9 and 10-29 differ structurally, the former constituting its field on the basis of ternarity, the latter on binarity; (2) whether one may be said to lend a greater degree of stability and clarity to wisdom's fundamental binary (wisdom-folly); and (3) whether one can demonstrate any correlation between the answers to (1) and (2).

Form-critically, the binary-ternary distinction appears to be a well-founded starting point. Whereas Prov 1-9 is best characterized as a series of imperative Lectures and Interludes (the normative content of which is underscored by a sharp power gradient between father and son, teacher and student), Prov 10-29 is on the contrary marked by its descriptive and indicative mode of instruction, the ethical "application" of which is left to the reader/hearer. That is, the sentences of Prov 10-29 are not related to some fixed third position; their meaning, so it is usually claimed, emerges in the interval between a pair of truth claims—"Proverbs cannot be interpreted correctly without asking the question: How are the parallel verses of a verse related to one another?" For this reason there is perhaps nothing more important at the outset of our investigation into the discursive structure of the sentence literature than understanding the dynamics of bilinear parallelism. Only after establishing how the poetry "works" can we begin to understand how its wisdom is related to that of chapters 1-9 and, specifically, the coherency of the ternary-binary differentiation.

42 Binary opposition and the form of proverbs

The binarity under consideration here is first and foremost that of the two-line proverbs that pervade the collections of Prov 10ff.\(^5\) This structure, from the point in which authority exerts its power to compel consent.

\(^7\)WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 45.

\(^8\)This dissertation does not engage two questions that are perennially at the center of discussions about biblical parallelism: (1) what, if anything, distinguishes Hebrew poetry from its prosaic counterpart? and (2) what is the basic unit of biblical poetry? These omissions are allowable insofar as Prov 10-29 is dominated by what are indisputably poetic bicola of parallel lines and the particular determination of their poetics demand no requisite judgments at a more universal level,
of view of poetics, constitutes the principle feature of the proverbial form, by which they convey a depth and subtlety of meaning that belie their brevity. "The single line proverbs," von Rad remarks, referring to a verse composed of two parallel sections, "often enough makes higher claims and demands a greater degree of intellectual participation than a developed didactic poem."9 Or more recently in the same vein, "Content and elegance of form in even a brief saying craft a minute aesthetic of meaning to be understood, prized, embodied in character, and activated in the moral life."10

The aesthetic appeal and intellectual demand alike arise from the insinuation of difference into an accepted axiom of life, a point perhaps obscured by the tendency of scholarship to focus on the synonymy of parallelism.11 Reading Proverbs, whether with an eye towards poetics or ethics, involves a continual shifting of frames of reference: observations grounded in irrefutable common sense are not given in or for themselves but are established, it seems, only to be reinserted in a new context. To be sure the connections are often as common-sensical as their constituent elements,

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,
but the companion of fools suffers harm. (Prov 13:20)

A faithful witness does not lie,
but a false witness breathes out lies. (14:5)

but, not uncommonly, the shift to second line is accompanied by paradox

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8VON RAD, Wisdom, 27. 10PERDUE, Proverbs, 33.
11ALFIS (1985, 10) has sought to undermine the tight association between parallelism and the logic of repetition and synonymity. "It is equally important to recognize that literary expression abhors complete parallelism, just as language resists true synonymity, usage always introducing small wedges of difference between closely akin terms."

KUGEL (1981, 54), in a similar vein, has insisted that the relationship between the first and second line is much more open than has been understood since LOWTH's typology of Hebrew parallelism was introduced. "To recapitulate: the parallelistic style in the Bible consists not of stringing together clauses that bear some semantic, syntactic, or phonetic resemblance, nor yet of 'saying the same thing twice,' but of the sequence _______ / _______ // in which B is both a continuation of A and yet broken from it by a pause, a typically emphatic 'seconding' style in which parallelism plays an important part but whose essence is not parallelism, but the 'seconding sequence.'"
Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. (11:24)

The hand of the diligent will rule,
while the lazy will be put to forced labor. (12:24)
or moments of awkward reorientation to an oblique semantic field.
Better to be despised and have a servant,
than to be self-important and lack food. (12:9)

Wealth is a ransom for a person’s life,
but the poor get no threats. (13:8)

In such proverbs, the recognition of identity comes only in the second moment, wherein the original obviousness is retroactively canceled by the constellation of a new unexpected relation of identity in difference. It is undoubtedly a heightened sensitivity to this term of difference that lies behind a scholarly re-evaluation of Prov 10-29.\textsuperscript{12} that finds in the sentence collections an inverse relationship between the simplicity of the binary form and its complex thematicizations of ontology, epistemology, and subjectivity.

43 \textbf{IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE}

The dialectic of identity and difference (or, as in the case with “synonymous parallelism,” difference in identity\textsuperscript{13} is not unique to biblical or even Semitic poetry but mirrors the prevailing model of linguistic meaning as such, the elementary structure

\textsuperscript{12}See the collection of essays (including a survey of recent scholarship by K. Kuntz) in Fox, Michael, editor, \textit{Essays on the Art of the Aphorism}. Volume 29, 2004.

\textsuperscript{13}In agreement with the critiques registered by Kugel and Alter, I wish to \textit{de-emphasize} the typological distinction between “synonymous” and “antithetical” parallelism. These determinations reflect what amounts to the distribution of a sign as with the logically equivalent expressions $A = A$ and $A \neq \text{not-}A$. We are saying (and will develop at length in this chapter) of parallelism as such, that meaning is constituted in the establishment of \textit{two axes}: one of difference, one of identity. Synonymous parallelism says that hard work and good manners, though they are different (belonging to different semantic \textit{topoi}, different social milieus) are the same on wisdom’s axis. Antithetical parallelism says a constrained spirit and a fiery temper, though they are equivalent (indicating magnitudes of the same “stuff” of human temperament) are opposed on the axis of wisdom.
of which (to repeat the now familiar formula) is the differential relationship between two signifiers $S_1$ and $S_2$. With respect to the sentence wisdom, this is suggestive in terms of a methodological axiom: The meaning of any proverb is constituted by the differential relations established between lines one and two. And indeed statements to this effect are exactly what we find in recent Proverbs scholarship. However, given the status of the "binary opposition" as something of a philosophical slogan, and further given the deadening familiarity with which biblical scholarship tends to view the phenomenon of poetic parallelism, it will serve us well to elaborate, as precisely and rigorously as possible, a linguistic model of biblical parallelism that takes into account the differential nature of the signifier.

44 Expression and Content

In recent scholarship, the most sustained and linguistically sophisticated theorization of biblical parallelism is Adele Berlin's. Her research isolates the aspect of parallelism that, on her view, constitutes the fundamental structure of Hebrew poetry. She convincingly illustrates important differences between the (1) syntactic, (2) morphologic, (3) semantic, and (4) lexical dimensions of parallelism which we,

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14Recall Waltke's remark cited above (¶ 41 on page 161): "Proverbs cannot be interpreted correctly without asking the question How are the parallel verses of a verse related to one another?"

15The legacy of Robert Lowth is thus ambivalent. On the one hand, his discovery of parallelismum membrorum (1753) must be counted as one of the most elegant and durable rubrics for our understanding of biblical poetry. On the other hand, his classificatory scheme—parallelism as "synonymous," "antithetical," or "synthetic"—has undoubtedly contributed to distortions in interpreting parallel verses, even if one would not go so far as Kuechel (1981, 115): "it has had a disastrous effect on subsequent criticism."


17By design both Berlin's work and what follows in the present study attend to the relationship between parallelism and poetry or, to be specific, what Berlin articulates as the "poetic function." I understand her use of the term "aspect" as a rather shrewd, defensive measure, so that her work is not appropriated on one side or the other in the heated typological debates, which have preoccupied a disproportionate space in the discussion of biblical poetry. In this I share her inclinations and thus limit my remarks to the poetic function of parallelism. This, by all accounts, is what is most relevant to Proverbs.
without needing to sacrifice her important nuances, reduce to two. These correspond to L. Hjelmslev's distinction between *expression* and *content*.\(^{18}\) (At times Berlin herself recognizes this more fundamental distinction by which syntax and morphology are distinguished in kind from semantics and lexicology. In her own words, "If the grammatical aspect provides the skeleton of the parallelism then the lexical and semantic aspects are its flesh and blood."\(^{19}\) The crucial point here and the reason we invoke Hjelmslev's categories at all is not to lend Berlin's framework the authority of science, but rather to aid our own vigilance against the more familiar relaxation of thought into the binary form and content. For the Hjelmskevian opposition *expression-content* is crosshatched by a second one of *form-substance*, yielding a much more complicated and dialectical representation of language.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Expression :} & \\
\text{FORM:} & \quad \text{The relational structure that is articulated by phonological or morphological rules.} \\
\text{SUBSTANCE:} & \quad \text{The medium that carries the differential form of the expression—the voice or the mark.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Content :} & \\
\text{FORM:} & \quad \text{The semantic object constituted by the linguistic expression.} \\
\text{SUBSTANCE:} & \quad \text{The raw material of meaning: history, perception, i.e. the point of intersection between Hjelmslev's matrix and the Real.}
\end{align*}
\]


\(^{19}\) Berlin, *Dynamics*, 64.

\(^{20}\) The last, "content-substance," is exceptional with respect to the other three, indicating the
4. The Poetics of Binarity

Slev helps us see, in other words, that the categories Berlin has distinguished as (1) "grammatical" and (2) "lexico and semantic" are themselves cross-hatched by the fundamental distinction between form and substance.

To anticipate my critique of Berlin, which is rightly placed after an acknowledgment of my debt to her work, the formal analysis of parallelism falls out of Berlin’s work when she turns to content. To a large extent, she approaches expression and content as two incommensurable dimensions of parallelism21 as evidenced by her markedly different theoretical orientations towards them. Where structural linguistics organizes and directs her approach to expression, her approach to content is rooted in the quite different field of psycholinguistics.22

45 Parallelism and the Poetic Function

At the level of expression, Berlin’s work is inspired by R. Jakobson’s somewhat enigmatic pronouncement on parallelism as the essential dimension of poetry: parallelism qua poetic function “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive point at which Hjelmslev’s theory (or, rather, linguistics as such) reaches its limit, which is simply meaning. Hjelmslev uses the word purport. One could substitute, the signified. “Purport remains, each time, substance for a new form, and has no possible existence except through being substance for one form or another. We recognize in the linguistic content...a specific form, the content-form, which is independent of, and stands in arbitrary relation to, the purport, and forms it into a content-substance.” HJELMSLEV, 52.

21Volosinov/Bakhtin has identified a split in the science of linguistics, giving rise to two conceptions of the proper linguistic object that cannot be coordinated in terms of a unified philosophy of language. “In the philosophy of language and in the related methodological sectors of general linguistics, we observe two basic trends in the solution of our problem, i.e. the problem of the identification and the delimitation of language as a specific object of study...The first trend can be termed individualistic subjectivism...and the second, abstract objectivism.” V. N. VOLOSOINOV, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. London: Seminar Press, 1973, 48. I take these trends as functionally equivalent to the two approaches we find in Berlin: abstract objectivism and expression; individualistic subjectivism and content.

22By observing this tendency I do not, of course, intend to suggest that there is no inmixing of theoretical approaches to each dimension.
device of the sequence.\textsuperscript{23}

The selective or paradigmatic axis refers to each moment of the unfolding message as an autonomous function whereby one element is chosen from a set. "If 'child' is the topic of the message, the speaker selects one among the extant, more or less similar nouns like child, kid, younger, tot, all of them equivalent in a certain respect."\textsuperscript{24} It is important to recognize that the absent members of the set are in a sense present insofar as they determine the signifier's meaning (a child is a type of younger, older than a tot, younger than a kid, etc.), which is therefore, in a sense, absent.

The combinatory or syntagmatic axis, on the other hand, traces the time of the utterance itself: the sequential elements that constitute the more or less complex moments of the message. Returning to our exemplary child:

- to comment on this topic [the speaker] may select one of the semantically cognate verbs—sleeps, dozes, nods, naps. Both chosen words combine in the speech chain.

- The selection is produced on the basis of equivalence\textsuperscript{25}—similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy—while the combination, the buildup of the sequence, is based on contiguity.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus the promotion effected by the poetic function refers to the staging of what is normally latent in language. The logic of substitution that describes the invisible paradigmatic dimension of non-poetic language is made to appear in time as a combinatory sequence of syntags.

We can at this point better understand the importance of Berlin's twofold insistence:

1. To say that parallelism is the constitutive or "dominant" feature of Hebrew poetry is to describe a qualitative shift that cannot be settled statistically. Parallelism


\textsuperscript{24}Jakobson, The Speech Event and the Functions of Language, 77.

\textsuperscript{25}Jakobson's language of “equivalence” must be conceived apart from the prevailing categories of “synonymous” and “antithetical” that are deeply embedded in biblical studies' treatment of parallelism. For Jakobson, equivalence indicates an axis of identification by which differences and similarities between terms are made evident. “Wise” and “foolish” are poetically equivalent terms, whereas the relationship between “wise” and “righteous” is more oblique, despite the fact that Proverbs frequently sets the latter terms in what is called “synonymous parallelism.”

\textsuperscript{26}Jakobson, The Speech Event and the Functions of Language, 77-78.
4. The Poetics of Binarity

is of course extensively used in Hebrew prose, but its use there as a “subsidiary, accessory constituent” is to be strictly distinguished from the way, in poetry, parallelism manifests the “poetic function.” (2) The corollary to this: parallelism qua poetic function fundamentally alters the purpose of discourse. Whereas in prose the primary function is referential, i.e. having the aim of orienting the addressee to some context (Jakobson’s preferred term for what used to be called the “referent”), poetry turns discourse inwards to focus on the conditions of its own production. The poetic function is “the set (Einstellung) toward the message as such...[which] by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects.”

For our own purposes, we may leave aside the intractable difficulties of delimiting the boundaries of poetry in the Hebrew Bible, instead attending to the peculiar syntax Jakobson and Berlin uncover—the projection of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic one. For the insistence of this poetic function would seem to radically alter the normal aims of interpretation, which now must account for a double function at the level of signification. Each proverb will naturally convey some content it wishes to teach, but equally it will seek to unveil the structural interplay of equivalence and difference that grounds not only the teaching at hand, but the production of meaning as such.

Let us briefly turn to a particular proverb to illustrate the preceding abstract discussion.

27 BERLIN, Dynamics, 9.

28 Berlin refers to the six functions of language Jakobson develops in relation to his formalization of the speech event: “An outline of [the functions of language] demands a concise survey of the constitutive factors in any speech event, in any act of verbal communication. The addressee sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to graspable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a code fully, or at least partially, common to the addressee and addressee; and, finally, a contact, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addressee and the addressee... Each of these six factors determines a different function of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. The diversity lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several functions but in a different hierarchical order of function. The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function.” (JAKOBSON, 1990a, 72-73).

29 JAKOBSON, The Speech Event and the Functions of Language, 76.
A wise son pleases a father
but a foolish son is the grief of his mother.

Prov 10:1

Note how the combination of terms in the first colon of Prov 10:1 unfolds sequentially along the syntagmatic axis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>bn-ḥkm</th>
<th>yśmh</th>
<th>b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wise</td>
<td>to please</td>
<td>a-father</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.1: Prov 10:1—the syntagmatic axis

The following colon now “makes visible” the hidden workings of the first by presenting the (normally implicit) equivalences that determine the value of the key terms—son, to please, father—in the first place:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>bn-ḥkm</th>
<th>yśmh</th>
<th>b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wise</td>
<td>to please</td>
<td>a-father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bn-kšyl</td>
<td>twgt</td>
<td>mw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foolish</td>
<td>grief</td>
<td>his-mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2: Prov 10:1—the paradigmatic axis.

The verse as a whole, by juxtaposing the corresponding semantic and grammatical functions of each line, thus stages the selective process behind every meaningful combinatory utterance.

46 Sequentiality versus narrativity

A clear grasp of paradigmatic selection and syntagmatic combination vis-à-vis parallelism and the poetic function allows us to grasp the polemical edge of Berlin’s
work; i.e. to identify its distance from equally classic accounts of parallelism such as those of Robert Alter\textsuperscript{30} and James Kugel\textsuperscript{31}.

Although Alter has done so in more explicitly linguistic terms, both he and Kugel have sought to characterize Hebrew parallelism in terms of difference rather than identity (see note 11 on page 162) and, moreover, each has understood the logical relationship between the first and the second lines to be syntagmatic and not paradigmatic.\textsuperscript{32} Alter specifically cites Jakobson and so offers a formulation that is particularly useful in marking the contrast with Berlin:

> At first thought, semantic parallelism would seem to be preeminently an operation along what Roman Jakobson calls the paradigmatic axis, or axis of selection, of language . . . In point of fact, the links between verses are often what Jakobson would call syntagmatic—that is, proceeding along the axis of contiguity, which is transformed by the poet into actual concatenation—rather than the axis of selection. Or, perhaps it would be better to put aside the Jakobsonian imagery of axes, with its suggestion of movements set at right angles to each other, because what we very frequently find in biblical verse is the emergence of the syntagmatic from the paradigmatic: as the poet offers an approximate equivalent for an image or idea he has just invoked, he also begins, by the very logic of specification or intensification of the system in which he works, to push the initial image or idea into action, moving from one image to another that is temporally subsequent to and implied by the first. Narrativity, in other words, asserts itself at the very heart of synonymy.\textsuperscript{33}

What is the difference between Alter's argument that the syntagmatic emerges from the paradigmatic and Jakobson's that the paradigmatic is projected syntagmatically? Alter, opposed to the imagery of "axes...set at right angles to each


\textsuperscript{32}This should be evident in their twinned notions of "seconding" (Kugel) and "consequentiality" (Alter), according to which the relationship between cola is not static but rather a dynamic movement that usually heightens, focuses, dramatizes, specifies, or concretizes the first colon. This is the sense of Kugel's culminating declaration on the meaning of the parallel form: "What then is the essence of parallelism? In asserting the primacy of our form we are asserting, basically, a sequence: first part—pause—next part—bigger pause." Idea, 51. I am thus equating Kugel's "sequence" and Alter's "(con)sequence" to the linguistic concept of syntagm.

\textsuperscript{33}ALTRBR, 37.
other," prefers to de-emphasize the paradigmatic relation between parallel lines. For him, the concatenation of lines A and B evokes a heightened attention to the temporal sequence: "narrativity ... at the very heart of synonymity."

What remains unclear is how Alter conceives the function of the semantic paradigm in meaning as such. Jakobson's imagery of axes (which Alter would set aside) represents two dimensions equally fundamental to language though standing at different degrees of visibility with respect to the surface of speech or text. The distinctiveness of poetic language, so posit Jakobson and Berlin, lies in its rendering visible the (normally invisible) paradigmatic linkages. Apart from an alternate theorization of language in toto, it makes little sense to distinguish parallelism on the basis of the "emergence of the syntagmatic from the paradigmatic"—this being the basis of any utterance whatsoever.

It is certainly possible that Alter holds a different view of language, a theory in whose frame Jakobson's poetic function makes little sense. (Though, if this is the case, why the evocation of Jakobson?) If so, however, then Alter has nonetheless leaped too quickly from the inherence of sequentiaity to that of narrativity. For there is a level of sequence or time in Jakobson's formulation—in parallelism the paradigmatic relation is staged syntagmatically—but it is the time of reading, of traversing the same syntagmatic combination twice. Alter ignores this when he takes any sequentiaity as evidence for his notion of narrativity and against Jakobson's imagery of axes. By simply opposing sequentiaity to the paradigmatic axis, Alter fails to justify his notion of narrativity. Much more significantly, however, in leaving Jakobson's concept of the poetic function behind for his of narrativity, Alter leaves behind the interpretive implications of Jakobson's great insight into the poetic function, namely, the way parallelism exposes the workings of the paradigm, and thus the ghostly present-absence that corrupts the stability of meaning.

An example will illustrate the confusions that arise when paradigm and syntagm are muddled.

For their feet run to evil
and they hurry to shed blood.

Prov 1:16
Alter understands the cola of Prov 1:16 to represent the temporality of the criminal act itself.

Often the movement from general to specific is also, at least implicitly, a movement in temporal sequence . . . Bloodshed is of course a specific and extreme instance of the general category, evil, but the line also intimates sequentiarity: they go running to do evil and end up shedding blood.34

While it is acceptable to relate evil (r') and shedding-blood (lšpk-dm) along the lines of genus/species, the relationship between the corresponding verbal constructions goes in precisely the opposite direction: running (yrušw) from the first colon being a specific instance of hastening (ymhrw) in the second. Thus we cannot understand the parallel to work according to the principle of increasing specificity. As for the couplet's "narrativity," i.e., the notion that the bandits first run to do some kind of non-specific evil, but subsequently intensify this activity in the actual shedding of blood, let us consider the verse in its pedagogical context. The father's lecture (1:8-1:19), in which v 16 marks a turn toward the concluding summary, is devised around a series of identifications (or merely apparent identifications that the father aims to deconstruct) that cannot be understood in temporal categories. I do not understand the father to be saying, in other words, "My son, first listen to your father's instructions, and after do not reject the teaching of your mother" (v 8). Neither are the bandits enticing the son, "Initially we will lie in wait for blood and then later ambush the innocent" (v 11). On the contrary, the pedagogical intent of the lecture is to break the semantic equivalence, ostensibly posited by the bandits, between violence and profit ("Let us lie in wait for blood...let us fill our houses with booty") in order to establish or reinforce a counter equivalence between violence and death: "Yet for their own blood they lie in wait" (v 18).

Against Alter, then, bloodshed is not a species of the genus evil; rather they are here used as members of the same categorial paradigm. Furthermore, the narrative dimension of the poetry, its "plot" if you like, is not the diegetic world embedded in the father's lecture but the final resolution of antagonistic signifying constellations—that of the "band of youths" (violence leads to profit) versus that of the father (violence leads to death)—into one, a feat deftly accomplished by the father's final line:

34 ALTER, XX.
Such are the ways of each profiteer (ḇāṣā) of profit (ḇāṣā) --
the very life of its owner it will take.

Prov 1:19

To understand this final move in the father's lecture, this move whereby it drives home its ultimate lesson, the interpreter must attend to (and not leave behind) the paradigmatic relations which the lecture has projected syntagmatically.

47 Perceptible opposition and the linguistic sign

Curiously, Berlin herself abandons Jakobson's thesis on the poetic function at the point of transition from expression to content. Here the conceptual demands of the differential sign are displaced by the notion of "perceptible opposition."35 Recalling Hjelmslev's categories invoked above (see on page 165) to account for the distinction between the grammatical versus the semantic-lexical aspects of parallelism, we may

35 Berlin is not the first to waver from the conceptual consequences of "pure difference." WEBER (1980, 37) finds the same fault in Saussure himself, who, at a crucial point, abandons his own insistence upon difference, displacing it with the altogether different one of determinate opposition. "The question of the status of the system, then, is absolutely decisive for the Saussurean enterprise. It is not a peripheral question, but one that strikes at the heart of the theory: no single signifier or signified can be determined apart from the play of difference, but that play itself must be limited in order for determination to take place. The dilemma is visible in the section of Saussure's Cours entitled 'The Sign Considered in its Totality.' There the underlying notion of 'pure difference' as that which underlies the sign is revoked, or qualified. It is said to be an abstraction which holds only for signifier and signified 'taken separately,' in isolation; once the sign is considered 'in its totality' we find ourselves confronted not merely by negative relations, but by something more 'positive'; not by 'pure difference' but by determinate 'opposition.'" One can further see how Saussure justifies the second, more stable relationship, via reference to the reified concept of a "linguistic institution." In the same section, Saussure defends this shift as follows: "Bien que le signifié et le signifiant soient chacun pris à part, purement différentiels et négatifs, leur combinaison est un fait positif; c'est même la seule espèce de faits que comporte la langue, puisque le propre de l'institution linguistique est justement de maintenir le parallélisme entre ces deux ordres de différences." FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE, Cours de linguistique générale. Paris: Payot, 1922, 166-167. Because there is meaning, it is true that such a social pact (or, what carries the same function, to stabilize what Berlin will call a "semantic fact") must be posited as a regulative principle. In pointing to its empirical substantiality, i.e. there actually is a "linguistic institution" or a "semantic fact," Saussure and Berlin respectively undercut their own efforts to disengage the linguistic sign from its extra-linguistic referent.
specifically locate Berlin’s departure from her avowed “structuralist” assumptions at the transition point between expression and content. Attentive readers encounter several difficult confusions in Berlin’s discussions and chapters on the semantic and lexical aspects of parallelism.

Having established the distinctive function of parallelism in terms of the poetic function—not simply to convey a particular content but to stage the relational structure underlying “content” as such—Berlin argues that “effective parallelism” works through “perceptible opposition.”

For example, one can parallel any adjective with another adjective and create a morphological parallelism, but the combination of *the weak boy* // *the strong boy* is, under normal circumstances, a more effective parallelism than *the weak boy* // *the blond boy* because within the equivalent terms *weak* and *strong* there is an *inherent contrast*, whereas this contrast does not exist between *weak* and *blond* . . . Thus the perception of contrast (and that includes positive or negative contrast) within a set of equivalences makes a parallelism effective. This contrast may exist as a *semantic fact* (as in synonyms, antonyms, etc.) or may be a product of the formal structure of the text. In a text where the generation of such contrasts is the constructive principle, we have poetry.37

Insofar as it suggests that the paradigm relation that drives the poetic function is produced between terms which derive their substance from inherent “semantic facts,” Berlin’s account, as we said, goes astray of her structuralist orientation and, what’s more, leads us astray in our quest for a satisfactory theoretical orientation toward the poetics of Prov 10-29. Before we can propose such a theoretical orientation, we need to understand exactly how and where Berlin has herewith erred.

36Writing retrospectively, Berlin locates her own work in terms of a growing interest, on the part of biblical scholars, in the contributions of structural linguistics. “By the 1970s the influence of modern linguistic research, especially structural linguistics and transformational grammar, began to be felt in biblical studies. Interest in the grammatical analysis of poetry grew, and with it, the grammatical analysis of parallelism.” ADELE BERLIN, “Parallelism”. The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 5 1992, 157. Granting the amorphousness of what goes under the name of “structuralism,” Berlin at least assumes the tenets of the body of linguistic theory that traces its origin to Saussure, with Jakobson being the privileged representative. Condensing the overall theoretical orientation of (the first half) of her book, Berlin writes of Jakobson, “No modern linguist has had more impact on the study of parallelism, both within and outside of the Bible, than Roman Jakobson.” BERLIN, Parallelism, 157.

37BERLIN, Dynamics, 11-12, emphasis mine.
The most fundamental axiom of structural linguistics, as is by now a truism, dictates that one must bracket consideration of the referent when inquiring into the question of linguistic meaning. Saussure, as is also well known, deduces from this two bedrock principles for a program of linguistic research: (1) the arbitrary relationship between any given signifier and its signified\(^\text{38}\) and (2) the strictly negative, differential value of meaning, established with a network of diacritical signifiers.\(^\text{39}\)

Given these reference points, we can only conclude that the terms Berlin sets in opposition are in every way equivalent: a "semantic fact" is one and the same as its corresponding "formal difference;" the former has no basis in "nature" but rather exists purely as a social convention (which may indeed be deeply entrenched as with the example weak//strong).

48 THE ELEMENTARY STRUCTURE OF SIGNIFICATION

The problem lies in an underestimation of the qualifiers "negative" and "differential" that lie at the heart of linguistics. It is not enough to summarize Saussure's radical turn with the dictum, "in language there is only difference." It is not enough to say that the poetic function shows us that we only know what "strong" means because we know what "weak" means. One must, with Saussure himself, complete the thought: "il n'y a que des différences sans termes positifs."\(^\text{40}\) To translate this in terms of the "logic of signification" we are approaching, the seme—the linguistic designation for the minimal unit of signification—cannot be understood as an "atom

\(^{38}\)Le lien unissant le signifiant au signifié est arbitraire, ou encore, puisque nous entendons par signe le total résultant de l'association d'un signifiant à un signifié, nous pouvons dire plus simplement: le signe linguistique est arbitraire." SAUSSURE, Cours, 100.

\(^{39}\)Dans d'autres domaines, si je ne me trompe, on peut parler des différents objets envisagés ... or il semble que la science du langage soit placée à part: en ce que les objets qu'elle a devant elle n'ont jamais de réalité en soi ... n'ont absolument aucun substratum à leur existence hors de leur différence ... mais sans que l'on sorte nulle part de cette donnée fondamentalement et à tout jamais négative de la différence de deux termes, et non des propriétés d'un terme." FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE, Écrits de Linguistique Générale. Paris: Gallimard, 2002, 65.

Throughout the Cours Saussure underscores the radical quality of the principles of arbitrariness and differentiability [Cf. SAUSSURE (1922, 165)] and in fact posits them as correlative terms: "Arbitraire et différentiel sont deux qualités corrélatives." SAUSSURE, Cours, 163.

\(^{40}\)SAUSSURE, Cours, 166.
of meaning,” i.e., the indestructible kernel of Berlin’s “semantic fact,” but rather as that which exists only in relation to a previously defined axis of meaning.

However, does the positing of such a prior reference point not simply involve us in an infinite regress: a “previously defined axis of meaning,” which in turn must rest upon a previous “previously defined axis of meaning,” and so on. We find ourselves bound by a logical impasse, having to posit the impossible as the conceptual pre-condition for what we in fact experience, i.e. the fact that meaning exists as an objective, social link.

As with all such impossible-yet-indispensable conditions, the deadlocks of linguistic meaning are overcome by a vertiginous leap of “sublation,” wherein what was previously conceived of as the problem, now set in a radically different conceptual context, becomes its own solution. Apropos of meaning, this shift is not completed with Saussure—for whom still the sign was miraculously a positive thing of value, a positive outcome derived somehow from purely negative components—but must wait for the reformulation of A. J. Greimas. F. Jameson designates the crucial passage in which

Greimas himself effects and describes his own decisive swerve: “The production of meaning is meaningful only if it is the transformation of a meaning already given; the production of meaning is consequently a signifying endowment with form [Mise en forme] indifferent to whatever content it may be called on to transform. Meaning, in the sense of the forming of meaning, can thus be defined as the possibility of the transformation of meaning” (Du sens, 15). These pronouncements can now be paraphrased as follows: We can ignore the static or philosophical problem of meaning and its relationship to language, along with the infinite regress of metalanguages that seems to result whenever we try to isolate the meaning of a certain verbal complex, only to find ourselves producing yet another text in its place; and the reason we can ignore this problem is that the static moment of the apparent presence of meaning in a text is a mirage or an optical illusion. Meaning is never there in that sense, or rather it is an ‘always-already-given’ in the process of transformation into another meaning. It is now this process of transformation—of the production of meaning—that is the object of semiotics and its only possible object (meaning as such having proved to be a reification or a deceptive afterimage of some kind).41

41FREDRIC JAMESON, “Foreword”. In On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory

176
Henceforth, just as with Jakobson’s discovery of the *sequence* at the heart of the poetic function, *transformation* and the attendant experience of *time* will play a constitutive role in the apprehension of meaning, which, since Saussure, has been conceived primarily in terms of synchronic and spatial metaphors. There is of course something paradoxical in reading Greimas, whose famous “semiotic square” we must shortly take up, against the synoptic apprehensions afforded by a diagram, for the critique of structuralism’s detemporalizing tendencies is nowhere so focused as on the square’s manifestly *spatial* conceptualization of meaning. But we need not deny this connection to insist that the problematics of time persist within the spatialized system, the very system which, in seeking its own eternality, seeks also to efface all traces of time from its field.

Recall from above: we were struggling with the question of the “semantic fact,” how to explain its apparent solidity within the constraints of the purely differential sign. To follow Greimas in equating meaning with the transformation of meaning, we must reckon with this term *transformation*, by which Greimas refers specifically to the range of logical operations that constitute the elementary structure of signification, la typologie des relations élémentaires—contradiction, contrariété, complémentarité—qui ouvre la voie à de nouvelles générations de termes interdéfinis, et qui permet de donner une représentation de la structure élémentaire sous forme de carré sémi-
4. The Poetics of Binarity

otique.\textsuperscript{44}

[the typology of elementary relations—contradiction, contrariety and implication—that opens the way to the subsequent generation of interrelated terms, and which permits the representation of the elementary structure in the form of the semiotic square.]

The distinction between these logical relations, \textit{in particular the distinction between contradiction and contrariety}, is the basic discovery of Greimassian semiotics.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure4.3.png}
\caption{Logical relations in the semiotic field $S$.}
\end{figure}

The terms $S_1$ and $S_2$ represent what is visible on the surface of the text and are opposed on an axis of \textit{contrariety}, e.g. wisdom $\longleftrightarrow$ folly, righteous $\longleftrightarrow$ wicked, or, as Berlin suggests, weak $\longleftrightarrow$ strong.\textsuperscript{45} The contrary term $S_2$, however, does


\textsuperscript{45}Throughout, I have sought to follow Greimas’s relatively standardized notations: (1) the axis of contrariety as “$\longleftrightarrow$”, (2) the axis of contradiction as “$\rightarrow$”, and (3) the axis of implication as “$\rightarrow \rightarrow$.”
not have an immediate relation to $S_1$, as we can see from its position in an enlarged, more complex network (see figure (4.3) on the preceding page).

For the appearance of semantic value rests on a prior displacement: the assertion of $S_2$'s contrariety is substituted for the logical possibility of $S_1$'s absence. Quite literally, weak represents, gives body to, the absence of strength.

![Diagram of opposition](image)

Figure 4.4: The structure of opposition apropos of weak versus strong.

Generalizing from this example, (logically) antecedent to the contrary axis, i.e. the axis of "perceptible opposition," is the contradictory axis ($S_1 \leftrightarrow \text{not-}S_1$), whose logic is the pure binary of presence$\leftrightarrow$absence: wise$\leftrightarrow$not-wise, righteous$\leftrightarrow$not-righteous, weak$\leftrightarrow$not-weak. The value of $S_2$ is thus mediated by this term of pure difference; through $S_2$ the lack of $S_1$ acquires an existence in praesentia.

Consequently, the form of binarity proper to linguistic meaning must be grasped as the surface expression of a ternary relationship, wherein the substitution of $S_2$ for not-$S_1$ (this being the third logical relationship described by the square, the "vertical" axes of implication) has no basis in reality but reflects a conventional, arbitrary and strictly formal association.

This has the further consequence that the terms of the signifying dyad ($S_1 \leftrightarrow \ldots \leftrightarrow S_2$) are radically asymmetric, a point we can make apropos of the opposition frequently attested in Proverbs between wealth and poverty. The common
sense opposition we perceive therein obscures the double function of the signifier “wealth,” which designates an extreme instance of the category (as in, a wealthy man) but equally and paradoxically the standard by which one is located on the axis wealthy/poor (as in, the quantitative measure of assets minus liabilities). Strictly speaking, when we call someone wealthy, we mean, “With respect to wealth, this one is wealthy”; and when we call someone poor, we mean, “With respect to wealth, this one is poor.” The pedagogical consequence of the poetic function that reveals the workings of this paradigmatic substitution is to bring to light the contingency of the convention. Because what is contingent is changeable, the possibility arises of a new convention whereby one’s wealth is no longer measured in terms of wealth:

For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.46

Which we could translate in pedantic terms, “With respect to love, I am wealthier than kings.” The effect of which is to renew our perceptions about wealth, to cause us to notice the particular perspective it requires to view poverty as the absence of monetary wealth rather than, as Shakespeare has it, the monarch’s loveless isolation.

49 GREIMAS WITH LACAN

Before returning directly to the structure of Proverbs’ parallel sayings, we should pause to consolidate what appears to be two distinct theoretical approaches, i.e. the Lacanian framework with which we analyzed Woman-Wisdom’s position as that of the barred subject of the signifier ($) and now Greimas’s formidable semiotic framework. How does one justify this change in registers, which on the face of it evidences a certain inelegance? My response is twofold.

1. On one hand the methodological shift is demanded by the material itself. The problem of Woman-Wisdom’s split essence—on one hand the avatar of cosmic order, restraint in speech, and moreover the dense point of centripetal force around which the literary diversity of Proverbs is formed as a unity; on the other hand driven by desire, driven in the text we considered (1:22-33) to the hysterical speech of lament—suggests the psychoanalytic field, whose problem in a nutshell is coming

46W. SHAKESPEARE, Shakespeare’s Sonnets. D. Nutt, 1899, XXIX.
to terms with the *ex-timate* essence of the subject, the alien core of otherness which radically defines subjectivity as such, even while it remains impossibly beyond the scope of subjective apprehension.

The parallel poetry of Prov 10-29, in contrast, appears to be a discourse without a subject. In these verses what we find are objects, arranged and re-arranged so as to produce meaning. The fact that these rearrangements are formally restricted to four terms—the subjects and predicates of two parallel lines—again suggests the intrinsic usefulness of Greimas's square as a discovery procedure. So, as a first response, the formal or generic exigencies of Proverbs demand a variety of analytic frameworks.

2. On the other hand, I claim a fundamental congruity between Lacan's "logic of the signifier" and Greimas's "elementary structure," the defense of which requires a demonstration in two directions: (1) to show how for Lacan the dimension of difference is bifurcated along the lines of contrariety and contradiction; (2) to show the place of the subject (S) in Greimas's square.

**Contradiction and contrariety in Lacan** In the first case, we need only recall Lacan's definition of the signifier—that which represents the subject for another signifier—whose formula

\[
\frac{S_1}{S} \rightarrow S_2
\]

already bears a family resemblance to the semiotic square. This is verified by Lacan's specification signification in terms of two constitutive operations—*metaphor* and *metonymy*—the former structured according to the logic of presence-absence, the latter materializing this absence in the signifying chain.

The effects that are discovered at the level of the chain of materially unstable elements that constitutes language...are determined by the double play of combination and substitution in the signifier, according to the two axes for generating the signified, metonymy and metaphor;\(^47\) effects that are determinant in instituting the subject.\(^48\)

---

\(^47\)I will not pursue the connection here, though it is relevant that Lacan gets his highly developed notions of *metaphor* and *metonymy* from Jakobson, and in particular Jakobson's theorization of *combination* and *selection*. In other words, we have not strayed much from the poetic function.

\(^48\)LACAN, *Ecrits*, 689.
The metaphorlic relation, in Lacan's logic of signification, refers to the identification of the subject with the signifier, i.e. $\frac{S}{\overline{S}}$. This is the same structure as Greimas's axis of implication, $\text{not-}S_2 \rightarrow S_1$, though we will have to continually remind ourselves of the difference in nomenclature. Greimas's $S_1$, i.e. the upper left position of the semiotic square, is the "subject" in the sense of subject-matter, die Themenstellung; Lacan's "subject of the signifier" ($\overline{S}$) is the empty point of enunciation, structurally equivalent to what the square labels $\text{not-}S_2$.

In the second moment of signification, the lack instituted by metaphor is not left as "mere absence" but given an ontological specificity in that its dimension appears metonymically in the signifying chain. Here again, Greimas and Lacan describe the same structure, this time without the discrepancy in terminology. The relationship between one signifier $S_1$ and another $S_2$ is mediated, in the last instance, by the absence of the signifier, the Lacanian sign for which is $\overline{S}$.

The place of $S$ in the semiotic square Now, reversing the relational trajectory, we must designate in the structure of the semiotic square the place of the psychoanalytic subject ($\overline{S}$), which necessitates our more careful consideration of the square's fourth term, $\text{not-}S_2$. We have said that the substitution of $S_2$ for $\text{not-}S_1$ represents the arbitrary conventions of a particular language. This must now be nuanced, for $S_2$ is determined apart from $S_1$ in its own ternary network.

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40"Lack in Lacan's work has, to a certain extent, an ontological status: it is the first step beyond nothingness." FINK, The Lacanian Subject, 51.
Thus the determination of $S_1$ does not unfold in the strictly tautological circuit $S_1 \leftarrow S_2 \leftarrow S_1$ for the value of $S_2$ is derived not only from its asserted contrariety vis-à-vis $S_1$ but also from its contradictory relation to not-$S_2$, the fourth term of the square. With this does Greimas finally solve the deadlocks of differential signification? Not exactly (or at least not apart from his dictum that we think meaning only as the transformation of meaning), for not-$S_2$ as a positive instance of meaning is precisely what is missing from the semantic field. With respect to the signified $S$, not-$S_2$ must be pre-supposed but it is never and can never be present. It is that which in itself has no content but is only a certain point of view wherefrom the rest of the semantic field $S$ makes sense. It is from this lack of a proper signifier that would make the meaning of $S$ fully present that we would approach the psychoanalytic subject from Greimassian semiotics.

50 The pedagogical axis of the two-line proverb

Our critique of Berlin referred to her regression, at the point she leaves grammar to take up semantics, from the Symbolic register (as differential, ternary, signifierly...the poetic function) to that of the perceptible dyad (as substantive,
binary, invoking the referent...the semantic fact). What is required, then, is to dramatically re-stage the confrontation of the two axes of language (precisely the value of Berlin's disquisition of parallelism in terms of the poetic function): on one hand to uncover the "systemic," "synchronic" underlayment that subtends every utterance as its a priori condition of meaning; on the other to trace the exigencies of diachrony that forestall the constitution of such a system. Towards this end, the parallel sentences of Prov 10-29 are remarkably suited.

The formal regularity of the bi-linear proverbs allows us to describe a specific and invariable pedagogical structure, a logic that depends on no criterion apart from the sequential presentation of subjects and objects. At the basic level, in other words, every two-line proverb makes some assertion \( A \rightarrow B \), which is then specified \( A' \rightarrow B' \).\(^{50}\) The subject of the proverb, what it is about, is simply \( A \); \( A \) constitutes the question to which the novel dispensation of the three other terms are an answer. In terms of the precise positions we are offered by the semiotic square, we can say that \( A \) holds the position of \( S_1 \).

The semiotic reduction allows us to say which, amongst the various semantic relations that constitute any given proverb, is being taught; what transformation of meaning is being aimed at. It will not be the contradictory relations, which found each proverb as so many presupposed axioms; it will be rather the contrary relation that is newly asserted in the juxtaposition \( A - B // A' - B' \), i.e.

\[
A \longleftrightarrow B'.
\]

To give the briefest of examples, consider the following three proverbs wherein the seme of riches plays proportionally an equal part.

A gracious woman gets honor,
and violent men get riches (\( \& \& \)). (Prov 11:16)

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches (\( m;m;\)).
and favor is better than silver or gold. (Prov 22:1)

\(^{50}\) As stated earlier, whether the pair is determined to be "antithetical" or "synonymous" changes the sign of the relationship constituted by \( A - B // A' - B' \) but not the logic of the poetic function, i.e. the juxtaposition of syntagmatic staging of the paradigm.
One who trusts in riches (בָּשַׁר ו) will fall, 
but like a green leaf will the righteous flourish.

(Prov 11:28)

It is only 11:28 that offers “riches” as its topic of instruction, that constructs a 
semiotic field by which to determine it vis-à-vis the other signifiers, its reference 
points.

![Diagram]

**Figure 4.6: $S_1 \leftrightarrow S_2$ as the pedagogical axis.**

Modifying the Greimassian terminology slightly, so as to better fit the purposes 
of the sages, we designate $S_1 \leftrightarrow S_2$ the “pedagogical axis.”

Such a schematization is on its own not without diagnostic value, though its use-
fullness will become more apparent in application to a series of proverbs. We have 
already mentioned the exceptional and, from the standpoint of meaning, problem-
atic status of the fourth term (not-$S_2$), which the literary form of Prov 10-29—its 
long chains of sequential associations\(^\text{5}\)—seems supremely designed to address. How 
this works, we will now try to see from the first “cluster” of the collection, Prov 10:1-5.

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\(^5\) On the compilation of sayings as *Listenuwissenschaft* see *van der Toorn*, 118-125.
4. The Poetics of Binarity

51 A PROVERBIAL CLUSTER

In Chapter 4 we will more systematically sort through the proper unit of analysis for the sentence collections of Prov 10-29. The range of possibilities is, at any rate, apparent:

- These chapters are ad hoc collections of autonomous proverbs; no overarching editorial intention is perceivable.52

- These chapters, and each proverb therein, are to be read in the literary context of Proverbs as an artistically coherent thing.53

Neither approach stands without some nuancing, for while no book-wide principle of arrangement has been discovered, it seems relatively certain that there are “clusters” of proverbs54 that are set off as a unity, a point that the editors made through recognizable poetic devices: (1) the presence of a prospective or retrospective summary proverb; (2) the framing of coherent sections by the employment of inclusio; (3) patterning along other lines such as chiasm or alternation; (4) the presence of a clear Leitwort; and (5) paronomasia, the recurrence of a particular sound pattern. This is to admit that the designation of larger units is a matter of analysis itself and not simply given.

For the remainder of the chapter we will assume the kind of literary unity implied by the term “cluster” for Prov 10:1-5. This unity is, in our opinion, vouchsafed by the following formal features:

52For example, McKane (1970, 413) writes in what seems to me very strong terms, “In [the sentence literature] there is no context, for each sentence is an entity in itself and the collection amounts to no more than the gathering together of a large number of independent sentences, each of which is intended to be a well-considered and definitive observation on a particular topic.”

53That Proverbs should be read as a literary unity is an idea whose advocacy has many different bases. Skehan (1948) argued early that Proverbs evidenced a single editorial hand on the basis of numerology. Childs (1979, 553) finds that Proverbs’ unity is effected by the contextual-canonical function of chapters 1-9, their role as a “hermeneutic guide for understanding the rest of the book.” Waltke (2004, 50) exemplifies the recent turn to poetics as the proper criterion by which to judge Proverbs’ compositional coherence. “There are sufficient instances of poetic transparency in many units to prejudice viewing the editors of Proverbs as authors, not merely collectors. In other words, it is more probable than improbable that the ancient Hebrew editors logically arranged all proverbs to protect and enrich them, though that logic is not transparent to the modern reader.”

54On the notion of a proverbial cluster see Schrader (1995), Heim (2001), but noting the
• The enframing of the section by the twice repeated “son”:
a) in v 1—*a wise son, a foolish son*; b) in v 5—*a son of maskil, a son who brings shame.*

• A further enframing element: the filial horizon of wisdom established explicitly
  in v 1 (“he pleases a father”; “the grief of his mother”) is continued implicitly in
  10:5. The bad result brought about by the foolish son (in 10:5—“the harvest-
time sleeper”) does not fall back upon him but brings about a negative result
  for the family; he is “a son who brings shame.”\(^55\)

• The intervening verses (vv 2-4) are to be read as successive permutations of
two semantic axes: the one defined by the poles *righteous* \(\longleftrightarrow\) *wickedness*;
the other by *prosperity* \(\longleftrightarrow\) *poverty*.

• Finally, the proverbs are linked by a distinct function that lies at the heart
of our thesis and will take up the bulk of our analysis below. In short, each
successive verse sutures the gap in meaning upon which the previous verse
stumbled. This is to go well beyond the alternating thread of “virtue” and
“vice” frequently ascribed to these verses. What is passed on to the next
proverb is irreducible to an ethical (+) or (−), but in each case, what is taken
up and “filled” is a signifier heretofore left empty, at the level of pedagogy
simply “given.”

52 PROV 10:1-5: TEXT AND TRANSLATION

Thus following the Solomonic superscription (10:1a),\(^56\) we discern the following as
a coherent “cluster”:

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\(^{55}\) The transitiveness of “to shame” (designated by the *hiphil* stem) is not here specified by an
object, as in “he shames his family.” Throughout Proverbs, however, the milieu of shame is, if not
the genetic family, the household. A wife shames her husband (Prov 12:4). A servant shames the
king he serves (14:35). A son who brings shame is contrasted to a servant who serves the family
wisely (17:2). A son who brings shame “violates” his father and “drives away” his mother (19:26).
A son shames his mother (29:15).

\(^{56}\) On the significance of the Solomonic superscription see CRENSHAW, Old Testament Wisdom,
40-44 and WALTER BRUEGEMANN, “The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom”.
In JOHN G. GAMMIE LEO G. PERDUE, editor, *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*
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bên hâkâm yê'sammâh-âb 1b A wise son pleases a father
âbên kâsîl tâgat immô 1c but a foolish son is the grief of his mother.
lô-yốtlâ 'ôsrôt rešô 2a Treasures of wickedness do not profit,
âšôdâgôh taššîl mîmmâwet 2b but righteousness delivers from death.
lô-yârîb yhwh nepeš šaddâq 3a Yhwh will not let a righteous appetite starve,
wa'hôwât rêšâm yehâôp 3b but the desire of the wicked he throttles.
râš wôšeh kap-rêmiyyâh wôyad 4a A poor man works slack-handedly,
hârasing ta'âšâr 4b but a diligent hand makes rich.
ôûr bâqqayîs bên makšîl 5a A summer gatherer is a son of/for makšîl,\textsuperscript{57}
nîrdâm bâqqâṣîr bên mèbîš 5b but a harvest-time sleeper, a son who brings shame.\textsuperscript{58}

53 THE FATHER’S PLEASURE

A wise son pleases a father
but a foolish son is the grief of his mother.

The parallel lines of 10:1b-c counterpose the stereotyped wise son and foolish son in terms of their respective impact on what pleases a father and the grief of his mother.\textsuperscript{59} How is this arrangement illumined by (1) the syntax of the poetic

\textsuperscript{57}I leave makšîl untranslated for the reason discussed below (§ 57 on page 201). The hesitation marked by “of/for” reflects the objective and subjective possibilities of the genitival construction.

\textsuperscript{58}The Hebrew bên mèbîš is grammatically parallel to bên makšîl though I have settled the semantic possibilities of bên mèbîš for the reasons rehearsed in 55 on the preceding page.

\textsuperscript{59}It is difficult to know how to read the relationship between the terms “a-father” and “his-mother”. On one hand, the pair functions most frequently as a lexical representative of the (collective) object of filial address: “Hear, my son, your father’s instructions, //and do not reject the teaching of your mother” (Pro 1:8). Or, in the same vein: “One who curses his father and his mother, //his lamp is extinguished in darkness” (Pro 20:20). In these two cases (see also 6:20, 19:26, 23:22, 23:25, 28:24, 30:11, 30:17) the terms function equivalently in successive parallel lines; or, as we see in 20:20, they are best understood as onomatopoeic. In 10:1 (and 15:20, which nearly reproduces 10:1) the parallel is made more contrastive by the change in grammatical definiteness: “a-father” versus “his-mother” (ELBURN, 2008, 50-51). While some have argued that “his” is simply gapped in line A of the parallelism (WALTKE, 2004, 447n.3), the contrast does seem to underlie a difference between paternal and maternal relationships to the wisdom of a child. It suggests that such wisdom (or folly) exerts itself on the general category “father” but on the particular mother
function? (2) the elementary structure of signification? In other words, how do we put the theoretical precisions offered by Berlin/Jakobson and then Greimas to analytic use?

Recall Berlin's articulation of the poetic function as that which projects equivalence from the axis of selection (the categorial opposition wise, foolish and joy, grief) onto the axis of combination (the duration of time contracted by the scansion of the second line).

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{wise-son} & \xrightarrow{\text{paradigmatic opposition}} & \text{foolish-son} \\
\text{syntagm} & \downarrow & \text{syntagm} \\
\text{pleases a father} & \xrightarrow{\text{paradigmatic opposition}} & \text{his mother's grief}
\end{array}
\]

time of reading, axis of projection

We should not hesitate to ask as to the practical (i.e. pedagogical) effect of this configuration. We begin, in agreement with what was said immediately above, that the fundamental concern of this verse (and, one could argue, of Proverbs as a whole) is the wise son—specifically, how to be one. But under that very broad sign, what particular determinations are being made? We have already suggested the importance of distinguishing between the equivalences which the parallel lines presuppose (an axiology) and the new relationship propagated in the instant of projection (a discovery). It is not true, in other words, that Prov 10:1 teaches "a wise son pleases a father," and even less true that it teaches the opposition wise-foolish. The relations that the proverb explicitly formulates—the two just mentioned and further the connection between folly and grief, and the opposition between grief and to please—are the axioms that this saying configures in order to make visible a new relationship that had heretofore been invisible or only implicit.

in question. Excerpted from the equation is the actual, biological father, whose relevance, it would seem, is limited to his role as bearer of the Symbolic paternal function. We have not, however, pursued the implications of this subtlety.

To wit: the wise son—in so far as wise sons please fathers and act contrariwise to foolish sons—will not grieve his mother.

As we said above (¶ 50 on page 183) the distinction between a proverb’s axioms and its discovery follows the different logics of contradiction and contrariety. On the contradictory axis, wisdom means stricto sensu the absence of folly and vice versa. The wise person cannot simultaneously be foolish. The contrary opposition between wisdom and grief follows a different rule, for indeed there is occasion for the wise to grieve.\(^{61}\) (And of course, the same distinction holds for the contradiction between grief and joy and the contrariety between wisdom and grief.) But while wisdom and grief (and folly and joy) can logically exist in the same space, the teaching of this proverb is that they work against each other. The wise son, we could say, diminishes the grief of the mother.

For all this, the connection between wisdom and grief is not somehow gratuitous, grief merely adding a level of connotation to the core meaning of wisdom. For it is only by the intervention of this \(S_2\) grief that the tautological relay between wisdom and folly (i.e. folly is not-wisdom, wisdom is not-folly) is halted, in so far as its value derives from a different signifying series (grief means not-pleasure, a proposition whose value is not under question here\(^ {62}\). Thus we can specify very precisely what and even how this proverb teaches (which is the same as saying what and how this proverb means): with respect to wisdom, to bring grief is folly. (Or, said positively, the wise son implies the non-aggrieved mother.)


\(^{62}\)As indicated above, the insistence that this proverb is about "wisdom" more than it is about the other terms does not depend on a judgement as to Proverbs' overall theme, but on the logical-temporal construction of the two lines, which raises at the outset the question of "the wise son." A hypothetical proverb that reversed the terms of its predication—"The happy father has a wise son..."—takes as axiomatic what Prov 10:1 is trying to teach and teaches what Prov 10:1 takes as axiomatic.
The uncertainty that persists, of course, is caused by the lack of a signifier that would anchor the series gift. joy. Grief, it is true, is set as the logical contradictory to joy, but this joy is only an unfathomable constant, imported from without 10:1's diminutive Symbolic matrix. This discovery leaves us with two interpretative possibilities.

1. In reading 10:1 as an autonomous unit, which after all is not unheard of in the case of proverbs, we come across the signifier yšmḥ-b he pleases a father as a "Master"; by the sheer imposition of its enunciation as a signifier (which is not the same as saying "as a sign"), the rest of the semantic oppositions are locked into place.63 We are uncovering a structure, then, whose nodal element is not the one invested with the richest, most unmistakable meaning; on the contrary this One that quiets all the others simply holds the place of a certain lack. It is

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63Here again the temptation is towards a common-sense reading: Do we not know the value of yšmḥ—to rejoice, to make glad, to be filled with joy? Indeed we do. But, we know its value as determined by a set of formal relations—it's conventional "place" in the Symbolic order (in opposition to grief, as correlative to wisdom, and so on)—and not as a semantic fact. What else do we make of the fact that joy too can represent folly—cf. Prov 2:14, 17:4, 24:17, 27:9?
the metaphorical stand-in for the totalized field (Lacan’s Other, Heidegger’s world, Pascal’s custom, Berger’s nomos, etc.) which every utterance assumes and even promises yet cannot produce.

2. We can read further, confident that the semantic universe of Proverbs as a whole does locate “to please” (šmh) in its relational network of signifiers.

54 A TREASURE THAT DOES NOT PROFIT

Treasures of wickedness do not profit
but righteousness delivers from death.

B. Waltke describes the connectedness of Prov 10:1-5 in these terms: “[This] subunit pertaining to wealth is framed chiastically by the initial “wise/foolish son” in both verses of v. 1 and by the final “prudent/shameful son” in both verses of v. 5...The alternating pattern in these antithetical parallels of virtue (+) and of vice (-)(i.e., +:-; -:+; +:+; -:+; +:-) stitches them together so that the proposition at the close of one verse is picked up at the beginning of the next.”

I would like to use his felicitous metaphor of “stitching,” though the thread I am chasing is not the alternating pattern of virtue and vice. What dangles from 10:1 is not vice, but the question of the father’s pleasure, for whose differential determination we are now reading. Thus when v 2 evokes a new subject—treasures of wickedness (šrēt reśā’)—this does not arise ex nihilo but as the (deferred) determination of pleasing a father yšmh-b, whose meaning can no longer be understood as prosperity sans phrase, for here, in fact, we find a treasure arrayed against the father’s being-pleased.

---

An answer in so far as it looks back to *joy*, *treasures of wickedness* nonetheless poses its own semiotic question. Like the positionally analogous *wise son* of 10:1, this particular treasure is the subject with which 10:2 has to do. Its meaning is thus locatable at the intersection of two *a priori* logical oppositions: on one hand *treasures of wickedness* $\leftrightarrow$ *righteousness*, and on the other does *no profit* $\leftrightarrow$ *delivers from death*. We can elaborate the logical arrangement as before.
Figure 4.9: Prov 10:2—treasures of wickedness do not deliver from death.

To highlight again the highly mediated predication that takes place in this "simple aphorism": with respect to treasures of wickedness (or one could even say, what is seen as a treasure from the perspective of wickedness) what delivers from death is valued as little as righteousness.66 But here again death is not invoked as something endowed with a self-obvious referent;66 it is specified in opposition to

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65The full ternary logic being (1) treasures of wickedness \( \rightarrow \) not-treasures of wickedness \( \rightarrow \) righteousness; and (2) deliverance from death \( \leftarrow \) not-deliverance from death \( \rightarrow \) not-profit.

66MURPHY (1966, 9–10) wishes to use life as an anchoring point for the wisdom tradition: “The kerygma of wisdom can be summed up in one word: life. . .Life and death—these realities are central in the doctrine of the Old Testament sages.” This undoubtedly carries certain emotional resonances but as a semiotic determination remains unhelpful, a point that Murphy himself raises shortly after his enthusiastic declaration. “Of itself, life is a very elastic concept . . .The value refers to the good things of life: sheer existence in many days (3:16; 28:16), a good name (10:7; 22:1), ‘riches, honor and life’ (22:4). Implicit in all this doctrine is also possession of (or being possessed by) God . . .” ibid., 10. Thus life, the most primal of signifiers, passes into the opposite extreme of contrivance.

On the historical assimilation of life to the notion of “norm” or “the normal” (and its corollary, the assimilation of death to “the pathological”), see C. CANGULHÉM, The Normal and the Pathological. New York: Zone Books, 1991. To read death here as an absolute (negative) reference point, exempt from the logic of signification in other words, is to replicate uncritically a previous ideological anamorphosis.
profit, whose exceptional status network of 10:2 we must emphasize. As with joy šmḥ in the previous verse, the pronunciation no profit l-ywylw indicates a fixed point in relation to which the other three terms are given a particular significance. About the absolute significance of this point, however, this proverb says nothing. It is a paradoxical fixity that has no moorings; the manner of its function is to grant intelligibility without being itself intelligible. Is this to say “profit” has no meaning, no signified; that the reader who came to the fourth term fell suddenly into a lack of comprehension? Of course this is not the point. To reiterate the specific context of our argument: the antithetic parallels that make up the bulk of chapters 10-29 make explicit a logic of meaning that operates at all times (though

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67The opposition is actually more complicated than indicated by the relationship death ←→ profit, as there is a negative term distributed on both sides: that which delivers from death (i.e. that which negates death) contradicts that which does not profit. I have not made anything out of the negative voicing of the opposition and so, to make things less unwieldly, refer to the contradictory relationship between death and profit.

68Žižek (2000, 50-51) illustrates this “difference between the series of ordinary signifiers and the central element… which has to remain empty in order to serve as the underlying organizing principle of the series” with a “well-known joke about a pupil being examined by his biology teacher about different animals, and always reducing the answer to the definition of a horse:

‘What is an elephant?’

‘An animal which lives in the jungle, where there are no horses. A horse is a domestic mammal with four legs, used for riding, working in the fields or pulling vehicles.’

‘What is a fish?’

‘An animal which has no legs, unlike a horse. A horse is a domestic mammal…’

‘What is a dog?’

‘An animal which, unlike horses, barks. A horse is a domestic mammal…’ and so forth, until finally, the desperate teacher asks the pupil:

‘OK, what is a horse?’ Perplexed and totally thrown off balance, the poor surprised pupil starts to mumble and cry, unable to provide an answer.…” The horse functioned as an empty signifier, separated out from the series of other signifiers and rigidified as the point from which all the others could make sense.

This joke also illustrates well the nature of our claim that “profit” has no meaning. In a certain sense the student relies on the signifying value of Horse every time he’s faced with a question from the teacher; it is therefore not without a signifying function. The crucial point, however, is that this function is not in line with that of the other signifiers—dog, fish, elephant, etc.—in that its enunciation is completely performative, i.e. constituting meaning as an empty point of reference.

Mutatis mutandis any sage could have defined profit but not in this series of signifiers wherein it functions as a purely structural guarantor of meaning.
usually beneath awareness), whenever linguistic meaning, i.e. the signified, is being produced. The object of this mode of analysis is to dramatize in the temporal unfolding of the sequence—the traverse from line A to line B—the normally invisible "axis of selection." In this juxtaposition, we see the negative and differential character of the signifier, whose value is self-consciously posed as a function of opposition to another signer. Hence the vertiginous effect of the poetic function.

55 Narrativity Revisited

*Yhwh won't starve a righteous appetite*

*but the desire of the wicked he thwarts.*

If *pleasing a father* and *no profit*—the respective fourth⁶⁹ terms from Prov 10:1 and 10:2—are alike in the strictly structural function they carry out, they differ in the way they are subsequently taken up. We saw that 10:2 set *pleasing smh* in the context of a new contradictory schema, *smh* —→ *uṣrwt rš*, but the same manoeuvre seems less suited to describe the specific logic that links 10:2 and 10:3. Rather, 10:3 opens with a description of Yhwh's activity that distinctly recalls the positive axis of implication of 10:2, constituted as *righteousness* —→ *deliverance from death.* This draws our attention to a further feature of the square. We can see that each categorial term (*S₁ and S₂*) is subordinated to the totalized field *S*, which, of course, may function as an element of a hierarchically superior term, which may function as an element of another superior term, until such basic hypernyms as *state, entity or change* are reached.

Greimas specifies the operation that *gives rise to* this hierarchical structure as a synthetic one, the two poles of a given axis *contract* into a more complex "meta-term."

Étant donné que tout système sémiotique est une hiérarchie, il a avéré que les relations contractées entre termes peuvent servir, à leur tour, de termes établissant entre eux des relations hiérarchiquement supérieures ... On dira, en ce cas, que deux relations de contrariété contractent entre elles la relation de contradiction, et que deux relations de complémentarité établissent entre elles la relation de contrari-

⁶⁹ I refer to their positions in the semiotic square, each located within its own two-line poem as the contradictory to the contrary, i.e. *not-S₂.*
ét... Les métaterms et les catégories qu’ils constituent seront considérés comme des termes et des catégories de seconde génération.  

[Granted that every semiotic system is a hierarchy, one can see that relations formed between terms can themselves constitute [further] terms, establishing between themselves hierarchically superior relations. It is said, in this case, that the two contrary relations form themselves into the [new] contradictory relation, and that the two complementary relations establish between themselves the [new] contrary relation... The metaterms and the categories constituted by them will be considered as of the second generation.]

He gives the following example,

![Diagram](http://example.com/diagram.png)

**Figure 4.10: Meta-terms generated by being versus seeming.**

designating *truth* and *falseness* the contradictory meta-terms, *secret* and *lie* the contrary meta-terms.

Returning to our main line of thought, we have said that 10:2 bears a lack (the significance of *profit*), which 10:3 must in some sense solve. We can analyze this solution along the lines of the synthetic operation just described. The semic axes of 10:2 solidify (*contraeter*) as complex terms, subsequently to be

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Gréimas/Courtes, 32.
4. The Poetics of Binarity

![Diagram showing the relationship between YHWH thwarting wickedness and delivering from death, and the profit of righteousness.]

**Figure 4.11:** Prov 10:2-3 and the second generation of categorial terms.

![Diagram showing the relationship between YHWH thwarting starvation and the provision for the righteous.]

**Figure 4.12:** Prov 10:3—YHWH’s provision for the righteous.

taken up by 10:3. What remained enigmatic in 10:2 (*A treasure that does not profit?*) is now clarified. The negation of profit (*l. ywylw*) is the outcome of YHWH’s advocacy for the righteous and its corollary—YHWH’s antagonism towards the wicked. The deliverance from death that belongs to the righteous is put in the form of a new *contradiction*: 10:3 finds that for a *righteous appetite* starvation is
an impossibility (l: yryb). Similarly, the fulfillment of the desire of the wicked is perpetually thwarted (hdp).

It is appropriate here to revisit the possibility of narrativity in parallelism (recall the earlier critique of Alter, ¶ 46 on page 171), for there is a particular sense in which 10:3 provides a narrative solution to the impasse of 10:2. Recalling the precise logical status of contradiction (S₁ means the absence of not-S₁, and vice versa), we can conceive this negation conceptually (as with the semic opposition pleasing ←→ wickedness constituted in the movement from 10:1 to 10:2) but equally in terms of a dynamic operation, as with 10:2 to 10:3. In other words, the disjunction between the wicked and what they desire is not expressed in terms of mutually incompatible categories as much as the assured outcome of a struggle. Yhwh's thwarting negates, makes absent, the desire of the wicked in this properly narrative movement.

56 Signifying-count, zero

A poor man works slack-handedly

diligent hand makes rich.

The semiotic context of v 4 is as follows. We have come across a version of the signifier wicked twice to this point. First as the subject (S₁) of 10:2—wšrw tš, the question to which 10:2 is the answer, and then as the fourth term (not-S₂) of 10:3—hut ršym as the unconditioned perspective, which renders the proper value of 10:3 as a whole. Here we encounter the “bad infinity” of signification: 10:3, which has been invoked to complete 10:2, is grounded upon the same signifier whose meaning 10:2 seeks to teach. The specific fact—that 10:4’s elaboration of the of hut ršym is a second attempt—teaches us more generally about the recursive structure of semiotic relations. Prov 10:4’s exposition of hut ršym folds into itself the circular logic of 10:2—10:3, which runs from treasures of wickedness to the desire of the wicked-ones.

Generalizing from this observation, the successive determinations of each fourth term do not illumine an incrementally longer line of understanding. We do not “shore-up” each signified in turn and then move-on, for the transformation involved in each successive determination of wicked (rš) rebounds retroactively upon every link in an endless chain of signifiers—wise son...foolish son, profit...wickedness,
life...starvation, $S_1, S_2, S_3, \ldots S_n$. With each punctuating fourth term, all the others must be decrementally re-calculated.

Therefore analyses of such sequences along the lines of alternating thematics—let B. Waltke’s comment stand as exemplary in this regard: “Verses 4-5 balance the ethical and theological assertions of vv 2-3 with practical theology”\(^{171}\)—leaves aside the temporal lag of the signified in relation to the signifier, “a retroversion effect (effet de rétroversion) by which the subject, at each stopping point, becomes what it was to be (était) from before, and ‘he will have been’ (il aura été) is only announced in the future perfect tense.”\(^{172}\) There is to be sure an objective and even necessary illusion that the signified is co-present with the signifier, an effect that rests on the (again: objective, necessary) misrecognition of the One signifier as exempt from differential determination, as bearing a plentitude and self-presence that would fix the axes of religious or practical truth.\(^{73}\) This is exactly the opposite as what we encounter in the succession of verses that has led

\(^{71}\)WALTKE (2004, 454). But see also CLIFFORD (1999, 112) who can speak of wisdom’s ‘ethical side” in contrast to its “religious aspect”; similarly MURPHY (1998, 73) counter poses the “objective” character of v 2, on one hand, and on the other the “divine” horizon unveiled by v 3; or in a more systematic application, MCKANE (1970) classifies each proverb according to its “individualistic,” “community,” or “religious” orientation.

\(^{72}\)LACAN, Subversion, 808.

\(^{73}\) Which is to say that ideology cannot be reduced to either stupidity or to a kind of vulgar class prejudice. Ideology is “objective” and “necessary” insofar as, apart from its organizing effects, the coherent and discrete objects that constitute the very fabric of everyday life (beginning with what must be considered the most basic of these, the me-object) disintegrate past the point where human subjectivity can be maintained. This is the basic lesson of Kant’s distinction between ideas that are transcendental and those that are regulative. “I maintain that transcendental ideas can never be employed as constitutive ideas, that they cannot be conceptions of objects and that when thus considered they assume a fallacious and dialectical [i.e. ideological] character...Yet this illusion (which we can, after all, prevent from deceiving us), is nonetheless indispensably necessary if, besides the objects that are before our eyes, we want at the same time to see—far from these objects—also the objects that lie behind our back. I.e. the illusion is necessary if, in our case, we want to direct the understanding beyond every given experience (as part of the entirety of possible experience), and hence also to direct it to its greatest possible and utmost expansion.” (KANT, 1998, 619-620). Disregarding Kant’s hedge (that we could prevent ourselves from being deceived) as well as those philosophical points of view that amount to a return to nominalism, it is clear that Israel’s wisdom movement is a vigorous attempt to extrapolate from “the objects that are before our eyes” to a truth that “lies behind our backs” and fills the “greatest possible and utmost expansion.”
us to this point. The One that, at each stop, secures the signified is not full but empty. Thus, the religious only means once it is transposed onto the noisy sphere of practicality, whose significance in turn is vouchedsafe only by reference to a deeper ethico-religious dimension. From this perspective, verse 4 must be read as the most frustrating proverb of this sequence. For if 10:1–3 have moved some distance from the patently absurd thesis that wisdom is reducible to righteousness is reducible to wealth, verse 4 returns us to signifying-count zero.

57 THE QUILTING POINT

A summer gatherer is a son of maškil

but a harvest-time sleeper, a son who brings shame.

Verse 5 begins in the usual way, giving the differential point of reference missing from the previous proverb. Slack-handedness (kp rmỳh) is herewith defined in opposition to the summer-gatherer (‘qr bqỳs), whom v 5 locates according to the following dispensation of signifiers.

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The logical elaboration of kp rmỳh is unremarkable, or perhaps it is better to say remarkable in its lack of dynamism. The passage from v 4 to v 5

slack handed \leftrightarrow \text{ summer gatherer}
is simply reversed by v 5's internal structure.

summer gatherer ←→ harvest-time sleeper

The negation of the negation remains entirely within the categorial paradigm of activity with the annoyingly tautological result, slackness rmgh means sleepiness nrdm.

This in contrast to the marked contextual rotation (which, looking back to v 1, we recognize as a return) effected by v 5's own pedagogical assertion: the summer-gatherer ←----- son who brings shame. I understand this second term as a return to the question of wisdom's filial horizon,\textsuperscript{74} i.e. the question of pleasing a father. It is a difficult question to answer, as we have seen, a matter of economic success infused with righteousness, righteousness itself understood as a reliable guarantor of prosperity that yet stands opposed to treasures of wickedness.

The manner in which the son who brings shame is determined, as with each preceding proverb, is decisive and, as it turns out, decisively different. Consider how each fourth term (unable to refer to anything in its own signifying constellation) has sent us both forward to the next proverb and laterally to another axis. Specifically, since being presented the question of the father's pleasure, we have been shuttled back and forth between two semantic registers, one which has been called practical (having to do with such matters as profit (yîl) and starvation (ršb) the other called ethical (the repeated iterations of righteousness šdq and wickedness ršś). The non-identity of these categories poses an ever-circling threat of meaninglessness, which must be staved off at each turn with one more proverb. The breakdown in meaning is forestalled by successive functions of exclusion, the lapsus between prosperity and piety covered over by a fourth term whose meaning we are led to believe can be looked up elsewhere. But thus far, the fourth term has only kept the reader in motion, answering the ethical question in terms of a practical consideration, which is in turn specified with reference back to the ethical. The difference that belongs to this verse, it follows, involves a function that would constitute the series as a totality and not simply an endless line of equivocation, a "quilting point" (point de capiton) that would bring a halt to the circuitous vacillations of metonymy.

\textsuperscript{74}On the specific familial dimension of buš see note 55 on page 187.
What pleases the father? Verse 5 answers, via a long passage of double negation, a son of maskil. This location which in its current semiotic context is strictly speaking untranslatable. Why? Can we not access, easily enough, the lexical value of this Hebrew word?—a simple matter of collating its usages in the Hebrew Bible, or even just in Proverbs. Yes and with relatively clear results. It is a signifier used to indicate a positive value vis-à-vis three semantic axes—

- piety\textsuperscript{76}
- prosperity\textsuperscript{77}
- discernment\textsuperscript{78}

— which is to say, given the signifying matrix of Prov 10:1-5, it reduplicates exactly the vacillation of the system as a whole.\textsuperscript{79} In its semiotic function, then, maskil must be considered a carefully insulated module of meaninglessness, a signifying trough wherein the excess produced by each successive proverb is captured within, and not projected beyond, its semantic field.

58 Excurser 2: Forms of Value

In the opening chapter of Capital, Marx provides an analysis of the origin of the most popular form of value, the money form.\textsuperscript{80} To make sense of this form, he

\begin{itemize}
\item Pleasing the father [...] \implies a son who brings shame \implies a son of maskil.
\item \textsuperscript{HALOT} does not comment on the semantic ambiguity of the root \textit{skl} but simply lists a range of meanings: “to have success”, “to understand, comprehend”, “to have insight.” It is curious, therefore, the amount of discussion devoted a close synonym of \textit{maskil}. I am referring to \textit{tu\textsuperscript{c}iyy\textsuperscript{y}h}, whose main headings are virtually identical to those of \textit{maskil}: on one hand, “success, good result”; and on the other, “sound wisdom, prudence.” The editors go on to describe the difficulty in conveying the sense of \textit{tu\textsuperscript{c}iyy\textsuperscript{y}h}: “The various suggestions surveyed above have been presented to show how difficult it is to give an adequate translation of the Hebrew substantive, for it has no real equivalent in modern languages. It appears as one of the favorite ideas of wisdom literature, where it takes on many shades of meaning; the general sense has been rather accurately defined by \textsuperscript{Genmer Spr. 2\textsuperscript{24}}: \textit{tu\textsuperscript{c}iyy\textsuperscript{y}h} really means the promotion of being, encouraging something to exist, allowing the successful outcome of an enquiry; as such it means help as much as cleverness, or skill; [...] as stated in \textsuperscript{[Koehler-B.]], with the substantive \textit{tu\textsuperscript{c}iyy\textsuperscript{y}h} it is necessary to associate the double meaning of result and prudence; see further G. von Rad \textit{Weisheit in Israel} (1970) 1098.” I am claiming precisely the same semantic difficulty in the case of \textit{maskil}, and would simply underscore \textsuperscript{HALOT} that this semantic field \textit{qua} ambiguous is “one of the favorite ideas of wisdom literature.”
\item \textsuperscript{Karl Marx, Capital} New York: Penguin, 1990, 138-63.
\end{itemize}
defines and elaborates three other forms as its logical predecessors (the simple, the expanded, and the general forms). Latent in this analysis is the logic of signification we rely upon throughout as well as a welcome warning not to succumb to the idealist temptation to relegate linguistic evidence and arguments to an ideal sphere above and beyond the effective actuality of extra-linguistic materiality.\footnote{For the connection between the logic of the form of value in Marx and the logic of signification I rely on Žirmůk, For They Know Not What They Do, 21-27.}  

The simple form  “The simplest value-relation,” Marx writes, “is evidently that of one commodity to another commodity of a different kind (it does not matter which one). Hence the relation between the values of two commodities supplies us with the simplest expression of the value of a single commodity.”\footnote{Marx, 139.} This can be immediately mapped onto what we have called the simplest linguistic relation, namely, the signifying dyad, that of one signifier to another.\footnote{All Marx means by stipulating the necessary difference that must exist between the two commodities is that, in Marx’s example, 20 yards of linen cannot be valued in relation to 10 yards; value requires a different element; e.g., a coat. The crucial misunderstanding to be avoided here would be the one that reads “in kind” to mean “in substance,” i.e., to refer to something substantial about the commodity itself. Marx has just warned us against this, “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp as a thing possessing value.” Marx, 138} Just as a commodity is that which represents value for another commodity, so too is a signifier that which represents the subject for another signifier. “Here two different kinds of commodities (in our example the linen and the coat) evidently play two different parts. The linen expresses its value in the coat; the coat serves as the material in which the value is expressed.”\footnote{Marx, 139.} So too do the two signifiers play two different parts in the signifying dyad. So long as the signifying dyad continues to be the limit of our inquiry, little more than the observation of these two, mutually exclusive roles can be said of these two signifiers. This single, isolated relationship between the linen and the
coat cannot satisfy our quest to grasp the forms of value because the nature of this relationship cannot be clarified without establishing whether or not it is equivalent to other expressions of value.

The expanded form So, according to Marx, "the simple form of value automatically passes over into a more complete form." In this expanded form, "the value of a commodity, the linen for example, is now expressed in terms of the innumerable other members of the world of commodities." So, we may say that the linen is equivalent to 1 coat, 10 lb. tea, 40 lb. coffee, 2 ounces of gold, etc. Here it becomes clear that value is indifferent as to the particular commodity that represents it for another commodity.

With the expansion of the simple form of value into the expanded form, we pass from a simple, contingent instance of exchange (your neighbor wants some olive oil and insists that it would only be fair if you took a sample of her recently brewed beer in exchange), to the medium of a local barter-economy, where any number of goods can express the value of another good. Granting all the problems and disputes facing any attempt to draw conclusions about the Neo-Babylonian Period (most significantly, the difficulty of isolating evidence specific to this period and the sparsity of the potential evidence), the economy of Judah and Benjamin at that time, and Yehud at the beginning of the Persian Period, did not often carry out operations at a higher formal level.

The exile and Neo-Babylonian attacks significantly reduced the population and wealth of Jerusalem and its surroundings in the tribal areas of Judah and Benjamin. The population decline, coupled with the absence of the monarchy and its concomitant infrastructure, undoubtedly led to a significant reduction in trade-

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85 *Marx*, 154.
86 *Marx*, 155.
87 For much of the evidence and the contours of the debates about Neo-Babylonian Judah, see the essays in *Lipschits/Blenkinsopp* (2003). In addition, the difficulty of identifying Babylonian destruction levels is addressed in *Blenkinsopp* (2002) and *Stern* (2004).
88 Of course, particular judgments vary concerning the degree of decline, the area of the province, proper methodology, and so on. For a discussion of the issues, including further references, see the estimates based on archaeological data in *Carter* (1999, 172-248) and *Lipschits* (2003), which includes a critique of the former on pp. 359-60.
activity. While we recognize the evidence for the production of certain cash crops, especially in the tribal area of Benjamin, other factors (e.g., deurbanization) suggest that Judah and Jerusalem were not great participants in the imperial economy. Industrial production of the lucrative and exportable crops of oil, grain, and wine

So MILLER/HAYES (2006, 480), “Many cities, like Jerusalem, that had once been thriving centers were left as depleted, subsistence-level villages if occupied at all. The primary economy of the country was probably reduced to a purely agricultural base.” Several factors complicate this judgment, as Miller and Hayes recognize, and suggest some level of trade continued, even if severely reduced. (1) ZORN (2003) argues that the material evidence from Tell en-Nasbeh, biblical Mizpah, supports the biblical claim that the Neo-Babylonians established a new administrative center there for the region (cf. Jer 40 and 2 Kings 25). In addition to Mizpah, the ceramic and paleographic evidence found at Gibeon suggests to CARTER (1999, 119-22) that its primary industry, its winery, continued and prospered in the Neo-Babylonian period. (2) STEIN (2001, 321) expands the scope of this argument to generalize about the region: “in contrast to all other regions west of the Jordan that had been conquered by the Babylonians, the settlements of Benjamin were not destroyed, continued to exist during the Babylonian period, and may have even prospered.” Consequently, the primary historical debate centers on the extent to which social and economic activity of Judah continued, although perhaps shifting its center 12 km to the north, from Jerusalem to Mizpah. At one end of the spectrum, BARSTAD (1996, 69) claims, “life fairly soon would have ‘returned to normal’” following the events of 587. On the other hand, SMITH-CHRISTOPHER (2002, esp. 47-49) offers a critique of Barstad’s work that greatly emphasizes discontinuity, without returning to the so-called “myth of the empty land.” (3) The Neo-Babylonian empire appears to have been highly interested in the continued economic activity of its western provinces. As is well known, Nabonidus, emperor from 555-539, spent a decade in the western provinces without returning to the capital city (see ANET, 562). Typical is the interpretation of this by MILLER/HAYES (2006, 490), who conclude that his activities “were probably necessitated by economic and trade considerations. He must have been trying to establish and exercise control over the overland trade routes in the region.” With regard to Judah, however, scholars are divided about the extent to which economic concerns for tribute outweighed the debilitating effects of the early sixth century destructions and the continued political concerns for stability (i.e., the concern to keep Judah poor so as not to have to expend resources squelching any more of its revolts; cf. 2 Kings 24:1; 25:1). On this matter, BARSTAD (1996) gives more weight to economics whereas VANDERHOOFT (1999) weighs the political concerns more heavily. These are not necessarily exclusive considerations and it seems best to conclude that economic relations with the empire did not completely disappear even if the steps taken to reestablish Judah’s productivity were minimal (e.g., the redistribution of land among the poor in Jer 39:10 and 2 Kings 25:12) and the threats to its stability maximal (e.g., the significant decrease and deurbanization of Judah’s population and the encroachments of Edomite and Arab peoples into the southern region of pre-exilic Judah, occupying previously Judaean towns such as Lachish and Hebron; for the latter, see LEHMAN (2003, 290) and ALBERTZ (2003, 96).
no longer appears to have organized the economic activity of the region.\textsuperscript{90} It is most likely that a subsistence-level economy existed under a Neo-Babylonian appointee in Judah for a good portion, if not all, of the sixth, and even into the fifth centuries.

\textbf{The general form} At some point in the Persian period, however, Jerusalem apparently became, if not at the same scale, a center of economic activity beyond subsistence levels once again.\textsuperscript{91} Even if Jerusalem’s population remained mostly rural and small throughout the period,\textsuperscript{92} this would not necessarily preclude its presence in the trade economy of the empire. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the new temple functioning in any other context, nor does there seem to be any need to do so; the textual and material evidence gives the impression of significant trade in the Jerusalem marketplace (e.g., Neh 13:15-21).

Seow describes the Jerusalem that emerged in the Persian period as follows,

Jerusalem in the fifth century was a thriving cosmopolitan marketplace where the Judeans, even on the Sabbath day, worked in the winepresses, brought in heaps of grain, loaded the animals with goods, and hawked their agricultural products—grain, wine, grapes, figs, and ‘all kinds of loads’—and sold food, while Tyrians brought fish and all kinds of merchandise (Neh 13:15-16).\textsuperscript{93}

Regardless of whether or not one would agree with Seow’s depiction of a “thriving cosmopolitan marketplace,” there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Jerusalem was a participant in the imperial economy and no longer relatively isolated in a subsistence agricultural economy.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{90}There is plenty of evidence that the production of these crops continued in the sixth century and beyond, but it seems likely that this production, at least during the sixth century, was more in the service of the public’s subsistence than the industry’s trade.

\textsuperscript{91}See HOGLUND (1991, 60-62), for example, who identifies a pattern of increased commercial development in Palestine in the Persian period.


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This is to suggest that Jerusalem, at some point and to whatever degree, passed from the second, expanded form of value into Marx's third, general form of value. Such a form could also exist in a subsistence-based economy but it is easier to illustrate through the production of craftwares, the presence of trade, and payment in precious metals or coins, all evident in the Persian period record. The simple and expanded forms of value are unlikely to exist at such a level of economic activity because of two inherent deficiencies Marx describes in the following terms:

1. the relative expression of value is incomplete because the series representing it is interminable; and

2. the representations cannot be said to have anything in common as each case is qualitatively different.95

The expanded form appears to forever deflect value from one commodity to another because it establishes no equivalence among the series of value representations. When the expanded form is reflected upon itself, when the expressions of value are reversed, however, a single commodity may be said to represent the value of all the other commodities. Now a universal equivalence has been established among all commodities on the basis of the particular commodity that represents their value. To return to the example evoked above, in the general form, linen's value is not represented by a series of other commodities (1 coat; 10 lb. tea, 40 lb. coffee, 2 ounces of gold), the general form inversely reflects the expanded form so that linen expresses the value of all the other commodities. The coat, tea, coffee, and gold are all given an equivalent value in terms of the linen.

The general form of value imposes on a single commodity “the character of universal equivalent”96 by excluding it from the whole world of commodities. The Persian empire established this form of value at an unprecedented scale. Seow writes, “Indeed, the Persian period is distinguished from the preceding epochs by the widespread use of money and the democratization of commerce.”97 While we should not imagine that the use of coinage was widespread in Yehud during the


95MARX, 156. 96MARX, 159.

97SEOW, Ecclesiastes: a new translation with introduction and commentary, 23.
Persian period, it is true that this time marks a transition for the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world to a monied economy. Although we will have to wait until the Hellenistic period for a truly monied economy, the Persian period's standardization of weights and measures and its introduction of coinage alongside traditional in-kind systems of payment establish a universal equivalence among commodities that Marx considered characteristic of the general form of value, the final form before the money form.

The Persian period provides us with such an illustrative moment because traditional in-kind forms of value coexist in it with the monied form. The expanded form of value allows for in-kind exchange but lacks the systematic and totalizing force of a standard of value that the imperial stamp establishes. Darius provides such a standard. The daric, which would become the gold coin of the empire, illustrates this transition on its own insofar as it was initially a standard of weight. Other standards of measurement were implemented and found throughout the empire, e.g., the or dab, which was in use at approximately the same time in Egypt (e.g., the measure of Elephantine's rations), in Babylonia to the east, and Sardis to the west. Briant's judgment on Darius's reforms registers the qualitative difference separating the general form of value from the first two forms by its totalizing effect,

\[ W \] cannot reduce the impact of Darius's reorganizations to a simple logical correlation of preexisting elements. However large the contribution of his predecessors, it seems quite clear that the new king was able to integrate all of his acquisitions and inheritance into a coherent, efficient system.

From Darius on, every commodity shares in common an imperially sanctioned register of value, e.g., a daric. The empire grants an eternal validity to the daric by stamping it such that it can be damaged, chipped, or worn, but so long as it is recognized as a daric, nothing can hinder its function to be endlessly exchangeable as something with the value of a daric.

There is a paradox to be isolated here that derives from the establishment of universality that comes with this form of value. The daric is a daric, on the one

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98 The evidence, which constantly changes as new finds are reported, is neatly summarized with references in Carter, 259-85 (cf. chapter 3 for further bibliographical information on the sites).


100 Briant, 414. 101 Briant, 415.
hand, because of its substance. The daric is an 8.3 g chunk of gold, a particular commodity which functions as a metonymic substitute for the Whole. On the other hand, the daric is a daric because it is not its substance, because it metaphorically stands for its substance. The 8.3 g of gold, once stamped with the sign of a daric, stands for 8.3 g of gold even if it doesn’t weigh 8.3 g, even if .1 g gets rubbed off. If one daric is of poorer quality gold than another daric, they nonetheless express an equivalent value. Just as is the case for a proper name, a daric doesn’t lose its meaning when that which it signifies undergoes a change in substance. The daric’s validity as a universal depends on nothing but the social recognition of the daric qua daric (and not just its weight or quality).

The money form  The money form, then, marks the moment this signifier/commodity loses its ground in any actual substance and even begins to function in opposition to any substance. Money can be thought of as that which cannot lose its value insofar as its value is simply to be that for which all the other commodities represent value. It has no value other than its formal exclusion from what is valuable. It is not clear if Marx really thought of the money form as separate from the general form or simply its second stage. Regardless, it’s clear that the money form is implicit in the general form (just as, in fact, each is implicit in the others) but also that it does not function there with the same level of independence and abstraction. The general form does not yet have the added reflection contained in the money form wherein the commodity proceeds from being that which expresses the value of all the others to that for which all the other commodities represent the value.

Thus the Persian period should be seen as something of a vanishing mediator between the form of value based on substance and the form of value based on an empty gesture analogous to the giving of a name. In the Ptolemaic period, money is separated from substance and begins to function as a pure abstraction. In the Persian period, the pure abstraction is added to what is substantially valued in order to guarantee its substance.

This line of difference separating the Persian period from the Ptolemaic period (the general form from the money form), illustrates perfectly the difference between the functions of the Master Signifier in Prov 10:1-5 and in Prov 10:22-27 and 14:16-27. In Prov 10:1-5, the substance of mškyd remained important to our ability
to understand the cluster alongside its function as a Master Signifier. Its content covered over the gap separating the two axes of righteousness and wealth which the cluster had developed. In 10:5 mškyl functioned as a universal equivalent, flexible enough to provide both axes of meaning with some point relative to which they could constitute a series of parallelisms as more than a series of parallelisms, as a "cluster," a small but nonetheless totalized field of meaning. In 10:5 mškyl may be said to function as an empty signifier, a signifier with no content, insofar as it represents the subject for all the other signifiers therein.
Enlil, king of the gods,
who created teeming mankind,
Majestic Ea, who pinched off their clay,
The queen who fashioned them
—mistr ess Mami:
Gave twisted words to the human race;
They endowed them in perpetuity
with lies and falsehood.

Babylonian Theodicy

What does philosophy designate over its
entire evolution? It's this—thief,
abduction, stealing slavery of its
knowledge through the maneuvers of the
master.

Jacques Lacan

59 Provisional starting points

Before returning to the main concern of the chapter, "the poetics of totality," it is
clear that we will have to situate ourselves with respect to a difficult debate. We
proceed with two uncertainties held in abeyance, which we must here identify and
later, once our own argument has unfolded, revisit.

Especially, we will have to say something about the position for which we took
F. Golka as the exemplar. Both the main points of his argument—the autonomy
of the individual proverb, and the anthropological, rather than literary, basis of proverbial meaning—stand in stark tension to our stated objectives. Were it determined that Proverbs' proper interpretative frame was the performative situation of each proverb, our elaboration of the Master-Signifier (a signifier that totalizes the manifold as a singular but imperceptible field) would be woefully misguided.

With respect to the spectrum of literary readings, from those that seek to read all of Proverbs as a cohesive book to those who conceive of Proverbs 10-29 as a series of more or less integrated "clusters," I want to declare my methodological adherence to the latter while at the same time maintaining some distance from the confusion that arises once we lend "the proverb cluster" an aura of objective solidity. I use the term provisionally as a regulative idea, in order to set in motion an expanding sequence of descriptions. This amounts to a judgment about the field of view that best suits a given theoretical perspective. For our investigation into the logic of signification, the question is how best to disclose the motion of metonymy, the way each term in a series is subtly modified by the inclusion of a new term, whose own meaning is nonetheless solely a function of the series. Thus as a purely practical matter, it is the "cluster"—the series of 3, 4, 12 proverbs—whose scale is large enough (unlike the single sentence) that the signifier traces a detectable path, small enough that the permutations can be held in the simultaneity of thought. You will find no argument here, however, as to the objective certainty of this or that way of delimiting things. What I have invariably found in repeated close readings of short passages is this: what initially seemed a clear sign of poetic demarcation, stared at long enough, becomes the deeper logic of a henceforth unseen continuity, and vice versa. I would be shocked if it was not the same for the scribes who undertook the arrangements in the first place.

60 The function of mastery

Provided we don't lose track of these conditions, we can resume our investigation into the function of the Lacanian Master-Signifier, designated S1. Initially, what we experienced in our efforts to interpret Prov 10:1-5 was the bad infinity of an untotaled system. If we approached these verses with the aim of learning about (how to be...how to represent...even how to identify) a "wise son," we soon ran into a vicious circuit of self-reference. No designation was self-sufficient; the "truth"
of each statement could only be discerned in relation to the very terms that were under question. Hence we found ourselves endlessly oscillating between two semes: righteousness (defined in terms of the prosperity it grants) and prosperity (split between the false prosperity of the wicked and the life-granting prosperity of the righteous). “Life-granting” in what sense? In that by it prosperity is granted. How do we know what kind of prosperity? And so on—no matter how many rearrangements are made, there is always one signer too few.

The signer that emerged to intervene in this non-productive system was maškîl. How does maškîl (S₁) remedy the fundamental lack in the signifying system (S₂) that had failed us in 10:1-4? It does so by dint of its status, in this particular context, as a pure signer without a signified. If what eludes the system is the firm differentiation between righteousness and prosperity, then we should read maškîl as a stand-in for the system in its failure; it reduplicates exactly the vacillation of the system as a whole (see ¶ 57 on page 203) thereby reflecting the failure of representation into representation itself. Accordingly, the “mastery” of Lacan’s S₁, its invulnerability to the instability of differential systems, derives from its strict identity with the lack in the big Other.¹ “The element which represents, in the structure of the utterance, the immanence of its own process of enunciation is experienced as a kind of transcendent Guarantee, the element which only holds the place of a certain lack, which is in its bodily presence nothing but an embodiment of a certain lack, is perceived as a point of supreme plentitude. In short, pure difference is perceived as Identity exempted from the relational-differential interplay and guaranteeing its homogeneity.”²

What we turn to now is parallel account—again the emergence/fading of a Master-Signifier (S₁) that would totalize a dispersed field of knowledge (S₂)—but on a larger scale. I refer to the exceptional status of the fear-of Yhwh in relation to the numerous and variegated attributes of Wisdom. It will help to keep before us, for a moment longer, the analogous and much simpler case of Prov 10:1-5—a semiotic problem structured around three terms:

1. a positive signified whose essence set us in motion (“a wise son”);

2. the aggregate of predicates that fails to correspond to this essence (“righteous-

¹Thus Lacan dubs its enunciation the metonymy of nothing. ²ŽŽEK, Sublime Object, 100.
ness, prosperity, . . . not-wicked, not-famished”); and

3. the exceptional term *(maškil)* that represents the failure of all the others to signify the universal essence.

The much more complex problem of Wisdom as a whole, the totality of Wisdom that is represented in Proverbs, yet works according to this triadic structure: (1) the essence of Wisdom, (2) all the wise things that the sentences teach, and (3) the exceptional term, the fear-of YHWH, whose enunciation as a “pure signifier without a signified” is the point at which Wisdom’s limit and essence are constituted and endlessly bound.

Now, to speak of the fear-of YHWH, this famous signifier, as *stricto sensu* meaninglessness (a mark, pure noise) smacks of contrariness and a heavy-handed reading. What seems a more productive approach to pursue and test against the evidence of local exegesis is to posit a gradual eclipse of meaning, an approach towards emptiness that is fully realized only when Proverbs as a whole is punctuated by its “motto-verse” (1:7, 9:10). Our beginning point, therefore, is the meaning that gets buried by the increasing dominance of the master’s function.

61 A DEVELOPMENTAL ACCOUNT OF FEAR

Most discussions about the (content of the) fear-of YHWH encircle the semantic possibilities of awe, reverence, and piety (or religious behavior). Rather than posing distinct, mutually exclusive options, these three possible meanings of the fear-of YHWH often form a sort of interdependent web whose particular configuration is mostly a result of how it is approached. For an initial glimpse of their interconnection, we need only note their association with the more familiar and crude division between subjective, instinctual, pre-reflective experience on the one hand, and objective, intellectual, social behavior on the other. Not infrequently this division gets transposed onto some kind of progressive framework according to which the infantile, clamorous, instinctual drives are slowly colonized and cultured by the rational discipline of the sapiential life. In short, the narrative movement of many classical articulations of the fear-of YHWH remains bound to a sort of developmentalism of which the contemporary critic should be suspicious. We are attuned to denounce this narrative regardless of the categories through which it is told. Take two of the
most familiar. In naive Freudian categories, the Ego conquers the Id by submitting the pleasure principle to the exigencies of the reality principle. In the vulgar categories of religious development, the institutionalization of animism allows it to become a living religion by inevitably setting it on a path toward bureaucracy and dead piety. As one matures in wisdom, the fear-of YHWH grows ever closer to knowledge. To return to our initial three semantic possibilities and establish a point of juncture: fear qua reverence can be understood as the conversion of fear qua awe into fear qua piety.

Exemplary in this regard is J. Becker's monograph, according to which the fear of God develops semantically from a "numinous fear," i.e., the spontaneous reaction of humans during an encounter with God, to a moment that the actual fear is almost wholly eclipsed by cultic (characteristic of Deuteronomy and deuteronomistic literature), moral (characteristic of Proverbs), and/or nomistic (characteristic of Ben Sira) meanings; in short, the fear of God becomes equivalent to religion and piety. Thus the fear of God takes the place of our abstract religious concepts. Although Becker claims that the emotive, numinous fear has not been totally eclipsed, his argument hardly permits any other conclusion because it maintains a strict opposition between the intellect and affect alongside its argument for an "intellectualization" of fear.

62 THE ANTI-DEVELOPMENTALISM OF DAVID CLINES

D. Clines, in what is the most thorough and detailed recent examination of the semantics of the phrase "the fear of YHWH"/"the fear of God," positions his conclusion in direct opposition to such developmental accounts. He writes,

the yr'h group [in non-religious contexts] straightforwardly indicated the normal and common human emotion of fear. It is somewhat surprising therefore to discover

3 Some texts supporting this conception include Gen 3:10; Gen 28:17; Exod 3:6; 15:11; Deut 5:5.
4 Becker writes of this development, for example, "Im Zuge dieser Entwicklung geht das Moment eigenerlicher Furcht fast ganz verloren; Gottesfurcht wird Äquivalent für Religion und Frömmigkeit ... Gottesverehrung war ihnen mehr Realität als Theorie, da bei ihnen Gottesfurcht die Stelle unseres abstrakten Begriffes Religion einnimmt." JOACHIM BECKER, Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1965, Analecta Biblica, 75.
5 BECKER, 38.
on reading the lexica and textbooks a well-nigh universal agreement that, broadly speaking, when God is the object of \( y\sp{\mu} \) or when the fear of God is mentioned, there is no reference to any emotion experienced by the person but rather to (a) their attitude of respect or reverence towards the deity and/or (b) their ethical behavior.\(^6\)

He cites as representative of this view G. Wanke in *TDNT*, Stähli in *TDOT*, the Brown, Driver and Briggs lexicon, et al. We think Clines helpfully shows that (1) ultimately, the use of the word “fear” in what he calls “religious contexts” does not entail an elimination of the affective, and (2) that the developmental schema involves several false oppositions.\(^7\) However, exactly what the fear-of Y\(\text{hw}\) signifies for Clines remains unclear. He insists that the principle issue concerns maintaining a clear delineation of the difference between denotation and connotation.

I believe that the whole edifice of a moral, ethical, and cultic meaning for the phrase ‘fear of God’ is built on a confusion of sense and reference, which is to say, of denotation and connotation. My conclusion is that the \( y\sp{\mu} \) word group always signifies the emotion of fear (which is its sense or denotation), but that sometimes that emotion leads to actions (which are then its reference or connotation). In brief, when people do not lie, for example, because of the ‘fear of God’, it does not mean that they do not lie because they behave ethically but because they are afraid of God and of the consequences he may exact of them for lying.\(^8\)

While no doubt to fear God implies also to be in awe of him and to show him respect, and while those who fear God engage in appropriate ethical and religious behavior precisely because they fear the consequences of not doing so, these can only be connotations of ‘fear’; the terms for fear studied above mean no more and


\(^7\)It is, however, questionable whether Clines is critiquing what his opponents’ say or whether he is critiquing a possible but not necessary implication of their arguments. Rather than a lack of reference to emotion, in most of his examples (and others) the pious meaning of fear becomes independent of its emotive meaning. Fear is depicted as a more or less mythical (not cognised) ground of affect subsequently subjugated to the Symbolic world of the sages and given a theological meaning, after which the fear-of Y\(\text{hw}\) begins to function independently of its emotive ground. But any overstatement of his opponents’ position is not necessarily fatal to Clines’ argument.

\(^8\)CLINES, 64.
5. The Poetics of Totality

no less that the emotion of fear.⁹

There are at least three problems with Clines' argument.

First, his conclusions overstep the allowances of the denotation-connotation distinction, which can in no way bear the universal burden he assigns it. Denotation and connotation distinguish two signifying relationships through recourse to the more natural or factual signification of the former over the latter. Just as we rejected Berlin's claim to have found a foundation for semantic parallelism in common-sense (apropos her weak-strong versus weak-blond distinction), so too must we reject Clines' claim that denotation provides him a foundation for the semantics of fear. Such a distinction is all the more suspicious in this case insofar as it is made with recourse to a kind of mythical emotive state as a universal. To distinguish fear's denotation from its connotation in a signifying system could indeed be a useful analytic tool, but its very dependence upon the logic of signification renders any suggestion of an eternal or universal denotation nonsensical. As R. Barthes has put it, "denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature.⁰¹⁰. We should be skeptical of that superior myth by which Clines establishes a certain denotation of fear as "natural," fear's "first" meaning, which he laments is unfortunately confused with its "mere secondary" connotations; and of the way his gesture aims to "arrange all the meanings of a text in a circle around the hearth of denotation (the hearth: center, guardian, refuge, light of truth)."¹ⁱ

The second problem with Clines' argument is that his claims are disingenuous insofar as fear's denotation is not obvious but precisely what is under dispute among biblical scholars. For example, consider Waltke's statement on the fear of God.

The formula H₂O is not the same as the differentiated two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen, and concrete does not exist without mixing cement and water. Even as one will not understand "butterfly" by analyzing "butter" and "fly" independently, so also "fear of the Lord" cannot be understood by studying 'fear' and 'the Lord' in isolation from each other. The expression is a compound.¹²

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¹¹Barthes, 7. ¹²Waltke, Proverbs 1-15, 100.
Without necessarily endorsing his argument, his quote clarifies our point that a connotation in one signifying system is no natural thing and can become a denotation in another. What Clines takes for granted is nothing other than what’s being debated; can fear be taken as a signifier on its own that denotes an emotion in Proverbs or does it, perhaps together with “of Yhwh,” form a signifier whose denotation must be defined as something else altogether (e.g., piety, humility, reverence, etc.)?

The third and, for our purposes, most productive problem with Clines’ argument is the way he defines fear in terms of an emotion that somehow too easily drifts into the mythical realm of specious explanations in terms of a pseudo-scientific biology, affectivity, and so on. For Clines, fear in “religious contexts” is always the effect of uncertainty about God’s disposition toward oneself. Fear is the feeling that one is (potentially) guilty and thus in store for divine punishment unless one acts in accordance with God’s will. Thus the sage only fears from within the conceptual coordinates supplied by the law, in this case a fairly strict retribution theology but which we would want to expand, in accordance with the fundamental insights achieved by psychoanalysis, to simply mean the renunciations imposed on all subjects by the socio-symbolic order they inhabit. How, then, can one establish any clear-cut difference between fear, the law, and reverence for the law (piety). Though Clines has them confidently sorted, they appear inextricably entangled, each to the others. The relationship between fear and the law is a productive field of inquiry but by no means settled. Second, it is simply not the case that everywhere the fear-of Yhwh occurs retribution thought offers the appropriate background for understanding it. Let us dispel of the latter problem with recourse to Prov 14:2 before turning to the former.

**Proverbs 14:2—a non-affective account of Fear**

Proverbs 14:2 reads

> He who walks in uprightness fears Yhwh,
> but he who is devious in his ways despises him.

Relying on the semiotics of parallelism developed in the previous chapter (on pages 175–180) we can express the proverbs’ semantic logic as follows:
The square suggests that nothing much can be said of the fear-of Yhwh in this text. Proverbs 14:2 teaches that to walk uprightly is not to despise God, which is understood as contradictory to the fear-of Yhwh, itself taken for granted by the proverb. The fear-of Yhwh thus functions to quilt together an axis of meaning created by the opposition of upright versus devious behavior, i.e., an ethical or pious axis, and the disposition of the individual to Yhwh. The word *buz, bzh* ("despise") is never any sort of "natural" or pseudo-biological response; its meanings denote no emotive dimension that could be divorced from their association with the law. It is used of objects e.g., birthright in Gen 25:34 and images in Ps 73:20, but mostly denotes an expression of inappropriate socio-cultural relations between parties of unequal status that dishonors or shames one or both parties, e.g., mother and son in Prov 15:20; divine and human in 1 Sam 2:30. Perhaps most importantly, it also occurs parallel to "fear" in Prov 13:13, where the objects of contempt and fear are "the word" and "a command." It would therefore be extremely difficult to argue that it formed a purely emotive axis with fear, i.e., an axis separate from, or at least primary with respect to, the law and the Symbolic order.\(^{13}\) In essence, because

\(^{13}\)If we take the proverb as part of a cluster e.g., vv. 1-7 or vv. 1-15, the behavioral connotations mount and it seems even more likely that the fear-of Yhwh signifies an ethical dimension that
of the location of the fear-of Yhwh as the fourth, empty term of the square, it could receive the emotive meaning Clines claims, and we could even suppose that some sage(s) invested it with just such a meaning from time to time, but to say that it is necessarily so and not otherwise has no basis in the text. The fear-of Yhwh, strictly speaking, has no necessary content in this proverb; it simply holds the place of a certain lack so that something can be taught about walking uprightly. The fear-of Yhwh anchors the signification of “despising him” (which the proverb teaches is the implication of a crooked path with respect to an upright walker) by giving it a reference point, thus creating an axis of signification that has nothing to do with Yhwh’s consequential activity to these contradictory subjective positions (i.e. fear and loathing) and everything to do with the sage’s activity toward Yhwh.

64 PROV 15:33—ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES

Having found Clines’ ambivalence about fear’s relationship to the law unsatisfactory (it is both cause and effect), does this mean we advocate another kind of developmental thesis on the fear-of Yhwh’s meaning? What is the relationship between fear and the law?

Our thesis is that the function of the law traces the path of fear and not vice versa. To say that fear means being afraid is completely unsatisfactory and not only because it is a tautology. The law is necessary for any fear of God to exist; no action or thought can elicit the fear of God unless it is mediated through a certain Symbolic matrix that supplies it with a certain fearfulness with respect to God. In this sense

14It is possible to take “fears Yhwh” as the subject of Prov 14:2a (cf. Bruce K. Waltke/M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990, 132-35; Waltke, Proverbs 1-15, 576, n.5; Crawford H. Toy, The Book of Proverbs. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899, ICC, 281), in which case the subject of the B line would presumably need to be “despises him.” We would then read, “The one who fears Yhwh walks in uprightness, but the one who despises him is devious in his ways.” The pedagogical aim of this configuration would be to teach us about the path of a fearer of Yhwh. This path is “not devious,” a judgment that is equally difficult to sequester to an emotive realm away from the law.

15Here we follow Lacan’s “profound reversal of a central theme in Freud,” which A. Johnston formulates as follows: “The libidinal life of the subject is not a consequence of a bundle of internal forces, but an outcome conditioned by an external matrix of mediation,” Adrian Johnston, Time
our position is aligned with those classical conceptions Clines is so eager to dismiss. That is, even though we accept his rejection of any naive developmentalism, we find it impossible to come to any other conclusion than that the Symbolic law conditions any and every expression of fear we have in Proverbs. Where we agree with Clines, however, will be evident in our treatment of Prov 15:33, which makes it clear that what he takes to be a quasi-biological emotive force is better understood as fear’s ability to function as a cause. That is, Clines erroneously attributes to an emotive denotation the reason why fear leads to certain actions in religious contexts but, in rejecting this causal explanation, we nonetheless follow him in recognizing a precise structural distance between the fear-of YHWH and pious action in certain texts. To anticipate, we will find two axes of meaning achieved by the fear-of YHWH in Prov 10-29 that roughly correspond to the distinction between form and content.

To grasp the kind of developmentalism proposed here which, as we said above, is better conceived as a fading than an accumulation of the fear-of YHWH’s meaning, we turn to Prov 15:33, a text often evoked to support the developmental theory.16

The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom,
and humility comes before honor.

What is the subject of this proverb?


16This proverb, even more unambiguously than 14:2, lacks any evocation of emotive semantic categories.
Figure 5.2: Prov 15:33—fear in relation to humility and honor.

Again, with the help of our semiotics of parallelism, we can say that this proverb renders the traits of “fear-of Yhwh” and “humility” identical in terms of their prerequisite status, respectively, for “wise instruction” and “honor.” What the proverb aims to teach (evident in its pedagogical axis) is that the fear-of Yhwh, insofar as the fearer-of-Yhwh can be defined as humble when open to the instruction/discipline of wisdom, precipitates honor. This proverb teaches nothing about the affectivity of the fear-of Yhwh, its lesson concerns the structural connection between the fear-of Yhwh and honor, which is somewhat paradoxically (insofar as humility implies a certain lack vis-à-vis the assumption of honor) made by humility. Proverbs 15:33 teaches that dishonor comes from the pride of the fearer-of-Yhwh; or, that the fear-of Yhwh implies honor.

\(^{17}\)This proverb may seem odd in the context of our discussion of the poetics of parallelism. We have almost exclusively dealt with so-called “antithetical parallelism”—parallelism in which the valence of the B line is the opposite of A (A righteous one . . . but a wicked one . . . )—whereas this proverb contains “symonymous parallelism”—the B line repeats the value of A. Thus, in this case, we should read the contradictory axes as establishing an identity and the contrary axes as establishing an equivalence. This may also be a good place to remind the reader that this dissertation aims not at any orthodox semiotics but rather unabashedly “uses” the tools of semiotics only to the extent that they aid the interpretive process. On the “usefulness” of the square, see Jameson, Foreword.
At this point we can identify a first moment in our search for a "substantial" semantic meaning of the fear-of Yhwh in Prov 10-29, namely, to fear-of Yhwh means to anticipate honor, understood as a particular effect of wise instruction. This proverb, therefore, would be better referred to as a mediator than an exception.\textsuperscript{18} The former term captures the proverb's connection of the fear-of Yhwh to instruction, characteristic of Prov 1-9 (cf. 1:7), and its connection to retribution, considered characteristic of the fear-of Yhwh in Prov 10-29. Furthermore, it is the temporality (and not the content) of 15:33's meaning that is, I think, what's behind many of the developmental accounts of the fear-of Yhwh in Proverbs. M. Fox, for example, cites Prov 15:33 to connect a prior moment of emotive fear, which could carry any number of meanings (he cites possibilities such as worry, uneasiness, trepidation and recognizes that all are dependent upon the subject), to its cognitive meaning. Fox writes, "The fear of the Lord is the musar of wisdom—its propædeutic, the discipline that prepares the way to it."\textsuperscript{19} Unlike Becker, Fox maintains an emotional essence to the fear-of Yhwh even though they both adopt similar positions on its semantic development. This emotional essence seems to be in-itself a simple, unreflective, feeling of unease that is not known or cognised unless it becomes for-us through a coupling with the knowledge of God. Once coupled, the fear-of Yhwh develops as something like a "known feeling," for which he finds the term "conscience" useful. In his commentary on Prov 2, he writes,

\begin{quote}
If the child does his part—the other parties will obviously do theirs—his fear of God will move to a higher stage, as described in [Prov 2]. The simple fear of divine anger that prompted the first, juvenile steps towards wisdom matures into a reasoned, cognitive conscience. The fear of God at the mature stage is the object of understanding (2:5a) and is defined by the parallel as a form of knowledge (2:5b). Fear of God becomes conscience, an inner sense of right and wrong and a desire to do what is right.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Fox's account of fear's semantic development, then, is from a passive, basically unrecognised unease associated with retribution theology, to an active, thoughtful desire to do the right thing.

\textsuperscript{18}For the latter, see MURPHY, Proverbs. \textsuperscript{19}FOX, Proverbs 1-9, 68. \textsuperscript{20}FOX, Proverbs 1-9, 112.
65 **Two axes of fear**

But we should try to put a stop to these oppositions and axes of meaning that threaten to proliferate into a field that could mean anything and its opposite. Is there some way to create some semblance of order without reducing the complexity of the fear-of *Yhwh* in Prov 10-29? As a first step, we should concisely state so as to denounce a false opposition which obscures the meaning of the fear-of *Yhwh*. The development of the fear-of *Yhwh*, regardless of how one conceives it, does not correspond to any division between intellect and affect. Both retribution and instruction, to take the most commonly used categories, are equally dependent upon the subject’s location within a Symbolic order of meaning or, said differently, neither immediately expresses some raw instinct nor is reducible to pure cognition. Although there are a couple verses that suggest a “negative” emotive connotation of the fear-of *Yhwh* may be present (Fox cites Prov 14:27 and 24:21-22), it is not a “simple fear” that is prior to meaning or knowledge of God. It rather appears to be, at least in Prov 14:27b and 24:21-22, a calculated desire to avoid sudden harm. Conversely, those proverbs in 10-29 that evoke the instructional connotations more associated with Prov 1-9, e.g., 14:2 and 15:33, are no less emotive for their connotations of feelings more often labeled “positive.”

Here we can expand the first meaning of the fear-of *Yhwh* arrived at above: more than anticipating the reception of the honorable effects of wise instruction, the fear-of *Yhwh* also anticipates the avoidance of the harmful effects of folly. In Prov 10-29 the fear-of *Yhwh* is associated with “honor” (15:33), with “life” and “dwelling satisfied” (19:23), with “riches and honor and life” (22:4), and with “avoiding deathly snares” (14:27), with “atonling for wickedness” and “avoiding evil” (16:6), and with “not being met with harm” (19:23). The fear-of *Yhwh* makes divine blessing phenomenally accessible to the sage’s experience. But this is not to say that the fear-of *Yhwh* produces these experiences immediately in every case. There is a sense in which it means, in Prov 10-29, the experience of obtaining the blessings and avoiding the curses that retribution theology promises the one who lives uprightly and is not devious (e.g., 16:6). But there is also a sense in which it means the behavior that precipitates, and thus allows the sage to anticipate, the cause of these effects (e.g., 15:33).
5. The Poetics of Totality

What exactly is the relationship between the anticipation and the realization of such effects? At the outset we can note their mutual exclusivity in relation to one another; one only anticipates from a position of lack. But this hardly clarifies matters satisfactorily. How far does this mutual exclusivity go? Are we to see in these two contradictory meanings a battle in which one wins at the end? Does the fear-of Yhwh as anticipation somehow prevent any realization from ever occurring? Does realization forever satisfy anticipation? For the moment, we need not attempt to resolve this complexly dialectic contradiction, for both moments leave unambiguous the impossibility of defining the fear-of Yhwh in terms of a positive quality in the object or referent.

The object can absolutely not be cited as the background against which these meanings of the fear-of Yhwh can be adjudicated. To do so would be to imagine that the sages applied some sort of direct referential scheme to the material conditions of their lives (which is the complaint any teacher receives from his or her students soon after introducing the book of Proverbs). On the contrary, proverbs such as 15:16 suggest otherwise.

Better is a little with the fear-of Yhwh
than great treasure and, with it, trouble.

The fear-of Yhwh relates to the experience of reward or punishment, but these do not possess some inherent meaning; they receive their signification from within the Symbolic world of the sages. That is to say, a little can be enjoyed as the sage's reward for upright living just as easily as the anticipation or even the realization of abundance (Prov 19:23).

Thus our attention is turned back in a Kantian loop to the fearer qua subject. Some of the proverbs in which the fear-of Yhwh occurs in Prov 10-29 are easily distinguished as having a concern for one or the other, for the precipitating behavior or for the experienced realization of righteousness within a retributive theology (whether that is punishment-avoided or reward-obtained). But others seem to associate it with both meanings, or at least it could be interpreted in either direction. For example, the l in Prov 19:23 could be read resultantly (as in the JPS, “He who fears the Lord earns life...”) or emphatically expressing a state (as in the NRSV, “The fear of the Lord is life indeed...”). This leads us to the reflected identity of anticipation and realization, the fact that they so easily slide into one another.

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It is obvious that anticipation does not only mean lack, for at some level the lack itself produces a sliver of the enjoyment it allegedly defers. And conversely, realization doesn’t simply mean pure enjoyment; there is a certain enjoyment lost at any realization of desire. But this does not make the distinction useless. In order to understand why and to address the question we formed above about the nature of the relationship between these two meanings of the fear-of YHWH, we have to account for the aspect of time involved in both meanings.

Thinking through the temporal paradoxes involved in shift from anticipation to realization (and in the reverse direction as well), we can see that there is no neutral background of retributive existence behind these two meanings of the fear-of YHWH despite the fact that Prov 10-29 relates both meanings to retribution theology. The anticipatory meaning of the fear-of YHWH serves as something like a transcendental condition for the possibility of the realized meaning. The sage can experience blessing as a benefit of being wise or suffering as a punishment for being foolish, or he can conceive righteousness as an identifiable feature of a diversity of objects only on the basis of some x which is itself timeless, excluded from the field of possible experience by the fear of YHWH. In its anticipatory meaning then, the fear-of YHWH means that any final totalization of wisdom as a coherent field of meaning remains forever incomplete, relegated to some ideal point to which the sage himself can never gain access. This is the meaning of the fear-of YHWH as a deferring action, a Symbolic designation for the increasing resistance Wisdom offers in the course of the subject’s approach to it. The fear-of YHWH is the position of humility that anticipates honor and instruction in wisdom in 15:33; it means ever-deferring the possibility that one needs no more instruction in wisdom, that one is fully honorable. The fear-of YHWH is the assurance that some timeless position outside of the sage’s own temporal experience exists, giving the sage a (virtual) reference point by which his/her diverse experiences can relate and cohere as wisdom. As a designation for something realized, the fear-of YHWH refers to the temporal experience of sapiential life (the notion of a “search” or “process” that both Crenshaw and Rose saw as fit metaphors for Wisdom), which is founded on the basis of a doubled moment of posit ing/exluding Wisdom’s timeless essence from lived experience, this exclusion being the condition of possibility for the emergence of wisdom and folly as meaningful distinctions in “real life.” The fear-of YHWH
means, in its anticipatory sense, the making timeless of a Wisdom that cannot be known so that the fear-of YHWH in its temporal sense can exist, that is, so that the sage can know the real content and effects of wisdom and folly. The fear-of YHWH, in both its senses, provides the basis on which the sage can enjoy a meaningful life wherein wisdom, folly, evil, righteousness, reward, punishment, etc. can be endlessly disputed, because they must be, i.e. they are never finalizable.

The fear-of YHWH begins to stand for this empty space of contestation in Proverbs.21 This, rather than emotive—cognitive or retribution—instruction, we argue, best describes the transition of the meaning(s) of the fear-of YHWH in Proverbs. In the rest of the chapter, we argue that this transition is exposed in two privileged textual clusters. Despite becoming formally “empty” its effects can be seen in certain privileged moments in Proverbs.

66 Fading

We have tried to indicate something of the complexity of the fear-of YHWH, the way it straddles multiple semantic domains and perhaps “means” only the specific perspective from which this multiplicity can be resolved, if not into a unity at least into a harmony. That is what our analysis of Prov 14:2 and 15:33 led us to believe. In terms of our larger thesis, which seeks to describe a “fading” whose zero-degree marks the structural function of the Master-Signifier, we will be better served observing it, the fear-of YHWH, amidst a metonymic movement whose patterns would only emerge in a sequence of proverbs, in the kind of substitutions and condensations we disclosed in our reading of Prov 10:1-5.

It is for this reason that we find the notion of a proverb “cluster”—linked to the work of Scorlack (1995) and Heim (2001)—useful: not as the sacrosanct “unit” of sapiential composition, but for the practical benefits secured by its medium length. Across its span of ten or so verses we will be able to see the processual quality

21 M. Fox argues that the fear-of YHWH’s most important role occurs when it becomes that by which the sage adjudicates the content of wisdom and folly in the midst of contradictory experiences and meanings. This is why he uses the term “conscience” to refer to the fear-of YHWH: “it motivates right behavior even when socially enforced sanctions do not exist or cannot become effective.”Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 70 This citation has the added benefit of illustrating the substantial changes this space effects in spite of its formal emptiness.
implied in the designation "fading." But, at the same time, the cluster is not so big that the network constituted in the moment of capitation will not exceed the capacity of our mind to register it.

The justification for particular clusters (14:16-27; 10:22-27, chosen for the way in which the fear-of Yhwh structures each of them as a unity) can be grasped only in retrospect in that these passages make visible a transformation whose movement becomes invisible at the point of its completion—when Proverbs states that the fear-of Yhwh is the raty of Wisdom, Wisdom's first step and its highest end.

67 Proverbs 14:16-27: text and translation

\[hākām yārē\v qesār mērā\v\]

Guided by the word of wisdom, he does not disobey the law

16a The wise one fears and turns from evil,

\[ak'sēl mit'abbēr ābōtē\h\]

and the foolish one is overthrown by his own folly.

16b but the fool is overrun and trusts.

\[qēṣar-\ammā'ēn ya\dāṣēh īwūlet\]

The short-tempered makes folly, and a planner is hated.

17a The short-tempered make folly,

\[wētš mēzimmōt yiśṣānē\]

but not a planner

17b and a planner is hated.

\[Reading yārē\ as a qal participle (rather than a substantival adjective), carrying same active sense as the parallel predicative constructions: wēsār “and he turns”; mit'abbēr “he is overrun”; ābōtē\h “and he trusts.”

I do not mean here to downplay the sematic register of anger that is reflected in the usual English rendering of mit'abbēr —“to be hot-headed” (NIV); “throws off restraints” (RSV); “he rageth” (KJV)—but rather to insist upon two additional nuances of the Hebrew: (1) the passive sense of the hitpael participle; and (2) the semantic link with ābr by which anger is considered a matter of blurring emotional/personal boundaries, letting them be crossed or, even better, transgressed.

It is in my opinion an interpretative error to overlay the translation of bīth with a moral judgement—“is careless” (NASB); “is reckless” (NIV); “and yet feels secure” (Waltke). The positive and negative valences associated with bīth are entirely derived from the object of trust that is being considered. Thus in the injunction to trust in Yhwh (cf. Psa 115:10,11) and in the one do not trust in nothingness (cf. Isa 59:4) the meaning of bīth is precisely the same: “to trust,” “to place confidence in;” “to rest at ease in.” Furthermore, to avoid a premature moral evaluation of bīth is especially crucial in this passage in light of its resolution in terms of a mibāh.

As with the case of bīth above, it is problematic to render mēzimmāh as a term of unambiguous depravity, as in “man of wicked devices” (KJV), “crafty man” (NIV), “man of evil devices” (NASB). (It is perhaps even less desirable to alter the sense of the verb yēšānē: as does the RSV: “a man of discretion is patient.”) Here it cannot be overlooked that Proverbs (in all but one instance—24:8) views mēzimmāh as a positive quality, the achievement of which is one of the notable pedagogical ends of the book—to give to the naive shrewdness, to the young knowledge and discretion (mē-
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nāḥōlā pītāyim riwelet 18a  The naive inherit folly,
wa'orātmā naktirū ḏāaṭ 18b but the shrewd are crowned with knowledge.
šāhū rāmīm lipnē ābītem 19a The evil ones will bow down before the good ones,
ūrēšām ‘al-ša’ārē saddiq 19b but the wicked ones are over the gates of the righteous.

gam-lērēhā yissāne rāš 20a Even by a neighbor are the poor hated,
wēōhabē aṣṭr rabbtam 20b but those who love a rich-man are many.
bāz-lērēhā ḥôlēh 21a The one who despises his neighbor is a sinner,
ūmī‘hōnēn ‘ōnāyim ‘aṣrāyaw 21b but the one who is gracious to the poor—blessed is he.

hōlō-yită hōršē rāś 22a Do not those who devise evil err?
wēhesed wērīmet hōršē tōb 22b but loyalty and faithfulness are good in silence
bēkol-eṣeṣ yihyeh mōṭār 23a By every toil will come profit,
dēbar-šēpattayim ak-lēmahsōr 23b but a thing of speech is only for want.
‘ērēt hōkāmām ōṣrām 24a The crown of the wise is their wealth,
riwelet kêsīlōm riwelet 24b and the folly of fools is folly.
maṣṣīl nēpāsāt ēd ūmet 25a What delivers someone is true testimony,
wēyāpēh kēzābtem mirmāh 25b but a lying witness is treachery itself.

bēyōrat yihwā mibṭah-ōz 26a In the fear-of Yhwh is a strong safe-house,
ūwēnāyaw yihyeh mahseh 26b and for his children it will be a refuge.
yōrat yihwā mēqōr ḥagyyēm 27a the fear-of Yhwh is the source of life
lāsūr mimmōqēr māwet 27b for turning from the snares of death.

zimmāh)” (Prov 1:4).

26hōršē tōb should be read as an epexegetical genitive—referring to those whose goodness is found in their quiet bearing—in which the construct conditions the absolute, as opposed to the more common attributive genitive wherein the absolute conditions the construct. We find the same construction in v 16, qēṣar- appayim referring to a temper that is short, not an intertemporal short person. The critical feature of the parallelism, which the translation obscures, is the pun on ħrāš, which means both “to devise” and “to be silent.”

27The idiomatic yāpēh kēzābtem (cf. Prov 6:19, 12:17, 14:5, 19:5,9) is to be analyzed in relation to the Ugaritic noun yphā, which is synonymous to the Hebrew ēd. See D. Pardee “YPH ‘Witness’
68 The unity and logic of Prov 14:16-27

The unity of the passage is to be found in the form of a resolution to an impasse around the idea of “trust.” Verse 16 celebrates an ethical posture of fear (yārē) and avoidance—turning from evil (sār mērā) rather than cleaving to good. It counsels a bearing of cautious mistrust in contrast to the fool who trusts (kēstil ... bōtēh). On the one hand, the condemnation of trust raises a sharp difficulty that Wisdom ideology has in the context of the Bible, a difficulty that is in this case heightened by the preceding references to YHWH and those that come at the end of this passage (vv 2, 26, 26). These are unavoidably evocations of a trans-ethical and indeed trans-cognitive demand for absolute trust. On the other hand, I would say that v 16’s counsel to “fear” takes up and focuses a theme the previous verses have broached in a diffuse way. We could call it “the opacity of meaning.”

10 The heart knows its own bitterness,
yet in its joy no stranger shares.

12 There is a way that seems right...
but its end is the way to death.

13 Even in laughter the heart is sad,
and the end of joy is grief.

15 The naive believe every word,
but the clever consider their steps.

We are thus introduced to several oppositions in these lines: what is private versus what is public, apparent versus essential, superficial versus deep; a posture that is naive versus one that is critical. These form a recognizable constellation of ideas that v 16 crystallizes in the language of fear:

The wise one fears and turns from evil
but the fool is overrun and trusts.

in Hebrew and Ugaritic,” VT 28 [1978], 204-213.

28 The paradigmatic case of trust beyond ethics is, of course, Gen 22—the near sacrifice of Isaac. In less extreme articulations, trust in YHWH is the basis for a secure livelihood and society. Psalm 4:6, for example, urges “Trust in YHWH (bīthā el-yhwh)!” The justification for this comes shortly thereafter. “For you alone, YHWH, cause me to dwell securely (lābeṭah).”
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The problematic tension between fear and trust motivates the subsequent verses until a resolution is reached in vv 26-27. The organizing rubric of problem–solution discloses three distinct moments that the poem works through:

- vv 16-21, the problem is posed;
- vv 22-25 supply a compelling but ultimately false solution;
- vv 26-27 give the true solution though not in the sense of a direct, positive overcoming.

This solution comes by a very smart re-situating of the three terms—fear, turn, trust—effected by the specification of fear’s proper object, the fear of YHWH.

Figure 5.3: Prov 14:16-27—fear, turn, and trust as framing elements.

In this reconfiguration, fear becomes the very basis for authentic trust (a strong trust—mîḥâh-ẓîż). And the turn is not the withdrawal from vibrant relationships—the turn inward, or away from others—it is rather a turn from the cold snare of death (lāsûr mimmîqṣē māwêt).
The perspective we take on these verses will be different than it was with Prov 10:1-5. Before our central operation was the reduction of a series of rather self-assured propositions, whose surfaces somewhat resisted the alienating imposition of semiotic analysis. One is forgiven for silently raising the question of pedantry in the course of analyzing such oppositions as wisdom-folly or lazy-diligent; aren’t these self-explanatory, true of certain semantic pairs by definition? Against the coercions of the text, what had to be demonstrated in each case was the rather brazen promise/bluff of a founding moment that of course never materializes: whole superstructures of proverbs rooted in lack, the absence of definition and explanation occulted by the benumbing assurances of familiarity.

This text (14:16-21) seems to be doing something quite different, a fact to which we are alerted to by the quite different logic of connection, one proverb to another. Rather than the looping circuits of substitution that characterized 10:1-5 (wisdom defined in terms filial pleasure defined in terms of righteousness defined in terms of prosperity defined in terms of, again, filial pleasure), Prov 14:16-21 takes up three sapiential axioms

- vv 16-17: the benefits of prudence over passion
- vv 18-19: the social esteem that accrues to the wise and righteous and
- 20-21: the importance of being gracious to the poor without in any way trying to connect them or solve the antimonies of one with reference to another. The conventional ideas regarding each pair are tested, found lacking, and discarded.

I do not think this amounts to a shift vis-à-vis the positional, topological analysis previously undertaken in the mode of Greimassian semiotics, but it does seem to call from it a different explanatory capacity. In contrast to the mechanisms of synthesis and substitution our previous analyses attended to, it seems that this one will turn its focus on the infinite divisibility of what we had mistakenly taken for “fundamental” categories. Against the tendency to leave off with our analysis at the point of obviousness, the self-explanatory term—such givens are thrown into

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doubt by this cluster of sayings. Operating behind such a suspicious posture towards a risk that seems at least likely in any intersubjective event must be a theory about the ubiquity of “false speech.” The foolishness of trust (bțh, v 16b), however, is not here traced, at least not primarily, to what we usually mean by lying—the blameworthy act of intentionally deceiving—but turns on the fundamental impossibility of “saying what you mean and meaning what you say.” In the multiplication of slight semantic shifts the conventional formulas of wisdom—the superiority of prudence over passion, the accrual of honor to the righteous, the ethics of showing compassion to the poor—are made to say their exact opposite.

Prudence versus passion

The wise one fears and turns from evil
but the fool is overrun and trusts.

The respective grammatical subjects of vv 16a and 16b constitute Proverbs’ most conventional opposition, the hâkām versus the kēstil. Predicated of these are two more elaborated participial phrases, giving us the following dispensation of categorial terms.

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\[\text{wise} \rightarrow \text{foolish} \]
\[\text{overrun and trusts} \rightarrow \text{fears and turns from evil} \]

\[\text{Contrariety} \]

\[\text{Implication}^{+} \]

\[\text{Implication}^{-} \]

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Figure 5.4: Prov 14:16—prudence versus passion

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\[^{29}\text{F. Jameson’s warnings as to the reifying tendencies of Greimas’s square are highly relevant. He writes, “the four primary terms need to be conceived polysemically, each one carrying within its own range of synonyms, and of the synonyms of its synonyms—none of them exactly cotermious}\]

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The contradictory relationship supposed between, on one hand, emotional involution and trust, and on the other, distancing and wariness constitute a semic axis well-known to Proverbs and indeed to the ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition as a whole. This is the valorization of emotional and especially discursive "cooleness" and the accompanying degradation of emotions/words that are "hot."

What comes through so clearly in this particular verse is the spatial figure that animates the (equally figural) valorization of emotional detachment. The ideal of coolness or reticence is closely linked to the maintenance of boundaries and a healthy distance. (This is the basis of my concern to maintain the predominate lexical value of בּר—"to cross over.") Conversely the fool is cavalier to these staples of emotional restraint; not recognizing here a point of extreme vulnerability, he maintains lax borders. Within this matrix fear versus trust signify diametrically opposed attitudes towards the other who is different, whose difference ought to be approached with great circumspection Proverbs thinks. Similarly turning aside versus being overrun represent extreme attitudinal bearings to the proprieties governing social proximity: the wise-one sees in his or her anger or concupiscence the potential for disaster; the fool lets it fly.

*The short-tempered make folly
and a planner is hated.*

Verse 17 begins as if to cover the same ground; its first character is described in terms that evoke a tendency towards over-haste, perhaps especially with respect with each other, such that large areas of relatively new or at least skewed conceptuality are thereby registered. [...] This will to embrace the slippage within terms is here a practical recommendation, like handicraft rules of thumb or inherited wisdom, but it also opens up a dizzying perspective of the subatomic universes, a prospect of what a very different semiotician, Umberto Eco, following Peirce, calls 'infinite semiosis,' in which each of the four primary terms of the square threatens to yawn open into its own fourfold system, down into the infinite divisibility of semiotic nature."

JAMIEON, Foreword, xvi.

30 The genitival phrase *q̄ ẓar-rappayim* which literally means "short of nose" is not attested elsewhere, but the formula is comparable to other constructions: "short of power" (2 Kgs 19:26 and Isa 37:27), "short of days" (Job 14:1), "short of spirit" (Prov 14:29).

31 The other usage in Proverbs (v 14:29: *q̄ ẓar-rāh* ="short of spirit") must mean something like "impatient," "impetuous."
to anger.\footnote{The face and in particular the nose being the seat of anger, according to Hebrew.} When one who is disposed along these lines inevitably does commit some act of folly he or she (in the eyes of Proverbs) has no recourse to well-worn explanations—"I was drunk with fury...driven mad with desire." The judgment is leveled at the folly of leaving passions unchecked. There is a temporal skew introduced by the juxtaposition of a characterological evaluation ("short tempered") and a punctiliar act ("he will do folly"), but the proper sapiential viewpoint understands that the latter is a symptom of the former and cannot be curtailed or \textit{trained} without self-control over the long run.

We can conceive of a \textit{Bildungsroman} around such a character who makes slow progress on the road to prudence and discretion, in thinking things through for their impact on the long run. And does not v 17b provide the ideal mentor, designed by constitution to curb such impetuousness: \textit{if} m/zimm\textit{m}ot — the man of calculations, deliberate in planning, discrete in execution? A perfect foil to the \textit{qar-appayim} until Proverbs reshuffles the deck sending us to look for the slightest trace of manuscript corruption: this man too (it does not say whether he is wise) is hated (\textit{yiss\textbar{\mathchar'26}n\textbar{\mathchar'26}}). The very possibility of such a reversal is what justifies the mandate to fear. Why should the sage fear instead of trusting? Because words are untrustworthy. The meaning of the world is something quite unstable. An infinitesimal difference may separate what is wise from what is hateful.

\textbf{Ethics and social esteem}

\begin{quote}
\textit{The naive inherit folly}
\begin{quote}
\textit{but the shrewd are crowned with knowledge.}
\end{quote}
\textit{The evil ones will bow down before the good ones,}
\begin{quote}
\textit{but the wicked ones are over the gates of the righteous.}
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

Verses 18-19 analyze the respective social standing of three familiar pairs: the gullible versus the shrewd, evil versus good, and the wicked versus the righteous. Trappings of respect, even respect befitting royalty, accrue to the shrewd who wear knowledge like a head-dress (18b) and to the good, to whom the evil-doers will inevitably submit in obeisance (19a). The \textit{p\textbar{\mathchar'26}t\textbar{\mathchar'26}yim} are in this context perhaps mocked. They too presume to become "heirs," but naturally their bequest (folly
 naïve/folly (18a) goodness/esteem (19a) clever/knowledge (18b) evil/subservience (19a)  

Figure 5.5: Prov 14:18-19—esteem accrues to the righteous

the upshot of which, of course, is the direct relationship posited between ethical comport and social standing.

The fourth sentence—"but the wicked ones are over the gates of the righteous"—once again undermines the coherence of what has just been stated, evoking the standard correlation between corruption and power (a connection we may suppose was felt in a particularly concrete manner "in the gate," i.e. the seat of a city's judiciary\footnote{On the gate as the designated place for the daily operations of the judges see Deut 16:18, 17:8. It is Amos who attends in particular to the gate as the fragile seat of justice, whose function is always under threat on account of bribery (cf. Amos 5:10-15). The author of the so-called "succession narrative" recounts the beginnings of Absalom's insurgency "at the side of the gate" (2 Sam 15:2). Zechariah imagines the gate as the site of divine redemption (Zech 8:16). In sum, the gate represents a dense node of power whose deployment is always a matter of great contestation.}). Of course our point is not that Proverbs as a whole is ignorant of power that is accrued by wickedness\footnote{Cf. Prov 14:31, 22:16, 28:8; especially relevant to the gate and the potential for unjust economic gain is 22:22: "Do not rob the poor because they are poor; and do not crush the afflicted at the gate (bšr)."} but to indicate the overt "demonstration"
that is being undertaken here—how it is impossible to say something and have its meaning stay still.

Class and the ethics of covert disdain

*Even by a neighbor are the poor hated.*

Verse 20a considers poverty and the social antipathy that results therefrom: "Even by his neighbor," i.e. the one charged with the highest responsibility for mutuality and well-being, "is a poor man hated." The proverb seemingly judges neither the poor man nor his neighbor, but, as B. Waltke aptly puts it, "lays bare a hard unvarnished truth." The subsequent three clauses seek to respond to this hard truth.

*Those who love a rich-man are many.*

The appearance of "love" (*ḥāḇ*) in this context radically qualifies the significance we ascribe to the previously mentioned hatred (*ḥāan*). For the *ḥāḇ* here points neither to the ideal of neighborly regard nor that of covenant loyalty but rather a calculated social positioning whose chief aim is the benefit of the lover. This implies a view of loving/hating removed from the sphere of actual, interpersonal feelings. They are rather obverses of an overall strategy aimed at securing the best social standing.

*The one who shows contempt to his neighbor is a sinner.*

This ethical judgment seems at odds with the original statement as to the universal scope of class antagonism. Suggestions for "fixing" this inconsistency in the text include textual emendation, but more commonly verse 21 is seen as a corrective

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35Waltke, Proverbs 1-15, 598.

36Their coherence is marked by a shared syntactical pattern, constructed on the template: (1) for the subject three participial *nomina agentis* — the ones who love, the one who shows disdain, the one who shows pity; (2) the object of the specified affect — the rich man, his neighbor, the needy; and (3) a predicative judgment, giving a specific value to the relationship that has been established — are numerous, is a sinner, blessed-is-he.

37B. Gemser, perceiving that 20a and 21a are incongruent, emends *lārēḇāhū* (his neighbor) to *lārēḇēb* (the hungry).
to potential misunderstandings arising from v 20. Along these lines MURPHY (1998, 106) demurs, "But should this truism in v 20 about human conduct be allowed to dictate attitudes toward others, especially the poor? The verdict in v 21 is quite unequivocal; an inner disposition, as well as its outer expression, of disdain is considered a sin." I read differently than Murphy on the basis of the very distinction that he foregrounds—inner disposition versus outer expression. I would say that this is precisely the axis of difference between v 20's "to hate" and v 21's "to show contempt for." Given the way that love has just been used—as a means to gain favor with the rich—it seems plausible that the contempt in question has no bearing on the question of "inner disposition" but refers only to "outer expression." This is in perfect accord with the semantic range of ḫuz, which, when followed by l- (as with our verse) means "to show contempt for," followed by a direct object, on the other hand, it means "to despise."

I suggest that this ambivalence is important to our understanding of these lines and moreover that only the second sense—not hatred per se but its brazen, outward expression—is being condemned in verse 21.

Is such a difference maintained in Proverbs? For the most part it is. The famous v 1:7, for example, reads

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

hoḵmāh āmūsār ḥwilm bāzū

Here, Murphy's definition of ḫuz surely applies—"an inner disposition and outer expression of disdain." Fools totally hate wisdom and discipline. Consider the quite different meaning of 11:12, which contains the exact same locution as our verse:

Who shows contempt to his neighbor (bī lḥw) lacks sense;
someone of understanding remains silent.

The basis of the ethical judgment in this case is explicitly disconnected from the issue of "inner disposition"; it is a question of decorum and the social harm that

--8WALTKE (2004, 599) reaches a similar conclusion: "[Verse 21] protects against misinterpreting v. 20 as a rationalization for shunning a poor neighbor. Indeed, the one who despises [see 1:7] his neighbor is a sinner." The usage of ḫuz he cites from 1:7 is not a good parallel, on which see immediately below.

--9HALUT (114) provides two definitions for ḫuz/bāz, whose usage is dictated by the presence or absence of a preposition marking the object: "1. with l to show contempt for someone . . . ;
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comes from outward disdain. The wise person is the one who hides his contempt behind a wall of silence.

Or, take the account in 6:30-31 where the difference between *buw l-* and the actual status of the person being judged is set forth in even more concrete terms.

They do not hold a thief in contempt who thieves

*lē-ḥāzū ḥaggannāb*

to fill his belly when he starves;

but when he is found he repays seven-fold;

all the wealth of his house he gives.

The extenuating circumstances of hunger qualify the civic opinion of the thief. The declaration of his sentence is conveyed with a measure of decency, which, nonetheless, has no bearing on his actual juridical status or the retribution that is exacted from him.

Thus there is no illogic in the sequence of verses. The “cold, unvarnished” truth of v 20a stands, in light of which a second determination is made. *Everyone—even his neighbor!*—*hates a poor man; nonetheless, the one who shows contempt for his neighbor is a sinner.* What is left to determine, then, is what to show the poor neighbor whom you hate.

*Who shows pity for the needy*

—*blessed is he!*

We can rather hastily complete our analysis of the passage as a whole, for *hnn*—the verbal root of 21b’s participial subject—carries the same lexical ambiguity as *buw*:

*to be gracious*, after all, is a posture one can practice in the presence of enemies.40

In a different context Proverbs in fact warns about the underside of graciousness.41

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40Hence the surprise of all carpetbaggers the first time they find they have been “killed with kindness.”

41In a looser but still relevant connection, Proverbs exhibits extreme antipathy towards flattery or “smooth speech” (*ḥlq*). A flattering tongue is the subject of general warning in the sentences (cf. 26:28; 28:23; 29:5) and specified in Prov 1-9 as what is most dangerous about the Strange-Woman (cf. 2:16; 5:3; 7:5, 21). This sense of *ḥlq* is a repeated motif of the *psalms* as well. For example, Psalm 5 condemns the enemies of righteousness, “There is no truth in his mouth, their core is...
When he acts graciously (yāhānnēn)\textsuperscript{42} in word, do not believe him; indeed, seven abominations are in his heart.

Verse 21b, too, does not reverse or undermine v 20a, which remains throughout this passage a difficult “fact of life,” which like many such things will elicit different responses from the wise and foolish. The coordinates of this passage, in other words, do not pit those who hate the poor against those who love them. Acknowledging the “social impoverishment of the poor,”\textsuperscript{43} it nonetheless posits an inverse relationship between blatant disrespect for the poor and the sages’ own social status, which the proverb goes on to connect with happiness.

These verses, like the preceding pairs 16-17 and 18-19, seek to drive a wedge between what is expressed and what is. The logical possibilities that are entertained in vv 20b-22 turn alike under the stifling Real of 20a (“the poor man is hated”), their permutations limited to the illusory realm of appearance.

\textsuperscript{42}Destruction, an open grave is their throat, by their tongue they flatter (yāhānnēn).’

\textsuperscript{43}WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 598.
Figure 5.6: Prov 14:20-21—the dominance of appearance over essence apropos of social status.

70 THE BALEFULNESS OF SPEECH

The negative rhetorical question of v 22a (ḥ̄ ṣ) marks a shift in the passage: from the liturgical demonstrations of “the unreliability of the signified” (vv 16-21), this series (vv 22-25) moves to take up the more abstract categories of evil and truth through the controlling opposition of word versus deed. Verses 22 and 25 constitute a frame for these verses, setting forth the positive value of truth (mt) over and against various representatives of its absence: error (th) and evil (r) in v 22; lies (kzbym) and treachery (mrkh) in v 25.
In light of the preceding verses (vv 16-21), we are likely to be suspicious about
the idea of truth in so far as it must be conveyed in such a shifty medium. Thus the
central proverb pair (vv 23-24) moves toward a different solution, suggesting that
if “true speech” is somewhat of an oxymoron, truth can nonetheless be produced in
toil (ṣb), measured in profit (mwr).

**Silence and the possibility of truth**

*Do no those who devise evil err?
Yet loyalty and truth are good in silence.*

The idea of going astray introduced by *ṭḥ* fits well with the previous examples
of metonymic *dérive* (vv 16-21), though immediately it is contextualized in the
altogether different frame of intentional deceit. Such “drift” is identified as the
*modus operandi* of the devisors of evil (ḥoršē rā). To incorporate the meaning
of intentionality, however, one need not abandon the previous topic—i.e. assume
that now we are simply talking about lying and need not account for difficulties
intrinsic to language. What is new in this verse is the idea that this signifierly
instability can be put to work in the service of evil plans. One doesn’t have to lie
but simply to use certain ambiguities offered by language.

The second colon of v 22 establishes the opposition between the discursiv-
cognitive dimension of scheming (ḥrš) and the intrinsic truth value of silence,
an idea which is developed in the subsequent verses (vv 23-24) along the lines of
“actions, not words!” This surprising overlay on the conventional pairing evil
versus *good* is effected by the clever deployment of the polysemic *ḥrš*. The “those
who devise good” are at the same time the “silent ones of goodness.” Thus, in a
highly refined articulation, the very indeterminacy of *ḥrš* pushes our determination
towards a particular meaning. In so far as speech is susceptible to the kind of
ambivalence it carries, the identification of goodness (ṭwb) with silence becomes
the more compelling reading.

44 This perfectly logical combination of semes is nonetheless somewhat strained, because of the
pronounced negative associations with *ḥrš* when it is used in the sense of “devise” or “plan.” Apart
from the current verse, the occurrences of *ḥrš* that signify “planning” (cf. Prov 3:29; 6:14, 18;
12:20) all refer to “scheming”, i.e. planning harm or evil.

45 On the syntax of the genitive *ḥoršē ṭūb* see above REF.
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The superiority of deeds over words

By every toil will come profit
but the stuff of speech—pure lack.

The initial opposition between toil (ṣb) and stuff of speech (db ṣptym) can be read as a kind of blue-collar anti-sophism. Talking gets you nowhere; it produces nothing, pure lack (k mḥswr). If in Proverbs the benefits of silence (i.e. ḥrs from v 22) are characteristically read in the direction of emotional restraint (See ¶ 69 on page 234) here it is mapped onto another of Proverbs' favorite virtues, that of hard work. The lack v 23 refers to must not be stripped of its material implications (i.e. poverty), but we do not err in supposing the sages also had in view the characterological lack we convey in the condemnation, "He's all talk."

The crown of the wise is their wealth
and the folly of fools is folly.

The opposition between "word and deed" is here stunningly returned to the categorical opposition wise versus foolish. The first clause of v 24 cuts through the "intellectual" benefits of wisdom (culture, a broader perspective, appropriate comportment, etc.) and identifies its value in the results it produces at the concrete level of wealth. Wisdom leads to something solid at the level of reality. In stark opposition to this, the second clause brings into view the idiocy of language reduced to its purest gesture: the tautological folly is...folly.46

True testimony

What delivers someone is true testimony
but a lying witness is treachery itself.

We return anew to the signifier truth (mt), now doubly wary that we will find its locus in speech. For (1) having experienced the signifier's slippery movements, (2) having just been instructed in the superiority of deeds over words, we start to look elsewhere, in non- or trans-symbolic zone. Verse 25 interrupts this particular line of flight. For here, not only is the cruciality of truth affirmed (in the balance is

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46 On the significance of tautology see HEGEL, Hegel's Science of Logic, 413-416 and ¶ 13 on
the deliverance (מָשִּים) or betrayal (מְרִיתֶה) of life, but its discursive dimension is stubbornly insisted upon. The field whereon truth opposes deceit is testimony (ד, יָפָה).

The problem we are left with is how to connect two apparently contradictory affirmations: on one hand, the insistence upon truth and all of its discursive resonances (i.e. the epitome of truth is true testimony) as that which delivers life from ubiquitous deceit; and, on the other hand, the view that words don’t do much. We might expect a kind of metaphorization of speaking: “actions speak louder than words” or the valorization of a sage who “testified with his deeds.” That the text at hand does not take these available options marks, perhaps, the emergence of the sages’ most crucial insight; or, at the very least, it shows the point at which they resisted the relaxation into any ideology that could not answer the obvious objection: “The meaning of actions and deeds is just as susceptible to instability of the signifying chain.” Here sapiential desire—the form of which we have said was the metonymic connection of $S_1$ and $S_2$—becomes the unavoidable truth of Wisdom, that which bears no “solution” in sense of positive overcoming. Rather, what is startlingly disclosed in vv 26-27 is a shift in perspectives, whereby what had heretofore been treated as an obstacle to Wisdom was, all along, Wisdom itself.

71 Your fear is your trust

_In the fear-of YHWH is an unshakeable trust
and for his children it will be a refuge._

_The fear-of YHWH is the source of life,
for turning from the snares of death._

Recall v 16’s opening proposition: to be wise is to be afraid; to be foolish is to trust. This is the background against which we must read the paradoxical conclusion to this passage, which short-circuits the entire thematic that has been developed to this point with the declaration “to be afraid is to trust.” This, it will have been noticed, is exactly the opposite rhetorical gesture as we found in v 24’s tautological “folly is . . . folly.” Here we find ourselves facing the obverse of Hegel’s analysis of absolute identity ($\lambda = \lambda$ as the form of pure contradiction), which is the reflective identity of page 60.
identity and non-identity. *The true basis of trust lies in the identity of fear and trust.* How do we connect such a nugatory formulation with a more comprehensive theorization of the relationship between Wisdom and the fear-of YHWH?

We can approach this via a question closer to the text: What distinguishes the signifier by which the son can finally trust? It is *not* in its substance as the richest possible signifier, the one that captures the proper cognitive and affective dimensions of Wisdom.47 Rather, we must understand its “meaning” on a different level from the other signifiers, if for no other reason than *all the others have failed to represent wisdom.*

How is it that the fear-of YHWH too does not fail to slide away from its intended meaning? Precisely in that it stands for the failure of all the others in the first place. This is the paradox of the “mastery” exhibited by the Lacanian $S_1$:

This “reflective” signifier “totalizes” the battery of “all the others”—makes a totality of “all the others”: we could say that all signifiers represent the subject [i.e. Wisdom ] for the signifier which in advance represents for them their own ultimate failure and is precisely as such—as the representation of the failure of representation—“closer” to the subject than all the others...[the Master Signifier] is not a positive, substantial entity persisting outside the series of its representations: it coincides with its own impossibility; it “is” nothing but the void opened up by the failure of its representations.48

Only as such, insofar as its contribution to the signifying set must be counted as a $(-1)$, stripped of residual meanings that no doubt belong to its history, *faded* as we said at the outset—only at this level does the fear-of YHWH become the indestructible point of reference whereby fool and sage are once and for all separated.

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47 These categories are taken directly from Waltke. “Fear of the Lord involves both rational and non-rational aspects at the same time. Its rational aspect entails an objective revelation that can be taught and memorized... [The fear of the Lord] is a co-referential term to ‘law,’ ‘statutes,’ ‘commands,’ and ‘ordinances’ of the Lord...[it] refers to a standard of moral conduct known and accepted by men in general...[The fear of the Lord] also entails a nonrational aspect, an emotional response of fear, love, and trust.” Waltke, Proverbs 1-15, 100-101. M. Fox sets the same emotive/cognitive binary into a developmental scheme. “[The understanding of the fear of the Lord] consists in a mature insight into what it means to fear God. At a certain level of development, one can *understand* (and not just feel) the fear of God, for it has cognitive content or ‘subject matter.’” Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 110.

48 Žižek, For They Know Not What They Do, 25.
One should not neglect the reverse direction of this punctiliar designation/constitution, the fact that the structure only emerges as an *après coup* effect of one of its elements. In this paradoxical "retroversion effect" we can pinpoint what we have called the "poetics of making transcendent." One element, encountered amidst a sequence of *all the others*, an element whose meaning is entirely immanent to its enunciation, is perceived as a fixed transcendent point beyond the play of difference.

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**Prov 10:22-27: Text and Translation**

*birkat yhwh hē ta-āšār* 22a The blessing of YHWH, it enriches,

*wālā-āvyi ēṣeb īmmāh* 22b and toil does not add to it.51

*kīshāq* 23a As a pleasure,

*likstī ʾāsāt zimmāh* 23b to devise schemes belongs to a fool,

*wēḥokmāh lēʾēs tēbānāh* 23c but wisdom to one who understands.

*mēgōrat rāṣāh hē tēbōvennā* 24a The terror of the wicked will overtake them,

*wēta-āwāt ʿaddāqm yittēn* 24b but the desire of the righteous is given.52

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49u A retroversion effect (*effet de rétroversion*) by which the subject, at each stopping point, becomes what he was to be from before, and it is only announced; he will have been (il aura été) in the future perfect." Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966, Le Champ freudien, 808.

50 I follow a number of translations that render "toil" the subject of this line. The JPS, for example, translates, "It is the blessing of the LORD that enriches, And no toil can increase it." This is contrary to those versions that take YHWH to be the antecedent subject of ʾāvyi. (So, for example, the N/RSV translation: "The blessing of the LORD makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it." See also TOY (1899) and WALKE (2004).) The problem is that YHWH is not the subject of 22a; rather "blessing" is. Were blessing to govern 22b as the implicit subject, we would expect the feminine form of the verb ʾāṣir, as with the parallel construction in v. 27: ʾirāt yhwh ʾā-sip. Others, noting this discrepancy, have read ʾāvyi as an impersonal/passive construction (so MCKANE (1970): "and there is no increase of vexation with it"), though Proverbs elsewhere conveys the passive meaning of ʾāvēp with the nihpal stem (cf. 11:24: "there is one who spends freely, and still more is added ʾāvēp"). A third option, which disregards the MT's pointing, would be to read ʾēṣeb or ʾāṣāb in place of the extant ʾĀṣeb: "and an idol adds nothing to it." Counting against this last suggestion are the other uses of ʾēṣeb in Proverbs, which refer to the semantic field of *work*.

51 On the "comparative" use of īmm see WILLIAMS (1976, 57), who cites Ps 28:1 and Job 9:26 as further examples.

52 On the passive impersonal form see IBHS, §4.4.2. Some want to preserve divine agency,
5. The Poetics of Totality

ka'abîr sâpâh wâ'en râšâ: 25a When the storm passes, then there is no wicked one,
wâ'saddîq yâ'sôd ôtâlm 25b but the righteous one is established endlessly.
ka'hômes lašînnayîm 26a Like vinegar to the teeth,
wâ'ke'âšân lâ'ênâyîm 26b and like smoke to the eyes,
kên heâ'âel l'sâhîhâyw 26c so is a slacker to the one who sends him.
yîrât yîhw tâstîp yâmêm 27a The fear-of Yîhw increases days,
adînôt r'éshâm tiqsonâh 27b but the years of the wicked are short.

73 THE UNITY AND LOGIC OF PROV 10:22-27

I follow here the proposal of R. Scoralick, in understanding “the blessing of YHWH” in v 22 and “fear-of YHWH” in v 27 as framing elements for the intervening verses. The coherence of the passage as a whole is further supported by the following:

1. The paranomasia of yâsîp (v 22), sâpâh (v 25), and tâstîp (v 27)53 links the framing elements to the central proverb pair (vv 24-25).

2. The distribution of negative and positive sentences is exceptional with respect to proverbial sentences as a whole, specifically the fact that the four intervening verses begin with the negative element of the “antithesis.”54

3. The previous and following “clusters” are distinctly framed by robust inclusios:
10:13-21 by the paired elements šph (vv 13a, 21a) and hsr-lb (vv 13b, 21b);
10:28-11:7 by tw'hîl, tw'hû, and tb'd (v 28), each repeated in 11:7.55


53Darüber hinaus gibt es die Reihe der Lautanklänge in V 22 ywsp, V 25 swph, V 27 twsp.

SCORALICK, 179.

54On the statistical peculiarity of this structure see SCORALICK, 179.

55Prov 10:29a presents a difficulty of interpretation as to the grammatical status of YHWH. Is it the subject, or is it the genitive term of a construct chain? The two options are reflected respectively in the RSV (“The LORD is a stronghold to him whose way is upright”) and the NRSV (“The way of the LORD is a stronghold for the upright”). The former is preferable for the following reasons. (1) With respect to the wisdom corpus, the locution “upright of way” is relatively standard (see Prov 11:20; 13:6; Job 4:6; 22:3; note also Proverb’s frequent references to those who “walk in integrity”):
Moving beyond Scoralick's strict concern to properly *delimit* the sub-collections of Prov 10:15, we analyze vv 22-27 according to the following chiastic structure:

A  the-blessing-of Yhwh
B  the fool and the one who understands
C  the righteous and the wicked: terror and desire
C' the righteous and the wicked: suddenness and permanence
B' the slacker and his employer
C' the fear of Yhwh

Figure 5.7: Prov 10:22-27—a chiastic structure.

The Yhwh construct chains in vv 22 and 27 constitute the outside frame of this sub-collection. The symmetry between vv 23 and 26 is less semantic than syntactic. Both begin with a κοπ. prepositional phrase, and both are structured as triadic interruptions to the prevailing bilinear pattern, each verse containing an excessive use of the phrase “the way of Yhwh” used as a predicate of “way” (derek). It is of course possible to speak, metaphorically, of a “way” as a “stronghold,” so Toy's conclusion that "a stronghold is a strange predicate of 'way'" (TOY, 1899, 217) has struck subsequent commentators as arbitrary. For example WALTKE (2004, 468) comments, "The predicating of 'stronghold' to 'way' ... is no more strange than predicating 'a strong refuge' to 'the fear of the Lord' (14:16)." If "strange" is taken as a statistical rather than evaluative statement, however, then Toy's point is certainly valid. Waltke's counter-example is further disingenuous in that "a strong refuge" is not predicated of "the fear of the Lord" in 14:16. The verse reads, "In the fear of Yhwh (b'yirat yhwh) is a strong security." While a certain solution is not likely here, the construction is distinct from the Yhwh construct chains of vv 22a, 27a and therefore not considered in my analysis of them.

Scoralick, by the design of her study, does not undertake sustained analysis of the sub-collections she marks out beyond what is required to establish their distinctness and coherence.

The polarized characters inhabiting these verses—the fool/the-one who understands (v 23) and the slacker/the-one who sent him (v 26)—become semantically parallel insofar as they are both mapped onto the central quatrains's binary of righteous/wicked. The opposing pairs relate to each other through the mediation of this central binary which bestows on them their values.
or out-of-joint “third.” Verse 23 works by distributing the idea of “pleasure” or “laughter” (sḥōq) across an already completed parallel, i.e. the contrast between a scheming, malevolent intelligence (ašōt zimmāh) and authentic wisdom (ḥokmāh). To underscore the formal aspect, we might translate “To hatch plots belongs to a fool (as a pleasure); but wisdom belongs to a man of understanding (as a pleasure).”

Verse 26, similarly, consists of a third leg that interrupts the clean succession of bicola in vv 24-25. Here, the relation being considered (that between a “slacker” [āšēl] and his employer, “the one who sent him” [āšēl ḥāy]) is established with reference to the Imaginary analogies of vinegar on teeth (v 26a) and smoke in the eyes (v 26b). The parallel in other words, is constituted by three cola and not the usual two. Finally, the central pair vv 24 and 25 are twinned meditations on the wicked and the righteous, differentiating those who bear these traits on the basis of subjective pathos and objective permanence.

Overlaying this extended chiasm is a thicket of connections between three clauses: 22a, 24a, and 27a. These linkages can best be seen by simply lining up the verse halves in strict word order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>function</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>predicate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>construct</td>
<td>absolute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22a</td>
<td>brkt</td>
<td>yhwh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the-blessing</td>
<td>(of) Yhwh</td>
<td>it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24a</td>
<td>mgwrt</td>
<td>rš‘</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the-terror</td>
<td>(of) the-wicked</td>
<td>it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27a</td>
<td>yrt</td>
<td>yhwh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the-fear</td>
<td>(of) Yhwh</td>
<td>increases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.8: Prov 10:22-27—syntactical and semantic linkages.

The assumption of the Symbolically constituted relationship between employer/worker to the intensely phenomenological evocations of physical discomfort illustrates the logic of Lacan’s Imaginary register with extreme clarity.
In each case the subject is a two word construct chain. Verses 22a and 24a share the emphatic resumptive pronoun hē. Verse 27a echoes 22a not only in the repetition of Yhwh but further by the repeated sense of “causation”⁶⁹ and “increase.”⁷⁰ Finally, 24a and 27a share the sense of “fear,” carried by mēgarāh and yērāh.

The effect of this layered structure is to draw our attention to a logical argument that unfolds in the three subjects of the clauses (22a, 24a, and 27a), which receive their significations in large part from the elementary pedagogical structure of which they are a part. In terms with which we are now familiar, the logical argument consists of a yet to be determined syntagmatic function that moves along the progression blessing—terror—fear. To grasp the argument's meaning, we have the remainder of the sentences—the direct parallels (22b, 24b, 25, and 27b) as well as the more indirect statements of 23 and 26—which, in paradigmatic fashion, determine our understanding of its three principle terms. These sentences, therefore, do not interrupt the sequential logic of the argument even though they shape it. To give an example, 22b (“and vexation does not add to it”) bears specifically on our reading of 22a (“the blessing of Yhwh, it enriches”) but does not tell us about the syntagmatic movement from “blessing” to “terror.”

What is the problem for which this logical argument poses a solution? It is one we are likely inured to, given our propensity to read the fear-of Yhwh a priori as a posture of religious reverence.⁶¹ It goes like this: given that Yhwh is the source of blessing, that those wise who live in accordance with this principle will be enriched, and given the corollary to this, that foolish/wicked people are under the constant threat of annihilation, for, as v 24a tells us, what terrifies them most “will come upon them,” given all these things, how is it that the fear-of Yhwh, which would be a logical response to the latter, i.e. the dire situation of being in antagonistic opposition to Yhwh, belongs instead to the wise and understanding, who would seem to be justified in having great confidence in Yhwh? In other words, while the first two statements—the one that associates Yhwh with blessing and enrichment

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⁶⁹Indicated in both cases by the hiphil stem.

⁷⁰yēp (27a), having the general meaning of “to add,” hearkens back to ār (22a)—“to add wealth, to become rich.” The identification is strengthened by the initial determination of tēgr in opposition to l yēp.

⁷¹See CLINES, 62-64 and on pages 215-228.
and the other that associates wickedness with terror and catastrophe—form a kind of recto-verso of each other, the third disrupts this logic by establishing the fear-of Yhwh as proper to the righteous, or at least as opposed to the wicked. To put it crudely: How does the text differentiate mgwrh (v 24) and yrh (v 27), which are, lexically speaking, so closely related? We will arrive at an answer by taking up the elements of the argument in turn and along with their paradigmatic relations.

74 The blessing of Yhwh

The blessing of Yhwh, it enriches
and vexation does not add to it.

We may best approach the notion of blessing through v 22’s explicit antithesis between blessing (bərakah) and anxious-toil (ešeb). Here a familiar theme of Proverbs (frequently found in the Psalms as well) is sounded. The efficacy of wisdom or righteousness or, here, “blessing” is marked by a lack of striving: those who heed Wisdom’s call “dwell in trust” and “rest from dread” (1:33); “all the paths of Wisdom are peace” (3:17); or, a later instantiation of the same tradition: “Take my yoke upon you ... for it is easy, and my burden is light” (Mat 11:29-30). The “blessing of Yhwh” refers to the imperturbable if at times imperceptible motion of the universe in accordance with the law of justice (cf. 26:27), a tectonic inertia

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62 After presenting a chart that surveys the semantic field of words for “fear,” including gur, Cline concludes his attempt to determine the meaning of yr: from this field as follows, “the yr- word group belongs to a wider group of words for ‘fear’ which behave very similarly. I find no evidence for distinguishing among these terms.” Cline, 69.

63 Pss 127:2 is the locus classicus for the thematization of anxious-toil: “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious-toil (leḥem hā-šēbēm) ; for Yhwh gives to his beloved sleep.”

64 This particular semantic combination—blessing and ease, the easy procurement of blessing—becomes, ironically, an exceedingly burdensome ideal to uphold. Apropos my own university context, I mention a report released in 2003 by Duke University’s Women’s Initiative, which described the frustrations of undergraduate women who sought to conform themselves to the impossible standard of “effortless perfection.” Women perceived the expectation that they would be “smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful, and popular,” but, and here’s the rub, “all this would happen without visible effort.” Liana Wyler, “Variations on ‘Effortless Perfection’”. The Chronicle December 12 2003.

65 On the connection between blessing and creation see Claus Westermann, Blessing in the
that sharply relativizes the impact of human contrivance.66

The Hebrew 'eseb accordingly signifies the frenetic movement that, whether it
works to secure or undermine67 the "blessing," is from the point of view of efficacy
strictly irrelevant. Prov 5:10—"Lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and
your toil go to the house of a stranger"—is a perfect narrative complement to what
'eseb connotes here: a man works doggedly for years only to have his strength and
toil alienated from him, appropriated by an outsider to his community.68 We have
here a face of foolishness that appears, and no doubt is subjectively experienced,
as the polar opposite to laziness (to the 'āšēl, for example, in v 26) but which, in the
end, proves to be just as futile. The blessing-of-YHWH alone, therefore, enriches,
and toil can add nothing to it.

75 THE TERROR OF THE WICKED

The terror of the wicked will overtake them
but the desire of the righteous is given.

When the storm passes, then there is no wicked one,
but the righteous one is established forever.

To ascend to our second principle term, terror, we must travel through a layer of
paradigmatic relations, though the way the text works is relatively straightforward.
As we pointed out above in our development of a semiotics of parallelism, we are
not being taught that wickedness opposes righteousness (vv 24-25)—similarly, a
fool one who understands in v 23 and a slacker his employer in v 26; all axioms we

Klaus Koch's distinction between "retribution belief" (ein Vergeltungsdogma) and the "deed-con-
sequence-nexus" (Tun–Ergehen–Zusammenhang). KOCH.
66Proverbs is not univocal on the inefficacy of human actions. See, for example 11:11. "By the
blessing of the upright is a city exalted, but by wicked mouths it is overthrown.
67Ironically in the context of the present verse, the HB's not infrequently negative attitude
about wisdom is couched as "the futility of human scheming.". See JAMES CREESE, "Wisdom
Influence upon 'Historical' Literature". In Urgent Advice and Probing Questions Macon, Ga.: Mercer
University Press, 1995c, 317.
68The other obvious illustration here is childbirth; the woman toils, labors, to produce what is
subsequently alienated from her. The connection is made lexically explicit in that Gen 3:17 uses
the same root (ʾissēbôn) to denote the painful labor with which women are cursed.
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have presumably learned—but it is rather this established value that orients us to the semiotic field of terror, the subject of the central quatrain in vv 24-25. The difference between the wicked and the righteous that the cluster takes as axiomatic bestows an oppositional order onto two signifying axes:

- terror versus desire (v 24), and
- storm versus eternity (v 25).

These terms construct the subject terror according to the following semiotic field,

![Semiotic Field Diagram]

Figure 5.9: Prov 10:24-25—the temporality of terror and desire.

which we can put in the form of a proto-narrative. When the storm passes (1) righteous desire will be granted, stilled by an eternal solidity; (2) terror will come upon the wicked and they will vanish. “Terror” and “desire” will, therefore, both disappear at the moment of their fulfillment, both will be banished in the fullness of time, at the eruption of the storm. When? For the wicked, terror comes and goes at “the passing of a storm” (v 25a): a sudden irruption of violence whereby terror is dissolved into the immanent suffering of retribution, into death itself. For the righteous, the satiation of desire comes with the establishment of eternity (wilm), not the infinity of Christian heaven, but the constitution of a durable totality no longer susceptible to incursions of disorder, society on earth organized as the Kingdom of God.
Insofar as they both disappear when realized, however, both terror and desire immediately turn into registers for their opposing values. That is, insofar as the desire of the righteous persists, eternity has not yet been established and the righteous remain susceptible to the winds of time. It is thus not simply a lexical contingency that desire is just as frequently understood as a force opposed to righteousness in Proverbs (e.g., 18:1; 21:26; cf. 3:15). Righteous desire, in other words, turns so easily into something which the righteous cannot but experience as, well, the terror of wickedness. Desire is essentially ambivalent in Proverbs, even in moments such as this where it appears so sure of its righteousness. An eternal foundation promises to fulfill righteous desire which directly implies that any persistent desire, any disruption of the durable society becomes an index for some amount of wickedness that must be rooted out insofar as it calls the promised foundation into question. Is this simply what Proverbs, in the final verse of the cluster, calls the fear of YHWH? Is v 27 a basic case of an ideological sleight-of-hand whereby the sage realizes there is some terror proper to the righteous which cannot, phenomenologically speaking, be distinguished from the terror proper to the wicked and so he simply names it something else, calls it the fear of YHWH, and imagines the ambiguity is resolved?

The ambivalence of desire and terror extends to other oppositions as well. The cluster's initial subject, we said above, establishes the meaning of the blessing of YHWH by juxtaposing it to anxious-toil (ēseb). But the valence then associated with these riches is drawn, by a signifying force that is as inevitable as it surely is unintentional, into the semantic field of v 26's slacker (or v 5's harvest-sleeper discussed above). And how would any attempt to avoid this slide not find itself laboring after the blessing of God (which, as 14:23 suggests, never fails to profit)?\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{69}To supply some negative "proof" to what may strike readers as a kind of interpretive violence (or foolish scheming apropos v 23), we need only cite some of the comments made by scholars apropos v 22, which strike me as symptomatic, as so many attempts to stop the inevitable slide of meaning by insisting on the existence of the big Other fully supported by a potent Master. Waltke writes, "The next quatrain pertaining to the righteous versus the wicked (vv. 24-25) ... and the frame featuring the sluggard (v. 26) protect the proverb [v 22] against the misinterpretation that the Lord's blessing of true wealth happens apart from diligent work ... Righteous diligence is the means of God's blessing, but his blessing does not depend on hard, strenuous labor alone" (WALKE, 2004, 473, emphasis added). But 10:22 in no way implies the "alone" Waltke supplies to arrive at the opposite of what line B states directly: Toil does not add anything to blessing. Ironically,

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76 The fear of Yhwh

The fear-of Yhwh increases days
but the years of the wicked are short.

How then does the text fix these signifiers which tend so easily toward an opposing value—terror to the side of righteousness, desire to that of wickedness—and which bring in their wake the other oppositions produced by the cluster—riches slide toward laziness, toil toward blessing? It does so with respect to the fear-of Yhwh’s relationship to time; or, we should rather say, with respect to the distinctive way terror and desire escape the vicissitudes of historical time.

What does it mean to say that “the fear-of Yhwh increases days, but the years of the wicked are short”? To the majority of scholars, the verse’s meaning requires no explanation; interpretative efforts, for the most part, circle around second order questions of application or implication.

- “Long life is one of the blessings of revering Yahweh. Impiety diminishes life and brings about a premature end.”

- “Everything being equal, living in a way that conforms to God’s will results in a longer life . . . Though not specified by the proverb, it is also possible that Yahweh himself will cut short the days of the wicked, either through human means or by direct intervention. The purpose of this proverb is to motivate people toward fear of Yahweh.”

- “As is usual with proverbs, this saying needs to be qualified, for the life of the righteous is sometimes cut short . . . The problem’s ultimate resolution requires a developed view of life after death.”

- “To someone who ‘fears the Lord’ [v 27] promises long life, while the wicked

Waltke’s own analysis suggests that the B line rules out any final determination concerning the righteousness or wickedness of one (labor) or the other (riches) by eliminating the possibility of any relationship, of any direct communication between Yhwh and human laborers; v 22b, he writes, “rules out synergism” (Waltke, 2004, 473). Longman (2006, 240) writes, v 22 “is an aspect of the truth, not the whole truth. All things being equal, those who are blessed by God, presumably associated with wisdom, will be rich. After all, the wise are hard workers, not lazy.” Thereby he too has concisely stated the opposite of v 22’s pedagogical lesson.

is threatened with an untimely death.\textsuperscript{73}

- “long life, a supreme blessing when there is no hope beyond the grave, is the reward of piety.”\textsuperscript{74}

- “The indefinite predicate of the [fear of the Lord], \textit{adds days}, is specified as eternal in v. 30, and of the [wicked], \textit{years are short}, is equivalent to ‘is no more’ in v. 25.”\textsuperscript{75}

Verse 27 appears relatively straightforward. To be sure, it contains a series of oppositions that, on their own, present little interpretive difficulty: fear of YHWH versus wickedness; day versus year; increase versus decrease. However, as they are combined in this verse, and as this verse punctuates the larger cluster we have delimited, they present a more complex picture than such a remarkable consensus admits. Before attending to its implications, we can summarize the essence of our intervention as follows. First, we agree that the fear of YHWH is in a certain sense a substitute for “the righteous” in v 27. However, there is a certain disjunction among the categorial terms, suggesting the righteous is not only metaphorically replaced but also gapped, leaving a certain remainder of meaning to be accounted for.

First let’s establish what we mean by a disjunction among v 27’s “categorial terms.” Verse 27 forges oppositions between semes that would normally be grouped together in their opposition to other semes with which they are joined. For example, “years” is opposed to “days” (which strikes us as thoroughly conventional) but in this dyad it is years that represents truncated existence, an interruption—\textit{qsr} (which is counterintuitive). Obversely, days represents prolongation (\textit{yts}) in opposition to years.\textsuperscript{76}


\textsuperscript{74} Toyi, 216.

\textsuperscript{75} Waltke, Proverbs 1-15, 477.

\textsuperscript{76} The peculiar grouping of shortness/years versus length/days is obscured by most English translations that very loosely render \textit{tōṣp yāmîm} as “...prolongs life.” Cf. NASB, RSV and NRSV, JPS and NIV.
However, the true disjunction is evident only when we read this verse as the cluster’s concluding moment, i.e. that which resolves or, better, *sublates* the opposition between blessing and terror. “The terror of the wicked” is a subject we have learned much about in the central lines of the cluster so it is certainly not an innocent choice to oppose “fear” in 27a to the “wicked” in 27b (even if most commentators hardly pause before displacing any associations the fear-of Yahweh may have with terror by simply making it a substitute for “the righteous”). In other words, there is no comment on the paradoxical contradiction that is established in the course of vv 24-27 between terror and fear.
Figure 5.11: Prov 10:27—terror situated as the logical contradiction to fear.

Finally, time, which has provided a possible foundation on which the righteous and the wicked could be opposed, again presents itself as the point of reference in this verse. We are not surprised to find “fear” coupled with “days” (as opposed to “years”), but we are surprised that this axis is opposed to “wicked” (having just learned about the terror of the wicked) and “shortness” (days being shorter than years). And conversely, we are not surprised to find the “wicked” associated with “shortness” (because the wicked disappear at the sudden storm) but are surprised to learn that this axis is opposed to “fear” (terror being the accompaniment of shortness).

If we take the fear-of YHWH as a substitute for the righteous in v 27, its terms become roughly equivalent to those in v 25. The fear-of YHWH increases the righteous sage’s days (into an eternal foundation) but cuts short the years of the wicked (so that they are no more). The fear-of YHWH is that by which the storm can be experienced as insignificant to the eternal foundation of the righteous (it is perfectly understandable as, for example, mwr or twkh; cf. 16:4) but a sudden and ultimately destructive terror for the wicked (the wicked, from the perspective of the righteous, have no way to understand the storm\textsuperscript{77}).

\textsuperscript{77}See, for example, verse 29, “YHWH is a stronghold for the one whose way is upright, but a ruin
This sudden and destructive storm that terrorizes the wicked is then assimilated to a series of texts in which the duration of the wicked is truncated by a sudden burst of divine violence in Proverbs. Proverbs characteristically signifies the moment of the terror of the wicked (v 24), the moment the storm renders him no more (v 25), with pitōm. For example, the sage is taught

- to fear YhvH whose disaster (̂ed) comes suddenly (pitōm) (Prov 24:22);
- to guard himself against the Strange-Woman after whom the naïve lad suddenly (pitōm) follows “like an ox to the slaughter” (7:22);
- that disaster (̂ed) strikes the evil one, the scoundrel, suddenly (pitōm) so that in a moment (petav) he is broken “beyond repair” (6:15);
- and, finally, Proverbs’ student is commanded not to fear “sudden terror (mippahad pitōm) or the disaster that strikes the wicked” (3:25).

As natural as it seems to interpreters familiar with Proverbs, this reading of v 27 takes days and years as an interchangeable word pair signifying duration and overlooks or dismisses the odd sense in which days signify durational length and years, shortness. Furthermore, the odd morphological shift in the verse’s verbs is also passed over without comment. Translations can be divided into one of two camps, both of which obscure the asymmetry of the Hebrew (“the fear-of YhvH increases days, but the years of the wicked are short”). Scholars either supply a sense of causality to the second verb (“the years of the wicked are shortened”), taking the fear-of YhvH as the agent behind the passive construction (which is itself an oddity never elaborated; how does fear shorten years? whose fear?), or they remove the causality from the first verb and replace the abstract noun (the fear-of YhvH) with a nomen agentis (one who fears YhvH): “The God-fearer has long days, but the wicked have short years.”

Perhaps simply slips, these two oddities in v 27—the morphological shift and the reversed word pair—invite us, continuing the comparison with v 25 above, to treat the fear-of YhvH as a substitute for the storm (and not the righteous), with

for the evildoers.” In fact, the following cluster (10:28-11:7) could be read as a series of reflections on why Proverbs (at least in part) grounds its distinction between the righteous and the wicked on its expectation of their durability.
a gapped (and not displaced) line about the righteous. Thus the verse would be a tri-cola such as this,

The fear-of YHWH increases days,
[the days of the righteous are long]
the years of the wicked are short.

There is a logical priority given to the first clause. The fear-of YHWH is not simply at the same level as righteousness here, it forms the (a)temporal background that allows righteousness and wickedness to be historically experienced as such.

The experience of the storm, nearly all commentators find occasion to say, is suffered by both the righteous and the wicked as an interruption in their experience of the present as a moment on a continuum. This point is crucial because by it Proverbs argues that the phenomenological experience of the storm is the same for both the righteous and the wicked. For both the experience is one wherein the moment is rent from the Symbolic matrix of meaning and history, achieving thereby an (awful) autonomy from it. Once abstracted out-of-time, however, this moment is defined in two opposing senses. It is the pitōm of the wicked on the one hand, and the 'olām of the righteous on the other. This division of the moment of the storm occurs only at a conceptual level, a level beyond historical experience, a level identified as the fear-of YHWH by v 27.

In this reading of v 27 (not the metaphorical substitutive reading) we learn that the fear-of YHWH gives to the phenomenal experience of days and years their truth by signifying what is exceptional to them. The fear-of YHWH is an ahistorical concept that, as such, adds nothing to a day and subtracts nothing from a year, but with it, the sage understands that days and years are never complete on their own, that they require the fear-of YHWH to be truly understood. That is, the fear-of YHWH is here the deeper truth of historical experience, the atemporal point which must exist for temporal experience to be understood and which is, therefore, not an object of experience itself.

The fear-of YHWH must therefore be understood in both of these two senses, both as that atemporal moment that reorganizes the experience of history as one of righteousness and wickedness and the historical experience of righteousness and wickedness. The fear-of YHWH is that which provides the ever elusive, squirming experience of the present its form in a doubled present out of time, in the pitō-
5. The Poetics of Totality

...of the righteous or the 'ālām of the wicked. The righteous are, of course, the God-fearers, and thus the ahistorical concept is dragged back into historical experience in a way that the metaphorical reading of the passage accounts for. By an entirely self-referential circuit—the fear of Yhwh is the atemporal cause of historical experience's division into two modes of temporality one of which is the distinction between fear (of Yhwh) and terror—this cluster receives its closure and meaning. Fear does not equal terror because fear grants the violent experience of the storm a meaning by doubling it into a representative of either 'ālām or pitōm, the latter of which it associates with terror and the wicked. Fear thus adopts a "meta-function" at the level of signification that prevents it from being compared with terror. For the sage, fear and terror are fundamentally different, incomparable really, because it is only by fear that terror's meaning becomes comprehensible. 77

77 Empiricism revisited

I want to return now to the issue of empiricism, an engagement we have suspended over the course of our exegesis. We had noted a variety of opinions as to the proper unit of significance in Proverbs ( ¶ 59 on page 212) and in particular the fundamental disagreements of our own analytic strategy with those approaches that suppose the "autonomous individual proverb," "with no overarching arrangement," whose meaning refers to "its life situation." This approach, which I am going to call empirical, has been strongly influenced by the work of Claus Westermann 78 and elaborated by his student Friedemann Golka 80. By "empirical" I refer to the way the ideal object of interpretation is constructed as original and discrete. On this particular axis, the distinction between anthropological and literary approaches dissolves. Qua empirical, Golka's investigation into the life setting of a single proverb (authorized with

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77 This recalls similar oppositions from Woman-Wisdom's first speech. See the discussion ¶ 39 on page 152.
80 See FRIEDEMANN GOLKA, "Die Königs- und Hofsprache und der Ursprung der israelitischen Weisheit". Vetus Testamentum, 36 1986 No. 1; and in English FRIEDEMANN GOLKA, The Leopard's
reference to the methods of anthropology and analogies with African tribal society) and, for example, Waltke’s elaboration of various literary units and sub-units (authorized with reference to the broader field of Hebrew poetics) are alike. That one object is literary (and so necessarily carries associations with an intellectual elite) and the other oral (and so can be understood as a product of “ordinary people who have made a contribution to the Hebrew Bible”) has no significance vis-à-vis empiricism even while it animates the polemics around the question of Proverbs’ class affiliation. And this issue of class, it turns out, will be the best access point by which to register our difference from and critique of Golka but more fundamentally the operations of empiricism that undergird his work.

Regarding the question of Proverbs’ social milieu—the class affiliation of the sages and their students—Golka assumes that the current consensus view has been overrun by the class interests of modern scholars. In short, academics have continually lionized the abstract world of intellectual professionalism or the elite world of bureaucratic management, at the same time repressing the genius of the Volk. It is these prejudices and not the evidence that has distorted our reading Proverbs in readily identifiable ways: the assumption that either schools or the court constituted the proper context of wisdom’s transmission, the supposition of an elite circle of professional sages, all at the expense of uncovering a vibrant popular wisdom.

Golka’s criticisms of von Rad and Hermisson can be made to stand for his analysis of wisdom scholarship as a whole.

Although von Rad admits that the majority of the proverbs has nothing to do with the Court, his bourgeois prejudice forces him to attribute them in that case to the upper classes of the bourgeoise and the gentlemen farmers (p. 30f.) That way he can still consider them education, and not popular wisdom.92

And then even more acerbically against Hermisson, who supposed a school setting for the whole of Proverbs:

There is . . . no evidence for the derivation of Wisdom from Israel’s schools which Hermisson claims, because it is based on two presuppositions which are in turn unproven. The origin of proverbs among ordinary people is still more likely. Hermisson’s investigations seem to me to be hindered by a bourgeois–elitist concept

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91GOLKA, The Leopard’s Spots, 22. 92GOLKA, The Leopard’s Spots, 12.
of education. He has to deny the existence of any folk wisdom, so that it can instead be attributed to the creative individual personality. The origin of this way of thinking in 19th century German idealism is self-evident.\(^{83}\)

To be sure, Golka caricatures the work of these scholars—Hermisson does not deny the existence of pre-literary folk wisdom; nor can von Rad be made to say that wisdom belonged only to one class of Israelite society—but our point is better made if we assume Golka is right, that von Rad and Hermisson and biblical studies as a whole have distorted the wisdom literature by insisting upon its mediation through the upper class elite and the educated.

Against this deep and widespread Tendenz Golka thus aims to (and does) show the affinities between biblical proverbs and traditional African wisdom sayings. Towards this he cites a rich variety of parallels, organized according to shared themes (“Rich and Poor,” “Family and Kinship,” “Creation and Wisdom”), establishing a complex weave of shared sensibilities and even rhetoric.

A sovereign too gentle has no kingdom / a sovereign too severe does not dwell with his subjects (=‘in either case they relieve themselves of his services’)

If you see a stick that will pierce your eye/break it off (=‘removal of the chief’)

Do not open the mouth of the roaring bull (=“Do not speak with the angry chief”)

By way of explaining his distinctive typographical representation of the African proverbs (the lack of punctuation, the use of “’”) he notes,

I quote these proverbs in units of meaning without comma [sic], as we are dealing with oral literature (Cf. Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa [Oxford, 1970]) dividing sections by (/). Proverbs are handed orally in Africa. The written collections have been assembled by European missionaries, anthropologists, etc.\(^{84}\)

\(^{83}\)GOLKA, The Leopard’s Spots, 14. P. Goodchild’s animadversions on the basic structure of ideology critique are an important corrective to Golka’s (unfair) indignation. “Moral condemnation has been replaced by ideology critique, the surgical procedure of operating behind the opponent’s unconsciousness. The post-Enlightenment critic claims insights into the processes of his or her opponent’s thoughts which exceed those which are available to the opponent’s self-obstructing consciousness. . . . Each ideological unmasking confronts the opponent with the embarrassing spectacle of the interests underlying their ideas, whether these interests are those of race, class, sex or ego, and result in privileged access to power, wealth, or pleasure.” PHILIP GOODCHILD, Capitalism and Religion: the Price of Piety. New York: Routledge, 2002, 47-48.

\(^{84}\)GOLKA, The Leopard’s Spots, 18.
At this point the Lacanian distinction between *le sujet de l’énonciation*—the subject position from which a statement is spoken—and *le sujet de l’énoncé*—the content of what is said—is strikingly illustrated; a distance carried in a somewhat humorous but nonetheless significant fashion by the Latin pluralization of "commas" and the co-appearance of European missionaries and Oxford anthropologists.

This is the paradoxical space wherein Golka’s argument assumes the form of its antithesis: to prove that Proverbs is the product of an indigenous, unschooled tribal culture, *unmediated* by the upper classes of Israel’s intellectual or bureaucratic strata, he gives us African wisdom, collected and edited by the European cultural and intellectual elite (translated by Christian missionaries, published by Oxford, etc). One must raise the question: did Ruth Finegan (or any of editors of Golka’s African source material) have any existential concern with the intricacies of dryland farming or tribal etiquette?

If there is a proper “African” analog to canonical Proverbs, it is not the voice of the sub-altern *Volk* Golka wishes to level against the “bourgeois-elitist” sympathies of Hermisson or von Rad. Proverbs is rather more like the Oxford edited anthologies: *it articulates the knowledge of the pre-literate indigene for its own purposes, specifically to enable the discourse of Wisdom.* Lacan will generalize about this abstraction of knowledge under the rubric of *philosophy.* "What philosophy designates throughout its whole evolution is the following: the theft, the abduction, the removal from the slave of his knowledge, through the operations of the Master … Philosophy in its historical function is this extraction, I would almost say this betrayal of the slave’s knowledge, in order to obtain its transmutation into the master’s knowledge."\(^{65}\) What is at issue is not the impossibility of the peasant knowing something good enough to be recorded in a book.\(^{66}\) (Recall that at the outset of the dissertation [¶ 4 on page 12] we identified the slave’s own field with knowledge [S₂]; the slave is the one who has the know-how.

There is as a matter of fact a question to be asked. Does the master who brings about this operation of the displacing, the conveysance, of the slave’s knowledge


\(^{66}\)Golka’s concern for “ordinary people (as opposed to courtiers) who have made a contribution
want to know? Does he have the desire to know? ... he desires that things work.  
And why would he want to know? There are more amusing things than that.  

Two conclusions then.

1. What Golka's analysis overlooks and then replicates is the difference between the utterance and the position of enunciation. But there is a crucial distinction to be made between, say, the admonition to avoid domestic quarrels or to be diligent in the fields and, on the other hand, the notion that such incommensurable practices may be equated under the sign of Wisdom. Golka analyzes only the former—the positive content of the biblical and African sayings—not seeing how the meaning of such content is irreversibly sealed by the retroactive effect of its becoming a text. It does not impugn the intelligence or cultural contribution of "ordinary people" to insist that their intelligence/culture is assimilable to different and even antagonistic class projects. Fox (1996, 237) helpfully describes the composition of Proverbs as gathering of diverse sources for the particular ideological purposes of the scribal/courtly class. "Such a process accounts for the great diversity and the even greater unity in Proverbs. The diversity comes from the varied sources, the unity from the redactor's own creative activity. The redactors' intervention was radical and determinative.... In such a process, the very notions of original and additional, of authorial and redactional, intertwine inextricably." The cogency of Golka's local readings (i.e. whether the African proverbs he selects are good analogues, whether his discernment of anti-royal rhetoric is persuasively argued) misses the radical intervention, which takes place on an entirely different level.

2. The distance between the original thought of Volk and the "radical and determinative" intervention of the sages cannot be diagnosed empirically. On the contrary, at the level of utterance (le sujet de l'énoncé) the Master and the Slave are saying the same thing; or, more specifically, the Master is simply parroting what the Slave has told him. The mechanism of appropriation does not tarry at this point.  

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89 Lacan continues from where we left off above: "Refer to the Meno, where it is a question of the square root of 2 and its incommensurable. There's someone who says, 'Hey, look, get the slave to
level but aims to establish a distinctive positionality with respect to knowledge the Master in no way produced. It is a matter of rendering the volkish know-how in a certain way, distilling it down to pure knowledge, theoretical knowledge, transcendent Wisdom.

It is here that you have the entire effort to isolate what is called episteme. It's a funny word, I don't know whether you have ever given it much thought—"putting oneself in the right position," in short it is the same word as Verstehen. It is all about finding the position that makes it possible for knowledge to become the master's knowledge. The entire function of the episteme insofar as it is specified as transmissible knowledge—see Plato's dialogs—is always borrowed from the techniques of craftsmen, that is to say of serfs. It is a matter of extracting the essence of this knowledge in order for it to become the master's knowledge.90

We have tried to show, at a perhaps tedious level of detail, how this is accomplished by the function of a signifier—"the signifier for which all the others represent the subject," the Master-Signifier (S1). At the level of the discrete and original object, and here's the anti-empirical punchline, its intervention changes nothing.

78 Negative theology and the persistence of transcendence

It will be helpful to pause and review the ground we have covered and, in light of this, gauge how far we have come in unseating the obvious conclusion of transcendence.

At the outset we defined Lacan's Master-Signifier in terms of a "pure signifier," one from which all traces of meaning had faded. Seeking to isolate this function in Proverbs, we have put forth our own "developmental" theory of the fear-of YhwH, tracing the incremental occlusion of its meaning behind an increasingly pure structural function (the purity of function completed by the time Proverbs articulates its famous slogan—"The fear-of YhwH is the rēšt of Wisdom"). Pressed for the meaning of the fear-of YhwH in this particular configuration, our determinations can only come over, that little fellow, can't you see he knows.' They ask him questions, master's questions, of course, and the slave naturally answers what the questions already dictate as their response. You find here a form of ridicule. It's a way of scoffing at the character who is being taken apart here. It is show that the serious business, the aim, is to make it known that the slave knows, but by acknowledging it only in this derisory way, what is hidden is that it is only a matter of robbing the slave of his function at the level of knowledge." Lacan, Seminar Xvii Pr., 22.

be made negatively: in the field of the signified it is the void, the placeholder of a constitutive gap. The fear-of Yhwh thus relates to the totality of Wisdom as the particular element of the Universal that preemptively signifies the failure of the sum total of all the other finite, positive elements to represent the Universal. Wisdom is knowledge, understanding, prudence, fidelity, discretion and the interval between this aggregate and Wisdom qua Universal, a lacuna whose place is held by the fear-of Yhwh.

It is unclear, however, the extent to which these exegetical conclusions relate to our overall concern to disclose the processual emergence of transcendence from an immanent field, i.e. the poetics of "making transcendent." In positioning ourselves in opposition to empiricism is there a sense in which we've simply repeated the obvious? For, many if not most scholars who have worked recently on the wisdom literature have rejected what in the preceding generation of commentaries would have been a commonplace assessment: "Proverbs represents a secular empiricism."91 Rylaarsdam, as we have seen, rejected such a notion very early, but again, von Rad's articulation is the most prescient in naming the un-ease recent scholars harbor against the label "empiricism."

In fact, what the sentences teach already surpasses any objective material knowledge in so far as it is dealing with perceptions which have been acquired in connection with a truth for which one has already decided. It is, in other words, a truth to which one has already committed oneself.92

"What the sentences teach"—a locution we have no trouble assimilating to our own idea of Wisdom as a totality, Absolute Wisdom—"surpasses any objective material knowledge [gehen...weit über alles neutrale Sachwissen hinaus]." This is a stunning surmise of the difficulties about representing Wisdom, since its ontological status, its objectivity (Sachlichkeit) is not constituted by experience but is always-already decided; it is the a priori condition that defines the bounds of experience at the outset.

91In a recent article, M. Fox explicitly rejects the view that the proverbial sages were empiricists. "Before addressing the question of what wisdom epistemology is, it is important to determine what it is not. Contrary to the scholarly consensus, it is not empiricism." Fox, Journal of Biblical Literature, No. 4, vol. 126, 2007, 670.
92VON RAD, Wisdom, 64.
This raises questions about the value of the highly abstract and at times unwieldy Lacanian mediation. Why not just read von Rad?—or any of the other significant scholars who have understood wisdom as an intellectual/ideological commitment constituted around the unfulfilled desire of the sages? And furthermore, doesn’t the fact of the sages’ lack underscore the distance between representation and reality, between word and world; the latter term impossibly transcendent to the former? Indeed, there is a venerable tradition wherein it is understood that human limits do not diminish our experience of God but draw us closer to a confrontation with enigma of freedom and the “uncaused cause.” This logic serves as a common denominator or, better, a common limit for a radically diverse range of theologies from Maimonides\(^3\) to Aquinas\(^4\) and matches exceedingly well with those readings of Proverbs, which heartily affirm its discipline (māsar) within circumscribed epistemological limits.

79 Cause

As a starting point we should ask the question: what is the basis of the connection between negative theology and transcendence? As a provisional hypothesis, we can posit as their common ground the same bifurcated theory of causality. On one hand, every effect is preceded by a commensurate cause; thus for each phenomenon one traces a series of links backwards (in a diachronic series) or outwards (in a synchronic system) towards some transcendent primordia/exteriority. History and the universe form two extents whose geometries and movements are transparent to human cognition,\(^5\) or rather would be apart from the sheer number of phenomen-

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\(^3\) The faculty of thinking is a force inherent in the body, and is not separated from it, but God is not a force inherent in the body of the universe, but is separate from all its parts. How God rules the universe and provides for it is a complete mystery: man is unable to solve it” (Guide to the Perplexed, §1.1xxii).

\(^4\) When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not . . . we know [God] from created things as their cause way of excellence and by negation” (Summa Theologica, §1.3, 13).

\(^5\) Befærgemmann (1990, 127) has understood the difference between the wisdom tradition and other biblical modes of discourse (i.e., prophetic and legal) in terms of the sages’ systematic atten-
ena (an immensity we now approach in accordance with the trajectory described by Moore's law<sup>96</sup>). On the other hand, what ex-sists before or outside does not obey (the same) law of causality. Rather, transmissions from the latter realm are experienced in the context of the former as sheer contingency,<sup>97</sup> which is to say they are experienced as failures of human knowledge. As we have discussed at length (¶ 9 on page 48), to the extent that the sages tarried with this degree of negativity, scholars have viewed this as subversive to “normal” wisdom ideology,<sup>98</sup> and as a strong hint that the Israelite sages maintained the distinctive features of YHWH religion, which in this context means the radical transcendence of YHWH’s freedom.<sup>99</sup>

The complexity of an integrated circuit ... has increased at a rate of roughly a factor of two per year. ... Certainly over the short term this rate can be expected to continue, if not to increase.”


<sup>97</sup>The account of this “two-story” universe is particularly striking in von Rad, because he goes so far in insisting that it doesn’t exist. “We see the teachers—with what sometimes appears to us as an uncanny confidence—holding together the awareness of an inherent determinism on the one hand and faith in Yahweh’s power on the other... It can be categorically stated that for Israel there was only one world of experience and this was apprehended by means of a perceptive apparatus in which rational perceptions and religious perceptions were not differentiated” von Rad, Wisdom, 60-61.

This strong statement of one field of experience is immediately qualified (though not, I think, resolved) under the rubric, “a dialectic of experience.” “But behind our assertion that experiences of Yahweh were, for Israel, experiences of the world, and vice versa, there lurks the question: were there actually two areas of experience which Israel in the last resort did differentiate, or was there only one? That we can no longer separate a realm of religious experience from a realm of secular experience is clear. On the other hand, Yahweh and the world are certainly not identical. Yahweh encountered man in the world. But why do there still exist parallel series of statements about ‘experiences of Yahweh’ and ‘experiences of the world’... We can only answer as follows. Obviously Israel, in her ‘enlightened’ understanding of the world, has stumbled upon a dialectic of experience which could no longer be simply resolved and released” von Rad, Wisdom, 63.

<sup>98</sup>For example, Würthwein’s description of Maat as the sine qua non not only of Egyptian wisdom but of Ancient Near Eastern wisdom as a whole. WÜRTHWEIN, Egyptian Wisdom and the Old Testament.

<sup>99</sup>So H. Gese’s reading of a countercurrent within Proverbs (cf. 10:22; 16:1, 9, 33; 20:24; 21:1, 30, 31; 25:2) that protests against the “reduction” inherent to any construal of the world bound by the structure of causality. HARTMUT GESSE, Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit;
In such accounts, noumena versus phenomena, reality versus appearance, Yhwh versus idol, line up in opposed series between which lies an unbridgeable gulf. The void of the subject (S) and the empty signifier that represent it (S1) serve only to consolidate the transcendent object as unanalyzable cause. Thus, to complete our argument we must directly engage the nature of this object: the stuff it is made of and the conditions of its status as cause, as the “check” the sages wrote of in their sentences about the limits of Wisdom.

If thinkers of transcendence share a complex of ideas about causality, viz. its multiple and discontinuous fields, and furthermore, if these thinkers understand the representation of such discontinuities to be possible only in negative terms—how then does our disclosure of the Master-Signifier’s function support the thesis of an ontologically prior immanent discord, only subsequently effaced by the poetics of “making transcendent”? Which is to say, how do propositions about the function of the Lacanian Master-Signifier disturb the linear but circumscribed theory of causality that underlies the a priori assumption of a transcendent beyond?

It is a truism to say that psychoanalytic cause is, at its core, an elaboration of psychic trauma: an intensity of experience which cannot be assimilated into the ego’s world of meaning, whose overwhelming quota of affect must be discharged, therefore, along more oblique pathways of association.100 The analysis of the pathogenic symptom is a work of detection, the uncovering of an idiosyncratic series linking the only apparently remote neurotic symptom to a repressed primal scene. Exemplary in this regard is Freud’s analysis of the Wolf Man, whose symptoms101 Freud traced to an early witness of parental intercourse.

Studien zu den Sprachen Salomos und zu dem Buche Hw. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1958, 45 ff. 100 Freud’s most ambitious attempt to create a model for the establishment and operation of these hidden yet logical connections (connection he eventually theorizes as the operations of displacement and condensation) is SIGMUND FREUD, “A Project for a Scientific Psychology”. Standard Edition, 1 1950.

101 Briefly the Wolf Man was directed to analysis to address a constellation of symptoms including debilitating depression and a longstanding phobia of wolves. The crux of Freud’s intervention was his analysis of a recurrent dream, recalled by the analysand from his early childhood. “I dreamed that it is night and I am lying in my bed…Suddenly the window opens of its own accord and terrified, I see that there are a number of white wolves sitting in the big walnut tree outside the
5. The Poetics of Totality

What was activated that night out of the chaos of unconscious traces left by a memory imprint (*Eindruck*) was the image of coitus between the boy's parents in conditions which were not entirely usual and which lent themselves to observation. It gradually became possible to find satisfactory answers to all the questions that might be prompted by this scene, given that the first dream was reproduced endlessly in countless variations during the therapy, and on each occasion the analysis provided the wished-for explanations. In this way we were first able to establish the child's age when he observed his parents, some 18 months.\\(^{102}\)

As to the pathogenic effect of the primal scene and the alteration in sexual development that its resurrection produced... we must keep in view the fact that the activation of this scene (I am deliberately avoiding the word 'memory' here) has the same effect as if it were a recent experience. The effectiveness of the scene has been postponed (*nachträglich*), and loses none of its freshness in the interval that has elapsed.\\(^{103}\)

The scandal of psychoanalytic thought lies here, though not where it is usually put. (Two contradictory critiques of Freud's thought are produced as if by reflex: from a "scientific" perspective, the links uncovered in free association, dream-work, slips-of-the-tongue, jokes, etc. are deemed too speculative, lacking the dignity of empirical verification; from a "hermeneutic" perspective, Freud crudely reduces the complex warp of lived experience to the libidinal economy.)

The great affront of psychoanalysis is rather the question of *when* the traumatic cause occurs with respect to its symptomatic effects. The answer Freud formulates is the theory of *Nachträglichkeit* or "deferred-action",\\(^{104}\) according to which trauma

window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were white all over, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dogs, because they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs watching something. Obviously fearful that the wolves were going to gobble me up I screamed and woke up. My nurse hurried to my bedside to see what had happened. It was some time before I could be convinced that it had only been a dream, because the image of the window opening and the wolves sitting in the tree was so clear and lifelike. Eventually I calmed down, feeling as if I had been liberated from danger, and went back to sleep." **SEMGUND FREUD**, *The Wolfman and Other Cases*. New York: Penguin, 2003, 227.

\\(^{102}\) FREUD, *The Wolfman and Other Cases*, 234.  
\\(^{103}\) FREUD, *The Wolfman and Other Cases*, 239.  
\\(^{104}\) LAPIANCHIN/PONTAUX (1973, 112) define the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* in terms of three characteristics: “a. It is not lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context. The traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience. b. Deferred
assumes its status as Cause only after its disruptive effects at the level of the conscious ego are manifest. Cause, as such, is mediated by the Symbolic field which it disturbs, a fact which dictates where we must look for it.

This paradox of trauma qua cause that does not pre-exist its effects but is itself retroactively 'posed' by them involves a kind of temporal loop: it is through its repetition, through its echoes within the signifying structure, that the cause retroactively becomes what it always-already was. In other words, a direct approach necessarily fails: if we try to grasp the trauma directly, irrespective of its later effects, we are left with a meaningless factum brutum – in the case of the Wolf Man, with the fact of parental coitus a tergo, which is not a cause at all, since it involves no direct psychic efficiency. It is only through its echoes within the symbolic structure that the factum brutum...retroactively acquires its traumatic character and becomes the Cause.\(^{105}\)

What is left for us is to give an account of Wisdom qua Real—as the traumatic ground of the sages' (symbolically mediated) desire, as the absent Cause around which their discourse circulates yet constantly fails to comprehend—yet not as an unassimilable exteriority transcendent to the finitude of human subjectivity, but rather as the unassimilable remainder of the subject’s joining itself to and determining its own meaning from the order of the signifier.

80 Sexual difference

On this point the psychoanalytic orientation confirms, against the reduction of reality to the “endless play of the signifier” what is everywhere in plain view, on the surface of Proverbs. For as much as Proverbs seems threatened by and inimical to the persistence of difference, it is equally the case that such difference, whose efficient cause we have sought in the workings (or rather the failure to work) of language, is heavily inflected on a sexual register, though it is not adequate to say “the Symbolic fails to come to terms with it.” Joan Copjec marks the crucial

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\(^{105}\) Žižek, The Metastases Of Enjoyment: Six Essays On Women And Causality, 32.
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distinction that runs between psychoanalytic and “deconstructionist” readings of
gender.

When we speak of language’s failure with respect to sex, we speak not of its
falling short of a prediscursive object, but of its falling into contradiction with
itself. Sex coincides with this failure, this inevitable contradiction. Sex is, then, the
impossibility of completing meaning, not (as Butler’s Judith Butler, whose Gender
Trouble provides the occasion of Copjec’s intervention) historicist/deconstructionist
argument would have it) a meaning that is incomplete, unstable. . . The point is that
sex is the structural incompleteness of language, not that sex is itself incomplete.¹⁰⁶

This brings us to the “beyond of the Symbolic” evoked by the Lacanian Real and
allows us after a long and at times taxing traverse to approach Wisdom’s essence,
whose opacity qua object arises from the very Symbolic operation that, intending
only to make sense, unwittingly produces the opposite—a substance that cannot be
understood but only enjoyed. It’s place in the text is not the signifier but the caput
mortuum signification leaves in its wake.

To this stuff, the sages compulsively return; from it they eventually deduce
the sublimities of “Absolute Wisdom” whose subjective truth, finally, they name
fear. I mean “stuff” in its precise psychoanalytic usage, whose emblems are a series
of objects—the breast, feces, and the phallus (the imaginary protuberance that
evokes in the child the fear of detachment, not the genitals)—to which Lacan adds,
crucially, the gaze and the voice.

A common characteristic of these objects as I formulate them is that they have no
specular image . . . no alterity. This is what allows them to be the “stuff” or, better
put, the lining—without, nevertheless, being the flip side—of the very subject
people take to be the object of consciousness. . . . It is to this object that cannot
be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes.¹⁰⁷

The promise of the object is of solidity; were one to grasp it, the slippage inherent
to representation could be, once and for all, stilled. (This is of course precisely why
such objects must be ungraspable.) According to this criteria, Proverbs constructs
its objective anchors most admirably, lining its words with a voice built for enigma,
and a gaze that flits through darkness of a window.

¹⁰⁶JOAN COPJEC, Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT
¹⁰⁷LACAN, Subversion, 818.

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Part III

The-Strange-Woman-Wisdom
"Slave, oblige me again!"
"Here, master! Here!"
"I'm going to fall in love with a woman!"
"Fall in love, master, fall in love! The man who falls in love with a woman forgets depression and melancholy."
"No way, slave, I will not fall in love with a woman."
"Don't fall in love, master, don't fall in love. Woman is a well, she's a well, a pit, a hole. Woman is a whetted iron dagger that cuts the throat of a fine man."

Dialog of Pessimism; or, the Obliging Slave

81 Terms of Discourse

At the very outset of the dissertation we privileged the master's discourse as a way of conceptualizing the Real (a paradoxical undertaking to be sure). Lacan's Real, we said (¶ 3 on page 6), while it is entirely other to the Imaginary-Symbolic world of meaning, yet this otherness is inscribed therein and only therein as "an impasse of formalization." Lacan names the locus of this "ex-timate" kernel of identity objet petit a. In short, the Lacanian conception of the Real suggests that a certain Symbolic world of meaning, for example Wisdom, is incapable of saying something true about the truth but only because its truth corresponds to this internal limit, impasse, or failure. The object (a) incarnates this impossibility as a surplus of
enjoyment (*plus de jouir*) not pre-existing speech but born forth in its enunciation, thus fulfilling the conditions of an immanent beyond or, obversely, a transcendent effect. By dint of this ambiguity, object (a) affords a position of analysis that succumbs neither to postmodern reduction of ethics to “how the individual construes the world,” nor simply repeats the ideological gesture of the text, as when we avert our eyes from the master’s carefully dissembled impotence. This is of course an “etic” account of discourse, disclosing the very ideological cotter-pin that must remain hidden if it is to compel subjects under the sway of its world. On the importance of maintaining this subterfuge, we need only recall Lacan’s dire warning (see note 32 on page 13): “If one does not squander [*jouissance*], there will be all sorts of consequences.” The structure of a discourse is therefore, by necessity, a particular strategy of squandering its own excesses, of laying them at the foot of an external cause.

Having familiarized ourselves with the terms of Lacan’s fundamental form of discourse

\[
\frac{S_1 \rightarrow S_2}{\overline{S} \lor a}
\]

we can say roughly how and where the requisite semiotic laundering takes place in Proverbs. On one hand, the meaning (S) of Wisdom\(^1\) was fixed only *retroactively* in its identification with the fear-of YHWH (S\(_1\)), a signifier which does indeed represent the essence of Wisdom but insofar as this essence is only an impossible breach in the field of “actually occurring wisdom,” i.e. \(S_2\). The instantiation of wisdom-ideology will then be the moment that the enunciation of the fear-of YHWH is abstracted from its purely performative and retroactive effect and posited instead as a self-sufficient plentitude which corresponds specifically and sufficiently to Proverbs’ definition of Wisdom.

“Fear of the Lord” involves both rational and non-rational aspects at the same time.

Its rational aspect entails an objective revelation that can be taught and memorized...“Fear of the Lord” [in contrast to the generic ANE phrase “fear of God”] refers to the Lord’s special revelation, whether

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\(^1\)Where S is either what, at the level of positive substance, corresponds to the totality of Wisdom’s predicates or, on the other hand, what corresponds to the true identity of Woman-Wisdom.
through Moses or Solomon. By this term Solomon traces his wisdom back to the Lord's inspiration.

“Fear of the Lord” also entails a nonrational aspect, an emotional response of fear, love, and trust.

From this perspective, the fear-of יהוה is misrecognized as to its purely negative dimension. Out of the series of Wisdom’s predicates, it is perceived as the most stable reference point, the eternal “meta-signifier” that gives us the proper meaning of all the others. The persistence of sapiential lack (the ongoing, restless search of the sages) is thereby displaced from its proper Symbolic locus, henceforth to be justified by the remoteness of the Real object.

82 Discourse as a social link

The persuasiveness of this short circuit can be seen most clearly in the way the sage/father assumes his Symbolic identity, i.e. the way that the empirical sage assumes the office and privilege of representing Wisdom. The hall-mark of his authority is not discernment about the future (as one would expect from someone who had long tracked the causal nexus) but a vigilant abjuration of his own wiseness. True, Proverbs never questions the legitimacy of paternal authority (recall our discussion [¶ 41 on page 158] of the sage as Wisdom’s Vertreter). But this authority is grounded in the father's limits and the a priori circumscribed quality of human wisdom,

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes?
—more hope for a fool than for him.

(26:12)

with the consequence that the father's point of identification with the son is a shared distance towards the object they pursue. The father is, like the son, born into a Symbolic debt he cannot overcome.

Indeed, I was a son to my father, a tenderfoot,
and precious before my mother.

(4:3)

The son must, like the father, learn to sublate (in the properly Hegelian sense of negate and preserve) the immediate distance of naivete (i.e. the status of the pett) to the reflected distance of fear.
This “virtuous” kernel of folly, to be sure, is situated in a highly specific manner with respect to the object it fails to grasp. To wit, it is judged the only appropriate response of the finite subject to the infinite object, which is beyond compare and representation.

More precious is [Wisdom] than jewels
and all of your satisfactions—they resemble her not.

(3:15, cf. 8:11)

The interpellative mechanism of Proverbs prima facie does not take crude form, I am worthy of your obedience (the ascription of worth coerced or otherwise inflated), and you will therefore obey. Rather, our assent to the father has his inadequacy fully in view, and yet we obey! In granting the (empirical) father’s lack, the discourse demands and justifies our compliance only within a circumscribed zone, thus preserving freedom and responsibility alike in relation to the infinite transcendent truth. Before this we stand with the father in our common finitude, even while we grant his status as “master” in the banality of day to day reality and its equally banal applications of power.  

In light of this, we may wish to increase our estimation of the master (speaking of both the signifier and the father who bears its function), who does more than “squander” the surplus of discourse. Rather he appropriates it, boldly establishing

2Is this not precisely the form of Kant’s (very conservative) ethical formulations, which come as a puzzling non-sequitur to his radical critique of metaphysics and to his (equally radical) dismissal of an “ethics of the common good” via the categorical imperative. How does Kant reconcile this apparent contradiction? “Now in many affairs conducted in the interests of a community, a certain mechanism is required by means of which some of its members must conduct themselves in an entirely passive manner so that through an artificial unanimity the government may guide them toward public ends, or at least prevent them from destroying such ends. Here one certainly must not argue, instead one must obey. However, insofar as this part of the machine also regards himself as a member of the community as a whole, or even of the world community, and as a consequence addresses the public in the role of a scholar, in the proper sense of that term, he can most certainly argue, without thereby harming the affairs for which as a passive member he is partly responsible.” Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” In Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, and What is Enlightenment? New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959, 99. Absolute freedom, what Kant considers the condition of any ethic whatsoever, must be preserved through “passive assent” to “an artificial unanimity” underwritten by the state. The obverse to noumenal freedom is phenomenal
6. The Poetics of Making-Transcendent

the merits of its/his lack on an ever expanding field, a virtuous up-cycle in which lack can be traded for profit. There is, Lacan points out, a technical term for what sanctions this exchange at any given time and place—the episteme.

This is a funny word, I do not know whether you have ever thought about it a lot—putting oneself in the right position, in short it is the same word as verstehen. It is the question of finding the position that enables knowledge to become knowledge of the Master. The function of episteme in so far as it specified as transmissible knowledge—consult Plato’s dialogues—is still entirely borrowed from the techniques of the craftsman, that is to say, of serfs. It is a matter of extracting its essence so that this knowledge becomes the Master's knowledge. And then, that is naturally increased by a little return shock, which is called a slip, a return of the repressed. But, so says someone or other, Karl Marx or someone else...  

3Lacan here and throughout Seminar XVII refers to Plato’s Meno in terms of a quasi primal emergence of the master’s discourse. The problem posed by Socrates to Meno, which we will not find remote from that posed by the proverbial sages, is to discover or better, distill, the essence of virtue from its manifold appearances. Meno, the slave, has no knowledge of virtue as such but when asked can only speak of many virtues ("there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them"). Socrates: "How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping. Suppose that I carry on the figure of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? and you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees, because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as for example beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?"

Meno: “I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.”

Socrates: “And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike—would you be able to answer?” (Plato, 1967, 72a-c) Meno’s famous question, after having failed (as the sages failed with Wisdom) to name the essence of virtue, pure virtue and not one of its predicates, reflects his befuddlement as to possible grounds of the master’s function. "Why, on what lines will you look, Socrates, for a thing of whose nature you know nothing at all? Pray, what sort of thing, amongst those that you know not, will you treat us to as the object of your search? Or even supposing, at the best, that you hit upon it, how will you know it is the thing you did not know?" (Plato, 1967, 80d). On what grounds, in other words, will we ascribe mastery to the master? What is wise about wisdom? Plato’s answer, the theoretical elaboration of anamnesis—we will remember the eternal truth that our incarnated bodies have forgotten—traces the same reverse temporality we have elaborated under the rubric of “psychoanalytic cause.”

The evocation of Marx, who appears throughout the seminars of 1969-1970, underscores (once again) the materiality of Lacanian discourse: the "arches of the world" he calls them. (And, of course, the language of "surplus enjoyment" cannot but call to mind Marx’s own discover of the "master's function" in the extraction of surplus value.) What is even more important in this quote is the insistence upon the primacy of position. The function of mastery depends not on what one says or how one says it but upon where one stands, addressing whom, in the moment of enunciation.

83 Positions of discourse

This recalls us to second feature of Lacan’s structure of discourse, not the terms (S1, S2, a, S) but a fixed arrangement of positions into which each term is slotted.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{agent} \\
\nearrow \quad \Downarrow \\
\text{truth} & \lor & \text{product}
\end{array}
\]

The “surface positions” fit well with the most basic model of communication: there is an agent, one who speaks; of course he speaks to somebody, so there is also an other. The link between them (→) is what the agent means to say. It is his intent. On the bottom things are more complicated. We have, in our comments about object (a), theorized a “surplus enjoyment,” but let us here speak more generally. The surplus is just something produced in excess of the avowed intent. The agent’s word produces an unforeseen consequence. And then in the final position, truth. The truth is what drives the discourse, unbeknownst to the agent. (Herein lies the sting of Freud’s “Copernican turn”: the ego is not master in its own house.) Whoever occupies the position of agency is an imposter, it is the truth that drives him and not vice-versa. The disjunction (\(\lor\)) between product and truth is a foregone conclusion in the Lacanian system. “Whatever the signs, whatever the master signifiers that come to be inscribed in the place of the agent, under no circumstances will production have a relation to truth.”

The surface structure of Proverbs can thus be apprehended in two modes. As a

\[\text{LACAN, Seminar XVII, 203.}\]
synchronic system of signifiers Proverbs defines the field of Wisdom as the network given by

\[ S_1 \rightarrow S_2 \]

fear-of Yhwh \( \rightarrow \) diligence, prudence, discretion, etc.

The theoretical and exegetical consequences of this algorithm have taken up the bulk of our work thus far. But of course this gives only a partial picture of discourse, which never in fact assumes this kind of static, spatialized existence (and herein lies the paradox of Saussure’s privileging of the synchronic dimension of *langue*) but is only the multiplicity of diachronic utterances. This first algorithm is thus the transcendental condition of Proverbs, a deduction we can nevertheless make only from a series of characteristic interactions,

agent \( \rightarrow \) other

father \( \rightarrow \) son

as C. Newsom has succinctly put it: “a father talking to his son, mostly about women”\(^6\)—a synopsis that is not as simple or self-explanatory as at first appears.

For in describing Proverbs operation as bifurcated along two vectors

father \( \rightarrow \) son

\[ \downarrow \]

woman

we locate the critical distinction between the father’s intent at the level of meaning and his aim as that which his discourse seeks to effect, to produce. Newsom’s inclusion, “...about women,” suggests that this aim has to do with imparting a proper perspective on women, or rather on “Woman” as an ideal whose specific coordinates are given by the Strange-Woman (the woman that the son must avoid) and Woman-Wisdom (the woman that the son must embrace).

Already this helps us immensely in our approach to object (a), which until now we have placed at the center of our project (of tracing the immanent origins of transcendence) but only defined in the abstract idiom of Lacanian theory (*plus de*...\(^6\)

\(^6\)NEWSOM, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 116.
**jouir**, object cause, the disembodied voice, the "lining" of the specular image, and so on). In terms of the master's discourse, the topological coincidence of

- object (a) as what disrupts the discourse's coherence, and
- a magnitude of certainty about the object "woman" as what the discourse produces

allows us to specify the former in the much less ambiguous terms of the latter. Nuances that were difficult to follow in the abstract are given in scenarios that are recognizable as possible experiences (and crucially for us, exegetical data). As *object cause of desire*, object (a) refers to the son's desire to be certain as to Woman's identity—this certainty as impossible. As *voice*, object (a) is the material ground of this certainty, the unique feature of Woman's identity not susceptible to the frailty of Symbolic identification—this materiality as ungraspable. As *plus de jouir*, the way that discourse itself produces the opposite of what it intends: in delimiting the "dangers" of the Strange-Woman—in terms that cannot but resonate with echoes of enjoyment—the father incessantly disorients the son in relation to the "proper" coordinates of desire—this desire as caught in an infinite regression: "Is this what I should desire to desire?" As a practical matter, then, we will seek to come to terms with object (a) where Proverbs exhibits the impossibility of maintaining the opposition between Woman-Wisdom and the Strange-Woman.

**Discursive revolutions**

Newsom's taut description of Proverbs brings to mind a further consequence of discourse's intrinsic *positionality*, namely that you might not like where you stand in the context of a given discourse. In so far as it is only the *father* who gets to speak, Proverbs offers what is patently "patriarchal wisdom," whose norms pit father over son and men over women in relations of dominance and subordination, privilege and deprivation. The reproduction of this discourse must therefore overcome antagonism that at times festers as passive *resentment* but at other times erupts in active resistance, as when one refuses to take one's assigned place. For Newsom these subtexts are accessible to the reader of Proverbs, "who does not take up the subject position offered by the text."³ For this reader

³*Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom*, 131.
6. The Poetics of Making-Transcendent

Proverbs 1-9 ceases to be a simple text of initiation and becomes a text about the problematic nature of discourse itself. Not only the dazzling (and defensive) rhetoric of the father but also the pregnant silence of the son and the dissidence that speaks from the margin in the person of the Strange Woman become matters of significance.⁸

Discourse is not stable; revolution is possible. Lacan, who gave Seminar XVII in Paris, at the height of the student unrest, had a quite specific idea of what constituted a revolution in discourse.⁹

Given the terms we are dealing with—$S$ and object $(a)$, whose being persist beneath the Symbolic domain of history where they, nonetheless, “do not cease to inscribe themselves”—the notion of revolutionary change would seem to sit at an uncomfortable distance from Lacan’s theory of discourse. Yet, Lacan’s projection for Seminar XVII is “four radical discourses,” the master’s discourse and then three others, which he derives by rotating the four terms (counter-clockwise) a quarter turn with respect to the positions, yielding four arrangements he designates according to who is speaking, i.e. what term fills the position of the agent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master’s</th>
<th>University</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$S_1 \rightarrow S_2$</td>
<td>$S_2 \rightarrow a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S \lor a$</td>
<td>$S_1 \lor S$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyst’s</th>
<th>Hysteric’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$a \rightarrow S$</td>
<td>$S \rightarrow S_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_2 \lor S_1$</td>
<td>$a \lor S_2$</td>
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Figure 6.1: The four discourses.

As for what drives this quarter turn, a question often leveled as a critique of Lacan’s “structuralism,” we need only keep in mind the incompleteness that insists within

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⁸Newson, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 131.

the structure. I refer to the impossibility of the connection marked (→): the fact that the agent cannot say what he means, there is always some excess produced; and the consequent disjunction (V) between what is produced and the truth. Lacan therefore needs no recourse to a transcendent teleology (like the caricature of Hegel's Absolute Geist, who operates behind the screen of history, whose subtle "ruses" successively move society towards the realization Truth). Rather the movement arises from a fatigue and then repulsion at the solutions of representation provided by the extant master. In short, once the master (crystallized, as we saw in Prov 10 and 14, in the dialecticization of lack) is sullied in the course of its usage by accretions of positive meaning, its function qua mastery is compromised. The compulsive movement of unnaming and reconfiguration begins, lest our speech fail to adequately squander the jouissance it engenders.

85 Having recognized the master

And, in fact, there is a sense in which the enterprise of critical exegesis and the form of the scholarly commentary, insofar as they stand at some distance from "the subject position offered by the text," take for granted what the text took such pains to hide. For even to acknowledge in a mild tone that a text reflects its historical context is to unveil the master as bound to the prejudices of his time and place. When, for example, we read a text as "patriarchal," we have already stepped out from under the master's sway—the revolt has taken place; or, at the very least, our speech has revolted.

Nonetheless in trying to uncover the text's true meaning, a task that preoccupies the modern scholar as much if not more than her ancient counterpart, we are not spared the impediments of language. Even having displaced the master (S1) from his preeminence and having recognized a text as his way of looking at things, we (we who have learned to speak the language of the university) necessarily ground our interpretations on the same dubious cornerstones, S and object (a). That is, we are in no sense immune to the "the pleasures of the text,"

\[10\]

The phrase is Roland Barthes, Le plaisir du texte, whose concept of plaisir stands in productive tension to Lacan's jouissance, even if here it is only being exploited for the play on words it affords.
these will resonate in a historically specific way, routed through the associations of late capitalism\textsuperscript{11} by which we are now unavoidably and profoundly shaped.

To “recognize the master,” in our view, is more than to act on a hunch about a text’s bias. It is to uncover the way a discourse is structured around the absent center of S\textsubscript{1} and in doing so naturalizes the arbitrary allocation of privilege. In this regard, M. Fox’s (more or less) form-critical and C. Newsom’s (more or less) structural\textsuperscript{12} analysis of Prov 1–9 can be taken as exemplary demonstrations of how Proverbs’ discursivity reflects and underwrites the patriarchal authority of the sage. For each of them, the difference between Woman-Wisdom and the Strange-Woman is of central concern, but it is equally true that on this point, in their respective demonstrations of how and why Proverbs does (Fox) or fails to (Newsom) sustain this difference, both scholars abandon the assumptions that unfailingly guide their interpretation elsewhere. This can be specified on the axis that has remained throughout in the background of our argumentation. Where the Strange-Woman appears, at that point scholarly attention is shifted from the immanent field of discourse, however discourse is being conceived, to the transcendent world of real objects, dense objects into which the text’s own jouissance can be cathected.

86 THE MASTER AS LECTURER

In general terms, befitting its belonging to the Anchor Bible series, Fox’s commentary traffics in “historical critical” methodologies: textual criticism, a developed if agnostic opinion about dating, an accounting for compositional historical questions, great attention to the ancient Near Eastern context, sophisticated philological argumentation, and (much less generic) knowledge and extensive use of the ancient Jew-

\textsuperscript{11}On this characterization of the historical conjuncture beginning in the 1960s see ERNEST MANDEL, \textit{Late Capitalism}. London: New Left Books, 1975.

\textsuperscript{12}I do not wish to narrowly label Newsom’s work, which defies and indeed argues against those readings that circumscribe their object of inquiry by donning a authorized “methodological hat.” Newsom’s reading draws heavily on psychoanalytic and feminist theory and is “structuralist” specifically only in that it attends to the discursive structure of ideology as inherently open and unfinished. Her argument is structuralist, in other words, in so far as structure is strictly opposed to the possibility of closure implied by form, particularly as it has been realized by biblical studies under the auspices of form criticism.
ish commentaries. Granted this broad range of analytical tools, we may nonetheless assert that Fox’s primary frame of reference is form critical. The textual “objects” to which he attends are

1. the Ten “Lectures”—themselves understood as a composite Gattung, consisting of an exordium, lesson, and conclusion; and

2. five poetic “interludes”—later scribal insertions, composed by different authors, responding to points raised by the lectures, and cohering around the figure of Wisdom as a woman.\footnote{The connections among the Wisdom interludes can be explained not from having a single author but from a process of organic growth, with each successive author reading the earlier text and elaborating on it. From the idea of wisdom in the lectures they extrapolated a different, more abstract concept of wisdom, then embodied that concept in a personification.” Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 328-29.}

Fox thus unveils the function of master apart from any treatment of “content” or “meaning.” The most superficial reading discovers it at once on the very surface of the text, in the fact that here a father is lecturing his son.

Consequently, following this indication, nothing we come across in Proverbs (including the Strange-Woman) is not mediated by its highly formalized textual environment: embedded in the speech of the father (representing the Law, authority, the Master, etc.) to the son (the governable, educable, potentially transgressive site of Knowledge). Accordingly Fox writes,

Only in Lecture X [Prov 7] is the Strange Woman portrayed as a personality and endowed with some suggestion of feelings and motives. To recognize that this portrayal is a deliberate characterization, we should consider that the personality of the woman in 7:6-23 is not the only one possible. The author might have shown a languorous, sultry femme fatale waiting for her prey; or a friendly neighbor concealing her seductive plans till the time is ripe; or a desperate nymphomaniac, who snatches at sex like Potipher’s wife; or a harlot, promising copulation without complications.\footnote{Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 253.}

So, Fox recognizes that the Strange-Woman is a characterization from the father for the son (the one in the story and the reader), but what does he think she characterizes? Here Fox gets into a bit of trouble; he abandons the rigor of his approach and leaves the (dubious) ground of his censure unexamined.
87 Overreading the Strange-Woman

Rather than reading the signifier Strange-Woman as a signifying element, as a fixed location in a given discursive network (apropos of Prov 7, a more complicated, reflected positionality as the Strange-Woman is a character in a didactic narrative which is in turn the object lesson of Lecture X), Fox simply strips off the complicated Symbolic entanglement to extract a stable referent. Fox himself seems aware of, if not a problem, at least the anomalous nature of his reading. Thus, at this point he breaks off from the commentary for a long (corrective) excursus on the Strange-Woman.

Much has been said about the mythological proportions of the Strange Woman, how she is a stereotype of women’s evil and a symbol of vast chaotic and destructive powers and how she epitomizes “the Other.” All this, in my view, is an egregious, if productive, over-reading.15

In the guise of defending her authenticity as “a character in her own right, not merely a personification of sins and dangers,”16 Fox dismisses in turn “allegorical-symbolic interpretations”—the Strange-Woman as a reference to heresy, as a symbol for material pleasures or the body, as a symbol of intolerable difference—and with greater specificity, a selection of well-regarded feminist readings of the past three decades.

He summarizes his findings in the final section of the excursus, “Over-reading is Misreading,” as follows.

Common to the allegorical interpretations, as well as to the foreign cult interpretation and some feminist readings, are certain presuppositions of a rather academic character: that ‘mere’ fornication or even adultery is too incidental or narrow or banal a danger to warrant such solemn and extended admonitions, or that an ordinary slut would be an inadequate antithesis to Wisdom herself ... The menace of sexual trespass is sufficiently grave to warrant the intensity of the warning it receives.17

Here we must read Fox differently than he reads himself, that is, that he merely allows the Strange-Woman to be seen, unmediated by so many “homiletic” and “hermeneutic” encodings.18 Quite the contrary, the reduction of the “mythological

15Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 252. 16Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 253. 17Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 262. 18Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 262.
proportions of the Strange Woman” to an “ordinary slut” represents the hermeneutic gesture *par excellence*, not in the least bit less allegorical for its dry, commonsensibility. The traverse from signifier, *the-strange-woman*, to signified, *ordinary-slut*, is nearly indistinguishable from the interpretations Fox has decried as “allegorical.”

On what grounds could we call such a common-sensical and apparently *concrete* conclusion allegorical? He has tried to account for her as a meaningful totality by appealing to what is essentially a proper name, *ordinary slut*, but has in no way accounted for his own role as namer. The one who gives names is traditionally none other than the father. So, does Fox’s attempt to master the Strange-Woman through this Master-Signifier mean that he offers us nothing more than a reiteration of the Master’s discourse? Not exactly, for we must account for a degree of difference in this repetition. Fox’s discourse does not and surely could not speak explicitly from the perspective of the Master: “My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you . . . then you will understand the fear of Yhwh and find the knowledge of God.” This is not academic prose. Instead, Fox (clearly we are not singling him out here; few in the academy are permitted to speak otherwise) assumes the mantel of the scientific subject-of-knowledge and offers us a well-reasoned argument to convince us that these other arguments are “over-readings.” What he offers in their place is a rational and empirical explanation for this perturbing Woman. Thus we write his approach to the Strange-Woman $S_2 \rightarrow a$, corresponding to the visible portion of the University discourse, by which we can specify the difference between Proverbs and Fox’s reading of Proverbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proverbs (Master’s Discourse)</th>
<th>Fox (University Discourse)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$S_1 \rightarrow S_2$</td>
<td>$S_2 \rightarrow a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\frac{}{S \lor a}$</td>
<td>$\frac{}{S_1 \lor \overline{S}}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear $\rightarrow$ knowledge</td>
<td>knowledge $\rightarrow$ slut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father $\lor$ woman</td>
<td>$\overline{\text{fear}} \lor \overline{\overline{S}}$</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The agent of knowledge interrogates the excess that persistently interrupts the smooth functioning of the Master. In doing so, however, he draws our attention
to a certain gap (§) between what was said about her and what, he assures us, was meant. This inevitably produces uncertainty in his critical readers. At the most surface level, one cannot help but be struck by the incongruity between the adjectives deployed by Fox and the father which ostensibly name the same object: strange and ordinary. The Master-Signifier’s ability to “make sense” when deployed to mean the exact opposite of what it may otherwise denote is, of course, one of its most symptomatic characteristics. So, in its use as a Master-Signifier, in its radical emptiness at the level of signification, “ordinary slut” is the most ideal interpretation of all, and Fox’s dismissal of “the mythological proportions of the Strange Woman” rebound on him with a vengeance.

88 leqah

That the signifier is, according to our reasoning, the “hidden truth” of Fox’s discourse, one expects to uncover, nonetheless, signs of its occlusion. Thus, where wisdom and foolishness (and their womanly avatars—Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman) are indistinguishable at the level of the signifier (which is after all, the only level upon which they exist), Fox’s reading becomes “symptomatic.” I give one example. The word leqah, in the context of wisdom literature, means “a learning” or “a teaching.” It is a nominal form of the verb lqḥ “to take” or “to accept”—a connection emphasized in the definition of Atkinson, who suggests “getting a grasp on what the teacher wishes to convey.” It is a stock term for Proverbs, associated with both the father/teacher and Woman-Wisdom. It is included in the opening programmatic statement wherein the author exhorts, “Let the wise hear and add learning (leqah)” (1:5). In light of this, we can easily see the dissonance a reader might have felt coming across 7:15, where the father says of the Strange Woman, “She persuaded him by the greatness of her teaching (leqah)”; a dissonance we observe is significantly attenuated by Fox’s rendering, “She enticed him with her soft ‘instructions’”—the quote marks directing us to read the term ironically, in view of the father’s sarcasm. Make no mistake, I am far from saying Fox is wrong in his interpretation of the father’s intent (S₁ → S₂); his explanation is perfectly cogent:


20 Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 238.
legah is elsewhere used of teaching or doctrine, as in 1:5. The word should not be assigned a unique meaning in this one occurrence, such as “seductive speech” (NRSV) or “eloquence” (JPSV). Rather, it is used in its usual sense—“doctrine,” “instruction”—but said in a facetious tone.²¹

We should heartily affirm Fox’s conclusion of a “facetious tone,” understanding that the resort to sarcasm arises as a last ditch effort to stop the slide in meaning. At any rate, Fox’s hermeneutic decisions do not account for the text’s failure to stabilize the object-signifiers for the son’s desire.

Does this mean that one would be mistaken to differentiate and a fortiori to evaluate among hermeneutical readings? No, it simply means that they share an interpretive posture (which may sound surprising given the radical difference methodological discussions would lead us to anticipate between these readings). We can summarize this posture as the one that asks what the Strange-Woman means and proposes an answer external to the field of Proverbs’ discourse, either with recourse to some historically contingent character (Fox’s “ordinary shit”) or to some pure signifier of otherness (Camp’s “death in sexual form”) that threatens or subverts male discourse.

Opposed to these approaches is the one that asks not what the Strange-Woman means in Proverbs’ discourse but how Proverbs’ discourse produces meaning through its use of the Strange-Woman. In short, the alternative approach neither takes language’s relationship to an external referent nor its ability to produce meaning for granted. It takes as axiomatic the inherent instability of language, in terms of our mathemes, that S₂ relies upon the externalization of S₁ as a privileged signifier and is therefore essentially lacking. C. Newsom’s article on Proverbs’ discourse best represents this approach.

89 Structure and the castrated master

Newsom’s structure of discourse does not fail to include the Strange-Woman as an internal object. She approaches Prov 1-9 as a structural knot between the father and the son in a way that (perhaps counter-intuitively) coheres extremely well with

²¹Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 248-49.
Fox's form critical analysis of "The Lecture," she writes, "does not reach the son directly but only as filtered through the father's speech." Following Fox's formal judgment we were able to depict Prov 1-9 as an instance of the Master's discourse. Recall from above: the empty Master-Signifier (S₁) holds the dominant position in its relationship to the other signifiers (S₂), the locus of knowledge, in order to maintain or expand its power as that for which the others represent the subject. Apropos the repressed underside of the Master's discourse, when Fox aimed his analysis at the surplus (a) produced by the discourse, he did so as the knowing subject (S₂) who would give it a rational place in (or rather, outside of) Proverbs' Symbolic world and thereby enacted two important effacements; the place of the object (a) as internally excluded from the Master's discourse on the one hand, and the position of pure mastery (S₁) on which his analysis depends on the other. Newsom picks up the analysis where Fox abandons it through these effacements by relentlessly interrogating the Master (S₁), calling into question the support of Fox's conclusions and exposing the gaps and failures in the father's ability, finally, to make sense.

Accordingly, what catches Newsom's eye are the places where the father's words find no signifying support, the key junctures where the signiferness of Proverbs' discourse is particularly exposed. Throughout Newsom finds a preference for abstract terms, such as 'righteousness, justice, and equity' (1:3). The pragmatic meaning of these terms is seldom clear from the text. And yet it is precisely in the struggle to control the meaning of such terms that one finds evidence of ideological conflict between social groups. ...What is important for Prov 1-9 is the issue of interpellation and the need for continual reinterpellation. When Newsom refers to the unclear "pragmatic meaning" of certain privileged terms she is, of course, identifying and promoting the underside of the Master's discourse. She exposes what the discourse tries so hard to keep hidden and she expresses somewhat impressionistically (or at least narratively) what we have, following La-

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22 Noting the affinity allows us to characterize quite precisely the nature of their differences, specifically with regard to the Strange-Woman. To reiterate, the interpretative split runs not between Newsom and Fox but down the middle of Fox's own reading, at the non-existent intersection of his formal argumentation and his determination of the Strange-Woman's referent.

23 NEWSOM, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 135.

can, conceptualized as the Master-Signifier, "the signifier (S₁) for which all the other signifiers (S₂) represent the subject." The bearers of this discourse—the father of the lectures and the empty, privileged signifiers named by Newsom (righteousness, justice, etc.)—are equally non-sensical, and so must be read symptomatically. The question is not "what do they mean?" but rather "what primordial failure of meaning do they positivize?" This difference in attention approaches a kind of absolute horizon in the case of the Strange-Woman, whose "content" approaches nullity as compared to her structural function, the shifting guarantor of so many threatened binary oppositions. From the extension of this Symbolic instability to the social and historical world of the sages at the end of her quote it is clear that Newsom explains the Symbolic failure as a result of real social antagonism in the Second Temple period, a point we will return to below.

The primary opposition to the discourse of the father is the Strange-Woman but this opposition, Newsom is careful to note, is inherent to the discourse itself, it resides strictly within the male phantasm; the Strange-Woman only reaches the son "through the father's speech." Newsom's point is just the opposite of the hermeneutical readings seeking the Strange-Woman's signification outside the discourse of wisdom; for Newsom, the antagonism is ontologically prior; patriarchal discourse is always already subverted; only subsequently is the Strange-Woman qua signifier invoked to "cover the gap." Newsom notes apropos of the lecture in Prov 2,

Invoking the Strange Woman as a threat provides a basis for solidarity between father and son. Her difference makes available a shared sameness for father and son that bridges the generational division of patriarchy that was visible in Proverbs 1.

The Strange-Woman is thus the "solution" much more than she is the problem, a container into which the literally un-speakable contradictions of the society may be safely localized.

It is a solution, however, with its own difficulties. "But," Newsom continues,

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24 In this particular sense, the figure of Woman can be compared to such eminently useful fictions as Becher's phlogiston or Descartes' pineal gland.
25 NEWSOM, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 126.
27 NEWSOM, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 122.
the woman and her discourse exist as a persistent irritant located, to borrow Julia Kristeva's phrase, at the margin. In the following chapters she continues to preoccupy the father's advice. He can never quite be finished with her. The competition she represents is the cause of the father's speech, the incentive for its very existence. The Strange Woman figures the irreducible difference that prevents any discourse from establishing itself unproblematically. She is the contradiction, the dissonance that forces a dominant discourse to articulate itself and at the same time threatens to subvert it. These dissonances can no more be eliminated than can sexual difference itself.28

The Strange-Woman is as much the condition of possibility for the father's patriarchal discourse as its condition of impossibility. "Metaphorically, in the social fabric of patriarchy woman is the essential thread that joins the pieces. But equally she indicates the seams where the fabric is subject to tears."29 The Strange-Woman threatens the discourse insofar as she, by covering over its inherent contradiction, signifies the discourse's essential lack. Lacan would say, she is the signifier of the lack of an other Other; she signifies that there is no Other of the Other that could guarantee its meaning.

What "solves" the irreducible ontological lack in Proverbs' Symbolic order, that is, what creates the illusion that an order exists despite its essential nonexistence, returns with a vengeance in the father's speech (the text of Proverbs) as so many cracks in the façade of his wisdom.30 Thus Newsom's readings of particular texts tend to be diagnostic: uncovering both the failures of re-scripting and the tell-tale traces from other registers of discourse. For example, in her discussion of Prov 5-6, she attends to the slide of signification as what purports to be about sexual ethics, never quite manages to stick to its topic.

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28Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 122.
29Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 127, emphasis added.
30We have suggested throughout that this crack in the façade is Wisdom itself. There is no Wisdom apart from wisdom and the cracks that prevent it from being Wisdom, that grant the illusion that some universal Wisdom exists. Newsom's work confirms our thesis by taking the crucial dialectical step to transform the father's failure to get rid of the Strange-Woman and simply teach Wisdom into a success. The references to the Strange-Woman offer so many chances to see wisdom itself as lacking in its essence insofar as the essence of Wisdom is a negative dimension produced by but irreducible to representation.
The system of approved and disapproved sexual relations forms a language through which men define their relations with one another... Although there is an obvious element of psychosexual fantasy here, it is overwritten by social references... Exogamy is deplorable because it results in the alienation of wealth.  

Newsom continues, drawing the appropriate conclusion from her argument,

When symbolic thinking is carried forward by means of concrete objects or persons, statements and actions pertaining to these concrete entities can never be merely pragmatic on the one hand or simply metaphorical on the other.

Newsom's ensuing analysis of Prov 7-8 as a diptych in which the mythological and the realistic cannot be severed offers another textual illustration and seems ultimately to put any claims for a non-allegorical meaning of the Strange-Woman to rest.

90 THE HYSTERIC’S DISCOURSE

What we refer to as diagnostic in Newsom’s reading mode, we can at this point conceptualize as hysterical, insofar as its structure is equivalent to Lacan’s third structure of discourse, the Hysteric’s discourse. We refer to her mode of analysis as diagnostic because, in rejecting the question motivating Fox’s University discourse (“what does the Strange-Woman mean?”) as a false dilemma, she asks instead how the Strange-Woman and other signifiers embody the failure of patriarchal discourse to ever fully account for what it means. The label “hysterical” is also appro-

\[31\] Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 135.

\[32\] Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 127.

\[33\] This would obviously include Fox’s, discussed above. He writes, “It is true that by the intensity of his description of the woman’s evil the author comes very close to the boundary between literal and allegorical and prepares the way for symbolic interpretations, but that is not his intention. Allegory or symbolism is not within the text.” Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 361. This boundary that Fox tries to conjure by his word and treat as if it were natural and in no need of defense is precisely what Newsom, so many years earlier, exposed as dubious, her challenge apparently remaining, unfortunately, unanswered and unacknowledged.

\[34\] As shown above, Newsom does not think it necessary that the Strange-Woman mean anything in particular, just that she exist as a signifier capable of receiving the blame for the failures of patriarchal discourse to form a logical totality. The Strange-Woman “is not simply the speech of actual women, but she is the symbolic figure of a variety of marginal discourses.” Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 122. Thus, the Strange-Woman, in the guise of “troubling”
prière insofar as it signifies incessant skepticism and the best kind of scholarship that exposes the unquestioned assumptions the master’s discourse relies on and the university discourse tacitly accepts.

The positions of the Hysteric’s discourse such that each one may be seen in its direct opposition to those of the University discourse are as follows,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{University} & \quad \text{Hysteric’s} \\
S_2 & \rightarrow a \\
\overline{S_1} \lor \overline{S} & \quad \overline{a} \lor S_2
\end{align*}
\]

and we may elaborate them *a propos* of Newsom as follows:

\[
\frac{\text{reader} \rightarrow \text{father}}{\overline{a} \lor \text{knowledge}}
\]

We have dwelt at length on the position she assumes as the lack in significiation (\(S\)) interrogating the father’s claims to mastery (\(S_1\)), and have thereby indirectly sketched some of the knowledge she has produced (\(S_2\)), but we have not done so with any precision, which is prerequisite to understanding the position of truth (\(a\)) on which her agency relies.

The knowledge produced by Newsom’s diagnostic-hysteric interrogation of the Master’s discourse can be mapped onto two oppositional axes of a semiotic square. On the one hand, the actual sage—insofar as patriarchal discourse sustains concrete, bodily inequalities between men and women, rich and poor, ruler and ruled—stands opposed to any number of marginal or subaltern subjectivities that threaten status quo arrangement. In the sage’s manner of speaking, this multitude is conveniently consolidated in the function of One signifier; sexual difference comes to stand for difference as such. “The Strange Woman . . . is the symbolic figure of a variety of marginal discourses.”35

On the other hand, patriarchal discourse as the Symbolic matrix that justifies the privilege of men over women is set against the presence of actual women, whose perspective and speech throw patriarchal norms into a confusion of dissonance.

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35 NEWSOM, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 122.
As women enter into public discourse as speaking subjects, the habit of patriarchy to think symbolically by means of woman is thrown into confusion. Woman cannot occupy the same symbolic relationship to herself that she does to man. With that change the long, slow crisis of the symbolic order is at hand.\textsuperscript{36}

These two oppositional axes can be displayed as follows:

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\node (A) at (0,0) {actual sage};
\node (B) at (2,2) {marginal subjectivities};
\node (C) at (0,2) {patriarchal discourse};
\node (D) at (2,0) {actual women};
\path[->,dashed] (A) edge (B);
\path[->] (B) edge (C);
\path[->] (C) edge (D);
\path[->] (D) edge (A);
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

Figure 6.2: \textit{S}_2—the product of Newsom’s analysis

What the square so clearly depicts is the irreducible and mutually implicating relationship Newsom’s analysis insists upon and tries to maintain throughout between the Symbolic order and embodied experience—the human being as \textit{parlêtre}.

\section{The ethics of knowledge}

The move to ethics inevitably arises from her conclusions insofar as the interpreter, as a \textit{parlêtre}, is not excluded from the Symbolic world the text creates. The knowledge the square is intended to depict is not without its relation to corporeality; that there is no disembodied knowledge is a direct implication of the Hysteric’s discourse. The square does not lose its usefulness here as it also depicts the Utopian and dystopian possibilities constituted by the knowledge Newsom’s analysis produces.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Newsom}, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 127-28.

\textsuperscript{37}Earlier we referred to the former as the pedagogical axis, not a bad term here either. In this case the dystopian possibility would quite appropriately be the negation of the lesson learned from Newsom’s knowledge.
As for the latter, dystopian possibility created by this knowledge: to the extent that patriarchal discourse is reproduced, the position of actual women (actual poor people, actual victims of subjugation, etc.) will be antagonistic to male privilege. Men will be scholar-sages whereas women will be, at the most material level, income-generators. On the Symbolic register, woman as the quintessential sign of otherness will be both vilified and elevated, all the while her reality is confined to male ideals of domesticity and male sexual fantasies. Woman qua income-generator: either praised domestic enabler of male leisure or vilified public object of male fantasy.

And the Utopian possibility Newsom suggests: to the extent that the countless marginal perspectives are “given voice,” which here simply means are allowed to speak from the position that the actual sage has heretofore reserved for himself, discourse itself becomes a contested zone, wherein the long hegemony of the father must share significance with “the pregnant silence of the son and the dissidence that speaks from the margin in the person of the Strange Woman.”38 Bodies heretofore marginalized must be allowed to speak a new Symbolic order. The Symbolic support of the status quo must not be allowed to marginalize another generation of non-male bodies.

92 “Woman” as another name of the Father

Here we need to complicate the knowledge and ethic Newsom provides, because the nature of the relationship connecting the contradictory terms remains opaque. Consider the axis connecting “marginal subjectivities” to “patriarchal discourse.” Newsom describes the former as exclusions from the latter but also argues for their dependence upon the latter; marginal subjectivities depend upon patriarchal discourse for their constitution just as patriarchal discourse depends upon the (excluded) existence of marginal subjectivities to constitute itself as a totality. The axis that defines their relationship is, for this reason, far from simply contradictory. They are mutually exclusive but they are also co-dependent. One exists neither with the other—marginal subjectivity is excluded from patriarchal discourse—nor without the other—marginal subjectivity must be posited as exclusive with patri-
archal discourse for both marginal subjectivity and patriarchal discourse to exist.\textsuperscript{39} The logical relationship of this contradictory axis is disjunctive: the space of overlap uniting marginal subjectivity and patriarchal discourse is occupied neither by any part of the one nor the other; that is, this space forms a certain determinate void between the two (determinate because these two "not-all" Euler circles give it a specific shape at the locus of their disjunctive encounter). Any authentic change in the structure of patriarchal discourse would have to arise from this void because patriarchal discourse already accounts for, makes sense of, everything else, including the subjectivities \textit{it defines} as excluded. To call this space a void is not to say it does not exist but rather to define its existence as foundationless \textit{within} the bounds of patriarchal discourse. This foundationless void is the space of the object (a) which outlines the discourse's blind spot, that which it cannot predict or account for and from which change will come, not through a marginal subjectivity but rather on

\textsuperscript{39}The substantial body of scholarly work Newsom has contributed since 1989 and the publication of \textit{The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom} has stayed remarkably close to the question (or possibility) of "marginal discourses." Her work on \textit{Job}, of course, which relies heavily on Bakhtinian categories (polyphony, his distinct elaboration of genre, the unfinalizability of discourse) and even more recently her work on \textit{Qumran, The Self as Symbolic Space: Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran}. In this latter work, as with \textit{The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom}, we find (1) the same recognition that discursive mediation is always-already prior to any direct engagement with "the world" (like the Lacanian dictum: "there is no other of the Other"); and (2) the same attempt to carve out a zone not entirely determined by the prevailing ideological field, wherefrom some kind of external critique can be mounted. Thus, in Newsom's telling, the structure of women's marginality with respect to the patriarchal discourse of Wisdom is echoed at \textit{Qumran} as sectarian marginality with respect to mainstream society. "The discourse of the \textit{Qumran} community was not simply produced to maintain an established society but to create one that distinguished itself from other discursive communities within Second Temple Judaism. The need to create the sentiments of affinity and estrangement required for social boundaries and the need to offer a new identity to persons who had been previously formed in other communities set special conditions for discourse. The practices, verbal and otherwise, that serve to produce and reproduce social relations and identities in an established and dominant culture may be so thoroughly worked into the background hum of discourse as to be virtually inaudible; but for a sectarian community they will tend to be much more explicit." \textit{Newsom, The Self as Symbolic Space: Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran}, 3. The Lacanian supplement to this particular structure of inaudible mainstream discourse brought to critical awareness via sectarian distance is to point out how the stability of the mainstream and sectarian communities alike requires the "explicit" perception of a split; that this script of antagonism is precisely what keeps ideology in the background, an "inaudible hum."
the back of a singular subject.

The other contradictory axis of Newsom's square must be approached rather differently, although we end up saying something quite similar; it is best grasped by treating its terms in turn. If we can restrain from defining the relationship between the two terms and instead account for how they, like the previous ones, are fundamentally split, not-all, then we will be better positioned to say something about the nature of their relationship and the need to return to the text with this in mind.

The problem this axis confronts us with is that here Newsom is content to refer to actual men and women whereas we insist on the need to reinsert the function of the Symbolic order. Our opposition may be summarized in the following statement: it is not actual men and women who, by virtue of some sort of unique individual identity, stand outside the Symbolic order, it is simply sexual difference itself that stands outside this order. In other words, no Symbolic identity will grant a reader/sage access to a non- or extra-symbolic position, such a position is only accessible if we develop a proper notion of this impossibility, that is of the Real limit to all Symbolic or discursive analyses, which psychoanalysis refers to as sexual difference. Why is it that women and men are forced to create ever new identifications and can never be fully spoken? What is it about them that cannot be spoken?

The actual sage is not-all on account of his relationship to the Law and the Law-giver, the Symbolic Father. "The male subject is to a certain degree apportioned between father and son." The sapiential subject is a consequence first of all of an

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40Herein resides the core of Lacan's critique of the American ego psychologists: Hartmann, Kris, and Lowenstein. "With respect to the economy of progress in an analysis, [Kris] emphasizes what he calls—since he has read Freud—the preconscious mental processes and the fruitful nature of ego-regression, which amounts to placing the means of access to the unconscious entirely on the level of the Imaginary. If we follow Freud it is on the contrary clear that no exploration of the preconscious, however profound or exhaustive it is, will ever lead to an unconscious phenomenon as such. The excessive prevalence of ego psychology in the new American school introduces an illusion similar to that of the mathematician—we can assume he is ideal—who having got a vague idea of the existence of negative magnitudes sets about indefinitely dividing a positive number by two in the hope of finally crossing over the zero line and entering the dreamt-of domain." Jacques Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychosis, 1955-1956. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991c, 166.

41Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 124.
alienating identification with the image of the father. This identification initially occurs as an expression of pure desire.\textsuperscript{42} It is alienating in the sense that the paternal imago is external to the subject and must be introjected by him for him to become a subject of Wisdom. This introjected imago then has a formative function on the sage’s image of himself, the sage recognizes himself as a son, a recognition which must be considered a misrecognition insofar as it is formed by an image of the other.\textsuperscript{43} We have, then, two images which, following Lacan, we may call the ideal ego and the Ego-Ideal, capitalizing the latter insofar as it forms the boundary between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The ideal ego is the image one has of oneself and with which one identifies others (for instance, as sons like oneself), whereas the Ego-Ideal is the exterior point in the Symbolic Other from which the Imaginary ego is perceived. We must add that this “exterior” point resides entirely within the subject. Thus the sage’s ego is always divided between a constituted identification—an ideal image, which he more or less resembles—and a constitutive identification—

\textsuperscript{42}This is what I take Newsom to be saying when she writes that every “son understands and thinks ‘when I grow up, that’s what I’ll be.’ The father status already exists as potentiality in the son.”\textsuperscript{43} Consider, for example, the following quote from an essay we have repeatedly returned to: “What the subject finds in this altered image of his body [in the mirror] is the paradigm of all forms of resemblance . . . It is this image that becomes fixed—this is the ideal ego—from the point at which the subject fixes as ego-ideal. The ego is thus a function of mastery, a game of bearing, and constituted rivalry. In the capture it undergoes due to its Imaginary nature, the ego masks its duplicity; that is, consciousness, in which the ego assures itself an indisputable existence . . . is in no way immanent in the ego, but rather transcendent, since consciousness is based on the ego-ideal as unary trait (the Cartesian cogito does not fail to recognize this). As a result, the transcendental ego itself is relativized, implicated as it is in the misrecognition in which the ego’s identifications originate” Lacan, Ecrits, 685.

\textsuperscript{44}Žižek (1989, 106) underscores the cruciality of this distinction in a clinical context. “This gap between the way I see myself and the point from which I am being observed to appear likable to myself is crucial for grasping hysteria (and obsessional neurosis as its subspecies). . . Concrete analysis has to discover who—which subject—embodies for her the Other. Behind an extremely ‘feminine’ Imaginary figure, we can thus generally discover some kind of masculine, paternal identification: she is enacting fragile femininity, but on the symbolic level she is in fact identified with the paternal gaze, to which she wants to appear likeable.”
*Imaginary-Symbolic* identifications. Here we must add the perhaps obvious point that this space does not exist prior to the infusion of substantial identity supplied by the *Imaginary-Symbolic* order.\(^{45}\) We should also mention that the purely virtual locus of the Father as the son’s Ego-Ideal, as Newsom is keen to note, does not exclude it from having real effects.\(^{46}\) To conclude this discussion: Proverbs’ sage, the man of patriarchal discourse, is divided, split among traits identifying him with the father and the son among which he drifts in an unending flux, each remaining open to subsequent determinations by new identifications. He remains subservient to a dialectic of desire whose goal, he admits, is impossible. He will never attain the satisfaction of being a Father even though he will have sons and even though he will remain fixated upon it and the Father who keeps it overhead.

The woman in patriarchal society has two images with which she can identify herself, the Strange-Woman or Woman-Wisdom. These are not the same as those available to the sage. One could argue, of course, that Woman-Wisdom is just like the Father, a purely Symbolic point of identification for the actual woman to which she can never correspond but should always try. This interpretation would work but for the other form open to woman. The actual woman who is not Woman-Wisdom, Newsom tells us, conforms to the Strange-Woman. If she were the sage, she would be the son. But as woman, she is excluded from wisdom.

Where, then, is the woman’s place? Recalling our engagement with Tribe’s work on Prov 1 in the dissertation’s first part, we could say that woman’s place in patriarchal society is behind the parapet that hides the home. Her place is not found in the public discourse; she is not given the space from which she could

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\(^{45}\) Our *psychoanalytic* orientation prevents us from drawing what Anglo-American scholars would call the “post-structural” conclusion from the fact that the individual’s identifications originate outside of the self, in the Other, namely, that there is no subject. On the contrary, the crumbling of the self’s identifications lead—I am not saying to a substantial core essence—to nothing, to a void. The subject qua S is nothing but this nothing, this empty void. Lacan and important post-Lacanian theorists such as, especially, S. Žižek, thereby strictly oppose the subject to the ego.

\(^{46}\) Specifically, she writes, One is always a subordinate son to the collective authority of the symbolic order. But its transcending father status [Ego-Ideal] is what underwrites the father status of those who occupy positions of authority within it.” Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 124 That is to say, the virtual Ego-Ideal forms the ideal egos of sages who act according to their identifications.
speak publicly. But it is also not outside the discourse, as a text e.g., Prov 31:10-31 makes clear. Woman’s place in patriarchal society is outside of its discursive field but not in the way the Strange-Woman is outside, that is, not as inclusively excluded as a symbol of the outside, but rather as exclusively included, without any potential non-inclusion. The woman can find no place inside patriarchal discourse except by adapting herself to its approved images, but she also has no place outside it, from which she could take an active part in determining these images. Actual woman is thus not-all in a way that has no potential avatar of filling in her lack because it corresponds to the not-allness of patriarchal discourse itself. She can only appear, immersed in forms of male psychosexual fantasy, and her appearances hide no essence. But her appearances, precisely because they betray no underlying essence, shatter the very givenness of appearance so that appearance itself achieves an ontological weight and the notion of essence is exposed as a retroactive fantasy of patriarchal discourse. It is from this that Léacan says “La femme n’existe pas,” placing woman under erasure and thereby establishing her relationship with the Real as the internal limit of the Symbolic, that which limits the Symbolic from within. Woman thus suggests, in her inherent dislocation, that there is no other place to which the subject can withdraw, there is no position outside the order of the world to which the self could flee. Opposed to this male fantasy of an outside, her position alone exposes the space wherefrom an act could exceed the limits of patriarchy because the void that is her essence is the essential not-allness that orders the (patriarchal) world.

Finally we can specify the nature of the relationship uniting the poles of this contradictory axis of Newsom’s semiotic square. We had to approach each pole separately because the space of disjunction that forms their overlap is evidenced differently by each. For each pole, a split, a non-coincidence of the one with itself; for the actual sage, the split is evident in the void the Father occupies for every sage/son as a virtual figure, idealized for his direct relationship with God and

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47 The foundation of this controversial point is established in chapters 6 and 7 of Lacan, Seminar XX. Many discussions outlining what’s at stake here exist and might be just as good but none is likely better than chapter 8, “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason,” in COP/JECC, Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historians; cf. JOAN COP/JECC, Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002.
Woman-Wisdom; for the actual woman, the split divides her from herself and is not accompanied by an idealization if only because she is afforded no position that is not an idealization. Instead, every idealization that she is redoubled, split from within, with no other with respect to which she could ground her duplicity. The feminine position confronts us with the negative space in which any definition or identification inscribes itself and thereby tears any identification from itself.

93 DISSIDENCE AND ORTHODOXY

Although both these conclusions aim directly at the space wherefrom an event could erupt that would effect change in patriarchal discourse, they also outline a certain negative magnitude, a space of void, which lies at the center of subjectivity as such. This space has an ontological weight making an account of it prerequisite for any ideology. And indeed we see the wisdom literature including this minimal critical distance throughout its corpus as the proper subjective posture of the authentic sage.

This posture is reflected throughout Proverbs—in those sentences whose importance commentaries concerned to emphasize the sages’ epistemological modesty never fail to highlight. The essential content of these sentences is a critical distance the sages held vis-à-vis the letter of wisdom ideology.

This is, in our opinion, the only productive context in which to frame the notorious debate as to the presence of a “retribution ideology” in Proverbs. Unless one takes the position that certain sentences/instructions in Proverbs do not represent what the sages thought, e.g.,

Such is the end of every plunderer of plunder;
the very life of its owners it takes. (1:19)

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor,
you will cry out and not be heard. (21:13)

Whoever digs a pit will fall into it,
and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling.


49 “Ideology” here and throughout this particular discussion is meant in the polemical sense of
(26:27)

the answer is unavoidably, Yes, Proverbs espouses a retribution ideology. The much more interesting and (for the purposes of analyzing the workings of wisdom ideology as a whole) productive observation adds to this truisms, ... and the sages perceived its ideological dimension as such.50

As this is not a particularly novel point, suffice it to mention one example of such a posture from each of the canonical wisdom books: Proverbs "Trust in YHWH with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding" (Prov 3:5). Job "...[Job] would rise early in the morning and make burnt offerings for all of [his children] for Job said, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and blessed God in their hearts'; this is what Job always did" (Job 1:5). Ecclesiastes "Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise...Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool...It is good that you should take hold of the one without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both" (Qoh 7:16-18). In short, the disclosure of this ideological kernel of critical distance does not (and this is the gist of our critique of Newsom's "metaphysics of the will") subvert the persuasiveness of sapiential discourse; on the contrary, the discourse includes this minimal distance from its letter, and in fact, as we have tried to show apropos the constitutive function of the fear-of YHWH and apropos the subjective positions of man and woman in patriarchal discourse, this distance lies at the very heart of Proverbs' articulation of Wisdom.

So too for Woman-Wisdom. As we said apropos Prov 1, with regard both to the fundamental status of the sapiential subject as a pets as well as to Woman-Wisdom's paradoxical ethical call to turn and indictment of turning, some distance from her is built into the sage's relationship with her. What, however, about Proverbs' other woman, the Strange-Woman? In her case, there seems to be no space for any critical distance whatsoever. As Prov 2:18-19a reads, "Her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the shades. All who go in to her do not return." There is no distance

"false consciousness."

50 As we have had occasion to mention above, Yoder's thesis on the function of contradiction and repetition in the book of Proverbs (YODER, Fearon) may be taken as paradigmatic of the kind of analysis which recognizes this critical distance as central to Proverbs' ideology and reads for the ways in which the text creates this posture in its adherents. In essence, repetition and contradiction prevent anyone who takes the text seriously from remaining tied too tightly to the universality of
built into what she means; her meaning is as certain as death. How, then, do we read Prov 7, the most developed account of an encounter with the Strange-Woman?
Imagine... a phantom—an infinitely more primal form of life, in no wise willing to settle for a duplicate role in some microcosmic world within a world...

Let us assume the latter to be a large crêpe that moves like an amoeba, so utterly flat that it can slip under doors, omniscient as it is guided by the pure life instinct, and immortal as it is fissiparous. It is certainly something that would not be good to feel dripping down your face, noiselessly while you sleep, in order to seal it...

It goes without saying that a struggle would soon ensue with such a fearsome being, and that the struggle would be fierce. For it can be assumed that since the Manlet has no sensory system, it has for guidance but the pure Real; it thus has an advantage over us man who must always provide ourselves with a homunculus in our heads in order to turn that Real into a reality.

Jacques Lacan, on the "lamella"

94 Proverbs 7:1-27: Text and Translation

bēnē šēmōr 'ōmarāy 1 My son, keep my words;
amiswōtay tispo n 석akah  and my commandments hide within you.
šēmōr miswōtay vehēyēḥ 2 Keep my commandments and live,
7. The Limit-Essence of Wisdom

\[ wtoriti k'es\on enek\a \]
\[ qosrim al-esb\a\a\aat \]
\[ kothem al-lah libbek\a \]
\[ 'm\or lashomah \a\a\aat \]
\[ um\d\a\a\a labn\a\a\a tigr\a\a \]
\[ li\smork\a m\e\s\s\s zar\a \]
\[ minnochyy\a \a\am\a\a\a heh\a\a\a\a \]

my teaching as close as the black of your eye.\(^1\)

Bind them upon your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.

Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister," and as kin call to understanding so to keep you from the Strange-Woman,\(^2\) from the foreign-woman who smooths her words.\(^3\)

\[ ki b'hall\a\a bett \]
\[ be\ad esnabbi niq\a\a\aat \]
\[ wa\a\ere\\a\a bapp't\a\aat \]
\[ ab\a\a\a\a babb\a\a\aat \]
\[ na\a\ar hasar-l\a\e\b \]
\[ \d\b\erd ba\d\s\a\q \d\s\a\el pinn\a\h \]
\[ w\d\a\der b\a\et\a\a yi\a\e\aat \]
\[ be\a\e\e\e\a be\e\eb \y\a\m \]
\[ k'es\on lay\a\a wa\a\a\a\a pe\a\aat \]
\[ w\hinn\a\h is\a\a\h l\a\a\a\a\a to\]
\[ \d\l\d z\a\e\n\a\h \a\e\e\a\e\a\a\a\a\a\a ler\b \]
\[ h\a\m\a\i\a\i\y\a\h h\a\\a w\a\a\e\d\a\e\a\a\e\e \]

For at the window of my house through my lattice I looked out.

I saw with the unwise, I perceived with the boys, a lad without sense:

crossing the street next to her corner, on the way to her house he marches, at twilight, at the setting of the day, in the black of night and darkness.

And behold a woman to meet him— a harlot’s dress and a guarded heart

\[ h\a\m\a\i\a\i\y\a\h h\a\\a w\a\a\e\d\a\e\a\a\a\a\a\a\a \]

She is loud, and bold.

\(^1\)The problem with rendering k'es\on enek\a according to the English idiom “as the apple of your eye” is the way it obscures the connection with v 9b, which locates the son’s encounter with the Strange-Woman in the “black of night” (b'es\on lay\a\a\h).

\(^2\)The common rendering of is\a\s\a z\a\e\a\a h along the lines of “unfaithful wife” or “wife of another” or the “loose woman” [cf. WALTKE (2004, 362), SCOTT (1965, 61), the NRSV, and \textit{passim}] is \textit{absolutely indefensible}. These are not, as is often claimed, derivable from the LXX, which reads γυναικὸς ἀλλοτρίας. The adjective ἀλλότριος, meaning other or foreign, is declined according to the feminine form, indicating the woman’s own alterity and not the “other man” to which she allegedly belongs. Or, responding the other strategy, it is not right to extend the lexical meaning of ἀλλότριος to include the sense of “belonging to another.” Luke 16:12, which is cited in support of this reading, is a specious point of comparison, for the sense of ἀλλότριος in this verse is determined by the substantive use of a dative case—“And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another (ἐν ᾗ ἀλλοτρίῳ)”—and so is irrelevant to the Greek of Prov 7:5.

\(^3\)The same distorting tendency at work in the translation of is\a\s\a z\a\e\a\a h is evident in translations of nokriyy\a (i.e. “unchaste,” “adulteress,” “seductress,” “wayward”) that assimilate the
b̄bētāh lō-yašk̄nā raglēħā
pa'am bāhās pa'am bār̄hōbāt
wēēšel kol-pinnāh tešrōb
wēhešēqtāh bó wēnāšqāh-lā
hēēzāh pānēhā watōmar lō

Her feet don’t rest at home:
now in the street, now in the squares,
beside each corner she waits.

She holds him fast and kisses him.
Steeling herself, she speaks to him:

zibhē šlāmūm 'ālāy
hāyōm šillāmītn nēdārāy
'al-kēn yāsātū ḫiqātekā
lēšāhēr pānēkhā wēvēmāsēkkā
marbabdām rābadīt 'arṣē
hīṭubōt ēṯān mēṣrāyīm
napṭī mēskōbī
mōr ṣēḥlīm wēqinnāmōn
lēkāh nirweh dōdīm
'ad-habbōqer niwālēsēah bābēhābtī

Sacrifices of peace were upon me,
yet today I completed my vows.
So I come, calling to you,
seeking your company I have found you.

With coverings I have covered my bed,
of the colored threads of Egypt.
I have sprinkled my bed
with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
Come let us drink our fill of love,
until the morning let us enjoy our lovemaking.

kt ūn hātšā bēbētō
hālak bēderek mērāhōq
šērōr-hakkēseph lōqāh bēyādō
lēyōm hakkēseph yābōh bētō
hiṭṭattā bērōb līqāhā
bēḥēlēq šĒpēthā tagēthēnā
hōlēk ahērēhā pītēm
kēšōr ēl-tābah yābōh
ākešwil ēl-mūṣar ekes
'ad yēfālah hēs kēbēdō
kēmāhēr šippōr ēl-pāh
wēlō-yādaš kē-bēpanse hō

For there is no man in his house;
he has gone on a far journey.
A sack of money he took in his hand;
at the day of the full-moon he enters his house.

She turned him with the abundance of her teaching;
with the smoothness of her voice she compelled him.
Going after her suddenly,
like an ox to slaughter he enters,
like a fool to the bounds of his chains.4
Till an arrow pierces his liver—
like the speeding of a bird to a trap—
and does not know that it is his life.

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strangeness to sexual promiscuity.
4This verse half is difficult. I follow DeLITZSCH (1874, 169) in transposing the nouns of the clause, i.e. wēkešwil ēl-mūṣar ekes rather than the extant ēkešwil ēl-mūṣar, the MT.
w^eattāh bānēm šīmā-lē 24 And now children, listen to me, and pay attention to the words of my mouth.
w^eḥaqšūlā l^e-imrē-pā
'al-yē‰t 'el-d^e rakēhā libbekā 25 Let not your mind be turned to her ways; do not stray onto her ways.
'al-tē‰t bintībētēhā
kā-rabbēm ḫālīm ḥippēlāh 26 For many she has cast down wounded; and mighty are all who were slain by her.
wa-'ašūmēm kol-h^e rûgēhā
darkē š^e‰ ol bētāh 27 The way of Sheol is her house, descending to the rooms of death.
yūrdōt 'el-hadrē-māwet

95 **Between two objects**

**A syntactical reference point** As was the procedure in the analysis of Prov 1:22-33, I want to submit this passage to a careful examination on the question of how it dispenses subjects and objects, a dispensation that we expect will be complicated by the pedagogical device of an embedded story. (Just as with Woman-Wisdom’s first speech, the content of which was embedded in the father’s reportage.) As with many of the father’s lectures, the first thing is to set forth the purpose what follows. In the case of Prov 7:

...to keep you from the Strange-Woman, from the foreign-woman whose words flatter.

(7:5)

The “syntactical” reading I am proposing will necessarily depart from the picture one gets reading the story as a whole, in which the story’s subject is the lad. It is his emerging subjectivity that is at stake as it undergoes a “trial of desire.” We are thus provisionally to imagine him suspended, even if only for a brief moment, between two compelling objects of desire, into which are respectively invested his desire to be wise and thus gain the approval of the father who gazes from an upper window, and his (foolish) libidinal desire for the Strange-Woman. The outcome remains open until his dramatic and abrupt demise in v 22, “Going after her suddenly (pi‰ tōm)

...”

It is not as pedantic as it seems to insist at this point upon a terminological specification apropos the phrase “object of desire,” desire at this point having been
defined in a very specific way that presupposes a Symbolic orientation. Desire, as we have understood it, is the ceaseless, metonymic movement of the subject (S) between signifiers, so that every desire is at root the desire for recognition, for the impossible point of coincidence when I arrive at my proper place in the Symbolic order and from that perspective desire properly: I desire what one who is wise desires.

The exigencies of the object  In this precise sense, there is no object of desire, for the object is stricto sensu beyond the signifier and so beyond desire. On the one hand, then, to the extent that the son encounters the object (say for example the father as the unbridled Law-Giver who is nonetheless beyond the law, whose agency is pure enjoyment;\(^5\) or the Strange-Woman as the bearer of an alien feminine jouissance that has no place in the Symbolic order) qua object (de-linked from the differential ration of meaning) his desire (which is to say his position in the big Other, which is to say his social belonging, which is to say his subjectivity as such, and so on) risks being eclipsed by jouissance. But, on the other hand, one cannot simply dispense with the object. Recalling what is for Lacan the fundamental form

\(^5\)We need not be speculative, nor anachronistic (at least not very anachronistic), to imagine how such an encounter might be staged in the idiom of the Bible. Job's encounter with God, which is entirely contemporaneous to the shattering of his Symbolic world, is written as the unbearable proximity of the object. God's unrelenting gaze ("Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?" [7:19-20 cf. 7:8, 10:6, 14:3, 6]) and oppressive hand ("Withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me!" [13:21, cf. 9:33, 19:21, 23:2]) are manifestations of God's unmediated jouissance. Always it is Job trying to construct some Symbolic frame by which to return God's being to the frame of meaning. Always the frame appears ridiculous in its juxtaposition with God's immediate capacity to enjoy. Job's resignation is put explicitly in these terms: "I would state my case," goes Job's repeated refrain, "...but he is alone, and who will restrain him. What his appetite desires, thus it does (\(w^n\)ap\(\delta\)i \(r\)\(\nu\)\(w\)t\(\alpha\)h \(w\)\(a\)y\(\gamma\)\(\alpha\)s)."

The association between the impossibility of mediation and the provocation of anxiety is one Lacan established in his early articulations of the Real, "an anxiety provoking apparition of an image which summarizes what we can call the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the Real, of the Real lacking any possible mediation, of the ultimate Real, of the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence."  

of discourse

\[
S_1 \rightarrow S_2 \\
\frac{S}{\lor a}
\]

we have situated the object [the object \((a)\)] as its product. At the same time, the object as the signifiers supplement of enjoyment seals the Symbolic identification, compelling the subject in the manner of cause. The relations between discourse and the object are thus strained at best, discourse requiring for its coherence sure evidence of the existence of the object, whose presence must nevertheless be held in permanent abeyance.

96 The gaze and the eye

The logic of re-mark Before we can grapple with the father as an object of desire (taking into account all the caveats that were just now rehearsed) we are confronted first with his subjectivity. Of course this is an expected feature of the "lecture" form—the father consistently begins each of his speeches with reference to his credentials and, in light of this, to the proper posture of the son. This moment of orientation takes place prior to the content of the lecture, which (again, not surprisingly) turns to the world of objects and the third person speech that best suits a description thereof.\(^6\) However, in Prov 7 it is not between the introduction (exordium) and the story (lesson) that we find the shift in perspective. Rather, the introductory first-person discourse

- my son, my words, my commandments (v 1)
- my commandments, my teaching (v 2)

continues into the story itself

- my house, my lattice, I looked out (v 6)
- I saw, I perceived (v 7)

at least until the hinneh\(^7\) in v 10, after which the father recedes from the scene he narrates.

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\(^6\)Fox (2000, 45) formalizes the distinction I am drawing in terms of an exordium and the lesson.

\(^7\)Taking hinneh as formal indication of a first-person perspective, indicating the self-identification of the speaker.
I want to open up the analysis of the text with two examples from the domain of cinema, following the lead of S. Žižek, who frequently explicates the most abstruse dimensions of philosophy and psychoanalytic theory with reference to film. In the first case, Žižek is speaking of the Derrida’s reappropriation of Mallarme’s notion of the re-mark, the way that in every signifying structure (the elements of which, in Derrida’s way of putting things, are a series of “marks” bearing meaning) there must be “an additional tropological movement by which the same mark refers to what demarcates the marks, to the blanks between the marks that relate the different marks to each other.”  

(This, we now recognize, is the function of the Master-Signifier (S1), which indelibly “re-marks” the series of signifiers (S2) as its predicates.) Žižek notes,

A homologous inversion is often practised by Alfred Hitchcock—in The Birds, for example, the famous panoramic shot from great height of a small town in which a fire has just burst out. Suddenly, a lone bird enters the frame from behind the camera; soon it is joined by a couple, followed by the entire flock. The same shot is thus re-marked. What seemed at first to be an establishing shot of the entire scene, taken from a “neutral,” objective point of view, is subjectivized and proved to be the threatening view of the birds themselves of their victims.

Proverbs 7 stages the same reversal of figure and ground, though in precisely the opposite direction—the subjectivization of what we mistakenly took to be an objective perspective on “X as a whole” is inverted, so that the father’s particular, subjective perspective gradually dissolves into an objective retelling of what happened. The scene begins,

For into the window of my house
through my lattice I looked out.
I saw with the unwise,
I perceived with the boys,
a lad without sense.

(7.6-7)

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9 Žižek, For They Know Not What They Do, 77.
There is no ambiguity as to whose perspective first gives us the son.\textsuperscript{10} Three times the father speaks as an "I"; three times a verb of vision is interposed between the reader and the street below—I looked, I saw, I perceived—and as if to underscore the concrete nature of the mediation, the vision is passed through two material barriers: through the window, through the lattice. This renders the objects (the lad and the Strange-Woman) in a highly subjectivized fashion: just as we see the town through the eyes of the birds, we see the son through the eyes of the father.

\textbf{A re-re-mark} We may perceive the father beyond the 1st person pronouns as far as the \textit{hinneh} in v 10, but beyond that he is elided from the scene. (The father’s re-emergence in v 24 does not contradict this, for at that point he is not longer “in” the scene, but rather he sums the lesson for his students, those for whom the story is told as an object lesson. “Now boys listen to me...pay attention to what I’m saying...”) Verses 10b-13 present the Strange-Woman from the panoramic God’s-eye-view; in vv 14-21 the Strange-Woman speaks as an "I" and addresses the son exclusively as a “you”; and vv 21-23 return to the panoramic view of an omniscient narrator. The filmic sequence we must imagine, then, is a convergence between two initially disparate points of view: starting somewhere behind the father’s shoulder, zooming in on the back of his head, until we are finally positioned exactly behind his eye.\textsuperscript{11} The subtle distinction between perspective and eye is grounded in the fundamental structure of Lacan’s \textit{gaze} as that impossible point of view that looks out from \textit{behind} the eye; the eye is rendered as an objective organ that lies \textit{within} the gaze’s field of vision.

\textbf{The gaze as object (a)} The logic of ideological interpellation rests, in part, on this split which isolates the \textit{gaze} from the eye, whereby the “eye [becomes] only

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\textsuperscript{10}On the question of “the woman at the window” see below, note 70 on page 343 and the accompanying figure (7.3) on page 344.

\textsuperscript{11}There are of course cinematic versions of this movement, though it is much more difficult visually convey the melding of two initially distinct points of view. One thinks, for example, of the first appearance of the title character in the Wachowski brother’s \textit{V for Vendetta}. \textit{V} wears a mask for (almost) the entire movie. Only for a moment is he unmasked, though not to afford us a cathartic glimpse of his burned, disfigured face. We look rather from his perspective at the \textit{inside} of the mask he holds in his hands; we look \textit{at} its concave surface, \textit{at} the ovals of light that come through the eye-holes. As he raises the mask to his face, its the eye-holes enlarge to fill the screen

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the metaphor of something that I would prefer to call the seer's 'shoot' (pousse)—something prior to his eye...In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze.”

The persistence of this impossibly elusive object recalls us to the way Lacan structured the master's discourse, whose “underside” is the absolute disjunction between subject and object (S ∨ a). Consequently, in order to understand the compulsion of interpellation it is not enough to “deconstruct” the Master-Signifier, to unveil its bearer as an imposter, to note its tautological emptiness, and to refer its efficacy to the pure “performativity” of the utterance. It is not enough insofar as it neglects the way such a fragile structure is supported by an object into which its impossibilities are cathected. Or, said another way, there is no desire (desire being strictly correlative to the Symbolic, the mortification of the body by the signifier, the paternal prohibition of the maternal object, etc.) without the surplus of desire—the desire for some ineffable substance produced in the operations of signification. The substance, we know by now, is jouissance, to which all the manifestations of object (a) stand as more or less provisional representatives. “In so far as the gaze, qua objet a, may come to symbolize this central lack expression in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an objet a reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance, an ignorance so characteristic of all progress in thought that occurs in the way constituted by philosophical research.”

Which we might translate into the particular idiom of Proverbs as follows: The wise subject is attached to the Symbolic field only via a shared point of lack [the phenomenon of castration], whose place is held by an aptly named signifier, the fear of Yhwh. This particular nomenclature is found persuasive by the interpellated subject, at least in part, in that it labels his anxious encounter with this [punctiform, evanescent] gaze, now grasped onto (inasmuch as one can grasp what has no body) as a pretext for his fear.

and then disappear—the perspectives of the mask and of the masked man dissolve into one.


13 LACAN, Seminar XI, 77.
From this we glean a rough idea of one objective pole of the lad’s desire. And even with this first approach (soon to be complicated) there are some subtle distinctions that have been made. The son’s desire for wisdom is objectively sustained neither by the Symbolic Father (who is not an object and cannot be put-in-scene) nor by the empirical father (whose shortcomings are undoubtedly too conspicuous) nor even by the paternal eye as comforting icon of his sagacious oversight. It is rather the gaze that shoots from a point behind the eye that the re-marking of this scene (the father’s effacement as a subject and the subsequent emergence of an “objective” view of things) has effected. Were the trajectory of this gaze to be understood, were its intent clear, the son’s desire would be satisfied. As inherently impossible to discern, however, the gaze is for the son the object cause of desire.

97 The voice

And what of the other pole—are its devices so subtle or can we not simply chalk it up to the teenage libido, which on its best days might might mount a feeble and token attempt to resist the seduction that is orchestrated by the Strange-Woman. As a thought experiment, let us read line by line, willing ourselves to occupy the position of the lad who does not know with whom he speaks.

Line by line I begin at v 11, whereupon according to our reading the father has been eclipsed as a diegetic presence. Our attention now fixates on the unfolding drama, whose opening gestures we watch at some remove in vv 11-13,

She is loud, and bold.
Her feet don’t rest at home:
now in the street, now in the squares,
beside each corner she waits.
She holds him tight and kisses him.
Steeling herself, she speaks to him.

(7:11-13)

but whose dialogue, beginning in v 14, addresses us directly.
Sacrifices of peace were upon me,
yet today I completed my vows.
So I come, calling to you,
seeking your company I have found you.

(7:14-15)

The effect of this juxtaposition, is it not, is to allow us, the readers, to identify with the lad’s desire as it orients itself to two sources of data: (1) the objective background information of vv 11-13, and (2) the highly subjective and personal encounter described in vv 14-15. This orientation takes place, it is understood, in the shadow of what is arguably, from Proverbs’ point of view, the crucial question that every “lad” must in time answer. *Who is speaking? Which Woman is it?*

What do we learn? Are the reports congruent? Does the “word on the street” match up to “my own experience”? We must conclude yes; in both cases the same constellation of character traits emerge: a woman exceedingly volatile and assertive; she is restless and in constant motion; at home in the city, she seeks out the public spaces of street, square, corner and temple. And of course what is most striking about this Woman is the intensity of her desire: taking the form of affection, perhaps of religious zeal, but more relevant to the lad’s desire (and via the identification that has been established, our desire) her yearning for “me.”

Let us go two further steps before we attempt some sort of synthesis by which to assign her a value with respect to Wisdom.

With coverings I have covered my bed,
of the colored threads of Egypt.
I have sprinkled my bed
with myrrh, aloe and cinnamon.
Come let us drink our fill of love,
until the morning let us enjoy our lovemaking.

(16-18)

To state the obvious, any ambiguity about the nature of the Woman’s desire (a kiss, an embrace, the orchestration of a meeting—all leaving its aim somewhat open) is in these verses laid to rest. The eroticism of the scene is exquisitely detailed, and indeed in the Bible only the Song of Solomon is as free in enumerating the sensual
possibilities of love: its smells, its tactial luxuries, its gustatory savor.\textsuperscript{14} And then, lamentably, the scene is (a third time) re-marked by the not very subtle appearance of conjugal infidelity.

For there is not man in his house
he has gone on a far journey.
A sack of money he took in his hand;
only at the full moon will he come home.

(7:19-20)

I say "lamentable" in a specific sense: having striven to identify with the lad's desire and so keep the interpretative situation open, we reach a point where the text confines us to the depressing and depressingly cliched situation of an unhappy marriage—a lonely wife whose husband is away on a business trip.

The draining of Symbolic efficacy I want to stop here, what seems to me a liminal space in the narrative: the cards have been played, but still the lad has not acted. To consider he is momentarily frozen in his ethical quandary requires taking the character seriously, as sincere in his desire to discern who is speaking. My impression is that on the whole he is not afforded this dignity but is read instead as a simplistic cartoon drawn for the benefit of unsophisticated novitiates. And of course correlative to this reading of the lad is an assumption that the woman's overtures are blunt and plainly marked as bad. The two most substantial commentaries (in English) published in the last years give the general picture:

- her loud voice is taken as the sign of interior discord;\textsuperscript{15}
- her resolve as brazen disregard for communal values;\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14}On the broader generic connections, see MICHAEL FOX, \textit{The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Songs}. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

\textsuperscript{15}The narrator can penetrate the woman's inner character... she is by nature homiyyakh, noisy, boisterous, and unsettled... rather than quite and composed, as a proper woman must be." FOX, Proverbs 1-9, 244. "The sage by his powers of keen observation and cogent reflection exposes two more characteristics of the unrestrained wife's inner disposition. She is unruły (hōmiyyāḥ) denotes the confused mixture of loud noise and ceaseless movement." WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 374.

\textsuperscript{16}A harlot, living in defiance of social mores, is inured to public contempt." FOX, Proverbs 1-9, 245. "And she is \textit{defiant} indicates her rebellion against propriety for a life of profiagacy." WALTKE, Proverbs 1-15, 375.
• her movement throughout cityscape as waywardness;\textsuperscript{17}

• her encounter with the lad as rape;\textsuperscript{18}

• her religion as false appearance;\textsuperscript{19}

• her love as degraded lust.\textsuperscript{20}

What is depicted in readings such as Fox’s and Waltke’s is a structure of nearly pure Symbolic efficacy, the ambivalence of certain signifiers stabilized in a total picture befitting the \textit{a priori} wicked character of the Strange-Woman. The position to which such \textit{a priori} knowledge avails itself is that of the subject supposed to know, which one need not dismiss as “mere patriarchal ideology” to see that it is nevertheless the very opposite position than the one occupied by the lad, i.e. the subject who \textit{wants to know}. Or at least that is the claim I’m making and will now try to support.

From the lad’s perspective, I would say, the experience of listening to or of reading (and re-reading) the text is accompanied by the \textit{draining} of Symbolic efficacy. The more the lad determines to pay careful attention, to listen to every nuance of the woman’s speech, the \textit{less} certain he is. The logic is akin to the operations of the super-ego, whereby the more one strives to obey the internalized command, the more one uncovers hitherto unrecognized depths of depravity.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{17}Her behavior is a perversion of the Shulammite’s search for her beloved in the Song of Songs... She habitually roams about looking for sexual prey.” \textsc{Fox}, Proverbs 1-9, 244, 246. “She lurks at every favorable spot to meet her john... as a lustful woman on the prowl, not as a godly wife building her home.” \textsc{Waltke}, Proverbs 1-15, 375.

\textsuperscript{18}This woman is rapacious, a predator of young men.” \textsc{Fox}, Proverbs 1-9, 245. “Her direct and bold acts reveal her tyrannical resolve to conquer her victim.” \textsc{Waltke}, Proverbs 1-15, 376.

\textsuperscript{19}She uses the cultic details as an embellishment for her actual desires, thereby covering them in a thin religious veneer.” \textsc{Fox}, Proverbs 1-9, 246. “She presents herself not as the strumpet she is but as part of an orderly society, and she exhibits her impudence by covering her lust with a religious motivation.” \textsc{Waltke}, Proverbs 1-15, 376.

\textsuperscript{20}The skilled seducer plays to the boy’s ego by claiming intense longing for him, him alone. She perverts the motif of seeking the beloved.” \textsc{Fox}, Proverbs 1-9, 247. “The merchant’s wife was willing to spend all this [referring to the expense of the linens and perfumes] to gratify her fervid sexual passion.” \textsc{Waltke}, Proverbs 1-15, 379.

\textsuperscript{21}The non-intuitive structure of the super-ego is, for me, easier to grasp in the structure of “radical evil,” in the fundamentally ethical nature of the projects undertaken by the likes of Sade
To read with him line by line—in step with his tight focus on the absolutely contemporaneous moment of enunciation, trying to coordinate what he hears with a (partial) map of Wisdom’s lexical terrain—is to relinquish the position of knowledge so as to interpret from the position of uncertainty. It is to take a second glance at a phrase once confidently comprehended, only to look back again and again at the behest of a gnawing doubt. The following phrases, for example, warrant a re-reading as to their “obvious” significance.

She is loud, and bold. This is, in the light of the sages’ “powers of keen observation,” a negative trait, a mark against this woman, and a manifestation of inner chaos. It suggests she is “unsettled” and “unruly” in contrast to the “proper woman” who is “quiet and composed.” This is clear enough apart from the unsettling confusion introduced by Woman-Wisdom’s own direct attachment to the same signifier. *At the head of the hōmmiyōt she calls out* (1:21). Is she at the head of the noisy streets? cities? crossroads? Is she, perhaps, the queen of the loud women? How does the status of this woman here as hōmiyyāh position her with respect to Woman-Wisdom? In opposition? That would be peculiar.

She holds him fast and kisses him. We saw how her embrace (*w̱heḥṭṣiqāh bāḥ*) and kiss (*w̱näsqāh-llāḥ*) were read over the malevolent undertones of sexual predation and even rape. Again there is a discrepancy, as both ḥzq and ṇṣq carry only positive associations in Proverbs. “[Woman-Wisdom ] is a tree of life for those who hold fast to her (lammah ṣiqām bāḥ)” (3:18). Elsewhere the father charges the son, “Hold fast to discipline (ḥah “ṣēq bammāsār)!” (4:13). The thing you hold is what you think is precious, what one cannot afford to lose. It is the same with ṇṣq, which Proverbs uses only one other time: “One who gives an honest answer

or Don Giovanni. That is, the determination to free desire from the restraints of ethics—to sleep with the most women, to experience the basest forms of pleasure, to violate the most sacrosanct social norms—devolves (or elevates, either way) into a grim determination no less austere than that of the Puritan. Sade’s principled pursuit of pleasure thus mirrors the ascetic zeal of the desert fathers and not at all the bourgeois aspirations to Gemütlichkeit.

Fox translates 1:21: “At the bustling crossroads: Wisdom calls from the busiest places. ‘Crossroads’ are literally the ‘the head of the bustling (roads),’ in other words, the point at the city gate from which the roads fan out into the city. Hōmiyyōt ’bustling, noisy’ is a noun only hear. I disagree with Fox on this point. On what basis could one judge that hōmiyyōt is a noun and not a feminine plural participle?] It is elliptical for ‘bustling roads.’” Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 97.
gives a kiss on the lips" (24:26). The gesture signifies an open affection, quite at odds with the ulterior motives we have been assured are driving this woman.

Let us drink our fill of love. The crime alleged here is the woman's "servid sexual passion." She endeavors to gulp (mirveh) what we assume the proprietous sage might think to sip. Though, to be fair, the father instructs the son otherwise in the case of the right woman, "the woman of your youth." In that case he urges, "May her breasts fill you up always (داددهای "راووکای بکل-ئی); by her love may you always be intoxicated (ب"احد "بئاه تیسچه ثم‌تیم)" (5:18). This is simply to make the point that the sages did not find sexual exuberance per se to be problematic.

With coverings I have covered my bed. This, taken together with the liberal use of expensive spices, was read as a crass display of materialism, another stratagem of the woman to lure the lad into her lair. The words for "covering" (marbadâm) and "to cover" (rdb) are difficult, occurring only here and one other place in the Bible. In Prov 31:10, we discover that the maker of these rare fixtures is the "woman of valor," who is to a high degree, both on semantic and poetic grounds, linked to Woman-Wisdom. "[The woman of valor (ئیسر-هایشیل) ] makes herself coverings (marbadâm); her clothing is fine linen and purple" (31:22)—thus giving us occasion to ponder the nuanced difference between crass materialism and virtuous industry.23

Now in the street, now in the squares, beside each corner. Curiously, it is the characterization of the woman in constant, restless motion that evokes the sharpest criticism, at least from her modern detractors. To rehearse what we referenced earlier in a footnote, Fox (2000, 244, 246) ascribes to her wandering a wicked and in fact aggressive motive: "Her behavior is a perversion of the Shulammite's search for her beloved in the Song of Songs... She habitually roams about looking for sexual prey." In even more disparaging language, Waltke (2004, 375) locates the Strange-Woman's unsettledness in antithetical opposition to godliness. "She lurks at every favorable spot to meet her jehol... as a lustful woman on the prowl, not as a godly wife building her home." Patriarchal anxiety about women "loose" in public spheres is a well-documented phenomenon, and it is certainly probable that a "lad" acculturated in such a society would have understood this to a greater or

23 On the role of women in the Persian Period textile industry see the comments above (¶ 35 on
7. The Limit-Essence of Wisdom

lesser degree as aberrant. That said, the location(s) of the Strange-Woman is surely the feature of the father’s lesson the lad must find perplexing, the specification that stands as the greatest obstacle to the certain verdict, This one is bad.

For it is from the particular angle of location—collating the handful of signifiers that tell us where Woman-Wisdom speaks and how we are to enter this space with her—that the verses introducing the son to the Strange-Woman (7:11-13) must be evaluated from a pedagogical standpoint catastrophic, inscribing an uncanny symmetry where we assume the father meant to establish absolute difference.

A narrative of redemption? The signifiers of place, of encounter, and of seeking and finding are arranged in the following parallel structure.

1:20a ḫāṣ bahāṣ
1:20b ṭeḥōḇ bārēḥōḇōt
1:21 ḫmḥ bērōš hōmiyyōt
...
1:28a qr: ūāz yāqūnֱט nē wēlō·ē·neḥ
1:28b šhr yēšāhֱט runֱט nē wēlō yāmāšūnֱט mš

7:11a ḫmḥ hōmiyyāh ḥv
7:12a ḫāṣ bahāṣ
7:12b ṭeḥōḇ bārēḥōḇōt
...
7:15a qr: ʾal-kēn yāsūṯt liqāṭeḵā
7:15b šhr lēšaḥēr pānēḵā wāemšāēkkā
mš

Figure 7.1: The misplaced Utopian possibilities of Prov 7.

page 136) and more comprehensively YODER, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance.
Inscribed within this basic ("cartoonish" we said earlier) assurance of essential difference are the lineaments, in fact, of a narrative of redemption. The site of past calamity is invoked; the figure of the not-yet-wise boy filled anew (the role of the peti seamlessly taken over by the na'ar); and a woman's voice is heard after a long silence. The failed relationship of Prov 1

They will call me, but I will not answer.

They will seek me but not find me.

(1:28)

is revived by the gracious initiative of the Woman.

So I come, calling to you

seeking your company I have found you

(7:15)

It is too much—an overreading I know. Too many elements of the text are elided, the inclusion of which would wreck the fantasy.24 The Woman has just told the lad (whose place I, the reader, am in also) that her husband would be gone for the foreseeable future. Well she didn’t use precisely those words. She said, using quite awkward diction all things considered, “There is no man in his house.” Whose house? Is it her husband?25

I am trying to make palpable, or even just conceivable, the impossibility (the lad’s and ours) of maintaining certainty. In rousing ourselves to master the exact nuance of the teaching, we are compelled by connections exceeding what the father wanted to say. In seeking to shore up these new conceptual and semantic resonances we unwittingly disturb points of disjunction on what had been solid ground. This is the twofold movement I have in mind, when I interpret the lad’s conspicuous inaction (after verse 20, having heard about the man’s absence) as a moment of total paralysis. And I am reminded of the p'tay'im who failed to navigate the narrow path he was to|k to follow—to turn-back without back-turning, to live securely by eschewing security, to fear and thus be delivered of fearful living.

24It should be noted, on the other hand, in our encounter with Woman-Wisdom’s speech, we came across elements which “wrecked the fantasy,” Woman-Wisdom’s Schadenfreude being chief among these.

25Rashi’s novel proposal as to the identity of “the man” vigorously and healthily unsettles our assumptions. He thinks that the man is God, having left his house (Israel) as an unsuitable habitat.
98 **Excursus 3: The Textualization of Revelation**

We leave the lad for a moment, frozen in his indecision as it were, with the thought that questions raised by a particular historical phenomenon might help us understand his suicidal final move.

I have alluded to the work of Karel van der Toorn (see note 126 on page 75), whose thesis about the scribal "invention of revelation" bears directly upon the literary function of the woman's voice and the father's gaze. Van der Toorn begins with the following paradox: Judaism, the quintessential "religion of the book," originates in an oral culture, a society in which writing and reading would have held significance for a very small segment of the population. "They [the scribes who wrote the Bible] practiced their craft in a time in which there was neither trade in books nor a reading public of any substance."26 The growing significance of the Torah qua book (I mean for the Jewish population as a whole) is by van der Toorn separated entirely from the notion of a broadly literate culture. "To the public at large, the books of the Bible were icons of a body of knowledge accessible only through the oral instruction presented by religious experts."27 This iconic quality of the book, i.e. the book as an objectal manifestation of the sacred, is indicated (positively) in Neh 8:5, whereupon the opening and reading of the Bible (apart from the dimension of understanding, which occurs at a subsequent moment28) is ritually marked as a moment of religious significance: "And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up." The same sacred quality is demonstrated negatively in 1 Macc 1:56, the destruction of the physical Bible being one of Antiochus's noteworthy desecrations: "The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire."

I want to acknowledge but then move past an important critique of van der Toorn's argument as to the scribal and therefore literary quality of the biblical texts. for God's own Glory. For the reference see Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 248.

26 Van der Toorn, 2. 27 Van der Toorn, 2, emphasis added.

28 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation.
Namely, there is a compellingly constructed thesis that maintains the oral origins of the biblical texts (a rootage van der Toorn would not deny) are everywhere evident, indelibly marking the written record as the record of an oral tradition. Arguments along these lines,\textsuperscript{29} give us cause to pause over van der Toorn's sharp distinction between orality and literacy, as when he writes, "Scribal production was based on literacy and texts, i.e. documents—comparable in sophistication to the medieval monasteries."\textsuperscript{30} On the basis of what justification could one overlook the problematic assertion and maintenance of this distinction, the blurring of which seems \textit{prima facie} to diminish the importance van der Toorn ascribes to the scribal handling of prior oral traditions?

I would say that the "persistence of orality" \textit{within} the written record yet marks a decisive change in the locus of meaning, a change we have already raised in distinguishing \textit{énonciation}, the moment of speech, and \textit{énoncé}, the content of what is said. In other words, van der Toorn does not over-emphasize the difference introduced by "scribal culture," even if at times he misrepresents it as the difference between oral and literary production. Regarding much of the Bible, we should speak instead of the difference between spoken orality and written orality, i.e. the marks of oral performance preserved in many written texts.

This brings us to van der Toorn's strongest and undoubtedly most innovative thesis, that a radically different notion of revelation—revelation as reconceived by the Second Temple scribes—provides the ideological underpinning that justifies the transfer of authority from the oral to the written word.

Van der Toorn's demonstrations of scribal production are most compellingly illustrated in texts that have not generally been associated with a scribal ethos, i.e. the law and the prophets as opposed to wisdom literature or, even more broadly,


\textsuperscript{30}Van der Toorn, 140.
the writings. In successive chapters, van der Toorn traces two parallel transformations: (1) of Deuteronomy, from the enactment of a political treaty to the “Book of the Torah”; and (2) of Jeremiah, from oracular theater to prophetic scroll. In both cases the locus of revelation (and consequentially the locus of religious authority) is removed from the contemporaneous event. “When the notion of revelation is transferred from the spoken word to the written text, the concept gains a new significance. ...Since the written text has an objective existence outside its producers and consumers, it is a source of authority by itself. Where, before, religious specialists derived their legitimacy from the revelation they possessed in person, they now have to refer to the sum of knowledge laid down in a body of texts. The related changes in the concept of revelation affected the nature and the role of religious experts: revelation became the province of scribes and scholars; the art of interpretation supplanted the gift of intuition.” It would not be far-fetched to posit the same trajectory of Proverbs, whose individual proverbs it is taken for granted belonged not only to a book but to uncountable oral performances on the lips of parents and teachers. This is to say that Proverbs, like Deuteronomy and like Jeremiah, is subject to the same process of congealment: from voice to text, from performance to object.

Two results of van der Toorn’s work resonate with arguments made by this study: one he explicitly draws and one we extrapolate.

1. The scribal construct of revelation, which van der Toorn has aphoristically described as “an object rather than an interaction,” is coterminous with the instantiation of transcendence as the basis of scribal authority. “According to the new paradigm of revelation,” van der Toorn notes, “it is from the gods; from the

31There are notable exceptions to this rule of thumb. See Moshe Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972. Also relevant to the scribal nature of the Pentateuch is the thesis of Blum (1990), taken up and expanded by Blenkinsopp (1992) and Alpert (1994). Finally, following the model of Fichtner (1975), there are a host of local arguments as to the scribal character of this or that particular prophet.

32Van der Toorn, chaps. 6, 7. 33Van der Toorn, 206-207.

34This in no way reverses my earlier insistence pace Golka that the Book of Proverbs, once constituted as such, irreversibly alters the meaning of individual proverbs in their literary context.

35Van der Toorn, 231.
time before the Flood; and from an extraterrestrial place that ordinary humans can never reach.\textsuperscript{36} This displacement of an immanent, processual notion of revelation, van der Toorn thinks, reflects the ascendancy of scribalism in a particular historical context. In support of this, he points to analogous formal shifts in Mesopotamian and biblical traditions. The “scribalization” of a textual tradition like \textit{Gilgamesh},\textsuperscript{37} introduces the same trope of transcendence as does the “Torah version” of Deuteronomy, which concludes with what van der Toorn reads as a colophon:

\begin{quote}
The hidden things belong to \textit{YHWH} our God; but the things that have been revealed belong to us and to our children, that we may do all the words of this Torah.

\textit{(Deut 29:28)}
\end{quote}

Van der Toorn attributes the following significance to these verses. “In the presentation of the Torah Edition, then, the text of Deuteronomy is a Torah—that is, an instruction—by Moses, the legendary founder of the nation; that instruction, moreover, is not based on human insight but has been revealed (a passive form of the verb \textit{gālā}) by God.”\textsuperscript{38} It is on the basis of this reversal, the written now more “authentic” with respect to the essence of revelation,\textsuperscript{39} that van der Toorn locates with Deuteronomy and the historical moment of Josiah’s cult reform a fundamental shift in Judaism—a shift whose logic is extended in the notion that God revealed the

\textsuperscript{36}Van der Toorn, 209.

\textsuperscript{37}Van der Toorn contrasts the Old Babylonian edition with “the standard version” put down in 1100 BCE. He notes of the former, “The epic conveys the message that the way to a good life requires acceptance of one’s morality and the mental disposition to enjoy the good things in life.” Van der Toorn, 213. The scribal framing of the newer edition changes this outlook considerably. “The editor has added a prologue of twenty-eight lines in which he pictures Gilgamesh as a man who obtained hidden wisdom, inaccessible to others. ‘He learned the sum of wisdom of everything: he saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden; he brought back a message from before the Flood’ \textit{Gilgamesh} I 1-8. The theme of the prologue returns at the end of the text in tablet XI. That tablet describes the encounter between Gilgamesh and Utanapishtıı, the hero who survived the Flood. This Utanapishtıı ‘reveals’ (\textit{petū}) various secrets, referred to as ‘a hidden matter’ (\textit{amat niyiṭī}) and ‘a secret of the gods’ (\textit{pirišti ša ści}).” Van der Toorn, 213.

\textsuperscript{38}Van der Toorn, 223.

\textsuperscript{39}“Until Deuteronomy, the written word had been an aid in the oral transmission of the tradition; Deuteronomy stands for a reversal of roles: it turns oral exposition into a handmaid of the written text.” Van der Toorn, 225.
Torah to Moses directly via dictation and completed *in extremis* by the Midrash Rabbah, which unflinchingly concludes that God himself consulted the Torah before creating the world.

2. It is clear, from the perspective that understands *lack* as the transcendental condition of discourse, the identification of the totality of revelation with a circumscribed textual corpus should have posed an insurmountable obstacle to the constitution of a coherent Second Temple Judaism. For as long a revelation is attached to a voice—the voice of Sinai, for example—it remains something ephemeral, ungraspable, and, with respect to the categories subjective versus objective, purely liminal. Such an elusive object is never confronted with the contradictions of the signifier, for, as we have mentioned (¶ 5 on page 23) the voice carries a particularity, a quiddity that the text (unchangeable, solidly objective, by necessity *universal*) misses. In this gap between voice and text one can stuff many discrepancies, which, were they brought to light, would not cause the reigning discourse to be somewhat modified but rather topple its fundamental claims.

Does this mean that van der Toorn’s hypothesis is mistaken? No, I do not think so. Apart from the abundant evidence and clear argumentation he marshals for his claims, what he says in many ways resonates what we have identified as the central problem of Proverbs, which can be grasped either (1) as the construction of a unity out of multiplicity, or (2) as the extrapolation of the universal principle from the situated practice. These are the very dynamics van der Toorn finds at the center of the scribal “invention of revelation.”

Do we say then that textualization rendered Second Temple Judaism incoherent?

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40Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly. They used to say three things: ‘Be deliberate in judgement, and bring up many students, and make a fence for the Torah.’ (*Pirke Avot* 1:1) The same structure existed in the Mesopotamian conception of wisdom as the total field of knowledge preserved as *corpus of texts* from the antediluvian age. With great variety as to the details, a singular trajectory is traced from the sages to a primeval past to its divine source; from the post diluvian scholars (*ummanu*) to the mythical antediluvian heroes *apkallu*, to *Ea*, the ‘sage among the gods,’ perhaps at some points removed further from the sphere of human culture to *Ap’u*, “the mother who has begotten heaven and earth.”

41The Torah was to God, when he created the world, what the plan is to an architect when he erects a building’ (*Gen. Rab. 1:1*).
While one must complicate the picture of a monolithic Second Temple Judaism, it is certainly not possible to speak of the splintering of a once unified Israelite religion, i.e. a religion once grounded on the authenticity of its oral traditions but subsequently degraded with the introduction of textuality. On the contrary, one must say that Jewishness as a contested but nonetheless identifiable locus of identity emerges in the Second Temple period; the Jewish subject, leaving aside the question of cause, and the Jewish Book emerge concurrently.

It will come as no surprise that, in this study, the way past this deadlock will be pursued via the Hegelian logic of *Aufhebung*, whereby what is initially experienced as an unassimilable impediment to thought becomes the very basis of its being reconstituted on expanded, unassailable grounds; *the stone that the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone*. What is instructive about the particular historical process of textualization and indeed the reason we have taken some care to rehearse the details of van der Toorn’s work, is the way it compellingly grounds Proverbs’ preoccupation with *voice*—smooth as honey or sharp as a blade, the abrupt clip of rebuke or the plush warmth of seduction, hanging in liminal space, riven from the Woman’s body yet incontrovertibly hers. It is the enigmatic stuff that remains when the Symbolic opposition between strange and wise has broken down, an “acoustic fingerprint” whereby the vicissitudes of the signifier are once and for all laid aside.

The voice, on one hand, insofar as it is the only “real” link between the disembodied structure of signification and the act of speech, offers the authentic provenance of the enunciation, armed with which the determination of the signifying value falls into place. On the other hand, the radical *alterity* of the voice to the body—the voice as ungraspable, in its brief passage escaping the speaker’s intent, not reaching

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43Dolar, 22; see note 49 on page 24.
the hearer all the way, falling in between two bodies— is the very cause of human lack and thus a fitting referent to which the fear of  יהוה points. The voice transcribes the constitutive disruption running through the linguistic sign onto the bodies in question, the speaking woman and the listening son alike.

99 Following her, suddenly: the sacrificial gesture

A narrative hesitation  We must return now to the lad, whom we left at an inopportune moment. Having smelled the myrrh and run his hands over her fineries, now assured that there is no risk of getting caught, he has neither succumbed nor fled. He has been listening to the woman’s voice, which stops now.

The hesitation following v 20 is not sufficiently recognized as a departure from the narrative world. But, from here it is the father who finishes the story, who speaks about the woman’s voice, no longer from within the scene but as its narrator.

She turned him with the abundance of her teaching; with the smoothness of her voice she compelled him.

Going after her suddenly, like an ox to slaughter he enters, like a fool to the bounds of his chains.

(7:21-22)

Still taking the lad seriously as an ethical agent (or, what amounts to the same, taking the story seriously as a reflection on the character of an ethical act) we ask why? Why at that moment and not earlier, with the suddenness befitting an epiphany, does the lad do something so foolish, thereby forfeiting his status in the Symbolic order of Wisdom. It is the second question, about the timing of the act, which has the more straightforward answer. The pivot at v 21, at which point the father puts the story back in his own voice, mirrors on a micro scale the logic van der Torn discovered on a macro, historical scale.

A symbolic epiphany via concentricity  Recall that the “scribal invention of revelation,” when all is said and done, refers to the written evocation of the moment of

44 Voice—like breath to which it is so physiologically tied—comes to stand for what is in the body more than the body: the spirit or soul without which the body is a truncated aggregation of dust. The voice is what animates both the lifeless network of signifiers just as the breath animates the lifeless materiality of the human corpse. “And the LORD God formed the human as dust from
speech. The moment of enunciation is displaced from its privileged position only by becoming, at the level of content, the central preoccupation of the text—whole scrolls, as van der Toorn notes, dedicated to tracing their own pristine preservation of an ancient and remote utterance. Mutatis mutandis what this text is about is the enigma of the woman’s voice, what the lad experienced, unquestionably I would say, as an impenetrably opaque object. Who is speaking? What does she want? The more he strains to hear, the more meaning is occulted by the acoustical substance. (Recall the soldier whose comprehension was inversely related to his auditory attentiveness; his response—Che bella voce!—indicates that he hears too well.)

The written voice, on the other hand—now disclosed according to the most characteristic literary feature of the Ḥb, structuring both the frame (vv 5 and 21) and the focal point (vv 13-15) of the scene’s completed concentric form—presents no particular problem to this lad.

A 5 who smooths her words
B 6 my-house
C 9 at the evening
D 10 a harlot’s dress
E 12 she waits
F 13 she speaks to him
F’ 15 calling to him
E’ 15 I have found
D’ 16 colored threads
C’ 18 until the morning
B’ 19 his-house
A’ 21 with the smoothness of her voice

Figure 7.2: The concentric form of Prov 7.

the ground, and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being” (Gen 2:7).

45The aporetic nature of such a project reminds me of the structure of those cell phone conversations that never stray from the issues of reception, battery-life, roaming-rates, etc.

46See the reference to Dolar (2006) on page 23.
With the reiteration of ḥiq (the twice mentioned “smoothness” [vv 5 and 21], the effect of which is altogether different than the experience of the timbre it describes) we re-enter the field of the Symbolic, and on this much more solid ground the boy knows just what to do. He’s off at once, “Following her, suddenly...”

An ethical act (in the wrong direction) At the abstract level of form, this interpretation yields a satisfactory symmetry. The moment of the ethical act occurs simultaneous to the Symbolic reintegration of the voice. Concretely, however, we are left with the more perplexing version of the why question: why does the lad suddenly follow rather than suddenly flee? Why when the voice becomes subjectivized and thus its speaker knowable (this woman does, unambiguously, just what the father said the Strange-Woman does) does the lad act so foolishly, rejecting the Symbolic message, the structural completion of which he has so sensitively responded to.

Our dilemma arises from the fact that the lad exemplifies wisdom in the processual time of the narrative and then punctuates this wise posture with an act of utter folly. Assuming that the lad is basically foolish, we cannot answer the narrative’s temporal lag: if the lad is a fool, why does he forestall his own immediate gratification? His close attention to “the abundance of her teaching” and his decision to act at the moment of the passage’s structural constitution indicate a non-foolish orientation to both the woman’s and the father’s words. Assuming that the lad is basically wise, an even more obvious problem awaits us: if the lad is wise why does the moment of comprehension evoke an act precisely in the wrong direction? For the Symbolic order that he discerns so clearly indicates with no ambiguity the disastrous consequences of his act. Accordingly, what demands a closer reading is the relationship between enjoyment and punishment that motivates the plot of this narrative in such a counter-intuitive way.

Le père ou pire

It will initially seem an odd transposition to read the Strange-Woman as a maternal figure. (Is not the dimension of women celebrated by the wisdom tradition?) However, in terms of the mythical topos of the Oedipal drama, the Strange-Woman structures the narrative play of desire and fear as Mother. She stands for the mother,
insofar as she occupies the prohibited object of libidinal satisfaction. Obversely, the paternal gaze stands for the law’s potential recrimination, i.e. the threat of castration that hangs over the prohibited object of incestuous desire. Our perplexity arises from the peculiar timing of the son’s act, the way he tarries until he is certain to suffer the Law’s fearful sanctions.

As has become clear by now, we view Lacan’s rewriting of these sanctions, i.e. castration, as a crucial correction to the view frequently attributed to Freud, that of the harmonious relationship between mother and child, abruptly interrupted by the paternal prohibition. Though indeed for Lacan, just as with Freud, the unmediated relationship between Mother and is interrupted by the prohibition of the Father, Lacan ascribes different motives and a much more ambivalent affective valence to the mother-child dyad.

A comment on Lacan’s view of infancy will clarify what follows regarding the function of the Oedipal Law. For Lacan the infant must be reconstructed as a being of pure (i.e. Real) need, grounded in physiological lack. (It is cold, hungry, immobile, etc.) At some point, early on, the infant encounters an unavoidable medium, such that needs cannot be directly addressed but must be reformulated (and in this reformulation, minimally frustrated) as a linguistic demand. This space of frustration refers to the impossibility of need and demand being perfectly aligned; the mother’s response, no matter how well intended or expertly informed, will leave some aspect of need unsatisfied.49

47Freud’s elaborations of the Oedipus conflict are far from the banal cliches that abound in the many “Freudian readings of X”; at the same time, certain of Freud’s writings contribute to distorted accounts of the family romance. As Johnston (2004, 2) judiciously puts it, “Freud has a tendency, in certain contexts, to sharply polarize the child’s feelings toward the maternal and paternal figures in the Oedipal situation: The mother is loved, desired, and cherished, while the father is hated, feared, and resented. Although Freud’s own thinking is far from being entirely seduced into believing wholeheartedly in this theoretical fairly tale, those moments when he does give himself over to it feed into popular vulgarizations of analytic reflections on the family’s role in the formation of the individual (vulgarizations that reduce the Oedipus complex to nothing more than the suppressed desires for parricide and maternal incest).”

48The Name-of-the-Father (le nom du père), Lacan’s term for the transcendental signifier to which signification as such must refer, conveys the inherent ambivalence of the Symbolic field, whose naming function (le nom) is always linked to an implicit prohibition (le nom du père).

49Herein lies Lacan’s etiology of human desire: “Desire begins to take shape in the margin in
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These local and incidental frustrations of needs, however, are but a precursor to a much more profound and profoundly alienating transformation. The logic of demand perforce involves the structure of intersubjectivity, and so the transformation of biological needs into communicable demands is at the same time the joining of the child’s well-being to an Other—the Mother who first occupies the place where demands must be inscribed.\(^{50}\) The gravity of this Otherness is such that the irreducibility of need to demand is overshadowed and ultimately reversed as to its means and ends. The child arrives at a singular demand for the one irreducible need, which is the Mother’s love.

This structure inevitably brings about the experience of anxiety in the child, which is distinguished from its opposite affect, fear, on the axis of presence versus absence. If the latter refers to the subject’s lack with respect to the Law (a structure we have explored at length), the former designates this lack gone lacking (\textit{le manque vient à manquer}),\(^{51}\) the impossibility of establishing any Symbolic point of identification with a fully present Other.

The law of the mother rests simply in the fact that something of the child’s desire is completely dependent on something else, which as such is already articulated as

which demand rips away from need, this margin being the one that demand—whose appeal can be unconditional only with respect to the Other—opens up in the guise of the possible gap need may give rise to here, because it has no universal satisfaction.” \textsc{Lacan, Subversion}, 814.

\(^{50}\) On this point, Lacan gives us a hint as to why the subject so universally accedes to the Symbolic order of the Law. Why, in other words, is ferality such a rarely chosen pathway for childhood development? Lacan frames the answer with an account of the Law’s impotence to compel on any basis other than the father’s evasive retort, \textit{I said so}. “Let us begin with the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. No authoritative statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for the statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus. I formulate this by saying that there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law) comes forward to make up for this, he does so as an imposter.” But this ungrounded \textit{I said so} necessarily recalls the period of prematurational helplessness and the first Real Other of demand, which the Symbolic Other represses even as it circles endlessly around the site of repression. This is the Real Other, “[which] is not an imposter, nor is he who authorizes his actions on its basis. The fact that the Father may be regarded as the original representative of this authority of the Law requires us to specify by what privileged mode of presence he is sustained beyond the subject who is actually led to occupy the place of the Other, namely the Mother. The question is thus pushed back a step.” \textsc{Lacan, Subversion}, 813

\(^{51}\) \textsc{Lacan, Seminar X, Nov. 28, 1962.}
something of the order of the law. But this law is entirely within the subject that
upholds it, i.e. in the good- or ill-will of the mother... [The child] is strictly a-
subjective, for it feels and senses itself above all else to be profoundly subjected-to
the caprice of that on which it depends.52

The mother's apparently whimsical alternations of presence and absence53 give rise
to the infant's conception of an unrestrained and entirely enigmatic Mother, in
whose unlawful comings and goings the infant can find no rhyme or reason. "It is
this whimsy that introduces the phantom of Omnipotence—not of the subject, but
of the Other in which the subject's demand is instated (it's about time this idiotic
cliche54 was, once and for all, and for all parties, put in its place)—and with this
phantom, the necessity that the Other be bridled by the Law.55

As a check against whose desire, then, is the paternal Law uttered? The ambigu-
ity of Lacan's response, "the desire of the Mother (le désir de la mère)," should
be maintained in its perfect ambiguity, allowing for two readings. The law places ab-
solute conditions on both the child's desire for the mother, but equally the mother's
own desire for the child. More accurately, the transformed relationships mutually
entail each other, such that the condition of possibility for the child's desire qua
subject is the restraint of the Mother's "elephantine whimsy" to which he or she has
been entirely subjected.

Thus the subject who does not submit to the Father's interdict (the signifier,
the relinquishment of enjoyment in exchange for desire), is less free than subject to
devourment.

The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. You never
know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. That is the
mother's desire. [But there is] something reassuring... a roller, made of stone, of
course, which... holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a
roller which protects you, should the jaws suddenly close.56

53 As Lacan (2006i, 814) puts it, "The elephantine feet of the Other's whimsy."
54 Lacan refers, I assume, to the commonplace (psychoanalytic) reading of infantile narcissism
that presumes the child's experience of omnipotence.
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The phallus is the here understood as the cornerstone of an *unconditional* law, grasped onto by the infant as a means of attaining subjectivity against the threat of *jouissance*. The child must submit her needs to the defiles of the signifier to gain some space from the smothering, overwhelming presence of the Real. *Jouissance*, read ontogenetically as the *a-subjective* and immediate relation to the mother's body, must be refused, that is, the child must alienate herself into the world of language, if she is to be a subject. The subject qua desirous, qua S is precisely the subject whose desire is alienated in language. At the point of the Law's institution, however, the zone of alienation (still the Other, undoubtedly still the Mother) is not an overwhelming, unchecked agency, but it also lacks. It lacks with respect to a third point of reference, in terms of which the child learns to coordinate its desire in step with the desire of the M/Other, whose absences and failures now have a name.

101 *Jouissance equals holiness*

This theorization of the Mother qua primordial Real Other (i.e. not the Symbolic big Other) has proven important but also difficult in the psychoanalytic world, yet it may be especially accessible to biblical scholars insofar as they have already come to terms with its precise density in the term *holiness*—equally a reference to the Real Other, for holiness in the ה is always the holiness of יְהֹוָה.

The Israelites' encounter with holiness splits the semantic field of *fear* into the distinctive responses we have presented as the difference between fear proper and *anxiety*. Consider the Israelites' disparate reactions to an encounter with יְהֹוָה: one before the giving of the Law, a second in the context of an already established Law.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they saw and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."

(Exod 20:18-19)

The people tremble (they "totter" *wayyēnwâ¿), their very being threatens to dissolve) at the prospect of יְהֹוָה's immediate proximity. Their defensive instinct is

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first to establish distance⁵⁷ (wayyavoamdā mērāḥāq) and then to send Moses (the paternal bearer of the law par excellence) to mediate what should be described in terms of Yhwh’s ferocious maternity.

This is altogether different, opposite I would say, to the idea of “fear” that is recommended after the giving of the Law.

Yhwh heard your words when you spoke to me [i.e. when the people told Moses that he alone should ascend the mountain into the presence of Yhwh] and Yhwh said to me: “I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they are right in all that they have spoken. If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me (lēyirāḥ ʿēti) and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever (lēʾōlām)!”

(Deut 5:28-29)

Fear (yr) has become the state of mind maximally geared for stability—well-being that stretches on forever (lēʾōlām).

We should not fail to point to a pronounced underestimation, in certain traditions, of the catastrophic encounter with jouissance. The Christian churches descending from Calvin have tended read this passage as a judgment against the people: they sacrificed the vitality of a “personal” relationship with God for the desiccated legalism of priestly religion. But of course the people were exactly right to be afraid. The thick darkness into which Moses withdrew is precisely the maw of

⁵⁷To underscore the connection made above (on page 334 and earlier ¶ 34 on page 126) between anxiety and presence (or, to mirror mērāḥāq, presence inflected as, over-proximity), I mention here Lacan’s re-interpretation of the famous Forêt-Da game invented by Freud’s grandson. “Anxiety,” Lacan writes, “is not the signal of a lack but of something that you must manage to conceive of at this redoubled level as being the absence of this support of the lack. Well then, take up again Freud’s very list that I take here arrested at its term in full flight, as I might say: do you not know that it is not nostalgia for what is called the maternal womb which engenders anxiety, it is its imminence, it is everything that announces to us something which will allow us to glimpse that we are going to re-enter it. What provokes anxiety? It is not, contrary to what is said, either the rhythm nor the alternation of the presence-absence of the mother. And what proves it, is that the infant takes pleasure in repeating this game of presence and absence: this possibility of absence, is what gives presence its security. What is most anxiety-provoking for the child, is that precisely this relation of lack on which he establishes himself, which makes him desire, this relation is all the more disturbed when there is no possibility of lack, when the mother is always on his back.”

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the Real, the uninhabitable place of jouissance. Wherever Moses' mediation is set aside for a more “personal relationship,” holiness reveals itself to be fatally beyond meaning. I indicate here the story of Nadab and Abihu in Lev 10 as a striking but by no means deviant staging of such an encounter.

Now Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered a strange fire (qīṣ zārāh) before YHWH, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of YHWH and consumed them, and they died before YHWH. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what YHWH meant when he said, 'Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified.'” And Aaron was silent.

(Lev 10:1-3)

The trenchant difference of affect indexed by these passages corresponds to Lacan’s distinction between fear and anxiety. They are accordingly related to the Law in inverse proportion. The Deut passage portrays the Law as fear-worthy insofar as transgressing its commands carries severe sanctions. (The cause for fear is heightened greatly if we take into account the impossibility of the subject [S] “adequately” bearing the Law's Symbolic mandate.) The Exod and Lev passages disclose the speaker's anxiety that the Law isn't fearful enough, that it will prove unable to restrain YHWH's holiness, “a primal form of life, in no wise willing to settle for a duplicate role in some microcosmic world within a world.”

How does this configuration relate to our initial query regarding enjoyment and punishment as ethical motives that ultimately trigger the lad’s act? We can no longer think of a line that runs from subject-negating punishment (castration) to subject-affirming enjoyment (jouissance), for it is in the direct presence of the latter that the subject is consumed without remainder (cf. Nadab and Abihu). This, apparently, is remote from the experience of “enjoyableness,” which we are left to understand now as what lightly penetrates the Symbolic sieve. Thus the final sentence of the essay we have followed throughout this section: “Castration means that jouissance has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the

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88The paronomastic connection with the Strange-Woman (ṭōṣ bārāh) is remarkable without in any way implying that an explicit allusion is being made.

89Jacques Lacan, “Position of the Unconscious”. In Œuvres New York: W. W. Norton & Com-
Law of desire. For our purposes, we may paraphrase, "the evocation of the Law avoids anxiety by refusing jouissance, which is the only way to obtain a manageable amount of enjoyment (lichettes de la jouissance, "slivers of enjoyment") on the inverse scale of the Law of fear." Refusing maternal (jouissance) by submitting to the castrating Law allows the subject to enjoy (a little bit) without the subjective annihilation that results from the proximity of jouissance. In this way jouissance is safely maintained in a perpetual state of deferral, jouissance-à-venir.

What the subject experiences as "really, unbearably bad" is therefore not the threat of castration, rather it is when the protection afforded by the castrating Law begins to break down. When the object looms in proximity, when jouissance-deferred looks as if to manifest as jouissance-obtained—then the subject begins to sweat. "[T]he Real—more specifically here, das Ding as the apparent goal of Trieb—only appears desirable when coated by a thin layer of fantasizing, by a veil woven of imaginary and Symbolic threads. Once das Ding is placed behind the cloth of this screen, any subsequent lifting of the veil reveals not the expected sublime Thing nostalgically prized by the drives, but, as Lacan puts it, an ugly 'gift of shit.'" It is so that Oedipus finds the experience of actually having sex with his mother. Think too of Qoheleth's judgment that being wise is hebel. The lesson, in both cases, is that Oedipal victories are ultimately Pyrrhic.

Thus we uncover the ethic of the lad's transgression, which is performed less under the (extant) gaze of the father but rather to call forth this gaze. His gross violation of Wisdom is the one thing sure to activate the Law. And in no way are the penalties of the law trivial—perhaps there is a death sentence on the table—though from these deprivations the subject is more likely to return in tact (even in death the subject lives on in the propagation of a meaningful legacy). As for jouissance, its horror lies precisely in the continuation of life stripped of meaning, trapped in the eternal circuits of the un-dead.

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60 Law of desire.
61 Johnstone, Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive, 240.
62 The tragic dimension of Oedipus lies here and is voiced in his lamentation, I did not kill my father!... if only I were guilty! Zupancič (2000, 195) identifies herein something much more radical although not entirely separate from the wish for justice à la fairness. Her gloss on Oedipus's
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102 The gaze and the fantasy function

I turn now to the long delayed second cinematic example (the first being the Bodega Bay scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds*). Again I follow the commentary of Žižek, this time on the final scene of Chaplin's *Limelight*.

It is centered upon a magnificent backwards tracking-shot, from the close-up of the dead clown Calvero behind the stage to the establishing shot of the entire stage where the young girl [Claire Bloom's character, Terry], now a successful ballerina and his great love, is performing. Just before this scene, the dying Calvero expresses to the attending doctor his desire to see his love dancing; the doctor taps him gently on the shoulders and comforts him: "You shall see her!" Thereupon Calvero dies, his body is covered by a white sheet, and the camera withdraws so that the screen comprises the dancing girl on the stage, while Calvero is reduced to a tiny, barely visible white stain in the background... it is this stain, this white smudge in the background, which guarantees the sense of the scene.

The significance for this scene, for Žižek, is in its dramatization of a shift in libidinal economies, from the economy of desire to the one of drive.

Where, precisely, is the transmutation of desire into drive? We remain within the register of desire as long as the field of vision is organized, supported, by Calvero's desire to see for the last time his love dancing; we enter the register of drive the moment Calvero is reduced to a stain-object in his own picture. For that precise reason, it is not sufficient to say that it is simply she, the ballerina, his love, who makes herself seen to him; the point is rather that, simultaneously, he acquires the presence of a stain, so that both of them appear within the same field of vision.

As with the Hitchcock scene, the parallels to Prov 7 are striking. And, as with the Hitchcock scene, the direction of the transformation is reversed: if Chaplin stages "the transmutation of desire into drive," Proverbs recovers the drive back into the fold of desire. This requires some explanation: setting aside for the moment the supervening psychoanalytic distinction between desire and drive, we can instead

cry runs as follows. "If only I were guilty – but you took from me even that honor, that place in the symbolic (open to me by right)! ... You did not even leave me the possibility of participating in things as a subject (of desire)."

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64 Žižek, *Tarrying*, 199.
identify what it is about the scene itself that we are positing as the inverse mirror image of Prov 7.

Reminding ourselves that these scenes are staged for someone—for the viewer or hearer or reader—we notice the constantly shifting interplay between what the characters in the scene know and what the hearer/viewer of the scene knows. These knowledge gradients can be lined out for the two scenes as follows:

- Terry, the ballerina, believes she is dancing for Calvero: for his approval, to please the man who saved her, to demonstrate her love and gratitude, etc. The spectator, of course, knows that Calvero has already died, now “reduced to a stain-object.” Yet it is Calvero’s presence in the scene (“a tiny, barely visible white stain in the background”) that discloses Terry’s drive to make herself seen. Indeed, the great pathos of the scene arises from the fact that Terry’s subjectivity is entirely organized around an inert, opaque object, which she misrecognizes as the gaze who knows and loves her, the one perspective that can see her as she really is. This structure of misrecognition (un méconnaitre essential au me connaitre) is not incidental but rather the transcendental condition of the subject of language.

- The lad, unlike the dancer, is in a position of uncertainty. Seeking to discern the enigma of the woman’s voice—Was will das Weib?—he is hampered by the elusiveness of a paternal reference point. “Elusive” in two senses: (1) as the bearer of the Symbolic order, the father’s discourse has failed to produce the meaning of the Strange-Woman and especially failed to distinguish her from Woman-Wisdom. (2) as a comforting guarantor of social stability, his presence can be perceived by the lad only as “a stain-object,” “a tiny, barely visible

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66 This has been a recurring theme of our study: cf. ¶ 4 on page 18 and apropos of Woman-Wisdom ¶ 28 on page 108.

67 The reference is to Freud’s famous admission towards the end of his life: “The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is What does a woman want?” Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud: Life and Work. Volume 2, New York: Basic Books, 1961, 377.
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[dark] stain in the background.” Whereas Chaplin’s ballerina misrecognizes the true coordinates of her desire, the son faces the opposite situation of *aphanisis*, the threat of desire’s dissolution, arising from the failure of the Symbolic field to fix its coordinates.

The presence of the father, regarding which the lad has only the slimmest evidence (*something behind* the darker shape of the trellis, itself barely visible in the shadowy recesses of the window) can be read as the narrative’s point of last resort, that which the lad must solidify if not for himself then for the audience of sons for whom this story is a lesson.

Let us without further delay elaborate in specific detail the visual topography of this scene, which we have now referred to several times. As there is some recursive complexity, we initially formalize the sight-lines according to the algebra of the Master’s Discourse. The three characters in the scene are organized (roughly—we will want to nuance things shortly) in two interconnected relationships: the son watching the woman and the father watching the son watch the woman. There is a third relation brought into play in that the scene is rendered up as a pedagogical object.

From the center of the scene, moving outwards, we can organize the poles of the narrative as follows.

1. $\text{lad}_{(S_2)} \rightarrow \text{woman}_{(a)}$
2. $\text{father}_{(S_1)} \rightarrow (\text{lad}_{(S_2)} \rightarrow \text{woman}_{(a)})$
3. $\text{son}_{(S_2)} \rightarrow [(\text{father}_{(S_1)} \rightarrow (\text{son}_{(S_2)} \rightarrow \text{woman}_{(a)})]$

The first equation refers to the content of the narrative—the seduction of the lad by the woman; the second equation is effected by what we have described above in filmic categories, the tracing of the omniscient “God’s-eye” view of the scene back to the father at the window; and the third equation reflects the fact that the narrative is presented for the son’s/reader’s instruction; it is embedded, as Fox has shown us, in the form of a lecture. The “lad” and the “son” occupy the same discursive position $(S_2)$ in relation to paternal authority $(S_1)$, a point of identification upon which this genre of teaching story relies.

But here we must emphasize, the “cure” for the son is no romantic “unveiling” of the father, whose spurious authority hides behind a false appearance, akin to
the famous scene in the *Wizard of Oz*. Why is this? "It is because the subject in question is not that of the reflexive consciousness [Newsom's dissident reader], but that of desire [the unconscious subject of the signifier]. One thinks it is a question of geometrical eye-point [the place of ideological interpellation, just outside the hysterics' field of vision], whereas it is a question of a quite different eye."68 Well, whose eye is it behind the trellis? Lacan insists, as emphasized in his commentary on Sartre's voyeur,69 on distinguishing it from the gaze of the Other that assaults the subject "from behind," i.e. the disciplinary gaze of the father registering the transgression of the son. The eye in this scene is that which sustains the (impossible) fantasy in which the son sees himself from the perspective of the ideal Father, whose place in the scene is the dark stain of the trellis.70

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68 LACAN, Seminar XI, 89.

69 The force of Sartre's account lies in the annihilating reversal he stages apropos the seeing-subject (the voyeur being the see-er) *par excellence*. Upon hearing a click or rustle behind him, some external disturbance, the voyeur understands that he himself is under the gaze of the Other. "The gaze, as conceived by Sartre, is the gaze by which I am surprised—surprised in so far as it changes all the perspectives, the lines of force, of my world, orders it from the point of nothingness where I am, in a sort of radiated reticulation of the organisms. As the locus of the relation between me, the annihilating subject, and that which surrounds me, the gaze seems to possess such a privilege that it goes so far as to have me scotomized, I who look, the eye of him who sees me as object." LACAN, Seminar XI, 84.

70 At this point the scholarly investment in the Near Eastern type scene—in which the gaze belongs to the mother—is shown to be another "externalizing strategy" whereby what props up the father's discourse is posited as an "actually existing fact," regardless the literary or historical inflection this fact is given. The point is, just as with Newsom's reading of the Strange-Woman, that the gaze emerges from within the discourse as that which must be posited, after the fact, to maintain the ontological consistency of the subject.
"The gaze I encounter ... is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other."\textsuperscript{71} Here the "measure of identification"\textsuperscript{72} Newsom points out between father and son is brought into the open as to its mechanism: The gaze sees itself.

Thus we must re-read the "coincidental" temporality of the scene,\textsuperscript{73} the fact that the father's gaze manifests itself at the very moment the lad encounters the enigmatic voice. Lacan's wager, and ours, is that this gaze which views the lad's encounter with the woman from the place he cannot see (behind the trellis), the gaze that "changes all the perspectives" (the parallactic view whereby the enigmatic

\textsuperscript{71}Lacan, Seminar XI, 84. \textsuperscript{72}Newsom, The Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 124.

\textsuperscript{73}The absolute simultaneity of the father's gaze and the son's encounter is conveyed both by the play of tenses—the perfective actions of the father ("I looked out (nišqēṭtū =perfect) and I saw (wāʾērēʾ =converted imperfect)") juxtaposed with the ongoing actions of the son ("Crossing over (šārēʾ =present participle) in the street ... he marches (yāšūd =imperfect) on the way to her house")—and the phatic particle in v 10—"and there (whînēh), a woman, approaching him." Only

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voice "becomes" the voice of the Strange-Woman) is a piece of the son cut off from himself, the sacrifice he owes the Symbolic Law in exchange for the protection it offers against the Real. This gaze "of which it would not be untrue to say that its presence is necessary" is what the lad cannot "unveil"—recall Newsom's solution to the fundamental antagonism between the father and the Strange-Woman: a reading subject who would assume a different position vis-à-vis the father's hail—for it grounds precisely the subject position that would undertake such a critical project. Even the most suspicious appropriation of the paternal gaze, the relentless determination to strip it of ideological pretense down to its truth in reality, finds "in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear." At this point, we can complete our analysis of Newsom's reading as the Hysteric's. The object (a) (the object cause of desire), that which perturbs the discourse at every point it would seek once and for all to symbolize its core reference point, belongs not to the contingent contradictions of patriarchal society—which, after all, might be organized differently—but to the subject of the signifier, which is to say the subject as such.

Concluding, we certainly agree with Newsom that there is no ideal Father behind the trellis—but neither is there patriarchal ideologue inauthentically bearing the standard of sapiential authority, nor the maternal teacher subsequently effaced by the tradition's biases—but the son who gazes impossibly upon himself.

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\text{son}_{\text{reader}} \rightarrow [\text{son}_{\text{father}} \rightarrow (\text{son}_{\text{character}} \rightarrow \text{woman})]
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The gaze as the place-holder for the Law, Lacan's "big Other" (A), comes into view as object (a), as "something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ ... a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking." In this light, the aim of Proverbs 7 is not to differentiate the Strange-Woman from the Woman-Wisdom at a substantive level but rather to ensure sons/students everywhere that there is an eye, an I; there is One who can make distinctions between objects indeterminate at the level of the signifier (that is, the son as wise or lacking sense, the woman as strange or wise). For if no

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once the son is irrevocably "on his way," does father appear behind the trellis.

ultimate determinations about the woman can be gained through the signifier, then any instance of meaning requires that there be some Father beyond the logic of the sign, on the basis of which meaning can be established in the subject's submission to him. It is only by maintaining the authority of the father, *by maintaining a father worthy of fear*, that the son can avoid the anxiety he feels in the presence of an object situated beyond the Symbolic, to which the son's own social identity is also bound. We might imagine, for example, the horror of realizing that "I" am a dance performed before myself, looking through the eyes of a corpse. This corpse is not the dead Father of Freud's law, but the inert object of *jouissance*. Just as Lacan's lesson is not that the bearer of the Father's office is an imposter, but rather that the Father does not exist (*L'Autre n'existe pas*). Behind the veil (*b'd *ān*) has only ever been the son.

The analytic act, whereby the desire of the son would come across itself no longer in its purity but merely as a partial object among objects, assumes the contours of the Möbius band: by persisting on one side he finds himself suddenly on the other: the side of the drive.

103 **Beyond the dialectic: sinthome and drive**

Drive in the scenario that concerns us, as we said, refers to the scopic drive, the pulsion to make oneself-seen. Which is to say what, exactly?

Drive moves towards the dissolution of the fundamental fantasy (*S*ova) by which the subject is oriented with respect to his desire. In the manner of a chain reaction, the toppling of the fantasy brings about the annulment of the big Other, for it was only the fantasmatical screen of the *paternal gaze* that kept hidden the son's own (subjective, unconditioned) constitution of the order by which his own actions could take on (objective, conditioned) value. The efficacy of the Other's function rests on the son's disavowed ratification of it; it rests, in other words, on a self-referential loop that the scopic drive strives into view.

At the level of literature, the effect of the shift to drive is a sparer scene, the *dramatis personae* reduced to son → woman, which even goes too far in that...

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without the father's gaze as a third point of reference the encounter is stripped of 
its intersubjective dimension, leaving us with son → voice. We can reduce it still 
进一步 to the terms of discourse,

\[ S \rightarrow a \]

the subject in immediate relation to the object, an experience that gives subjective 
meaning no perceptible foothold.

It is appropriate to raise here a preeminently practical question. If this (i.e. 
\( S \circ a \)) is the "true" structure of subjectivity—stripped of its "false" fantasy screen—
then what is the end psychoanalytic praxis (preserving both sense of the word, its 
telos and the completion of a particular analytic intervention)? How do Lacanians 
understand the therapeutic value of the subject's identification with object (a) at 
the point of Symbolic destitution? What is the ethical posture of the analyst who 
seeks to orchestrate this loss of moorings?

To approach these issues I cite a famous passage from one of Freud's case studies. 
It affords I think a very concrete picture of the kind of link that might bridge what, 
at the level of desire, the fantasy keeps safely contained, each term quarantined to 
its own side of the equation (\( S \circ a \)).

During a session a young married woman mentioned by way of association that 
she had been cutting her nails the day before and 'had cut into the flesh while 
she was trying to remove the soft cuticle at the bottom of the nail.' This is of so 
little interest that we ask ourselves in surprise why it was recalled and mentioned 
at all, and we begin to suspect that what we are dealing with is a symptomatic 
act. And in fact it turned out that the finger which was the victim of her small act 
of clumsiness was the ring-finger, the one on which a wedding ring is work. What 
is more, it was her wedding anniversary, and in the light of this the injury to the 
soft cuticle takes on a very definite meaning, which can be easily guessed. At the 
same time, too, she related a dream which alluded to her husband's clumsiness and 
her anaesthesia as a wife. But why was it the ring-finger on her left hand which 
she injured, where as a wedding ring is worn [in her country] on the right hand? 
Her husband is a lawyer, a 'doctor of law' [Doktor der Recht, literally 'doctor of 
right(s)'], and as a girl her affections belonged in secret to a physician (jokingly 
called Doktor der Link ['doctor of the left']). A left-handed marriage, too, has a 
definite meaning.\(^78\)

\(^78\)FREUD, S. E., VI:192.
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An entire structure and history of libidinal disappointment is knotted together in a dot of blood welling up through a ragged flap of skin. What is the usual way of understanding the generation of this classical case of a “conversion symptom”? Roughly, the body encrypts a meaning that is too traumatic for the ego to assimilate. The truth is first transformed by the processes of condensation and displacement and then expressed—now safely disguised as harmless before the preconscious censor, yet still affording the libidinal release of catharsis.

But in this account we have entirely neglected Freud’s signal discovery about the unconscious, wherein the fields of cause and effect are reversed, the effect preceding its cause which exerts its force nachträglich. Preserving, as we have, the linear sequence of cause and effect, the symptom comes to stand only for more subtle form of transcendence. (Meaning from the depths of the unconscious is no less rarefied than from the heights of the heavenly hosts.) That Freud’s own analytic intent does not follow this path is clear in his careful phrasing of the diagnostic moment. He found the thing itself—the slip with the implement that cut the cuticle “...of little interest.” What attracts his analytic attention is that the event “was recalled and mentioned at all.” The fallacy—the psychoanalytic term for which is transference—is to posit meaning of any sort (conscious or not) to the event of the cut, which at the moment of its occurrence should be understood stricto sensu as the subject’s encounter with the nonsensical dimension of the Real.70 It is only afterwards that the momentary prick—situated just so on the left ring-finger, at just such an auspicious occasion as on a wedding anniversary—is irresistibly imbued with meaning by the automatic (in the sense of blind, “machinic”) codifying operations of the unconscious.

The questions we were pursuing before this brief Freudian excursus had to do with psychoanalytic praxis. Perhaps there is value in asking naively about the psychoanalytic cure. What are its limits? What are its aims? It is around the concept of the sinthome that Lacan gives his final (I do not wish to say only) answer to this crucial question. In contrast to Lacan’s earlier disposition of the symptom as

70 This is the same point we elaborated apropos of the Wolf Man’s encounter with the primal scene, which only becomes traumatic in the course of its subsequent (extremely dissonant, one assumes) reverberations with the Symbolic order. Cf. ¶ 79 on page 273.
somatic condensation of a Symbolic formation, a cipher for the analyst to crack, the *sintro* is

- opaque to interpretation, referring to the unique, entirely idiosyncratic way
  the subject enjoys a particular signifying formation (hence, *jouir-sens*);

- the exact opposite of a supervening distortion of subjective authenticity, the
  *sintro* refers to absolute coincidence of truth and excess, of meaning and
  sheer contingency.

The subject’s identification with the *sintro* is, at the end, what Lacan judges to
be the aim of analytic praxis. “This would also,” notes Žižek, “be the last Lacanian
reading of Freud’s motto, *Wo es war, soll Ich werden*: in the real of your symptom,
you must recognize the ultimate support of your being. There where your symptom
already was, with this place you must identify, in its ‘pathological’ singularity you
must recognize the element that guarantees your consistency.”

Is this a concept we can recuperate for exegesis? For example, where does it get
us to interrogate the son in relation to his *sintro*? Does he have one? Can we
say? The yield of such psychological investigations are invariably disappointing, for
it is doubtful whether the text will deign to be our analysand. No, but the specificity
of the *sintro* might offer something different, like the perfectly shaped diagnostic
tool for scanning the “poetics of making transcendent,” which I am comfortable
saying at this point forms the horizon of Proverbs’ epistemology and ethics. At every
evidence the Other’s incoherence the proverbial cast (sons and fathers, daughters
and mothers alike—one this point we should insist upon inclusiveness) rushes to shore
up the point of exceptional Potency, thus effecting the juxtaposition by which our
experience of castration is intensified both with respect to its severity and in its
semblance of comprehensibility.

Indeed, of Prov 7’s much maligned lad, we discerned a strict conformity to this
pronounced preference for comprehension over enjoyment. This took the form of
a costly exchange: I forfeit my good standing the Symbolic order to maintain the
integrity of the order itself. Though in an ethical inversion carried out with great
nuance by the sages, the Symbolic order is able to reassert such “fallen” sages.

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Indeed, the father need sustain no false pretense relating to his status qua wise and, in fact, must vigorously disavow all claims to a non-mediated relationship with the truth. For such a subject the essence of Wisdom remains alienated and remote yet equally impregnable and eternal.

The sages on this trajectory protected the place of Wisdom with a quite impenetrable veil of transcendence—consider, for example, the disquisitions on Woman-Wisdom in Prov 8 or Sir 24, which are unambiguous in their portrayals of Wisdom's essence as infinite and so infinitely beyond the human, but even these gestures were found by some to be too implicated in the sages' surrender of their desire. As a further purifying measure, a strand of the wisdom tradition eventually let nothing stand in its place—witness the fear-of Yhwh as the essence of wisdom which no human can find in Job 28 and, even more radically in the wisdom texts found at Qumran, the Teacher's lesson that the essence of wisdom is a raz-niyyeh, a "mystery that is to come." Here ends the first trajectory in the land of pure transcendence, the path towards the purity of a place-holder for wisdom's immanent limit, failure, void, which immortalizes this contingent limit by christening it with the mark of necessity. Fear God and you'll be sure to remain protected from Yhwh.

Implicitly, the authors of such a trajectory will stand in ethical antagonism to the pulsion of drive, insofar as it directly maps the immanence of Wisdom's limit to its essence (as with the final topography of the sinthome). For the proverbial sage the economy of drive, which traffics in the joy of the signifier rather than the desire of the signified, likely sullies the ideal of an infinitely elusive object, Wisdom. But surely it is also the case that beneath this ethical indignation, the specter of anxiety threatens the solidity of sapiential fear.

Acknowledging the keenness with which the sages defended the territorial borders of their desire, however, it is not necessarily true that the sages never understood the poetics whereby the transcendent essence of Wisdom was produced at their immanent encounters with limit and certainly false to say they couldn't have. The resources of their texts are precisely what allowed von Rad to suggest the co-incidence of limit and essence in wisdom and this dissertation to place his observation on solid, textual ground. Just as we found several privileged moments in Proverbs' history of the interpretation wherein the limits and essence of wisdom were not posited as the source of an alien ideology but rather read as that with
which the texts are most preoccupied, because it is that to which they are most intimately tied (i.e. Crenshaw and Newsom), there are moments in the literature wherein the texts themselves reveal their own role in the production of this intimate externality.

Indeed, the ethical commitment to the drive is attested in those texts known as the skeptical tradition—I refer to Job and Qoheleth, despite Crenshaw's quite correct insistence on the universality of skepticism to wisdom as such. (Just because it is universal doesn't mean it is not variously assimilated, manipulated, or enjoyed.) The surprise awaiting us: the contours of skepticism consistently attributed to these texts and the crisis to the tradition they instantiate (the effect of an excessive accent on transcendence\(^\text{81}\)) have already been described as the heart of the so-called "optimistic tradition," thus giving rise to the question: what do Job and Qoheleth say, if anything, that deserves to be called different.

To state provisionally what must be worked out in subsequent dissertations, on this second trajectory the sage does not let the vanished object stand in the place of truth but rather finds himself there and takes responsibility for it. The ethics of desire is traversed, and then realized in the torsion of drive. This realization, of course, cannot be understood as the moment of fulfillment, as if object (a) were discovered and with dimensions exactly fitted to desire's negative contours. It is rather when desire itself appears as a partial object in the frame of the fantasy that sustains it.

Thus we have Job standing innocent before his maker, a position of impossibility, assumed by himself and affirmed by God.

Thus too we find Qoheleth tarrying with Wisdom's limit-essence as the infinite sinthome he makes seen by his discourse.

[God] set the infinite (hādālām) in the human heart so that no one would discover what God had done from beginning to end.

(Qoh 3:11)

Annulled as to its meaning, Wisdom gains its bearing anew in the fleeting interval of enjoyment. As for our untiring efforts to symbolize lack as transcendence—rivetted on the failure of our finite bodies to foreclose the infinite, such poetics appear if

\(^{81}\)As we saw in the very consistent narrative of wisdom's "crisis" ¶ 9 on page 39.
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not disingenuous at least clumsy, so many failed attempts to barge through an open door.


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Biographical note

David Knauert was born on a tomato farm in Winters, California. He graduated from Harvard College in 1993, concentrating in psychology. After college, he coached and taught at the Woodberry Forest School in Orange, VA, before matriculating to Columbia Theological Seminary in 1999 and then Duke University in 2003. He lives with his wife Leigh and children Peter, Harrison, Lily and David.