

מתוך מאמרה של ד"ר ניצה קרן על "ארץ העצמות הפורחות":

## APPROPRIATION OF THE HEGEMONIC BOOKCASE AS A CULTURAL RITE OF PASSAGE AND RIGHT OF ADMISSION INTO THE ISRAELI POETRY CLUB

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### *The Rebirth Myth – The Local Female Version*

The twelve lyrical prose chapters of *The Land of Flowering Bones* engage in an overt textual dialogue with the five chapters of T.S. Eliot's masterpiece "The Waste Land." Inspired by Eliot's intertextual strategies, the texture of *The Land of Flowering Bones* is interwoven with Erich Kästner's poem "Do You Know the Country Where the Cannons Bloom?" (itself a parody, Rass explains, of Goethe's poem "Mignon"), as well as with chapter 37 of Ezekiel and with Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*. In addition, *The Land of Flowering Bones* includes allusions to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Camus's *The Stranger*, Shakespeare (Rass points to "Macbeth," but scenes from "Hamlet" are also detectable), Blake ("The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"), as well as Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Celan's "Death Fugue." The list should be supplemented with foundational biblical stories (mainly from Genesis) such as those of the creation of the world, the "covenant of the pieces" (Gen. 16), the giving of the Torah, and the fatal quarrel of Cain and Abel, as well as with H.N. Bialik's poems "The Pool" and "The Dead of the Desert," which are not explicitly mentioned in Rass's poem but echo through it. We are therefore dealing with a highly complex work of art, which interacts openly and unabashedly with the masterpieces of western and Hebrew culture.

*The Land of Flowering Bones*, written and published in Hebrew, was rendered freely into English and self-published by the author. Both versions are presented here, and both are taken into account in the following discussion.

In two places, in its opening lines and further on in the poem, *The Land of Flowering Bones* overtly references *The Waste Land*:

זֶה הָיָה בְּאַפְרִיל, לֹא?  
הָעֲצָמוֹת שֶׁשִּׁתְּלָתָ בְּחֵצֵר  
כָּבֵר הַחֲלוּ נֹבְטוֹת? מַעֲלוֹת נָצְחָה?  
הִפְרָחוּ עוֹד הַשָּׁנָה? (p. 7)

It was April, wasn't it?

The bones you planted in the backyard – will they sprout?

Will they bud and bloom? (p. 7<sup>1</sup>)

העצמות מעלות נצה.  
היפרחו עוד השנה? (p. 30)

The bones are sprouting!  
Will they bloom this year? (p. 30)

These lines echo the opening lines of “The Waste Land,” as well as the closing stanza of the first chapter, “The Burial of the Dead”:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain. (ll. 1–5)

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout?  
Will it bloom this year? (ll. 71–72).<sup>2</sup>

Yet unlike Eliot, who, in the intonations of a biblical prophet, offers an apocalyptic vision of post-World War I Europe,<sup>3</sup> Rass – conforming to expectations of a women writer in hegemonic culture – chooses a minor position. Rather than anchoring her story in big, historical or metaphysical events, she shares with her readers a personal story about the loss of a soul-mate who sinks into the recesses of oblivion. Although her private, intimate story is not free of political undertones, it is not loaded with the historiosophical meanings of Eliot’s poem.

Furthermore, Rass – who dedicates her poem to her sister, Nina, “with love” (p. 5) – prefers a dialogue over a monologue. Conducting an imagined conversation in the intimate form of a letter – a genre evaluated by hegemonic norms as inferior and suitable to women<sup>4</sup> – she conveys the connective nature of the female bond, as described by feminist psychoanalysts.<sup>5</sup> Rass thus accords with Lily Rattok’s description of the Israeli poetess (in the 1960s–1980s) as sending a love message,<sup>6</sup> although she addresses

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<sup>1</sup> The page numbers refer, respectively, to the Hebrew and English editions of Raz’s *Flowering Bones*; see above, note 6.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land” (1922), in idem, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934), pp. 29 and 31.

<sup>3</sup> As claimed by Northrop Frye, “About ‘The Waste Land,’” in Eliot, *The Waste Land* (Hebrew transl. by Esther Caspi; Tel Aviv: Keshev, 2001), pp. 49–53.

<sup>4</sup> According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1984 [1979]), p. 71–72.

<sup>5</sup> On this see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978); Judith V. Jordan, “Empathy and Self Boundaries,” in eadem et al. (eds.), *Women’s Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991); and Jessica Benjamin, “The First Bond,” in eadem, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Lily Rattok, “Portrait of the Woman as an Israeli Poetess,” *Moznaim*, 52/2–3 (1988), pp. 56–62 (Hebrew).

a woman, not a man, and her text is freighted with cultural connotations.

זוכרת, היינו בנות שש עשרה כשעל שפת הירקון ישבנו,  
קראנו את 'ארץ הישימון', תהינו ובהינו.  
אחר כך קראנו את הפרק ההוא מיחזקאל והתפוצצנו מצחוק. (p. 7)

Remember?

We were just sixteen when we sat  
on the bank of the Yarkon River holding hands,  
reading "The Waste Land" aloud  
and we wondered.  
Then we read this chapter about dry bones  
in the book of Ezekiel, and we rolled with laughter. (p. 7)

The lines recall the elegy of the exiled Jews sitting by the rivers of Babylon and weeping for the destruction of Zion (Ps. 137), a reference also invoked by Eliot ("By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept ...").<sup>7</sup> They add a lamentational note to the speaker's private elegy for the loss of her beloved friend.

Rass's speaker described her unforgotten companion:

מדי פעם בין השמשות אני רואה אותך  
מרחפת קלילות בין הקברים, מתרפקת  
על הקבר שלך, על הקבר שלו, מלטפת  
במבטך את דם הפרג, את הסביונים  
הצומחים בחרות פראית  
במלבן האבן הפרטי שלך. (p. 56)

Once in a while, at sunset, I see your tall scrawny  
figure stealing among the graves, snuggling  
on your grave, on his, your eyes stroke the red  
poppies that grow wild in the tiny bed all your own. (p. 58)

The face of her beloved haunts her.

אני בוחנת את פני משתקפות במי הירקון, הכנרת, הזים  
ורואה רק את שלך  
כחושות, נאות, החלטיות, אש שחורה באישוניך,  
שעריך הצף כתר קוצני לראשך. (p. 10)

Examining my face reflected in the waters  
of the Yarkon River, of the Lake of Galilee,  
of the Mediterranean, I will discern only yours –  
gaunt, handsome, resolute, black fire kindling  
your eyes, wild hair crowning your head. (p. 10)

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<sup>7</sup> Eliot, "The Waste Land" (above, note 10), p. 36, l. 182.

The “death by water” parallels Eliot’s poem<sup>8</sup> and the description (in the Hebrew version, which speaks of a “thorny crown”) evokes the image of Jesus’ crown of thorns and drowning Ophelia’s crown of flowers.

רוח קלילה מגלגלת את פני המים, מקמטת את פניך  
שוקעות/נבלעות במעמקים. (*ibid.*)

Breeze will ripple  
the water and wrinkle your face –  
submerged into the depth – to vanish once again. (*ibid.*)

Later on, under the heading “I Saw When They Pulled You Out of the Water,” the speaker goes back to the horrid image of her drowned beloved:

ראיתי כשמשו אותך מן המים, נפוחה, מכרסמת,  
שמלתך הלבנה מפשלת. בשערך הארד  
הסתבכו אצות לם, מחרוזות מחרוזות.  
עדין צעירה. כבר מתחילה  
להרקב, כלתו של ... (p. 54)

I see you, pulled out of the fuming waves  
all swollen, your face wrinkled, your dress rolled up  
baring pale gaunt thighs, your trailing long hair  
nestling beads-like seaweed, your youthful  
body showing signs of decomposing – you,  
the bride of ... (pp. 56–57, ellipsis in the original)

Rass reinforces Ophelia’s tragic story with that of another unwedded bride, Demophon’s, who was transformed into an almond tree (p.54), shedding:

שמלת תחרה לבנה ונדרדה על הקבר. (p. 53)

a pink-white gown  
over the graves. (p. 55)

As in Eliot’s poem (ll. 43–59), this fate is foreseen by a fortune-teller:

בנר הראשון, ביום הלדתי השמונה עשרה, הלכתי  
אל הקוראת בקלפים.  
לא ספרתי לך. לא ספרתי לאמי.  
היא טרפה את הקלפים, פורשת אותם כמניפה,  
מנפנפת בקלף מלאך המות ומגחכת.  
נדבקתי למושב הכסא באימה.  
”המנות – הוא רק התחלה”, אמרה, קולה מזדמר. ”מה שהיה מת.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 47 and 55, and the “Death by Water” section, ll. 312–321.

מת. משהו אחר יוגד. מישהו אחר. מה שהיה, מי שהיה, מת, מת, מת – (p. 11)

On my eighteenth birthday I visited the card reader.  
I didn't tell you. I didn't tell my mother.  
She shuffled the cards and fanned them out front,  
She picked the card of the angel of death  
and waved it in front of me, grinning.  
I am glued to my seat in terror.  
"Death is just the beginning," she chanted.  
"Whatever was, is dead, something else will bloom,  
someone else – whatever was, whoever was,  
is dead, dead, dead ...." (p. 11, ellipsis in the original)

The fortune-teller's foreboding message, in which death is followed by "beginning" and "bloom," evolves sinisterly into a reassertion of the regeneration myth that is the *leitmotif* of Eliot's poem. The speaker remembers:

באפריל, קצת לפני פסח, כשהשתחררנו מהצבא, נסענו  
לשבת לכנרת. ישבנו על החוף, חבוקות, שתקנו והבטנו. (p. 9)

In mid-April, soon after completing our military  
service, we traveled to the Lake of Galilee  
for the weekend. Sitting on the shore, snuggling  
in the shade of the giant eucalypti, we silently  
watched the waves. (p. 9)

The story told by Rass's speaker unfolds between Rosh Pina in the Upper Galilee and the Sea of Galilee.<sup>9</sup> Her memories are thus located on the earth of the Galilee, upon which Jesus – a dominant figure in Eliot's world – walked, performing his miracles, walking on the waters of the lake and delivering his speeches.

The biblical setting also brings to the fore Eliot's use of the Book of Ezekiel:

על שפת הכנרת ישבנו, שוב קראנו את הפרק ההוא מיחזקאל  
וּצְחָקְנוּ.

אפריל, צטטת בפסקנות, האכזר מכל החדשים. (*ibid.*)

On the shore of the Lake of Galilee we sat  
and read once more about dry bones in the book  
of Ezekiel, and we giggled.

April, you say, *is* the cruelest of months. (p. 10, emphasis in the original)

But, the speaker points out, in present-day Israel, engaged as it is in an ongoing battle with its neighboring

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<sup>9</sup> According to references on p. 24 of the Hebrew version; the English translation does not mention the exact location.

countries, not only April is cruel:

וְיָנוּאָר, וְיַפְרָוּאָר, וְיַמְרָץ?  
וּמַאי, לֹא?  
וְיוּנִי? כְּמוֹכֶן, יוּנִי?  
וּמָה חֶסֶר לְיוּלִי וּלְאֹגוּסְט?  
וְסֶפְטֵמְבֶּר?  
וְאוֹקְטוֹבֶר הַנְּמָהָר?  
וְנוֹבֶמְבֶּר הַמֵּר?  
וְדֶצֶמְבֶּר, שְׂכַחְתָּ? [...]

בְּאַפְרִיל, אֲמַרְתָּ, בְּאַפְרִיל פּוֹרְחוֹת הַעֲצָמוֹת. (pp. 9–10)

And January is not? And February and March?  
And May? Certainly June?  
What about July and August?  
Definitely, September? October?  
And what about gray November?  
And murky December?

In April, you declare, in April the bones bloom. (p.10)

Transplanting the regeneration myth to the biblical land allows Rass to adjust its cultural associations to the region's history, linking it back to its ancient Near Eastern origins. The move beyond Eliot's Christian world and its medieval legacy, beyond the Hellenistic mythology of Western culture, and even beyond the monotheistic world of the Old Testament, toward an earlier pagan era, allows Rass to extend her work far back into the ancient sources of the rebirth myth and its reflections in the Biblical legacy. Evoking the Mesopotamian narrative, with its crucial dependence on the natural cycles of rain and aridity<sup>10</sup> that mark our very existence in "the Promised Land" to this day, substantiates the myth of rebirth and regeneration as the reflection of an existential position (documented in the biblical stories of the Patriarchs moving back and forth between Canaan and Egypt in search of food in times of drought). The change of setting thus endows this motif in Rass's work with a local dimension, highlighting the links between Eliot's metaphorical wasteland, set in rainy Europe, and the Israeli desert, here and now.

In the Sumerian-Akkadian myth, the god of fertility, Dumuzi/Tammuz, is nipped in the bud, wilts and blooms again in a pattern that evinces the world's natural cycles of growth and wilting. The same motif recurs in the tragic stories of Adonis, Attis and Osiris, a major source for Eliot, via James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.<sup>11</sup> "The womb of the earth clamors for fertilization, and blood sacrifices and corpses are the food she likes best. This is the deadly side of the earth's character," explains Erich Neumann.<sup>12</sup> Those

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<sup>10</sup> As pointed out by S. Shifra and Jacob Klein in their introduction to the anthology *In Those Distant Days: Anthology of Mesopotamian Literature* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), pp. 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> As described in Eliot's footnotes; see *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (above, note 10), p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (English transl. by R.F.C. Hull; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954 [1949]), p. 54.

“flower-like boys” who are “always the victims, dying like adorable flowers,”<sup>13</sup> nurture the soil with seeds of perennial flowers that sprout each year in a fixed cycle, masking, according to Julia Kristeva, humanity’s irredeemable cultural debt to Mother Nature<sup>14</sup> (an obligation that gains an additional dimension of meaning in present-day Israel).

Adonis (Adon), originally a Semitic god, was the lover of Ashtoreth, the infamous daughter of Ashera, mother-goddess of Canaan (and familiar to the Hebrew reader from the biblical text). The earth soaked in Adonis’s blood sprouts poppies or anemones, according to the Hellenistic version of the story mentioned in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and the lament for his untimely death echoes in the poetry of Sappho. In his honor, Hellenistic women prepared bowls of seasonal wild plants that bloomed and wilted, calling them “gardens of Adonis.”<sup>15</sup>

A similar myth is echoed in the first chapter of “The Waste Land,” in the gloomy image of the hyacinth girl (ll. 35–40),<sup>16</sup> which evokes the ancient Greek legend of Hyacinthus, mentioned by Rass as one of her sources. Hyacinthus was a beautiful Spartan youth, beloved by both Apollo the sun god and Zephyrus the god of the western wind. Hyacinthus chose Apollo, and Zephyrus thereupon killed him during a game of discus throwing with Apollo, by blow the discus out of its course. From Hyacinthus’s blood, the grieving Apollo raised the flower bearing his name.<sup>17</sup>

Another tragic lover-boy mentioned by Eliot is Attis, the Phrygian lover of Cybele, who castrated himself as a punishment for betraying the mother goddess, and whose bloody worship spread over from the Hellenic world to Rome.<sup>18</sup> The third unfortunate youth Eliot mentions is the Egyptian Osiris, brother/lover of Isis, who was murdered and cut to pieces by his own brother Seth.<sup>19</sup> Like Anath, sister of the Canaanite Baal, who mended him after he was ravaged by his brother Moth (Death),<sup>20</sup> Isis collects Osiris’s organs, assembles them back together and even bears him a child (her image holding a child in her arms helped inspire the image of the Madonna with Jesus). This blood legacy stirring beneath the foundations of Eliot’s poem culminates in the image of Jesus, who, according to Christian tradition, was crucified and resurrected after three days, and who held special significance for the author of *The Waste Land*.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (English transl. by Leon S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 [1980]), p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (English transl. by A.R. Maxwell-Hyslop; Oxford–Cambridge [Mass.]: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 12–13; *Dictionary of Mythology* (London, etc.: Chancellor Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (above, note 10), p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Grimal, *Dictionary*, p. 218; *Dictionary of Mythology*, p. 83 (both above, note 23).

<sup>18</sup> Grimal, *Dictionary*, p. 70; *Dictionary of Mythology*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Grimal, *Dictionary*, p. 238; *Dictionary of Mythology*, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> *Dictionary of Mythology*, pp. 12 and 28.

<sup>21</sup> As F.R. Leavis explains, the “Hanged Man” figure featured in the Tarot pack, as well as the “hooded figure” described by Eliot, stand for “the Hanged God and all the sacrificed gods: ... Adonis, Attis, Osiris”; see idem, “The Poem’s Unity,” pp. 28–29, in Knoll, *Storm over The Waste Land* (above, note 11), pp. 28–29 (first published in Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1950]). Likewise F.O. Matthiessen explain that “he who ‘is now dead’ is not Christ alone, but the slain Vegetation God: he is Adonis and Osiris and Orpheus”; see idem, “The System of Allusion,” in Knoll, *Storm over The Waste Land*, p. 42 (first published in idem, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935]). Matthiessen draws the reader’s attention to “the basic resemblance, ... between the vegetation myth of the rebirth of the year, the fertility myths of the rebirth of the

The red poppy, in its role as an official memorial flower (blooming forever in John McCrae's "Flanders Fields"<sup>22</sup>), appears again and again in Rass's poem (p. 14, p. 24), moving through the natural cycle of the seasons. Early in the poem, echoing the ancient blood-soaked myth, she writes:

העצמות שמעלות נצה בגנה  
מפריחות באביב כרבולות פרגים אדמות כדם. (p. 8)

In April the bones planted in the backyard  
sprout and flower  
as red as blood. (p. 8)

Later, the speaker recalls:

באמצע אפריל התבלבלו סדרי עולם. הטמפרטורה צנחה.  
קמנו בבקר ולא האמנו: שכבת שלג כסתה בשמיכה  
צחרה ובוהקת את כל אשר פגעה העין. הפרגים שנקברו בשלג  
שבו ונשאו ראשם ונפנו מעל הלך בכרבולות דם. (p. 48)

In mid-April the order of things became confounded.  
The temperature dropped. When we awoke, we  
couldn't believe it: a thin blanket of sparkling snow  
shrouded everything the eye met. Poppies buried in  
the snow lifted their heads spilling their blood over  
the whiteness. (p. 49)

In July, the speaker hears her lost friend:

לחשית/פזמת לי לחן עתיק:  
רק הסביונים המעוכים  
יכולים לספר היכן היה מנח ראשי  
אבל איש לא ידע, מלבדו ומלבדי  
מה עשה לי, מה עשיתי לו  
בין הסביונים. (p. 59)

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potency of man, the Christian story of the Resurrection, and the Grail legend of purification. The common source of all these myths lay in the fundamental rhythm of nature – that of death and rebirth of the year, and their varying symbolism was an effort to explain the origin of life" (*ibid.*, p. 41).

<sup>22</sup> The poem "In Flanders Fields" (1915) by the Canadian army physician John McCrae remains to this day one of the most memorable war (or anti-war) poems ever written: "In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row, / That mark our place; and in the sky / The larks, still bravely singing, fly / Scarce heard amid the guns below. // We are the Dead. Short days ago / We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, / Loved, and were loved, and now we lie / In Flanders fields.// Take up our quarrel with the foe: / To you from failing hands we throw / The torch; be yours to hold it high. / If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders fields." John McCrae, *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems* (Toronto–New York: William Briggs, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), p. 15.

I hear you humming an ancient tune:  
Only the crushed poppies  
Could tell where my head lies  
But no one except you and I  
Could tell, what you did to me,  
What I did to you  
In the flaming field. (p. 61)

The speaker assures her:

גם השנה גולשים על המצבות, מתפוצים  
הפרגים בכרובולות דם. (שם)

This year too the poppies cascade over  
the graves, flaunting their blood-red crowns.<sup>23</sup> (*ibid.*)

Her recollections begin with a similar picture:

ליד הכביש הראשי בואד אילניה  
חלקת שדה גולשת בווערת  
ימה גועשת בארנמן  
והרוח נוהמת ומנערת את הפרגים בהמת זעם  
עד כי יחוללו כמסממים.  
ואת, במקנסים קצרים וירכים שזופות,  
נחילי שער כסוף מעתירים עלך אצילות,  
רצה ורצה בשדות כי כבר מזמן נגמר לך ללקת  
זרועותיך פרושות לפנדל לחבק את הרוח  
קוטמת מלא חפנים ראשי פרגים  
והרוח משתוללת בכרובולות מתפוצצות מדם  
נושאת אותן על שבלה  
והאור מתמלא באדם האדם הזה<sup>24</sup>  
שתמיד שגע אותך בלהט הדחוס שבו  
ואת קוראת: אשה, איזה יפי!  
וצוחקת! צוחקת  
וצועקת, צוחקת  
וצועקת! (pp. 8–9)

Along the main road heading north  
I see a caucous of ten thousand crimson,

<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew version describes not crowns but cockscombs, thus bringing to mind the chicken used by religious Jews for the expiatory ritual of *kaparot* before the Day of Atonement, possibly a relic of the ancient bloody ceremony marking the beginning of the year. For a discussion of the transformation of Yom Kippur from a pagan festival to a holy day of repentance, see Simcha Yom-Tov, “The Day of Atonement: Festivity of Fertility and Revelry of Astarte – Matriarchal Footprints in the Jewish Liturgy,” in idem (ed.), *Gender – Culture – Architecture* (Hebrew; Haifa: Technion, 1990), pp. 231–281.

<sup>24</sup> An allusion to the “red pottage” of Gen. 25:30.

seething droves rising up in flame,  
their fiery heads sway in frenzy, tossed  
and rocked by the hand of a vengeful wind

... and you, in shorts baring long lean suntanned  
thighs, glistening silver lines your hair, your graceful  
face too boyish for a girl yet too girlish for a boy –  
charge across the flaming fields, arms –  
outstretched to embrace the wind –  
embrace instead crimson heads,  
severed by a raging wind  
that rips open the flowers  
and slashes their guts,  
launching red into flight –  
that dense red which always  
drives you crazy, and intoxicated,  
you shout, “What beauty”  
and you laugh  
and laugh  
sobbing. (p. 9)

Rass’s description of her beloved boyish/girlish<sup>25</sup> companion celebrating the beauty of nature in the poppy field echoes the ancient orgiastic rituals marking the seasonal coming to life of the flowerlike lover boys, Adonis, Attis, Tammuz.

In *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*, Annis Pratt describes women’s fiction as “a mutually illuminative or interrelated field of texts reflecting a preliterate repository of feminine archetypes, including three particularly important archetypal systems – the Demeter/Kore and Ishtar/Tammuz rebirth myths, the Arthurian grail narratives, and the Craft of the Wise, or witchcraft.”<sup>26</sup> Unlike Eliot, who chooses the grail legends of the later Middle Ages, Rass, through her emphasis on intimate relationships between women (childhood friends, soul mates, sisters or lovers, as they are described on the cover), evokes the Demeter/Kore narratives. These and the Ishtar/Tammuz myths, according to Pratt, “have particular appeal to women,” as “they derive from feminine materials alien to the patriarchy”:

Both the Demeter/Persephone and the Ishtar/Tammuz narratives (also the Aphrodite/Adonis and Isis/Osiris stories) underlie ancient feminine rituals celebrated in preclassical and classical times. Both [...] have uniquely feminine overtones, and the rites that derive from them have had a perennial appeal to women.<sup>27</sup>

The appeal of these myths is manifested in texts by modern women writers like Mary Shelley, Hilda Doolittle, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Muriel Rukeyser and Toni Morrison.<sup>28</sup> Feminist scholar Adrienne

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<sup>25</sup> The companion’s androgynous nature is explicit only in the English version of the poem.

<sup>26</sup> Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 170.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>28</sup> “Women writers from Mary Shelley (*Proserpine*) to H.D. (‘Demeter’), Virginia Woolf (*To the*

Rich has pointed out the particular significance of the Demeter/Persephone version of the rebirth myth to the reestablishment of the mother-daughter relationship outside the rules of patriarchal culture.<sup>29</sup> Although Rass does not mention this Hellenistic version explicitly, it echoes between the versed lines of her work, supplementing the Sumerian and Akkadian versions explicitly invoked in them and evoking a feminist dimension of the central myth that structures Eliot's poem.

Eliot employs the medieval version of the vegetation myth, associated with the Passion of Christ<sup>30</sup> and echoing Sanskrit legends.<sup>31</sup> A central motif, inspired by Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*,<sup>32</sup> is the legend of the Fisher King, the wounded, sterile king of a drought-stricken country. Like the barren, sterile *Waste Land*, the country of the *Flowering Bones*, too, stands arid, its land "charred" and "vomiting bones," which:

נפלטות, חוזרות ונבלעות במעיה  
ואד עלה ממעמקי הבתרים. (p. 58)

thrust up, plunging down  
to be devoured into the entrails of the earth

and vapor rises up from the depth of the chasm.<sup>33</sup> (p. 60)

This is Rass's contemporary vision of the original covenant between God and the people of Israel described in chapter 15 of Genesis. In the "sun-scorched / land" (*ibid.*) – recalling the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities of evil that harbored not even a handful of righteous men to save them – the speaker walks at the beginning of the arid summer season. This is the season of the death of the Tammuz, the young Akkadian fertility god mourned by women in the Temple court (Ezek. 8:14).

By setting her poem in the Promised Land, strewn with the bones of the dead – to be resurrected, according to Jewish belief, with the coming of the Messiah – Rass adds a new, ironic meaning to the old biblical vision of Ezekiel, which had served Eliot as a source of inspiration. The anticipated advent of the Messiah is not entirely cut off from everyday Israeli reality, where zealous religious leaders constantly stir up turmoil over the uncovering of ancient graves. Transplanting the poem from the metaphorical

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*Lighthouse*), Sylvia Plath ('Two Sisters of Persephone'), Muriel Rukeyser ('In the Underworld'), and Tony Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*) have described female sexual initiation in terms of the myth of Persephone, with its themes of abduction, rape, the death of the physical world, and sorrowful separation from female companions," write Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* (above, note 12), p. 504.

<sup>29</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood," in eadem, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), pp. 240–243.

<sup>30</sup> According to Northrop Frye, in the Hebrew translation of Eliot, *The Waste Land* (above, note 11), pp. 49–53.

<sup>31</sup> According to Cleanth Brooks, "The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), pp. 136–172. Ezra Pound is said to have declared that "the poem's obscurities were reducible to four Sanskrit words, three of which are ... the words of some ritual or other"; see Hugh Kenner, "How the Poem Was Constructed," in Robert E. Knoll (ed.), *Storm over The Waste Land* (Chicago, etc.: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), pp. 6–7.

<sup>32</sup> *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, note, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> An allusion to Gen. 2:6 and 15:10.

wasteland of Europe to the “land that devours its inhabitants” (a modern Hebrew expression deriving from Num. 13:32) adds a relevant and chilling dimension to the description of the bones “in the bowels of this land,” whose earth “has been feeding on bones ... [f]or centuries” (*Land of Flowering Bones*, p. 8).

“This land, is it alive with bones?” asks Rass’s speaker, adding an exquisitely local tone to the closing lines of Eliot’s first chapter (“That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / ‘Has it begun to sprout?”). The speaker continues:

בְּכֹל מְקוֹם שֶׁחוֹפְרִים הֵן מְצִיצוֹת:  
וְאֵת גְּנֵבֶת אוֹתוֹן מֵהַקְּבֹר שֶׁלוֹ וְשִׁתְּלֶתָּ בְּגִנְהָ: (p. 8)

Any place you dig, are you sure to run into bones?  
So you stole them from his grave and planted them in your backyard? (p. 8)

In a mocking tone, Rass alludes explicitly to Kästner’s “Do You Know the Country Where the Cannons Bloom?” as well as to the poem it parodies, Goethe’s “Mignon,” which begins: “Do you know the land where the lemons bloom?”

הִדְעֶתְּ אֵת הָאָרֶץ בְּהַלְלֵלוֹת הַחֲרִים, הַלִּימוֹנִים מִשְׁחִירִים,  
הָאֲשֻׁכּוֹלִיּוֹת מִצְטַמְקוֹת, הַנְּחָלִים מֵאֲכָזְבִים, הָעֵצִים גּוֹסְסִים,  
הִדְעֶתְּ אֵת הָאָרֶץ אוֹתָהּ מִפְּרוֹת הָעֵצְמוֹת: (p. 57)

Do you know this land whose nights are pale,  
its lemons black, its apples shriveled, its rivers dry,  
its trees dying –  
do you know this land which feeds on bones? (p. 59)

No reader could miss the bitter irony of her question. The promised land is barren, its vegetation withering, as if a curse lay upon it (in the spirit of Eliot’s poem). Only the bones in its depths sprout, in a kind of inversion that signals the upending of the world order. Israel, caught in an unresolved and violent territorial conflict, is the land planted with bones, which sprout upward and flower, like souls wishing to reunite with their maker. Rass plays on the double meaning of the Hebrew verb *parah* – “to bloom” and “to fly.” The Hebrew expression *parḥah li haneshamah*, “my soul flew out [of my body],” connotes fear and horror.

Out of the ravaged background constructed by the poem, the speaker’s addressee emerges as a mythical figure – the powerful “Needle Woman,” who mends the torn universe:

וְאֵת עֲמֻדַת שֵׁם  
בְּיָדָהּ מַחֵט גְּדוֹלָה כְּמִשׁוֹט וְחוּט אָרָף: (p. 58)

I see you standing at the edge holding a needle  
as large as an oar and a very long thread. (p. 60)

Rass depicts her addressee in the image of the mother goddesses who, as described by Helen Diner, “weave the world tapestry out of genesis and demise.”<sup>34</sup> Artist Judy Chicago refers to this motif in

<sup>34</sup> Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons: The First Feminine History of Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), p.

*Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework:*

One important aspect of many of the ancient goddesses was that of the Eternal Weaver, whose womb was thought to contain the pattern of life .... Many ancient goddesses were described as “spinnners of life” or “weavers of destiny.”<sup>35</sup>

Among these goddesses (the Egyptian Neith and Net; the Sumerian Innana, queen of the sky and companion of Dumuzi, the young shepherd she sentenced to death for his betrayal; the Scandinavian Norns; the Aztec Xochiquetzal and Ixchel), Chicago mentions Isis, the powerful sorceress-goddess who pieced together the severed parts of her brother/lover Osiris, in the Egyptian version of the rebirth myth.<sup>36</sup>

Rass writes:

נוֹעֲצָת אֶת הַמַּחֲט בְּשִׁפְתוֹ  
שֶׁל הַשָּׂסַע מִשְׁחִילָה אֶל הַשָּׁפָה הַשְּׂנִיָּה,  
וּבִסְבִּלְנוֹת אֵין קֶץ  
תּוֹפְרָת אֶת הָאֲדָמָה עַל עֲצָמוֹתֶיהָ  
תִּפְרֵר אַחַר תִּפְרֵר. (p. 58)

You thrust the needle into one side of the abyss,  
pulling it toward the opposing edge,  
drawing out the thread, and with infinite patience,  
stitch after stitch,  
you sew up the earth  
with its bones. (p. 60)

The image in which she depicts her addressee is that of Ariadne, Penelope, Philomela, and the other mythological figures who, in the words of feminist scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “sewed to heal the wounds inflicted by history”<sup>37</sup>:

וְאֵת עַמֻּדֶת שָׁם, עֲצָם מְעַצְמָה,  
מֵאַחַה אֶת הַבְּתָרִים. (*ibid.*)

And you stand there, a lonely bone among bones,  
laboring to put the pieces together again. (*ibid.*).

The Hebrew words allude to Adam’s response to the creation of woman in Gen. 2:23: “This at last is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh.” The language thus creates a synergy between the classic mythical figure of the Needle Woman as the Great Mother and biblical Eve, mother of humanity. This context is further reinforced by the use of the uncommon word *betarim*, pieces, reiterating the allusion to the bizarre story of the *berit bein habetarim*, the “covenant of the pieces” in Gen. 15.

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16, cited in Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* (above, note 12), p. 521.

<sup>35</sup> Judy Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework* (New York: Anchor, 1980), pp. 24 and 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Dictionary of Mythology* (above, note 23), p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* (above, note 12), p. 642.