

## Encountering the Song of Spring in Ralph Hotere and Cilla McQueen's *Song of Solomon*

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*New Zealand Maori artist Ralph Hotere's (1931–2013) Song of Solomon series is a collaborative visual and poetic commentary that Hotere made with award winning New Zealand poet Cilla McQueen (b.1949) in protest at the Gulf War (Iraq, 1991). Here I present a reading of one of the paintings from this series with McQueen's poem, Warpath. I explore the sonorous effects of repetition and visual and spatial arrangements in Hotere and McQueen's collaboration, paying specific attention to the appropriation and re-contextualisation of 2:10 – 12 of the Song of Songs as it is embedded in the particular material qualities of the painting.*

New Zealand Maori artist Ralph Hotere's (1931–2013) *Song of Solomon* series is a collaborative visual and poetic commentary that Hotere made with award winning New Zealand poet Cilla McQueen (b.1949) in protest at the Gulf War (Iraq, 1991). McQueen, a poet and multidisciplinary artist in her own right, gave Hotere a poem, initially entitled *Warpath*, compiled from news items on the Gulf War she copied and reconstructed from *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines.<sup>1</sup> Seeking to counter the poetic war-language she had invented, she selected two verses from the spring song in chapter two of the Song of Songs,<sup>2</sup> slightly altering the King James Version, with:

Arise my love, my fair one and come away,  
For lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone  
The flowers appear on the earth  
The time of the singing birds is come

This paper will explore the sonorous effects and visual and spatial arrangements of this biblical reference, through its appropriation and re-contextualisation in Hotere and McQueen's work.

Through their collaboration, McQueen's poetic and politically integrated sensibility met Hotere's signature painterly engagements and equally embodied convictions. Hotere made a series of collage works, drawings, and lithographs, over this time, exploring different configurations of the content of McQueen's poem. The particular work from this series I will focus on is made up of fourteen individually signed and numbered black paint and exposed white paper panels, composed in reference to the convention of the Stations of the Cross.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Warpath" is published in Cilla McQueen, *Axis* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2001) 131-132.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to Hotere and McQueen's collaborative series as the *Song of Solomon*, and to the biblical text as the Song of Songs, or the Song, throughout.

<sup>3</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 1991. Mixed media on fourteen sheets of paper. Overall size: 1324 x 3675mm. Private Collection, Auckland.

Lyrical hand inscribed, or italicised typeface, from the text of the Song of Songs is juxtaposed, a single line at a time, with chunks of military terminologies in an invented jargon, visceral and clunky. In addition to McQueen's poem, Hotere included an Arabic phrase, that can be found in lesser or greater degrees throughout most of his *Song of Solomon* series. The phrase translates as "Libyan connectedness" in the literal sense,<sup>4</sup> and can be seen in faint black on black paint in one of the panels in this particular painting. Hotere was an intensely politically engaged artist, and abhorred the stupidity of war, yet he was also known for rarely divulging anything definitive about the meaning of his works. This phrase remains somewhat of a mystery, yet given Hotere's political focus, it was no doubt inserted as a way of acknowledging the plight of the Gulf war – a device to contextualise the work with a gesture to the Middle Eastern situation.<sup>5</sup> Within the context of Hotere's intention for the work, the heavy application of black paint also recalls the dispute over oil in the Gulf. The paint is translucent in parts; lines fade, speckled and splattered across the panels – it looks like petroleum. The dotted lines have also been compared to tracer fire by critics, or the flight path of birds in reference to the presence of the Song of Songs in the work.<sup>6</sup>

While I do not take Hotere's and McQueen's political stances for granted – both artist and poet felt very strongly about the circumstances surrounding the Gulf War and commented in particular on the role of the media – this paper will consist of a close reading of the textual and visual elements of their art work, exploring the potential for wider commentary that acknowledges a universal context of crisis, suffering, and the hope for reparation. The instrumental role of the soft sonority of the Song of Songs within the contrasting elements of their work will be demonstrated. The effects of repetition in a reading of the painting as a participatory process and material engagement will critically anchor this focal point. A reading that integrates the material quality of paint with the literary component of the work is also at the forefront of this consideration.

The reference to the Stations of the Cross was a compositional addition made by Hotere, beyond what McQueen had composed. This addition reflects Hotere's Roman Catholic sensibility which is evident across his oeuvre. It also calls for a sequential reading of the work. The reader is presented with a succession of alternating black and white painted mixed media pages that lay out the poem, in large format, to be viewed along a wall. While there is an extractable written or verbal component to Hotere's *Song of Solomon*, I am interested in a way of reading that affirms the material effects of both written text and visual marks as a whole. A

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<sup>4</sup> The translation is provided by Taneli Kukkonen in an email correspondence during October, 2014: "Libyan connectedness" (or "Libyan ties" or, at a stretch, "Libyan federation"). Jack Ross, writes: "My Arabic teacher, Mr. Alan Dabaliz, tells me that it translates roughly as "Libyans Unite!" Copied, perhaps, from some news bulletin?" <http://jackrossopinions.blogspot.co.nz/2013/01/hotere-out-black-window-1998.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The Arabic phrase was apparently understood by Hotere to carry a reference of praise to Allah. (Correspondence with Marian Maguire, May 2015). But there is no direct translation of any such reference, or any reference to Allah that I have been able to confirm. Any kind of territorial specificity makes no sense in light of the content and context of the painting. Perhaps the phrase is a nod towards Gadhafi, as the hero he was once perceived as; or as a generalised term espoused by black liberation figures, or a reference to the pan-African movement, but this is speculative.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory O'Brien, *Hotere, Out the Black Window: Ralph Hotere's work with New Zealand poets* (Auckland: Godwit, 1997) 109.

focus on sensation over representation in this initial encounter with the work follows the immersive size of the painting, as the swathes of black painted segments that repeat irregularly across the work has an impact upon the viewer beyond a correspondence of literal meaning. One is confronted first with this visual thing. Through grounding a reading in the material and visual presence of the painting over the correspondence of meaning in sign systems that might come more easily in a literary analysis of the poem, I hope to present an integrated reading that does not separate the written from the visual – or to at least keep in mind that the text is imbedded in paint.

Artist and theorist Barbara Bolt outlines a useful approach for this kind of reading. She locates an indexical quality at the level of affect at the base of a tiered interpretation of any given painting. Underneath any iconographic or narrative reading is a reception-based relation that “...involves the indexical quality of the paint and the *effect* that this has on the viewer ... a vibration that hits us bodily.”<sup>7</sup> Against the assumption that there is a gap between the sign and its referent, and towards the notion that an artwork might perform rather than represent, she asks if there could be a causal link or “dynamic relationship” between the image and matter – material effects that are also bound up with the contextual situations of the art work, or the mode of artistic production.<sup>8</sup> Following art historian James Elkins, she finds promise in the contiguous relation between the indexical sign, and the “insistent force”<sup>9</sup> of the dynamic object, first theorised by Charles Sanders Peirce, for her reconciliatory project that would see images as simultaneously signs and not signs.

For Elkins there can be no semiotic parallel between visual marks and written marks. Images are not the same kinds of things as texts. Elkins praises the *difficulty* of art, believing semiotic analysis makes pictures too easy.<sup>10</sup> He believes marks are avoided or simplified: put into broad categories such as “handling” “surface” or “gesture” which are then applied with meaning.<sup>11</sup> He claims that the historical and analytic specificity of marks can confound semiotic readings.<sup>12</sup> Yet he does not completely reject the significance of the development of a linguistic or semiotic model for visual texts. While semiotic analyses enable access to understanding structures of power and societal contexts through the reading of images as signs or sign systems, Elkins posits a counter “antiseiotic” approach, claiming that images are structurally complex: “they are partly inside and partly outside systematic, linguistic, logical, and mathematical structures of meaning.”<sup>13</sup> He

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004) 179.

<sup>8</sup> Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 168-69, 173.

<sup>9</sup> The dynamic object is the real thing: an “insistent force,” in relation, yet “external to the sign.” Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 173-75.

<sup>10</sup> James Elkins, *On Pictures: And the Words that Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 46.

<sup>11</sup> Elkins, *On Pictures*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Elkins, *On Pictures*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Elkins, *On Pictures*, xii.

believes visual products should be considered “simultaneously signs and not signs.”<sup>14</sup>

Elkin’s “antisemiotic” approach involves a close scrutiny of mark making. He demonstrates the difference between visual marks and written words through exploring a series of kinds of marks that cannot be categorised under the rubric of “disjoint, orderly, systematic, linguistic signs.”<sup>15</sup> He demonstrates the way marks resist semiotic analysis through various modalities that include the way marks can unite with surfaces, or perform unclear and idiosyncratic behaviours that avoid distinct categorization and hence a correspondence of meaning. Elkins celebrates the difficulty of images that “both hinder and enable” the viewer in their approach to reading marks that are neither “merely signs” nor “merely technical” components.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on the material thing in Elkins’ argument – the mark itself – that cannot correspond to linguistic forms of meaning, helps ground my reading as one that affirms an embodied approach.

Hotere and McQueen’s work contains a text that is integral to its meaning. Even though the text assists in an interpretative reading that eases the difficulty that Elkins describes, an integrative approach considers the work as it impacts upon the reader/viewer, as they move through it, as they allow the painting to speak as paint, as colour, as sensation.

In the painting, segments of text sit as horizons of light against the dark. A hint of yellow and faded marks of red maintain a compositional thread that brings visual coherence to the work as a whole. There is a fragility to the work, and it is rough. It lacks an elegance that many more of Hotere’s works exude. Reading the textual poetic component of the work as it is embedded in paint, adds complexity and nuance to a straight forward repetition or numbered succession. The composition and quality of the painted support carries a material presence of meaning for the poem. Each page arranges the text in a distinct compositional configuration. In a number of instances, the black is pushed right up to the border of the text in danger of erasing readability. But the evocative strength of the poetry is not overwhelmed by the black. This textual/poetic repetitive element of the painting, as a reiteration of paint, has the potential to engender a participatory and affective experience. It is the succession of black and white in this work that first reaches the viewer, that is the most immediate. The text comes later, as the reader engages, bringing context and meaning, and to this I now turn.

The hard language of the Gulf War newspeak in McQueen’s poem is a mixture of segments or singular words of transcribed news statements that have in some instances been hybridised or conjoined. McQueen’s assemblages of words present a visceral and mechanistic picture of acts of violence/ battle strikes and the tragic outcomes. Iterations of certain words and combinations create coherence: *bodycount*, *bodybomb*, *bodypoint*, *bloodbag*, *bodybag* *bodybag* for example. The use of the words body, gas, milk, moth and flame, are found in different configurations throughout the poem. There are cultural religious associations: Holy Cow. There are expressions that combine the organic with mechanised mass destruction:

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<sup>14</sup> Elkins, *On Pictures*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Elkins, *On Pictures*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Elkins, *On Pictures*, 46.

*pouncemilk* and *milkgas*. Words join, and conjoin, shift and tumble in a violent and confused succession. There is a conceptually descriptive characteristic to the war jargon, with no grammatical structure, aside from contained repetition and alliteration. The contrasting imagery of the warspeak: *liberating flame*, or *bacterial satellite*, lack any grammatical conjunctions that might create meaning or emphasis in any particular phrase. Militaristic operations, or the original news items the words were extracted from, are made senseless, to the point of abject absurdity. While many of the words are nonsensical, *pouncemilk* for example, the overall configurations convey a horrible reality that, one could imagine, is pretty accurate. McQueen has transformed, or transposed, cold dispassionate newspeak into a commentary that conveys the tragedy and horror of war.

Verses from the Song of Songs, follow these sections: in McQueen's words, she "needed some soft peaceful language to counter" the "euphemisms and weasel-words of war."<sup>17</sup> Two completely different codes are juxtaposed and the contrast is accentuated through the insertion of coherence, from the Song of Songs and in most cases a change of font (italics, or in hand written script) in the painting. Read as a love poem, with the specific address, "my love" and with the call to "come away" also strengthens the contrast, leading the reader into a gentle and lyrical space where flowers bloom and birds sing.

An emphasis on physical connection and immersion in the land in the biblical text (which can also be read in light of the wider context of anthropomorphic erotic undercurrents we find attached to the land in the Song of Songs), assists in an immersive reading of Hotere and McQueen's work. In this small excerpt of the Song of Songs, spring is described through the senses of sight and hearing, flowers appear and birds sing. To read McQueen's poem as "...an invitation to immerse oneself in nature as the place of love..."<sup>18</sup> is an apt counterpoint to the ravaging effects of war that is the call of the poetic painterly work. On the whole this section of the Song of Songs that McQueen appropriated, describes "the integration of the lovers into nature" the man and the woman each in their way, are participating in the awakening of nature that comes with the arrival of spring.<sup>19</sup>

These verses follow a kind of universal convention that associates springtime with young love. This section of the biblical text is a quotation of the lover's invitation to depart into nature. In this instance, the voice of the narrator belongs to the woman, who is also a character. Cheryl Exum draws attention to the blurring of boundaries at this point in the biblical text, between past and present, as the woman sits both inside and outside the text.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the voice of McQueen as the author of the poem reflects this same mode of narration within Hotere's work and it might be added that McQueen and Hotere were married at the time.

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<sup>17</sup> From personal email correspondence with Cilla McQueen, November 21, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*, trans. Michael Tait (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011) 103.

<sup>19</sup> Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005) 123-25.

The basic entreaty of the verses chosen for the artwork is: “Go, it is spring outside. (2:10 – 15).”<sup>21</sup> The couplet of the first line, “Arise my love, my fair one and come away” exudes devotion with the second echo of meaning. “Rise up” or “arise” suggests that it is the morning – an awakening. The emphasis here is on departure. It is no longer raining so it makes sense to leave the shelter of the house. With spring comes the association of a profusion of green growth and flowering life. The flowering descriptive sits in stark contrast to the painting’s allusions to a desert landscape and crude oil.

Another feature of the Song, and the last line of verse selected for the artwork, focuses on the arrival of singing in the land.<sup>22</sup> A reading that draws a connection between bird song and human song, a human love for the beauty of bird song as part of the enjoyment of spring, and “the musical aspect of life which is awakening...” in the Song, is emerging.<sup>23</sup>

Poems read aloud can have a musical quality, and it is to this performative feature of the work I now turn. The repetition of the segments of the Song of Songs, as appropriated by McQueen and Hotere, could be considered a kind of chant, or a refrain at the end of each verse of war-speak. This translates both visually and sonically. The repetition of motifs, in general, can have a unifying effect, and this is a central characteristic of Hotere and McQueen’s *Song of Solomon*. The painting houses a struggle, exemplified through the repetition of dark and light, and hard and soft language: the heavy “blastbreak” and the call to “alight and sing.” Yet McQueen’s refrain has a calming effect, juxtaposed against the hard language. In this way, the iteration of the Song of Songs engenders a meditative quality. A certain kind of mindfulness is fostered in the reader, or a way of listening, that houses transformative potential for the viewer. An association with the “musical aspect of life...” comes alive in the reading.

McQueen’s poem is composed of several alternating lines of verse, which Hotere transposed in the painting to fit a compositional structure that makes reference to the Stations of the Cross: each segment of the work is assigned a roman numeral, one to fourteen. This format places the work within an art historical trajectory and in this case constructs and demarcates the work as repeated sections of the poem.

Comparisons can be made to other artists who have made similar statements referring to the Stations of the Cross. Critics and art writers have made a compositional comparison, through the commonalities of abstracted landscape and use of roman numerals, to a 1974 work of Colin McCahon’s *The Song of the Shining Cuckoo*.<sup>24</sup> The title of McCahon’s work was inspired by a poem, given to

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<sup>21</sup> Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> Whether the meaning should be rendered “to sing” or “to prune” is debated. Some exegetes prefer pruning, following the flora imagery, others prefer singing, as pruning at the time of full bloom goes against common sense. Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 113.

<sup>23</sup> Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 112-13.

<sup>24</sup> See: <http://jackrossopinions.blogspot.co.nz/2013/01/hotere-out-black-window-1998.html> McCahon wrote the following translation of Tangirau Hotere's poem in his workbook:

Te Tangi o te / Pipiwhararua / Tuia Tui / Tahia Tahia / Kotahi Te Manu I Tau / Ki Te Tahuna / Tau Mai / Tau Mai / Tau Mai

McCahon by Ralph Hotere and written by Ralph's father Tangirau Hotere.<sup>25</sup> Although the text is not particularly visually or compositionally prominent, there is a beautiful allusion from *The Song of the Shining Cuckoo* to the birds of the Song of Songs: "Alight, my friend / alight, my friend / alight and rest."

Related in style to these works, I recall Barnett Newman's 1958-66 "Stations of the Cross," which makes a similar stark monochromatic statement as that uttered by the *Song of Solomon*, with Newman's signature "zips": vertical lines of black against mostly white exposed raw canvas with subtle flutters of black paint. Newman's work is subtitled "Lema sabachthani" ("why have you forsaken me").<sup>26</sup> In his exhibition statement he reflects upon a universal experience of suffering, which involves the way that each segment of the work contributes towards a single statement. In the Newman's words:

*Lema?* To what purpose – is the unanswerable question of human suffering. Can the Passion be expressed by a series of anecdotes, by fourteen sentimental illustrations? Do not the Stations tell of one event? The first pilgrims walked the Via Dolorosa to identify themselves with the original moment, not to reduce it to a pious legend; nor even to worship the story of one man and his agony, but to stand witness to the story of each man's agony; the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, willed – world without end.<sup>27</sup>

There is uniformity to all of these works in the structural element of repetition that is not loaded with the visual clutter of narrative pictorial content. In Hotere and McQueen's work, the biblical text is repeated line by line, then over again, as the viewer moves through the stations, centralising the effect that repetition has on the reader/viewer. Numbered and marked as a journey, the viewer is invited into a participatory and sequential movement across two rows of seven "stations" – or "meditations" might be a more apt description that fits the nature of the work. The reader is carried along the lines of a call and response that does not make any significant conceptual or compositional development as the painting lacks any of the narrative content associated with a conventional Stations of the Cross. The work has an even balanced contrast of themes – light and dark; the text, for the most part, inhabits the white spaces between the thick applications of black paint.

The liturgical tradition associated with Stations of the Cross also adds a degree of theological specificity to the *Song of Solomon*. Here is a subtext that draws on a

The Song of (Grief of) / The Shining Cuckoo / Glow Glow & tell us / Te Tui: pierce us and / Join us together / Bird: alight on / the beach / alight, my friend / alight, my friend / alight and rest. See: <http://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm001609>.

<sup>25</sup> McCahon in turn made the work in memorial for three deceased poets: R.A.K. Mason, Charles Brasch and James K. Baxter. See Peter Simpson, *Answering Hark: McCahon/ Caselberg; Painter/Poet*, 110. See also *Islands (Summer 1976)* for Caselberg's write up on *The Song of the Shining Cuckoo*.

<sup>26</sup> *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (1958-66) National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection. Each canvas: 78 x 60 inches. There is also a fifteenth panel entitled *Be II*, that was first exhibited with the series at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966/ [http://www.philamuseum.org/micro\\_sites/exhibitions/newman/galleries/eleven.shtml](http://www.philamuseum.org/micro_sites/exhibitions/newman/galleries/eleven.shtml)

<sup>27</sup> Barnett Newman, *The Stations of the Cross: Lema sabachthani* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966) 9. (Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2011 with funding from Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Library and Archives. <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/publications/from-the-archives/items/view/132>.)

sense of communal and active participation in the paschal mystery, which usually involves a movement of practitioners around a room or a garden as they pause and reflect upon each “station.” The painting thus holds a general emphasis on the “journey motif of the Christian life.”<sup>28</sup> This format invites the reader to journey through the landscape of the artwork, with the idea of compassionate participation in the represented suffering and call to “salvation” (which includes the broadest sense of the word) that is so acutely presented in the poetry.

Considering the visual and literary forms of repetition that occur in the *Song of Solomon*, and with the connection to a history that asks for an active participatory reading, I now turn to the kind of effect this reading might have upon the viewer, as all the elements of the work coalesce in an encounter. Political theorist Jane Bennett’s thoughts on a notion of enchantment through the “...somatic effects of repetition,” represents an approach in which to explore this encounter.<sup>29</sup> Her first example of repetition as a means for enchantment is a surmise on Augustine’s *Confessions* where she regards Augustine’s insertion of scriptural refrains interspersed amidst theological arguments on the nature of evil, (which Bennett imagines would have been read and repeated aloud.)<sup>30</sup> She writes:

Augustine’s verbal litanies of faith (similar to recitations of “The Catholic Profession of Faith” or the Rosary) work to overcome doubts about a benevolent God apparently tolerant of the suffering of innocents – and these refrains do so not only intellectually (by explaining evil as part of a mysterious, divine plan) but also somatically (by the calming effect of chanting magic words). Augustine says his prayers in order to transfix his eyes and his thoughts upon an invisible and ineffable God. He sings himself to faith.<sup>31</sup>

Bennett does not stay long with Augustine, who is not the most fitting exemplar for her version of enchantment, as the effects of sensuous or aesthetic experience, that in this case is preferred, would in Augustine’s view, run the risk of contaminating his notion of “purity of spirit.”<sup>32</sup> So Bennett turns to Paracelsus, who welcomes the “somatic effects of repetition,” and locates a notion of enchantment in a perception encapsulated in the theory of microcosm-macrocosm relations – mirroring repetitions of inner and outer worlds. Here she finds a celebratory “meticulous attentiveness to the singular specificity of things.”<sup>33</sup> In this schema, everything that exists is pivoted equally against the universal “Iliaster” (meaning “matter and the stars,” or in other words: “Prime Matter”).<sup>34</sup> However, for Bennett, the dualism in Paracelsus’ schema, where every repetition has to shift between specificity and unity, confounds the nature of the specificity she admires. Ultimately she favours a non-teleological worldview, so she turns to Gilles

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<sup>28</sup> Mark G. Boyer, *The Liturgical Environment: What the Documents Say*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004) 168.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 37.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 36-37.

<sup>32</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 37.



Deleuze in order depart from a relational system subsumed under the universal. Not discounting her findings along the way, she adopts a Deleuzeian train of thought in a contrasting “spiral form of repetition,” where “singular elements enter into relations with each other” and “themselves change [or transform] as a result of their encounters with each other.”<sup>35</sup> Following Deleuze she appeals to the realm of science for supportive imagery for her theorising, citing a model of biological evolution, as one way of explaining the transformative potential of spiral repetition: “sometimes that-which-repeats-itself also *transforms* itself.”<sup>36</sup> Not akin to cyclical repetition, the spiral encounters a new context at each turn. Spiral repetition also works, “intensively” not “extensively” according to Bennett, and this is especially evident with regard to language.<sup>37</sup> Each word, or phrase, is not merely repeated, but is “weighed down...by invoking increasingly intense versions of it to the effect that its meaning eventually dissolves and realigns.”<sup>38</sup>

This close reading of Bennett’s trajectory of thought, as she draws from the particular qualities or approaches of a series of disparate thinkers from across historical and cosmological divides, supports an openness to the transformative potential of the effects of repetition I hope to find in a reading of McQueen’s and Hotere’s work. Augustine, as he inserts praise to counter evil; an attentiveness to the specificity of things which grounds an ethical approach in material reality; and a form of repetition that can be defined as transformative, are all sympathetic approaches for such a reading.

Taking cue again from Bennett’s tales of enchantment, Deleuze and Guattari’s classification of the refrain as it engenders a sense of shelter and organises a centre, sonorously and spatially, from which to orientate oneself, is a useful analogy that extends this reading further: “A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath...The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos...”<sup>39</sup> As the call to be immersed in spring is intensified through the repetition in the painting, the disordered and scrambled effect of conflict and the jargon words that jar and jolt the reader are pushed away. Through considering the Song of Songs refrain in Hotere’s painting and McQueen’s poem as a central point, and in the form of a song, “to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center,”<sup>40</sup> the refrain then functions along these lines as a kind of re-orientating or organizing effect that works against and walls out the hard language of war educated garble. This productive space created by the refrain then enables the possibility for departure, in Deleuze and Guattari’s turn of phrase: “As though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters...One ventures from home on the thread of a tune.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 311.

<sup>40</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.

<sup>41</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.

There is an interchange between singing birds and human song in the biblical text, and in the painting as dotted marks, trace *lines of flight* across the boundaries of black.<sup>42</sup> New lines of connection are produced, beyond the territorializing effect of the operation of Song of Songs in the painting. Birdsong, as both a territorializing notion, as a “bird sings to mark its territory,”<sup>43</sup> and a human to non-human affinity, as the reader is called to arise! depart! and immerse oneself in the singing of spring, adds weight and nuance to the role of the repetition of the Song of Songs, as the viewer/reader participates with the painting.

There is a rhythm to the painting, demarcated by fixed autonomous territories of text: a counterpoint between the content of the poem that is reflected in the light and the dark of the painting. Dark foreboding and violent language is offset by an entreaty to fly off and escape the violence through singing the Song of Songs, or on the other hand, the achievement of stabilisation by the organising principle of the interior space created by the Song. While I do not venture far with Deleuze and Guattari, the bird song, the call of lovers, forces of chaos, the conceptual apparatus of the refrain, of the counterpoint, and motif, and so on, find correspondence with various components of the *Song of Solomon*.

To conclude, McQueen wrote a reflection on Hotere’s work and his incorporation of written language that complements this commentary on the sonic and visual potential of language as art, or language in art:

Language makes arrangements. These might be compared to the behaviour of water, an expression of energetic relations among molecules. There is activity at the meniscus where tensions arise from oppositions juxtaposed...You mark the surface, leaving a visible impression that points beyond what can be seen...In this language meaning is shifting, polyvalent...Resonance, tension, multi-layered interference patterns. You are moved by the intimacy of language, the euphony of language elements spoken aloud, or seen, or silently uttered by the voice in the mind of contemplative, absorbed reading...<sup>44</sup>

On the whole, it makes sense to read the *Song of Solomon* as a single event, a *via dolorosa*, a way of grief, reiterated. Hotere’s work has the same monochromatic simplicity, single, constant and unrelenting, as Newman’s blank canvases. Yet, the Stations of the Cross devoid of pictorial content still exude a material presence in reference to the political context the work refers to. The visceral expression of physical pain in the poetry of the *Song of Solomon*, and the use of the word body: *bodycount*, *bodybomb*, *bodypoint*, *bodybag*, *bloodbag*, might recall the physical suffering and death of Christ. In turn, the call of the Song of Songs in the poetry, to *arise*, implies a hopeful intimation towards the resurrection, inseparable from the paschal mystery narrative. A meditation on Christ and the work as it sits within an

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<sup>42</sup> “The refrain moves in the direction of the territorial assemblage and lodges itself there or leaves. In a general sense, we call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes (there are optical, gestural, motor, etc., refrains).” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 323.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 312.

<sup>44</sup> Cilla McQueen, “Dark Matter, Ralph Hotere and Language,” in *Ralph Hotere: Black Light. Major Works Including Collaborations with Bill Culbert* (Wellington, Dunedin: Te Papa Press/Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2000) 39-46.

expansive tradition of painting in this format, while reflecting Hotere's Roman Catholic sensibility, informs the rhythm of the biblical text in the work as a whole.

The excerpt from the Song of Songs works within the painting as a single refrain, as a consistent and increasingly weighty iteration. The 'somatic effects of repetition' in a progressive intensification of the impact of the imagery in the poem (of the flowers, of bird song, of singing itself), help engender an integrated and participatory process that taps into the transformative potential of repetition for the reader/viewer. This repetition is not merely cyclical. The centre of the work might be found in a sonorous form of spiral repetition and the participatory work of the viewer as they move through the fourteen panels. The text sits embedded in heavy black and in the spaces of light, of raw exposed white paper, a kind of prayer is reiterated, ringing out in the call to take flight, to be immersed in springtime as the place of love.

trenchmother ambush blastbreak bodypoint blank count fireball threat  
bodybag bodybag truth fire pompom collateral damage moth of all flame

for lo the winter is past the rain is over and gone

the FLOWERS APPEAR on the EARTH

the time of the singing birds is come

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