

# QOHELET AND THE EXIGENCIES OF THE ABSURD

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## *Introduction*

The book of Qohelet sets up a horizon of thought, a landscape of poetry, that is opaque, unsettling, intangible, and ephemeral.<sup>1</sup> It conveys an exigency of meaning, yet the words spin around a thematic centre that seems, ultimately, not to exist. The text is not meaningless but is unrelentingly and strangely both creative and destructive. Its movements are ephemeral, with only breezes of significance and apparitions of answers. It is this intangibility of the book that distresses the reader, raising questions for which it resists the provision of answers and offering advice that is swiftly denied. In this sense the book is itself an instantiation of the vapour, the *הבל*, that Qohelet detects in the universe. Yet far from insignificant in its insubstantiality, this book is at play in the arena of ultimate human significance. The concerns of the text impinge upon us, for they speak to a malaise of existence, but Qohelet will provide no ballast, no control, to moderate the reaction that these elemental concerns produce.

The book of Qohelet is both difficult and confusing—in the midst of contradiction it is virtually unintelligible. It is for this reason that readers, from biblical scholars to poets, have expressed such distress over this book. In its attention to ultimate human concerns such as justice, purpose, and destiny, the book is seductive but, owing to its elusiveness, it is only tauntingly so. The angst surrounding this text is an outgrowth of our frustration, perhaps anger, with our inability to pin down or to make sense of the message of the book. Is Qohelet arguing for utter despondency or, as some would have it, is he proffering a message of joy? What is God's place in the *הבל* that Qohelet identifies? What, if anything, are we to *do* in the face of Qohelet's philosophy? These

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefited greatly from the tremendous insights and guidance of Francis Landy.

questions demand answers but the contradictions and obfuscations of the text preclude an unequivocal denouement.

Yet it is this failure to "make sense" that signals a key arena of fruitful thought about the Book of Qohelet. Insofar as one "makes sense" by establishing a framework of *reasonable* deductions, distress on the part of readers is a product of the vain attempt to impose reason and order onto a text that resists these categories mightily. And resistance to sense, order, and reason bothers us.<sup>2</sup> But the breakdown of coherence can also delight us. There can be a certain pleasure in the appreciation of paradox and the maintenance of difficulty. In order to grasp this delight in complexity, a delectation that the admirer of Qohelet must possess but that most commentators seem not to tolerate, it is instructive to turn to Roland Barthes:

Fiction d'un individu (quelque M. Teste à l'envers) qui abolirait en lui les barrières, les classes, les exclusions, non par syncrétisme, mais par simple débarras de ce vieux spectre: *la contradiction logique*, qui mélangerait tous les langages, fussent-ils réputés incompatibles; qui supporterait, muet, toutes les accusations d'illogisme, d'infidélité; qui resterait impassible devant l'ironie socratique (amener l'autre au suprême opprobre: *se contredire*) et la terreur légale (combien des preuves pénales fondées sur une psychologie de l'unité!). Cet homme serait l'abjection de notre société: Les tribunaux, l'école, l'asile, la conversation, en feraient un étranger: qui supporte sans honte la contradiction? Or ce contre-héros existe: c'est le lecteur de texte, dans le moment où il prend son plaisir. Alors le vieux mythe biblique se retourne, la confusion des langues n'est plus une punition, le sujet accède à la jouissance par la cohabitation des langages, *qui travaillent côte à côte*. le texte de plaisir, c'est Babel heureuse.

(Barthes 1973: 9-10)

But these anti-heroes are also certain writers. Qohelet is this Monsieur Teste *à l'envers*, and it is this acceptance of illogicality and incongruity that is both the seed of meaning and the source of distress in the book.

With the book of Qohelet the quest for cohesion must fail or, in the alternative, will succeed only in its reductionistic blindness to the poetics of the text.<sup>3</sup> Yet the text resists these categories—

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<sup>2</sup> In this vein, Jacques Ellul, in his "Preliminary, Polemical, Nondefinitive Postscript," identifies a trend in criticism of Qohelet to insist upon "the necessity of formal, logical coherence in a text" with the extension of this supposition being the belief that "an author cannot possibly write a precept and its opposite at the same time" (Ellul 1990: 7). As we will see, this latter assertion attenuates an appreciation of the significance of contradiction in the text.

<sup>3</sup> The "Joy thesis," propounded by such scholars as Whybray, Ogden, and Chia, is a strong example of this attempt to impose cohesion on the text by ig-

order, sense, and reason—precisely because it understands its subject, the cosmos, to rebuke these categories.<sup>4</sup> Qohelet looks to the world and finds that it, too, rebukes our desire for order, sense, and reason. In this way, theme and style, content and form stitch together into the mesmerising, and exasperating, fabric of this text.

These concerns, this revelation of the disorderliness—perhaps indifference—of the cosmos are also sentiments expressed in some streams of existentialist thought. There is a vision of the absurdity of the universe bubbling forth in some existentialist thinking that is sonorous with the book of Qohelet. Like Qohelet, Albert Camus and Lev Shestov address the vain imposition of reason and order onto an inchoate world. All three see an unnegotiable gap between our desire for the world to provide us with meaning and that which the universe is willing to supply. Although these three sources call to each other from across vast chasms of time and culture, they share this central concern. Beyond thematic resonance is a common stylistic, a poetic, that accompanies these concerns. The writings of these three authors all engage in aphorism, negation, and contradiction. They exhibit a certain complexity and a tolerance for, perhaps pleasure in, paradox. All three speak in a very personal, and by this I mean humanistic, tone designed to convey the exigency of their concerns. In this sense, there is a provocative harmony of style and form among these thinkers—a harmony that I will seek to hear more clearly.

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noring or reducing the complexities of the book. Simply stated, these theories maintain that, in the final analysis, the book of Qohelet conveys the message that the ultimate good is to enjoy life. Thus, in his paper "Vanity It Certainly Is Not," Ogden maintains that the author of Qohelet "is essentially an optimist" (Ogden 1997b: 306) and believes that Qohelet asserts that, although the world is הבל, "the person of faith recognises this fact but moves forward positively to claim and enjoy the life and the work which God apportions" (Ogden 1987a: 22). Rightly, this position has recently been challenged in light of the overall structure of the book. William Anderson asserts that "the thesis that the book of Qoheleth essentially has a message of joy cannot be sustained in light of the book's literary structure" (Anderson 1998a: 299).

<sup>4</sup> In a section of his book concerned with "the nature of texts," Battersby writes that since he is "concerned with a psychological, semantic, truth-conditional view of truth and meaning, we acknowledge the wisdom of the notion that without rationality there is no content, no truth, meaning, or reference" (Battersby 1996: 27). This narrow definition of truth, as opposed to the expressivist view as propounded by Charles Taylor, finds another weakness in the book of Qohelet. As will be discussed, Qohelet does not operate within this horizon of extensional meaning and, therefore, has seemingly found in Battersby yet another conventional wisdom to assault.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to appreciate the book of Qohelet in the fullness of its beauty and intensity. Having considered major themes or concerns dealt with by Qohelet, I will turn to the manner of his expression, including an estimation of the place and function of contradiction in the text. Following a reconsideration of the message of the text in light of these investigations, I will turn my attention to the provocative affinities between the Book of Qohelet and the thought of Albert Camus and Lev Shestov.

### *Qohelet's Concerns*

Qohelet's concerns are manifold and urgent. Qohelet asserts that he "observed all the happenings beneath the sun" (1:14) and this insatiable appetite for inquiry is reflected in the diversity of issues with which he is concerned. Profit, companionship, women, and evil; the text is bewildering in its breadth of interest. Yet a central concern, an overarching theme to his inquiries, can be extracted from this plurality of thought. Qohelet is ultimately concerned with the experience of existence. The book unfailingly returns to the basic question of what it means to be human in the universe that Qohelet sees. For this meta-question, Qohelet offers a simple but torturous answer: all is illusion and a chasing after wind. Although there has been much scholarly discussion surrounding the meaning of the term *הבל*, the key to this word lies in its description of that which is hard to grasp, ephemeral, and like vapour.<sup>5</sup> So the universe is illusory.

This conclusion cannot be allowed to eclipse the specifics of Qohelet's treatise. Qohelet has specific concerns that grow out of or, perhaps, feed this overarching anxiety that all is illusory. Among these, I wish to take up four themes to which Qohelet seems always to return: toil and progress, time and memory, justice, and wisdom and knowledge.

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<sup>5</sup> The discussion surrounding the proper translation of this term has been a central concern for modern scholars and is seen as a key to understanding the book. Graham Ogden (1987a) has emphasised the various contexts in which the word *הבל* is used as opposed to seeking verbal consistency in order to determine meaning. He identifies six uses including *הבל* as concluding device, as descriptive of enigmatic situations, as representing contradictory experiences, as a term used when Qohelet does not understand certain situations, and as descriptive of anomalous human conditions in general. In light of his belief in the overall purpose of the text as a call to enjoyment (see note 3), Ogden proposes a trans-

Qohelet repeatedly asks what gain or advantage there is for all the work that humans do in the world. "What adequate gain does man get through all his toil at which he labours under the sun?" (1:3).<sup>6</sup> The repeated answer is disheartening. Seemingly, Qohelet has found no lasting gain for human work. He has built gardens, made pools, and acquired slaves and money (2:4-8).<sup>7</sup> This certainly appears to constitute a gain, perhaps progress. Nonetheless, Qohelet deconstructs his achievement in his statement that

2.11 ופניתי אני בכל-מעשי שעשו ידיו ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות והנה הכל  
הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש:<sup>8</sup>

Qohelet represents himself as the most successful man in Jerusalem. His gains in this account far exceed the wildest expectations of the average man. Nevertheless, Qohelet explains, this all amounts to nothing. The achievement is illusory.

lation of הבל as "enigma" or "mystery." It is evident, however, that הבל is not as neutral a term as this and that, rather, "the word clearly has negative connotations in the book" (Seow 1997b: 102). In recent work, Douglas Miller (1998) criticises this "multiple sense" approach for its failure to present a coherent Qohelet and, in my view more incisively, its inability to explicate blanket uses of the term like "all is הבל." Miller identifies and critiques an "abstract sense" approach to the term for its lack of contextual consideration as well as the "single metaphor" proposal on the basis that הבל is not applied consistently in the text. These critiques are fair, yet his own proposal of a symbolic understanding of הבל as meaning, variably, "insubstantiality," "transience," and "foulness" seems rather to be a constrained variation on the multiple sense approach. Seow surveys the uses and connotations of the word הבל (Seow 1997b: 101-2) and concludes that no single term can capture the precise meaning of every usage. Nonetheless, he focuses on the understanding that "what is *hebel* cannot be grasped—neither physically nor intellectually" (Seow 1997b: 102) and resolves to use the traditionally employed term "vanity" to express a general sense of all things that the term can mean. I concur with Seow's reasoning and feel in addition that by approaching הבל from a multiple sense orientation the rhythmic refrain of the text is lost. Yet, in choosing a term that will tolerate a range of particular meanings but that will maintain the integrity of the poetics of the text, I am inclined toward understanding הבל as meaning "illusion" or, in Fox's terms, "absurdity" in as much as הבל refers to those things that inhere "in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations" (Fox 1989: 31).

<sup>6</sup> Except where I take issue with certain renderings, I will make use of Michael Fox's translation of Qohelet (Fox 1989). This decision depends largely on Fox's understanding of absurdity in the book of Qohelet.

<sup>7</sup> Arian Verheij argues that parts of this "royal experiment" paraphrase the Garden of Eden story (Verheij 1991). If this is so, then Qohelet assumes the role of God in this account of his exploration of the world and, having seen the world, the "and it was good" refrain is transposed with "and it was absurd."

<sup>8</sup> "When I turned [to consider] all the things my hands had done and the toil I had laboriously performed, I realised that it was all an absurdity and a vexation, and that there is no adequate gain [to be had] under the sun." (2:11).

An intervening discussion of wisdom and folly builds to 2:18, at which point an explanation for the *הבל* of toil and gain is provided. Here, however, it is suggested that all gain, all wealth, is ultimately illusory because someone else will come to possess all that you had. Moreover, “who knows whether [the inheritor] will be wise or foolish” (2:19). So all that you gain will be lost when you are gone and, to compound the problem, the person who inherits your wealth might well be foolish. One can find here the spectre of death looming over Qohelet’s concern with toil and gain, anticipated by his declaration that “what happens to the fool will happen to me too” (2:15).<sup>9</sup> It seems that all progress is negated by the unavoidable fact of human finitude. Our gains outlive us and, in doing so, cease to be our gains. In this bareness that comes with death, humans are like the animals:

3.19 כי מקרה בני־האדם ומקרה הבהמה ומקרה אחר להם מן־הבהמה  
 כמות זה כן מות זה ורוח אחד לכל ומותר האדם אין כי הכל הבל:<sup>10</sup>

Some argue that Qohelet sees one gain, and that is pleasure.<sup>11</sup> These critics will point to Qohelet’s statement that “there is nothing better than that a man get pleasure through his activities” (3:22). Surely, they say, this constitutes a truth in Qohelet’s estimation. Yet even pleasure and joy fall under the canopy of the illusory. For, when Qohelet says to himself “come, let me make you experience pleasure and have enjoyment,” he concludes with the unequivocal realisation that “it too is an absurdity” (2:1). In an even more broad sense, “the main literary structure which

<sup>9</sup> The theme of death in Qohelet has been explored by Barry Davis (1991). In this paper, Davis works through the many passages in Qohelet, among them 12:1-8, dedicated to the issue of death and draws out their significances. Fox (1988a) and Fredericks (1993) join Davis in treating 12:1-8 in terms of death in Qohelet. Although I certainly appreciate that this is a possible level of meaning for the passage, I resist the understanding of 12:1-8 as solely an excursus on ageing and death. Fox explores interpretations of this passage on levels other than the allegorical, which lends itself to understanding 12:1-8 as concerned with the death of a human, and suggests a “symbolic” reading in which the passage suggest a disaster of a cosmic magnitude. This interpretation lies close to my reading of 12:1-8 in which the city, a symbol of human order (perhaps reason?), is first invoked in an extended way at a time when it is dissolving, falling into destruction.

<sup>10</sup> “For what happens to men and what happens to the beast is one and the same thing: as the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same life breath. So man has no advantage over the beast, for both are absurd” (3:19).

<sup>11</sup> See note 3 above concerning the “joy thesis.”

undermines such a thesis is the superlative *hebel* inclusio of i 2-xii 8" (Anderson 1998a: 293). Joy or pleasure is a relative gain that is lost in the shade of death. For Qohelet, there is no advantage, no gain, to be found in the universe.<sup>12</sup>

The reason for the absurdity of toil and gain, namely that we will all die and lose claim to our achievements, points to another of Qohelet's seminal concerns—that of memory and time. While in some sections of the text Qohelet conveys a very balanced, rhythmic view of time<sup>13</sup>, seen in its totality, his conception of time is far more conflicted. Qohelet moves into his concern with time and memory via his discussion of toil and gain. After asking in 1:3 "what adequate gain does man get through all his toil at which he labours under the sun?," Qohelet provides his vision of time:

1.9 מִהֲשִׁיחַ הוּא שִׁיחַ וּמִהֲשִׁנְעָה הוּא שִׁנְעָה וְאֵין כֹּל־חֶרֶשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם:  
 1.10 יֵשׁ דָּבָר שִׂיאֲמַר רֵאשִׁיחַ חֶרֶשׁ הוּא כְּבֹד הִיָּה לְעֹלָמִים אֲשֶׁר הִיָּה מִלְּפָנָיו:  
 1.11 אֵין זְכוּרֹן לְרֵאשִׁיחַ וְגַם לְאַחֲרָיִם שִׁיחֵיו לֹא־יִחַיָּה לָהֶם זְכוּרֹן עִם  
 שִׁיחֵיו לְאַחֲרָנָה:<sup>14</sup>

Here, time is in a state of constant circulation, a description that

<sup>12</sup> Spangenberg's excellent piece, "Irony in the book of Qohelet," asserts that the book of Qohelet is characterized by a kind of cosmic irony in which the universe does not provide the ultimate meaning and immortality that the human so urgently desires (Spangenberg 1996, esp. 69). In this context, Qohelet's calls to enjoyment, his declarations that "there is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and give himself enjoyment through his toil" (2:24) are simply recognitions that if one is able to enjoy life despite the existential truths of the universe, then this pleasure should be cherished. It must be remembered that, in the end, even this pleasure is subtended by Qohelet's guiding pronouncement that all is absurdity.

<sup>13</sup> See 3:1-8; 3:11; 3:17; 8:6 for this balanced view of time. With respect to 3:1-8, Joseph Blenkinsopp comments that the form of this section approximates conventional onomastic wisdom (Blenkinsopp 1995). He further argues that, viewed as a unit, the whole of 3:3-22 functions as "a major instance in the book of text followed by idiosyncratic commentary" (Blenkinsopp 1995: 57). Yet, in a strange move, Blenkinsopp suggests that 3:2-8 was not authored by Qohelet but, rather, by a "stoicising Jewish sage, or a Stoic composition translated into Hebrew" (Blenkinsopp 1995: 59). This text can be understood without recourse to external sources, so why this hypothesis is necessary is unclear to me.

<sup>14</sup> "That which happens is that which shall happen, and that which occurs is that which shall occur, and there is nothing new under the sun. If there is anything of which one might say, 'See, this is new,' it has already happened in the aeons that preceded us. There is no remembrance of things past, nor of things yet to come will there be remembrance among those who will come still later" (1:9-11).

evokes the image of the wind just verses before.<sup>15</sup> This circulation does not produce accretion but negation. God has placed eternity in the human heart (3:11) but this same eternity coexists with the fact of forgetfulness and is, therefore, obliteration. Lack of memory is, for Qohelet, the erasure of history, toil, and gain. Time is engaged in a process by which it continually washes itself out. For the human, and herein lies the source of Qohelet's anxiety about memory, the process of forgetting—the natural effect of time—subverts all meaning found in life. After death, there is no hope for memory and this loss is a loss of everything—of love, hatred, and jealousy (9:5-6).

Expressed in this view of time and memory is the burden of being the past. There is the feeling in the text that Qohelet bears a grudge against the future because it displaces him, the present, and the past. Even wisdom, a central topic I will address below, loses its meaning in the wake of forgetfulness, "for the wise man, just like the fool, is never remembered, inasmuch as in the days to come both are soon forgotten. Oh, how the wise man dies just like the fool" (2:16). There is a profound sense of personal anguish in Qohelet's words—an anguish derived from the historical, and therefore forgetful, nature of human existence.

Qohelet further addresses this theme in his story of 4:13-16. Here, in a much neglected aspect of this tale,<sup>16</sup> the story ends with the loss of appreciation, or memory, for the poor wise boy. This motif is repeated in 9:14-15:

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<sup>15</sup> Whybray questions the view that the natural processes in 1:5-7 are viewed by Qohelet as futile (Whybray 1988). Rather, he says, the point of this nature symbolism is to demonstrate the limits of nature. I must comment that Whybray's commentary seems to have missed the point of this symbolism. The power of these nature metaphors lies in their extension to the human realm. Once applied to human endeavours, the sense of limitation conveyed in 1:5-7 certainly falls into line with Qohelet's use of the term *הבל*. In this way, Daphne Merkin's comments on Qohelet's vision of time, that "possibility is recurrent; nothing is surprising, nothing is absolutely unprecedented ... in our leavetakings are the stirrings of return" (Merkin 1997: 330), strike more incisively at the meaning of this symbolism.

<sup>16</sup> Addison Wright writes that this story can only be understood in the larger context of 4:7-16 (Wright 1997). Therefore, in his interpretation, 4:13-16 is a story about companionship over solitude. He does not, however, consider the theme of loss of memory that appears at the end of the story. Dominic Rudman (1997a), on the other hand, casts this story in light of the Joseph narrative and other "court stories" (including that of King Nebuchadnezzar) and concludes that the forgetfulness expressed at the end of the passage explains that history is in a state of continuous cycling.

9.14 עיר קטנה ואנשים בה מעט ובא־אליה מלך גדול וסבב אתה ובנה  
עליה מצודים גדלים:  
9.15 ומצא בה איש מסכן חכם ומלמדהוא את־העיר בחכמתו ואדם לא  
זכר את־האיש המסכן ההוא:<sup>17</sup>

These stories are the paradigms of forgetfulness in which the achievements of their respective heroes are wiped out by a lack of memory. Both in story and in experience, Qohelet is terribly anxious about the workings of time and memory. Time is constantly moving and, in doing so, produces a forgetfulness that casts human meaning into doubt.

This question of forgetfulness points to another unique, perhaps unsettling, aspect of this book. Accompanying the forgetfulness that characterises human history is the book's seeming loss of all sense of divine history. After Qohelet establishes himself as "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12) there is no further mention of the kingship or of Israel. Furthermore, beyond the invocation of a Solomon-persona, no biblical characters cut a figure in Qohelet's book. It is as though the kingship, and with it Israel's history, and the person of Solomon are invoked only to be erased by silence. Covenant, exodus, exile, and strife—all are conspicuous in their absence from the book. These topics of central concern to the rest of the Tanach exist only as shadows—absences—in the book of Qohelet. In his existential account, the divine history of Israel simply does not figure. This feature of the book powerfully underscores Qohelet's anxiety about memory and his apparent belief that there is no gain to be had for the human ... all covenants included.

So there is no opportunity for gain, perhaps no opportunity for meaning, in the world that Qohelet sees. What, then, of justice? As with all issues taken up in this book, the answer involves contradictions. Qohelet writes that "he who keeps a command will experience no misfortune, and the wise man's heart should be aware of the time of justice" (8:5). Reading this statement alongside the vision of balance given at the beginning of chapter 3, we might be encouraged. Yet, as should be expected, Qohelet precludes a positive conclusion by way of unapologetic contradiction.

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<sup>17</sup> "There was a small city with few people in it. And a great king came and encompassed it and built great siege works against it. And in it he apprehended a man who was poor but wise, and it was he who saved the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man" (9:14-15).

In appropriately circular fashion, we must return to the topic of toil and advantage in order to assess Qohelet's conception of justice.

2.20 וסבוחי אני ליאש אחלבי על כל-העמל שעמלתי חחת השמש:  
 2.21 כ-י-יש אדם שעמלו בחכמה ובדעת ובכשרון ולאדם שלא עמל-בו  
 יתננו חלקו גם-זה הבל ורעה רבה:<sup>18</sup>

In his quest to see everything under the sun, it seems that Qohelet has found a truth that is to him a "great evil." People work, he says, and then the benefactors of their work are individuals who did not toil at all. In this predicament there is an incongruity between what should be fairly expected and what the universe provides. This discrepancy constitutes a kind of injustice. Qohelet finds many of these sorts of dissymmetries. He has seen that "under the sun the race does not belong to the swift, nor the war to the mighty, nor bread to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor favor to the knowledgeable" (9:11).

Qohelet also asserts that there are realities in the world that subvert religious visions of the good. Where conventional wisdom states that righteousness will bring reward and the wicked will suffer, Qohelet reflects that this is not at all his experience of the world. Rather,

7.15 אח-הכל ראיתי בימי הבלי יש צדיק אבד בצדקו ויש רשע מאריך  
 ברעתו:<sup>19</sup>

and,

8.14 יש-הבל אשר נעשה על-הארץ אשר יש צדיקים אשר מניע אלהם  
 כמעשה הרשעים ויש רשעים שמוניע אלהם כמעשה הצדיקים אמרת  
 שגם-זה הבל:<sup>20</sup>

Seemingly, there is no pattern of conduct that will assure, or even suggest, reward and happiness for the individual. This is a disturb-

<sup>18</sup> "So I turned to rid my heart of illusions concerning all the toil at which I had laboured under the sun. For sometimes a man whose wealth was [gained by toiling] in wisdom, knowledge, and skill ends up giving it as a portion to someone who did not toil for it. This too is an absurdity and a great evil" (2:20-21).

<sup>19</sup> "I have seen both in my absurd life: there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and a wicked man who lives long in his wickedness" (7:15).

<sup>20</sup> "There is an absurdity that happens on the earth: there are righteous people who receive what is appropriate to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people who receive what is appropriate to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this too is an absurdity" (8:14).

ing notion that destabilises all sense of the human's ability to guide his way in the world or have influence upon her destiny.<sup>21</sup>

The depth of Qohelet's critique of justice goes deeper than even this concern with existential incongruities. Justice in the world is flawed in its nature, perhaps in its conception. In his exploration of the world, Qohelet seems to have discovered that there is an inversion of the very notions of good and evil, of the just and the wicked. He writes that "in the place of justice, wickedness is there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness is there" (3:16). Yet Qohelet does not present this state of justice as a perversion of an ideal state. Rather, it seems that these existential incongruities, this falseness in conventional wisdom, are a product of the way in which the universe is assembled.<sup>22</sup> Having explored the injustices suffered by the poor youth of 4:13-16, Qohelet exhorts us: "Do not be hasty with your mouth, and let not your heart rush to utter a word to God, for God is in heaven and you are on the earth" (5:1). By this view, there is a huge bureaucracy between humans and God that allows space for injustice to work its way into our world. It is no surprise, therefore, that the world is flawed.

Ultimately, these three concerns—toil and progress, time and memory, and justice—converge in the issue of human wisdom and knowledge. Qohelet's search is, in essence, a search for understanding of his existential situation. Qohelet's self assigned task is "to investigate and explore with wisdom all that occurs under the sun" (1:13). The fact that he "realized that they are all absurdity and vexation" (1:13) provokes the ensuing discussion and throws into question issues of memory, of justice, and of progress. Perhaps it is wisdom, that quality with which Qohelet says he explores the world, that resists illusion. In many places within the text Qohelet appears to exalt wisdom, a stance we would expect from

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<sup>21</sup> Graham Ogden asks, "If one dies before seeing the divine justice work its way out, does that emasculate life of its meaning? Surely not!" (Ogden 1987b: 303). Beyond the questionable masculinization of life, this statement ignores the profound existential anxiety that would ensue if life were seen to be void of all patterns of justice.

<sup>22</sup> Drawing a link between the epistemology of the *Sefer Yesira* and that of Qohelet, Hayman remarks that "Qohelet pits his *rati* (I saw) against the whole received tradition of Jewish wisdom" (Hayman 1991: 98). Hayman is wrong, however, in his assertion that the *Sefer Yesira*, like the book of Qohelet, ignores "the whole Moses-torah-chosen people complex" (Hayman 1991: 95). The concluding portion of the *Sefer Yesira* describes God's rather erotic adoration for Abraham and makes mention of the covenant with Abraham.

his Solomon-persona.<sup>23</sup> He writes that “to the one whom God likes he gives wisdom and knowledge” (2:26), that “wisdom is as good as an inheritance” (7:11), and that “wisdom helps the wise man more than the wealth of the rulers who are in a city” (7:19).

As we now come to expect, Qohelet negates this conventional understanding by means of the contradictions so characteristic of his text. Alongside exaltations of wisdom Qohelet also asserts the following:

9.16 ואמרתני אני טובה חכמה מנבורה וחכמת המסכן בזויה ודבריו אינם  
נשמעים:  
9.17 דברי חכמים בנחה נשמעים מזעקה מושל בכסילים:  
9.18 טובה חכמה מכלי קרב וחומא אחד יאבד טובה הרבה:<sup>24</sup>

This passage is striking in its apparent consciousness of its own contradictions. Qohelet recognises that he has said that wisdom is powerful, yet he simultaneously asserts its frailty and tenuousness. There is, here, an inversion of the wisdom tradition as instantiated elsewhere in the Tanach. Where Proverbs primarily contents itself with the glorification of wisdom, Qohelet turns the matter on its head and exposes the potential insignificance of *החכמה*.<sup>25</sup> In this vein, “a fly dies and spoils a chalice of precious perfumer’s ointment. A little folly outweighs wisdom” (10:1). Wisdom, in this view, is not the powerful colossus for which we might hope. It is, at best, a relative good.

Wisdom is not the loophole that leads one out of absurdity. Qohelet’s world is characterised not by wisdom but by a cloud of unknowing. This fact comes through particularly clearly at the

<sup>23</sup> Seow shows the close links between the autobiographical style assumed by the author of Qohelet and fictional Akkadian autobiography. The interesting inversion that occurs in the case of the book of Qohelet is that, rather than suggesting the permanence of king and wisdom as this genre is wont to do, Qohelet invokes the fictional autobiography in order to ironically undercut all forms of permanence—all is illusion (Seow 1995: 284).

<sup>24</sup> “I said, ‘Better wisdom than might’; yet the wisdom of the poor man is held in contempt, and his words are not heard. The words of the wise spoken gently are heard more than the shout of a ruler among fools. Better wisdom than weapons, yet one offender can destroy much of value” (9:16-18).

<sup>25</sup> It must be noted that Proverbs and Psalms also contain, in a less intense and sustained fashion, this self-critical approach to the wisdom tradition. Consider Ps. 49:11, in which it is recognised that “when we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others.” This self-criticism even turns to self-contradiction in the book of Proverbs, in which one is simultaneously counselled “do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself” (26:4) and “answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes” (26:5).

beginning of ch. 11 where Qohelet writes that “just as you cannot understand how the life-breath gets into the fetus in the womb of a pregnant woman, so you cannot understand the work of God, who makes everything happen” (11:5). God is an odd character in this book. He is both the one who is the source of joy (2:24) and the one who assigns to us an evil task (1:13). He gives humans all that they desire but will not allow them to enjoy their prosperity (6:2). Even God is not, it seems, outside the reach of Qohelet’s consumptive contradictions. There is no doubt in the book that God subtends human existence, but, just as readily as he will echo the happy platitudes of conventional wisdom, Qohelet will turn the tables and attribute human suffering to the design of God. Where, then, is the human to look in an effort to make sense of the world? This anxiety about not knowing the workings of the universe permeates Qohelet’s thinking about human life and death.<sup>26</sup>

6.12 כי מִי־יודע מִה־מוֹב לְאָדָם בְּחַיִּים מִכֶּפֶר יִמְ-חַיִּי  
הַבָּלוּ וַיֵּעֲשֶׂם כִּצְלָ אֲשֶׁר מִי־גִיד לְאָדָם מִה־יְהִיָּה אַחֲרָיו חַחַח הַשְּׂמֵשׁ: <sup>27</sup>

Qohelet cannot figure out why God does what he does nor can he discern a proper path for the human being. Yet he is relentlessly compelled on his search “to find a *modus vivendi*, a way of living within the narrow and harsh framework with which God has endowed mankind” (Vogel 1997: 146). It is this compulsion, this exigency that permeates the seeker’s world, of which Qohelet speaks when he makes this decisive charge against the nature of wisdom and knowledge: “For in much wisdom there is much irritation, and whoever increases knowledge increases pain” (1:18).

There is no base, no footing in Qohelet’s world. The human cannot grasp hold of achievement or progress, for nothing of the sort exists. Time soaks away the marks of history, rendering human action, perhaps even religious aspiration, wholly futile. Justice is nowhere to be found in this universe where predictability and rules do not exist. Even the pursuit of wisdom and knowl-

<sup>26</sup> Russell Peck, who considers the way in which Qohelet might be a text that moves towards Stoicism, Cynicism, and Epicurean thought, feels that “for Qohelet, scepticism lies in the juxtaposition of God’s inscrutability and man’s delusions, whereby all is reduced to vanity” (Peck 1985: 46).

<sup>27</sup> “For who knows what is good for man in life during the few days of his absurd life (which he passes like a shadow), for who can tell man what will happen afterwards under the sun?” (6:12)

edge has no lasting significance for the individual. And this whole perplexing system is suffused with the enigma, and frustration, of an inscrutable God. Where is the human to look for meaning? This figure, Qohelet, has experienced everything, witnessed all, and his pronouncement is *הבֵּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבֵּל*, “absurdity of absurdity, all is absurdity.” It seems that the universe is not assembled such that we may understand it. Ours is not a world that admits human reason or responds to our longing for meaning. It is a world of absurdity.

The book of Qohelet does not dilute the enormous potency of this sense of absurdity. Rather, absurdity is the effect of the continual negation of those elements of human life that otherwise seem inalienable and imperative. From this Qohelet offers no relief. Even the final verses of the book are like a bandage applied to a broken leg. “Fear God and keep His commandments; for this concerns every man” (12:13). The wound may be covered, may appear more attractive, but beneath the surface, and not far beneath, the trauma remains. It is a world of confusion; a universe that, at every turn, resists our imposition of order and reason upon its inscrutable structure. The human is set adrift in this world and the conventions of biblical wisdom offer no help. It is a very strange and unsettling vision. Utter negation. Utter absurdity.

### *The Poetics of Absurdity*

How are utter absurdity and total negation conveyed through text? A text, by its nature and existence, *asserts*. It asserts both meaning and its own authority as a product of the words it uses and the structure that it forms. Yet an enticingly paradoxical issue emerges when a text is aimed at the expression of complete absurdity and negation. Can a meaningless world be reflected in meaningful language? This is the issue faced by the critic of the book of Qohelet.<sup>28</sup> Somehow the futility of human endeavour and the resistance of the universe to our strivings for reason and or-

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<sup>28</sup> The complexity and evasiveness of this issue is, perhaps, reflected in the remarkable absence of scholarly reflection about the question of stylistics in Qohelet. Although large sections of various commentaries are devoted to thematic issues (see Fox 1989, Seow 1997b, Gordis 1968, etc.), none of these address in a sustained way the relationship between theme and style in Qohelet.

der must be carried by the aesthetics of the text. Overarching characteristics of the book's thematic structure or message should form the foundation for the book's style. Specifically, one would expect that the experiential epistemology found in this book, Qohelet's inversion of conventional wisdom, and his delight in paradox—all elements that infuse the specific concerns of the text—would find their way into the poetics of absurdity.

The poetics of the book of Qohelet, though complex and frequently exasperating, are based on three elements akin to these characteristics. First, the book of Qohelet is guided by an autobiographical style in which the "I" dominates the discourse of the text.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, there is a tension between aphorism and tautology developed in the book that challenges the form of conventional wisdom writing. Lastly, the often paradoxical thematic aspects of the text are reflected in an aesthetic of contradiction. These features of the book form the core of Qohelet's poetics of absurdity.

The book of Qohelet bursts forth with the recorded speech of its protagonist. The reader is immediately alerted that what follows are the very words of Qohelet. The remainder of the book is dominated by the first person singular voice,<sup>30</sup> which conveys the experiences, thoughts, and attitudes of Qohelet. This stylistic feature establishes a kind of autobiographical quality<sup>31</sup> for the book that finds its most vivid incarnation in, what has been referred to as, the royal experiment of 1:12–2:26. Here, Qohelet introduces himself, sets his task before the reader, and records the outcome of his investigations—that all is absurdity. Yet this passage also

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<sup>29</sup> I do not give attention to the third-person frame in the book because a great deal of consideration has been given to this aspect of the text (see Fox 1977) and, though important from a narratological perspective, it has little bearing upon the stylistic analysis that I undertake. The frame is simply one element of the text that has several implications for poetic structure including a kind of distancing effect at the outset and conclusion. It also provides an ironic twist at the end of the book (for a discussion of the ironic effect of the frame see Spangenberg 1996). In terms of the latter effect, the final words of this text function in much the same way as the final phrase of Hosea (see Landy 1995: 176).

<sup>30</sup> Williams remarks that "the content of Kohelet's thinking and his literary style clearly give center stage to the voice of the experiencing self" (Williams 1981: 48). In my understanding, the term "voice" is preferred so as to distinguish this aspect of the book from "focalisation." See Genette 1980 and Bal 1985 for a discussion of the importance of this distinction.

<sup>31</sup> Seow notes the close links between this autobiographical mode and Akkadian fictional autobiography (Seow 1995).

evidences the two most outstanding effects of this autobiographical style. Namely, this first person mode functions, first, to establish an immediacy and intimacy to Qohelet's philosophical investigations and, secondly but related to the former, to allow for these investigations to proceed from an experiential epistemology.

- 1.12 אני קהלח הייתי מלך על-ישראל בירושלם:  
 1.13 ונתחתי את-לבי לדרוש ולחור בחכמה על כל-אשר נעשה חחת השמים  
 הוא ענין רע נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו:  
 1.14 ראיתי את-כל-המעשים שנעשו חחת השמש והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח:  
 1.15 מעות לא-יוכל לתקן וחסרון לא-יוכל להמנות:  
 1.16 דברתי אני עם-לבי לאמר אני הנה הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה על  
 כל-אשר-היה לפני על-ירושלם ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה ודעת:  
 1.17 ואחנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת הוללות ושכלות ידעתי שגם-זה הוא  
 רעיון רוח:  
 1.18 כי ברב חכמה רב-כעס ויוסף דעת יוסף מלאוב:<sup>32</sup>

This first portion of the royal experiment immediately draws the reader into the world of the speaker. Qohelet was king over Israel and set out to explore everything under the sun. It is a grand and compelling task although, in Qohelet's words, also "an evil business" (1:13).<sup>33</sup> The first person voice engages the reader in an intimate conversation with Qohelet, and this produces a certain immediacy to the issues that he raises. Even more, the reader is not only privy to the activities of Qohelet, but to the peculiar dialogue that he carries on with his heart.<sup>34</sup> The intimate feel of

<sup>32</sup> "I am Qohelet. I have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I set my heart to investigate and to explore with wisdom all that occurs under the heavens—it is an unfortunate business that God has given people to busy themselves with. When I observed all the events that occur under the sun, I realized that they are all absurdity and vexation. Nothing twisted can be straightened out. No deficiency can be made up for. I spoke with my heart: 'See, I have amassed wisdom far beyond anyone who preceded me over Jerusalem.' And my heart observed much wisdom and knowledge. But when I applied my heart to the appropriation of wisdom and knowledge, 'inanity and folly', I realised that this too is a vexation. For in much wisdom there is much irritation and whoever increases knowledge increases pain." (1:12-18).

<sup>33</sup> I have departed from Fox's translation, which I view as too weak in this case. Fox chooses to render this phrase as "an unfortunate business." The word רע is translated by Seow as "terrible" (Seow 1997b) and by Gordis as "sad" (Gordis 1968), whereas Ogden notes that, in the context of the book, this word can mean "pain," "evil," or something like *hebel* (Ogden 1987a: 35). The semantic range clearly admits a number of interpretations, but the force of Qohelet's condemnation must, in my opinion, be retained.

<sup>34</sup> Qohelet's heart plays an odd role in the book, expanding to contain the entire world and then nullifying everything, including itself, in its declaration of absurdity.

the book is compounded owing to this access to the inner thoughts of Qohelet. Qohelet and the reader become engaged in a true heart-to-heart.

But, unlike most narrative tales with which we are familiar, the outcome of Qohelet's quest is not withheld in favour of suspense. Rather, in 1:14, Qohelet makes his pronouncement. In fact, this conclusion has already been stated in the indirect speech of 1:2: "Utterly absurd, said Qohelet, utterly absurd. Everything is absurd." So right from the beginning of the book the thesis, the critical point of Qohelet's discourse is known to the reader. This fact transforms the book into something more akin to a philosophical excursus than to a narrative tale. The proposition is made at the outset of the text, and what remains of example, anecdote, and parable is all by way of argumentative support. In this sense, the book of Qohelet more resembles a philosophical dialogue than the Genesis narratives. Although the objection may be raised that a dialogue requires a response or a partner, I would suggest that Qohelet is in dialogue with himself and with his heart.<sup>35</sup> Even more, Qohelet is engaging the whole of the wisdom tradition—an assertion that will be developed in the discussion of aphorism and tautology. At this point, the key observation is that the style of the book of Qohelet, owing to its autobiographical mode, takes on the character of an intimate lesson.

The predominance of the first person voice in the book allows for this lesson to be grounded in an epistemology of experience.<sup>36</sup> Qohelet is not making abstract or theoretical arguments; rather, he is drawing from a vast store of extraordinary personal experiences. For Qohelet, as Williams writes, "the source of wisdom, the limited wisdom that humans can obtain, is reflection upon the experiences of the individual" (Williams 1981: 47).

2.9 וּגְדַלְתִּי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי מִכֹּל שֶׁהָיָה לִפְנֵי בִירוּשָׁלַם אֲף חֲכַמְתִּי עִמָּדָה לִי  
 2.10 וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר שָׂאֵלוּ עֵינַי לֹא אֲצַלְתִּי מֵהֶם לֹא־מִנְעַחִי אַח־לְבִי מִכֹּל־שִׂמְחָה  
 כִּי־לְבִי שִׂמַּח מִכֹּל־עֲמָלִי וְזֶה־הָיָה חֻלְקִי מִכֹּל־עֲמָלִי:<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Loader enumerates seven instances of what he calls "self discourse" in the book of Qohelet: 1:16; 2:1; 2:15; 3:17; 3:18; and 7:23 (Loader 1979: 25).

<sup>36</sup> Hayman argues in a compatible way that the book of Qohelet shares with the *Sefer Yesira* a empirical epistemology (Hayman 1991).

<sup>37</sup> "I grew far greater than anyone before me in Jerusalem, and still my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes saw I did not withhold from them. I did not restrain my heart from any type of pleasure, so my heart received pleasure through all my toil, and this was my portion from all my toil" (2:9-10).

Making use of his Solomonic persona,<sup>38</sup> Qohelet asserts that he has seen everything under the sun, that he has indulged himself, and that he has delved deeply into the world of wisdom. Yet all is absurd. This experiential knowledge carries with it a profound authority. Qohelet is relying on what he saw, not merely on conjecture. No reader could compete with the variety or extremes of Qohelet's experience. Rather, the experiential epistemic of the book of Qohelet provides the speaking voice with absolute and authoritative discursive hegemony.

Thus, the might of Qohelet's **אֵינִי** combines with the first person voice to produce a text characterised by the intensity of its message. The text draws the reader into Qohelet's world of experience and repeatedly asserts that all is absurdity. The message is transmitted directly from Qohelet's heart, making Qohelet's exigencies the reader's concerns. The power and command of this style of expression carries the message of absurdity with an urgency that a third person narrative would be unable to manage.

This sense of intimate urgency is accompanied by a paradoxical state in which the text seems, at once, both condensed in the extreme and extraordinarily attenuated. Qohelet's wisdom comes in short bursts of enlightenment, in kernels of truth. Yet he also seems to ramble, repeating and elongating his message. This contradictory dynamic is the play of aphorism and tautology in the text. These stylistic qualities coexist in poetic tension throughout the text. The book is, thereby, infused with a neurotic aesthetic.

Qohelet is clearly stylistically indebted to the book of Proverbs. In the book of Proverbs, aphorism is used to represent a nugget of truth where a short phrase imparts wisdom in condensed form. Aphorism is the crystallisation of language in service to truth. Like Proverbs, this poetic device is found throughout the book of Qohelet.

4.6 טוב מלא כף נחת ממלא חפנים עמל ורעות רוח: <sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ogden, Fox, and Crenshaw all agree that "it is probably the intent of the author to evoke memory of Solomon, the wise king *par excellence* and the best example of one who has it all" (Seow 1997b: 37). Seow further notes that this practice of attributing the authorship of a piece of literature to a wise figure finds its parallels in Egyptian wisdom texts.

<sup>39</sup> "Yet better is one handful earned calmly than two fistfuls of wealth with vexation" (4:6).

7.1 טוב שם משמן טוב ויום המות מיום הולדו:<sup>40</sup>  
 10.12 דברי פִּי־חכם הן ושפחות כסיל תבלענו:<sup>41</sup>

The book is littered with these proverbial statements, and, in some sections (e.g. 7:1-6), the text reads like an aphoristic assault, maxims in rapid succession. Two entire chapters (10 and 11) are, in fact, dominated by this proverbial structure. The epigrammatic nature of these statements has a distinct aesthetic effect on the book. Aphorism distils knowledge into its most pithy form and, in so doing, gives the impression of extreme concentration and condensation. The use of aphorism in Qohelet creates this aesthetic of precision, in which the reader gains the sense that Qohelet is extracting the essence of truth and transmitting this nectar to the reader. In effect, much like the compression of the entire world into Qohelet's heart, the book of Qohelet seems to condense the universe into a mere cluster of epigrammatic phrases. The book feels tight, compact, pointed.

Yet the book also feels protracted, elongated, and repetitive. Qohelet seems to stammer on, covering topics previously covered and repeating conclusions already declared. This tautological style is reflected on both the macrostructural and microstructural levels of the text. At the broader level, the entire book can be understood as a kind of thematic pleonasm. At the outset we hear that all is absurdity and that there is no gain to be found under the sun. What remains of the book is by way of explication and repetition of this pithy conclusion. The book is bracketed by an *inclusio*, הבל הכל הבל, found at 1:2 and 12:8.<sup>42</sup> The word הבל is found 38 times in the book. The extreme tautology surrounding the theme of absurdity is apparent.

Yet, as was discussed in the previous section, subsidiary themes also enter into this repetitive play in Qohelet. Wisdom, toil and

<sup>40</sup> "A name is better than good oil, and the day of death than the day of one's birth" (7:1).

<sup>41</sup> "The words of a wise man's mouth bring him favor, while a fool's lips devour him" (10:12).

<sup>42</sup> Anderson writes that "the *hakol hevel* statements are probably rhetorical: Qohelet does not literally mean every single thing in life" (Anderson 1998b, 205) but offers no evidence for this conclusion. Anderson's view is representative of a general trend in scholarship on Qohelet to reduce the potency of this statement. Yet Qohelet is adamant and insisting with respect to his conclusion that all is absurd and there is no textual reason to doubt the scope of his indictment; rather, it refers to every single thing in life.

gain, and time and memory are all topics treated recurrently by Qohelet. Unlike the proverbial or aphoristic mode, in which a topic is exhausted in a single crystallised statement, Qohelet insists on constantly revisiting issues, often without adding anything substantial to his previous attempt.<sup>43</sup> Thus, on a thematic level, the style of the book of Qohelet can be characterised by a certain tautology that gives the stylistic effect of extraordinary prolongation.

The microstructural level of the book, the sentence also instantiates this tautological aesthetic. Alongside the kind of aphoristic phrases quoted above, Qohelet's statements can also be characterised by attenuation and elongation.

5.17 הנה אשר־ראיתי אני טוב אשר־יפה לאכול־ולשתות ולראות טובה  
בכל־עמלו שיעמל תחת־השמש מספר ימי־חיו אשר־נתן־לו האלהים  
כ־יהוא חלקי: <sup>44</sup>

In stark opposition to Qohelet's aphoristic statements, this thought seems to dawdle to its conclusion. As though it would not suffice to simply refer to "one's toil" Qohelet reminds us that it is "one's toil at which he labours under the sun during the few days of this life that God has given him." This prolongation of thought occurs repeatedly in the book:

9.2 הכל כאשר לכל מקרה אחד לצדיק ולרשע לטוב ולפיהור  
ולפסא ולזבח ולאשר איננו זבח כטוב כחטא הנשבע כאשר  
שבועה יראי: <sup>45</sup>

Again, the point of the statement is prolonged with example after example. The words do not add substantively to the conclusion—they serve only to prolong, to extend the sentence. In this way the microstructure of the book, like the macrostructure, has a distinct element of tautology, with the aesthetic effect of dullness, haziness, and delay.

So, the style of the book of Qohelet is characterised at once by

<sup>43</sup> The book of Proverbs, as a whole, tends also to incessantly revisit issues without substantial addition.

<sup>44</sup> "Here is what I have seen to be good: it is appropriate to eat and drink and experience enjoyment in all one's toil at which he labours under the sun during the few days of his life that God has given him, for that is his portion" (5:17).

<sup>45</sup> "<absurd>, inasmuch as all have the same fate: the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, and the pure and the impure, and he who gives sacrifice and he who does not give sacrifice; the good person just as the offender, the one who swears oaths just as the one who fears to swear oaths" (9:2).

both aphorism and tautology, both condensation and dilution. These two contradictory stylistics collide with the ensuing effect of the pointedness of aphorism being dulled by tautology. In a sense, this produces a parodic critique of conventional wisdom writing that mirrors and sustains the thematic concerns of the text. Qohelet invokes the traditional mode of wisdom writing only to undermine it with prolongation and attenuation. The potency of proverbs is made impotent by babble. But in its broad effect, the confluence of these two styles in the book of Qohelet produces a contradictory aesthetic. The book is at once pointedly concise and needlessly repetitive.

This sense of contradiction extends from the discrete instance of aphorism and tautology to become a stylistic principle that infuses the whole of the text. As I have explored above, contradiction seems to guide the thematic concerns of the text. Some scholars have taken the contradictions in the book of Qohelet as an opportunity to flex their exegetical muscles either by forcing all contradictions into tenuous union or simply carving up the text.<sup>46</sup> I have maintained in this paper that contradiction is an integral component of the message of the book. This is true on the thematic level. Justice, toil, advantage, wisdom—all are subject to Qohelet's distressingly paradoxical approach. A reader is left with the impression that there is nothing that Qohelet asserted that he did not, at some point, undermine. Having established the thematic effect of contradiction, at this point, I wish to address the aesthetic effects of this style of contradiction.

That a text is internally contradictory is normally thought to be a flaw in conception or style. Yet the book of Qohelet is so consistently contradictory, so flawlessly difficult, that one is pushed to entertain the possibility that this medium of paradox was the intended stylistic carriage for the thought of the book. Consider another example of contradiction drawn from the text. With respect to women, on the one hand, Qohelet proclaims that:

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<sup>46</sup> E.g., Whybray, Ogden, Gordis. It seems to me that these critics are suffering from, what W.B. Stanford calls, "the fallacy of always clearly intended meaning" (Stanford 1980: 114). In this wonderful book, Stanford makes a number of keen observations of the fallacious tendencies of classicists. Among these (there are 26, in fact) Stanford remarks upon "a reluctance among critics to accept the possibility of deliberate ambiguity in literature" (Stanford 1980: 115). Something analogous is at work with critics of Qohelet who resist the ubiquitous contradictions in the text.

7.28 אשר עור־בקשה נפשי ולא מצאתי אדם אחד מאלף מצאתי ואשה  
בכל־אלה לא מצאתי:<sup>47</sup>

While, on the other, he maintains that one should:

9.9 ראה חיים עם־אשה אשר־אהבת כל־ימי חיי הבלך אשר נתן־לך תחת  
השמש כל ימי הבלך כי הוא חלקך בחיים ובעמלך אשר־אתה עמל תחת  
השמש:<sup>48</sup>

These statements are utterly irreconcilable. Women, in Qohelet's androcentric scheme, cannot be said to be either a source of joy or a source of evil. These two statements, rather than supporting one another, as we would prefer to see in a text, utterly undermine one another, bringing about their mutual negation. The aphorisms are themselves infused with contradiction.<sup>49</sup> No stance can be taken in this horizon of thought. Rather than an aberration in the text, this kind of erasure or negation is the norm in the book of Qohelet.

Concern after concern is treated in this manner. An idea is invoked and a stance is taken only for the reader to find its annihilation in the verses to follow. Only the vague sense of a problem remains. This is the distressing rhythm of the text. There is, at first, a tremendous sense of construction, but it is a structure that is ultimately destroyed. Much like the race lost by the swift, we are not used to this poetry without progress. Rather than creating a poetic world, the book of Qohelet creates a poetic black hole from which no ray of light is permitted to leave. The poetry, like Qohelet's heart, is all consuming. A strange balance is struck by means of which everything is cancelled out. Thus, the poetics

<sup>47</sup> "A good woman I continually sought but did not find. One good person in a thousand I did find, but a good woman in all these I did not find" (7:26). Rudman finds in this example evidence for Qohelet's understanding of woman as divine agent, "an every-woman figure who works for rather than against God in her enactment of judgement upon those who have sinned" (Rudman 1997b: 419). Though novel, this interpretation is, in many ways, simply another attempt to drain these two phrases of their paradoxical character.

<sup>48</sup> "During all your absurd days that God gives you under the sun, enjoy life with the woman you love, all your absurd days, for this is your portion in life and in your toil that you labor at under the sun" (9:9). Note the repeated stress on the word *הבל* in this passage in contradistinction to 7:26.

<sup>49</sup> Concerning the contradictory nature of Qohelet's aphoristic statements, Williams writes that Qohelet's "primary literary mode of representing the paradox of the human situation is the citation of contrasting proverbs, some of which may be his own aphorisms, in order to contradict traditional wisdom" (Williams 1981: 60). In this sense, Qohelet uses aphorism as a weapon for his assault on conventional wisdom.

of the book of Qohelet can be said to be a kind of stylistics of emptiness.

There is a profound absence at the core of this text. Qohelet is constantly searching but always ends up with emptiness. This text, stylised by way of contradiction, is characterised by a certain poignant hollowness. There is no reference point, no means of orientation or progress. This is the tragic style written about by Moltmann: "life is a tragedy, and a tragedy is a perpetual struggle without victory or hope of victory—simply a contradiction" (Moltmann 1981: 36).<sup>50</sup> Qohelet's style of contradiction is, therefore, both a kind of tragic style and a supreme exercise in mimesis.<sup>51</sup> Qohelet tells the reader that he has found that the world is full of contradiction and he then reflects this existential reality at both the thematic and aesthetic levels of his text. The world, and all of the complexity and absurdity of the human place within it, is pictured in the book of Qohelet. Thus, the aesthetic of contradiction in the book of Qohelet is tragic, mimetic, consumptive, and, finally, totally negating. The book is stylistically formed around a vacuum created by contradiction, which allows for no accretion, no accumulation. In the end, it is this powerful effect of contradiction in the book of Qohelet that carries the book's message.

Qohelet draws us close to whisper his message of absurdity. He tells of his adventures, his investigations, and his exploits. Sometimes he speaks in aphorism, mimicking the book of Proverbs,

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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Ellul, who also quotes this passage from Moltmann, writes that "the principle of noncontradiction relates to death. Contradiction is the necessary condition for communication. Only Contradiction allows for understanding a person, and, finally, for union (not a fused unity!)" (Ellul 1990: 41). From this stance, Qohelet is, oddly, a consummate communicator in his very inscrutability.

<sup>51</sup> Thale identifies three types of literary incoherence. His second type is of importance to this analysis: "The second type of incoherence is a more recent development, and certainly one of the most striking features of the literature of recent decades. This I have called grand mimetic incoherence. Its disorder is deeper and more pervasive than that of the first type; it is not incidental or merely on the surface, and it does not contain an underlying coherence. It is mimetic in that it seems to be communicating a sense that reality is or seems very chaotic, incoherent, is unsusceptible of being made to cohere. It is not that a particular event or episode is incoherent but that reality itself is incoherent, is unsusceptible of being understood, does not provide patterns beyond temporal sequence" (Thale 1975: 372). This is precisely the mimetic function that is found in Qohelet. Seow entertains this idea, suggesting that "it may indeed be the intention of the author for the reader to wrestle with the contradictions, as one does with life itself" (Seow 1997b: 42).

while sometimes he carries on at length, incessantly repeating his conclusion. Often he makes little sense, undermining statements made before or constructing paradoxical ideas. Yet all of these stylistics, the modes of conveyance, serve to carry the same judgment—that all is absurdity. The close, experiential first person voice combines with a dialectic of aphorism and tautology as well as a consistently contradictory style to produce a poetic that manages to impart the absurdity of human existence.

The book of Qohelet is difficult to read. It is made so not only by the concerns confronted in the text but also by the manner in which these concerns are presented. Amid parable and parody, contradiction and confusion, once again Qohelet provides no foothold and no base. The reader is set adrift in a text whose stylistics are all in service to its overarching message. Qohelet, insofar as he is able to construct a poetics of absurdity, conveys absence and illusion through poetry. He seeks to describe the human condition in the fullness of its complexity and, in the end, can only say that all is absurd.

### *Qohelet, Camus, and Shestov*

Qohelet's declaration of absurdity resonates through history and unto our own time. There are chords in this book that are sonorous with strings of thought in modern times. The rawness of his proclamation—that all is absurd—finds a degree of harmony with thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Lev Shestov. Though no single definition for existentialism will suffice, the thought of these individuals is concerned, in different ways, with the manner in which humans find themselves in the world, with the inchoate nature of this universe, and with the irrationality of existence. From this descriptive stance it is a simple matter to see the potential for contiguity between Qohelet and these thinkers. All rebel against established ways of understanding the human condition and all elevate personal experience to a heightened significance. All are concerned with human freedom, or the lack thereof, and all describe the emotional intensity—be it *angst*, nausea, anguish or dread—inherent in the human confrontation with the universe. It is here, in this motley crew of thinkers, that we find Qohelet's closest analogues.

Yet foremost among the parallels between existentialism and the

book of Qohelet stand Albert Camus and Lev Shestov. The striking similarity of these three sources arises from the combination of their shared concerns and their common stylistic. All three address toil and advantage, time and memory, justice, and knowledge and wisdom. But all three also engage contradiction, aphorism and tautology, and the autobiographical mode in the creation of a common aesthetic. Although other scholars have explored general connecting themes,<sup>52</sup> what is required is a consideration of the specific concerns and stylistic qualities that fuse these thinkers across vast distances and time.<sup>53</sup> What issues from such a consideration is the recognition of a synergy of creative thought.

“The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (Camus 1991: 21). Thus Albert Camus’s most renowned statement concerning the absurdity of existence sets the bounds for the whole of his thought. Camus is relentless in his insistence that order and reason are fruitless faculties in the face of a universe wholly unsympathetic to human concerns. *The Rebel*, *The Stranger*, and, most of all, *The Myth of Sisyphus* testify to a vision of human agency and cosmic order that renders the entirety of existence utterly absurd. Camus’s vision of human experience is of complete frustration that finds its ontogenesis “in the signs of disproportionality between the human being and the world, in the confrontational nature of the relationship between the self and life, in the sense of futility and in the lack of a satisfactory explanation of the unavoidable reality of death” (Kovacs 1987: 131). Even at this

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<sup>52</sup> See Gordis 1968, Peter 1980, and Schwartz 1986.

<sup>53</sup> Beyond remarking that the book is usually dated to the Ptolemaic period, Sneed identifies three approaches to establishing the social setting of the book of Qohelet. While criticising the evolutionary, historical crisis, and cultural influence approaches to the book, he notes that “Wisdom literature, by its very nature, resists sociological/historical investigation and analysis” (Sneed 1998: 47). For example, he argues convincingly against historical crisis approaches, assumed by scholars such as H. Müller, on the basis that these theories are flawed by circularity: “no reasoning is brought forth that is not itself circular, as when Egyptian skeptical literature is cited in support, the date of which is based on the assumption that pessimistic/skeptical literature can only arise during periods of anarchy!” (Sneed 1998: 44). He also critiques this approach for its failure to “explain why some persons respond to a crisis with faith instead of doubt” (Sneed 1998: 45).

broad level the similarities between Qohelet and Camus are apparent. Fox sees

a fundamental congruity between the two thinkers in their insistence on life's irrationality, in their sense of the world's opaqueness, in their exaltation of the value of lucidity, and in the zest with which they invoke the power of unaided reason to undermine its own foundations. (Fox 1989: 14)

Yet the parallels between Camus and Qohelet carry through to the specifics of both concern and aesthetic.

Like Qohelet, Camus is concerned with toil and progress and time and memory. He finds no place for human progress or advantage in the world as he finds it. His paradigmatic absurd hero, Sisyphus, is the consummate emblem of human activity. Sisyphus' fate is to push his boulder up a mountain and then to watch as it rolls back down, only then to begin the long struggle back up the slope. There is absurdity in the pointlessness of this endeavour, made even more absurd with the passing of time—the product of an accretative appreciation that one's toil is for naught.

To work and create 'for nothing,' to sculpture in clay, to know that one's creation has no future, to see one's work destroyed in a day while being aware that fundamentally this has no more importance than building for centuries—this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions. (Camus 1991: 114)

This understanding of toil and progress resonates with Qohelet's declaration that all work is "an absurdity and a vexation, and that there is no adequate gain [to be had] under the sun" (2:11).<sup>54</sup> Camus sees the human condition as one of constant struggle, but struggle without advance. The universe is unyielding and, if ever it seems that progress is made, the inevitabilities of time and death will negate this advantage.

In the midst of this absurdity Camus, like Qohelet, harbours a

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<sup>54</sup> Matthew Schwartz addresses visions of achievement in Camus and Qohelet, but his analysis suffers from a misapprehension of Qohelet's understanding of toil. Schwartz writes that "Qohelet's world is neither meaningless nor absurd, and man may work, learn and be happy?" (Schwartz 1986: 31). Schwartz relies upon Gordis (1968) as a foundation for his discussion but, as Fox astutely points out, Gordis relies upon the designation of contradictory passages as quotations in order to make sense of the text. "The quotation hypothesis, as it has been used throughout the history of Qohelet-exegesis, too quickly becomes a magic wand for the easy—and illusive—elimination of difficulties, making significant complexities disappear in the process" (Fox 1989: 26). In order to appreciate Qohelet's vision of toil and progress, one must sustain for consideration the contradictions that negate all seeming declarations of good.

very relative notion of knowledge and wisdom. Just as Qohelet places himself far from the conventional wisdom tradition that sees proper knowledge as an existential panacea, Camus effects a hard break with the optimistic positivism of his time.

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. (Camus 1991: 51)

There is no trace of hubris in this conception of knowledge. For Camus there is no discernible governing principle or foundational significance to the universe. Insofar as it remains hidden from human minds, if there is such a meaning to the universe, Camus is not interested. Camus's knowledge is deeply relative and grounded in experience.

Here we can detect a commonality between Qohelet's autobiographical style and Camus's experiential emphasis wherein "philosophizing, according to Camus, begins with existential thinking, with reflection on lived experience" (Kovacs 1987: 125). Like Qohelet, Camus writes in the first person. Although his claims are not as grand as those of Qohelet, his insights also emerge out of experience. Condemning human conduct, Camus writes that "I have seen people behave badly with great morality and I note everyday that integrity has no need of rules" (Camus 1991: 66). This experiential mode of writing predominates in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the style supporting his thematic contention that human experience is the only proper source of insight. The overall effect ascribes immediacy and exigency to the ideas discussed. The reader is drawn close to Camus via the first person voice. In this way, Camus's "I" parallel's Qohelet's *אני*.

The "I" yields numerous aphoristic statements about the nature of Camus's absurd reality. Camus crystallises language into packets of profound impact. He writes such pithy statements as the following: "Describing—that is the last ambition of absurd thought" (Camus 1991: 94) and "It is natural to give a clear view of the world after accepting the idea that it must be clear" (Camus 1991: 42). These phrases, which abound in Camus's writing, give the impression that he is transmitting the core, the nectar, of truth about the universe. Yet a strong current of tautology subtends these discrete aphoristic statements. All of Camus's writing describes the absurdity of human existence. He repeatedly shows that the human condition is the product of a fundamental tension be-

tween the individual and the cosmos and then concludes that this is absurdity. This repetitive proclamation is closely parallel to Qohelet's tautological pattern of declaring that *הכל הכל הכל*.

Finally, it is interesting to note the attention that Camus gives to the issue of contradiction. He sees contradiction as the true structure of absurdity.

I want everything to be explained to me or nothing. And the reason is impotent when it hears this cry from the heart. The mind aroused by this insistence seeks and finds nothing but contradictions and nonsense. (Camus 1991: 27)

Contradiction is the poetic that leads to the revelation of absurdity. Many of his own passages are seemingly contradictory, but Camus sees this not as a flaw, but as a representation of reality. "Camus, according to his claim, writes only about his experience, about the joys and despairs that are endemic to human living" (Kovacs 1987: 121). If his writing is contradictory, this is because it arises out of experience, which itself is inherently contradictory. Again, one can see that Camus and Qohelet share a use of, and regard for, the contradictory as an expression of absurdity and the absence of meaning in the universe.

For Camus, the only response available to humans in the face of absurdity is to rebel. Rebellion is merely indifference to, and accepting of, the absurdity of existence. Just as Sisyphus is an absurd hero because he resigns himself to his fate—a supremely courageous act in the eyes of Camus—each human must accept and be indifferent to the absurd reality of existence.<sup>55</sup> While Qohelet and Camus concur on many points and share a certain aesthetic, it is apparent that Camus's vision of the universe remains an exclusively humanistic one. This point constitutes the most significant disparity between Camus and Qohelet. While I disagree with the bulk of Gordis's analysis of Qohelet and modern existentialism,<sup>56</sup> I think that he is correct in pointing out that Qohelet remains a theist, though a strange one. What is needed, then, is

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<sup>55</sup> Some have suggested that Camus finds some value in collective solidarity. Sprintzen, for example, asserts that Camus believes that it is "collective meaning and purpose that alone can truly sustain us in the face of an infinite and indifferent universe" (Sprintzen 1998: 195).

<sup>56</sup> Remarkably, Gordis writes that "there is pain and passion, even resignation, before the Unknown and the Unknowable in *Job* and *Koheleth*, but no nausea or despair, no disgust or dread, no fear of failure" (Gordis 1968: 118). Rather, the preceding has shown the extent to which Qohelet despairs at the human condition.

an example of modern existentialism that includes God in the constitution of the cosmos. Interestingly, we can look to Camus for direction on this matter:

If there is a Chestovian philosophy, I can say that it is altogether summed up in this way. For when, at the conclusion of his passionate analyses, Chestov discovers the fundamental absurdity of all existence, he does not say: "This is the absurd," but rather, "this is God: we must rely on him even if he does not correspond to any of our rational categories." (Camus 1991: 34)

Lev Shestov (1866-1938), né Yehuda Leib Shvartsman, was a Russian existentialist whose work has, in recent years, been largely forgotten or ignored. This fact is truly regrettable, for Shestov writes lucidly and passionately about the human existential predicament. In *Potestas Clavium*, *In Job's Balances*, and *Athens and Jerusalem* Shestov is concerned with the way in which reason and order fail to provide meaning in a world that resists these impositions at every turn. He opposes faith and reason, for "with faith Shestov associates will, that is movement, hope, and even passion, while reason is for him a passive knowledge that surrenders to what has been or apparently must be" (Despland 1985: 265-66). Reason results in necessity, *ananke*, which is a force that binds the human to despair. Faith, for Shestov, is the resignation to our condition with a cognisance that, in God, there is infinite possibility—it is theistic despair.

Shestov's philosophy is the result of 'magnanimous' despair rather than of speculative thought. He was profoundly concerned with man's plight in a world of necessity and he was searching for a balance between suffering and justice, but could not find it on the human plane. (Shein 1979: 61)

The thematic parallels with Qohelet are clear. Shestov, like Qohelet, searches for meaning in the world but is unable to find it. Shestov's writing also demonstrates "that philosophy begins in despair, not in wonder, as the Greeks believed" (Rosenthal 1998: 742). Unlike Camus, God figures in Shestov's vision of the cosmos, although in a rather impersonal and absconded fashion. The symmetry between Shestov's writing and the book of Qohelet is sometimes startling, for it operates on both the thematic and aesthetic planes.

In most respects, Shestov agrees with Camus. Therefore, many of the parallels drawn between Camus and Qohelet can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to a comparison of Shestov and Qohelet. Yet there are a number of statements in Shestov's writings that

demand consideration for their commonalities with the book of Qohelet. On the matter of toil and progress, Shestov writes that “men leave the world after having begun something, often something *very important and significant*. Where do they complete their beginnings?” (Shestov 1932: 212). His answer is that these beginnings are left without completion owing to the immutable truth of death. This assertion resonates perfectly with Qohelet’s view of toil and progress. Both Shestov and Qohelet understand that death leaves all activities, even those that are *very important and significant*, bereft of inherent meaning.

This homologue leads to a comparison between Shestov and Qohelet with respect to the question of time. Beyond the inevitability of death as the endpoint to human life, Shestov and Qohelet share a vision of the confluence of past, present, and future. Recall the words of Qohelet on this matter:

That which happens is that which shall happen, and that which occurs is that which shall occur, and there is nothing new under the sun. If there is anything of which one might say, ‘See, this is new’, it has already happened in the aeons that preceded us. (1:9-10)

Shestov writes the following:

Yes, but the future is the same as the present! Even the past is in many respects the present. Past wrongs burn even as present: sometimes childhood memories poison our lives no less than events of to-day. As for the future—it will be on us before we are prepared for it! (Shestov 1932: 145)

For both thinkers, time contracts to a single moment in which the future, the present, and the past exist simultaneously. The past and future impinge on us in the present and, existentially, linear conceptions of time lose all puissance.

On the stylistic level, Shestov makes use of both aphorism and tautology to the same effect as that achieved in the book of Qohelet. Shein writes that “the one idea which dominated [Shestov’s] thoughts was liberation from laws of *Ananke*. To this idea Shestov devoted all his philosophical writings” (Shein 1979: 60). The tautological macrostructure found in both Camus and Qohelet finds instantiation in Shestov’s work. This compulsive and repetitious concern with necessity and freedom, reason and faith, is in tension with Shestov’s aphoristic statements. “Everything that has a beginning has an end, everything that is born must die: such is the unshakeable law of existence” (Shestov 1966: 411). The idea and language in this statement are highly reminiscent of Qohelet’s writing. These “nuggets of truth” are ubiquitous in Shestov’s work

and some sections of *In Job's Balances* and *Athens and Jerusalem* are even organised in short, discrete, aphoristic paragraphs. There is, here, an apparent play between aphorism and tautology that mirrors a similar poetic in the book of Qohelet.

In *In Job's Balances*, Shestov reflects on the nature of wisdom and knowledge and, in doing so, also betrays his concern for personal lived experience. His thoughts on these matters are remarkably compatible with Qohelet's views. In this passage he also mirrors Qohelet's use of the personal voice and reliance upon proverbs. As such, this excerpt is a poignant example of the multifaceted congruities between Shestov and Qohelet.

There is an excellent Russian proverb: "Ask not the aged, ask him who knows about life." I think that it would not hurt philosophers, who have argued so much about *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, to listen now and then to the voice of popular wisdom. An aged man who, in his many days, has yet seen little of life, inclines to *a priori* thinking. He believes in unalterable principles, in a rigid construction of life—believes so firmly that he is inclined to hold his convictions for *a priori*, even innate, given by the gods. He despises "experience," thinks that there is nothing new under the sun, that all that is has often been and will often happen again. The knowledge of the experienced in life is different: as a man *experienced in life*, he has seen with his own eyes things that he would never have believed if he had not *seen them himself*. Kant lived to eighty, Nietzsche only to forty-four. But how much more *experienced* was Nietzsche than Kant! (Shestov 1932: 182)

Much like the structure of the book of Qohelet, Shestov proceeds from a conventional wisdom aphorism to a long discussion of the meaning of this statement. He invokes the "I." analogous to Qohelet's *אני*, and, in doing so, draws the reader into a discussion that is both highly personal and immediate. Shestov clearly indicates the value that he places on experiential knowledge, ultimately elevating Nietzsche above Kant, owing to Nietzsche's superior existential experience. In this way, Shestov's existential philosophy proceeds from the assumption that "its aim is not understanding, not knowledge, but life" (Wernham 1968: 95). "His manner of writing is aggressively anti-rational" (Despland 1985: 265), and there is, in this passage, a clear critique of the belief that "unalterable principles" and rigid constructions govern life. All of these qualities and ideas perfectly parallel the thought and style contained in the book of Qohelet.

These remarkable similarities to the book of Qohelet find their consummate expression in Shestov's statement that the aged man believes that "there is nothing new under the sun." The condem-

natory tone of this statement in the context of the above passage contradicts other assertions made by Shestov, including the comment quoted above that “the past is in many respects the present.” Yet Shestov’s reader, much like the reader of the book of Qohelet, must learn to tolerate contradictions. In *Potestas Clavium*, Shestov writes that “if life is filled with complications, philosophy cannot and must not aspire at any cost to ‘clarity and distinctness’. If there are contradictions in life, philosophy must live from these contradictions” (Shestov 1969: 282). It is in this vein that Wernham can assert Shestov’s understanding that “the law of contradiction is not a necessary truth; it is not a contingent truth, for it is not a truth” (Wernham 1968: 101). Shestov clearly understands human existence as riddled with contradiction and instead of flattening out these incongruities, Shestov chooses to embrace and reflect them in his writing. Like Qohelet, Shestov engages in a grand mimetic exercise.

For Shestov, the only response available to humans in the face of the irrationality and absurdity of the universe is faith. Returning to Camus’s statement, all of Shestov’s writing ultimately declares of the absurd human condition that “this is God: we must rely on him even if he does not correspond to any of our rational categories” (Camus 1991: 34). This view is tantamount to Camus’s concept of rebellion, but with God included in the picture. Yet the inclusion of God does not dilute Shestov’s appraisal of the existential situation. God is fundamentally abstracted from the human predicament and ultimate belief in him does not ameliorate the angst of existence—it merely provides possibility. God is, in Shestov’s definition, infinite possibility. So, although Shestov includes God in his view of the human predicament, Qohelet and Shestov differ on the way that God fits into the picture. While Shestov counsels faith in God because there is hope in his possibility, in the book of Qohelet God is generally the tormentor, the inventor of the evil treadmill on which we run.

The ultimate value of these kinds of comparisons does not reside in the postulation of influence or the assertion of common membership in a school of thought. As such, I am making no such proposals. Rather, the recognition of common aspects of thought and style across geographical and temporal chasms can bring into higher relief the concerns of these thinkers. Qohelet, Camus, and Shestov are all writing in a similar mood, perhaps an existentialist mood. They have each looked around their worlds and found that

the universe does not bend to human reason or conform to human order. They have all seen contradiction and injustice in the world and have sought to describe this condition. Interestingly, all of them have chosen certain similar stylistics to carry this message of absurdity. The first person voice, the dynamic between aphorism and tautology, and the poetics of contradiction—these devices have combined in Shestov, Camus, and Qohelet to create an aesthetics of absurdity. So form and content, aesthetic and concern have fused in each of these thinkers to produce a literature that addresses the way that we find ourselves in the world. These authors inform each other in our minds, helping us to recognise a trend or trajectory of human thought about the nature of our (absurd) existence.

### *Conclusion*

The book of Qohelet draws us deeply into a world of illusion and absurdity in a search for some ballast, some foundational meaning. Qohelet seeks to address the exigencies of the human existential condition. He undertakes a colossal project, setting out to witness everything and expanding his heart to encompass the world. Yet he comes up empty handed, finding no such answer in his frenetic search. Qohelet looks to toil and progress for some sense that, even if the world does not always make sense, humans can achieve great things in the course of their lifetimes. But this is not the conclusion at which he arrives. Rather, there is no gain, no progress for humans in this world. The ensuing feeling of futility is exacerbated by Qohelet's concept of time and memory. Qohelet expresses the burden of being a historical creature, bound to the past and restricted by the future with "nothing new under the sun." Time circulates, cancelling out all imagination and creation. Even sacred history—Israel, exodus, covenant—finds no place in the memory of the text. This negation extends to the realm of justice. The righteous, Qohelet finds, are often punished while the wicked find reward. No matter what good one accumulates in life, after death there is no guarantee that it will find a just inheritor. There is no sense, no order in this world where races are not won by the swift. In this context, no justice can be found. Finally, Qohelet looks to wisdom and knowledge to find meaning in this world in which all is absurd. Ultimately, Qohelet's search is a search for meaning and wisdom about how to live in

the world. But the absurdity is all pervasive, permeating even wisdom to the point that wisdom and folly are mutually indistinguishable. Wisdom is extremely fragile, and illusion and absurdity impenetrably obfuscate knowledge and understanding. In light of all of these revelations, Qohelet can come to no other conclusion than **הבל הבלים הכל הבל**.

This judgement of the absurdity of existence is supported and amplified by the particular aesthetic through which Qohelet conveys his thoughts—what I have termed the poetics of absurdity. All of Qohelet's concerns are explored through an autobiographical voice. His **אני** dominates the discourse of the book, drawing the reader close to the speaker and making his anxieties more exigent to the reader. These are not theoretical propositions with which Qohelet is presenting us but, rather, the experiential knowledge of a kingly persona. A book concerned with the existential situation of humanity, all conclusions contained in its pages derive from the experiences of the character. We are even privy to the dialogue between Qohelet and his heart, that through which he engages the world. This intimacy is infused with a tension that finds its genesis in the textual interplay between aphorism and tautology. Qohelet mimics the conventional wisdom tradition by using pithy proverbial statements. He gathers his wisdom into crystallised and cogent statements of truth. This use of aphorism gives the book a feeling of condensed immediacy. Yet at the same time, the book of Qohelet feels protracted and oblique. This latter effect is a product of the tautological elements in the book. In some senses, the whole of the book of Qohelet is an extended tautology. All of Qohelet's statements are ultimately by way of explication of his conclusion that all is absurd. But even at the narrow level, Qohelet is constantly elongating and delaying his thoughts. This dynamic between tautology and aphorism produces a highly contradictory aesthetic. And it is upon contradiction that the poetics of the text ultimately rest. Qohelet is constantly contradicting himself, asserting one thing and then, later, negating it entirely. The effect of Qohelet's rhythm of flawless incoherence produces a profound absence at the heart of the text. Contradiction turns the text into an exercise in erasure, not allowing any judgement to compete with the assertion that all is absurd.

These concerns and stylistics fuse together in service to Qohelet's thesis of total absurdity. By way of concern, stylistic, and conclusion, Qohelet finds close philosophical analogues in Camus and

Shestov, two modern existentialists. Both Camus and Shestov share Qohelet's views on toil and progress, time and memory, justice, and wisdom and knowledge. All agree that none of these principles retain final coherence in the absurdity of existence. They employ the personal voice, aphorism and tautology, and an aesthetic of contradiction to convey their ideas. In effect, the styles of these three personalities are remarkably alike. In the end, they concur with the conclusion that all is absurd. The world is ultimately insensitive to the human existential condition and remains unresponsive to our demands for rational coherence and order. While Camus finds no place for God in his system, Shestov sees the ultimate source for our existential predicament as residing in God. Thus, while Camus counsels rebellion, Shestov views faith as the only available response to an absurd world. All three of these thinkers participate in a common philosophical mood with respect to the human predicament. Critics of all three, when they have not attempted to "clean up their thinking" by ironing out all contradictions, have reductively labelled them as sceptics or condemned them for a perceived pessimism. Yet these thinkers are truly only concerned with describing the world in its raw reality and exposing reason, order, and conventional wisdom as flawed and illusory tools with which to understand the absurdity of the world.

Alas, I have studied philosophy,  
 the law as well as medicine,  
 and to my sorrow, theology;  
 studied them well with ardent zeal,  
 yet here I am, a wretched fool,  
 no wiser than I was before.  
 They call me Magister, even Doctor,  
 and for some ten years now  
 I've led students by the nose,  
 up and down, across, and in circles—  
 all I see is that we cannot know!  
 This burns my heart.  
 (Goethe, *Faust*, Part One, ll. 354-65<sup>57</sup>)

We come to Faust in a state of existential despair. He has studied everything, has delved into the deep secrets of the world, but remains unable to find truth. It is in this condition that Mephistopheles arrives and the Faustian drama begins. This is also the state

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<sup>57</sup> Translated by Peter Salm (New York and London: Bantam Books, 1985).

in which we find Qohelet. But while Qohelet's heart also burns with the absurd state of unknowing, there is no encounter with the devil in store for him. Rather, he remains limited to the raw absurdity of reality, confined by the contradictions of the world, and despairing in the absence of meaning in life. All of his highest values have failed under close scrutiny. There remains only God, somewhere, abstracted from the human condition. Qohelet has discovered that the universe stands mute in the face of our pleas for reason and order—all is absurdity. And although this message may not be uplifting, the poetic beauty and conceptual poignancy of the book finds us taking delight in the absurd.

#### ABSTRACT

This article considers the Book of Qohelet in terms of its concerns and stylistics and with an eye towards the book's modern analogues. In particular, I look at the themes of toil and progress, time and memory, justice, and wisdom and knowledge while endeavouring to maintain the contradictory and self-negating dynamics of the text. Qohelet, I conclude, finds no ultimate good and no foundational principle in the universe. The declaration that all is *הבל* is a judgement about the human experience of existence. Ours is not a world that admits human reason or responds to our longing for meaning—it is an absurd existence. Various stylistic strategies are employed in the text to support and sustain this message and these techniques combine to form a poetics of absurdity. The book is cast in an autobiographical voice, plays with the dynamics of aphorism and tautology, and, most significantly, builds itself around the poetics of contradiction. The text is engaged in a continual process of erasure whereby statements are made, explored, and then negated. I conclude by considering two modern analogues to the book of Qohelet, Albert Camus and Lev Shestov. These two thinkers parallel the book of Qohelet in both concern and style. They too find that the universe is infused with contradictions and does not bend to our longing for order and reason. Ultimately, all three sources convey a similar understanding of the human existential condition.

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