

CONNOTATIONS OF EVE

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The Boy listened to the [Nightingale's] song. He thought: Why is there anything at all, and not nothing instead? ...

The Girl ... sat down and looked up at the Moon. She thought: I am the question (Crowley 1989, 15).

John Crowley's story, "The Nightingale Sings At Night" (1989), takes place in a forest, not a garden, that has been created by Dame Kind. Time and history do not yet exist. The goddess walks in the forest and loves all of her creation. One day she tells the Nightingale that she has come up with an "idea": she has created a Girl and a Boy, as they have named themselves, for she has given them the ability to name things (1989, 5-6). This is also her idea. The Nightingale marvels at all of this novelty.

Not unlike Lewis Carroll's Alice, these children discover that names often cause problems (Carroll 1982, *passim*). Because names are not connected to their objects, a single object may have different names (or vice versa), and names allow you to think about objects even when they are not present. Names lead to thought and confusion; they lead to questions that may have no answers. Eventually the Girl's questions even cause Dame Kind to become angry, in a rather YHWH-like manner (Crowley 1989, 17). However, the goddess's anger does not deter the children from noticing that the Moon is constantly changing, and this leads them to invent ideas of their own: ideas of Time and of Death. The children also notice that they too are changing, and accordingly they change their own names to Woman and Man (1989, 22). "We learned it ourselves," says the Woman (1989, 25). They are no longer children.

Dame Kind is alarmed at the humans' sadness and fear in response to these new names and ideas (and also at her own anger), but she tells them that once an idea has been invented it cannot be undone, and therefore Time and Death have now come into the world. The ideas and their names create (or change) reality. She is also concerned that the humans' new unhappiness will spoil the tranquility of her forest. First the Man and then the Woman offer to go away, to "make up someplace else ... A better place" (Crowley 1989, 27). In response the goddess admits that "I made a mistake."

Later the Nightingale sees the Man outside the forest, looking in. The people have now invented tools, such as clubs and fire. They have also invented dreams, and they have found new fears, fears of the unknown, as well as memories of what they have lost. The Man tells the Nightingale that a gate bars his way from re-entering the forest, but the bird can see no gate there (Crowley 1989, 29). The Nightingale then decides to join the Woman and Man in their exile and to sing to them "his song of hope and remembrance" (1989, 34), primarily at night, to ease their fears and to comfort them.

Speaking more directly about the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, Umberto Eco presents a similar view in his essay, "On the Possibility of Generating

Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language” (1979). Eco argues that the basic semiotic structures of any language open the possibility of “aesthetic messages,” in which the same word or words may mean more than one thing (1979, 90).¹ It is in the very nature of language itself to generate distortion or obscurity in a message; this is what Michel Serres calls the “static” or parasite inherent in the physical medium (1982). Furthermore, if humanity is created in the image of God, then the linguistic corruption that already taints the human world in the garden of Eden itself arises in the supernatural realm. God either creates this corruption himself, or else even God is unable to prevent its occurrence.

As the creator of language, God is responsible for subverting “the presumed natural order of things” (Eco 1979, 95). Aesthetic messages arise from alterations in the linguistic form of a message that produce an additional signifying level of the message, which is its connotation (1979, 90-91). What the aesthetic message finally signifies is not some object in the extra-textual world, but rather another message. Among other things, this further message or further level of the aesthetic message points to the physical stuff of the message itself, that is, the material aspect of the signifiers. The message refers to itself as a message.

More simply, God’s error in the Edenic language leads to the creation by Adam and Eve of metaphor, language that conceals linguistic contradiction without eliminating it. The metaphor then ignites in the two humans a “language passion” (Eco 1979, 97) that corresponds to their desire for the forbidden fruit; it opens up the “limitless possibilities of semiosis” (1979, 98), which is both the power of signs to refer endlessly to other signs and the inability of any signifier to refer absolutely to any signified. The origin of sin is linguistic. The connotative disruption of linguistic order opens the door to narrative and ideology, and as Eco notes, it marks the beginning of history (1979, 103).

Although quite different from one another in many ways, Eco’s essay and Crowley’s story both suggest that the problem in Eden (or the “mistake” of Dame Kind) arises from the god-like yet flawed power of naming and the potential for semiotic play that appears in language. It is the “language passion” of the first humans that gets everything going and that continues to play a powerful role in human life.

In her book, *Admen and Eve* (2012), Katie Edwards suggests that modern advertisers exercise this passion or power of (re-)naming when they invoke the biblical story of Eden. Like Crowley’s Girl and Boy or Eco’s Adam and Eve, the “admen” draw upon the “limitless possibilities of semiosis” opened up by connotations that operate in every language and culture, but they do so in order to exploit the more mundane passions of female consumers: desires for happiness, success, or romance. More specifically, they draw upon a conventional Christian understanding of the Eden story (see 2012, 26)—an understanding that is quite different from those suggested in either Crowley’s story or Eco’s essay.

Edwards’s book surveys a large number of print advertisements in which what is evidently and often explicitly an Eve-figure appears, frequently accompanied by an apple, a serpent, or an Adam-figure, and sometimes in a garden or forest setting. The book’s final chapter also examines the TV series *Desperate Housewives*,

¹ Portions of my remarks on Eco were previously published in Aichele (2001).

as well as the movie *Twilight*. These are not advertisements as such but were actively used to market items of interest to women.

The re-naming of portions of the Eden story that appears in such advertisements reverses that story's connotative polarities as they are identified in the conventional understanding of it, replacing the signifieds of the Christian understanding with binary opposites. Eve as the Original Sinner and temptress of Adam is transformed into an alluring, prosperous, and powerful woman, and the biblical story of the paradisaal origins of human history metamorphoses into a postfeminist story of personal empowerment through consumption of perfume, cosmetics, or other items of interest to women.

The punning title of Edwards's book may itself connote that admen/Adams are now in a position to seduce and betray latter-day Eves. However, that is the sort of thing that advertising messages do to all of us. Roland Barthes argues in his essay, "The Advertising Message," that every advertisement connotes only one thing: "buy this product" (1988, 176).² Barthes imagines the case of a Martian – that is, "someone from another world." This Martian knows the vocabulary and syntax of "our language" quite well, but she is "utterly ignorant" of Earthly human cultures. Nevertheless, as long as any communication from Earth contains "here on this first level, a sufficient set of signifiers and this set refers to a body, no less sufficient, of signifieds," then this Martian is able to receive "a perfectly constituted message" (1988, 174).

However, Barthes's imaginary Martian is "deaf" to metaphor and other "second signifieds" (1988, 175), all the nuances and shades of meaning and usage that are attached to words through specific cultural codes. She is "stupid" in regard to any other information that might be inferred from the utterance by anyone with a broader experience of the human world—for example, overtones of words, slang or idiomatic usage, or local or group-related variations of meaning. Most of us regard these connotations as "obvious," but because this Martian reads the advertisement in isolation from any historical, literary, and cultural traditions to which it has been bound, she will always be mystified by this element of connotation. Consequently, the Martian's understanding of this message is hopelessly "literal."

Barthes suggests that only a fool or a child would pay serious attention to an advertisement's "literal" denotations. The Martian is in effect such a fool or child, and so for her the advertising message is simple and innocent, but utterly misleading. The denotations of advertising messages are always trivial and only their connotations are important. Meaning at the primary level of denotation is obscured by that far more powerful secondary level, which is the realm of ideology. As Barthes notes, connotation turns the signified message into a double message that "disconnects" the denotative meaning and thereby supports an illusion of "naturalness."

Nevertheless, even though the specifics of denotation no longer matter in language that is as highly connotative as that of the advertising message, they are still indispensable. Despite the crippled functioning of denotation apart from connotation, there can be no connotation at all without denotation. The

² Portions of my remarks on Barthes were previously published in Aichele 2012. Edwards cites neither Barthes nor Eco.

apparently natural quality of the advertised message arises from the culturally-determined symbol-system that denotation appeals to through the sequence of words, even though this “naturalness” is itself a product of the connotations (Barthes 1988, 176).

Barthes concludes that the advertising message, in its use of connotation, serves as the paradigm of *all* narrative. What is true of the advertising message is true of every story, for narratives of every sort, including biblical narratives such as the Eden story, draw heavily upon connotation. They depend upon ideology, without which they too are stupid. Nevertheless, the advertising message differs from many biblical texts (as well as other narratives) in at least one important way: most advertisements are explicit about their own double-ness. As Barthes says, “the second signified (the [advertised] product) is always exposed unprotected by a frank system, i.e., one which reveals its duplicity, for this *obvious* system is not a *simple* system” (1988, 178; his emphases). Indeed, without this “frank system,” the message might not be recognized as an advertisement (see further below). The self-referentiality of Eco’s “aesthetic message” becomes explicit in cases such as these, but it is often concealed by the illusion of “naturalness” in many other narratives. Any such frank system must always stand in some tension with the ideological illusion of naturalness.

Very few biblical texts or other narratives display such frank systems, and the biblical story of Eden evidently does not reveal any “duplicity.”³ Connotation explains the naturalness of this story, read as it has been through hundreds of years of predominantly Christian interpretation. It seems clear that Eve is the temptress who seduces Adam away from the command of God and brings about the Fall of humanity and the exclusion from paradise—how else could the story be understood? The reader has little difficulty understanding the biblical story’s language as rich with theological and narrative significance, just as the consumer in modern Western civilization has little difficulty understanding the advertising messages that Edwards examines. This can only happen because connotations are hard at work, and thus it is little surprise that most advertisers in the Western (again, predominantly Christian) world draw upon such readings as the basis for their connotative inversions—although it is somewhat surprising that they draw upon a biblical story at all (see further below).

Although the Eden story’s readers are often well aware of many of its connotations, they probably tend to think that those connotations are inherent in the text of Genesis. In contrast, it seems very unlikely that Barthes’s Martian would understand the biblical narrative in a Christian way. Furthermore, in neither Crowley’s tale of the Nightingale nor Eco’s droll reconstruction of the Edenic language do sexuality or needs for domination over the other play any significant role. If we read the biblical story in relation to either of these accounts, then other possible understandings of it become evident. No doubt there are also still other understandings among the vast accumulation of narrative afterlives that surrounds this story.⁴ As more alternative readings are brought to light, the reader

³ The advertisement’s duplicity is not deception, but rather the opposite. Ads are often deceptive in other ways, but they usually make it clear that their goal is to sell a product. The frank system takes on quite different forms in non-advertising narratives such as postmodern fiction.

⁴ Edwards acknowledges this possibility, but only indirectly (2012, 2; also n.7 on that page).

becomes ever more aware of how un-natural the prevailing understanding is, and with that, how un-natural the inversions of the Eve story in contemporary advertising are as well.

To be sure, the advertisers don't care about any of that. As Barthes says, they just want to sell the advertised product. By definition all advertisers are "hacks," writing only to make money. In contrast, I think at least some of those who write narrative afterlives such as those noted above do care about what they write.⁵ Movies and TV shows lie between these extremes, because large amounts of money are often spent in making them, and if they are successful, large amounts of money will be made from them. Support from those who want products to be prominently displayed during these shows or movies, or who reference them in their ads, may be helpful in funding them. Nevertheless, sometimes even highly "commercial" movies or TV shows can stimulate our thinking and perception in the ways that any good story does, and no advertisement ever does. However, this whole topic deserves further attention. Perhaps the original Eve-related ad is Genesis 2-3 itself!—but if so, the "frank system" of that text has become invisible to us.

As I noted above, the Eve-related advertisements that Edwards examines do not themselves so much present interpretations of the Eden story but rather inversions of that story as it is conventionally understood. The ideologically-loaded connotations that are typically associated with these advertisements are then the focus of her highly detailed analyses, and these analyses comprise a large part of her book. They go far beyond Barthes's conclusion that every ad connotes only one relatively simple thing.

Similarly, Edwards's reading of Genesis 2-3 itself (and the readings of other scholars that she cites) infers rather far-reaching connotations. Although she gratefully acknowledges the work of feminist scholars who have produced "positive re-readings of the biblical material," she rejects such views and maintains that the theme of "the sexual temptation of Adam by Eve" is implicit in the story (2012, 10). She allows that the meaning of any text must be negotiated between that text and its reader; the reader brings her beliefs and biases, and the text puts "constraints on the range within which meanings are constructed" (2012, 18, n. 13, quoting Pamela Milne). She then claims that the conventional understanding of the Eden story is "entirely plausible" and if read in that way, "the text lends itself to androcentric interpretation" (2012, 19, see especially n. 15). Sex and gender are both crucial to this androcentric interpretation:

The seeds of the idea that the function of woman is as sexual mate to man are already sown in the text before the transgression takes place. After the transgression the punishments or consequences reinforce the gendered roles assigned to the couple (2012, 23).

The resulting theme of sexual shame contributes to the blame placed on Eve in the conventional Christian understanding of the Eden story (Edwards 2012, 24). "The encoded message in the [biblical] text is that women need to be subjugated and controlled by men" (2012, 25). Edwards notes that this reading of the text also

⁵ I am not talking about the writer's conscious intention, but rather about whatever compels the writer to write. I am also not saying that writers of fiction believe in the truth of their stories, or that they claim to know their meaning.

emphasizes the vulnerability of Adam—that is, of men in general—and hence the weakness of patriarchy itself. The ads pick up on this concept of sex as a site of transgression, but the transgression is transformed into a positive, assertive move on the woman’s part. “Eve becomes a postfeminist capitalist heroine” (2012, 33).

Edwards also argues that, much as in the conventional understanding, Eve has greater responsibility for eating the forbidden fruit than Adam does in the biblical story, for she is the more active character in Genesis 3, in contrast to Genesis 2. Often the forbidden fruit is strongly associated with the woman’s naked body, depicted as an object of heterosexual desire. Combined with the appeals to sexual desire, this active responsibility is also picked up in the modern advertisements.

It seems that popular culture takes its cue from the biblical text and removes responsibility from Adam, placing it upon a knowing, seductive Eve. How can we blame Adam for buckling under the pressure of Eve’s considerable charms? (Edwards 2012, 27)

In advertising images, as in the biblical text, it is the woman, Eve, as the one who decides to eat the fruit, who is more strongly identified with the forbidden fruit than the man, Adam. In the popular cultural imagination the temptation offered by the fruit becomes the temptation offered by woman. (Edwards 2012, 32)

Edwards claims early in her book that she is not presenting the “original meaning” of the Eden story (2012, viii-ix), and she accepts that other readings are possible within the “semantic range” of the text. Despite this, she comes close to saying that the Genesis text is itself “unredeemably androcentric” (2012, 33). It is the wide acceptance of the androcentric interpretation of this text that motivates its reversal and exploitation in the advertisements that she studies.

However, if this text is indeed unredeemably androcentric, then the range of semiotic possibilities for Genesis 2-3 must be very limited, and alternate readings or afterlives such as those of Eco or Crowley must themselves either be androcentric or else simply wrong, just as the feminist readings of scholars like Phyllis Trible are wrong, according to Edwards. Instead it seems to me that although Genesis 2-3 may *allow* interpretations such as the androcentric one—as well as its exploitations in the advertisements—the text hardly *constrains* much less *compels* the reader to accept them. Indeed, the evident plurality of interpretations of this text, as well as its various afterlives, offers a fine example of what Roman Ingarden calls the “opalescent multiplicity” of the literary work of art (1973, 142, see also 144)—not to mention unlimited semiosis.

Apart from the question of its validity, the conventional interpretation has important strategic consequences for Edwards. Crowley’s story is interesting in part because of intertextual tensions that appear between it and the story in Genesis (some of which I noted above), and comparable tensions appear between the account in Eco’s essay and the Genesis story. Semiotic tensions such as these are crucial to defining the meaning of any story. Meaning arises from difference, and we only understand stories in tension with other stories. It is in intertextual spaces between texts such as these that criticism becomes possible.

However, according to Edwards’s analyses, the modern Eve-related ads merely reverse the connotative polarities of the Eden story’s conventional understanding. As a result, there can be very little intertextual or critical tension between each of

the ads and the story in Genesis. It is not surprising then that she has little to say, after her opening chapter, about specific relations between the ads and the biblical text, and in the remaining chapters of the book, her focus is almost entirely on the ads. This alone would be reason to question, or at least to re-examine, her earlier conclusions regarding the semantic range of the Genesis text.

Edwards's acceptance of the plausibility of conventional readings of the Eden story also implies what is basically a Christian reading of the text of Genesis. After all, the conventional reading of this story is first and foremost a Christian reading, in which the theological concept of Original Sin plays a large part. For this reading, Eve is not merely one among several bad women to appear in various biblical stories, and who just happens to be first in the sequence; instead, she is the aboriginal Bad Woman, the one whose sin infects us all, just as the gospel of Luke's Mary is the quintessential Good Woman. The concept of Original Sin makes little sense unless we human beings find ourselves unable to atone properly for our sins—that is, unless we require a heavenly Redeemer, an extraordinary Third Party to save us. Insofar as Edwards accepts this Christian reading, her text of Genesis 2-3 is already heavily interpreted by its canonical relation to the New Testament.

However, the concept of Original Sin can hardly be intrinsic to the text of Genesis, even though it derives from readings of Genesis 2-3, perhaps going back as far as Romans 5:12-21. Paul refers in that text to Adam and makes no mention of Eve,⁶ but the modern conventional reading of the story may well owe much to such earlier readings. Edwards never uses the phrase “original sin” (except to refer to ads for Original Sin Cider [2012, 15]), and she may be (understandably) trying to avoid any theological discussions. Nevertheless, the concept is there anyway, although inverted, in the ads, where “sin” has become something like “strength” (in Eve, anyway). No matter how theologians define original sin, it is somehow deeply sexual, and gendered, in the popular understanding. In the conventional understanding of the Eden story, Eve is the source of all sin, and this is precisely the concept on which the modern ads play and work their reversals.

It is this same canonical context from which the Eve-related ads are drawn, even if they make no further reference to the Bible or to Christianity. This raises further questions. By drawing upon this Christian reading of the story, do these ads also retain in some way a theological understanding of it, perhaps in some repressed form, or do they empty the story of any such implication when they reverse its connotative polarities? Similarly, do the ads entirely remove the story from its canonical context, as many biblical references in novels, movies, or other forms of popular culture do, or does the rest of the Bible remain somehow attached to the ads as well? The latter is suggested by treatments of Adam-figures as Jesus-figures (Edwards 2012, 107-108).

These concerns of mine do not seriously impair the value of Edwards's fine analyses of the ads (although I wanted a fifth chapter that returned to the Genesis story and its critical tension with the ads). They are instead further points that need to be considered. That advertisers in the modern secular world would draw at all upon a primarily Christian canonical reading of the Bible, even if to invert it, is

⁶ For Pauline mention of Eve, see 2 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Timothy 2:13-14.

surprising and surely requires further consideration. Two additional questions were also raised for me by Edwards's book:

1. First, to judge from her survey, most of the ads are for alcohol, beauty products, or lingerie. While a few fall outside of this range, there seem to be no Eve-related ads for products that do not carry, at least remotely, sexual connotations for or to women. This supports Edwards's argument. But are there any Eden-related ads that lack such connotations? In the US, there are Eve cigarettes (with ad images that associate women with flowers), and I wonder also about Apple computers (with their bitten-apple logo). Does the absence of clearly sexual references in ads for such products imply that the contemporary understanding of the Eden story is now emptied of theological overtones?
2. Second, why have no other biblical passages been referenced in ads? (Imagine: the four horsemen of the Apocalypse ride toward the camera against a background of smoke and flame. One of them glares straight into the lens and growls, "What's in *your* wallet?")⁷ Does some quality make the Eden story so appealing and "universal" that apparently it alone has not only been chosen, but referenced again and again in advertisements from different advertisers, even though many other biblical passages, some of them quite obscure, have been referenced in novels, films, TV shows, songs, comic books, and other forms of popular culture, and in widely different ways?

The study of the Bible in relation to popular culture has itself recently become a very popular topic, but I know of no other works that deal with the use of biblical texts in advertising. As a result, Edwards's book is welcome, both for opening up this "new" territory (well known to sociologists and other scholars, but new to biblical scholars), as well as for the rigors of her analyses. However, there still remains a great deal of further work to be done in regard to the countless advertisements that do not explicitly reference biblical texts but in which intertextual tensions with biblical texts may nevertheless be found. Not every intertextual link is a matter of explicit reference—indeed, the vast majority are surely not! I suspect that political ads are one category in which such tensions would appear, but also the many ads for products that relate to contemporary lifestyle choices and issues.

In addition, the topic of advertising and the Bible calls for reflection on the broader topic of the use of the Bible to market other items, which pop culture and Bible scholars rarely talk about.⁸ Whatever else we might say about her, Eve sells! To judge from her popularity with advertisers, she is a remarkably capable saleswoman. This returns us to the complex relations between advertisements and the more artistic or less overtly commercial forms of popular culture. As

⁷ A somewhat less imaginary advertisement is the scene in *Jesus of Montreal* (Arcand 1989) in which a commercial for "l'Esprit" perfume features a young woman in a filmy white gown, walking across a pool of water as wind blows around her.

⁸ Edwards does address economic aspects of the ads that she studies, but not the impact of the biblical text on these aspects. A related topic would be the use of religious images or "catch phrases" (including biblical phrases) in the names or advertising of businesses. In the US at least, there are many businesses that do this, mostly small, local companies.

Edwards's final chapter makes clear, in some movies and TV shows the line between advertising and aesthetic content is very fine, if it is there at all. Barthes's "frank system" has been obscured (but not too much).

Earlier I made the comment, derived from the stories of Crowley and Eco, that the Eden story may not be about sexuality or personal power, or about sin. Instead, if Eco is right, the desire for the forbidden fruit is the desire for infinite semiosis, and Crowley suggests that the consequences of this language passion lead to change and novelty. The flaw (or blessing) narrated in those stories is a flaw in language itself, the distance between names and their objects that makes any sort of narrative possible at all, including biblical narratives as well as those of modern advertising.

As we move ever deeper into a human world defined by global corporate capitalism, the manias of consumerism, and the society of the spectacle, every conceivable image, writing, sound bite, or other "meme" will become fair game for the language passion of advertising and the forces that drive it, and they will be used in any way that sells. Insofar as biblical texts continue to be referenced in advertisements, in no matter how marginal or distorted a way, then the Bible still offers significant material for this all-consuming passion. However, if even these limited references should disappear altogether, that would indicate that the biblical texts have been relegated to the dustier, forgotten shelves of our cultural archive, along with so many others. It is not clear to me which of these options would be preferable.

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