

Deliver Us from Evil

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Desire: Between Good and Evil

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In this paper I will explore two different responses to desire in Western thought. The first conceives of desire as basically evil and gives rise to what I call a hermeneutics of prohibition. The latter views desire as either ambivalent or, at its best, as a function of what is most noble and divine in humans. This I call, with Paul Ricoeur, a hermeneutics of affirmation.

Under the first heading I will consider certain biblical accounts of desire as “an evil inclination of the heart,” looking at various passages in Talmudic and Christian philosophy (e.g., *concupiscentia oculorum*). I will also draw here from some Greek accounts of *eros* in Hesiod, Aristophanes, and Plato, which construe desire as an agent of unruly passion and chaos.

Under the second heading, I will identify an alternative and more positive reading of desire in biblical and Greek traditions that has often been neglected. Here desire is recognized as an indispensable function of creation and communion, and is at times even attributed to God. A proper understanding of this function will prompt us to distinguish between ontological desire (the less seeking the more) and eschatological desire (the more seeking the less). One of my underlying hypotheses is that when it comes to “good” *eros*, the old binary opposition between ascending and descending desire is ultimately unraveled and surpassed.

Part 1: The prohibitive reading (Hermeneutics of Suspicion)

(a) Biblical narratives

In Genesis, Yahweh tells us that the “desire in man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 6.5).¹ The Hebrew term used is *yetzer hara* and is usually translated as “evil inclination of the heart,” “evil imagination,” or “evil drive.” The negative verdict on desire is intimately linked with the role played by the *yetzer* in the Fall of Adam and Eve. The evil desire is what prompted the First Parents to become fascinated and enthralled by the forbidden fruit, desiring to become “like gods” (after the prompting of the serpent in the Garden of Eden). The result was an ignominious fall into mortality, guilt, and shame—Adam and Eve cover their

genitals and are hitherto condemned to the shames and labors of menstruation, procreation, and childbirth. But the evil desire of the *yetzer* is more than sexual; it is primarily a desire of desire itself, a desire to possess what the other has, be that other divine or human—in short, a deep metaphysical drive to move from lack to absolute fulfillment. This is why Cain's murder of Abel is attributed to his evil *yetzer*. Cain kills his brother because he covets his relationship with Yahweh. And he then proceeds to blame Yahweh for it, declaring that it was God's fault for creating the "evil *yetzer*" in him in the first place.

It is no accident, as René Girard explains, that most of the Ten Commandments involve injunctions of one kind or another against the covetous, acquisitive, and idolatrous impulses of mimetic desire. That is, against our human desire to have what we do not have and to do everything possible to acquire it. The root of evil is thus identified with the *yetzer* as a carnal impulse buried deep in the human heart to possess and therefore replace the divine (Genesis Rab. 27, Jalkut Shim. Gen. 44). As Solomon Schecter puts it in *The Evil Yetzer: The Source of Rebellion*, "Sin, being generally conceived as rebellion against the majesty of God, we inquire after the source and instigator of this rebellion. In rabbinical literature the source is entitled *yetzer hara* . . ."²

From this basic prohibition of desire in Genesis and Exodus, we find a whole tradition of suspicion and suppression developing. Let me take just a few examples. First, in rabbinical or Talmudic literature, we find self-denial, contemplation of death and other ascetic practices being counseled as remedies for the erotic drives of the *yetzer*. Indeed, even circumcision is recommended, on occasion, as a means of purging our evil desire: "Remove the evil *yetzer* from your hearts so that ye may be all in one fear of God . . . circumcise therefore the foreskin. . . ."³ A number of other cautionary tales bear out this attitude of suspicion. We read of the Nazarite who had all his hair cut off in order to destroy the *yetzer* that had prompted him to idolize his own image (the rabbinical answer to the Greek myth of Narcissus) (Num. 6.18). Or more dramatic still, we have the case of the Rabbi who prayed for the demise of his nearest of kin when he feared she might become an agent for the power of the evil *yetzer* (Tann. 24a). But above all, the evil desire of the *yetzer hara* is associated with the crime of idolatry—that "strange god" within the heart of man, warned of in Ps. 81.10. As Rabbi Jannai starkly observes, "He who obeys his yetser practices idolatry" (Jer. Nedarim 41b).

In Christian theology also, we find a strong, perhaps even canonical reading of desire in terms of evil. One thinks of a long lineage of suspicion running from the various Patristic warnings against the demonic temptations of sexual desire to Augustine's famous analysis of desire as an evil "lust of the eyes" (*concupiscentia oculorum*) in the *Confessions*. But in the Christian, as in the Jewish, tradition, the desire is evil not primarily because it is some base animal instinct but more interestingly because it is a metaphysical drive to possess what is not

ours, and in the most offending instance, what is absolutely not ours is divine power. At its most pernicious, this ocular-erotic drive takes the form of an obsessive *curiositas* with regard to absolute knowledge. "Such empty curiosity," writes Augustine, "is masked by the names of learning and science," but it is really just another name for what biblical language called "the lust of the eyes."⁴

That is why the desire of the eyes, or inner fantasy, is considered even more dangerous than the desire of sexual organs. For while acts of genital eroticism are confined to one person (or at least one person at a time), non-genital or metaphysical eroticism knows no limits. It is by its very nature megalomaniac, serial, endless. Hence it is one explanation for the curious link between sinful *eros* and evil imagination in the biblical tradition (the term *yetzer* is used synonymously of both). Christ too has harsh words for the one who desires to commit adultery with the "eyes": "If a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5.27). For here again, it seems, the worst form of desire is not that of carnal fornication but of spiritual fornication—what Luther will call *fornicatio spiritus* or the proud drive to dominate and appropriate what is another's as if it were ours. In other words, we are dealing less with physiological appetite than mimetic or metaphysical craving. And those who wish to reduce the absolute Other to a property of conceptual vision (*visio dei*) are, for Luther, the most egregious perpetrators of evil desire.⁵

I take it there is no need here to track this biblical hermeneutic of suspicion any further in the history of Western Christianity. Reformation Puritanism and counter-Reformational Jansenism offer ample evidence of doctrinal links between evil and *eros* right into modernity and, one might add, into many of the secularized versions of puritan morality that continue to inform our present age, not least in the recent moral crusade led by America's home-grown Burning Bush. Suffice it to say that these various theoretical and doctrinal condemnations of evil desire see it as a spiritual deformation that seeks to replace the fullness of the divine with the emptiness of human fantasy and illusion. Evil desire is above all a sin against the spirit.

(b) Greek narratives

Nietzsche was not correct, however, to claim that it was only Christianity, or the biblical tradition, which gave *eros* poison to drink. The Greek tradition also contributed in its own way to our Western attitudes of suspicion and prohibition. This is particularly so with the allegedly "Platonic" view of things, as we shall see, but already in Greek mythology we find evidence of this mistrust. Hesiod tells us, for instance, that *eros* follows chaos into the universe and so is forever a threat to order and structure. As Thomas Moore comments in his book *Dark Eros*, "This sibling origin of *eros* and chaos pictures the vast crater that *eros* can blast when he appears unexpectedly in the center of an ordered life. What is more unsettling than an unsought fall into love? Along with it may

come powerful fantasies in which cherished relationships fall apart, or a career collapses, or long-held values crumble.⁶ The classic Greek linking of *eros* with a dark underworld or hell is to be found in this famous passage in Aristophanes' *The Birds*: "Then in the infinite bosom of Erebus first of all black-winged Night bore a wind-sown egg, from which in the circling of seasons came Eros. . . . Mingling in broad Tartaros with winged and gloomy chaos he hatched out our race . . ."⁷ And so we find that in both of these early Greek sources, *eros* is identified with negative powers of night, confusion, and that gaping emptiness at the bottom of the world known as Tartaros: "A gloomy place through which souls pass on their way to Hades, Erebus is where Eros is born. Erotic experience originates in this gloomy place of the soul."⁸

Plato is the first Western philosopher to formulate a more systematic or rational account of *eros*, but here, I would argue, the "official" Platonic verdict is still ultimately in the negative. (The "unofficial" Plato of *The Phaedrus* and other mystical dialogues is another matter.) In classic and canonical texts like *The Republic* this verdict is pretty unambiguous. We might cite here, for example, the denunciation of poets and artists in Book 10 of the *Republic* to the degree that they foment and foster our passions and desires. Poetry only leads us from reason to confusion, argues Plato, because it "gives us representations of sex . . . and the other desires and passions . . . it feeds them when they ought to be starved and makes them control us when we ought to control them" (*Republic* 606d).⁹ The terms Plato uses in this passage are *to aphrodisia* and *epithumia*.

In the *Symposium*, desire—called variously and synonymously *eros* and *epithumia*—would seem to come off better. But in fact the ultimate account of desire offered by Diotima treats *eros* as a ladder which leads us away from the flesh to a supra-sensible realm of Forms beyond this world. *Eros* is stigmatized here with the character of lack or indigence: Diotima tells us that the mother of *eros* was *penia* or penury. And the ultimate service that *eros* is deemed to offer is to lead us beyond all expressions of flesh or carnality to a zone of immutable ideality. Diotima's ladder, like Wittgenstein's, is really only there to be kicked away again once we have reached the top. The aim is to reach the contemplation of pure and unalloyed Form, "untainted by human flesh and color and a mass of perishable rubbish (*phlearia*)" (212c).¹⁰ Platonic *eros* is, in this influential text, ultimately anti-carnational in character.

In sum, in the canonical Plato *eros* is given pretty short shrift as a human desire for embodied persons or things. There are, it must be said, many contemporary readings which, of course, dispute this orthodox view, suggesting for example that Alcibiades' intervention in the final act of the *Symposium* subverts the Socratic direction of transcendental ascent. But whether we go with the traditional metaphysical reading or the more contemporary rhetorical one, it is safe to say that in Plato's world the divine as such cannot desire. In short, while we mortals may desire the beatific form of the Good (*kalagathon*), it does not desire us mortals. Platonic *eros* moves from lack to fulfillment, never from

fulfillment to lack. And since the divine is considered by Plato, then later by Aristotle, as that which knows no lack, insufficiency or movement, divine desire is a contradiction in terms.

For the Greeks, it is true that when desire is considered evil it is more as a failure of knowledge (epistemology) than of spirit or will (ethics). But the fact remains that in the Hellenic texts cited above, no less than in the biblical ones quoted in our first section, desire is evil insofar as it seeks to replace the divine with the human, the timeless with the transient, plenitude with lack, reality with unreality.

Part 2: The affirmative reading (Hermeneutics of Celebration)

(a) Biblical narratives

Having traced what I consider to be some of the most formative readings in the genealogy of evil desire, I now turn to a very different if often neglected reading of desire in Western culture. This involves a hermeneutic of celebration which can also be traced back—like its rival narrative just mentioned—to the very beginning.

Let me start with some biblical sources.

If it is true that several passages in the Torah and Talmud describe desire in terms of "an evil inclination of the heart," there are other passages where desire is recognized as a positive and, at times even indispensable, agency of creation. When Yahweh (*Yozzer*) first created (*yazar*) humans with the *yetzer*, deploying the letters of the divine Book of Creation (*Sefer Yezirah*), he said that it was "good" (Gen. 1.31). He spoke likewise of all created things. Indeed the *yetzer* was considered by some to be that "image" of the divine in the human, according to which Yahweh created us. Thus if it is true that the evil *yetzer* led to the Fall, it also led to history and therefore to the promise of a messianic kingdom of peace on earth. And if it is true that Cain reprimands Yahweh for creating him with an evil *yetzer*, causing him to covet his brother's blessings and ultimately kill him, a common rabbinical defense of Yahweh on this front is that God created us free and that we therefore have the liberty to choose whether we follow the evil or the good drives of the heart (the *yetzer hara* or the *yetzer hatov*). Likewise, if it is true that Enosh and Aaron used the *yetzer* to create idols and false Gods, the prophets and psalmists used it to create divinely inspired narratives of salvation, mercy, and justice. (This question of divinely inspired desires and prophecies will also be raised by Plato in some of his mystical dialogues, e.g., the *Ion*, *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*.)

In his book *Good and Evil*, the modern Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, offers this illuminating gloss on the activation of the *yetzer*: "The curse conceals a blessing. From the *seat* that had been made ready for him, man is sent out

upon a *path*, his own, the human path. This is the path to the world's history, only through it does the world have a history—and an historical goal . . .”¹¹ Or, as Buber explains, once the desire of the heart is activated and one is no longer content with what one is, one strives for what one *might* be and *could* be and *should* be. The future tense of history enters human consciousness the moment the *yetzer* of desiring imagination is ignited. This is why Joel praises the *yetzer* as the “the hidden one in the heart of man” (Joel 2.20). And one particular Talmudic source even claims that God preferred the songs of humans over the songs of the angels, because only the former possessed the “desire of the heart.”¹² It is for this reason that Buber argues that Judaism sees evil as an anthropological rather than cosmological condition. Evil is not some cosmic force that pre-exists the human and somehow overpowers and takes possession of us. Evil, like good, must be seen in terms of human beings' free decisions. Our desires, good or evil, are *our* responsibility—not God's. Thus, as Buber explains,

If the *yester* in a measure displaces Satan in the rabbinical account of sin, it must be regarded as a movement in the direction of a more ethical and rational conception. For the *yester*, however vividly it is personified, always remains the tendency or disposition of a man's heart. Satan cannot be appealed to for the purpose of explaining the origin of the *yester*. . . . God made the good *yester* also and man is responsible for the evil, or at least for its persistence . . . or the evil *yester* itself is good, or at least inevitable in the world, and men are to turn it to good purposes.¹³

This internal drama of good and evil desires is thought to be at the root of Paul's famous account of his own existential struggle between spiritual intentions and corporeal inclinations.

Indeed, some interpreters go so far as to suggest that the reason God did not create on the Seventh Day was not out of some perverse need for sabbatical self-congratulation, but because he wanted to leave that ultimate phase of creation free for humans to complete. In short, the kingdom of messianic justice is something that humans are called to co-create with God. Buber concludes accordingly that the *yetzer* is *potentially* both evil and good.

In the midst of it, (our) decisions can arouse the heart's willing direction toward Him (God), master the vortex of the possible, and realize the human figure proposed in creation, as it could not have done prior to the knowledge of good and evil. This is the greatest danger and greatest opportunity at once: to unite the two urges implies to equip the absolute potency of passion with the one direction that renders it capable of great love and great service. Thus and not otherwise can man become whole.¹⁴

Hence the command to love God with one's “whole heart,” meaning with the entirety of one's desiring being.

(b) Eschatological eros in the Song of Songs

It is no doubt within this tradition of affirmative interpretation that we can best locate the erotics of the Song of Songs. For here it is not only human desire that is unashamedly celebrated, but divine desire as well. Or given the dialectical exchangeability of bride and bridegroom in several of the speeches, we might be wiser to talk of a desire that is at once human and divine. The Song of Songs testifies, it seems, to an eros that is at once meontological (moving from lack or non-being/*meon* to fulfillment) and eschatological (moving from surplus towards the least and most lacking of beings). And the “at once” is all important. It is not a matter of either/or but of desire both ascending (*anabasis*) and descending (*katabasis*).

Let's look a little more closely at this revolutionary text, which has caused so much controversy and debate over the centuries in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, but has never actually been banned, despite several attempts. Here *eros* is characterized not as a source of evil but as a source of good.

One of the most revealing verses here is surely the Song of Songs 3.1–4 where the anxious, expectant seeking of the love-struck bride is reversed into a *being-found*, that is, a *being desired*. Here the desire of God is a “hound of heaven” that hunts and finds, a disguised sentinel who finds you out by asking “where are you?”—“Who goes there?”—and you reply, “Here I am! It is me.” The lover of God, this verse tells us, exists in the accusative as well as the nominative. It is only *after* the bride has passed the sentinels who “found” *her* that she finds *Him* whom her soul loves!

God, it seems, is the other who seeks me out *before* I seek him, a desire beyond my desire, bordering at times, in the excess of its fervor, on political incorrectness! Solomon's Song is here in keeping with a whole theoerotic tradition which surfaces in a number of texts from Hosea to the Psalms. Ps. 63 is pretty explicit on this score: “My soul is thirsting for you my God . . . My flesh faints for you . . . Feast where all your desires may be satisfied.” Here desire takes on the character of superfluity and abundance, as in Ps. 34, where we are told that “those who seek the Lord lack no good thing”; or again in Ps. 139, where it is clearly God who now seeks out the human with amorous passion:

You have searched me and you know me Lord. . . . You search out my path and are acquainted with all my ways . . . You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me . . . Where can I flee from you? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there . . . If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea . . . your right hand shall hold me fast. (Ps. 139)

This is a hot God if ever there was one! *Eros* is no longer considered as some fantasy or deficiency but its own reward—excess, gift, grace. Why? Because such

desire is not some gaping emptiness or negation (as Sartre and certain existentialists held) but an affirmative “yes” to the summons of a superabundant, impassioned God—“Here I am. Come. Yes, I will Yes, I will Yes.”

The lovers’ discourse in the Song of Songs is very much inscribed in this theoerotic tradition. It powerfully testifies to the traversing of sensuality by transcendence and of transcendence by sensuality. On the one hand, Solomon compares his beloved’s breasts to “two fawns, /twins of a gazelle” (7.4) while she compares his eyes to “doves at a pool of water” (5.1). On the other hand, the amorous passion serves as a *trace* testifying to the unnameable alterity of God: there is even a telling allusion to the burning bush episode of Exod. 3.14 in the beloved’s claim that “love is as strong as Death. . . . The flash of it is a flash of fire./A flame of Yahweh himself” (Song of Songs 8.6). The transfiguring fire of the burning bush here becomes the fire of a devouring desire—the Shulamite woman tells us she is “sick with love”—where the ecstasy of the beloved traverses the incarnational love of God (5.8). And in this crisscrossing of divine lover and human beloved, both are transfigured. Divine desire is embodied. Human desire is hallowed. It is made good.

If Exod. 3 allowed for a God speaking through an angel and a burning thorn bush, the Song of Songs amplifies the range of divine speech to include lovers’ bodies and, by analogy, entire landscapes. The landscapes in turn are brimming with fruits (nuts, figs, pomegranates), harvests (wine, honey, wheat), plants (lilies, cedars, roses, apple-trees), and animals (gazelles, stags, and turtledoves). The divine desire of Yahweh’s flame here appears to embrace all that is alive. As though the seed of the thorn bush has spread from the dusty heights of Mt. Horeb and disseminated its fecundity throughout the valleys and planes below. But above all, the seed has found its way into the embrace of lover and beloved. The free nuptial love celebrated in this song challenges the cheerless moralism of tribal legalities (the Shulamite’s proprietorial brothers oppose the relationship). And, in so doing, it miraculously echoes the innocence of *eros* prior to the Fall, when God made the first lovers of “one flesh” and declared it “good” (Gen. 2). And perhaps even more radically, the beloved’s desire looks *ahead* to an eschatological kingdom where such innocence may flourish again once and for all. The reference (backward and forward) to paradise is reinforced by the suggestive verse “Under the apple-tree I awakened you?”—an allusion reiterated in the fact that the lover-king-shepherd is himself referred to as an apple tree (8.5). These ostensibly retrospective echoes of a lost Eden are thus transformed here into a celebration of a passionate desire *in the here and now* for a fuller consummation *still to come*. This latter eschatological horizon is powerfully indicated by v. 5.1, among others, which sings of the lover entering a garden full of milk and honey.

It is this underlying eschatological intent which has prompted several contemporary commentators to identify a “subversive” intent behind the Song’s lyrical and pastoral tones.¹⁵ We would be mistaken, however, to see this subversiveness

as somehow turning the lovers into cardboard characters of abstract allegory. The lovers are not mouthpieces for some spiritual message. They are much more than “personifications” of spiritual wisdom or “representations” of Yahweh’s continuing love for Israel in spite of infidelity.¹⁶ These things too perhaps, but much more. The lovers come across as carnal embodiments of a desire which traverses and exceeds them while remaining utterly themselves. Hence the candid corporality of recurring references to limbs, mouths, breasts, hands and navels, etc. Not to mention the sense of deep inner yearning and the sheer naturalism of description which brings *eros* to vivid life: the woman is a lily, garden, mare, vineyard, dove, sun, moon; while the lover is a gazelle, king, fawn, bag of myrrh and cluster of blossoming henna. The powerfully erotic charge of many of the amorous verses and metaphors defies any purely allegorical interpretation: “his left arm is under my head and his right makes love to me” (2.6 and 8.2); he “pastures his flock” among the lilies (6.3); his “fountain makes the garden fertile” (4.15); or “my beloved thrust his hand/through the hole in the door;/I trembled to the core of my being”(5.4).

This kind of language was, according to André LaCoque, almost unprejudiced in the Bible. And it was to prove so controversial in the later rabbinical and Christian traditions as to be frequently chastened or censored. And as a certain ascetic and puritanical mind-set took hold, the Song was often explained away in terms of a Platonizing dualism which contrived to take the harm out of its sensual content by attributing its *real* meaning to some supra-sensible metaphysical message—a reading typified, for example, in the refrain “wisdom, *not love*, is divine.”¹⁷ In such censorious readings, the suspicion that desire is basically an evil inclination returns.

Equally unique in the biblical Song is the fact that divine desire finds privileged expression in the voice of a young woman. It is the Shulamite who takes most of the initiative and does most of the talking in the Song of Songs. And if the lover-king, Solomon, speaks at some length in his own voice, his discourse often quotes the Shulamite and harks back to her as its source of reference. It is a “woman’s song” from first to last and it keeps the heroine centre-stage.¹⁸

Moreover, since this freedom and centrality of the woman’s point of view suggests an Egyptian influence, one might even see the Song as an extension of God’s exodic “flame”; that is, an amplification of the voice of the burning bush, which pitted Israel *against* Egypt, to a more inclusive voice which brings them together again in some kind of actual, or promised, nuptial bond (8.6).¹⁹ The Shulamite’s passion represents “free love”—she is faithful to her lover “outside matrimonial bonds and social demands” (e.g., demands to remain a servant, wife, child-bearer, mother or commercial family exchange), and this corroborates the view that the Song puts the entire societal orthodoxy into question.²⁰ The Israelite poetess is not just seeking to entertain her public but also, deep down, to shock them. “The family and familiar guardians of women’s chastity, namely the ‘brothers’ and the night watchmen in the Song, are largely outdone

by events over which they have lost control. Those who consider the future marriage of their son or daughter as a commercial transaction are derided. The institution in general is swept aside and the event of love is glorified."²¹

The Canticle of Canticles offers an erotic poetics which sings the unsayable and unnamable by means of an innovative and insubordinate language. Here we encounter a language resistant to both allegorist abstraction and metaphysical dualism. By intimating a similarity of relations between dissimilar things (divinity and carnality), this canticle of *eros* creates a *surplus* of meaning. It twists and turns accredited words and thoughts so as to bring about a mutation within language itself (*catachresis*). And it is this very semantic innovation and excess which transfigures our understanding of both divinity and desire. So that engaging in the Song we can, in Paul Ricoeur's words, think *more* about desire and *more* about God.²² We can think each of them otherwise.

All of this indicates that burning, integrated, faithful, untiring desire—freed from social or inherited repressions—is the most adequate way for saying a) how humans desire God, b) how God desires humans, and c) how humans, in this light, desire each other. It suggests that human and divine desire may reflect and transfigure one another. A radical suggestion, to be sure, and one which confirms the controversial claim of Rabbi Aqiba that if “all the Scriptures are holy, the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”²³

The eschatological symbolism of nuptial love, witnessed in this text, is enmeshed in an erotics of the body without ever being reducible to it. This elusive effect is accompanied by what Paul Ricoeur calls “a phenomenon of indetermination,” evident in the fact that many readers have difficulty identifying the lover and the beloved of the poem.²⁴ (The lovers never clearly identify themselves or go by proper names: for example, the term Shulamite is not a proper name). So we find ourselves forced to admit that we are never really sure who exactly is speaking, or to whom, or where. We can even imagine that there are up to *three* different characters involved—a shepherdess, a shepherd and a king (Solomon).²⁵ This puts us on a constant state of alert, like the amorous fiancée herself, as we keep vigil for the arrival of the divine lover. “Who is coming up from the desert?” we too find ourselves asking (3.6). Or to frame our question in more eschatological terms: “Is it not from the end of the world and the depth of time that love arises?”²⁶ Moreover, we might add that it is precisely the primacy of the indeterminately fluid “movements of love” (Origen's phrase in his famous Homily on the Song), over the specific identities of the lover and the beloved, which guards the door open. We are kept guessing. This guarding of the Song as an open text of multiple readings and double entendres—divine and erotic, eschatological and carnal—provokes a hermeneutic play of constant “demetaphorizing and remetaphorizing” which never allows the song to end.²⁷

In sum, what we have here is a story of *eros* that considers the impossible possible, the Word made flesh. Here is a poetic genre set off from other kinds of erotic expression: e.g., romantic infatuation, mystical ecstasy or courtly *fine*

amour, not to mention the more extremist genres of matrimonial moralism or libertine pornography.²⁸ The Song, informed as it is by Egyptian influences, extends the range of Western erotic literature and amplifies the scope of religious expression. The Song marks an opening of religion—understood by Julia Kristeva as “the celebration of the secret of reproduction, the secret of pleasure, of life and death”—to an aesthetics of the ultimate.²⁹ It adumbrates what we have called elsewhere a poetics of divine epiphany. And the Shulamite herself may be seen, in this context, as a figure who promises the coupling, without final consummation, of desire. Here is a narrative of passion at once “sensuous and deferred.”³⁰

In short, the Song of Songs confronts us with a desire that desires beyond desire while remaining desire. And it is good. Not evil but good. Perhaps even, in the final analysis, the highest good we have.

Conclusion

Let me conclude, finally, by comparing this biblical hermeneutic of eschatological desire with a certain Greek affirmation of *eros* as good rather than evil. Given the limits of this essay, I will confine myself to a few remarks. Looking to Plato, we could usefully contrast the metaphysical account of desire as lack in the *Symposium* or as disordered passion in the *Republic*, to the more positive appraisal of *eros* in Book XIII of the *Phaedrus*.³¹ Here *eros* is described less in terms of ontological privation than in terms of eschatological surplus, namely, as an outflowing from a prior mystical experience of plenitude and nourishment. It is praised as (1) a recollection of Beauty itself; (2) a healing of pain; (3) a power that renews the plumage of the soul (*eros* as *Pteros* or “the winged one”); (4) a source of nutrition and bliss. Here is a select sample of phrases used by Plato to describe the erotically mobilized psyche:

When one who is fresh from the mystery, and saw much of the vision, beholds a godlike face or bodily form that truly expresses beauty, first there comes upon him a shuddering and a measure of awe which the vision inspired, and then reverence as at the sight of a god . . . Next, a strange sweating and fever seizes one: for by reason of the stream of beauty entering in through the eyes there comes a warmth, whereby the soul's plumage is fostered . . . as she gazes upon the boy's beauty, (the soul) admits a flood of particles streaming therefrom—that is why we speak of a “flood of passion” . . . she is filled with joy . . . then has she refreshment and respite from her stings and sufferings, and at that moment tastes a pleasure that is sweet beyond compare. (*Phaedrus* 251a–52)

Here, as in the Song of Songs, we witness a celebration of desire as flourishing abundance and excess. And as the passage develops we find optical images and

metaphors giving way to idioms of the other senses, in particular the tactile, gustatory and olfactory. For here, as in the Shulamite's song, divine *eros* seems to go all the way down. Indeed Plato's recourse in this mystical-erotic text to poetic figures and citations, supposedly derived from Homeric, Orphic and mythic sources, is analogous in some respects to the use of poetical and lyrical language in the Song of Songs. And here, as there, celebration trumps condemnation.

We need not be too surprised then to find a Patristic author like Dionysus the Areopagite bringing both Biblical and neo-Platonic idioms together to celebrate Christ as a divine *eros* that spills out into the entire universe, nurturing and transfiguring all before him. In chapter 4 of his *Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, for instance, Dionysius declares that *eros* is redemptive, empathically resisting the conventional opposition between good "*agape*" and evil "*eros*."³² *Eros*, he insists, "is eminently a power of unifying, binding and joining. Before subsisting, it is in the beautiful and good on account of the beautiful and good; it is given forth from out of the beautiful and good on account of the beautiful and good . . ." Dionysius cites approvingly the claim in Kings that "[y]our *eros* came upon us as the *eros* of women" and concludes with this rousing liturgical flourish:

Before being, in the good,
flowing forth out of the good to beings,
returning again into the good;
in this the divine *eros* is excellently
manifested to be without beginning and without end.
The divine *eros* is like an everlasting circle—

When James Joyce comes to affirm the recreative powers of *eros* in Molly Bloom's soliloquy in *Ulysses*, he does so, like Dionysius before him, by combining the poetic idioms of both biblical and Hellenic ecstasy. "Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet. Women's reason."³³ Imagining Molly's last words as a confluence of the Attic Penelope and Semitic Shulamite, might we not hear her voice as a contemporary conversion of evil desire into good desire, of scatology into eschatology, of perversion into a paradise-to-come?

What else were we given all those desires for I'd like to know I can't help it if I'm young still . . . of course a woman wants to be embraced 20 times a day almost to make her look young no matter by who so long as to be in love or loved by somebody if the fellow you want isn't there sometimes by the Lord God I was thinking . . . and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and

drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will yes.

Notes

- ¹ *The New Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Henry Wansbrough (New York: Doubleday, 1985).
- ² See S. Schecter, "The Evil Yetser: The Source of Rebellion," in *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 242 ff. See also *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 8 (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 1318.
- ³ Quoted in Schecter, "The Evil Yetser," 258.
- ⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 174f.
- ⁵ John Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 189 f.
- ⁶ Thomas Moore, *Dark Eros* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 1990), 22.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ⁹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003).
- ¹⁰ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (New York: Penguin, 2003).
- ¹¹ Martin Buber, *Good and Evil* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 80.
- ¹² Schecter, "The Evil Yetser," 250–51.
- ¹³ Frank Porter, "The Yetzer Hara," in *Biblical and Semitic Studies* (New York: Scribner, 1981), 122–23.
- ¹⁴ Martin Buber, *Good and Evil*, 93–97.
- ¹⁵ See André LaCocque's argument that the Song is a subversion of the social, legal and matrimonial establishment: "The Shulamite," in *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 236 f. See also Paul Ricoeur and Karl Barth's eschatological reading of the song in Paul Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," in *Thinking Biblically* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 298 f.
- ¹⁶ See Paul Ricoeur's account of certain allegorical readings of the Song in "The Nuptial Metaphor," 287–90. The allegorist interpretation sees the beloved either as the people of Israel returning to YHWH or, in the Christian tradition, as the bride of Christ returning to Christ. Several Talmudic commentaries tend to see the Song as an allegory for the Shepherd leading his lost flock back from Exile to Palestine. According to this reading, the breasts of the beloved symbolize the tribes of the North and South, the "bed of green" symbolizes Palestine covered with olive and fig trees, and the "bed at night" is the bed of Jerusalem.
- ¹⁷ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 575. Quoted in LaCocque, "The Shulamite," 238. By contrast, LaCocque claims that the "entire Song strums on the chord of 'free love,' neither recognized, nor institutionalized" (238).
- ¹⁸ LaCocque, "The Shulamite," 243. See also Michael Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 309: "All events are narrated from her point of view, though not always in her voice, whereas from the boy's angle of vision we know little besides how he sees her."

- ¹⁹ See Michael Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Egyptian Songs* and André LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically*, 243 f. Neither Fox nor LaCocque read this passage, as we do, in the eschatological light of an ultimate nuptial reconciliation between traditional enemies, Israel and Egypt, Jew and Gentile, and other adversarial brothers. For us this is, of course, only one of many readings possible within the semantic surplus of this text as hermeneutically re-read and “re-used” throughout the history of its constant reinterpretation and re-enactment. See Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, 291 f.
- ²⁰ La Cocque, “The Shulamite,” 245.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 253.
- ²² See Paul Ricoeur, “From ‘I am who I am’ to ‘God is love’—An Essay in Biblical Hermeneutics” (cited in LaCocque, “The Shulamite,” 263). Here Ricoeur suggests that the claim in I John that “God is love” provokes a “surplus of meaning” in both the terms God and love. By virtue of this statement “we think more about God and about love.” In “The Nuptial Metaphor,” Ricoeur makes much of the hermeneutic-linguistic-semantic role of the Song as a poetic reworking and augmentation of meaning, opening the poem up to multiple intertextual possibilities of recital and indeed re-enactment (in liturgy, baptismal rites and sexual acts). “The poetic sublimation at the very heart of the erotic removes the need for contortions meant to desexualize the reference. That it should be poetically displaced is sufficient. And it is this way that the same metaphorical network, once freed of every realist attachment through the unique virtue of the song, is made available for other investments and disinvestments” (274). And so Ricoeur goes on to ask why what is “demetaphorized” cannot be “remetaphorized” on the basis of a “general metaphorization of the nuptial,” for example, in terms of an intertextual interpretation of the Song in dialogue with other texts of the biblical and scriptural traditions (276)? This is precisely what Ricoeur himself proposes in the third part of his essay (295–303). Rabbi Volozhyn appears to propose something rather similar when he suggests that the metaphors of fecundity, fruition and flourishing in the Song refer not only to the richness of human-divine love but also to the multiple levels of meaning which flourish and proliferate within the sacred texts themselves, especially when read intertextually or rabbinically, in terms of one another. See Rabbi Hayyim de Volozhyn, *Nefesh Hahayyim*, translated into French as *L’Ame de la Vie* (Paris: Verdier, 1986), 191–96.
- ²³ Rabbi Aqiba, Tosephta Sanhedrin 12.10, cited in LaCocque, “The Shulamite,” 263.
- ²⁴ See Paul Ricoeur on the indetermination and proliferation of metaphorical meaning in the Song, “The Nuptial Metaphor,” 268–70.
- ²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “The Nuptial Metaphor,” 269: “Is it a question, for example, in 1.6–8 of shepherd and a shepherdess, or in 1.4 and 3.2 and 11 of a king and a woman who might be a townswoman, or of a peasant in 1.12–14 and 7.6 and 13? What is more, the dialogue is rendered even more complex by internal explicit and implicit quotations. Nor is it sure that certain scenes are not dreamed or that they might consist of dreams. . . . These features of indetermination are incontestably favorable to the freeing of the nuptial held in reserve within the erotic.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 271 and 274–75.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. L. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 97.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 96. For a more detailed and elaborate reading of the eschatological significance of the Song of Songs see our “Desiring God” in *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001) and “The Shulamite’s Song: Divine Eros, Ascending and Descending” in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Catherine Keller and Virginia Burrus (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

³¹ Plato, *Phaedrus and The Seventh and Eighth Letters*, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin, 1973).

³² Dionysus, *Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John Jones (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980).

³³ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Penguin, 1992).