TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF EROS

Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline

EDITED BY VIRGINIA BURRUS AND CATHERINE KELLER

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS • NEW YORK • 2006
The Shulammite’s Song: Divine Eros, Ascending and Descending

RICHARD KEARNEY

The Song of Songs offers no single, stable perspective from which to view the amorous scenes unveiled on its pages. Most readers of the Song from antiquity to the present have, however, been inclined to identify with the female figure traditionally known as the Shulammite. But who is the Shulammite, and who, for that matter, is her beloved? The sustained ambiguities of identity and fluid reversals of erotic roles have made this text fertile ground for conceiving and reconceiving the mysteries of desire, in particular, the mysteries of divine desire—despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that God is never explicitly named in this biblical book. Does the Song celebrate God’s desire for us? Our desire for God? Or both? The text appears to cross modes of the erotic that have traditionally been considered antithetical—human and divine, finite and infinite, ascending and descending, Platonic and Jewish or Christian. In particular, it crosses an ontological understanding of desire as a movement from lack toward fullness and an eschatological understanding of desire as a movement from fullness to lack. In this respect, it harbors the potential for a revolutionary reappraisal of our understanding of eros. In the Song of Songs, I will suggest, human and divine desire meet and traverse one another, ascending and descending, filling and emptying.

After a brief outline of my hermeneutic hypothesis, I will test it against some of the most influential premodern readings of the Song—Jewish and Christian—before placing my own argument into the context of contemporary interpretations.

ESCHATOLOGICAL EROS IN THE SONG OF SONGS

One of the passages most revealing of the “crossing” to which I have pointed is Song 3:1–4, where the anxious seeking of the love-struck bride is reversed into a being-found and her desiring suddenly becomes a being desired. The bride speaks of her beloved: “Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. So I said to myself, ‘I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves.’ . . . I sought him, but found him not. The sentinels found me, as they went about the city. I asked, ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’ Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves.” Here one may imagine the desired and desiring God appearing in the guise of a sentinel who hails the reader—“Where are you? Who goes there?”—to which she replies, “Here I am! It is me.” The lover of God, this passage seems to suggest, is at once the object and the subject of desire.

Indeed, it would appear that the divine lover seeks out the beloved before she seeks him. His desire is both before her desire and beyond her desire. This desire is no mere deficiency but its own excess, gift, and grace. It seems to fulfill the promise of Psalm 34 that “those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.” Why? Because such desire is not a gaping emptiness or negation but an affirmative “yes” to the summons of a superabundant God—“Here I am. Come. Yes. I say, yes I will. Yes.”

The lovers’ discourse in the Song of Songs testifies as well to the double 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 testifies to the unnamable alterity of the divine at the very moment when the Song reaches its highest pitch of exchange between lover and beloved and eros is both matched with death and identified with God.

Stamp me as a seal upon your heart,
sear me upon your arm,
for love is as strong as death,
passion as hard as the grave.
Its sparks will spark a fire,
An all-consuming blaze (8:6)

The identification with Yahweh is alluded to through the final word, *shalhevet yah*, referring to a hyperbolically burning flame. As Tod Linnaelt notes, "'yah, the last syllable of the last word of the verse, is a shortened form of Israel's personal name for God, Yahweh, and serves grammatically as an intensifying particle. ... In a book that never directly mentions God, this particle of divinity ... can only add to the freightedness of the line." Thus the all-consuming flame is also the flame of Yahweh; divinity is the measure of the intensity of eros. The very unicity and uniqueness of the word (which appears nowhere else in the Bible) may suggest, furthermore, that it is a fitting—if indirect, figural, masked and oblique—code for the transcendent one (*Un*): the Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Shepherd of shepherds, Lover of lovers. Here we might also detect an allusion to the burning bush episode on Mount Horeb (Exodus 3:15). The transfiguring fire of the bush becomes the blaze of devouring desire where the ecstasy of the beloved traverses, without consuming, the incarnational love of God. In this crisscrossing of divine lover and human beloved, both are transfigured. Divine desire is embodied. Human desire is hallowed.

If Exodus 3 allowed God to speak 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 now appears to embrace all that is alive, as though the seed of the thornbush has spread from the dusty heights of Mount 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 love celebrated in this song echoes the innocence of eros prior to the Fall, when God made the first lovers of one flesh and declared it good (Genesis 2). Perhaps even more radically, the Song 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 startlingly suggestive verse: "Under the apple-tree I awakened you" (8:5), an allusion reiterated in the fact that the lover-shepherd is himself referred to as an apple-tree. These ostensibly retrospective echoes of a lost Eden are thus transformed here into a celebration—without the slightest hint of melancholy—of a passionate desire in the here and now for a fuller consummation still to come. This latter eschatological horizon is indicated by verse 5:1, among others, which sings of the lover entering a garden full of milk and honey.

These lovers are not just mouthpieces for a theological message. They are not mere personifications of spiritual wisdom or representations of Yahweh's continuing love for Israel in spite of infidelity. They are these things too perhaps, but much more. The lovers come across as carnal embodiments of a desire that traverses and exceeds them while they remain utterly themselves. Hence the candid corporeality of recurring references to limbs, mouths, breasts, hands, and navels, not to mention the sense of deep inner yearning and the sheer naturality of description that brings this Song to vivid life. The woman is a lily, garden, mare, vineyard, dove, sun, moon; her lover is a gazelle, king, fawn, bag of myrrh and cluster of blossoming henna. The powerful erotic charge of many of the amorous idioms 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 is unmatched elsewhere in the Bible, as we shall see—and it was to prove so controversial in the later rabbinical and monastic traditions as to be frequently chastened or censored. Equally unique in this biblical song is the fact that divine love finds privileged expression in the voice of a young woman. It is the Shulammite 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 Shulammite 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 at center stage.
Moreover, since this freedom and centrality of the woman’s point of view suggests the possible influence of Egyptian nuptial hymns, one might even see in the Song’s dissemination of God’s exodic flame (8:6)—that is, its amplification of the voice of the burning bush—a move away from a perspective that pitted Israel against Egypt to a more inclusive voice that brings them together again in an erotic bond. The fact that the Shulammite’s passion represents a free love—she is faithful to her lover outside matrimonial demands and social contracts—corroborates the view that the Song puts the entire societal orthodoxy into question.

This breaking open of divine desire beyond tribal or familial confines is in turn reinforced by three crucial references in the Song. We have, first, the reference to the Shulammite as a chariot (6:12), that is, as one who may be said to carry the Ark of the Covenant, a mark of God’s love for his people, to those hitherto considered beyond the familiarly acknowledged bounds. Second, we have the reference to a dance (6:13), which seems to allude to the naked David “swirling with all his might” before the Ark (2 Samuel 6:14), a gesture of human desire for God but one that may equally allude to the eschatological figure of a divine-human love-dance in the last days. And, third, we have the verbal play between the terms Shulammite and Shunammite—the latter being the “extremely beautiful girl” brought to warm King David’s bed but ultimately shunned and left a virgin. The fact that the formerly rejected Shunammite is here reprimed as the liberated Shulammite who captivates her shepherd-king indicates how this revolutionary biblical Song succeeds in turning the once “passive and reified” woman into an “active subject whose first-person pronoun” dominates the love-talk and celebrates the love.

In short, in the very singularity of the Shulammite’s embodied voice we can discern a love cry of universal import.

**Talmudic and Kabbalistic Readings**

The influential nineteenth-century Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn reinforces the reading of the Song in the double light of revelation and eschatology. He takes the beloved’s famous apostrophe—“Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth” (1:2)—as a plea that the revelations on Mt. Sinai eventually be given directly, no longer obscurely through a voice disguised as an angel, a bush or the “back of God’s head,” but given mouth to mouth. This intrepid reading is born out by the Volozhyn’s conviction, deeply influenced by the kabbalistic Books of Creation, that the cosmological orders of nature and the human body are themselves incarnational metaphors for the eschatological expression of a divine flame. He cites Jewish sources that attribute different powers and names of God to different parts of the body, reserving the nameless name of Exodus 3:15 (eheyeh or “I shall be”) as the only one that perdures throughout the entire history of creation. The rabbi interprets the invocation of the Song 5:2—“My dove, my perfect one”—as an indication of God’s deep association with the universe of creatures and, more precisely, of his eschatological “orientation towards the creation of worlds and His union with them.”

We see thus how certain Jewish interpretive traditions—traditions that have exerted considerable influence on contemporary thinkers like Levinas, Rosenzweig, and Scholem—came to read the texts of Genesis, Exodus, and the Song of Songs in the light of the kabbalistic premise that creation is, in part at least, God’s body and points toward the transfiguration of a new world. In the context of such traditions, the Song may be said to reveal how eschatology repeats cosmology, taking the form of a gradual filling out of the incarnational voices of Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah. The nuptial promise reads accordingly as a reprise of the promise of Sinai (Exodus), while the lover longing for his “promised bride” anticipates the promised kingdom.

The correlation of the Song with sacred or covenantal events in biblical history—such as creation, revelation, redemption—is found in many prior rabbinic and medieval commentaries. While several of the allegorical readings offered by Christian Patristic thinkers urged a surpassing of carnal love in favor of a purely spiritual one, Jewish commentators were generally less prone to such an “ascetic renunciation.” For rabbinical exegetes, writes Elliot Wolfson, “the internal meaning of the Song is not predicated on undermining the external form of the scriptural metaphor. On the contrary, the allegoresis intended by the midrashic reading is an interpretation of the literal carnality and the consequential application of erotic imagery to the divine.” Uncovering a certain esoteric tradition stretching from some early midrashic readings to the kabbalistic exegeses
of later Jewish history, Wolfson notes: “A number of aphoristic comments scattered throughout Talmudic and midrashic literature, including the critical exegetical remark that every Solomon mentioned in the Song is holy, for the name refers to God, the ‘one to whom peace belongs’ (li-mi she-ha-shalom shelah), indicate that the allegorical interpretation of the Song for some rabbis seems to have been predicated on a theosophical conception that attributed gender and sexual images to God.” This reading finds support in the famous view of R. Aqiva that if all Scripture is holy, the Song is the holy of holies, for it suggests that the Song captures, in nuce, the entire matrimonial and erotic charge of the divine revelation of Torah to the people (a charge also echoed in the Psalms and Hosea, for example). The Song was considered commensurate with the entire Torah by Aqiva and other rabbinic figures who located the utterance of the Song at Sinai. In other words, the recitation of this poem about the love between God and Israel was thought to coincide with the original giving of Torah in the Sinaic epiphany—a moment itself erotically charged. But the sensual nature of the language used is also deeply linked to the poetical character of the revelation. For, as Wolfson argues, “the very notion of Torah as revealed word entails the structure of the parable, which is predicated on the paradox of metaphorical representation that is basic to the dynamic of eros, with its disclosure of truth through the appearance of image.”

Kabbalistic commentaries of the medieval era developed the allegorical reading of the Song as an erotic relationship between the soul and God, engendered respectively as feminine and masculine. These interpretations may have been influenced by Maimonides’ philosophical claim in the Mishneh Torah that the entire Song is a parable (mashal) for the all-consuming love of the soul for God. Maimonides, like many of the Christian medieval commentators indebted to Neoplatonic and Aristotelian sources, takes the amorous symbolism as code for the contemplative ideal of union between the rational soul (the bride) and the Active Intellect (bridegroom), a union thought to be consequent upon a final overcoming of carnal desire originating in imagination. The kiss mentioned in Song 8:2 is thus interpreted as an intellectual communion with the lights of the divine Intellect, predicated on the emancipation of the human mind from the lures of physical pleasure. The human soul, in a state of mere potentiality, is depicted as female, whereas the fully actualized Intellect of God is depicted as male.

Influence from the philosophical tradition of intellectual allegory intersected with inspiration from the Hispano-Jewish poets who combined the genres of Arabic love poetry with the rabbinic-liturgical use of the love Song. In both instances, the erotic relation of human and divine is seen more in terms of personal salvation than in terms of national redemption. In short, if on an exoteric level the Song was construed as a parable of the relationship between Yahweh and his people, at the more esoteric level favored by the kabbalistic allegoresis it relates to the more intimate rapport between individual human lover and God.

The kabbalists tended to see the gendering of the personas in the Song as either a token of the feminization of the male mystic in relation to the masculine God or a symbol of the theosophical rapport between feminine and masculine potencies within divinity itself—e.g., the lower feminine glory (Shekhinah) ascending toward the upper masculine glory (Tiferet). In both cases, as Wolfson has argued, we find a certain transformation of the original heterosexual language of the poem into a spiritualized homoeroticism that is itself predicated upon an ascetic renunciation of physical, carnal desire. By means of these various allegorizations—philosophical, soteriological, messianic, mystical, and theosophical—sex is taken out of the Song. Gender becomes a matter of supra-physical symbolism and sublimation. The bride's appeal to the kiss of the mouth, in several of these accounts, has little to do with love between real lovers and everything to do with a code or cipher that might arouse the return journey of the lower spirit to the higher Spirit from which it originated.

In this context, the equation of eros and thanatos in 8:6—“Love is as strong as death”—was read as indicating that the kiss of union with the mouth of the divine is actually a kiss of death identified with the final liberation of the intellectual soul from the body. An ascetic renunciation of the flesh is understood to prepare one for the day when the death of the body coincides with a uniting with God “like the coal bound to the flame.” As Wolfson phrases it, the Zohar sees in Song 8:6 the “eternity of the soul... attained in its being annihilated in the flame,” “the death of eros experienced through the eros of death and the consequent crowning vision of the glory.”
But elaborately gendered and eroticized images are still in play. The desire of the fragmented human being for some kind of eschatological consummation is depicted in the Zohar as a holy marriage (hieros gamos). “In that moment when the wife remains face-to-face with her husband,” we read, “the Song of Songs is revealed.” The amorous coupling is said to occur in both orders of being—lower and upper—corresponding to the elevation and augmentation of the female (Shekhinah) in union with the male. As the ontological ascension of the female is met by the descent of the male, the female lover becomes an open space or chora. Receiving the male into herself, she subsequently expands and overflows beyond herself. We thus witness an extraordinary reversal and transformation of gender. Restored to the higher Binaḥ, the lower Shekhinah (represented by the swarthy Shulammite woman) is finally transfigured from a passive receptacle into an active power that overflows into the terrestrial world of differentiation. Binaḥ here takes on the eschatological character of a messianic world-to-come, identified with King Solomon himself. Only when the lower and higher females are thus realigned in one pattern, through a union with the male principle that is also a transformation into a masculine potency, will all the different gradations of creation ultimately correlate and correspond. The eschatological import of this radical transmutation and conjoining of genders is evident.

These zoharic texts thus retrieve the earlier rabbinic interpretations of the Song in terms of an historical allegory about the overcoming of exile and the coming of a messianic age. Moreover, the poetical allegory of the union of the female with the male in the divine realm is now seen to parallel the corresponding redemption, which may unfold in historical time. History repeats eternity forward, so to speak. And the Song is the map or guide that enables us to correlate our actions here below to the peaceful world-to-come, Solomon (shelemo) once again resonating with the etymological echoes of she’ha-shalom. Hence this telling reading of Aqiva’s famous claim for the Song: “This Song is the Song that contains all of the Torah, the Song in relation to which the upper and lower beings are aroused, the Song that is in the pattern of the world above, which is the supernal Sabbath, the Song on account of which the supernal, holy name is crowned. Therefore it is the holy of holies. Why? Because all of its words are in love and in the joy of everything” (Zohar Hadash 2: 143b).23

The symbolic overcoming of the gender division between male and female in the eschatological Sabbath thus signals in turn the historical overcoming of the divisions and conflicts of exile, death, and separation. The world-to-come is identified with the “place of the hidden wine”—an attribute of Binaḥ—which overflows all divisions in the promised moment of erotic intoxication. There is, then, a double movement of eros from below to above and above to below. Indeed, the Zoharic reading of the kiss in terms of an interplay between the four emanations (Shekhinah, Yesod, Tif’eret, Binaḥ) and the four names for God (Adonai, Sevar’ot, YHWH, and Ehyeh), expresses the “desire of each to enter the other, so that one may be contained in the other.”24 This Zoharic interplay of desires—lower and upper, female and male, earthly and celestial—is not a matter of intellect or reason. It is a truth of the heart. For just as the bride bids her King to stamp her with a seal upon his heart (simeni kakhotam al-libbeka, Song 8:6), so too the ultimate mystical union can only be realized by “contemplation of the heart” (sukhlatenu de-libba). The heart knows it, claims the Zohar, even though it is not seen at all.25 What these Zoharic and midrashic passages are ultimately pointing toward is, we might wager, a desire beyond desire that somehow remains desire. As Wolfson puts it, “For the erotic ascetic, desire not to desire is a potent form of desire, for who, after all, affirms more affirmatively than one who resists affirmation in the affirmation of resistance?”26

To be sure, as Gershom Scholem pointed out, kabbalistic readings of desire resist the Christian ascetic ideal of total abstinence. Marriage is not viewed by the kabbalists as a necessary evil to keep alive the human race, but as an appropriate symbol of reconciliation between the male and female powers within the divinity itself. In fact, nuptial union is seen—in keeping with the Song of Songs—as the highest idiom of correlation for a proper understanding of divine and human desire. According to Scholem the mystery of sexuality is not a via negativa but a via eminentia leading us right to the core of divinity itself. Indeed, historically speaking, the Hispano-Jewish kabbalists who wrote commentaries on the Song were functioning within the norms of halakkah, which did not affirm celibacy as an ideal. Marriage was a central part of Jewish ethical and
religious life. And observance of the Sabbath involved engaging in carnal intercourse by way of facilitating a holy union above. One of the highest zoharic images for the eschatological return to the womb of repair and pardon is, for example, the reversal of eros from pain to pleasure. This expresses itself, for example, in a double gesture of messianic reparation where the upper foundation of the male father (yesod de-abba) descends from on high until it meets the ascending lower foundation of the mother womb (yesod de-imma). This eschatological return to the restorative womb of the mother might also be said to echo the summons of the Shulammite to her lover to return with her to the place under the tree where she was originally conceived.

But one should be wary of romanticizing Jewish mysticism’s affirmation of human sexuality. As Wolfson has argued, most kabbalistic accounts of the Song ultimately serve to displace carnal sexuality with spiritual eroticism. The spiritualization of eros for the purposes of mystical contemplation or communion is based on a form of ascetic renunciation. “The sacralisation of human sexuality attested in kabbalistic lore cannot,” Wolfson insists, “be understood in isolation from the ascetic impulse.” Indeed, he concludes his comprehensive survey of the kabbalistic tradition by suggesting that the nexus between asceticism and eschatological redemption was one of the central tenets of the zoharic interpretation of the Song, which “embraces an erotic mysticism that affirms the ideal of ascetic eschatology, an ideal that is prophetically realized by kabbalists in their pietistic fraternities principally through communal study of the secrets of Torah.” This called for celibacy and abstinence on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), for example, as one identified with Shekhinah as the “virgin that no man has known” (Gen. 24:16). And if a crucial role is indeed attributed to the female potency of the divine, in the figure of Shekhinah ascending to Binah, the ostensibly sovereign feminine is ultimately restored to the male androgyn in the final Great Sabbath. Binah is masculinized as “king.” The divine female is reintegrated into the divine male.

Nonetheless, as Wolfson also argues, the eschatological eros adumbrated by the kabbalistic commentaries is less a denial or postponement of human desire than an opening to a form of desire beyond desire that remains desire. Or, to put it in the words of Jewish poet Paul Célan, we not here encountering that strange and rare phenomenon of a “desire realized as love but remaining desire” (l’amour réalisé du désir resté désir)? If so, we no longer need to oppose carnal and spiritual desire in terms of a binary dualism, but might envisage a form of eschatological eros that transforms a first desire into a second desire. Thus theoerotics might be construed as an anaerotics where we return to desire having renounced desire, rediscovering in the retrieved or refigured eros a still deeper incarnational connection between Spirit and Flesh.

PATRISTIC AND MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN READINGS

The first Christian interpretations of the Song date back to the commentaries of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. In both cases, we find a strong determination to oppose any historical or physical sense of eros by situating the Song as part of a symbolic relationship between the Church and God or the soul and Christ. This might seem, at first, surprising, given the emphasis placed by Christianity on incarnation. But for many of the Church fathers the Word became Flesh not so much to glorify sexuality as to lead it beyond its physical instantiation toward a more spiritual and transcendent expression. The influence of Neoplatonism here was very marked indeed, at times finding voice in vehement resistances to any sensual or embodied sense of the Shulammite’s desire. As Origen put it in his second Homily on the Song of Songs: “All the movements of the soul, God . . . created for the good, but in practice it often happens that good objects lead us to sin because we use them badly . . . [O]ne of the movements of the soul is love.” The worry here is not so much that Origen recognizes that there are good and bad expressions of desire, but that he should make so much of the deviant and sinful potential of sensual desire in his commentary on a poem that celebrates its inherent goodness. The right use of love for Origen is in the service of a higher truth and wisdom, far removed from the embodied love of flesh and blood. Only those who are spiritually detached from their physical desires can raise themselves up to this intellectual form of love. This anti-carnal reading of desire is one of the main motivations behind Origen’s insistence on an allegorical interpretation of the Song. It takes the threat out of the sexual imagery by disembowing and depersonalizing the actual lovers in favor of more
abstract movements of love—movements that, in Origen’s ascetic reading, ultimately subordinate desire to wisdom. Sex in the Song is really just Logos in drag—a way of inveigling the unsuspecting audience into a sensuous-sounding poem that is really a covert homily about how to transcend the senses in pursuit of supersensible divinity.

As a Christian theologian, Origen insists that since God became flesh in Christ so as to teach us how to renounce the flesh in favor of the Word, we should read the Song as a proleptic allegory of this same movement of ascent or abasiss. The bride’s desire for the bridegroom is construed accordingly as a coded parable of the soul’s ascetic yearning to become one with Christ as the royal way to absolute transcendence via renunciation and sacrifice. It is in this context that Origen spends much of his time establishing the epistemological and soteriological status of Solomon’s Song as a book of Wisdom. All references to the body, the senses, flowers, animals, landscapes, nature are no more than ciphers for higher spiritual truths. And the bride herself is but a thinly disguised emblem of the soul or Church in its quest for the one true transcendent God. As a result, “eroticism is subsumed under the body of the text rather than the text of the body, which is to say that this (Patristic) approach diminishes the concrete sensuality implied by the contextual meaning.”

Writing in the third century, Origen was one of the first church fathers to combine Neoplatonic and biblical discourses in what was to prove a deeply influential move. In later Patristic writers such as Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory of Nyssa, we find this particular insistence on allegory being employed on behalf of rigorous ascetic renunciation. Nyssa’s commentary on the Song of Songs betrays a deep suspicion of corporeal desire of any kind. Interpreting 3:1–4 as an attempt by the bride, who rises up from her bed at night, to go beyond all worldly sensations, feelings, images, names and concepts, Gregory concludes: “She says ‘scarcely had I passed them’—meaning that she left behind all creation . . . she finds her beloved by faith.” Gregory goes on to insist that there is in fact an insurmountable gap (diastēma) or “impenetrable wall” fencing off the “created essence” from the “uncreated nature” of God. And if Gregory does refer to something called “divine desire” (theseros) in his commentaries on the Song, he makes it clear that this is to be construed in the form of a Neoplatonic analogy of spirit impervious to the corrupting matter of the flesh. Citing the comparison of air and water to illustrate the descent of divine spirit into flesh, he writes: “Air is not retained in water when it is dragged down by some weighty body and left in the depth of the water, but rises quickly to its kindred element.” It would be difficult to find more rigorous practitioners of the via negativa than these Patristic apologists of the Logos, even in their commentaries of the Song of Songs. For them, desires of the flesh represent a hazardous detour through the lures of the material universe. Only through purgation, abnegation, and sacrifice can they be ultimately renounced in favor of an intellectual devotion to a supernatural deity.

The most influential medieval commentary on the Song was undoubtedly that of Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of Cistercian monasticism. Writing in the twelfth century, Bernard devoted eighteen years of his life to composing the eighty-six sermons that make up his famous Talks on the Song of Songs. The fact that he scarcely gets past the second verse of the Song is an indication of just how fascinated he was with this controversial and oft-contested poem of divine Scripture. Clearly there is something of an existential, and perhaps theological, battle going on between the lines, as Bernard vacillates between allegorical and confessional readings of the Song. At times we find him testifying to an ecstatic visitation by divine Love, at other times pulling back and tempering his enthusiasm with a dose of doctrinal caution.

Most of the first forty-eight sermons are in fact an elaborate series of reflections on the opening lines—“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” Bernard is evidently concerned with drawing the listeners’ attention to the secret meaning “hidden in the words.” He calls this the “inner music” of the verse, which imparts “the great joy of privately whispered secrets.” Unlike his Neoplatonic patristic predecessors, Bernard does not shy from acknowledging that this poem is more about love than wisdom as such (Sermon 8)—and not some purely metaphysical love, it seems, but that of a “passionate wedding song” (Sermon 1). It seems from the outset then that Bernard is preparing to lead us beyond the safe ecclesiastical terrain of doctrines, dogmas and first metaphysical principles to another kind of mystery—one that has less to do with Christ as logos than with Christ as kiss. The “kissing mouth,” as he puts it, “is
the Word in human flesh” (Sermon 2). It is that point of chiasmic exchange where “the human and the divine are mingled—two become one” (Sermon 2).

There is an ambiguity in the opening avowal of some secret meaning behind the words in that this mystery could be the occasion of either an allegorical or mystical reading. At times Bernard goes so far as to confide that he is speaking of his own experience of being shot through with God’s desire. He speaks of God “entering” and completely “flooding” his being (Sermon 74). And on one occasion he identifies with the bride who has been found by her beloved, while at the same time identifying with Paul being mystically visited by the Lord. In fact, there is a curious temporality at work here to the extent that the moment of rapturous indwelling seems to explode the divisions of linear time and open up an eschatological notion of time where divine eros can only be experienced either as already past or as still to come—what Levinas calls the enigma of “anterior posteriority.” “He has come to me on numerous occasions,” confesses Bernard. “I never notice the precise moment when he arrives. I feel his presence and then I remember that he was with me. Sometimes I have a premonition that he is coming to me. But I have never been able to put my finger on the exact instant when he arrived or departed. What path he uses to enter or leave my soul is a mystery to me” (Sermon 74). And after such momentous entries and exits, Bernard, not unlike other mystics before him, is left talking “like a fool.” He sings rather than argues. He chants rather than expounds. Just like the Shulammite in the Song.

On many other occasions, however, Bernard seems to be censoring himself, drawing back from the extraordinary implications of his own existential-mystical testimony. Then we find him resorting to a standard anticensational interpretation of the Song, seemingly determined to convince his monastic audience—and himself—that all this talk of personal experience of divine desire is really just that—talk: allegory and homiletic preaching with a good moral message to it all! What matters is the ulterior metaphysical meaning. Thus we find him reassuring his listeners, for example, that when it comes to the divine kiss, “far from a mere touching of lips, it is a spiritual union with God.” For when it is a question of kissing God’s feet and hands and mouth, it is only in a spiritual sense that we can so speak. “Only God,” says Bernard, “does not require some kind of body” (Sermon 9). And this from someone who is a devoted believer in the mystery of the Incarnation! These contortions and revisions continue apace as Bernard struggles to contain the erotic fall-out of his own mystical reading. Eventually he contrives to withdraw the drama from the realm of embodied creation altogether, back into the safe super-worldly confines of an intradivine Trinity. The kiss now becomes a love affair of God with himself. “The Father kisses. The Son is kissed. The Holy spirit is the kiss. . . . Only God gives himself fully to Christ with a ‘kiss of the mouth’” (Sermon 8).

This conflict between what we might call the amorous and the allegorical readings of the Song is carried on through the entirety of Bernard’s homilies. In some passages, Bernard attests to an eschatological desire that descends on him from God, provoking his own passionate longing in turn: “I am in love. I have already received much more than I deserve, but less than I desire. I am motivated not by my head, but by my heart. It may be unreasonable to want more, but I am driven by passionate desire. I blush with shame, but love will not be denied. Love does not listen to arguments. It is not cooled by the intellect. I beg. I plead. I burn. ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth . . . . ‘Let him kiss me,’ I plead, ‘with the kisses of his mouth’” (Sermon 9). He represents himself as seduced against his will by the Song: “I did not intend to spend so many days on the mystical dimensions of our text. . . . I had no idea I would be diverted” (Sermon 16).

Elsewhere, however, Bernard seems determined to drain the excitement from the text: “Most important is knowledge of self . . . self-knowledge that leads to knowledge of God. . . . You have heard enough for now and grow weary. I see you yawning and dozing. I’m not surprised” (Sermon 36). His tone is moralizing, even censorious: “We are talking about love. This is not about a man and a woman. It is about the Word and a soul—Christ and his church. The hiding places are not locations for lovers to have a secret rendezvous. Another writer (Gregory the Great) understands the clefts of the rock to mean Christ’s wounds in crucifixion. . . . It is the same with a Christian martyr. By looking at Christ’s wounds, we will not pay much attention to his own. Pain that would have been overwhelming becomes endurable” (Sermon 61).
With repressive zeal, Bernard subjects the Shulammite to rhetorical humiliation, shaming her beauty as "limited" and "earthbound": "It is too soon for her to gaze upon God in the brightness of midday. She is not ready" (Sermon 38). "She wishes she could be in the warm presence of the Bridgroom, but she is instructed to bear and rear children instead" (Sermon 41). The result of the mystical visitation by divine eros is here deformed into an unwanted pregnancy. At the same time, the bride’s amorous apostrophe to her divine lover, "Turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or a young stag" (Song 2.17), is interpreted as a summons to deny the flesh: According to Bernard, this turn is from the transient world of embodied beings toward a metaphysical God who is unchanging, since "The spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing" (1 Cor 14) (Sermons 73-74). The soul-body dualism that had so hampered the Patristic commentaries of the Song seems still to echo in such dismal passages. Desire climbs a one-way ladder of metaphysical ascent in grim flight from the passions of the flesh.

And yet, in the dips, folds, and invaginations of the text, an amorous eschatology persists, as we have seen. There it is revealed that desire ascending is a response to desire descending—an eros that precedes the upward movement of the soul and comes to meet it halfway down, indeed all the way down, in the kiss of perpetual incarnation. When the Novice Master steps aside to let the secret Shulammite in Bernard speak, the message becomes bold. Here we read that "she who loves is also loved"; that the divine loves us first, before we can love in return, and is waiting to claim us in a personal, secret, intimate mystical way—"as though God’s love is exclusive" (Sermon 69). This is the lover descending to the flesh without reservation or reserve: "Our love for him became possible when he came down to browse among our lilies. This revelation of himself generated our loving response" (Sermon 70). We find resurfacing idioms of nourishment and feasting, of fragrance and nourishing, of abundance and superabundance, of grace and gift and gratuituity, which so marked the original poetics of the Song itself. "Perhaps it is even possible to be overfilled," as he cites the Gospel passage about the measure "running over" into our laps (Luke 6.38) (Sermon 72). This feeling of asymmetrical passivity before the overflowing eros of God leads in turn to an exchange or reversibility of giving and receiving, of ascending and descending. Commenting on the Shulammite’s famous climactic line, "I held him and would not let him go till I brought him down to my mother’s house, to the room of the one who conceived me," Bernard notes tellingly: "This is a reciprocal love. . . . She could not endure if she trusted her own grip. She needed to be held" (Sermon 79). Moreover, this holding is, Bernard adds, of the most intimate kind: "She is not simply taking him to her mother’s house. She wants the privacy of its bedroom. The savior brings salvation to the house he enters, but when he enters the bedroom there is intimacy" (Sermon 79).

Deeply immersed in the eros of the Shulammite’s Song, we seem as far away from the strictly ascending desire of Platonism as could be imagined. Bernard concludes his Sermons with a reaffirmation of this reciprocal nuptial bond between human and divine desire. "When God loves, his only desire is to be loved in return. . . . A soul that loves like this will be loved. This sharing of love results in a perfect marriage" (Sermon 83). The asymmetry and symmetry of the theoerotic bond are here evenly poised, evidencing once again the miraculous paradox of posterior priority: "You should understand that if your soul seeks God, God has (already) sought it. . . . She loves because she is loved" (Sermon 84).

Bernard adds—anticipating Johannes de Silentio in Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling—that he cannot legitimately talk about what he has just been talking about for the last 86 Sermons ("Words do not communicate this"). He thereby acknowledges that he is engaged in a performative contradiction. From a logical point of view, his propositions are to be regarded, in retrospect, as meaningless. But from a poetical point of view—and songs, hymns and litanies are of course of such an order—his words say much more than they can explain, if also much less than they have received. The sacred gift of eros is here ultimately attested to, even as it is officially quarantined within the cloisters of Bernard’s ecclesiastical apologetics. This is eros betrayed, in both senses of the word.

Mystical Readings

The readings of the Song by later Christian mystics—above all, John of the Cross and his protégé Teresa of Avila—were to become still more forthright. John of the Cross’s famous commentary on the Song, "The Spiritual Canticle," was written in Spain, in 1584, almost five hundred
years after Bernard’s “Talks.” These are not delivered in the manner of formal homilies but rather in the guise of a personal testimony addressed to a single spiritual leader, Mother Ana de Jesus, prioress of the discalced Carmelite nuns of St. Joseph’s in Granada. The Canticle, as the prologue dedicated to Mother Ana makes plain, is not to be taken as a mere gloss on the biblical text but rather as a canticle in its own right. For who, says John in the prologue, can explain the desires that God gives one? All one can do is respond with a song overflowing with an abundance of figures, comparisons, similitudes, secrets, and mysteries—a song that poetically repeats the biblical song. Departing from Bernard’s residual fidelity to some kind of knowledge about such matters, John invokes a new genre of what he calls “mystical wisdom,” which, he claims, “comes through love and is the subject of these stanzas and need not be understood distinctly in order to cause love and affection in the soul.” And so John proceeds to compose a canticle of forty verses, entitled “Stanzas between the Soul and the Bridegroom.” This rewriting in Christian mystical language of the original biblical Song is followed by almost two hundred pages of notation where each stanza is reprinted in copious elaborations, digressions, and perorations: a poetic commentary of commentaries that is virtually endless in scope and intent. Indeed, the impression one receives in reading through these pages is that of stepping carefully through a series of concentric cloisters in a circular centripetal movement that leads, gradually but asymptotically, toward the “holy of holies” itself—the Song of Songs. But the reader, like the soul, like the Bride, like Moses, will never actually reach the promised land of desire.

From the opening verses, John bears witness to a wound caused by the divine stag. He has already been shot through with “the thrust of the lance,” which now leaves him “moaning” and disoriented—sick with love. And yet this wounding, which leaves him in such destitute loss, is also, he avows, something blissful and benign. It is “after the taste of some sweet and delightful” contact with the divine lover that the bride speaks out. In short, the bride’s sense of terrible absence is consequent upon a prior visitation of fullness and presence. The goal of her desiring is somehow already the origin of her desire. Its eschatology is its archeology.

John persistently privileges the choice of the sense of taste over that of sight or even sound. For if the soul is indeed wounded through what John calls a “trace of the beauty of the beloved,” this beauty itself remains unseen and unseeable. Indeed, so sublimely unknowable—“I know not what”—sings John in stanza 7—is this divine eros that the witness is reduced to a state of “stammering.” This is precisely how John seems to regard his own “spiritual canticle.” And if the vision of divine beauty signals the impossibility of proper thought and speech, it also marks an interruption of life. “May the vision of your beauty be my death” (stanza 11), the wounded lover cries out. Eros reveals itself here as mysteriously bound to thanatos.

As we proceed through the stanzas, a remarkable shift occurs that, I believe, is typical of John’s mystical experience. The wound of the bride is reversed into the wound of the bridegroom. The human and divine lovers are now both sufferers of the wound, which unites them in blissful painful desire. This “spiritual betrothal,” as John describes it in stanzas 14–15, is profoundly ambivalent. It speaks of a superabundance of love, comparable to Isaiah’s “overflowing river” where the soul may “taste a splendid spiritual sweetness”; but it also speaks of terror and fear before the very force of this mystical ecstasy. The soul is compelled to beg the beloved to “withdraw the eyes I have desired”; it is clearly too much for either the senses or mind to endure. This is the bottomless “abyss of knowledge,” the colorless void of sensation, the dark night of the soul which the bride must endure before she can move from “spiritual betrothal” to “spiritual marriage” proper.

By the time we reach stanza 15, we have joined a divine supper that, we are enthusiastically informed, “affords lovers refreshment, satisfaction and love.” We have now passed beyond the various ejaculations and withdrawals attendant upon the dark night of loss and embraced upon the eschatological drinking and eating of a divine-human marriage feast. Pre-optical images of fragrance, touching and taste abound, from allusions to David “drinking the delicious spiritual wine” (Ps. 63:1) to the bride “feeding among the lilies” (Song 6:2–3), “sucking honey from all things” (stanza 28), swallowing the “juice of pomegranates” and imbibing the “flowings from the balsam” of God to the point of rapturous intoxication (stanzas 26–28, 36). Here, John informs us suggestively, “the soul feels that her beloved is within her as in her own bed” (stanza 16). And
she responds by offering herself with unconditional abandon. This language of “sweet inebriation by divine wine” (stanza 25) epitomizes the spiritual espousal where the soul “drinks of her beloved in the inner wine cellar” and feels her “heart tremble at his touch” (Song 5:4 and stanzas 25–26).

John here speaks of a progressive journey through the seven wine cellars of love, anticipating Teresa’s mystical itinerary through the seven mansions of her Interior Castle. Indeed when the innermost point of divine indwelling (Prov. 30:1) is reached, we witness a mutual surrender of the soul and Christ, and even a reversal of the prior asymmetry between the finite and infinite. Now it is God who becomes the servant of love and the bride the sovereign ruler! (stanza 25). In this paroxysm of “mystical theology” (as John names it with oddly technical precision), we encounter a jouissance of incarnation-crucifixion, of eros-thanatos. For here, we are told, the soul “desires to be dissolved” with Christ in a “beatific pasture . . . where pure water flows . . . deep into the thicket” (stanza 36).

But the invocation of a self-reflexive term like mystical theology is like a bell that tolls the singer back to his more epistemological and ecclesiastical self. By the end of “The Spiritual Canticle” John is clearly reigning in his own enthusiasms in deference to some higher tribunal of intellect. In stanza 40 he has firmly reintroduced a traditional dichotomy between soul and body, declaring the necessity of “putting the passion in order according to reason” and “mortifying the appetites.”[13] But even in his reversion to the old hierarchy of spirit versus soul, sense versus body, reason versus sex, John uses the telling term “descend” in place of the Platonic term “ascend.” The dualism is preserved in some kind of dichotomy but the hierarchy is curiously inverted. In the penultimate statement of the last stanza, John makes this startling observation: “The soul declares that they (the corporeal senses) descended—she does not say “they went,” or use some other word—in order to point out that in this share that the sensory part has in the spiritual communication, when the soul takes this drink of spiritual goods, the senses discontinue their natural operations and go down from them to spiritual recollection.”[14] Down, not up. Katabasis, not anabasis. Here John seems to be hinting, even in this ostensible return to the border divides of traditional epistemology into rational and embodied experience, that there is perhaps a form of second desire, other desire, supplementary desire. A desire that the senses can reinvest after they have renounced their first attachments and cravings. And this second desire—this eschatological eros beyond biological eros—is less an expression of lack than of surplus. However purged and spiritualized it may have become, it still pertains to what he calls a passion of “heart and flesh.” Or, as he cites David, his predecessor in biblical erotics, with evident approval: “My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God” (Ps. 84:2, stanza 40).

John’s protégé Teresa is at once more autobiographical and more circumspect. She is highly personal in her utterances but also very aware that her mystical-erotic witness borders on heresy. Perhaps she learned a lesson from John’s own incarceration or from his occasional rebukes to her regarding her sensory enthusiasms (he is said to have ensured she always received a small piece of Eucharistic bread at Mass to curb her natural appetite!). Teresa certainly covers herself with all kinds of disclaimers—I am only an ignorant foolish woman! What do I know about anything!—and constantly defers to higher ecclesiastical authorities for proper guidance and judgment. But for all her caveats and proper piety, her testimonies frequently break through with the shock of an explosion. The fallout has scarcely time to register before she retreats again into formulaic devotions. Her salient comments on the Song of Songs in The Interior Castle—arguably her most intrepid text—are of particular interest for our present study.

In the first chapter of the Fifth Mansion, Teresa invokes the Bride’s confession that “the King had brought her into the cellar of wine” (Song 1:3, 2:4). This particular scene was to become a staple diet in the mystical imaginary of the Song as it developed from Teresa and John down to the Beguines and beyond. Teresa’s opening salvo in this line of visionary poetics decisively casts theoeroticism in the form of passionism. Eros is experienced as a form of radical receptivity to the incoming and descending force of love, surpassing all finite human forms of will, capacity or understanding. Commenting on the bride’s experience of being led down into the cellar for the pleasure of the King, Teresa writes: “It (the Song) does not say that she went. It also says that she was wandering about in all directions seeking her Beloved (Song 3:2). This, as I understand it, is
the cellar where the Lord is pleased to put us, when He wills and as He wills. But we cannot enter by any efforts of our own; His Majesty must put us right into the center of our soul, and must enter there Himself; and, in order that He may the better show us His wonders, it is His pleasure that our will, which has entirely surrendered itself to Him, should have no part in this.”¹⁴

Teresa proceeds to make suggestive analogies about the way in which divine eros enters and exits from the center of the feminine being—without using doors or removing stones—intimating that this is some mysterious experience of pre-phallic jouissance. The associative implications of erotic pleasuring, fecundation and impregnation are powerfully present, if discreetly deferred to the ultimate erotic feast awaiting the pilgrim in the Seventh or Sabbatical Mansion—unmistakable echoes of the Shulammite’s deferral to eschatological postponement in the Song. “Later on,” she addresses her readers, “you will see how it is His Majesty’s will that the soul should have fruition of Him in its very center, but you will be able to realize that in the last Mansion much better than here.”¹⁵ The recurring allusion to center, as correlative image to the inner wine cellar of secrecy, intoxication and delight, carries such an obvious sexual charge that a later clerical redactor of Teresa’s text, Gracian, saw fit to cross it out twice in this very text! Of course, to the degree that Teresa insists on the involuntary and unexpected character of divine ecstasy, she is also cleverly making it plain that it is not her moral or intellectual responsibility, but God’s.

Mystical sex is safe sex because it is not consensual. Or rather: It is the effect of a divine seduction in which consent is not easily distinguished from coerced submission. Teresa explores this ambivalence as she returns to Song 2:4. Interpreting this verse now to mean that the divine bridegroom put the bride into the cellar so that he could “ordain love of her,” she goes on to relate this to the climactic verse of the Song (8:6) where the bride actually bids her lover to stamp her as a seal upon the heart. Here Teresa exposes the soul’s willingness to surrender itself to the influx of divine love at a level beneath that of the conscious or the contractual. In a passage that reprises the Shulammite’s pivotal apostrophe and anticipates a whole line of mystico-erotic poetry, Teresa writes: “That soul has now delivered itself into His hands and His great love has so completely subdued it that it neither knows nor desires any thing save that God shall do with it what He wills. Never, I think, will God grant this favor save to the soul which He takes for His own. His will is that, without understanding how, the soul shall go thence sealed with His seal. In reality the soul in that state does no more than the wax when a seal is impressed upon it—the wax does not impress itself; it is only prepared for the impress: that is, it is soft—and it does not even soften itself so as to be prepared; it merely remains quiet and consenting.”¹⁶ Here, in short, we are speaking of consent beyond consent, just as we are witnessing a desire beyond desire.

Then, in a flash of afterthought, Teresa suggests that in this mystico-erotic union of the divine and the human, the one becomes the other in a strange reversibility. The human and divine, lover and beloved exchange places, as human wax suddenly transmutes into the divine wax. “Oh, goodness of God, that all this should be done at Thy cost! Thou dost require only our wills and dost ask that Thy wax may offer no impediment.”¹⁷ In the next paragraph, Teresa compares this paradox of active passivity experienced by the lover bride to the surrender of Christ himself at the last supper. “With desire have I desired” (Luke 22, 15). Rarely have the words desire, feast, surrender and suffering—as both allowing and enduring—carried such double meanings. Rarely has the term mystical “subject” carried such strong connotations of both subjection and sovereignty. The seed of grain at the center of our being must be consumed and transmuted into a new, risen, reborn being. Indeed Teresa will go on to compare this secret inner event to the miraculous transmutation of the “seed” of a silk worm into a butterfly.¹⁸

Is it not easy to imagine that Mary Margaret Alacoque had something like this in mind when she experienced her own blissful vision in Paray-le-Monial of an exchange of blazing hearts between herself and Christ? Or John Donne when he composed “Batter my heart, three-person’d God”:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Or George Herbert: “when th’ heart says (sighing to be approved), / O, could I love! And stops: God writeth loved.” (“A True Hymn”) You must
sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: / So I did sit and eat” (“Love
III”) Or, finally, the driven Gerard Manley Hopkins when he celebrated
the erotic-mystical sacrifice of the Nun in The Wreck of the Deutschland:

[She] was calling “O Christ, Christ, come quickly” . . .
Is it love in her of the being as her lover had been? . . .
What by your measure is the heaven of desire,
The treasure never eyesight got . . .
Ipse, the only one, Christ, King, Head:
He was to cure the extremity where he had cast her;
Do, deal, lord it with living and dead;
Let him ride, her pride, in his triumph . . .
What was the feast followed the night
Thou hadst glory of this nun?—
Feast of one woman without stain . . .
Is the shipwreck then a harvest, does tempest carry the grain for
thee? . . .
For the lingerer with a love glides
Lower than death and the dark;
A vein for the visiting of the past-prayer, pent in prison,
Our passion-plunged Giant risen . . .

The images that recur in these examples of what we might call a Chris-
tian mystical poetics are remarkably reminiscent of, if not directly indebted
to, Teresa’s own mystical imaginary as response to the Shulammite’s
song: cellar, womb, core, heart, seal, feast, sacrifice, seed, passion, ravish-
ment, and rapture.

Before we leave Teresa I would like, however, to follow up on her
promise, given the reader in the Fifth Mansion of “spiritual betrothal,”
to reveal an even fuller form of divine-human union later in her journey.
True to her word, Teresa returns to the Shulammite woman later in the
text, focusing this time on verse 32. The bride rising from her bed at
night and wandering the streets and squares is compared to the mystical
lover who is prepared to let go of her ego attachments, to surrender her
conventional and controlling self, and to welcome the arrival of absolute
desire into the core of her being. The release of the lover into an open

space of exposure and quest corresponds, curiously, to her being dis-
covered by the beloved in the most inner mansion of the castle where divin-
ity dwells. The images of expenditure and loss are thus counterposed
with images of enclosure and concentration, a paradoxical movement of
mutual traversal and reversal echoed in similar contrapuntal metaphors
of waking/sleeping, pleasure/pain, living/dying, breathing/not-breath-
ing, etc. “He at one commands that all the doors of the Mansion shall
be shut, and only the door of the Mansion in which He dwells remains
open so that we may enter . . . For when He means to enrapture this
soul, it loses its power.”46 “This lasts only for a short time,” Teresa ex-
plains, “because, when this profound suspension lifts a little, the body
seems to come partly to itself again, and draws breath . . . Complete
eccstasy, therefore, does not last long . . . to this it is fully awake, while
asleep . . . Oh, what confusion the soul feels when it comes to itself
again and what ardent desires it has to be used for God in any and every
way in which He may be pleased to employ it!”47 It is in the same Man-
sion that Teresa chooses to deliver her most notorious and audacious
account of divine ecstasy, which has so preoccupied commentators
of mystical desire down through the ages from prurient redactors and in-
quisitors to subversive anthropologists (Georges Bataille) and bemused
psychoanalysts (Marie Bonaparte, Jacques Leuba, and Jacques Lacan),
who coined the term erotic “transverberation.” Given the decisive in-
fluence this text has exerted on most attempts to comprehend the mys-
tery of theoretic ecstasy, I cite it here in full:

So powerful is the effect of this upon the soul that it becomes con-
sumed with desire, yet cannot think what to ask, so conscious is it
of the presence of its God. Now, if this is so, you will ask me what
it desires or what causes it distress . . . I cannot say; I know that this
distress seems to penetrate to its very bowels; and that, when He
that has wounded it draws out the arrow, the bowels seem to come
with it, so deeply does it feel this love. I have just been wondering
if my God could be described as the fire in a lighted brazier, from
which some spark will fly out and touch the soul, in such a way that
it will be able to feel the burning heat of the fire; but as the fire is
not hot enough to burn it up, and the experience is very delectable,
the soul continues to feel that pain and the mere touch suffices to produce that effect . . . and just as the soul is about to become enkindled, the spark dies, and leaves the soul yearning once again to suffer that loving pain of which it is the cause.48

Teresa is adamant on this point: Mystical joustance is not a permanent condition but a passing experience of divine rapture, which stems from desire and returns once again to desire. It is not a fullness that consumes eros—either divine or human—in any final sense. On the contrary, the more ravished the lover’s bride the more ardent her desire. And as one moves from a primary desire of attachment and craving to a second desire of freedom and bliss, Teresa insists that one not abandon the world of created bodies and things. On the contrary, Teresa’s testimony to this second, eschatological desire is accompanied by a summons to return to the ordinary universe. We must not “flee from corporeal things,” she warns us, for that would be to deny our “greatest blessing”—namely, “the sacred Humanity” of the incarnate God.49 Love of the embodied everyday is crucial to Teresa’s vision. It defies all attempts to construe the mystical-erotic experience in terms of metaphysical or Platonic polarities. And in this she certainly seems faithful to the prophetic erotics of the Shulammite herself whom she discreetly cites and celebrates.50

Bernard, John, and Teresa all challenged standard Platonic dualisms between the divine and the human, the spiritual and the corporeal. All three acknowledged that theotaurics, since the Incarnation, involves both ascending and descending eros. (The later notion of a divine desire descending from the Highest Cause or Form to embrace the human would have been anathema to Plato and Aristotle).51 But these Christian saints lived their mystical witness to divine desire in diverse ways and to different degrees. Where Bernard betrays a contradiction between carnal and spiritual eros, and John a dichotomy, Teresa lives the tension as a fecund paradox that provokes further contemplation and action. Divine eros always calls for more of the same, while simultaneously summoning us back to the ordinary universe of everyday love.

Indeed, of all the Christian readings of the Song we have reviewed above, Teresa’s is the most incarnational. In this, she might be said to be most faithful not only to Christ’s own message of “enfleshment” (ensarkosis) but equally to the message of the Shulammite’s song, as voiced by Jewish as well as Christian interpreters. For Christ and the Shulammite sing from the same theocentric sheet. The divine cries out to be made flesh in both the testimony of the Shulammite bride and of the incarnate Nazarene. Teresa, by doing justice to both, restores the hyphen between Judeo and Christian, where it belongs. Divine desire is, she shows us, but another name for this hyphen.52

Our hermeneutic wager may be reformulated thus: The Song of Songs is a chiasm where Judaism and Christianity may interweave and interact. It is a common source and resource for both hermeneutic traditions, a poem of being-between.

READING THE SONG IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

Jacques Lacan gives a tantalizing nod to the conundrum of mystical eros in his Encore essay, “God and Woman’s Joustance” (1972–73). Here, referring by name to celebrated mystics like Bernard, Hadelich, John of the Cross, and most especially Teresa, Lacan speaks of a new form of joustance. This “extra” joustance he terms “supplementary” in that it goes beyond normal phallic joustance where a woman’s desire is considered in terms of a lack or a not-all (vis-à-vis the phallicus taken as signifier of plenitude, fullness, allness). In the phallic—or to use Derrida’s variation, phallogocentric—regime woman’s desire is considered as a pas-tout that is said to combine with male desire to form a totality or Tout. As such it is complementary rather than supplementary. Referring to the famous depiction of the swooning Teresa in Bernini’s statue in Rome, Lacan insists that here we are witnessing an “other” bliss that is supplementary rather than complementary (in an ontological, biological or genital sense). At this level, eros functions as surplus (enplus) rather than as lack (pas-tout/tout). Or, to rephrase it in our own terms, as an eros that appears to be more eschatological than ontological—moving from more to less rather than less to more.

In a highly dense and arcane passage full of mischievous wordplay and rhetorical brio, Lacan writes of Teresa’s joustance: “She’s coming [elle jouit]. There’s no doubt about it. But what is she getting off on? It is clear
that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it. These mystical ejaculations are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage; they provide, all in all, some of the best reading one can find on the subject.”

That is, of course, up to Lacan’s own psychoanalytic Écrits, which, he insists, is of the “same order.” Then, entertaining the hypothesis that many of his readers may now think that he, the atheist Jacques Lacan, believes in God, he adds: “I believe in the jouissance of woman insofar as it is extra [en plus].”

And referring to a number of early psychoanalytic attempts—around Charcot and various late-nineteenth-century experiments with hysterical eroticism in women—to reduce mysticism to a matter of sexual repression and deferred genital gratification, he rejoins that this is not it at all. This “other bliss” of the mystics is not reducible to a matter of foutre. On the contrary, rejoins Lacan, “doesn’t this jouissance one experiences and yet knows nothing about put us on the path of ex-sistence? And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as based on feminine desire?”

Does this make God an unconscious projection of feminine desire? Or does it make feminine desire (and Lacan is quite prepared to admit that such mystics as John of the Cross were “feminine” too in this respect) a privileged landing site for incoming divinity? What precisely does Lacan mean by “ex-sistence” anyway? A Heideggerian being-toward-death, as the term first seems to imply? Or a Kierkegaardian openness toward a transcendent “good at one remove” (bien au second degré), as he seems to hint in his final paragraph? Lacan does not resolve the issue. The jury is still out. But perhaps the Shulammite woman is prompting from the wings. (To mix poor-taste Lacanian wordplay with a well-known English verse, we might ask: “If Theresa comes, can the Shulammite be far behind?”) Though coming—jouir, venir—in Lacan’s reading is also a matter of coming-out, that is, finding psychoanalytic formulations for this “other bliss” which otherwise remains unsayable in anything but the coded “jacula- tions” of the mystics themselves.

What remains but a tantalizing hint in Lacan receives sustained treatment in Georges Bataille, another French thinker fascinated by what he calls “divine love.” Drawing on both psychoanalytic and anthropological insights, Bataille focuses sustained attention on the liaison dangereuse between mysticism and sensuality. Indeed, Bataille gives us the added advantage of explicitly referencing the Song in his controversial deliberations. In a section of The Accursed Share entitled “From the Song of Songs to the Formless and Modeless God of the Mystics,” a subsection of “Divine Love,” Bataille makes this provocative statement: “Only eroticism is capable . . . of admitting the lovers into that void . . . where it is no longer just the other but rather the bottomlessness and boundlessness of the universe that is designated by the embrace . . . [B]y holding resolutely to purity, but at the same time to the desire for the other, for that which is missing and which alone might yield us the totality of being, we are in search of God.”

But for Bataille, God understood as “supreme being” is a denial of the totality of reality understood as contingency and immanence. In settling for such a logical formulation we lose what he terms God’s “sensible presence.” To try to regain this and rediscover the “burning” divine love that “consumes” us, we need to retrace our search for God back to the “darkness of eroticism” with its concomitant experiences of “horror, anguish, death.”

These are kept alive in the violent and transgressive “threes of sacrifice,” which, according to Bataille’s anthropology, lie at the root of all religious experience. This is not something we will find access to in any kind of positive theology but only in the most extreme forms of negative theology—or what he will call “theopathy”—practiced by the mystics. The mystic who identifies his or her own wounds and lacerations with the “horror and suffering” of the dying God of the Cross no longer speaks logically or theologically but according to a discourse of “human love.” And it is precisely here that Bataille locates the language of the Song as prototype of the legacy of biblical mysticism. In this respect, he approvingly cites a believer who claims that the great mystics “saw in the Song the most adequate grammar of the effects of divine love and never tired of annotating it, as if those pages had contained a prior description of their experiences.” But Bataille makes it clear that he is not reducing mystical states to sexual neuroses. He is simply pointing to the tacit analogy that these two forms of desire share as modes of “consumption of all the individual beings’ resources.” The erotic effusions of the mystics may, Bataille suggests, be construed accordingly as expressions
of extreme expenditure and transgression that consume all the energy that sets their life “ablaze.” They thus bear witness, unbeknownst to themselves, to a deviant sensuality that returns the God of metaphysics, morality and transcendence, to the abyss of formless jouissance—a void where the self is subsumed back into the seamless fusion and continuity of brute being. The descent from the elevated sublime of Kant to the abyssal sublime of the Marquis de Sade could not be more direct. Bataille’s conclusion is as chilling as it is candid: “Whatever one makes of the erotic language of the mystics, it must be said that their experience, having no limitation, transcends its beginnings and that, pursued with the greatest energy, it finally retains only eroticism’s transgression in a pure state, or the complete destruction of the world of common reality, the passage from the perfect Being of positive theology to that formless and modeless God of a ‘theopathy’ akin to the ‘apathy’ of Sade.”

The jury that remained out with Lacan returns here with a vengeance. The verdict is unambiguous. Divine eros, as evidenced in the long religious tradition ranging from the Song to the mystics, is really about a desire to blissfully and sublimely dissolve into limitless fusion. With what? With what behind the illusory veil of an imaginary God is nothing other than nothingness, death, indifferention. In short, the ultimate aim of eros is thanatos. The link between self-annihilation and the jouissance of sensual excitement is unequivocal. But this does not, for Bataille any less than for Lacan, mean a reduction of mystical-religious desire to animal or biological drive. On the contrary, what is unique about mystical eros is precisely its ability to use the illusion of ascent as a demonic means to descend far lower than the animal order, to a zone of objectless immanence and intimacy never dreamed of by other living beings. What is so special about the divine eros of the mystics is its sense of waste, its sheer gratuitity. And if the Shulammitic, like her eponymous mystics, is indeed “sick with love,” it is precisely because she has traded the normal behavior of “life against death” (governed by fear, control, taboo, property, convention, survival) for an abnormal life for death. She is sublimely disoriented and undone as she errs hystically through the streets at night, “losing her footing without falling irrevocably.” She risks her existence to the point of illness, folly, disequilibrium, violation, and self-destruction. For mystical eros is defined, above all else, by its assent to life up to the point of death. It is committed to the quest of an impossible “life through death.” This, at bottom, is divine desire—“the desire to live while ceasing to live, or to die without ceasing to live.”

It is not surprising, therefore, to find in Bataille’s Eroticism—a work that explicitly acknowledges its debt to both Jacques Lacan and the aberrant sensuality of de Sade—this unambiguous statement of intent: “The human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him. The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm; she does not know that his unacknowledgable passions and her own are really one . . . [I]n this work flights of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are seen to be part and parcel of the same movement.” Whether the saintly “she” Bataille invokes here is the Shulammitic woman, or Teresa of Avilla, or his own contemporary Simone Weil (another devotee of “divine desire” whom Bataille loved to meet in late-night Parisian cafés, after he had frequented his regular brothels, to discuss questions of depravity and salvation), it is uncertain. Perhaps none? Perhaps a combination of all three? But later in the text, his explicit comment on Saint Teresa’s alleged jouissance could not be more explicit: “One essential element of excitement is the feeling of being swept off one’s feet, of falling headlong. If love exists at all it is, like death, a swift movement of loss within us, slipping into tragedy and stopping only at death.” This, he says, is the “desire of an extreme state that Saint Teresa has perhaps been the only one to depict strongly enough in words: ‘I die because I cannot die.’” Bataille concludes that the “longed for swoon is thus the salient feature not only of man’s sensuality but also of the experience of the mystics . . . Temptation is the desire to fall, to fail, and to squander all one’s reserves until there is no firm ground beneath one’s feet.” If Bataille is to be believed, Teresa yielded to this ultimate temptation of eros lived as thanatos, as did all the great mystical lovers before and after her, starting with the daring bride of the Song of Songs. What else, after all, could be meant by the immortal line “Love is as strong as death”?

These critical readings throw down the gauntlet to allegorical readings. For while the latter saw desire as ascending—often on Platonic wings—from below to above, the former signal a reverse direction of descent to the most abyssal (and at times abject) depths of the unconscious psyche.
Indeed, theopathy and apathy are, in Bataille, just cover names for the perversive pathologies of the erotic psyche he is determined to chronicle. Not that he or Lacan—I repeat—wish to reduce this ontology (or meontology) of eros to a mere biology of animal or genital instincts. They believe they are onto something far more complex and intriguing than anything that could be found in a manual of sex instincts. This is more a matter of ejaculation than juculation, of psychic jouissance than of physiological jouir, of eros-thanatos (something alien to the evolutionary animal species drive) than of eros-bios. It is metaphysics, in other words, but metaphysics in reverse. Metaphysical desire turning around in mid orbit and gravitating back to the darkest entranls of the earth, all the way down, to its fathomless, bottomless core (abgrund/beance/vide).

There is, of course, something strangely complicit about the two brands of metaphysical eros—the allegorical ascent and psychoanalytic descent—in that both see more in sex than sex. But where the allegorical tends to follow the mystic beyond sexuality the psychoanalytic tends to follow the mystic beneath it. Either way, we eventually follow the respective trajectories, upward and downward, until they disappear off the radar screen. Until we reach what both agree is a zone of pure silent, deathlike stillness. If we live after eros, we live posthumously.

But these are not the only options. There is, as suggested several times in our discussion of the mystical testimonies, a third way that combines the two directions of divine eros. Here we encounter an enigmatic phenomenon of mutual traversal, where ascending and descending desires cross and exchange without fusing into one. This crossing occurs at the site of metaphor. As Wolfson puts it, with reference to rabbinitic interpretation but in terms that also resonate with Christian readings: “The implication of the symbolic reading of the Song . . . is well captured in Rosenzweig’s recognition of the essentially metaphorical nature of eros and the concurrent affirmation of the essentially erotic nature of metaphor. In his words, ‘love is not ‘but a metaphor’; it is metaphor in its entirety and its essence; it is only apparently transitory: in truth it is eternal. The appearance is as essential as the truth here, for love could not be eternal as love if it did not appear to be transitory. But in the mirror of appearance, truth is directly mirrored.”

The surplus of metaphoricity in the Song, whereby an eschatological symbolism of nuptial love is enmeshed in erotics of the body without ever being reducible to it, gives rise to what Paul Ricoeur calls “a phenomenon of indetermination.” This is evinced in the fact that many readers have difficulty identifying the lover and the beloved of the poem, for the lovers never clearly identify themselves or go by proper names: the term Shulamite itself 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. We can even imagine that there are up to three different characters involved—a shepherdess, a shepherd, and a king (Solomon). 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?” (3:6) we too find ourselves asking. 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?” Moreover, we might add that it is precisely the primacy of the indeterminately fluid “movements of love” over the specific identities of the lover and the beloved that guards the open door. We are kept guessing. This guarding of the Song as an open text of multiple readings and double entendres—divine and human, eschatological and carnal—provides a hermeneutic play of constant “demetaphorizing and remetaphorizing,” which never allows the Song to end.

In sum, what we have here is a story of transfiguring eros as the making possible of the impossible. This sets the biblical eros celebrated in the Song off from other kinds of erotic expression: e.g., romantic infatuation, courtly fine amour, not to mention libertine pornography. But if the Song extends the standard range of Western love literatures, it also amplifies the range of religious expression. The Song marks an opening of religion to what we might call a poetics of aperotics. The persona of the Song may thus be seen as a figure who promises the coupling without final consummation of God and desire—“sensual and deferred love . . . passion and ideal.”

The Song of Songs confronts us with a desire that desires beneath desire and beyond desire while remaining desire. It is a desire that spills out beyond the limits of the Song itself, sending innumerable ripples throughout many readings—rabbinitic, cabalistic, Patristic, mystical, and
more. Indeed, I have been claiming that it reverberates right down into the most contemporary of voices, not only in philosophy and theology but in art and literature too. Let us leave the last words to Molly Bloom, one of the most powerful contemporary reincarnations of the Shulammite woman. Here is Molly’s unconditional yes to love:

What else were we given all those desires for I’d like to know I can’t help it if Im 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."
of indetermination are incontestably favorable to the freeing of the nuptial held in reserve within the erotic."

70. Ibid., 270.
71. Ibid., 271 and 274–75.
72. Ibid., 274. Julia Kristeva, Tales of Love, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 97, also speaks of "an impossibility set up as amatory law." She understands religion here as "the celebration of the secret of reproduction, the secret of pleasure, of life and death" within, over and against the limits of law and language.

73. Kristeva, Tales of Love, 96.

SUFFERING EROS AND TEXTUAL INCARNATION: A KRISTEVAAN READING OF KABBALISTIC POETICS | ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

To Virginia, for suffering eros in the eros of suffering.

4. My analysis accords in significant ways with the feminist reading of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body and the phenomenology of the flesh offered by Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 86–111. For a nuanced description of the body as an inscriptive surface, a conception that may be usefully applied to kabbalistic sources, see ibid., 138–59. See also Henri Maldiney, "Flesh and Verb in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty," in Chasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 51–76. On the textual nature of the semiotic process of signifying the feminine body in the thought of Kristeva, see Shari Benstock, Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 23–46.