The Song of Songs: The Rhetoric of Love

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Recommended Citation
THE SONG OF SONGS:
THE RHETORIC OF LOVE

RHETORIC knows special triumphs in the Song of Songs. For with whatever persuasion one approaches or leaves the Song, one must deal with it rhetorically. The speech of this greatest of biblical poems is highly artificial. It is packed with rhetorical figures. Some of them are marvelously lucid in themselves but hopelessly opaque in context. Some are of an intrinsic opacity that makes any translation of meaning questionable: One must seize these by an ironclad intuition and hold them by a conviction of the same metal. All the figures, no matter what their surface simplicity or complexity, are remote, abstruse, patent of an ambiguity of circumstance or characterization that will allow no less than two meanings and will often permit a half-dozen or more, going as far as the rhetorical training, the human experience, and the poetic graces of the reader can take him.

One cannot fight shy of rhetoric in the Song of Songs. Whether one sees the book as an unparalleled flight of mysticism or a paean of praise of sexual union, it works its way in terms of rhetoric. It calls a cheek a cheek, a breast a breast, and an eye an eye. But it also calls a cheek a piece of pomegranate, a breast a young roe, an eye a weapon that wounds, and brings up among the heavy artillery of love one hair on the neck. It does not hesitate to compare the whole neck to "the tower of David, which is built with bulwarks," a thousand small round shields hanging on it, "all the armour of valiant men" (4:4)—the literal-minded can perhaps be forgiven for seeing in this formidable piece of anatomy something less than a comely object.

But the Song of Songs is not for the literal-minded. Those who think, as they read, by the letter, must surely be outraged by the bride's description of her beloved: his head like gold, his hair like
the branches of palm trees, his eyes (as well as hers) dove eyes, his cheeks concentrated perfume, his lips lilies oozing myrrh, his hands not only of marble but cast in pillars and erect on gold foundations, his shape like a cedar of Lebanon (see 5:11–15). Those, on the other hand, who by temperament or training are always constrained to go beyond the letter are not made unhappy by such figures. They recognize here an ancient art, practiced with at least as much zeal by pagans as by Jews. If the Jews did rather better by intuition than the Greeks and the Romans did by academic system, the pagans could claim that they had systematized the study of rhetoric and had provided a vocabulary and a method with which to judge not only the products of pedantry but also those of sacred inspiration.

ANCIENT RHETORIC

Aristotle’s definitions—and those of Isocrates and Cicero and Quintilian—are not very far from the structure or the effect of the Song of Songs, whatever its purpose may be. Rhetoric, like dialectic, is “concerned with such things as come, more or less, within the general ken of all men and belong to no definite science.” It “may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” How does one persuade? By ratiocination, by which Aristotle means syllogistic reasoning, an infrequent recourse of Old Testament poets. By understanding, by which he intends “human character and goodness in their various forms”—certainly not an alien art to the writers of the Bible. By understanding the emotions, by which, Aristotle makes clear, he means the ability “to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited”—equally not an unknown discipline to the makers of the Book. The rhetorical craft is persuasive speech; its use “is to lead to decisions.” Thus rhetoricians employ their understanding of the emotions, “those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgements, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure.”

This broad understanding of rhetoric was general among the ancients. Isocrates, of the genre about it. Rhetoric has for subject is human happiness. It cannot be a kind of art which can implant I has never existed and does not confess that power will grow weary before such an education is ever can be effected by rhetoric:

People can become better and we speak well, if they become possess their hearers, and, finally, if they speak well—I do not mean “advantage” in empty-minded, but advantage in the The “true meaning” of “advantage sense of that term, a correct status, and an instinct for the sources of which are the virtue of learning and practicing the Cicero, defending the poet as an alien, feels impelled to speak for is that kind of literate “read in nearly every nation un is confined to its own boundaries. He votary” he is, “exalts the nation “those who stake their lives incentive to peril and endurance Other pursuits belong not to a gives stimulus to our youth an charm to success, and offers a home it delights, in the world it on all our journeying, and in our companions.

5. Isocrates, Antidosis, 274–276 (Library”; London: Heinemann, 1929)
8. Ibid., 16, p. 25.
ancients. Isocrates, of the generation before Aristotle, is very clear about it. Rhetoric has for subject matter almost all that is. Its object is human happiness. It cannot always achieve its ambitious end—"the kind of art which can implant honesty and justice in depraved natures has never existed and does not now exist, and the people who profess that power will grow weary and cease from their vain pretensions before such an education is ever found." But a palpable improvement can be effected by rhetoric:

People can become better and worthier if they conceive an ambition to speak well, if they become possessed of the desire to be able to persuade their hearers, and, finally, if they set their hearts on seizing their advantage—I do not mean "advantage" in the sense given to that word by the empty-minded, but advantage in the true meaning of that term. 5

The "true meaning" of "advantage" is self-interest in the highest moral sense of that term, a combination of material well-being, good reputation, and an instinct for the right action, "in a word, happiness," the sources of which are the virtues. 6 And rhetoric is the signal means of learning and practicing the virtues.

Cicero, defending the poet Archias against expulsion from Rome as an alien, feels impelled to go beyond the poet to poetry. What he speaks for is that kind of literature which makes Greek the language "read in nearly every nation under heaven, while the vogue of Latin is confined to its own boundaries. . . ." Literature, whose "unashamed votary" he is, "exalts the nation whose high deeds it sings"; it offers "those who stake their lives to fight in honor's cause . . . a lofty incentive to peril and endeavour." 7 Its range is all of life:

Other pursuits belong not to all times, all ages, all conditions; but this gives stimulus to our youth and diversion to our old age; this adds a charm to success, and offers a haven of consolation to failure. In the home it delights, in the world it hampers not. Through the night-watches, on all our journeying, and in our hours of country ease, it is our unfailling companion. 8

8. Ibid., 16, p. 25.
The greatness of poetry is that it goes beyond any kind of system, any sort of training; and where it goes is to a divine source:

We have it on the highest and most learned authority that while other arts are matters of science and formula and technique, poetry depends solely upon an inborn faculty, is evoked by a purely mental activity, and is infused with a strange supernal inspiration. Rightly, then, did our great Ennius call poets "holy," for they seem recommended to us by the benign bestowal of God. Holy then, gentlemen, in your enlightened eyes let the name of poet be, inviolate hitherto by the most benighted of races! The very rocks of the wilderness give back a sympathetic echo to the voice; savage beasts have sometimes been charmed into stillness by song; and shall we, who are nurtured upon all that is highest, be deaf to the appeal of poetry?

Cicero makes the most direct connection between poetry and rhetoric, one which is both technical and moral: He has the right to indulge in literature because "my devotion to letters strengthens my oratorical powers, and these, as they are, have never failed my friends in their hour of peril." He has learned of the glory and honor, which alone make life worth living, from literature; from literature come the incentives to right action. Unlike Plato, Cicero trusts the poet; more, he depends upon him. Nor does he always require a poetry of high moral issue and correlative tone. He speaks to extol the poet as a poet, simply because he is a poet, with the inspiration that partakes of the divine. He has seen him improvise lengths of verse on events of the day without having to commit any of it to paper. He reminds his listeners that the islands of Greece fight among each other for the honor of a dead poet's birthplace, "merely because he was a poet; and shall a living poet be repudiated by us?"

**ORIGEN**

This is the background against which the Song of Songs was read in the West by Christians trained in the rhetorical traditions of Greece and Rome. This is the way Origen, the first commentator on the Song who was not a rabbi, inevitably came to look at the text, as did

9. Ibid., 18–19, p. 27.
10. Ibid., 13, p. 21.
11. Ibid., 19, p. 29.
St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, St. Bernard, William of St. Thierry, Richard of St. Victor, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and all other men and women who plunged into the letter seeking the spirit beneath the surface. Apart from any religious allegorizing, apart from any elaborate accommodation of the text to exalted spiritual motif, there was the inexorable conviction of a work designed to persuade, "to lead to decisions." There was, as there had to be for all trained in classical rhetoric, an awareness of the play of "feelings that so change men as to affect their judgements. . . . " There was a sense of the tension of souls seeking perfection, even if all the actions that tensed the souls were bodily ones. There was, obvious for all to see, all the classical apparatus of a rhetoric and a poetry so constructed as to bring men (in Isocrates' figure) to seize their advantage, to grasp a writing (in Cicero's words) that "exalts the nation whose high deeds it sings." The pagan rhetorical tradition was basis enough to allow the saints to read the Song in depth. They did not need to rest their case—to the extent that they bothered to construct and to state a case—on the divine inspiration of Scripture.

Origen reminds his readers within a few paragraphs of the beginning of his commentary of the noble pagan precedents for both the form and content of the Song of Songs:

Among the Greeks, indeed, many of the sages, desiring to pursue the search for truth in regard to the nature of love, produced a great variety of writings in this dialogue form, the object of which was to show that the power of love is none other than that which leads the soul from earth to the lofty heights of heaven, and that the highest beatitude can

12. As early as 383, St. Jerome translated Origen's homilies on the Song of Songs into Latin and in his own interpretation followed Origen’s accommodations very closely. Though in controversy he later repudiated a radical Origenism, he never disavowed the several positions he had taken up with regard to the Song. He could not. For on the basis of texts taken from the Song he had made his most eloquent statements in defense of virginity and in praise of a life of total dedication in the world: "Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in thee" [4:7]. What can be fairer than a soul which is called daughter of God and seeks no outward mourning? She believes in Christ and enriched by this ambition she goes to her Spouse, having her Lord for Bridegroom. " (Letter LIV, in St. Jerome, Select Letters, trans. F. A. Wright, "Loeb Classical Library"; London: Heinemann, 1933, p. 233.) “Carnal love is overcome by spiritual love: desire is quenched by desire: what is taken from the one is added to the other. Nay rather, as you lie upon your couch, say these words and repeat them continually: 'In my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loveth... '(3:1)." (Letter XXII, ibid., p. 89.)
only be attained under the stimulus of love's desire. Moreover, the disputations on this subject are represented as taking place at meals, between persons whose left banquet, I think, consists of words and not of meats. And others also have left us written accounts of certain arts, by which this love might be generated and augmented in the soul.13

It is true that some "carnal men have perverted these arts to foster vicious longings and the secrets of sinful love." Even the wise and learned among the Greeks were subject to the temptation to "interpret in a vicious and carnal sense the things the ancients wrote with good and spiritual intent. . . ." It is a temptation that remains. We must, by prayer and action, beseech God to permit us to see things whole. From the very beginning, Origen says, following Philo, there have been two kinds of men, some created "in the image and likeness of God," some "formed of the slime of the earth."14 As a reading of Scripture, this is less than felicitous, not to speak of its theological limitations, but it sets the literary tone, at least, for that dichotomy which Origen spent so much time describing and combatting, the split between the outer man, with his tendency to corruption, and the inner, who is day by day renewed.15 The terms here are St. Paul's (see 2 Cor 4:16; Rom 7:22; Eph 3:16). Elsewhere the struggle is dramatized in the conflict between Jacob and Esau, surrogates, according to Origen, for the spirit and the flesh.

For those who find in Origen's exegetical method a torturing of scriptural texts to reveal doctrinal truths, it should be added that he is nowhere as simple-minded as brief summation must make him appear. He does translate events into doctrine, and sometimes recklessly. But the underlying method is at least sound rhetorically. He recognizes that words commonly, in the most ordinary usage, have multiple val-

14. Origen, The Song of Songs, pp. 24-25; GCS, VIII, 63, 64.
15. St. Jerome solves the problem of carnality in the Song by resort to other scriptural books as preparation for reading it. In his famous letter to Laeta on the education of her daughter Paula, he prescribes a sequence of readings starting with the Psalms and Proverbs, and then proceeding by way of Ecclesiastes, the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, the Prophets, the Heptateuch, Kings and Chronicles, to Ezra and Esther. "Then at last she may safely read the Song of Songs: if she were to read it at the beginning, she might be harmed by not perceiving that it was the song of a spiritual bridal expressed in fleshly language." (Op. cit., p. 365.)
For ever, the distant meals, between the lot of meats. And by which this love

These arts to foster in the wise and

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We must, the things whole. Philo, there have and likeness of

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He recognizes the multiple val-


they resort to other letter to Laeta on readings starting of Ecclesiastes, the and Chronicles, to of Songs; if the perceiving that it (Op. cit., p. 365.)

ues. No word, no matter how simple, can escape some overtone of a second or third meaning. The figurative always hovers over the literal. When St. John the Evangelist writes: "I have written to you, children, because you have known the Father; I have written you, fathers, because you have known Him who was from the beginning; I have written you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one" (see I Jn 2:12-14), he uses the designations of paternity and childhood in more than one sense. There are self-evidently outer meanings, those which conform to the age and function of the body, and inner ones, those which conform to the age, or maturity, or grace, of the soul. It is the exegete's responsibility to discover which childhood or which paternity is meant by such sayings, the physical and outer one or the spiritual and inner one. The same words are used for both, a duality which conforms to man's double nature. 16

The subtlety of Origen's reading is demonstrated in his commentary on the text:

Thy name is as oil poured out:
therefore young maidens have loved thee.

Draw me:
we will run after thee to the odor of thy ointments.

(1:2-3)

The bride tells us "that she is running towards the fragrance of the bridegroom's ointments under the compulsion of one single sense, the sense of smell alone." She does so either because she still needs to make speed, to make progress, or she does so to lead others. "What, do you think, will they do when the word of God takes possession of their hearing, their sight, their touch, and their taste as well, and offers excellences from Himself that match each single sense according to its nature and capacity," he asks. This is in time, in this life. In the next, there is other food, other nourishment, for each of the senses, "which a man still clothed in skin and flesh and bones and sinews cannot ... take." But even now, in order to grasp what is really meant, those who hear such things must "mortify their carnal senses." They must not apply these texts to the senses of the body but rather to the "divine senses of the inner man." Yet, the divine

senses suffer from infirmities just as the bodily ones do; interior vision can be "mislaid . . . by ignorance and inexperience," made "bleary as from the feebleness induced by some disease," and thus find itself unable "to discern good from evil by any means at all." The fragrance of the bridegroom offers man a "divine sense of scent," which has to be followed with the alertness modern man associates with bloodhounds. What one with well-developed interior senses does at this stage of the Song of Songs is best described as "picking up the scent of Christ." 17

Origen is well aware that to one outside the faith such a reading may seem nonsense. But, he says, with an elaborate play on words, if among the faithful "there should be anyone . . . who does not accept a spiritual exegesis on these lines, but scorns and disparages it, let us try to instruct and persuade him from other passages of Scripture, in the hope that perhaps he may return to his senses." 18 And so he goes to other texts that offer light to the eyes, understanding to the ears, a good odor, a sweet taste, and the word of life to be handled with the hands. The psalms and the New Testament offer an abundance of such texts, in which the senses appealed to are those of the spirit rather than the body.

WILLIAM OF ST. THIERRY

COMMENTS ON the Song of Songs are replete with this rhetoric of the senses. William of St. Thierry, nine centuries later, makes as much of the two faces of man—the face of his soul and the face of his body—as Origen had of the two sets of senses. The bride remembers the bridegroom courting her, and asking, with a special earnestness, a fitting eagerness in a culture where women are veiled: "Show me thy face, my sister" (see 2:14). By William's time, it was an unshakable conviction that the bridegroom of the Song of Songs was, like the bridegroom of the eighteenth psalm and of Isaiah 62:5, the figure of the Christ explicitly identified by Jesus in His parable of the wise and foolish virgins (see Mt 25:5-6, 10) as well as in His rhetorical question: "Can the children of the bridegroom mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the

17. Origen, The Song of Songs, pp. 76-81; GCS, VIII, 102-106.
18. Origen, The Song of Songs, p. 82; GCS, VIII, 106.
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The bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then they shall fast” (Mt 9:15). Thus for William, the bridegroom who asks his bride to unveil is that Sun of justice who has made the light of His face and the splendor of His truth “to shine before the eyes of all.” Thus “the soul of good will . . . the man, that is to say, who is Christ’s brother and whose soul is called His sister” yearns to appear before Him without adornment and in His light to see light.

If she is a sinner, she shows to thee the face of her misery, and seeks for the face of thy mercy. If she is holy, she runs to meet thee with the face of her righteousness, and finds in thee a face resembling her own; for thou, O righteous Lord, lestest all righteousness. But the soul that has a harlot’s brow has no desire to blush, and, fleeing from thy truth, comes face to face with thy most fearful justice. For the human soul turns to thee as many faces as she has dispositions. Yet thou, O Truth, receivest all and, though thou dost adapt thyself to all, thou art thyself unchanged. Devout humility finds in thee friendly flavor; a burning love finds sweetest fuel for its flames; the lowly heart’s contrition finds in thee the righteousness it sought; the harlot’s brow finds itself put to shame. 20

The special grace of the rhetoric of the Song of Songs is that it makes accessible, at least to those who find their ease in Origen’s and William’s kind of accommodation, a most firmly fleshed Godhead. The face of Christ is very clear to William, and a burning magnet: “If our soul’s face does not seek thy face, her face is not a human face at all, but a beast’s face and a mask.” [By contrast], an enemy . . . finds in thee a fiery oven; a sinner finds the portion of his cup, fetter and flames, sulphur and stormy winds; the proud finds the power that resists the proud; the hypocrite the light of truth that he abhors. And all these, whose consciences are branded each

19. See the Introduction to William’s exposition of the Song (PL 153:475) in which he explains the reasons for the name of the book: the nobility of its sentiments, the excellence of its subject, and the way it leads the reader to all the ancient canticles of the patriarchs and prophets. Specifically, says William, this structure is employed to deal with bridegroom and bride, that is, with Christ and the rational soul. Its subject is, then, the love of God, a love of which God is both the object and the subject. In the course of his introduction, William stresses the experience of God the Song describes: God condescends to enter into the soul of him who loves Him, to make His dwelling there. The remote becomes familiar. The terrifying distance between God and man is reduced to lengths that man can cover.

with the face of his own particular evil, present in general the face of unrepentant badness.

William, dense he says with misery, lifts his face to the Lord, "the face of my sore plight and my great blindness," the face that finds its first bones and flesh in the rhetoric of the Song of Songs. 21

The Song serves William well. When he considers the fruits of the Incarnation, the figure he uses is out of the Song; for what has the Lord been doing in His dealings with man but "sweetly ordering all things for the sake of the daughters of Jerusalem." Then he identifies the daughters: "Souls devout but weak as yet, who, since their faculties are not yet trained to contemplate those lofty mysteries, nevertheless love to be touched and moved by the lowliness wherein thou art made like unto themselves." 22 William's touch is sure, his reading graceful. In a few words he accounts for the sensuality of the daughters of Jerusalem, who "love to be touched," and for their taunting manner, their "lowliness." And with the same words he describes the magic of the Song of Songs for all who find in it a language of worship, that it is Christ Himself who is there associated with the lowly and the weak, Christ Himself, the condign sign of whose human condition is the flesh He has taken on. In the Song of Songs the language of worship is the language of love, manifestly fleshly love. Nothing, for the mystic, better signifies spiritual love. Nothing better describes the mystery of hypostatic union which is instinct in the Incarnation.

Thus, in the boldest and most commanding of William of St. Thierry's glosses of this text, he transmutes the fruit of the garden of the bridegroom in the Song, and the honey and the wine, which he has eaten and drunk and of which he has invited others to partake, into the food of the Last:

The invitation in the Song

I am come into my garden, my friend,
I have gathered my myrrh, my frankincense,
I have eaten the honey and the wine,
Eat, O friends, and be satisfied with the love of your God.

[What] happier arrangement could he want to ascend to his God?

William, examining the text, say: "When I loved you, I lay hold on me, that I might abundantly, beloved, unite you to me in the bliss of the Father are one," and in love through the Holy and making His abode with us, in the mystery of the holy Jesus Christ. 23

FRAY LUIS DE LEÓN

No commentators beyond the Spaniards for the legend of faith. The Augustinian Franciscan and Chaldaic scholar Fray Luis de León criticized the accuracy of the friar's devotion to the Song, translated it into Spanish, and added the conclusion of the friar to the Song as a Jewish ancestry and wise

21. Ibid., pp. 62–63, 64. William is fascinated by the likeness of the human face to the divine. It is not, he explains in his Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei, something that man wills: The first resemblance between man and God exists whether or not man wants it, whether or not he is capable of understanding what it means. But there is a further likeness which is voluntary, in which the soul is on fire to copy in some way the sublimity of the sovereign Being by the splendor of its own virtue and to imitate, if only by perseverance, the immutability of God. This is the motivating force of William's mystical theology and the axis of his attraction to the Song of Songs, in which the imitation of God's grandeur is made uniquely explicit. (See Un traité de la vie solitaire: Lettre aux frères du Mont-Dieu, ed. and trans. M-M. Davy, Paris: Vrin, 1944, pp. 285–289, especially the concluding paragraphs, 106–119.)

in general the face of the Lord, "the face that finds the face" to the Lord, "the face of the Lord." Then he identifies the face that finds the face, and the face of the Lord, as that which is sure, his reading of the daughters of Jerusalem. For nowhere else in the Song of Songs does he describe the face that finds the face, as a language of worship... the garden and the wine, which were associated with the lowly and the human. The language of whose human contact with a Man who had the likeness of the human dignity was the language of fleshly love. Nothing, indeed, perhaps nothing better describes the mystery of its exact in the Incarnation. In the Com-mentators are more aware of "the float of likeness" than the Spaniards for whom the Song of Songs is like an article of faith. The Augustinian Fray Luis de León, for example, whose Hebrew and Chaldaic scholarship were such that he could not refrain from criticizing the accuracy of the Latin of the Vulgate Bible, was so devoted to the Song that at some danger to himself he translated it into Spanish, and added a learned commentary. The result was denunciation of the friar to the Inquisition as a man of dubious, that is, Jewish ancestry and with an even more questionable addiction to the

William, examining the picture of the Passion closely, seems to hear it say: "When I loved you, I loved you to the end. Let death and hell lay hold on me, that I may die their death; eat, friends, and drink abundantly, beloved, unto life eternal." The parallel is clear enough. William sees in the invitation of the Song to eat and be inebriated ("drink abundantly") the great tender of the Incarnation.

[What] happier arrangement could have been made for the man who wanted to ascend to his God . . . than that, instead of going up by steps to the altar, he should walk calmly and smoothly, over the floor of likeness, to a Man like himself, who tells him on the very threshold, "I and the Father are one," and that forthwith, being himself gathered up to God in love through the Holy Spirit, he should receive God coming to himself and making His abode with him, not spiritually only but corporeally too, in the mystery of the holy and life-giving Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.23
biblical readings of the rabbis. Imprisonment did not dim the fires of his love for the Song. He published an expanded version of his commentary, in Latin, and he grounded the most polished of his theological-rhetorical expositions, that on *The Names of Christ*, in the language and figures of the Song of Songs.

For Fray Luis, as for Duns Scotus before him and Suarez just after, the universe was created to make possible the Incarnation. The Song broadens and deepens our understanding of this end and purpose of all creation, as it makes vivid the physical figure of the Lord. The Song provides us with a poetic description of Christ’s body (see 5:11-15, quoted above).²⁴ It makes Jesus palpable in the figure of the Good Shepherd; and Fray Luis is quick to point to all the texts that proclaim the zeal, the urgency, and the solicitude of the Shepherd’s husbandry: ²⁵

Show me, O thou whom my soul loveth,
where thou feedest,
where thou liest in the midday,
Lest I begin to wander
after the flocks of thy companions.

(1:6)

Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one,
and come.

For winter is now past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers have appeared in our land,
the time of pruning is come:
the voice of the turtle is heard in our land:
The fig tree hath put forth her green figs:
the vines in flower yield their sweet smell.

Arise my love, my beautiful one, and come.

(2:10-13)

Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my undefiled:
For my head is full of dew,
and my locks of the drops of the nights.

(5:2)

²⁵. See ibid., pp. 57-70.
The latter text is to him a sign of the Shepherd’s vigilance, of His rising before dawn, or refusing any sleep at all, as He seeks eternal entrance into the hearts of men. No text better describes the tender care,

the merciful ways in which God prevents a man from being lost, even when he seeks his own damnation . . . His unwillingness to admit defeat in spite of our repeated ingratitude, His compassing us about on all sides in an attempt to enter within us, His hand always upon the latch of the gate of our heart, His pleading in gentle and loving words to open to Him, as if nothing else mattered to Him. . . .26

Greater even than Shepherd among the names of Christ is that of Bridegroom. For in this name is compounded several central cycles of creation. Here is the growth of the world in time from infancy until that ultimate marriage which will bring time to an end. Here are the states of nature, of the law, and of grace. Here is the history of the Church, from childhood to maturity, with the Bridegroom playing in each age the suitable role, the whole narrative chronicled in the Song of Songs:

Thus, in the first part of the Canticle, which takes us to the middle of the second chapter, God speaks of things which reflect the condition of His spouse in the state of nature and the type of love which the Bridegroom has for her. From this passage (see 2:13) to the fifth chapter the state of the law is described. The remainder of the Canticle is a symbol of Christ’s love for His spouse in the period or age of grace.27

With this structure before him, Fray Luis does not find it difficult to describe the Church’s history in the rhetorical figures of the Song. As a young girl, the spouse uses “the privileges of her childhood and, manifesting the impatience which strong desires arouse at that age,” begs for the Bridegroom’s kisses (see 1:1). In the second state of life, when the spouse is in bondage in Egypt, the Bridegroom comes to deliver her. She is summoned, in Fray Luis’s interpretation of the Song, in “beautiful figures,” and who can deny the force of this reading of the rhetoric? The Bridegroom calls: “Arise, make haste, my love . . . winter is now past, the rain is over . . .” (2:10–11). Again the

26. Ibid., pp. 151-152.
27. Ibid., p. 212.
call comes, and "as one who is older and more daring, she gladly answers. . . ." She goes to seek her divine Lover: "In my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loveth . . . and found him not . . . in the streets and the broad ways I will seek him . . ." (3:1-2). When she finds him, she holds him tight, promising she will not let him go until she has brought him into the "mother's house, and into the chamber of her that bore me" (3:4).

Fray Luis's comment on this verse is that the bride always "bore" the Bridegroom "before her" until she came into the promised land. His reading goes through each of the stages of history, each of the ages of the Church, all figured in terms of the bride's progress through the Song and revealed in the exalted language of the rhetoric of love. The exquisite lauds of the fourth chapter, in which the King-Bridegroom praises each of His bride's beauties in sequence, are part of a masterful military figure, according to Fray Luis. The Bridegroom sees His spouse spread before Him like the tribes of Israel marching through the desert by day and encamped by night. Fray Luis sees the tribes configured by each of the bride's parts—her eyes are by day the cloud that led the Israelites, by night the pillar of fire; her hair, the vanguard of the column; her teeth, the tribes of Gad and Ruben; her lips, priests and Levites; her cheeks, the tribe of Ephraim; her neck, Dan; her breasts, the sustaining figures of Moses and Aaron. In the promised land, the spouse is "a garden enclosed" (4:12). In the last epoch, that of grace, Christ comes to His bride, asking her to open to Him (see 5:2); when the people—His people, His spouse—appear reluctant, He says sadly:

I have put off my garment,  
how shall I put it on?  
I have washed my feet,  
how shall I defile them?

(5:3)

Once again He departs, this time to seek another more grateful people; once again the bride searches for Him, crying out as she goes about the city. And so the narrative continues, as Fray Luis tells it, until the spouse has grown to such a stature, in her love and knowledge, that she is no longer confined to one nation; she embraces the world, and in peace and prayer marriage in an eternity of joy.

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

Fray Luis went to prison with the Songs. In prison, St. John of the Cross, with the matter and much of the substance of the Song, or two other poems. Through his Mitigated Carmelites, he would eat a Redemption of dry bread and one sardine or two other meals per day, for months of his captivity, his union. Like the bride in the Song, the bride, he sought help from all creatures:

O wood, Planted
O meadow, Enamelled
Say if He

28. See ibid., pp. 202-217; can be found in the appearance of Notre Dame de la Fosse, the feast day of the apparition of the Virgin at the time of the pruning, the voice of "let thy voice sound in my patience. On July 2, the Feast of the Magdalene, who has certain all creatures: the daughters of Jerusalem made mention of verses from chapter 3 (28:2) for final deliverance from the Song. The Magdalene, who has certain the broad ways of the city, it speaks the language of marriage to speak of the souls of employment of Song rhetoric.

more daring, she gladly
looked for her Lover: "In my bed by
night, and found him not...
will seek him..."

tight, promising she
would enter the "mother's
way" (3:4).

be always "bore"
to the promised land.

of history, each of the
bride's progress through
of the rhetoric of love.

which the King-Bride-
sequence, are part of
Fray Luis. The Bridegroom
tribes of Israel marching
night. Fray Luis sees
parts—her eyes are by
the pillar of fire; her
kiss, the tribes of Gad
her cheeks, the tribe of
sustaining figures of
spouse is "a garden en-
time of pruning, the voice of the turtle dove. "Make haste," the lover cries,
"let thy voice sound in my ears": The Church is in the sta-
patience. On July 2, the Feast of the Visitation, the Epistle echoes these
sentiments, as the whole passage, so long seen as an invocation of the Incarnation (see 2:8-14),
is quoted: The Church is to be delivered from bondage, redemption has come.
Finally, on July 22, the feast day of St. Mary Magdalene, a masterly combination
of verses from chapter 3 (2-5) and from chapter 8 (6-7) signifies the search
for final deliverance from the world and the ultimate achievement of divine union.
The Magdalene, who has certainly of all brides sought her love in the streets and
the broad ways of the city, and who beyond all others has the right to caution
the daughters of Jerusalem not to stir up love until they are quite prepared for
it, speaks the language of maturity. A multiple identity, of saint, spouse, and Church,
not to speak of the souls of the faithful, is the handsome achievement of this em-
ployment of Song rhetoric.

29. St. John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle, or more precisely, "Songs between the
Soul and the Spouse," Stanza IV. The translation here is as literal as possible.
See, for comparison, and for the Spanish text, Roy Campbell, The Poems of St.
John of the Cross (London: Harvill, 1951), p. 15; also The Complete Works
of St. John of the Cross, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (Westminster: Newman,
1953), II, 45, 419.
The creatures offer little help: The bridegroom had passed through their groves, “scattering a thousand graces” as he hurried by. In the many verses consecrated to the bride, and the seven in which the bridegroom speaks, the freshness of St. John’s verse is unmistakable, but so too are the texture, the tone, the very images of the Song of Songs. The bride compares her beloved to the mountains; he sees her as a dove. She recalls that he loved to watch one hair on her neck flutter in the breeze. She comes into the bridegroom’s garden, under his apple tree. And in her final verses, the final ones of St. John’s Canticle, the bride echoes the rejoicing of the last lines of the scriptural Canticle, as she asks her lover to drink the new wine with her, and to bring her what her soul has so long desired, to consume her in a flame that cannot pain.

St. John sings songs both more explicit and more oblique than the great Song. He imposes upon the imagery of Scripture his own mountain, Carmel, and his own night, the dark night of the soul. He adds and subtracts at will, to construct what is still the most thorough and the most compelling of systematic mystical theologies. But the Song is always a counterpoint to his melodies: Only the psalms, among his scriptural sources, appear more often. For in the Song he finds a constant reiteration of the theology of the Gospels, of St. Paul, of the book of Wisdom, of the book of Job, and something more besides, a language of human experience—of his own experience. When in the course of his commentary on the Spiritual Canticle he comes to find a verbal likeness for transforming union, he reinforces again and again the bride’s cry in his own poems, imploring a stream to reflect on its crystalline surface the eyes of her beloved, the eyes “which I hold outlined in my inmost parts.” 30 St. Paul means the same thing when he says: “I live, now not I; but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Following this image of transformation, it can be said that St. Paul’s life and his Lord’s have become one through the union of love. And so it may be for any one of us in this life, though less than perfect fulfillment; “the soul may reach such a transformation of love as in the spiritual marriage, which is the highest estate that can be attained in this life. . . .” By “comparison with the perfect image of transformation in glory,” this is only an outline of love. But it is happiness enough; it pleases the beloved. Hence, seeking to be held

30. Spiritual Canticle, Stanza XI.
in the bride's soul, he says: "Put me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm" (8:6). The heart, St. John explains, "signifies the soul, whereupon God is set in this life as the seal of an outline of faith," and the arm represents a strong will, "wherein it is as the seal of an outline of love." St. John has found his theology in St. Paul; but his rhetorical figure, the one he uses in his own poem, comes from the Song, which was in every way his spiritual canticle and the seal of his faith and of his love.

The most compelling rhetoric in the Song of Songs is, for St. John, that of identity, multiple identity. The many exchanges of personae in the Song of Songs are paralleled again and again in his songs, for this is the root meaning of the Song to the mystic, this its special suasion and enduring grace: What is accomplished in the intimate union of bride and bridegroom is not a mere physical coupling but a radical transformation of personality in which the one somehow becomes the other. The bride enters into the bridegroom, just as the bridegroom enters into her. Each goes into the other's garden. Each describes the other in images incomparably voluptuous, even in the literature of the East, where the love of the spirit so often finds translation into the language of the love of the body. And regularly, the mystics have interchanged and drawn together these images so that, for example, the breasts that are unmistakably the bride's may, in figurative language, become the bridegroom's—that is, Christ's, the Lord's—and all manner of meaning may be accommodated to them: the two Testaments or the two Laws or Israel and the Gentiles. It is all a way of saying, with considerable richness of image and subtlety of phrase, that the Incarnation effects a double movement of the spirit, the divine inhabiting the human and the human seeking a corresponding enclosure in the divine. What is sought is nothing less than mystical marriage, and, at least in the vision of the Song that is the mystics', it is found.

32. See, for example, Richard of Saint-Victor, Benjamin Major, V, 14 (PL 196:186), for the gloss on Song 8:5 ("Who is this that cometh up from the desert, flowing with delights, leaning upon her beloved?"). See also Richard's Commentary on the Canticles (PL 196:406-523), especially chaps. 26, 27, 32, 33, and 35.
33. For a pellucid explanation of the compelling power of the rhetoric of marriage as it is employed in the Song of Songs, see St. Bonaventure, Vitis Mystica in
St. John makes this aim of the mystics, this holy aim, this brazen one, into beguiling poetry. The eyes the bride seeks on the surface of the stream are at once the bridegroom's and her own: She yearns for eyes "I hold outlined in my inmost parts." She has drunk "in the cellar" of her beloved, where he "gave" her "his breast" and instructed her in "a science most delectable." The wisdom she gathered was such that in the world's eyes she could only be counted lost. The relationship—the exchange of persons—removed her entirely from the ways of the world; only in a geography of the spirit could she be found: "From now on I am neither seen nor found... wandering love-stricken, I lost my way and was found." 34

The paradoxes of this relationship can only be expressed in an arcane rhetoric by a rhetorician who does not fear the utmost devi­ousness, the most deliberate distortion of the natural world. The bridegroom flees the bride, in the opening verse of St. John's Canticle, like a stag. In conventional terms, the poet would describe the fleeing animal as wounded during the hunt, but in this poem it is the stag that wounds its pursuer, ultimately to be wounded itself—"in solitude"! St. John makes clear that the most lasting wounds are always received in solitude, for that is the only way divine love wounds and, in this special manner of speaking, is itself wounded. St. John's gloss on the wounding of the bridegroom, "who likewise in solitude was wounded by love," makes this clear by showing in the delicate crisscrossing of sensuality and spirituality where it is and how it is that God and man can consummate their love for each other.

"Who likewise in solitude was wounded by love." That is to say, by the love of the bride. For not only does the Spouse greatly love the solitude of the soul, but He is most deeply wounded with love for her, because she has desired to remain alone, and far from all things, inasmuch as


holy aim, this brazen seeks on the surface her own: She yearns. She has drunk "in her "his breast" and " The wisdom she could only be countable—removed her a geography of the in neither seen nor my way and was be expressed in an earth the utmost devi-
natural world. The verse of St. John's poet would describe but in this poem it be wounded itself—
t lasting wounds are aly way divine love 3, is itself wounded. room, "who likewise clear by showing in ality where it is and their love for each

That is to say, by the atly love the solitude love for her, because things, inasmuch as

As The Mystical Vine
ey, 1955), pp. 18-22. ment, see the twelfth-
ismicha, wrongly ascribed
Hit Sister, by Geoffrey
XXVI, XXVII, XXIX.

she has been wounded with love for Him. And thus He would not leave her alone; but rather, wounded by her through the solitude wherein for His sake she lives, and, seeing that she is content with naught else, He alone guides her to Himself, draws her to Himself and absorbs her in Himself; which He would not do in her had He not found her in spiritual solitude.35

The astonishing fact is that such a love can be consummated. St. John cannot quite reduce to rational explication either the fact or his astonishment over it. But he never loses control. He is simply confined to explaining that "the lower and sensual part of the soul is now so purified and in some manner [so] spiritualized in this estate of the spiritual marriage that she, together with her sensual faculties and natural forces, is recollected." In their own way the senses participate in the "spiritual grandeurs" implanted in the soul by God, as the psalmist signifies when he says: "My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God" (83:3).36

In explaining this, St. John comes as close as anyone ever has to explaining what it is that the mystic finds in the Song, which is to say, why it is that voluptuous language is so suitable for expressing an experience that seems beyond all others to transcend carnal delights. The last line of St. John's poem echoes the fearful Shulamite at the end of chapter 6 of the Song:

I went down into the garden...
to look if the vineyard had flourished...
I knew not: my soul troubled me
for the chariots of Aminadab.

(6:10-11)

St. John transforms the chariots, engines of the devil in the Song, into the cavalry of the senses: "And the cavalry came down at the sight of the waters." The cavalry stands for "the faculties of the sensual part, both interior and exterior," he explains, faculties which "carry within them the phantasms and figures of their objects." The waters are entirely spiritual; they are the grandeurs which God communicates to the soul. The cavalry does not drink the waters, however; it merely springs forward, "comes down," at the sight of them. Our sensuality is not equipped "to taste essentially and properly of

But our senses can be drawn into a state of recollection; they can be absorbed into a contemplation of the soul as it drinks the waters. The senses, it is clear now, are not rejected in the mystical life, but are on the contrary refreshed and delighted.

In the rhetoric of love, then, we have come full circle. We have not only used the vocabulary of the senses to communicate the operations of the spirit, but in the most exalted state of that communication, we have given particular attention, not to the spirit but to the place of the senses alongside it. St. John has paid a stirring tribute to human nature in his *Spiritual Canticle* and given us a handsome reminder of the analogy to the Incarnation which every human being offers in his own hypostatic union of body and soul.

**ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA**

Among the singers of the Song the most radiant are those who can effortlessly identify themselves with the bride. Sts. Teresa of Avila, Jeanne Françoise de Chantal, Catherine of Siena, and Thérèse of Lisieux found the rhetoric of espousal natural and welcomed every opportunity to use it. Though in each of these brides the flesh may be mortified, the language of the senses drawn from the Song of Songs is, as with St. John of the Cross, the appropriate one with which to express the passionate love of God.

In major legend and minor, the mystical marriage of St. Catherine of Siena is celebrated. Like St. Margaret Mary Alacoque and St. Thérèse after her, she consecrated herself to Christ at a very early age, seven to be exact. In her mid-twenties, she was rewarded with espousal for returning to nurse a fellow Beguine of St. Dominic who was twice repugnant to her, once for the ugly running sore on her breast and once for the revilement of her tongue. Espousal and its consolations were the greatest of her joys, for they offered constant assurance of the acceptance of her dedicated love. Her confessor and biographer, Fra Raimondo of Capua, tells us again and again how little she cared for anything, and least of all for her body, as long as she could give "free service to her eternal Spouse." 38


One of her ardent followers, Fra Tommaso Caffarini of Siena, narrates the details of the “admirable espousal” with compendiousness, imitating in his brief but jubilant chapters the Song itself. When, he explains, Catherine prayed for an increase of faith, the answer given her was the promise: “I will espouse myself to thee in perfect faith,” a promise soon enough fulfilled. Praying alone in her cell, she was drawn to her Lord by His mother, who begged her “divine Son . . . according to His promise to deign to espouse” Catherine “in perfect faith.” This, we are told, He did, bringing to her “a magnificent ring composed of four pearls and one diamond,” and assuring her that she could “henceforth . . . do without hesitation all things my providence places in thy hands.”

She followed the terms of that espousal, the terms of the Song, with a corresponding assurance. Her advice to Fra Raimondo was in itself a small canticle:

I wish that you hide yourself in the open side of the Son of God, which is an open shop full of perfumes, so much so that sin is perfumed. There the sweet Spouse reposes in a bed of fire and blood. There is seen and made manifest the secret of the Son of God. O distilled fountain which inebriates and satisfies all loving desire, and rejoices and illuminates all intelligence and fills the tired memory so that it retains nothing and understands nothing but the sweet and good Jesus. Blood and fire, inestimable blood! Therefore my soul would rejoice to see you thus plunged into it. I desire that you should do as he who draws water with a bucket and then pours it over something else. Pour, therefore, this water of holy desire over the heads of your brothers who are our members, bound as we are together in the body of the sweet Spouse.

It is advice she follows very closely herself. She tells Brother Raimondo in the same letter of going to see one Toldo of Perugia, sentenced to be executed for having spoken out against the ruling house of Siena, and bringing him such consolation and ease that he went easily to confession and then pleaded with her to stay with him at the time of execution, knowing almost before he asked that she would consent. She did, enacting in the condemned man’s life the role of the bride with a daring that one could not easily expect of any other woman, religious or lay. Toldo’s only fear was that at the very end he might lose courage: “But God tricked his fear by creating in

39. Ibid., pp. 81–82.
40. Ibid., p. III.
him a desire of God so loving and so inflamed that he could no longer live without Him." She reports: "I held his head against my breast; I felt then a great joy and it seemed to me I breathed the odor of his blood mixed with mine, that I so longed to pour out for the love of my sweet Spouse Jesus." When she felt Toldo become frightened once again she counseled: "Courage, my sweet brother, because soon we shall enter into the marriage feast." He then offered up his earthly life with every expectancy of the everlasting life that Catherine had held out to him and with the special hope that he would find her waiting for him in the life to come. "Bending over him I reminded him of the blood of the Lamb. His lips pronounced the words Jesus and Catherine, and as he said them I received his head in my hands." 41

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa of Avila's experiences with the Song were not so challenging as Catherine's, but in writing about its texts she took on a role that even her confessor thought unfitting for her or for any other woman. He ordered her to burn her little book of commentary on the Song of Songs, Conceptions of the Love of God, which in obedience she promptly did. Fortunately, the Duchess of Alba preserved an excellent copy of Teresa's gloss which she had received in the convent at Alba, and there was at least one other version extant when Father Gracian, some years after her death, came to publish a collected edition of St. Teresa's works. He may have needed some courage to print the Conceptions. Fray Luis de León, whose misadventures with the Song had ended in jail, had left it out of his edition of Teresa's works, some years before. It hardly needs to be added that nothing in Teresa's commentary justifies any fear.

St. Teresa's Conceptions is a small work and an articulate one, filled with both the tenderness and the hard tensile strength which invariably and inseparably identify her love of God. Its special message is best summed up in the words of one of her Exclamations of the Soul to God, where she celebrates the joy of suffering for, and in, the love of God: "Happy are they who find themselves laden with the strong fetters and chains of the gifts of God's mercy, so that

41. Ibid. pp. 112-114.

they are unable to get this point stick she try "love is strong as death; 'strong as death of rhetoric which she says: "Oh, that one this divine hell, when of finding oneself can except those of life. I because I do not die," she welfare, would that intolerable only because because God endures St. Teresa's love of Conceptions, as in more she attempts to stir preserve you from people! God forbid that perpetual war!" The juices, a relaxing into if not of vices then from the rules that disturbances may even in the love and fear "making a dwelling-time it will be possible are strong words, the and, "if taken literally normal state of mind, most sublime of love, the use of such words notwithstanding their p

42. Exclamations of Teresa of Jesus, trans. 1946), II, 419. For a 8:6, see Hugh of St. Religious of C.S.M.V., Mowbray, 1956), pp. 11
they are unable to gain the power to set themselves free." To make this point stick she transmutes some strong words from the Song—"love is strong as death, jealousy as hard as hell" (8:6)—into stronger ones—"strong as death is love and hard as hell." In a great burst of rhetoric which she garlands around these lines she says: "Oh, that one might die at the hands of love and be cast into this divine hell, whence there is no hope of escape, or rather, no fear of finding oneself cast forth from it!" Her love knows no bounds, except those of life. In a variation on her familiar plaint, "I die because I do not die," she cries again: "O life, that art the enemy of my welfare, would that one were permitted to end thee." This life is tolerable only because in it she can express her love: "I endure thee because God endures thee; I sustain thee because thou art His." 42

St. Teresa’s love of God has about it a kind of holy violence. In her Conceptions, as in most of the texts she wrote for her sisters in Carmel, she attempts to stir in others the tumult she felt in herself: "God preserve you from many kinds of peace experienced by worldly people! God forbid that you should ever know these, for they bring perpetual war!" The peace of the world is a stewing in one’s own juices, a relaxing into the stupor of self-contentment, an acceptance if not of vices then of faults, a willingness to indulge in deviations from the rules that bind religious. Temptations are all right. Inner disturbances may even be helpful, for they may make us watchful, in the love and fear of God, and lead us to the best of employments, "making a dwelling-place for our Spouse within the soul," so that in time it will be possible "to ask Him for the kiss of His mouth." These are strong words, she knows. They would shock a sinner, she is certain, and, "if taken literally, would strike fear into anyone who was in a normal state of mind." But in those drawn out of themselves by the most sublime of loves, there need be no fear; the Lord will forgive the use of such words and "even of more words of the kind, notwithstanding their presumption." Those who love this way can no

longer make discretion their central standard of behavior. If you know "by the effects" that God has heard your prayers to be kissed "with a kiss of His mouth . . . you need stop at nothing: you can forget yourselves altogether in order to please your gentlest Spouse." 43

The effects of which Teresa talks are those of "special friendship" with "His Majesty." They are the effects of a pervasive sweetness and tranquility, a peace brought to all the faculties of the soul by the prayer of quiet. The words that engender these reflections are those that follow the petition to be kissed by the Bridegroom: "Thy breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments" (1:1–2). And this too is a petition, not simply a cry of joyous admiration. For if the Bridegroom yields to the bride, in that curious inversion of physical roles which is acceptable only when the Lord plays the part of a mother, the result will be a "heavenly inebriation" here on earth.

When first in that state of inebriation, she felt it impossible to rise higher; but now that she finds herself in a loftier state, and wholly absorbed in God's indescribable greatness, she realizes how she has been nourished and makes this subtle comparison, saying: "Thy breasts are better than wine." For, just as a child has no idea how it grows, or how it takes its nourishment (since often, without any act or movement of its own, the milk is put into its mouth), so here the soul of itself knows nothing, and does nothing and neither knows nor is capable of understanding how or whence this exceeding great blessing has come to it. But it knows that it is the greatest blessing that can be enjoyed in life, even if all the delights and pleasures of the world should be put together and compared with it. It finds that it has been nourished and benefited, yet cannot understand how it can have deserved this. It has been instructed in great truths without having seen the Master who teaches it. It has been strengthened in the virtues and comforted by Him who so well knows how to comfort it and has also the power to do so. With what to compare this it knows not, save to the caress of a mother who so dearly loves her child and feeds and caresses it.44

44. Ibid., p. 384. St. John of the Cross is very fond of this rhetorical figure. He uses it frequently in the Ascent of Mount Carmel, the Dark Night of the Soul, and the Spiritual Canticle. See, for example, the opening of Dark Night of the Soul in The Complete Works, I, §30: "It must be known, then, that the soul, after it has been definitely converted to the service of God, is, as a rule, spiritually nurtured and caressed by God, even as is the tender child by its loving mother, who warms it with the heat of her bosom and nurtures it with sweet milk."
ST. JEANNE DE CHANTAL AND ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX

ST. JEANNE DE CHANTAL'S spirituality is no different in purpose from St. Teresa's. What Mother Teresa wanted to accomplish with her daughters in the Carmel of the reformed or discalced observance, the foundress of the Visitation nuns wanted to do with her sisters in religion. But the tone of the French nun is softer than that of the Spaniard. St. Jeanne draws from the texts of bride and bridegroom a more tender song, suitable not only to the passive state but also to the passive approach to it, which her temperament found natural. The exclamation points are fewer here, the rhetoric more directed to the intellect than to the will. The logic is, as she sees it, inescapable, its conclusions irrefutable. She argues like a bride who has met her bridegroom in a school of law, a fitting role for the great good friend of St. Francis de Sales.

The special suasio nubendi she offers her nuns is based on the Song of Songs. The apartments of the king in the Song, his "secret chamber," she identifies as "the religious state." Her argument is firm, well-founded, and, as one expects, thoroughly convincing to those listening:

You see, my daughters, when a king has had a secret chamber built in an ancient castle, this chamber is his delight and may be looked upon as his favorite abode. He embellishes it, he straightway fills it with delicate ornaments, scents and perfumes; he makes it the depository of his most precious possessions. To be invited to it is a mark of his special favor for in it he holds secret converse with his guest, they two, alone with each other; and there he entertains his dear spouse, the queen.45

Almost every appeal of St. Jeanne to her daughters is couched in terms of the Song. She asks them to strip themselves of everything except love of the King, like the spouse in the Song who cries out: "My beloved is mine and I am all his." All affection must be concentrated in Him; any other attachment is, whatever it may appear to

be, nothing more than dross and mire. Her instructions on prayer rest on the same rhetorical pedestal. She echoes the bride’s fervent “Draw me” of the Song; she reminds her listeners of the Bridegroom’s “longing to come back to our souls,” when He says: “Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is full of dew, and my locks of the drops of the nights” (5:2), a passage which she, in common with many others, reads in terms of the Passion. The dew represents the sufferings and the sweat on the cross; soon it “will be converted into pearls of consolation.” The voice of the turtle is “a devout soul very agreeable” to the Sacred Spouse at the time “when she presents herself before Him and meditates in order within herself to feed the holy love of Him.”

Of each of the words of the Song that St. Jeanne takes up she makes another codicil in the monumental deposition of love that is her system of prayer. Perhaps “system” is not the word. “Witness” would be better. For what she seeks to do is to testify to the fullness of the love of God and its all-encompassing reach through life and death. Thus the bride in the Song becomes anybody, everybody, “our neighbor created to the image and likeness of God. . . . Look, see this creature, how she resembles her Creator.” The passionate language of the Song is fitting for her too:

Should we not embrace her, caress and be full of affection for her, call down upon her a thousand blessings? But why all this. For the love of her? Ah, not for the love of her, because we know not if she be in herself worthy of love or hatred. Then why? Oh, for the love of God who has created her to His own image and thereby renders her capable of participating in His goodness, His grace and glory. For love of God, I say, by whom she is, to whom she is, through whom she is, in whom she is and for whom she is; to whom she has a resemblance in a unique manner. This is why divine love so often not only commands the love of our neighbor but creates that love and diffuses it in the human heart, because of this resemblance, and he in whom this love is diffused would willingly die to save his neighbor from perishing. True zeal has a glowing ardor but it is constant, firm, sweet, laborious, equally lovable and indefatigable. All otherwise is false zeal, it is turbulent, disordered, insolent, proud, short-lived, angry, equally impetuous and inconstant.

46. See Exhortation, 7, in The Spiritual Life, p. 62. The verse from the Song is St. Jeanne’s variation on 6:2: “I to my beloved, and my beloved to me . . .”
47. Ibid., pp. 220-223.
48. Ibid., pp. 230-231.
The substance of St. Thérèse's reading of the Song is the same. For her, the great injunction is: "Draw me, we will run after thee to the odor of thy ointments." No further words are necessary; nor need anything be said about one's neighbors, about those one loves, for, explains St. Thérèse of Lisieux: "Lord, I know that when a soul is captivated by the intoxicating fragrance of thy sweetness, it does not run alone: all those it loves are drawn along with it . . . without special force or effort. It is a natural result of the soul's attraction to you." In one of her most felicitous conversions of Scripture to the purposes of her own spirituality, St. Thérèse compares the magnetic pull of love on the heart to iron and fire. She deepens her rhetoric by imagining both as reasonable beings, so that the iron might say to the fire: "Draw me" and "thus establish its desire to be so united to the fire that it might be filled with it and saturated with burning substance so that the two would become one." This is her prayer. The more she feels the fire of love in her heart, the more she will cry out: "Draw me"—she says—"poor little piece of useless iron, if I be withdrawn from the divine fire." And the more she cries, the more will those she loves "run quickly in the fragrance of the Beloved; for a soul on fire with this love cannot stay inactive." 49

ST. BERNARD

No soul showed itself more on fire with the love of God than St. Bernard of Clairvaux. For some nineteen years, from 1135 until his death in 1153, he preached on the Song of Songs to his monks at Clairvaux. "Draw me," the bride directed, and he drew eighty-six sermons from her blessed text, more than 170,000 words—what amounts in modern terms to a pair of substantial volumes—and yet he never got beyond the fourth verse of the third chapter. Even more remarkable, the fires of rhetoric did not dim in nearly two decades of commenting, glossing, preaching, teaching, teasing the text for exalted meaning, of searching the most rarefied of words for the most trustworthy of rubrics for the life of the spirit. The fires were as bright, as fervent, as hot at the end as at the beginning. St. Bernard sets out to feed his brothers "solid food," commensurate with their station in life; not the milk that would be acceptable for those who live in the world, but bread,
the "exceedingly good and palatable" bread of the Song.\textsuperscript{50} He ends—though he does not end, for he never finishes his exposition—with more of the same, with solid food, with consoling food. In his eighty-third sermon he sums up the three preceding discourses on the relationship of the Word and the soul, a relationship more or less of a mold and the wax that bears its stamp. What can be gleaned from the cycle of sermons is not a technical lesson in theology; it is a parable of hope that is the soul's great consoling rapture:

Now it may be asked, what is the use of all this labor? Let me tell you. We have learned from this discussion that every human soul, no matter how burdened with sins, no matter how entangled in vices, no matter how enslaved to the enticements of pleasure, though she be held captive in exile, imprisoned in the flesh, clinging to the mire, sunk in the slime, yoked to the body, tortured with cares, distraught with solicitudes, terrified with fears, afflicted with sorrows, deceived and seduced by errors, worried with anxieties, disquieted with suspicions; though she be, lastly, a stranger in the land of her enemies, and, in the words of the Prophet Baruch, "defiled with the dead" and "counted with them that go down into hell"; yes, I say, though the soul should be in such a state of despair and damnation, yet we have learned from the preceding discourses how she can still discover in herself something which is not only capable of establishing her in the hope of pardon and in the confidence of mercy, but also of animating her with courage to aspire even to the nuptials of the Word, to enter boldly into an alliance of friendship with God, and to begin fearlessly to draw the sweet yoke of love with Him who is Lord of the angels. For what may she not safely presume in the case of One with whose image she beholds herself adorned, and by whose likeness she perceives herself emminded? What, I ask, has she to fear from His Majesty?\textsuperscript{51}

St. Bernard lights up many texts. Alongside bounding accommodations that leap far from the narrative, he makes sharp observations about the nature of the spiritual life; though these are intended for his monks at Clairvaux, they are almost always equally apposite for those of his brothers in the world who prefer solid food to liquid, bread to milk. One of the great exegetical leaps is that performed on the text of "Jerusalem" (1:4), taunts and rebukes "maledition with haughtiness as St. Paul was, "diatribe with indignation, stature, afflicted 'in the offscouring of all', more labors, in stinging with 'offscouring of all',

One of the most exceptions is in a cycle of discourses on the Song of Songs: His reading of the text is dialectical: Either is capable of "sweet and spiritual, and divine" and pleasing the soul who is "weary and wayward sensitive death found entry to."

St. Bernard with kind speech serves sanity. It preserves us in no danger of being moralized by it.\textsuperscript{54}

One can read


\textsuperscript{51}. \textit{Sermons on the Canticle}, II, 485-486; \textit{S. Bernardi Opera, II}, 298-299.

\textsuperscript{52}. Compare this reading—\textit{Nigra sum et micans}—as St. Jerome, \textit{Commentary on the Song of Songs}, pp. 91-92, \textit{Nigra sum et micans}—rather than "beautiful" rather than "as beautiful as St. Bernard's."


He ends his exposition—"with good. In his eighty years on the stage, he is a parable; it is a parable..."

Let me tell you. An soul, no matter what its vices, no matter how it be held captive by error, sunk in the mire, seduced by solicitudes, it is a parable of salvation. A Priest of God, in the case of the Prophet that go down into a state of despair, He shows how the daughters' ill-willed taunts and rebukes meet with the bride's patience and good will, "malediction with benediction." He explains that one can be black, as St. Paul was, "discolored and deformed . . . a man of diminutive stature, afflicted 'in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in many more labors, in stripes above measure, in deaths often' . . . the 'offscouring of all,'" and yet be a "truly most beautiful soul." 52

One of the most far-reaching of St. Bernard's psychological perceptions is in a cycle of five sermons on the text: "If thou know not thyself, O fairest among women, go forth and follow after the steps of the flocks, and feed thy kids beside the tents of the shepherds" (1:7). His reading of these apparently harsh words of the bridegroom is dialectical: Either she knows herself, with the bridegroom's help, capable of "sweet and familiar contemplation of things celestial, spiritual, and divine" or she must apply herself "to the task of satisfying and pleasing the senses of the flesh," that is, the kids of the flock, who because of their sins "on the Last Day are to stand on the Judge's left." The young sheep are emblematic too of "the wandering and wayward sensitive faculties, by which, as through windows, sin and death found entrance to the soul." 53 Knowledge of self is equated by St. Bernard with knowledge of God, for in the close inquiry of the kind the king commands in the Song, one discovers who one is and who God is, a twofold knowledge that offers many balms. It preserves sanity. It precludes despair. It induces proportion: "We are now in no danger of being 'puffed up' by whatever learning we may add to it." 54

One can read St. Bernard's sermons as a triumph of intuitive

52. Sermons on the Canticle, I, 270, 274; S. Bernardi Opera, I, 163, 165-166. Compare this reading with St. Jerome, op. cit., p. 55, and Origen, The Song of Songs, pp. 91-113 (GCS, VIII, 113-130), where in spite of a difference in text—Nigra sum et formosa instead of Nigra sum sed formosa, "I am black and beautiful" rather than "I am black but beautiful"—the interpretation is much the same as St. Bernard's. But where St. Bernard creates a psychological drama of high tension, St. Jerome is content with a commonplace about man's fallen nature. Origen, on the other hand, spends his time looking feverishly to find in Scripture types that provide an honorable lineage for the bride, whom he sees as an Ethiopian. In substance, Origen says what St. Bernard says, but in this passage at least he lacks almost entirely the rhetorical strength of St. Bernard.


54. Sermons on the Canticle, I, 440; S. Bernardi Opera, II, 11.
exegesis, each of his spontaneous insights bulwarked by a massive edifice of scriptural texts. One can read them, as surely some of the time one must, as a guide to the life of the spirit by a master of that way of passing one's days. But inevitably one must come in them to that translation of divine love into the language of the human which is the abiding concern of all those who have been granted the mystical graces. That is why they all turn to the Song of Songs. Its texts permit such rapturous exclamations as this one of St. Bernard's, just seven sermons before the last of those the Song inspired in him:

"Have you seen Him whom my soul loveth?" [3:4]. O love, so precipitate, so violent, so ardent, so impetuous, suffering the mind to entertain no thought but of thyself, spurning everything, despising everything which is not thyself, content with thyself alone! Thou disturbest all order, disregardest all usage, ignorest all measure. Thou dost triumph over in thyself and reduce to captivity whatever appears to belong to fittingness, to reason, to decorum, to prudence or counsel. Thus every thought which this spouse thinks and every word which she utters savors of thee, and sounds of thee and of nothing but thee, so completely hast thou monopolized both her heart and her tongue.55

Do the great lovers of God who turn to the Song of Songs do so merely to use the rhetoric of love? No, they are drawn to it because it is the very source of that rhetoric. Without it, they would be mute.

55. *Sermons on the Canticle*, II, 435; *S. Bernardi Opera*, II, 272. The exultant flow of words proceeds from an intoxication of which all the rhetoricians of love who cull their rhetoric from the Song make mention. See, for example, Richard of Saint-Victor, *De Tribus Procesionibus*, in *Sermones et Opuscula Spiritualia Inedita*, ed. Jean Chatillon and William-Joseph Tulloch (Bruges: Desclee de Brouwer, 1951), I, 104-106: "After the inebriation that yields true sweetness come the ardor and the order of interior love: 'The king,' says the Song, 'brought me into the cellar of wine, he set in order charity in me' [2:4]. Only true spiritual sweetness can appease the insatiable hunger and thirst of the human heart."

WHEN the Emperor Hadrian prohibited the study of Torah, the illustrious scribes gathered his disciples about to study Torah, the illustrious scribes gathered his disciples about to study Torah, the illustrious scribes gathered his disciples about the Law. Jailed and condemned, he was led to execution at the profession of faith in Yahweh, in pressed astonishment that he remained faithful to his duty. He was troubled by the words 'Thou art all thy soul,' which I understand perfectly. I said to myself: Where is this fulfilling such a command?" 5

1. *The Shema*, so called from *Shem*—to mention; from *t'fillin* or leather phylacteries, and they shall be as pendants for the prayer shawl ("Tell them to put garments throughout their garments"). The *Shema* also reads: "Tell them on the doorposts of the house..."

2. Ber. 61b; cf. B. Talmud, essay are based on *The Babylonian Talmud* (Soncino, 1935-48). In order to avoid the idiom, so distinct in language verbatim; at times I shorten it.

An explanation may be helpful for the translators of the Babylonian Talmud, while others make a distinction between "Torah," the whole body of the Pentateuch and "the tradition of the law. Unless I quote, I make this