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## Extravagant Beholding: Love, Ideal Bodies, And Particularity

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Steven P. Hopkins

EXTRAVAGANT  
BEHOLDING: LOVE,  
IDEAL BODIES, AND  
PARTICULARITY

I. INTRODUCTION: DILEMMAS OF DESIRE

In the recent documentary film by Amy Kofman and Kirby Dick on Jacques Derrida, there is a strange and rather humorous exchange with Derrida on the subject of “love” (*l’amour*), after the philosopher and the filmmaker/interviewer clear up a confusion about the exact topic at hand, at first mistakenly taken as “death” (*la mort*).<sup>1</sup> The pun in French here, due to mispronunciation, like the Derridean “*différance*,” is telling. It’s a

Any comparative study such as this assumes a long list of colleagues who have helped to clarify arguments and refine comparisons across several traditions and languages. I am indebted, over a period of many years, to Moshe Idel, Charles Hallisey, John Strong, Nathaniel Deutsch, Michael Sells, Barbara Holdrege, Vasudha Narayanan, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, Indira Peterson, and Scott Kugle for their support, suggestions, and encouragement along the way. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Pérez and Stephanie Frank, editorial assistants for *History of Religions*, to the anonymous readers for the journal, and particularly to Daniel Boyarin, the outside reader, for his close and generous reading of the manuscript.

<sup>1</sup> See *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Kofman, 84 minutes, English, French (United States: Jane Doe Films, 2002). The pun is of course obvious and predictable, and it is everywhere present in European literature. It makes one of its most memorable and funny appearances in a German book, in Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, where the novel’s hero speaks passionately (in French, of course) about “the body, love, and death” as simply “one and the same” (*le corps, l’amour, la mort, ces trois ne font qu’un*) to his erstwhile, indifferent beloved Clavdia Chauchat (“hotcat”) in a parody of Goethe’s Faustian Walpurgis Nacht. See Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1995), 406–7. The punning is of course lost in the Woods translation, which renders the French of the original German text into English. For the French original, see the earlier classic (and sometimes confusing) English translation of H. T. Lowe-Porter or the original German text (1924; Berlin: Fischer, 1965), 314–15.

bad joke, but, as always with Derrida, it's something more than a joke. At first saying that he is incapable of "generalities about love," that he has an "empty head" about it, Derrida poses a series of suggestive insights, some of which will guide our study of this vexed but crucial topic in religion and literature through the particularly vivid poetic motif of loving bodily description.

LOVE: THE WHO AND THE WHAT

Derrida inquires about "love" since Plato: Is this love the love of someone or the love of something (*quelqu'un, quelque chose*)? Does one love someone for the absolute singularity of what they are, or does one love the qualities (the beauty, youth, intelligence, excellence) of that person, the "way that person is"? Does one love someone or does one love something about someone? At the heart of love, Derrida remarks, there is a difference between "the who and the what" (*le qui et le quoi*), a difference that "separates the heart." Love dies, he says, when the beloved falls short of the "idea" or "ideals" held by the lover: the other person, after all, is not like "this or that." That is, he summarizes, "the history of love, the heart of love, is divided between the who and the what." To love is to be true to someone, irreducibly, concretely—but love will ultimately die in that singular individual's inability to "be" the "what." Love, ultimately, is about potentially unrealizable ideals, beautiful ideas, Truth and Beauty beyond individual objects of love. One might also think, in another context, of the savage prose poem of Baudelaire in *The Spleen of Paris*, "Laquelle est la vraie?" where, after the death of "a certain" Benedicta "who filled the atmosphere with the ideal," a miraculous girl who was "too beautiful to live long," the narrator is tormented by "a little person who bore a singular resemblance" to the miraculous but dead beloved, and who, as she tramples the still-loose and damp earth of the grave site "with an hysterical and bizarre violence," cackles with laughter and says: "It's me, the true Benedicta! It's me, a famous lousy bitch! And to punish your foolishness and your blindness you shall love me as I am!" In despair, the narrator, one leg sinking into the damp ground, like a wolf caught in a trap, ends up literally with one foot in the "grave of the ideal."<sup>2</sup>

Love, eros, *l'amour* here, is corrosive and deeply ambivalent; far from simple union or loving presence, it speaks to us of unattainability (of the ideal) and dissatisfaction, a constant stretching forth; its goals are neither simple nor univocal. Love here is division, fissure, fracture, duality, vulnerability, and a horizontal asymmetry. To be in love is to become a victim

<sup>2</sup> *Le spleen de Paris* 38 in Baudelaire: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, texte établi, présenté, et annoté par Claude Pichois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975), 342.

of ideals, in Baudelaire's image, in the end, to be stuck in the mud, to have one foot in the grave of one's own ideal.

LOVE'S RISING STAIRS AND FLICKERING LIGHTNING

Derrida's remarks and Baudelaire's prose poem allude to tensions in the theory and practice of love that indeed have deep roots in early Greek literatures, in Plato's dialogues, particularly the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, and in the discourses of the later Stoa. Eros is "sweetbitter" (*klukupikron*), as Sappho would say; and to Pausanias in Plato's *Symposium* eros is a *poikilos nomos*, a law that is "dappled," "spangled," "devious," "abstruse," "subtle," of scintillating, destabilizing ambivalence.<sup>3</sup> Greek sources speak about both division and idealized unity, of love's ambivalent and necessary powers.

Socrates' famous speech in the *Symposium* summarizing the doctrine of eros attributed to the Mantinean wise woman Diotima would seem to successfully domesticate the native unruliness of eros. There Socrates-Diotima charts an ordered, stepwise, goal-focused "ascent of eros," from earthly to heavenly forms of love, from love of the individual person, the individual body, the "who" of Derrida—a love vulnerable to pain and attachment, to need and desire—to love of his/her qualities, love of beautiful objects or ideas (*logous kalous* [210A]), the "what," and finally, beyond, to a great sea of beauty and truth, a transcendental state that strips away all that is merely human in love (210A–211C). There is no longer a particular boy, a particular lovely body, but one is grounded in loveliness itself, "the Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality."<sup>4</sup> One is safe from Baudelaire's "little" earthly *Benedicta*, the messy, and the foul. This is the "orthodox" love (we note as we read the repeated use of *orthos* in the text), a love that always leads, in an orderly manner, the lover upward "for the sake of Beauty, starting out from beautiful things" (the particular body of a particular beloved) and "using them like rising stairs" (*hōsper epanabasmōis chrōmenon* [211C]). But as Martha Nussbaum has shown quite powerfully in her studies of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, this is hardly Plato's final word on eros. After the Diotima speech, Alcibiades, Socrates' young errant lover, bursts into the drinking

<sup>3</sup> See Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 3, 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> "ei tō genoito auto to kalon idein eilikrives, katharon, amikton, alla mē anapleōn sarkōn te anthrōpinōn kai chrōmatōn kai allēs pollēs phlurias . . . [And the phrase goes on] all' auto to theion kalon dunaito monooides katidein [but if he could see the divine Beauty itself in its one form?]" For the translation, see Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehmas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 57–59. For the Greek text, I am using John Burnet's *Platonis Opera*, vol. 2 (1901; Oxford, 1986).

party and systematically answers back every point made by Socrates in his speech: he argues vulnerability and instability, what Nussbaum describes as “the flickering lightning of the open and unstably moving body,”<sup>5</sup> to Socrates’ impassibility, his stony transcendence; he argues vivid particular material images (*eidōla* of the Silenus statues [215B]) and concrete material beauty to Socrates’ shimmering invisible “true virtue” (*de aretēn alēthē* [212A]); passions to irony, tormenting closeness to Socrates’ remote round gleaming; warmth to the cold impassible body; lack to sure possession; “suddenness” (Nussbaum comments much on the uses of the word *exaiphnēs* throughout the dialogue) to Socrates’ studied intellectual trances.

Plato reveals eros at the end of the *Symposium* in all its dividedness. On the one hand, we have the view of love as potentially ennobling, as a process of ascent that transcends its roots in the love of an individual person, an individual body in its sexual particularity, to any beautiful body, to beautiful ideas, and to beauty and virtue itself. The “who” is transcended, and the “what” of love internalized and made perfect in a self-possessed state of virtue. On the other hand, Plato makes very powerful and concrete the argument about particularity, of love that ruins, renders vulnerable, and courts insanity, love that makes one a slave, love that is irreducibly about another person, the other who is impossible to encompass, transcend, turn into a universal idea, love and its disorder, its excess, its instability, its failure. As Socrates says of his fatal lover: “I shudder at his madness and passion for love” (213D).

Nussbaum argues that this dilemma, this tension at the heart of eros, is resolved by Plato in the *Phaedrus*—particularly in Socrates’ “recantation” speech and defense of *mania*, love’s crazy vulnerability to the particular and to madness—in the “good life.”<sup>6</sup> Socrates has just listened to Phaedrus read to him a learned discourse on love by a certain “Lysias,” whom Phaedrus deeply admires, where the author recommends that the young man avoid accepting the service of one who loves him and seek out the one “who does not love.” After criticizing Lysias for his disingenuousness and arbitrariness, his lack of clear structure, and for his mere rhetorical treatment of this important theme, Socrates responds, his head covered, with a speech that faults love for its powerful jealousies and its lovers whose loves ultimately do more harm than good to their beloved boys, in mind, body, possessions, family, and friends. But after crossing the river, Socrates feels he has made offence; a *daimonion*, a “familiar

<sup>5</sup> “The Speech of Alcibiades,” in her *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 198.

<sup>6</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, “‘This Story Isn’t True’: Madness, Reason, and Recantation in the *Phaedrus*,” in her *The Fragility of Goodness*, 200–233.

divine sign,” comes to him like a voice on the air, and he recants his previous condemnation of eros and proceeds to formulate quite another kind of approach, one that neither condemns eros nor subsumes it, as in his “Diotima” speech in the *Symposium*, into some “higher” experience beyond the passions. This speech will defend eros and its *mania* undiluted as being at the very heart of the life of virtue. What is implied in this shift is that eros in its “ascent” ceases altogether to be eros as it gives up the particular (other person). The ladder of love is hardly a satisfactory answer to the real dilemmas of desire. Real eros—the particularity of its needs, its passions and interests and limits and vulnerability—critical to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), demands that we descend the stairs, encounter again the world of concrete risk, of luck, to truly love, and ultimately to truly embark on the adventure of *eudaimonia*. In Nussbaum’s summary:

Unlike the life of the ascending person in the *Symposium*, this best human life is unstable, always prey to conflict. The lovers have continually to struggle against inappropriate inclinations, to expend psychic effort in order to hit on what is appropriate. Unlike the ascending person, again, they risk, in the exclusivity of their attachment to a mutable object, the deep grief of departure, alteration, or inevitably—death. This life, unlike Diotima’s, seems to admit full-fledged conflict of values as well, since the lovers’ devotion to one another is so particular that it might in some circumstances pull against their political commitments or their pursuit of knowledge. . . . But Plato seems to believe that a life that lacks their passionate devotion—whether or not it had this at some former time—is lacking in beauty and value next to theirs.<sup>7</sup>

The *Phaedrus* ends with Socrates and the young Phaedrus (whose name means “sparkling”) discovering the “mutual love of individuals based on character and aspiration,”<sup>8</sup> quite subtly and gradually, in a wild dangerous place outside the city gates, near the river and near the place where, according to a legend, a young girl was carried off by Boreas, the love-mad wind

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 221. Even the Stoics, as Nussbaum has argued elsewhere, famously attempt to somehow preserve eros at the heart of friendship (*philia*), as virtue’s bloom, beauty’s appearance that, purified, inspires reverence and gratitude and not merely divisive, possessive desire. But as Cicero remarked in his critique of what he perceived as inconsistencies in the Stoic theory of love: eros is never truly present without “anxiety, longing, care sighing” (*Tusculan Disputations*, 4:70). When the Stoics refer to the “attempt to form a friendship on account of the appearing beauty of young men in their prime” (*epibolē philopoiias dia kallos emphainomenon neōn kai horaion*), that is all well and good, but do not, says Cicero, “call it *erōs*.” See Martha C. Nussbaum, “Erōs and Ethical Norms: Philosophers Respond to a Cultural Dilemma,” in *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Julia Sihvola (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 56, 76–81, 81–82. Compare Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, “This Story Isn’t True,” 233.

god, and where the god Pan has his shrine. Socrates' "recantation" speech, alluding in several images to Sappho's fragments, extols the power of a mad love that sends shudders, "strange sweating," fever, and a tingling warmth inspired by the "stream of beauty" that enters "in through the eyes" of the lover at the sight of a "godlike" face of a beloved beautiful boy (251A–B). The speech is memorable for its vivid image-rich evocation of sexual joy and the pains of separation, love's intense mad emotions, an exterior and interior *jouissance* and extravagant beholding that responds to the physical beauty of a beloved (and so godlike) body. And immediately after his lyrical evocation of the positive, life-giving power of eros that flows from the eyes, in a material "stream of particles" (images of desire here—*himeros*—are of flow, of a liquid light that inundates the senses),<sup>9</sup> Socrates sounds the register of eros's inevitable (and seemingly immediate) decline; we have, sudden loss (*exaiphnēs* in the *Symposium*), separation (*chōris*), and the pain that "simply drives it [the soul] wild." There are the temporary consolations of memory, though it is pain that dominates the soul when it is separated from the immediate physical presence of the beloved. So one is moved back and forth, from ecstatic joy, this "sweetest of all pleasures" (*ēdonēn d' au tautēn glukutatēn* [251E5]) to the stings of pain. In Socrates' words, "From the outlandish mix of these two feelings—pain and joy—comes anguish and helpless raving; in its madness the lover's soul cannot sleep at night or stay put by day; it rushes, yearning, wherever it expects to see the person who has that beauty. When it does see him, it opens the sluice-gates of desire and sets free the parts that were blocked up before" (251D–E).<sup>10</sup> Socrates of the *Phaedrus* seems to understand well the emotions of his old wayward lover Alcibiades, his claims of particularity in love. And just as Alcibiades does in the *Symposium*, Socrates here claims to be speaking the "truth" about love in the form of a "likeness." He uses images.

At the very end of the dialogue, Socrates prays to Pan. In Nussbaum's words, the philosopher, rejecting "the simplicity of his former ideal" (in the *Symposium* speech), prays to "the mad erotic god, son of Hermes god of luck, and to the other gods of this wild place, asking for a beautiful inside and an outside that will be loved by that inside" (279B–C).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Nehamas and Woodruff note that the word here used for "desire," *himeros*, is fancifully derived from *merē* ("particles"), *ienai* ("go"), and *rhein* ("flow"): thus the parenthetical emphasis on the word. They also draw attention to a "different but equally fanciful Platonic derivation of the same word" in *Cratylus* 420A, where it is linked with images of "flow" (*hrous*) and *erōs* from *esrōn*, "flowing in." Earlier, in 418 C–D, *himeros* is derived from *himeirousi*, "to long for" light (in the darkness). Here Socrates works out from the words for day, *himera* or *ēmera*. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 40.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41.

<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum, "This Story Isn't True," 232–33.



## DESCENDING THE STAIRS

At the heart of erotic love there lives a felt experience of difference, of unresolvable singularities, along with the most thoroughgoing visions of ideals and universal ennobling virtues. A source of loving bliss, of transcendental energies, eros also writes suffering and separation into our bodies. What goes up in love, what ascends, must, finally, inevitably, in spite of our philosophies, come down. One must descend the stairs. Ultimately, one might say that love, and certainly the beloved, love's ultimate object, is something, in its essential final unattainability, "yet to be," or perhaps something always "about to be," *l'à-venir*, a "process" phrase that Derrida will use instead of the secure, already decided confident "future" (*le futur*).<sup>12</sup> We have yet to arrive at the beloved.

We languish in instability, uncertainty, division, openness, even "destinerrance," another Derridean coinage.<sup>13</sup> Love is foiled in its destination: eros the nonarriving, the everreaching. Like Sappho's apple:

As a sweet apple turns red on a high branch,  
high on the highest branch and the applepickers  
forgot—  
well, no they didn't forget—were not able to reach.<sup>14</sup>

EXTRAVAGANT BEHOLDING: RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATIONS OF A LYRIC  
LOVE MOTIF

I argue here that various tensions in the life of eros outlined above are vividly present in a particular literary motif common to devotional literatures of four different religious traditions—Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Hindu—and present in four different languages: Hebrew, the Greek of the Septuagint Bible, Arabic, and Sanskrit.<sup>15</sup> This motif in Jewish and

<sup>12</sup> For a central discussion of *venir* and *à venir*, see Derrida's essay, "Psyché: Invention de l'autre," trans. Catherine Porter in *Reading Paul de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). See also a reading of this thematic in Derrida in John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), esp. 69–76.

<sup>13</sup> For an exhaustive study of images of "nonarrival" and, most specifically, "destinerrance" throughout the work of Derrida, see Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath: Traveling with Jacques Derrida*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. 60–63.

<sup>14</sup> From *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, 105A, in Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> An early version of this article was given as a paper for the panel "Erotic Figuring of Divine Love in Jewish and Hindu Traditions," Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaism Group, American Academic of Religion Annual Meeting, Atlanta, November 24, 2003. See also, for my early thinking on the *Song of Songs* and South Indian poetry, Steven Hopkins, "In Love with the Body of God: Eros and the Praise of Icons in South Indian Devotion," *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 17–54.

Islamic literatures is called by the Arabic term *waṣf* (pl. *awṣāf*), which literally means “description,” a poetic passage that describes in sequence, and by means of a series of exaggerated, sometimes artificial images, the parts of a body (divine or human). In the medieval South Indian Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu tradition, such a sequential description, most commonly reserved for deities, is called an *anubhava*, a “relish” or “enjoyment experience” of the body of the god Vishnu, from toe to head or head to toe, in his material form of a temple image. In Śrīvaiṣṇava *anubhavas*, like the *waṣfs* of the early pre-Islamic Arabic odes and their later Sufi Islamic religious transformations, or the flamboyant *waṣfs* of the Hebrew *Song of Songs*, the body of the beloved disassembles itself into dozens of similes and metaphors, an excess that dazzles and expands in the lover’s gaze to extraordinary, multiple forms, into cosmic and earthly landscapes, across historical and mythical time, taking on animal and cultic forms. Meanwhile, the lover’s body remains, in varied degrees, simultaneously concrete and individualized, the beloved who stands before the lover, literally or in the elastic presence of memory, as his or her own. Through the *anubhava* and the *waṣf*, respectively, we are able to glimpse a form of love language, what I am calling an extravagant beholding, that holds in tension together ideal visionary forms with the concrete, material reality of the individual object of love: we touch, all at once, particularity, presence, and transcendence, even the experience of absence and erotic deferral, in the charged horizontal space of the poem.

I argue here that many of the unresolved, even willed, ambiguities of eros that we have alluded to through Derrida’s reluctant commentary on love and Nussbaum’s readings of Plato’s dialogues find an elegant though sometimes fragile balance in the *waṣf* and *anubhava*. In effect, this rather obscure motif of love poetry and its transformations in Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Hindu religious literatures rival the attempt—equally rhetorical and lyrical, with its own store of extravagant images—of Plato’s Socrates in the *Phaedrus* to provide a place in language for the blissful and tortuous excesses of eros, its ideal virtues and ideal beauty but also its passionate beholding of another person, its longing to possess a particular body, the awesome almost material infusion of beauty through the eyes in the concrete act of seeing and being seen:

First he shudders and a fear comes over him. . . . Then he gazes at him with the reverence due to a god, and if he weren’t afraid people would think him completely mad, he’d even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god. Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings. Meanwhile, the heat warms him and melts the places where the wings once grew, places that were long closed off with hard

scabs to keep the sprouts from coming back; but as nourishment flows in, the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul (long ago, you see, the entire soul had wings). Now the whole soul seethes and throbs in this condition. Like a child whose teeth are just starting to grow in, and its gums are all aching and itching—that is exactly how the soul feels when it begins to grow wings. It swells up and aches and tingles as it grows them. But when it looks upon the beauty of the boy and takes in the stream of particles flowing into it from his beauty (that is why it is called “desire”), when it is watered and warmed by this, then all its pain subsides and is replaced by joy. (251A–C)<sup>16</sup>

The issues that haunt Derrida and the Greeks draw their shadows across the *wasf* and *anubhava* in very different cultural and religious contexts. As we will see, it is through the *wasf* and the *anubhava* that love language, swelling and aching and itching, “grows wings.” Its metaphors and similes throw verbal bridges across empty space that serve both to connect and to separate lover from beloved; to touch and to preserve difference, at one and the same time: to defer finality and to prolong a certain insatiable desire. Through close readings of particular poetic texts in Hebrew, Arabic, and Sanskrit, we will also see how the particular and the universal, Derrida’s “who” and “what” of love, love’s crushing experience of separation, absence, defeat, and fissure, its one foot in the grave of the ideal and its visions of blissful presence, are expressed in exquisite literary forms that crosscut secular and religious forms of love.

I will treat the motif in each tradition in turn, beginning with the Hebrew and Greek *Song of Songs*, noting in brief Jewish and Christian commentarial traditions, followed by the Arabic, *qaṣīdah* in its Islamic and pre-Islamic forms, Greek Jewish texts, and the *anubhava* in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition in South India, with special focus on the poetry of the medieval saint-poet Veṅkaṭeṣa. In the conclusion I will return to themes introduced at the beginning of the article, with the addition of Augustine and Dante on “ladders of love,” linking these insights on love, ideal bodies, and particularity with the study of the *wasf* and *anubhava*.

## II. LOVE’S BODY IN *THE SONG OF SONGS* AND THE ARABIC ODES

The *wasf* literary motif is only one of many striking characteristics of *The Song of Songs*, a text that remains unique and singularly obscure among all other texts of the Hebrew canon. Before we discuss in greater detail the significance of this motif in the *Song* for the themes of love, ideal

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff, 40. For a gloss on the “stream of particles” and the word “desire,” see n. 9 above.

bodies, and particularity, it is best to say a few words about the text itself, its provenance, and its place in the Bible.

*The Song of Songs* is one of the most important root texts for Jewish and Christian spirituality. The *Shir ha-Shirim*, this strange, rich, evocative, late biblical text—its cosmopolitan vocabulary points to post-Exilic, most likely the Hellenistic period in Palestine, around third century BCE—has long drawn to itself controversy and detailed commentary by Jewish and Christian scholastics, theologians, and mystics.<sup>17</sup> It is a sequence of love poems, at its core a dialogue between a lover, the dark-skinned female Shulammit, and her male Beloved.<sup>18</sup> The poem cycle's origins are obscure and its particular provenance unknown. Reflecting a variety of languages and traditions—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, even South Indian (there are several Tamil loanwords in the *Song*)—the Hebrew text is filled with unfamiliar terms, words of doubtful origin, striking lacunae, and many thorny locutions.<sup>19</sup> It does not trace any linear movement in the lover's union and separation but ends rather abruptly with the Shulammit charging her Beloved to “run away, my love, and be like a gazelle . . . on the

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed treatment of the origins and provenance of the *Song*, see the introduction to Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> As Bloch and Bloch note, *ha-shulammit* is of uncertain meaning. Medieval Jewish exegetes like Ibn Ezra understood the word as an epithet, “the Jerusalemite [fem.],” derived from *shalem*, a “poetic term for Jerusalem, and one of the city's ancient names.” See *ibid.*, 197–98.

<sup>19</sup> I will not attempt here to enter into a discussion of *The Song of Songs* and ancient Tamil secular love poetry. Several years ago Chaim Rabin wrote what since has become an oft-cited article on the sources of the *Song* in the classical Tamil literature of ancient South India (“The Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 3, no. 3 [1973–74]: 205–19). Basing his thesis on certain striking Tamil loanwords in Hebrew, he postulates that “the Song of Songs was written in the heyday of Judean trade with South Arabia and beyond (and this may include the lifetime of King Solomon) by someone who had himself traveled to South Arabia and to South India and that had there become acquainted with Tamil poetry” (216). This is a suggestive thesis that relies, particularly in the case of ancient Tamil love poetry, on dating that is highly questionable. The probable dates of the earliest Tamil texts themselves (ca. 100 BCE–250 CE) are too late to fit Rabin's theory of South Indian influence, a theory based almost entirely on the exaggerated claims of Tamil tradition that the poems go back millennia in time, though they more closely match the dates suggested in recent scholarly work on the *Song* (Hellenistic Palestine around the third century BCE). Compare the study by Abraham Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems: Poetry and Symbolism* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), which takes up the comparison in much greater detail than Rabin. Though Mariaselvam brings to his comparative study an encyclopedic knowledge of the Tamil originals, as well as knowledge of Hebrew, there is still no evidence put forth as to genetic influence. His findings in Appendix I (279–86), where he recounts in some detail the discussions on the possible dependence of the *Song* on Caṅkam Tamil poetry, are inconclusive, other than ruling out an a priori negative answer. Obviously, far more work needs to be done on this fascinating topic. For an exhaustive discussion of the problems of dating the corpus of classical Tamil poems, see Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 4–5, 42–43.

mountains of spices.”<sup>20</sup> Its strangeness and difficulty have marked it from the beginning as a text particularly sacred, one that, in the words of early rabbis, “defiles the hands”; it is paradigmatic “scripture” hidden in the enigmatic sheaths of a love poem where God’s name is never mentioned. It sits on the page, just as it is, quietly compelling, issuing its disarming challenge to the religious imagination. According to one rabbinic tradition, it is precisely the *pshat*, the literal meaning of this love poem that is most esoteric (*sod*).<sup>21</sup>

Its language, in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, pushes the limits of physicality in its depiction of human love. “Love” in the Hebrew *Song* does not embrace only the generalized semantic registers of *’ahab*, a word that holds a variety of meanings in the Bible, from “lust” in the story of Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam. 13:4, 15), to the love of parent, one’s brother, or sister; to love of spouse; or to love of “all humankind.” The *Song* in Hebrew, in the very first line, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your loving is sweeter than wine,” praises not *’ahab*, generalized, universal love, but the plural form *dodim* (*dodeyka*, “your *dodim*”), literally “loving,” “lovemaking,” kisses, caresses, intercourse.<sup>22</sup> The text celebrates, in idealized literary pastoral form, the intimate, individual, vulnerable, unstable, physical lovemaking and passionate desire of two bodies, and this sense of vivid physicality drives all the commentaries that attempt to show how these love poems speak about love of God. The text also plays with this rich term, punning with *duda’im*, the mandrake, a large-leaved, purple-flowered aphrodisiac with juicy golden fruit. Love of God and Knesset Israel or the individual Jew is, inescapably, the love of two bodies.<sup>23</sup>

It is the same in Greek and Latin. *Dodim* in the Greek *Azma* (in the Septuagint) is translated, in a most wonderful misprision that reads *dadayk* for *dodayk*, *mastoi*—in the Latin text of the *Canticle* it is *ubera* or *mammae*—“breasts,” an image that combines in a physical image both fertility and sensual immediacy.<sup>24</sup> Gregory of Nyssa used this imagery of breasts to great sensual effect in his *Canticle* commentary, associating it

<sup>20</sup> For commentary on this last cryptic phrase, see Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 220–21.

<sup>21</sup> See Shmuel Yerushalmi, *The Book of Shir HaShirim: Me’am Lo’ez*, trans. Zvi Faier (New York: Moznaim, 1988), 4.

<sup>22</sup> See commentary in Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 137, where it is noted that “the word ‘love’ [for *dodeyka*] in most translations is too general and evasive.”

<sup>23</sup> This punning is lost in the Greek and Latin, where mandrake is simply *mandragorae* and *dodim* is *mastoilubera*. See below.

<sup>24</sup> The *Septuaginta* reads *hoti agathoi mastoi sou huper oinon*, and the *Vulgata* reads *quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino*. I am grateful to Daniel Boyarin for pointing out to me the *dadayk/dodayk* misreading.

with luminous warmth and milky flow; “breasts of wine”; fountains of the fluid, moving, and fecund presence of God.<sup>25</sup> Though the Greek text of the *Song* itself uses *agapē* and its various verbal transformations for “love” and for being in love (2:4, 7), Greek Christian commentators such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa often associate *agapē*’s actual pitch of meaning as equivalent to *eros*, a word that, as we have already noted, carries a semantic register of intense desire, inexplicable wounding, and unstable yearning. In Gregory’s commentaries on the *Song*, *eros*, and not the more generalized *agapē*, best describes love of God as “infinite insatiability,” sharp yearning, at once painful and blissful, which leads one on the path to an “eternal progress” (*epektasis*) in God. At one point in his *Canticle* commentary, Gregory notes: “For heightened *agapē* is called *eros*” (*epitetamenē gar agapē erōs legetai*).<sup>26</sup> Latin commentators like Bernard of Clairvaux use the word *amor*, shared by troubadour traditions of southern France, and sometimes *diligende*, but rarely *caritas*, to describe the religious love that lies beneath or behind the lovers’ voices in the *Song*.<sup>27</sup> The *Vulgata* text itself uses various terms interchangeably, mostly forms of *caritas* and *dilectio*, though *Canticle* 2:5, “for I languish with love,” is the vivid *quia amore langueo*, the single use of the word *amor* in the Latin *Song*.<sup>28</sup> *Erōs* and *amor*, religious *erōs* and *amor*, stake a claim through the *Song* as the most appropriate words to describe love of God.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Martin Laird, “Fountain of Presence, Breasts of Wine: The Flow of Knowledge in the *In Canticum canticorum*,” in his *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131–53.

<sup>26</sup> From *Oratio* 13 (5, 10), 1048C, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, ed. W. Jaeger, vol. 6, *Gregorii Nysseni in Canticum Canticorum*, ed. Hermannus Langerbeck (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 383. See this text citation and an excellent discussion of the identification of *agapē* with “*erōs* intensity” and “wounded” love in Origen and Gregory in Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 70–79.

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent summary study of the *Song of Songs* commentaries in medieval Christianity (one that includes mention of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa in the Christian East, along with the Mariological commentaries), see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). For a general introduction by Jean Danielou and a fine selection of translated texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s commentary on the *Canticle*, see *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*, trans. and ed. Herbert Musurillo, SJ (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> In Hebrew, *ḥolat ʾahabah*, using here the word *ʾahab* in its sense of intense desire.

<sup>29</sup> In medieval Latin *amor* suggests a basis more in the physical than in the intellectual: *icore amamus*, “we love with our livers,” reports Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae* XI, 1:27). *Amor* can sometimes be distinguished, as Isidore states, from *dilectio*, a word that refers to a love that comes from deliberate intellectual choice (*Etymologiae* VIII, 2:7). I am indebted to Robert Newlin for these references. See his rich and suggestive PhD thesis on Latin beast literatures, “Cunning Ambassadors” (Department of Comparative Literature, Rutgers University, 2004). See also, for the destinies of *The Song* in the Latin tradition, Peter Dronke, “The Song of Songs and Medieval Love-Lyric,” in his *The Medieval Poet and His World* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984), 209–36.

The *Shir ha-Shirim*—*Asma* in Greek, the *Cantica canticorum* in Latin—inspires a rich tradition of what one might call religious transformations of the love lyric.

FLAUNTED FIGURATION: THE *WASF* IN THE *SONG*

How sweet is your love my sister my bride  
 your loving is more fragrant than wine  
 your perfumes sweeter than any spices

Your lips drop sweetness like the honeycomb my bride  
 honey and milk are under your tongue  
 and your dress has the scent of Lebanon

A garden locked is my sister my bride  
 A hidden fountain a sealed spring  
 Your branches are an orchard of pomegranates  
 an orchard full of choice fruits  
 spikenard and saffron aromatic cane and cinnamon  
 with every frankincense tree  
 myrrh and aloes  
 with all the most exquisite spices<sup>30</sup>

Many have come across these curious lines in the *Song*, in various translations from various editions, with delight and not a little amazement. The lovers in the Hebrew *Song of Songs* describe the body of their beloved from foot to head or head to foot in hyperbole that at times seems to border on the comic and grotesque. The innovative metaphors and similes of the lovers leap across chasms of association in what Robert Alter has called a poetics of “flaunted figuration.”<sup>31</sup> Yet in spite of its strangeness, their language is charged with feeling and presence; it expresses an alluring,

<sup>30</sup> Translation adapted from the Jewish Publication Society edition from the Hebrew, Oxford Jewish Study Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); the Revised English Bible, with Apocrypha (Oxford/Cambridge: Oxford University Press/Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*. See the detailed philological notes in Bloch and Bloch, 175–77: the translations are all somewhat inaccurate, based as they are upon a combination of sources, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and the root in each language contains many layers of meaning.

<sup>31</sup> See his chapter on the *Song*: Robert Alter, “The Garden of Metaphor,” in his *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1986), 196. Alter distinguishes in this chapter between stock, intensive, and innovative imagery (the latter strikingly apparent in *Job* and in the *Song*). See also page 193: “It should be observed, to begin with, that in the *Song of Songs* the process of figuration is frequently ‘foregrounded’—which is to say, as the poet takes expressive advantage of representing something through an image that brings out a salient quality it shares with the referent, he calls our attention to his exploitation of similitude, to the artifice of metaphorical representation.”



even disarming, erotic energy. In chapters 4:1–7 and 6:4–7 of this text of love songs that Rabbi Akiba in the second century is said to have praised as the “Holy of Holies,”<sup>32</sup> the female beloved’s eyes are doves behind “a thicket of hair” (*sammah*: locks, tresses, mass of hair);<sup>33</sup> her hair a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead; her teeth a flock of newly shorn ewes, “freshly come up from the dipping; all of them have twins and none has lost a lamb”; her parted lips (or forehead, depending on the translation) behind her veil is like a pomegranate split open; her neck or nose a tower, “David’s tower, which is built with encircling courses, a thousand bucklers hang upon it, and all are warrior’s shields”; her two breasts are like two fawns, “twin fawns of a gazelle grazing among the lilies.” Here the body of the beloved becomes, within the scope of the lover’s gaze, numbingly plural—it disseminates into landscapes, into gardens, orchards, and wilderness at once natural and cultural/pastoral; into shrines, sacred mountains, towers, walls, vineyards, and warrior’s halls—while remaining a singular, individual, discrete other, a beloved (the dark-skinned Shulammit) who finally, and mysteriously, disappears. The poem sequence ends midstream, almost breathless, with a call, a longing, for return:

Run away my love  
and be like the gazelle or the young stag  
on the mountains of spices

The radical presence evoked in the charged language of loving description is combined in the *Song* with a sense of suspension, of a love (for the time being) lost and (perhaps) just about to be regained. Presence is linked to deferral, what is (always) yet to be.

<sup>32</sup> This well-known palinode is from Mishnah Yadaim III:5: “Said Rabbi Akiba: Heaven forbid that any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean, for the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, and the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.” Quoted in Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 13. And this identification of the *Song* with the sanctuary of the Temple need not be merely metaphorical, if we keep in mind the very ancient Jewish tradition, recorded in the Talmud and reiterated by the Kabbalists, of the Holy of Holies as a bedroom where the cherubim lay in sexual embrace like a husband and wife. The divine presence (the Shekhinah) was said to dwell between the two cherubim in the Temple as it does now between the pious husband and wife. It is thus no wonder that a love poem would be seen by the tradition as central to its divine mystery. For a detailed account of the sexual symbolism and its “theurgic” meaning in Jewish mysticism, see Moshe Idel, “Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah,” in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 197–224. For a detailed treatment of the place of the *Song* in Midrash, see Daniel Boyarin, “The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory as Midrash,” in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, edited by Regina M. Schwartz (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 214–30.

<sup>33</sup> See commentary on this verse in Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 166–68.



One of the most vivid of poetic sequences describes the dancing Shulammitte from the feet up. I quote from Marcia Falk's fine contemporary translation of the *Song*:

Dance for us, princess, dance  
as we watch and chant!

*What will you see as I move  
in the dance of love?*

Your graceful, sandaled feet,  
your thighs—two spinning jewels,  
your hips—a bowl of nectar  
brimming full

Your belly—golden wheat  
adorned with daffodils,  
your breasts—two fawns, the twins  
of a gazelle

Your neck—an ivory tower,  
your eyes—two silent pools,  
your face—a tower that overlooks  
the hills

Your head—majestic mountain  
crowned with purple hair,  
captivating kings  
within its locks (7:2–6)<sup>34</sup>

But these descriptions do not concentrate only on the female body, the male lover's erotic enjoyment. In 5:10–16 the girl describes *her* lover from head to foot. Again in Falk's translation:

My love is radiant  
As gold or crimson,  
Hair in waves of black  
Like wings of ravens.

<sup>34</sup> Quotations are from poems 15 and 22 in Marcia Falk's edition of the *Song*, *The Song of Songs. A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990). See commentaries of Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 199–206, for the many linguistic issues and choices involved in translating these rich and often ambiguous verses. A comparison of Falk with various Bible translations also helps to open the original text to readers in all its rich literal registers of meaning and begs the question on the inevitable limitation of every translation.

Eyes like doves, afloat  
 Upon the water,  
 Bathed in milk, at rest  
 On brimming pools.

Cheeks like beds of spices,  
 Banks of flowers,  
 Lips like lilies, sweet  
 And wet with dew.

Studded with jewels, his arms  
 Are round and golden,  
 His belly smooth as ivory,  
 Bright with gems.

Set in gold, his legs,  
 Two marble columns—  
 He stands as proud as cedars  
 In the mountains.

Man of pleasure—sweet  
 To taste his love!  
 Friend and lover chosen  
 For my love. (5:10–16)<sup>35</sup>

The exact origin of this descriptive motif is unclear. It has only been since the last century, when similarities between the *Song* and pre-sixth-century Arabic poetry were first noticed, that critics and biblical scholars have referred to this genre of poetic description by the Arabic word *wasf*. There are analogous, though not as well-developed, limb-by-limb descriptions in the earlier secular love poetry of Egypt. The Egyptian songs, though they come down to us from a time remote from the current scholarly dates of the *Song*'s composition (ca. 4–2 BCE), share with the Hebrew cycle of poems the provenance of Palestine and perhaps, as Michael V. Fox has argued, the same local literary tradition.<sup>36</sup> Even though genetic links are impossible to prove, Fox contends that the Egyptian songs are one, if not the main, source for the imagery and poetics of the Hebrew *Song*.<sup>37</sup> Whatever the cogency of this theory (it is one of many

<sup>35</sup> This passage occurs in poem 19 of Falk's edition: Falk, *The Song of Songs*. Again, see the detailed notes of Bloch and Bloch on these verses: Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 184–88.

<sup>36</sup> See Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), esp. i–xxvii.

<sup>37</sup> See, in this regard, Fox's remarks: "The Egyptian love songs give us an idea of what an ancient Israelite audience would have expected in a love song, thus helping fill out the

competing theories on the literary and religious origins of the *Song*),<sup>38</sup> there are scattered among the Twentieth-Dynasty papyrae passages such as the following that bear some resemblance to the sequential descriptions of and by the Shulammite beloved:

One alone is (my) sister, having no peer:  
 more gracious than all other women.  
 Behold her, like Sothis rising  
 at the beginning of a good year:  
 shining, precious, white of skin,  
 lovely of eyes when gazing.  
 Sweet her lips (when) speaking:  
 she has no excess of words.  
 Long of neck, white of breast,  
 her hair true lapis lazuli.  
 Her arms surpass gold,  
 her fingers are like lotuses.  
 Her full buttocks, her narrow waist,  
 her thighs carry on her beauties.  
 Lovely when she strides on the ground.  
 she has captured my heart in her embrace.<sup>39</sup>

#### JEWISH SOURCES OUTSIDE THE *SONG*

As for the motif of the *wasyf* in Jewish tradition, it is often said the only examples in all of ancient Hebrew literature of this convention are in the *Song of Songs*.

But there is at least, as Shaye J. D. Cohen has argued, one exception to this rule.<sup>40</sup> The genre reappeared in Jewish literature as early as the *Genesis Apocryphon*, one of the manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls

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generic context lacking in extant Hebrew literature. . . . In my opinion the similarities justify a hypothesis of at least indirect dependence, that is to say, the supposition that the *Song* is a late offshoot of an ancient and continuous literary tradition, one whose roots we find, in part at least, in the Egyptian love poetry. I do not assume that the author of the *Song* necessarily knew Egyptian or borrowed directly from Egyptian originals (though that is by no means impossible). It is more likely that Egyptian love poetry was sung in Palestine, where it became incorporated into the local literature and developed there in new ways" (ibid., xxii, xxiv).

<sup>38</sup> Along with the theories of Egyptian and South Indian origins, as well as the theories that the *Song* is made up of a collection of ancient Near Eastern wedding songs or fragments of the liturgy of a fertility cult, one of the more suggestive recent accounts is by Marvin H. Pope in his edition of the *Song* for the Anchor Bible—*The Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 7C (New York: Doubleday, 1977). Pope's theory is that the *Song* is connected in some way to mortuary cults or funeral feasts of the ancient Near East that, according to some scholars, were ritually organized feasts of love.

<sup>39</sup> From the P. Chester Beatty I papyrus, group A, no. 31, translated in Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> See Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Beauty of Flora and the Beauty of Sarai," *Helios* 8, no. 2 (1981): 41–53. I am indebted to Moshe Idel for this reference.

written in Hellenized Palestine during the first century BCE. The author of the *Apocryphon* adds to the Genesis 12:10–20 account of Abram and Sarai among the Egyptians: his praise of Sarai includes a sequential head-to-foot description of her beauty.<sup>41</sup> But in this case his model, as Cohen argues, is not the *Song*, but one of the epigrams of his contemporary Philodemus, a Syrian of Gadara who around 70 BCE went to Italy to embark on a literary career and who was one of the first to incorporate this literary device into the love poetry of the West. The Jewish writer, who, like Philodemus, flourished in a Hellenized environment, followed the pattern of the Syrian poet in blending descriptions of bodily beauty with a particularly Hellenistic emphasis on feminine wisdom, intelligence, and skill (an aspect absent from the *Song*).<sup>42</sup> As Cohen suggests, “Each independently Hellenized the Near Eastern descriptive song.”<sup>43</sup>

#### A PRESENTATIONAL POETICS

With the genealogy of the genre and its many variations in mind, how might we interpret *awṣāf* in the *Song*? What does this form of love language in the *Song* tell us about our theme of particular and ideal bodies?

The literal meanings of *awṣāf* simply provoke smiles—we are forced to muse on the radically different notions of beauty held by an ancient people. We certainly cannot impose a self-conscious surrealist poetic of aesthetic shock on this ancient material. Perhaps we might take a more academic approach, viewing the *awṣāf* not as descriptive love songs but as parodies or, more soberly, as learned allusions to sculptural or architectural forms. There may indeed be a cultic element in such sequential descriptions, particularly of the male body, where we read allusions to

<sup>41</sup> The text describing Sarai “more or less from the head to the feet” (*ibid.*, 46) is put into the mouth of the courtier Hirquanos, whose description is decidedly more chaste in imagery and diction than the one of the author of the *Song*: “How splen[did] and beautiful the form of her face, and how . . . and how soft the hair of her head; how lovely are her eyes and how pleasant is her nose and all the radiance of her face . . . ; how lovely is her breast and how beautiful is all her whiteness! Her arms, how beautiful! And her hands, how perfect! And (how) [attrac]tive all the appearance of her hands! How lovely [are] her palms, and how long and dainty all the fingers of her hands. Her feet, how beautiful! How perfect her legs! There are no virgins or brides who enter a bridal chamber more beautiful than she. Indeed, her beauty surpasses that of all women: her beauty is high above all of them. Yet with all this beauty there is much wisdom in her; and whatever she has.” Translated in Cohen, “The Beauty of Flora,” 45–46.

<sup>42</sup> Philodemus’s witty epigram is, like the praise of Hirquanos in the *Apocryphon*, more apostrophic than lyrical, as it is built upon a series of vocatives to the beloved’s feet, legs, thighs, buttocks, sex (*kteis*), hips, shoulders, breasts, neck, etc. This lack of metaphoric texture also sets it apart from the densely figurative style of the *Song*.

<sup>43</sup> Cohen, “The Beauty of Flora,” 48. Among the possible influences on Philodemus other than the ancient Near Eastern song, one of the more fruitful seems to be the genre of *ekphrasis* (‘description’), defined, as Cohen observes, by the ancient rhetoricians as an “elaborate and embellished description of a person or an object, usually of a work of art” (*ibid.*, 43).

ivory and marble.<sup>44</sup> As Richard N. Soulen has observed, such a realist approach to this poetic of description, whether it be to point to its grotesqueries as an example of carnival or even to analyze it in terms of ancient Egyptian iconography, rather misses the point.<sup>45</sup> The latter is a perfect example of what Alter calls “misplaced concreteness.”<sup>46</sup> It is obvious from any detailed reading of these passages that neither a cultic nor a purely artistic context would entirely explain the exuberant, exaggerated similes and metaphors of the *awṣāf*.

The purpose of the *waṣf* in the *Song*, Soulen suggests, is “presentational rather than representational.” “Its purpose,” Soulen observes, “is not to provide a parallel to visual appearance” or “primarily to describe feminine or masculine qualities metaphorically.”<sup>47</sup> Rather, the images want to evoke feeling; they “seek to create emotion, not critical or dispassionate comprehension; their goal is a total response, not simply a cognitive one.”<sup>48</sup> The lovers’ metaphorical hyperbole is, in Soulen’s words, “the language of joy” that seeks to “overwhelm and delight the hearer.”<sup>49</sup> We are invited, even greatly coerced, to share a lover’s awe, joy, and erotic delight in the physical beauty of the beloved and, beyond, in his or her qualities and virtues that create a rich imagistic world of their own, sometimes dissolving the original focus of gazing.

As a physical response to the flood of beauty that enters the eyes, the lovers of the *Song* delight in recreating each other’s bodies through verbal art. The visual exaggerations of the *waṣf* are related to other rhetorical extravagances of the text, which include tactile images of entering, eating, tasting, and feasting on the beloved and the olfactory eroticism of flowers,

<sup>44</sup> See Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 185.

<sup>45</sup> See Richard Soulen’s article “The *Wasfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, pt. 2 (June 1967): 183–90. Soulen refers, on 185–87, to M. H. Segal’s theory of literary parody, Morris Jastrow Jr.’s notion of difference in aesthetic taste, and Gillis Gerleman’s obsession with Egyptian art and ornamental figures in the *awṣāf*. See also Fox’s exegesis of the *awṣāf* in *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 140–65, which basically follows Gerleman and Pope—though with some important misgivings—in its emphasis on the tropes’ origin in works of art, artifacts, icons, and sculpture. For a sense of his ambivalence on this, however, see the following remark: “Some of the imagery in this section [5:10–16] is drawn from the arts: the head of gold, the arms like cylinders of gold, thighs like marble pillars on gold sockets, the belly like an ivory bar. Only the gold head is taken from sculpture, so we cannot suppose that the boy is being described as if he were a statue (contrary to Gerleman)” (Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 147).

<sup>46</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 196.

<sup>47</sup> Soulen, “The *Wasfs* of the Song of Songs,” 187.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 188. See Michael Sells, “The Guises of the Ghūl: Dissembling Simile and Semantic Overflow in the Classic Arabic *Nasīb*,” in *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 130–64, for a similar argument with regard to the Arabic odes.

<sup>49</sup> Soulen, “The *Wasfs* of the Song of Songs,” 190.

fruits, spices, perfumes, and the many aromas of the hills, fields, and countryside. And the *Song* not only engages the senses one at a time but also often mingles them in a vivid synesthesia, as in one of its first images, where the beloved's name is said to be a "spreading perfume."

Through such synesthesia and extravagance of rhetoric the *awṣāf* of *The Song of Songs* create a charged field of metaphoric energies between the particular other lover, her concrete presence for the lover who gazes at her (and recreates her, over and again, by that gazing), and a dissembling semantic overflow that blurs boundaries, that defers final possession of the other person but also draws out a certain erotic relish. Built into the structure of these elaborate descriptions is an affirmation both of physical possession, intimate delectation, and (immanent) loss, an endless oscillation between seeming arrival and separation, the beloved's discrete presence and at the same time her boundlessness, her infinity of forms. We have here, in literary form, to return to Sappho's phrase, eros blissfully, even insatiably, "nonarriving," the soul growing wings watered by streams of beauty that enter through the eyes in Socrates' *Phaedrus* speech, verbal horripilation, affirming what Gregory of Nyssa called in his *Song* commentaries "eternal progress" (*epektasis*).

Such "nonarrival," however, never overly darkens the overarching sunny aspect of this cycle of love poems. The main register of the *Song* is joy and joyous anticipation, in spite of eros's willed deferral. Though the *Song* itself seems to end with separation, a call and an absence, its rhetoric, deeply informed by the images of the *waṣf*, is about an inevitable and reliable presence that overwhelms and delights and that multiplies delight. Deferral here is *jouissance*. The "who" and the "what" of love are held in elegant tension here, a tension that excites, withholds, releases, withdraws, but ultimately pleases. Here is language that raises the hairs at the back of the neck, that transforms ache and tingle into metaphor, simile, a network of symbols "thrown across" two bodies in love.<sup>50</sup> This is not, however, always the case with the *waṣf* and its rhetorical roles in a poem.

With this in mind, we turn now to the very different context of the Arabic odes.

THE WAṢF IN ARABIC QAṢĪDAH: MEMORY OF WHAT IS LOST—EXTRAVAGANT DESCRIPTION AND ABSENCE

As we have already noted, *waṣf*, used by critics to refer to a motif in *The Song of Songs*, is an Arabic term that literally means "description," a poetic passage that describes in sequence, and by means of a series of exagger-

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the nature of the symbol as something that both unites and separates, putting into tension together sameness and difference in a way that matches similar tensions in the life of eros, see Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 70–76, 109–10.

ated, sometimes artificial images, the parts of the human body.<sup>51</sup> The term *wasf* refers most specifically to a poetic form used by poets in the early pre-Islamic Arabic odes (pre-622 CE).

Michael Sells has studied the poetry and poetics of the Arabic odes and their later religious transformations in the Sufi poetry of Ibn ʿArabī and has come to a conclusion about the uses of the *wasf* that differs from what we see in the *Song*. The balance, however precarious, between the “who” and the “what” does not seem to be present at all. In the Arabic and later the Islamic mystical context, the *awsāf* and their semantic extravagances serve to evoke not only an elusive erotic/divine presence but also, and perhaps most important, absence.<sup>52</sup> The rich dissembling similes, imagery, and metaphors serve to evoke increasing distance and a continuous metamorphosis, finally, memory of what is lost: the beloved as a concrete individual presence evaporates in the dissembling semantic overflows of the *wasf*. I quote a section of Sells’s translation from a poem of Ghaylan Ibn ʿUqba, also called Dhū al-Rumma, one of the finest poets of the late classical period, where the narrator is in search of the elusive Beloved, Mayya:

Her buttocks like a dune  
over which a rain shower falls  
matting the sand  
as it sprinkles down

Her hair-fall  
over the lower curve of her back  
soft as the moringa’s gossamer flowers,  
curled with pins and combed,

With long cheek hollows  
where tears flow,  
and a lengthened curve at the breast sash  
where it crosses and falls.

You see her ear pendant  
along the exposed ridge of her neck,  
swaying out,  
dangling over the abyss.

<sup>51</sup> See the section on *awsāf* in Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 217–35.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Sells draws attention to the “dissembling similes” and “semantic overflow” of the *wasf* in the classic pre-Islamic Arabic odes and in later Sufi poetry. Such “semantic overflow” is part and parcel of head-to-foot descriptions of the alluring female beloved, the *ghūl*, in this pre-seventh-century literature. See his “Guises of the Ghūl.” See also, for translations of such poetry, Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by ʿAlqama, Shanfara, Labid, ʿAntara, Al-A ʿsha, and Dhu al-Rūmma* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), esp. the poem “To the Encampments of Māyya,” 67–76.

With a red thornberry tooth-twig,  
 Fragrant as musk and Indian ambergris  
 brought in in the morning,  
 she reveals

Petals of a camomile  
 cooled by the night  
 to which the dew has arisen at evening  
 from Rama oasis.<sup>53</sup>

Sells comments on this section:

In passages like that cited above, the beloved is evoked so powerfully that the reader or hearer is convinced that she has been described. But in fact the similes, so vivid in their imagery, tell us very little about the factual appearance of the beloved. They seem to be depicting the beloved, but in fact what they actually show (camomile blossoms, moringa trees, lush vegetation, flowing water, and in other examples, wild animals giving birth or nursing in tranquility) is the symbolic analogue of the beloved: a lost garden. What occurs here is less a description of Mayya than it is a metamorphosis.<sup>54</sup>

The poet's name, the epithet Dhū al-Rumma, literally means "he-with-a-cord-of-a-rope," and, as Sells in another context remarks, this nickname is an inversion of one of the beloved's epithets, *dhatu alwanin*, "she-with-many-guises." We have here "the poet-hero attempting to bind the many-guised and constantly changing into a stable and secure world."<sup>55</sup> And it is this immense, boundless, ever-shape-shifting beloved that finds her way into the religious lyrics of one of the greatest Sufi mystical poets of medieval Islam, Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165–1240).

IBN AL-ʿARABĪ'S RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE ARABIC *QAṢĪDAH*

Such a literary evocation of absence and "memory of an irretrievable past" through sequential description is translated by the Sufi poet Ibn ʿArabī into a very complex theological discourse about love and the beloved. This discourse affirms the experience of concrete presence (now past) and the individual identity of the beloved, even as it turns apophatic, dramatizing the ultimate inability of religious language to finally and fully seize its referent, the beloved as the divine in the form of the Eternal Feminine.

Again, in Sells's vivid translation:

<sup>53</sup> Taken from Michael Sells's article "Ibn ʿArabī's 'Gentle Now, Doves of the Thornberry and Moringa Thicket,'" *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* 10 (1991): 2–3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>55</sup> Sells, *Desert Traces*, 68.



At Rama between White Sands and Hajir  
there is a shy-eyed girl in a howdah,

Child beauty who lights the way,  
like a lamp  
for a man who walks the night,

Pearl in a shell of hair as black as jet,

Your mind dives to reach it  
never to emerge from the watery deep.

Neck supple, gestures coquette  
bring to mind a gazelle of the sandy hills

Like the forenoon sun  
in the constellation Aries  
cutting across the cosmic reaches.

When she takes down her veil  
When she shows her face  
she veils the morning  
light with her shadow.

I called to her between Hima and Rama:

Who is here for a braveheart  
who halts at Sal 'in and hopes . . .

Who for a braveheart  
drowned in his tears,  
drunk from the wine  
of her open mouth

Who for a braveheart  
burned by his own sighs,  
led astray and abandoned  
in the beauty of the glow between her eyes.<sup>56</sup>

Or, in another poem by Ibn 'Arabi that echoes images from Dhū al-Rumma:

Gentle now,  
doves of the thornberry and moringa thicket,  
don't add to my heart-ache  
your sighs. . . .

<sup>56</sup> Selection from Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire: Love Elegies from Ibn 'Arabi and New Poems* (Jerusalem: IBIS, 2000), 131–33.

I echo back, in the evening,  
 in the morning, echo,  
 the longing of a love-sick lover,  
 the moaning of the lost.

In a grove of tamarisks  
 spirits wrestled,  
 bending the limbs down over me,  
 passing me away.<sup>57</sup>

NIZĀM, DAUGHTER OF A SHEIKH

Though Sells argues that Ibn ‘Arabī’s love poems are about divine absence and essentially apophatic,<sup>58</sup> it is important to remember that the poems in Ibn Arabī’s *Dīwān*, those passionate verses filled with dissembling and visionary descriptions of a beloved’s body, were originally composed for a very particular girl: as he writes in the original prologue to the collection he called *Tarjūmān al-ashwāq*, or “The Interpreter (Translator/Guide) of Ardent Desires,” they were for Nizām, the daughter of a famous Iranian sheikh, Zāhir Ibn Rustam, and the niece of “the venerable ancient, the learned woman of Hijāz,” Fakhr al-Nisā’ Bint Rustam, both of whom were staying for a time in Mecca. Long evenings spent with these two great sheikhs were filled with the most marvelous conversations and the most remarkable people, but the most compelling of persons Ibn ‘Arabī met at that learned home was Nizām, “a figure of pure light.”<sup>59</sup> Concrete references to this “historical” Nizām are spread throughout the lyric love odes (*nasīb-ghazals*), Ibn ‘Arabī’s transformation of the traditional *qaṣīdah* of the *Tarjūmān*.

In one passage, mention of this “princess from the land of Persia” occurs after a litany of longing lovers, including Mayya and Ghaylān of the classical Arabic *qaṣīdah*.

. . . and stop a while with me  
 at the ruins, so we may try to weep,  
 no, so that I can weep  
 at what has become of me.

Passion shoots me without arrows,  
 slays without a spear:  
 tell me, will you weep with me when I weep  
 beside her?

<sup>57</sup> From Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Gentle Now,’” 9.

<sup>58</sup> See above.

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed account of this meeting and its circumstances, see Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 136–39.

Help me, help me to weep  
 and tell me again the tale of Hind and Lubna,  
 Sulayma and Zaynab and ‘Inān,  
 then tell me of Hajir and Zarud,  
     give me news  
 of the pastures of the gazelles  
 and mourn for me  
 with the love poems of Qays and Lubna,  
     with Mayya  
     and the afflicted  
 Ghaylān.

    Long have I yearned for that tender girl,  
     gifted in prose and verse, with her pulpit,  
 eloquent, a princess  
     from the land of Persia,  
 from the most shining of cities,  
 Isfahan.

    She is the daughter of Iraq,  
 the daughter of my teacher,  
     and I her opposite, a child from Yemen.  
 O my Lords, have you seen or heard that two things  
     opposite  
 are ever made one?

Had you seen us at Rama, passing each other cups  
 of desire without fingers,  
 as our passion caused words of sweetness and joy  
     to pass between  
 us without a tongue  
     you would have seen a state  
 where all understanding  
 vanishes:  
 Yemen and Iraq  
     in close embrace.<sup>60</sup>

Another reference is embedded within a lyric that contains vivid *awṣāf* of lithe women with dark hair who sway like boughs, whose lips are sweet to the kiss, with delicate bare arms, swelling breasts that offer choice gifts, “luring ears and souls,” “taking captive the devout and fearing heart”:

<sup>60</sup> Translation adapted from *Tarjūmān* XX:10–22, in *The Tarjūmān al-ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muḥyi’ddīn ibn al-‘Arabī*, ed. and trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Theosophical Publishing, 1978), 87.

. . . showing teeth like pearls  
 healing with tongues moist with spit  
 one weak and wasted;  
 throwing glances from their eyes that pierce  
 a heart grown used to wars and long combat.  
 From their breasts  
     new moons rise that suffer  
 no eclipse  
 on waxing full,  
     causing tears to flow as if from dark rain clouds,  
 sighs the sound of  
     crushing thunder.

O my two comrades, may my life-blood be the ransom  
 of a slender girl  
 who bestowed upon me favors and riches:  
 she established  
 the harmony of union, she is  
     our very principle of harmony:  
 both Arab and foreigner,  
 she makes the gnostic  
 forget:  
     when she gazes, she draws  
 against you long broad swords,  
     her white teeth a dazzling  
 lightning.<sup>61</sup>

Another lyric praises Niẓām in the context of her home in Mecca:

. . . how should I not love the City of Peace,  
 since there I have a teacher  
     who is the guide of my religion,  
 my reason, my faith?  
     It is the home  
 of a daughter of Persia, subtle  
 in her gestures, her eyes  
 languid: she greets and heals those whom  
 she kills with her  
 glances.  
     After beauty and beneficence,  
 she gives  
     the best gifts.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Adapted from *Tarjūmān* XXIX:9–15, in *ibid.*, 107.

<sup>62</sup> Adapted from *Tarjūmān* XXXVIII:2–4, in *ibid.*, 122.

A final allusion describes this girl as someone who possesses a fearsome splendor, a beauty that kills:

Truly she is an Arab girl who belongs by birth  
to the daughters of Persia, yes,  
truly, beauty strung for her  
a row of fine pearl-white teeth,  
pure as crystal.<sup>63</sup>

The first recension of these poems contains a prologue, describing his meeting with Niẓām, and the poems, without commentary. The second recension takes out the references to the “human” Niẓām and includes an autocommentary that emphasizes the esoteric, transcendental/theological meanings of the poems. The third recension is identical to the second, though it contains extra passages that depict the circumstances surrounding the writing of the commentary.<sup>64</sup> In his later prologues and allegorical/theological/mystical autocommentaries on these love lyrics, Ibn ‘Arabi disabuses the reader of any idea that there is some kind of physical love in these erotic poems or that their original object was ever merely the physical, particular “Niẓām.” Indeed, he comments, their subject is “Niẓām” (i.e., Beauty, Artful Arrangement, Perfected Harmony, Fluency, from the Arabic root *n/z/m*), the Eternal Feminine, the very “Eye of the Sun and of Beauty” (*‘ayn al-Shams wa’l-Bahā’*), and not a merely human girl. These poems, he says in his commentary, “allude enigmatically to the various kinds of mystical knowledge which are under the veil of an-Niẓām, the maiden daughter of our Shaykh.”<sup>65</sup> This “slender girl” is the “single, subtle, and essential knowledge of God,”<sup>66</sup> as a “daughter of Persia,” she is, allegorically, a “form of foreign wisdom connected with Moses, Jesus, Abraham, and other foreigners of the same class.”<sup>67</sup> He was responding, in these commentaries, to criticisms of fellow sheikhs, particularly, as Henry Corbin remarks, “those of a certain learned moralist of Aleppo,”

<sup>63</sup> Adapted from *Tarjūmān* XLII:4–5, in *ibid.*, 127. I have adapted all of the Nicholson translations used above. These poems of the *Tarjūmān* not translated in *Stations of Desire* have yet to find their Michael Sells. I’ve done my best to make them read better as poems on the page in English, to better complement other translations in this article.

<sup>64</sup> For a detailed genealogy of the various recensions, along with an account of the composite contents of the Leiden MS he is working with, see Nicholson, *The Tarjūmān al-ashwāq*, 1–9.

<sup>65</sup> From commentary on XX, in *ibid.*, 109.

<sup>66</sup> From commentary on XXIX, in *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> From commentary on XXXVIII, in *ibid.*, 123.

as to the appropriateness of this love and these erotic poems addressed to a young female.<sup>68</sup>

“NIZĀM”: THE WHO AND THE WHAT

But one cannot come away from the *Tarjūmān*, from poems or commentary, without a sense of the concrete particularity of the object of these poems: she may be Wisdom, Harmony, a transcendental Truth of Divine Beauty, the “what” of love, but she is at the same time a particular human being, the “who” of love whose very particular beauty—of soul and of body—awakened in the sheikh-poet experiences of universal significance. I quote sections from the original prologue of the *Tarjūmān*, translated in Corbin’s seminal study of Ibn ‘Arabī, *L’imagination creatrice*:

Now this shaikh had a daughter, a lissome young girl who captivated the gaze of all who saw her, whose mere presence was the ornament of our gatherings and startled all those who contemplated it to the point of stupefaction. Her name was Nizām [Harmonica] and her surname “Eye of the Sun and of Beauty” [*‘ayn al-Shams wa’l-Bahā’*]. . . . The magic of her glance, the grace of her conversation were such an enchantment that when, on occasion, she was prolix, her words flowed from the source; when she spoke concisely, she was a marvel of eloquence; when she expounded an argument, she was clear and transparent. . . . If not for the paltry souls who are ever ready for scandal and predisposed to malice, I should comment here on the beauties of her body as well as her soul, which was a garden of generosity. . . .

At the time I frequented her, I observed with care the noble endowments that graced her person and those additional charms conferred by the society of her aunt and father. And I took her as model for the inspiration of the poems contained in the present book, which are love poems, composed in suave, elegant phrases, although I was unable to express so much as part of the emotion which my soul experienced and which the company of this young girl awakened in my heart, or of the generous love I felt, of the memory which her unwavering friendship left in my memory, or of the grace of her mind or the modesty of her bearing, since she is the object of my Quest and my hope, the Virgin Most Pure [*al-Adhrā’ al-batūl*]. Nevertheless, I succeeded in putting into verse some of the thoughts connected with my yearning, as precious gifts and objects which I here offer. I let my enamored soul speak clearly, I tried to express the profound attachment I felt, the profound concern that tormented me in those days now past, the regret that still moves me at the memory of that noble society and that young girl.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> See Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 138, also 321–22. See also Sells, *Stations of Desire*, 34–35, where he refers to a later rewrite of the original prologue.

<sup>69</sup> See Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 136–37, 321–32. Passage is taken from the *Tarjūmān*, in Nicholson, *The Tarjūmān al-ashwāq*, 10ff. This young Iranian girl is assimilated to the “princess from among the daughters of the Greeks” that he saw one night while circumambulating the Ka‘aba, and ultimately Christ (as Wisdom, Divine Sophia). See Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 139–45, 322–28.

Ibn ʿArabī notes elsewhere, in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (the bezels of wisdom), that women represent the concrete particular, like the Prophet Muḥammad, the “wisdom of singularity,” and so *awṣāf* in Ibn ʿArabī’s religious love poetry, addressed to the female beloved, describe the divine epiphanized in concrete particulars, affirming divine particularity and universality at one and the same time.<sup>70</sup> As Ibn ʿArabī himself remarks, in the original preface:

Whatever name I may mention in this work, it is to her that I am alluding. Whatever the house whose elegy I sing, it is of her house that I am thinking. But that is not all. In the verses I have composed for the present book, I never cease to allude to the divine inspirations (*wāridāt ilāhiya*), the spiritual visitations (*tanazzulāt ruḥāniya*), the correspondences [of our world] with the world of the angelic Intelligences; in this I conformed to my usual manner of thinking in symbols; this because the things of the invisible world attract me more than those of actual life, and because this young girl knew perfectly what I was alluding to [that is, the esoteric sense of my verses].<sup>71</sup>

The *awṣāf* in Ibn ʿArabī’s *nasīb-ghazals*, to use the still-crucial insights of Corbin, transfigure the earthly figure of the woman by setting her against a light that brings out her “superhuman virtualities” and so anticipates something that is “still absent” in its totality, the full divine presence which is “not yet,” though it shimmers in metaphors and similes inspired by the memory of the particular Beloved body.<sup>72</sup> The *wasf* here, as an act of loving beholding, is a “transmutation of the sensible,”<sup>73</sup> the “descent of the divine and an assumption of the sensible,”<sup>74</sup> what Ibn ʿArabī, in another context refers to, in Corbin’s translation, as a “condescendence” (*munāzala*).<sup>75</sup> We descend the stairs as Socrates did in his “recantation” speech on love, ideals, and particularity in the *Phaedrus*.

This is hardly negative theology in a pure sense (if such a thing ever exists), but rather it joins a certain *via negativa*, a vivid sense of an endless yearning and infinite search for the Beloved akin to Gregory of

<sup>70</sup> See the last chapter of the *Fūṣūṣ* on Muḥammad and Ibn ʿArabī’s discussion of women, perfume, and prayer. Translation in *Ibn al-ʿArabī: The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 272–84. See also a translation from Titus Burckhardt’s French edition of the text with notes: Muhyi-d-din Ibn ʿArabī, *The Wisdom of the Prophets (Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam)*, trans. from Arabic to French Titus Burckhardt; trans. from French to English Angela Culme-Seymour (Gloucestershire: Beshara, 1975). I am indebted to Scott Kugle for suggesting I take a look at these passages in Ibn ʿArabī’s *Fūṣūṣ* on women, particularly, and the Prophet.

<sup>71</sup> From Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 138.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 155–56.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Nyssa's "eternal progression" (*epektasis*), to a kind of spiritual messianism, a beholding of the transcendental visionary truth of the "not yet" in the object of love.<sup>76</sup> In a *nasīb* addressed to "her" as a male Beloved, Ibn ʿArabī expresses such "infinite insatiability" in simple, stark words:

I am absent, and desire  
 makes my soul die.  
 I meet him,  
 but am not cured:  
 it's just desire,  
 whether I am absent  
 or present.

When we meet, something in me stirs  
 that I could hardly  
 imagine: the cure's a second disease  
 of passion  
 because I beheld a form whose beauty,  
 as often as we meet,  
 grows in splendor  
 and majesty:  
 there is no escape from passion  
 that grows,  
 on a predestined scale,  
 with every growth  
 in loveliness.<sup>77</sup>

Guises of loveliness beguile. One is so close, then far, then, in much of our literature, one discovers that the shape-shifting beloved has, all the time, dwelt in the heart, deep within, or in the gut, the innards, though it still sends out its bewildering array of images, odors, and sensations:

I am mad with love for Salma  
 who dwells at Ajyad.

<sup>76</sup> See Ibn ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt* [Meccan revelations] II:327: "It is certain that the beloved object is something that does not yet exist and that the love of an already existing object is in no wise possible. The only possibility is the attachment of the lover for a real being in whom there comes to be manifested the realization of the beloved object that does not yet exist." Compare II:334: "Many sophisms occur in connection with love. The first of all is one we have already mentioned: lovers imagine that the beloved object is a real thing, whereas it is a still unreal thing. The aspiration of love is to see this thing realized in a real person, and when love sees it realized, it then aspires to the perpetuation of this state, whose realization in the real person it has previously awaited. Thus the real beloved never ceases to be unreal [i.e., always transcendent], although most lovers are unaware of this, unless they have been initiated into the true science of love and its objects." Quoted in Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 334–35.

<sup>77</sup> Adapted from *Tarjūmān LV*, in Nicholson, *The Tarjūmān al-ashwāq*, 141–42.



No, I am wrong.

She lives  
in the black clot  
of blood in the membrane  
of my liver.

Beauty is bewildered by her:  
odors of musk  
and saffron  
drift away  
on the air.<sup>78</sup>

LOVE LANGUAGE OF EXCESS: THE WHO AND THE WHAT IN THE BODY

Thus we have in Ibn ‘Arabī’s limb-by-limb descriptions a distinctive coupling of the particular and the general, with an emphasis on absence and lack. The *wasf* here bewilders, confuses, confounds particularity; it loses at times the singular other in guises and disguises. Love here is, indeed, divided, and it “divides the heart,” to return to the phrase used by Derrida.

But it is not only this. In a way certainly different from *The Song of Songs*, and less apparent, the *wasf* in Ibn ‘Arabī also holds in its semantic registers the sense of the singular beloved, even if in a purely proleptic sense of something that is yet to (fully) be. “She,” as feminine, like the Prophet Muḥammad, is the very cipher of particularity, and that fact haunts these image-rich poems of longing. As we have seen, in spite of the excessive semantic overflow or surplus of extravagant metaphoric energies used to describe the beautiful body of the beloved, the concrete particular person never entirely evaporates or is wholly concealed, at least in the context of the *Tarjūmān* as a whole. Though the ancient Arabic *qaṣīdah* may emphasize absence and the memory of what is lost, its elaborate *awṣāf* a systematic dissembling and not a literary act of presencing, we have also seen that the *qaṣīdah* in the hands of a religious poet like Ibn ‘Arabī combines visionary idealization—divine otherness and the “not yet”—with a sense of a “real” object of desire, the “assumption of the sensible”—the lovely scholar-girl in a household of scholars in Mecca who was also Wisdom, Harmony, and, finally, perhaps most strangely, Divine Love in the gut.

We move now to an analogous motif in a religious poet and a religious tradition of medieval South India. This motif in the Sanskrit poetry of South Indian saint-poet Venkaṭeṣa combines in a unique way many of the

<sup>78</sup> Adapted from *Tarjūmān* LXI:7–9, in *ibid.*, 148.

semantic and syntactic registers, the willed ambiguities, of the *waṣf* in its praises of a protean, “many-guised,” boundless, though also (yet sometimes only potentially) powerfully present divine beloved. But there are also important differences. These Hindu verses house the most theologically self-conscious and elaborated form of extravagant description we have yet looked at, and so, in their systematic joining of the “who” and the “what,” the least ambiguous and most confident vision of the unity of particular and ideal forms of love.

### III. ANUBHAVĀ: ENJOYING THE BODY OF GOD IN SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE

There are interesting analogues to the *waṣf* in one of the most widespread, though little-studied, descriptive devices in South Asian literatures, the sequential description of a god or goddess, a hero or heroine, from foot to head or head to foot (*pādādikeśāḥ*, *āpādacūdānubhavam*, or *nakha-śikha*, literally “toenail-to-topknot” for the Hindu god Krishna).

As with the *awṣāf*, the actual origin of such limb-by-limb descriptions is far from clear. One obvious textual and perhaps cultic source—alluded to by some poets—may well be the Vedic *Puruṣa sūkta* (Ṛg Veda X:90), though some of the earliest literary examples come from Pāli descriptions of the body of the Buddha in the *Lakkhaṇasuttāna* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (ca. third century BCE), inspired in part by ancient conventional accounts of the thirty-two auspicious marks of the “great” person (*mahāpuruṣa*). By the third century CE, in the Buddhist *stotras* or “hymns” of Mātṛceta, we have fully developed examples of the adaptation of this form of sequential description to the body of the Buddha.<sup>79</sup> By the seventh century, the Chinese pilgrim I-tsing attests to the fact that two of Mātṛceta’s *stotras*, the *Catuṣṣataka stotra* and the *Śatapañcaśatika stotra*, were widely chanted throughout “India.”<sup>80</sup>

In the Pāli *Therīgāthā* (lyrics with commentaries and attached biographical narratives collected in fifth-century Kāñcīpuram), such descriptions are used ironically to satirize a love poet’s erotic descriptions of a human female beloved. The verses of Bhikkhunī Ambapālī, a self-portrait of the nun-heroine from head to foot, are a parody of the erotic love tradition. They juxtapose conventional images of the young girl’s hair “glossy

<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of Mātṛceta’s *stotras*, see Anthony Kennedy Warder’s *Indian Kāvya Literature*, vol. 2, *Origins and Formation of the Classical Kāvya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), 228–30, 230. And this Buddhist notion of the “great man” (*mahāpuruṣa*) obviously has its roots both in the royal notion of the *cakravartin* and in the ancient Vedic tradition of the “cosmic person” from whose sacrificed body the cosmos and the social order was created. See Ṛg Veda X:90 (esp. verses 12–14) for a sequential description of the *mahāpuruṣa*.

<sup>80</sup> This reference is taken from Nancy Nayar’s study of the poetry of the early Ācāyras: *Poetry as Theology*, 39.

and black as the down of a bee,” “a casket of perfumes,” her teeth “like the opening buds of the plantain,” her throat of “mother-of-pearl,” and her arms “shining like twin pillars” with the old woman’s body, “wrinkled and wasted” with years. The language of love is turned on its head and used in the service of a meditation on impermanence.<sup>81</sup> Here extravagant sequential description is used precisely against particularity, in a way different from the dissembling motifs of the Arabic *qaṣīdah*, and in the service of a transpersonal, general ideal of self and body.<sup>82</sup> The irony is even more savage in the verses attributed to Bhikkhunī Subhā of the Mango Grove, where the young male lover’s hyperbolic praise of the beautiful nun’s eyes—compared to “gazelles,” “enshrined” in her face as in the “calyx of the lotus”—is answered by the nun tearing out her eye in contempt and handing it to the young man.<sup>83</sup> “Here then,” she says in disgust, “take your eye!” (*handa te cakkhum harassu*).<sup>84</sup>

Other early examples of this form directed not to human lovers, nuns, or holy men but to actual temple icons include Bāṇa’s *Caṇḍī Śataka* (ca. seventh century CE), which contains a detailed foot-to-head description of the loveliness of the goddess Caṇḍī’s body, with a distinctive focus on the toenails, and a work Winternitz claims as contemporary with Bāṇa, Mūka’s *Pañca Śasti*, a praise in five hundred verses of the charming form of the goddess Kamākṣī of Kāñcīpuram. Also by the seventh century there are analogous Buddhist and Jain Sanskrit *stotras* that describe in elaborate detail the bodies of Buddhas or of the Jinas.<sup>85</sup>

In later centuries, limb-by-limb descriptions become widespread in pan-Indian cosmopolitan Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*), as well as in various

<sup>81</sup> For Ambapālī’s verses see *Therīgāthā* 252–70 (in Oldenberg and Pischel’s Pali Text Society edition, *The Thera- and Therī-gāthā* [London, 1883], 147–50). For an English translation, see Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists, I: Psalms of the Sisters* (London: Pali Text Society, 1909), 120–25. See also K. R. Norman, trans., *The Elder’s Verses II: Therīgāthā* (London: Pali Text Society, 1966). For a contemporary translation and running commentary, see Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therīgāthā* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 129–34.

<sup>82</sup> The *Therīgāthā* material poses some important variations on the theme of ideal bodies and particularity, but detailed treatment exceeds the scope of this article.

<sup>83</sup> *Therīgāthā* 366–99, in Oldenberg and Pischel, 158–52.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 396. For an English translation and discussion, see Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 177–83. See also Kevin Trainor, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Non-Attachment and the Body in Subhā’s Verse (Therīgāthā 71),” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 57–79.

<sup>85</sup> I am indebted to Nancy Nayar for these references. See her *Poetry as Theology: The Śrīvaṣṭava Stotra in the Age of Rāmānuja* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 20, 38; See also M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, trans. Subhadra Jhā (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), 2:377. Other important poems include Harṣa Vardhana’s *suprabhāta stotra*, a “wake-up” poem for the Buddha (in the style of shrine poems for the deity), and Jain poet Mānauṅga’s *Bhaktāmara Stotra* and eulogy for the Jina Rṣabha (Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, 2:548; Nayar, *Poetry as Theology*, 38).

Prākritis and “cosmopolitan” vernaculars, such as Sri Lankan Buddhist *kāvya* literature in Sinhala—developed from Sanskrit models—beginning in the thirteenth century. The important thirteenth-century Sinhala *māhākāvya*, the *Kavsiḷumīna*, contains, for instance, an elaborate foot-to-head description of the beauty of Queen Prabhāvati, the wife of the Buddha in his birth as King Kusa.<sup>86</sup> The *Pūjāvaliya*, another thirteenth-century Sinhala *kāvya*, contains long passages describing, limb by limb, the beautiful bodies of women, along with an emotionally charged description of the beautiful body of the Buddha as seen by his lovesick wife Yaśodharā upon his return to his father’s palace.<sup>87</sup> Such Buddhist Sinhala texts, the exquisite products of a second wave of vernacularization in Sri Lanka after the twelfth century, are imbued with a rich atmosphere of religious emotion that is deeply indebted to the aesthetic models of Sanskrit erotics.

Such descriptions also play an important role in Āgamic and tantric ritual texts such as the *Pāñcarātra*, where they form the basis of visualizations of a deity from foot to head. They also form part of iconometric texts for *śilpīns* (icon makers) shared by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains from a very early period. According to South Asian art historian Gustav Roth, the iconometric lists drafted by craftsmen in texts such as the sixth-century *Citralakṣaṇa* begin from the top point of the head and proceed down to the foot, while early Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious texts, miming the attitude of the worshipper, move from foot to head.<sup>88</sup>

Sanskrit *kāvya* poets from the earliest periods marshal a considerable store of rhetorical figures (*alaṅkāras*), such as metaphor (*rūpaka* or *dīpaka*), simile (*upamā*), “fancy” (*utprekṣā*), and alliteration (*anuprāsa*),

<sup>86</sup> The *māhākāvya* is based on a Jātaka tale (no. 531), as its original title of *Kusadāvata* indicates. See Canto V:224–44 in *The Crest-Gem of Poetry: Kavsiḷumīna*, trans. W. R. McAlpine and M. B. Ariyapala (Colombo: Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, 1990). For one of the few discussions in English of the *Kavsiḷumīna*, see C. E. Godakumbura’s seminal study, *Sinhalese Literature* (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries, 1955), 148–52. I am indebted to Charles Hallisey for drawing my attention to this remarkable text.

<sup>87</sup> See excerpts from Mayūrapada Buddhapatra’s *Pūjāvaliya* in *An Anthology of Sinhalese Literature up to 1815*, ed. C. H. B. Reynolds (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), 168–91, esp. 182–83, for a translation of passages describing Yaśodharā’s ecstatic vision of the Buddha as the hairs on “every part of her body” stiffened with joy.

<sup>88</sup> See Gustav Roth, “Notes on the *Citralakṣaṇa* and Other Ancient Indian Works on Iconometry,” in *South Asian Archaeology 1987: Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, held in the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice*, pt. 2, ed. Maurizio Taddei and Pierfrancesco Callieri (Rome: Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio Ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), 1026. The above discussion is indebted to the discussion of bodily description in my full-length study of Vedāntadeśika: Steven Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedāntadeśika in Their South Indian Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 136–37.

to evoke the aesthetic experience of the erotic (*śṛṅgāra rasa*) in their elaborately figured descriptions of beautiful women from head to toe and gods and goddesses from toe to head. For centuries Indian critics have focused their considerable critical and analytical faculties on the detailed analysis of such figurative language in poetry, prose, and the drama and its classification into types. In such poetry—according to one of the early theorists of Indian poetics, Bhāmaha (ca. fourth–fifth or seventh centuries CE—his dates are uncertain)—hyperbole or “exaggeration” (*atiśayokti*) is quite acceptable, even inevitable, given a suitable poetic “pretext” (*nimitta*); it would not, strictly speaking, be seen as “flaunted” at all but, rather, appropriate to the aesthetic enjoyment of the erotic. Moreover, again according to Bhāmaha, elaborate figuration (*vakrokti*) is one of the defining characteristics of ornamentation in poetry.<sup>89</sup>

#### LOVING DESCRIPTION AND THE DEVOTIONAL EYE

From the eighth through the fourteenth centuries in South India, the trope of exaggerated sequential description is used in distinctive ways first by Tamil saint-poets (Āḷvārs), and later by Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas composing in Sanskrit and Tamil, to describe the male bodies of temple images (*vigraha*, *mūrti*, *mēṇi*): the various standing, seated, and reclining images of the god Vishnu in a growing network of shrines that dot the landscape of Tamil Nadu. I have already noted that Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators call such foot-to-head or head-to-foot descriptions *anubhavas*: “experiences” or “enjoyments” of the body of the god. Sanskrit and Tamil *anubhavas* in Śrīvaiṣṇava literature are visionary pictures of the deity meant as a tool for systematic tantric-style visualizations (*dhyānāni*) but, as devotional visions, also as inspirers of emotion, an atmosphere of “divine passion,” a direct experience of amorous feeling through a refined erotic language inherited from Sanskrit *kāvya*.

Like the *awṣāf* of the *Song*, the Śrīvaiṣṇava *anubhava* is a language of overflowing joy and one of the most potent vehicles of love language in the literature. In the rush of images, the concrete object of contemplation, the temple icon, expands before one’s eyes. Like the *awṣāf* of Ibn ‘Arabī and the early Arabic odes, the poets’ similes, metaphors, and double entendres serve at times to dissolve the original object of gazing—a jeweled belt, a toe, a thigh, earrings, crown or navel; this, along with mythic and cultic associations from Purāṇic or Pāñcarātra liturgical texts, natural imagery of earth, atmosphere, and the planets, creates a complex composite image of a vigorously protean god, where the starting point of

<sup>89</sup> For a detailed account of the history of Indian poetics, see A. K. Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, vol. 1, *Literary Criticism* (1972; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989). For passages referred to here on figures of speech in Bhāmaha, see 82–89.

contemplation, the particular limb or particular body form, tends to get obscured, deconstructed in the extravagant textures of the text.<sup>90</sup>

Yet in spite of their lyrical energies and dissembling metaphors, such descriptive texts are decidedly rooted in an individual experience of a particular beloved form of Vishnu, a “cultic” context where one is honoring the temple body of a deity. They represent perhaps the most elegant balancing act between the “who” and the “what” of love that we have yet encountered. Unlike in the Arabic odes, there is no imagery of absence or the apophatic here. The saint-poet’s experience—to use a phrase of Richard Davis, his “devotional eye”—is shaped by sanctum icons, by their individual liturgical service and ritual honor (*pūjā*), always physically, materially present in the shrine.<sup>91</sup> Even when Vishnu is seen to change form, to move about like a living being, or to be played with like a doll (as in the charming narrative of the Muslim princess who fell in love with the plundered temple image of Raṅganātha), the poets often simply oscillate in imaginative vision between the immobile standing or reclining stone *mulabera* and the bronze festival images (*utsava mūrtis*) that stand before them in the “literal” space of the temple sanctum or as booty in the palace storerooms of a Delhi Sultan.<sup>92</sup>

Vishnu in this southern Tamil and Sanskrit poetry is the god who once stood/dwelt “here” and still is “standing/dwelling” (the verb *ṇil*—to dwell, abide, stand—as past participle and in the gerundive is used with elastic energy in the Tamil verses). This beloved god “abides” in the temple and its environs but most vividly “stands/abides” there right in front of the adoring poet, even while he has, simultaneously, become all things. The “what” of this beloved is impossibly immense, beyond metaphor, though the “who” remains present in spite of the full theanthropocosmic form. To the late poet and scholar A. K. Ramanujan the paradigmatic verse that describes this experience, drawing together in dynamic tension the universal and particular object of desire, appears in the work of Nammālvār, one of the earliest and most treasured of Tamil saint-poets. Nammālvār’s stanza reads almost like a grammatical paradigm, as Ramanujan notes, “a breathless recital of Tamil pronouns.” In his concise translation:

<sup>90</sup> For *The Song of Songs*, see Soulen, “The *Ways* of the *Song of Songs*,” 188. See also Sells, “The Guises of the Ghūl.” Sells, as we have seen, argues that the language of the Arabic odes expresses a “language of unsaying,” that it has an apophatic or negative sense (i.e., the Beloved disappears in the dissembling of semantic overflow).

<sup>91</sup> See Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>92</sup> For versions of the story of the icon of Vishnu as Raṅganātha and the Muslim princess, see Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 132–35. See also Vasudha Narayanan, “Arcāvatāra: On Earth as He Is in Heaven,” in *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of the Divine in India*, ed. Joanne Punzo Waghorne and Norman Cutler, in association with Vasudha Narayanan (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1985), 53–66.

We here and that man, this man,  
and that other in-between,  
and that woman, this woman  
and that other, whoever,

Those people, and these,  
and these others in-between,  
this thing, that thing,  
and this other in-between, whichever,

All things dying, these things,  
those things, those others in-between,  
good things, bad things,  
things that were, that will be,

being all of them,  
he stands there.<sup>93</sup>

ANUBHAVAS IN THE THEOLOGICAL VISIONS OF A SOUTH INDIAN SAINT-POET

The *anubhavas* of Veṅkaṭanātha or Veṅkaṭeśa, a fourteenth-century South Indian Śrīvaiṣṇava saint-poet also known by his title Vedāntadeśika, “Preceptor of the Vedānta,” take this Tamil paradigm and play with it, toying endlessly with images of Vishnu’s terrific forms, telescoping all times, past, present and future, myth and narrative history, the universal and the minute particular, layered similes and metaphors and the singular focus, in one complex and extravagant act of beholding. That god who performed so many exploits in so many remote ages, who took on so many different forms, who is, simultaneously, so many very different things, the “many-guised”: he is also, perhaps above all, out of individual love, here, in the shrine, before the loving gaze of the saint-poet.

This telescoping pattern is vividly expressed in one of Veṅkaṭeśa’s Sanskrit poems that describe the icon-body of Vishnu at Śrīraṅgam in sensuous, erotically charged detail, from foot to head. Veṅkaṭeśa’s Sanskrit poem was modeled on an early Tamil poem by Tiruppaṅālvār, which also described this same form of Vishnu from foot to head but without some of the extraordinary splendor of the Sanskrit saint-poet’s images. Verses from that poem read like this:

O Lord of Raṅga!

I see the exquisite curves of your calves,  
the lustre of anklets

<sup>93</sup> See A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu by Nammālvār* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 122–23.

bathes them  
 in color;  
 swift runners between armies in time of war,  
 long ladles to catch the liquid light  
 of your beauty—

their loveliness doubled by the shade  
 of your knees:  
     seeing them,  
 my soul stops running  
 the paths  
 of rebirth.

They seem like firm stems of plantain  
 growing in a pleasure garden;

wrapped in the linen cloth,  
 on fire  
 in the dazzle of the jeweled belt,

they are pillows  
 for his wives,  
 Kāmala, Bhūmī, Nappiṇṇai:<sup>94</sup>

Ah! my mind plunges into the mysterious depths  
 of Raṅga's young thighs  
 as into a double stream  
 of beauty.

What can equal it?

It's so deep that once all worlds  
 were tucked away inside it;

creator of all creators,  
     its lotus flower spews out  
     shining pollen.

In its lustre,  
 a whirlpool of beauty—

this fine navel of the Lord of Raṅga  
 gives endless delight  
 to my mind.

<sup>94</sup> “Napiṇṇai,” or “our Piṇṇai,” is Vishnu's Tamil consort. In Tamil mythology she is one of Krishna's cowgirl (*gopī*) lovers.



His broad chest burns with a vermillion  
of shining jewels; blessed  
by the touch of goddess Śrī's small feet,  
its lustre deepened  
by the mole with its curl of hair,  
Śrīvatsa:

with its long king's garland of victory,  
its shining pearls bright  
as the full moon—  
strewn with the tender leaves  
of holy basil—

                  this cool shade  
between the long arms of the Lord of Raṅga  
soothes the fever  
of my mind.

Below the tall crown of Raṅga's Lord,  
dappled with a fiery light  
of flowers  
and jewels,

his dark wavy hair, with its fine garlands  
knotted with sweet spices and  
fragrant herbs,

is graced by the touch  
of his wives' slender fingers,

and wild as the barbed words  
of angry Chola girls—

my mind's mad wandering  
finds its rest  
on that good king's  
crown.

So my mind touches the lotus feet of Raṅga's Lord,  
delights in his fine calves, clings  
to his twin thighs and,  
slowly  
rising, reaches  
the navel.

                  It stops for a while  
on his chest,

then, after climbing  
     his broad shoulders,  
 drinks the nectar  
     of his lovely face  
     before it rests at last  
 at the crown's flowery  
     crest . . .

And after this dizzying itinerary of imagistic description that integrates specific attributes and iconographic details of the cult images with mythic exploits that go backward in time and an anthropomorphism that evokes the presence of a living, animated person, a penultimate verse places the reader back into the central temporal and special context of the praise poem, the temple sanctum itself and the temple icons of a particular god of a particular place that are the immediate focus of the poet's gaze, and ultimately into the very body—into the gut, as Ibn 'Arabī would say of his beloved—of the poet himself:

The noble beauty of his arms;  
     his body scarred by a warrior's bowstrings  
 and women's bangles—  
     his chest belongs  
     to Lakṣmī,  
 goddess of luck.

And the thick club  
 studded with iron: his weapons  
 show his fearlessness.

He is here, asleep on the coiled serpent,  
     where, just in front of himself,  
 his very own self, his image,  
     shines. Here,  
 in the middle of Śrīraṅgam town,  
     a king with his three queens—

here, in the middle  
     of my heart!

These verses are from the *Bhagavad-dhyānasopānam* (The ladder of meditation on the body of Bhagavān) and describe what for the twentieth-century Sanskrit commentator Veṅkaṭagopāladāsa is an experience (*anubhava*) of an “astonishing otherworldly beauty” (*alaukikādbhūta-saundaryam*) and of “sweet deep inner delight”; it represents a “continuous burning desire” (*nirantaraotkaṭakāma*), a “ladder of love that has as

its sole object the Lord” (*etadapi bhagavaviṣayakāmasya sopānameva*).<sup>95</sup> This same commentator cites as the source for such sensual relish of the divine body a passage from one of the finest works of Sanskrit *kāvya*, the limb-by-limb description of young Pārvatī in Kālidāsa’s *Kumārasaṃbhava* (1:32–49). The slow journey up the body of god is compared by Veṅkaṭeśa’s commentator to the erotic relish of the young girl and future consort of Śiva:

At her waist like an altar, curving and slender,  
there were three gentle folds of the skin,  
as if a woman in her youth could freshly grow  
steps for the God of Love to climb.<sup>96</sup>

Veṅkaṭeśa, the religious poet, like Kālidāsa before him, uses in a creative way motifs from secular erotic literature to express emotions proper to love of a deity. Here *bhakti*, religious love, is continuous with *kāma*, so-called “secular” erotic love—the Sanskrit cousin of *eros*—and concrete human emotions and literary conventions of erotic love are harnessed for religious purposes, with the *anubhava* as one of their most effective literary vehicles.

There are *anubhavas* in every major poem by Veṅkaṭeśa that praise a specific particularized icon of Vishnu, and in each case these stepwise descriptions form the core of the long hymn of praise: a head-to-foot or foot-to-head delectation for the eyes, an extravagant beholding of the beautiful body of the god.<sup>97</sup>

#### THE WHO AND THE WHAT IN “COSMOTHEANDRIC” UNITY

I will conclude this section with selected verses from one of Veṅkaṭeśa’s Sanskrit *anubhavas* to Vishnu, this time in his form as Devanāyaka Swāmi at Tiruvahāndrapuram. This particular form of Vishnu calls forth some of the poet’s most passionate and seemingly personal poetry, in all three of his working languages, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit. The verses express vividly and memorably the language of excess that is the mark of the *wasf* in its most general sense.

<sup>95</sup> Verses are from *Bhagavadhyanasopānam* 3–6, 9–11. See full translation and detailed discussion in Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God*, 157–65.

<sup>96</sup> *Kumārasaṃbhavam* 1:39. Translation from *The Origin of the Young God: Kālidāsa’s “Kumārasaṃbhava,”* trans. Hank Heifetz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 27. See also discussion in Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God*, 161–63.

<sup>97</sup> Though traditionally foot-to-head description is reserved for divinities, and head-to-foot for the human beloved, Veṅkaṭeśa and the other poets in this tradition use both directions for Vishnu. Though the exact reasons for this are not clear, some scholars and Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators claim that in the head-to-foot descriptions the saint-poet assumes intimacy, a spontaneous familiarity with the divine beloved, as if he were human.

Veṅkaṭeṣa uses a variety of dissembling similes and metaphors, from the natural world, the world of mythic narratives, and that of human bodies. To use the coinage of philosopher and comparative theologian Raimon Panikkar, these *anubhavas* are “cosmotheandric,” bringing together the worlds of nature, the divine, and the human in elegant balance.<sup>98</sup> More self-consciously and systematically theological than either the verses in *The Song of Songs* or in the *nasīb-ghazals* of Ibn ‘Arabī, here the divine is directly invoked as the many-guised beloved, present in human, natural, and cosmic forms. And also, unlike the inherited tradition of the Arabic *qaṣīdahs*, there is no imagery of absence here that the poet uses to evoke incommensurability or dissembling metamorphosis. It is here all about manifold, multiple, and simultaneous forms of presence, natural, divine, and human.

In the following poetic description we have natural images in the cold darkness of the night, in stars, a cool moon, the sea, rivers, and the night sky’s “asylum”; flora and fauna in the bees, peacocks, the lotus, *bimbā* fruit; the world of sacred narrative and myth in the birth of the god Śiva from Vishnu’s sweat, the exploits of the Love God Kāma, Vishnu/Devanāyaka’s form of the pastoral child-cowherder Krishna, the creation of the world from the god Brahmā, who emerges from the lotus that grows from Vishnu’s navel, the god’s swallowing of the entire universe at its periodic dissolution, and his freeing of the cursed wife of a sage, Ahalya, from a stone. Finally, we have the human world, in the fierce and sensual anthropomorphism of the imagery common in the southern Tamil and Sanskrit literatures: the god whose body’s perfect beauty draws the envy of the jewels that adorn it; his lovemaking with his wife, Lakṣmī/Padmāvati; his scuffed soiled knees as the child Krishna; his sea-creature (Makara) earrings; his curly black hair; the images of a mother’s womb, the young cowgirls of Braj; the three folds of the god’s belly; and the passionate emotions of the poet’s “devotional eye.”

Roughly, from head to toe, in this religious and visionary art, the god is dissembled but not confused, not evoked in metaphors of absence; the “whole” here is unequivocally present in every “part.”

Seeing your lovely body whose splendor  
is made even more perfect  
by each perfect  
limb,

enjoyed by your beloved wives  
with unblinking, astonished

<sup>98</sup> See Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (New York: Orbis, 1993), esp. “Colligite Fragmenta: For an Integration of Reality,” 1–77.

eyes, and sought out  
by the jewels and weapons that adorn it  
to increase  
their own radiance,

my sight, O Lord of Gods,  
is not sated with  
seeing! (14)

. . . . .  
O Lord of Gods,  
a night smeared with stars,  
the shining waves  
of your dark curly locks of hair  
join with the moon  
of your face  
that drips bright nectar  
of a tender smile:

this is fit object for our meditations

to cool the burning  
fevers of births  
and deaths. (17)

. . . . .  
That rare mark of auspicious grace—  
half-dark,  
half-bright,  
worn by the moon  
for only a certain  
phase  
of it waxing,

shines always on your brow

where, long ago,  
O Lord of Gods,  
from the mere drop  
of a drop  
of sweat,  
was born  
three-eyed Puruṣa, Lord Śiva  
who wields  
the spear. (19)

. . . . .  
On your lovely ear, O Lord of Gods,  
that shines  
in flowing waves of beauty,  
it takes the form

of the Fish  
 that marks the banner  
 of the love god,

enflammer of desires:

Makarikā,  
 this jeweled earring,  
 sweet to behold  
 by those who stand before you,  
 plays frisky  
 games,

swimming  
 against  
 your current. (22)

. . . . .  
 O Lord of those who ride  
 the aerial cars,

they are eager to play at the protection  
 of the world,

miming the simple charms  
 of the lotus flower;

sending streams of blissful perfumes,

they call to us, breathless,  
 with no words,  
 as from the quiet  
 of a mother's womb:

the glances  
 from the reddened corners of your eye

drench me

with sweetest nectar. (25)

. . . . .  
 O Lord of immortals,  
 mad with love,  
 my mind kisses your lower lip red as *bimbā* fruit,  
 as the tender young shoots  
 from the coral tree  
 of paradise:

your lips enjoyed by young cowgirls,  
 by your flute

and by the prince  
of conch-shells. (27)

. . . . .  
O Lord of Gods,  
like your long garland,  
Vanamālikā,  
stirred into bright bloom, my mind,  
radiant with wonder

becomes an ornament  
for your neck

which wears fine tattoos  
from Padmāvati's  
lovely bangles

like a conch  
blueblack  
as the eye of a peacock's tail

from the glow of your  
dark light. (28)

. . . . .  
Cool and moist,  
pure luminous  
destroyer  
of darkness,

bright asylum for stars;

dripping sweet  
nectar for gods,  
desire's passionate  
yes:

O Lord of Gods,

such a wondrous thing is this mind of yours,  
that gives birth to moons  
in every  
creation! (34)

. . . . .  
Though it is so thin,  
O Lord of gods,  
it swallowed

and spat out

this entire  
universe;

its three soft  
folds  
mark nothing less

than the three-fold  
division  
of worlds;

in its fragrant lotus navel  
a bee  
the shape of Viriñca,  
Lord Brahmā,  
has its little house:

like a waist band  
my mind

adorns  
your sweet belly. (35)

. . . . .  
They are like surging whirlpools of light  
that quiver  
and play  
in a floodtide  
of beauty

or beloved companions  
of Lakṣmī's jeweled palace  
mirrors;

yet they scuffed and crawled  
their way  
through crude cowherder's  
courtyards:

these two knees of yours  
will not let go  
of my mind! (39)

. . . . .  
With its touch  
the young wife of the forest sage  
emerged  
out of a stone;  
ashes from a womb  
became the handsome  
young prince;

caressed by Lady Ramā  
and Mahī,



goddess Earth,  
 they say  
 this foot  
 is the One God  
 of all. (41)  
 . . . . .  
 Even this heart of mine—  
 madly tossed  
 here  
 and there  
 by force of its desire  
 for every  
 other thing—  
 clings to  
 and of its own accord  
 is held  
 captive,  
 O Lord of Gods,  
 by your toes:  
 flowing  
 downward  
 in the liquid light  
 of their own  
 rays,  
 they are petals  
 of your divine  
 lotus feet! (42)<sup>99</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION: LOVE, IDEAL BODIES, AND PARTICULARITY

In a characteristically thoughtful essay on Augustine and Dante on the “ascent of love,” Martha Nussbaum argues that both Christian writers end up rejecting the Platonic Ascent of Love, a doctrine ostensibly based upon Socrates’ account of eros and the ascent up the ladder of truth in the *Symposium*. Platonist accounts of love’s ascent claim, as we have already noted, that as one grows in love one moves up the scale of being, from earthly to heavenly forms of love, from love of the individual person—a

<sup>99</sup> From the *Devanāyakaṇḍikā* [Fifty verses in praise of Devanāyaka], translated in full in my anthology of Veṅkaṭeśa’s Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prākṛit poetry: Steven Hopkins, *An Ornament for Jewels: Love Poems for the Lord of Gods by Vedāntadeśika* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Stanza numbers in original are noted in brackets at the end of each translated verse.

love vulnerable to pain and attachment, to need and desire—to love of his/her qualities, love of beautiful objects or ideas, and finally, beyond, to a great sea of beauty and truth, a transcendental state that strips away all that is merely human in love.<sup>100</sup> Nussbaum points to Augustine's moments of profound ambivalence on this point in the *Confessions* and ends up claiming that Augustine “advances a picture of ascent (or ascent combined with descent) that gives a more substantial and more positive role to certain ingredients of ordinary human love.”<sup>101</sup> This valuation of the individual and of ordinary human love has more to do with Augustine's critique of the perfectibility of the body, his awareness of the brokenness (the “horizontality,” as it were) of sin and of moral weakness, along with a vivid sense of the power of memory to draw one back down to the past, than with a pervasive idea about the religious power of human love.

With Dante, however, it is a different matter. Dante's journey in the *Commedia* would seem at first glance to be a kind of model of love's ascent. We begin, back in the *Vita Nuova*, with Dante's love for Beatrice when both of them were nine years old, when he first caught sight of her in her red dress. In the process of reading the *Commedia*, particularly when we see Beatrice again in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, and feel with Dante the deep emotion of this reunion after “ten years' thirst” and the signs of the “old flame” (*cognoso i segni de l'antica fiamma; Purg. XXX:48*), we witness the steady and sometimes precipitous transformations of Dante's beloved girl from Florence: she is Theology, Trinity (the numbers three and nine), Love, teacher, matronly admonisher, even a kind of figure of Christ, but for all those extraordinary transformations, and all the inconceivable rarefied intensities of her growing physical and spiritual beauty as they ascend, right up to the upper reaches of Paradise, she remains that same Beatrice, his irreducible “other.” One can even argue that the body of Beatrice, almost in a physical way, beginning in the *Vita Nuova*, is the vehicle of the entire vision, ultimately forming the very framework of the

<sup>100</sup> See Nussbaum's brilliant essay on the *Symposium*, “The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of the *Symposium*,” 165–99, where she argues that Plato himself, in his construction of the text, questions the ultimate authority of Socrates' speech and its neat arrangement of the stages of eros, by including Alcibiades as an all-too-vulnerable foil, desperately and ultimately tragically in love with the very particular and irreducible Socrates, at the end of the dialogue. To interpret Alcibiades only as a kind of failure or a cautionary tale about the perils of false eros is to ignore important ironies of the text and the central dilemma of love placed before the reader by its author, Plato, at the close of this “night of heavy drinking.”

<sup>101</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, “Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love,” in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 63. We have seen this same ambivalence about concrete love of individuals in Ibn 'Arabī and his critics.

literary edifice of the *Commedia*.<sup>102</sup> Even in the transcendental vision of the Rose at the very end of the journey, the heavenly Rose where all the saints gather into a unity that seems to swallow all particularity, her gaze meets Dante, in flawless clarity, undimmed by great metaphysical and spiritual distance:

I, without answering, then looked on high  
and saw that round her now a crown took shape  
as she reflected the eternal rays.

No mortal eye, not even one that plunged  
into deep seas, would be so distant from  
that region where the highest thunder forms,  
as—there—my sight was far from Beatrice;  
but distance was no hindrance, for her semblance  
reached me—undimmed by anything between.<sup>103</sup>

As Nussbaum remarks: “Her particularity transcends all barriers. In that full particularity he loves her.”<sup>104</sup>

The *awṣāf* in *The Song of Songs*, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *nasīb-ghazals* of Nizām’s “absent presence,” and Veṅkaṭeśa’s *anubhavas* of the body of Vishnu, though they express different registers of the particular and the ideal, and different foci on the spectrum of the divine and the human, do this same thing for the beloved. Sometimes, like the lovely body of Pārvatī, daughter of Himālaya and goddess consort of Lord Śiva, they are called “ladders of love”; we are meant to climb, with the poet, up the body of god or of the human beloved, from the foot to the head, and grow in the intensity of our love or our awareness of the “splendor . . . made even more perfect by each perfect limb.” The great eleventh-century rabbi from Champagne, Schelomo Izhaqui, known as Rashi, in his commentary on the very first verse of the *Song* speaks about various levels of the “kiss”: there is “kissing of the shoulder, which calls for great exertion, there is kissing of the hand, where God helps; but then there is kissing of the mouth, when our prayers are sufficient to yield the desired results through divine intervention.”<sup>105</sup> But as we have seen, overall, in the *wāsf* and in

<sup>102</sup> See the fascinating study by Robert Pogue Harrison *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). It can be argued quite decisively, I believe, that the *Paradiso* in particular can be seen as an ascent of the body of Beatrice, that her body is the vehicle for Dante’s vertical flight up and into the heavenly spheres.

<sup>103</sup> *Paradiso* XXXI:70–77, from the translation of Alan Mandelbaum ([New York: Bantam, 1986], 283).

<sup>104</sup> Nussbaum, “Augustine and Dante,” 81.

<sup>105</sup> See Yerushalmi, *The Book of Shir HaShirim*, 17. See also Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, 137.

the *anubhava* there is really no ladder at all, no one particular direction that is privileged: we oscillate between the poles of the universal, transcendental attributes, love's beautiful ideas, and, ultimately, the irreducible individuality of the singular beloved, whether this is made present in the very texture of the text, as in the *Song* and in Veṅkaṭeṣa, or is anticipated, as in Ibn 'Arabī's *nasīb-qaṣīdahs*. Up or down, ascent or descent, it's all the same, in that full particularity; we love each limb, its distinctive beauty, as if it were the whole.<sup>106</sup>

Here the "who" and the "what" of eros is in creative tension together, at one point dividing and at another healing the heart, but never absorbed into some "higher" abstract ascendant unity either. At times this literary device emphasizes presence, in a surplus of praise, as in *The Song of Songs* and especially in the theological praise poems of the South Indian saint-poet Veṅkaṭeṣa; at other times, as in the Arabic Odes, there is confusion, the absence (for the time being) of the particular other in a profusion of imagistic dissemination, an emphasis on eternal progress and the beloved as something, to use the phrase of both Corbin (glossing Ibn 'Arabī) and Derrida, "yet to be." But in all cases a central tension is maintained, a kind of willed ambiguity that preserves the particular and the ideal—or even more precisely, the particular in the ideal—and it is in this sense precisely that the *wasf* and *anubhava* contribute to the study of the literature of love cross-culturally.

In these literary motifs of extravagant description, the irreducible "who" of love remains, particular among its ideal forms. What remains as well is the standing possibility of conflict, duality, movement, and instability, along with a sense that what these two lovers have yet before them is not an end to the discourse, not a planned ordered telos of love but a "continued pursuit" of better questions. Eros is not a ladder here; it does not trace a vertical motion but rather creates a kind of charged horizontal space, an energetic arena of continual risky encounter, a permanent, sometimes blissful, sometimes anxious "destinerrance," where lover and beloved waver in an endless liquid play of sensations, their bodies mingling with the landscape around them, then separating into distinct persons, at once transpersonal and utterly individual, each to the other, mutually.

Love here, at once human and divine, draws together in one gaze the universal in the particular.

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<sup>106</sup> Though it is of course beyond the scope of this article, one can argue that this emphasis on beauty and particularity is one of the most compelling ethical dimensions of eros. For an argument about the role of "beauty" (and the particular) in ethics and justice theory, with an implied connection to the eros of beholding the other person, see Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).