The Desire of God

Garry J. Deverell

Monash University[1]

Abstract

By exploring the contours of human longing and desire, particularly in its complex relationship with the body and material reality, the article shows that it is in the very nature of the *humanum* to seek after and promise the presence of a divinity whose arrival cannot be guaranteed (not from the human side, at least). Biblical poetry from the *Psalms* and the *Song of Songs* will be invoked and explored as exemplars of that psycho-theological landscape. While human desire is not enough to guarantee God's arrival, desire perseveres on the basis of a mysterious sense of call or promise which, while experienced and apprehended *within* the self, nevertheless appears to emanate or broadcast as from *another place*.

INTRODUCTION

Human desire for another raises a fundamental question. If one cannot guarantee the arrival into presence of that which one longs for, how can one claim some kind of reality or substantiality for the object of desire? In attempting to answer that question via an engagement with the French phenomenological tradition, this article shall revisit Derrida's intriguing suggestion that a self's desire for some kind of non-yet-arrived 'other' may well be read as the sign or promise of that other's desire or love for the self.[1] In a theological sense, the phrase 'desire of God' could then be read in two distinct and yet inter-related senses: our desire for God, but also God's desire for us. Could our desire for God *already* be God's desire for us? I will answer, 'yes,' and argue further that the human body is a privileged site for the confluence or negotiation of these two kinds of desire. For the self is not at one with itself. It is present and identifiable in the body, and yet is still arriving, as from some other 'place' or 'time', in what has been called *persona* or *spirit*. But neither is God at one with Godself. God, who is *spirit*, has nevertheless chosen to make the

---

pilgrimage towards self-confluence via the material and human history of Christ and the church.

1. DESIRE AND THE BODY

1.1 the body: the desirable before desire

According to Lévinas' early reflections in *Existence and Existents,* it is the phenomenon of desire that shows us that there is both a world and a relation that precedes the action of the intentional ego as it moves out from itself, from the interior to the exterior. Philosophy, he says, has always assumed that 'the world' was that which the *intending consciousness* produces as its field or horizon of perception. '*Existing*, in the whole of Western idealism, refers to the intentional movement from inwardness to the exterior. A being is what is thought about, seen, acted upon, willed, felt—an object.' Here the centre of the world is the ego, and the world itself a function of that ego. The discovery of the unconscious, however, implies that there is an event in some way prior to this world, an event that Lévinas names 'the desirable'. Here there is a forgetting of personal intentions in favour of a reality that does not come about by the objectifying movement of the ego, but is rather 'given'.[2]

> The world is what is given to us. This expression is admirably precise: the given does not to be sure come from us, but we do receive it. It already has a side by which it is the terminus of an intention . . . Desire as a relationship with the world involves both a distance between me and the desirable, and consequently a time ahead of me, and also a possession of the desirable which is prior to the desire. This position of the desirable, before and after the desire, is the fact that is given. And the fact of being given is the world.[3]

That the desirable is not simply an idea, projection, or object of intention is underlined in what Lévinas says about the nude or naked body. The nude signifies, for him, that which is desirable, the genuinely 'other'. This because the nude retreats or hides from society into a place where it is no longer inscribed or 'dressed' with the forms or markings of social and cultural life.[4] The nude can therefore be said to both proceed and exceed the intentionality of philosophical consciousness.

Desire such as this, directed towards a mystery that is able to resist objectification, is what Lévinas does not hesitate to call 'love.' Love, he says, is an insatiable hunger: insatiable because it cannot be fulfilled within the circumscribing orbit of economic

exchange, which is the world of the subject. In the phenomenon of a lover's caress he locates an absolute limit to such designs:

> The trouble one feels before the beloved does not only precede what we call, in economic terms, possession, but is felt in the possession too. In the random agitation of caresses there is the admission that access is impossible, violence fails, possession is refused . . . The *other* is precisely this objectless dimension. The hunger of love pulls away from every being. [5]

According to Lévinas, the solitary subject is not able to transcend itself, to save itself, from the bondage of self-enclosure. The possibility of salvation comes through an encounter with absolute *alterity* in the figure of the body, and especially the *face*, of another.[6] The naked face, then, is the precise location of otherness for Lévinas. It is the persistence of particularity over the universalising tendencies of Being. 'The body is a permanent contestation of the prerogative attributed to consciousness of "giving meaning" to each thing; it lives as this contestation.'[7]

Furthermore, it is from the specific locatedness of the body in space and time that the very possibility of unique and conscious *identity* arises. 'Consciousness comes out of rest, out of position, out of this unique relationship with place. Position is not added to consciousness like an act that it decides on; it is out of position, out of immobility, that consciousness comes to itself.'[8] The *spirituality* of the body is therefore described by Lévinas as a certain non-coincidence between the locality of one's body and the transcending consciousness it makes possible.[9] We meet with something similar in Jüngel's analysis of the 'Here' and the 'Now', phenomena which do not correspond with each other because of the distanciation of eschatological time and space. For Jüngel, the ego becomes *spirit* or consciousness precisely as it comes to itself from a space beyond the Now, and a time beyond the Here.[10] For Lévinas therefore, as much as for Jüngel, the selfhood of the self is a correlation without correlation, a product of this difficult non-coincidence of body and the temporality of consciousness the body makes possible.

To summarise Lévinas' early work, then, the self is constituted by a twofold encounter with alterity. First, there is the encounter with the otherness of one's own body, an encounter which is 'immemorial' in the sense that it occurs even before I become conscious of myself. Indeed, it can be said to *possibilize* such consciousness, for consciousness is precisely a desire towards that which precedes

and exceeds consciousness. Second, there is the encounter with the body, and particularly the face, of another, a particularity that resists inscription or possession even as my own body does. In the face one encounters not an *alter ego* or *Miteinandersein*, as with Heidegger, but an *other* who claims an asymmetrical power of desire even over my own desire, a certain 'distance' even in proximity.[11]

1.2 the face to face: desire as a pre-lingual ethics

In a later text, *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas draws an explicit connection between desire, the face, speech, and 'religion.' Because desire comes into being as from the bodily 'isness' of another, desire is that which lives from the persistence of *mystery* in the other. Paradoxically, it is therefore in the interests of subjectivity to make room for the other within its own self-definition. Without such 'hospitality', desire would cease to be desire, for the other would be vanquished as other.[12] There is a certain 'madness' to desire, then. It is able to put aside self-interest in order to attend to the interests of another. Desire is a madness that is able, if you like, to transmute itself into goodness, goodness defined by Lévinas as the preoccupation of the self not with itself, but with another being. Desire, he says, is 'Religion.' While Platonic love longs for the immortality of the self in communion with some kind of demiurgic divinity, religion is a self being able to surpass itself in 'glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice'.[13] The truth of ethics in Lévinasian religion should not be understood, therefore, as some kind of culturally constructed moralism or social contract by which the truth of other beings comes to light in the manifesting glow of one's own being. Against the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, Lévinas argues that ethical truth comes not as some kind of manifesting 'disclosure' but of 'revelation'. Here the being of the other 'tells' itself before any such manifestation even becomes possible, 'revealing' itself not according to a thematizing gaze or form, but according to its own pre-eminent will and authority.

The revealing other reveals itself, as we now understand, in the *face*. But we must emphasise that in Lévinas the face cannot be simply identified with 'form,' if form is understood as some kind of cultural 'dressing' which we provide for nakedness.[14] For the self-expression of the face exceeds whatever forms we may place upon it, and it does so by a kind of 'speaking' or 'signifying' which comes directly from the eyes.[15] What Lévinas means by this metaphor is somewhat difficult to discern. On

the language side, he clearly regards the signifying movement of language as essentially interlocutionary in character. One can picture two people facing each other in a mutual gaze, such that the interlocutionary, as a language event, arises from facing.[16] Signification (the face to face) makes the sign (language) possible. 'Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.'[17] There is reference, here, to a language somehow *before* language, somewhat in the mode of Kierkegaard's ethics before ethics.   In the case of Lévinas, ethical conversation arises first from an encounter with the *eyes* of the other which, he says, speak more frankly even than the face, which is capable of being either a mask or a mirror. The eyes speak a truth for the face that is 'impossible to dissemble.' In the language of the eyes is 'the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face.'[18]

Jean-Luc Marion's exegesis of these rather dense metaphors is helpful, I think. In *Prolegomena to Charity* he reflects upon the nature of love. What makes the other necessarily invisible to my objectifying gaze is not some special quality that the other possesses but I do not. It is simply that the other can do what I do—intend objects which are unable to first intend or see me. If the other can do this also, then he or she can render himself or herself invisible to every object he or she intends, including myself! 'The other, as other, irreducible to my intention, but origin of another intention, can never be seen, by definition.' This is borne out, as it happens, in the phenomenon of the mutual gaze. When I want to fix my intention exclusively on another, I focus on the eyes, and the pupils in particular. But the pupil appears to me as an emptiness, a black hole, so that even here in the midst of a visible face 'there is nothing to see, except as an invisible and untargetable [*invisable*] void.'[19]

Marion develops these ideas further in his text *In Excess*. Friendship, he says, is the paradigm example of the face-to-face as an *event*. In friendship, I first 'take for myself [the other's] point of view on me, without reducing it to my point of view on him; and thus he comes to me.' This looking to position oneself in the place of being seen is termed *anamorphosis*: literally, allowing oneself to be morphed or figured according to the gaze of another. Whence, secondly, 'the event of this friendship is accomplished all at once, without warning or anticipation, according to an *arrival* without expectation and without rhythm'. One cannot produce the event from oneself alone. The other gives itself before I am ready to receive it. Third, the

phenomenon given in this way 'gives nothing other than itself. Its ultimate meaning remains inaccessible, because it is reduced to its *fait accompli*, to its *occurrence* [*incidence*].' Thus, for Marion, the meaning of the other is surplus to its appearance: 'we cannot assign to it a single cause or any reason, or rather, none other than itself, in the pure energy of its unquestionable happening'. This suggests that what shows *itself* in the face 'only manages to do so by virtue of a *self*, strictly and eidetically phenomenological, that assures to it the sole fact that it gives *itself* and which, in return, proves that its phenomenalization presupposes its givenness as such and starting from itself.'[20]

1.3 asymmetry and covenant: friends or antagonists?

This begs the question, of course, as to whether there can be any really mutual *partnership* or covenant in the face-to-face. If the very *selfhood* of the other perseveres in darkest mystery, even as I constitute myself in response to his or her 'isness', wouldn't this mean that my relationship with the other is not so much a partnership as an *antagonism*? Antagonism: 'The mutual resistance or active opposition of two opposing forces, physical or mental; active opposition to a force.'[21] It is not difficult, certainly, to find evidence for that claim. *Totality and Infinity* is shot through with the language of radical asymmetry—the other's 'mastery' over the I.[22] The freedom of the other is often said to be a freedom which is 'superior' to my own freedom in that it 'dominates' my own.[23] If one imagines that sense of superiority cutting two ways, as Marion would have it, it is indeed difficult to picture the relation as anything other than a mutual *resistance*. Lévinas has often been accused of disqualifying the possibility of a perception of the other that could lead to partnership. In his enthusiasm for protecting the otherness of the other from manipulation and objectification, does he not also make that other unreachable, even in the mode of invocation?

I agree that Lévinas certainly does err towards that outcome. Yet, it is difficult to conclude that the door is closed entirely. In a key passage of *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas hypostasizes the Other as a 'Beloved' who, in a 'paroxysm of materiality' (i.e. the nakedness of a body, face and eyes), indeed *appears*, yet without appearing, and *signifies*, yet without speaking. That paradoxical mode of speech is necessary, according to Lévinas, not because relationship is entirely impossible but because it is

an *event*, a process of becoming which correlates with the becoming of the subjectivities it enfolds. The self, he says, is not always the same. It is identical with the changes it undergoes through the encounter with its other.[24] What appears and is manifest in a present is in fact the 'not yet' of eschatological time.[25] That is not simply to say that the present implies a future, but that the 'Eternal' or the 'Infinite' has a priority over temporality such that even those things which seem temporally impossible might turn out to be possible after all[26]—relationships of love included.

Lévinas speaks about the eventfulness of relationships in time when he says that the impossible is also the infinitely 'fecund'. *Fecundity is the self ever in search of itself in the other*. It is a relationship with 'infinite time' in which a kind of 'eternal youth' is made possible because every moment is a recommencement towards an infinitely open future.[27] In order to explain what is meant here, Lévinas introduces a metaphor that is uncannily *relational* and even *trinitarian* in its patterning and force. The embodied encounter with the mystery of the Beloved other, while remaining a mystery, also creates the possibility for a new kind of relationship: paternity. 'By a total transcendence, the transcendence of trans-substantiation, the I is, in the child, an other. Paternity remains a self-identification, but also a distinction within identification—a structure unforseen in formal logic.'[28] My child is at once me, but also a stranger: myself, but not of my own making.

Surely Lévinas is reaching here for a way in which desire for the other can return to a habitation in the self as *a genuine experience of intimacy*. If my child is myself as a stranger, she is also myself as myself. This means that the stranger can also be, literally, familiar. If it is the stranger that I desire, without prospect of absorption into the self, it is nevertheless a familiar stranger: the self *as* another. What Lévinas prefigures here is the possibility that self and other actually constitute each other in such a way that they may come even to *know each other* in and as that mode of *self-*knowledge which I am calling 'covenant', or the performance of the self as from another. Additional support for this perspective may be garnered from what Lévinas says (albeit in a very masculine way), about 'Woman'. 'Woman' is the name of that intimate someone who is at once a presence and an absence, the very meaning of hospitality. For hospitality is the 'secret' welcome made by a *present* Intimate, an empty space or habitation carved out *within* the self—in/habitation, a recollection in interiority. The Woman, says Lévinas (and one may surely add 'the Man' as well), is

a welcoming before all welcoming because she is a welcoming that has always already occurred from the deepest and most interior sanctum of interiority.[29] Surely this suggests that the 'Other' is already closer to me than I am to myself, already producing the distance of relationship within the proximity of intimacy. If that is so, then Lévinas cannot finally be read, even in *Totality and Infinity*, as a denier of covenant. For covenant is exactly this: the self that is unable to produce itself apart from this distance-in-proximity with another.

Marion tweaks the famous Lévinasian asymmetry by saying that it is only in the crossing of **two** asymmetrical gazes that a genuinely ethical injunction towards love may be discerned.[30] What I see in the other's eyes is an invisible gaze that already sees me.[31] Such a gaze is able to dismiss the priority of the nominative 'I' in favour of an accusative 'me', so that while I may never know precisely who or what this other is, I may know that she or he faces *me* and aims at *me.* This has the effect of stripping away the *I* so that the decentred *me* of the other's injunction is all that remains.[32] Yet the asymmetry of this experience cuts both ways, leading Marion to make this proposal for a phenomenological definition of love: 'two definitively invisible gazes (intentionality and the injunction) cross one another, and thus together trace a cross that is invisible to every gaze other than theirs alone.'[33] In this kind of love, the other remains untamed and undomesticated, and yet the 'I' comes to see this fact as deeply desirable. 'If to love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself.'[34] I may not know everything about the Beloved, in other words, but I can certainly love 'the look of love' within his or her eyes!

It is not yet clear, however, that the relationship established in 'secret' is in any way *communicable*. How, in other words, does the more-or-less invisible and wordless relation of the face-to-face come into visible, communicable reality? Marion has something to say about this. With regard to visibility, he imagines the invisible *self* of the other projecting itself on *l'adonné* (I, myself) as onto a screen; all the power of what is given comes 'crashing down' on this screen, provoking a 'double visibility': (1) a visibility like that which comes into being when invisible white light crashes into a prism and is thereby splintered into visible colours. 'With this operation— precisely, reception—the given can begin to show *itself* starting from the outlines of visibility that it concedes to *l'adonné,* or rather that it receives from it.' Here I,

myself, make a very specific contribution to the form of the other. Nevertheless, the form I contribute already belongs to the selfhood I receive in the other's arrival. Thus the second kind of visibility: (2) a visibility that provokes, in the same movement as the first, the visibility of *l'adonné.*

> In effect, *l'adonné* does not see itself before receiving the impact of the given . . . since, properly speaking, *l'adonné* is not without this reception, the impact gives rise for the first time to the screen against which it is crushed, as it sets up the prism across which it breaks up . . . The given is therefore revealed to *l'adonné* in revealing *l'adonné* to itself.[35]

This amounts to a phenomenal *reciprocity* 'where to see implies the modification of the seeing by the seen, as much as the modification of the seen by the viewer.'[36] In this way, the resistance of the screen that I myself am, the very force of my act of receptivity, turns out to be the essential ingredient by which the invisible becomes visible. 'The greater the resistance to the impact of the given . . . the more the phenomenological light shows *itself.*'[37] In this view, my reception of the other implies passive receptivity, certainly, but it also demands an *active capacity*, a capacity (*capacitas*) that is able to increase to the measure of what is given and to make sure it happens.   This work of reception, which the other asks from *l'adonné* 'every time and for as long as it gives itself,' explains why I do not receive myself once and for all (at birth) but, rather, receive myself anew in the event of each experience of the other giving *itself.* [38]

But what of language: how does the wordless, unseeing, gaze of the face-to-face find its way into a language and a conversation without destroying the ethical pre-eminence of one party or the other? Well, surprisingly enough, Marion finds a place for hermeneutics at this point. Hermeneutics, he says, is not only pragmatically necessary but actually *called for* in the face of the other. This because the other is always in at least as much doubt about the truth of its self-expression as I am. 'The other person cannot know more what his or her face expresses than he or she can see this face (because the mirror only ever sends back an image, and an inverse image).'[39] The other searches for his or her truth in me, as much as I search for my own truth in them . 'A face only says the truth about what it expresses—truth that in a sense it always ignores—if *I believe it and if it believes that I believe it*. Confidence, not to say *faith*, offers the sole phenomenologically correct access to the

face of the other person.'[40] Thus, the face calls me to a faith/ful (and therefore risky) form of witness or substitution.

> To accede to this face demands . . . envisaging it face-to-face, despite or *thanks to* its absence from defined meaning—in other words, expecting that a substitute comes to give a meaning (to constitute, Husserl would say) and a significance to the expression which, of itself, is lacking from it. This substitute is named the event, in the double sense of what happens and, especially, of what fixes the result of an action or sanctions the unravelling of an intrigue.[41]

This means that the truth of the face is played not in what it says in the moment (whether in words or by expression) but in what it does through time, that is, across the whole 'story' of its life. To my mind, this insight represents a veritable point of reconciliation between Lévinas and Ricoeur. The face resists interpretation, certainly. Yet, that exact fact *calls for* the telling of a story in which the other, as much as myself, seeks to complete its own self-understanding. The story is retold over and over, never adequately, yet it is done so from a faith and a hope that the meaning of the story will one day be manifest.

In this situation, theology and phenomenology necessarily part company, according to Marion. Theology preserves the person as a meaning which is always arriving, as from an eschatological future in God. In faith it looks for a meaning beyond time, and a visible beyond invisibility (Heb 11.1). The revelation of the other person's meaning is therefore tied to the revelation of the meaning of God. The former only comes to its fulfilment in the latter. 'How could the finite face of the other person rise up in the glory of its truth, outside the glorification of the infinite Face? The hermeneutic of the saturated phenomenon of the other person becomes, in Christian theology, one of the figures of faith, thus of the eschatological wait for the manifestation of the Christ.' Phenomenology, on the other hand, cannot wait for the end of time. It can only wait *in* time.[42] Thus it is theology, specifically, that is able to help us understand that it is the impossibility of an absolute *fusion* in relationships that nevertheless calls for the interlocutionary *performance* of relationships. Relationships are 'impossible' to totalise, yet they are fecund also, giving rise to the intrigue of a story of becoming selves.

1.4 body-language: a speech before interlocution

This is already borne out, I think, in what Lévinas writes about the 'correlation' of the 'saying' and the 'said'. We have seen how Lévinas places his emphasis on a 'language before language,' a language of the lover's mutual, unseeing, gaze. In *Otherwise Than Being or, Beyond Essence,* he names such a language the eventfulness of 'saying' over against the détente of the 'said.' The 'said,' he argues is a word-game in which there is a constant attempt to outwit the other in one's own self-interest. The 'saying,' however, is a fore/word preceding language: 'it is the proximity of the one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.' Read in conjunction with *Totality and Infinity,* one is inclined to conclude that the 'saying' has to do with the pre-lingual expression of the body and with its 'gravity'. It is 'disinterested' in the sense of being unconcerned about compensation in an economy of exchange. In the end, Lévinas is *not* so naïve as to think that the saying is accessible in some kind of 'pure' form, apart from the said. In order to manifest itself, in order that its reality might be really *known*, the saying must 'correlate' itself with the said, and therefore with a linguistic system, with interlocution, and with being. Yet, it is in the miracle of language, according to Lévinas, that it allows itself to be betrayed; that is, the more 'original' reality of the saying becomes manifest by a kind of negative capability, by our becoming aware of the said's non-coincidence with itself.[43]

This amounts, I think, to a plausible claim that the 'pure' language of love can remain itself even as it is disseminated throughout the otherness of ordinary, objectifying, language. Or, to put things a little differently, the ordinary language of love—objective and manipulative as it is—may nevertheless become the means by which a more genuine love gains traction in the world without, at the same time, losing its identity as love.

1.5 the saying and grace: two kinds of substitution

The possibilities of this thinking for a fruitful intersection with the Christian language of grace are profound. Robert W. Jenson argues that the word of God must be understood as both law *and* gospel, and these should be neither separated nor confused. The law, he says, is a descriptor for our whole web of mutual address and obligation. It is culture, it is society, it is language. In Lévinasian terms, it is the 'said.' Like Lévinas, Jenson does not wish to see the apparent necessity of law as

some kind of 'fall' from grace or saying. For it is *God* who stands 'behind' the law, says Jenson. There is indeed a sense in which the law of obligation and command is rightly understood as the command and obligation of God. The 'gospel,' however, is a specifically Christian form of address, particularly as it *promises* itself in Christ. As promise, it signifies a fullness not (yet) arrived in presence. We might then compare the word of the gospel with Lévinas' 'saying'. While the law imposes obligation, the promise represents an address by which the one who stands behind the law, *himself* assumes obligation, and so opens a new kind of possibility for the one addressed. If the law, then, commands freedom, the word of the gospel promises that God will guard and guarantee our freedom. While our own promises, promises made under law, are ordinarily *conditional* in that we are unable to control either the future or the past, the gospel promise is *unconditional* because it is offered by one who is the power to transcend such apparent necessities. According to Jenson's schema, law and gospel are not to be mixed up (any more than Christ's human and divine natures are to mixed up), but neither are they to be separated from one another. For the law of God speaks for the legitimacy of our brother or sister's need; but it is the promise of the gospel that guarantees the transcending fruitfulness of our obedience. In this sense, the gospel's promise acquires our human action and language as its referent; and the promise of the gospel may be discerned as the transcendent quality towards which every act of law reaches.[44]

There is an affinity, I think, between this Pauline-Lutheran theology of promise and the proposals of Lévinas concerning the 'saying.' Both the promise and the saying are seen as essentially dynamic; they are, *like the body*, the un-made ground of all that is human language, culture and society. They are also, each of them, presented as the veritable way of salvation for egos trapped in the eternal return of their own sophistry. Like the body and its desires, promise and 'saying' contest such sophistry, interrupting culture and language in the figure of a primordial 'call'. Yet there is a crucial difference between the 'saying' and the 'promise,' a difference discernable in the way in which one person is said to be able to 'substitute' for another.

Ricoeur is concerned that, in *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas' self sometimes appears helpless to compensate for the asymmetry of the injunction toward justice and the good demanded by proximity with the other.[45] In *Otherwise Than Being* Lévinas makes no attempt to overcome that difficulty, choosing instead to push the

asymmetry yet further by proposing the hyperbole of 'substitution.' Here the 'Other' is portrayed as the offender who needs pardon, a pardon which the 'I' seeks to affect by substituting itself for the other in a radical act of responsibility which is, in fact, never responsible enough.[46] Horner observes that such an *absolute* asymmetry is problematic because 'it leaves no prospect for my own alterity for the Other . . . And this is how Lévinas intends it to be, emphasising my own, always greater, share of the responsibility. There can be no reciprocity.'[47]

If this is what 'saying' finally comes to, in Lévinas, then the promise of the gospel must finally be distinguished from saying. Rather than laying upon us an ever-increasing responsibility which we will never be able to discharge, the gospel promises that in Christ God has done *for* human beings exactly that which we are unable to do for ourselves: the performance of the law's injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself:

> For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom 8.3, 4).

> We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (1 Jn 4.19, 20).

Here salvation comes as a free gift; it is not earned by us, and cannot be finally represented by us according to our own system of thinking. As far as this, the gospel and Lévinas agree. Where they disagree is in what 'salvation' actually means or makes possible *in the flesh*. In the end I would contend that Lévinas opts for an ever-increasing burden of responsibility in which the 'I' is substituted for every other self. What the gospel envisions, on the other hand, is the coming of a Christ who substitutes for the 'I' in such a way that the real and proximate responsibility of the 'I' is performed by another, an other who is competent to do so because he has both suffered and conquered every human limitation, even death.

Crucially, the substitution of Christian atonement does not pretend to do away with the kind of ethical responsibility Lévinas wanted to preserve. For Paul, Christian people are, and remain, responsible before God and the neighbour. What we are given, in Christ, is not a dismissal of responsibility, but an example and power to

perform those responsibilities as from a self which is already an *other* in the sense we have been enumerating: another self who is yet 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col 1.27). I agree, therefore, with David Ford who says that it is possible to believe in the substitution of Christ without therefore negating the kind of radical ethical responsibility that Lévinas rightly champions.[48] In the schema I am proposing, the figure of Christ's crucified body can be read doubly: as God's salvific love for human beings, but also the fully unconditional love of human beings *for one another*, a love which we are empowered to perform by the atoning substitution of baptism, a passage at once Christ's and our own: our own death in Christ's death, our own resurrection in Christ's resurrection.

1.6 the body as the site of covenant

It therefore suits my theological purposes to adhere more closely to Lévinas' earlier language, which appears to leave open (albeit obliquely, or marginally) the possibility of a genuine reciprocity or covenant. In *Totality and Infinity*, the body, and particularly that kind of embodied interaction known as 'facing,' acts as a crucial site or 'hinge' by which the negotiations of desire between a self and its other take place. With Charles Winquist we might say that the body is that place in which a person becomes available to our searching intention. It is therefore 'corrigible' in the sense that by its presentation in a body, a self becomes vulnerable to the constructive manipulations (either positive or negative) of both one's own self and other selves. At the same time, however, the body presents the world with a sense of the absence of its self from presentation. There are 'regions' of the body, as it were, which are 'incorrigible,' that is, capable of resisting the manipulations of society and culture absolutely. What the body limits is the tendency of imaginative subjectivity to know or construct the world as a wish-fulfilment, thus ignoring the bodily facts of pain, death, hunger, and the mysterious forces of material facticity.[49]

In a profound meditation upon the body in pain, Elaine Scarry argues that pain is the very opposite of the intentional imagination. It is that which both resists imagination and creation, and yet calls out for these responses as a way to endure.[50] In that sense one might draw an analogy between the encounter with one's own body and the encounter with another's. In both cases, the body is that reality which allows us to identify and converse with a person, a self; yet it is the body that also secrets away

the very self we would want to engage with. The body is therefore a veritable presence of that absence which Kearney calls *persona* or *spirit,* a transcendent self that has either arrived already (and now is present only as the memory or trace of itself) or is yet to arrive (and is therefore promised).[51]

Jenson provides a useful summary of these findings when he defines body-interactions according to a fourfold taxonomy. First, the body is the *object-presence of a person for another person.* In order to become present for another I must grant that other the possibility of my becoming an object for them. Second, the body is the *object-presence of a person for themselves.* 'My body is myself insofar as I am available to myself, insofar as I am not merely identical with myself, but *possess* myself.' There is a sense in which I can cause my body to do and be things; but there is a sense in which my body dictates terms to me as well. I can therefore address myself in words only insofar as my body is a sense-object that participates in a society in which the body is addressed. Third, the body is the *to-be-transcended presence of a person.* 'I am beyond myself as a describable object in the world; and so am not merely a describable object.' This withholding or transcendence of self can be experienced as either the inalterability of the past or the promise/possibility of a future. (Lévinas would of course say that the unpresentable origin of such temporal absences is that which is not at all temporal—infinity.) Finally, and crucially for our discussion of church and sacraments later on, the body is also the site in which *words become visible.* It is only visible words, argues Jenson, which become solid enough to resist the arbitrary replacement of words with other words.[52] In the visible speech of the face-to-face, we might say, words are governed not primarily by grammar, but by *gravity.* In the body, and therefore in the communal situation of interlocution, words take on traction and weight.

2. BIBLICAL POETRY: COVENANT RELATIONS EMBODIED

What we have said about the body as a site of negotiation between the desire of self and other (even if that other is 'oneself as another') is borne out beautifully within the deeply covenantal canon of Hebrew Scripture, particularly in the *Psalms* and the *Song of Songs.* I should like to spend some time with these texts, because they also suggest a bridge to the next stage of my argument, i.e. that it is the sacred body of the

church and its worship which provides the primary site for a specifically covenantal or *vowed* relationship between God and specifically Christian selves.

2.1 *Psalms*: covenanting through antiphonal speech

The *Book of Psalms* has been described as Israel's most powerfully prayerful response to the speech of God in Torah. As such, it would be a mistake to classify the psalms as merely 'spontaneous musings or uncontrolled aspirations.' Rather, they are a paradigmatically *responsive* literature, which finds its origin and reference in a traumatic encounter between the psalmist and the word of God as it has been passed down in law and tradition.[53] Ricoeur notes that Psalmic prayer, as distinct from other modes of naming God in the Bible, actually addresses God from the first person "I". This implies, of course, that God is the other who, if not literally a person, is 'not less than a person.'[54] Such prayer proceeds on the basis that God has already spoken, and that this speech lingers on in the dependence of prayer on that address. As such, the Psalms perhaps inaugurate that tradition of bi-vocal performance that seems so essential to Scripture and liturgy: embodied words that present *antiphonally* as both prayer *to* God and the speech *of* God. We shall make much of this in the latter sections of this article.

Childs has written that the complex dynamism of this relationship can be usefully traced through the Psalmic understanding of 'righteousness' [s^{e}daqah]. Psalmic righteousness is quite unlike juridical conceptions of right, which pertain to some kind of absolute ethical benchmark or norm. Psalmic righteousness is rather about specific, and ultimately dynamic, negotiations of the good between covenanting partners. Thus, 'A righteous person was one who measured up to the responsibilities which the *relationship* had laid upon him.' [Italics mine]. Even when the term 'righteousness' is used of God alone, it refers not to a fixed norm, but to any action of God that bestows 'salvation' in the sense of a relationship that liberates. In the understanding of the Psalms, God's intervention in Israel's life 'established a bond between him and his people which was defined by the quality of his saving acts.' Human justice is then understood to be a free outcome, a *relationally* determined response to divine justice (cf. Psalms 111, 112). Righteousness is therefore not earned or gained by human beings alone, but proceeds from God and is conferred on a person or community by virtue of God's free choice in making, and persevering

with, a specific relationship through all of its ups and downs. Thus, 'The Psalmist can praise God, complain of his sufferings, plea for a sign of vindication, but through it all and undergirding his response, lies the confession that life is obtained as a gift from God.'[55]

2.1.1 lament: othering pain

The psalms of lament are particularly valuable as commentaries upon the complex relationship between the spirit or promise and a body in pain. Again we must repeat that none of the Psalms should be read as spontaneous expressions of religious emotions. They are feeling-states modified first by speech and then by the canons of Hebrew poetry, refined in both manifestations by memory, recitation and singing in the temple liturgy.[56] As such, the Psalms are inherently theological in character. So while it is rightly said that the Psalms do not, as prayers, speculate or theorize about the ultimate meaning of human suffering, they nevertheless assume and infer an implicit theology, which responds to the tradition that precedes their performance.[57] What is striking about the Psalms of lament, then, is that the process of formation should have chosen to *preserve* a sense of emotional spontaneity in such a way as to make it both communicable and exemplary in contexts beyond its specific existential origins.[58] Psalm 22 is a case in point. At one level, who can doubt that the prayer issues from a real and visceral experience of pain and persecution?

> Many bulls surround me:
> > strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
> Roaring lions tearing their pray
> > open their mouths wide against me.
> I am poured out like water,
> > and all my bones are out of joint.
> My heart has turned to wax;
> > it has melted away within me.
> My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
> > and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
> > you lay me in the dust of death.
> Dogs have surrounded me;
> > a band of evil men has encircled me,
> > they have pinned my hands and feet.
> I can count all my bones;
> > people stare and gloat over me.
> They divide my garments among them
> > and cast lots for my clothing (vss 12-18).

Yet the language employed here is so slippery in its reference that the reader is left in some doubt as to the precise and specific origins of the pain being experienced. Who are these 'bulls of Bashan,' who are these 'lions'? How, precisely, is the protagonist's life being 'poured out'? Are his bones literally 'out of joint,' his hands and feet 'pinned,' or are these figures for the paralysis of fear? Such language succeeds in preserving 'enough concrete indications to keep the lament within the horizon of individual experience' and yet is calculatedly indeterminate enough 'to raise the expression of suffering to the rank of a paradigm.' The effect of that device, as Ricoeur notes, is to transform the "I" of the protagonist into 'an empty place capable of being occupied in each new case by a different reader or auditor.'[59] That explains how the Psalms of lament have come to resonate so powerfully in contexts so different, so *other*, to their own (a context which is itself so very indeterminate, so *other* than *our* own).

2.1.2 prayer: the self as another

The resonance of *otherness* in Psalm 22 may be discerned, I think, in three different modalities. First, it is my experience in reciting the Psalm privately that *another self* is praying the Psalm both with me and in me. It has often been pointed out that the Psalms of lament never present themselves as lament alone. Rather, their lament occurs within a paradoxical context of faith and praise. So, here in Psalm 22, a sudden reversal may be discerned in verse 22 and following, where the protagonist makes a 'vow of praise'. The change of direction continues the lament in the sense of heightening its power by a strategy of contrast, but it also strengthens the elements of faith and praise which have been 'waiting in the wings,' so to speak, throughout.[60] Walter Brueggemann would say that this 'imbrication of the one with the other'[61] is a consequence of the fact that we are many selves, and that 'we get through the day because we have arrived at some covenantal arrangements, within the self or among the selves, that are often tenuous and provisional, but enough to get through the day.'[62] On a day when I am feeling happy and grateful, in reciting this Psalm I become aware of a part of myself which is not like that, a self in memory or expectation which suffers the weight of the 'not yet' of faith and desire. Conversely, on a day when I feel that weight most acutely, in reciting this Psalm I become aware of another self which contests the ultimacy of my circumstances by *calling* me to faith and hope. Again, Brueggemann comments that we spend our lives gathering a

18

strong self together. But sometimes, when that self is 'scattered' through trauma, displacement or disorientation, other selves assert their right to be heard. We resist their power because we are afraid of losing ourselves. But in doing so, we fail to see that there can be another gathering, a re-gathering which is, perhaps, even more 'ourselves' than before. Without the scattering, there can *be* no regathering.[63]

Psalm 22 is perhaps the most radicalised instance of this phenomenon in the Psalter because the expressions of laments and praise are so extreme. On the one hand, the suffering of the protagonist is all the more acute because it is claimed as a suffering *before* God, and at the hands of God: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (vs 1). On the other, the supplicant's praise takes the form of a *commandment* to his brothers and sisters that they might praise God as well: 'You who fear Yahweh, praise him! All you descendents of Jacob, honour him!' How then are these two expressions, these two so *extremely* separated selves, regathered into some kind of unity? Perhaps through the flow of a narrative or drama. What mediates between them, what makes a renegotiation possible, is the threefold voice of a supplicant as he both remembers who God has been and invokes that God as from a not-yet-arrived future:

> Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
>   you are the praise of Israel.
> In you our fathers put their trust;
>   they trusted and you delivered them.
> They cried to you and were saved;
>   in you they trusted and were not disappointed (vss 3-5).
>
> Yet you brought me out of the womb;
>   you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast.
> From birth I was cast upon you;
>   from my mother's womb you have been my God.
> Do not be far from me, for trouble is near
>   and there is no one to help (vss 9-11).
>
> But you, O Lord, be not far off;
>   O my Strength, come quickly to help me.
> Deliver my life from the sword,
>   my precious life from the power of the dogs.
> Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
>   save me from the horns of the wild oxen (vss 17-21)

In narrative or dramatic terms, these interspersions remind the suffering "I" of the reader that things have been different in the past and therefore could be different again. This pushes the reader along with the supplicant toward not only invocation,

but, eventually, praise. It is as if what is looked for and desired is eventually found within the orbit of a peculiar kind of knowledge: faith.[64] Faith, it seems, is capable of gathering the different selves into a narrative whole. That is not to say that any particular whole is final! Narrative is never finished from the point of view of its main actors and characters. If there is a finishing, an ending, it is inscrutable . . . except, perhaps, for the (implied) author.

2.1.3 prayer: another with the self

Of course, as has been noted already, the Psalms are not simply internal dialogues between various selves. They are also the prayers of a gathered community at worship in temple, synagogue, home, or church. The history of their reception encompasses all these contexts. It is therefore the case that even if the Psalms are recited alone in one's lounge-room, they resonate with the voice of a gathered community. What I hear in recitation is not simply the voice of another self which is nothing other than my own, but a *synchrony* and *diachrony* of encounter with genuinely other, embodied selves. As a temple-worshipper, the author of Psalm 22 stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his or her fellow-worshippers. The Psalm was said or sung *antiphonally*, that is, according to a dialogical pattern of call and response. But the call or address would not only have been heard in the voice of the cantor; it would also have resonated in what was heard and felt alongside and in the body, as worshippers spoke or sung their responses in unison. In a similar manner, I share a synchrony with others of my congregation or tradition who pray the Psalms in the morning and the evening. Although the social patterns of life have changed over the centuries, so that it is rarely possible anymore to gather in the same architectural space with my compadrés on a daily basis, there remains a sense in which I hear them praying the Psalms along with me in a *common* of time, rite, language and spirit.

There is a sense, also, of what is called 'the communion of saints' in all this. Diachronically, I am aware that people of faith have been praying these Psalms for millennia. During recitation one certainly has a sense of the Psalmist as *other*. His voice is certainly not reduced or collapsed into my own. But one also has the sense of many other voices, many other selves, who perhaps prayed this Psalm in a time of great anguish. For example, I sometimes think of the early Christians who were fed

to the lions as entertainment for the blood-thirsty Roman public. I imagine them praying this Psalm, with its extraordinary dialectic of despair and faith, as the gates open before them onto certain death. Diachronic connection of this kind has the effect of taking me beyond and even outside of the particular nature of my own difficulties and challenges such that they are relativised by another's.

For Christians, of course, the most potent of these latter encounters is with Jesus as he invokes the Psalm at the scene of his crucifixion (Mk 15.34). Bonhoeffer, who was himself executed by an oppressive regime, made much of this. He wrote movingly that in praying the Psalms 'Someone else is praying, not we; that the one who is here protesting his innocence, who is invoking God's judgement, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself . . . The *Man* Jesus Christ, to whom no affliction, no ill, no suffering is alien and who yet was the wholly innocent and righteous one, is praying in the Psalter through the mouth of his Church.'[65] For Bonhoeffer, the Psalter was Christ's Prayer Book, which he continues to pray in and through the church as both the address of God to human beings, and the only paradigmatic human response to God's promises. Therefore, in attending to the Psalter, we learn to pray as Christ prays; we learn to pray even those things which do not spring from ourselves, but belong to Christ and the whole of his body, the church.[66]

2.1.4 prayer: another as the self

We have already begun to explore a third mode in which *otherness* resonates in the Psalms: through the implied or explicit address of the one to whom the Psalm responds, 'Yahweh'. Yahweh appears, first of all, as one who has *already addressed* the psalmist in both tradition and personal experience. The rememoration of national liberation in verses 3-5 references the prior address of Yahweh in Torah and the events of the Exodus, while the rememoration of infancy in verses 9-10 is witness to the psalmist's belief in a more personal experience of address as a child.

Both these memories speak of a God whose word of address is one of care and liberation. And yet clearly, since the psalm as a whole is dominated by lament, there is another kind of God implied here, a God who has also abandoned the psalmist to the weight of his pain: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? . . . you lay

me in the dust of death.' It seems that the already established theology of Torah does not entirely account for this. Perhaps the more recent events of Exile, with the accompanying destruction of temple and state, have raised a question about God which as yet remains unanswered. Has God, perhaps, removed Godself from the history of Israel? How might these different Gods, or different God-selves, be reconciled? In the prophets, of course, the apparent abandonment of God is interpreted as a form of judgement. Here God abandons God's people in response to their prior abandonment of God (cf. Hos 4.6, 6.5, 13.6, 9; Isa 1.3ff, 5.13-17, 29.14b). The extreme form of that view is that of the Deuteronomists, who tried to exonerate God at the price of indicting the people. But clearly that reduction was not entirely acceptable in Israel. Psalm 22 and other psalms of lament bear witness to the perseverance of a question that remained unanswered. Here the fact of the people's sins is not regarded as sufficient explanation.[67]

2.1.5 the non-synchronous selfhood of God

Scarry has noted just how often, in the Hebrew Bible, the relationship with God is mediated by the sign of a weapon. Such signs tend to emphasise the invulnerability of the creator and the vulnerability of the creature. Indeed, in some accounts, the already wounded or the disabled are sometimes understood to be at an even greater distance from God than the ordinary person (cf. Lev 21.16, 22.21; Deut 17.1).[68]

These very different experiences of asymmetry with God, at once a liberator and forsaker (or even a wielder of weapons), bear witness to a deep and abiding struggle in the Hebrew Bible which, according to Scarry, springs from the original scene of making or creation.[69] The act of God's making can be seen as either a positive, generative gesture, or as a negative wounding or destruction. Both involve an act of scarification upon material reality in which the creator 'objectifies his presence in the world through the alterability of his world.'[70] The *Book of Genesis*, it is noted, is dominated by the voice or word of God in the form of a generative command or promise "Be fruitful and multiply." It is a command or promise repeated over and over in the iterative sense we discovered in Derrida: the same repeated otherwise through a myriad of images.[71] The many genealogies of Genesis, along with the stories they suggest, are iterations of the first making. In the consistent pattern of this alternation of list and story Scarry discerns a repetition of the making or crossing

from divine idea or promise into material substantiation. Here the human body becomes the substantiation of interior or non-material things.[72]

The Genesis language of generative promise sets up a particular kind of relationship between the word or voice of God, and the body-selves of human beings. 'The verbal enters the human phenomenon of generation by being placed before it and so coming to be perceived as its cause or agent . . . Hence the actual fact of the magnification of the human body, the literal event of procreation and multiplication, is never simply an event in and of itself but becomes in the first form an obedient acting out of the thing that had come before, and in the second form a divine fulfilment of the thing that had come before.' What Scarry wants us to note, here, is that no matter how much more powerful than human flesh is the word of God, that Word never substantiates itself apart from a change in human and material matter. In this generative schema, the body is understood to substantiate something other and beyond itself: to make ample and evident the aliveness and realness of God.[73] Visible change represents the invisible. So the Scriptural stories, while not subverting the essential difference between God and human beings, nevertheless entwine the two together such that human beings can impersonate or represent God, and God can also impersonate or represent Godself in human beings.

According to Scarry, then, the difference between these scenes of generation and the scenes of wounding countenanced in lament is simply this: in scenes of generation/liberation both God and human beings are affirmed and magnified, but in scenes of wounding/forsakenness God is magnified at the expense of people:[74]

> As God in the scene of hurt is a bodiless voice, so men and women are voiceless bodies. God is their voice; they have none separate from him. Repeatedly, any capacity for self-transformation into a separate verbal or material form is shattered, as God shatters the building of the tower of Babel by shattering the language of the workers into multiple and mutually uncomprehending tongues (Genesis 11.1-9). [75]

What are we to make of this difference? Or, to repeat our earlier question, how are God's two selves—liberator and forsaker—to be reconciled? Scarry's own solution is to re-read the scenes of destruction anthropologically: not as examples of disobedience and punishment before God, but as stories of doubt in which the conviction of God's *reality* is fading. In the absence of other evidence, the pain in one's own body or the bodies of one's fellows is produced as witness to God's presence and power, though now in a negative and destructive mode. To this way of

thinking, which Scarry claims for the Hebrews, 'The failure of belief is, in its many forms, a failure to remake one's interior in the image of God, to allow God to enter and to alter one's self. Or to phrase it in a slightly different form, it is the refusal or inability to turn oneself inside-out, devoting one's physical interior to something outside itself, calling it by another name.'[76] I suspect, however, that this reduction is just a little *too* neat. God, for Scarry, is ultimately an artifact or product of human making, which then returns as an explanatory metaphor for the interior structure of making as such.[77] But clearly, in the belief of the Hebrew people, God is that reality which *precedes* both themselves and their need for explanations. So, if we are to accept that their stories are properly theological, that is, that they situate material and human history within a more expansive divinity, then the problem of a God divided against Godself still remains.

I am inclined, for reasons that will soon become clear, to read Psalm 22 as part of a canonical shift in Jewish thinking toward the eschatological. In this view, the differing selves of Yahweh, as they are presented in Psalm 22, would not be seen as ultimate or definitive. They would be read, instead, as pieces of a puzzle that is not yet complete, or as signs of a persisting *inscrutability* with regard to the personhood of God. Recall Ricoeur's suggestion that the Psalm represents a persisting question. Questions, as Rilke wisely wrote, are ways of living toward a future that has not yet arrived.[78] In the late prophetic tradition of Israel there *are*, in fact, hints at a way in which the wounding-self and the liberating-self of God might be reconciled in covenant:

> This is what the Lord says:
>
> "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce
>   with which I sent her away?
> Or to which of my creditors did I sell you?
> Because of your sins you were sold;
>   because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.
> When I came, why was there no one?
>   When I called, why was there no one to answer?
> Was my arm too short to ransom you?
>   Do I lack the strength to rescue you? (Isaiah 50.1-2a).
>
> Why do you say, O Jacob,
>   and complain, O Israel,
> "My way is hidden from the Lord;
>   my cause is disregarded by my God"?
> Do you not know, have you not heard?
> The Lord is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
    and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
    and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
    and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
    will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
    they will run and not grow weary,
    they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40.27-31).

Here one sees the beginnings of that kind of 'substitution' in which the perseverance of Yahweh in relationship is substituted for the weariness of the people. There is a hint, in these sermons, that Yahweh's abandonment is simply his suffering at being abandoned himself, and that it is precisely this that he offers as the genesis or source of a new possibility of salvation.[79] The second pericope looks for some kind of future marriage between the inscrutability of God's ways and God's action of liberation. I would claim that a future of that nature begins to arrive in Jesus of Nazareth. For here, as Jüngel has argued, God comes to God's *own* future through the pathways of the very *human* struggle against the threat of nothingness. In the career and cross of the crucified and risen One, who takes on his lips the cry of dereliction from Psalm 22 (cf. Mk 15.33), God makes himself known as one who *undergoes* the human experience of God's wounding and absence, but is not overcome by it. This effects a change in the character of nothingness, first of all. Nothingness, which God as creator has of course made possible, changes from being a nihilation, pure and simple, to being a '*concrete negation*' that gives the concrete affirmation of being a properly critical edge.[80]

But it also effects a change in the being of God. Now revealed as a God who '*exists for others*,' in the Crucified the different selves in God can be seen for what they are: not an irreconcilable hidden God who wounds, and an historical God who saves, but the relationship between a Father and a Son who are at once different and yet the same.[81] We caught a glimpse of that possibility in Lévinas' theory of paternity. In trinitarian perspective, the desire of the Father for the Son gives God a *human body*, a human *self* indeed, a self which can be identified historically and is weighted in presence; yet God's being does not terminate in a human self. For the Son's desire for the Father also gives human beings a *divine Spirit*, a transcendent kind of selfhood, which arrives, as from the future, and is still arriving. Because this self is

'hidden with Christ' in a God who is still arriving at God's own selfhood, we too are still coming to ourselves through the pathways of God.

2.2 the *Song of Songs*: finding oneself in God

We have journeyed from the phenomenology of desire into the relationships of selves in the Psalms, and finally into the strange and mysterious theology of divine-human love. It is time, then, to delve into the character of that love as it is presented in the *Song of Songs*. There are those who would deny, of course, that the *Song* has anything at all to say about the divine. After all, God is never named in the poem.[82] But that would be to read the poem apart from both its thoroughly Jewish religious context, and the history of its reception in the canons of both Jews and Christians.

2.2.1 an erotic allegory of divine-human love

From the very beginning, the poem has been read as an allegory of divine-human love.[83] While the poem is certainly erotic in character, describing the mutual desire of a woman and her lover in radically fleshly ways, the canonical fathers and mothers clearly did not see the flesh, or erotic love, as somehow unworthy of God or God's people. That this is so might appear to be something of an oddity when one considers that Judaism and Christianity alone, amongst all the ancient Near Eastern religions, appeared to have no sacred rites of a sexually explicit nature. Kristeva explains this by reference to an analogy with the biblical canon as a whole. The *Song of Songs* imagines the desire of God as a desire without consummation. There is no love-making at the maternal hearth in this erotic poem. Therefore the *Song*, as with the canon as a whole, imagines God as one who loves, and is desired by human beings, but who remains absent, or not entirely present. Desire is not finally consummated, and so remains desire.[84] We shall return to this theme in a moment. Ricoeur, for his part, is happy to defend the traditional reading on the grounds of his now famous hermeneutics of reception. Allegorical reading, he says, is authorized by a long history of reading in which a text is cited in new contexts without the 'otherness' of that text necessarily being absorbed into such contexts. The only difference between the rabbinical and patristic readings and our own, he says, is a precise recognition of the difference, the gap, which necessarily remains between the cited and the citation.[85]

2.2.2 indeterminacy of identification

The Song of Songs indeed encourages such citation, for the precise identity of both its characters and its social milieu is notoriously difficult to pin down. Even the term 'Shulamite', primary subject of the poem, is not a proper name.[86] The plentiful signs of indetermination in the poem include: (1) The fact that pieces of dialogue often appear to include quotations from someone other than the one who is speaking, with the result that it is difficult to *identify* the speaker (1.4b, 1.8, 2.1, 6.10). (2) There are several dream-sequences that present a similar problem. Is the shepherd dreaming of being a king? (3.6-11). Is the Shulamite dreaming of being a peasant woman? (5.2-8), or is it the other way around? Or, are all these figures quite distinct from one another in the body? (3) There are evocations of memory that intertwine with the present in such a way that it is difficult to tell which is which. The mother figure returns again and again in 1.6, 3.4, 3.11, 6.9, 8.1, and 8.4, but whose mother is she? Or is she the beloved as a younger woman?[87] (4) The seven 'scenes' often referred to by commentators are said to begin with lover or beloved searching for each other, and to end with a consummation when they find each other. But these alleged 'consummations' are very difficult to find, in fact, because they are sung with a sense of longing rather than recounted with any sense of material gravity or traction. These features suggest that the *Song* is not a narrative in which characters can be readily identified, but a poem that explores the very formation of identity. The poem often asks the question "who?" but the question is never entirely answered.[88]

2.2.3 the nuptial metaphor: love incarnate

Following Origen, who said that it is the 'movements of love' in the *Song* which are more important than the identity of its characters, Ricoeur argues for an interpretation of the *Song* in which the 'nuptial' metaphor for the relations between the lovers is 'liberated' from a purely human reference. As we noted earlier, the Greek paradigm of erotic love tended to see the point of sexual entanglement as a means of ecstatic *escape* from the body into some kind of self-less and unconscious communion with the divine One. But that is not what is happening in the *Song of Songs*. There the profound play of desire in the possession and dispossession of selves suggests, instead, a view of love that is transcendent and yet powerfully

incarnational at the same time. While the dominant metaphors in the *Song* are classically material in that human selves, animals, and landscapes tend to stand in for one another, the very intensity of these metaphors actually has the effect of dissociating the metaphorical network from its *support* in materiality.   What happens here is not a doing away with the properly sexual reference but rather its putting on hold or suspension; this then effects a freeing of the whole metaphorical network of nuptuality for other embodied 'investments and divestments.'[89] That possibility is further enhanced by the radical mobility of identification between the partners of the amorous dialogue, a mobility that smacks of 'substitution' in the sense we have been using it.[90]

Kristeva agrees. The consistent play in the text between the lover as King and the lover as Shepherd is only explicable, she argues, if one accepts the Freudian doctrine of transference, i.e. that the absence of a beloved object (the King) is that which makes the *enjoyment* of a beloved subject (the Shepherd) possible. Transference love, she argues, is necessary for the very living of life because it avoids either (erotic) fusion with a beloved or (stoic) disengagement by rearranging life's accidents on the 'higher level' of symbolic organization. In the symbolic relation between an 'I' and an 'Other' the self can be destabilised and reorganised in the direction of innovation and rebirth.[91]   On this basis, Kristeva argues that the lover in the *Song* can be legitimately interpreted as the cipher for an absent or incorporeal God who is nevertheless made available to the human beloved in ritual, as well as in the very ordinary movements of daily life.

> Supreme authority, whether it be royal or divine, can be loved as flesh while
> remaining essentially inaccessible; the intensity of love comes precisely from
> that combination of received jouissance and taboo, from a basic separation that
> nevertheless unites—that is what love issued from the Bible signifies for us, most
> particularly in its later form as celebrated in the Song of Songs. [92]

2.2.4 human love as the passage for an eschatological divinity

Of course, that reading would only be possible if one were to read the *Song* in its canonical context as a book of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. But that is what it is!   In *that* context, one can see how it is that the appearance of God in the materiality of the burning bush of Exodus 3 might be amplified in the *Song* to include lover's bodies and whole landscapes. Furthermore, Kearney has made the

important point that a canonical reading of the *Song* would also be an *eschatological* reading. In this view, the love between the Shulamite and her lover looks both back to Eden's innocence, and forward to a time when God and human beings will gaze upon each other 'face to face'. Citing Rabbi Hayyim de Volozhyn (19th century), Kearney points out that the Song is filled with eschatological imagery. 5.1 speaks of love as entering a garden filled with milk and honey, an image of the Promised Land. Similarly, the kiss of 1.2 might be read as the promise that one day the revelations of God will be given mouth to mouth and face-to-face, rather than through the mediations of angel, fire, or ritual.[93] Such eschatology is subversive, according to Kearney, for it makes the powerful erotic charge of the poem into something more than (but still including) the erotic. If this is the case, then our received understandings of both God and desire are transformed. Law-based understandings of both God and the obedience of God are swept aside in order to say that 'burning, integrated, faithful, untiring desire—freed from social or inherited perversions—is the most adequate way for saying how humans love God and God loves humans. It suggests how human and divine love may transfigure one another.'[94]

In a similarly canonical move, Ricoeur compares the *Song* with two other biblical texts. The first is Genesis 2.23: "This is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called *ishah*, for out of *ish* this one was taken." He notes that neither this nor the *Song* is literally about anything other than human love. The Genesis text witnesses to the birth of an interlocutionary speech, while the *Song* makes such speech into a discourse of love and desire. The Genesis text imagines a relation which comes between the birth of the good and the coming of evil, while the *Song* is perhaps witness to 'the innocence of love within the heart of everyday life.' Perhaps one could then surmise that the *Song* proposes a kind of realised eschatology in which the mythic birth of innocence is reiterated otherwise, this time as the promise of a rebirth of innocence in the midst of the profane love of the everyday. The two texts are also joined, perhaps, by a sense in which, while God is not named, it is nevertheless God who makes such love possible. God makes possible even a love that is unconscious of God in its performance.[95]

A second canonical point of comparison is that of the conjugal metaphor used in the prophets for the love between Yahweh and his people. Hosea 3.1 says: 'The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, although she is loved by another

and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods . . .' There are clear differences between the prophetic image and that of the *Song,* but these nevertheless 'face' each other in a kind of 'mirror-relation'. In the prophets, the love of God is seen *as* conjugal love; so also, in the *Song*, conjugal love might be seen *as* the love of God. This kind of 'facing' of metaphorical fields invites the canonical reader to combine the two fields in such a way as to create a new kind of intertextual theology. If one were to intersect the divine love (invested in old and new covenants), and human love (invested in the erotic bond), then the nuptial metaphor common to both would be revealed as the very power of metaphorical inter-signification, the 'hidden root, the forgotten root of the great metaphorical interplay that makes all the figures of love refer to each other.'[96]

CONCLUSION

What have we discovered then? Perhaps that there is a fundamental uncertainty at play in theological discourse about whether the English phrase 'desire of God' indicates first a human desire for God, or else a Godly desire for human beings. You will recall our opening remarks about this particular conundrum in Derrida. Could it be that our desire for God is already occasioned by God's desire for us? Could it be that our sense of God's absence is the very sign of God's promised (but not yet arrived) presence? Kristeva says of the speech between lover and beloved in the *Song of Songs* that whenever a speech is uttered concerning the self, it is always already referenced in the reality of the other. There is a dialectic or dialogue here in which 'the protagonist constitutes himself as such, that is, as a lover, as he speaks to the other, or as he describes himself for the other.' Such a dialogue, says Kristeva, is not dialogue as communication, but dialogue as 'incantation' or 'invocation'. *Prayer*, one might say. As such, it reveals 'at the very heart of monotheism,' a double dynamic of *ecstasy* (going out of oneself) and *incarnation* (welcoming the other into oneself).[97]

Jüngel has written, similarly, that in love 'the loving ego experiences both an extreme distancing of himself from himself and an entirely new kind of nearness to himself. For in love the I gives himself to the loving Thou in such a way that it no longer wants to be that I without this Thou.' 'Lovers' he says, 'are always aliens to themselves and yet, in coming close to each other, they come close to themselves in a

new way.' He therefore repudiates, as the *Song of Songs* does, any theology of *agape* or unconditional love that does not include or encompass the *eros* of body and embodiment. For in love, a lover certainly *does* want to have or possess the other, but such possession actually transforms the structure of having in that it is only possible to do so by also possessing or having one's own self in a radically different way. What is both ontologically and theologically significant here is that the beloved other is desired by the loving I 'only as one to whom it may *surrender* itself.' In love, the 'I' only wants to possess the other in the form of *being possessed* by the other.[98] What the Psalmist says of the love of God is therefore true of every genuine love: 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on the earth that I desire beside you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.' (Psalm 73.25, 26). Christian theology calls such desire and confidence 'covenant love'.

---

[1] Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," pp. 156, 157.
[2] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 37-39.
[3] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* , p. 39.
[4] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* , pp. 40, 41.
[5] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* , p. 43.
[6] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* , p. 93.
[7] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 129.
[8] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* , p. 70.
[9] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* , p. 72.
[10] Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* , pp. 173, 174.
[11] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* , pp. 95, 96.
[12] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 24.
[13] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , pp. 62-64.
[14] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , pp. 65, 66.
[15] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 66.
[16] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 69.
[17] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 206.
[18] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , pp. 66, 67.
[19] Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity* , p. 81; cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 115.
[20] Marion, *In Excess* , pp. 37, 38.
[21] From the *Oxford English Dictionary* online: <http://dictionary.oed.com>
[22] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , pp. 69, 75.
[23] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 86.
[24] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , pp. 36, 37.
[25] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 256.
[26] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 55.
[27] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 268.
[28] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 267.
[29] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 155-158.
[30] Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity* , p. 88.
[31] Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity* , p. 82.
[32] Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity* , p. 84.
[33] Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity* , p. 87.
[34] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* , p. 266.
[35] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 50.

[36] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 50.

[37] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 51.

[38] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 48.

[39] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 120.

[40] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 122 [italics mine].

[41] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 122.

[42] Marion, *In Excess* , p. 124.

[43] Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being* , pp. 5-7.

[44] Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 6, 7.

[45] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* , p. 189.

[46] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* , p. 338; compare Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being* , pp. 13, 25-26, 117, 135, 138.

[47] Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift* , p. 69.

[48] David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 70.

[49] Charles E. Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 7-12.

[50] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , pp. 163-167.

[51] Kearney, *The God Who May Be* , p. 14.

[52] Jenson, *Visible Words* , pp. 21-23.

[53] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 207.

[54] Paul Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," trans. David Pellauer, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, eds. André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 213.

[55] Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* , pp. 208, 209.

[56] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," p. 215.

[57] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," p. 222.

[58] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," p. 215.

[59] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," pp. 215, 216.

[60] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," p. 219.

[61] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," p. 219.

[62] Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 12.

[63] Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self* , p. 14.

[64] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," pp. 218, 219.

[65] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1954), p. 31.

[66] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* , pp. 32-34.

[67] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," p. 224.

[68] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , pp. 182, 183.

[69] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , pp. 183, 184.

[70] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , p. 175.

[71] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , p. 191.

[72] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , p. 188.

[73] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , p. 193.

[74] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , pp. 198, 199.

[75] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , p. 200.

[76] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , pp. 201, 202.

[77] Scarry, *The Body in Pain* , p. 181.

[78] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, 1st ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

[79] Ricoeur, "Lamentation as Prayer," p. 226.

[80] Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* , pp. 218, 219.

[81] Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* , pp. 220, 221.

[82] Although a textual variant at 8.6 reads 'Love . . . is like the very flame of the Lord', most modern translations have chosen to leave this aside.

[83] Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 86.

[84] Kristeva, *Tales of Love* , pp. 95, 96.

[85] Paul Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," trans. David Pellauer, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, eds. André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 277.

[86] Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," p. 268.

[87] Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," p. 269.

[88] Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," p. 270.

[89] Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," pp. 273, 274.

[90] Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," p. 278.

[91] Kristeva, *Tales of Love* , p. 15.

[92] Kristeva, *Tales of Love* , p. 90.

[93] Kearney, *The God Who May Be* , pp. 54-56.

[94] Kearney, *The God Who May Be* , pp. 56-58.

[95] Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," pp. 296-299.

[96] Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," pp. 301-303.

[97] Kristeva, *Tales of Love* , pp. 91-95.

[98] Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* , pp. 318, 319.