Hindu Myths
Adapted from the
Vishnu and Bhagavata Puranas
by Gregory Spinner

When Krishna and his brother Balarama were very little, they would crawl around on their hands and knees. They delighted in the tinkling sound which their anklets made as they scurried about, getting all splattered with mud. They would crawl after some passerby, and suddenly realizing that they were a short distance from their mother, scurry back to her. Yashoda's breasts would flow with the milk of tenderness for her sons, and she would embrace the mud-covered boys in her arms, gazing into their little faces shining with innocent smiles as she gave them suck.

As the boys grew, they began to walk, and then to run. They got into everything, finding all sorts of mischief. They played the games the women of the village loved to see boys play: grabbing hold of the tails of calves and being dragged about the pasture, or tossing nuts at monkeys. At these sights, the women would forget their housework and laugh merrily. But at other times, when their childish pranks involved animals with sharper teeth or tusks, fire or deep water, knives or thorns, then the village women did not laugh. On those occasions, Krishna and the other boys he played with were gently scolded, and escorted out of harm's way.

One day Balarama came home and told his mother Yashoda that he had seen Krishna secretly eating some dirt. Yashoda went and took Krishna by the hand and, for his own good, she began to scold him. "Naughty boy, what are you thinking by eating dirt? Krishna, you'll get sick!" "But mother, I have not eaten any dirt! Balarama is lying." "Is that so? Well then open your mouth, and let me look," she said to the Lord Hari, the god of unchallenged sovereignty, who in sport had taken the form of this human child.

Krishna opened his mouth, and when she peered inside, Yashoda saw the whole universe: the majestic heavens and all the regions of the sky, wrapped around the great orb of the earth, with its mountains and forests and oceans and islands; she saw there the wind and the lightning and the rain; the moon and the stars and the zodiac; all the elements and empty space; time and nature and mind. She saw within the body of her son, through his gaping mouth, all there is to see, the whole world above and below, in all its variety and motion, with its many forms of life; and every person with his or her actions, thoughts, hopes and dreams; and there Yashoda saw her own village, and she saw herself, looking into Krishna's mouth. She was amazed; and then she became confused, thinking, "Is this a dream? Is it some delusion of my own making, or an illusion wrought by God? Is this my dear little boy?" As Yashoda realized that some mysterious force was at work, she said to herself, "I bow down to the feet of the god, whose true nature can not even be imagined, nor grasped by the mind, or by the heart, or through acts or through speech. God is my refuge: He in whom

3 Hari" is another name for Vishnu: the earlier texts which tell stories about the child Krishna stories assume that he is an avatar of Vishnu.
the universe is, and who is impossible to fathom, He from whom all things come, and to whom all things go; and in Him there really is neither 'me' nor 'my son,' just the great power of His illusion.... "

And just as Yashoda came to this realization, the Lord once more spread His illusion over her, in the form of maternal affection. Instantly the cow-herd's wife lost all memory of what she had seen in Krishna's mouth. Taking her son into her lap, her heart flooded with an even greater love than she had known before, considering Hari, the sum and sovereign of the universe, to be her own beloved child.

ii.

As Krishna grew, so did his mischief. He would lead the other boys of the village in all sorts of delightful games and pranks. After all their playing, they would be hungry, and so they would steal into people's houses looking for a snack. Maybe they would confiscate some yoghurt or curds; but their favorite treat was the delicious butter which the gopis, or milk-maids, worked so hard to churn.

The village women came to Yashoda to complain about how naughty Krishna was, in stealing their provisions. Yet even his dear mother could not restrain her son when he was being willful. Once Yashoda had tried tying him to a large mortar with a strong rope, to keep him from roaming about and getting into everything. But that divine Krishna just toddled away, and when the heavy mortar wedged itself between two large trees, the little boy gave a quick tug and uprooted them both. There was just no place in the village he could not go.

Trying to prevent these acts of petty theft, the villagers placed their butter in pots and then placed the pots in rope slings, which they hoisted to the rafters and tied up out of reach of the children. Krishna thought this was wonderful sport. He and his friends sneaked into a house, and began to jump for the butter pot. But the pot was too high; no one could reach it. Krishna hit on an idea. He had two boys get down on their hands and knees, and he made Balarama stand on their backs, and then Krishna climbed up on Balarama's shoulders. Another boy handed a stick up to him, and Krishna gave the pot a whack, and then a good smack. With the third blow, the pot burst open and out poured the butter. All the boys clamored underneath, scooping rich handfuls of the butter into their eager mouths, and laughing along with Krishna.

iii.

In the north of India runs the river Yamuna; and where it winds near Mount Govardhan, the area is known as Braj. Surrounded by twelve forests and studded with green pastures, in which the people grew their crops and left their cows to graze, Braj was a peaceful place. Like most folks, the inhabitants of Braj venerated the god Indra, mighty ruler of the heavens, who sits in his celestial palace high above the earth. Indra is the storm god: appeased, he opens the rain clouds that water the fields, yet his fury unleashes terrible tempests. And so the people of Braj made their offerings to Indra, that he would send them the rains in due season.
One day, while everyone was getting ready for the annual festival that honored Indra, Krishna came by. Looking at all the preparations for the sacrifices, he said, "Why do you worship Indra? Why do you slaughter the cows which sustain you on Indra’s behalf? Why not worship the cows, who give us milk and calves? Why not worship the Yamuna, where we and our cattle go to drink, and whose water irrigates our crops? And why not worship Govardhan, on whose grassy slopes our cattle graze? Are not these the true sources of our blessings? Are they not just as deserving of our praise and thanks?"

The people agreed that Krishna had made some fine points, but they were still reluctant to abandon the old ways. Krishna then took the form of Mount Govardhan itself, and a voice from its summit rang out, "I am the mountain. Honor me!" And Krishna made all its stones cry out too, saying, "I am hungry, I am hungry." Hearing these wonders, the people went and brought food, and they offered it to the hungry mountain. Through a crevice he opened in the mountain’s side, Krishna devoured their offerings. This is how they began to worship cows and the river and the mountain, as people in Braj still do today.

Needless to say, Indra was infuriated. "How dare they disrupt their sacrifices to me! How impious, how impudent! To me, o clouds of blackest rain! To me, o winds of war and storms of strife! At my command, we shall descend upon these insolent cowherds and we will show them who is Lord -- a lesson taught by divine wrath and destruction!"

Thus the violent storm of Indra’s anger broke upon the land of Braj: lightning lashed out like a whip, and thunder claps boomed across the horizon like gigantic drums beaten in the sky. The world darkened under the heavy clouds, and as the downpour came down harder and harder, the area around Mount Govardhan began to flood. Feeling the bitter sting of the driving rain, the people huddled together, soaked to the skin, they were all cold and miserable. And with torrents of waters rising about them, they feared for their lives.

When Hari saw what was happening, he understood that it was because Indra had been denied his sacrifices. Realizing that it was up to him to rescue the people of Braj, Krishna reached out and uprooted the mountain itself. With one hand he lifted Govardhan up over his head, and he held the broad expanse of rock aloft, like some giant umbrella. Krishna smiled at the cow-herds and their families, and said to them, "Quick, under here! Now you will be safe from this wind and rain!"

Amazed at this great feat, the people hearkened to Krishna’s words, gathering their cows and grabbing up their belongings. They hurried to get under the mountain, and all while Krishna supported it over their heads effortlessly. No longer pelted with rain, the people’s eyes widened with joy, and their hearts brimmed with relief. Sheltered there against the awful din of Indra’s storm, the people cheerfully raised their voices in song, to celebrate Krishna’s mighty deed.

For seven nights Indra raged on, sending down his deluge of driving rain; yet it mattered not, for Krishna continued to hold the mountain up, thereby keeping everyone underneath dry and content. Seeing that the people of Braj enjoyed the protection afforded by Mount Govardhan, Indra relented at last and dispersed his clouds and winds. As the fierce storm dissipated, the people of Braj returned to their homes, very happy and full of praise for Krishna.
Autumn: the lotus flowers are blooming in the ponds, the forests are filled with the buzzing of bees, and the sounds of cuckoos and woodcocks enchant the evening. The sun sets amidst splendid colors, the moon rises crisp and bright, and the people of Braj settle into their beds.

And then the sound of a flute, plaintive, passionate, winds its way through the tranquil night. The gopis, or milk-maids, creep out of their beds, past snoring husbands and sleeping children, and sneak out of their homes to hear the alluring sound. Awakened from their slumbers, the young women follow the sound out into the lotus-scented night, lured there by the music from Krishna’s flute.

As they make their way through forests, some of the gopis appear bashful, and others bold, in their ardent desire to find Krishna, to see Krishna, to be with him. The flute music stops. There is a pause, pregnant with heartache and hope. Where is he now, this dark one whom they seek? Then they hear Krishna’s own voice, singing sweet and low, and they are thrilled. Responding to his song, they pick up his tune and sing along, answering his summons.

Soon the gopis arrive in an open glade, deep within the forest. It is a beautiful setting, festooned with jasmine and mango and other fragrant blossoms, leaving the air heavily perfumed. The glade is gently bathed in the silver illumination cast by the harvest moon; and there in the middle stands Krishna, with one leg crossed in front of the other, playing Murali, his flute. The gopis’ hearts leap like gazelles! Krishna is a gorgeous youth: garlanded with flowers, his body is a lovely dark hue, and rubbed with sandal, aloes, musk, and saffron, so that his strong lithe limbs seem to glow. There is a peacock feather tucked into the dark hair which frames his handsome face; his deep eyes are serene and yet alit with an inner vibrancy, as if within this dark form there blazes the smokeless fire of a million suns.

As they draw near, Krishna smiles at the gopis, flashing white rows of teeth luminous like strings of pearls, and he gives them a look which makes their skin shiver with excitement. Enchanted by Krishna’s playing, enticed by his seductive glances, the gopis surround him. They take each others’ hands, forming a perfect circle, and begin to dance. Turning around and around in that circle of love, the milk-maids of Braj celebrate Krishna. Joined arm in arm under the autumn moonlight, gripped by unbreakable bonds of bliss, the gopis dance, all intent on the central figure of Krishna, yoked to the sheer joy of his presence.

Suddenly, Krishna vanishes from sight! He has gone off for a special rendezvous elsewhere in the forest, to be alone with his favorite lover, Radha. And in that moment of his absence the gopis miss him terribly. There are tinges of jealousy -- O, lucky Radha! O, to be Radha! -- but much more than that, the gopis now know an acute longing, a desperate sense of cruel separation from Krishna. Their sorrow overflows into song: the gopis cry out for Krishna, singing of his irresistible beauty and his amazing grace. Moved past tears, the gopis then recount tales of his childish mischief and his heroic deeds, and they call out for Krishna to return.
And then the dark youth reappears. The milk-maids hold no grudge: he is back, and all that matters is to be with him! Yet this time many Krishnas appear in the flower-strewn glade, one next to each gopi grouped in that circle of dance. Krishna has multiplied his handsome form, so that close beside each dancing woman there is a dark figure -- Krishna after Krishna after Krishna. Through the wondrous power of this illusion, each one feels herself to be the sole focus of his attentions --- each gopi is now like Radha. As they begin again to sing and dance, each woman now believes herself to be Krishna's lover, so that her heart's every desire has been fulfilled. Held in Krishna's arms, looking into his eyes, each gopi feels faint from the pleasure of this amorous embrace, each one knows the bliss of being united with Krishna in this lila of love.
Songs of the Saints of India

Text and Notes by
John Stratton Hawley

Translations by
J. S. Hawley and
Mark Juergensmeyer

New York Oxford
Oxford University Press
1988
Mira’s Fame

In the first place, she attained enormous celebrity. Just as Antal, the only woman among the Alvar poet-saints of south India, is the one whose verse and life story are best known of all the Alvars', so Mira’s poems are probably the most often quoted of any north Indian saint, and her biography the most familiar. More than any other saint with the possible exception of Kabir, she has become a pan-Indian figure. Her songs are sung all the way to the southernmost tip of the sub-continent by people who otherwise have little command of Hindi, and in fact some of the most popular renditions in recent times have been made by a south Indian vocal performer, M. S. Subbalaaxmi. Subbalaaxmi is a woman, and her recording of selections from Mira is intense and personal; it is one of the most influential discs of Hindu religious music ever produced. For sheer numbers of copies sold, of course, it has plenty of competitors in the music that emerges from India’s huge film industry, but there too Mira has made her mark. Not that she is the only bhakti saint to have become the subject of a feature-length movie—one could say the same for every poet in this book—but Mira’s story has been enacted ten times on the screen, in a succession of films that goes back to the earliest days of sound cinematography in India. Once M. S. Subbalaaxmi herself played the leading role.

There are other signs of Mira’s popularity. In Pune, in the western state of Maharashtra, an institution called St. Mira’s School has developed a whole philosophy of education that sets it apart from most Indian schools. Founded in 1931 in Hyderabad, in present-day Pakistan, by a visionary named T. L. Vaswani, the Mira Movement in Education called for the sort of training Vaswani believed would make sense for girls. He insisted that one must educate the whole person, not just the mind, so he attempted to inculcate not just formal learning but purity, prayer, simplicity, and service—virtues that he saw exemplified in “the queen saint” Mirabai, whom he held up as a beacon to his young charges. Every day, beneath huge portraits of him and of Mira, and before little dioramas that illustrate what it means to be kind to brother dog and mother cow, hundreds of neatly uniformed girls assemble for the school’s “sanctuary” hour. There in flawless unison they recite a chapter from the Bhagavad Gita, sing the songs of the saints—often Mira’s songs—and reaffirm their dedication to God, school, and world in the words of their school song, “I Would Be Simple.” In St. Mira’s College for Girls, a glistening campus some distance away, older girls celebrate Mira’s birthday with a solemn ceremony that begins at 5:00 A.M. each June 4th. An hour of Mira’s songs serves as the centerpiece for readings from the world’s great scriptures on that day, and at other points in the school year—for instance, on the occasion of Krishna’s birthday some months later—students enact incidents from Mira’s life.

If one goes to Brindavan, the town in Braj that serves as the principal pilgrimage center for devotees of Krishna, one finds another memento of Mira. It is in the form of a temple dedicated to her, which was established in the middle of the nineteenth century by one of the chief ministers of the state of Bikaner, in Mira’s native region, Rajasthan. It is a lovely little temple built around a courtyard draped with dense green foliage, and it has become a regular stop on the pilgrim route. This temple is not just memorial in nature, but sacramental. The central deity is Krishna, of course, and to his left is an image of Radha, his favorite consort. To his right, however, stands another female figure—apparently another consort, a counterpart to Radha. This is Mira herself, and not a few people think of her in just this way.

Nowhere is this sentiment more evident than in Rajasthan, the region of deserts, rocks, and fortresslike princely kingdoms to the west of Delhi that is said to have been Mira’s home. There in Merta, the town that claims her birth, a huge, gaily lit temple proclaims her fame, and during the summer rainy season pilgrims pack themselves so densely inside that when they join together to sing her songs the sound is deafening. Once again, the temple is formally dedicated to Krishna, Mira’s chosen Lord, but an auxiliary shrine is devoted to her, and it is there that most of the music and dancing takes place. The building is supposed to commemorate the site where Mira her-
that began to take shape around the turn of the seventeenth century. But if sex was the obstacle, one wonders how Mira gained such widespread acceptance a century or two later. Another possibility is that her poetry, which is definitely closer to the folk idiom than any other we have explored, was regarded as insufficiently “poetic” to be preserved in writing. In that case it would have been the preserve of bardic groups and circles of female singers, who were not literate. Evidently her life story would also have been told—and also, often, in verse—by these same groups, for the legend of Mira colors her poetry more than is the case with any of the other bhakti poets. And that raises a final possibility: perhaps the large quantity of poetry now bearing Mira’s signature grew up, in the course of time, as a response to the existence of her well-known legend.

Whichever explanation we choose, we seem to be left with a group of poems whose date of composition is so late that they can scarcely provide a check on the accuracy of Mira’s biography. They must have been written by other “Miras” than the original one, if ever indeed she existed at all. In such a situation all we can do is listen critically to what the legends say, and for that purpose the oldest is probably the best. It is Nabhadas’s brief sketch:

Mira unraveled the fetters of family;
she sundered the chains of shame to sing
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.
Like a latter-day gopi, she showed the meaning
of devotion in our devastated age.
She had no fear. Her impetuous tongue
intoned the triumphs of her artful Lord.
Villains thought it vile. They set out to kill her,
but not even a hair on her head was harmed,
For the poison she took turned elixir in her throat.
She cringed before none: she beat love’s drum.
Mira unraveled the fetters of family;
she sundered the chains of shame to sing
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.10

Although several major themes make their appearance here, one needs the extended commentary of Priyadas (A.D. 1712) before Mira’s hagiography really becomes clear. Priyadas’s life of Mira is the oldest full narration that has come down to us, and it is one of the liveliest

---

History and Hagiography

The question is an important one, for not only do we lack a reliable historical frame to associate with Mira’s life, we also lack a corpus of poetry that can convincingly be associated with a historical person. Only two poems bearing Mira’s signature can be found in documents whose date can be accepted as coming before the beginning of the eighteenth century. For a sixteenth-century poet, this is serious. One of the two poems occurs in the Adi Granth, so we know that Mira must have had a fair reputation at the beginning of the seventeenth century when it was compiled, and Nabhadas’s Bhaktamal, the oldest extant hagiographical statement concerning Mira, dates from the same period. But where are the rest of the poems?9

At present it is hard to give a satisfying answer. One possibility is that as a woman Mira was excluded from the devotional anthologies
in his large anthology. His central focus, like that of Nabhadas, is on a woman ever at loggerheads with the segment of society that matters most to an Indian woman: her family. It was not her natal family that presented the problem but the family into which she married. Yet since north Indian custom decrees that marriage—particularly a girl's marriage—take place at an early age, and since the girl is ever after expected to regard her husband’s family as her own, Mira's struggles with her husband and his family essentially occupied her entire life.

As the story goes, the problem was desperately simple. Ever since she was a little girl, Mira knew perfectly well whom she wanted to have for a husband—Krishna—and no earthly man could compete. The form of the deity that had particularly won her affection was Krishna Giridhar, the “Lifter of the Mountain,” and this title recurs in countless poems attributed to her. It is a youthful, heroic, protective aspect of Krishna, and one very widely worshiped in Rajasthan. The story it commemorates is one in which Krishna as a young man held aloft Mount Govardhan, the symbolic center of Braj, to shield the cattle and cowherds of the region from the wrath of the rain-god Indra. It was Krishna who had provoked Indra to anger in the first place, by urging the Braj people to turn their devotional attentions away from the quixotic sky-god, captain of the old Vedic pantheon, and toward the mountain itself, which symbolized the nourishment and prosperity that were already in their midst. The mountain, as it turned out, was a form of Krishna. When Indra rained down his resentment for seven days and nights, Krishna countered by raising his mountainous umbrella above the heads of those he loved. Priyadas reports that Mira had a personal image of Krishna in this mountain-lifting guise, and that she repaired to him for protection herself.

Such protection was necessary because, as she saw it, to be devoted to Krishna meant that no other devotion was possible. Given her own preference she would have eschewed marriage, but she had no control over such matters. In Rajasthan, today as in the sixteenth century, marriages are arranged; and she had no choice but to go through with it. So she converted the marriage to her own purposes. When her Rajput family, the rulers of Merta, betrothed her to the son of a princely family from another Rajput state, she merely went through the motions. She followed her youthful hus-

band around the marriage fire as tradition dictated she must, but the mantras she said in her heart as she did so tied her for life to a different youth, the one she called the Mountain Lifter. When it came time for her to depart for her new home, similarly, she was uninterested in taking along the requisite dowry. All she wanted to have at her side was her image of Krishna.

What she did when she arrived at the palace of her new family was even more appalling to them: she refused to bow her head to her mother-in-law when the older woman greeted her at the threshold, and she refused to bow to the goddess who was the family’s chosen deity. To have done so, she felt, would have compromised her fealty to Krishna. These acts caused humiliation to her mother-in-law, shame to her father-in-law and her husband, and discredit to her own father’s lineage as well.

Never content with the family that marriage had given her, Princess Mira proceeded to replace it with another, “the company of the saints” (sidhu sang) who were “attached to the will of Syam,” that is, Krishna.12 Her sisters-in-law tried to dissuade her from associating with wandering mendicants and religious enthusiasts—hardly the proper involvement for a woman sheltered inside the palace—but to no avail, and before long the rama took action by dispatching to Mira a cup of poison intended to bring an end to such disgraceful behavior. Whether Priyadas means Mira’s husband or her father-in-law when he uses the term rama (“king” or “ruler”) is not entirely certain, but the latter may be more likely, since Mira’s father-in-law would have been head of the house. More recent versions of the story have seen it the other way around, however, attributing this heinous act to Mira’s husband, or blaming it on an evil brother-in-law.

Whoever it was, the action failed. The poison was sent in the guise of a liquid offering (saranamrit) to the feet of Krishna, Mira’s deity, with the foreknowledge that Mira would be bound by Hindu practice to consume whatever was left over from the table of her divine Lord as prasad. But as she dutifully drank it, the poison became saranamrit indeed: “immortal liquid from his feet.” Not only did she emerge unscathed from the wicked draft, she glowed with an even greater health and happiness than she had before.

This is the central event in Mira’s life story and the one to which everyone from Nabhadas on makes reference. Other events tend to
be patterned after it. Some later versions of Mira’s biography have the \textit{rana} sending her a snake when the cup of poison failed, but again to no avail: the asp transformed itself into a rock holy to Krishna (\textit{salagram}) that Mira honored on her altar. According to another story, this one told by Priyadas himself, Mira was overheard one day as she whispered affectionately to Krishna behind her closed door. Her in-laws quickly concluded that some secret liaison had been detected, and the \textit{rana} (again, the ambiguity between husband and father-in-law persists) raced to the door to avenge the family honor. Sword in hand, he demanded to be admitted to Mira’s chamber and see the man with whom she had been conversing so sweetly. She opened the door and replied that the man with whom he desired to speak was standing directly in front of him—Krishna, her image—and that he was never one to shy away from a confrontation, at which point the \textit{rana}, flustered and angry, froze “like a picture on the wall.” Thus the gross reality paled in strength before the subtle: the living \textit{rana} turned to stone while Krishna was shown to be much more than an image, more than “real life” itself.\textsuperscript{14}

In time, Mira escaped the confines of her earthly family to join the larger family she had embraced. She traveled to Brindavan to join the “company of saints” gathered around Krishna there, but again a confrontation ensued. This time her opponent was none other than the great Krishnaite theologian Jiv Gosvami, with whom she wished to speak about matters of faith.\textsuperscript{15} Jiv refused. He had undertaken a vow to think only of Krishna and never, therefore, to have concourse with a woman, since that would be apt to distract him from his holy thoughts. Mira was incensed at this attitude and let it be known that as far as she could see there was only one male in all of Brindavan, and it wasn’t Jiv. Before Krishna, she implied, the rest of the world is female. Jiv saw the point and relented, and Mira stayed some time in Brindavan as the focus of a large circle of devotees who gathered around her in song.

The final journey in Mira’s life took her in the opposite direction from her native Rajasthan—west to the great temple of Krishna in Dvaraka, on the shores of the Arabian Sea, to serve her Lord once again. When she had been gone for some time the \textit{rana} finally missed her. He recognized that she was the very “personification of love,” and sent a delegation of Brahmins to bid her return.\textsuperscript{16} She resisted, of course, and the Brahmins found themselves driven to extremes in their effort to carry out their mission: they went on a hunger strike. This did indeed earn Mira’s sympathy, and she prepared to go home, but as she did so, Krishna intervened. One day, as she worshiped in the temple, he drew her into his own image, and she was never seen again. Although Mira herself was at last willing to explore the possible coexistence of earthly propriety and heavenly devotion, her Lord could not bear to see her try.

This, then, is the outline of Mira’s story, but because of the fascination it exerts throughout north India there have been a number of expansions and modifications since Priyadas’s time. First and most important, there has been a tendency to specify that the family into which Mira married was the ruling house of Cittor, a city in southwestern Rajasthan known for its defiantly proud Rajput heritage. More than that, she has been given a historical husband. Apparently the first choice was Rana Kumbha, one of the great heroes and builders of Cittor, but when it was realized that his dates preceded those of the man in Merta whom tradition had come to recognize as Mira’s father, a later prince of Cittor received the honor, a sixteenth-century figure named Bhojraj.\textsuperscript{17}

Once such an honorable historical marriage had been arranged, it became necessary to extricate the groom from the opprobrium he would have earned as a would-be murderer of his wife. For this purpose Bhojraj was perfect, since in fact he soon disappeared from history. It was proposed that his marriage to Mira occurred shortly before he died, and that one of his younger brothers was responsible for the attempts on Mira’s life. In several versions of Mira’s life, including the one that has become standard comic-book fare in the \textit{Amar Chitra Katha} series, this has a most desirable effect. Mira can be said to be “an ideal Hindu wife” with respect to Bhojraj—an astonishing reversal of Priyadas’s picture—and still retain the enmity she expresses in so many poems toward the \textit{rana} who tried to poison her.

Another alteration that may have been made to improve Mira’s image as a wife may be seen in Priyadas’s report that Mira was once set upon by a man who pretended to be a wandering ascetic come to sing Krishna’s praises in Mira’s devotional group, but who actually had less elevated matters on his mind. One day he confronted Mira with amorous advances and claimed that the Mountain Lifter had commanded she submit. Fearlessly Mira complied, offering the man
food and preparing a bed for them to use; but this she laid out in the presence of the worshipping company before she urged her forward guest to have a good time. Faced with so many eyes, it was not she but he who blanched with shame. He lost all desire for corporeal contact and begged Mira to help him attain the godly devotion she displayed.

The story has an uplifting ending, but it must have seemed risky to subsequent generations, because it has been omitted from many accounts of Mira's life. As Mira became a symbol of devoted womanhood in general—both religious and secular, or domestic—she lost some of the latitude she once had in demonstrating how freely one might respond when the intensity of bhakti led to situations that offended ordinary morality. Such offense was minimized. One particularly instructive page in the comic-book version of Mira's life, in fact, shows that her extraordinary faith could be altogether reconciled with an exemplary home life. In the foreground and in color we see Mira tending dutifully to the needs of her husband; only when these have been fulfilled does she slip away into the background frame, into the shadows of black and white, to serve her other Mate.  

No mention is made, of course, of Mira's resistance to the idea of sharing Bhojraj's bed—this is a publication intended for young minds.

But this portrait is an extreme. The drama of Mira's defiance of the expectations of ordinary womanhood is still at the core of her legend as usually told, and no one has ever dared to suggest that she was anything but a virgin. Motherhood and Mira don't mix. Most changes in the myth of Mira have been in the nature of elaboration rather than revision, and many serve merely to associate motifs in her story with places people can visit today. Temples once dedicated to other deities have been converted to Mira shrines in Cittor and the neighboring city of Udaipur, and in the Mira temple in Brindavan one can now view the very salagram stone that once appeared before her in a much more threatening form. As the sign there says, in Hindi and in capital letters in English,

---

**Themes in the Poetry**

Many of the themes and emphases in poetry attributed to Mira correspond closely to what we have in the compositions of the other bhakti saints. Mira speaks of the importance of the name of God; she praises the True Guru; she uses nautical imagery to characterize what it is to cross the sea of existence; she underscores the importance of sharing the company of other worshipers (sants, sadhus, bhaktas); and there are times when she indulges in the sort of self-denigration that points by contrast to the greater glory of God.

But there are strains in Mira's poetry that would seem distinctly out of place if one encountered them in the poems of Kabir, or Sur. One such strain is the close resemblance in style between many poems that bear Mira's signature and the often anonymous folk compositions sung by women in Rajastan and elsewhere. These are generally simple in format, involving a great deal of repetition, as one might expect in a round or a refrain, and they take up themes that belong typically to women. Mira's poetry too tends to be sim-
ple, with ample repetition, and it often mentions family tensions, or the emotions a bride might feel, or festivals confined to women.\textsuperscript{27} One also finds in her work such typically female genres of poetry as songs depicting the various characteristics of the twelve months and songs describing the coming of the rains, when one’s man is not yet home and the roads become impassable.\textsuperscript{28} These moods and genres are not entirely absent from poems composed by men and put into the mouths of women, but in Mira they are particularly pronounced. Considering our inability to isolate a body of poetry composed by a historical Mira or even by close associates in a “school” that might have grown up around her, this osmosis between “Mira” on the one hand and folk poetry on the other is easy to understand.

Another distinctive tendency in poems attributed to Mira concerns the line separating Mira from Krishna’s gopis. There are poems in the Mira corpus in which this separation is carefully maintained. The poet may even assign herself the status of a maidservant (manjadi) and watch from the sidelines as love develops between Krishna and Radha, paramount among the gopis, as is theologically correct.\textsuperscript{29} But when Radha is absent from the scene, as is frequently the case, it is much harder to tell who is speaking, and there are times when it is almost impossible not to conclude that Mira understands herself as a gopi. She concludes one poem, for instance, with the following line:

Let Mira, your servant, safely cross over, a cowherding Gokul girl.\textsuperscript{30}

It is often much harder with Mira than it is with Sur (to choose a parallel saguna case) to subtract the poet’s signature from the poem and still have it make sense. The line between the internal drama of Braj—the gopis’ world—and what Mira experiences is not fixed, and grammar often forces the hearer to assume a close link between the two. This is not so with the poets we have studied so far. In poems of Ravidas and Kabir the signature is often cordoned off from the body of the poem by means of the verb “says,” a word that appears directly in the text. Or it may just be understood, as is typical in many instances involving Nanak and Sur: only the poet’s name appears, and the hearer supplies an implicit “says.” With Sur the formal bond between the poet and the world he describes sometimes becomes stronger, in phrases such as “Sur’s Lord” (sur prabhu). It is the Lord who acts in the poem, but the poet’s presence is suggested indirectly through the use of the genitive. Yet the genitive meaning is only one possibility; usually one can also divide such a phrase so that the “Lord” participates in the drama and the “Sur” merely speaks it. All the hearer needs to do is supply the verb “says” and the poet becomes a mere narrator, formally distinct from the world he describes.

With Mira, however, one often has no choice but to pull the poet directly into the poem. We have already quoted one concluding verse in which this is required, and by far the most frequent formula for ending a Mirabai poem has equal force. In such a poem the whole first half of the final line enters as an indissoluble unit—“Mira’s Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter”—and the presence of the genitive marker re in “Mira’s Lord” (mira re prabhu, or mira ke prabhu, depending on the dialect) makes it impossible to factor her name out of the direct action of the poem by understanding it as the subject of the unexpressed verb “says.” It is as if the whole phrase becomes Mira’s signature, pulling her, via her Lord, into the world of the poem, which is most often the gopis’ world. Often other things she says suggest that she is there anyway, not merely in the persona of a gopi but as a woman of Rajasthani, someone the rana tried to poison, but this clinches the case. And the repeated mention of Krishna in a particular role, as the one who lifts Mount Govardhan, has the effect of further attracting the action described toward Mira herself. The image of Krishna as the Mountain Lifter is the one she holds most dear.\textsuperscript{31}

One often has the feeling that because Mira’s own biography is of such vivid importance in north India, whoever composed the Mira poems was eager to draw in as much of Mira herself as possible. Clearly this happened when episodes from her own life such as the incident of the cup of poison or the snake made their way into poems she is said to have composed, but it may even be true when the only autobiographical fragment is an expanded version of her signature—something like “Mira’s Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter.” What happened, of course, was that the signature itself, like the rest of the poem, became something to be composed. In the absence of a historical Mira, she too had to be created.
A third distinctive emphasis in poems attributed to Mira has to do with this same set of issues. It is the particular view Mira takes of marriage and yoga in relation to Krishna, a view that is somewhat deviant when measured against much that is standard in Krishnaite doctrine. Saguna theology has some pointed things to say about these institutions. Typically it rejects the view that Krishna was married to the gopis, reserving that sacrament for a much later stage in his life, when he has assumed the throne of Dvaraka. The gopis are his paramours, not his wives, and theirs is therefore a costly, dangerous liaison: they risk the opprobrium of all society, and perhaps worse than opprobrium at the hands of their husbands if their trysts are discovered. With equal vehemence, saguna theology rejects the idea that Krishna was in any way an ascetic, a yogi. When Krishna recommends this pose to the gopis through Udho, it is in large measure a joke on Udho. No one who fools around as much as Krishna does can possibly hope to build a reputation as a yogi, and the gopis are quick to say so. For that reason we suspect that it is only a daring metaphor when a go-between reports to Radha that Krishna yearns for her with such unbroken concentration that he has begun to act like a yogi. Or worse: perhaps it's just a ploy to break down her resistance.32

In the poems of Mira both these sacred cows—marriage and asceticism—are defied. Not only does Mira have a tendency to portray herself as wed to Krishna, a theme familiar from her hagiography, but she often depicts her betrothed as a yogi. Whether this marriage actually transpired is another matter. In one much-quoted poem, Mira seems convinced that the wedding happened in a dream in which Krishna appeared to her; in others she longs for the union to take place and describes her bridal readiness.33 As for Krishna's identity as a yogi, it seems to have much to do with the fact that he is so distant, wandering as if he were an ascetic. Indeed, Rajasthani women's folk poetry sometimes touches on this theme in depicting an absent husband or lover. But here more is involved: Mira is ready to take up the yogi's life herself in order to go where he is.34 Strangest of all, she imagines this liaison not just as one between a male and female yogi who are fellow travelers, but as an actual marriage between the two—a marriage of yogis, something whose possibility is simply disallowed by basic categories of Hindu thought.35 To become a yogi is to leave behind one's marriage and everything that goes with it—family, home, and all. Mira, however, would seem to create a new institution to answer her urges. In doing so, she once again confuses the realms that others hold apart, and once again her audacity seems to have to do with her gender.36

Bhakti is a force that propels a person beyond the confines of ordinary life. In a man's case such a departure may take the form of imagining one's way into the lives of women, and specifically women who themselves abrogate social norms. This is what happens when Sur takes on the voice of a gopi. But if the poet is a woman, the landscape necessarily changes, so a woman who imagines her religious involvements as transgressing the boundaries of ordinary life may well do so in different ways. Rather than accepting the loving profligacy that official saguna theology designates as the appropriate avenue of escape from mundane, domestic involvements—a theology, of course, designed by men—she may try something new. She may attempt to forge categories that give new bite to bhakti from a woman's point of view. This is what Mira did in demanding for herself a marriage with the world's most eligible and unmarried bachelor and in imagining this marriage as taking a form the world regards as impossible: the coupling of two yogis. In Hindu terms a female yogi is already an oddity, since women are so closely identified with home and family. But to compound this aberration with marriage to a yogi whose personality seems to contradict the spirit of yoga in every way is to hatch an act of madness.

Mira says that the world did indeed call her mad—mad with love—and no wonder.37 Whoever she was, whether a historical individual, a collective, mythical projection, or some combination of the two, she fired the imagination with her fearless defiance. In one respect she is revered as Krishna's spiritual wife, as quiet and humble and self-sacrificing as any woman could be expected to be in relation to her "husband-god" (patidev), but in another sense she is celebrated as the kind of person who shattered complacencies wherever she went, particularly by making it clear that the world's conception of a woman's place is not always a place one wants to be. In both these aspects, and as the only one of her gender to have earned a place on the honor roll of north Indian bhakti saints, she exerts a fascination that none of her male counterparts can match.
POEMS OF MIRABAI

I'm colored with the color of dusk, oh rana,
colored with the color of my Lord.
Drumming out the rhythm on the drums, I danced,
dancing in the presence of the saints,
colored with the color of my Lord.
They thought me mad for the Maddening One,
raw for my dear dark love,
colored with the color of my Lord.
The rana sent me a poison cup:
I didn't look, I drank it up,
colored with the color of my Lord.
The clever Mountain Lifter is the lord of Mira.
Life after life he's true—
colored with the color of my Lord.

Life without Hari is no life, friend,
And though my mother-in-law fights,
my sister-in-law teases,
the rana is angered,
A guard is stationed on a stool outside,
and a lock is mounted on the door,
How can I abandon the love I have loved
in life after life?
Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:
Why would I want anyone else?

Today your Hari is coming,
my friend,
to play the game of Spring.
The harbinger crow in the courtyard speaks,
my friend,
an omen of good times ahead.
All the cowherds have gathered in the garden,
my friend,
where the basil grows:
I hear the sound of tambourines and drums,
my friend.
Why sleep? Wake up and go!
There's water and betel-leaf, mats and sheets,
my friend.
Go greet him: touch his feet.
Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter,
my friend,
the best blessing you could have.

I saw the dark clouds burst,
dark Lord,
Saw the clouds and tumbling down
In black and yellow streams
they thicken,
Rain and rain two hours long.
See—
my eyes see only rain and water,
watering the thirsty earth green.
Me—
my love's in a distant land
and wet, I stubbornly stand at the door,
For Hari is indelibly green,
Mira's Lord,
And he has invited a standing,
stubborn love.
Hey love bird, crying cuckoo,
don't make your crying coos,
for I who am crying, cut off from my love,
will cut off your crying beak
and twist off your flying wings
and pour black salt in the wounds.

Hey, I am my love's and my love is mine.
How do you dare cry love?
But if my love were restored today
your love call would be a joy.
I would gild your crying beak with gold
and you would be my crown.

Hey, I'll write my love a note,
crying crow, now take it away
and tell him that his separated love
can't eat a single grain.
His servant Mira's mind's in a mess.
She wastes her time crying coos.

Come quick, my Lord,
the one who sees inside;
without you nothing remains.

[Caturvedi, no. 84]

Murali sounds on the banks of the Jumna,
Murali snatches away my mind;
My senses cut loose from their moorings—
Dark waters, dark garments, dark Lord.
I listen close to the sounds of Murali
And my body withers away—
Lost thoughts, lost even the power to think.
Mira's Lord, clever Mountain Lifter,
Come quick, and snatch away my pain.

[Caturvedi, no. 166]
I have talked to you, talked,
dark Lifter of Mountains,
About this old love,
from birth after birth.
Don't go, don't,
Lifter of Mountains,
Let me offer a sacrifice—myself—
beloved,
to your beautiful face.
Come, here in the courtyard,
dark Lord,
The women are singing auspicious wedding songs;
My eyes have fashioned
an altar of pearl tears,
And here is my sacrifice:
the body and mind
Of Mira,
the servant who clings to your feet,
through life after life,
a virginal harvest for you to reap.

[Cutvedi, no. 31]

Go to where my loved one lives,
go where he lives and tell him
if he says so, I'll color my sari red;
if he says so, I'll wear the godly yellow garb;
if he says so, I'll drape the part in my hair with pearls;
if he says so, I'll let my hair grow wild.
Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:
listen to the praises of that king.

[Cutvedi, no. 153]

Oh, the yogi—
my friend, that clever one
whose mind is on Siva and the Snake,
that all-knowing yogi—tell him this:

"I'm not staying here, not staying where
the land's grown strange without you, my dear,
But coming home, coming to where your place is;
take me, guard me with your guardian mercy,
please.
I'll take up your yogic garb—
your prayer beads,
  earrings,
  begging-bowl skull,
  tattered yogic cloth—
I'll take them all
And search through the world as a yogi does
with you—yogi and yogini, side by side.

"My loved one, the rains have come,
and you promised that when they did, you'd come too.
And now the days are gone: I've counted them
one by one on the folds of my fingers
till the lines at the joints have blurred
And my love has left me pale,
my youth grown yellow as with age.
Singing of Ram,
your servant Mira
has offered you an offering:
her body and her mind."

[Cutvedi, no. 117]
And everything else is later.

There where the love of the Dark One comes first

Of beauty, and a golden crown—

And deck themselves with the six Hue signs

They dance the dance of communion

Carried in goodness—their minds free

And receive their minds like fire

To focus on the dark form of the Lord

To submission in pure immediacy

There they gather—the good, the true

After in the full light of love

Where the high-flying birds alight and play

Where death is affairs to go,

Let us go to a realm beyond going.

140 / SONGS OF THE SAINTS OF INDIA
Journal Title: The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal

Volume: Issue:  
Month/Year: 1989 Pages: 1-29

Article Author:

Article Title: Introduction

Imprint:

Item #:  
Call #: BL1153.7.B46 M37 1989
Location: LML Book

Date Received: 7/30/2014 6:18:29 PM

Notice: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

University at Buffalo Libraries. Document Delivery Services  
BUF NYUSBU  
716-645-2812 butlend@buffalo.edu
Bhagavān [God] is mad, he has created all sorts of confusion
He has made the country mad
Such a madman as this, I have not found

O crazy mind
I haven't found the madman I desire
I haven't found any such madman
Thus I have not become mad.

—Untitled Bāul song,
sung by Boidyanāth Śarma,
Calcutta, 1984

O Crazy Mind

There is a nostalgia for madness in Bengal. The lovers, poets, and saints are mad, full of intense passion and desire for direct experience. A person may be mad for love or mad for God.

Madness (pāgalāmi) has many connotations. There is insanity associated in indigenous Indian psychology with violent delirium and seizures caused by ghosts, ancestors, or other nonphysical beings, magic, or an imbalance of the elements. Madness connotes the unexpected, as in the Bengali proverb What will a madman not say? What will a goat not eat? (Pāgal kī nā bole, chāgol kī nā khāe?) It connotes affection, as a father may call his daughter “My little pāgli.” And it connotes the madness of the saint who is subject to intense emotional states and visions of God, whose life follows his experiences of religious ecstasy.

This book is a study of religious ecstasy in the Bengali devotional or bhakti traditions. These traditions are dedicated to religious experience, and the texts of Bengali bhakti give some of the most detailed accounts
of ecstatic states in world religion. They describe states of trance and intense emotion—how they occur, their effects on the body and personality, the place of the ecstatic in the community and in the culture. Ecstatic states are described in theological texts, in handbooks of spiritual practice, in poetry and hagiography. They show the power of devotion in the lives of individuals, the ways in which direct contact with the sacred may disrupt and reorganize personality.

The Bengali devotional tradition is a history of people who are considered saints, incarnations of deities, and liberated souls. Their words change the course of the tradition, for their inspirations and revelations are believed to come directly from their deities. And their ecstasy is the sign of the truth of their words, for the divine presence is known to drive the person mad with love and passion.

Ecstasy in the devotional tradition differs from the more classical notion of ecstasy articulated by Mircea Eliade—the literal interpretation of the Greek root ex-stē, which is “to stand outside” or “to be outside.” As Eliade states, ecstasy brings the shaman “beyond the realm of the sensorial”: “it is an experience that brings into play and engages only his ‘soul,’ not the whole of his being, body and soul; his ecstasy manifests the separation of the soul; that is, it anticipates the experience of death.”¹

This definition necessitates a separation of self or soul and body, which bhakti does not require. In the classical definition of ecstasy, the soul leaves the body and returns, perhaps after visiting other worlds. Ecstatic devotees and gurus, on the other hand, may have visions while they are within the body or may participate in the identity or emotions of a deity through a spiritual body, or the physical body itself may become the dwelling place of the deity.² In this book, devotional ecstasy is defined as a radical alteration of perception, emotion, or personality which brings the person closer to what he regards as the sacred. It is manifested through word and bodily state, voluntarily or involuntarily. The ecstatic often passes through a stage of disintegration, but ultimately experiences an integration that brings parts of the self, or the self and the Divine, into a closer relationship or union.

The spiritual antecedents of the Bengali devotional tradition may be seen in some earlier Indian ideas. The perceptual or visionary form of bhakti ecstasy is comparable to the idea of dṛṣṭi or direct perception. The Vedic hymn is often called simply mantra or dhīti, “thought,” implying that it is seen spontaneously in the mind and not learned.³ The affective
aspects of ecstasy are illustrated in one characterization of bhakti in the Bhagavad Gītā (9.29), spoken by Krṣṇa to Arjuna:

Ye bhajantī tu māṃ bhaktyā
maya te teṣu cāpy aham.
Those who worship me with devotion,
They are in me, and I in them.

This reciprocity is seen in the idea of darśana, which includes both seeing the deity and being seen.4 Bhakti as emotion is not only devotion, but sharing—a love relationship in which the devotee both gives and receives. Such reciprocity is also seen in the bodily transformations involved in bhakti ecstasy, when the person consciously creates or suddenly discovers a spiritual body (siddha deha). This body is an intermediate self, participating in the experiences of both the deity and the earthly person. The worshiper becomes a part of the deity’s world of love and knowledge, while the deity is established within the heart of the worshiper. In ecstatic states, the spiritual identity becomes the dominant one, which may in turn affect the physical body (visions seen with spiritual eyes become materialized when the devotee leaves his trance). The inner states manifest in the physical body in the ecstatic symptoms—the sāttvika bhāvas and bhāvera vikāras—which show that the soul is not radically separated from the body. In shamanic ecstasy, the soul goes on a spirit journey through invisible regions to meet the dead or the gods and takes magical flight through the upper or lower worlds. In devotional ecstasy there is a permeability and openness uniting the person and the divinity, and a sharing of love between them.

Bengali bhakti ecstasy also differs from the definitions given by Gilbert Rouget in Music and Trance, in which he details the history of understandings of the term ecstasy. He contrasts trance, which involves movement, sound, company, sensory overstimulation, crisis, and amnesia with ecstasy, which requires immobility, silence, solitude, sensory deprivation, hallucination, no crisis, and recollection.5 Yet devotional ecstasy occurs unpredictably, in group or alone, with noise or silence—the love of Rādhā and Krṣṇa can be recognized in kīrtana hymns and dancing, or while sitting in yogic meditation, or walking in the forest to bring water. The significant opposition studied here is not ecstasy and trance, but spontaneous and ritual devotional states.

In this study of ecstasy and ecstacies, three types of sources are used:
theological texts, biographies of ecstatic saints, and interviews with living ecstacies. These allow a comparison between the expectations of the religious tradition and the actual experiences of persons who belong to the tradition.

One interesting fact arising from such a comparison is the discrepancy between what “should” occur (the stages of religious development and gradual growth of insight and emotion) and what ecstacies actually experience (a chaos of states that must be forced into a religious mold, since they often do not naturally fit). As we look at the texts, we notice that the more personal detail is present in these stories, the greater the violation of ritual and theology. Human devotion does not always fit the ritual pattern, especially among the highly individualistic and idiosyncratic visionaries in this book. Indeed, this is why virtually all were mistaken for mad or possessed, and many had to undergo exorcism or Ayurvedic treatment to prove the religious origins of their passions and visions.

Both ritual and theology seek to order religious experiences. Ritual puts such experiences under human control, making the link with the deity subject to individual or group will. Theology rationalizes the experiences, justifies the rituals, and often centers on a story or past event that has forged the link with the sacred in which the group participates. Yet ecstacies are not necessarily dependent on the traditional rituals for their religious experiences.

William James, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, contrasted two forms of recovery from disease: *ysis* and *crisis*. One was gradual, the other abrupt, and he felt that these corresponded to the ways in which inner unification could occur in the spiritual realm. His emphasis was on spontaneous conversion, a sudden change in emotional excitement or “hot place in consciousness,” which he found to be “firsthand and original,” opposing the “imitative” types of experience associated with traditional religion. While he thought that religious ritual imitates such experiences, he also saw the ways in which spontaneous ecstatic experience must be limited and reworked to fit into a tradition. He quotes the *Treatise on Religious Affections* of Jonathan Edwards:

Very often their experience appears like a confused chaos, but then those parts are selected which bear the nearest resemblance to such particular steps as are insisted on; and these are dwelt upon in their thoughts, and spoken of from time to time, till they grow more and more conspicuous in their view, and other parts which are neglected grow more and more ob-
scure. Thus what they have experienced is insensibly strained, so as to bring it to an exact conformity to the scheme already established in their minds.\(^7\)

Thus experience may come to imitate ritual. James also quoted John Wesley, who sought hopelessly for gradual sanctification in the 652 members of his society and was forced to recognize instantaneous sanctification ("practically if not dogmatically"): Had half of these, or one third, or one in twenty, declared it was gradually wrought in them, I should have believed this, with regard to them, and thought that some were gradually sanctified and some instantaneously. But as I have not found, in so long a space of time, a single person speaking thus, I cannot but believe that sanctification is commonly, if not always, an instantaneous work.\(^8\)

Can ritual induce ecstatic states? Some of Karl Potter's findings in *Presuppositions of Indian Philosophy* may bear on this issue. He distinguishes between progress and leap philosophies as ways of attaining mystical freedom. According to the progress approach, there are causal relations between complete freedom and its necessary and sufficient conditions; thus a person may attain such freedom gradually. This is *jātivāda*, an approach emphasizing action, discipline, and ritual. According to the leap approach, there are no causal relations leading to the spiritual goal, and freedom is not ultimately gained by progress along the path of cause and effect. This is acausal *ajātivāda*, in which practice may be preparatory or additional but cannot coerce attainment. Like the Buddhist concept of *prajñā*, it is sudden knowledge or intuition, which does not depend on such contingent factors as circumstances and previous information.\(^9\)

Potter finds both of these approaches in Indian philosophy, and both are present in Bengali *bhakti*. Those aspects of the devotional traditions that have incorporated yogic and tantric practices have also adopted the idea of a ladder to the deity—the assumption that bodily control and detachment can lead to spiritual control and attachment to the god or goddess. In *bhakti yoga*, the devotee may practice passion or passionlessness, visualize the paradise and a new spiritual body—in hope that these may bring the desired religious goal. For spontaneous ecstasies, ritual is the result rather than the cause; as Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsa phrases it, the fruit comes before the flower.

These two approaches are important for Bengali devotionalism—the
path of progression and the path of breakthrough. The path of progression is associated with James’s *krisis* or gradual approach. It emphasizes order and harmony, and the divine is reached by self-control and obedience. The god is most present in the greatest purity—of self, of place, of statue. Such purity involves loyalty to lineage and tradition, acceptance of hierarchy and authority, and ritual worship and practice. Ecstasy is attained by faith and learning, by acceptance of *dharma* and avoidance of *siddhis* (powers) and self-glorification. Such a path is yogic and devotional, and called in Bengal *śāstrīya dharma*, the path of scriptural injunctions.

The path of breakthrough is associated with James’s *crisis*, or abrupt change. It emphasizes chaos and passion, and the divine is reached by unpredictable visions and revelations. The presence of the deity is not determined by ritual purity—the god may be found in pure situations, but also at the burning ground, at the toilet, in blood and sexuality, in possession and ordeals. Initiation and lineage do not determine experience—often there is a “jumping” of gurus,—where different gurus are followed at different times. The criterion for status is neither yogic knowledge nor ritual skill, but rather *bhāva*, the ecstatic state that comes with direct experience of the divine. Such states are called *sahaja* (natural and spontaneous) or *svābhāvika* (unique to a particular individual). The path is more generally called *aśāstrīya*, or not according to the scriptures.

These two types of path run through the major traditions explored in this book; both are found among Vaiṣṇavas and Śāktas. Bāuls are voluntarily *aśāstrīya*, while holy women (*sādhikās*) have been largely limited to the *aśāstrīya* approach, as there is little opportunity for them to rise in the *bhakti* lineages (although in chapter 5 one woman is described who attained her status by being her guru’s successor of choice).

While the ritual approach to Indian spirituality has been widely explored, the nontraditional or *aśāstrīya* approach has been mentioned only tangentially, largely in association with the “little tradition” of folk religiosity. However, it is not limited to worship of local deities and possession cults—the breakthrough aspect of Indian ecstasy runs throughout Bengali religion. In the mainstream devotional traditions, this approach is present in the lives of believers and saints, as James phrases it, “practically if not dogmatically.” Spontaneous ecstasy has its own themes, its own order, which will be explored in the conclusion. For now, we shall look at one of the major manifestations of the breakthrough approach: divine madness.
Divine Madness

Divine madness is not unique to Bengal, or even to India. It has been explored in various traditions: in both Eastern Orthodox and Western Christianity, among the Hasids of eastern Europe, among the Sufis, in possession and trance dancers around the world.\(^\text{10}\) Plato distinguished two types of mania in the *Phaedrus*: one arising from human disease, and the other from a divine state, “which releases us from our customary habits.”\(^\text{11}\) He noted four sorts of divine madness sent by the gods: the manic, from Apollo, which brings divination; the telestic, from Dionysus, which brings possession trance (as a result of ritual); the poetic, from the Muses, which brings enthusiasm and poetic furor; and the erotic, from Eros and Aphrodite, which brings frenzied love. He states, “In reality, our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness, which indeed is a divine gift.”\(^\text{12}\) Greek playwrights showed divine madness to be a punishment from the gods, the “disease of heroes” or sign of the tragic hero, or a realm of illusion and error which may test or purify them.\(^\text{13}\)

In India, divine madness is described among the Alvars and Tamil Śaiva saints of South India, the Marathi saints of western India, and in the genre of popular biographies of yogis and saints. There is a wide range of behavior that may come under the title of divine madness. For instance, such madness is not always ecstatic. In *The Deeds of God in Šrīdhipur*, Anne Feldhaus translates a biography of Šrīdham Rāul, believed to be a divine incarnation by his Mahānubhāva followers. Rāul is abrupt, impolite, childish, irritable, and occasionally able to perform miracles (he could sit in the rain and not get wet, read minds, predict the future, and cure disease). However, he shows nothing that could be called an ecstatic state and shows no devotion himself—as he is God, he need not worship or identify with another. He is viewed as both divine and a madman, but not an ecstatic or bhakti saint.

David Kinsley, in “Through the Looking Glass: Divine Madness in India,” finds the madman to be a spiritual hero, echoing the behavior of the gods.\(^\text{14}\) Gods exhibit madness in their inconsistency, destructive acts, delight in enjoyment, and self-absorption; these actions show their freedom, transcendence of the world, and indifference to order. The devotional madman shows his total absorption in the divine, his renunciation, his imitation of or participation in a deity, his freedom and transcendence, and his not being at home in the physical world.\(^\text{15}\) However, bhakti traditions tend to prohibit direct imitation of a deity. As one informant
stated, "There is already a Kṛṣṇa—what need is there of another?" The more accepted goal is to be a close friend or beloved of the deity so overwhelmed with devotion that the physical world appears unreal and the transcendent world his true home.

Mad ecstasies tend to act in certain patterns. Sometimes the person is a trickster who does foolish or outrageous things, smiling mischievously, or he may be a hermit who stays alone in meditation, threatening visitors and potential disciples with magical vengeance or showers of rocks. He may be a lover in separation, crying, burning, and hallucinating, or a lover in union, dancing and singing in the beloved's presence. Indeed, across the various bhakti traditions, ecstasies tended to act more like each other than like members of differing belief systems.

Observers often confuse divine and ordinary madness. Spontaneous ecstasy can appear similar to ordinary madness—the person may demonstrate eccentric behavior, violation of social or moral codes, visual and auditory hallucinations, catatonic stillness, jumbled and chaotic or coded speech. However, while many Bengali saints are called madmen by their devotees and biographers, the realm of religious madness is generally considered a separate category from clinical madness. Psychiatrists interviewed in the Calcutta area stated that they never see patients with religious symptoms and that such patients are kept within the family group or become holy people for their village. In the most severe cases they might be taken to an exorcist (ojhā), who would try to exorcise a possessive ancestor, or to a tantric healer, who might give a metal amulet with spells or objects inside, or some Āyurvedic medicine, to discourage a mischievous ghost. There are also temples at which the disturbed person may be given mantras, special practices, and an iron bangle to wear on the wrist.

It is not difficult to differentiate ritual ecstasy from ordinary madness, for both are clear cultural models—the ecstasy is described and bounded by a preexisting theology, and the person may attain a defined state by mantra, visualization, or other spiritual practice. If the saint fits the tradition, his experience can be justified and validated by it.

It is, however, more difficult to differentiate religious madness from ordinary madness. Often the methods used are draconian; exorcisms can involve torture (in case the cause of the strange behavior is possession by a demon) such as tying the person down, burning him, hitting him with shoes or other objects. If the exorcism fails and the strange behavior remains, the person may be declared a saint by default. One cannot exor-
cise a god, for he would be more powerful than the exorcist. Indeed, only a deity is strong enough to resist the coercion of the exorcism. If no Ayurvedic cause can be found for the person’s beliefs or behavior, sainthood is the only option remaining—by a process of elimination.

A less strenuous way to differentiate is judgment by a religious authority. Caitanya’s divine status was announced by Śrīvāsa, a respected Vaiṣṇava. Rāmakṛṣṇa’s female guru, Bhairavi Brāhmaṇī, convened a group of pandits at Dakṣiṇeśwar and demonstrated to them that Rāmakṛṣṇa had the eight ecstatic symptoms (sāttvika bhāvas) and had experienced mahābhāva (the highest ecstatic state for Vaiṣṇavas). As a result, Rāmakṛṣṇa was proclaimed not only a saint but an avatāra or incarnation of the deity. Often, passing holy men, brahmins, or even doctors may play this role of validator. However, for validation to occur, some of the ecstatic symptoms must be recognizably part of a specific tradition.

In popular folk belief, both the ecstatic and the madman have symptoms due to separation; however, the madman longs for his ancestral home, or money or a wife, or his lost job, while the ecstatic longs for his god. Separation (vīraha) causes the same symptoms in both. It is the nature of the desired object that distinguishes the states. There are also differences in behavior, according to informants—the ecstatic appears to be harmful but instead ends up helping, while the madman genuinely hurts people by mental or physical violence. There is also a difference in control of states in folk belief: informants claim that the madman is forced into his abnormal behavior and cannot become normal if he tries, while the ecstatic chooses his states—he might be lost in trance, but he can emerge at will to argue with persons of different beliefs.

Holy men and women interviewed in Calcutta have distinguished the saint from the madman in both cause and behavior. The madman has a weak or defective brain, or his soul is in a bad body; he has no sense and will bite and hit; he is hostile and has many troubles. On the other hand, the saint is filled with the presence of Bhagavān (God); he is without any sense of the body—he has only the sense of divine presence and no others; his body is purified, and his appearance of madness is due to his visions of God; he talks to deities with words and gestures, and gets along well with animals; he can play with snakes and they will not bite him; he can swallow poison and it will not hurt him. Several holy men listed four qualities as the hallmarks of the saint: he is inert, jāda (he becomes lost in meditation, appearing like a corpse or a stone statue); mad, unmaḍa (he acts irrationally, for he is always in ecstasy); ghoulish, piśāca (he does not
discriminate between pure and impure things, feeling love toward all); and childlike, bālaka (he acts like a child between four and eight years old). As a holy man interviewed in Bākreśvar stated, the one who has attained Kāli\textsuperscript{18} is eternally in a state of apparent madness (pāgal bhāva) and has these qualities:

In this state, the ordinary self does not manifest. The person is naked, acts like a madman, sometimes speaks as the goddess, and sometimes as a little child. One cannot tell a madman [pāgal] just because he goes to eat at the outhouse; many people here do that. There are many false holy men here, they are like imitation jewels, glass instead of diamond. . . . Only certain kinds of states are respected. When consciousness returns after a quiet trance, everybody comes to [the holy man's] feet and says, "O Bābā." But when he is in a true mad ecstasy [mahābhāva], people throw stones at him and say, "Go away."\textsuperscript{19}

This informant mentions the false (nakal) holy man, who pretends to have ecstatic states, imitating those of others. Such a person is greatly scorned; the concept of imitation of ecstasy is widely known and universally despised. He also describes how intense ecstasy frightens people by its passion and resemblance to madness, while the milder trances are considered socially acceptable.

Ecstatic states and divine madness have been examined from a psychological perspective by opponents and proponents—by those who find ecstatic symptoms and mystical states to be forms of psychopathology and by those who are advocates of psychological breakdown as a path of spiritual growth. In "Mysticism and Schizophrenia," Kenneth Wapnick looked at the similarities and differences between ecstatic and mad states.\textsuperscript{20} He found that both show a dichotomy between two levels of experience—one outer or social, the other inner or personal. Both show a breakdown of attachments to the social world, an experience of pain or terror as the person "entered the inner world," a feeling of peace following the end of the terror, and a "return" to the social world.

However, the mystical process is lifelong, while the schizophrenia episode tends to be shorter—and there is no evidence that recovered schizophrenics tend to explore such inner experiences voluntarily. Mysticism culminates in a state of unity, while schizophrenia has no such culmination. While the mystic generally maintains conscious control throughout, the schizophrenic has a breakdown in functioning and must be hospitalized.\textsuperscript{21}
Wapnick suggests that the function of the religious discipline is to develop “muscles” to withstand the experiences of the inner world. These allow the inner and outer worlds to be joined, rather than separate and opposed as in schizophrenia, when conflict renders the person sterile and unproductive. Thus, mystical ecstasy and psychopathological states can be distinguished by goal, by adaptation to the social world, and by creativity.

These distinctions have been differently interpreted in India. Bengali understandings of divine madness are to a large extent based on pan-Indian understandings of the relationship of body, mind, and spirit. To better understand the organization of the person in India, we shall look at the medical system of Ayurveda.

Madness and the Indian Medical Model

In ancient India, both physical and mental disease were understood to come from outside the person, due to possession by a spirit or vengeance by a ghost. Amulets were believed more powerful than medicine, unless the drug was considered an “internal amulet.” From the sixth century B.C. to the second century A.D. came a growth of medical schools, and medicine became more aligned with philosophy than with religion. Caraka, Suśruta, and Bhela brought out compendia based on theories of the elements and influenced by the Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Sāṅkhya schools of philosophy. Caraka and Suśruta located the mind (with cognition and sensation) in the heart, while Bhela located mānas (cognition) in the brain and citta (associated with feelings) in the heart.

These writers were the major influences on the Ayurvedic system. Ayurveda (from āyus, life, and veda, knowledge), is the dominant system of Indian medicine, and it includes three possible sources of disease generally, and madness in particular. Endogenous (nīja) diseases are biological imbalances, which are cured by herbs and drugs. Mental (mānasika) diseases result from negative emotion, mental strain, and an imbalance of guṇas or qualities and are cured by yoga and moral action. Exogenous disease (āgantu) is a result of outside invasion and includes god and ghost possession, which is cured by sacrifice or exorcism. Thus there are three major understandings of mad and ecstatic behavior possible: the biological, the psychological, and the spiritual.

These three areas are explored in a bit more detail. Endogenous disease arises through the humors, which are vāyu or vāta (associated with movement, nerves, muscles, and pain); pītta (associated with enzymes
and hormones, digestion, and body temperature); and *kapha* or *śleṣma* (which regulates the other two, as well as liquids and plumpness). When these three humors have left their regular channels (*srotas*) they become faults (*doṣas*) and the person becomes ill. Madness is the intoxication of the mind by these *doṣas*, and it is relieved when the body is brought back to a homeostatic balance. Endogenous disease includes astrological and karmic factors (interpreted by modern Āyurvedic physicians as hereditary and congenital factors), hormonal imbalances, brain tumors, old age, and degenerative diseases with mental symptoms.

Diseases of *mānasa* are understood to be a disorganization of the mental elements, which are associated with passion and inertia. The causes of such an imbalance are called *vihara*—mental strain, improper activities, negative emotions, anxiety, strong instincts, loss of loved persons or objects, and association with hated ones. An imbalance may also be caused by improper yogic meditation, which causes the inner, spiritual bodies to go out of harmony with each other, or by too much study, which causes the folk disease called “study-āryā.” Again, its cure is a return to a homeostatic balance. Passion and inertia must be subordinated to purity; the weak mind must be strengthened and desires disciplined. Proper meditation and prayer aid this balance, and yogic practices align mind and body.

Exogenous disease is the broadest category, for it includes the outside agents that affect the person. In this category are drink, drugs, poison, accidents, unclean food, parasitic infections, and bites of rabid animals. However, the emphasis of Āyurveda has traditionally been on spirit invasion and the ways in which to deal with it.

If the problem is possession, the healer must find out what sort of spirit it is and whether it is acting on its own or as an agent for another. In some cases, it may even be difficult to determine that a spirit is the problem, for ghosts may influence people through their humors and imitate a physical disease. The spirit may be any of a variety of life forms. The victim may have been touched by a *gandharva*, seized by a *yakṣa*, smelled a *rākṣasa*, be ridden by a *piśāca*, seen by a god or ancestor, or cursed by a guru or ascetic. All of these cause exogenous insanity, especially by possession. The infecting spirits can act on their own, because they want attention (usually in the form of a fruit or animal sacrifice), or because they want to play or to punish the person for a sinful, impure, or careless act. Or in their search for gratification they may act as agents of witchcraft and sorcery.
If a sacrifice will not get rid of the possessing entity, exorcism may be required. This can be a painful proceeding—it is assumed that the possessed person cannot feel pain, that only the ghost can—and torture chases it away as quickly as possible. The exorcist (ojhā) may also neutralize the effect of the evil eye and subdue, placate, or expel spirits by sacrificial rites. Blackford reports red pepper juice put into the eyes, sticks put into the ears puncturing the eardrum, and branding as techniques of exorcism. Other folk cures include jhār phuk (blowing on the patient while reciting mantras) and the use of amulets and iron bracelets. An interesting description of the use of an amulet for a type of madness is given by J. C. Oman:

His people had a servant who was afflicted in this way. Every six months or so the man used to become subject to a strange, morbid restlessness, and a mental inquietude which could only be allayed by his being visited and bitten by a serpent. Everyone looked upon him with repulsion as one allied with such a terrible reptile. He also inspired a sort of awe because of this connection. The man himself was generally unhappy, and when the paroxysms were at hand he was wretched and miserable.

At last the sufferer consulted a wise sadhu, who gave him a gānda tāwiz (a peculiar malodorous amulet). When he had attached this to his person he experienced a sort of nightmare. Serpents seemed to crawl round him, to wind and coil about his limbs, and to hiss and dart at him. Even the ambient air seemed to be peopled with writhing serpent forms. For two hours or so this dreadful vision obsessed him, nearly driving him mad, and then the air cleared, as it were, and the ground at his feet resumed for him its natural appearance. He was cured forever; the mental shadows and the very real serpents passing entirely out of his life.

Other cures for exogenous madness include pilgrimages (often to curing temples), fasting, religious rites and vows, jewels (especially astrological gems, to avert bad planetary influences), and sacrifices.

Caraka, probably the most influential writer on Indian medicine, says of insanity:

Insanity is characterised by the perversion of mind, intellect, consciousness, knowledge, memory, desire, manners, behaviour and conduct. . . . Due to the perversion of mind, the pa-
tient does not think of such things which are worth thinking; on the other hand, he thinks of such things as ought not to be thought of. Due to perversion of intellect, he understands eternal things as ephemeral and useful things as harmful. . . . Due to the perversion (loss) of consciousness, the patient is unable to have perception of burns caused by fire, etc. Due to the perversion of memory, the patient either does not remember anything or remembers things incorrectly. Due to perversion of desire, disinclination develops for things desired previously. Due to perversion of manners, the patient, who is otherwise normal, gets enraged. Due to perversion of behaviour, the patient indulges in undesirable activities. Due to the perversion of conduct, the patient resorts to such activities as are against the rules prescribed in religious works.29

He states of exogenous insanity, whose origin is external to the body:

Some scholars hold the view that this type of insanity is caused by the effects of the sinful activities in the past life. Lord Punarvasu Ātreya considers intellectual blasphemy as the causative factor of this condition. Due to intellectual blasphemy the patient disregards the gods. . . . He also resorts to undesirable and such other inauspicious activities. The gods etc. cause insanity in him because of his own inauspicious activities.30

The patient is thus himself responsible for his madness—he cannot claim innocence and blame the gods:

Neither the gods, nor gandharvas, nor piśācas nor rākṣasas afflict a person who himself is free from misdeeds. The primary causes of insanity in an individual are his own misdeeds, and other agents like the gods etc. act only as the consequence of these misdeeds. . . . The wise man should not blame the gods, ancestors or rākṣasas for diseases caused by his own misdeeds due to intellectual blasphemy. One should hold himself responsible for his happiness and miseries. Therefore, without apprehension one should follow the path of propitiousness. . . . Thus the power either to avert or invite the attack of insanity rests within the individual himself.31

Suśruta includes religious hallucinations (such as hearing gandharvas when they are not really present) as signs of impending death:

The man who hears a variety of divine sounds, even in the absence of any of the celestial beings (such as the Siddhas, the
Gandharvas etc.), or thinks that he is hearing the uproar of a city, or the moanings of the sea, or the rumbling of a rain cloud, without their actual presence or proximity . . . or assigns to them causes other than the actual ones, should be regarded as a doomed being.\textsuperscript{32}

Āyurvedic psychiatry is a broad and sophisticated system, including in its modern form perceptual disorders (\textit{indrīyartha grahaṇa vikṛti}), thought disorders (\textit{vicāraṇa vikṛti}), disorders of memory (\textit{smṛti vikṛti}), emotional disorders (\textit{bhāva vikṛti}), and behavioral problems (\textit{ceṣṭā vikṛti}). It recognizes hallucination, obsession, amnesia, anxiety, elation, and depression. While there are cultural models and syndromes, there is a broad range of possible forms of insanity.

Many psychiatric patients in India do not fit clearly into the cultural models of the possessed or enchanted person; neither do they fit clearly into the Āyurvedic medical model. Rather, they show bits and pieces of various syndromes. G. F. W. Ewens, an English psychiatrist in India at the turn of the century, wrote of some of the insane patients he had seen. Few of them fit into a recognized cultural model, yet they were recognized as insane. One patient claimed that a \textit{dhobi} (laundryman) in a tree was his enemy and tried to kill him; another was an uncrowned rājā; another was a king of yogis; another was blind and walked with a blanket on his head, for enemies would throw fire on his head. One patient was killed each night by attendants, but revived in the morning by a faqir; another felt that his insides were a river, and he required great amounts of food and drink; a third believed his shadow was God, and he would assault anyone who stepped on his shadow (as this would insult God).

Ewens found common hallucinations among the patients: that the food was poisoned, that beautiful women visited them at night, that they were attacked by insects and animals, that human faces would appear and talk to them, that small fires or bad odors would suddenly start. In one detailed case history, a Muslim hashish addict saw multicolored animals appear before his eyes, and he would get \textit{behosh} (emotional). He was tormented by spirits who would sit on his chest at night, preventing him from sleeping. He would write phrases from the Koran in the dust and filth on the floor so that people could walk on it, for he claimed the Koran was at the root of his misery.\textsuperscript{33}

Another case was a Hindu who threatened suicide and assault. He would sit naked, collecting rags and bits of paper. He destroyed clothing and other objects, and rubbed feces on himself and on the walls of the
cell. He would curse the jail officials and accuse them of crimes. He claimed to be ordained by the gods to direct human affairs.  

Some of these cases may demonstrate cultural syndromes, but few Western psychiatrists would not recognize the symptoms. These patients were considered criminals when they committed illegal acts (such as murder), but not when they merely displayed symptoms that were deviant. Patients used religious imagery, but primarily to justify erratic behavior. In some cases, a yogi or faqir was believed to have magical powers; in one case, a man subject to fits of violence and incoherence would shout “Jai Devi”—he claimed that his outbursts were caused by worship of the goddess. Visionary experience was not that of a compassionate mother or mythic paradise, as saints have described. Rather, deities would appear in parts (disconnected heads and voices) and encourage violence, fear, and guilt.

Cultural syndromes are often seen in folk psychology. Deborah Bhattacarya found three Bengali categories of folk interpretations of madness: tuktak, māthār golmal, and bhor. Tuktak is sorcery, often due to the envy of neighbors. The person is struck by madness, disease, and misfortune, his personality changes, and he acts against his own best interests. In māthār golmal (the disfunctioning or confusion of the head), madness is seen in activity, anxiety, anger, sexuality, and sometimes burning sensations. It is attributed to excess bile, which generates heat, or to shock. Bhor is possession by a ghost, which often occurs during religious festivals. It is expressed by rigidity and personality change.

The madman is acultural, denying dharma. He has no home and lives on the street; he eats anything and does not bathe; he is naked and speaks gibberish. He does whatever he wishes, acting according to whim and his own inclination; he does not follow his social and religious obligations. Bhattacarya finds all of these forms of madness to be due to intrusions and the cure for madness to be a strengthening of the individual against such intrusions. While Ayurvedic psychology emphasizes individual responsibility, folk psychology speaks of madness due to illness and the actions of others.

Both Ayurvedic and folk understandings of madness are a useful background for studying the lives of the saints described in this book. When these saints first described their visions and trances, observers first viewed them through the medical, not the religious, model.

Like Western psychology, Ayurveda recognizes many types of insanity. And like Western psychology, it has great difficulty differentiating be-
tween mental imbalance and religious ecstasy, especially ecstasy that occurs unpredictably and outside the traditional religious situations.

Spontaneous and Ritual Ecstasy

The tension between spontaneous and ritual forms of ecstasy is not unique to the Indian tradition, but can be found in at least two other religious traditions—those of Buddhism and Christianity. In seventh-century Chinese Zen (or Ch’an) Buddhism, there was a conflict between the northern school of Shen-hsiu and the southern school of Hui-neng. The most well-known instance of this conflict is seen in poems intended to indicate the degree of enlightenment of their writers. Shen-hsiu wrote:

The body is the Bodhi tree (enlightenment)
The mind is like a clear mirror standing.
Take care to wipe it all the time
Allow no grain of dust to cling.

Hui-neng wrote:

The Bodhi is not like a tree
The clear mirror is nowhere standing.
Fundamentally not one thing exists
Where, then, is a grain of dust to cling? 37

In the first poem, the importance of ritual practice is emphasized, while the second poem denies the efficacy of practice. Shen-hsiu’s “Northern Zen of Gradualness” emphasizes meditation by purification of the mind, continual quieting of desires, and gradual ascent by disciplined repetition. Enlightenment is “acquired.” According to Hui-neng’s “Southern Zen of Suddenness,” practice does not lead to enlightenment; rather, both are identical and meditation “contributes to the process of revealing one’s enlightenment.” Enlightenment comes suddenly, “in no way acquired, in no way caused.” The goal is not a state of cultivated purity, but an experience of transcendence, a “breakthrough.” 38

In the Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, these two approaches are symbolized by two Chinese logographs: k’an ching or “paying attention to purity,” and chien-hsing or “seeing into one’s true nature.” The debate between these two schools was continued in the Japanese split between the Rinzai and Soto Zen schools.

The distinction between spontaneous and ritual religious experience also appears in the Roman Catholic tradition in the distinction between
ascetical and mystical states. In ascetic or acquired experiences, the cause is human activity and repeated effort, and there is an increase in knowledge and virtue, as well as an inner purification. In mystical or infused experiences, the cause is divine operation, and the mystical graces come down like "rain falling from heaven." The operations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit lead to visions, mystical lights, and such extraordinary states as the mystical marriage and the unitive life.\textsuperscript{39}

In \textit{The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology}, Poulain defines supernatural ecstasy as having two aspects: "the first, which is interior and invisible, is a very intense attachment to some religious subject; the second, which is corporeal and visible, is the alienation of the sensible faculties."\textsuperscript{40} While basing his writings primarily on the experiences of Saint Theresa of Avila, Poulain also cites Saint Thomas Aquinas, who equates ecstasy with the Greek \textit{extasis} and the Latin \textit{excessus mentis}, the flight of the spirit. Ecstasy in the Catholic mystical tradition includes intense rapture, both brief and longer term, and intellectual visions (of the Trinity or of divine attributes). It may include the beatific vision, the direct view of God (although this is a debated point), and there are often spiritual sufferings during ecstasy—the pain of love (compared to a wound), a horror of sin, compassion for the damned, and the sorrow of the Crucified.

There are also ecstatic effects on the body: paralysis, weakness, trembling, rigidity, lowering of temperature, convulsions, and sometimes bloody sweat and inability to eat. Poulain describes how the ecstatic state is distinguished from the morbid state on the basis of knowledge gained in the ecstasy, such as moral sense, strong will, loving emotional state, acceptance of suffering, memory of the state, and the ability to act in the world.\textsuperscript{41} While ecstasy cannot be produced "in a purely natural manner, by an intense concentration of the attention on a religious object," it may be simulated by conscious lying, overactive imagination, the devil's action, and inaccurate memory.\textsuperscript{42} Such phenomena as fainting, hysteria, somnambulism, and hypnotic trance may also resemble ecstasy.

In Catholic theology, ritual practice can only lead to the ascetic virtues, and the person must depend on the action of the Holy Spirit for the infused graces. In Bengali devotion, both are believed capable of leading the person to the goal of mad, ecstatic love of the deity.

\textit{Bhakti}, however, emphasizes ritual in a way different from Catholic mysticism. While Catholicism has unpredictable raptures and flights of the soul, \textit{bhakti} attempts to control such events by visualization of paradises and spiritual bodies. Consciously induced love and vision take the
place of infusion, drawing down the deity's grace. Both traditions emphasize ecstasies of divine love, but these are validated in different ways. While the Catholic ecstatic states are proved primarily by the moral actions they motivate, bhakti ecstasies are validated by their strength and persistence—causing the person to endure exorcism, medication, social rejection, and renunciation. Catholic mysticism has emphasized simple, intellectual visions of the divine attributes and Trinity, while Bengali devotional mysticism includes lush, sensual environments and physically attractive spiritual beings.

Ritual ecstasy is that state induced by following a discipline of spiritual practice, as taught by a guru of accepted lineage, and following statements in authoritative texts. Such ecstasy conforms completely to doctrine, with ecstatic vision arising from expectation and imitation of previous models. It is regulated behavior, according to rule, following tradition and religious practices, emphasizing purity and obedience to authority. Ecstasy is similar among different practitioners, who take identical paths to an identical goal. There is no room for madness here—it would be a failure of discipline, a break in concentration, a wrong word in the ritual. As the Vaiṣṇava devotee Jagadānanda Dāsa stated: "In the Western system, people try to invent things for themselves. In India, we try to follow previous people, to do what they did and get it down properly, the way that it was done before."45

However, spontaneous ecstasy is individual, different for different people. Trance may occur in meditation, but it may also occur while the person is eating dinner or working. In the biographies of Bengali saints, a vision or insight unique to that particular person is called svabhāvika. Such ecstasy is innate, native, not forced; the visions, revelations, and extreme emotional states come to the person without effort. Mad behavior may be a part of such spontaneous experience—the person may be overcome by passion for a god, or possessed, or in a trance. Such a state is not limited by textual rules. Its emphasis is on mystery and intuition, the limits of the conscious will.

Ritual and spontaneous states tend to oppose each other, but they may meet in the middle in two ways. One approach is the ritual seeking of spontaneous love—bhakti yoga—which creates conditions in which passion may best arise and be cultivated. In bhakti yoga, devotees attempt to induce love—both their own for the deity, and the deity's love for them—by ritual practice. The other approach is divine madness—divyomāda—when the person loves the deity madly and passionately, and expresses this love in ritual action or in religious art forms (such as poetry, song,
and dance). The expectation in bhakti yoga is that ritual is the trigger; in
divine madness, ritual is the expression of emotion. In the former, ritual
leads to spontaneity; in the latter, spontaneity leads to ritual.

In both cases, devotional ritual regulates the emotions. Ritual in bhakti
yoga increases the practitioner’s emotional intensity, giving traditional
images and actions greater depth and meaning, while ritual in bhakti ec-
statics lessens emotional intensity, expanding the focus from the vision
of the deity to the worldly actions of worship and chanting. Rituals of
worship are used to both increase and decrease ecstatic states.

Ecstatics are rare in modern India. The clear majority of religious
practitioners interviewed during research for this book performed daily
and periodic ritual, yet never had ecstatic experiences (or were unwilling
to admit that they had them). These people were serious, dedicated, and
respected by others of their traditions and were hopeful that they would
one day experience such states of depth and intensity. These states were
not understood to result from the practice itself, but rather from the
grace of the deity, who might respect the devotee’s religious commitment.

The ecstatic minority performed ritual as a means of ordering and
stabilizing their lives. Visions and voices could appear at any time, but a
life of ritual service and instruction of disciples provided an anchor, a
social role, and a limited measure of control over events that had been
chaotic, even violent, in the past.

For this approach, Rouget’s analysis of the function of music gives an
excellent idea of the function of ritual:

The psychic upheaval that [trance] manifests thus obeys a
purely internal logic of the state of consciousness. This means
that the role of the music is much less to produce the trance
that to create conditions favorable to its onset, to regularize its
form, and to ensure that instead of being a merely individual,
unpredictable, and uncontrollable behavioral phenomenon, it
becomes, on the contrary, predictable, controlled and at the
service of the group.44

To better understand both ritual and spontaneous ecstasy, we look at
the Bengali terms for ecstatic states.

The Language of Ecstasy

Ecstasy holds an important place in Indian religious traditions. The
most authoritative texts are revealed (sruti), seen, and heard by the sage,
and later described or written by him. These arise from firsthand experience, unlike the indirect text based on memory (smṛti) and the systematic analyses and explications called śāstra. The language of revelation is vivid and powerful, its knowledge not acquired by the ordinary senses. The seer can say: “I have seen the Great Puruṣa, as golden as the sun, beyond all darkness.”

When authors wish their texts to gain authority, they claim that the texts arise from that author’s ecstatic experiences; they claim that they are revealed texts. The texts most generally accepted as revelatory are the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, and Upaniṣads. Other forms of ecstasy are described in less universally accepted sources: Vaiṣṇava devotional texts, Śākta poems, magical tantras, the worship handbooks handed down from guru to disciple. Terms for ecstasy are used in this literature and in the oral tradition of practitioners and devotees.

The terms used by most Bengali informants to translate the English word \textit{ecstasy} were bhāva,\textsuperscript{45} mahābhāva, and bhāvāvesa. The Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary gives many definitions for bhāva, including: birth, existence, state, condition, mental state, mood, love, inner significance, imagination, meditation, ecstasy, and outburst of emotion. The Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary has four columns of definitions for bhāva. The \textit{Bāngāla Bhāṣār Abhidhān} has two columns, including as definitions the terms for essence, heart, imagination, divinity and yogic powers, passion, mental confusion, possession trace, and rapture.

To include definitions of bhāva in present usage, I asked Bengali informants encountered in a variety of locales what the word bhāva means. Many informants divided the meaning of the word into two categories: material and nonmaterial, or worldly and ordinary versus supernatural or spiritual. This section also divides their answers into two general categories, showing something of the wide range of understandings of the term. Some of the more technical definitions are further described in later chapters of the book.

Bhāva in the worldly sense is used to refer to mood, emotion, idea, state of mind, meaning. Although its use is secular, it still shows potential for a sacred dimension. Bengali informants have defined such bhāva as follows:

\textit{Bhāva} is that aspect of mind which deals with emotion and experience; it is a result of culture and personality. It is only emotion—it does not include images, which are only fantasy. Yogis may develop stages and faculties of bhāva. Any experi-
ence can be called a bhāva, but the highest bhāva is brahma-

bhāva, a state of realistic expectations, a poise in which a stable
equilibrium is established. (Psychiatrist)

Bhāva is a spontaneous response to natural beauty, often

when alone, by seriously religious people. At that time, there

are no worldly problems. It can occur in any time or place.

There are local nuns who can deal very well with children;

they do not have bhāva, but they are on their way to bhāva.

(Psychiatrist)

Bhāva is sentiment or emotion. It depends on the context—
it may be used for poetry and art, or for people—dujon bhāva,

they are close. After fighting, children clasp fingers and say,

“Bhāva, now we are friends.” Bhāva is also inspired thought.

(Grant administrator)

Bhāva is the person’s first response to a stimulus, personal

and idiosyncratic, which then becomes an appropriate re-

sponse. It is spontaneous and normally subliminal, unless the

person is well versed in introspection. Bhāva is a small gap

which is different in different people. It is due to the bhāva-
samskāras, the person’s cardinal traits or inborn reactions. Nor-

mally these are submerged below the surface, but the person

who practices a spiritual discipline may bring these behavioral

traits to the surface. Sītārāmādāsa Oṃkārnāth is an example of

a person who shows the fullest expression of these cardinal

traits. (Psychiatrist)

Bhāva is thoughts and ideas. It is one’s total thinking toward
doing or obtaining something good; it means doing some-

thing good for others. (Bookseller)

Bhāva has a material and a spiritual meaning. Its material

meaning is love between a man and a woman, but spiritual

bhāva is love of God by a devotee with all his mind and heart.

(Insurance salesman)

Bhāva is character or personality. After rebirth, if one looks

back at one’s old life, it is a bhāva. Different saris relate cloth

and body in different ways; they cause different bhāvas. There

is a soundless word inside which decides such preferences.

Bhāva comes in waves and includes relations between people.

It also includes bodily feelings, such as bhālo bhāva (to feel

well) and khārāp bhāva (to feel ill). (Storekeeper)

Bhāva in the spiritual sense refers to intense inner experience. The
deeper layers of the self are encountered and integrated, and the person
maintains a vivid relationship to deity or Absolute. There are technical terms, such as the three tantric bhāvas, and the five Vaiṣṇava bhāvas, which are explained later. Bhāva in the spiritual (ādhyātmika) sense includes visions of the deity, mystical union, trances, and ecstatic symptoms. The following definitions are from Bengali informants, both laypersons and religious professionals:

*Bhāva* is the religious experience of traditional holy men and women performing spiritual practices. It is taken seriously if they are part of a lineage. (Vaiṣṇava layperson)

*Bhāva* is when different parts of the person come together, as when cooking Kashmiri chicken. Different spices are blended together to create a taste. In love affairs [*premer bhāva*], the parts of the soul are mixed together like spices. The soul and mind consult each other, along with the body, to decide about loving. Good worship [*pūjā*] creates good bhāva between the devotee and the goddess, if the person believes 100 percent. There is a relation of soul between the deity and the worshiper—they share the same actions, and adjust to each other, even if there was conflict between them at the beginning. (Śākta layperson)

*Bhāva* is when a man surrenders completely before the deity with full faith. Worldly affairs become secondary. In the state of divine bhāva, there are no distinctions, no separate self. One can taste the pleasures of Kailāsa, and the nectar flows down onto the head. (Śākta practitioner)

*Bhāva* is the combination of three aspects of the self. Together, these make up the subtle body [*bhāvamaya deha*], the body made up of bhāva. The subtle body becomes the perfected body [*siddha deha*] when it is purified by meditation and spiritual practice. Bhāvas are also purified in this way. Also, there is a relationship between bhāva and rasa [esthetic enjoyment]. Bhāva and rasa added together equal bliss. Each bhāva requires a rasa to satisfy it. For instance, hunger is bhāva and pudding is rasa. Bhāva also can describe inner conceptions and intuitive thought. (Vaiṣṇava practitioner)

*Bhāva* is very deep thought, deep in the heart, until one is lost within the self. The person becomes explosively pure in heart—he sees persons as other persons, such as all women as mother or sister. There are three stages of bhāva in the worship of Śakti—bhāva, possession by bhāva [*bhāvāveśa*], and deep trance [*bhāva samādhi*]. In bhāva, one becomes lost in
memory and emotion. In possession by bhāva, one becomes lost from the material world and sees the heaven worlds. In the deepest trance of bhāva, one roams in the absolute [ātman]. (Śākta layperson)

The precondition for bhāva is absorption in what the guru teaches about the form and qualities of the deity. You know what rasagullās are. Here something is to be kept in melted sugar for a long time, and the qualities of the melted sugar are slowly absorbed into it. Bhāva is like this. . . . Bhāva is an evolutionary process, not to be acquired in a single day. The guru will set up the stage and supply the imagery. You are to be absorbed in it, to utter the names, Hare Kṛṣṇa, repeatedly until it takes your mind outside the realm of worldliness. Then bhāva will be aroused in you. (Vaiṣṇava practitioner)

Bhāvas are of two kinds, pure and impure. That which leads the mind to Bhagavān, which leads one to the realization of Bhagavān, is pure bhāva. Its opposite is impure, that which leads men to worldly desires. . . . The person who has been possessed by divine bhāva will see the object of his worship all around, wherever he looks. There was a devotee in Vṛndāvana, and while he was preparing bread he became possessed by bhāva. His hand was on the burning oven; he was burnt, but he could not feel it. Someone saw it and he was rescued. Real bhāva makes one forget the material world. It is that condition in which one can forget and ignore his body of five elements. (Vaiṣṇava practitioner)

These informants’ definitions of bhāva describe gradual degrees of inwardness. The worldly type deals with thought and emotion, spontaneous responses to beauty and other stimuli, outlook, personality, conscience, memory, and the beginnings of contemplation. As the person becomes more introspective and focused on a religious goal, the ecstatic aspect of bhāva emerges—the person becomes more integrated and surrenders before the deity; he tastes bliss, trance, aesthetic delight, passion for the god; he sees visions within his heart or all around him; he visits the heaven-worlds. Eventually, he reaches his highest goal: ātmān, the heavenly Vṛndāvana of Kṛṣṇa and the gopīs, or the paradise of Kailāsa, where Śiva and Śakti eternally dwell.

Bhāva includes not only inward states, but also their outward manifestation; a bhāva may be hidden or revealed. The ecstatic may leap and
dance like a child or hide coyly behind a veil, acting a woman's role. Hidden states may be visible only to a few chosen disciples or to all observers.

**Notes on Method**

Ecstatic phenomena have been studied from a variety of perspectives. Those most prominent include the literature on mysticism, anthropology, classical and transpersonal psychologies, and ethnopsychology. Mystical literature includes both older and favorable works dealing with mystical ecstasy\(^{47}\) and more skeptical recent works.\(^{48}\) Psychoanalytic studies tend to focus on the pathological dynamics associated with certain ecstatic states: schizophrenia,\(^{49}\) denial and depression,\(^{50}\) anxiety,\(^{51}\) anorexia nervosa,\(^{52}\) and regression.\(^{53}\) Anthropological literature on ecstasy tends to emphasize trance and possession states, and often includes in-depth studies of individual cases.\(^{54}\) Transpersonal psychology views ecstatic states as a special type of "altered state of consciousness" and seeks to find ranges of possible states that religious practitioners and others may enter.\(^{55}\) On India specifically, work on ethnopsychology shows devotees and gurus in context, exploring indigenous understandings as well as Western conceptions of religious phenomena.\(^{56}\)

In comparing the expectations of the religious tradition regarding ecstasy with the actual experiences of ecstatics and practitioners, I used three types of texts. The first type was theological texts, which would give historical instances of ecstasy in avatāras, sages, and devotees in mythical/historical situations and describe how these were understood in the tradition. Instances of faith and ritual practice were described in these texts, which would later become paradigmatic for followers. For this study, I chose texts that scholars considered significant and that the majority of followers claimed as the most important texts on religious experience. Vaiṣṇava devotees and practitioners felt that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa was the most important text on ecstatic states, followed by the Caitanya Caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, and the Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu and Ujjvala-Nilamuṇi of Rūpa Gosvāmin. Śākta devotees and practitioners generally felt that texts were less important than instruction from the guru, but the majority suggested the Mahānirvāṇa and Kulārṇava Tantras, and the songs of Rāmprasād, as well as the Kathāmṛta of Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsa. Bāuls are much closer to an oral tradition and also do not emphasize the use of texts, but several suggested the songs of Lālan Fakir as best exemplifying bāul bhāva.
The second type of text used was sacred biography. The ones I used here are at an early stage in the biographical tradition—before the organization of a critical text or orthodox biography. They are not considered divinely inspired works, but rather journalistic accounts. Almost all are relatively recent—within the last 150 years—except for the biography of Kṛṣṇa Caitanya. This biography is used here as a theological text (based primarily on the Caitanya Caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja) rather than as a saint biography—for its usage is different from the other biographies, and it plays a much more influential role in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Indeed, Caitanya was viewed by many of his biographers as more of a deity than a human being, and there was more use of mythic elements and miracles in his biographies than in others.57

Lorenzen, basing his ideas on those of Weber, suggests that Indian hagiographies became important during 500–200 B.C., with the dissolution of Aryan social structures and the rise of new territorial kingdoms with urban centers and new social and religious movements. Such hagiographies appealed to the emotions of the general populace and served as a medium for new gods, heroes, and belief systems to enter into society.58

The Bengali style of hagiography appears to be less formal and less idealized than many other Indian lives of saints. These volumes are generally written by disciples who have lived with the ecstatic for some period of time and who carefully avoid coming to conclusions about events they do not understand. Quite frequently, the author states some curious action or phrase of the ecstatic and says outright that he does not understand its significance, but doubtless the guru understands better than he. The author tends to avoid elaboration, using a sort of realism comparable to the Bengali style of filmmaking and short story. However, there are patterns that appear in the lives of the ecstatic saints, which are described in the concluding chapter of this book.

The third type of text I used in this research was interview, generally taped and transcribed. I interviewed many religious practitioners who are not specifically mentioned in the book, who were asked about ecstasy (as bhāva or mahābhāva). They told stories, gave definitions, described their gurus or ecstacies known to them, and gave their own theories on what was really occurring with true saints (siddhas). Almost all practitioners I interviewed (over fifty persons) also mentioned false ecstacies—people who did rituals and pretended to go into ecstatic states, but really sought only status or money.

The longer interviews included in this book generally came from a
single day of talking, although I may have visited the persons involved many times. I have written the stories in the same order as given by the person interviewed, although some repetition within the stories has been omitted. I found the interviewees through a network of informants, the most helpful of whom owned a pūjā supply store in Calcutta and knew the many religious practitioners, devotees, and renunciants who visited him. Interview questions were open-ended: "Could you tell me something about your life? Could you tell me the meaning of ecstasy [bhāva, mahābhāva, bhāvāveśa]?" While some religious practitioners were hesitant to speak or refused outright, most were glad that someone from so far away was interested in their beliefs and their lives; some bemoaned the fact that young Indian men and women were no longer interested in these issues. It was generally necessary to eat the prasād, the food or Ganges water that they offered, in order to speak with them.

The majority of ecstatics included in this book are people whose religious experiences began spontaneously. However, I did not originally choose them because they had spontaneous experience. Nor were they chosen for their madness. I used those biographies that gave the most detailed descriptions of ecstatic states for members of the devotional traditions of Bengal. Most of those chosen were major anchors of their traditions, who altered and validated traditional theology by their experiences. They were chosen for authenticity (the firsthand view of a devotee or an interview was preferred to second- and thirdhand sources) and for providing information about the childhood of the ecstatic, when ecstatic states often began. All of the ecstatics studied were respected: they had āśramas (temples or houses in which they were respected authorities) and disciples ranging from a few up into the millions. The ecstatics who were interviewed were chosen by my informants.

For the biographies, I deliberately chose non-Westernized saints in order to emphasize the native traditions. Therefore, such famous Bengali holy men as Vivekānanda, Yogānanda Paramahamsa, Śrī Aurobindo, and Rabindranāth Tāgore were excluded.

Some data were unavailable. I was unable to find any reliable Bāul or Sahajiyā biographies (although there were at least three competing oral histories of Lālan Fakir). Childhood data were scanty among Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, and Rāmprasād's experiences must be deduced from his poetry, as he had no firsthand biographer.

I approached the various types of texts phenomenologically—looking for categories that arise from the material—without forcing the data
into a preconceived mold. The respected elders in this approach are James, Eliade, and Van der Leeuw (whom Eliade called its “first authoritative representative”). While phenomenology has been understood in a wide variety of ways, from Hegel to Husserl, these three writers best show the orientation of this book: James on the value of spontaneous ecstasy, Van der Leeuw on the value of empathy, and Eliade on respect for the sacred as a unique and irreducible category.

William James also emphasized the importance of religious pathology—the study of the extremes in order to understand the norm. He states:

Insane conditions have this advantage, that they isolate special factors of the mental life, and enable us to inspect them unmasked by their more usual surroundings. They play the part in mental anatomy which the scalpel and the microscope play in the anatomy of the body. To understand a thing rightly we need to see it both out of its environment and in it, and to have acquaintance with the whole range of its variations.

While James saw the study of the abnormal as a means to understanding the normal, this book studies the extremes of religious experience for their own sake. This is a study of the extremes in order to understand the extremes. It is the nature of such phenomena, being at the ends of the spectrum of human thought and action, that they are highly idiosyncratic and unpredictable. We approach the study of religious ecstasy with the following four points in mind: (1) There is a significant discrepancy between the theological concepts of ecstasy and the ways in which it actually occurs in the lives of Bengali ecstasies—that the theories and stages do not correspond to lived experience. (2) This gap is based on a distinction between ritual and spontaneous ecstasy, a distinction clearly seen in the biographies of ecstatic saints. (3) Divine madness is the highest goal of religious devotion—a state in which incorporation of opposites is more important than ritual purity and which includes elements of destruction and sacrifice as well as integration. (4) Despite the fact that divine madness is the highest state attainable on the devotional paths, it is extremely difficult to differentiate from ordinary madness, which is the least valued mental state, and from simulation. However, society has ways to distinguish these states.
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).1 The pun in French here, due to mispronunciation, like the Derridean “différence,” 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 Sella, Barbara Heldt, and Naisa Narayanan, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, Indra 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.

1 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 German, 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 Claudia Chauchat (“hotrat”) in a parody of Goethe’s Faustian Walpurgis Night. 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.

© 2007 by The University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved.
008-2710(2007)020-0001S10.00
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.”

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.

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 pikilos nomos, a law that is “dappled,” “spangled,” “devious,” “abstruse,” “subtle,” of scintillating, destabilizing ambivalence. 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 kalou [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.” One is safe from Baudelaire’s “little” earthy 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 epanabasmois 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

3 See Anne Carson, Eros the Bittersweet (Normal, IL: Del Rey Archive Press, 2003), 3, 23–24.
4 "ei to genoito auto to kalon idein elikrives, katharon, amikton, alla me anapelein sarxon te omonopinon kal chrōmaion kal allēs pollēs philerias...[And the phrase goes on] all' auto to theion kalon akouito monontes knidein (but if he could see the divine Beauty itself in its one form?)" For the translation, see Plato, Symposium, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 57–59. For the Greek text, I am using John Burnet’s Platonis Opera, vol. 2 (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," to Socrates' impassibility, his stony transcendence; he argues vivid particular material images (ειδώλα of the Silenus statues [215B]) and concrete material beauty to Socrates' shimmering invisible "true virtue" (δε αρετὴν αλήθες [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 exaipnhes 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." 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 daemon, a "familiar
History of Religions

divine sign," comes to him like a voice on the air, and he recons 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-blooded 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.7

The Phaedrus ends with Socrates and the young Phaedrus (whose name means "sparkling") discovering the "mutual love of individuals based on character and aspiration,"8 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-nad wind

7 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” (epithalē philoteutikē duo kallos emphantinomenon neōn kat koraiôn), that is all well and good, but do not, says Cicero, “call it erōs.” See Martha C. Nussbaum, “Eros 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 Silvia (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).
8 Nussbaum, “This Story Isn’t True,” 233.
god, and where the god Pan has his shrine. Socrates’ “reclamation” 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). Socrates sounds the register of eros’s inevitable (and seemingly immediate) decline; we have, sudden loss (exaiphnes in the Symposium), separation (choiret), 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” (etodon d’ au tauten glukutatén [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). 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).

---

9 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 Platonist derivation of the same word” in Cratylus 420a, where it is linked with images of “flow” (brous) and eor from eorēn, “flowing in.” Earlier, in 418 C–D, himeros is derived from himelrousai, “to long for” light (in the darkness). Here Socrates works out from the words for day, himera, or eorēa. See Plato, Phaedrus, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 40.

10 Ibid., 40–41.

11 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). We have yet to arrive at the beloved.

We languish in instability, uncertainty, division, openness, even “destinercance,” another Derridean coinage. Love is foiled in its destination: eros the nonarriving, the ever-reaching. 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.

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. This motif in Jewish and

---

14 From Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragments, 105A, in Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 26.
Islamic literatures is called by the Arabic term *wastf* (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 Śrīvaikhava 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 Śrīvaikhava *anubhavas*, like the *wastfs* of the early pre-Islamic Arabic odes and their later Sufi Islamic religious transformations, or the flamboyant *wastfs* of the Hebrew *Song of Songs*, the body of the beloved dissembles 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 *wastf*, 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 *wastf* 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 throns 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) 

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, qaṣida in its Islamic and pre-Islamic forms, Greek Jewish texts, and the anubhava in the Śrīvaishṇava tradition in South India, with special focus on the poetry of the medieval saint-poet Veṅkaṭeśa. 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

---

16 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. It is a sequence of love poems, at its core a dialogue between a lover, the dark-skinned female Shulammite, and her male Beloved. 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 locations. It does not trace any linear movement in the lover's union and separation but ends rather abruptly with the Shulammite charging her Beloved to "run away, my love, and be like a gazelle... on the

17 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).

18 As Bloch and Bloch note, ha-shulammih is of uncertain meaning. Medieval Jewish exegetes like Ibn Ezra understood the word as an epithet, "the Jerusalemite [fem.]," derived from shulem, a "poetic term for Jerusalem, and one of the city's ancient names." See ibid., 197–98.

19 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/Science Religiones 3, no. 3 (1973–74): 205–19). Raising 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 there he became 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 Mariasselian, The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems: Poetry and Symbolism (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), which takes up the comparison in much greater detail than Rabin. Though Mariasselian 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 Cañiak 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.” 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).  

It is 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,” “lovecmaking,” kisses, caresses, intercourse. 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.

It is the same in Greek and Latin. Dodim in the Greek Azna (in the Septuagint) is translated, in a most wonderful misprision that reads dadaýk for dodeyk, nástoi—in the Latin text of the Canticle it is ubera or mammea—“breasts,” an image that combines in a physical image both fertility and sensual immediacy. Gregory of Nyssa used this imagery of breasts to great sensual effect in his Canticle commentary, associating it

---

20 For commentary on this last cryptic phrase, see Bloch and Bloch, The Song of Songs, 220–21.
22 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.”
23 This punning is lost in the Greek and Latin, where mandrake is simply nandragora and dodim is masteïlibera. See below.
24 The Septuagint reads hoi agathoi mastei sou luper oinou, and the Vulgate reads quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino. I am grateful to Daniel Boyarin for pointing out to me the dadaýkdadaýk missetreading.
with luminous warmth and milky flow; "breasts of wine"; fountains of the fluid, moving, and fecund presence of God. Though the Greek text of the Song itself uses ἀγάπη 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 ἀγάπη'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 ἀγάπη, 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" (ἐπεκτασία) in God. At one point in his Canticum commentary, Gregory notes: "For heightened ἀγάπη is called eros" (ἐπιεικέστερον γαρ ἀγάπη ἐρός λέγεται). Latin commentators like Bernard of Clairvaux use the word amor, shared by troubadour traditions of southern France, and sometimes diligente, but rarely caritas, to describe the religious love that lies beneath or behind the lovers' voices in the Song. The Vulgata text itself uses various terms interchangeably, mostly forms of caritas and dilectio, though Canticum 2:5, "for I languish with love," is the vivid quia amore languor, the single use of the word amor in the Latin Song. Eros and amor, religious eros and amor, stake a claim through the Song as the most appropriate words to describe love of God.

28 In Hebrew,办法 'ahabah, using here the word 'ahab in its sense of intense desire.
29 In medieval Latin amor suggests a basis more in the physical than in the intellectual: amore amans, "we love with our livers," reports Isidore of Seville (Etymologicae 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 (Etymologicae 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 destines of The Song in the Latin tradition, Peter Dronge, "The Song of Songs and Medieval Love-Lyric," in his The Medieval Poet and His World (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984), 209–36.
History of Religions

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 WASH 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

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.” Yet in spite of its strangeness, their language is charged with feeling and presence; it expresses an alluring,

---

30 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.

31 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,” the female beloved’s eyes are doves behind “a thicket of hair” (ṣammah: locks, tresses, mass of hair); 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 Shulammite) 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.

32 This well-known palindrome is from Mishnah Yadim 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 Lundy, *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 chereubim 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 at Midrash,” in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, edited by Regina M. Schwartz (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 214–30.

33 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 Shu-lammite 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)\textsuperscript{34}

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.

\textsuperscript{34} 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, 159–206, 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.
Byes 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)\textsuperscript{35}

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.\textsuperscript{36} 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*.\textsuperscript{37} Whatever the cogency of this theory (it is one of many

\textsuperscript{35} 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.


\textsuperscript{37} 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
History of Religions

competing theories on the literary and religious origins of the Song,\textsuperscript{38} there are scattered among the Twentieth-Dynasty papyri 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.\textsuperscript{39}

JEWISH SOURCES OUTSIDE THE SONG

As for the motif of the wasf 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.\textsuperscript{40} The genre reappeared in Jewish literature as early as the Genesis Apocryphon, one of the manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

generic context lacking in extent 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).

\textsuperscript{38} 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.

\textsuperscript{39} From the P. Chester Beauty I papyrus, group A, no. 31, translated in Fox, The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs, 52.

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. 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). As Cohen suggests, "Each independently Hellenized the Near Eastern descriptive song."

A PRESENTATIONAL POETICS

With the genealogy of the genre and its many variations in mind, how might we interpret awṣaf 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 awṣaf 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 surrealistic poetic of aesthetic shock on this ancient material. Perhaps we might take a more academic approach, viewing the awṣaf 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

41 The text describing Sarai "more or less from the head to the feet" (ibid., 46) is put into the mouth of the courtier Hirquanas, whose description is decidedly more chaste in imagery and diction than the one of the author of the Song: "How splend[d] 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) attractive 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.

42 Philodemus's witty epigram is, like the praise of Hirquanas in the Apocryphon, more apostrophical than lyrical, as it is built upon a series of vocatives to the beloved's feet, legs, thighs, buttocks, sex (ktein), hips, shoulders, breasts, neck, etc. This lack of metaphorical texture also sets it apart from the densely figurative style of the Song.

43 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 by Cohen as the ancient rhetoricals as an "elaborate and embellished description of a person or an object, usually of a work of art" (ibid., 43).
ivory and marble. 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. The latter is a perfect example of what Alter calls “misplaced concreteness.” 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 *awsaf*.

The purpose of the *awsaf* 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.” 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.” The lovers’ metaphorical hyperbole is, in Soulen’s words, “the language of joy” that seeks to “overwhelm and delight the hearer.” 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 *awsaf* 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.

---

44 See Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 185.
45 See Richard Soulen’s article “The *awsaf* 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 *awsaf*. See also Fox’s exegetical of the *awsaf* in *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 140–65, which basically follows Gerleman and Pope—through 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).
49 Soulen, “The *awsaf* 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 synesthesias, as in one of its first images,
where the beloved’s name is said to be a “spreading perfume.”
Through such synesthesias and extravagance of rhetoric the awṣaf 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 oscil-
lation 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 bliss-
fully, even insatiably, “nonariving,” the soul growing wings watered by
streams of beauty that enter through the eyes in Socrates’ Phaedrus speech,
verbal horrorpilation, affirming what Gregory of Nyssa called in his Song
commentaries “eternal progress” (epetasis).
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 wasf, is about an inevitable and re-
liable 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, witholds, releases, with-
draws, 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.50 This is not,
however, always the case with the wasf and its rhetorical roles in a poem.
With this in mind, we turn now to the very different context of the
Arabic odes.

THE WASAF IN ARABIC QAṢĪDAH: MEMORY OF WHAT IS LOST—EXTRAVAGANT
DESCRIPTION AND ABSENCE
As we have already noted, wasf, 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-

50 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. 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 'Arabi 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 awqaf and their semantic extravagances serve to evoke not only an elusive erotic/divine presence but also, and perhaps most important, absence. 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 'Uqba, also called Dhu 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.

51 See the section on awqaf in Folk, The Song of Songs, 217–35.
52 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-toe descriptions of the alluring female beloved, the ghul, in this pre-seventh-century literature. See his "Guises of the Ghul." See also, for translations of such poetry, Michael Sells, Desert Tractings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by 'Alqama, Shunjara, Lahd, 'Antara, Al-A 'sha, and Dhu al-Rumma (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), esp. the poem "To the Encampments of Mayya," 67–76.
With a red thornberry tooth-twig,
Fragrant as musk and Indian ambergis
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.53

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 sym-
bolic analogue of the beloved: a lost garden. What occurs here is less a descrip-
tion of Mayya than it is a metamorphosis.54

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-guisers.” We have here “the poet-hero attempting to bind the
many-guisers and constantly changing into a stable and secure world.”55
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

IBN AL-ʿARABI’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 ʿArabi
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 apophtic, drama-
tizing the ultimate inabilty 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:

53 Taken from Michael Sells’s article “Ibn ʿArabi’s ʿGentle Now, Doves of the Thornberry
54 Ibid., 3–4.
55 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 Sālūn and hopes . . .
Who for a braveheart
    drowned in his tears,
    drunk from the wine
    of her open mouth

Who for a braveheart
    buried by his own sighs,
    led astray and abandoned
    in the beauty of the glow between her eyes.56

Or, in another poem by Ibn ʿArabī 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 . . .

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.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{NIZĀM, DAUGHTER OF A SHEIKH}

Though Sells argues that Ibn ʿArabi’s love poems are about divine absence and essentially apophatic,\textsuperscript{58} it is important to remember that the poems in Ibn Arabi’s \textit{Divān}, 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 \textit{Tarjumān 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-Nisāʾ 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 ʿArabi met at that learned home was Nizām, “a figure of pure light.”\textsuperscript{59} Concrete references to this “historical” Nizām are spread throughout the lyric love odes (\textit{nasīb-ghazals}), Ibn ʿArabi’s transformation of the traditional \textit{qaṣīdah} of the Tarjumān.

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 \textit{qaṣīdah}.

\ldots 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?

\textsuperscript{57} From Sells, “Ibn ʿArabi’s ‘Gentle Now,’” 9.
\textsuperscript{58} See above.
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.\(^6\)

Another reference is embedded within a lyric that contains vivid awṣāf of lihe 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”:

. . . 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.61

Another lyric praises Niğâm 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.62

61 Adapted from Tarjumān XXIX:9–15, in ibid., 107.
62 Adapted from Tarjumān 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. 63

The first recension of these poems contains a prologue, describing his meeting with Nizām, and the poems, without commentary. The second recension takes out the references to the "human" Nizām and includes an auto commentary 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. In his later prologues and allegorical/theological/mystical auto commentaries 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 "Nizām." Indeed, he comments, their subject is "Nizām" (i.e., Beauty, Artful Arrangement, Perfected Harmony, Fluency, from the Arabic root یَاصَابُ، 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-Nizām, the maiden daughter of our Shaykh." 65 This "slender girl" is the "single, subtle, and essential knowledge of God," 66 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." 67 He was responding, in these commentaries, to criticisms of fellow sheikhs, particularly, as Henry Corbin remarks, "those of a certain learned moralist of Aleppo,"

63 Adapted from Tarjumān XLI:4-5, in ibid., 127. I have adapted all of the Nicholson translations used above. These poems of the Tarjumān 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.

64 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 Tarjumān al-ashwaq, 1-9.

65 From commentary on XX, in ibid., 109.

66 From commentary on XXIX, in ibid.

67 From commentary on XXXVIII, in ibid., 123.
as to the appropriateness of this love and these erotic poems addressed to a young female.68

"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 ʿArabi, L’imagination creatrice:

Now this shāhīd 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” [fayān 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-Adhra’ al-batīl]. 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.69

---

68 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.
69 See Corbin, Creative Imagination, 136–37, 321–32. Passage is taken from the Tarjūmān, in Nicholson, The Tarjumān al-ashrāf, 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’ba, and ultimately Christ (as Wisdom, Divine Sophia). See Corbin, Creative Imagination, 139–45, 322–28.
Ibn 'Arabi notes elsewhere, in his *Fusûs al-hikam* (the bezels of wisdom), that women represent the concrete particular, like the Prophet Muhammad, the "wisdom of singularity," and so *awyâf* in Ibn 'Arabi's religious love poetry, addressed to the female beloved, describe the divine epiphany in concrete particulars, affirming divine particularity and universality at one and the same time. As Ibn 'Arabi 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 (wâridât ilâhiyya), the spiritual visitations (tanazzulât rubûnîyya), 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].

The *awyâf* in Ibn 'Arabi's *nasib-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. The *wasf* here, as an act of loving beholding, is a "transmutation of the sensible," the "descent of the divine and an assumption of the sensible," what Ibn 'Arabi, in another context refers to, in Corbin's translation, as a "condescension" (*munazzalot*). 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

---


71 From Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 138.

72 Ibid., 154.

73 Ibid., 155.

74 Ibid., 155–56.

75 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.\textsuperscript{36} In a nasib addressed to “her” as a male Beloved, Ibn ʿArabi expresses such “infinite insatiability” in simple, stark words:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I am absent, and desire} \\
&\quad \text{makes my soul die.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I meet him,} \\
&\quad \text{but am not cured:} \\
&\quad \text{it’s just desire,} \\
&\quad \text{whether I am absent} \\
&\quad \text{or present.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{When we meet, something in me stirs} \\
&\quad \text{that I could hardly} \\
&\quad \text{imagine: the cure’s a second disease} \\
&\quad \text{of passion} \\
&\quad \text{because I behold a form whose beauty,} \\
&\quad \text{as often as we meet,} \\
&\quad \text{grows in splendor} \\
&\quad \text{and majesty:} \\
&\quad \text{there is no escape from passion} \\
&\quad \text{that grows,} \\
&\quad \text{on a predestined scale,} \\
&\quad \text{with every growth} \\
&\quad \text{in loveliness.}\textsuperscript{37}
\end{align*}
\]

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:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I am mad with love for Salma} \\
&\quad \text{who dwells at Ajyad.}
\end{align*}
\]

\textsuperscript{36} See Ibn ʿArabi’s Futūḥat [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.

\textsuperscript{37} Adapted from Tarjumān IV, in Nicholson, The Tarjumān al-arthūq, 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.28

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

Thus we have in Ibn ‘Arabi’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 ‘Arabi 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 Muhammad, 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 Tarjīmān as a whole. Though the ancient Arabic qaṣīdah may emphasize absence and the memory of what is lost, its elaborate awṣaf a systematic disassembling and not a literary act of presencing, we have also seen that the qaṣīdah in the hands of a religious poet like Ibn ‘Arabi 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 Veṅkataśēṣa combines in a unique way many of the

28 Adapted from Tarjīmān LXI:7–9, in ibid., 148.
semantic and syntactic registers, the willed ambiguities, of the *wasf* 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. **Anubhava: Enjoying the Body of God in South Asian Literature**

There are interesting analogues to the *wasf* 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 feet to head or head to foot (*padadīkēśāḥ, āpadacucīnabhavan, or nākaḥ-śikhā*, literally “toenail-to-topknot” for the Hindu god Krishna).

As with the *awṣf*, 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 sukta* (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 *Digka 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.⁷⁹ By the seventh century, the Chinese pilgrim I-tsing attests to the fact that two of Mātṛceta’s *stotras*, the *Catuḥśataka stotra* and the *Śatapāśatikā stotra*, were widely chanted throughout “India.”⁸⁰

In the Pāli *Therigāthā* (lyrics with commentaries and attached biographical narratives collected in fifth-century Kaṇḍīpuram), such descriptions are used ironically to satirize a love poet’s erotic descriptions of a human female beloved. The verses of Bhikkhuni Ambapāli, 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

⁷⁹ For a discussion of Mātṛceta’s *stotras*, see Anthony Kennedy Warder’s *Indian Kavya Literature*, vol. 2, *Origins and Formation of the Classical Kavya* (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*.

⁸⁰ This reference is taken from Nancy Nayor’s study of the poetry of the early Ācāryas: *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. Here extravagent sequential description is used precisely against particularity, in a way different from the dissembling motifs of the Arabic qasidah, and in the service of a transpersonal, general ideal of self and body. The irony is even more savage in the verses attributed to Bhikkhuni 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. "Here then," she says in disgust, "take your eye!" (handa te cakkham harasti).

Other early examples of this form directed not to human lovers, nuns, or holy men but to actual temple icons include Bāna's Caṇḍi Śātaka (ca. seventh century CE), which contains a detailed foot-to-head description of the loveliness of the goddess Caṇḍi's body, with a distinctive focus on the toenails, and a work Winternitz claims as contemporary with Bāna, Mūka's Pañca Śasti, a praise in five hundred verses of the charming form of the goddess Kamākṣi of Kāśipura. 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.

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


83 The Therigāthā material poses some important variations on the theme of ideal bodies and particularity, but detailed treatment exceeds the scope of this article.

84 Therigāthā 366–69, in Oldenberg and Pischel, 158–52.

85 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 (Therigāthā 71)," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 61, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 57–79.

86 I am indebted to Nancy Nayar for these references. See her Poetry as Theology: The Śrīvaiśnavī Stotras in the Age of Rāmānuja (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 20, 38: See also M. Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, trans. Subhadra Jhit (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), 2:377. Other important poems include Harṣa Vardhana's suvrahītī stotra, a "wake-up" poem for the Buddha (in the style of shrine poems for the deity), and Jain poet Mānatunga's Bhaktānāma Stotra and eulogy for the Jīna Rābha (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 maha-kāvya, the Kaviśṭhamiṣṇa, contains, for instance, an elaborate foot-to-head description of the beauty of Queen Prabhāvatī, the wife of the Buddha in his birth as King Kusa. The Puṭṭaṇaḷiya, 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 Yasodharā upon his return to his father’s palace. 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 Pāṃcarātra, where they form the basis of visualizations of a deity from foot to head. They also form part of iconometric texts for āṭhipats (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 Citralakṣaja 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.

Sanskrit kāvya poets from the earliest periods marshal a considerable store of rhetorical figures (alankāras), such as metaphor (rūpaka or dipaka), simile (upama), “fancy” (ntreksa), and alliteration (anuprāsa),

66 The maha-kāvya is based on a Jātaka tale (no. 531), as its original title of Kusadāvatā indicates. See Cento V.224–44 in The Cross-Gem of Poetry: Kaviśṭhamiṣṇa, trans. W. R. McAlpine and M. B. Anātyapala (Colombo: Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, 1980). For one of the few discussions in English of the Kaviśṭhamiṣṇa, see C. E. Godakumbura’s seminal study, Sinhalese Literature (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries, 1955), 115–130. I am indebted to Charles Hallsey for drawing my attention to this remarkable text.

67 See excerpts from Mayārapāda Buddhāpatra’s Puṭṭaṇaḷiya 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 Yasodharā’s ecstatic vision of the Buddha as the hairs on “every part of her body” stiffened with joy.

History of Religions

to evoke the aesthetic experience of the erotic (śīgāra 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.89

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 (Āvārs), and later by Śrīvaishnava Acāryas composing in Sanskrit and Tamil, to describe the male bodies of temple images (vīghraha, mūrtti, mēni): 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 Śrīvaishnava 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 Śrīvaishnava 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 Śrīvaishnava 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 ‘Arabi 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 Purānic 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

89 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.  

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. 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 mulabhera 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. 

Vishnu in this southern Tamīl and Sanskrit poetry is the god who once stood/dwelt “here” and still is “standing/dwelling” (the verb nil—to dwell, abide, stand—as past participle and in the gerundive is used with elastically 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 Namālvar, one of the earliest and most treasured of Tamil saint-poets. Namālvar’s stanzas read almost like a grammatical paradigm, as Ramanujan notes, “a breathless recital of Tamil pronouns.” In his concise translation:

---

90 For The Song of Songs, see Soulen, “The Way of the Song of Songs,” 188. See also Sells, “The Guises of the Ghul.” 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).


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.\(^{91}\)

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

The *anubhavas* of Veṅkaṭaṇātha or Veṅkaṭeśa, a fourteenth-century South Indian Śrivaśnva 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 Tiruppaṇālvār, 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.

---

bathes them
in color;
swift runners between armies in time of war,
long ladies 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, Bhūmi, Nāppānai.91

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 luster,
a whirlpool of beauty—

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

91 “Nāppānai,” or “our Pīṇāi,” is Viṣṇu’s Tamil consort. In Tamil mythology she is one
of Viṣṇu’s cowgirl (goḍi) lovers.
**History of Religions**

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 'Arabi 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 Lakṣmi,
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 Śrīnāgama town,
a king with his three queens—

here, in the middle
of my heart!

These verses are from the Bhagavaddhyānasopānam (The ladder of meditation on the body of Bhagavān) and describe what for the twentieth-century Sanskrit commentator Veṅkaṭajagopālādāsa is an experience (anubhava) of an "astonishing otherworldly beauty" (alaukikābhūta-saundaryam) and of "sweet deep inner delight"; it represents a "continuous burning desire" (nirantararaṅkapuṭkāma), a "ladder of love that has as
its sole object the Lord” (etadapi bhagavavishayakamasya sopanaevam).

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 kavya, the limb-by-limb description of young Pārvatī in Kālidāsa’s Kumārasambhava (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.66

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.67

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 Svāmī at Tiruvahindrapuram. 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 Prākrit. The verses express vividly and memorably the language of excess that is the mark of the wazīf in its most general sense.


67 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 Śrīvaṁśava 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.
Venkatesha 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. More self-consciously and systematically theological than either the verses in *The Song of Songs* or in the *nasib-ghazals* of Ibn ʿArabi, 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 *qaṣids*, 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/Devaṇāyaka’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/Padmāvatī; 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 Brāj; 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

---

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 Purusa, Lord Siva
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:

Makariña,
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,
Vamanālīka,
stirred into bright bloom, my mind,
radiant with wonder

becomes an ornament
for your neck

which wears fine tattoos
from Padmāvatī’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 Viśvāma,
Lord Brahmā,
has its little house:

like a waist band
my mind

dorns
your sweet belly. (35)

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

or beloved companions
of Lākṣmī'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;

carressed by Lady Rāma
and Mahī,
History of Religions

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)

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

99 From the Devanāyakaparītatait [Fifty verses in praise of Devanāyakal, translated in
full in my anthology of Veṇkaṭeśa's Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prākrit poetry; Steven Hopkins,
An Ornament for Jewels: Love Poems for the Lord of Gods by Vedāntadeva (New York:
Oxford University Press, 2007). Stanza numbers in original are noted in brackets at the end
of each translated verse.
literary edifice of the *Commedia.* Even in the transcendent 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:

1. 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.  

As Nussbaum remarks: “Her particularity transcends all barriers. In that full particularity he loves her.”

The *avāşf* in *The Song of Songs,* in Ibn ʿArabī’s *nasib-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 Iżhaq, 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.” But as we have seen, overall, in the *avāşf* and in

---

102 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 *Paradise* 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.


104 Nussbaum, “Augustine and Dante,” 81.

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 ʿArabi’s nasīb-qasīdahs. 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.\textsuperscript{106}

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 ʿArabi) 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 waṣf 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.

\textit{Swarthmore College}

\textsuperscript{106} 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, \textit{On Beauty and Being Just} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).