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The End of Desire: Theologies of Eros in The Song of Songs and Breaking the Waves

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Abstract
In this paper we intend to use Georges Bataille's reflections on Eros, death, and God as the basis for a comparison between the biblical book, The Song of Songs (The Song of Solomon) and the controversial film by Lars Von Trier, Breaking the Waves. Following Bataille, we believe that both the biblical book and the film portray desire as a longing for the unification of separate realms, the joining of separate bodies. That which is desired is known to be always at risk, contingent and susceptible to dissolution, never far from the domain of violence, termination, and death.

The comparison of The Song of Songs and Breaking the Waves, however, introduces something missing in Bataille's analysis of Eros, death, and God. The book and film both provide a more complex understanding of the implications of desire for the divine. That is, they raise the question of what follows if God were not "by definition" immune to risk. What if God were not above the fray of passion, contingency, violence and death? What if the divine were not understood to be perfection, but also bound to the vicissitudes of life, with all of the anguish and ecstasy that implies?

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**I. Georges Bataille**

If, as Wallace Stevens has written, "not to have is the beginning of desire," then "to have" would be its end. If Eros arises from separation, lack, a felt absence,
then union, plenitude, and presence represent its telos. This is, of course, a telos in both senses of that word: telos as the goal or objective, that which is sought; and telos as cessation or termination, the quitting of seeking. Thus, fear of contentment is the beginning and end of desire. Desire begins when one is torn out of contentment, and it reaches its end with a return to that contentment. Eros exists, then, only as a denial of its beginning and as a deferral of its end.

Yet how long can its beginning be gainsaid and its end cheated? Desire is as precarious as it is overwhelming. Recognizing how contentment threatens desire, George Bataille has written that "happiness is the most demanding test of all for lovers" (1997:95). And though one may learn this seeming truism by watching any soap opera, Bataille has explored its implications and paradoxes in a striking way. He writes:

Compared to the person I love, the universe seems poor and empty. This universe isn't 'risked' since it's not 'perishable.'... Carnal love, because not 'sheltered from thieves' or vicissitudes, is greater than divine love. It 'risks' me and the one I love. (95)

Affirming that it is the very precariousness of desire - the fact that it is not sheltered - that constitutes its desirability, Bataille nevertheless complicates the truism by introducing two other propositions. He points out first that carnal love not only is at risk itself but also puts those in its thrall at risk. And, second, he proposes that precisely this double-edged risk makes carnal love superior to divine love.
The first of these propositions may once again seem to repeat what any melodrama or soap opera knows about desire -- "star crossed lovers" and all that - but Bataille pursues it in unexpected ways. In the volume Erotism (1986), he begins by emphasizing that we exist as "discontinuous beings." While individuals may interact, affect each other, and even experience an intense solidarity with each other, each being is nonetheless separate and distinct from all others. "Between one being and another," Bataille writes, "there is a gulf, a discontinuity" (1986:12).

Birth is the starting point for this discontinuity, as a being emerges out of the continuity of being-in-general and into a self-contained existence. Death is the return to continuity, a dissolution of individual existence back into being-in-general. Eroticism arises when "we yearn for lost continuity." The promise of Eros is the promise of "a total blending of two beings, a continuity between discontinuous beings" (20). Bataille himself cannot seem to decide whether or not the promise is ever kept. Indeed, who among us can tell if desire is simply a quest for the impossible or if there is in carnal love a moment -- "precarious yet profound" - of genuine dissolution of individual existence. In any case, it is this promise of continuity by which Bataille links sexuality to death: both represent ways of overcoming the discontinuity of being - an overcoming that is, in each case, both promise and threat.
The second of these propositions - that carnal love is superior to divine love - is based on Bataille's insistence that "God by definition isn't risked." "However far the lovers of God go with their passion," he writes, "they conceive of it as outside the play of risk. ... In carnal love we ought to love excesses of suffering. Without them no risk would exist. In divine love the limitation of suffering is given in divine perfection" (1997:95-6). Returning to the etymological roots of "passion" (coming as it does from the Latin passus), one is reminded that the meaning of the word has progressed from (i) "suffering" to (ii) "the state of being affected by an external agent" to (iii) "desire." For Bataille, these three meanings are bound up with one another still. Passion in relation to an external agent exists as suffering both because the promise of unity may well turn out to be a fraud, and because of the threat that this promise may not be a fraud. That is, to experience, even for the briefest of moments, continuity with another is to experience what Bataille calls "the abrupt wrench[ing] out of discontinuity" (1987:16). To take seriously the fact that we exist as discontinuous beings is to take equally seriously the fact that "the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence" (16). The commingling of selves exists only in the violation of borders, only in the state of being affected by an external agent, which, though we may know such violation as an experience of ecstasy, is no less an experience of anguish.

I I. The Song of Songs
As the only example of erotic literature in the Bible, the poetry of the Song of Songs stands out for its unabashedly voluptuous character. It is, as Robert Alter has aptly put it, "the great love poem of commingling - of different realms, different senses, of the male and female bodies" (in Bloch and Bloch, 121). In alternating voices, two young and obviously unmarried lovers take great delight in describing each other's bodies and their desire for on another. In these descriptions, all borders become fluid and begin to dissolve: as the voluptuousness of the body fades into the voluptuousness of nature and back again, as the five senses of these bodies become intertwined, as the bodies themselves are intermingled. Consider the following exchange between the male and female voices (4:11-5:1):¹

[The male voice begins]

Your lips drip with nectar, my bride,

honey and milk lie beneath your tongue.

The fragrance of your garments,

is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

A private garden is my sister, my bride,²

a secret well, a spring concealed.

Your branches are an orchard of pomegranates,

of all the choicest fruits,

with henna and spikenard,
spikenard and saffron;

with cinnamon and cane,

and every kind of frankincense;

with myrrh and aloe,

with all the finest spices.

You are a spring in the garden, a well of living water,

a stream flowing from Lebanon.

[The female voice responds]

Awake, north wind; come, south wind -

breathe upon my garden, carry its spices.

My lover shall enter his garden,

he shall taste these choice fruits.

[Reverting to the male voice]

I have entered my garden, my sister, my bride -

I have gathered my myrrh and my spices,

I have tasted my nectar, my honey,

the rich milk and the sweet wine.

As elsewhere in the *Song of Songs*, nature and landscape provide the poetic metaphors for the lovers' imaginings. Sometimes the surrounding landscape is
presented as the place of the couple's lovemaking ("Wherever we lie our bed is green./ Our roof beams are cedars, our rafters firs" [1: 16-17]), but at other times the bodies of the lovers become the landscape, as in the above quoted passage where the woman's body is described as an impossibly rich garden bursting with a superabundance of sights and scents, a babbling brook, and the taste of milk and honey. The mingling of the senses and the poetic identification of the lovers' bodies with the surrounding landscape provide the metaphorical means of imagining a union between these two discontinuous beings. Bataille's language of discontinuity and continuity is quite appropriate here: the woman is described as "an enclosed garden, a sealed spring"; yet she invites her lover to come into the garden, which, we are told, he does. Now, the *Song of Songs* is full of double entendres, and on one level the garden most certainly represents the woman's sexuality, with her invitation being to the pleasures of carnal love. Yet the garden is also more than the woman's sexuality, it is the woman herself; and the invitation is more than to the act of consummation. It is an invitation for her lover to become one with her, an invitation to, in the words of Bataille, "substitute for their discontinuity a miraculous continuity between two beings" (1986: 19).

This longing for continuity is of course what drives the *Song of Songs*, and it is expressed in both subtle and overt ways. For example, an implicit expression of continuity may be seen in the essential mutuality between the lovers that persists
even in the choice of descriptive metaphor. Each of the lovers is described in terms of beauty and tenderness: thus, both are said to have eyes like doves, both are associated with lilies, both evoke the grace of fawns and gazelles, and both have pretty hair and a sweet smell. But likewise, each is described in terms of power and strength: the woman being compared to towers and ramparts and said to be as daunting as a bannere army, while the man is said to be as strong as a cedar tree and to have thighs like marble pillars. One also finds more explicit expressions of this longing for continuity, as in the woman's account of her desire in the first of two "night scenes" (3:1-4):

In the night, lying in my bed,
I sought the one I love;
I sought, but did not find.
I will get up, and go out in the city,
into the streets and the squares.
I will seek the one I love;
I sought him, but did not find him.
But the watchmen found me,
as they patrolled the city.
"Have you seen him," I asked,
have you seen the one I love?"
Scarcely had I passed them when

I found the one I love.

I held him tight and would not let go,

until I brought him to my mother's house,

to the room where she conceived me. ³

Night after night the woman in her bed longs for her lover. Her longing drives her out of her house in the middle of the night to search incessantly for the object of her desire. When he is found she brings him into the place of ultimate safety and, it must be noted, ultimate identification: "I brought him to my mother's house/ the chamber of her who conceived me." This image of the lovers as having existed in the same womb of continuous being before being wrested apart into discontinuity, and of their desire to return to this state of continuity, is reinforced by the woman's statement in another passage, that "If only you were a brother who nursed at my mother's breast! I would kiss you in the streets and no one would scorn me" (8:1).

All is not, however, milk and honey and desire fulfilled in the Song of Songs, though many modern interpreters have portrayed it so. The Song of Songs, long before Bataille, recognized "the anguish of desire" (1986:19) and the precariousness wherein it exists, never quite fulfilled and yet never quite denied. Thus, in one of the most striking passages of the book (5:2-8), one finds the counterpart to the woman's first night-time search for her lover:
I slept, but my heart stayed awake ...

Listen! My lover implores:

"Open to me, my sister, my darling,
my dove, my perfection.

My head is wet with dew,
my hair with the night's mist."

But I have undressed myself;
should I dress again?

I have bathed my feet;
should I get them dirty?

My love reached in for the latch,
and my heart beat wildly.

I got up to open to my love,
my hands wet with myrrh,
my fingers dripping myrrh
on the handles of the lock.

I opened to my love -
but he was gone.

I longed for his voice.

I searched, but did not find him,
I called, he did not answer.
Then the watchmen found me,

as they patrolled the city.

They beat and bruised me.

They stripped me of my shawl,

they who guard the walls.

So you must swear to me, daughters of Jerusalem:

If you find my lover,

you will tell him that I suffer for love.

As confident in the undeniability of Eros as the earlier passage seemed, with its culmination in fulfillment and union, the book refuses to pretend that this is the end of desire. It refrains from telling us that this telos is inevitable. Instead of the presence of the lover there is stark absence. Instead of consummation with the lover there is a beating at the hands of the watchmen (it is no accident that they are called "the watchmen of the walls," ones who guard boundaries and refuse Eros its power to overcome the discontinuity they guard).

Perhaps even more striking, though, is that the Song of Songs, again in anticipation of Bataille, recognizes that not only is desire at risk from the vicissitudes of the world (in this case the watchmen and, in chapter 8, the woman's brothers), but that desire itself entails risk. Not only is there the risk that borders may be rigorously policed, there is the equal if opposite threat that borders may
well be violated. As Bataille puts it, "What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners? - a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder?" (1986:17). Or, as the woman in the Song of Songs puts it (8:6):

   Stamp me as a seal upon your heart,
   sear me upon your arm,
   for love is as fierce as death,
   its passion harsh as the grave.
   Even its sparks are a raging fire,
   a devouring blaze.

Though thoroughly rooted in the body, Eros transcends the confines of the body and takes on near cosmic dimensions. The risk to discontinuity is enormous, as a mere spark of desire threatens to become an uncontrollable blaze. The language of the body, elsewhere in the *Song of Songs* so positive, teeters here on the brink of obsession, as one lover demands to be stamped into the very being of the other and tattooed upon the other's skin. This is serious continuity. And it should perhaps come as no surprise that here, at the poetry's most intense moment of continuity and dissolution of borders, that love is equated with death.

One needs reminding that this is in the Bible. Given that fact, the character that is most conspicuously absent from all this is God. The *Song of Songs* fails to
mention God even in passing. This absence of the divine has vexed pious interpreters no end, causing them to expend great interpretive energy in the service of allegorical interpretations whereby the body-to-body business of the *Song of Songs* is transposed into the relationship between God and humanity. Thus, in traditional Jewish interpretation, Israel is cast as the female lover and God as the male lover. Collections of midrashic interpretations become virtual compendia of homoeroticism, as the male heroes of Israel's faith become the objects of God's desire. One such interpretation of *Song of Songs* 4:7, "Every part of you is fair, my darling; there is no blemish in you," reads: "This refers to our ancestor Jacob for his bed was blameless before God and no flaw was found in it" (Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 4:7,1). When the biblical book has the male lover state that "your breasts are like two fawns/ twins of a gazelle" (4:5), the midrash explains (from its thoroughly masculine perspective), "These are Moses and Aaron. Just as the breasts are the pride and beauty of a woman, so Moses and Aaron are the pride and beauty of Israel" (4:5,1). Christian interpreters are no less imaginative as the human lovers of the biblical book become ciphers for God and the church, or Christ and the individual soul, or even God and the Virgin Mary.

Modern biblical scholars have tended to dismiss these allegorical interpretations, since they so obviously do violence to the literal sense of the text. The allegorical mode of interpretation spiritualizes the Song of Songs, and thus
tames its potentially subversive role in a Bible that has so often been taken as shoring up borders and fencing in sexuality. It is no less true (as Howard Eilberg Schwartz has pointed out), however, that such interpretation eroticizes theological discourse, with potentially very radical results. With the stroke of an allegory, God becomes both an object and a subject of desire. The world becomes the result of "an explosion of erotic energy, the ecstasy of a God who, in his act of creating, stands outside himself, perhaps literally 'beside himself' with Eros" (Turner 1995:47). By way of the allegorical interpretation, God is introduced into the vicissitudes of erotic existence and is no longer "by definition" un-risked. "It risks me and the one I love," writes Bataille; and while the traditional allegorical interpretation will sometimes try to delimit the flow of Eros so that God remains unmoved by human desire (Turner 1995:143-44), the effort seems ultimately vain. God desires the world; and God desires the world's desire.

### III. Breaking the Waves

The portrayal of Eros in *Breaking the Waves* is in many ways strikingly similar to its portrayal in the *Song of Songs*. Most obviously, and not surprisingly given the fundamental dynamic of the erotic, there is the breaching of borders, the commingling of bodies and of different realms. The very first line of the film succinctly introduces those bodies and realms that will be caught up with one another. "His name is Jan," spoken by Bess before the elders in the church, stations
Bess, Jan, and God as the foci of the story. When asked if she knows what matrimony is, Bess replies with a seemingly innocuous answer, but one that will have dangerous consequences later: "The joining together of two people, under God."

The coming together of Bess and Jan physically both mirrors and depends upon the overcoming of the communal borders set up by Bess's church and embodied by the elders. Jan and his friends from the oil rig are patently presented as outsiders, whom Bess is introducing into this place in which they seem so foreign. The character of Bess embodies the erotic impulse toward border-crossing and the mixing of realms. (She also breaks down the divide between viewer and characters by directly looking at the viewer.) It is a bit more complicated, however, than just introducing the "outsiders" into the provincial world of this Calvinist village, for as the film makes clear, the world represented by the village is not so very different from the world found on the oil rig, despite their seeming polarity. We see the intrinsic similarity in a humorous aspect of the wedding celebration. Jan's friend chugs a beer and crushes the can only to be matched by Bess's grandfather chugging his lemonade and crushing the glass. Each world is an realm in which male strength and subjectivity are imagined as paramount and autonomous. The superficial contrast of the workers' cavorting in the shower room and smoking a joint with the dour meetings of the church elders only serves to
heighten their similarity as stereotypically all-male realms. Into both these realms, however, Bess intrudes. And her desire, both for God and for Jan, exceeds the strictures of both.

This larger tendency toward the transgression of borders is of course, as in the Song of Songs, rooted in the experience of carnal love. Consequently, the bodies of the lovers in each are of primary importance. In the biblical book this importance takes the form of literary set pieces in which the man and the woman take turns articulating a sort of erotic inventory of each other's bodies. In chapter 5, the woman begins at her lover's hair and playfully yet methodically works her way down the man's body. She describes his eyes, his cheeks, his lips, and his arms. Then she allows her gaze to come to rest on his stomach "like hard ivory," and his thighs "like marble pillars" (5:14). In chapter 7, the man indulges his gaze in reverse order, beginning with the woman's feet, and moving up to her thighs, her navel, her stomach, her breasts, her neck, her eyes, and culminating in her hair, imagined as a thicket in which he finds himself caught. These literary set pieces -- the most strikingly visual of this love poetry that otherwise privileges touch and smell -- have their counterpart in Breaking the Waves in the filmic set-pieces where Bess and Jan also stand naked before each other, delighting in a similar erotic inventory of their respective bodies.
"Stripping naked is the decisive action," writes Bataille. "Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence" (1986:17). The act of stripping naked means that there is physically one less layer of separation between one discontinuous being and another, or between a discontinuous being and being-in-general. Stripping naked presages the dissolution of the individual. On the one hand, it is a prelude to erotic union. But on the other hand it is a symbol of vulnerability, a reminder that the violation of borders inherent to sexuality is but a step removed from the violation of borders inherent to violence and culminating in death. Thus, also like the Song of Songs, the film refuses the lovers an idyllic existence free from threat. It is perhaps here, in the "risk" of Eros, that Breaking the Waves most closely resembles the biblical book: first of all, in the inevitable existence of desire at the intersection of presence and absence, of longing and consummation, of "not having" and "having." Bess and Jan's physical consummation, though representing a telos of desire (in the sense of its goal), nevertheless takes place at the beginning of the film and gives way to an absence, while Jan is on the oil rig, that only intensifies desire. So also must the first of the "night scenes" we looked at above from the Song of Songs, ending as it did in a union in the mother's house, give way to the second night scene, ending as it does in absence and violence. This parallel is reinforced by the pointed barring of Bess from her "mother's house" after her excommunication by the elders, a scene that
comes immediately on the heels of the "watchmen" (here represented by the male children of the village) stoning Bess and chanting "Who's the tart?"

*Breaking the Waves*, however, takes the risk associated with Eros and the connection of sexuality with death much further than the *Song of Songs*, takes them in fact to their deeply disturbing conclusion. "Bess is sacrificed on the altar of patriarchy," writes one reviewer, dissenting from the near unanimous critical praise of the film. This reviewer is, we think, correct, but fails to recognize that the distance from eroticism to sacrifice is never so far as it might seem. "Paradoxically, intimacy is violence, and it is destruction, because it is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual" (Bataille 1997:214). We are back to Bataille, who explores not only the interrelatedness of death and sexuality, but also more particularly that between sacrifice and sexuality. "The [sacrificial] victim dies and the spectators share in what [t]his death reveals ... the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite" (1986:22).

We cite Bataille here neither to defend the practice of sacrifice in general nor to justify the sacrifice of Bess in particular; for there are at least two caveats to this theory of sacrifice. First, because the sacrificial victim must be something or someone from within the community that is carrying out the sacrifice and must be
of value to that community, the act of sacrifice becomes for Bataille an act of recklessness, an act that depletes the life of the community. He writes (1997:219):

    Such an intense movement of consumption responds to a movement of malaise by creating a greater malaise. It is not the apogee of a religious system, but rather the moment when it condemns itself: when the old forms have lost part of their virtue, it can maintain itself only through excesses, through innovations that are too onerous.

The sacrifice of Bess on the altar of patriarchy, represented both by Jan and the elders of the church, serves not as a reinforcement of its order but rather as a condemnation of it.

    The second caveat to this theory of sacrifice arises from the filmic medium itself. If sacrifice so clearly depends on "those who watch it as a solemn rite," then the sacrifice of Bess complicates this theory, for it occurs off camera. As Brent Plate has pointed out to us, this is quite significant. By its very style (the hand held camera that gives almost a home video feel to it; Bess's direct looks at the camera), the viewer has already been brought into the film almost as another character. The fact that we as viewers are allowed access to the most intimate scenes of Bess's and Jan's lovemaking only underscores the fact that we are denied access to the scene of Bess's sacrifice. This refusal of voyeurism challenges not only traditional filmic notions of point of view as neutral, but also challenges the notion of sacrifice as "a solemn rite" that can be absorbed into a system of religious meaning by those who watch it.
Sacrifice, like Eros, is about excess - that which exceeds boundaries, systems, societies, and individual bodies. The moment of death, like the moment of erotic fulfillment, is finally no moment at all, but rather the difference between two moments: the final moment of "not having" and the initial moment of "having," the moment of absence and the moment of presence. Eros is the threshold, the link between two things that cannot be linked. This brings us, finally, back to God. Just as the concept of Eros functioned to link the divine and the human in the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, so does the embodiment of Eros in the character of Bess serve to link the divine and human in "Breaking the Waves." As human sexuality and theology mingle in the allegorical commentaries on the Song of Songs, so do Bess's desire for God and her desire for Jan come together. This commingling of bodily desire with spiritual desire is made explicit in the wedding scene, when the minister interrupts the ceremony to praise Bess's "love for God in heaven". It is reinforced when Bess, while making love to Jan looks heavenward and utters a thank you, which she then repeats to Jan.

We have no desire to defend Bess's God, who is after all thoroughly shaped by the authoritarian, patriarchal religious community of which she is a part. Likewise, we have no desire to defend the twisted relationship that develops between Bess and Jan after his accident, a relationship no less shaped by an authoritarian patriarchy. (And it is worth noting in this regard that the third,
mediating option - represented by the well-meaning doctor who refuses to collude either with the church or with Jan - also presents one more version of a controlling patriarchal perspective.) Bess, and her desire, finally exceed all of these. This desire is not "good," in the same way that it is not "bad." It is, rather, excessive; and such excessiveness is required if one is to overcome discontinuity. Bess's desire, in its excess, unites good and bad, her church and the outside world, sexuality and theology, the audience and the film. To paraphrase Bataille (1986: 19), what Bess desires is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain. The shame is that we can finally sustain very little ... the wonder is that we can sustain any at all.

1 All translations of the Song of Songs are our own, made from the Hebrew text, though we have often benefited by the fine translations of Marcia Falk (1993) and of Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch (1995).

2 It should be noted that although the male voice refers to the woman as "sister" or as "bride" throughout the poetry, it is clear that she is neither. Rather this is part of the role-playing that the two unmarried lovers engage in throughout the book. Thus the woman also refers to the man playfully as a "king" and as a "shepherd," neither of which is to be taken literally.

3 This new translation was added to this article on 17 May 2002.

4 For surveys of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs in Jewish and Christian commentary writing, see Ginsburg (1970), Matter (1990), and Murphy (1990).