Latens Deitas

Eros, Divine Hiddenness,
and the Language of Poetry

Introduction

Erotic desire, as the contemporary American novelist Steven Millhauser reminds us, derives its power from the “paradoxes of transparent concealment and opaque revelation.” Antonio Canova’s sculpture *Psyche Revived by Cupid’s Kiss* (1793), for instance—where the god’s arm partially obscures Psyche’s breasts and cloth bunches loosely around her waist—is at once delicately artistic and richly erotic. Pornography, by striking contrast, is not only revolting but boring: by revealing exactly everything, it short-circuits the interval between hiddenness and anticipated disclosure that makes desire possible. So where the pornographer suffocates eros by sealing off the area in which it could move, Canova’s sculpture inflames desires by promising more than it reveals and inviting eros to dwell in the space between. In precisely this sense, St. Thomas Aquinas’s famous eucharistic poem “Adoro te devote,” from which I take the Latin phrase in my title, is a poem of eros. Aquinas’s “hidden deity,” of course, veiled as it is by the bread and the wine, provokes spiritual rather than carnal desire, but the structure of longing is the same. As he writes in the final stanza:
Jesus, whom I now see hidden [velatum],
I ask you to fulfill what I so desire [sitio],
That seeing your face unveiled [revelata],
I may have the happiness of beholding your glory.²

Aquinas’s artful placement of sitio between velatum and revelata makes the point clearly: desire subsists in the interval between concealment and disclosure, and indeed it is precisely because the Eucharist “veils” Christ’s presence under the species of bread and wine that it also provokes the poet’s “desire” for the full “revelation” of that presence in the Kingdom of God.

In somewhat more general terms, the erotic dialectic of concealment and disclosure that characterizes “Adoro te devote” is central to certain, especially mystical, branches of the Christian tradition.³ In his Life of Moses, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa contends that the elusiveness of the divine essence kindles the soul’s desire for ever greater knowledge of and unity with God.⁴ St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) picks up the same theme in the rather more overtly erotic context of his Spiritual Canticle (1584), where the bridegroom’s elusiveness (“Where have you hidden?” asks the opening line) prompts the bride to race through forests and over mountains in search of her beloved.⁵ The Spiritual Canticle takes its coordinates, obviously enough, from the Song of Songs, the locus classicus, in the Judeo-Christian tradition at least, of the relationship between eros and divine hiddenness.⁶ That Aquinas should pick up the same theme in, precisely, a poem about the Eucharist opens up a space to reflect on how the “erotic paradoxes” of concealment and disclosure might relate not only to eucharistic theology but also to poetry and poetic language. That is the space I would like to explore in this article. I begin by looking at the Song of Songs itself, or more exactly at the commentary tradition it has engendered, with special attention to the way in which that tradition regularly stages the relationship between bride and bridegroom as an erotic interplay of concealment and disclosure (section 1).⁷ Then, in section 2, I try to show how this
interplay is related to broader questions of language. Here I shall be especially interested to explore Origen’s suggestion that language itself—and especially allegorical language—participates in the erotic dialectic of concealment and revelation that characterizes the content of the Song. Finally, in section 3, I turn to a series of poems by the Spanish eucharistic poet José de Valdivielso (1565–1638). I have chosen to focus on Valdivielso for two reasons. First, despite his status as what one critic calls “the prince of eucharistic poetry,” his work remains relatively unknown and deserves a wider readership. The second reason is far more important and has two subparts. First, I suggest that by modeling the relationship between communicant and sacrament on the relationship between bride and bridegroom, Valdivielso opens up a space to think about the Eucharist itself as a site of erotic desire. Second, and more importantly, through a series of subtle metapoetic techniques, Valdivielso grafts his own sense of the Eucharist as a site of erotic desire onto Origen’s insight that language itself participates in the interplay of concealment and disclosure that characterizes such desire. My goal in making this argument is likewise twofold. The first is simply to introduce an important Spanish-language poet to an English-speaking audience unlikely to be familiar with his work. The second and rather more explicitly theological goal is both to confirm and reinforce an understanding of art as generative of theological insight, and to show that, under the right hermeneutical resolution, poetry itself may be conceived as a form of eucharistic practice, even as an act of worship.

Let me begin by looking more carefully at the Song.

Desire and the Hiddenness of God

In his remarkable Méditations sur le cantique des cantiques (c. 1620), the French baroque poet Claude Hopil (c. 1580–c. 1633) observes that the Song of Songs is characterized from beginning to end by an excès d’amour. In one sense, excès d’amour means “excess of love” and refers to the superabundance of desire or longing that characterizes the
bride’s attitude toward the bridegroom. In another sense, however, the phrase also appears to evoke the Latin excessus mentis or excessus cordis, expressions which, at least since St. John Cassian (c. 360–435), have come to refer to the “ecstasy” or “going out of oneself” associated with the highest forms of spiritual experience. These two senses converge in Hopil’s commentary. Inflamed by an “excès d’amour,” he writes, the bride “conceived an intense desire [un extrême désir] to know the bridegroom” and so “resolved to go out and search for him in the streets and places of the city of the world.” Here an excès d’amour in the first sense prompts an excès d’amour in the second sense: an overabundance of desire precipitates an ecstatic “going out” in search of the object of that desire. As it turns out, however, the bride’s going out is not only prompted by desire but also itself prompts greater desire. The bride’s quest, after all, is necessary only and precisely because the bridegroom himself is absent: she goes out to search because he is not there. Yet, as often as not, the bride’s search for her absent beloved yields neither possession nor communion but only more absence. Paraphrasing the opening verses of Song 3, Hopil remarks that the bride often “searched for the bridegroom and sometimes did not find him,” or else found him only to lose him again. According to Hopil, these instances of looking but not finding, or of finding and then losing again, not only fail to sate the bride’s desire but in fact stir her to “desire with greater zeal and fervor.” The two senses of excès d’amour thus mutually reinforce one another, giving rise to a kind of self-perpetuating erotic spiral: if a superabundance of desire (sense 1) prompts to the bride to “go out” in search of her beloved (sense 2), that “going out” (sense 2) produces still greater desire (sense 1), which in turns prompts an ever more desperate “going out” (sense 2), which in turn prompts yet more desire (sense 1), and so forth. This erotic interplay of revelation and concealment—where the quest for disclosure yields further hiddenness and hence more desire—is central not only to Hopil’s reading of the Song, but also to his conception of the spiritual life in general as consisting in “nothing but an endless search [recherche perpétuelle] for the beloved.”
Perhaps unsurprisingly, this same interplay is also central to what is arguably the most influential interpretation of the Song of Songs: Origen’s *Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum*. Early in Book 1, for instance, Origen finds the bride “stirred with desire” for a bridegroom who “delays his coming for so long.” Later, he concludes that the dialectic of delay and desire is not merely a quirk of the opening chapter but a crucial feature of the entire drama. Origen’s clearest statement comes during an extended discussion of Song 2:10–11, where the bride awaits the bridegroom at home:

The Bridegroom, however, is to be understood as a husband who is not always in the house, nor is He in perpetual attendance on the bride, who stays in the house. Rather, He frequently goes out, and she, yearning for His love, seeks Him when He is absent; yet He Himself returns to her from time to time. It seems, therefore, that all through this little book we must expect to find the Bridegroom sometimes being sought as one who is away, and sometimes speaking to the Bride as being present to her.

As a description, this seems clearly accurate. The twin dialectics of “leaving and returning” (*exeat* . . . *redeat*) and “absence and presence” (*absens* . . . *praesens*), for instance, recall Hopil’s description of a bridegroom who “now shows himself and now hides,” while Origen’s remark that the bride is “stirred by [the bridegroom’s] love” precisely when he is absent establishes the crucial link between hiddenness and desire. But the description also raises a further question: why does the bridegroom fail to reveal himself fully and completely? Why does he hide? Origen offers two sorts of answers to this question, each of which inflects the other. On the one hand, he suggests that the bridegroom “does not always stay with the bride” simply because “that is not possible for human nature.” The comment is suggestive but obscure, and Origen does not develop it here. One possibility is that the bride is simply incapable of enduring, emotionally or intellectually, the sustained presence of her beloved. This interpretation
finds support in the first book of *De principiis*, where Origen argues that God is strictly “incomprehensible and incapable of being measured” and hence must be “by many degrees far better than what we perceive Him to be.”¹⁹ Barely a page later, however, Origen suggests that strict divine incomprehensibility is only a temporary condition and that if the mind were separated from the body, it might come to “some knowledge of the nature of divinity.”²⁰ Later, he raises the stakes even higher, claiming that “perfect knowledge” awaits those saints who, having “reached their celestial abodes,” are “no longer at all impeded by those carnal senses.”²¹

This gradual progression from “incomprehensibility” to “some knowledge” to “perfect knowledge” is related to Origen’s vision of the soul’s ascent, which is also a return, to full communion with God; but the same progression also plays an important role in his second explanation of the bridegroom’s absence. After remarking that Christ’s constant presence is “not possible for human nature,” Origen adds: “He may visit her from time to time, indeed, and yet from time to time she may be forsaken by Him too, that she may long for Him the more.”²² The last clause is crucial, suggesting as it does that the bridegroom’s absence does not simply happen to stir the bride’s desire but is in fact *designed* to stir the bride’s desire. The thought seems to be that absence serves a kind of pedagogical function. Recall that at this point in the narrative the bride awaits her beloved at home, which, unsurprisingly, Origen reads as an allegory of the soul’s confinement in the body. On this basis, he proceeds to reason that as long as the soul remains trapped “in the house of this body,” it cannot “receive the naked and plain wisdom of God,” but instead “beholds the invisible and incorporeal” through “tokens and images of visible things.”²³ Since the bride is thus incapable of receiving the fullness of her beloved’s presence, he instead supplies partial and temporary intimations of that presence aimed at persuading her to “arise and come to Him”: that is, to “forsake things bodily and visible” and “hasten toward things incorporeal and invisible and spiritual.”²⁴ For Origen, then, the bridegroom’s hiddenness is essential to the
bide’s spiritual progress: only by concealing himself does he entice her to abandon the “house of this body” and ascend to “the high and lofty truths of heavenly wisdom.”

Language, Hiddenness, and Desire

As I noted in the introduction, and as should become clear in a moment, this account of the link between divine hiddenness and human desire is deeply related to Origen’s understanding of language and, more specifically, the language of the Song itself. He frames the issue early in the prologue with a reference to Plato’s Symposium. Noting that Greek writers often represented discussions of eros as taking place at banquets or convivia, Origen argues that such banqueters actually feasted on “words” (verborum) rather than “food.” Framing the Song as a “banquet of words” serves two crucially important purposes. First, Origen’s subsequent and lengthy argument that love itself presides over the Song’s “banquet of words” establishes an intimate connection between eros and speech. Second, and more importantly, throughout the commentary Origen refers to the bridegroom as the Word of God (verbum Dei or sermo Dei) and the bride as the sponsa verbi (the spouse of the word). In a relatively straightforward sense, then, the bride’s desire for the bridegroom is an erotic desire that is also a linguistic desire, that is, a desire for Christ as Word. Origen makes the point clearly in his gloss on the Song’s famous opening lines: “‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,’ that is to say, let him pour the words of his mouth into my mouth.” The same theme reemerges in Book 2, where, following St. Paul (Gal 3:24), Origen describes the Law as a pedagogue appointed to instruct the bride until such time as she can “receive the kiss of the Word of God Himself, that is, His words and teachings.” On this point, later commentators follow suit. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), for instance, finds in the phrase “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” an expression of the Church’s desire that Christ no longer speak “through the prophets” but instead “with his own mouth.” Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090–1153) likewise
reads the kiss as a “living and efficacious word” from which “wonderful teachings flow in streams.”

In each of these cases, as Patricia Cox Miller points out, the crucial point to notice is that language itself is “actively erotic.” Just as the Song is a logos erotikos (a love story), so the bridegroom, as the Word of God, is also a logos erotikos—an erotic word that inflames the bride’s desire for the kisses (words) of his mouth. But this is only part of the story. For if the bridegroom’s words exercise erotic power over the bride, the text of the Song likewise exercises a parallel erotic power over its readers, a power that both Gregory and Origen link to the Song’s allegorical character. Gregory, for example, argues that since “divine speech” cannot be communicated directly to the “torpid and frigid human soul,” scripture employs allegory as a “device” (machina) to elevate our earthly natures to God. The lever that sets the allegorical machine in motion is precisely eros. As Gregory goes on to explain, in unmistakably erotic terms, the Song of Songs deploys allegorical narrative to “reheat” (recalescat) our souls, so that through “descriptions [verba] of lower love” the soul is “aroused” (excitatur) to seek “the love which is above.” The Song’s depiction of carnal love, he continues, thus leads its readers to “burn [ferveamos] with love for God.”

Origen makes a similar point when he remarks in the Prologue that the Song inflames the soul’s desire to be united to the Word of God (verbum Dei) through the word (verbum) of scripture. The pun is surely intentional: it is the erotic power of the Song’s allegorical verba that inflames readerly desire for the Word of God himself.

But what exactly is the relationship between eros and allegory? How is it that allegorical narrative—or at least the allegory of the Song of Songs—incites readerly desire in the way Gregory and Origen suggest? The answer is straightforward but important: the Song derives its erotic power from the way in which allegorical texts “speak otherwise” (allōs agorein): that is, from the way in which they tell one story by referring to another and so conceal spiritual meaning under a veil of literality. Gregory makes the point with an offhanded
but revealing metaphor: in allegory, he writes, divine thoughts are “cloaked” or “clothed” (vestiuntur) in earthly words, so that by examining “exterior descriptions” we come to “interior understanding.” The clothing metaphor, framed as it is by the interior/exterior distinction, goes to the heart of the Song’s erotic power. Note first that Gregory invites us to imagine the text as an (exterior) garment covering an (interior) body of spiritual insight. But how, one might wonder, do we know that the garment in fact conceals the body Gregory imagines it conceals? Might it not conceal a different sort of body altogether (a lifeless manikin perhaps)? Or might it instead be pure surface, concealing nothing at all? The answer, surely, is that the garment gapes—that there are gaps and spaces, splits and slits where the body’s skin flickers, half-concealed and half-revealed, between two edges of cloth. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Roland Barthes rightly describes these spaces of partial and intermittent revelation as “the most erotic portion of the body.” They are also, I want to suggest, where allegory’s erotic power dwells. As an allegory, in other words, what the Song offers are gaps and spaces where intermittent bursts of spiritual insight flicker between the clothy edges of literality. Such spaces, moreover, like the cloth bunched loosely around Psyche’s waist in Canova’s sculpture, provoke desire precisely because they both reveal and conceal—or, better, because they reveal enough to seduce but not to satiate. The act of reading the Song is thus itself an exercise in eros: a participation in the same seductive interplay of hiddenness and revelation that governs the bride’s quest for the beloved and the soul’s quest for God.

Origen develops a similar line of thought with a different set of metaphors. Commenting on Song 2:9—where the bridegroom “stands behind our wall, gazing in at the window, looking through the lattice”—he observes that the beloved is not to be found “in the open” but rather “covered and as it were hidden [latens] behind the wall.” The point of hiding, Origen continues, is that by failing to “reveal himself openly and completely,” the Word incites the bride to leave the house and behold him not *per speculum in aenigmate*, but *facie*
The allusion, tellingly, is to 1 Corinthians 13, where, in the context of his famous discourse on agape, Saint Paul uses the aenigma metaphor to describe the partial and defective character of our knowledge of God. But—and this is equally important—in ancient literary criticism, aenigma was also one of a series of technical terms used to designate allegorical interpretation. This technical meaning persists in Christian usage (Augustine, for instance, classifies aenigma as a species of allegory—specifically, an obscura allegoria). Understood in this light, the Song of Songs is not merely an allegory of the soul’s quest for God or the Church’s union with Christ. It is also an allegory of itself—or, more precisely, an allegory of its own interpretation. If the bridegroom’s hiddenness “behind the wall,” in other words, is an allegory of God’s hiddenness from the soul, it is also an allegory of the way in which the Song itself conceals spiritual meaning under literal description. Just as the bride glimpses her beloved hidden behind the aenigmata of windows, walls, and lattice, so we readers glimpse the Song’s spiritual meaning hidden behind the aenigmata of its literality. Given this close parallel, it is unsurprising that Origen should describe the bride’s quest for the bridegroom as, among other things, a hermeneutical act: “when she has begun to discern for herself what was obscure, to interpret parables and riddles [parabolas et aenigmata] . . . then let her believe that she has now received the kisses of the Spouse Himself, that is, the Word of God.” Here the bride is at once an allegory of the soul and a double of the reader: her riddling quest for the hidden bridegroom runs exactly parallel to the reader’s interpretive quest for the spiritual insight hidden behind the Song’s literality. The act of reading the Song thus enacts meaning of the Song: if, under the veil of its literal meaning, the Song is finally about the soul’s erotic quest for union with God, then the process of reading the Song is our own erotic quest to discover that that is what the Song is finally about after all.
Language, Desire, and Eucharist

To this point, I have been trying to suggest that for both Gregory and Origen there is a kind of parallel between the bride’s erotic quest for the bridegroom and the reader’s erotic quest for the spiritual insight veiled by the Song’s literal meaning. This parallel, so I have argued, is driven by the structure of allegory itself: that is, by the way in which allegorical language participates in the play of hiddenness and disclosure that governs erotic desire as such. But perhaps we should not restrict language’s erotic power to allegory alone. From a certain angle, in fact, language as such, and not merely allegorical language, is erotically charged. In his now classic essay on love and eroticism, *The Double Flame*, the Mexican poet and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz remarks that “eroticism is first and foremost a thirst for otherness.”

Within the context of the Song, Paz’s definition applies not only to the bride’s thirst for the otherness of the bridegroom, nor even simply to the soul’s thirst for the otherness of God, but also to the reader’s thirst for the “other-speaking” of allegory itself. The same definition supplies a clue to language’s erotic structure. Because signs function by rendering present to the mind something *other than themselves*, the very act of signification is, so to speak, oriented to alterity. Language always has, if not a transcendent structure, then at least a self-transcendent structure. By pointing beyond themselves, words reveal a kind of structural lack of self-sufficiency and thus intimate a fullness of presence that they themselves never quite deliver.

In its own way, Origen’s reading of the Song dramatizes this point as well. By allegorizing the bridegroom’s kisses as words, he lays bare, albeit subtly, language’s orientation to otherness and transcendence. Kisses, after all, are more provocation than consummation: they do not so much satiate desire as inflame it, and they do so by foreshadowing a fullness of presence and communion that they themselves do not supply. Lest we miss the connection, Honorarius of Autun (1080–1151), a twelfth-century commentator on the Song,
explicitly locates “kissing” between “touching” and “intercourse” on the ladder of sexual love. And yet if kisses are “words,” as Origen says, they are not merely words. Instead, because they partly constitute the erotic desire they signify, kisses also embody that desire. They not only signify but also, by signifying, partially actualize the content of their signification.

And this, of course, is just to say that if the bridegroom’s kisses are words, they are also sacraments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sacramental readings of the Song are not without precedent in the commentary tradition. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, reads Song 5:1 (“Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love”) as a type of Christ’s words at the institution of the Eucharist, while Ambrose takes the phrase “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” as an expression of the soul’s desire to approach the altar and receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. In his “Mysterious Canticle of the Holy Kiss,” Hopil picks up the same theme, describing the bridegroom’s kisses as types of the

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\text{[...] kiss that the Holy Spirit} \\
\text{Gives to our faithful spirits,} \\
\text{Joined to the breasts of his sweet bounty} \\
\text{In the Holy Sacrament.}\]

In a certain sense, the connection between Eucharist and eros is unsurprising. The Eucharist, after all, provokes desire because in it Christ’s body is at once given and withheld: given sacramentally under the species of the bread and wine, and yet also withheld because what is given points beyond itself to the fullness of Christ’s bodily presence in the kingdom. It is precisely this interplay that Aquinas thematizes in “Adoro te devote” and that I would like now to explore in more detail by turning to a series of poems by the seventeenth-century Spanish poet José de Valdivielso.

Consider, as an initial approximation, Valdivielso’s “Mixed Verse of the Bride and Bridgroom to the Most Holy Sacrament” (1612),
a dramatic account of the relationship between communicant and sacrament modeled unambiguously on the biblical Song. The poem begins as the *esposa* (bride), “soul-sick with love” (27), races through “streets and plazas” (28, cf. Song 3:2) in search of her lost beloved. The bridegroom, moreover, in a series of nearly verbatim allusions to the Song, is described as “covered in dew” (12, cf. Song 5:2), with eyes like “doves” (21, cf. Song 1:15), lips like the “sweetness of native honeycomb” (23–24, cf. Song 4:11), and a “divine head all golden” (19–20, cf. Song 5:11). At this point in the narrative, an anonymous interlocutor informs the bride that she will find her beloved robed in a “white sheepskin coat” (34) and “hidden among white lilies” (32, cf. Song 2:17). Whereupon the poet, eliding much of the remainder of the bride’s search, transports us to an unidentified dwelling in which the bride and bridegroom, reclining at a table, share the following exchange:

**BRIDE**
My divine lover
Behind that veil
Though you cover yourself
I know and see you.
Why are you absent?

**BRIDEGROOM**
Though to you I appear,
Soul, to leave,
With you I stay.
Perhaps from your doors
I pretend to be absent.
And I stay to see
What it is I have in you.
To see you cry
Oh, how it gladdens me.
To see that you love me.
As I deserve. (lines 44–59)
Here Valdivielso follows Origen by making the bridegroom’s partial hiddenness the principal engine of the bride’s desire. The eucharistic occasion of the poem, however, leads him to work a series of subtle transformations on his source material. Notice, in the first place, that the bridegroom’s response is built around a distinction between what appears to be the case and what actually is the case: “Though to you I appear, / Soul, to leave, / with you I stay” (49–51). The distinction is unsurprising. The central mystery of Catholic eucharistic theology, after all, has to do with the manner in which, upon consecration, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Christ while nonetheless retaining breadlike and winelike qualities. And yet by deploying this distinction within a poem modeled so unambiguously on the Song of Songs, Valdivielso also lends the Eucharist itself an unmistakably erotic character. Just as, for Origen and others, the bridegroom’s partial and intermittent hiddenness is designed to stir the bride’s desire for her beloved, so for Valdivielso Christ’s hiddenness under the “appearances” of bread and wine is likewise designed to stir the communicant’s desire for Christ himself.

In one sense, in fact, Valdivielso’s treatment of this theme is rather more radical than that of his predecessors. On his telling, as lines 49–54 make clear, the erotic interplay of concealment and disclosure that characterizes the Eucharist seems to be part of an elaborate ruse in which the bridegroom merely “pretends” to be absent in order both to observe the bride’s pining and to test the depth and character of her devotion. The bridegroom, in other words, is playing hard to get, and in one sense the entire scene takes on precisely the air of playful whimsy one might expect from a flirtatious game between knowing lovers. The problem, of course, is that the bride does not appear to be in on the game, and so the bridegroom’s evident delight at her weeping (56–57) is bound to strike us as needless, perhaps even a bit cruel. By the end of the poem, however, Valdivielso makes it clear that the bridegroom’s apparent cruelty is in fact an indispensable part of the circuit of desire. For by pushing the bride’s longing to a peak of painful, frustrated intensity, it sets the stage for the inevi-
table climax of the final stanza in which the “hidden God,” by “giving himself” to the bride, “drives her out of her mind [de sí la enajena]” with a “taste” of the Eucharist. The key term, enajenar (“alienate”), carries a variety of different and overlapping connotations. In the most basic sense, it means “to drive mad” or “to drive out of one’s wits,” though it also harbors both erotic and mystical overtones. In his enormously influential Dialoghi d’amore (1535), for instance, Leone Ebreo picks up the erotic connotations when he describes “the ecstasy, or alienation [alienazione], caused by amorous meditation.”

On the other hand, the 1 7 3 2 edition of the Royal Academy of Spain’s Diccionario de la lengua castellana highlights the term’s mystical overtones when it defines enajenamiento as the “privation experienced by the senses” when “the soul, carried away by supernatural grace, is elevated and drawn outside itself.”

Perhaps even more importantly, the root ajeno (“other” – Lat. alienum) suggests a kind of “alienation” or “othering” whereby what is properly “one’s own” (proprius) is stripped away and transferred to someone else (alienus). It is precisely this sense of enajenamiento as dispossession and transfer that resonates most deeply with the eucharistic character of Valdivielso’s poem. In part three of the Summa theologiae, Aquinas explains the difference between “bodily food” and “spiritual food” by arguing that while bodily food “is converted into the substance of the one who consumes it,” spiritual food “converts the human being into itself.” In a rather straightforward sense, then, Eucharist is alienation: by converting us into itself, it also alienates from ourselves, and so makes us “other” (alienus). The “self” from which we are alienated is, of course, sinful and unsanctified, and so alienation turns out to be a boon rather than a burden; but the structure of dispossession is the same. Just as mystical and sexual ecstasy takes us “out of ourselves” in order to unite us to the object of our desire, so the Eucharist “alienates” us from ourselves in order to join us more perfectly to Christ. With a single word, then, Valdivielso grafts both the special intensity of sexual pleasure and the unspeakable ecstasy of mystical union onto the “alienating” or “othering” effect of
the Eucharist. For Valdivielso, the eros that characterizes the Song is precisely analogous to the eros that characterizes the Eucharist.

In each case, moreover—and this is the crucial point—at the heart of this process is the interplay of concealment and revelation that Origen and others identify as the whirling, convulsive engine of the Song’s erotic power. The sensual dance of cloth and skin, of a God veiled by bread and wine, of absent bridegrooms glimpsed dimly behind walls and through latticed windows—these spaces of partial and intermittent revelation propel the drama of both the Song and the Eucharist, and by so doing drive their participants into a state of frenzied ecstasy. For Origen, however, as we saw earlier, the Song’s erotic power is related intimately to the erotic power of language itself, which, through its play of literality and figuration, at once recapitulates the eroticism of the Song and amplifies its intensity. Partly, no doubt, because he is familiar with the Origenian tradition, and partly because he is a poet, Valdivielso is sensitive to this aspect of the Song’s power. In at least one case, in fact, he also makes it a central, albeit subtle, theme in his own erotic approach to the Eucharist.

In his “Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament” (1612), Valdivielso casts the eucharistic Christ as a kind of rustic shepherd-lover who descends from the hills during Corpus Christi to reveal himself to the faithful.51 The first of the poem’s three stanzas reads:

Lover king,
wounded by love,
in the mountains
you donned a coat
of whitest skins.
Your head you crowned
with thorns of wheat
infused with sweet lilies.

No matter the disguise,
Gallant divine,
The description of Christ as both shepherd and king is, of course, perfectly unsurprising, though the addition of the unmistakably erotic “enamorado” (“enamored,” “in love,” or even “smitten”) suggests that the poet is perhaps already thinking of the opening chapter of the Song, where we learn that the bridegroom is also both shepherd and king (1:4, 7). These erotic overtones are echoed in the second line (“wounded by love”) and again in the refrain’s description of Christ as “galán divino.” The appearance of “galán,” a term drawn from the world of courtly love, is especially revealing. In his Tesoro de la lengua castellana (1611), the first monolingual dictionary of the Spanish language, the lexicographer Sebastián de Covarrubias defines galán as “a man dressed for a gala,” adding that “because lovers ordinarily dress attractively to woo their ladies, the ladies call them galanes.” The image is therefore not merely of Christ as beloved, but of Christ as lover: a figure who, as in the Song, is actively engaged in an erotic quest for his bride.

A further series of intertextual echoes bears out the connection with the Song. Christ’s appearance in the “mountains” (line 1), for instance, recalls the bridegroom’s entrance “leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills” (Song 1:8), while the “crows” of line 5 echo the “crown with which his [Solomon’s] mother crowned him” (3:11). Similarly, the references to “wheat” (line 7) and “fragrant lilies” (line 8) recall both the bride’s description of her beloved’s “lips” as “lilies distilling liquid myrrh” (5:13) and the beloved’s description of the bride’s “belly” as “a heap of wheat encircled with lilies” (7:2). In the second stanza, Valdivielso picks up the Song’s various references to the bride’s hair (4:1, 5:2, 5:11, 6:5, 7:6), while in the concluding stanza the bridegroom’s “spiced wine” (8:2) becomes, obviously enough, eucharistic wine, and the “honeycomb” of Song 5:1 (“panal” in Spanish) is subtly transformed into eucharistic “pan” (“bread”). Perhaps even more importantly, the point of each of these
descriptions is to present Christ as a figure who, like the bridegroom himself, is both present and absent, both concealed and disclosed. The refrain, repeated with slight variations at the end of each of the three stanzas, makes the point clearly: “However disguised you may be, divine lover, in all that you have given, they know you well.” Here Christ’s identity is at once sufficiently concealed to merit the adjective “disguised,” and yet sufficiently manifest that the faithful “know” that the king of heaven and earth lies hidden beneath the garments of a humble shepherd.

These echoes and allusions, both verbal and thematic, strike me as sufficient to confirm that Valdivielso has consciously chosen the Song as the model for his poem and that he intends it to be read against that backdrop. As in “Mixed Verse of the Bride and Bridegroom,” however, the eucharistic occasion of “Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament” again leads Valdivielso to work a series of telling and consequential transformations on his source material. We have already seen, for instance, how the bridegroom’s “spiced wine” becomes eucharistic wine while the Song’s “honeycomb” (“panal” in Spanish) becomes eucharistic “pan” (bread). But there are other examples besides. The “blanco pellico” (white sheepskin coat) of line 4, for instance, echoes the poem we examined a moment ago, where the chorus informs the bride that she will find her beloved dressed in a “blanco pellico.” In fact, the “pellico” is something of a recurrent image in Valdivielso—often used, as here, to describe the Eucharist, but also in reference to the bands of cloth in which Mary wrapped the infant Christ. Something similar might be said of the reference to “wheat” in line 6, a manifestly eucharistic image which Valdivielso elsewhere employs to link the Eucharist to the Song. In “Mixed Verse to the Most Holy Sacrament in Rustic Style” (1612), for instance, he describes Christ as a “lover” who “hid himself in the shadow [a la sombra] of the lovely wheat,” a description strongly reminiscent of Song 2:3: “With great delight I sat in his shadow [sub umbram illius].” Even the third stanza of Valdivielso’s poem, which depicts Christ as “all arrayed in pearls and stars,” is likely an allusion to the richly or-
nate monstrance used to transport the consecrated Host during the Corpus Christi procession.57

Perhaps most telling of all, however, is the image that governs the entire poem: the image, that is, of Christ “robed” or “dressed” (vestido) in various sorts of garments. In one sense, the point of this motif is clear and straightforward: whereas in the Song, the walls, windows, and lattice are the primary mechanisms of concealment and revelation, in Valdivielso’s poem this role is taken over by the vestimenta which, by obscuring Christ’s identity, render him at once “disguised” (12) or “hidden” (24), and yet also “known” (16, 28, 40) to those who love him. Even so, the subtle way in which Valdivielso works out the implications of this motif merits closer attention. The first point to notice is that the sartorial motif carries patently incarnational connotations. In fact, this particular use of the motif is relatively common in the poetry of eucharistic devotion in Counter-Reformation Spain.58 In his Peregrinos pensamientos (1614), for instance, Alonso de Bonilla writes that the incarnate Christ comes “vestido de humanidad” (dressed in humanity).59 Likewise, Valdivielso’s near contemporary, the Spanish Dominican friar and theologian Luis de Granada (1506–1588), describes the Incarnation as the product of Christ’s “desire to dress himself [vestirse] in our humanity.”60 In Valdivielso’s poem, the choice of the term pellico to describe the garment covering the eucharistic Christ reinforces the point. The Spanish pellico (“sheepskin coat”) comes from the Latin pelliceus, meaning “made of skins,” and so when Valdivielso tells us in the first stanza that Christ “donned a white pellico in the mountains,” we are to hear in this description a subtle but unmistakable allusion to the Incarnation. Something similar might be said of the opening lines of the second stanza, “You donned a coat (gabán) / In Bethlehem for the cold (17–18),” where the first line continues the clothing metaphor, while the second, by transporting the reader to Bethlehem, links that metaphor to the Nativity and hence to the Incarnation.

Perhaps even more importantly, in each of these cases Valdivielso draws a series of subtle but unmistakable connections between the
incarnational overtones of the clothing metaphor and the eucharistic occasion of his own poem. In the first stanza, for instance, Christ dons not only a “white pellico,” where the “skin” of the pellico recalls the incarnation while its “whiteness” suggests the actual whiteness of the eucharistic Host. The allusion to Bethlehem has a similar effect. In one of his homilies on Luke, for example, Gregory the Great reads Bethlehem as bayth leh’-khem and so interprets Christ’s birthplace as a domus panis—a “house of bread.” A later writer, St. Aelred (1109–1167), abbot of Rievaulx, draws out the connection in considerably more detail, reading the “house of bread” as the “holy Church,” the “manger in Bethlehem” as an “altar in the church,” and the “swaddling clothes” (pannis in Jerome’s Latin) enwrapping the Christ child as the bread (panis) and wine enveloping Christ’s sacramental Body.

For Valdivielso, moreover, the effect of deploying these incarnational images within a eucharistic poem modeled on the Song of Songs is to highlight the erotic character of the Incarnation itself. In one sense, of course, the Incarnation is an act of divine eros: a process, in other words, whereby God goes “out of himself” (cf. Phil 2:7) in pursuit of a lost and dying humanity. But Incarnation is also an act of divine eros designed to provoke human eros in response. If Christ is, as Paul says, an “icon of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), then what we see in Christ is divinity itself; and yet, as Paul also says, whereas in the future we shall see that divinity “face to face,” we now see only “through a mirror, in an enigma [ἐν αἰνίγματι] (1 Cor 13:12). For Valdivielso, then, as for Paul, the incarnate Christ is a kind of riddle, a living “enigma” whose true identity is at once sufficiently revealed to permit even an unlettered centurion to exclaim, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15:39), and yet also sufficiently concealed to make the occasion of that recognition a brutal and inglorious judicial murder. Just as, for Origen, the bride’s erotic quest for the bridegroom takes the form of a hermeneutical act in which parabolas must be deciphered and aenigmata unraveled, so for Christian thought the quest for Christ’s identity is likewise an act of interpretation—most memorably, of course, in the Christological
controversies of the fourth century, but also in the life of anyone who has ever felt compelled to respond to Christ’s question in Matthew 16:15: “He asked [ἠρώτα] his disciples . . . who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15). In fact, as the homophonic play between ἔρωτος (the genitive of ἔρως) and ἐρωτᾷν (to ask) suggests, the very act of asking (ἐρώτησις) the question about Christ’s identity is itself imbued with desire: the desire, most immediately, to have an answer, but also the desire to be joined mystically and eucharistically to that answer in the manner Valdivielso describes. In this sense, then, Valdivielso’s text is doubly erotic: the eros of the Eucharist recapitulates, and is reinforced by, the eros of the Incarnation.

And yet if Valdivielso’s framing of Incarnation and Eucharist in terms of the Song of Songs highlights the erotic character of these doctrines, the language itself of his poem adds a further layer of erotic energy. As we saw a moment ago, “Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament” is governed by the image of Christ “robed” or “dressed” (vestido) in various sorts of garments. As Frederick Rener has shown, moreover, the motif of “clothing” or “dressing” is an influential rhetorical metaphor in which words are regarded as the “clothing” or “apparel” of things. We have already noted Gregory the Great’s observation that allegory “dresses” or “cloaks” (vestiuntur) divine thoughts in earthly words, but there are other examples besides. In his Institutio oratoria, for instance, Quintilian remarks that orators “dress” (vestiuntur) things in “the habitus of words” (verbórum habitu), while Cicero, in the De oratore, suggests that effective speakers must “dress” (vestire) or “adorn” (ornare) their material in “speech” (oratione). In one sense, of course, all language use involves—or can be construed as involving—something like the habitus image. What makes Valdivielso’s text interesting is the manner in which he suggests an explicit connection between the content of his poem and the specific act of poiesis (that is, the act of poetic meaning-making) whereby he articulates or “dresses” that content.

Perhaps we can begin to get at this connection by recalling that in “Adoro te devote,” Aquinas locates Christ’s divinity “hidden” or
“concealed” beneath the *figurae* of the eucharistic elements. *Figura* is a technical term in eucharistic theology, and though Valdivielso does not employ it in this poem, it appears widely in his other writings, and he seems clearly to have it in mind. In the most basic sense, after all, “Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament,” like “Adoro te devote,” is a poem about the manner in which the *figurae* of the eucharistic elements “conceal” or “disguise” Christ’s body and blood. The frame of the poem, however, suggests that Valdivielso also has in mind a different but related sense of *figura*. Specifically, by refracting his eucharistic poem through the prism of the Song of Songs, however, Valdivielso also invites us to interpret *figura* in a hermeneutical or typological sense: that is, to see the “lover-king,” who is himself modeled on the bridegroom from the Song, as a “type” or *figura* of Christ himself. This, of course, is a perfectly traditional interpretation of the Song, but here it has the added effect of making Valdivielso’s “lover-king” what we might call a metafigure: the figure of a figure. Just as the bridegroom is a figure of the Christ, so Christ himself is hidden beneath the figures of the bread and wine. Valdivielso’s Christ is thus already doubly figurative and hence doubly concealed: not only under the rustic garments of a humble shepherd, but also under the appearances of the eucharistic elements.

But there is another layer of concealment besides. For in addition to its eucharistic and typological connotations, *figura* is also a poetic or rhetorical term that refers to giving language a shape or form other than the common or ordinary one. Taken in this sense, Valdivielso’s poem, precisely because it is a poem, does not merely contain figures but is constituted by figures. It is, in other words, literally “composed” of figurative language. And this means, in turn, that Valdivielso’s lover-king is not merely doubly but triply figurative. And if triply figurative, then triply concealed as well: just as Christ is concealed by the figures of bread and wine, and just as the eucharistic figures themselves are concealed behind the bridegroom as a figure of Christ, so both sets of figures are at once “dressed” and concealed by the poetic *figurae* of Valdivieso’s language.
In one sense, as I noted a moment ago, all of this is perfectly obvious. Poems are, practically by definition, composed of poetic figurae, and Valdivielso’s is no exception. But there is something else at work in “Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament” that suggests a deeper and more consequential connection between its form and its content. Take, again, the reference in the opening stanza to Christ’s “blanco pellico.”“Pellico,” as we have already seen, derives from the Latin pelliceus and functions in Valdivielso’s poem both to “hide” or “disguise” the eucharistic Christ and to fire the speaker’s desire. Pelliceus, in turn, derives from pellis, which in addition to “skin” or “pelt” also and crucially means “parchment.” The allusion to a metapoetical term at the heart of the poem suggests that Valdivielso’s text is not simply poetic but self-consciously poetic—that it is aware of itself as an instance of poetic invention. In other words, by identifying the pellico that conceals the eucharistic Christ with the pellis upon which he composes his own text, Valdivielso explicitly thematizes the Christ of his poem as a text, as a linguistic or poetic Christ, a Christ constituted by poetic “signs” inscribed on “parchment.” Even more importantly, he suggests that what “cloaks” and therefore “conceals” the divine lover-king is not simply the “blanco pellico” of the Eucharist, but also the pellis, the very textuality of the poem itself.

And herein, finally, lies the precise sense in which Valdivielso grafts his own sense of the Eucharist as a site of erotic desire onto Origen’s insight that language participates in the interplay of concealment and disclosure that characterizes such desire. First, by linking the Eucharist and the poem through the pellico image, Valdivielso effectively textualizes the Eucharist: that is, he highlights the manner in which the eucharistic Christ is a “text,” a kind of material allegory that invites the reader to look beyond the veil of literality (bread and wine) to discern the meaning hidden underneath (Christ’s body and blood). Second, and more importantly, by textualizing the Eucharist in a poem in which the Eucharist itself has already been eroticized through its association with the Song of Songs, Valdivielso also eroticizes textuality itself. Like Origen he
casts language itself as a site of erotic power. Third, and most important of all, the textual eroticism of the Eucharist and the textual eroticism of the poem operate in perfect and revealing parallel. The eros of the Eucharist, on the one hand, lies in the fact that in it Christ is at once revealed and concealed, given and withheld: given in the transubstantiated real presence of body and blood, and yet also concealed by the persistence of the accidental properties of bread and wine. It is precisely this interplay that fires Aquinas’s *sitis* (thirst) in “Adoro te devote” and that leads Valdivielso to model his own eucharistic poem on the manifestly erotic Song of Songs. But if this is indeed how the Eucharist works, then Valdivielso’s poem works in a precisely analogous way. For what we, as readers, see when we read “Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament” are not the *figurae* of eucharistic bread and wine, but the *figurae* of the poem. Or, rather more precisely, we do see the *figurae* of the Eucharist, but only as concealed by the *figurae* of the poem. And just as eucharistic figures both conceal and reveal, so too do Valdivielso’s poetic figures. Like all signs, in fact, Valdivielso’s poem allows us to conceive, imagine, picture, and recall the Eucharist, but, precisely because it is a poem, it does not and cannot make the Eucharist itself present. Or, again, rather more precisely, it makes the Eucharist present in a manner appropriate to its form: that is, as a poem, a “poetic Eucharist,” a Eucharist made of poetic signs.

In this sense, then, “Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament” is not merely a poem about the Eucharist, but also a kind of allegory of the Eucharist, one in which the concealment of the sacrament under the figures of the poem doubles or parallels the concealment of Christ’s body under the figures of bread and wine. And this means, of course, that if the Eucharist itself is a site of erotic desire, so too is Valdivielso’s poem. Just as the interplay of concealment and disclosure of Christ’s divinity in the Eucharist is designed to stir our desire for the full revelation of that divinity in the *visio beata*, so the interplay of concealment and disclosure in Valdivielso’s poem is designed to stir our desire for the Eucharist itself. Reading “Lyric to the Most
Holy Sacrament” is thus not merely an erotic act but an erotic act that derives its power from the eros inherent in the Eucharist itself. Even more importantly, if read aright—and, I would suggest, if read as Valdivielso intended—the poem also turns out to be a kind of exercise in eucharistic pedagogy. Precisely because it grants us partial and incomplete glimpses of the eucharistic Christ concealed beneath its own *figurae*, Valdivielso’s poem works not only to train us in the sort of desire appropriate to the Eucharist, but also to make us *actually desire the Eucharist itself*. It aims, in other words, to inspire us to pass beyond the poetic figures to the figures of the Eucharist itself. In fact—and here I pass from textual exegesis to psychological speculation—I suspect that nothing would please Valdivielso quite so much as knowing that his readers, upon completing the poem, set the *pellis* aside and sought out the dazzling white *pellico* of the eucharistic Christ himself.

Appendix

Mixed Verse of the Bride and Bridegroom on the Most Holy Sacrament

bride:

If you know, oh heart,  
the pain of a ravaged soul,  
which, losing God,  
Loses all it has or ever shall;

If you know what  
It means to love well,  
Raise up your voice, let it  
Rise to the merciful ears  
Of the one whom I adore.
PROCLAMATION:

He is white and shining,
More than a jasmine or a rose,
His divine head all
Covered in fine gold.

Eyes like doves
And hands of hyacinth,
His lips are the sweetness
Of native honeycombs.

RESPONSE:

Oh, love-sick soul, you
Who with tender sighs
Seek your lost beloved
Through streets and squares,

Know that he rests
among white lilies,
Hidden in the midday sun.

You will find him bodily,
Clothed in whitest skins,
And trailed by the song
Of the docile lamb.

Spring has come,
And winter is gone
Hark as they sing
To him this song:
SONG:

*He truly is a powerful king,*  
*Who, seated on his heavenly throne,*  
*Remains with us on earth.*

This is the king in whom  
glory and infinite majesty abide,  
Who steals away our hearts  
With his open heart.  
With lavish extravagance  
He gives all to all.

*He truly is a powerful king,*  
*Who, seated on his heavenly throne,*  
*Remains with us on earth.*

BRIDE:

My divine lover,  
Though you hide yourself  
Behind that veil,  
I know you, I see you.  
Why do you forsake me?

BRIDEGROOM:

Though it seems  
That I forsake you,  
With you I stay.  
Perhaps I only feign  
To abandon your doors,  
Yet remain nearby  
To see what I have in you.
Oh how it delights me
To see you cry,
To see that you love me
Just as I deserve.

Sit at my table.
Let us dine together,
And as we dine,
Let me sing to you, my heaven:

Come just in time
O flower of May,
Come just in time
Most beautiful flower.

Come from the desert
Most beautiful flower,
With riches filled,
Most beautiful flower.

The hidden God,
Most beautiful flower,
Is given in this feast,
Most beautiful flower.
He drives her into ecstasy,
Most beautiful flower,
With just one bite.

Come just in time
O flower of May,
Come just in time
Most beautiful flower.75
Romance of the Soul
Sick with Love and Absence

The lover God visits
His pallid bride,
Sick with love,
And wishes her health.
He learned she was in bed,
Stricken with the sickness of absence,
A sickness of heart
For those who truly love.
Among created things she finds
None that gladdens her soul.
For when God is absent,
God alone consoles.

“My Jesus sweet,” cries the soul,
“You are my sickness’s cure.
And I shall not have it
Until you enter my door.
I remember, absent one,
How with frosty head
You passed down my street
Whispering a thousand-fold tenderness.
I remember, oh my Jesus,
How all through the night,
With sighs and knocks,
You called at my door.
I remember, one night,
They took you prisoner
When they found you
In an orchard with me.
When you set out for battle,
A sword on your shoulder,
To fight bravely with three
Vicious ruffians who tempted me;
When you stretched your hand to me
They nailed it to a cross,
Where, though left for dead,
You emerged unharmed from the fight.
When, returning for me, they left you
Beaten, naked, and mistreated,
It was difficult to recognize you;
When, after three long days,
You returned from the fight,
More gallant than the sun itself,
To give me your greeting,
When my soul was at your side
And seated at your table,
You took bites from your mouth
And gave them to her [the soul],
These acts of kindness and love
The soul recalls, weeping,
Sure that it now suffers
This punishment for its own sins.
Come! Life of my soul,
And give life to a dead soul,
For if its life comes not,
There is no reason to flee death.”
The hidden lover,
Dead with love for her [the soul],
Uncovers himself, delighted
To hear such expressions of kindness,
And opening his arms and chest,
He sits on the bed, wiping
The loving pearls from her eyes.
“No more tears, soul,” he says,
“Come into my heart, for I have
Left open the door that you might enter.
Take my body and eat,
Take my blood and drink,
For with these gifts
You will arise healed.”

Lyric to the Most Holy Sacrament

Though you disguise yourself,
Gallant divine,
In all your bounteous gifts
Your people know your face.

Lover king,
wounded by love,
in the mountains
you donned a coat
of whitest skins.
Your head you crowned
with thorns of wheat
infused with sweet lilies.

No matter the disguise,
Gallant divine,
In all your bounteous gifts
Your people know your face.

You wore a coat
Arrayed in stars and pearls
For the Bethlehem cold,
And a thousand hearts
Cling to your peasant’s
Cap of curly locks.
On your table you desire
Only the cleanest cloth,
The salt of your word,
Knives of agony.
The bread is your flesh,
The wine is your blood,
And in each morsel
We eat and drink infinity.

Publication Information: José de Valdivielso, “Letra al Santísimo sacramento,” in Romancero espiritual en gracia de los esclavos del Santísimo Sacramento (Madrid, 1663), 8–9.

Notes

4. Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis*, chaps. 232–39 (*PG* 44: 401–404). When translations have been modified, I provide references to Rufino’s Latin version, available in volume 13 of Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* (abbreviated *PG*). References to Migne’s *Patrologia Latina* will be abbreviated *PL*.
7. It is nearly meaningless to speak of the way in which “the commentary tradition” treats this theme, since that tradition is legendarily massive and multifarious. I use the term to refer to the handful of commentators I take as my guides in this article: primarily Origen and Gregory the Great, but also Ambrose of Milan and Gregory of Nyssa—and, a bit farther down the line, the French baroque poet Claude Hopil (c. 1588–c. 1633).


11. Hopil, Méditations, 11.
12. Ibid., 24.
17. Ibid., 3.13, 230; PG 13: 179
19. Ibid., 1.1.5.
20. Ibid., 1.1.7.
21. Ibid., 2.11.7.
22. Ibid., 3.13, 232.
23. Ibid., 3.13, 234.
26. The rest of the paragraph is much indebted to Patricia Cox Miller’s fine article, “‘Pleasure of the Text, Text of Pleasure’: Eros and Language in Origen’s ‘Commentary on the Song of Songs’,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 54, no. 2 (1986): 241–53.
28. Comm. in Cant., 1.1, 60.
29. Ibid., 2.8, 148.
34. Comm. in Cant., prol. 2, 38.
35. Gregory, Super cantica canticorum expositio, proemium, 2 (PL 79: 473)
37. This way of reading Gregory’s metaphor is indebted to Miller’s reflections on Origen and Barthes. See Miller, “Pleasure of the Text,” 247.
41. Augustine, De trinitate 15.9.15.
42. Comm. in Cant., 1.1, 61.
43. Octavio Paz, La llama doble: amor y erotismo (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1993), 20.
46. Hopil, Méditations, 414.
48. Leone Ebreo, Dialoghi d’amore (Vinegia, 1558), 106
49. Diccionario de la lengua castellana (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1732), def. 4, 421
50. Aquinas, Summa theologicae, 3a, q. 73, a. 3.
51. Many of Valdivielso’s eucharistic poems, this one included, were written on the occasion of the festival of Corpus Christi in Toledo, Spain.
53. Sebastián de Covarrubias, Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española (Madrid: Imprenta del Reino, 1611), 422.
57. For a description of the monstrance used in the Corpus Christi procession in Toledo, Spain, see Francis G. Very, The Spanish Corpus Christi Procession: A Literary and Folkloric Study (Valencia: Tipografía Moderna, 1962), 33
58. On this point, see the helpful discussion in Arantza Mayo, “‘Parece lo que no es, y no es lo que parece’: Guises and Disguises in Poems to the Most Holy Sacrament,” Bulletin of Hispanic Studies 86, no. 5 (2009): 751–61. The same image also appears elsewhere in the Christian tradition. In his Liber de carne Christi, for instance, Ter-
tullian writes that the incarnate Christ “clothed himself [in dúit] in our flesh” (PL 2: 781), while in his (possibly spurious) commentary on the story of Jesus’s encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–26), John of Chrysostom takes the references to Jacob (vv. 5–6, 12) as an occasion to recall that Jacob wrestled with God (Gen 32:22–32) and then to interpret that wrestling as an intimation of God’s intention to “clothe himself [ἐνδύσασθαι] in human flesh for our sake” (PG 59: 538).

59. Alonso de Bonilla, Peregrinos pensamientos de mysterios divinos (Baeza: Pedro de la Cuesta, 1614), 73
61. The use of the sartorial image to describe the Eucharist is also relatively common in Golden Age Spanish eucharistic poetry. For additional examples and discussion, see Mayo, “Guises and Disguises,” 254–58.
62. Gregory the Great, Homiliarium in evangelia, 1.8 (PL 76: 1104).
63. St. Aelred, Sermo 2 (PL 195: 227). The pun on pannis and panis is implicit in Aelred, but it is difficult to imagine that he does not have it in mind.
64. The Incarnation is of course also an act of agape, and this, rather than eros, is the term standardly used in the New Testament to describe God’s love for humanity. But despite occasional and influential suggestions that eros and agape constitute mutually incompatible conceptions of love, there is in fact strong precedent in the Christian tradition (e.g., Origen, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Pseudo-Dionysius) for seeing eros and agape not simply as compatible but also as mutually reinforcing. For references and discussion, see D. C. Schindler, “The Redemption of Eros: Philosophical Reflections on Benedict XVI’s First Encyclical,” Communio 33, no. 3 (2006): 375–99.
65. Comm. in Cant., 1.1, 61.
66. Socrates, puns on eros/erotan at Cratylus 398d.
67. See Frederick Rener’s discussion of this motif in Interpretatio: Language and Translation from Cicero to Tyler (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), 24–26.
68. Gregory, Super cantica canticorum expositio, proemium, 2 (PL 79: 473)
69. Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 8, Proemium, 20; Cicero De oratore 1, 31, 142. I owe my knowledge of these passages to Rener, Interpretatio, 24.
70. Aquinas uses a similar expression in the Catena on Luke 22: “[Christ] substituted the body and blood of the lamb with the sacrament of his own body and blood in the figure of bread and wine [in panis ac vini figura subsistuens].” Aquinas, Catena in Lucam cap. 22, lec. 5. The term figura appears regularly in Valdivielso’s other works. To cite only a few examples: in “Octaves on the Institution of the Most Holy Sacrament” he describes Christ as the “substantial figure [substancial figura] of God’s substance” (Romancero espiritual, 158), while in the “Fourth Mystery of the Cross,” he calls Christ the “figura of the Father” (Romancero espiritual, 251). Similarly, in Sagrario de Toledo (Tabernacle of Toledo, Barcelona, 1618), Valdivielso describes the Eucharist
as the “spotless mirror into which / God transfers his substantial figure [sustancial figura]” (250). Finally, in his Vida, excelencias y muerte del Gloriosissimo Patriarca San Joseph (Madrid, 1728), Valdivielso uses the term figura repeatedly and in a variety of senses (see, e.g., 29, 54, 155, 166, 174, 182, 214, 215, 228, 266, 305, 386, 391).

71. This is a paraphrase of Quintilian’s definition at Institutio oratoria, 9.1.4.


73. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Valdivielso’s actually composed the poem on parchment. Given the widespread availability of paper in seventeenth-century Spain, he presumably did not. Instead, “parchment” here is a metaphor of the material process of committing words to page.

74. Cf. the closing stanza of Aquinas’s “Adoro te devote,”

Jesus, whom I now see (aspicio) unveiled, [does he mean ENveiled here?]
I pray, let what I so desire be fulfilled,
That beholding (cernens) your face revealed,
I may be blessed to see (visu) your glory,

where the progression from aspicio to cernens to visu suggests that the telos of the poet’s physical contemplation of the Eucharist is the intellectual contemplation of the Beatific Vision itself. (Aquinas, “Adoro te devote,” 70 [translation modified].)

75 José de Valdivielso, “Ensaladilla de la Esposa y el Esposo al Santísimo Sacramento,” in Romancero espiritual en gracia de los esclavos del Santissimo Sacramento (Madrid, 1663), 75–77.

76 José de Valdivielso, “Romance a un alma enferma de amor y ausencia,” in Romancero espiritual en gracia de los esclavos del Santissimo Sacramento (Madrid, 1663), 97–99.