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The Weight of Love

Davis, Robert Glenn

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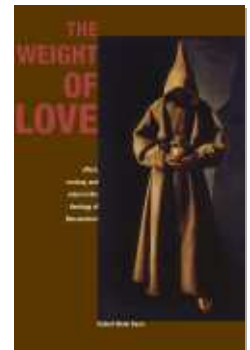
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C O N C L U S I O N

A Corpus, in Sum

A question of reading or hearing. In any case, negative theology would be nothing, very simply nothing, if this excess or this surplus (with regard to language) did not imprint some mark on some singular events of language and did not leave some remains on the body of a tongue . . .

A corpus, in sum.

—JACQUES DERRIDA, “Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)”¹

Throughout this book, I have attempted to trace a coincidence of opposites in Bonaventure’s devotional program, in which the innermost affective disposition of the soul—what Bonaventure calls the natural instinct for the good or *synderesis*—coincides with the brute, inanimate body. The soul’s natural instinct for the Good is its innate capacity to exceed its own faculties and operations. This capacity is at once constitutive of those deliberative, volitional faculties and irreducible to them. In a way that is similarly paradigmatic for much of late medieval affective devotional practice and reflection, a site of excess, affect names for Bonaventure a place of immanent otherness that is finally inassimilable to the operations of intellect. This place is *unknown* to the soul and yet as intimate to the soul as the body to which it is joined. At once secret and manifest, then, the affective conforms to the paradoxical logic of mystical theology.

For Bonaventure, this logic is also exemplified by Francis’s body. In the *Legenda Maior*, the drama of secrecy and disclosure unfolds immediately upon Francis’s wounding Seraphic vision: “Christ’s servant, seeing that the stigmata impressed so vividly in his flesh could not be concealed from his close companions, was nevertheless afraid to expose the secret

[*sacramentum*] of the Lord.²² Illuminato, however, warns Francis not to hide the divine secret from the benefit of others: “The holy man was moved by these words, even though at other times he used to say, ‘My secret is mine [*secretum meum mihi*].’”²³ Thus Francis recounts his vision to his companions, though not fully: “He added that the one who appeared to him said some things that he would never disclose (*aperiret*) to anyone as long as he lived.”²⁴ There are secrets that Francis will take to his death, even as his dying body betrays him: “Though he tried with great diligence to hide the treasure he found in the field, still he could not keep others from seeing the stigmata in his hands and feet.”²⁵ The “Lord’s secret” can neither be disclosed nor hidden. The secret (or mystery, or sacrament: *sacramentum*) unleashes a play of hiding and revealing, and yet it is not a matter of one or the other. Francis’s secret is as open as the bleeding wound at his side. And like his wounds, it is not contained within the boundary of interiority, but produces a radical, ecstatic reconciliation of inner and outer. The secret is not something that Francis can hide, because there is nothing to hide, and so nothing to disclose.⁶ The spiritual depth of Francis’s compassion is at the same time the porous and protruding surface of his body. Marked with the signs of Christ’s passion, Francis’s body is a text, indicating the reconciliation of spirit and flesh, inner and outer.

At the opening of the final chapter of Francis’s life, Bonaventure announces that Francis was now “nailed to the cross as much in his flesh as in his spirit” as he depicts Francis’s dying body (*corpus emortuum*) being carried through the streets.⁷ The near-dead body is the obedient body, the body that does not resist the prompting of desire. Thus the glorified and stigmatized body contrasts with the body that Francis used to address as Brother Ass: the body in its stubborn resistance to the promptings of Francis’s love of God.⁸ The miraculous Seraphic vision transforms Francis’s body not only by the signs of Christ’s passion but also by the weakening of its resistance—not to the soul’s promptings but to a different motion. Francis’s body becomes Christ’s body in that it no longer moves itself but is fixed to the cross, carried simply by its passion. The body comes to be moved in accordance with the movement of the spirit. And the spirit moves inexorably toward God, like a simple body, by its weight.

Nevertheless, the paths of soul and body diverge in death. At Francis’s death, his followers witness the ascent of his soul in the form of a star rising on a cloud to heaven.⁹ Yet for all the radiance of this vision, it is Francis’s corpse that becomes the locus of wonder and desire. Abandoned to death, the miraculous nails in his hands and feet are not only plainly visible but tangible. The body of Francis “confirmed the faith and incited the love”

of the many citizens of Assisi who came to experience the presence of the saint's body, and news of the glorious body "excited the desire" of all who heard of it.¹⁰ Bonaventure reports that Francis's formerly dark flesh became dazzlingly bright, contrasting brilliantly with the iron black protrusions from his hands and feet. The natural contraction of the flesh after death shrank the holy man's side wound into a perfect round rose. And at the same time, in an unnatural reversal of *rigor mortis*, his limbs became soft and easily movable (*mollia et tractabilia*).¹¹

It would be clear, then, even if Bonaventure did not point it out explicitly, that Francis's corpse has been transformed, miraculously, into a resurrection body (*illius secundae stolae pulchritudinem praetendebat*).¹² More specifically, Francis's body has become the resurrected body of Christ, with a doubting knight by the name of Jerome playing the part of Thomas.¹³ Touching the wounds with his own hands, and moving the nails around Francis's hands and feet, the knight is cured of his doubt. Yet where Jesus appeared in his glorified body to his disciples walking and speaking, Francis's resurrection body remains inanimate. Just as was done before his death, Francis's body is now carried into the streets of Assisi. His corpse is transformed into a radiant example of perfect obedience, beautifully wounded, entirely unresistant to being moved, and bereft of both intellect and will. Francis's sanctity, which began with an inborn affective ardor, reaches consummation finally in his inanimate body, obedience perfected in death, virtue materialized in flesh. His body is at once silent and eloquent. It heals the wounds of doubt and yet stupefies the intellect.¹⁴ The body keeps its secret in the exhibition of the body and the certainty of death.

If Francis's death is the enactment of Christ's passion, then the soul's *excessus* in union with God is itself an enactment of this death. The soul's journey into God and the Dionysian abandonment of intellect that takes place at the journey's consummation is a prefiguration, a living into, the glorified corpse that Francis's body miraculously exhibits on earth prior to resurrection. The soul's ascent to God is its becoming-body, its natural desire for God is its groaning to become body, to be consumed and moved wholly and simply by God. Both the *Itinerarium* and the Franciscan spirituality for which it serves as blueprint are often described as a journey from the appreciation of the corporeal traces of God to God's incorporeal being and goodness. Yet the enduring presence of Christ's suffering body at the culmination of the journey suggests that the stages of ascent chart, paradoxically, not only an ascent from the corporeal to the spiritual but also a transformation, effected by love, of soul into body—that is, into the body of Christ and the body of Francis. And that, as Bonaventure writes in

the seventh chapter of the *Itinerarium*, is “mystical and most secret.” Like the Seraphic revelation to Francis, the secret is not *scientia*, something that could be revealed to the intellect, but something that can only be “known” in the darkness devoid of intellect. The secret remains hidden from intellect essentially; it can only be experienced as the ecstatic body that the soul becomes *in excessus mentis*: the body of Francis *in excess* of the soul in its deliberative faculties. The *itinerarium* is the journey of the soul out of itself and into the body of Christ. What remains hidden from intellect, the secret that cannot be *known* because it is heterogeneous to knowledge as such, is the embodiment of the soul that is fulfilled and redeemed in union with God.

Not only for Francis, but for his followers, the practice of ardent devotion to Christ’s suffering is similarly oriented toward this ecstatic becoming-body of affect. As I suggested in the Introduction, the climactic episode of Francis’s vision of the crucified Seraph is itself an exemplary scene of Passion devotion, an icon and model of the practice of vivid and highly wrought meditation on Christ’s crucifixion that Bonaventure commends to his brothers and sisters in the Franciscan orders. As an example of Passion meditation, Francis’s vision at LaVerna establishes the endpoint and purpose of meditating on Jesus’s human suffering: The lover takes the place of Francis taking the place of Christ on the cross, in a double displacement of the self in desire. Passion meditation is an ecstatic practice leading to Dionysian union.

As Karnes rightly observes, Bonaventure’s treatises on Passion meditation—most notably the *Lignum vitae* and *On the Perfection of Life Addressed to the Sisters*, engage the reader’s imagination, memory, and conscience; neither their purpose nor their methods can accurately be described as wholly affective.¹⁵ Meditation on the scenes of Christ’s passion is effortful, Bonaventure indicates. The practice requires the mind’s focused attention. But in drawing a devotional template that begins in purgative self-examination and ends in the meditant standing outside herself and—through the fulfillment of the proper affections of fear, love, and compassion—becoming so intimate to Christ that his lifeless body becomes hers, Bonaventure depicts the practice of Passion meditation as a Dionysian ascent into a crucifying and ecstatic union in which love is the binding and transforming force.

In Bonaventure’s most extensive treatment of the practice of Passion meditation, the *Lignum vitae*, the reader finds herself in the text from the opening words: “With Christ I am nailed to the cross.”¹⁶ While narrating and interpreting the meaning of Jesus’s crucifixion, Bonaventure weaves

the first person through the text, placing the reader in the scene, until Paul's identification with Christ with which Bonaventure opens the work becomes the reader's identification with Christ—even and especially unto death. Accordingly, “the true worshipper of God and disciple of Christ” should strive to carry Christ's cross “in both his soul and his flesh [*tam mente quam carne*] . . . until he can truly feel [*sentire*] in himself what the Apostle said above.”¹⁷ Such an effort engages the memory, intellect, and the will, and indeed the form of the *Lignum vitae* appeals explicitly to the imagination as an aid to understanding.¹⁸ But to be nailed with Christ to the cross, to take Christ's place in that moment, is, Bonaventure writes, an affection (*affectum*) and a feeling (*sensum*). Compassion for Christ's suffering is finally ecstatic, lifting the meditant outside herself and bringing about a total identification with and transformation into Christ. This is no less the case when Bonaventure addresses the *sponsae Christi*, a group of Poor Clares for whom he composed *On the Perfection of Life Addressed to the Sisters*, probably during the period just after his election as Minister General.¹⁹ While the treatise *On Perfection* is focused on practical instruction in the pursuit of devotion, its organization is less a step-by-step outline of perfection than a primer in the virtues and habits proper to the religious life. Like the *Lignum vitae*, *On Perfection* details the practice of exercising the imagination in order to witness the graphic details of Jesus's human suffering and scripts the appropriate interpretations and affective responses to that suffering.

In Sarah McNamer's opinion, *On Perfection* presents a more emotionally immediate program of meditation than the *Lignum vitae*, in which the immediacy of affective response is mitigated by a heavily allegorical framework.²⁰ McNamer attributes this difference to the fact that in the former work, Bonaventure is addressing religious women and encouraging them in a practice in which they are already engaged. However, while Bonaventure highlights certain devotional topoi as particularly suited to women (he is particularly scandalized at the prospect of garrulous nuns who neglect their commitment to silence), and while Jesus is frequently referred to as “your spouse,” the text gives no indication that meditation on Christ's passion, or the affections proper to that practice, are inflected by sex, or that compassionate meditation on Jesus's sufferings is the special province of women. Instead, the text presents Passion meditation as one of a repertoire of devotional practices (including examination of one's faults, fear for future punishment, focused attention on God, and gratitude for one's vocation) proper to a mendicant life aimed at cultivating and sustaining an ardent, consuming love.

In this way, the devotional program addressed to the sisters is consistent with the itinerary toward union with God that Bonaventure develops in other devotional works such as the *Itinerarium* and *Triplex via*.²¹ The leit-motif of *On Perfection* is not nuptial fidelity but self-immolating affection. Lamenting the resistance to poverty among members of his own order, Bonaventure blames the cooling of desire, which leaves the heart frozen and in need of clothing and shelter to cover it. In an oblique allusion to Francis's life, Bonaventure notes that those who burn with the heat of love seek nakedness, casting off their garments. Remembrance of the Passion is offered as a means of tending the fires of love. One must feed the altar of the heart daily with the wood of the cross.²²

In a chapter on perfect prayer, Bonaventure explains the goal of this ardent devotion in terms that recall the final chapter of the *Itinerarium* and the culmination of the *Legenda*. Citing Augustine's definition of prayer as "the turning of the mind in to God [*conversio mentis in Deum*]," Bonaventure explains:

When in prayer, you should recollect your whole self and enter, with your Beloved, into the little chamber of the heart, and remain there alone with him. Forget all exterior things [*omnium exteriorium*], and with your whole heart, your whole mind, your whole affect, your desire, your whole devotion, raise yourself above yourself. Do not slacken your spirit from prayer, but keep ascending upwards through the ardor of devotion, until you enter into the place of the wonderful tabernacle, even to the house of God. There, when you have in some manner seen your beloved with the eye of your soul, and tasted how sweet is the Lord, and how great the multitude of his delights, fall into his embrace, and kiss him with the lips of intimate devotion. Then you will be wholly alienated from yourself, wholly rapt into heaven, and wholly transformed into Christ.²³

This passage, in the context of the treatise's emphasis on gospel meditation, corroborates Karnes's observation that medieval meditation on Christ's passion had a mystical purpose. Passion meditation charted a progression from visualizing Jesus's human sufferings to beholding the glory of his divinity. This duality is further evident in *On Perfection* in a passage on evangelical poverty. Here, as in the *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure identifies example and reward as the two factors that move the soul to desire. In order to cultivate a love for poverty, one should first contemplate the example of holy poverty presented through the humble life and gruesome death of Jesus, as well as through the lives of his exemplary followers, Francis and

Clare. And secondly, one should concentrate on the heavenly reward that awaits the person who shuns the comforts and riches of the world: "Voluntary poverty merits one to appear before the creator of glory, and to enter into the power of the Lord, in that eternal tabernacle, those illuminated mansions. They become citizens of that city whose artificer and sustainer is God."²⁴ The distinction between example and reward quickly collapses, however, when Bonaventure identifies this celestial dwelling as "nothing other than you, Lord Jesus Christ."²⁵ Jesus is both example and reward, and so to live according to the example of his life and death *is* to enter the mansions prepared for those who follow him.

The goal of entering into Christ as one's eternal dwelling is echoed in the treatise's discussion of Passion meditation. The genre of Passion meditation is often distinguished by the presence of rhetorical devices used to make the reader sensorially, imaginatively, and emotionally present to the events of Christ's Passion, as though the meditant were herself an eyewitness to the scene. Bonaventure explains the goal of meditating on the crucifixion, however, as a far deeper intimacy. The text appeals directly to the reader to

draw near, O handmaid [*famula*], with the feet of your affection step to Jesus wounded, to Jesus crowned with thorns, to Jesus fixed to the gibbet of the cross, and with the blessed apostle Thomas, do not merely look upon the piercings of the nails in Jesus's hands; do not merely stick your finger into the place where the nails were; do not merely stick your hand into his side, but pass totally through the door in his side up to Jesus's very heart, and there, with the most ardent love of the crucified one, you will be transformed into Christ.²⁶

Here, the intense, sustained meditations on every aspect of Jesus's wounded body aim at more than compassion. But they neither leave behind nor rise above Jesus's humanity.²⁷ Rather, like the lover of poverty who longs to enter the heavenly city that is Christ, the meditant passes wholly into Jesus's wounded flesh until, fueled by love, she fully incorporates herself into Christ, taking the place of the Crucified. The text explains how this transformation comes about: "Fastened with the nails of holy fear, transfixed by the lance of the most deep-seated love [*praecordialis dilectionis*], penetrated [*transverberata*] by the sword of intimate compassion [*compassio*], seek for nothing else, desire nothing else, wish to be consoled by nothing else, than to be able to die with Christ on the Cross. And then, with the apostle Paul, you will cry out and say: In Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live, now not I; but Christ lives in me."²⁸ Fear, love, and compassion are the instruments of

the reader's Passion, pious affections becoming-body in the soul's ecstatic transformation into Christ. The wound in Jesus's side is not simply a portal one passes through on the way from flesh to spirit, but an aporia, the gap in which affective dispossession, the ecstatic substitution of the lover for Christ, is embodied.²⁹ The incorporation, the becoming-body, of the lover into Christ is an affective transformation that displaces the "I" even as she testifies to her own crucifixion in the words of the Apostle.³⁰ An impossible testimony—the "I" who testifies to her crucifixion already "no longer"—the words of the Apostle are not the expression of the meditator's interior state but a kind of corpse, the body that remains in and after the *transitus*. Yet as the vacated "I" becomes at the same time the place in which "Christ lives," the body of her testimony, Christ's crucified body, is also Christ's resurrection body. The words of the meditator are witnesses to more than a transformation of the self; they are witnesses to the limits of what can be claimed for any self.

As Charles Stang has shown with regard to the Dionysian corpus, the twin, contradictory affirmations of Paul's words ("I live, now not I") amount to more than a simple self-denial. Instead, consistent with the dynamic of affirmation and negation developed throughout Dionysius's mystical theology, the apostle's words testify to the unknowing—the double movement of cataphasis and apophasis—of the self. As Stang concludes, Dionysius "offers an account of what it is to be properly human in relation to God—namely, no longer an 'I,' neither yourself nor someone else, because you are now both yourself *and* Christ."³¹ In Bonaventure's hands, a devotional practice aiming at self-consuming love fueled by the remembrance of Jesus's bodily sufferings follows this double movement of Dionysian mystical theology: The meditator is urged to think over (variants of the term *cogitare* appear frequently in *De perfectione*), imagine, and feel Christ's body in pursuit of union, an incorporation more intimate than knowledge. The body of Christ is no longer an object of knowledge, but the place in which the lover dwells, united through love, fear, and compassion, in an attachment that transforms lover into Beloved. The pious affections proper to Passion meditation reveal themselves finally to be what they always already were—Dionysian, deifying *eros*.

Recall that in Bonaventure's early scholastic account of synderesis, the apex of the mind, he maintains that all knowledge is dependent on language and other external information in order to be realized, save for the affects of loving and fearing God. These affections proper to the divine are given innately and immediately to the soul. Thus they can be said to be "known," but the term is partly equivocal. The innate love and fear of God

are set apart from everything else the soul is capable of knowing; that is to say, they are kept secret.

Because they require nothing external for their realization, these affections proper to God are in one sense that which is most fully claimed by the soul: “my secret is mine.” It is a fitting coincidence, then, that the very same love and fear become, in the final passing over, the *arma Christi*, the instruments of the lover’s passion. That which belongs to me utterly is thereby the means of my dispossession. The words that embody this dispossession—“In Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live, but now not I . . .”—are, to recur to the epigraph that opens this chapter, an imprint on the tongue, in which the tongue refers both to the body of the lover and to the discourse of Christian mystical theology. Just as Francis’s seraphic vision dispossesses him and leaves his body marked, the lover’s incorporation into Jesus unseats the “I” who testifies to that transformation, so that her words, said and unsaid, remain as a corporeal trace. The words of the lover are no more (and no less) *hers* than Francis’s secret is his. To say that the lover’s words *express* her interior affections, or to say that Francis’s compassion is “externalized” in his flesh, would be to reinscribe in these scenes the selfsame subject that this devotional program aims to interrupt. A closer analog of what is occurring in this revelation can be found in Derrida’s reflection on death and secrecy:

And if my secret self, that which can be revealed only to the other, to the wholly other, to God if you wish, is a secret that I will never reflect on, that I will never know or experience or possess as my own, then what sense is there in saying that it is “my” secret, or in saying more generally that a secret *belongs*, that it is proper to or belongs to some “one,” or to some *other* who remains *someone*? It is perhaps there that we find the secret of secrecy, namely, that it is not a matter of knowing and that it is there for no-one.³²

What sense is there, after all? Only a sense peculiar to the place that Bonaventure reserves for the height of *affectus* in Christian mystical theology: an ecstatic inhabitation in which soul and body, possession and dispossession, crucifixion and resurrection, coincide.

