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# MYSTICISM AND/AS LOVE THEORY

Edited by

Marc De Kesel & Ad Poirters



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MARC DE KESEL

MYSTICISM, THEORY & BEYOND

On Mystical Love Theory in General and on Some Passages  
in Jean de Saint-Samson

‘Mysticism and/as Love Theory’: what can a title like this mean? What kind of point does it intend to make?

Characterizing ‘mysticism as [a matter of] love’ makes sense: a lot of mystical traditions put love forward as the main road to reach the mystical goal. But does ‘mysticism as theory’ make sense? Is the mystical not by definition *beyond* theory? And does this not count for ‘love’ as well? Is love not precisely something non-theoretical par excellence?

Obviously, the problematic issue in the title of this volume is ‘theory’. Both mysticism and love are commonly defined as surpassing the limits of theory. This is indeed the common opinion. But is this opinion correct? Are mysticism and love really beyond theory? It is true that they are *said* and *considered* to be so. But can this opinion itself be anything other than theoretical? And what is more, does a theory not always include its ‘beyond’, at least in a formal way? Does it, in some way or another, not inevitably have some ideas about its limits and, consequently, about its beyond? Not at the level of its contents, but *formally*. Formally, the ‘beyond of theory’ is in fact a highly theoretical notion.

In what follows, I defend the thesis that, in our Western tradition, love is a theoretical concept, through and through. Likewise, Western Christian mysticism is supported by an elaborated theory too – a theory in which love is far from absent. If, in this mystical theory, there is a ‘beyond’, this is not situated in the mystical climax of an *unio mystica*, but rather in its opposite, in what disturbs the aimed union.

The first part of this article (I) refers to the platonic love theory that has dominated the major part of our history (1). This theory is in itself already a theory of its own beyond – a topic that, centuries after Plato, became the central point in Neo-Platonism (2). The third section elaborates on the specific way in which Christianity, in its relation to the beyond of theory, introduces ‘love’ (3). All of these aspects together articulate the founding ‘grammar’ of Western mysticism (4).

And where, then, does the mystical experience go ‘beyond’ the limits of theory? The second part (II) explains that this is not so much in the ecstatic moment of a union with the divine, but rather in the moments when it risks relapsing into the facticity of corporeal love (5-11).

## I. Mysticism – A Theory of Love

### 1. *Theory of Love*

The ancient Greek word for love is *eros*. It is also the name of the eternally young son of Aphrodite, shooting around arrows with his famous bow. Wounded by one of his *golden* arrows, one inevitably falls in love and this love will be answered; wounded, on the contrary, by one of his *leaden* arrows, one’s love remains forever unanswered.<sup>1</sup> Why? Do not ask a god why. The reasons why a god does what he does are his. In the eyes of mortal human beings, it is all blind fate. For the ancient Greeks, this was the divine nature of love. Love simply occurs to someone, and the reason for this escapes him or her entirely. Is love absolute? Yes, it is, but in a way similar to the absoluteness of death. ‘Love is strong as death’.<sup>2</sup>

Is there truth in love? For the ancient Greeks, this would have been a strange, even nonsensical question. Just like the gods and the entire domain of the divine, love does not obey the laws of truth. Just like any other god, love too does not heed the criterion false/true. Love is simply something that occurs; it has not even to be faithful to itself. In love, all depends on the whimsicality of the god, whose interventions we – as mortal humans – can only understand as mere blind fate.

This is why speaking of a theory of love in ancient, pre-philosophical Greece simply does not make sense. Theory only emerged when truth – or, what amounts to the same thing, the criterion ‘true versus false’ – was introduced as the paradigm of the way in which humans relate to reality. This introduction took place in the sixth century BC on the Greek-speaking coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, with the emergence of philosophy. That was when people started to

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of the origin of the god ‘Eros’, see chapter 7 in: Barbara Breitenberger, *Aphrodite and Eros: The Development of Erotic Mythology in Early Greek Poetry and Cult*, New York/ London: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This is a quote from Song of Songs 8:6. Notice however that the entire biblical – and, more generally, monotheistic – tradition contradicts this statement and rather claims that ‘Love is stronger than death’. I return to this issue further on in this essay. ‘Love is strong as death’ is clearly a remainder of a genuine (pagan) Hellenism within the monotheistic biblical text.

relate to reality on the basis of truth – i.e., the idea that Logos (language),<sup>3</sup> gives access to the essence of things. Not the perishable tree we see, but the word ‘tree’ gives access to its unperishable, eternal essence, to the ‘tree’ that will never coincide with a non-tree. Logos – i.e., words used in a proper and purified way – leads to truth, to true knowledge. Such is the power of *logical* thinking. It introduces the non-contradiction rule, which became the basic rule of Western philosophy and (what amounted to the same thing at the time) science.

‘Being is, not-being is not’, Parmenides said.<sup>4</sup> If you stick to the word [*logos*] ‘being’, you have access to what is and never will not be. Logos reveals being ‘as it is’. The problem, however, is that our eyes and other senses never meet such a world. They meet a world where nothing remains what it is, a world full of transience and mortality. What kind of world is it, then, that we see with our sensible eyes? How to think this world in which nothing ever *is* (read: remains forever) what it *is*? How to think the ‘being’ of this non-being?

Plato was the first to answer this question. Remember for instance his famous ‘myth of the cave’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the sensible world we see around us is not ‘being as it is’. And yet it is, Plato says, in the sense that it is the shadow of true, ‘logical’ being. What we see on the cave’s wall is *mimesis*: representations of the true things, or, as Plato calls them, the ‘Ideas’ – i.e., that which we face in our ‘logical’ thinking.

Where is Eros in all of this? It is in this context that love receives its first theory. Plato uses *eros* as a term for the desire to find a way out of the cave full of untrue representations and to go searching for the truth, for the real ‘logical’ world, where things just are – and remain – what they are. In other words, eros is what makes us think critically; what makes us, in a world of shadows, distinguish what these shadows are shadows of. Thinking is longing for truth; it is loving truth. That longing, that love is ‘erotic’. How then?

In dialogues such as the *Symposium* or the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes what happens when I am erotically attracted by the beautiful body of the one I love. Why am I in love with beauty? Because in beauty I face something that I wish to *remain* so. I wish the beloved body not to age, not to change, but to endure

<sup>3</sup> ‘Logos’ is language used in a purely ‘logical’ way, i.e. ‘language’ in which words are strictly taken for what they say. Numbers as used in arithmetic and mathematics can be seen as paradigmatic here. ‘One’, taken in its ‘logical’ sense, is ‘one’. It will always be the one its says, it will never be less or more than one.

<sup>4</sup> See *Fragment 5 (6 DK)* in: *The Fragments of Parmenides: A Critical Text with Introduction and Translation, the Ancient Testimonia and a Commentary* by A.H. Coxon, rev & exp. ed., with new transl. Richard McKirahan, pref. Malcolm Schofield, Las Vegas/ Zurich/ Athens: Parmenides, 2009, 58, 59.

<sup>5</sup> *The Republic 514a-520a*; see: *The Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari, transl. Tom Griffith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 220-227.

as it is. Of course, the body will age, and in that sense it is not real being; it is but a 'shadow', *mimesis*. But in the beauty of this 'shadow', I am longing for something this shadow is the shadow of. In beauty, I long for the truth of being – of being so far as 'it is what it is' and never changes, i.e., never will be what it is not. In the beauty of my beloved's body, what attracts me is in fact the truth of his being.<sup>6</sup> In him, I love the truth. This is why I am still able to love my beloved even when, aged, his body has lost all beauty. I will love the truth he tells me, the truth we both discuss and try to achieve. In the end, I will not simply love the truth that comes out of *his* mouth, but I will love *the* truth *in general*. I will be a 'philosopher', someone with a *philia* [love, friendship] for *sophia* [wisdom, truth].

As a philosopher, I walk the path of eros. Eros, desire, has its origin – its *being* – in that what it longs for, which is nothing else than the truth, than being-as-it-is. It is the truth of being that makes me long for it. Through the radiance of corporeal beauty, truth itself has seduced me to leave the cave of shadows and has encouraged me to purify myself and my desire in order to deliver myself from all fakeness, falseness and untruth. Thinking, 'doing theory', searching for truth all require eros, although eros that needs sublimation and purification to become what it really *is* and to reach its goal, which is being.

## 2. *Theory of Theory's Beyond*

Love is not beyond theory, as common sense likes to state. It is rather the other way around: love is what drives theory. Thus Plato. But what about mysticism? Or, since talking about mysticism is an anachronism in Plato's case, what about the beyond of theory? Is there not something which radically escapes theory? If Plato's answer to this question is positive – yes, there is a beyond escaping theory – he nonetheless immediately adds that this beyond is at the same time theory's very core.

Let us turn back to the 'cave'. Why does Plato come up with this 'myth'? Not to explain the difference between Ideas and sensible reality – or, what amounts to the same thing, between 'shadows' on the wall and real being, between *doxa* [opinion] and *epistèmè* [true knowledge]. Explaining such *logical* differences does

<sup>6</sup> Indeed 'his': the 'beloved' in Plato's text is always male, more exactly a young male. In ancient Athens, *Erotikè* was the name for the love between an older man (characterized as having a beard) and a (beardless) young man – a love that is intrinsically temporal, for it is the procedure to introduce a free young man (living in the *gynaika*, the house ruled by women) to the public world (the *agora*) where free adults lay down the law. (See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* [*The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2] transl. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1990.) It is this 'pederast' love that Plato reshapes (i.e., sublimates) into the philosopher's way to Truth.

not require a *myth* at all. Only illogical things do. What the myth tries to clarify is the fact that the non-being of the ‘shadows’ on the wall, in some way or another, *is*. How to explain that not-being nonetheless *is*? What is the ontological status of things that have no real ontological status? In other words: if real being is the realm of Ideas outside the cave, why then is there such thing as a cave? What is its ontological status?

Here the Logos fails, and a ‘myth’ is required. This myth consists of the story of the cave, with Ideas (real beings) behind the people’s back and their shadows on the cave’s wall (sensible phenomena). How, then, are these shadows possible? Thanks to the light beyond the Ideas that shines upon them, the myth answers. Is this light an Idea like the others? Is it being that is (and remains) what it is? Not exactly. The light is not a thing that unchangeably keeps the shape it has (as Ideas do); it is rather the opposite: it is ‘fluid’, insubstantial, constantly changing. It is, according to Plato, something like a source: it does not stop giving its light away, having it shine on Ideas, on real beings. And what is the effect of this shining? It makes shadows on the cave’s wall. Of course, these shadows are not real reality; they are false, non-being. Nonetheless, they do have something in common with the source of being. They are the effect of the light shining on real reality – the light that makes Ideas possible. And it is precisely thanks to the unreal reality of the shadows on the wall that we, locked up in the cave, are put in the position to notice the shadows, more precisely to realize that these shadows are but shadows and, thus, to look at them as if they invite us to go in search for that what they are shadows of. They are the shadows of Ideas, and that shadow-effect is caused by nothing else than the source of being, by the Idea beyond all other Ideas, the Idea beyond being: ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας [*epekeinas tēs ousias*; *Politeia* 509b].

Plato calls this Idea beyond being the ‘Idea of the Good’. The very ground of being – its source, that which makes being possible – is mere gift-giving; it is abundant goodness. In its abundance, the light-source does not only make the Ideas possible, but also their shadows on the cave’s wall. What is more, the abundant goodness, through the false shadows, enables us to leave those shadows behind and to go searching for the truth. It is goodness – *real* goodness, a goodness coinciding with the very source of being – that makes us think, that makes us desire for truth and that guarantees that this desire is based in the truth it longs for. Basically, being is excessively good, and this is the ultimate reason why we are able to think being, to touch with our logos the truth of reality.

However, to express the foundational goodness of being, Logos – logical thinking – falls short. Similarly, the Logos also falls short to express the goodness that is its own very source. This is why Plato uses a myth to express it. The ground of Logos, the foundation of logical thinking, can only be expressed by a myth.

So, is the ground of the Logos logical? Is the basis of rational theory rational? It is not. Logos is grounded in its beyond. And so is the basis of theory. Ultimately, Logos is Logos *of* its beyond; theory is theory *of* its beyond. The beyond constitutes the very core of logical theory and the entire logical theory is oriented towards this mysterious beyond.

This structure, which is drawn up in only a few passages in Plato's dialogues, becomes the central thesis in the coherently constructed system of Plotinus and of the different kinds of Neoplatonism after him. Being is what it is, it is 'one', but in its abundant goodness this one 'emanates' into the multiplicity of beings, spiritual and corporeal, in order to 'return' at the end – by the force of 'love' – to itself. The acts of thinking and loving participate in that process by which the oneness of being gives itself away to being's multiplicity, and the force that brings this multiplicity to itself is its return to the One.

An elaborate theory of the One: this is a first aspect that distinguishes Plotinus' thinking from Plato's. A second aspect is Plotinus' thesis that we humans are able to have a lived *experience* of the One, the source of being – an experience that by definition is extremely exceptional and that, when it occurs, is so overwhelming that we, instantaneously, lose ourselves in it. Unlike for Plato, for whom the starting point of thinking is the erotic perception of the other's body, for Plotinus that starting point is the individual's ecstatic experience of the One. It is this experience that awakens one's desire to go searching for the truth – which is ultimately unification with the One.

Summarizing Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought with respect to our initial question – the relation between mysticism, love and theory – we can state, first, that love is a matter of theory just like theory is a matter of love, and, second, that theory in its core is theory of its beyond. Looking for its ultimate goal, theory ultimately touches its untouchable, mysterious beyond as its very core.

Christian mysticism inherits both features. When it comes to love, it is never without theory, and neither are the mystical it aims at, nor the mystical paths it goes. Christian mysticism is a love theory, through and through.

### 3. *Loving Theory's Beyond...*

But where, precisely, is Christianity *itself* in all of this? Does Christianity need Plato to be a religion of love? Indeed, in its origin, Christian love has nothing to do with Plato. This does not, however, prevent this love, too, from being theoretical.

In the first centuries of Christianity's history, 'love' was a central concept within the theoretical framework of its narrative. This framework is one of a fulfilled messianism. Since Adam's fall, man has been marked by sin, death and finitude. In his goodness, God had given his Beloved People the Law (Torah).

By following its rules, man was supposed to restore his relationship with God. Since this did not really work, the Jewish religious imagination started to dream of a Messiah, a divine messenger who was to take away sin, death and finitude, introduce a new creation delivered from all of this, and restore eternal life. Christianity is based on a *fulfilled* messianism. In Jesus' death on the cross, the old creation died, and his resurrection introduced a new creation, the realm of the eternal life.

'Love' was the name for this new kind of human condition: a condition without finitude, without sin and death. The word the early Christians used for this love was not eros, since eros means a state of desire, a by definition unfulfilled, finite desire. To name the state of fulfilled desire, they took the word *agape*. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, in the first decades, Christians lived in 'agape-communities', where no one was in need, since no-one had any possession and all things were possessed in common.

Agapeic love was the heart of Christian theory, in the sense that it was the 'beyond' of theory, i.e., the place where its theory became reality. And the Christian lived in this state of divine 'love'.

Yet, to understand later Christian mysticism, one must realize that this agapeic love came to be mixed up with erotic love. Claiming to be delivered from sin, death and finitude in a world where these things were all over the place soon became untenable. This is why the idea of resurrection had to be supplemented by the idea of ascension. Christ has risen and delivered us from sin and death, but he has gone back to the Father for a while, and in the meantime, man has to wait for his return. Messianic expectation has been fulfilled and yet, at the same time, that expectation remains unfulfilled since the Messiah still has to come back to finish his messianic job.

In this condition of still expecting the Messiah, eros – *unfulfilled* desire – gained a place within the Christian narrative. The Christian still had to wait and long for God. He lived in God's love; he lived in agape: in the midst of finitude and death, he already shared the infinity of eternal life. But at the same time, he realized that this realm was not yet fully there, so he still had to wait and to long for it. His love for God – his living in God's *agapeic* love – was at the same time a longing for God – and in that sense it was eros as well.

It is no surprise that many intellectuals among the Christians were sensitive for Platonism and, later, Neo-Platonism. Both provided an excellent 'grammar' for the Christian mix of fulfilled and unfulfilled messianic expectation. Christians were living 'outside the cave', in the realm of truth or, what amounted to the same thing for them, in the realm of God's love, of agape. Yet, this realm was spiritual; it was still in heaven. It had realized itself on earth, in the terrestrial domain, but only in one person, in God's incarnate Son. Since that Son had joined the heavenly Father, man still had to wait for his return. Christian

love changed: it became longing. Agape was mixed with eros. This was not the pre-philosophical eros, but the platonic one, the eros that sublimated itself in order to get in line with its genuine source, which was the truth, the source of being-as-it-is – in short: to get in line with God. Around the middle of the third century, Origen was one of the first Christian intellectuals to reshape the Christian narrative on the basis of Platonism. Platonism was by far the most popular philosophy of the time, certainly in the place where Origen lived and taught: Alexandria, the city that had almost become more famous than Athens for the number and the quality of philosophical schools located there.

Though Plotinus himself was undoubtedly adverse to Christianity, his Neo-Platonism reinforced the tendency that had started with Origen. It gave the Christian narrative a kind of ontological basis. The One God in heaven, in his limitless love, emanates into terrestrial, material reality. By loving God, the Christian participates in the return of reality to the One, the divine source of all that is: God.

In the fourth century, Proclus, one of Antiquity's last pagan philosophers, reshaped Plotinus' thinking into a well-ordered system. This restyled Neo-Platonism delivered the 'grammar' for the Christian system of Pseudo-Dionysius (beginning of the sixth century). But in the meantime, Neo-Platonism had already shaped the Christian theories of the Great Cappadocians and so many other Church Fathers, as well as the intellectual giant of Latin Christianity, Augustine, in whose vocabulary *caritas* (his word for *agape*) and *amor* (eros) became almost synonyms.

In these centuries, the Christian *hodos* – the 'way of life', as Christianity had named itself in the first centuries – turned into an elaborate, highly theoretical doctrine, built around its own beyond, i.e., around the divine source of the One out of which all things emanate and to which all that is, is supposed to return. This movement of reality as well as the way in which humans move in that reality can be defined as 'love' – a kind of 'love' representing at the same time the state of perfection that the universe is in *and* our longing for this perfection (realized in the perfect oneness of God). Love is the central concept in the Christian doctrine, representing at the same time the perfect state that the Christian has attained in principle *and* the attitude of the actually imperfect Christian who loves God in the sense that he is longing for Him – transforming himself and his eros/amor in order to get in line with God.

#### 4. ...as the Core of Christian Mysticism

Christian mysticism is imbedded in Christian theory. In this sense, it is inherently theoretical. Of course, in mystical practices, the emphasis is not on theory but on experience. But this experience is nothing but the 'lived' heart of theory – as is taught by the theory underlying most of Christian mysticism: Neo-Platonism.

As Plotinus stresses, the core of this theory – and, according to him, of all theory, of theory as such – is experience. Living in a world full of non-truth, we ourselves *are* truth and, in a moment of ecstasy, we can fully experience that truth. We can be one with the One, and on the basis of this experience, we know that the core mission of our being is to return to the One.

However, Christian mysticism does not owe the primacy of experience to Neo-Platonism only. The mystical experience is not solely the ecstatic moment of unification with the divine. It is also a matter of *desire*, of longing for such unification. And the experience of this desire, too, is *lived* theory, theory implemented on the level of practice. Here again, Plato with his ‘erotic’ pathway to truth has provided the paradigm. Remember the ‘cave’. The truth is not in the shadows on the wall before us, but in the real beings (the Ideas) behind us, illuminated by the Idea of the Good. Knowing the truth is not only a matter of mere theory, of merely looking at beings as they are. A treatment and a management of my gaze is needed as well. What is more, I have to change myself. I have to get rid of the self that I am locked up in, the sensitive self, the self of ‘doxas’, of unclear opinions. In order to know the truth, I need a meticulous *askēsis* [ascetism] to change that self of mine in such a way that it becomes truly what it is. Only then will I be able to properly approach the truth at which I aim.

Truth requires a change of the subject searching that truth. Since for Plato knowledge is based in desire/eros, that change is ‘erotic’ as well. Thinking – i.e., longing for truth – requires a sublimation of my eros, my desire. My desire for truth must become true desire, purified desire, desire that coincides with its own true way of being. Only then it is able to know being and truth outside itself. In other words, thinking requires what Foucault calls *spiritualité*: an exercise of reshaping the self in such a way that it becomes compatible with the truth it longs for.<sup>7</sup> Christian mysticism is ‘spirituality’ in this sense.

Concerning the end of this ‘spiritual’ way, of the way of reshaping one’s self in order to reach God, two different theoretical models can be distinguished in Christian mysticism, both shaped by the framework of (Neo-)Platonic thought. A first model is that of ‘ecstasy’. My desire for God and the reshaping of the self needed to reach that goal end in the extinction of my desire and the restless absorption within God. I leave behind the earthly self I was and become one with the real Self of all that is: God. A second model is that of the ‘epectasis’: in the moment my burning love for God is satisfied, my desire, instead of extinguishing, keeps on burning. God remains the beyond of my desire, even

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the lesson of January 6, 1982 in: Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, transl. Graham Burchell, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2005, 15-30.

when that desire is entirely satisfied. Here, satisfaction consists in getting lost in the act of permanent desiring itself. It is the way in which Gregory of Nyssa conceptualizes the end of man's desiring path to God.<sup>8</sup>

Both the model of 'ecstasy' and the one of 'epectasis' are present in the history of mysticism, and each particular kind of mysticism embraces a specific combination of both models. Despite the formal difference, both are ways to conceptualize the '*lived* beyond' which is the centre of Christian theory. In the end, loving God is a matter of disappearing as human self, be it disappearing in God Himself or disappearing in the impossibility to do so and to keep on endlessly desiring Him.

Does mystical love go beyond theory? Is mysticism a way to go beyond it? What Christian mysticism shows is rather that the very movement of going beyond belongs to its theory. Neither 'ecstasy' nor 'epectasis' make any sense without the theory explaining – and so including – them.

## II. Where Love Goes beyond Mystical Theory

### 5. *Erastès/Eromenos*

And yet, Western mysticism *can* go 'beyond theory', in the radical sense that it can go beyond the 'beyond' of which it is the theory. In mysticism, a 'beyond' can break through, for which it has no tools to incorporate it in its mystical logic. Christian mysticism does not do this on purpose. It happens, so we read in some passages in mystical writings, when the author seems to lose hold over the sublimated treatment of the eros that leads him to God. Then, a kind of non-sublimated eros breaks through, able to deny – or at least disturb – the theoretical construction of his mystical procedure. Then, a non-platonized eros suddenly comes to the surface.

A non-platonized eros. Or, even more generally, a kind of eros that is *not* shaped after the paradigm of truth, that is not thought on the base of a supposed truth that holds its origin and its final goal. It is the kind of eroticism of which, as mentioned above, Aphrodite's son is known to be the god. Eroticism without truth: a kind of 'desire' not leading to – and not considered from the perspective of – its satisfaction. Eroticism as a game of fate, not necessarily leading to a happy end. It is the pre-philosophical eros that persisted in Antiquity, long even

<sup>8</sup> 'This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him'. In: Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, transl., introd. & notes Abraham J. Malherbe & Everett Ferguson, pref. John Meyendorf, New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978, 116 (§ 239). For a comment on the notion of 'epectasis', see: Jean Danielou (Ed.), *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, transl. & introd. Herbert Musorillo, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995, 56-71.

after the rise of philosophy and of eros's change into a matter of truth. How to describe this kind of pre-truth 'erotology'?

Here, the erotic is what occurs in the passionate fight between *erastès* (ἐραστής) and *eromenos* (ἐρώμενος), between lover and beloved.<sup>9</sup> It is a complex and highly subtle fight. And what is at work between both is not a matter of truth but of desire – of desire *only*. Both want one another, and the terms *erastès* and *eromenos* name positions, not persons. Of course, each of the partners is in one of the two positions, but neither are both in the same position at the same time, and neither of them is ever in one position all the time. In other words: in none of these positions is one ever 'at home' or has one ever arrived at one's final destination. The moment when one of them keeps a particular position and feels 'at home' in that position, the erotic unavoidably fades away. Certainly, the lover wants the beloved, but she/he wants the beloved to love him/her: she/he wants to be his/her beloved. The *erastès* wants his/her *eromenos* to be his/her *erastès*. Or to put it in hunting terms: the hunter wants his quarry, but only in order to become himself *her* quarry, i.e., the quarry of the quarry, the victim of the victim. And the latter means not the end of the game, but something that, when it occurs, is undone again and again and restarts the game.

Eros only works on the basis of the persisting difference between the *erastès* and the *eromenos*. Of course, both genuinely want unity and want to become 'one' with the other. And yet, the erotic, even when the partners dream of mutual unity, only works if that desire meets its non-satisfaction over and over again and remains unsatisfied in the end.

This kind of *eros* is definitely not what happens between a Christian mystic and the God he loves. At least it is not the way God loves the mystic or any other human being.

Does God love us? Of course. This is why He became incarnate and, by doing so, redeemed us. That love of His, however, is by definition not erotic, for it is not motivated by lack, but by abundance, by profusion. In a way, it is because of God's superabundance of perfection that He shares it with us, imperfect, mortal beings. Such is God's love, which is radically different from the erotic paradigm at work in our human, all too human way of loving.

In Christianity, 'eros' only defines man's love for God. The whole mystical tradition is testimony to that. But how, then, can a love relation be erotic when the love of the beloved partner is not erotic? How to erotically love God when God's love is not erotic? How can desire bring us closer to God, when God by definition is not desiring?

<sup>9</sup> See: Kenneth James Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978, 202. Anna Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*, New York/ London: Routledge, 2008, 23.

Here we meet the basic reason why Plato's sublimated conceptualization of eros was so useful to Christianity. Platonic eros allows God to be put in the position of *eromenos*, of the object of love, without making Him part of a whimsical erotic game with an *erastès*. God is never an *erastès* like a human lover is, for He is not marked by lack and need. God is perfect in Himself, and his love for man is not a kind of longing (out of lack or need); it is the love of abundance, the love of a never-ending source (as is the case with Plato's Idea of the Good, or Plotinus's concept of the One).

So, God is non-erotic, agapeic, perfect, abundant, without lack and without desire. We from our side, however, cannot but relate to God on the basis of the lack that marks our human condition. In other words, we cannot but relate to Him in an erotic way. Here we meet the risk of the mystic. In her burning love for God, a mystic often treats God as her perfect Beloved, as the divine *Eromenos*, and then supposes that He is at the same time the divine *Erastès* who needs her as a mystical lover, i.e., as a lover who, in love with her, longs for her and is terrified to death when confronted with a non-response from her side.

Within the logic of Christianity, all of this is not without risk. For the stronger the emphasis on God as *erastès*, the more the limits of Christian – and even monotheistic – doctrine are challenged, if not transgressed. If mysticism, within traditional and doctrinal Christianity, was never easily accepted, if most of the time it has been more or less suspicious in the eyes of the official religious powers, we find here one of the basic reasons for this.

In what follows I briefly discuss a mystical text in which God, approached as *eromenos*, turns out to be addressed as *erastès*. Such moments are rather rare even in the mystical tradition. They are but moments, almost 'slips of the tongue', imbedded in a context that immediately neutralises the *erastès*-position – and consequently the radicality of the erotic dimension – of the divine Beloved.

## 6. 'Are You not Passionately Mad about Me?'

Let us zoom in on a few pages of *Épithalame* by Jean de Saint-Samson (1571-1636), a blind Carmelite and author of a remarkable, still only partly published oeuvre. The title *Épithalame* originates from the Roman word for a wedding song (*epithalamium*), used here for a 'rewriting' of the Song of Songs, the famous 'erotic' Bible book and, since Origenes, a major point of reference in Christian mystical texts.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, in this *epithalamium*, the antique, pre-Christian, pre-Platonic eros, at times worms its way to the surface.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive reading of the *Épithalame* (though with a different focus than mine), see: Ivan Scicluna, 'L'Épithalame de Jean de Saint-Samson (1571-1636)', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 18 (2008), 289-311.

After a direct address to the reader in which he warns him of the difficulties and particularities of the book he has opened, the author starts his account of the love story that unites him with God:

What is it all about now, my Love and my Life?

What? For me it is very clear: I must sing the unique loves [*les amours uniques*] of the Bridegroom for his bride, and of the bride, become all love, for her Bridegroom.

But you, my dear Life and Bridegroom, how are You? Are You not passionately mad about me [*passionnement affolé de moi*]? Yes, it must be so; I have no doubts about that. If this were not the case, You would never have become flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones. And no, neither would You have let your infinite fullness shrink down to the dust of my human nature in order to take me as your bride, with all that this brings about, which is much.<sup>11</sup>

‘The bride’, a metaphor for Jean de Saint-Samson’s soul, is in love with God – a love the bride openly declares to her adored Bridegroom. And, like a genuine lover (*erastès*), she wonders if her Beloved (*Eromenos*) is in love with her as well. It is rather exceptional, even in mystical texts, but here the question is directly addressed to God: ‘Are You not passionately mad about me?’ Do you not miss me like a lover misses his beloved? Are you not, like any lover, burning with desire? Does God answer the soul’s question? As is often the case in mystical dialogues, God remains silent. Which does not stop the ‘bride’ from being sure: ‘Yes, it must be so; I have no doubts about that’. Why, then, is the bride so sure? Here, her argument leaves, so to speak, the erotological grammar and enters the one of mere doctrine. God’s incarnation in the flesh is what proves that He, the Bridegroom, is in love with his ‘fleshly’ bride. God has created the world and has become incarnate within the realm of sin and death, which certainly are acts of divine love. But is this incarnating love-act motivated by the fact that God misses something and hopes to find it among his beloved creatures? This can be the logical conclusion one could draw from what Jean de Saint-Samson writes. It is not, however, the conclusion drawn by the author. That it is out of erotic love that God has incarnated, as Jean de Saint-Samson seems to try to suggest, can be read as, indeed, just a suggestion. The author has good reasons for not saying it explicitly, at least if he wants to stay within the boundaries of Christian doctrine.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless the conclusion, though not

<sup>11</sup> Jean de Saint-Samson, *Oeuvres complètes 2: Méditations et Soliloques 1*, ed. Hein Blommestijn, Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1993, 336; author’s translation. See also: Jean de Saint-Samson, *Épithalame: Chant d’amour*, transcr. & ed. Jean Perrin, Paris: Seuil, 1997, 55.

<sup>12</sup> The most that can be said within the boundaries of Christian doctrine, is that God’s (non-erotic) love has created erotic love, in order to give ‘fleshly’ human beings the opportunity to fall in love with Christ or God and, by so doing, to find his way out of the realm of the flesh.

drawn explicitly, is not entirely absent either. It haunts, as will become clear in the few quotes that follow, the entire text.

7. *'Did You Think, in Good Faith, that You just Could Possess your Bride Alone?'*

It is noticeable on the next page already. The 'bride' describes the delight that the Bridegroom has brought her. In the middle of the passage cited below, a 'What?' appears. Such 'Whats?' are omnipresent in *Épithalame* and they definitely contribute to the remarkably vivid rhetoric of Jean de Saint-Samson's text. And, as is the case here, such 'Whats?' often introduce in the text precisely a kind of 'erotic surge'.

What is there still to say, since we are together now in our inner residence? Whatever can be said, I know what is different now: I am delighted, O my Bridegroom, by You and in You; and so, You hold me divine by your divinity and in Your divinity. I believe it is no surprise, since I am your bride in love, entirely consumed by your love, entirely divine and entirely lost in You.

What? Did You think, in good faith, that You just could possess your bride alone, without your bride possessing You in the force of our love, both impetuous and conjugal, which makes us both just as happy in everything when we enjoy it and dwell in it, and hold one another more and more tight, in incomparable hugs.<sup>13</sup>

'What? Did You think, in good faith, that You just could possess your bride alone, without your bride possessing You in the force of our love, both impetuous and conjugal ...'. The bride has been absorbed by the Beloved, she has become one with Him, she is in his divine possession. In fact, this implies that she has reached the end of the mystical path. The soul, longing for God, has now reached the state of satisfaction. She has become God. She has lost even her loving 'self, her 'subject', in her unity with the Beloved. She really disappears in God. Yet, not without objections: 'It is not because You possess me, that I should not possess You'. She clearly wants reciprocity. Does she want God to lose his divine Self in her? It is not what the text says with so many words. It is not so clear what, the text says about this exactly, but the most plausible reading is that the loving soul, possessed by God – wants God *loving/desiring* to

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So, in one of his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Bernard of Clairvaux writes: 'I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love'. Sermon 20.IV.6; in: Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*. Vol. 2, part 1: *Song of Songs*, transl. Killian. J. Walsh, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981, 152.

<sup>13</sup> Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 337-338 (author's translation); *Épithalame*, 61.

possess her. The soul does not so much want that God possesses her, as that He *loves, desires*, to do so.

What unites man and God is love, but love as *eros*, as *desire*: love marked by the insurmountable difference between the positions of lover (*erastès*) and beloved (*eromenos*), of possessor and possessed. Eros implies that neither of the two partners can occupy both positions at the same time, nor one of the positions all the time. Their relationship is based on a permanent change of position, and it is in this very change that the required reciprocity exists. Now possessed, then possessor, never both at the same time, never one of both all the time. In *Épithalame*, it is due to the erotic character of the soul's love that God is appealed to occupy the position of the possessed, just as He is experienced as the one who takes possession of the soul. The game of love requires the two. And the constant change of the two.

#### 8. *'Is It What You Missed in your Beatitude?'*

As we saw a few pages earlier, Jean de Saint-Samson neutralised a certain eruption of the erotic paradigm by abandoning the 'erotological' narrative in favour of the doctrinal one of incarnation, whose paradigm is definitely 'agapeic'. Being the result of God's abundance and profusion, the idea of incarnation does not fit a supposed lack in God, a God considered to be 'desiring'. And yet, a few pages further on, there is a passage in which the author explicitly eroticizes the idea of incarnation, suggesting it was motivated by God's erotic desire.

There, we first read that the 'soul' has expressed her 'happiness' and her 'objective enjoyment' in God's 'solely divine nature' [*mon heur et ma jouissance objective en votre seule nature divine*]. Yet, at the same time, she remembers that God has become incarnate and so, she concludes, the flesh must be loved as much as God's 'solely divine nature'. It is then that she addresses the following question directly to her Beloved:

But where is it [the flesh]? From whom have You taken it? Has it not been mine? In the sense that You are flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones as well as life of my life and love of my love? And why, then, have You taken it [i.e., the flesh] from me, from my shape? Is it what You missed in your beatitude? Why, I say, did You take it from me, if it is not that You wanted me to love it madly [hopelessly: *esperdument*], to such an extent that I would take refuge in it, as if [in it, i.e., in the flesh] I were one and the same thing with my Bridegroom and in my Bridegroom that You are?<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'Mais ou est ce, et de qui l'avés vous prise? N'a-ce pas esté de moy? De sorte qu vous estes chair de ma chair, os de mes os, aussi bien que la vie de ma vie, et l'amour de mon amour. Pourquoi aussi la priéniés vous ainsi de moi, et ma forme en ma forme? Aviés point de cela en

Why has God incarnated? Because he lacks something. That is the clear suggestion put forward in these lines. God was lacking the flesh, and He became flesh in order to be able to love the fleshly man and to be loved by him. God is 'flesh of [man's] flesh' and, so the text adds, He is 'love of [man's] love'. So, if we understand Saint-Samson correctly, at least in these lines of his *Épithalame*, the paradigm of God's love is not agape, not abundance, not a shower of wealth. It is eros, marked by lack, and eager to find with the beloved other something to fill that very lack of his.

If love is the desire to possess and to be possessed (which is the erotic paradigm of love), then this does not go for God's love. This is Christian doctrine. Not because God does not possess and is not possessed. God does possess all that is and He certainly allows mystical and other mortals to try to possess Him, but He is not marked by the unsurmountable difference between possessing and being possessed. This is to say that God is not under the regime of *desire*. God does not *desire* to possess; He simply already has everything that is. So, it is us, humans, who want union with Him. He himself always already has that union; He is always already with us. It is not He who longs to make the difference between Him and what is human undone. His love has already made it undone, so He no longer needs to do so. Only we, humans, have such a desire – a desire that is based on difference and, for that very reason, erotic.

Yet, in the passage just quoted from Saint-Samson's *Épithalame*, something else is going on. In erotic fever, the bride seems not to accept that non-difference of God's, i.e., God being always already in unity with her. If it is unity with God that she wants (which definitely is the case), she wants it in a mutual longing for one another by God and by her. She wants reciprocity in their mutual *desire*, i.e., in the fact that, for neither of them, to possess and to be possessed ever coincide, and that both are united in this very non-coincidence, in this insurmountable difference.

### 9. *Vengeance*

Of course, the author cannot continue his wedding song in merely 'erotological' terms. He indeed changes his logic. But the way in which he does so is highly remarkable. Why has God become incarnate? Why did He, in his impeccable beatitude, have the idea to love human mortals? The author no longer holds that it is because of God's beatitude missing something. God is not missing

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votre beatitude? Pourquoi, dis-je, la preniés vous de moi, si vous ne voulies que ie l'aimasse esperdument, et de telle sorte que l'y constituasse mon repos, comme estant une mesme chose avec mon Espoux, et en mon Espoux que vous estes'. Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 339 (author's translation); *Épithalame*, 64-65.

anything; He is, after all, pure abundance. So why does He love man? Out of vengeance! It is literally what we read a few lines further on. (Notice again that remarkable ‘What?’).

But what, my Love? All of us, and first of all the dearest among us, are really surprised about such an unusual vengeance [*la tant estrange vengeance*] that You have taken upon them for their past infidelity. For, as your divine brides assure, it was out of vengeance that, with your divine majesty and nature, You married them (...).<sup>15</sup>

God is perfect. He needs nothing. So, why does He love us, imperfect human beings? Why does He not punish us for being imperfect, marked as we are by the sins in which we persist? Do we not simply deserve chastisement? However, instead of punishing us, God does the opposite: He takes ‘revenge’, which in case means that He overwhelms us with the abundance of his love. He marries us out of revenge! A few lines further on, we read (again introduced by ‘What?’):

But what, my Love? If this is the way in which You take vengeance upon me for my many insults with respect to You, then this vengeance is not only tolerable, but sweet and delicious as well (...).

O my Love, is it allowed [*licite*] to take revenge in this way? But since love wants me to take revenge on You in this way (...) my revenge will be that I will not stop sinking into my limitless love for You (...).<sup>16</sup>

Here, the erotology is neutralized, but nothing more than that. The erotic logic is neutralized, since it is out of abundance that God loves the soul. The normal – in this case *erotic* – logic would be the opposite. If the lover, living in sinful infidelity, has shown no love for the Beloved, why should the Beloved love her? But since the Beloved is beyond the logic of sin and lack, His revenge is a superabundant love. Eros is overwhelmed by *agapeic* love.

And yet, eros is not gone. It is still there, simply because God’s love is said to act out of revenge. For does ‘vengeance’ not imply that God is still acting as if He is feeling some lack of love – which, then, is why He feels resentment and the need for revenge? And is it not because of God’s revenge that man, too, can take revenge and, consequently, love God as abundantly as He loves him? God and man keep on finding one another as lover and Beloved, each of them occupying both positions in the active – read position-changing – way. They find one another in their mutual desire, in the lack they both feel – in the lack of

<sup>15</sup> Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 339 (author’s translation); *Épithalame*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 340-341 (author’s translation); *Épithalame*, 71-72.

missing that what constitutes their mutual relationship, their 'erotic' intercourse. Only a few lines further on, the 'erotological' tone returns already:

But my sweet Life, I have still not specified the means by which I want to take revenge on You for your sweet and loving war [*douce et amoureuse guerre*] that You wage against me in eternal love. Here is what I will do: if You enjoy the acts of your profoundest love that bring You to me incessantly, then I too, doing what I can in the infinite force of my [love], will not cease to come to You, where, in endless encounters, we will fight, spirit against spirit, until one of us will succumb.<sup>17</sup>

And although, of course, the text immediately adds that it is the soul who will succumb and not God, this passage nonetheless suggests a non-ending fight where they both lose and win their 'war of love' – or, what amounts to the same thing, where neither of them loses nor wins that war. The unity that they find one another in, is one of reciprocity – a unity in shared insurmountable difference, revealing the regime of desire in which they both are.

#### 10. 'Very Simple Love'. 'But What?'

This is a conclusion that can be drawn from this particular passage in Jean de Saint-Samson's text. But it is clear that, when push comes to shove, for the author, God's love is unique, is one, and not two. It is *agapeic* oneness and not *erotic* division. Not the doubleness of possessing and being possessed, two positions lovers inevitably occupy but never both at the same time, never one position all the time. At the end of the Christian mystic love story reported in the *Épithalame*, lover and Beloved become one. The difference between possessing and being possessed has been overcome definitively.

And yet, up to the last page the difference can still be felt persisting in many details of the text. Let us read a passage almost at the end of *Épithalame*. It is now God, the Beloved, who addresses himself to the soul, his lover:

You understand Me well on all of this: all these secrets of us both are for you as well as for Me the most profound, the most amorous, the most secret and the most intimate of our mutual loves [*de nos reciproques amours*], but they are clearly mine, [they are the fruit] of my love for you, in you – [the love] in which, as I have always said, we possess one another in our equal and mutual love, in our equal happiness: equal, I say, as you know and understand it well.<sup>18</sup>

And to avoid misunderstanding, the author stresses he really has a union in mind that is exclusively based in God. The soul will become one with the flesh

<sup>17</sup> Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 341 (author's translation); *Épithalame*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 358 (author's translation); *Épithalame*, 132.

God has become Himself, and then the soul will return to God's 'simple' divinity. In the next sentence, we read:

And, as I say you, from my humanity that you have possessed very smoothly and in supreme fullness, you will return into our divinity, in order to possess Me, you in Me, in very profound and very simple ardour and very simple love (...).<sup>19</sup>

The soul has loved God, she has loved the *fleshy* God, the God who has loved the flesh and has become flesh. The soul has 'possessed' the flesh of God, just like God has possessed the flesh of the soul. This mutual game of possessor and possessed was eros, and that is what we read in the love song of Saint-Samson's *Épithalame*. But eros is not the end. In the end, it is all God's work, God's love. In the end, the love at stake is *agape*. This is why the passage repeats three times the word 'simple': 'very simple ardour', 'very simple love', and (in the part of the sentence left unquoted) 'very simple (...) glory'. It is, in sum, 'love' that is 'simple' because it is divine, because it comes from the One. Agape has overcome eros. The lover and the beloved are not united in their insurmountable difference (eros), but in their indivisible union.

And yet, even in these last, concluding pages of the *Épithalame*, the difference between lover and Beloved nonetheless persists. What persists, at least in a few passages or sentences, is the resistance of the lover – in this case: the human soul. As if the soul is staying in the erotic condition, or 'in desire', so to say. She keeps on being motivated by what she misses. On the last page of the text, addressing himself to the soul, God mentions their 'amorous and mutual enjoyment' [*notre amoureuse et réciproque jouissance*] in which the soul is totally in God, who no longer has any secrets for her, nor she for God. She has full knowledge of God, she has seen Him fully and become equal to Him. And yet, apparently, God unexpectedly has to react to a non-recorded objection made by the soul (notice again the 'What?'):

And you do not doubt, my daughter, my bride, that if you should have been capable of more and better, I would have done it in you and would have shown it in Me. But what? [*Mais qu'oi?*] You see Me naked, entirely, you possess Me naked, entirely [*Tu me vois tout nud et totalement, tu me possèdes tout nud et totalement*]. What more could I do for you? What could show you what is better than Me in all of Myself, in the total plenitude and the richness of Myself. Being lost in unity, and become totally rich, you have become Myself in Myself, and you possess Myself in Myself.<sup>20</sup>

The soul sees God 'tout nud et totalement', she has full possession of God, and what does God notice? That she loves His 'lack'. She loves what escapes His

<sup>19</sup> Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 358 (author's translation); *Épithalame*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Saint-Samson, *Méditations et Soliloques 1*, 359 (author's translation); *Épithalame*, 136.

‘nakedness’, his ‘fullness’, his perfection, his revealed truth. In other words: God notices that the soul loves Him *erotically*. Even in the moment when she is in perfect unity with Him, what she loves is what is lacking in that unity. Eros persists in the culminating experience of the *unio mystica*.

### 11. *The Question of Love*

Like so many other mystical texts, Jean de Saint-Samson’s is a love song for God. Is it theoretical? It definitely is. The Christian *agapeic* love theory underlies the love for God that is expressed in the text. This agapeic love theory is itself a specific theorizing of eros, the antique relation between *erastès* and *eromenos*, originally lived without any reference to truth. Platonism – supported in this by the later Christian version of its theory – has reshaped eros into a matter of (and a way to) truth. Platonized eros – together with Christian agape – enabled ‘theory’ to acknowledge the inaccessibility of its own core, its ultimate goal. By doing so, the way to truth acknowledges that its end and goal are beyond the reach of its own theoretical power. As already argued: theory is by definition the theory of its beyond. This is why, unlike common sense states, Christian mysticism is not beyond theory. It is, more accurately, the lived experience of theory’s beyond.

The tradition of mystical texts is a treasure trove that bears witness to this lived experience. Yet, the experience shows that what is lived is not only and not simply the theoretical beyond of theory. Focusing on the ‘love’ that leads us to this beyond as the ultimate shape of truth, this ‘love’ at times is visibly haunted by the kind of ‘love’ that it is supposed to have overcome. The Platonized, ‘agapeized’ love is at times deconstructed by a non-platonized eros, which is agape’s complete opposite.

I am reluctant to draw conclusions. It might still be too soon for that. For if all of the above shows one thing, it is that the question of love is not an easy one. If only it asks for the *truth* of love and ends up making us face the question *whether truth fits love at all* – or, what amount to the same thing, *whether love even fits the format of a question*.

If love defines our way to truth, then the *lived* love for truth, par excellence, must bring us this truth. However, as texts such as those of Jean de Saint-Samson show, it is precisely love – *lived* love – that again and again disturbs the truth claimed about love.

The mystic asks for truth by loving it, by addressing his love to truth, a truth that he defines as love. But while addressing his love to truth, expressing love as the perfect definition of truth (the truth of truth, so to say), he falls into a love-game affecting the very truth he claims. The love with which he claims the truth of love again and again supposes both truth and love to be imperfect, not

without lack. It supposes truth itself to be desiring – and, consequently, not being – the truth. It supposes love itself to be desiring – and, consequently, not being – love. The latter kind of love is agape, love defined as both the way to truth and truth itself. The former kind of love, the desiring one, is eros – eros that, even while it desires truth, is never that truth since it never stops desiring it.

The question of love confronts us with the possibility of a question that is harmed and affected in the supposition underlying it, namely that there *is* an answer, i.e., that there is a truth in answer to the question – even if this answer/truth is beyond the limits of the question's theoretical powers. Texts like those of Jean de Saint-Samson make us realize that the question of love makes the phenomenon 'question' as such highly problematic. And, as said, I am reluctant to draw conclusions from this.