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# Eroticism and Mysticism as a Transgression of Boundaries: the Song of Songs 5: 2–8 and the Mystical Texts of Mechthild of Magdeburg

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents the structural connections between eroticism and mysticism on the basis of two text sources: there are some texts of ‘The flowing light of the Godhead’ of Mechthild of Magdeburg and the Song of Songs 5: 2–8. Both texts represent a call for transgressions, since without these the experience of God is not possible. Eroticism as well as mysticism strives for the transcendental experience of union. This is however only to be attained in ecstasy, in a state of the Ego out of itself where the border separating one from the other is transgressed. This results in an unexpected and incomparable experience where no more boundaries between ‘You and Me’ are perceivable. Therefore eroticism is a sort of sacred reality that leads to the experience of the transcendent and divine and through it to the existential transubstantiation of the person.

## **Keywords**

Biblical theology, mysticism, politics, feminist theory, Liberation theology

If the Holy Scripture evokes the suffering of women, it does not stop at the representation of tragic female destinies, instead it encourages women to activate their inner female power and to transgress their boundaries which are defined by social and religious expectations. This transgression leads them into the sphere of self-definition, for which they too, as creatures in God’s image, received two gifts from their Creator: reason and free

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will. Many female figures of the Bible affirm that true happiness and real life cannot be experienced without certain transgressions – even if what this requires is nothing less than a confrontation with death and the deepest destruction of the previous Ego.

In this paper I intend to present the structural connections between eroticism and mysticism on the basis of two wonderful text sources: These are the texts of Mechthild of Magdeburg and the Song of Songs of the Old Testament. The mysticism of Mechthild of Magdeburg as well as the eroticism of the Old Testament's Song of Songs represent a call for transgressions, since without these the experience of God is not possible. It is exactly through the 'transgression' in mysticism and eroticism that one can enter the sphere of the Sacred. How could one thus deny the sacredness of eroticism? And on what grounds has Christian theology been doing this since late Antiquity? If sexuality is a God given gift, how could one consider its challenges as something that originates from the Devil and not from God? How could one compulsively repress these innermost, elementary life forces? The consequences of such an approach are quite obvious: misogyny, abuse and, by a lack of integrity of one's own sexuality, human immaturity and a completely perverted spirituality that has little to do with Jesus' charisma.

## Life and Work of Mechthild of Magdeburg

First I would like to give a short outline of the life and work of Mechthild of Magdeburg.<sup>1</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207–1282/1294) was born to a noble family close to Magdeburg. She received a thorough courtly upbringing and an extensive secular education.

As the 23-year-old noble girl met the dark sides of thirteenth century prosperity, the growing poverty, the begging and vegetating crowds on the streets, she went as a beguine to Magdeburg's poor neighborhood to take care of society's outcasts and abandoned people.

The most profound crisis of her life was the vocation God gave her to write a prophetic and mystical work for which she needed unconditioned spiritual authority. But it was this very spiritual authority of women that was disputed in 1260 at the diocesan synod in Magdeburg.<sup>2</sup> By the middle of the thirteenth century, beguines stood in the crossfire of criticism. The synod tried thus to discipline them and make them an object of pastoral care. By means of her work Mechthild intervened in this theological and ecclesiastical-political conflict.

Mechthild's engagement was a political act and the fruit of her mysticism at the same time. She was challenged by the transcription of her 'flaming words' to

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1. Brüning B (2008) *Mechthild von Magdeburg, Mechthild von Hackeborn, Gertrud die Große: Mit den Augen der Seele schauen*. Leipzig: Miltzke, 36–51.
  2. Keul H (1999) *Du bist ein inniger Kuß meines Mundes: Die Sprache der Mystik – eine Sprache der Erotik. Am Beispiel Mechthilds von Magdeburg*. In: Bangert M, Keul H (eds) *Vor dir steht die leere Schale meiner Sehnsucht: Die Mystik der Frauen von Helfta*. Leipzig: Benno, 95–111, here 108–109.

transgress her boundaries and while doing so she had also to first fight against her own conviction that as a woman she was incapable of writing. Mechthild fought against the religiously motivated misogyny of clerics while also making reference to the love words of her God from whom she says: 'You are a passionate kiss for my mouth' (FL III, 5). She very consciously and passionately took up the fight against clerics and contemporaries.

Mechthild lived in Magdeburg for 40 years (1230–70). On the advice of her confessor, the Dominican Heinrich von Halle, Mechthild ultimately fled to a monastery of Cistercian nuns and away from the danger of being persecuted by heretics as a result of the publication of her book and her heavy criticism of the Church. At this point again she had to face boundaries in her life but it enabled her to set the basis for the mysticism of Helfta, because this is where she met her fellow sisters, Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great and encouraged them to write. Through her activity Helfta became a place of freedom and spiritual authority for women and at the same time a center for education accessible to women and for mystical literature.

### The Flowing Light of the Godhead<sup>3</sup>

While in the theological language of scholasticism it is the rational aspect that dominates, mysticism consciously seeks a completely different language to put its deep experience of God into words. Thus Mechthild of Magdeburg's work 'The Flowing Light of the Godhead' is very strongly influenced by the eroticism of her language. Thereby the mystic relates to two traditions: on the one hand to the Minnelied of the courts of her time, well-known to her from her parental home, on the other hand to the Song of Songs of Love of the Old Testament.

The erotic character of her language is a huge provocation but still explainable on logical grounds. The language of a certain field can only be transferred to express experience in a different field if between these two fields there is a structural link, a similarity that just sets the precondition to such a transfer. 'Thus if mystical experiences can or even have to be expressed in an erotic language, mysticism then discloses an inherent connection between religion and eroticism.'<sup>4</sup>

Mechthild sees God as a 'God, burning with your desire' (FL I, 17), who 'has enough of all things, only to touch the soul is never enough for God' (FL IV, 12). When evoking her profoundest mystical experience she uses the words of the eroticism of the body: 'I am in you, and you are in me, we could not be closer, for we two have flowed into one (...)' (FL III, 5).

3. Tobin FJ (1998) *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

4. Keul H (1999) *Du bist ein inniger Kuß meines Mundes: Die Sprache der Mystik – eine Sprache der Erotik. Am Beispiel Mechthilds von Magdeburg*. In: Bangert M, Keul H (eds) *Vor dir steht die leere Schale meiner Sehnsucht: Die Mystik der Frauen von Helfta*. Leipzig: Benno, 96. 'Wenn also mystische Erfahrungen in einer erotischen Sprache ausgedrückt werden können oder gar müssen, dann offenbart die Mystik einen inneren Zusammenhang von Religion und Erotik.'

While women in Mechthild's time were treated by the traditional clerical mindset as though they hadn't been created in the image of God, indeed, as if they had no soul at all, in Mechthild's mysticism it is exactly the dignity of women that gains manifestation.

As Mechthild realized the deeply rooted problems of the Church of her time, she was invoked to reform it. Although she remained cautious and enciphered her thoughts in metaphors, she did not mince her words: 'Woe, Crown of the holy priesthood, how utterly have you disappeared! You have nothing left but what is wrapped around you; that is, ecclesiastical authority with which you fight against God and his chosen friends. For this God will bring you low before you know it (...)' (FL VI, 21).

## Text Analysis of the Song of Songs 5:2–8

In the second part of my paper I would like to present a beautiful pearl of the Song of Songs. In this sensual but at the same time dramatic song, one of the main characters, in fact the woman, is called upon to follow the fire of her glowing desire. This however is only possible by the transgression of her personal and the socially-morally defined boundaries. These transgressions are however very dangerous for the existing conceptual and institutional structures. Thus the punishment of the controlling and leading authorities could not be avoided.

### Verse 2a

*I am sleeping, but my heart is awake. Listen, my beloved is knocking/urging.*<sup>5</sup>

The introductory verse reveals a special paradox, the ambivalence of the heart's sleep and wakefulness. This description shows that the heart, home and source to human emotions and excitement, does not remain passive, not even in its sleep.

In the Hebrew text, the rare word *דופק* in its participle form 'knocking' in the sense of 'pushing, urging', is to be interpreted as a 'vigorous knocking', such as for example in the case of Keel's German translation: 'Horch, mein Geliebter drängt'<sup>6</sup> ('Listen, my beloved is urging')(cf. 'If they are driven hard' in Gen. 33:13 and Judg. 19:22: '(...) some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door (...)'). This violent aspect of knocking in Song 5:2 shows the passionate excitement of the man who wants to 'penetrate' his lover. Here, of course, a sexual connotation is to be perceived. One could sense the sexual connotation of excitement in the Hebrew verb *עיר* 'to be awake' as well, just as in Song 4:16; 8:5b.

The power and the verve of Eros' passion are described in this verse. Like human passion attracts the lovers to each other, the 'God, burning with your longing' (FL I, 17) attracts Mechthild and kisses her 'passionately with his divine mouth. (...) Then she rises to the heights of bliss and to the most exquisite pain when she becomes truly

5. The translation is based on the Masoretic Text found in BHS: Elliger K, Rudolph W (eds) (1990) *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Stuttgart: Dt. Bibelges.

6. Keel O (1992) *Das Hohelied*. Zürich: Verl. Zürcher Bibelkommentare, 18, 173.

intimate with him' (FL II, 23). She gets closer and closer to God who reacts in turn in an even more powerful way: 'The nearer I come to you, the more wonderfully and abundantly God comes upon me. (...) For the deeper I fall, the sweeter you taste' (FL IV, 12).

## Verse 2b

*'Open to me, my sister, my girlfriend, my dove, my perfect one  
For my head is filled with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.'*

After the vigorous knocking the man tries to express his passion for the woman by a torrent of flattering and flirting addresses. In the first address 'my sister, my girlfriend' a significant difference to Song 4:9–12; 5:1 (cf. 4, 8) can be discovered where 'my sister, (and) my bride' make up a word couple. According to Müller, the reason for this is that the following verses are more suitable for free love than for a spousal relationship.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the second address: 'my dove, my perfect/flawless one' we have to do with a *tertium comparationis*, since the dove is the symbolic accompanying animal of the goddess of love and fertility. She is 'flawless' and accordingly 'perfect' (Song 5:2; 6:9). This refers in both cases to a beauty ideal and is not to be interpreted in the sense of physical virginity, says Müller.<sup>8</sup> The personal pronouns here rather express dependence from a goddess rather than possessiveness.

The second half verse follows as some kind of a technical explication using very practical arguments to explain why he is so vigorously asking her to let him in. His hair, drenched with cool dew turns his waiting into a highly uncomfortable experience. In the Old Testament dew often stands for a blessing (Gen. 27:28, 39), but in Palestine indeed there are sometimes dew drops falling like rain (as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar excluded from the society in Dan. 4:22, 25; 5:2). Rabbinical and Arabic traditions also know the harmful dew.

Beyond this, hair is the epitome of beauty. The objective of a description of the lover's drenched hair is clear without ambiguity – it is aiming at wakening the woman's desire. The request 'open to me' seems to have a sexual connotation here which evokes the sexual union.<sup>9</sup>

## Verse 3

*'I have taken off my tunic — How? Shall I put it on?  
I have washed my feet — How? Shall I soil them?'*

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7. Müller H-P, Kaiser O, and Loader JA (eds) (1992) *Das Hohelied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Ester*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 55.
  8. Müller H-P, Kaiser O, and Loader JA (eds) (1992) *Das Hohelied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Ester*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 55.
  9. Bartelmus R (1988) 'Art.pth'. In: Fabry H-J, Ringgren H (eds). *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 831–52, here 833.

The woman replies to her lover by two simultaneous rhetorical questions in which she hides behind two obviously illogical excuses. What is in fact the reason behind her reaction? Maybe she is still in a state on the borders of sleep and wakefulness and therefore is only able to respond with delay? Or does she want to reproach the belated lover for something? Does she want to slow down the urging/penetration of the man by her demonstrative hesitation? Or is this verse part of a coquettish game of love that she uses exactly to awaken the man's desire?

What does the woman exactly say? She says: 'I have taken off my tunic.' Then she adds: 'I have washed my feet.' According to Ancient Oriental tradition people washed their feet in the evening before getting ready to rest at home and going to bed (Gen. 24:32; 2 Sam. 11:8). Thus the description indirectly reveals that she is lying naked and freshly bathed in her bed, waiting for her lover.

At this point, a special parallel becomes evident: the man and his wet hair – the woman and her wet feet. Here, 'my feet' רגלי as well as the later mentioned 'hand' יד (in 4) might be a euphemism for the genitals (Exod. 4:25; Isa. 6:2; 7:20; 36:12).

#### Verse 4

*'My beloved stretched his hand through the opening, and my feelings were moving for him.'*

In this verse one finds an ingenious interplay of hinting and concealing. What the man could not reach until this point by his words, he now tries to arrive at by his touch and seeks to open the door latch on his own. The sexual connotation of this image is very strong, the latch opening referring to the vagina and the 'hand' to the 'phallus' (cf. Keel, Müller and also Isa. 57:8, 10 and in Ugaritic texts).<sup>10</sup>

Then the verse says: 'my feelings were moving for him', or as Zakovitch' German translation puts it: 'und mein Inneres ward erregt über ihm'<sup>11</sup> (and my inside became excited for him) or Reichert's: 'und meine Herzgegend bebte ihm entgegen'<sup>12</sup> (and the surroundings of my heart pounded towards him). The word מטה has a very wide range of meanings: It designates the insides/entrails as a center of emotions and impulses (2 Sam. 20:10); bowels, stomach and belly are where the reproductive organs are located (the female ones in Isa. 49:1; Ps. 71:6; Ruth 1:11 or the male ones in Gen. 15:4; 2 Sam. 16:11; 2 Sam. 7:12). In the sense of 'insides/entrails' the word can specifically designate the womb, too (Ruth 1:11). This way it can be an allusion to the female orgasm which is also supported by the Hebrew verb הטה standing next to it and bearing the meaning 'being troubled, to bluster, to heave, to shiver, to moan'.

10. Keel O (1992) *Das Hohelied*. Zürich: Zürcher Bibelkommentare 18: 181. Also see Müller H-P, Kaiser O, and Loader JA (eds) (1992) *Das Hohelied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Ester*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 55.

11. Zakovitch Y (2004) *Das Hohelied*. Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 215.

12. Reichert K (1996) *Das Hohelied Salomos*. Salzburg und Wien: Residenz-Verl, 114.

## Verse 5

*'I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with flowing myrrh on the handles of the bolt.'*

Up until this point the man was the protagonist being the active one (his impact: an inner one), from this verse on, it is the woman who finds herself in the center of action (her impact: an external one).

It is striking that the verb פתח, 'open' does not have an object. What does the woman in reality want to open? The door? Or herself? The tender words of the lover, the glowing touch of his seeking hand have awakened the woman's innermost longing for union. This union however conditions the opening of her Ego first, of her person taken as a whole, since eroticism requires much more than the mere opening of the body. Her Ego and the door symbolically stand for the same reality. To open the door finally means to open herself. Eroticism as well as mysticism is some kind of an opening and the loving surrender of the Ego is a sort of selflessness, abandonment and ultimately the profound union in the reality of 'Us'.

The myrrh is flowing on the handles of the bolt that locks the door. At this point it remains unclear where the myrrh comes from. Does it designate the abundance of liquid myrrh with which the beloved woman perfumed her hands?<sup>13</sup> Or did it stick to the handles of the bolt as the man reached out his hand?<sup>14</sup>

According to Müller, this is a game of hide and seek – the keywords 'myrrh', 'drip' and 'flow' suggest unambiguous sexual associations.<sup>15</sup>

In this verse we can already perceive the first disappointment and the beginning of a drama, since the valuable balm does not flow, as wished for, on the hand of the lovers but on the handle of the bolt. Although this symbol involves the longing for touch, there is no desirous contact accomplished between the lovers whatsoever. They rather remain painfully separated from each other. There is a secret irony hidden in the text, for the Hebrew word כַּף 'handle' also means 'palm of the hand'.

## Verse 6

*'I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned, he was gone  
My soul went out for his turning away. I sought him, but did not find him  
I called him, but he did not answer me.'*

The woman finally opens the door to her lover, the long awaited and belated action is accomplished. Here one could possibly think of the sexual union. Yet the scene is not continued with a gratifying fulfillment of Eros but is dramatically interrupted, for

13. Gerlemann G (1965) *Ruth /Das Hohelied*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 166.

14. Rudolph W (1962) *Das Buch Ruth. Das Hohe Lied. Die Klagelieder*. Kommentar zum Alten Testament 17(1/3):156.

15. Müller H-P, Kaiser O, and Loader JA (eds) (1992) *Das Hohelied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Ester*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 56.

while the woman was hesitating to open the door, the man all of a sudden vanished without a trace.

The second half verse is even more complicated: 'My soul went out for his turning away, (...)'. Zakovitch translates it this way: 'meine Seele war ausgegangen bei seinem Reden'<sup>16</sup> (My soul had gone out when he spoke). In Reichert's version: 'Meine Sinne schwanden da er sprach' (My senses faded when he spoke) and 'meine Seele floh, entwich bei seinem Sprechen oder seiner Rede nach'<sup>17</sup> (my soul fled, escaped at his words or speech). According to Zakovitch, the woman reverts here to an earlier stage of the interaction. The sound of his voice made her disconcerted in a way that she was not completely aware of her actions and their consequences.

Keel interprets the verb דָּבַר (dabar) as *turning away* and translates it as follows: 'Ich war ganz betäubt von seinem Rückzug' (I was completely stunned by his turning away) or literally 'meine nephesch ging hinaus' (my nephesch had gone out).<sup>18</sup> The nephesch going out stands for a total disappearance of the will to live. This is a state directly preceding death (Gen. 35:18), it is already the beginning of death. This state infests the woman in love not because of the speaking (dabar II), but clearly due to the retreat (dabar I) of the lover.

## Verse 7

*'The watchmen found me, who made their rounds in the city  
They beat me, they wounded me, they took away my shawl from me, the  
guardsmen of the walls'*

The lover is disappointed by the disappearance and non-finding of her beloved. However, she does not give up the search for her lover and gets hurt one more time, although this time by the watchmen, the keepers of the legal and moral order.

The verb מָצָא 'to find' carries the connotation 'revealing of guilt' (cf. Prov. 6:13). Here again there is a tragic irony hidden in the text: While the woman wants to find a man, the one that she loves, she is found and brutally mistreated by other men.

A woman wandering through the streets at night was treated as an adulteress (Prov. 7:11 et seq, Isa. 23:16) or as a whore in the cultures of the Old Testament. A Middle Assyrian law code from the twelfth century BC says: 'A harlot shall not disguise herself, her head stays bare. If someone sees a harlot, they should arrest her (...) They should hit her with clubs 50 times and pour asphalt on her head.'<sup>19</sup> This influence had a repercussion in Israel, too.

16. Zakovitch Y (2004) *Das Hohelied*. Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 217.

17. Reichert K (1996) *Das Hohelied Salomos*. Salzburg und Wien: Residenz-Verl, 115.

18. Keel O (1992) *Das Hohelied*. Zürich: Zürcher Bibelkommentare 18, 183.

19. Keel O (1992) *Das Hohelied*. Zürich: Zürcher Bibelkommentare 18, 183. 'Eine Dirne darf sich nicht verhüllen, ihr Kopf bleibt entblößt. Wer eine verhüllte Dirne erblickt, soll sie festnehmen. (...) Man soll ihr 50 Stockschläge versetzen und Asphalt auf ihren Kopf gießen.'



‘(...) they took away my shawl from me (...)’ This kind of disrobing was an expression of public humiliation.

In Müller’s opinion, the city’s watchmen represent the enemies of the lovers; they are also known from Egyptian lyric poetry, associated with many evil dealings.<sup>20</sup>

## Verse 8

*‘I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem — if you find my beloved, what will you tell him? That I am sick of love.’*

This verse seems to be inserted at this point without transition. The reader does not learn at all how the woman was released from the previous life-threatening situation. While the watchmen were enemies of love, the daughters of Jerusalem are its helpers. The speaker confides her pain to them. At this point again, there is a thematic inversion. While in verse 7 it was a woman who was found by many men, now several women are called upon to find a man. If the allies of lovers don’t disappoint her, there is still a chance that the sudden separation won’t be a final one. The text itself however does not offer a solution. At the end therefore, at least temporarily, there is no happy ending.

‘(...) what will you tell him?’ This is what the last verse is about. The interrogative word *מה* could also be interpreted as a negation particle, that is ‘don’t tell him that I am sick’, in order not to give him the satisfaction that he offended her by his disappearance.

The question remains open what kind of a sickness it is about. Basically the whole poem is about lovesickness and with this kind of sickness, the only one able to heal is the one who caused the sickness.

This kind of lovesickness is not only well-known to Eros, but also in mysticism: ‘Tell my dear Lord Jesus Christ how sick with love for him I am. If I am ever to recover, he himself must be my physician (...) He has wounded me to death. If he leaves me lying here untended, I can never recover’ (FL VII, 58). What makes this text passage of Mechthild’s mysticism especially beautiful is that here the human soul is not the only one to suffer from human love, but also the loving God himself: ‘Lord, you are constantly lovesick for me (...) You have painted me in your humanity. You have buried me in your side, in your hands and feet. Ah, allow me, dear One, to pour balsam upon you (...)’ (FL III, 2).

## Mysticism and Eroticism

In the third and last chapter of my paper I would like to sum up some considerations about eroticism and mysticism as a transgression of boundaries. Eroticism and mysticism have structural similarities since both involve the experience of a transgression.<sup>21</sup>

20. Müller H-P, Kaiser O, and Loader JA (eds) (1992) *Das Hohelied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Ester*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 56.

21. Keul H (1987) *Eia, Liebe, nun laß dich wecken!* *Das Hohelied und die Anrufung des weiblichen Begehrens in Mechthild von Magdeburgs. Fließendem Licht der Gottheit*. In: *Bibel und Kirche* (70. Jg.), 105–14.

The mystic Mechthild was downright driven by an insatiable desire to overcome the isolation and the finiteness of her person through a union with God: 'I am in you, and you are in me, we could not be closer, for we two have flowed into one and have been poured into one mold. Thus shall we remain forever content' (FL III, 5).

The mystical experience is a radical confrontation with one's self here where one recognizes one's real boundaries and is at the same time invoked to transgress them. Mysticism is also an intense devotion to life but in a way that the touch of death, a kind of an annihilation of one's previous Ego that leads to a profound transubstantiation of the person, cannot be avoided: 'I delight in loving him who loves me, and I long to love him to the death, boundlessly, and without ceasing' (FL I, 28).

The loving soul has to, at the point where all things are lost, risk its life and accept the possibility of real death. By this, however, it reaches the highest reward life can give: love that is God himself: 'He kisses her (the soul) passionately with his divine mouth (...) Then she rises to the heights of bliss and to the most exquisite pain when she becomes truly intimate with him' (FL II, 23).

Eroticism is very similar to this experience. It is an ecstatic devotion to the here and now of sensual tangibility, sort of a joint breathing that unfolds such elementary energies that the person driven by Eros experiences a confrontation with boundaries and the forbidden.

This is what the woman in love also experiences in Song 5:6 who ignores all reflexes of the sober reason and does not recoil from any danger as she makes for the search after her lover at night. She is not able any more to hide behind the society-defined norms of femininity, instead she acts in a confidently demanding way and follows her own desire – at any price.

Eros is thus threatening since it requires nothing less but the abandonment of one's own Ego. It demands no less than the soul of the lovers themselves. And this is exactly why eroticism is such a profound confrontation between life and death. The French philosopher Georges Bataille formulates this in his main work (*L'Erotisme*, *Eroticism*, 1957) as follows: 'Between one being and another there is a gulf, a discontinuity'.<sup>22</sup> Eroticism is thus an attempt to reach the continuity hoped for, be it only for a moment.

Eroticism as well as mysticism strives for the transcendental experience of union. This is however only to be attained in ecstasy, in a state of the Ego out of itself where the border separating one from the other is transgressed.

The heavenly as well as the earthly love needs moments of selflessness, abandonment, only through which such a profound transgression of one's self becomes possible, in a way that can be described as an experience of death. Through this experience actual limits between 'You and Me' disappear. The Ego of the mystic Mechthild is 'dissolved' in 'the You of the divinity' in the sense of an everlasting union. The Ego of the loving person is 'dissolved' in the 'You of the beloved' in a similar fashion and wrested from discontinuity. This results in an unexpected and incomparable experience where no more

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22. Bataille G (1994) *Die Erotik. Neuübers. von Gerd Bergfleth*. München: Matthes & Seitz, 15. 'Zwischen dem einen und dem anderen Wesen liegt ein Abgrund, erstreckt sich die Diskontinuität.'

boundaries between ‘You and Me’ are perceivable. The mere continuity of ‘Us’ stepped into the place of the isolation of a ‘Me’ – the intense union of ‘You and Me’ is a total and everlasting transgression.

Therefore eroticism is – in its physical as well as spiritual dimensions – a sort of sacred reality that leads to the experience of the transcendent and divine and through it to the existential transubstantiation of the person.

The Song of Songs is thus – according to Dorothee Sölle – a paean of praise to the fulfillment of Creation right in the form of human sexuality. She criticizes in this aspect above all the strict distinction between Eros and Agape prevailing in Christianity that made us blind to the extensive reality of love.<sup>23</sup>

If deprived of an experience of the transcendental dimension of the human body in its absolute vulnerability and tangibility, man is hermetically separated from the world around him. This way he loses the chance of an encounter with God, as Kurt Appel put it in his inaugural lecture at the University of Vienna in July 2012.

Now the Song of Songs suggests that a profound experience of God is to be reached exactly through Eros and Love which inevitably and continuously bear the ambivalence of tangibility and vulnerability. It is exactly by the ambiguous nature of mysticism and eroticism as a promise of life and experience of death that the transubstantiation of the person, the transgression of the Ego and the real discovery of an ‘Us’ is consummated. This ‘Us’ of loving people nevertheless does not remain closed in on itself but opens up without limits by the nature of love and encloses all of those in need of love. This certainly also brings about interpersonal and social consequences, by which there can be no Eros without Agape and no Agape without Eros. This is the true nature of mysticism and eroticism.

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