Invitations

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Abstract and Keywords
This chapter describes the invitation poem, a genre of love poetry with its roots in the biblical Song of Songs that reflects on major questions that have always surrounded the nature of love. Does love entail recognition or fresh discovery, a completion of the self or a disruption of its contours? Is love primarily a natural passion or a cultural practice? The invitation poem, with its displacement of erotic desire onto an imagined landscape, negotiates these possibilities through its fusion of inward and outward, homecoming and exile, intimacy and alienation. The tradition initiated by the Song of Songs alters over the centuries, as poets including Christopher Marlowe and Charles Baudelaire, among many others, highlight different points of contact between the poetic and erotic imagination. The invitation genre can thus be seen as an archetypal form of love lyric, emphasizing some of the central paradoxes that link love to poetry.

Keywords: invitation, Song of Songs, nature, culture, displacement, landscape, homecoming, exile
At the climax of part I of Alfred Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855), the speaker urges his beloved Maud to leave her house and join him in the garden outside:

Come into the garden, Maud,
   For the black bat, night, has flown,
Come into the garden, Maud,
   I am here at the gate alone;
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
   And the musk of the rose is blown.

For a breeze of morning moves,
   And the planet of Love is on high,
Beginning to faint in the light that she loves
   On a bed of daffodil sky,
To faint in the light of the sun she loves,
   To faint in his light, and to die.

The slender acacia would not shake
   One long milk-bloom on the tree;
The white lake-blossom fell into the lake
   As the pimpernel dozed on the lea;
But the rose was awake all night for your sake,
   Knowing your promise to me;
The lilies and roses were all awake,
   They sighed for the dawn and thee.

Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,
   Come hither, the dances are done,
In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,
   Queen lily and rose in one;
Shine out, little head, sunning over with curls,
   To the flowers, and be their sun.¹
Tennyson’s lyric displays all the characteristics of one of the most prominent and enduring genres of Western love poetry, the invitation poem. The invitation tradition stretches from the biblical Song of Songs, which Tennyson consciously echoes in *Maud*, through Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” (“Come live with me and be my love”), and on to Charles Baudelaire’s “L’Invitation au voyage” and beyond. All these works are marked by a sense of displacement, in two ways. First, the speaker urges the beloved to abandon one place and come away to another, better place. Second, and more subtly, the poem’s erotic energy is almost wholly displaced from the lovers onto the landscape. Tennyson’s stanzas, for instance, are typical in focusing less on the girl than on the garden: the scent of the roses, the breeze of the morning, the light of the stars.
The second feature sets these poems apart. It could be argued that almost every love poem, at least any that addresses the beloved directly, is in some sense invitational. Love longs for union, while poetry, like all written discourse, implies some degree of separation; much love poetry, therefore, carries the explicit or implicit message “Come to me.” But the invitation poems discussed in this chapter are distinctive in devoting most of their attention, not directly to love, but to location—the locus amoenus to which the beloved is invited and which is described in rich, particular detail. This sublimation of physical desire into loco-descriptive fantasy has several attractions. In the first place, it turns what could be an abrupt demand (Come to me, here) into something more equitable: Come with me, to a distant place we can share. (Tennyson’s speaker is unusual in that he does ask Maud, in essence, to “come to me, here”; but his demand is still tempered by its concentration on the here rather than the me.) The displacement from body to landscape allows not just for greater delicacy, moreover, but for greater variety, offering the poet a broader canvas on which to paint. From Homer onward, poets have always reveled in imagining paradise or utopia. In the invitation poem, those elaborately detailed fantasies are imbued with erotic meaning, yet without any risk of prurience. Hence the invitation poem can be seen as a particularly refined, indeed exemplary, form of love poetry. It does what all love poetry does—namely, it prolongs and defers love by converting it into discourse; in the (p.51) words of Louis Mackey, it turns eros into logos.³ But the invitation poem also goes one step further and turns logos into topos. By substituting drawn-out descriptions of place for the more direct language of desire, it doubles the pleasures of deferral.
Above all, the invitation poem implicitly reconciles, or at least combines, two divergent schools of thought that have long dominated philosophical treatments of love. The first of these, discussed in Chapter 1, is the Platonic idea that love represents a return, or desire to return, to a primal state. According to this view, a person falling in love does not discover something truly new—an extraneous being or mode of being—but merely recognizes and resumes an original condition. Thus Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* proposes that the beloved represents a long-lost portion of ourselves; Socrates in the same dialogue, and then again in the *Phaedrus*, claims that the beloved represents a form of Beauty that we once knew and have lost sight of. The same notion underlies the thinking of Sigmund Freud, who attributes “the peculiar state of being in love” to our desire to recover an infantile state of perfect self-sufficiency. In these cases, falling in love represents not a going-out from oneself, but a rediscovery of one’s own most essential self.

The alternate view holds that, to the contrary, love represents a disruption of self-sufficiency—an acknowledgment of, and desire for, the beloved’s unknown alterity. As Martha Nussbaum convincingly demonstrates, this notion is just as Platonic as the other. The long final speech of the *Symposium*, Nussbaum points out, belongs not to Aristophanes or Socrates but to Alcibiades, who offers a totally different view of love from theirs, one involving not self-discovery and reunification but self-doubt and self-contradiction. Alcibiades describes how he fell madly in love with Socrates, desiring him all the more precisely because Socrates offered no affirmation but remained inscrutably alien and other. In such a situation, as Nussbaum puts it, “to make yourself a lover is to accept the reality and the power of another world.” And this, too, is a vision of love that has persisted through the ages. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, emphasizes the necessity of “the dissimilar” in love—that “one should possess what the other does not.” Likewise, Irving Singer writes that the beloved is all the more beloved for his or her “opaque reality”—in other words, for the irreducible difference from ourselves that draws us out of our isolation and inspires us to change.
The invitation poem embraces both these points of view and keeps them in fruitful tension. In Tennyson’s lyric, for example, Maud’s coming out to join her lover is represented primarily as a restoration to an earlier state. In the last stanza quoted above, Maud is invited to leave the gaudy world of dances and jewels to return to nature. More specifically, she is asked to return to her own nature: the garden, we have been told, belongs entirely to her (“Maud has a garden of roses | And lilies fair on a lawn”), and it offers her a direct reflection of herself, since Maud is “Queen lily and rose in one” (1.489–90, 905). The invitation is thus framed as a homecoming. At the same time, however, the speaker must plead for Maud to come forth, because her emergence into the garden represents, in some ways, not a return but a decided break. The house she is being asked to leave, after all, is her ancestral home, and the ball taking place inside is being given by her brother, whereas the lover waiting in the garden is all but a stranger to her. The invitation thus carries an undertone of frightening uncertainty, and this aspect too is reflected in the natural imagery. Venus, “the planet of love,” is shining, yet also fading and dying: “Beginning to faint in the light that she loves |...To faint in his light and to die” (1.858–61). The image of the fading star is just as erotic and seductive as that of the lilies and roses, but for the opposite reason; it presents love, not as a familiar reflection of the self, but as a sacrifice of selfhood in exchange for a potentially transcendent experience of union. This is the crucial duality that the genre of the invitation poem conveys.
In what follows I trace some of the genre’s major developments, beginning with the Song of Songs, which serves as a model for most subsequent invitation poems. The Song sets a number of powerful precedents, including a dialogic framework and a clear eroticization of the landscape; it also, crucially, introduces a concept of love as involving not only pleasure but an element of self-sacrifice. I then examine a series of later invitation poems, dating from the tenth to the twentieth centuries. All share the same central element—a displacement of erotic energy onto a landscape represented as at once foreign and familiar, threatening and welcoming, and equally attractive for both reasons. But the same poems also reflect on other important ambiguities associated with love: the dangers as well as the delights of idealizing the beloved; the mingling of nature and artifice that, as noted in Chapter 1, characterizes both love and poetry. These lyrics express more directly perhaps than any others the central paradoxes of love.
The Song of Songs is traditionally attributed to Solomon (hence its other title, the Song of Solomon), but scholars generally agree that it is much more recent, dating from perhaps as late as the third century BCE. It comprises a series of passionate erotic lyrics in the tradition of much ancient Near Eastern love poetry, spoken alternately by a woman and a man. The Song’s inclusion in the canon of sacred scripture therefore needed to be defended by commentators, who tended to read it allegorically: rabbinic tradition usually interpreted the Song as celebrating the love of God for Israel, while Christian exegetes most often read it as expressing the bond between Christ and his church. At the same time, however, the Song has always also been understood more literally as a poem of sexual love—even when, as during the Middle Ages, such readings were strictly condemned—as evidenced by the use of its language and tropes by secular love poets. The Song provides models for many different types of love poem, since it constitutes not so much a single, unified poem (except insofar as it is bound together by repeated images (p.54) and motifs) as a collection of lyrics in various styles: poems of yearning, poems of praise, brief narrative sketches. Critics disagree on how to divide up the poems, and sometimes even about whether a given verse is spoken by the man or the woman. But it is clear that the woman is given at least an equal role in the dialogue; indeed, her words begin and end the book. The Song thus differs from most of the tradition of love poetry that derives from it, in which the male voice tends to dominate; in the Song itself, the two voices express reciprocal desire and emerge as equal participants.

This equality is reflected in the Song’s three invitation poems, which form a relatively small but crucial part of the overall dialogue: Elie Assis, for instance, considers the invitations as defining structural markers in the Song, the culminating moments of each of its major movements. The second invitation, beginning at 4:8 (“Come with me from Lebanon”) is spoken by the man, and the third, beginning at 7:11 (“Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields”) by the woman. The first invitation, the longest and most influential of the three, is shared. The man speaks, but for once his words are presented as reported discourse, repeated or perhaps imagined by the woman as she sits indoors:

The voice of my beloved!
Look, there he stands behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face, let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.”

(2:8–14)

The landscape to which the beloved is invited is in itself beautiful and fertile. But the true erotic power of these lines, as of every other invitation in the Song, depends on a simple but effective principle: namely, that the natural landscape being described is closely associated with the bodies of the lovers. This link has already been established a few verses earlier: “As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens. | As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men” (2:2–3). The identification only grows stronger as the poem progresses, notably through the Song’s repeated use of what in Arabic poetry is known as a ṣawṣaf, a poem of praise in which each part of the beloved’s body is described figuratively in terms of natural features:

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy...
His eyes are like doves beside springs of water,
bathed in milk, fitly set.
His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance.
His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh.

(5:10–13)

Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies.
Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle... 
You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters.

(7:2–7)

Topography and anatomy are interfused. Every invitation to “come away” to a distant place thus functions also as an invitation to erotic exploration—and, equally, to self-discovery, since the locus amoenus reflects both of the lovers.

The conflation of place and person is perhaps clearest in the second invitation, which also foregrounds a complication or tension that characterizes all three of the Song’s invitation poems:

Come with me from Lebanon, my bride; come with me from Lebanon.
Depart from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards.

(4:8)

Again, this landscape echoes the description of the beloved’s body a few verses earlier, where she is likened to a mountain on which animals dwell: “Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. ...| I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense” (4:1–6). But here the difficulty arises. The woman is compared to a hill, a mountain, a slope. Is the request that she “depart from the peak[s]” of Lebanon, then, truly an invitation to a more amenable place, as it seems at (p.56) first? Or is it, more troublingly, an order to quit a familiar landscape for one that is more alien?

The ambiguity persists in the lines that follow. Having invited the woman down from the wilds of Lebanon (presumably to the cultivated area of Jerusalem, where the poem is set), the man describes her thus:

Your lips distill nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.
A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed...
a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.

(4:11–15)

Once more the woman is compared to the land into which she is being invited: she is a cultivated “garden,” and the “honey and milk” of her tongue recall “the familiar epithet of the land of Israel, the land flowing with milk and honey.”15 Yet at the same time the woman is twice associated with the wild “Lebanon” she is being asked to abandon. The invitation is thus more complex than it seems, and this complexity becomes an important feature of subsequent poems in the tradition. The addressee is invited to a desirable and welcoming place, one that echoes her own features as well as those of her beloved. Yet the proposition is not simple, since she is being asked at the same time to take a difficult, even fearful step, by leaving the familiar surroundings of home.

The same sense of conflict would seem to be absent from the first invitation in the Song, quoted above: the woman is invited out from behind a “wall” to enjoy a verdant and familiar landscape, a world where “the voice of the turtledove is heard,” just as she herself is compared to a “dove” whose “voice is sweet” (2:9, 12, 14). But even here there is an implied threat or difficulty. As Assis points out, in this archetypal invitation poem, the Hebrew words ulchi lach, which have invariably been translated as “come away” (in the repeated injunction “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (2:10, 13)), literally mean “go away.”16 For all its seductiveness, then, the first invitation culminates in what reads like an act of banishment. Yet the puzzling expression offers an important insight, since it points to a precedent that helps explain the ambiguity of threat and welcome, exile and homecoming, that characterizes all the invitations in the Song.
Ulchi lach—literally “begone with you”—is the same command, only in feminine form, that God speaks to Abraham in Genesis: “Go [lech l’cha—begone with you] from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). This verse marks a major turning point in Genesis, a transition from universal history to the story of a chosen people. God’s command constitutes both a serious test of faith, since Abraham is being asked to forsake everything that he has known, and a covenant, since God goes on to promise that a welcome new homeland awaits, to be populated by the offspring that have so far eluded Abraham (“I will make of you a great nation” (12:2)).

The echo of these words in the Song of Songs is therefore apt, however discordant the phrasing may seem, since the invitation to a fresh and fertile new world (the garden of love, of sexuality) is at the same time an injunction to leave the familiar home of one’s parents.

Behind God’s command to Abraham, moreover, lies a yet earlier biblical formulation of the need to leave the parental home and seek abroad: “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Taken by itself, this verse clearly seems to prescribe exogamy: love and marriage require a going-forth to find someone new. In context, however, the verse is far more ambiguous. Earlier in Genesis 2, God recognizes that “it is not good that the man should be alone” and therefore forms all of the animals out of the ground to show Adam; but none is deemed fit to be his partner (2:18). At last God forms Eve directly out of Adam’s body, prompting Adam’s triumphant cry: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken” (2:23). Does a man leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, then, because she is different from what he has known, a new and undiscovered world? Or is it, to the contrary, because she is closer to himself—not alien earth, but “flesh of his flesh”?
This ambiguity resounds through the later command to Abraham to leave his father’s house—is Abraham being asked to go forth or to come back to his true home?—and into the echo of that command in the Song of Songs. The Song has often been recognized as a version of the story of Eden, and (p.58) the love relationship depicted in the Song displays, at every level, the ambiguity suggested by Genesis: love is both a going-out of oneself and a finding of oneself reflected or embodied in another. The invitations are focal points of this ambiguity, with their double sense of venturing forth and coming home, their summons both to take a frightening leap into the unknown and to return to a landscape of comforting familiarity.

The same ambiguity—what might be called the lech l’cha trope—is reflected in the Song’s frequent fusion, or confusion, of outside and inside. The third invitation, spoken by the woman, seems to gesture outward, to a world of new growth:

> Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields, and lodge in the villages; let us go out early to the vineyards, and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love. The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and over our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

(7:11–13)
But this is followed immediately by a contradictory desire to retreat indoors, to the comforting familiarity of family love: “O that you were like a brother to me, who nursed at my mother’s breast!...| I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of the one who bore me” (8:1–2). On consideration, even the preceding invitation into the vineyard is not really a move out into the world, since the vineyard, like the enclosed garden of the second invitation (4:12), is a liminal space: outdoors, yet still private. By the same token, although the invitations are all directed outward into the natural world, they lead not into the wilderness but into something more tame and familiar; the garden and the vineyard represent nature, but nature cultivated and prepared (“fruits...which I have laid up for you”). These intermediate spaces encapsulate love’s duality. Love is both private, in the sense that a pair of lovers forms a community separate from the rest of the world, and necessarily public, in the sense that it exposes one’s inner self to another. Hence the locus amoenus, with its mingling of open nature and cultivated enclosure.

The Song of Songs thus sets a number of precedents for the invitation poem and in doing so offers a particular understanding of the nature of love. The Song’s invitations are, in the first place, radically dialogic: the discourse of love is shared. Second, they conflate person and place, so that an invitation to travel is simultaneously an invitation to love, and topographical descriptions of the proposed destination also function as suggestions of physical and emotional intimacy. Finally, the invitations always suggest a dual movement. The impetus is largely outward, a quitting of one’s private space for the unfamiliar and unpredictable world outside the self. But the same journey is also presented as a retreat towards a safe, familiar space. Hence love in the Song is depicted as both frightening and comforting, a discovery of the alien and of the intimate at once.
If we turn to two seminal later examples of the invitation poem, closely connected though written 900 years apart, we see how much they owe to the precedent of the Song of Songs, even as they introduce new emphases and suggestions about the nature of erotic relations. The first, “Iam, dulcis amica, venito,” which has been termed “the most famous and perhaps the oldest of the earlier mediæval love songs,” not only derives much of its imagery from the Song but preserves its most definitive features. In the first place, “Iam, dulcis” takes the form of a dialogue between a male and a female speaker, although scholars disagree about which stanzas belong to which voice. It features, moreover, a clear erotic displacement: the speaker’s desire is once again channeled into a lavish description of the locus amoenus. Finally, together with the promise of pleasure comes a hint of anxiety, a recognition of the sacrifice that comes with love, just as in the biblical model. The difference between “Iam, dulcis” and the Song lies chiefly in a disruption of the balance between the two speakers, a foregrounding of one’s more importunate desire.

The lyric begins with the male voice speaking, as he does through most of the poem:

| Iam, dulcis amica, venito, quam sicut cor meum diligo! Intra in cubiculum meum ornamentis cunctis onustum! Ibi sunt sedilia strata et domus velis ornata floresque in domo sparguntur herbeque fraglantes miscentur. |
| Come now, sweet friend, whom I love as my own heart! Enter into my chamber laden with all decorations! There the couches are laid out and the house is hung with curtains, and in the house are scattered flowers and fragrant herbs mixed in. |
These lines imitate the Song of Songs, sometimes verbatim; yet the emphases have changed dramatically. This invitation is very much an invitation: the beloved is asked to enter (“Intra in”) an interior, curtained space. There she will find the usual flowers and herbs, but they have been artificially introduced to imitate wild nature (they are “scattered” through the house). The mixture of nature and culture, organic form and human artifice echoes the gardens and vineyards of the Song, but with the emphasis clearly tilted toward artifice.

The description grows even more lavish in the stanzas that follow:

| Est ibi mensa apposita universis cibis onusta; | There the table is set loaded with every food, there clear wine abounds and whatever delights you, beloved. |
| ibi clarum vinum habundat et quicquid te, cara, delectat. | Ibi sonant dulces symphonie inflammur et altius tybie, ibi puer doctus et puella panguant tibi carmina bella. | There sweet harmonies resound and flutes play above them, there a learned boy and girl compose lovely songs for you. |

(stanzas 3-4)

The erotic displacement, already suggested by the focused intensity of the place description (such as the anaphoric repetition of ibi, “there”), is made all but explicit in the figure of the boy and girl. The rich decorations, which have been described provocatively in terms of all five bodily senses, here culminate in a matched pair, a substitute for the lovers themselves. Since the boy and girl are composing songs, moreover, they suggest a possible mise en abyme, an endless artistic deferral of the proposed erotic union: in this poem a man and a woman sing, together, of going to a place where a boy and a girl sing together, perhaps of another place...
At the same time that the poem imitates and even refines the substitutive eroticism of the invitations in the Song, however, it also introduces a new element: an almost crass insistence upon luxury or excess. Whereas the Song offered images of natural fertility and repletion, “Iam, dulcis” seems to go out of its way to suggest superabundance: it repeats how the room is loaded down (onustum, onusta) with all possible (cunctis, universis) foods and ornaments. Yet this material luxury is rejected just afterward in favor of the amorous pleasures for which, in any case, it stands: (p.61)

Non me iuvat tantum convivium quantum predulce colloquium, nec rerum tantarum ubertas ut dilecta familiaritas.

Such feasting does not delight me so much as sweet conversation, nor the richness of such objects so much as loving intimacy.

(stand 6)

It is not clear who speaks these lines. It could be the woman, rejecting the excesses of the earlier descriptions, or the man, clarifying the true aim and nature of his invitation. Yet the confusion is appropriate: not only does it hark back to the Song, where many lines are impossible to attribute to one speaker with any certainty, but the blending of voices in the reader’s mind is fitting for a stanza that longs above all for dialogue (colloquium).

The only lines that can unquestionably be attributed to the woman come two stanzas later, and they form the crucial lines of the poem. The man repeats his invitation (stanza 7), and the woman replies with a speech that, as often happens in the Song of Songs, does not respond directly or logically. Her reply is clearly engaged in the dialogue, yet at the same time it seems to hover above and apart from the rest of the lyric:

Ego fui sola in silva et dilexi loca secreta; I have been alone in the forest and have loved hidden places;
The lines are so striking (Helen Waddell comments that, compared with them, “the rest of the poem has the shabbiness of last year’s nests”) because they are perfectly ambiguous. At a grammatical level, it is not clear whether the newly introduced perfect tense (I have loved hidden places) indicates that the speaker now renounces such solitude (I used to love them) or that solitude remains habitual for her (I have always loved them and still do). More fundamentally, it is not clear whether a love of solitude and sequestration would naturally lead her to accept the man’s invitation or to reject it. Is love social, in other words, or is it the opposite—a sort of private retreat, where the only other people and things are merely reflections of the two lovers themselves? Once again, is the invitation to love a drawing-outward or a drawing-in?

This ambiguity is left unresolved as the man voices his final plea: (p.62)
Here a new note of urgency enters, audible not only in the rejection of deferral (quid iuvat differre?), which heretofore has been the mode of the whole poem, but in the sense of pleading, as if to overcome unwillingness—a sense almost wholly absent in the Song, where both parties express a yearning for each other. The speaker in these stanzas proffers his invitation in terms of submitting to an inevitable necessity, rather than—or as well as—indulging in pleasure. This sense is reinforced by an ominous allusion to the Gospel of John, where Jesus at the Last Supper speaks to Judas nearly the same words the speaker uses here: Quod facis fac citius—“Do quickly what you are going to do” (John 13:27). Yet, even if the specific tone of urgency is new, the implication that love involves self-sacrifice follows directly in the tradition of the Song of Songs, with its constant undertone of lech l’cha. The connection is suggested by the final line, which once again echoes the language of the Song, recalling Et macula non est in te (4:7; “there is no flaw in you”), phonetically (macula/ aliqua) as well as syntactically. “Iam, dulcis” thus serves as a crucial link between the Song and the later tradition of the invitation poem. It maintains the sense of mutuality, open-endedness, and sublimated eroticism of its model, while also foreshadowing later developments, in which a dominant, typically male speaker piles up physical enticements in an attempt to overcome or overwhelm the resistance of his addressee.

Many of the tropes that mark both the Song and “Iam, dulcis” reappear in Baudelaire’s “L’Invitation au voyage” (1855), but in more explicit, self-conscious form. Baudelaire was able to draw on what was by then a long history of invitation poetry, but he most likely took inspiration directly from “Iam, dulcis” as well. The poem as a whole offers an invitation outward, to a foreign country; but the second stanza focuses on an interior setting:

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<tr>
<th>Des meubles luisants,</th>
<th>Lustrous furniture</th>
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<tr>
<td>Polis par les ans,</td>
<td>Polished by the years</td>
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<td>Découreraient notre chambre;</td>
<td>Would decorate our chamber;</td>
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<td>Les plus rares fleurs</td>
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The rich interior décor, the mingled fragrance of flowers, the reflected image of the lovers (here literally reflected by the mirrors) all recall “Iam, dulcis.”

In this stanza, however, as throughout the poem, Baudelaire also harkens back directly to the Song of Songs. In particular, the reference to the soul’s “native language” clearly intimates that the locus amoenus, for all its oriental splendor, is not a foreign but a familiar place. As Barbara Johnson writes: “This evocation of a first, original language makes of the voyage not a departure but a return...toward a primal fullness.” The same sense of primal return has already been suggested in the poem’s opening line, which transforms the Song’s typical address, “My sister, my bride,” into “My child, my sister” (Mon enfant, ma soeur). Thus the phrase that in the Song suggests an unattainable ideal—a desire for an exogamous erotic relationship (my bride) that would have all the native force of a sibling relationship (my sister)—becomes intensified in “L’Invitation” into an Oedipal paradox. The desire for a love relationship of total likeness, closer even than any family bond, results in an expression at once tautological (my relative, my relative) and impossibly self-contradictory.

The whole opening stanza presents the proposed voyage as a journey backwards and inwards: (p.64)
The final line makes absolutely explicit what had always been implied in earlier invitation poems: that to go out there, together (là-bas...ensemble) is really to turn within, to oneself. Yet even here, despite the explicit assurance of resemblance, the destination described is not simply comforting:

As always, the invitation has a threatening undertone: the landscape resembles the beloved, not in her state of primal innocence, but in a state of unfathomable and tearful experience. Baudelaire thus candidly foregrounds both the promise of the invitation (familiarity, return) and its difficulties.
The refrain that follows promises perfection: “Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, | Luxe, calme et volupté” (There, all is but order and beauty, | Luxury, calm and pleasure). But this description is contradicted by the images of mist and treachery just before. Even the refrain, moreover, suggests sacrifice. Its totalizing perfection (“all is...order”) is cast in negative terms, as an exclusion: “tout n’est qu’ordre”—all is [nought] but order. The destination is thus one of total rest and unease at once, a sense reinforced at the beginning of the third stanza:

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<th>Vois sur ces canaux</th>
<th>See on the canals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dormir ces vaisseaux</td>
<td>Those vessels asleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dont l’humeur est vagabonde.</td>
<td>Whose nature is to wander.</td>
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</table>

(II. 29–31)

Once again the image is ambiguous. On the one hand, the boats seem to have found a comfortable berth in the locus amoenus. On the other hand, their rest is bought at the cost of sacrificing their natural, wandering (vagabonde) inclination.

“L’Invitation au voyage” quickly became one of the most famous examples of its genre, because it does exactly what the poems already discussed do—it conflates person and place, and it presents love both as an exotic, fearful journey and as a welcome return to originary identity—but with the difference that Baudelaire’s poem is even more self-conscious than its models. From its opening lines Baudelaire’s “invitation au voyage” is actually a meta-invitation. The beloved is not really invited to travel to the place described but rather to “imagine” (songe) traveling. Such an invitation is self-fulfilling, since the addressee necessarily does imagine such travel merely by grace of listening to the rest of the poem. So, of course, does the reader, and here we find one of the keys to the appeal of the invitation genre.
Baudelaire’s invitation, with its gentle but urgent imperatives (*imagine, see*), seems to be directed as much to the reader as to a fictional addressee. Baudelaire brings this implication deliberately to the fore, since several phrases in “L’Invitation au voyage” closely recall the prefatory poem of *Les Fleurs du mal*, “Au Lecteur” (“To the Reader”). But the same could be said, to some extent, of all invitation poems, even those that appear within a dialogic framework: the erotic appeal of the second-person address (“Come to me”) implicates and interpellates the reader as much as the fictional beloved. The reason this equation of lover and reader is so effective is that loving and reading are equally dependent on the imagination. Even the most basic erotic attraction, as many thinkers have observed, requires an imaginative effort. As Singer writes, “It is…through the amorous imagination that one person becomes sexually attractive to another. Our instincts alone would not enable us to love or even to lust in the way that human beings do.” The invitation poem insistently foregrounds this imaginative aspect of erotic excitement. Rather than directly inviting physical intimacy, the speaker instead invites the beloved to a place that by definition can be accessed only through the imagination, since it is far away or merely ideal. The real demand of every invitation poem, therefore, is “Imagine,” even when the explicit request is “Come away.” And, unlike “Come away,” the invitation to imagine is one to which the reader and the fictional addressee are able to respond in exactly equal measure—and necessarily do respond, by attending to the poem’s descriptions. The opening of Baudelaire’s poem thus self-consciously performs what other examples of the genre do implicitly: it proposes intimacy, and, by explicitly substituting a shared imaginative experience (*songe à la douceur*) for a physical one, it ensures its own success.
Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” which provides the model for almost every subsequent invitation poem in English, combines this type of sublimated eroticism with another, more materialistic tradition. By the time it was published, posthumously, in two different verse collections (1599 and 1600), Marlowe’s poem was already so well known that it had been frequently imitated, by dramatists as well as poets; Sir Walter Raleigh and John Donne both wrote responses to it, and Shakespeare’s Sir Hugh Evans tries to recite it in The Merry Wives of Windsor. R. S. Forsythe traces its influence all the way into the twentieth century, citing dozens of poems and plays and noting that, “initiated by Marlowe’s poem and its frequent imitations, a literary device, ‘the invitation to love,’ became established in English literature and has persisted in it down to our own time.”

Forsythe finds no real precedent for this device in English, and he traces Marlowe’s use of it, not to the Bible, but to classical pastoral poetry. In this he has been followed by later scholars, who generally cite three closely related poems as models: Theocritus, Idyll 11, in which the cyclops Polyphemus tries to woo the nymph Galatea; Virgil, Eclogue 2, which directly imitates Theocritus but replaces the cyclops and nymph with a pair of shepherds; and Ovid’s Metamorphoses, book 13, which also recounts the story of Polyphemus and Galatea. Each poem contains a passage in which the speaker invites the beloved to live with him and describes the rewards that await if he or she accepts. Although they form an independent tradition, these pastoral invitations resemble those in the Song of Songs and its successors, most notably in their implicitly dialogic framework. Theocritus’ and Virgil’s poems both feature a single speaker, but both appear in collections in which dialogue is more standard, and both immediately follow poems in which speakers engage in conversation. Instead of the single lyric voice seeming normative, then, it feels conspicuously incomplete: the speakers of Idyll 11 and Eclogue 2 offer their invitations aloud, and much of the pathos lies in the silence that follows. Ovid’s poem recalls the dialogic structure of the Song of Songs more closely. Like the first invitation in the Song, the woman’s recollection of the speech of her beloved (2:8–14), Polyphemus’ speech in Ovid is nested within Galatea’s, who recounts the invitation she once heard him offer.
Yet, despite these affinities, there exists a crucial difference between the invitations in the Song of Songs and those of the classical tradition. In the former, the eroticized *locus amoenus* is offered as its own reward, a place for both lovers to seek out and enjoy together. In the latter, by contrast, the richly described places and objects function, essentially, as bribes. The pastoral speakers offer material luxuries not as, but in exchange for, erotic pleasures. Theocritus’ cyclops explains that, though ugly, he is wealthy, and Corydon, the speaker in Virgil’s eclogue, frankly refers to the flowers and spices he has described as *munera*—“gifts” or “rewards” (Ecl. 2.56). In Ovid the situation is, once again, slightly more complex. The cyclops describes a landscape that, as in other invitation poems, deliberately echoes earlier descriptions of the beloved herself; he offers a world of apples and grapes, kids and milk, to a woman he has just described as being goodlier than apples, sweeter than grapes, friskier than a kid, milder than milk. Polyphemus seems almost to have taken his cue from the Song of Songs; the language of his invitation appears to offer a comforting sense of return. Yet, in contrast to the Song, he insists throughout that all these objects belong to him: *omne meum est*—“it is all mine” (13.821). And he concludes by referring to them in the same terms used by Virgil’s Corydon: “Now, Galatea, come, and do not spurn my gifts (*munera*)” (13.839). All the natural descriptions are thus merely a means to an end: one physical asset is being bartered for another. By contrast, in the Song of Songs, in “Iam, dulcis,” in Baudelaire, the paradisal destination is itself the focus of attention, as erotic attraction is channeled into topographical fantasy.

The achievement of Marlowe’s poem is to fuse the pastoral tradition of the gift-giving shepherd with the sublimated eroticism of the Song of Songs. The first move towards sublimation can be precisely located at the end of the second line:

Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove...

Taken by itself the couplet is straightforwardly erotic, an invitation to amorous experimentation. But the second line turns out to be enjambed, and the succeeding couplet unexpectedly reassigns the “pleasures” to the exploration of nature:
Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

(ll. 1–4)

Erotic energy is immediately projected outward. The second stanza continues this trend:

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

(ll. 5–8)

Much as in “Iam, dulcis,” where a boy and a girl sing of a place where a boy and a girl are singing, here the shepherd-singer invites his beloved to experience a place of shepherds and birdsong. The delicacy of the proposition lies in the displacement, the way the figure of the amorous speaker is diffused through the landscape.

The next three stanzas systematically associate the woman too with the landscape, as various natural elements are transformed into adornments for her body: the flowers are woven into her cap, leaves into her kirtle, the lambs’ wool into her gown:

And I will make thee beds of roses,
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle,
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.

(p.69) A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull,
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold.

(ll. 9–16)
Nature, which had originally appeared wild (valleys, woods, steepy mountain), here becomes cultivated for the beloved’s enjoyment, just as in the Song of Songs. An even more subtle echo of the Song comes in the way Marlowe combines the invitation with the *waṣf*, or part-by-part description of the beloved’s body: each fragment of the landscape is converted into an article of clothing for a specific area of the woman’s body. In contrast to the classical precedent, where these goods would be traded for erotic gratification, here the description itself provides that gratification. Douglas Bruster claims that “With each element building on the richness of the previous enticement…the invitation of the Passionate Shepherd functions as a rhetorical version of the sexual act; the process of enumeration is intended to excite.”

The self-conscious substitution of poetry for physical pleasures is summed up in the word “posies”: “And I will make thee beds of roses, | And a thousand fragrant posies” (ll. 9–10). As Marlowe’s editors point out, the word literally refers to bouquets of flowers but was frequently used to mean “poems,” and was in fact spelled “poesies” in the 1600 edition. The erotic energy of the invitation is thus displaced first onto the flowers (come to my bed…of roses) and then onto the poetic description of them. Like Baudelaire, Marlowe makes us an imaginative offer—of “posies”—that we cannot refuse, because we are already enjoying it.

This movement from physical enticement to abstract, metapoetic pleasures is visible again in the final stanzas:

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs,
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherd swains shall dance and sing,
For thy delight each May-morning.
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.

(ll. 17–24)
The penultimate stanza seems conclusive: having offered adornments to each part of the woman’s body, culminating suggestively in the “clasps” of her belt, the speaker repeats his original invitation verbatim (compare the repetition of “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (Song 2:10, 13)). The poem has come full circle, like the belt; further elaboration seems unnecessary. Yet Marlowe provides an extra stanza that reaffirms the self-conscious nature of the proposition. First, the speaker again removes the focus from himself to an image of himself: “The shepherd swains shall dance and sing, | For thy delight each May-morning.” The displacement suggests an endless deferral of actual erotic consummation, as reflected also in the promise of a changelessly recurring “May-morning.” The speaker then rephrases his invitation in more specific terms: “If these delights thy mind may move.” Like Baudelaire, and unlike the cyclops, the speaker is asking above all for imaginative interaction.
Even Marlowe’s highly refined and intellectualized invitation, however, is not entirely untroubled; but the trouble in this case arises, not from the inherent difficulty of surrendering to love, but from the phrasing of the proposal itself. Of the many responses and imitations to which “The Passionate Shepherd” gave rise in the Renaissance, a large proportion evinced skepticism of the speaker’s offer. Raleigh’s “The Nymph’s Reply,” for instance, refuses the invitation specifically because it is too abstract: such pleasures are very tempting in theory, Raleigh’s nymph points out, but have little meaning or value in the world as we know it. Donne’s “The Bait,” meanwhile, recasts Marlowe’s poem in terms of deception and entrapment. Bruster, who offers an excellent account of these and other responses, attributes them not only to readers’ consciousness of the classical precedent (in Ovid, Polyphemus’ love quickly turns to violence), but also to their deep suspicion of “the potential danger of the monological.” Renaissance readers, that is, felt compelled to provide responses in part because the invitation assumes a different tone when the expression of desire is univocal. Even more than at the end of “Iam, dulcis,” the dominance of a single voice becomes disturbing: the displacement begins to suggest deviousness, rather than delicacy. Certainly, the history of responses to Marlowe’s poem shows that readers ever since the Renaissance have found his invitation to be at once irresistible and troubling. The reassurance of its purely hypothetical, endlessly delayed pleasure is counterbalanced by a sense of dangerous seductiveness.
(p.71) “The Passionate Shepherd” highlights the limitations of idealization in love. The difficulty, which haunts all invitation poems to some extent, is twofold. First, the idealized description of the locus amoenus raises questions of sincerity, as the opening of Raleigh’s reply to Marlowe indicates: “If all the world and love were young, | And truth in every shepherd’s tongue...” When desire is couched in such fanciful images, Raleigh’s speaker seems to suggest, it is difficult to distinguish true passion from mere blandishment, Solomon from a cyclops. Second, even if we take the invitation to be spoken in good faith, there remains “the danger of the monological.” Because it is unilateral, the invitation spoken by Marlowe’s shepherd comes to seem more like an imposition; his addressee, rather than helping to imagine the ideal landscape, ends up disturbingly enfolded, almost buried, within it. Fantasy is intrinsic to love, yet, when the fantasy threatens to replace the actual beloved, it becomes self-defeating.40

Tennyson was highly conscious of this particular threat, which he deliberately exaggerates in “Come into the garden, Maud.” Tennyson’s poem showcases the tendency of love fantasy to take on an independent existence—a problem to which the mentally unstable speaker of Maud, who often has trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality, is especially prone. At the end of “Come into the garden,” after ten stanzas of increasingly elaborate descriptions, the speaker’s horticultural fantasy ends up burying, not his beloved, but himself:

She is coming, my own, my sweet;  
Were it ever so airy a tread,  
My heart would hear her and beat,  
Were it earth in an earthy bed;  
My dust would hear her and beat,  
Had I lain for a century dead;  
Would start and tremble under feet,  
And blossom in purple and red.

(1.916–23)

This stanza, which concludes the lyric, illustrates the overwhelming weight that the idealized locus amoenus can accrue. The speaker’s imaginings entirely displace his erotic desires; at the very moment that his beloved approaches at last, he morbidly fantasizes about mingling with the garden instead.
Yet Tennyson also wrote another, earlier invitation poem that directly addresses this difficulty by carefully de-idealizing the landscape. “Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height” appears in book 7 of Tennyson’s *The Princess* (1847). The speaker, as in Marlowe, is a shepherd, who invites his beloved to descend from her mountain retreat to the fertile valley below:

Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height:  
What pleasure lives in height (the shepherd sang)  
In height and cold, the splendour of the hills?  
But cease to move so near the Heavens, and cease  
To glide a sunbeam by the blasted Pine,  
To sit a star upon the sparkling spire;  
And come, for Love is of the valley, come,  
For Love is of the valley, come thou down  
And find him; by the happy threshold, he,  
Or hand in hand with Plenty in the maize,  
Or red with spirted purple of the vats,  
Or foxlike in the vine.

*The Princess, 7.177–88*

The valley with its vats seems at first more attractive than the mountain with its blasted pine. Yet, for all their appeal, the haunts of Love are described, in the final lines quoted, in terms that clearly suggest fallenness and imperfection. The phrase “hand in hand” echoes the close of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (“They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow”)—a moment when Adam and Eve also descend from a height, to wander through the fallen world below; and this is reinforced by “in the maize,” which punningly recalls Milton’s fallen angels, “in wandering mazes lost.”

The following line, with its stains of spirted red, carries an undertone of violence: we get the same collocation of purple and red that reappears at the grotesque ending of “Come into the Garden, Maud.” The last line then refers directly to the ominously threatening image that concludes the first invitation in the Song of Songs: “Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards” (Song 2:15).
The poem as a whole, moreover, recalls the second invitation in the Song, in which the beloved is troublingly invited away from the peaks of (p.73) Lebanon that she resembles to a new and less familiar location. In Tennyson’s poem, however, the difficulty involves a sacrifice not of familiarity but of possible sublimity. The maid is asked to forgo the aerial perfection of the mountain, a place where she lives in “splendour,” “near the Heavens,” as a “sunbeam,” a “star.” The mountain is perfect, in the sense that solitude can be said to be perfect. Even the most successful love relation, by contrast, has its irregularities. But Tennyson’s speaker, far from denying the imperfections of the valley of love, foregrounds them. His invitation resists over-idealizing, even at its seductive conclusion:

the children call, and I
Thy shepherd pipe, and sweet is every sound,
Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet;
Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

(7.202–7)

The famous musicality of the three final lines should not distract us from the extraordinary line just above them: “Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet.” The line is in a sense quite unnecessary; the ending would be smoother, and the invitation even more tempting, if it were omitted. But the line is crucial because it candidly grants such an important concession. What is being offered to the beloved in this poem is not something better: her own voice is admittedly sweeter than anything the valley can produce. What is being offered instead is something other, and better only insofar as it is other. “Come down, O maid” avoids the pitfalls of idealization by explicitly recognizing that love constitutes a compromise, a step down, even as it constitutes at the same time a crossing of “the happy threshold,” a transcendence.
Tennyson wrote separate invitation poems embodying extreme fantasy ("Come into the garden") and what might be called, for lack of a better term, realism ("Come down, O maid"); Percy Shelley combined them in a single poem. Shelley’s *Epipsychidion* (1821) seems a fitting work with which to conclude, since it contains perhaps the most exuberant invitation poem in English. Shelley wrote *Epipsychidion* when he fell in love, briefly but passionately, with a young woman named Teresa Viviani, whom he calls "Emily" in the poem. The first two-thirds of the work are devoted to praising Emily and describing the vicissitudes of the speaker’s life before he met her. But the final 200 lines form a hyper-extended invitation poem, which is extreme not only in its length but in its tropes. Shelley’s *locus amoenus* is not a garden or a vineyard but a magical island, and thus more perfectly hermetic, and more Platonically idealized, than any other example we have seen. At the same time, however, it is more explicitly imperfect. Shelley allows not just the outside world but the avowedly fallen world to interpenetrate with every aspect of his island: immediately after referring to the island as “Eden,” he calls it “Beautiful as a *wreck* of Paradise.” The island is likewise marked by a surprising lack of privacy. Yet paradoxically, by so candidly admitting these complicating elements into his ideal, self-sufficient world, Shelley is able to present his beloved the model of a more perfect union.

The invitation’s anomalies are evident from its beginning:

Emily,
A ship is floating in the harbour now,
A wind is hovering o’er the mountain’s brow;
There is a path on the sea’s azure floor,
No keel has ever ploughed that path before;
The halcyons brood around the foamless isles;
The treacherous Ocean has forsworn its wiles;
The merry mariners are bold and free:
Say, my heart’s sister, wilt thou sail with me?

(ll. 407–15)
Much here is familiar from other examples of the genre. The use of the term “sister” for the beloved acknowledges Shelley’s debt to the Song of Songs, which he echoes throughout the poem.\(^4\) The hint of trouble in the “treacherous Ocean” resembles the misty and “traitorous” skies in Baudelaire. The implication that the lovers must hurry, to take advantage of the halcyon calm, recalls the impatience at the end of “Iam, dulcis.” What is unfamiliar in these lines in the presence of the mariners. Third parties do, of course, feature in other invitations: the boy and girl playing songs in “Iam, dulcis,” the “shepherd swains” in Marlowe. But in those cases, the figures were transparent stand-ins for the lovers. Here, the lovers require the mediation of others merely to arrive at the *locus amoenus* in the first place. The introduction of these extraneous, mediating figures is all the more surprising, given that the island and even the approach to it are described (p. 75) just above as perfectly private, virgin territory: “No keel has ever ploughed that path before.” But this is the magic of Shelley’s imagined island: it manages to be at once private and populous, inviolate yet permeable.\(^4\)

The island is, foremost, a *utopia* in the truest sense—a nowhere, which can never be sullied because it can never be entered. “The blue Ægean girds this chosen home,” Shelley writes, “Kissing the sifted sands” of the beach without ever venturing farther (ll. 430–2). The same may be true of all islands, but in this case the winds, unusually, follow the ocean’s example and fail to penetrate beyond the shore: “And all the winds wandering along the shore | Undulate with the undulating tide” (ll. 433–4).\(^4\) Tempestuous nature goes out of its way to overleap or skirt the island, leaving an apparent vacuum above it:

Famine or Blight,  
Pestilence, War and Earthquake, never light  
Upon its mountain-peaks; blind vultures, they  
Sail onward far upon their fatal way:  
The winged storms, chaunting their thunder-psalm  
To other lands, leave azure chasms of calm  
Over this isle.

(ll. 461–7)
The island, moreover, seems to inhabit a “chasm” in time, as well as in space. All of its sensuous elements—its “every motion, odour, beam, and tone”—are said to be “Like echoes of an antenatal dream” (ll. 453–6). As “echoes,” these features recall a lost past (as befits a “wreck of Paradise”); as parts of “an antenatal dream,” they look forward to something yet to be. Yet the present is absent from this description. Time, like the tempests, skirts the island’s borders without touching it.

The model of love suggested by these images corresponds closely to the ideal put forth in Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (1295). Dante’s work, as Shelley indicates in his “Advertisement” and as many critics have discussed, served as an inspiration for *Epipsychidion*. In his *Defence of Poetry*, written the same year as his poem, Shelley calls the *Vita Nuova* “an inexhaustible fountain of purity of sentiment and language,” and in an echo of the phrase from *Epipsychidion* he credits Dante, together with other medieval love poets, with having created “a paradise...out of the wrecks of Eden.” It is fitting then that Shelley’s own love poem so faithfully reflects a Dantean paradigm. In the *Vita Nuova* the highest love operates around a vacant center. Such love is not merely sharpened or perpetuated by absence (as in the *amor de lonh*, or love from afar, celebrated by the troubadours and later by Petrarch) but goes a step further. Dante’s love remains perfect because, like the winds in *Epipsychidion*, it skirts Beatrice entirely; all of his efforts lead up to her or lead away but never touch her directly. Dante willingly sacrifices all the forms of intercourse usually associated with love—not only physical intimacy but conversation, and even the presence of the beloved—in exchange for a more transcendent love relationship. For Dante the beginning is the end: when he first hears Beatrice speak words of greeting, he immediately retires to his own room without replying (ch. 3), and later he avows to a group of ladies that the ultimate aim of all his love is Beatrice’s salutation (ch. 18). By the same token, the end of Beatrice is the beginning of Dante’s new life; her death is the source, not only of his book, but of his full understanding both of her and of his relation to her. But everything between salutation and valediction is elided; the perfection of Dante’s love depends upon the absolute vacuum at its core.
Shelley’s magical island shows the same characteristics. At the same time, however, Shelley includes many images of interpenetration and mutuality; the island may be unapproachable, but it is also porous and populous. The lovers share their Eden with others, just as they shared their approach to it with the mariners: (p.77)

It is an isle under Ionian skies,
Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise,
And, for the harbours are not safe and good,
This land would have remained a solitude
But for some pastoral people native there,
Who from the Elysian, clear, and golden air
Draw the last spirit of the age of gold,
Simple and spirited, innocent and bold.

(ll. 422–9)

These “pastoral people” seem to inhabit the same temporal wrinkle as the rest of the island: they are defined in terms of their beginning and end, birth (“native”) and expiration (“Draw the last spirit”). In the meantime, however, they permeate the island, every crevice of which seems to be inhabited:

The mossy tracks made by the goats and deer
(Which the rough shepherd treads but once a year,)
Pierce into glades, caverns, and bowers, and halls
And all the place is peopled with sweet airs.

(ll. 439–45)

Just as the shepherd and the animals “pierce” into the island’s undergrowth, so the island’s flowers, in return, penetrate all who behold them: “And from the moss violets and jonquils peep, | And dart their arrowy odour through the brain” (ll. 450–1). Throughout the poem the language of impermeability alternates with images of mutual penetration. The speaker, echoing the description of the flowers, invites Emily to “some old cavern...Through which the awakened day can never peep,” yet in which the lovers themselves will exchange “looks, which dart | With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart” (ll. 553–5, 562–3).
The same duality reappears in the “pleasure-house” (l. 491), the crowning feature of the island and a microcosm of the whole:

But the chief marvel of the wilderness
Is a lone dwelling, built by whom or how
None of the rustic island-people know:

It scarce seems now a wreck of human art,
But, as it were, Titanic; in the heart
Of Earth having assumed its form, then grown
Out of the mountains, from the living stone,
Lifting itself in caverns light and high:
For all the antique and learned imagery
(p.78) Has been erased, and in the place of it
The ivy and the wild-vine interknit
The volumes of their many twining stems;
Parasite flowers illume with dewy gems
The lampless halls, and when they fade, the sky
Peeps through their winter-woof of tracery
With Moon-light patches, or star atoms keen.

(ll. 483–5, 493–505)

It is an apparently seamless structure, a house not built with hands but “lifting itself” fully formed out of the bedrock. Yet its roof is no more than “tracery,” exposed to the sky and to the “keen” penetration of stars that “peep” inside. (The winds may not pierce the island’s defenses, but the starlight does repeatedly, its gaze penetrating fauna as well as flora: “the young stars glance | Between the quick bats in their twilight dance” (ll. 531–2).) Like the fantasy destinations in so many earlier invitation poems, the pleasure-house confuses indoors and out.
Just as striking as the structure’s combination of privacy and exposure is its mixture of nature and culture. In contrast to the typical *locus amoenus*, however, where nature is cultivated (as in Maud’s garden or the vineyards of the Song of Songs), here culture has become naturalized. The “antique and learned imagery” inscribed on the walls “has been erased” and replaced with vines—not vineyards, in this case, but “wild-vines.” Yet the wild vines still depend parasitically upon human structures. Moreover, they have obliterated the ancient inscriptions only to form a new text, by being woven (“interknit”) into “volumes.” The metapoetic nature of these lines is no accident; with this image of reinscription, Shelley is drawing attention to a truth about love that is reflected in all invitation poems but emphasized by the extreme example of *Epipsychidion*. Love, like the vines, is a natural growth, private and particular to the two lovers involved and erasing all consciousness of the outside world. Yet at the same time it is invariably mediated and supported by that world—by social structures (the mariners) and by art, whose “learned imagery” the lovers, like the vines, unconsciously reproduce.
The oxymoronic mingling of art and nature constitutes one of the most significant tropes of the invitation poem, because it epitomizes one of the central philosophical debates about the nature of love. Is love one of the passions, an innate and universal impulse? Or is it, instead, primarily a cultural phenomenon, a set of learned and often self-conscious practices? (p.79) We have already seen a version of this debate in Chapter 1, in the complex, related accounts given by Ovid and Stendhal; but both ideas have long and distinguished pedigrees. The essentialist point of view—that love is a natural, spontaneous passion—is prominent in classical thought: many Greek lyric poets and dramatists concur with Socrates’ description of love, in the *Phaedrus*, as a “god-sent madness.”51 The beginning of Genesis, with its normative declaration that “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife,” similarly depicts erotic love as a primal emotion, on a par with family love. And this notion remains a fundamental premise as much of contemporary neuroscience as of poetry and philosophy.52 Yet the opposing point of view, that love is largely, perhaps entirely, a product of culture, has also found much powerful support. It is perhaps best encapsulated in a maxim of La Rochefoucauld, which speaks of “people who would never have fallen in love if they had never heard love spoken of.”53 But the idea long pre-dates the Enlightenment, as is evidenced not only by the works of Ovid but also by such successors as Andreas Capellanus. And this viewpoint predominated through much of the twentieth century, as noted in the Introduction, especially among Freudian thinkers, who viewed romantic love as a cultural accommodation, “the by-product of the need to restrain sexual expression.”54
The invitation poem directly confronts these contradictory possibilities and combines them, in the form of the *locus amoenus*. Shelley’s pleasure-house, which manages to be at once self-generated (“lifting itself”) and self-conscious (“a wreck of human art”), is just one in a long line of idealized spaces that conspicuously mingle nature and artifice, beginning with the gardens and vineyards of the Song of Songs. (Even Baudelaire fits the pattern: although his ideal country may not have gardens, it has canals—features of the landscape that are typically both natural and manmade.) The central motif of the invitation poem casts love as a liminal power, one that mediates between what is most free or instinctive in our nature and what is most conscious or controlled. This liminality is reinforced in many instances by imagery of thresholds—what the speaker of “Come down, O maid” calls “the happy thresholds” of Love. The third invitation of the Song, for instance, locates the fruits of love “over our doors” (7:13). Similarly, “Come into the garden, Maud” places its speaker not only in the garden, halfway between the great house and the open fields, but specifically at the garden gate: “I am here at the gate alone.” The landscape of the invitation poem consistently straddles the worlds of natural spontaneity and self-conscious cultivation.

The *locus amoenus* thus serves as an apt figure for love, and also for the love lyric itself, which, as we have remarked, seeks to express personal passion in an inherently public and self-conscious form. In this sense the invitation poem can be seen, once again, as exemplary, the genre par excellence of love poetry. This prestige is perhaps reflected in the archetypal title that William Carlos Williams gave to his invitation poem “Love Song” (1917), which displays in miniature many of the chief features of the form:

55

Sweep the house clean,
hang fresh curtains
in the windows
put on a new dress
and come with me!
The elm is scattering
its little loaves
of sweet smells
from a white sky!

Who shall hear of us
in the time to come?
Let him say there was
a burst of fragrance
from black branches.

In a typical gesture of deferral, the speaker here delays his actual invitation. All three of the imperatives that precede the climactic “come with me,” moreover, are distinctly private and domestic, in opposition or at least in contrast to the invitation out into nature that follows. On the other hand, all of the requested actions could be seen as preparatory to emergence. Spring cleaning indicates a fresh start, a break with the past. Hanging curtains represents a move toward the threshold of the outside world. (Compare the woman’s first self-description in the Song of Songs, with its (p.81) suggestion both of modesty and of availability: “I am...like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon” (1:5).) And a new dress is meant to be worn in public and seen by others. “Come with me,” then, both contrasts with the previous series of demands and completes it. This fusion of public and private, outdoors and in, culminates in the image of the unheimlich elms, with their unexpected “loaves | of sweet smells.” “Loaves,” the aptly resonant central word of this fourteen-line poem (a length suggesting another archetypal genre of “love song”), suddenly marks the destination of this invitation as a magical kingdom, a place of fantasy. As such, it is fragile, described in terms of its smell, the most ethereal of the senses. Yet it is also immortal, preserved for “the time to come” in poetic “black” and “white” (ll. 11, 14, 9). In the fantasy world to which the invitation poem beckons, the paradoxes of poetry embrace those of love.

Notes:
(1) MaudThe Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987)

(2) MaudRobert Inglesfield, “Tennyson’s ‘Come into the Garden, Maud’ and the Song of Solomon,” Victorian Poetry, 37 (1999), 121–3,

Invitations


(9) Yet Maud’s eventual coming out to meet the speaker in the garden represents a primal return at yet another level, since she and the speaker used to play together as children, and their fathers betrothed them to one another even before Maud’s birth.


Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 83–90.

Thus the medieval commentator Rashi understands *lech l’cha* not so much as “begone with you” as “go for yourself”—i.e., “for your benefit and for your good”; see *The Rashi Chumash*, trans. Shraga Silverstein, 5 vols (Southfield, MI: Targum, 1997), i. 66.


See Landy, *Paradoxes*, 183–265. For a modern reader this connection is reinforced by the Song’s frequent use of the word *pardes* (which Hebrew borrowed from Persian), meaning an orchard or walled garden—a word that does not appear in Genesis but that has entered modern languages, including English, as “Paradise,” a synonym for Eden.


(22) “Iam, dulcis,” stanzas 1–2. The poem is preserved in three manuscripts dating from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Ziolkowski’s edition of The Cambridge Songs provides an edited text of all three versions (pp. 92–5, 333–5) as well as a literal translation for one of them. Helen Waddell reprints a composite version with free translation (Mediæval Latin Lyrics, 144–7). I quote throughout from the text of the Vienna manuscript (Ziolkowski (ed.), The Cambridge Songs, 334–5), which is the most complete; all translations are mine.

(23) Waddell, Mediæval Latin Lyrics, 324.

(24) The echo is noted by Dronke, who does not, however, consider it intentional or necessarily even significant (Dronke, “Song,” 250n).

(25) Les Fleurs du mal


(28) The Critical Difference


(31) The Nature of Love


(32) England’s Helicon


(36) Douglas Bruster notes that it is not clear whether the speaker himself is a shepherd, the only direct evidence being the title, which may not be authorial (Bruster, “‘Come to the Tent Again’,” 51). But the whole pastoral framework suggests that the speaker is a fellow-shepherd, and that is the way he was understood by Raleigh in “The Nymph’s Reply.”

(37) Bruster, “‘Come to the Tent Again’,” 52.


(39) Bruster, “‘Come to the Tent Again’,” 54.


Earlier the speaker exclaims, “Would we two had been twins of the same mother!” (l. 45), a line that comes almost directly from the Song (8:1). Shortly afterward he compares Emily to “A well of sealed and secret happiness” (l. 58); cf. Song 4:12: “A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed.”

To some extent the presence of others reflects the fact that earlier in the poem the speaker has rejected exclusivity in love in favor of community (in accordance with the views and occasional practice of Shelley and his immediate circle). Yet this scarcely explains away these nameless witnesses, who assist the lovers but do not participate in their love—especially since the specific figures whom the speaker does earlier invite to participate in their love are notably absent from the final third of the poem; see Newman Ivey White, Shelley, 2 vols (New York: Knopf, 1940), ii. 268–9.

I am indebted to my student Peter Hall for drawing my attention to this aspect of the poem.


Shelley's Poetry and Prose, 525.


Vita NuovaDante Alighieri, La Vita Nuova, ed. and trans. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), 9. La Vita Nuova


(52) Tim Hancock, “The Chemistry of Love Poetry,” *Cambridge Quarterly*, 36 (2007), 197-228,

(53) Maxim 136: “Il y a des gens qui n’auraient jamais été amoureux s’ils n’avaient jamais entendu parler de l’amour”; see François, duc de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, ed. Jean Lafond (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1998), 82. La Rochefoucauld’s oft-repeated epigram is perhaps more equivocal than it is usually taken to be; it does not actually specify how common is the condition it describes.
