A Vindication of Desire: St Anselm, with C. S. Lewis

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Abstract
Despite different starting points, in the cloister and the world respectively, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) enjoyed a mutual interest in the concept and experience of spiritual desire. Inspired by Lewis’ famous sermon, ‘The Weight of Glory’ (1941), but principally guided by Anselm’s reflections, this essay argues that desire exists in a dynamic relationship with love and that, as a journey of desire, the Christian life is extremely challenging, since it is a journey into mystery and towards moral perfection, but also contains and ultimately fulfils God’s promise of eternal joy. It is hoped that one by-product of this exploration may be to accord greater recognition to Anselm as a spiritual, even mystical, theologian, recognising him in Jean Leclercq’s description of an earlier monastic leader, Gregory the Great (d. 604), as a ‘doctor of desire’.

Keywords
Anselm of Canterbury, C. S. Lewis, desire, spirituality, mysticism

Introduction
In 1941, at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, C. S. Lewis preached his most famous sermon, ‘The Weight of Glory’. Even today, it continues to present a surprising and challenging programmatic for the spiritual life, arguing that the ambition for glory is a proper part of Christian piety and, as such, a spiritual good. Evidently, Lewis considered such ‘desire’ to be a prerequisite for the consummation of Christian life in some kind of union with God and, despite its brevity, his sermon returned to the term itself nearly thirty times. While desire is often treated in its purely erotic dimension, including in recent academic studies, and considered (particularly by those of a prudish disposition) to be incompatible with a Christian sensibility, Lewis exhorted his congregation to a deliberate and determined fostering of spiritual yearning. He admonished,
‘Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak’. This essay takes its cue from Lewis, agreeing that desire ought to be a powerful, positive dynamic within the spiritual life. There is no contradiction, we suggest, between full-throated desire for God, genuine hunger and thirst for the satiation which only God can provide, and the right-ordering of the Christian imagination and the Christian life. Moreover, in fact, the Christian life is deficient when genuine desire is not accorded its proper place, as a God-given capacity to discover and journey towards the eternal satisfaction and pleasure to which all human beings are called.

Lewis’ sermon has helped to inspire and frame this essay, but the credit for its underlying theology must go elsewhere, to the writings of the medieval monk and archbishop, St Anselm of Canterbury. The theme of desire appears intermittently throughout Anselm’s corpus, especially in the early works: the prayers and meditations (by c. 1075), Monologion (c. 1075–1076), and Proslogion (c. 1077–1078). Desire is possibly neither the term nor the concept which springs most readily to mind in connection with Anselm; most people would think of aseity, simplicity, honour, debt, satisfaction, and a dozen other subjects first. Yet, it is a constantly recurring theme in his work, as it must have been throughout his life as a monk. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that Anselm did not confine desire to a discrete study – there is no treatise, On Desire – that makes the concept so interesting. It may be described as a dynamic force within his theological project as a whole, informing his thinking upon a range of questions, and thereby revealing both the spiritual roots and the practical significance of even his most speculative theology. It is anachronistic and unfaithful to Anselm, as Eileen Sweeney has definitively argued, not to treat his body of work holistically, as the fruit of interaction between philosophy, theology, and devotion:

Anselm’s corpus, from his earliest prayer to last treatise, is a single project in which knowledge of self and God are inextricably linked . . . What links the parts of Anselm’s corpus is the union they strive for with such intense desire, the union of soul with God.4

In the subject of desire, we find a meeting point between the raison d’être of human life, the search for (re)union with God, and the essence of the monastic life which Anselm lived, striving for salvation. In every particular, monastic thought and experience intensify the general reality of human longing for God. While every soul ‘seethes with a longing’ for the Creator, perhaps only in the seclusion and spiritual atmosphere of the cloister may this longing be fully translated into experience.5 Although not often recognised for this, Anselm’s theology epitomises that bond between monasticism and desire which Jean Leclercq once saw in Gregory the Great, whom he described as ‘the doctor of desire’.6 It is notable that both Anselm and Gregory have been overlooked as theologians of the spiritual life, not least on account of their common experience as ‘contemplative[s] condemned to action’, with its determinative effect on the historical record.7 Desire, indeed, may be the key to unlocking the mystic Anselm, since it is a concept and experience which takes us beyond our present condition and the penetrative ability of human reason, as Thomas Aquinas (1224–1275) would later argue.8 If one by-product of this essay is to accord greater recognition to Anselm as a spiritual guide, perhaps even as a kind of mystic, then all the better.
Embarking upon the journey of desire

Anselm’s monastic perspective teaches, most fundamentally, that desire (desidero) exists in a dynamic relationship with love (amo; occasionally, pietas). The Christian life in general, and monasticism in particular, may be described as a via caritatis, a way of love, with desire as the vehicle by which the soul may be borne along to its destination. Love is preeminent – God deserves love and commands it9 – yet, Anselm argued, ‘God demands desire no less than love’.10 He may equally have written, ‘God demands desire for the sake of love, and love for the sake of desire’. In one of his greatest prayers, directed to St Mary Magdalene, Anselm declared, in words addressed to Jesus, ‘I want your love to burn in me . . . so that I may desire to love you alone’; love for desire, desire for love.11 Desire can be so powerful, in fact, as to make a sufficient offering to God where love may be lukewarm or lacking, or held back by sin: ‘let my desire for you be as great as my love ought to be’.12 Such desire may, in time, be transformed into love, so that the journey may become one of satisfaction and pleasure, as well as hunger and thirst. The journey itself, as we shall see, which is a journey of desire, is meant to become a journey of love, into love, and the possession of a God who is love: ‘my soul hungers andlongs to feed upon the experience of your love’.13 In his turn, Lewis illustrated something akin to this with an analogy of a schoolboy learning Greek, for whom the inducement gradually matures from fear of punishment to genuine pleasure: ‘he gets it gradually; enjoyment creeps in upon the mere drudgery . . . it is just insofar as he approaches the reward that he becomes able to desire it for its own sake’.14 It is desire – longing, yearning – to deepen the soul’s acquaintance with its creator which may offer a foretaste of the deeper love which comes from ultimate possession. Ultimately, the consummation of love is also the consummation of desire.

Yet, as Lewis observed in his sermon – and, by the testament of his Benedictine habit, we can confidently suppose Anselm would have agreed – the seed of good Christian desire is to be found in ‘unhesitating obedience’.15 Whether such obedience is born of human nature or, as in monasticism, of the will to ‘cherish Christ above all’, its consummation is the same; namely, ‘love that impels them to pursue everlasting life’.16 On this point, we may assume a slight difference of emphasis between Lewis, the layman and Anselm, the monk. The monastic prescription, predicated upon love for Christ, is more demanding than the secular image conjured by Lewis’ student of Greek. While the latter may proceed with some reluctance – that is, ‘for marks, or to escape punishment, or to please his parents’17 – this ‘luxury’ is not available to the disciple of St Benedict. Monastic ‘obedience must be given gladly . . . If a disciple obeys grudgingly and grumbles, not only aloud but also in his heart, then, even though he carries out the order, his action will not be accepted with favour by God’.18 The reason for this, by the light of Anselmian logic, is that glad obedience is simply what is owed by a creature to its creator, ‘not your property but the property of him whose bondslove you are’;19 glad obedience does not have some meritorious added value on account of its gladness. Moreover, such obedience should also be the sole source of gladness, since ‘you ought not to feel any happiness except in things which assist you to reach your journey’s end and give you hope of arriving there’.20 While, at first sight, the rigour of this teaching may appear to make it burdensome, the reality is quite the opposite; both Benedict and Anselm were concerned with the conditions in which the human soul, liberated from temporal shackles, may
spread its wings and soar, back to the ground of its being, ‘further up and further in’.\(^{21}\) Obedience, tiresome and difficult though it can be, is an obligation, which bears fruit in the ability to discern a true scent from a false one, to the pursuit of which every human soul yearns to abandon itself.

Not that things of the world, nor the human desire for them, are necessarily wicked. There are many good things for which the heart may long: from simple pleasures, good food and refreshing drink, to life-changing opportunities, a loving family and a good education. Even for Anselm, who prescribed flight from the world as a prerequisite to the liberation of the soul, and whose personal asceticism could be harsh, such things had received the effects of Christ’s saving work in some mystical way.\(^ {22}\) This can most clearly be seen in the greatest of his three prayers to the Virgin Mary:

Heaven, stars, earth, waters, day and night, and whatever is in the power or use of men was guilty; they rejoice now, Lady, that they lost that glory, for a new and ineffable grace has been given them through you.\(^ {23}\)

These words, and others in Anselm’s prayers and meditations, are the prism through which to view his mature reflections on atonement in *Cur Deus Homo*; in thought as in life, Anselm was first a monk, a theologian at prayer. Perhaps, Anselm meant to imply something like this in recommending flight ‘from ease and worldly pleasures . . . except to the extent you reckon suffices for your aim of reaching your goal’.\(^ {24}\) Anselm’s fundamental opposition, as Sweeney has explained, was to taking pleasure in things of the world as an end in themselves; he opposed returning the smile of good fortune this side of eternity.\(^ {25}\) Notwithstanding the risks, second-order goods may also assist the soul in its discovery and cultivation of love for God, not to mention the desire by which it is propelled. Lewis made a related point in his sermon, observing that the mind’s attraction to second-order goods is a sign – though *merely* a sign – of the innate desire for God:

Now, if we are made for heaven, the desire for our proper place will be already in us, but not yet attached to the true object, and will even appear as the rival of that object . . . If a transtemporal, transfinite good is our real destiny, then any other good on which our desire fixes must be in some degree fallacious, must bear at best only a symbolical relation to what will truly satisfy.\(^ {26}\)

The ultimate meaning of human life is a mystery, though not because it negates our humanity, but because it entails a fulfilment that we cannot imagine; ultimately, human beings are a mystery even unto themselves. Hence, Henri De Lubac wrote that the divine invitation to union is a form of Deep calling unto deep (see Ps 42:7): ‘our nature itself in the most fundamental sense, is not really understood at all unless we freely allow ourselves to be caught up by that incomprehensible God’.\(^ {27}\)

**Encountering the mystery of God**

The satisfaction provided by the presence of God is also marked by that fundamental paradox of mysticism: knowing begets unknowing. To begin with, let us say that desire
itself is a journey of becoming, into the mystery of God. In this way, God himself ‘desires’ to be possessed, in so far as human beings have been made with an innate yearning to possess him. Notwithstanding the moral seriousness of Lewis’ sobering words, ‘I do not believe . . . that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it’, such desire is ‘the evidence of a promise’ or a covenant initiated by the Creator, that the creature has been made to possess Him. Anselm was no less aware of the magnitude of the task than Lewis, yet chose, in the Monologion, to sound an optimistic note, emphasising the divine preference for human salvation over the challenge of human weakness:

But this we must hold on to as absolutely certain: the Creator, supremely just and supremely good, unjustly deprives nothing of that good for which it was made, and every one must exert themself to attain this good by love and desire, with all their heart, all their soul, and all their mind.

God inspires – first by way of nature, then by way of a dialogue with the soul – and sustains that desire. To possess God is to be possessed by God; to give oneself up, whole and entire, to the proprietorship of the True Proprietor. This not only applies to the journey’s end, but to the whole process of becoming, since it is made possible by the operation of God-given faculties and divine grace. The human being is rational, for instance, in order that it may distinguish between right and wrong, and between the greater good and the lesser good . . . in order that it might hate and avoid what is bad, and love and choose what is good, and, moreover, love and choose, for preference, the greater good.

With these words, Anselm affirmed a core principle of Christian ethics, that right action is the fruit of God-given powers, which would be expressed later about the Virgin Mary, with particular eloquence, by the Cistercian abbot, Ælred of Rievaulx (1110–1167): ‘[Christ] found such a soul [in Mary], so strong [a soul], because first of all he taught this strength’.

It would be profoundly ungracious, the rejection of a gift, for a human being to reject God-given desire on any basis, not least a perception of its unseemliness. We should recall that Anselm, our doctor of desire, may also be described as the doctor of decency on account of the controlling influence of the idea of ‘fittingness’ or appropriateness (decens) in his theology. Anselm’s greatest modern biographer, Richard Southern, has described ‘fittingness’ as one of Anselm’s key theological axioms. In a journey of desire, from its origin to its fulfilment, God is the primary author and, as such, it is impossible for a correctly oriented desire to be anything other than ‘fitting’: ‘By you I have desire; by you let me have fulfilment’. These words, from Anselm’s third meditation, speak of the great authorial pen of God, writing the histories of individual human beings; at the same time, however, they do not entail a negation of human volition. Every act of desiring is also an instance of willing, so while the ultimate realisation of desire depends upon the ‘kindness’ of God, recognition is also due to human effort and human deserts. The role of the will in desiring is morally neutral – it is the desired end in God which makes the willing (and therefore, the desire) ‘good’ – yet, it is emphatically real. Striking the proper balance between divine action and human volition is essential, since
it places the human journey of desire in its proper perspective. The saints, to whom Anselm composed most of his prayers, are those whose lives bear witness to this synergy, since they illuminate the capacity of the human will to cooperate with God. The saints are those who have translated the natural desire for happiness into an explicit, and insatiable, appetite for God. They have made the transition, explored by Bonaventure (1221–1274) and picked up by De Lubac, ‘from the “knowledge of beatitude in general” [to] the “knowledge of beatitude in particular”, the former being “inborn,” the latter given to us by faith’. Moreover, the insatiability of the saints’ desire for God is, in turn, outstripped by the magnitude of divine self-giving; hence, Anselm could declare, in his prayer to St Stephen: ‘For you always desire what you always have’. Such desiring speaks to the infinitude of God and, presumably, may be considered a precondition for the happiness of the blessed in heaven. Encountering and praising God ‘forever and ever, amen’, only makes sense in light of this paradox of saintly experience.

Desire is a journey into the unknown, since divine transcendence ensures that the desiring soul is called into the mysterious deep. For Lewis, it is an inevitable outworking of the realisation of divine transcendence that human language fails to capture the nature of what it means to be with him, resorting instead to ‘a dozen changing images, correcting and relieving each other’. Imaging-making is not intrinsically problematic, provided a true sense can be retained that, as Anselm put it, ‘God’s dwelling place is inaccessible’. In the Proslogion, Anselm’s prayer rises in mystical fashion:

[the desiring soul] strives so that it may see more, and it sees nothing beyond what it has seen save darkness. Or rather it does not see darkness . . . but it sees that it cannot see more because of its own darkness.

De Lubac has also echoed something of this: ‘Even in the light it gets from God, and at whatever phase one looks at of its intellectual or spiritual life, the believing and hoping soul is ultimately left “facing an impenetrable mystery”’. The desiring soul faces a monumental struggle; the weight of sin holds back its ascent towards the holiest and fiercest of all fires, which simultaneously burns away its imperfections. Such effort, such great struggle, must entail that the journey of desire cannot be sustained except by the highest of all possible motives, and only when the work itself offers a foretaste of the final reward. With the analogy of a military general who fights for victory, the reward ‘proper’ to his work, Lewis illustrated this fundamental point: ‘proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation’. Union with God cannot be the reward for anything other than the desire of a righteous soul to possess, and to be possessed by, its maker.

A journey of tears

Simply because desire may also offer a foretaste of its consummation, the struggle is no less; seeking God in desire is an all-consuming and often heart-rending labour. It is the wandering in ‘exile’ of an ‘orphan’ searching for a parent. The journey is so difficult because it goes directly to the heart of what really matters; namely, the quality of one’s soul in relation to absolute perfection, which is God. It entails a conflict between the
gradual realisation of the God-desired quality of the soul and the reality of its impurity. But we are in danger of getting ahead of ourselves. The journey begins, according to Anselm, with the soul’s searching for inspiration, not to mention *viaticum*, among images of God’s deeds. The first step of the desiring soul, whereby love and desire may be enkindled, is contemplation. This means, ‘remembering and meditating on the good things you have done’, especially the Paschal Mystery of Christ.\(^{47}\) In De Lubac’s words, ‘Man needs revelation . . . Certain depths of our nature can only be opened by the shock of revelation’.\(^{48}\) Contemplation of salvation history confirms the magnitude of divine goodness and throws into relief the moral poverty of the human condition. God illuminates human sin by the rays of the Cross – ‘My light, you see my conscience’ – and the soul is ‘confounded by . . . shame’.\(^{49}\) In his prayer to St Paul, Anselm likened this process to a trial in which the soul is accused before God by spirits, both good and evil: ‘The good, because they bear witness to the truth . . . the evil, because they seek my punishment’.\(^{50}\) In the journey of desire, the soul finds itself convicted as well as liberated.

The debasement of the soul, emptied of itself so that it may be filled with God, is the first step towards that possession which is its ultimate goal. Thus, Origen (d. c. 253) on Isaiah: ‘the prophet began to see his wretchedness at the moment of beginning to glimpse the glory of God’.\(^{51}\) It is little wonder that Anselm’s teaching on this subject is marked by references to weeping. The hollowing-out of the soul is a morally demanding process and it takes place in the desert of exile; God’s stern judgement feels closer than his consolation. Anselm declared, in his prayer to Christ, ‘let my tears be my meat day and night, until they say to me, “Behold your God” . . . let me be fed with griefs, and let my tears be my drink’.\(^{52}\) Such is the humility to which Benedict of Nursia also dedicated the longest and most theologically significant chapter of his *Regula*. In the context of a vision consisting of twelve steps, from the fear of God to the manifestation of humility in every aspect of daily life, the seventh step,

is that a man not only admits with his tongue but is also convinced with his heart that he is inferior to all and of less value, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet: *I am truly a worm* [Ps 21:7].\(^{53}\)

The mystical journey of desire seems to be formed by and to encompass the journey of humility. Indeed, Benedict’s own teaching is framed in mystical terms:

if we want to reach the highest summit of humility, if we desire to attain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb . . . then by our ascending actions we must set up that ladder on which Jacob in a dream saw angels descending and ascending. Without doubt, this descent and ascent can signify only that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility.\(^{54}\)

Most particularly, humility is the means by which the desire of the desiring soul is properly directed; humility is an ordering virtue, which safeguards the soul against the digressive and sometimes dangerous pursuit of what Lewis would have described as improper rewards. Hence, Anselm prayed to Mary Magdalene: ‘Ask urgently that I may have the love that pierces the heart; tears that are humble’.\(^{55}\)
Tears are not only a symbol of penitence, however, they are also a sign of grace; the outpouring of water is a manifestation of the soul’s turning back to God. The *debasement* of humility, symbolised by weeping, is but part of the reality; there is also the *liberation* of humility, which comes from a foretaste of the ultimate (and joyful) realisation of the smallness of the creature compared to the Creator. Lewis described this as, ‘the humblest, the most childlike, the most creaturely of pleasures... the specific pleasure of the inferior: the pleasure of a beast before men, a child before its father’.56 The utter dependence of the soul is reflected in the utter dependability of God, which, in turn, gives rise to a true desire. Humility transforms desire, but also increases its yearning; it awakens and cultivates a righteous *ambition* for God. Lewis’ sermon implies that, on account of humility, the Christian ought not to be squeamish about the soul’s ambition to be with God, since, ‘Perfect humility dispenses with modesty’.57 This does not mean that the soul experiences any kind of certainty or consolation but, rather, that ordered by humility to its proper end, ambition begins to allow the soul to open itself up to the operation of divine grace: ‘My soul waits for the inbreathing of your grace’.58 Again, a useful illustration of the dynamics of this experience is provided by Ælred of Rievaulx, in his contemplation of the Virgin Mary’s holy ambition to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel’ (Is 7:14). Thus, secretly and with some fear she longed that she might be that virgin. But at the same time she considered herself utterly unworthy of being granted such a privilege... It was then, when she was in this [moment of] hesitation, this wavering, this longing, that the angel came into her and said: Hail, full of grace [Lk 1:28].59 God’s messenger broke in upon the Virgin’s humility to offer reassurance. Weeping, then, is a cause of joy in the journey of desire. It is an expression of shame, transformed into a foretaste of the embrace of an all-loving God; it is a prelude to a Second Act. Nowhere, in Anselm’s body of work, is this better expressed than in his prayer to St Mary Magdalene, which has been described by Benedicta Ward as, ‘most of all a prayer of compunction – there is sorrow for sin, grief at the suffering of the Lord, out of which come tears of love and longing and joy’.60 With these words, Ward has captured the essence not only of the prayer but also of the dynamics of humility (manifested in weeping) in the journey of desire. They are both retrospective, predicated upon a genuine apprehension of past sins, not to mention the past of salvation history, and prospective, endowed with a promise of what is to come. The experience of Mary Magdalene, as described by Anselm, epitomises this dual orientation. In a sense, as she yearns for Christ in the Garden of Resurrection, where the prayer is mainly set, pining at his absence, Mary stands for every human soul which longs for union with the Lord. The text begins, ‘what can I say, how can I find words to tell, about the burning love with which you sought him, weeping at the sepulchre’.61 Such is Mary’s desolation, the cause of her weeping, when the presence of Christ begins to manifest itself as the gardener. This takes the form of a question asked three times, perhaps as a recapitulation of Peter’s threelfold denial: ‘why are you weeping?’62 By its apparent ignorance of the sufferings so recently endured by her beloved Lord, being asked this question serves to intensify
Mary’s grief and her longing; it is, according to Anselm, a ‘test’ of her love. In the journey of desire, God hides himself, allowing the soul to grieve for what it perceives itself to have lost, and for such grief to grow and grow into deep longing. Then, as the prayer would have it, the Lord,

for love’s sake . . . calls his servant by the name she has often heard and the servant knows the voice of her own Lord . . . He could not have put it more simply and clearly: ‘I know who you are and what you want; behold me; do not weep, behold me; I am he whom you seek’. At once the tears are changed; I do not believe that they stopped at once, but where once they were wrung from a heart broken and self-tormenting they flow now from a heart exulting.

**Journey’s end: the joy of homecoming**

The journey of desire ends not in depravity, as the sceptics warn, but in the grace of an exultant heart and mind. For Lewis, this meant the reward proper to Christian ambition for union with God; namely, divine approval: ‘response, acknowledgement, and welcome’. In this way, he referred to the consummation of the divine invitation to be fully immersed in the Mystery, ‘in beyond Nature’, by which the journey of desire is initiated and which, in reality, cannot be merited: ‘to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache [to be with God]’. That which Lewis described as drinking at the fountainhead, Anselm captured with reference to the experience of, ‘all the goods of body and soul’. Beauty, health, quenching of thirst, music, pleasure, wisdom, friendship, peace, power, honours and riches, and security; all will be available at the journey’s end. Such is the image of abundance which Anselm painted, not as a sufficient or even substantial reflection of what lies in store but, rather, as an attempt to convey the sheer weight of glory and the all-consuming nature of joy. To be sure, there will be glory – both the glorification of the soul and the revelation of divine glory – but there will also be an abundance of happiness: ‘reveal your glory and my joy will be full’.

Despite choirs of angels, lutes and timbrels, and all the ceremony captured by artists down the centuries, the glory of heaven is primarily the joy of a homecoming. In their reflections, Anselm and Lewis captured this ‘domestic’ quality; heaven is a ‘homeland’ and union with God is, simply, entering through a door. Given the inadequacy of human language for expressing supernatural realities, there are inevitably a thousand ways of describing this experience. In Anselm’s prayer to St Stephen, the analogy is one of rest. The soul which has undertaken and completed the arduous journey of desire finds in heaven, the home of its heart, the joy of eternal peace: ‘Sleep with rest, rest with security, security with eternity. Happy man, to rest in joy, and joy to rest. Safe home, you are glorified in fullness and you are filled with glory’.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this essay, as its title implies, has been to put flesh on the bones of C. S. Lewis’ fundamental assertion that the Christian life needs more desire, not less. We have attempted, therefore, to present a conception of such desire, ordered towards its proper
reward. Our lines of argument may be summarised as follows: desire exists in a dynamic relationship with love; the foundation of desire is obedience; the desire for temporal pleasures may be misdirected but is a sign of the natural yearning of the soul; only God offers the soul its true satisfaction; the journey of desire entails a paradox, since it is also a journey into unknowing; desire is God-given, rather than unseemly; the journey of desire is hard and can entail weeping; the consummation of desire, journey’s end, is glory and the joy of a homecoming. While, undoubtedly, more could be said concerning desire, we have also attempted to be true to a conception of the subject drawn from the writings of St Anselm and, thereby, to make an additional contribution in the field of Anselm Studies. Recognising desire as an important, unifying theme through Anselm’s work ensures that his rational arguments are kept in a proper – meaning, truly Anselmian – perspective; they are analysed as expressions of his famous maxim, fides quaerens intellectum (‘faith seeking understanding’). That is so, since desire is a concept and an experience which transcends reason. Hence, De Lubac on Aquinas,

It is hardly surprising then that beatitude – the only beatitude – ‘transcends all rational investigation’. St. Thomas himself, starting from his principle that a desire of nature can never be in vain, knows that he can only arrive at a sure conclusion because he is reasoning within faith.73

In whatever sense Anselm may be described as a mystical theologian – or, even, less controversially, a theologian of the spiritual life – he must first be esteemed a doctor of desire.

Anselm’s understanding of desire is particularly attractive since it affirms, in a truly monastic spirit, that the soul’s journey into God is not merely a matter of ends, attaining that final consummation, but also of the quality of the journey itself and its potential to inculcate moral growth. We have argued that the saints, in particular, may be described as those who have exhibited this quality of life, born of the insatiability of their desire. This is, at once, both a statement of the obvious and an affirmation of the greatest significance for the Christian life, should it be taken seriously. The last word shall be given to Anselm, since by his magnificent third prayer to the Virgin Mary, whom he described as the toast of the whole company of heaven, this point is made with particular force and eloquence. Mary, preeminent among the saints, reveals to all Christians what there is to be gained by the perfect union of divine initiative, grace, and human cooperation. That is, no less than the transcending of encounter and an initiation into the creative activity of God. Mary’s journey of desire may have culminated in pre-eminence as an intercessor, but more significantly, it encompassed a co-creative partnership with the One for whom she yearned and towards whom her life was always oriented:

A thing to be wondered at – at what height do I behold the place of Mary! Nothing equals Mary, nothing but God is greater than Mary . . . All nature is created by God and God is born of Mary. God created all things, Mary gave birth to God . . . God brought forth him without whom nothing is, Mary bore him without whom nothing is good.74

If Anselm is a doctor of desire, then surely Mary must be its queen.
Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, ‘The Weight of Glory’, in C. S. Lewis (ed.), The Weight of Glory: A Collection of Lewis’s Most Moving Addresses (London: HarperCollins, 2013 [1949]), pp. 25–46.
2. On the erotic preoccupations of recent studies, see Sam Hole, John of the Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 9–13.
3. ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 26.
4. See Eileen C. Sweeney, Anselm of Canterbury and the Desire for the Word (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), pp. 6–7.
5. See Anselm of Canterbury, De Concordia III, 13. See S. Anselmi, Opera Omnia, ed. F. S. Schmitt, 6 vols (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1940–1951); trans. Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000), and The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm with the Proslogion, trans. Benedicta Ward (London: Penguin, 1973).
6. Jean Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), p. 31.
7. Ibid., p. 28.
8. See Henri de Lubac, The Mystery of the Supernatural (New York: Herder & Herder 2016 [1965]), pp. 208–9.
9. See Anselm, Oratio II, lines 5–6; II, 17.
10. Anselm, Monologion, 70. Alternatively: ‘For the Supreme Good, which thus demands to be loved, requires equally that it be desired by [the soul] loving it (Etenim idem ipsum bonum quod sic se amari exigit, non minus se ab amante desiderari cogit).’ Hopkins and Richardson, trans., p. 80.
11. Or. XVI, 80–1 (Ward trans., lines 166–7).
12. Or. II, 13 (18–9).
13. Or. XIX, 44–5 (86–7).
14. ‘The Weight of Glory’, pp. 27–8.
15. Regula Sancti Benedicti V, 1. See RB1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes, ed. T. Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981).
16. Ibid. V, 10.
17. ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 27.
18. Regula Sancti Benedicti V, 16–8.
19. Anselm, Cur Deus Homo I, 20.
20. Ibid. I, 20.
21. Lewis, The Last Battle, in C. S. Lewis, The Complete Chronicles of Narnia (London: Collins, 1998 [1956]), pp. 520–1.
22. See Cur Deus Homo I, 20; Queen Matilda of England (r. 1100–18) expressed concern regarding the severity of Anselm’s asceticism, see Ep. 242.
23. Or. VII, 64–66 (118–22).
24. Cur Deus Homo I, 20.
25. See Anselm of Canterbury and the Desire for the Word, p. 64.
26. ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 29.
27. The Mystery of the Supernatural, p. 209.
28. See Anselm, Proslogion, 26.
29. ‘The Weight of Glory’, pp. 32–3; The Mystery of the Supernatural, p. 207.
30. Monologion, 74.
31. Ibid., 74.
32. See The Mystery of the Supernatural, p. 210.
33. Cur Deus Homo II, 1.
34. Ælred of Rievaulx, Sermo XXI, 5 (emphasis added). See Aelredi Rievallensis: Sermones I-XLVI, ed. Gaetano Raciti, CCCM II A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989); Ælred of Rievaulx: The Liturgical Sermons, The First Clairvaux Collection. Advent-All Saints, trans. Theodore Berkeley and M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2001).
35. R. W. Southern, Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 202.
36. Anselm, Meditatio III, 206–7 (265–6).
37. On God’s kindness, see Or. II, 11; II, 20. On human effort, see Or. II, 11. On deserts, see Or. II, 20.
38. See Anselm, De Casu Diaboli, 7–8. Also, ‘if my soul wills any good, you gave it me’, Or. II, 15 (22).
39. The Mystery of the Supernatural, p. 215.
40. Or. XIII, 119 (245).
41. ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 35.
42. Proslogion, 1.
43. Ibid., 14.
44. The Mystery of the Supernatural, p. 220.
45. ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 27.
46. See Or. II, 31, 36.
47. Ibid., 22–3 (39–40) (emphasis added).
48. The Mystery of the Supernatural, pp. 211, 214.
49. Or. II, 14 (20); Med. II, 65–6 (88).
50. Or. X, 19–20 (34–7).
51. The Mystery of the Supernatural, p. 214.
52. Or. II, 93–4 (182–3), 95 (185–6).
53. Regula Sancti Benedicti VII, 51–52.
54. Ibid. VII, 5–8.
55. Or. XVI, 19–20 (37–8); here, Anselm uses pietas rather than amo.
56. ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 37.
57. Ibid., p. 38.
58. Or. II, 28 (50).
59. Ælred, Sermo IX, 19–20.
60. Benedicta Ward, ‘Introduction’, in Prayers and Meditations, pp. 27–86 (p. 71).
61. Or. XVI, 31–2 (60–2).
62. Ibid., 40–1, 45–6, 49 (78, 90, 101).
63. See ibid. 55–6.
64. Ibid. 65–74 (132–51) (emphasis added).
65. ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 41.
66. Ibid., p. 44.
67. Ibid., p. 42.
68. Proslogion, 25.
69. Ibid., 25.
70. Or. II, 85–6 (170).
71. See Or. XVI, 20; ‘The Weight of Glory’, p. 42.
72. Or. XIII, 110–3 (226–9).
73. The Mystery of the Supernatural, p. 218.
74. Or. VII, 93–4, 97–9, 105–6 (175–8, 184–5, 197–8).