Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs

Secrets of an African Princess

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Abi Doukhan
Queens College, CUNY
Flushing, NY, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-30051-7 ISBN 978-3-030-30052-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4

Cover illustration: Counter / GettyImages

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

To my mother, in gratefulness for being a haven of faith, hope and love that I could always run to, for initiating me to the alchemical powers of marriage and for modeling to me the art of infinite patience, a gentle and steadfast luminosity, and the courage and audacity of radical fidelity.

Preface

The Shulamite: Feminist or Womanist?

The Song of Songs' teachings on love have been quoted for centuries to women and men alike in order to extoll the virtues and blessings of marriage. It has been a reference book for couples and for singles alike looking for love. Its oft quoted "do not arouse or awaken love before it so desires" has been used to dissuade young lovers from the reckless passions of their youth and the Shulamite has been set up as an example of virtue. Yet, though the Song has been understood by Christian and Jewish traditions alike as a celebration of virtuous love, I do not believe that the Song of Songs was intended for a virtuous audience, let alone an audience of virtuous women. On the contrary, I would argue that the Song was written for those women who, like its central character the Shulamite, have had the audacity to err, have wandered "off the *derech*"[1] and have dared venture outside of the protective limits of patriarchy. It is intended for those women whose hearts have led them to transgress and who have been lured away from the roads well-traveled by the exigencies of love. The Song of Songs was composed for those women who, like its feminine protagonist, have let love entice them from the safety of the walls of Jerusalem to the wild and untamed vineyards and blossoming fields of Galilee. And it is for those women who have found themselves often with more questions than answers as to how to navigate the new territory that love has led them to; for those women who with their new-found freedom at times still find themselves confused, vulnerable and hurt by love in a post-patriarchal world. For to leave behind patriarchy is also to leave behind its protective

structure, clear rules of engagement and comforting rhythms. Within patriarchy, the dance of love is already scripted and each partner knows what to do and what not to do. Everything is set up to ensure minimal damage to the hearts of both parties. To choose to leave behind patriarchy is therefore to expose oneself to certain risk and certain confusion as to how to navigate the untamed and dangerous waters of love. But can the heart even thrive in such a lawless dimension? Can the labor of love take place in a space of transgression? Does an alternative wisdom exist apart from the wisdom of the ancients? In other words, is it still possible to find lasting love when one has erred, sinned or become "damaged goods"? When one has dared venture outside of the walls of Jerusalem?

The good news is that our Shulamite has herself wandered off the *derech*. She is herself "damaged goods" having lost her virginity, thereby shaming her brothers. She has herself ventured outside of the protective walls of patriarchy in her approach to love and brazenly continues to do so with her present lover in the Song. She has broken every rule of engagement and courtship as well as the more implicit and delicate laws of modesty and discretion. And yet, she finds lasting love. This chapter explores her secret, her wisdom and her path as well as the grace that she encounters along the way. Our Shulamite has rejected the wisdom of the ancients, but, in the tumultuous throes of her love, she begins to craft her own wisdom; she has left behind the protection of patriarchy, but awakened to her own inner strength and courage. Ultimately it is not only love that she finds but herself. And though her path is often hard and her lover difficult, her willingness to submit to the love she finds herself in leads to her transformation and blossoming into a beautiful, strong and wise woman. The Song is ultimately a poem on a woman's initiatory journey to love. It is the feminine companion to the hero's journey sung by Greek epic writers such as Homer.[2] Here we have a no less heroic journey but the protagonist is a woman and her destination is the wild and uncharted territory of love. In the process, however, she finds much more than a companion; she finds herself. Our Shulamite's journey to herself, to her womanhood, her wisdom and her strength, is thus indissociable from her encounter with her lover.

Yet, although our Song unravels the experience of a woman having rejected the structures of patriarchy, our protagonist is no feminist[3] inasmuch as her feminine individuation remains profoundly relational, first with regard to her brothers, and second to her lover. Her self-discovery is as much bound to her differentiation from her brothers as a woman, as to

her awakening to her own feminine resources and wisdom in her lover's arms. As such, our Shulamite breaks with certain aspects of feminism in two ways. The first has to do with the way that our protagonist gradually awakens, in the Song, to her specific embodied feminine wisdom, to the way that she births herself in an act of conscious sexual differentiation from her brothers and from the watchmen of the city who both, in their own way, erect obstacles to her individuation as a woman with her own agency. Our Shulamite thus differentiates herself from her brothers not just for the sake of finding sexual freedom, but in order to find herself, what it means to be a woman and to love like a woman. The departure from patriarchy is thus about discovering an alternative path to self and to others that is specifically feminine; it is about self-discovery as a woman, about reclaiming a deeply feminine way of dwelling in the world. Thus, in the Song, the woman's awakening to her sexual difference is celebrated as a source of wealth rather than as a source of oppression; as a way for her to reclaim her specific feminine mode of dwelling in the world. In this, our Song aligns itself with the Hebrew concept of sexual difference as constituting a benefit to humans rather than a hindrance, as a source of creativity, inspiration, fecundity and, more importantly—when the delicate balance between the sexes is maintained—as mirroring the complex identity of the Creator himself.[4] Yet, patriarchal culture has, more often than not, occulted the initial partnership between men and women, as well as the initial glory of what it means to be a woman. Our Song, however, reveals to us these forgotten and lost moments of Creation. More specifically, in our Song, we discover a woman's way of love, a woman's wisdom in love, in contrast with the rest of the Hebrew Bible where a mostly masculine approach to love is at play, with some notable exceptions of course, our Song being one of them.

But this exploration of a specifically feminine approach to love is at odds with much of feminism's attempt at dismissing sexual difference as a vestige of oppression, or worse as a pure construct without any basis in reality.[5] The idea behind this brand of feminism's rejection of sexual difference has to do with the way that interpretations of this difference have systematically led in the past to the oppression of woman. From Aristotle to our days, commentaries on sexual difference have led to all kinds of oppression based on the perceived limitations of the feminine body.[6] Women have found their bodies interpreted in ways that have historically deeply stunted their possibilities and their agency as full-fledged human beings. It is thus understandable that sexual difference be seen as a threat

to freedom from the perspective of some feminists and therefore in need of being discarded as a vestige of ancient history. And yet, in discarding sexual difference, are we not cooperating with the erasure of woman already attempted for centuries by patriarchy? How are we to fight for our right to exist and contribute to a male-dominated world if we have no concept of our difference and our intrinsic value as women? Are we not forfeiting our unique contribution and wisdom by desiring to merge into a post-gender[7] world?

Rather than discarding sexual difference then, I would suggest fighting back with our own interpretations and commentaries. For centuries, males have done the work of interpreting sexual difference. Is it not high time that we take our place at the hermeneutic table and begin our own exploration of the hidden significations dormant in our feminine bodies?[8] Is it not our urgent task today to oppose historical interpretations of what it means to inhabit a feminine body with new interpretations—interpretations that liberate, free and open up new possibilities for women? We need to begin the work of resistance, not by annulling our differences but by offering positive interpretations of our difference. But in so doing, we must ever be vigilant not to fall back into the old patriarchal habit of reducing women to rigid and fixed definitions and roles. Our interpretative work must have the humility of remaining open-ended, that is to say, to remain aware of itself precisely as an *interpretation*, a perspective, a facet into the rich, infinite experience of womanhood, ever needing to be enriched by new interpretations, perspectives and facets.[9] In fact, as Cixous rightly advises, there should be as many interpretations as there are women's bodies.

And so, even though my reading of the Song will at times attempt to unravel what seems to be the Shulamite's specific feminine approach to love, it by no means seeks to establish an "essence" of woman, that is to say, a universal and rigid form that all women are meant to squeeze into. To do so would be to deeply distort the Song into a coercive and prescriptive text, thereby going against the very spirit of the text as poetry and song. For we must remember here that the Shulamite is a poet and not a priest. She does not legislate, but rather, through her poetry, invites us into an experience which is deeply personal, and yet, precisely as such, susceptible of moving, touching us and inspire, awaken in us a sense of our own dormant, latent womanhood. The Song, as poetry, does not prescribe, it does not legislate—here is how all women should love—but rather, it is simply an attempt to give a voice to the experience of one woman, and in so doing, give a voice to our own often buried and repressed

experiences as women. And so, the Song does not impose, but rather it exposes, reveals, brings to light a feminine experience, voice, wisdom and approach to love which we, as women born and raised in a patriarchal context, might have forgotten. As such, the poetry of the Shulamite is not meant to set an example to which all women should conform but rather is meant to strike a chord in its readers' hearts, albeit each time in a deeply personal and unique way.

But there is a second way that our Song breaks with feminism: In the manner that the Shulamite arrives at her individuation as a woman. Unlike the hero's journey of Greek writers, the Shulamite's path to individuation does not pass through an act of separation. Odysseus or Ulysses, in order to begin his journey, must separate from his family and his wife and navigate alone a series of challenges and trials. He thus individuates in *separation*. Our Shulamite, on the contrary, blossoms as a woman in *relationship* and at the contact of her lover.[10] In our Song, the awakening of the woman to herself occurs through an encounter with a man. She finds herself in relationship and not in isolation. Now this is certainly deeply problematic for many feminists: One look at history shows how women have systematically been reduced to mere relational beings, that is to say, as having no other purpose or calling than being a wife and mother. Such a reductive calling, however, has been inhabited by many women as a form of profound limitation and oppression. Having a child or a husband has required of countless women that they sacrifice their deep aspirations, dreams and powerful contributions they could have made in the public sphere.[11] The idea then that woman blossoms in relationship can thus be seen, and justifiably so, as a regression into the most archaic and problematic forms of patriarchy.

Understandably, then, the move of feminism has been to emphasize the need for a woman to find herself *apart* from the hereto reductive roles she had been given by patriarchy. Woman has been encouraged to get an education, a career and make a name for herself in order to discover her own unique gifts and contributions apart from being a wife and mother as well as develop a sense of independence and freedom from the men in her life. She has been encouraged to get "a room of [her] own"[12] and develop herself as an autonomous individual with a mind and agency of her own. As such, however, feminism has followed a Greek/Western model of individuation which privileges separation and autonomy over relationship and inter-dependence as a path to fulfillment and self-development. In this context, individuation passes through an initial act of separation and

grounding of oneself in oneself. Autonomy, freedom and agency are thus understood, in most feminist writings, as the foundations of feminine individuation and blossoming.[13] What our Shulamite teaches us, however, is that ultimate fulfillment is only possible in relationship.

Now this is a far cry from Western thought for which freedom implies being able to do what one wants without any restrictions or limitations. But such a definition of freedom cannot co-exist with the limitations and restrictions imposed by a relationship, be it with a spouse/partner or with a child. To be truly free, liberated and emancipated, woman would have to forfeit these. And this has indeed been the choice of many women when faced with relationships that they perceive as "inconvenient" or as "having outgrown," that is to say, relationships they feel are or have become detrimental to their blossoming or progress in life.[14] Separation seems then to be the only option for them to regain a sense of their own self-respect, freedom and agency. But this is to ignore the Hebrew sense of freedom at play in our Song. In the Hebrew context, freedom, far from entailing a lack of restrictions, blossoms precisely in the limitations of a relationship.[15] This has everything to do with the Hebraic understanding of what it means to be human. Contrary to Aristotle who taught that man is a "rational animal," the Hebrews teach that man is a "relational animal." What constitutes our dignity, nobility and elevation as human beings is not our capacity to think and to reason, but rather our capacity to relate.[16] As such, we reach our highest fulfillment, as human beings, in relationship. Full emotional, spiritual, intellectual and sexual maturity is birthed through relationships. This is why our Shulamite, although manifesting already a strong sense of self in the beginning of the Song, ultimately matures into a full-fledged woman only through her encounter with her lover.

And so, our Song, although it constitutes a departure from patriarchy, does not identify with the agenda of mainstream feminism. Its emphasis on sexual difference as well as on the inter-subjective character of growth and maturity constitutes a break with the work of many feminist writers. In contrast, our Song resonates deeply with the womanist movement initiated by African American or Africana women. Womanism emerged from within the corpus of African American writers and poets who, dissatisfied with the Western resonances of feminism, began to articulate their own version of femininity, one closer to the African tradition from which they came from. Womanism will then have close ties with the African concept of subjectivity and of sexual difference. Interestingly, the African concept of subjectivity is very close to the Hebrew one described earlier. Like the

Hebraic concept of subjectivity as intrinsically relational, the African worldview understands the subject as deeply inter-connected with both nature and its community. Thus, in the sub-Saharan African concept of *ubuntu*,[17] I am inasmuch as you are. In other words, I can only fulfill myself if you have found fulfillment. If you are happy, I am happy; if you are wretched, I am wretched. More specifically, in the African psyche, the self matures through a series of relationships, first with parental figures, then with the teacher/mentor, with the spouse and finally with the child.[18] Marriage to a spouse and the birth of the child constitute, in African culture, the highest state of maturation, that is to say the highest level of relationality and the apotheosis of responsibility. And this, precisely because marriage and family make the highest and most challenging demands on the self, because the level of work involved toward maintaining a relationship with a spouse and a child is at its highest point.

The womanist tradition follows this understanding of the subject, applying it however to the feminine subject. In line with the African concept of the subject as inter-connected and relational, the womanist tradition does not articulate the feminine subject in separation; rather, the woman, in this tradition of writing, is intrinsically related to the people of her life. This view of femininity is however deeply rooted in the African worldview as Clenora Hudson-Weems, in her groundbreaking book *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, mentions: "The worldview of the African is rooted in the philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism rather than in the individualistic isolationism of Europe. The principle of relatedness is the sine qua non of African social reality … the mainstream feminist is self-centered or female centered, interested in self-realization and personal gratification … the Africana womanist [on the other hand] does not have the luxury of centering her interest around herself as a victim in a society when the victimization of her entire community is at stake."[19] Thus, there is no distrust of an understanding of woman as intrinsically relational in the womanist tradition as you might find in some versions of feminism; rather, the woman finds herself deeply dependent on her relationships, be they with her family, spouse or child, for her own individuation and blossoming. Moreover, in Africana womanism, the woman is seen celebrating her femininity rather than attempting to downplay for the sake of a gender-less society as has been the task of many feminist writers. Alice Walker coins this womanist stance beautifully as that of "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility …

and women's strength. … Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health … Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit … Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.* Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."[20]

Thus, sexual difference is not seen in the womanist tradition as a factor in woman's oppression. Far to the contrary, sexual difference is seen in a deeply positive light as a means for the Africana woman to articulate and celebrate her difference, her unique wisdom and beauty in the face of overwhelming negative social constructs about herself, and as the very impetus for a constructive, liberating and creative partnership between herself and her romantic partners. We can now better see how our Shulamite is much more aligned with a womanist agenda than a feminist one. And this is not surprising since, as we shall establish in Chap. 1, she is not only situated in a Hebrew context having affinities with the African worldview, but she might herself be of African descent. And so, although our Shulamite certainly rebels against the structures of patriarchy, she is no feminist. Rather, her struggles fit beautifully within the womanist context of affirmation of sexual difference and of the feminine subject as intrinsically relational, that is to say, as deeply dependent on her partner for her own fulfillment and blossoming as a woman. And it is to this redefinition of the feminine subject as relational that we now turn in the chapters to come.

Flushing, NY, USA — Abi Doukhan

Notes

1. "Off the *derech*" (literally: off the path) is an expression used in an orthodox Jewish context to describe those Jewish youths who have wandered off the right path prescribed by Jewish law and have chosen to live a life indifferent to the prescriptions of their community.
2. *The Odyssey* is but one of the many examples in literature of the hero's journey as thematized by Joseph Campbell in his *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. According to Campbell, the hero always goes through three stages: separation, initiation and return. Unlike the Shulamite who is initiated in relationship, the masculine hero is initiated in separation. Moreover, the Shulamite's journey does not end with a return to her point of departure, but rather it ends in her transcending/exiling herself in her relationships.

Much has been written about the masculine hero's journey. It is high time that a heroine's journey be discovered. Perhaps this is one of the contributions of the Song of Songs.

3. The brand of feminism I will be responding to throughout this Preface is that of American third-wave feminism best articulated by the works of Judith Butler (to which I will come back shortly). This branch of feminism radically separates itself from second-wave feminism. The latter sought to explore the unique facets of femininity in order to explore the possibility of a fruitful partnership between men and women (Gilligan, Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva); the former seeks, on the contrary, to do away with sexual difference altogether as a mere construct in order to free women (especially lesbian or queer women) from potential heteronormative definitions of womanhood perceived as reductive and limiting.
4. The creation of humankind as male and female is described in Genesis 1 as constituting a reflection of the Creator's complex identity. The idea being that the image of God, that is to say, the divine presence, nature and will, is best represented when both sexes function in creative and fecund partnership without one taking precedence over the other.
5. Judith Butler makes this case in her book *Gender Trouble*. For her, not only is gender a construct but sexual difference also. In other words, even the concept of the binary—of there being two distinct sexes—is a construct, an interpretation of reality which in history has had devastating consequences for anyone not fitting within this framework, such as lesbian, queer and trans women. As she states in the preface of her book, "any feminist theory that sets up the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences" (*Gender Trouble* [Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006], viii). Thus, according to Butler, "gender is always a doing, though not a doing of a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed … there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Ibid., 34).
6. Aristotle, for example, argues that given the female's lower body temperature (than the male's), she lacks the energy or spirit to both resist vice and lead/govern. Thus, because of her physical nature, woman must necessarily submit to men to lead her and to govern her (cf. *Generation of Animals*, 608b, 1–14). This argument has made its way all the way to the nineteenth-century work of Geddes and Thompson, *The Evolution of Sex*, where they argue that because women tend to conserve energy (anabolic), they are passive, conservative, sluggish, stable and uninterested in politics. Men, on the other hand, having more surplus energy (katabolic), tend to be more eager, energetic, passionate, variable and therefore more vested in political

and social matters. The biological differences between men and women are thus, in this work, used to justify what the social and political arrangements should be in a way that makes sure that women stay out of politics.

7. A similar argument might be made about race. Over and against the numerous calls today to become "color-blind" and produce a post-racial world where everyone is the same and therefore equal, many thinkers object that to do so would be to lose the specific beauty and genius associated with different cultures, ethnicities and races. Africana thinkers such as Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire have written considerably about the specific genius of the African mind and the need for that mind to emancipate itself from the colonial mindset in order to recover its own voice and contribution to civilization. To do away with particularities in the post-colonial world that we live in, would hardly signify emancipation but rather the surrender to the dominant way of thinking and acting which is today predominantly Western. The same might be said of the emancipation of woman. To surrender her difference would be to capitulate to the dominant Western and male worldview that we find ourselves in today.
8. Hélène Cixous says this beautifully in her injunction to women to "write your self. Your body must be heard. Giving her access to her native strength, give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories … in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty: for having desires, for not having any, for being frigid, for being too hot, for not being both at once, for being too motherly, and not enough; for having children and for not having any … the emancipation of the marvelous text of herself that she must urgently learn to speak" ("The Laugh of the Medusa," in *French Feminism Reader*, edited by Kelly Oliver [Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000], 876).
9. Cf. Hélène Cixous: "There is at this time no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in common. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions. You can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another" ("The Laugh of the Medusa," 876).
10. Gilligans' study of the way that women's moral reasoning differs from men's observes that women individuate into moral selves in a way opposite to men: "While for men, identity precedes intimacy, for women, intimacy goes along with identity, as the female comes to know herself as she is known through her relationships with others" (*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016], 12). She adds that "men and women perceive attachment and separation in different ways and each sex perceives a danger which the other does not see—men in connection, women in separation" (Ibid., 12).

11. Cf. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan.
12. Cf. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.
13. Such an approach to the emancipation of women can hardly be deemed universal as Maria Mies observes in her *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 220. According to Mies, such views stem from a Western/individualistic approach which neither appeals nor benefits women from non-Western cultures. In such cultures, woman's fulfillment is defined in entirely different ways, often at odds with the Western view of emancipation as freedom and autonomy.
14. The acclaimed novel *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert is an example of this phenomenon. The premise of the book is that of a woman who leaves everything (including her spouse) in order to embark on a journey of self-discovery.
15. Emmanuel Levinas develops this notion of freedom as a relational concept beautifully in his magnus opus *Totality and Infinity*.
16. This essential relational character of human beings is of course present throughout the Hebrew Bible but has been more recently thematized in great detail in the philosophies of Jewish philosophers such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.
17. The connections between African concept of *ubuntu* and Hebrew thought are striking when one reads Jewish philosophers such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Buber, for example, makes a comment that resonates deeply with *ubuntu*: "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You" (*I and Thou* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996], 62).
18. Cf. Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1993), 71–88.
19. Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (New York: Bedford Books, 1995), 58.
20. Alice walker, "Womanist," in *The Womanist Reader*, edited by Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), 19.

Contents

Introduction: The Unconventional Feminine

Ever since the sexual revolution when it was determined that woman would no longer passively submit to the rigid and degrading roles inflicted upon her by patriarchy, woman has been searching for new ways to express herself and individuate as a woman. Womanhood has been in the making since then and the exploration of the endless possibilities that are open for a woman to express herself as a woman has been exhilarating. As Simone de Beauvoir beautifully puts it in her landmark work on woman, *The Second Sex*, "one is not born, one *becomes* a woman."[1] A woman is not born into a fixed, predetermined condition, but rather is responsible for making of herself the woman that she chooses to be. In the absence of traditional roles, woman is now free to find her own sense of destiny and calling. "No biological, psychic or economic destiny defines the figure that the female takes on in society."[2] Rather, woman must become the figure she decides to be.

The problem is that much of that exploration has been limited to showing how woman are the equals of *men* and deserve an equal footing in a world which hereto has been a *man's* world! As de Beauvoir keenly observes, "women have never pitted female values against male ones."[3] In other words, women were encouraged to adopt new formations and new roles in a world that was never itself questioned, in an old world. But new wine cannot be poured in old wineskins without threatening the wineskins. Before women would be allowed to shape their own destinies, the world itself had to change. But the male world was never put into question.

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_1

Women were instead expected to rise up and compete, as a man, within this world. What is lacking in such an attitude, however, is that although woman ends up building a successful career in the world of men, little progress is made in the discovery of her specific femininity, in the way that she is to contribute as a woman to this world, to think, to act and, especially, to *relate*! The outcry thus rightfully arises: "Where are the women? Today's women are not women."[4]

Needless to say that as far as relating to each other, especially to the opposite sex, not much is taught in the current education system. Young girls are not taught what it means to be a woman because, well, woman is still in the making! This is a vacuum which we must, as women, try to fill to the best of our abilities. "At this point," expounds Anais Nin in an essay on women's eroticism published in a compilation called *In the Favor of the Sensitive Man*, "I would say that woman knows very little about herself … she has to make her own erotic patterns and fulfillment through a huge amount of half information and half revelations."[5] Thus, "we have to create a new woman."[6] We must "seek new patterns" and stop limiting ourselves to the "imitation of men."[7] Woman must find ways to articulate not only what it means to be a woman but how that sense is to be projected in her relationships.

This project is an attempt to remedy this problem and add to the contributions to date on the becoming of woman. To do so, I have chosen, as a guide and framework for my reflections on womanhood, an ancient treatise on love, buried and oft forgotten in the dusty pages of the Hebrew Bible: The Song of Songs. I have chosen in the elaboration of this project to remain attentive to the wisdom hidden within this ancient text and allow my thoughts to move under its inspiration. Thus, although I will remain attuned to the exegetical work that has been done about this text, my contribution will be to reflect upon some of its gems in dialogue with my own experience as a woman and the experience of other feminist and womanist writers of the twentieth-century. It is my belief that the womanist reading proposed here in no way diminishes the sacred or revealed meaning of the text, but rather hopes to breathe in it new life and vitality,[8] as well as render its meaning clear and relevant to the "lost generation" of young women who are struggling to find meaning in a world where all traditional roles and meanings have been rejected.

But my decision to remain attuned to such an ancient text as to better understand, articulate and orient the present situation of the twenty-first-century woman seems uncanny. What might such an ancient treatise have

to say about the present times and circumstances? My approach is all the more objectionable in that I have chosen a text in the Hebrew Bible as a guide. How might a text deemed "patriarchal" by a number of commentators and exegetes have anything to offer the post-patriarchal situation that woman finds herself in today?[9] This view, however, reveals itself profoundly inaccurate upon a closer reading of the Hebrew Bible. Although the culture of the Biblical characters is unquestionably patriarchal, the narratives within the Bible often can be read as a reversal or subversion of patriarchy. There are countless examples of these subversions such as that of the daughters of Zelophedad in the time of Moses,[10] the warrior Deborah during the time of the Judges[11] and Queen Esther during the exile, to name but a few.[12] In his essay on woman as perceived in the Hebrew Bible and tradition, "Judaism and the Feminine," Emmanuel Levinas makes the observation that upon reading these stories one realizes that the Biblical narrative in these cases is "far from the conditions prevailing in the orient where, at the heart of a masculine civilization, woman finds herself completely subordinate to masculine whims or reduced to charming or lightening the harsh life of men."[13]

The notion that the Bible is patriarchal and only so also stems from the view of the Bible as a monolithic text. But the Hebrew Bible is anything but monolithic.[14] One can recognize a variety of genres in the Hebrew Bible, ranging from storytelling of the books of Genesis and Exodus, poetry of the Psalms, legal documents like Numbers and Deuteronomy, prophetic and visionary works by prophets like Daniel or Isaiah, parodic pieces such as Esther or Jonah and, finally, philosophical works such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the book of Job and our work, the Song of Songs. The latter philosophical works, classified as wisdom literature of the Bible by exegetes, are moreover profoundly subversive with regard to the worldview of the better-known sections of the Hebrew Bible often blatantly contradicting their message and intention.[15] The subversive content of wisdom literature pieces is often so powerful that discussions have arisen as to their legitimacy within the Biblical canon.[16] And yet, these texts seem to have survived these debates and found their niche in the canon.

There are of course important reasons as to why these wisdom texts have endured in spite, or perhaps even because, of their subversive character. My feeling is that these books have what Derrida has called "deconstructive" power. In other words, they hold a critical stance serving to keep a given society or institution oxygenated and open. As Derrida acutely put it, "deconstruction is justice."[17] In other words, without the

critical stance of deconstruction whereby a given society or institution is maintained under scrutiny, that society or institution is ever in danger in crystallizing upon itself and becoming rigid to the point of giving rise to conditions that go against the very *raison d'être* of its having been formed and instituted. Inasmuch as too much rigidity and dogmatism leads, according to Derrida, to forms of oppression and injustice, the stance of deconstruction is ever necessary, and even a healthy mode of dwelling within a given society or institution. It is within this line of thought that André Lacocque speaks in his commentary of the Song of Songs of the wisdom texts as allowing for "a return to erstwhile sanity" and sees in their deconstructive power a "chastening of the institution in a manner that recalls prophetic remonstrance."[18]

Inasmuch as our text the Song of Songs belongs to the deconstructive corpus of wisdom literature, we can expect, then, that it too will contain profoundly subversive ideas and events.[19] The main protagonist, the Shulamite, is unlike any of her Biblical feminine counterparts. First of all, our protagonist describes herself as dark or black—that is to say, she does not fit into the aesthetic norms ascribed to Hebrew women inasmuch as darkness was associated with the poor having to work hours in the sun in order to make a living.[20] One might go as far as to say that she is not even a Hebrew but, as some commentators have hinted, of African descent.[21] And yet, our Shulamite does not seem to care about what people think of her. I have called her a princess in the title of this work because, in spite of her dubious background, she makes a point in behaving like one. Our protagonist's race would clearly have been a problem in Biblical society—one remembers Myriam's reaction to Moses marrying a black woman—and yet, she "keeps her head up"[22] and is seen celebrating her blackness.[23] Even though, in the eyes of Biblical company, she would have been seen as inferior because of her dark skin, she seems to pride herself in her blackness. Her statement "dark am I, yet lovely"[24] in fact constitutes the foundational statement of the 1960s "black and beautiful" movement of female black pride in the United States.[25]

But there is more. Unlike the rest of the Hebrew Bible, this female character does not find herself under the authority of a father or of a husband; she lives on her own and not in her father's or husband's house.[26] In fact, she seems totally oblivious, perhaps even indifferent, to societal rules and customs regarding relationships.[27] Not only is she clearly not a virgin[28] but our African princess seems to fling this fact in the face of her disapproving public with royal panache. Unlike the customs of the time, our

princess can be seen initiating a romantic, even erotic relationship with a man. Moreover, she seems to freely engage in intimate, even sexual behavior with a man without there being any explicit mention of marriage or even courtship between the two protagonists. As such, André Lacocque speaks of the Song of Songs as a "reformation piece, a reaction against a certain religious and societal ethos that promoted a bourgeois frame of mind."[29] He witnesses there a "demoralized standpoint, celebrating eros without religious restraint."[30] Lacocque goes as far as to say that "the entire book strums of free love."[31]

This woman seems to exhibit a behavior that speaks to her being "liberated" from the patriarchal traditions of courtship and marriage; she moves within the world of men with ease and roams freely in the realm of love, exhibiting no fear or false shyness regarding her own desires. In her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Trible describes the Shulamite in the following terms: "She works … she is independent, fully equal to the man … more often she initiates their meetings … her movements are bold and open, no secrecy hides her yearnings … never is this woman called a wife nor is she required to bear children."[32] In other words, the Shulamite resembles with striking similarity the twenty-first-century woman who likewise has shaken off the patriarchal norms in an attempt to find her own unique mode of being and of dwelling in the world. Like modern women, the Shulamite refuses to submit to the gender roles of her time, she rebels against any norm or law attempting to regulate her body, and she seems intent to find her own way to love, in a blatant and bold move to ignore the wisdom of the elders and leave behind the structures of patriarchy.

But in leaving behind the constraints and limitations of patriarchy, the Shulamite also leaves behind the protections and guarantees that it offers. As such, the Shulamite is bound to struggle with a number of difficulties. Exposed to the whims and irresponsibility of her partners, the Shulamite, like many women today, has difficulty finding love. The frustration of the Shulamite with finding emotional fulfillment is evident from her repeated complaints: "I am faint with love" (Song 2:5; 5:8), "I looked for him but did not find him" (Song 3:1; 5:6). Like many women she struggles with uncertainty, with being misunderstood, with unfaithfulness, solitude, desperation, overwhelming feelings of clinginess and neediness, and, finally, the emotional rollercoaster that her man puts her through. Phyllis Trible perceptively observes that with her man "she wavers between distance and intimacy."[33]But worst of all, she struggles with perhaps never finding the

security and safety of a committed relationship nurtured by the patriarchal law. Like many women today who have abandoned the model of patriarchy, our Shulamite finds herself exposed, vulnerable and wounded in her attempt to find love.

Yet, as the poem progresses, she grows, she matures. The Shulamite at the beginning of our text is not the same woman that she becomes at the end. She moves from a mode of functioning that is erratic, insecure and obsessive to a stance of quiet trust, release and patient surrender. André Lacocque also takes note of this and speaks of a "transfiguration through love" of the woman who "is shown to us as dispossessed at the beginning of the affair and in full possession of herself at the end."[34] The man also seems to progress along with her, moving from a dispersion of his love interests to an increasing focus on her as the one and only woman in his life, as our poem indicates in the last chapters. In both cases, the protagonists are shown as having matured at each other's contact, as having developed, through their mutual interaction, a certain ethical sensitivity to each other. As such, our text seems to constitute much more than a mere elegy to sexual pleasure. Our text can also be read as a treatise on ethics. But this ethics is very different from what we are used to inasmuch as it will show itself indissociable from pleasure, risk-taking and passion. As such, it is an ethics borne out of the grittiness of the relationship itself and not the result of an abstract social or marriage contract. Between the love whispers of the lovers, it is thus possible to hear a secret wisdom, a wisdom of love. Beneath the struggles and messiness of her love affair, wisdom is brewing, wisdom is taking shape. And it is precisely such a wisdom of love, these secret revelations on love, that this project will attempt to distill from the Shulamite's often erratic and confusing experience.[35]

As such, the Song might be read as a treatise for sexual initiation written for women by a woman.[36] Unlike most ancient treatises on lovemaking written by men for men, it might be argued that this treatise was written by a woman for the women of her time, giving us a radically different perspective. Rather than focus strictly on sex and the art of lovemaking per se as is done by traditional treatises such as the *Kama Sutra* or *The Perfumed Garden*, this treatise will also focus on the relational aspects of the relationship. As such, the Song brings something radically new to the table and finds itself perfectly in tune with the explorations of feminist and womanist writers which will feature in this project. My reading of the Song will thus constitute an attempt to unveil the ethics and wisdom pertaining to the art of relationships hidden within the poetic lyricism of the

Song. In this book, I will extract seven of these philosophical jewels: The need for cultivating a sense of self which is relational, and awakened to its intrinsic generosity, the importance of protecting the delicate balance between sensuality and discretion, the essential role of patience for growth and maturity, the immense potency of faith in the other person and its role in inspiring commitment, the art of lovemaking, the redeeming role of grace and finally the mystical reading of the Song.

Chapter 2 will thus focus on the first of these gems: The need for a sense of self which is inseparable from its intrinsic generosity and responsibility toward the other. This section will constitute a commentary on the metaphor of the "vineyard" in the Song of Songs which refers to the woman's sexuality. It will be shown how the metaphor is used in a subversive way in our text so as to point to a sexual liberation not unlike what the twenty-first-century woman is experiencing today. This liberation is, however, not as freeing as one might expect inasmuch as it will be shown that patriarchy still dominates our relationships, albeit in more subtle ways. This chapter will then go on to show that true liberation for woman consists in being in relationship, but not in a way that is submissive or alienating, rather one that is in tune with her deepest longings and desires. This discussion will then conclude on a reflection on virginity as a gift of self rather than as a state of being that can be altered by someone else.

Having explored the implications of experiencing one's femininity as a form of generosity of self, a gift of self that is whole-hearted and generous, I will then, in Chap. 3, explore the structure of this gift. Indeed, too much recklessness and haste in the giving of oneself can lead to deep pain and degradation. Woman needs to be taught again how she is to give of herself in a way that will allow for sincerity and generosity. There is an art of giving of oneself that must be rediscovered. I will inspire my reflections on this art form from the repeated warning uttered by the daughters of Jerusalem, almost like a mantra, "do not arouse or awaken love until it is ready."[37] This warning constitutes a sharp contrast with the generally sensual and reckless lovemaking of the Song. From this contrast it will be shown that two voices of wisdom are to be heard in our text, one that encourages the whole-hearted gift of self and the other encouraging, on the contrary, restraint and patience. My argument will be that, contrarily to what commentators have argued, these two voices are to be heard together. Moreover, it will be shown that the art of seduction hangs precisely on the ability to protect the delicate balance between these two voices, between sensuality and discretion.

This rediscovery of the voice of discretion will then lead to a discussion on patience in Chap. 4. This section will be a commentary on what constitutes the heart of the book, the failed *rendez-vous* between the man and the woman described in chapter five of the Song. One wonders why a failed encounter would be placed at the center of our text. We might have expected there something more climactic, a marriage or engagement for instance. And yet, there is wisdom to be gathered from this failure too, the first of which is the realization of the essential differences between the woman and the man's timing. One of the partners is inexorably slower than the other. In our text, this difference in timing leads to a failed encounter, but it need not be so in real life. The hidden lesson of our text is one of patience. Thus, it might be gathered from this passage, even from the whole of the Song, that patience constitutes the very essence of love.

The notion of patience is, however, inseparable from the virtue of trust which every proficient lover must learn to cultivate. Thus Chap. 5 will constitute a commentary on the metaphor of the "lilies" which can be read as hinting to the other women that the man cannot help noticing and desiring. This metaphor thus alludes to potential infidelity on the part of the man. And yet, accompanying this reference is the woman's three-fold faithful affirmation of "my lover is mine and I am his" (Song 2:16, 6:3, 7:10). This statement occurs twice (Song 2:16, 6:3), accompanying the reference to lilies, but the third time (Song 7:10) the lilies are gone: The man seems to have committed. This passage is mysterious indeed! What made the difference? What happened for the man to commit? The key, I believe, lies in the formulation of the woman "my lover is mine and I am his." Therein lies her secret! How she did it! How she got her man to commit! This whole chapter will constitute a reflection on this passage as well as a meditation on trust and its incredible power to inspire love and commitment.

Chapter 6 will show how our text can be compared to the ancient treatises on sexuality such as the *Kama Sutra* and *The Perfumed Garden*, albeit from a woman's perspective. I shall attempt to be attentive, in this chapter, to the teachings on sexuality whispered between the lines uttered by the lovers to each other. There is a genuine art of sex to be discovered in the Song of Songs and it is this art that I shall attempt to unveil in this chapter. Moreover, with the Song being written from a woman's perspective, much can be learned from our text as to woman's sexuality and forms of pleasure. I will show, moreover, that in the Song

pleasure is inseparable from ethics. The more ethical the sexual behavior, the more pleasure is to be experienced by the lovers. As such, this section on sexuality constitutes more than a mere how-to guide for pleasuring the other. A whole ethics of sex can be extracted from these passages, which nevertheless will profoundly differ from traditional understandings of sexual ethics.

Chapter 7 will lead to a reflection on grace in the Song of Songs. This chapter constitutes, in my view, the crowning chapter of this project inasmuch as the true nature of love will be explored here. What is striking about the Song is that the lovers endure, and this in spite of their essential differences, this irrecuperable mistakes, the depth of their betrayals and their continuous recklessness. In the end, love reveals itself as strong as death and its potency described as a flame of Yahweh. There is a quality of love which escapes human understanding and effort; it is a sacred flame that burns on in the heart of God even when the lovers find their love for each other waning. And it is a flame from which the lovers might draw in times of need. Our text seems to imply that the source of love lies beyond the lovers themselves and that it is thus that their love has been found to endure in spite of their mistakes. There is therefore an element of grace, of gift, to any love that is shared between two people; it is a love that is received from above, a flame of God, and as such, it is a love which contains the seeds of infinity.

A reading of the Song which does not include a note on its traditional mystical interpretation would not be complete. And so, in Chap. 8, I will suggest an alternative mystical reading of our Song. While traditional mystical readings have interpreted our Song as playing out the deeper drama of a romance between God (the man) and his people (the woman), I suggest in this chapter that God is better embodied by the woman of our Song than by the man. Doing this, however, reveals a whole new facet of the persona of God. No more endowed with the typical male traits of aggressivity, power and control, we meet, through the traits of this African woman, a passionate, reckless, yet shy God. A promising new theology might arise then of a God which is shockingly different from how he has been traditionally perceived by theologians. This is however not surprising, given the subversive content of our Song—beyond the unorthodox vision of love we are given, we might also come to a radically novel, subversive, yet profoundly illuminating vision of God.

Notes

1. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 283.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 74.
4. Ibid., 273.
5. Anais Nin, *In Favor of the Sensitive Man* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 10.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 10.
8. Cf. Catherine Chalier, *Reading the Torah*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2017). In this fascinating work, Chalier argues that the Torah is not a rigid text meant to remain solidified through time, but rather a fluid text, ever susceptible to being revitalized by the new interpretations that each generation brings to the table. It is precisely this ability to remain open to new interpretations which makes for the lasting relevance of the Hebrew Bible and not, as some might think, its existence as a rock-solid immutable text.
9. Cf. Simone De Beauvoir: "Eve was not created for herself but as Adam's companion and drawn from his side. In the Bible few women are noteworthy for their actions: Ruth merely found herself a husband. Esther gained the Jews' grace by kneeling before Ahasuerus, and even then she was only a docile instrument in Mordecai's hands; Judith was bolder, but she too obeyed the priests and her exploit has a dubious aftertaste: it could not be compared to the pure and shining triumph of young David" (*The Second Sex*, 303).
10. Numbers 27.
11. Judges 4–5.
12. Not to mention the subversive roles at times adopted by the Matriarchs. I am reminded here of God telling Abraham to heed his wife Sarah's voice in chasing Hagar away. I am also reminded of Rebekah's subversive move to forcefully make her youngest the heir to God's blessing.
13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays About Judaism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1997), 31.
14. This is also Bloch's observation: "The Hebrew Bible, an anthology of works composed over the period of nearly a millennium is a very heterogeneous collection … [and] not every book meets the test of piety" (Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, *The Song of Songs: The World's First Great Love Poem* [New York: The Modern Library, 2006]).
15. I am thinking of the book of Ecclesiastes' subversion of the creation story replacing God's description of the world as "good" with his own perspective on it as "meaningless." One can also understand the book of Job

and the suffering endured by the pious man Job as a subversion of the Pentateuch's worldview that piety attracts divine blessing and providence. The Book of Proverbs even is subversive in its sourcing wisdom in human experience of a father teaching his son rather than in divine wisdom.

16. In the Mishnah there exists a discussion between the rabbis where the Song of Song's legitimacy is put into question. In this portion of the Mishnah, Rabbi Akiba famously salvages the Song by saying: "All of eternity in its entirety is not as worthy of the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel" (Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Yadayim*, 3:5).
17. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1992).
18. André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote* (Salem, OR: Trinity Press International, 1998), 17.
19. This subversive character of the Song of Songs has also been observed by Whedbee who notes the "subversive spirit of the Song, representing an inversion of customary roles in patriarchal and royal society" adding that "at the beginning and ending of the Song, the woman appears in the commanding and controlling position, inviting the king to kiss her and then sending away her lover at the end with an imperious 'flee away'" ("Paradox and Parody in the Song of Solomon." In *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 1st series, edited by Athalya Brenner [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 268).
20. Cf. note 21.
21. Actually for Carol Fontaine the latter interpretation of the Shulamite's blackness as testifying to her being a black woman is much more plausible than the common interpretation of her dark skin stemming from her belonging to the working-class people who typically were a shade darker for having to work in the fields all day: "I still wonder what has made modern readers so colorblind, preferring to spin out a tale of class conflict between urban and rural women. It certainly cannot be because these issues of race have been settled in the lived contexts of most of the critics! Though the Bible is not explicit on this topic, later traditions connected the Queen of Sheba with the songs of the Shulamite, as have artists through history" (Carol Fontaine, "The Voice of the Turtle," in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, edited by Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 179.
22. I'm referring here of course to the beautiful piece by Tupac "Keep your head up" released in 1993.

23. As such, the text makes a powerful countercultural and subversive move within the Biblical context which has traditionally been less than courteous with its black characters. Thus, according to André Lacocque, "against this background of texts that place negative judgment on Africa or that treat a black woman with contempt, the Shulamite proudly declares herself to be black and beautiful. Her blackness is by no means a flaw, but rather adds to her attractiveness" ("I am Black and Beautiful." In *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, edited by Lesleigh Cushing Strahlberg and Peter S. Hawkins [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], 167). Carol Fontaine makes a similar point: "Before there was black power or the defiant afro hair cult instead of straightening, there was the Song, calling out to a racist culture that cherished its Bible that blackness did not rule out the presence of beauty" (Carol, Fontaine. "Song? Songs? Whose Song? Reflections of a Radical Reader," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Song*s, 299).
24. This is all the more the case when one considers that the Hebrew conjunction translated as "yet" also translates as "and." Another possible translation might then be "dark am I *and* lovely."
25. I sometimes wonder whether the person who coined the term "black and beautiful" did it with our Song in mind. Arguably not, since it is not until recently that the expression in Hebrew has been translated as possibly also meaning "black and beautiful" and not only as commentators suggested in the past "black yet beautiful." The Hebrew preposition *waw* which connects black with beautiful holds the double meaning of "yet" and "and."
26. This ostentatious absence of the father has been noted by Trible who counts "seven references to the mother, without a single mention of a father" thereby underscoring "anew the prominence of the female in the lyrics of love" ("Love's Lyrics Redeemed." In *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, 116).
27. Such rules were quite specific and are enumerated as follows by Renita Weems: "Sex in Israel was completely confined by law to marriage; any deviations, according to the law codes, bore fatal consequences for women and severe penalties for men … considerable care was taken especially in Hebrew law to define when, with whom and under what circumstances sex was permissible and when the boundaries of intimate relations might be undermined" (*Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995], 4–5). Add to these rules concerning marriage the complex principles guiding courtship and/or any social interactions between men and women as would later be compiled in rabbinic literature: "Rules of etiquette prohibited a man's meeting alone or talking privately with a woman (Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Kiddushin* 4:12b; 81a) or even talking to her at all, except in the most

minimal way (Roberto Badenas, *Meet Jesus* [Pittsburgh: Autumn House, 1995], 82). In our text, all of these laws are broken by the Shulamite.

28. This has been observed by Chana Bloch in her recent translation and commentary on the Song of Songs. Commenting on the lovers' freedom she says: "For centuries exegetes have considered their relationship chaste, ignoring the plain sense of the Hebrew. The word *dodim* which occurs six times in the Song is almost always translated as love, though it refers specifically to sexual love. Moreover, the metaphors of feasting suggest fulfillment, particularly when they are in the perfect tense and the verb to come into or to enter often has patently sexual meaning in Biblical Hebrew" (Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch. *The Song of Songs: The World's First Great Love Poem*, 3). Furthermore, the habit of the lovers' meeting secretly in the countryside and night and of parting at day break is further indication, according to Bloch, that the lovers are not married (cf. Ibid., 3).
29. Ibid., 176.
30. Ibid., 49.
31. Ibid., 7.
32. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978), 161.
33. Ibid., p. 151.
34. André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote*, 72.
35. Thus the Song of Songs might be read as a reflection on a young maiden's initiative journey to love in order to crystallize the wisdom, lessons of love to be learned from it as Daphna Arbel observes: "The woman in the Song of Songs appears to describe a process in which she reflects upon her feelings of love and attraction towards her lover" (Daphna Arbel. "My Vineyard, My Very Own, Is for Myself," in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, 91).
36. The idea that the Song of Songs might have been authored by a woman, and perhaps even by the Shulamite herself, has been put forth by a number of commentators. Chana Bloch, for example, observes that "the prominence of women in the Song and the unusually sympathetic rendering of a woman's perspective, has led some readers to wonder whether the author might have been a woman. … In the case of the Song, the questions arises naturally, since women are associated to some extent with poetry and song in the Bible. … Perhaps it would help to explain why the Song is so remarkably different in spirit from much of the Bible" (Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch. *The Song of Songs: The World's First Great Love Poem*, 20). Bloch adds that the fact that the text mentions Solomon as the author of the book does not mean anything since "it was common practice in Antiquity to attribute works of literature to eminent figures from the past" and as such, "no one takes the attribution of 1:1 seriously today" (Ibid., 21).

Athalya Brenner makes the same observation regarding a possible female authorship of the Song basing it on the extraordinary absence of the "male bias generally found in Biblical literature" (*The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 1st series, 32). Goitein gives an argument for the female authorship of the book based on the fact that, contrary to most erotic works of the Near East, our Song contains not only extensive descriptions of the woman's body but "the novelty of our book is perhaps precisely in the fact that it also contains a detailed description of the male beloved" ("The Song of Songs: A Female Composition." In *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 1st series, 58).

37. *Song* 2:7, 3:5, 8:4.

Virginity Re-imagined

My own vineyard I have neglected

—Song 1:6

The degree to which the Song of Songs shakes the foundations of traditional relationships is evident in its very opening words, uttered by the woman, in an unabashed and unashamed invitation to the man she loves: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is more delightful than wine" (Song 1:2). Gone are here the rules of propriety, of modesty and of courtship! Contrary to all of that which was expected of a woman, the Shulamite initiates the relationship in a brazen invitation to the man she loves to love her back, without any consideration of what is proper or not, thereby setting the tone for the rest of the book. From the onset, our Song emerges as a voice against patriarchy and the Shulamite as a profoundly subversive figure. But there is no more radical statement against patriarchy than that which is implicitly made in the self-portrait the Shulamite paints of herself in the next few lines: "My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected" (Song 1:6). The motif of the vineyard is of course highly symbolic and has been interpreted to signify to the woman's sexuality.[1] The fact that she has "had to neglect" her vineyard, that is to say, her sexuality, speaks volumes to the radicalness of her subversion of patriarchy.

Our "emancipated woman" is, however, far from serene, as the Song indicates in a number of significant passages. In fact, far from enjoying her

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_2

newly acquired freedom from the patriarchal tyranny, the Shulamite seems to have entered another kind of bondage: That of her own uncertainties, insecurities and obsessions. Indeed, the relationship she is in is far from satisfactory and is permeated with anguish and anxiety as is evident in her repeated sighs: "I am faint with love" (Song 2:5; 5:8), "I looked for him but did not find him" (Song 3:1; 5:6). The subversion of patriarchy thus seems not to have brought the liberation that was expected. Likewise it is not an easy task to navigate today's world as an "emancipated woman." While the dissolution of patriarchy has brought about a certain number of freedoms to women, it has also brought about the disappearance of the structures designed to protect them from the dangers of unbridled desire. Women of the Western world are more vulnerable than ever to solitude, rejection, abuse and sexually transmitted diseases.

This vulnerability is such that, although Western women see themselves as liberated, women from other parts of the world do not envy their position. Maria Mies puts it this way: "The utopia of the independent, isolated, and autonomous female individual is not attractive to them. They oppose patriarchal exploitation and oppression which in their world as in ours is often perpetuated by the institution of the family. But their concept of woman's liberation does not imply severing all communal relations, they cannot conceptualize the isolation of the individual woman as something positive, they do not wish to live free and alone in the anonymity of big cities, to die finally, as we shall, in a home for the old."[2] How many women do not resonate with this portrait and wonder whether any genuine progress has occurred as far as the condition of the woman in the Western world? Yes, the Western woman is free to do as she please, to pursue the interests that she wants, but is there no more terrifying prison than that of a solitary self, incapable of forging lasting and meaningful relationships?

This so-called freedom of the emancipated woman must then also be called into question. I would suggest that the forms of liberation that the Western woman has achieved have not overturned patriarchy; rather they have paved the way for a new kind of patriarchy, a new kind of male domination. A hard look at the facts reveals that one of the main tenets of women's liberation, that is to say, the "sexual freedom" that woman enjoys in the West, has been more beneficial to the man than to herself. Bell hooks mentions this in her own critique of this so-called sexual freedom where "sexism continues to shape the ways most people think about sexual relations."[3] She goes on to note that "rather than change, patriarchal

males and females have exploited the logic of gender equality in the sexual realm to encourage women to be advocates of patriarchal sex and to pretend, like their male counterparts, that this is sexual freedom. Music videos and television shows … teach females, especially young females, that the desirable female companion is one who is willing to play either a dominant or a subordinate role, one who can be as nonchalant about sex as an patriarchal man."[4] Maria Mies also observes the illusory character of women's emancipation in her critique of the pill—the so-called emancipation drug—that it is rather the men who see themselves "freed more than ever from responsibility of the consequences of sexual intercourse"[5] while women continue to carry the whole burden of accidental pregnancy. Thus, birth control has really changed nothing as to the unfair dynamics between men and women, has not achieved genuine equality. What is needed, according to Mies is not "new technologies but rather new relations between the sexes where lust and burden will be shared equally."[6] Far from freeing woman from patriarchy, from male domination in the realm of sexual relations, it would seem that birth control has further radicalized the freedom and domination of male desire in the realm of sexual relations.

Moreover, one might wonder what kind of liberation is signified in woman's having to constantly repress her natural reproductive capabilities for the sake of sex. Maria Mies also calls this into question and speaks of a tyranny of the body for the sake of an abstract conception of autonomy. While, woman, in the words of Susan Zimmerman "must become the owner, the mistress of herself … decide by herself whether she is to become a mother or not,"[7] the question can be raised as to whether the repression of woman's natural reproductive potential constitutes genuine liberation? According to Mies, this is not the case. A woman's freedom is on the contrary, according to Mies, measured in how faithful she is able to remain to her own embodied desires and imperatives. To reduce a woman's freedom to the freedom of her intellect—which is the main achievement of first-wave feminism[8]—is to ignore the imperative of the feminine body to also find freedom in being allowed to blossom and flow freely in its embodied difference. Freedom then is not just being able to dispose of one's being at will but rather to become more deeply attuned to one's specificity as an embodied woman and to the female body's specific desires and imperatives.

This is however a completely new understanding of freedom. Rather than finding herself freed from the determinism of her feminine body—as de Beauvoir would have it—the woman finds freedom *within* this very determinism when she is allowed to follow and unravel the destiny that is

inscribed in her feminine body. According to de Beauvoir, for the woman to find the same kind of freedom as man, she has to learn to transcend her own corporeality and the handicaps attached to its functions. To find liberation then, woman must necessarily repress her own female body, her own femininity. This, according to Mies cannot constitute a genuine liberation. Commenting on de Beauvoir, Mies observes: "She maintains the dualistic and hierarchical split between life and freedom … between nature and culture, between spirit and matter. She maintains alienation from the body, especially the female body which, according to her, hinders self-determination. Our body is the enemy."[9] True freedom, according to Mies, cannot come from transcending the feminine body, but rather from attuning oneself more deeply to one's specific feminine nature and allowing it to flow unimpeded. As such, freedom might be better understood as a blossoming rather than as a transcending of the feminine body.

Finally, one might wonder if the sexual liberation that women are experiencing today is truly as liberating and enjoyable for them as is commonly thought. One might wonder whether the casual sex that is encouraged today is really what women want. Simone de Beauvoir notes that it might not be the case, and this, having herself experimented at length with multiple forms of casual encounters. She notes that a woman that engages freely in casual sex "is rarely completely sincere when she claims to envisage nothing more than a short term adventure just for pleasure, because pleasure, far from freeing her, binds her; separation even a so called friendly one wounds her … the nature of her eroticism and the difficulties of a free sexual life push the woman toward monogamy."[10]Anais Nin writes along the same lines that, "woman has not made the separation between love and sensuality which man has made,"[11] making casual sexual encounters all the more difficult for a woman who is attuned to her femininity.

True liberation would then entail not only that the dynamic of male-female relationships be equalized, but also that woman recover a sense of what she *really* wants, of her deeper, specifically feminine desires and longings. Rather than continue to conform to the neo-patriarchy that we can observe today, where sexual relations are still in effect governed by the demands of male desire, woman must awaken to what she truly desires, what she truly wants. Instead of surrendering to "a desire that is not her own and that leaves her in a well-known state of dependency" woman, according to Irigaray, must come to know "what she wants."[12] But for this, woman must become attuned all over again to her femininity as it is manifest in her body, in that body that she has been precisely repressing in

the name of freedom. Woman must develop a renewed sensitivity to her body's wisdom[13] and truth, relearn to listen to her feelings and intuitions if she is to ever come to a knowledge of who she is as a woman and what she truly desires.

My own vineyard is mine to give

—Song 8:12

The shift in the perception of the vineyard from being unkempt by the Shulamite—"my vineyard I have neglected" (Song 1:6)—to a vineyard that is hers "to give"[14] (Song 8:12) occurs toward the end of the Song and indicates a profound shift in the Shulamite's conception of her own gendered being, of her sexuality. Whereas in the beginning of the Song she is described as recklessly giving up her body with little restraint, she has now regained, it seems, a sense of self, as explicit in the notion of mine-ness. She is no more prey to foreign desires, she is no more a passive object, but an individuated self. The Shulamite of the end of the Song is no more subjected to the prescriptions of patriarchy, nor to the whims and desires of those around her; she is her own person. She has regained ownership of herself and agency.[15] Lacocque comments: "The maiden is shown to us as dispossessed at the beginning of the affair and in full possession of herself at the end, my vineyard, my very own, is before me."[16] Her "vineyard," that is to say, her body, her sexuality is "hers," it is under her jurisdiction, under her authority. She is now to decide when, how and to whom she offers herself.

This first moment of individuation is a fundamental moment of any possible and future transformation of the present dynamic of gender relations. Only upon recovering a sense of her own self, of her own desires and longings will woman by able to shift the power dynamics that are in place now and lead her community to the dawn of a new era, one where man and woman have reached true equality and partnership in their relationships with each other. Audre Lorde puts this beautifully when she speaks of woman needing to reconnect to the power of the erotic within her, that is to say, to the power of her desires: "There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling."[17] According to Lorde, learning to tap into this unrecognized feelings and desires that often lie dormant or repressed within us is to "begin to live from within

outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us."[18] There will never be true equality between men and women as long as woman remains unaware of who she is, what she wants and where she is going. But for this, woman must awaken anew to her specific feminine wisdom, to the wisdom still lying dormant in her own body. For too long, woman has remained alienated from her own body.

This alienation has been mostly perpetuated by Western thought which has constituted a systematic denial of the value of the body and of its inherent wisdom. The senses have been systematically denied as false and illusory, and feelings, intuitions and perceptions as unreliable. Reason has been privileged over feelings and the latter have been largely ignored as having any reliable truth-content. Moreover, woman has historically been assimilated with the body and its so-called unreliable and whimsical desires. The distrust of the body has thus been projected upon woman as the physical being par excellence, and as such, as intrinsically unreliable, hysterical and over-emotional. Woman thus finds herself stereotyped, in the words of Maria Mies, as "the moral gender, the embodiment of emotionality, human caring … excluded from the … public arena governed by male reason."[19] Woman is thus relegated to the realm of the body, and as such, excluded from rationality.

The initiative consisting of awakening woman to the wisdom inherent in her body might then seem, in light of this, detrimental to her striving for equality. Should not woman elevate herself, rather, to the realm of reason as to properly counter man on his own territory? What I am speaking of here, however, is not a return of woman to the whimsical and irrational movements of her moods as she continues to dwell in ignorance of the realm of reason, but rather of her becoming attuned to another type of rationality, an embodied rationality, an embodied wisdom which is inseparable from her own body. Woman must again become reconciled to the fact that her feelings and her emotions, even certain illnesses,[20] are not just random manifestations of hormonal imbalance, but rather have truth-content, are messengers trying to convey new directions, new orientations for her life. In her groundbreaking book on women's health, Christiane Northrup makes precisely this point: "Our bodies and their symptoms are part of our inner guidance. They have a message for us. Always."[21] She goes on to add that "when … we acknowledge our needs and release the emotional pain that results from denial, we are put immediately in touch with our hearts, our feelings, and our inner guidance

system. Our intellects and thoughts can now assume their rightful roles: being of service to our hearts and our deepest knowing, and not the other way around. This shift puts us in touch with the unmet needs behind our pain. And that is the first step towards healing."[22]

Any genuine transformation of our society's structures must then entail an awakening of woman to her own embodied wisdom. Rather than seeing the body, as de Beauvoir, as a form of bondage, as a prison which impedes upon the woman's freedom and transcendence,[23] we must rediscover to the feminine body as the very condition of possibility of that freedom, as the very place where the unfolding and blossoming of a woman's deepest desires and aspirations is to take place. Instead of continually repressing the female body's natural inclinations, feelings and emotions, we can begin to attune oneself to these, even to cultivate these so as to allow for a specifically feminine wisdom to emerge. Irigaray speaks of the "culture of sensibility"[24] which privileges "a reawakening of the senses, of the perceptions."[25] She speaks of the new attitude woman must develop toward her own body as the very place of freedom. The question arises then as to "why … the blossoming of their nature does not form part of their freedom?"[26] Why might woman not see her body as the very source of her creativity, her self-transcendence, her work? And I am not saying here that her work be reduced to the child-bearing functions of her body. I am saying rather that a better attunement to one's body, emotions and intuitions might foster deeper creativity on all levels: Art, science, philosophy, politics, theology. Contrarily to de Beauvoir's view, the self-transcendence of a woman's work must plunge its roots from the richness and depths of the immanence of her body. From her body, from the wealth of her experiences, feelings, intuitions, is the woman to come forth and create.

But to become attuned to one's feminine body is also to discover its essential relationality. The feminine body is entirely fashioned for relationship, as Irigaray observes: "In my present body I am already intention towards the other … insofar as I am a sexuate being, I represent meaning for the other and I am in a way destined to him … to be woman necessarily involves—as far as human essence and existence are concerned—to be in relationship with man, at least ontologically … there is in me, woman, a part which is negative, not realizable by me alone, part of night, a part which is reserved, a part which is irreducibly feminine and which is not suited to represent the whole of the human being that must enter into the constitution of my identity."[27] Thus to become re-attuned to the body is, by the same token, to awaken to

woman's intrinsic relationality. Woman, as a feminine body, is an intrinsically relational being. To recover one's femininity signifies then to discover and honor anew one's essential desire to connect, to relate, to offer, to give of oneself in relationships.

Here is the very orientation that the mine-ness that the Shulamite discovers is to have: "My own vineyard is mine *to give*" (Song 8:12). The Shulamite's words indicate that woman's deepest longing is to give herself to another. There only does she find fulfillment. The woman thus discovers her deeper feminine self through her relationships, through her interactions and generous gift of herself to others. It is therefore the other which initiates the woman to her feminine self. Without the presence of this other, the woman would always remain in the "night" as to the nature of true fulfillment.[28] Emmanuel Levinas goes as far as to speak of the relational self as the only mode of subjectivity capable of experiencing true freedom inasmuch as the other frees the self from the prison of its own self-enclosure and solitude. A solitary self, for Levinas, is never truly free! Even when it is doing what it wants and making its own choices. Rather, the other, inasmuch as it opens up the self to new horizons, new adventures and new beginnings, effectively frees the self from its routine and from the limits of its own agency. The self is thus truly free only when it opens itself up to the transformative potential of a relationship.[29] As such, even though the woman sometimes finds her own desires and aspirations limited by her relationships, she experiences a deeper freedom than if she were to focus solely on her own needs and desires. Contrarily then to the conception fostered by the sexual revolution that woman is to find freedom in autonomy and independence from her relationships, Levinas is describing true freedom as emerging precisely from these relationships, from this character of relationality of woman.

Yet, does not this definition of woman as profoundly relational come in direct contradiction with the advances of feminism? Has it not been one of the central contributions of the women's liberation movement to free woman from her subjugation to a foreign will? Describing the contributions of the movement, Maria Mies observes that "thus for woman self-determination must first be the liberation from occupation, the end of the determination by others, by men and by patriarchal social powers."[30] Does not the oppression of women for centuries stem from precisely a conception of woman as having no desires, no aspirations of her own apart from providing for her husband's and children's needs? Has she not found herself reduced to the roles of wife and mother, both of which constitute the

very modes of relationality signified by her corporeality? Is the Shulamite saying that the destiny of woman is summarized in these two roles?

To say this is to forget that the gift of the woman, in the Song, is inseparable from her specific mine-ness, from her specific suchness, that is to say her unique way of embodying her femininity! "My own vineyard is *mine* to give" (Song 8:12). While it was established above that the mine-ness of the woman is indissoluble from her gift of self, likewise, the gift of self of the woman is bound to her specific and particular mine-ness or suchness. As such, it escapes any generalizations as to what a woman should give *qua* woman, any fixed and general roles ascribed to womanhood in general. Thus, although it has been shown that there is a feminine mode of being consisting of being-for the other, the nature and mode of that relationality is still to be determined by each particular woman. And here the possibilities are endless. There are infinite ways that a woman can give of herself: She can choose to be a wife, a mother, but also an artist, a politician, a philosopher. What matters is that she offers herself fully to her calling and that this calling be birthed out of her deepest desires and aspirations. A woman's relational character is thus a mode of being wherein her very substance is expressed and poured out into what she chooses to do. As such, the expression of a given woman's relationality can never be imposed, it can never be fixed by a given social or cultural norm. It flows out of the woman's deepest core, out of her deepest longing and hunger.

But the importance of giving of oneself from one's deepest center is especially relevant in a woman's relationships. Yet it is there that her gift of self has been the most closely regimented by patriarchy. Patriarchy has always prescribed when, how and to whom a woman was to give herself. Strict rules have been set in place as to better control the woman's body and sexuality. In most patriarchal communities, the woman must remain a virgin and give herself within a certain context overseen by the father[31] or by society. To give oneself away prematurely is considered an act whereby the purity of the woman is stained forever and is sometimes punishable by death. This approach to woman's sexuality is still the norm in many countries, including in the West where communities of faith continue to teach that unmarried sex damages and taints one's sexuality as well as one's ability to ever love whole-heartedly again. While this teaching certainly stems from a legitimate and laudable concern to protect young hearts, derogatory portrayals of transgressors as "damaged goods" or "tainted wine" are violent and coercive techniques which do more evil than good and which can cause deep and sometimes irreversible psychological damage.

The sexual revolution would attempt to change all of this in its giving woman the freedom to give of herself to whoever she wants, whenever she wants. Yet, the twenty-first-century woman still finds herself having to cater to a desire and exigency foreign to herself. While patriarchy instilled the pressure in woman to keep herself pure before marriage, today's society instills the pressure on woman to rid herself of her virginity as soon as possible, as if it were some kind of disease or handicap. In patriarchal times a woman who lost her virginity was considered a pariah. Today, it is the woman who protects her virginity who is marginalized. In both cases, the woman's sexuality is regimented by forces outside of the woman's own agency. Likewise, a woman who chooses to opt out of casual sexual relationships and remain single for a given amount of time is seen as abnormal even if she has perfectly good reasons to do so. Today's woman is undergoing a continuous, yet subtle pressure to remain sexually active all the time, with whoever crosses her path, and however they choose to do so, notwithstanding the emotional, psychological and sometimes physical consequences.

What is needed is a liberation from both versions of patriarchy. Woman must reclaim her own body and sexuality from both the patriarchal and neo-patriarchal cultures that she might find herself in. Like the Shulamite, she must rediscover her mine-ness as it applies to her sexuality—"My own vineyard is mine to give" (Song 8:12)—rediscover her agency, and reconnect with her own rhythm, her deeper intuitions and desires. She must learn to give of herself in her own time without pressure either to rush things or to keep them from happening. She must again rediscover her infinite value and a sense of her own sacred spaces reserved for one that will love her and not use her. She must become wiser in her choices. She must also learn to listen more deeply to her own intuitions and feelings and let them guide her rather than blindly conform to a given society's ideal with which she does not resonate from the core of her being. Finally, she must recover a sense of her own inviolable virginity.

Emmanuel Levinas has a beautiful passage on woman's inviolability. For him, the woman can never lose her virginity; rather, as an infinite being, she "abides in virginity."[32] She "remains ungraspable, dying without murder, swooning, withdrawing into her future, beyond every possible promise to anticipation."[33] Inasmuch as every human being is, according to Levinas, infinite and as such, cannot be grasped or mastered by another, woman likewise finds her sexuality to have an infinite quality to it which makes any attempt to possess, stain or corrupt it impossible.

Like an everlasting spring of water, woman's body and sexuality constantly renew themselves and never remain in a given state of being. She might have been used, abused or violated at one point of her life, but the infinite flow of her being allows her to constantly reinvent herself, to continuously shed her old skin, to begin anew and be rebirthed.

Yet, for Levinas, a woman's sexuality remains described in terms of substance, of a state of being—albeit an infinite one, which constantly undergoes transformations through time. I would venture to suggest that woman's virginity is not substance but subject, is not a state of *being* but a mode of *giving*. Nuancing Levinas' view of woman's virginity, Irigaray proposes that virginity is to be "understood not as a simply physical or phantasmic thing which is lost or preserved, violable or inviolable" but rather as a "response,"[34] that is to say, a gift of self that is offered whole-heartedly and without holding back. Virginity is thus not a state of being which can be altered or ruined, but a mode of giving of oneself that is entire and whole-hearted. Virginity defined as such is thus indissociable from a woman's agency. Only inasmuch as she gives of herself freely, consensually, can she give of herself whole-heartedly and give to her gift of self a virginal quality. As such, it becomes impossible to "give up" one's virginity, or have it be "taken." Virginity in this sense can only be *offered*! To give oneself completely to another is thus to give oneself virginally.

This renewed conception of virginity as a mode of giving in turn transforms our understanding of purity. Purity is no more a state of being which can be ruined or lost forever; it is a mode of giving. One *is* not pure or impure, but rather one can *give* of oneself purely or impurely. I am reminded here of the gospels' explanation of purity as what comes out of the self rather than what goes into it.[35] Purity in this sense is not a state of being which can be altered by what happens to it; rather it is what comes out of the self, the actions, words and thoughts which can become impure. Kierkegaard came closest to this definition of purity when he said that "purity of heart is to will one thing."[36] That is to say, purity of heart is to give one's love and self whole-heartedly, with an undivided heart: "When the lover gives away his whole love, he keeps it entire in the purity of heart."[37] Thus, virginity can never be taken, or even given away; it remains ever new, renewed by the flow of its own immolation, of its own offering. Conversely, the source of all impurity according to Kierkegaard would be to love with a divided heart, without fully giving oneself to the other, without one's consent emerging from one's deepest core. And yet, a hard look at our own relationships will reveal that most of us love in this way,

love with a divided heart. The reason being that most of us all have had, at some point of our maturation into adults, our hearts shattered, fragmented, broken. Is there hope for those of us who have undergone such trauma? Can one learn to love again? Wisdom and healing are needed to begin the journey of love anew, which leads us to the next chapter.

Notes

1. The vineyard has been generally attributed by scholars to the woman's sexuality and eroticism. In her essay "The Structure of the Song of Songs and the Centrality of *Nephesh*," Deckers observes, for example, that "in the Song of Songs, the vine and the pomegranates are symbols for eroticism and sexuality" (in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 1st series, edited by Athalya Brenner [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 195). Lacocque gives the same connotation to the vineyard as symbolizing feminine eroticism here: "Over against the prophetic censure that she critiques throughout the Song, she proudly trumpets her own sexuality. Her vineyard is her own" (André Lacocque, "I am Black and Beautiful," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, edited by Lesleigh Cushing Strahlberg and Peter S. Hawkins [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], 170).
2. Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 220.
3. Bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 76.
4. Ibid., 88.
5. Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism*, 221.
6. Ibid., 228.
7. Ibid., 222.
8. Cf. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, UK: Minerva Publishing, 2018).
9. Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism*, 225.
10. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011). 773.
11. Anais Nin, *In Favor of the Sensitive Man* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 3.
12. Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 1985), 324.
13. On this topic, see Christiane Northrup's groundbreaking book *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).
14. The New International Version (NIV) translation is here not an obvious one. The Hebrew word behind the NIV's translation into "mine to give"

is *lefanai*, which literally means "before me." The meaning of this expression however points to the notion of empowerment and can be translated as "in my power" (cf. Duane Garett and Paul R. House. *Word Biblical Commentary: Song of Songs/Lamentations*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004], 258). The idea then is that of her vineyard being in her own hands, for her to do with as she pleases and offer it to whomever she desires.

15. The Song might then be read as a journey of feminine individuation. The woman's emergence from patriarchy into her own might even be read as a spiritual calling similar to that of Abraham as is noted by Klara Butting in her noticing of parallels between Abraham being called forth to his destiny by God and the woman being called forth to hers by her beloved in 2:10 and 2:13: "Twice we hear the call 'go your way' (*lech lecha*). This call in the second person singular feminine, imperative mode, is like the masculine form in Genesis 12 and 22, unique in the Hebrew Bible. … These love songs are full of theology. They tell us how in so-called privacy, Abraham and Sarah's setting out is taken over and a promise is retold and won for the singer's life" (Klara Butting, "Go your Way," in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, 145, 150).
16. André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote* (Salem, OR: Trinity Press International, 1998), 72.
17. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 53.
18. Ibid., 58.
19. Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism*, 347.
20. Cf. Christiane Northrup, *Women's Bodies Women's Wisdom* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).
21. Ibid., 23.
22. Ibid., 9.
23. Cf. Chapter 1 of De Beauvoir's *Second Sex*.
24. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2001), 91.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 32, 34.
28. This redefinition of the self as constituted by an other is incidentally one of the main contributions of twentieth-century thought. The eve of the twentieth-century gave rise to a number of philosophical movements wary of the Cartesian definition of the self as a strictly rational and autonomous being and began articulating the self as intrinsically relational (cf. the writings of Kierkegaard, Levinas, Buber and Marcel, among many others).
29. For more on the Levinasian understanding of freedom, see his two magnificent essays "Freedom Called into Question" and "The Investiture of Freedom, or Critique," in *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne

University Press, 2004), 82–90: "The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it. The shame for oneself, the presence of and desire for the other are not the negation of knowing: knowing is their very articulation. The essence of reason consists not in securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him into question and inviting him to justice" (Ibid., 88).

30. Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism*, 218.
31. This is the case even today in some evangelical contexts where purity balls are organized for young girls, during which they are given a chastity ring by their fathers in order to ensure that they will remain chaste until they are given away in marriage.
32. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.
33. Ibid.
34. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 27.
35. Cf. Jesus' words: "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean" (Matthew 15:11).
36. Søren, Kierkegaard. *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (Melbourne, AU: Rough Draft Printing, 2014).
37. Ibid., chapter 3.

The Art of Seduction

Let my lover come into his garden
And taste its choice fruits

—Song 4:16

This invitation by the woman to the man is one of the most beautiful moments of the Song. Our Song reads much like the Arabian nights with its incredibly sensual and erotic atmosphere. Every sense is awakened in our text. The lovers give themselves to the other fully, without holding back and without heed paid to societal conventions. And yet, instead of shedding a condemning light on the lovers' freedom, the author of the Song seems to side with them over and against society's verdict, setting their behavior in the lush and beautiful setting of nature in the first awakenings of springtime, as though mirroring the lovers' own awakening to their own bodies and to each other. And although the lovers will encounter moments of pain and disappointment, the overall tone of the text is one of bliss, of joy and of delight. It is as though the lovers are made to love each other, finding their greatest joy, fulfillment, blossoming, in the awakening, the opening up to each other. This emphasis on joy at the contact of another as the highest fulfillment of the self strikes a different note with regard to the way that sensuality has been understood in the Western tradition as a source of sin, corruption and pain.

There is then in our Song a deeply positive view of sensuality. Moreover, it is possible to read our text as a radical reversal and undoing

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_3

of the scenario of the Fall. Both narratives take place in a garden, and both involve the senses. However, while the narrative of the fall of the woman implies a misuse of all five senses—sight, taste, touch, hearing and smell—thereby situating sensuality at the source of all evil, our Song constitutes a rehabilitation of the sensual by placing all five senses in the redemptive light of true love. Phyllis Trible notes that "in this garden, the sensuality of Eden expands and deepens," whereas in Genesis 2–3 "all five senses capitulated to disobedience through the tasting of the forbidden fruit. Fully present in the song of songs from the beginning, these five senses saturate the poetry to serve only love."[1] Thus, according to Lacocque, our Song is "truly *pharmakon*, a healing text."[2] "Paradise lost is paradise regained."[3] Sensuality thus finds itself redeemed in our text and replaced in the context of love rather than of greed, lust or disobedience.

But this redemption of sensuality entails also a redemption of woman. Whereas woman was seen as a fallen creature, as the temptress of man,[4] here she is seen as the initiator of love as well as the one who, as we shall see, nurtures the flame of love until it endures stronger than death. Her body is no more the *lieu* of man's downfall, but rather has healing and redemptive virtues. Just like a garden offers relief, comfort, healing and rest, likewise the woman's body. No more is that body the place of the original sin which cast the human couple out into a cruel and arid wilderness, but rather it becomes likened unto a garden and a flowing fountain, both of which are symbols of abundance and restoration.[5] The sensuality of the woman is thus no more a source of evil but rather of redemption. Far are we here from the Western concepts of sensuality and of woman, both of which plunge their roots in the story of the Fall. Here we have a new narrative which speaks of the redemptive virtues of sensuality and of the woman's body.

There is thus a spiritual calling of the feminine body to heal, protect and redeem. This is perhaps the "new thing" that was prophesied by the prophet: "A woman will surround a man,"[6] that is to say, she will provide for him, protect him, heal him. Like a garden. Like a foretaste of Eden. Just as a woman can deeply wound a man and be the cause of his downfall—as was the case in Eden—she can heal and redeem him. This is the powerful reversal that is attempted by our Song. As such, our Song constitutes a celebration of the healing powers of a woman's body to restore her lover's heart and soul. Such a healing, however, takes time as well as a persevering spirit on the part of the woman who must not allow her love

to be swayed by the seeming apathy and distance shown to her. For there is a marked contrast between the quality of the Shulamite's passion and that of her lover which is highly significant. Whereas the Shulamite shows the passion of a young and first love, her lover seems somewhat distant and unavailable—his heart is not, from the onset, open. He is not as passionate as her nor is he as reckless. The man in the Song seems then to have already experienced the treachery of a woman's betrayal, making him overly cautious and apathetic.[7]

As such, the man does not come into the relationship whole. His personality is fractured and his desire diffused as is evident in his "browsing among the lilies." (Song 2:16, 6:3). This lack of wholeness on the part of her lover and his characteristic apathy are a source of pain for the Shulamite. While her predominant attitude is one of youthful exuberance and enthusiasm, the Shulamite also suffers poignantly throughout the Song. We get hints of her underlying pain from the very beginning when she speaks of the anger of her "mother's sons" toward her, when she admits to not having "kept" her own vineyard. Her shame quickly shifts to joy upon encountering her lover but his presence in her life only further exacerbates her longing for love and she is often seen pining for his love, feeling "faint with love" (Song 2:5, 5:8) because of his remoteness and distance. Yet she continues to seek after him, sometimes finding solace in his embrace, but sometimes not. The expression "I looked for him but did not find him" occurs throughout our Song (3:1, 5:6). Finally, we have a sense of her vulnerability as a woman not benefiting from protection of either a father or a lover when the watchmen corner her in the street: "The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me, they took away my cloak" (Song 5:7). Our text, in its characteristic subtlety remains discrete with regards to the violence of this encounter. But one wonders what the taking away of the cloak really entailed.

And so, there is ample evidence that, in the heart of her sensual opening up to her lover, there is both pleasure and pain. This pain is sometimes overlooked in reading the Song inasmuch as its sensual content is for the most part one of joyful and pleasurable exploration. But opening up so radically to an other, as the lovers do to each other, entails a risk: The risk of rejection. It is this risk, and the emotional devastation it entails, that patriarchy has accurately measured when it has created all kinds of obstacles and borders around the woman, making sure that only one who is truly ready to love might do so. But our Shulamite has chosen to venture outside of the protective structures of patriarchy, thereby exposing herself

to the pain of abuse and rejection. And so, inevitably, she will suffer. Yet this pain is as much a part of her sensual opening and awakening as the pleasure that she discovers at the contact of her lover. The devastation, anxiety, restlessness that she feels is as much a part of her awakening to love as the pleasure, joy and love that she receives from her lover. Both pain and pleasure are moments of her maturation as a woman.[8] Both are moments of opening up to an other, and consequently, of her blossoming into a woman.

To seek to protect the Shulamite from the pain of rejection, as her brothers nobly seek to do, is really to hinder her development as a woman. Moreover, it is to hinder the work of love that her vulnerable opening up might perform. For it is precisely this opening up, this welcoming of the man unto herself, in pleasure *and* in pain, that constitutes the beginning of healing. For only a love that courageously faces pain and devastation without becoming undone, without succumbing to despair, can bring a relationship new life and a new beginning: "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me" (Song 2:10–13). This setting of love in the springtime is not a mere detail, but rather speaks to the profound wisdom of a love which chooses to pass through the winter courageously, knowing that, in time, perseverance will give rise to new life. And only such a love that endures in spite of the difficulties truly nourishes, truly heals and truly redeems.

As such, the man's apathy and closed-heartedness present a powerful opportunity for the woman to transform her pain into a healing balm, the secret of which lies in her choosing to remain open, to remain vulnerable and to remain faithful in the face of devastation. For were she to be intimate with him for a mere season, she would merely confirm his painful realization that love is short-lived and plunge the knife deeper into the wound in his heart. Her sensuality is not *loaned* to her man for the span of a night or two. Her body is his and his alone *forever*. Thus, her sensuality heals because it is meant for him alone and because it is offered with a promise of eternity. There is no shadow of betrayal in her sensuous giving and it is precisely this that makes her healing power so potent. And so even though she acts recklessly, even loosely, her sensuality cannot be compared to that of a loose woman, or of a prostitute. Whereas the latter give

momentary relief from the pain experienced by a lonesome heart, they do not heal.

André Lacocque observes this contrast between the behavior of the Shulamite and that of a common prostitute or concubine in his enlightening study of the parallels between our Song and the book of the prophet Hosea. In his study of these two texts in his pertinent essay "I am Black and Beautiful," Lacocque shows "the deep influence of the first chapters of Hosea on the Song of Songs. The Lord commands Hosea to take a wife of whoredom … in sharp contrast, the whole concept of whoredom is subverted in the Song. Defiantly, the Shulamite gives the appearance of being a loose woman, but she upsets all conventions. Her love, in contradistinction to Gomer's is true; rather than being a source of shame it is gloriously proclaimed."[9] Thus "whereas in Hosea 2:3 God wrathfully turns Israel into a desert, the Shulamite we are told twice comes up from the desert (3:6, 8:5). While Gomer is decked with rings and jewels to allure new lovers, the Shulamite's jewelry is for the benefit of the beloved alone. Although Gomer is ever looking for partners … the Shulamite's quest is strictly for the one whom her soul loves."[10] As such, although exhibiting the same sensuous and sexually liberated behavior as Gomer, the Shulamite attains the opposite effect: She heals rather than wounds, and this on account of her unwavering fidelity to the man she loves.

This kind of offering of unconditional love, unwavering in the face of betrayal, can be performed, however, only by a woman who is herself deeply grounded. Where does the Shulamite find the strength to love in such a powerful way? Where does she find solace and refreshment when the man she loves fails her? How is a woman to find solace outside of the safety and love of a relationship? Our Shulamite herself does not seem at rest unless she is in her beloved's arms. This is true and also, unfortunately, the reason behind many of her woes. But there remain indications in our text of her awareness of another source of solace than her lover's arms: That of the exquisite realm of nature whose native daughter she clearly is. While our Shulamite is definitely not at home within the city walls and uncomfortable around society, she fully blossoms when in her element—nature. In fact, she is so much a part of nature that she does not seem to be able to love deeply until she has swept her lover away (or been swept away by him) from the city into the lushness of her natural environment: "Arise, my darling … see! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone" (Song 2:10–13). These first moments together in the embrace of nature are echoed toward the end of the song when, this time it is our Shulamite

who invites her lover: "Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened and if the pomegranates are in bloom—there I will give you my love" (Song 7:11–12). Nature is clearly the natural habitat of our Shulamite, her place of rest, resource and solace, to the point that her lover even playfully names her she who dwells "in the gardens" (Song 8:13).

But more needs to be said on this intimate connection that the Shulamite seems to have with nature. Her dwelling in the gardens is not to be described as mundane and trivial, but rather contains a deep spiritual connotation. For it is precisely in the gardens that she learns to become healer and lover. The question is, what is it that she experiences in nature that makes her the life-giving woman that she would become? What does she find there that constitutes the secret of her love arts? I would argue that what she finds in the gardens is the deep, abiding, mysterious presence of God. What she finds in the gardens is a lost and forgotten spiritual path to God, one more deeply attuned to her feminine soul than the priestly and patriarchal temple rituals taking place within the city walls. Perhaps what she finds in the gardens are the vestiges of a feminine approach to God, ones that have been all but obliterated by the gradual rise of the masculine in Israel's spiritual development.[11] I would venture to argue that the "mother's house" that is mentioned over and over again in the Song of Songs and where the Shulamite longs to bring her lover is this sacred place where the lovers' "bed is verdant. The beams of [their] house are cedars, [their] rafters are firs" (Song 1:16–17). The mother's house is the sacred temple of blooming pomegranates, budding vineyards visited by foxes and gazelles, gardens flowing with spices where the otherwise hidden presence of God can be smelled, heard, tasted with all of one's senses. It is this mother's house, this temple of cedar and pines, which replaces, in our Song, Solomon's priestly temple.

This mother's house, this sanctuary of blossoms and trees will however open up a whole new path or approach to the divine presence. Instead of a holy, transcendent God accessible only through the rituals of animal death and sacrifice, we sense, in the living gardens of the Shulamite, the proximity of a divine presence reminiscent of the one that intimately dwelt with mankind in the Garden of Eden. Instead of a God setting laws and limitations on human desire through rituals and commandments, our Song features, on the contrary an excess, a surplus, an abundance of desire, flowing without interruption, in spite of the betrayals, misunderstandings

and obstacles that are set upon its path. Such a desire however is not shunned or despised as it might be in a patriarchal context, but rather is celebrated toward the end of our Song precisely by virtue of its limitlessness, for its having shown itself to be "as strong as death" (Song 8:6), as rising from the very "flame of the Lord"[12] (Song 8:6)—the only explicit mention of God in our Song. Finally, and most importantly, instead of a spiritual practice defined by one's actions and performance of the prescribed commandments and rituals, our Shulamite chooses to adopt, throughout our text, a stance of joyful receptivity to her surroundings. Her stance toward the divine presence which surrounds her is not one of doing but of receiving; it is not a stance of striving for austere self-discipline, but rather one of enjoyment and pleasure. She worships not by exertion of her body, not as Simone Weil would later put it through "muscular effort,"[13] but through a joyful sensual opening up to the world around herself.

And so, the temple of nature is where our Shulamite first tastes, sees, smells, hears and touches the very presence of God. Now this experience of God through nature is a far cry from the priestly caste's view of the natural world. If nature is mentioned in the Pentateuch, it is either to be a victim of sacrifice or as the raw materials for idolatry.[14] And although the senses remain a part of the temple service, they are to be attuned to the man-made elements of incense, woven drapes, baked bread and burnt offerings. As such, however, the temple gradually replaces the garden as the *lieu* of encounter with the divine; the rituals mediating between God and man replace the immediacy of the encounter of the divine in the Garden of Eden. To sense God in nature is thus not to be understood as a regression into the idolatrous practices of the pagan nations surrounding Israel, but, on the contrary, as a return to Eden[15] where a more immediate relationship with the divine presence was at play. It is in the gardens that the Shulamite finds solace for her own feminine body and soul. It is in the gardens that she learns to worship, that is, to sense the divine presence within the material realm of nature. And it is in the gardens that she learns to love.

For what is love other than the joyful receptive presence to an other? For too long, love has been understood as a *doing* for the other. What we learn from the Shulamite, however, is that love is primordially an act of receptivity. And this is precisely what constitutes the potency of the Shulamite's love arts. Her healing power does not stem from her *doing* things for her lover. In fact, she seems to do nothing at all in our Song.

She does not work, she does not weave, she does not provide food for her household, she does not plant, nor put her hands on the spindle, she does not make bed coverings, nor does she make linen garments. As such she is the antithesis of the virtuous woman described in Proverbs 31. Clearly our Shulamite has no interest in virtue; rather, she loves simply by delighting in her lover. She receives him with joy and pleasure and *as such* heals him, welcomes him and appeases him. But the art of attentiveness is not natural to human beings, so engrossed as we tend to be with our own inner worlds of confusion, anxiety and expectations. It needs to be developed, practiced through a gradual, gentle turning away from the inner to the outer world. And this turning, this conversion of the Shulamite's feminine heart, can begin at the contact with the delights of nature.

And so, before being able to taste the "wine" (Song 1:2) kisses of her lover, or compare his scent to that of "perfume" (Song 1:3), the Shulamite has to learn to refine her own senses of taste and to smell. Before she can compare her beloved to a "sachet of myrrh" and to a "cluster of henna blossoms" (Song 1:13), she must begin to see in a new way; she must begin to see, breathe, taste, feel and hear the secret presence, the mystery that dwells in all things. Only then will she be able to sense and delight in the noumenal presence of her lover. If she cannot begin to sense the extraordinary in the ordinary, the sacred in the mundane, through an opening up of her senses to the profound and often subtle beauty that resides in the natural world, she will not see it in her lover and their encounters will be banal and trivial. Unless she awakens in herself a profound sense of wonder at the universe, she will never really *see* her lover. Irigaray calls this sense of wonder the "first passion" which she finds to be "indispensable not only to life but also or still to the creation of an ethics."[16] For Irigaray, to love consists in continuously cultivating a stance of wonder at the other's extraordinary difference. To love is to delight, to wonder at the sacred mode of being of the other without judgment or mastery: "Attracting me toward, wonder keeps me from taking and assimilating directly to myself … a separation without a wound."[17] And inasmuch as wonder supersedes the self's natural tendencies of appropriation, it constitutes the beginning of ethics: "Wonder is a mourning for the self as an autarchic entity; whether this mourning is triumphant or melancholy. Wonder must be the advent or the event of the other. The beginning of a new story?"[18]

And we can now better understand the source of the healing power of the Shulamite's love. For although she seems desperate for her lover's

presence throughout the Song, her love's incredible strength and capacity to withstand hardship and disappointments show that it is sourced in a place of fullness and plenitude and not in place of existential emptiness and neediness. Thus, the Shulamite's sensual opening to nature constitutes the very source of her love's powerful energetic qualities. Irigaray summarizes this beautifully: "To sense life, its tones, its fragrances—true communion. I allow the taste of experiencing to exist. I rediscover sensibility, escaping judgments, exiting prisons. I breathe nature. I impregnate myself with her. I become her, I become me, stronger, more faithful, capable of staying, of protecting. Of growing?"[19] And so, when the Shulamite arrives on the scene, she is ripe for love—and this in spite of her youth—her love overflowing from a place of excess and abundance, her loving presence nurtured at the breasts of the divine presence in a temple of blooming flowers, flowing milk and wild fragrances. Her garden has blossomed. She is now ready to open herself to her lover.

> *A garden locked up, my sister, my bride*
> *A spring enclosed, a sealed fountain*
>
> *—Song 4:12*

She is ready for love, yet she remains a garden closed for several chapters into her love story. A closer reading of our story finds our Shulamite opening up her garden only in chapter five, which constitutes the middle of the book. At no point does she open her garden before that; she does not advertise her goods nor flaunt her beauty. How then does she attract her lover? How does she seduce him? I would venture to argue that the key to her seductive power does not lie in seeking or striving to make love happen, but rather in *attracting* love. And the power of her attractiveness lies precisely in her being a closed garden. While her lover appreciates what he knows of her—the beauty of her eyes, her fragrance, the taste of her kiss—what really magnetizes him to her is what he does *not* know of her: "A garden locked up, my sister, my bride, a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain" (Song 4:12). But why is that? Why is the lover so powerfully attracted by what he does not see, smell or taste? The reason lies in the fact that what he does not perceive of his beloved has opened up a noumenal, mysterious dimension in the relationship. As such, the garden closed signifies toward a sacred and holy space. Through the closing of her garden, the receding of the beloved in her mystery, a dimension of sacredness has

opened up, a dimension which does not lend itself to the possessive or masterful grasp. And this, for the lover, is intriguing.

Throughout our Song, the lover is compared to a king, or to Solomon himself (Song 1:4, 12; 3:6–11; 6:12; 8:11). As such, everything he desires is within his reach: The natural world and all that it contains, with its generous offering of light, of warmth, of nourishment and of comfort. Everything is within his reach. Yet there is one being which recedes from the natural and spontaneous grasp: The beloved. This is what the Shulamite intuits when she chooses to reveal herself primordially as a garden closed. Here is set the limit to the mastery and possessiveness of the lover. Everything is before him except the beloved. As such, the beloved stands out in the natural realm as a being of extraordinary character. She is rare, a source of wonder and intrigue. This is what makes her stand out from the rest, this is what makes her unique and constitutes the source of her powerful magnetism: "As a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens" (Song 2:2).

And yet, even though she is a closed garden, she is not inaccessible to her lover. She does not remain closed in an ivory tower of modesty. She kisses him, lays with him, desires him, thereby giving him a glimpse of her garden, "an orchard of pomegranates, with choice fruits, with henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus, and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes, with all the finest spices. You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon" (Song 4:13–15). Her garden, although closed, does not withhold its fragrance from her lover: "Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad" (Song 4:16). And yet, it is not until the fifth chapter that she finally opens up fully to her lover, inviting him into her garden that he may finally "taste its choice fruits" (Song 4:16). And so, while she remains a closed garden, she also knows how give a glimpse of what lies behind the garden gates. Our Shulamite, although discrete, is no prude. This is a woman who has already awakened to her sensuality and to her femininity. She has taken the time to blossom in her feminine body, has learned the secret arts of love in her mother's house and is ripe for love. And yet, she does not offer herself from the onset. And it is precisely this balance between giving and not giving which constitutes the secret of her seductiveness.

As such, the art of seduction might be defined as the art of giving of oneself a little at a time. But for this the delicate balance between sensuality and discretion must be cultivated. A woman must learn to blossom like

a flower does, in a rhythm which combines the movements of opening and closing. In her commentary on the Buddha's flower sermon, Irigaray speaks of how we might learn the art of seduction from a flower's inner rhythm: "If we were more attentive, we would be flowers capable of opening ourselves to the light of the sun and also of love, and of reclosing ourselves in the interiority or in the intimacy of the heart … we would be capable of wonder and of self-collection, both of us, as two. The spiritual could therefore be completed between two, without the pain, the torments, the ecstasy of a solitary becoming."[20] The beloved knows that to give too much too soon can destroy the germination of love. She therefore cultivates a rhythm of giving and of withdrawing when needed. She understands that, to grow, love needs diurnal as well as nocturnal moments and that the latter are just as fundamental to the growth of love as the former. And so, she does not panic when her lover is not readily available, but rather uses this time to nurture herself and to return to her own garden. Likewise, she allows herself to be at times unavailable in order to resource herself and to protect the breathing space of the relationship. Irigaray describes this movement of self-collection as follows: "I want to live in harmony with you and still remain other. I want to draw nearer to you while protecting myself from you. it pleases me to protect for you the freshness of unknown flesh and the discovery which brings awakening."[21]

The art of seduction can take place even during the moments of togetherness. The biggest temptation in the beginning of a relationship is to try to make an impression. And so, we put ourselves on display, trying to impress the other with our charm, intelligence, money or beauty. The art of seduction however prescribes a different approach: The ability to reveal in the very act of concealing. But to understand this deep art, we must understand the Hebraic concept of modesty, or *tzniout*. This practice of *tzniout*, mostly kept by orthodox Jews, consists in avoiding all display. On the contrary, the emphasis is put rather on concealing one's assets and qualities, whether physical, intellectual or even spiritual. Interestingly, this does not lead to a dimming of charisma inasmuch as putting a damper on material assets has the extraordinary effect of allowing a deeper, more powerful light to shine through. The art of *tzniout* takes for granted that we all have a deeper spiritual core which is often smothered by our often over-bearing material presentation of ourselves. To dim the material part of ourselves, however, contributes to allowing the spiritual part of ourselves to shine through more powerfully, thereby releasing a deeper magnetic power. This is the secret of the deep arts of *tzniout*: Less is more! The

less one tries to flaunt and expose one's beauty and strength, the more the latter actually begin to shine through naturally and spontaneously. Gila Manolson describes this as follows: "The secret, then, to letting your spiritual light shine as God created it to, is to refrain from deliberately shining it at all. In reserving it deep inside, your spirituality will indeed come to powerfully define you, yet in a way which preserves its integrity and beauty. In filtering its light, you illuminate the true spirit of your inner self."[22]

But the question arises as to when to open up and when to close. How do we know when it is time to open up the garden and when it is wiser to keep it closed? In the beginning of a relationship, the temptation is always to rush things. But how fast is too fast? And, if we choose to take things slow, when does the wait start to become sterile? Inasmuch as our Song opens up a dimension beyond patriarchy, our Shulamite does not benefit from the protections and temporal structures set upon a relationship by patriarchy. In the context of patriarchy, the garden remains closed until the man has proven himself worthy of marriage and the marriage ceremony has been performed. But our Shulamite does not benefit from these structures; she has ventured outside of the norms of patriarchy. How then is she to know? Again here the key lies in an attentiveness and a presence but this time, not only to her lover's but to her self's deepest desires and intuitions. Let us remember the warning that she gives to the daughters of Jerusalem: "Do not arouse or awaken love until *it* so desires" (Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4). What is this "it" that is doing the desiring, if not the heart of the lovers? The key to knowing when to open up and when to remain closed lies then in the heart's secret desires. The way to know is to begin to become attentive to the heart's deep and often forgotten desires.

Now this is harder than it seems, for the voice of the heart is often drowned in a stampede of competing voices: The urgent and impatient voice of sexual desire, the internalized voice of society which might continue to impose its norms, the voice of compassion which longs to surrender to the beloved's desires. The key however is to learn to listen to the deep voice of one's heart, one's feelings, one's desires. Am I ready to open up? Is my lover ready to open up? Too often we follow a script written by society or by our preconceptions on love, prescribing when we are to open up and when we are to remain closed, or we succumb to the impatience of one of the partners. In so doing, however, we miss the internal wisdom of the heart thereby interrupting the natural growth process of the love. Learning to attune oneself to the rhythm of the other's process is the secret to practicing the art of seduction and balancing sensuality and

discretion. And for this, one must have already fine-tuned one's ability to open up, connect, remain attentive to an other.

But one must also learn to attune oneself to one's own rhythm and desires *for* the relationship. The temptation often exists to sacrifice one's desires for the sake of the other in a gesture we think is loving. And so we repress our deepest longings and desires for the sake of love. However, in doing so we do not help our love, but rather forfeit any intimacy we might have developed in openly sharing our heart's desires. In all of her immaturity, this is an ability that the Shulamite masters; she is not ashamed of the desires of her heart and she is not afraid to express them to her lover in a stance of stunning vulnerability. Our Song in fact opens with her heart's desires: "let him kiss me with the kisses of your mouth, for your love is better than wine" (Song 1:2). She expresses her heart's frustration, "tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock … for why should I be like a veiled woman besides the flock of your friends" (Song 1:7), its pain, "strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love" (Song 2:5), its desire for commitment, "place me as a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm" (Song 8:6). There is no modesty or secrecy when it comes to her heart, and it is the outpouring of her desires in a gesture of deep vulnerability that constitutes the source of her beauty and attractiveness.

It is her desires which, in fact, make her so desirable. First, because they do not come in the form of expectations and demands. The Shulamite never accuses her lover of not being supportive or loving enough. She never judges him for failing to love her in a given way. She comes into the relationship a blank slate, without preconceptions as to how this man should treat her. She only knows what the immediacy of her heart desires in the moment. Second, because her openly sharing her desires to her man, in a non-demanding or non-threatening way, constitutes an expression of her deep, abiding trust that he will eventually respond positively to her desires in his own time and way. And as an expression of her trust, her desires move him deeply, stirring something in him that has not yet been awakened: A deep and yet untapped longing to express love and respond to her desires. Her trust has a powerful effect on her lover, awakening him to the joy and ecstasy of giving, providing, caring for another than himself. Therein lies her erotic power, in the attentiveness to and vulnerable sharing of her desires. Thus, the Shulamite's erotic magnetism does not lie in *fulfilling* her lover's desires but rather in *inspiring* his love through her own desires. Her eroticism has nothing to do with what she *does* for her

man, whether in the bedroom or outside of it, but rather in what *he* might be inspired to do for her.

Knowing this, the Shulamite understands that even keeping her lover waiting can be formulated as a desire that will inspire and deepen her lover's love for her rather than turn him away. The key is that this wait is formulated as a desire of her heart and expressed for the sake of the relationship rather than as a gesture of distrust, manipulation or playing hard to get. In sharing her heart's desire to wait, she knows that, although this might be difficult for him, she is awakening and catalyzing in him the desire to respond to her in love and to rise to the challenge that she is placing before him. As such, she is differentiating herself from a mother figure ever ready to cater to her child's desires and taking up her place as a spouse whose role is rather to challenge and inspire her lover to new heights. And although she is taking the risk that the man will choose to move on, this is a sacrifice that she is willing to make for the sake of the relationship. Commenting on the risk any woman is taking in choosing to differentiate herself from the nurturing and comforting mother figure, Nancy Qualls writes: "The strength of the Goddess lies in the capacity to give up that which is most precious in order to ensure growth and regeneration … the active, dynamic aspect of feminine nature, that which promotes change and transformation, counter-balances the static elemental aspect, the maternal, which although it provides for growth is essentially conservative and protective."[23] In refusing to take up the mother's role of catering to her lover's every need and desire, she elevates herself to becoming the "*femme inspiratrice*" or "loving muse"[24] that her lover really needs: "The man who has not separated from the mother views a woman as only an object which on demand immediately gratifies his sexual desires,"[25] rather than as a source of inspiration and awakening to his even deeper desire to give lovingly to his beloved.

Finally, her erotic power has everything to do with the way that she dwells in the uncertainty of still unanswered desires. For to desire is not to expect. There is a letting-be, a sense of joyful expectation that follows a genuine desire, even when it still remains unmet. An expectation, however, puts one in a state of nervousness and anxiety if not catered to immediately. But our Shulamite, with all of her neediness, never expects. Her attitude never betrays manipulation, coercion or judgment, rather expressing praise and appreciation when addressing her lover. As such, in spite of often finding herself in a position of longing for more, she continuously chooses the high road of joyful receptivity, trusting that her lover will

respond to her desires in his own time and way and continuing to delight in the now. And it is precisely this attitude that makes her so endearing. Irigaray puts it beautifully as follows: "With steadfastness, I try to keep myself on the path of joy. … I savor what already is and what is often forgotten in the present."[26] But more needs to be said on this seeming lack of expectation on the part of the Shulamite. For while she does not expect or coerce her lover to give her the love she needs, she is not without *hope* that he will do so in his own time and way. And it is to this hope, to this patient and receptive waiting stance that she must learn to cultivate, that we now turn in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978), 153.
2. André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote*, 153.
3. Ibid., 48.
4. The woman as the downfall of man finds a rich hermeneutic tradition in both Jewish and Christian exegetes. For the rabbis, not only did Eve cause man's downfall by inciting him to sin, she also caused the expulsion from Eden and the loss of eternal life. Thus R. Joshua was asked: "Why does a man go forth with uncovered head, while the woman goes forth with her head covered?" He replied: "This is like someone who committed a transgression and is embarrassed before other people, therefore the woman goes forth covered [for she sinned and is ashamed]." He was further questioned: "Why do women go to the corpse first [it was the custom in Judea that women preceded the corpse in a funeral procession, while the men followed the bier]?" He answered: "Because they caused death to come to the world, they go first with the corpse" (The Babylonian Talmud, *Genesis Rabbah* 17:8). The Church Fathers have an even more virulent analysis of Eve's sin. Referencing 1 Tim. 2:14, Ambrose argues in his *Great Commentary on Genesis* that the woman is the originator of the man's wrongdoing, not the man of the woman's. He adds that she even dragged her husband along with her into sin and showed herself to be an incentive to sin. Before Ambrose, Tertullian made the argument that blame for Eve's first sin extended to all women and that God's judgment and guilt will live in each one forward. In his treatise *On the Dress of Women*, Tertullian says of women that they are the Devil's gateway, the un-sealer of that tree, the first foresaker of the divine law, and finally, the one who persuaded [Adam] whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach.

5. The imagery of the prophets associates newly planted vegetation or gardens and flowing water to the time in history when Israel will be redeemed from her exile (cf. Isaiah 43, 55).
6. Jeremiah 31:22.
7. Indeed, the man shows no sign of passion until chapter four, which is pretty much the middle of the Song. The woman is the one initiating, wooing and seducing her lover until then. And although the man does say a few things before chapter four, he is outdone by the woman who speaks three to four times as much as he does. Only in chapter four do we have the first long and passionate discourse on the part of the man, expressing his commitment and desire to be with her.
8. In her beautiful story *Seul ce qui brûle*, Christiane Singer tells of a young bride who has been shunned by her husband for perceived infidelity. For several years the bride bears her punishment with dignity and meekness, until she is freed by a stranger who happened upon the castle by chance and who convinces her husband to release her from her ordeal. Backtracking into the dark moments of her ordeal, we find her brothers showing up to free her and take her back with them. Interestingly, she is shocked by their profound misunderstanding of the pain which she has freely consented to bear. As such, she is in no need to be "liberated" from it by them. She refuses to go with them or even to acknowledge them in a defiant act of love and fidelity for her husband.
9. André Lacocque, "I am Black and Beautiful," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, edited by Lesleigh Cushing Strahlberg and Peter S. Hawkins (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 169–170.
10. Ibid., 169.
11. Several books have been written on the demise of the feminine in Israel's spiritual development (cf. Merlin Stone, *When God Was A Woman* [New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1976], and Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* [New York: HarperOne, 1995]). And it is true that Israel has rigorously opposed the Canaanite religions and crushed and destroyed any vestige of feminine deities or Goddesses (such as the Queen of Heaven Ashtoreth or Asherah and her Baal. Cf. Judges 2:13; Judges 3:7; I Samuel 7:3, 4). Israel's violent repression of the Goddess religions has been the subject of many harsh criticisms wherein the Hebrew Bible is depicted as conducting a violent patriarchal assault on the feminine. This is however to read only one section of the Bible—the Pentateuch. As I mentioned in my introduction, the Bible is anything but monolithic, and space is given in other texts for feminine approaches to spirituality. In fact, I would argue that our Song constitutes a reworking and a retelling of the Canaanite Goddess religions. Just like the Goddess religions, our Song has ties with nature, with springtime; the woman is seen as a central and

powerful character who, like the Goddesses of the Canaanites, arouses the man rather than the other way around. The main difference is that unlike the Goddess religions, the woman does not end up sacrificing or killing the man (cf. *When God Was a Woman*, 129–152), but rather, in the case of the Song, redeems and elevates him.

12. The NIV translates this passage as "like a mighty flame" but in the note it gives the alternate rendering of "like the very flame of the Lord" which is actually a closer rendering of the Hebrew text.
13. In her beautiful book *Waiting for God*, Simone Weil speaks of this attitude of receptivity versus activity toward God as follows: "The effort that brings the soul to salvation is like the effort of looking or of listening; it is the kind of effort by which a fiancée accepts her lover. It is an act of attention and consent; whereas what language designates as will is something suggestive of muscular effort" (*Waiting for God* [New York: Harper Perennial, 2009], 126).
14. Cf. Deut. 4:28 where idols are depicted as being made of wood and stone.
15. Cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 153.
16. Luce Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 74.
17. Ibid., 75.
18. Ibid., 75.
19. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2001), 114.
20. Ibid., 59.
21. Ibid., 13.
22. Gila Manolson, *Outside/Inside: A Fresh Look at Tzniout* (Jerusalem: Targum Press, 2004), 85.
23. Nancy Qualls-Corbett, *The Sacred Prostitute*. Toronto (ON: Inner City Books, 1999), 65.
24. Ibid., 67.
25. Ibid., 66.
26. Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 115.

A Room of Her Own

I opened for my lover
But my lover had left; he was gone

—Song 5:6

These lines are found in a passage that figures at the very heart of the Song. They are highly significant inasmuch as, in Near Eastern literature, the center of the book constitutes the very heart of the work, where everything is said, the key to the whole book. Whereas in Western thought all is said in the concluding lines, in Near Eastern thought all is said in the center of the work. The reader familiar with this writing technique will thus expect here to drink of the very elixir of love, will anticipate some climactic words on love, or, better, the surrendering of a yet undisclosed secret of seduction! Imagine this reader's disappointment upon reading these lines which tell the story of a tragic missed encounter between the two lovers. The story is troubling. It begins with the beautiful line: "I slept but my heart was awake" (Song 5:2), signifying the readiness of the beloved to receive her lover, her ever alert heart to his comings and goings, to his presence, even if her body is asleep. Our passage then goes on to describe her lover's passionate entreaty: "Open to me, my sister, my darling" (Song 5:2). Our passage, however, takes a disappointing turn as we behold the somewhat lukewarm reception of this passionate plea on the part of the beloved: "I have taken off my robe—must I put it on again? I have washed

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_4

my feet—must I soil them again?" (Song 5:3). The lover however persists, with increasing urgency, even violence: "My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening" (Song 5:4). The translation here is not doing justice to what is actually taking place. In the original Hebrew, the verb is one of violent pounding; the lover is now pounding on the door with increasing violence. At last, the beloved reacts and opens to her beloved. But her "lover had left; he was gone" (Song 5:6). And so the story which could have read as a climactic encounter of love, even as the consummation of the love between the lovers, now reads as a tragic misunderstanding where the lovers, even though they harbor strong feelings for their significant other, completely miss each other.

The first thing that strikes the reader upon reading this is the uncharacteristic reticence on the part of the woman to welcome the man into her home. The woman here seems to hesitate to let her man in, and this, for the most trivial of reasons, it seems: "I have taken off my robe. … I have washed my feet" (Song 5:3). Now this does not sound like the woman we have seen so far—the one who did not hesitate to take off her veil in public (Song 1:7), the one who aggressively has been pursuing her lover, taking initiatives, longing, pining for him and for his presence. And now that he finally shows up, his heart swollen with desire, she withdraws from him in a most unusual and unexpected way. Why is she not overjoyed to see him, the one whom she has been longing for so deeply? Why does she hesitate here to let him in? The woman's behavior is all the more intriguing that our text does not identify the woman's hesitation with a drop in her passion for the man. Our passage begins with a description of the woman's inner state: "I slept but my heart was awake" (Song 5:2). I shall come back on the meaning of this sentence. Suffice it to say here that the fact that she seems asleep—that is to say, uninterested, indifferent, distant—does not mean that she does not harbor any feelings. Her heart is "awake." So beneath a seeming indifference or inactivity—"I slept"—there exists a buried spring of passion, a powerful magma of feelings and emotions, a hidden state of wakefulness and alertness to love.

What is at stake is not a lover's quarrel then, nor a loss of interest on the part of the woman. Something more profound is taking place. Something that has everything to do with love, and something that the author of our Song has chosen to place at the very center, the very core of the passion between a man and a woman. The Shulamite closes the door not out of resentment or luke-warmness. She closes it in order to open up a space for herself. Amid the turbulence of the Shulamite's passionate

wooing, longing, yearning for her beloved, there is an empty space—this space that she is carving now for herself, this partitioned, enclosed space to which the man is denied access. And so, at the heart of our Song, between the passionate kisses and embraces, the brazen confessions of love, the aggressive and desperate pursuit of the other, we have a sacred space and a sacred boundary which the lover himself is forbidden to penetrate.

This boundary seems to do nothing to help their relationship, however. On the contrary, the woman ends up losing her lover. When she opens the door, he has already left. Our passage thus ends on a disappointing note. Nothing happens between our lovers. We are left, in limbo, like the Shulamite herself. One wonders why such a disappointing passage is to be found at the heart of the Song. What wisdom of love can one possibly gather from this tragic misunderstanding? How does such a mishap figure at the heart, the climax of our Song? Perhaps the lesson of our text is to be read in the invisible ink of what might have happened had the lovers been more *patient*. What might have happened if the beloved had actively been waiting for her lover? Perhaps she might have been ready when he showed up at the door. And what would have happened if the lover had been more patient, waiting at the door as his beloved slowly, gradually, made her way to the door? She might have welcomed him. What might have occurred between them that night had they mastered the art of *waiting*! Had they developed the virtue of *patience*! Perhaps this is the yet undisclosed secret of seduction that every lover needs to know and master if his or her relationship is to succeed. And so, it is to this secret that we now turn.

The first thing that our text describes to us is an essential difference of timing between the man and the woman. There is a sharp contrast in our text between the man's passionate, even urgent desire for the woman, and the woman's seemingly lukewarm response. Yet, as our passage as well as the rest of the Song indicates, the woman clearly harbors strong feelings for her man. The key to this seeming confusion or contradiction lies in the opening lines of our passage, "I slept but my heart was awake" (Song 5:2). Her heart is awake, but her body is sleeping. In other words, while the woman is clearly emotionally open and ready for her lover, her body is still sleeping and in need to be awakened, aroused, initiated. She is ready for him emotionally but not physically. For her to open up physically she needs more time, more coaxing. She needs to be initiated to the arts of physical love by one who is more urgently attuned to the realm of physicality. And only when she begins to feel the urgent perseverance of the

man's desire does she become aroused as our text indicates: "My heart began to pound for him. I arose to open for my lover and my hands dripped with myrrh" (Song 5:5).

Interestingly the opposite seems to be true of her man. He is totally ready physically as the urgency of his desire for her indicates. Yet, emotionally he seems unsure of himself as is evident in his losing heart when she does not open the door right away: "I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer" (Song 5:6). While the man is totally present physically, emotionally he is still remote and inaccessible. Unlike the Shulamite, it would seem that his body is awake but his heart is sleeping. And yet, this emotional distance does not speak for his true feelings. He likewise harbors strong feelings for his beloved as is manifest in his words to her: "my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one" (Song 5:2). Perhaps he too needs time to open up. Perhaps he too needs to be lovingly encouraged to open up emotionally by one who is herself more immediately attuned to the realm of feelings and emotions.

As such it seems that the lovers are a key to each other's secret depths. The man holds the key enabling the woman to open up on the physical level, and the woman the key for man to open up on the emotional level. Irigaray describes this phenomenon beautifully by alluding to an Eastern tradition of love: "The tradition of the far east teaches us that woman is hot inside and cold outside, while man is cold inside and hot outside."[1] In other words, woman is more readily capable of being emotionally attuned to her man while remaining cold physically, while man is more readily passionate physically while remaining cold emotionally. The alchemy of love that is needed according to this Eastern tradition is for woman to warm up on the outside and man to warm up on the inside. But this is only possible if they guide each other. Man can thus help the woman warm up on the physical level and cool down on the emotional level while the woman does the exact opposite: Help her man cool down physically as to be able to warm up emotionally.

But this alchemy is only possible when mediated through time. In other words, time is the essential catalyst of this transformation of woman and of man. The warming up of woman physically and the warming up of man emotionally thus go together and are achieved through time. But the task at hand necessitates the virtue of patience. Without it one is easily confused. It is thus a common mistake to think that the woman's physical coldness speaks for her feelings; just as it is an error to think that the man's ardent physical desire speaks for his. Likewise, it is an error to think that

the woman's emotional warmth and openness speaks to her readiness for sex; just as it is an error to think that a man's emotional remoteness speaks to a lack of love. The key lies in the gradual warming up to and by each other of the two lovers, him to her heart and her to his body. And for this, time is an essential ingredient. Such was the intuition of a number of treatises of love, one of which is Abravanel's Dialogue between Sophia and Eros.

In this dialogue the woman Sophia and the man Eros are in love which each other. Eros is making a passionate case for lovemaking, while Sophia unfailingly succeeds in stalling the moment of consummation through conversation.[2] The same wisdom can be found in Scheherazade's storytelling. Faced with the fate of the lovers before her—decapitation on the morning of her wedding night—her imaginative and captivating stories serve the same purpose as Sophia's gift at conversation: To stall the moment of consummation so as to allow for the raw fire of desire and all of its dangerous side-effects, such as lust, jealously and violence, to blossom into love.[3] Both women are wise, inasmuch as they understand the alchemical property of time to transform lust into love. One should not cut the fruit until it is ripe. And the longer the wait, the sweeter the love.

One now understands better the Shulamite's hesitation to open the door to her lover. This courageous gesture on the part of the woman of our Song to keep a partition or a wall between her lover and herself stems from the same intuition that desire needs separation in order to mature. Irigaray again seems to bear witness to our scene when she writes: "Without anger, to drive away the intruder, to return him to himself, to push out whoever penetrates our horizon and thereby destroys it. And also: to remove the ambiguity from desire, the possession from love."[4] This withdrawal of the woman from the man's desire is a powerful way to purify young love. In the beginning of relationships it is difficult to distinguish love from mere lust. One is easily overpowered by desire and gauging the authenticity of the other's feelings—even one's own feelings—is next to impossible. Our Song however seems to indicate that there is a way to sift true love from mere infatuation—even a way to help infatuation mature into true love. This sifting takes place by withdrawing from the other's hold upon oneself, by withholding oneself from their desire for us. And this is perhaps precisely what the woman is here allowing to happen by not opening the door to her beloved. She is creating the conditions for his desire to elevate itself from mere self-centered infatuation to a love capable of seeing her as a *subject* with their own desires and agency and not merely as an *object* of desire.

Again, Irigaray's words are particularly resourceful here: "I want to live in harmony with you and still remain other. I want to draw nearer to you while protecting myself for you. It pleases me to protect for you the freshness of unknown flesh and the discovery which brings awakening."[5] It is perhaps the ethical power of this withholding on the part of the self to the other that explains tradition's wise teaching that the woman and the man maintain a certain degree of separation as they are beginning their journey to love and, more specifically, that the woman learn to withdraw from her lover's passion until the time is right. As such, our scene echoes magnificently other passages in the Song such as the exhortation given to the daughters of Jerusalem not to "arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4). The exhortation to protect a space, a partition between the lovers, is thus in line with a dominant theme in our Song and as such takes its rightful place as the centerpiece of our Song.

The transformation of lust into love through the Shulamite's gesture of separation thus brings about an ethical transformation between the lovers. The act of waiting in itself allows for an ontological shift within the two lovers that is significant ethically speaking inasmuch as waiting implies a necessary contraction of the self and a hold put upon its desires and impulses. To wait is to undergo a profound limitation of one's egotistic desires for the sake of the other. Thus, Eros in Abravanel's discourse puts a hold on his physical desire for consummation for the sake of Sophia; and Sophia puts a hold on her emotional desire for intimacy as she waits for Eros to develop stronger feelings. Eros is also put on hold in the Arabian Nights when Scheherazade cunningly postpones the Sultan's desire. Finally, Eros is put on hold by the Shulamite in our Song in her refusing to open to her lover. The wait interrupts each partner's deepest desires and impulses. But this wait, while painful and frustrating at times, is ethically significant inasmuch as the contraction of the self that it brings about constitutes the very origin of an awakening to the other as a subject having its own rhythm and its own desires and not merely as an object of pleasure.

Thus, patience constitutes an act of profound respect for the other's internal rhythm and mode of being. Eros' willingness to take the time to converse with Sophia shows a deep respect for her own internal rhythm and femininity. He accepts that she might take longer than him to open up to him physically and respects her. But respect must also be given to the man's internal rhythm. Too often women do not acknowledge that the man's heart must be given time to open up when it feels safe enough to do so. And so, they often fall into the trap of self-righteously calling for a

commitment, for an engagement on the part of the man, without respecting his internal rhythm. And when he does not immediately submit to an often entitled desire for commitment on his part, he finds himself accused of lacking integrity and maturity. Yet it is just as difficult for a man to open up emotionally as it is for a woman to open up sexually when they do not feel safe enough to do so. Just like women are more vulnerable sexually, men tend to be more vulnerable emotionally. In Chinese philosophy, the man's heart is considered to be energetically yin—that is to say, introverted, fragile, gentle; the woman's heart, however, is considered to be yang—extroverted, daring, passionate. The reverse is true of the sexual organs. The woman's organs are introverted, fragile and gentle, whereas the man's are extroverted, daring and passionate.[6] Knowing this can help alleviate misunderstandings and foster greater respect for each gender's respective internal rhythms.

The waiting is thus what allows the object of desire to gradually turn into a subject. The waiting is that which, in Buber's terms, allows for an initial I-It relationship—where the other is seen as a mere *object* of desire—to develop, mature and grow into an I-Thou relationship between two *subjects*.[7] It is the wait which allows for the object of desire to gradually morph in the mind of his beloved into a full-fledged person with their own desires and agency. This is perhaps what Sophia, Scheherazade and our Shulamite sensed and which inspired them to open up what Irigaray would call a space of silence between them and their lovers: "The first word we have to speak to one another is our capacity and acceptance of being silent. It would be the first wave of recognition addressed to the beloved other as such. In this silence, the other may come towards me, as I may move towards him or her."[8] In other words, temporal distance is needed, where nothing is done or said, if a space is to be opened for the beloved not only to be approached as an object of desire but to approach *me* as an individual, autonomous subject. I can make a move toward the other, but then I must wait for an answer, a response on the part of the beloved. And until that response is offered, patience is needed.

But separation is not only key at the beginning stages of a relationship. The art of partition also holds virtues that can salvage and transform a relationship in crisis. I would venture to say that most relationship crises have to do with some degradation of one of the partners to the level of an object for the other, to the level of an It for the other. This degradation is manifest in countless ways, from disrespect, abuse, indifference or exploitation. The problem is always the same: One of the lovers has lost the

capacity to limit and interrupt the self's desires and is somehow imposing his/her will on the other. The once beautiful relationship of mutual respect and love has now degenerated in what Buber would refer to as an I-It relationship of the worst kind. This is the root of all crises. There is only one way to redeem such a marriage or relationship, according to Buber: To learn anew to "reveal the Thou to one another."[9] But what does this mean? I would venture to suggest that this quote might be understood in two ways.

The first way to understand the Buberian revelation of the "Thou to one another" is to rediscover the Thou in one's own self. In other words, in a relationship where, little by little, one has become absorbed by the other, one must learn to reveal one's sacred boundaries to the other anew. As Irigaray beautifully puts it: "Being faithful to you requires being faithful to me."[10] Indeed, while the temptation of the lovers to possess each other is especially strong at the beginning of a given relationship, it never subsides. As the relationship matures, the urge to control and possess takes up new forms and new manifestations, sometimes even degenerating into violence and abuse. As such, one is ever in danger of morphing from a subject into an object for the other and special care must be given to protect one's own sacred spaces, not so much for the sake of one's self, but for the sake of the other. One might go so far as to say that the refusal to submit or succumb to the other's possessive and controlling grasp is thus a grace rendered precisely to that other. In withholding oneself from being controlled or violated by the other, one is urging the beloved's passion to mature into true love, one is creating the conditions for them to grow into authentic manhood or womanhood, one is awakening them to a higher calling than that of the nurturing of their own egotistic selves, a calling where they realize their true calling of serving and protecting an other. Emmanuel Levinas observes justly that "the resistance of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical."[11] To resist the other is, according to Levinas, not detrimental to them, even when they might initially feel this resistance as painful and unjust—as did the man in our Song. This resistance has "a positive structure," it constitutes an ethical awakening on the part of the other and thereby an elevating of their desire to the realm of true love and a broadening of their ego into a compassionate Self.

Irigaray resonates profoundly with the Levinasian intuition when she speaks of the "nostalgia of the one" evident when one lover seeks to absorb the other as is manifest in dysfunctional relationships: "This

nostalgia takes different paths. It can aspire to fusion … at times, it corresponds to the self-love of Narcissus. Often it is equivalent to the desire to be or to possess the whole."[12] Against this nostalgia arises, according to Irigaray, the imperative need to protect the "two," that is the integrity of both lovers: "To remain between two requires the renunciation of this sort of unity: fusional, regressive, autistic, narcissistic."[13] Thus, the lovers have the responsibility to watch that their love or the love of the other does not become regressive, that is to say, childish on the one hand and parental on the other; that it not become autistic, that is wrapped in itself and oblivious to the need of the other; and narcissistic, entirely focused on its own needs. This renunciation is fundamental however if the love between the lovers is to mature into what she calls adult love: "This preservation of the two also requires the maturity to give up the needs of childhood and to renounce parental power."[14]

There is however another way to understand the Buberian quote on marriage, this time in favor of the other and not merely the self. For it is not only the self which needs to crystallize into a Thou, but the other also. And for this, the desires of the self also need to be curbed and put on hold. Irigaray redefines the art of patience as a form of letting-be of the other. According to Irigaray, rediscovering the sacredness of the beloved necessitates a space of letting-be between the lovers. As long as I try to impose my projects, my views, my plans on the other, I am not in an I-Thou relationship, but in an I-It relationship. To allow for a given relationship to recover its I-Thou character, an attitude of letting-be is necessary whereby I allow for the other to individuate into their essential being, to find their mode of being, of loving, of becoming that is specific to them, to blossom into the person they were meant to be. While I can ask for the beloved to love me in a specific way, or to move in a certain direction, I must also be open to their doing so (or not) in their own time. I cannot impose a timeline. This is of course incredibly difficult to do, as Irigaray observes: "Such a letting-be is what is most difficult for us. It forces us to relinquish the idea of mastery that has been taught to us, not as an aptitude for staying within our limits in order to respect the other, but as an ability to dominate everything and everyone, including the world and the other—without letting them blossom according to what and who they are. Moved by nature, by the other, it will be difficult for us to leave them to their becoming until our next meeting. Now this can only happen if we run such a risk—letting go of any ascendency over them."[15]

The attitude of letting-be can thus be likened to putting our desires for the other in the hands of the beloved and allowing them to fulfill them in their own time and way. Such is the high price of any genuine I-Thou relationship! And such is the virtue of patience which amounts to "suspending all projections or plans about them"[16] while waiting for the beloved to respond. Note that Irigaray speaks of "suspending" one's projects and plans and not of "doing away" with them. To suspend a plan, a project or a desire, does not mean to do away with it, but rather to put it on hold while the other deliberates within herself as to what her response to the lover's initiative will be. Thus, this letting-be cannot be mistaken for indifference or resignation to what the beloved chooses to do or become—for better or for worse. Rather, this letting-be is indissociable from hope. Choosing to let the other be does not signify that we leave them to their own devices; rather it is a stance whereby the lover keeps hope for the beloved, believes in them, anticipates their success and betterment.

But this capacity to anticipate the good in the beloved is only possible through the eyes of love. Without love, without love's capacity to see the extraordinary within the ordinary, the "ocean within a water jar" in the words of the Sufi poet Rumi, it is easy to give up on the beloved, to remain at the level of appearances, of what meets the eye, and to resign oneself to one's wretched existence with them. Thus, hope borne of love is a sense of the other's infinite potential for good and this even when all appearances testify otherwise. As such, while hope might be mistaken for blindness, it in fact constitutes a deeper insight into the infinite potentialities hidden within the human condition.[17] Kierkegaard states this beautifully: "But in love to hope all things signifies the lover's relationship to other men, that in relationship to them, hoping for them, he continually keeps possibility open with infinite partiality for his possibility of the good."[18] In other words, the love which hopes all things constitutes the choice to focus on the possibilities for the good in the beloved. It is hope *for* them, that they will become what they truly are, that they will rise up to the potentialities that the lover already sees in them.

But as such, hope constitutes the very condition of possibility for the good that is hoped for. For hope is more than a keen eyesight; it has creative power! The very act of believing and hoping has an impact on the beloved and can inspire them to be more than what they are at the moment. As such, hope is more than the mere nostalgia and longing for good, it has transformative power inasmuch as it can also strengthen and nurture the impulses for good in the beloved. Thus, the act of believing and hoping in the beloved can revitalize the generous impulses within the

beloved and help the invisible seeds of goodness blossom into fruits that will be visible to all. Kierkegaard observes in *Works of Love*, hope "never un-lovingly give[s] up on any human being … since it is possible that even the most prodigal son could still be saved, that even the most embittered enemy … could become your friend. It is possible that the one who sank the deepest … could again be raised up. It is possible the love that became cold could again begin to burn. Therefore [one should] never give up on any human being."[19]

Hope is what allows for the infinite potentialities of a human being to be birthed. While the act of waiting often coincides with a painful season of wilderness in the life of the lover, it is a sign that something extraordinary is in the making. To wait is thus a vigil over the seeds of goodness within a person, and as such, can be performed in joyous anticipation of the good rather than in a stance of resigned wretchedness. This is why patience is at the heart of our Song inasmuch as it characterizes the very essence of love. That "love is patient" constitutes the very core of the message of the Song and the ground for any commentary on love. Whatever has been said or will be said on the Song or on the nature of love always goes back to patience and to the art of waiting. To learn and practice patience is to learn and practice love. Such is the great secret and the deep art of love hidden within the heart of the Song. And the beauty is that this secret can be practiced in the here and the now, even without a partner, as a work of hope brimming with the promise of imminent love.

We now better understand why at the heart of our Song there is erected this partition and this wall between the lovers. For love to mature, a limit must be set on the lovers' grasp on each other. As such, the lovers need to learn at times to say no to each other and abstain from nurturing every desire and caprice in the other, especially when these caprices degenerate into violence and abuse. Likewise, the lovers also need to learn at times to accept the other's refusal and limits and let the other be. The lovers must continuously engage in the arduous task of respecting each other's boundaries, each other's sacred spaces, and this for the sake of desire, for the sake of love. For we must remember here that desire rests on duality and separation. Thus, the restoration of a space, a distance between the lovers, amounts to protecting a boundary or a partition between the lovers. As such, this sacred space can become the key to restoring desire in a relationship where passion has waxed cold. The emergence of the self's sacred space through the limits it places on the other's desires creates such a restoration. Likewise, the emergence of the other's sacred space through the limitations of the self's desires also protects the duality between the lovers.

Distance is then possible again, but this time from within the relationship, even as the lovers live in close quarters. As such, the rekindling of desire in a cooling relationship is again possible.

According to Irigaray, however, although this protection of love can be initiated by any one of the two lovers, the woman, given her sad history of submission to the man, has a special responsibility to do so: "Along this path, woman can be a guide for man because, born of one similar to herself, she is more capable of a relationship between subjects, and the subject-object duality is not as much a part of her subjectivity as it is a part of man's. But in order to guide the other, she must renounce fusion, submission, possession. Where man seeks the one, overcoming the scission between subject and object, woman must learn to remain two. Woman must be the one to initiate this process of remaining two, two who are differentiated, but not according to the mother-child, mother-son model. In order to do this, she must gain her own autonomy, her own interiority."[20] A genuine relationship of reciprocity between the man and the woman is thus only possible once both partners have emancipated themselves from each other, have set each other free. But for this, both partners must come to terms with the need to let go of the other and the need to protect a space, a sacred boundary where they forfeit the natural urge to possess, control and manipulate the other.

Notes

1. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2001), 55.
2. Cf. Leone Ebreo (Judah Abravanel), *Dialogues of Love*, translated by Cosmos Damian Bacich and Rossella Pescatori (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
3. Cf. *The Arabian Nights: Tales from One Thousand and One Nights*, translated by Sir Richard F. Burton (New York: The Modern Library, 2004).
4. Luce Irigaray, *To be Two*, 11.
5. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 13.
6. In a beautiful essay, Zhu Qing-hua offers an analysis of yin and yang in a way that does not narrow yin characteristics to women and yang ones to men. According to Zhu Qing-hua, both yin and yang are found in each human being: "A human, no matter man or woman, can be *Yin*, as well as *Yang*. Even he/she can be *Yin* and *Yang* at the same time in relation to its contexts." ("Women in Chinese Philosophy: *Yin-Yang* Theory in Feminism Constructing," *Cultural and Religious Studies*, July 2018, Vol. 6, No. 7, 397).

Zhu goes on to say that within each human being, male or female, there exist both yin and yang organs: "In traditional Chinese medicine the functional interpretation of *Yin* and *Yang* is the theoretical basis for diagnosis and treatment. *Yin* and *Yang* are different and interrelated functions. Each organ of the human body is classified as *Yin* or *Yang* according to its role. Furthermore, each organ as *Yin* or *Yang* is subdivided into *Yin* and *Yang* according to the different roles it plays. From this aspect, different functions that an individual are carrying out temporarily endow her/him the property of *Yin* or *Yang*. Following and harmonizing with one[']s corresponding virtue of *Yin* or *Yang* lead to a state of balance and success" (Ibid., 397). Furthermore, in traditional Chinese medicine, internal organs are considered yin while external ones are considered yang. As such, it becomes possible to understand why the woman's heart (characterized by the protruding/external breasts) is yang and a man's heart, in contrast, would be yin. Likewise, the protruding/external male sexual organ makes it more yang than that of the woman's sexual organ which, because it is internal, is yin.

7. The Buberian distinction of an I-It relationship in which the I is relating to the other as an It, as an object, and an I-Thou relationship in which the I is relating to the other as a proper Thou, as a person, is developed at length in his beautiful work *I and Thou* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
8. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 18.
9. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 95.
10. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 15.
11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 197.
12. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 57.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 58.
16. Ibid., p. 78.
17. As such, hope is a way of sensing, in the words of Kierkegaard, the eternal within the temporal: "Hope is composed of the eternal and the temporal" (*Works of Love* [New York: Harper Perennial, 2009], 259). But we must not understand here the eternal as the Christian concept of "eternal life" coming after death. The eternal, for Kierkegaard, is a metaphysical dimension lodged at the heart of existence, or of the temporal. Such a metaphysical dimension coincides with his description of God or of the hidden source of love in the first chapter of *Works of Love*. In this chapter, Kierkegaard describes how we can access this source or eternal dimension in the act of loving, and more specifically *in the act of hoping*. And as this

dimension is accessed, so are the infinite resources of love, wisdom, guidance and comfort allowed to flow into the lover's heart and into the relationship, thereby contributing to its renewal.

18. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 237.
19. Ibid., 254.
20. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 57–58.

Infidelity's Dark Night

My lover is mine and I am his
He browses among the lilies

—Song 2:16

We now enter into the darker pages of our Song. For beneath the blossoming of flowers and the joyful lovemaking of the lovers broods a tragic possibility: That of infidelity and betrayal. This painful possibility is evoked in the typical discrete and allusive way of our author through the metaphor of the lilies. Although our lover seems genuinely enthralled by our Shulamite, he is also seen several times "browsing among the lilies" (Song 2:16, 6:3, 7:10). The allusion to lilies is of course metaphorical and must be explored as signifying beyond the mere pastoral atmosphere they create. The first question that comes to mind then is what do the lilies represent? We already know that the lover refers to his beloved as a lily: "Like a lily among the thorns is my darling among the young women" (Song 2:2). The formulation of "lily" in the plural tense appears in that light highly troubling. Is there more than one beloved? Does the expression lili(es) in the plural allude to other women? André Lacocque seems to think so in his observation of the "surprisingly recurrent motif of the shepherd's pasturing among the lilies. As in 2.1 the shoshana is the beloved maiden; it is clear that the word in the plural designates females and that the male seems to be described as in promiscuous company on several occasions."[1] But there is yet another interesting facet to this story.

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_5

The last version of our passage (Song 7:10) does not mention any more lilies! The woman affirms as in the first two passages the deep tie of love that binds her to her lover, but this affirmation is not followed, as it had been so far, with the allusion to lilies. It seems then that the temptation of infidelity (or, worse, the *passage à l'acte* to infidelity) has been overcome. The man is no more grazing among the lilies! This shift in the man's stance toward his beloved is further confirmed by the surrounding passages where we find a powerful expression of commitment on the part of the man: "Sixty queens there may be, and eighty concubines, and virgins beyond number; but my dove, my perfect one, is unique, the only daughter of her mother" (Song 6:8–9). It seems then that somehow, in the whole process, the man has committed. Contrarily to Lacocque's view then, that the Song holds no genuine conclusion or resolution,[2] I would see in this evolution of the man's interests—from the many to the one—a very strong indication of a progression throughout the Song of the man's feelings toward his beloved.

The question of course that poses itself is what allowed for this shift on the part of the man from infidelity to commitment? Did the woman somehow contribute to this progression? And if so, how did she do it? What is her secret? The clue lies in our passage, in the woman's words—"My lover is mine and I am his"—which accompany each mention of the man's browsing among the lilies. But what is the secret elixir for commitment and lasting love that one might distill from these sparse words which read almost like a mantra? In all three passages one reads a variation of these words, of this stubborn, almost blind-sighted affirmation of the bond of love existing between the two lovers. But one might wonder how these words have anything to do with the man's transformation. Do these words not, on the contrary, speak to the woman's turning a blind eye to her man's infidelities? And if so, would not this refusal to look a painful situation in the face make things worse? Would not this attitude encourage rather than discourage the man's promiscuity? Yet we see that in our text, this attitude seems to lead to increased commitment on the part of the man. Delusional as it might seem, the woman's mantra seems to work! What then is the secret of its success?

I would venture to argue that, far from being delusional, the woman's words of affirmation show, on the contrary, a profound insight on her part: That her faith has power. Far from constituting a stance of passivity and resignation, the woman's words must be read as an act of resistance whereby she stands up not so much for herself as for the kind of love, the

kind of relationship she wants to create. Far from being a sign of her naïveté, her repeated affirmation "My lover is mine and I am his" constitutes the expression of a desire to fight for her love. Those familiar with martial arts know that the best way to resist a violent aggression is to apply the opposite force to it: To receive a blow with a hardened stance leads to injury, whereas receiving the blow with a "soft" stance actually absorbs the blow, allowing one to then retaliate with equal violence. I would venture to suggest that this is exactly what the Shulamite is doing; rather than retaliating with violence and/or coldness to her beloved's infidelities, she applies the opposite force: Fidelity. Thus, far from being an act of gullibility or naïveté, her decision to remain faithful in the face of infidelity constitutes a profound and powerful act of resistance.

As such, she is doing anything but *enabling* her partner's unfaithful behavior. Her fidelity is anything but an act of resignation. It is a force, an act of resistance. But in order to understand fidelity as such, we must see that it actually has an impact on the relationship. Our text seems to point to fidelity as being much more than wishful thinking on the part of the Shulamite, as being capable of creating a new reality: That of the man forsaking his lilies. As though her faith were somehow *creative*! Now this is certainly a new concept to the Western mind, habituated to thinking that only aggressive action can effectuate change and dismissing the internal movements of the heart and soul as mere chemical reactions or subjective feelings. In the Hebrew mindset, however, love is not seen as a mere feeling but as a force which when cultivated and nurtured has an actual effect on external reality. Simone Weil makes a similar observation: "Love for our neighbor, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius. Creative attention means giving our attention to what does not exist."[3] In seeing what does not (yet) exist, attention or love can call forth what it sees and can bring forth, in the other, the needed transformation. But more needs to be said on this. One does not see yet how the inner workings of the Shulamite's faith might have an actual impact on her lover. For this, we must turn to Franz Rosenzweig and his brief but profound commentary on the Song of Songs, and more precisely on this very passage.

In his commentary, Rosenzweig notices a fundamental difference between the way a man loves and the way a woman loves. For Rosenzweig, the man's love is essentially experienced in the present moment. The lover, when struck with the feeling of love, loves powerfully and completely at that moment. This is what can account for the intensity of the lover's feelings toward his beloved, but also for the discontinuity of those feelings. As

such, for Rosenzweig, the lover's love is essentially unfaithful: "The love of the lover … in its essence is unfaithful, for its essence is in the moment."[4] The lover's love, inasmuch as it is entrenched in the present moment, is thus essentially discontinuous, and as such, unfaithful. Is there no hope then for man to ever be able to forge a faithful monogamous relationship with woman? Is there no hope then for him to find in his heart the desire and the strength to commit to one woman?

According to Rosenzweig, there is hope for man. But this hope rests entirely in the hands of woman. She and only she can initiate the man beyond the frontiers of the present moment into the depths of a love lived out in the dimension of time and, as such, capable of enduring beyond the occasional ups and downs of the human heart. This is due largely to the way that she loves, which is fundamentally different from the way that man experiences love. Contrary to man, the passion that a woman might experience for a man is not found in the present moment of her feelings for him, but rather in the eternal character of her love. When a woman loves, she loves, from the onset, forever. Her love is always already entirely permeated with a sense of eternity. The very moment she begins to love, she finds her love already inscribed in the eternal. Rosenzweig puts it as follows: "That which for the lover is a moment always to be begun anew is known by that which is loved as eternal, perpetual and eternal."[5] Thus, the woman is more aptly able to project her love into the future, to see beyond the present moment.

As such, the beloved's love is essentially faithful,[6] that is, capable of believing that the love that she feels is meant to and must endure. And it is precisely this capacity to believe in the love between her and her lover which allows for the man's love to become inscribed into eternity: "The faithful belief of the beloved acquiesces to the love of the lover bound to the moment and reinforces it so far as to make it a lasting love. This is the counterpart of love: the faith of the beloved in the lover."[7] Thus the love of the man finds itself strengthened and confirmed in the faith of the woman in that love, and as such, made to last beyond the mere whims of the human heart: "The lover who surrenders his love is recreated in the faithfulness of the lover and from then on it is forever."[8] It is then the woman's faith in the man's love for her which inscribes that love into eternity. Thus, the woman's quiet trust is far from delusional, but rather holds tremendous creative potential. There is a powerful creative force emanating from the woman's trust in her man—no matter what—which, in time, transmutes, transfigures his unfaithfulness into faithfulness, his fickleness

into commitment: "The for eternity that the soul feels within itself from the first tremors owing to the love of the lover is not a deception, it does not stay enclosed within itself; it turns out to be a lively and creative force by tearing the love from the lover himself in the moment and renders it eternal."[9]

And so, it is the woman's opting for a stance of quiet trust, her choosing to nurture the faith in her love—and this in the face of betrayal—that seems to pave the way for the man's commitment. Everything is in her demeanor, her serenity, her quietness and her persistence. In other words, the man's faithfulness seems to have been called forth by her own faithfulness. Yet, such a stance of trust is not enough. Faith in one's love can, sadly, easily degenerate into an unhealthy obsession with the object of one's love. What was once a poignant and simple, loving faith can become a form of asphyxiating attachment to the lover, giving him no room for free choice and maneuver. As such, the cultivation of faith in one's love is not enough to attract commitment. Our Song points us to another move that is simultaneously necessary: That of releasing and letting go. We have seen that the woman's expression of faith is worded as follows: "My lover is mine and I am his" (Song 2:16). A look at the second formulation, however, reveals a slight but fundamental change in the way she words her trust: "I am my lover's and my lover is mine" (Song 6:3). The third formulation differs again from the first two: "I belong to my lover and his desire is for me" (Song 7:10). The shift of meaning seems trivial, but there is in fact a profound progression on the part of the woman from an attitude of possessiveness toward her lover, "My lover is mine" (Song 2:16), to an attitude of surrender to her beloved, "I am my lover's/I belong to my lover" (Song 6:3 and 7:10). The woman goes from claiming that her beloved is *hers*, her possession, her object, to surrendering to him as *his*, his treasure, his possession.

The difference seems minimal, but in fact everything has changed. In the first formulation, "My lover is mine," the woman's self is at the center and the man is a mere object of possession, much in the way that Buber describes the I-It relationship. In the second formulation, however, the man is moved to the center and the woman surrenders as "his." She is his, even in the absence of evidence of his love for her, even in the face of infidelity. She is his, she is there for him, she is there if he should choose to be with her, even though she has of yet received no concrete affirmation of his love for her. The woman has now operated a profound shift where the man is no more an It but a Thou. Buber puts this beautifully: "Whoever

says Thou does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation."[10] In other words, the moment one forfeits the possessive stance and releases one's grip, seeking nothing from the other, letting the other be, is the moment that a genuine and profound relation is possible.

This progression from possessiveness to release has, moreover, a profound effect on the man's desire for her, which goes from "my lover is mine" (Song 6:3) to "his desire is for me" (Song 7:10). In other words, the man goes from being a mere static object of possession to a proactive and dynamic lover whose desire now arises from himself to his beloved. In fact, there seems to be a direct correlation between the Shulamite's attitude of surrender and his attitude of proactiveness. The more she surrenders and releases the man from her possessive grasp, the more proactive he becomes and the more passionate his love is for her. The key to his change of heart therefore lies not only in her passionate faith in their love, but also in her ability to release her desire for him in an attitude of dispossession and surrender. Interestingly, it is precisely this attitude of dispossession, of contraction of her own desires and passions, which opens up a space within which the man's desire can grow and become stronger. Her release of her claim on the man is what gives him a new impulse toward her, what makes him come alive, what draws him to her. Emmanuel Levinas develops this theme in an essay on erotic love, observing that "nothing is further from eros than possession … voluptuosity is extinguished in possession."[11] The attitude of possessiveness, far from securing love, can destroy it. But the contrary is also true: That an attitude of release can rekindle love and heighten desire.

Our Song seems to imply then that the best way to awaken in someone love and faithfulness is to, paradoxically, let them go, is to stop wanting to control everything and let them draw close in their own time and way. This is what the Shulamite finally understands and which accounts for the shift in the man's attitude toward her. She knows she is risking everything by letting him go, risking that he will decide otherwise, that he will continue pursuing his course of unfaithfulness, but such is the price of true love and of any genuine relationship. Only when the other's transcendent will and freedom is acknowledged is there any proper basis for a relationship and for the self's escaping its own solitude. To ignore the inviolability of the other's will is to imprison oneself ever deeper in one's solitude—in such a world there is no other, and as such, never any true love or initiative on their part toward the self. Irigaray puts it beautifully: "The other is and remains transcendent to me through a body, through intentions, and

words foreign to me: you who are not and will never be mine are transcendent to me in body and in words insofar as you are an incarnation that cannot be appropriated by me lest I should suffer the alienation of my freedom. The will to possess you corresponds to a solitary and solipsistic dream which forgets that your consciousness and mine do not obey the same necessities."[12]

In a way, the woman needed to mature for the man to mature. She needed to lose her possessiveness, her desperation, her clinginess, for the man to lose his lack of focus and incapacity for a committed relationship. But this transformation of the man's stance toward her comes only at the issue of a deep transformation of her own raw, possessive desire for him. Thus, while the Shulamite certainly has operated a change in her lover, he also operates a transformation on the woman through the exercise of his own freedom, thereby awakening her to the realm of an other that she cannot control or possess. She can resist this freedom or surrender to it. The Shulamite chose surrender and this was the key to her success. As such, "the other of sexual difference forces me to an elaboration, to a transformation of my inclinations leading me to open my desire to a transcendental dimension in my relationship with the other as other. My freedom remains freedom only if the other remains transcendent to me and if I respect his freedom."[13] In giving the other his freedom, the woman reclaims her own freedom—the freedom from her own obsessions, neediness and clinginess—and individuates into true womanhood, which is source and not only mere recipient of love.

And so, it is this delicate balance between holding on to her lover through faith and simultaneously releasing him that constitutes the secret of the Shulamite's magnetism and ability to attract commitment. Let us note that at no point does the Shulamite express any of these to her lover in order to somehow sway his decision. This is all happening *internally*, in the secret depths of her heart. Yet, even though her stance is strictly internal, it has a profound effect on the transformation of her lover's desire. The woman is shown in this text to hold the keys to a lasting relationship, those being the potency of her faith in her beloved coupled with the opposite ability to release that very beloved and let him mature his decision to be with her in his own time. And it is this delicate balance between her tenacious faith in the relationship and her ability to surrender and release her desire for her beloved which constitutes the secret of her success and of her transformative power on her man.

But the happy ending that the Shulamite experiences through her faith does not always translate in reality. Sometimes the lover does not commit. Sometimes the pull of the other woman is too strong and he finds it impossible to choose. What attitude might one then adopt? How long should one believe? How long should one wait? How many years must one waste in waiting for someone who might never commit? And even if the lover does come back, the question remains as to whether the relationship can ever really be mended and healed from such a deep betrayal. Too often, the damage brought about by infidelity seems irreparable. These are serious questions that any woman will ask herself when working through this painful situation. And yet, as urgent as these questions are, the truth is that they do not come from a place of love. To ask these questions is already to have left the realm of trust—which is the sure sign of love—and entered the realm of anxiety, distrust and calculations. What makes our Shulamite's love so beautiful and poignant is that these questions never seem to enter her mind. Her emotional state is certainly tumultuous, and often burdened with uncertainty and confusion, but it is never calculating: "What's in it for *me?*" To ask such a question would be a sure indication that she has retreated upon her own interests and turned away from love. And this is something that the Shulamite seems incapable of.

For the sure sign that one has truly loved is that one never stops loving. That the lover has turned away cannot entail that one's love now turns to hate—for that would indicate that there never was any true love there to begin with. Kierkegaard puts it beautifully: "That love abides is presented then as praiseworthy … only the first is love; the other by its alterations shows itself not to be love—and consequently that it was never love at all … if one ceases to be loving, then one was never loving anyway."[14] According to Kierkegaard, love that goes through alterations, that changes into something else, was never love to begin with. Such a love is committed to waiting for the other until it has become evident that a separation is the only loving thing left to do, until the beloved themselves require it, whether implicitly or explicitly. Sometimes, our beloved will not have the courage to leave, and yet they know that they must, and this for a variety of reasons—it is then up to the lover to do so out of love. To love without alterations is to do everything in the name of love, even put an end to the relationship. As such, the relationship is never ended for the sake of protecting or preserving the self's interests or even dignity; it is ended because it is the loving thing to do *for* the other and for the sake of our love for them. But love abides, as Kierkegaard so beautifully says, until love itself

decrees an end to the relationship. Only then, and precisely because it has become love's command, can one stop waiting and move on.

And even then, this does not mean that one stops loving. It is just that one's love has taken another form: The form of forgiveness, of respect, of letting-be and of release. Only by allowing love to abide, even in the face of profound betrayal, can one avoid the deep and often permanent damage that infidelity can inflict upon the human heart. For it is not the infidelity itself that damages the heart, although it does profoundly wound it. It is our reaction to this infidelity and the choice to react to it in a toxic way—with resentment, hatred, a hardening of one's heart, a conscious or unconscious choice to never allow oneself to love again.[15] These are what damage the heart. It is not what happens to us that destroys us; rather, it is how we choose to *respond* to what happens to us that constitutes the real damage. Acts of violence or of betrayal inflicted upon a human heart that chooses love cannot damage it. Nothing can. The idea that a man or a woman might become damaged because they have been in a relationship that did not culminate in commitment and marriage is an idea that knows nothing of the power of love to protect and renew the human heart.

I would go so far as to argue that the heart that chooses to love through the betrayal of infidelity actually comes out stronger, richer and more alive than it was before going through such an ordeal. Rather than becoming damaged, the heart that chooses to love through the hour of betrayal can become enlarged and its capacity for love deepened. Kierkegaard speaks of a hidden spring of love within each one of us that can only be accessed by loving: "There is a place in a human being's most inward depths; from this place proceeds the life of love."[16] This place, according to Kierkegaard, dwells secretly in our deepest hearts and is not easily accessed. And yet, says Kierkegaard, there is a way to tap into this spring: "This hidden life is knowable by its fruits."[17] In other words, according to Kierkegaard, this hidden spring of love only becomes visible and accessible through acts of love toward the ones we love. Thus, we cannot get to the depth of this spring unless we love. Sadly, this deep source of love lies dormant for the most part within our hearts because we never really choose to love in a way that might require us to draw from it. But the more we love, the more we begin to tap into this spring. The more challenging and difficult the relationship is, the more we persist in loving our beloved anyway, the more access we begin to have to this spring. Thus, far from damaging the heart, infidelity can become the defining moment that the devastated and wounded heart, in desperation, begins to access its deeper resources,

begins to tap into its own hidden source of love, thereby opening up a channel between itself and the deep, abiding love that inhabits it.

And so, like the Shulamite who chose love and fidelity in the face of infidelity—"My lover is mine and I am his"—we also can choose to abide in love in the face of betrayal. Yet, ultimately, what we find is not the beloved but love itself—that deep inner source of love that inhabits us all and that nurtures, energizes, renews and refreshes all. We find the love that "makes all things new,"[18] the "new wine" that is offered last, at the very moment where we thought that we had run out of wine, run out of resources, of strength and of love.[19] Thus, if we let them—by choosing love every step of the way—the beloved can open and release this source within ourselves. For it is the very challenges that the beloved poses that push us to draw deeper within ourselves for the love that they cannot give us. And now we have found a treasure. It is not the one we thought, but an even better one. For we may have lost the beloved, but we have found love. And this is truly what the Shulamite finds when faced with the painful realization of her beloved's unfaithfulness—a deep quiet trust and unwavering fidelity that seems to surface from a much deeper place than her heart's usual tempestuous emotions. The Shulamite who maintains "My lover is mine and I am his" in the face of betrayal is a different woman than the one that we got to know throughout the Song. This is no more the capricious, obsessive and clingy woman that we knew. This is a woman who has tapped into regions of her heart hereto unknown both to her and to us, her readers. This is a woman who has connected to her source and to her core and found the love that heals all and protects all. Thus, the love that fails to blossom into a commitment or marriage inflicts no damage upon the heart that chooses love. For the heart which abides in love renews itself continuously, like a flowing spring of water, continuously washing itself clean of resentment, hatred and distrust which constitute the real damage to the heart. Such a heart has discovered, in spite of its failed attempts to hold on to the love of the beloved, the buried treasure of the hidden life of love within itself which "is itself in motion and has the eternal in itself … an eternal spring. This life is fresh and everlasting. No cold can freeze it."[20]

To love like this is thus to ever experience new beginnings, surprising turns of fate and miraculous reunions; it is to dwell in perpetual springtime where "the winter is past; the rains are over and gone.[21] Flowers appear on the earth" (Song 2:11–12). For those who have connected to the hidden source of love there can be no winter, no aging and no fading. Kierkegaard speaks as such of the eternal youthfulness of such a love: "Hope depends

on the possibility of the good. It … has far more in common with youthfulness than with the moroseness which often enough is honored by the name of seriousness, the slackness of age which under moderately fortunate conditions is moderately peaceful and relaxed but above all has nothing to hope for and under unfortunate conditions prefers to gnaw vexatiously rather than to hope."[22] As such, the one who loves, because they have their roots firmly planted in the hidden source of love, will find that the laws of temporality do not apply to them anymore. As such, there is no wasted time, but rather time becomes declined, in the loving heart, into infinite possibilities. This is what Kierkegaard means when he describes how the lover connected to her source, rather than finding herself impoverished by her faithful love in fact multiplies her possibilities: "Without the eternal one lives by the help of habit, prudence, conformity, experience, custom and usage … but one never gets possibility out of this, possibility, the miracle which is so infinitely fragile (the most tender shoot in springtime is not so fragile), so infinitely delicate (the finest woven linen is not so delicate) and yet, brought in to being, shaped, by the very help of the eternal, it is nevertheless stronger than anything else, if it is the possibility of the good!"[23] In other words, to remain faithful in the face of betrayal is to open oneself up to the infinite possibilities for rejuvenation, renewal and healing—and yes, even the possibility for redemption.

For it is the very redemption of the relationship, the very "possibility of the good," which the act of fidelity can also nurture and protect—even after the devastating act of infidelity has been committed! For the one that has kept his or her heart pure through the ordeal of betrayal, anything is possible, even a new beginning. Kierkegaard again puts it beautifully, stating that "if the lover does not fall away from love, he can prevent the break, he can perform this miracle; for if he perseveres, the break can never really come to be … by abiding he maintains superiority over the past; thereby he transforms what is a break in the past … into a possible relationship in the future."[24] Thus, it only takes one of the lovers having persevered in the love for the relationship to be salvaged. For as long as one of the lovers believes in their love, there is no break, only a postponement of what could still be. And so, concludes Kierkegaard, the one who has chosen fidelity in the face of infidelity not only has protected their own heart from damage, but, in the same gesture, has protected the relationship itself from utter destruction and opened up the possibility of a clean slate and new beginning: "That the transition of forgiving may be as easy as meeting with a person one had seen just recently, that the dialogue of love might flow as naturally as with a person one engage in conversation,

that the journeying together might be as rhythmically swift as it is between two people who for the *first* time begin a new life—in short that there might be no hitch none at all, which could shock in the least, not for a second and not for a split second: this the lover accomplishes, for he abides."[25]

We now understand that far from being naïve, our Shulamite in fact is working from a deeper wisdom. Such a wisdom will seem like madness in the eyes of those for whom love is a business transaction. For these, love must render a profit; it must be reciprocated to be pursued. Fidelity becomes in this context conditional on the behavior of the beloved. But such is not the kind of love that the Shulamite is embodying in the Song. Such considerations do not even cross her young mind. All she knows is to love. And in so doing, although she might be criticized for being naïve, an enabler or worse, a victim, our Shulamite is actually tapping into a deeper wisdom, into a deeper dimension within herself—the wisdom of the love that knows no limits. It is in this moment that our Song is most Biblical and comes closer to the structure of divine love. For to love as God loves, is to love even in the face of the most profound betrayal.[26] Only a love divine can love with such audacity and courage. And it is this love that our Shulamite innocently embodies in her tenacious willingness to trust even when it hurts and to continue to believe, deep in the inner recesses of her heart, and in the face of massive evidence speaking to the contrary, that "I am my lover's and he is mine."

Notes

1. André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote*, 128.
2. André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote* (Salem, OR: Trinity Press International, 1998), 190.
3. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 92.
4. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 176.
5. Ibid., 182.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 184.
8. Ibid., 185.
9. Ibid.
10. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 55.
11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 265.

12. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2001), 18.
13. Ibid., 93.
14. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964), 281.
15. Such is in my view the very definition of forgiveness: The refusal to react to the wrongs committed against us, whether in words, thoughts or actions, thereby not allowing the toxicity of the evil done to us to penetrate into our hearts. In Hebrew, the word for forgiveness, *nasa*, means "to carry." To carry the wrongs done to us means to receive them without retaliation, thereby protecting our hearts from being contaminated by the evil done to us. For it is never the wrong done to us which damages us, but rather our toxic reactions to is, whether in thought, word or deed, when we choose for example to close our hearts in resentment, or to enact revenge upon the wrongdoer, thereby becoming exactly like them.
16. Ibid., 28.
17. Ibid., 28.
18. Revelation 21:5.
19. Cf. the story of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12).
20. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 27.
21. As such, no time is ever wasted by loving. For to love is to live in tune with the dimension which Kierkegaard calls "the eternal" over which time has no power. Again, the dimension of the "eternal" which we mentioned in an earlier note has nothing to do with the popular Christian concept of "eternal life," but rather constitutes a metaphysical dimension present in the here and now and accessed through love. To speak then of "wasted time" however is to remain on the level which Kierkegaard calls temporality, which is the realm of human finitude, and as such, the *lieu* of human anxiety with regards to the passing of time. But to love and to abide in love is to live in the time zone of eternity which, as such, knows no decay, no limitations and no interruptions. Thus, for those who dwell in the shadow of the eternal, to love is to live according to other laws than those decreed for the temporal. As such, the one who loves, because they have passed on to the dimension of the eternal, will find that the laws of temporality, of finitude and of aging do not apply to them anymore. In the dimension of the eternal there is no wasted time, only infinite time and possibilities.
22. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 235.
23. Ibid., 233.
24. Ibid., 283.
25. Ibid., 291.
26. I am reminded here of Kierkegaard's powerful commentary on the betrayal of Jesus by Peter in which he describes this divine love as more powerful than betrayal (cf. *Works of Love*, 153–170).

Secrets of Lovemaking

I have come into my garden my sister, my bride
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice

—Song 5:1

This passage marks a clear shift in the relationship between the lovers. Up until then, their love had been that of two young, inexperienced lovers gradually exploring each other with their gestures focusing on "kissing" (Song 1:2) and "embracing" (Song 2:6). Our passage, however, signifies a shift into more mature and explicit lovemaking, indeed one where total consummation takes place. The shift from the preceding verses where the woman is compared to a "garden locked up" (Song 4:12) to a garden accessible and open to the man, "I have come into my garden" (Song 5:1), marks and highlights this profound change in the lovers' relationship. From inaccessible and "locked up," the woman now opens up, like a fully mature blossom, to her man for his complete and unrestrained enjoyment. He enters her, partaking of all of her best fruits: "I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk" (Song 5:1).

At this point of our Song, then, the lovers are clearly engaged in a mature, sexual relationship with each other. This of course has been a source of perplexity for commentators as there exists no clear mention of marriage between the lovers surrounding this act of consummation. Marriage is at best alluded to through the reference to Solomon's wedding

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_6

(Song 3:7–11) and by the lover's naming the beloved his "bride" (Song 4:8, 9, 10, 12; 5:1). But a clear marriage contract between the lovers is inexistent. This is however profoundly problematic and a blatant contrast with the Biblical ethos of marriage. It is indeed unheard of, in the Biblical context, of consummating a relationship without the sanction of marriage. What then is taking place in our Song? Is our Song condoning promiscuity, thereby destroying the very foundations of the Biblical perspective on love? Is our Song situating itself beyond ethics? I would suggest that our Song does have a strong ethical core, but that it is to be found on a whole other level than that of social and even Biblical conventions surrounding marriage. I will argue further that this core is to be found not in ceremonies surrounding the act of consummation, but in the very act itself. Ethics is to be found in our Song *within* the very act of lovemaking, in the very way the lovers make love.

That an ethics might find itself nestled in the very act of lovemaking rather than in the outside ceremonies surrounding the act is however unusual. Traditional ethical treatises on sex usually emphasize a period of abstinence leading up to marriage, whereupon sex is allowed. Yet nothing is said as to how that sexual interaction is to take place. Is there to be no "shoulds" and "should nots" in the sexual relationship? Is everything allowed? Is not an ethical cultivation of the senses also necessary? This is precisely Irigaray's observation: "The human dimension of the difference between man and woman requires us to overcome this instrumental horizon. This requirement has often been confused with sexual abstinence instead of encouraging us to cultivate the relations, including the carnal relations between subjects who are different."[1] Thus, according to Irigaray, the presence in the sexual relationship of two subjects of equal dignity necessitates that we think also of the sexual relationship in ethical terms inasmuch as the temptation of objectification is always present. And although a period of abstinence does serve the purpose of elevating the sentiments to a level of mutual respect that helps escape the pitfalls of objectification, it does nothing to redeem and elevate the sexual act itself. More then needs to be said about the sexual encounter itself.

It is a known fact that even in a committed, married relationship, the sexual act can be experienced by the woman as a form of objectification wherein she feels that she is nothing more than an object of pleasure for her lover. Thus, even in the context of a loving relationship, the sexual act can be felt as unloving; especially on the part of the woman, it can be experienced as an I-It relationship to borrow again from Buber's

terminology. But things need not be so. Responding to Sartre's descriptions of the sexual act as an inevitable act of mutual objectification whereby the lovers have no other ambition than to obtain pleasure from the other, thereby reducing the encounter to an I-It relationship, Irigaray introduces the novel possibility of experiencing the sexual encounter as an I-Thou relationship. Here, Irigaray effectuates a judicious application of the Buberian conceptuality to the sexual encounter itself. There is, according to Irigaray, a way to experience sex as an I-It encounter, that is, as an encounter whereby the lovers objectify and use each other for pleasure; but there is also a way to develop from *within* the sexual encounter an I-Thou relationship with the other, thereby escaping the temptation of objectification. This way she names the "caress": "The caress is an awakening to you, to me, to us … the caress is an awakening to inter-subjectivity, to a touching between us which is neither passive nor active … this does not mean that they are ambiguous, but rather that they are attentive to the person who touches and the one who is touched."[2] But more needs to be said on what the concept of the caress actually means.

Quoting Levinas, from whom she has borrowed the concept,[3] Irigaray provides more insight into what "the caress" actually means: "The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It [and I wish to add: this is man's caress] searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search."[4] In other words, the caress is a type of sexual touch which is not goal-oriented; it is not interested in achieving a purpose, such as creating the right conditions for arousal and penetration, but rather is simply a way to explore one's partner for the pure pleasure that this exploration brings. The caress can here be identified with the concept of foreplay, whereby one takes the time to explore one's partner's body, getting to know all of its erogenous zones, taking in its beauty and simply enjoying them for who they a*re*—taking pleasure in their very presence rather than constantly projecting ourselves toward a goal. The caress thus becomes a mode of fully receiving the other for who they are and not what they can grant us. It is way of being fully present to them, of celebrating them, of welcoming them onto ourselves. As such, the caress has profound ethical significations: It is a way of revealing one' partner as a person, an individual and not merely a sex object.

What we learn here from Irigaray is that the type of touch that shows itself "attentive" to the other, to their centers of pleasure, in addition to

enhancing the experience of pleasure within the sexual encounter, also serves the purpose of elevating the beloved to the level of a Thou. In such an act of attention, the other is redeemed from being a mere sex object, who is possessed as an *object* of pleasure by the lover, to the status of a feeling and sentient *subject* susceptible of receiving pleasure from the lover. This shift in the status of the beloved is directly dependent on a shift in the lover's stance from possessive to generous. Instead of taking pleasure from his beloved, the lover is focused on giving pleasure. As such, the sexual act, far from being an act of mutual objectification, is elevated to "an offering of consciousness, a gift of intention and of word addressed to the concrete presence of the other, to his natural and historical particularities."[5] Thus, the time taken to explore the beloved's body constitutes an act of recognition of the beloved as a *person*, as a particular, concrete individual that is yet to be explored and discovered in its very particular and unique sexuality, and not a mere generic partner to be used as a source of comfort and pleasure.

And this is precisely what is taking place in our Song. What is striking about our Song is the time the lovers take to fully explore, arouse and enjoy each other's bodies. The man's head, eyes, cheeks, lips, arms, body, legs are praised by the woman (Song 5:10–16). Likewise, the woman's eyes, hair, lips, neck and breasts are highlighted by the man (Song 4:1–5). Later it is her feet, legs, navel, waist, breasts, neck and eyes (Song 7:1–4). Notice that the man is either making his way up or his way down to the woman's center, and never directly engages his beloved sexually. As such, the lover is here displaying an unusual awareness of the woman's pleasure centers. Our Song belongs to the great classics on the art of lovemaking such as the *Ananga Ranga* and *The Perfumed Garden* in its refined sensibility to the woman's erotic nature and to her way of experiencing pleasure. It is well known from these ancient treatises that the woman is never to be engaged sexually in a direct and rash manner. Time must be taken for the exploration of her body for her to be fully aroused when the time comes for penetration. This is what our Song is telling us through its abundant descriptions of the beloved's body and its slow, sensual arousal of all five senses. This is also what the *Ananga Ranga* teaches in its opening verses: "Thus all of you who read this book shall know how delicious an instrument is woman, when artfully played upon; how capable she is of producing the most exquisite harmony; of executing the most complicated variations and of giving the divinest pleasures."[6] In this treatise, the woman is compared to a musical instrument which needs the proper artful touch

in order to emit a beautiful sound. This touch, as for an instrument, needs to be acquired through an ever deeper acquaintance with the beloved's body and its centers of pleasure. Just like the instrument resonates better or worse when touched a certain way, likewise the woman's body. It is up to the man to discover, as with his instrument, the proper place and way to touch as to conjure up the most intense and intoxicating pleasure.

The Perfumed Garden makes a similar point when it compares woman to "a fruit which will not yield its sweetness until you rub it between your hands. Look at the basil plant; if you do not rub it and warm it with your fingers it will not emit any scent. If you do not animate her with your toying intermixed with kissing, nibbling and touching, you will not obtain from her what you are seeking; you will feel no enjoyment when you share her couch and you will waken in her heart neither inclination nor affection, nor love for you; all her qualities will remain hidden."[7] In this passage, woman is compared to the basil plant which when rubbed and warmed between the fingers reveals a secret and exquisite side of herself to her lover. Without this "rubbing" and "warming" the woman remains cold and she never develops into the passionate lover she could be. Thus the man himself suffers and feels "no enjoyment" with a woman who has not been initiated and aroused to passion and therefore remains dispassionate in her own lovemaking to him. And she herself, because she has not been awakened to the heights of the erotic pleasure hidden within her body feels no love for such a man.

We learn from these treatises of the profound difference between a woman's erotic landscape and a man's. Man is easily aroused and his pleasure is centered on his sexual organ. As such, he might be tempted to think woman functions the same way. He could not be further from the truth inasmuch as woman is exactly the opposite. Her pleasure necessitates a slow hand and erogenous zones are found all over her body. In her groundbreaking work on woman's erotica, Irigaray observes the following: "Female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters … according to these theorists woman's erogenous zones are no more than a clitoris-sex which cannot stand up in comparison with the valued phallic organ,"[8] but "woman's desire most likely does not speak the same language as man's desire."[9] In fact, woman's sexuality "is at least double, is in fact plural … woman has sex organs just about everywhere. … She experiences pleasure almost everywhere … the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined."[10] In other words, the woman's

skin is woman's most important erogenous zone and pleasure spots can be found all over her body. As such, her sexuality is multiple, polyphonic in that it is not localized in one spot but beckons for continuous exploration, revealing ever new hidden springs and sources of pleasure.

We see a similar idea in Anais Nin: "There is a common agreement about only one thing, that woman's erogenous zones are spread all over her body, that she is more sensitive to caresses and that her sensuality is rarely as direct, as immediate as man's. There is an atmosphere of vibrations which need to be awakened and have repercussions on the final arousal."[11] Here again, the woman's sexuality is described with a musical metaphor. Her body is again compared to a musical instrument that needs a specific touch in order to vibrate, come alive, and feel optimal pleasure. And, as Anais Nin reminds us, the more the vibrations in her body are awakened, the more intense her climax. The height of her pleasure is directly dependent on the intensity and duration of the caresses preceding her climax. Our Song's emphasis on the sensuality, as well as the abundance of its descriptions pertaining to the gradual and mutual exploration of the beloved's body, thus situates it in the tradition of the great treatises on love and sexuality. Moreover, this slow, amorous exploration of the other's body, while it certainly contributes to pleasure, is also an act of attention and wonder, whereby the lovers celebrate each other, welcome each other and offer themselves to the other.

Thus, in our Song, pleasure is indissociable from ethics. In fact, the more sensitive the partners are to the ethical dimension of their lovemaking, that is to say, to the treatment of their partners as a Thou and not as an It, the more intense pleasure they will derive from the experience. This intrinsic connection between pleasure and ethics is however profoundly different from the traditional understanding of ethics. We know that the Western conception of ethics tends to dissociate it from pleasure.[12] In fact pleasure, for the most part, has been seen as the very antithesis of ethics inasmuch as the quest for pleasure too often coincides with the selfish interests of the self at the detriment of the other. Thus, in Western philosophy, the desire for pleasure is the enemy that ethics must combat. Not so in the Hebrew conception of pleasure. In the Hebrew mindset, the physical realm is not an enemy which must be transcended, controlled, mastered by the spiritual realm as is evident in Western thought. The physical realm is not considered naturally corrupt as a Platonist interpretation

would have it, but rather as "very good,"[13] as that which contains the trace of the divine, of the Creator. As such, the natural realm, including that of sexual pleasure, is already permeated by a divine intention, by the divine presence. And it is precisely this divine spark, this sacred essence, which the ethics of the caress seeks to recover.

But there is more. The attentive reader of the Song will also observe that the references to sexuality are inseparable in our text from a reference to love. We already noted that the shift in the lover's behavior from inexperienced exploration to a mature expression of their love through sexuality (Song 5:1) is directly preceded by an affirmation of the emotional bond between the lovers. We saw that this bond was expressed in our text by a reference to Solomon's wedding (Song 3:11) but also to the lover's referring to his beloved as his "bride" (Song 4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5:1). Six times does her lover call her his bride in the moments leading up to consummation; the final time appearing just before he makes love to her in 5:1. But the references to love are not limited to this moment. They permeate our text and are already noticeable in the early moments of the relationship. Already in chapter two the lovers affirm their exclusivity, the lover by comparing the beloved to "a lily among thorns" and the beloved in comparing her lover to "an apple tree among the trees of the forest" (Song 2:2, 3). After the act of consummation, the lovers' emotional bond continues to intensify, culminating in the powerful oath of love between them: "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave, it burns like a blazing fire, like the very flame of the Lord" (Song 8:6).

We have now reached one of the essential components in lovemaking: Emotional maturity. The extent to which the partners have committed to each other in a bond of love is an essential ingredient to their sexual chemistry. One might even argue that the deeper the emotional connection, the more pleasurable the sex. Addressing a female audience intent on exploring the possibilities of casual sex, Nin observes: "I believe women still mind a precipitated departure, a lack of acknowledgment of the ritual that has taken place … this may or may not disappear in modern woman, intent on denying all of her past selves, and she may achieve this separation of sex and love which, to my belief, diminishes pleasure and reduces the heightened quality of lovemaking. For lovemaking is enhanced, heightened, intensified by its emotional content. You might compare the difference to a solo player and the vast reaches of an orchestra."[14] In other words, while casual sex does have its pleasures, it might be contrasted to a solo player

playing a beautiful melody. How much more beautiful is this melody, however, when accompanied by a full orchestra. Likewise, how much more intense the lovemaking when inspired and exacerbated by its emotional content.

Thus sex has much more to offer than pleasure. What our civilization is slowly forgetting is that lovemaking is meant to be an expression, a language, a way of communicating love, and not just a release, fun times and a way to relax. Irigaray puts it beautifully when she speaks of lovemaking as a "gesture-word."[15] The gesture of lovemaking means nothing unless it is also a word expressive of a deeper emotional reality. For Irigaray, lovemaking must be an act of truth—a revelation of emotional content. The lovemaking must be sincere, truthful. Only then does it truly set the lovers free and allows them to surrender fully to the other: "Thus the gesture of the one who caresses has nothing to do with ensnarement, possession or submission of the freedom of the other who fascinates me in his body. Instead it becomes an offering of consciousness, a gift of intention and of a word addressed to the concrete presence of the other … the caress is a gift of safety … a gesture which gives the other to himself, to herself, thanks to an attentive witness, thanks to a guardian of incarnate subjectivity. The caress leads each person back to the I and to the you. I give you to yourself because you are a you for me."[16] Only when it is truthful—expressive of deeper emotional reality—does the lovemaking constitute "a gift of safety" wherein the beloved is given to themselves, allowed to fully blossom and open up to the other.

This is especially the case for the woman, whose sexuality can never fully blossom outside of a committed relationship. She can try and go through the motions of casual sex, but, as Simone de Beauvoir admits—and this in spite of a long history of polyamory—a woman is generally not true to herself when claiming that she wants nothing more than something casual because of the binding force that the sexual relationship has on her. As such, pleasure, far from liberating her, binds her deeply to her partner. This is why, according to de Beauvoir, most women lean powerfully toward monogamy.[17] To fully surrender and blossom in her sexuality, the woman needs then a certain degree of commitment on the part of the man. Thus, in order to fully experience a woman's sexual surrender, the man must himself learn to surrender emotionally to her. And it is to the degree that he commits himself to the relationship that the woman he is with will be able to blossom sexually. De Beauvoir observes several times in her work as a psychoanalyst how certain women remained hopelessly

frigid until a ring was slipped on their finger.[18] To really experience a woman in full sexual bloom, to really taste the nectar of her love, man must take the risk of commitment. To avoid that difficult step will leave him with a woman who has never been able to fully open up to him, with a still sexually immature woman. Even though she has been with him countless times, she remains unopened, virginal.

This is why a man will often find himself unsatisfied in a relationship, even though he is getting all of the sex that he might want. Inasmuch as his woman has not been given the "gift of safety" and has not been able to truly open up, and reveal the depths of her love, the man will continue to feel like "something is missing." And something *is* missing: The intimacy that is only possible at great risk and vulnerability on behalf of both partners. In her criticism of America's culture of greed, bell hooks bemoans the way that greed and the need for immediate gratification without effort has infiltrated romantic relationships: "The same politics of greed is at play when folks seek love. They often want fulfillment immediately. Genuine love is rarely an emotional space where needs are instantly gratified. To know genuine love we have to invest time and commitment."[19] And it is also this culture of greed which, according to bell hooks, makes it so easy to break off a relationship with someone who "does not satisfy us": "How many times do we hear someone say, 'well if that person is not satisfying your needs you should get rid of them.' Relationships are treated like Dixie cups. They are the same. They are disposable. It if does not work, drop it, throw it away, get another."[20] Yet in so doing these discouraged lovers "flee from love before they feel its grace. Pain may be the threshold they must cross to partake of love's bliss. Running from the pain, they never now the fullness of love's pleasure."[21]

But relationships fall apart also because, when intimacy is not achieved immediately, we mistakenly believe that we and our beloved are not compatible sexually. Yet nothing will be further than the truth. Inasmuch as chemistry exists between a man and a woman, compatibility remains a sure possibility. Yet no one comes into a relationship completely compatible. The harmonization, or marriage between two bodies, is the result of a long process that must be cultivated in the patient labor of love. Compatibility is the product of chemistry, commitment and time. This is why incidentally it is impossible to "test" sexual compatibility *before* committing to the relationship. Inasmuch as the woman can only blossom sexually in a committed relationship, her sexual performance before commitment will reveal only a stunted and limited version of who she really is

as a sexual being. I would add here that many of the sexual dysfunctions that a woman experiences are not necessarily a sign of incompatibility either, but rather a direct consequence of the woman submitting herself to a sexual situation wherein she does not feel safe or really loved. This does not mean that she is not *in fact* loved by her partner, but simply that they have not yet succeeded in creating an environment wherein she feels loved and committed to.

Thus, a woman's blossoming as a sexual being requires a space of safety, a sense that the relationship she is in is a loving and committed one. But in order to do this, a woman must learn to come to terms with and accept her body's deep need for commitment—no matter how un-emancipated and prosaic this need might seem to her—if she is to fully blossom in a sexual relationship. No matter how much we want to be "liberated," in true existentialist fashion,[22] the fact is that woman remains situated in a feminine body which seems to be wired for commitment. And to ignore this is to remain blind to one's "situatedness," that is, to the destiny and wisdom that is inscribed, whether we choose it or not, in one's given body. Simone de Beauvoir, after a life-work of attempting to free herself from the weight and responsibilities inflicted upon her freedom by her feminine body, finally comes to terms with this reality and confesses that "at every level, we [Sartre and herself] failed to face the weight of reality, priding ourselves on what we called our 'radical freedom.'"[23] For Simone de Beauvoir, radical freedom is a myth that the facticity of her own body would continue to stubbornly prevent. For her, the "weight of reality" is perceived as the negation of her freedom. Throughout her work *The Second Sex*, one gets the impression that her writing is one long lament about how being trapped in a woman's body has limited her creative freedom and her agency. And it is true that in many ways she is right. The vulnerability of our feminine body makes us more prone to be hurt by love, or impeded in our work by the emotional and physical toll that our menstrual cycle takes on our well-being, or finds our dreams of having a career profoundly shattered by the birth of a child.

Yet, one might also argue that the facticity of the feminine body, while it does restrict a certain freedom, is also the source of our wisdom and power as women. And as long as women continue to ignore this facticity, this embodied reality, they will be out of touch with their own inner wisdom and the power that lies therein. But for this, we must be able to reinterpret, *contra* de Beauvoir, the workings of the feminine body as a source of freedom and power. We must begin to see our ability to have a

child as freeing—as the deepest expression of our sexuality—rather than as a burden. We must begin to understand the emotional and physical rejuvenating power hidden in the natural ebbs and flows of our cycles. Finally, we must begin to understand our vulnerability to attachment in sexual relationships in a positive light—as a source of power rather than as an impediment to our freedom. But for this, we must understand that the profound desire that the woman has for commitment before she can fully surrender has everything to do with the nature of her surrender—which, when the conditions are right, is total: At that point, there is no turning back for her. A woman who has once surrendered belongs to her man forever, she is bound to him, she is his. Yet, the woman's ability to be bound deeply to the man she surrenders to must not be seen as an impediment to her freedom. Yes, she is not free, as she might like to be, to love a man and then freely leave him when she pleases. And this perceived "loss of freedom" is unbearable to many modern women. Many of us spend enormous energies in rejecting and repressing the inevitability of this deep binding force on our bodies and souls. But in so doing, it might be argued, we forfeit our power.

Indeed, the profound connection that woman is capable of, although it seems to limit her, can also be seen as powerful creative force: The force necessary to create a lasting, durable relationship, one that is "as strong as death."[24] But to get a sense of how this creative force operates, we must first understand that a woman's freedom does not lie in being free to do what she wants, but rather in being free to create the reality that her deepest self powerfully longs for: The reality of lasting love. It is because she finds herself irreversibly bound to her man that she finds herself best equipped for the task of awakening in her partner the possibility of a durable relationship. And while she must remain respectful of her partner's freedom and agency, the deep connection with her lover that the sexual encounter has created in her can become the catalyst for the work of love needed to create a durable relationship. Thus, far from being an impediment to her blossoming, a woman's deep ability to connect to her lover through sex can set the foundations for the labor of love which she must now begin. Her deep connectivity can become the first step in the work of love, as Anais Nin predicts: "Linking eroticism to emotion, to love, to a selection of a certain person, personalizing, individualizing, that will be the work of women."[25] In other words, the vulnerability of the feminine body to connect through sex betrays a profound and sacred calling to a very special work: That of being the witness and guardian of love in the

context of sex, that of slowly alchemizing sexual attraction into commitment, and transmuting the often capricious Eros into a durable and stable partnership. As such, the woman's sacred labor of love consists in bringing the sexual encounter to full fruition into a loving and stable partnership.

The lovers' sexual relationship in our Song thus finds itself deepened, intensified by their love for each other. As such, although the lovers in our Song have not subscribed to their society's ethical standards, their love-making is not without ideal. Although the lovers in our Song are far from perfect and are found to stray at times (the woman loses her virginity early on and the man is struggling with infidelity), the ideal of fidelity continues to be uplifted in our Song, and this through the patient work of the woman. Whatever freedom is to be found in our text is thus continuously experienced against this backdrop of love and faithfulness. Lacocque puts it beautifully in his description of the woman: "She is indeed a free woman, but her freedom consists in remaining unswervingly true to the one she loves … to him she is faithful even though outside of matrimonial bonds and social imperatives."[26] The freedom of the woman finds itself beautifully expressed, not in marking her independence from her lover, but rather in her faithfulness to him. It is paradoxically in remaining faithful that she finds herself blossoming into her full potential and agency as a woman. It is in choosing to remain faithful to her lover that she remains faithful to herself—to her embodied wisdom, to the deep desire for commitment that is lodged within her feminine body. Thus, although our Song does not seem to make much of marriage, one can sense beneath its raw eroticism a strong undercurrent of love, commitment and faithfulness which climaxes in the beloved's passionate description of a love that has become "as strong as death" (Song 8:6). But what is the secret of this transmutation of the lovers' young love into the mature state of a love "unyielding as the grave" (Song 8:6)? Is such a love truly to be found in our human experience? Or must a new dimension open up in our Song for such a love to blossom—a dimension of grace?

Notes

1. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 84.
2. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2001), 25.
3. In his beautiful essay "The Phenomenology of Eros" (*Totality and Infinity* [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004], 256–266), Levinas coins the concept of the caress to describe a mode of loving

which is not possessive nor dominating, but rather one that remains profoundly respectful of the woman's infinite and ungraspable character. Many have criticized Levinas for failing to ascribe to woman the characteristics of the "face" that he gives to the "other" in the rest of his philosophy. This text, however, might be read as giving us precisely such a definition or, more accurately, description of woman as that "other" which belongs to the sphere of intimacy, and yet, that even there, we cannot possess or control. "The Phenomenology of Eros" draws up a profoundly subtle portrait of woman as a face, as an other which escapes our grasp even in the embrace of lovemaking.

4. Ibid., 24.
5. Ibid., 26.
6. Kalyana Malla, *Ananga Ranga* (London: Forgotten Books, 2008), 3.
7. Shaykh Nefwazi, *The Perfumed Garden* (UK: Forgotten Books, 2008), 48.
8. Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 323.
9. Ibid., 324.
10. Ibid., 326.
11. Anais Nin, *In Favor of the Sensitive Man* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 7.
12. The main reason for this is that, in the continuation of Platonic philosophy, Western philosophy has adopted a profoundly problematic dualistic view of human nature, wherein its material dimension has been deemed as corrupt and perishable, whereas its spiritual dimension has been described as flawless and eternal. Thus, ethics or morality in Western thought, systematically consists in a rising above the material sphere of the body (deemed corrupt) into the spiritual or rational sphere of the mind. We see this in most of medieval philosophy, all the way until Kant, where the same dichotomy between the body and the mind, instinct and reason continues to persist. It is not surprising then, that pleasure which has to do with the body, might be viewed with stern suspicion as a detractor from the lofty moral principles of reason. This is why Kant, for example, argues (in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals)* that a moral action done with pleasure is less moral than the same action performed in pain and sacrifice.
13. Genesis 1:31.
14. Anais Nin, *In Favor of the Sensitive Man*, 3–4.
15. Luce Irigaray, *To be Two*, 26.
16. Ibid., 27.
17. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 733.
18. "It also happens that women who are defiant and stiff in their lovers' arms can be transformed by a ring on their fingers" (De Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*, 407).

19. bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 114.
20. Ibid., 116.
21. Ibid., 159.
22. The Sartrean idea that "existence precedes essence" (cf. his famous essay "Existentialism is a Humanism") is one of the main tenets of his version of existentialism. The idea behind this expression is that man (or woman) can refuse to be limited by an "essence"—that is to say, a fixed definition or role as prescribed by religion or society—but can rather forge their own identity and sense of self through their actions or existence. Such a philosophy, however, does away with any kind of situatedness, be it in a specific body or ethnicity/race. While it is true that we have certain freedoms with regards to the direction we would like our destiny to take, we remain situated in a given body and context which in turn, whether we like it or not, give a certain horizon or orientation to our actions. Heidegger understood this well when he coined, in his *Being and Time*, the concept of *Geworfenheit*, which implies our being "thrown" in a certain context or situation and which we cannot just make abstraction of. This notion of our situatedness in a body that in a way orients our possibilities is also found in Levinas and described by the concept of our creatureliness: "The unity of spontaneous freedom, working on straight ahead, and critique, where freedom is capable of being called in question and thus preceding itself, is what is termed a creature. The marvel of creation does not consist in being a creation *ex nihilo*, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself in question" (*Totality and Infinity* [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004], 89).
23. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xi.
24. Song of Songs 8:6.
25. Anais Nin, *In Favor Of the Sensitive Man*, 8–9.
26. André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote* (Salem, OR: Trinity Press International, 1998), 5.

The Crucible of Grace

For love is as strong as death
Its jealousy unyielding as the grave

—Song 8:6

We are now coming to the last of the secrets revealed to us by our African princess. And this last secret will come as a shocking reversal of everything that was said so far. Indeed, the princess's disclosure of the secret art of love has opened our eyes to the wisdom needed in order to skillfully craft a lasting relationship. As such, we have discovered that far from being a mere love poem intent on praising the other's physical beauty, this text must be read as a wisdom text. Such wisdom is not obvious and it is easy to overlook, so seduced one might be by the overall sensuality of the text, the lushness of the descriptions akin to those one might find in the Arabian nights. And yet, time and time again, one can glimpse gems of wisdom subtly woven into the beauty of the poetry, hidden within the pages of this erotic poem, and profound insights as to the ancient art and wisdom of love. There is however a stark difference between the wisdom that we might gather from the Song and the Shulamite's behavior.

Far from being wise, the feminine character of the Song of Songs seems herself to suffer from the foolishness and recklessness of youth. Even if she seems, at times, to speak words of wisdom, she is not wise herself. The things she says and the things she does are often at odds with wisdom's

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_7

voice of caution. If there is any wisdom to be gleaned from the Song of Songs then, it does not come from the lovers' own wisdom and maturity; rather their love is messy, inappropriate, reckless. In addition to their own immaturity and lack of wisdom, they seem to be completely oblivious to the prudence of the ancients. Societies have laws, principles governing relationships—and this in order to ensure that love does not find itself spoiled, marred, destroyed by the reckless passions of youth. There are clear laws of modesty, appropriate times and ways, proper rhythms. Here too the lovers fail. Every law is broken or ignored. They lack modesty. They do things too soon or too fast. There seems to be no proper order to the things they do, or, more problematic: They do things in the wrong order. Most of the time, they do not know what they are doing. Chaos and disorder dominate their relationship.

And yet, the lovers succeed. In time, their love matures and becomes one of the most celebrated loves in the Hebrew Bible. Although they make every mistake in the book, the lovers' love blossoms into a love that is "as strong as death" which "burns like a blazing fire, like the very flame of the Lord" (Song 8:6). But as such, our Song is not a good object lesson; its liberal happy ending might be seen as tricking the youth into thinking that reckless and lawless behavior has no consequences. Would it not be more appropriate to make sure, in writing such an educational piece, that the mistakes and transgressions of the lovers have tragic and dire consequences, so as to ensure that others do *not* follow in their footsteps? Must one not, in educating young readers about love, ensure that they understand the value of following the traditions of the elders and the ethos of the Bible—instead of dismantling them as the author of the Song seems to do—so as to ensure that their relationship follows the proper steps needed to mature into a lasting one? Clearly this is not the path that the author of our Song chooses to clear for his/her readers. Far from following in the footsteps of many sex educators, our author does not choose to strike fear in his/her readers' hearts as to the consequences of sexual transgression.[1] In contrast with the way that the youth are often educated about sex, our author does not serve a stern warning to his young readers to take care and protect themselves from the passions of the flesh, or else they will suffer tragic and permanent emotional or physical consequences. Our author in turn does not punish his protagonists for their mistakes and their shortcomings in order to dissuade his readers from following suit.

On the contrary, our Song seems to weave a story where the transgressions of the lovers, although at times experienced as painful, somehow find

themselves redeemed by the powerful and surprising outcome of a "love as strong as death" (Song 8:6). This might seem, to some readers, completely unfair. How is it that foolish lovers end up with the same beautiful and lasting love as wise lovers? Is it possible for the "foolish woman," described in the book of Proverbs as tearing her house down by her foolishness, to end up like the wise woman dwelling in a home blessed with love and serenity? One wonders as to how the total lack of wisdom and prudence as well as the prolific mistakes of the lovers could have led up to a love "as strong as death" (Song 8:6).[2] For things to be as such, the whole Biblical ethos must be reversed. And yet, our Song operates precisely such a reversal. Instead of serving us the Biblical ethos of justice which ensures that everyone receives the kind of love they deserve, our Song unveils the hidden workings of the more subtle Biblical dimension of unearned love, or *hesed*. As such, this *hesed* has nothing to do with the lovers' skill or their own resources of desirability or intelligence. It is not dependent on their own expertise. The Shulamite shows an awareness of this when she exclaims: "If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned" (Song 8:7). In other words, one cannot buy or manufacture love; one cannot strive to kindle it, make it work or cause it to last through human effort. For love as *hesed* is a grace, a gift; it is a space that the lovers find themselves in.

As such, far from being a mere subjective experience contained in the hearts of the lovers, love is a sacred dimension that opens up to contains *them*. This space where the lovers find themselves without having chosen to do so—for none can kindle the flame of love—is however anything but a comfortable one. Rather, this space must be understood as a crucible of transformation, a consuming fire, the "very flame of the Lord" (Song 8:6). The experience of *hesed*, precisely because it is so profoundly ecstatic and blissful, must also shake one's being at its very roots as well as cut deeply into the layers of the self. And so, this love, if surrendered to, has the power to operate a profound transformation on the lovers; it has the power to begin a deep alchemical work whereby the young selfish hearts of the lovers in our Song find themselves broken, ground, crushed so as to become enlarged, deepened and capacitated for the kind of passionate love "stronger than death" that we see in the end of the Song. Thus, it is not in the lovers' efforts, skill or in their own resources of desirability or intelligence that the secret to their lasting love can be found. Rather, what the Shulamite intuits in a brilliant moment of insight is that the love she shares with her beloved is maintained and upheld by sheer *grace*: The grace given

to them to love at all, the awakening to love and the way that this love has changed the very course of their lives. The key to their success lies then not in their prior expertise or skill, but rather in how they have allowed their love to transform them and awaken them to the wisdom of love.

What our Song teaches us is that love is much more than a feeling; it has transformative power. And it is to the degree that the lovers have yielded to the exigencies of their own love for each other that their relationship has matured. For love does not promise so much a bed of roses as it does a baptism of fire in which lovers are to be consumed and refined. This entails of course, however, that we allow this fire to perform its painful task. But too often, we want to taste only the sweetness of love without ever experiencing its pain. As Khalil Gibran beautifully put it: "Even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning. Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun, so shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth."[3] But if in our fear we "would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure," then the poet foresees only a "seasonless world" for us, without ever tasting the fullness of love's healing and experiencing all of its redemptive powers.[4]

It is thus not enough to merely feel love's passion, we must also allow this love to consume us, to transform us, to mold and shape our hearts so that we might not only love, but love well. Kierkegaard makes a beautiful statement when he speaks of love needing to "form a heart."[5] The love that is kindled in the heart must be allowed to do its work in that heart. The feeling of love is only the beginning of the journey. Its role is to awaken in the lovers a vision of who they might become, of the person they might be under its influence. But a maturation process—which is only possible through a willing surrender to the crucible of love—is needed to elevate their actions to the level of their love, and this is yet to be accomplished. And too often, this process of maturation is neglected, the crucible is avoided. We remain with the feeling and never allow our mode of being, our actions, our behaviors, to be purified, transfigured by that feeling. Our love thus never reaches its fullness. It remains a mere seed which is never allowed to burst forth into a living plant; the ego continues to reign supreme and is never encouraged to die and resurrect into our higher self. And so, in the words of the great Sufi poet Rumi we remain in "our cages with our wings spread yet we do not lift off," we remain "gasping on land but near the water" unable to "move back into the sea."[6]

And it is precisely this willingness to allow the transformation of their hearts by their love which makes the lovers' love in the Song so different from that of ordinary couples. We have already observed how the lovers in the Song progressively change. The lovers are not the same at the end as in the beginning. The woman who pines after her lover in the beginning of the Song longing for him to "kiss" her with "the kisses of his mouth" (Song 1:2) is not the same as the woman who releases her beloved at the end of the Song with these words: "Come away my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stage on the spice-laden mountains" (Song 8:14). We have seen how the Shulamite matures in the Song from a needy and obsessive lover, "faint with love" (Song 5:8) and intent on possessing and being possessed by her beloved, to a woman capable of giving her beloved the space and time to mature his love for her, a woman who knows how to wait with an attitude of quiet trust—"My lover is mine and I am his"—never giving up hope while abstaining from burdening her beloved with the weight of premature expectations. Such a woman has grown from wanting her beloved to revolve around her to a woman respectful of her man's internal rhythms and external space. Such a woman has allowed her feelings to become transfigured, purified by the love that has been awakened in her by this man.

One can say the same of the man. He too is a changed man at the end of the Song. The once indecisive man, unsure of his love for his beloved, "browsing among the lilies" (Song 2:16, 6:3, 7:10) finds his desire and interest growing for her, "my sister, my bride" (Song 4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5:1), to the point of committing to her and to her only: "Sixty queens, there may be and eighty concubines and virgins beyond number but my dove, my perfect one, is unique" (Song 6:8–9). "His desire is for me" discovers the Shulamite joyfully a few lines later (Song 7:10). He too has found his heart to have been purified by the love kindled in it at the sight of his beloved. "Purity of heart is to will one thing," as would later be observed by Kierkegaard.[7] The man's passion once dispersed and offered to any beautiful face or body encountered along the way is now reserved for his beloved and for her only. His passion too has been refined, has been purified by the transformative power of his love and is now elevated to the love of one woman.

Thus, it is inasmuch as the lovers humbly submit to the refining fire of their love, that they surrender themselves to love's commands, that they are themselves made holy by that love. It is inasmuch as the flame of the Lord (Song 8:6) progressively consumes their selfish egos that the lovers

find themselves sanctified by that love. Even though the lovers are seen transgressing the rules and customs of their society, even though their love is wild and free, even though they have broken every rule in the book, one cannot say that the lovers are *lawless*! It is just that they have submitted to a more profound law than that of society—the law of love.[8] Their allegiance is not to the elders of their community and to their laws but to each other. The only command they still hold sacred is that which is found in their beloved's face.[9] As such, the law to which the lovers submit is not found in the scripts and ancient wisdom of their respective communities but in the vulnerable face of the other. Although the lovers appear to have no concern for ethics inasmuch as they reject societal and religious principles, one cannot say that they are *un*-ethical. On the contrary, there is a powerful underlying ethics at work in the Song of Songs, but it is one that takes place on a very different level than the common understanding of ethics as compliance to a set of rules. A principle-based ethics founded in societal conventions or religious scriptures has here given way to a people-based ethics that holds the other's needs and dignity as the highest ethical command.[10] And it is precisely such a people-based ethics that constitutes the basis all principle-based ethics. That is to say, the rules and regulations of marriage and courtship find their very foundation, their very ground, in the law of love observed by the lovers in the Song.[11]

Theirs is the ethics intuited by Saint Augustine when he makes the shocking statement "love and do what you want."[12] It is inasmuch as one has submitted to the command to love, that one's rule of life is love, that the relationship is granted the grace to continue to grow and to mature and this even in the face of blatant mistakes and transgressions of societal conventions. As long as one submits to the arch-command, to the highest command, which is to love, the relationship continues to consolidate even as it seeks to free itself from human conventions. The great Sufi poet Rumi weaves a similar perspective into his poems: "Ideas of right and wrong operate until we die; love does not have those limits."[13] In other words, we need ideas of right and wrong, we need to be taught what to do, to have clear and precise rules guiding behavior *until we die*. Until we die, that is to say, until the ego has met its death, until our selfish impulses have been consumed by love, until we have been transformed and transfigured by love, *then* we can be said to truly love, and as such find that our love "does not have those limits." In other words, it is inasmuch as the lovers' love has been purified, refined by the exigencies of the face of the

other, that it has reached the purity which allows it to thrive even though it finds itself at times transgressing human rules and conventions.

As such, the lovers' love toward each other finds itself purified in the crucible of *hesed* so as to resemble divine love, and this in spite of all of its messiness and in spite of the imperfections of the lovers. One might read our Song as narrating the extraordinary event of divine love seeking to work its way through in the lovers' passion. It is then inasmuch as it is God's love that is at work in the love of the Song's lovers that Rabbi Akiba has called our Song the "holy of holies" in reference to the sacred space in the temple where God's presence could be encountered. The Song is the holy of holies because it is saturated with the consuming fire of divine love and as such, with God's presence itself. Thus, even though the love shared by the Song's lovers has not been sanctioned by a religious authority, it is considered holy, that is to say, saturated with the divine presence. Their love is considered holy not because of a ceremony or ritual but because it has been found to be sourced directly in God's love through its transformative power, the power to make holy—to purify and transform the lovers into their best selves. Thus, it is inasmuch as there has been a transformation on the part of the lovers, as their hearts have been refined in the "flame of the Lord" (Song 8:6), in this divine love that has been poured between them, that we can speak of a love that is godly, of a love that is holy.

And as such, the lovers of the Song escape public criticism. They are oblivious to the anger of the brothers (Song 1:6), immune to the shunning and attacks of the watchmen of the city walls (Song 5:7), and triumphant over the ones who "despise" them (Song 8:1). The lovers in the Song maintain their purity throughout the Song even though, to human eyes, they should be ashamed of themselves. The Song of Songs conserves its character of holiness even as it weaves human fragility with divine power. It is holy because, in spite of the limitations, weaknesses and mistakes of the lovers, it is still God's love that is being unraveled in its pages. Such a love is breaking through, making a way for itself in spite of the lover's insufficiencies and lacks, in spite of the brothers' and the watchmen's reproof. Such is the immensity of the grace of God, that he would pour out his love in the broken and calloused hearts of human beings and slowly deepen those very hearts' capacity for love, elevating mere human sentiment to the holiness of divine passion. Indeed, the whole of the Song of Songs can be read as a moment of incarnation of divine love, as a profound experience of grace, as a manifestation in human Eros of the flame of the Lord. And it is this enigmatic connection between human Eros and

the fire of God, this "profound mystery" to use the words of the Apostle,[14] that I would like to now explore.

Set me as a seal upon your heart
As a seal upon your arm

—Song 8:6

These words, incidentally uttered by the woman, have been understood by some commentators as one of the climactic passages in the Song and—in my view—as containing the first explicit mention of marriage. The woman's passionate plea for the man that he would "place [her] like a seal upon [his] heart, like a seal on [his] arm" (Song 8:6) is one of the most powerful moments of the Song. Now the seal in Near Eastern cultures is a sign of possession—whatever bears the seal of someone belongs to that person. Likewise, in her self-personification as a seal, the woman longs for the man to acknowledge that she is his, that she belongs to him. Moreover, her desire to belong to him extends from the private to the public domain. She wants to belong to him not only in the hidden regions of the heart, but also in the public eye as represented by the arm—symbol of action and power in the outside world. The urgency of her plea is, however, not to be taken for an act of desperation or possessiveness. Her desire is indeed not to possess but to be possessed. She is not asking the man to commit to her and give her the assurance of his enduring love, but rather asking that he make her his. As such, the woman is not speaking from a position of strength or manipulation but rather of vulnerability.[15] Her words do not form an ultimatum to the man, but rather a passionate plea that he would acknowledge her both privately and publicly as his.

In her passionate desire to move his heart, she makes herself poet: "For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like the very flame of the Lord" (Song 8:6–7). Her desire to belong to her man stems from a deep conviction that their love is "as strong as death," that is to say, stronger than any force that might seek to destroy it, stronger than potential problems and obstacles, stronger than disease, stronger than the change that the years may bring and yes, even stronger than the ultimate betrayal. "Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away" (Song 8:7), that is to say, the forces of death symbolized here by the water cannot overpower love, they cannot defeat it. By these words, the Shulamite hopes to move the heart of her lover to

acknowledge her as his—forever! But the words of the Shulamite are much more than mere wishful thinking. They are a marriage vow—a vow by which she is binding herself to her lover forever. But can one vouch in this way for the enduring quality of one's love? What is here the secret behind a love that is "as strong as death?"

The first clue lies in our text. There seems to be in the Shulamite's words a direct connection between her asking her lover to make her his—"Place me like a seal over your heart"—and the enduring quality of their love—"For love is as strong as death" (Song 8:6). It is as though the two are somehow related, as though the vow to love (as symbolized by the seal that the lover places on his heart and arm) has something to do with the lasting character of the love that is vowed. As though the human word had creative power! The power to transform a love that was hereto ephemeral and uncertain into lasting love. But one wonders how, almost by magic, the human word might have such an effect on the quality of one's love! In his magnificent commentary on love, *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard comes to the same intuition as the Shulamite. In a reflection on marriage, Kierkegaard observes a direct connection between the pledge to love no matter what, or duty, and the transformation of spontaneous love into eternal love: "True love which has undergone the change of eternity by becoming duty is never changed; it is simply, it loves and never hates, never hates the beloved."[16] In other words, the decision to love, or duty, operates a profound change on the love that has been hereto experienced between the lovers, giving it the quality of eternity. But one might wonder as to how duty operates this change of eternity.

According to Kierkegaard, the power of the pledge to love does not magically lie in the words themselves, but in the way that they redefine the nature of the love between the lovers. By pledging to love the beloved no matter what, the lover is, by those words, raising his love from the level of the relative to the level of the absolute. That is to say, in pledging his love, the lover is in effect saying that his love is no more relative to the beloved and to her behavior or attitude toward him but that his love is now absolute—independent of the way that she chooses to act, speak or think. Kierkegaard describes such a love as follows: "In this way the 'you shall' makes love free in blessed independence; such a love stands and does not fall with variations in the object of love; it stands and falls with eternity's law, but therefore it never falls. Such a love is not dependent on this or on that. It is dependent on the one thing—that alone which makes for freedom—and therefore it is eternally independent."[17] Thus the

pledge operates a profound transformation in the very substance of the love experienced between the lovers. Hereto relative to the beloved, the love now becomes absolute. No matter what the beloved says or does, the lover that has subsumed his love under the banner of duty will continue to love. And as such, his love is raised to the level of the eternal. It is no more a mere feeling, but a choice. Such a love cannot be swayed; it endures eternally.

Yet one wonders as to whether the pledge to love is enough to ensure the endurance of a marriage. So many marriages go awry that it would seem that the pledge to love, even with the best intentions, fails to accomplish the necessary transmutation in the lovers' love. A love that is completely absolute seems almost inhuman. There is no human being that can love so purely, so absolutely. And even if one of the partners raises their love to the level of the absolute, what is to say that the other will find the level of dedication and inner strength within themselves to do the same? More is needed to make a marriage work. But this, the Shulamite also knows. We have seen that, at the very center of the elegy of love uttered by the Shulamite, lies a reference to God: "It burns like a blazing fire, like the very flame of the Lord" (Song 8:6). In these words, the Shulamite is making a direct connection between the power of her love and the flame of the Lord, as though it were one and the same thing. What makes the love between the lovers so strong is thus the fact that the fire that burns within them, that is "as strong as death" and which cannot be quenched by "many rivers," is of the same substance as the flame of the Lord. But what can this possibly mean?

Simply this: That the human word must be allied with the divine word for love to fully achieve its transmutation into eternity. The human oath must be coupled by the divine blessing, that is to say, the human love must open itself up to being nourished, replenished by the divine love which lies as its source. In a prayer uttered at the onset of his *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard recognizes the need for all human love to find its way back to its source if it is to remain true: "How could love be rightly discussed if you were forgotten, O God of Love, source of all love in heaven and on earth, you who spared nothing but gave all in love, you who are love, so that one who loves is what he is only by being in you."[18] In other words, God is the source of all love in the world and one loves rightly only inasmuch as one is inspired by God. There can thus be no lasting, true, authentic love, according to Kierkegaard, without a reference to God, without a connection explicit or implicit to the source of all love.

This in turn clarifies the spirit of humility and despondency in which the oath of love is to be uttered. Of himself, the lover cannot love. The human word by itself cannot endure. This is why many shy away from the oath, for who can keep such a promise? Why promise love when one feels in the depths of one's heart that one can never keep such an oath? And indeed, no one can predict the future: One might change, or one's partner might change. How then can one vouch for one's future self? In his writings on marriage, Gabriel Marcel makes a similar observation, declaring the "ground of fidelity" to be "precarious to us as soon as we commit ourselves to another who is unknown."[19] Inasmuch as the other ever escapes our grasp, what is to prevent him or her from changing and becoming someone we neither recognize nor love anymore? What then of the oath? Are we still meant to keep an oath to a person that we no longer feel attracted to? Why then make a promise that we might not keep in the end? According to Gabriel Marcel, this is precisely the spirit in which we must make this promise: With the deep and sincere realization that one might not be able to keep it. The oath of fidelity thus contains the admission that one cannot keep this oath. And this is precisely why such an oath is sworn by God. But what does this mean?

Simply this: That the lover surrenders himself and his beloved into the hands of God. The oath is not so much a promise as the expression of a deep longing to keep one's love alive, an outcry, a desperate plea, bursting out at the seams of the carefully crafted words of the oath: "Let it be, Lord, let it be! You can make this happen!" Gabriel Marcel puts it as follows: "This ground of fidelity which necessarily seems precarious to us as soon as we commit ourselves to another who is unknown, seems on the other hand unshakable when it is based not, to be sure, on a distinct apprehension of God as someone other, but on a certain appeal delivered from the depths of my own sufficiency … this appeal presupposes a radical humility in the subject."[20] Far from coming from a place of certainty in the lasting character of their love, the oath is a desperate appeal which rises from the lovers' sense of their own insufficiency. As such, the oath is an expression of profound humility. It stems from the realization that, without God's help, the lovers' oath rings empty and false! Thus, the oath is not a consolidation of the lovers' own willpower into duty, but rather a breaking of that will, and as such, an opening up of that will to the source of all love and power.

It is in this sense that, for Marcel, the oath of fidelity is creative. Inasmuch as the human will open up to the divine source of love, it finds

its own finite love replenished and renewed. The oath thus has the potency of recreating one's love, rejuvenating it, transforming it into something more. But the will to love expressed in the oath does not of itself create this love, rather, inasmuch as it allows itself to be permeated and saturated by God's love, it receives a greater potency to love than it is itself capable of. It becomes capable of loving where it is impossible to love, at the heart of the deepest pain, the deepest betrayal. As such, one might say it is *inspired*. And it is precisely as inspired that it is creative. For creation is not, according to Marcel, mere "production" of something from one's will, but rather it implies an "active receptivity" to inspiration by something greater than itself.[21] Marcel puts it as follows: "Creation is never a production; it implies an active receptivity."[22] To create is not, for Marcel, to produce out of one's own capacity, but to rather to open oneself up to a work that is beyond our capacity.

Fidelity is thus creative not as a work of duty, but rather as a work of art, ever inspired and renewed by God's love. The lover who has performed the oath of love and attuned his heart to the source of love can rest assured that his love can endure the most bitter winter and find itself again, in time, pulsating with the life of a new spring. Such a love is able to weather anything, for it knows that every death brings with it renewal and rebirth. Such a love can surrender to any sorrow and pain, for it knows that every tear will mend and heal into an even stronger and deeper commitment. And such a love cannot possibly stem from the self's own resources but flows out of a deeper source—that of divine love itself. As Kierkegaard keenly observes: "Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person's love originate even more deeply in God's love."[23] As such, the lasting character of the lovers' love does not lie in their own power or in the strength of their own promises, but rather must here also be understood as the overflowing of *grace*. It is the hidden source of God's love which has been nourishing their love for one another and which is now being disclosed in the Shulamite's words.

What makes for the profound meaning of the marriage ceremony is not then so much a human vow as it is a divine vow: That what God has begun, he will also finish; that the love that he has kindled between the lovers, he will also continue to nurture, to strengthen and to deepen. The ritual of marriage is nothing but the unveiling of God's hidden work of love; it is the celebration of everything that *God* has orchestrated, from the lovers' first encounter, to their first kiss, to their first confession of love to

each other, to finally, their first night together. At the very heart of the lovers' love for each other, we find God! Far from being a mere secular treatise on human love, the Song of Songs sings the love of God! In the words of Richard Davidson, "the love between man and woman is not just animal passion or evolved natural attraction, but holy love ignited by God himself."[24] It is thus this "flame of the Lord"[25] glimpsed by the Shulamite which constitutes the secret of the endurance of the love between the Song's lovers and this in spite of all of their mistakes. One learns here that all the wisdom of the world cannot save a relationship! It needs genuine renewal, a connection to the source of love, to endure. In other words, it needs *grace*.

The key to the lovers' enduring love in our Song, and this in spite of all of the messiness, mistakes, betrayals, is grace. Love then is far more than a mere subjective feeling susceptible to dying out or becoming cold: It is a flame which God himself kindles into a consuming fire which, if surrendered to, can profoundly transform and melt the lovers into "one flesh." As such, love endures not from the lovers' own strength or skill, but because God himself stands as the "alpha and omega" of the whole process. He himself is the kindler and the sustainer of the flame of love. Love then is a state of grace rather than something the lovers have any control over. It is a gift which if received and acquiesced to in humility can transform water into wine, the caprices of passion into lasting holy love. But there is so much more to the story than this. The lovers are more than mere channels for the love of God. They are also a "sign and wonder"[26] testifying about a deeper drama, a yet undisclosed script: That of the love between humankind and God. As such, the Song of Songs is much more than a mere human love affair; it is also the stage to the cosmic drama of divine love for humanity. And it is with this mystical reading of the Song, one which strives to detect, between the lovers' embraces and kisses, the very outpouring of God's love for humanity, that I would like to conclude this book.

Notes

1. Most sex education classes can be summarized as follows: Don't have sex! And if you do, all of these diseases—long list of sexually transmitted diseases described in graphic detail—will happen to you … including pregnancy! I can hardly imagine anyone graduating from such a class with a healthy view of sex.

2. Interestingly the success of the lovers' love goes against some commentators' view of the Song as a "cautionary tale" that preaches "about the risks of passion" and whose moral is "to stay upstairs in the balcony, Shulamite woman, for withheld consummation is the best kind" (Daphne Merkin, "The Women in the Balcony: On Re-Reading the Song of Songs," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, edited by Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel [New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994], 249–250). The fact that the lovers succeed and do not receive divine punishment or the withholding of divine blessing for their reckless mistakes shows that grace permeates our Song and that it is not limited by or relative to human behavior.
3. Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), 11.
4. Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, 12.
5. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964), 29.
6. Rumi, *Bridge to the Soul*, translated by Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 44.
7. Cf. the beautiful essay *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (Melbourne, AU: Rough Draft Printing, 2014) by Søren Kierkegaard.
8. And as such, the Song of Songs remains profoundly Biblical, and this in spite of its subversive character, for, as Lacocque puts it beautifully, "love is the core of revelation; all the rest is commentary" (André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote* [Salem, OR: Trinity Press International, 1998], 39).
9. Here one cannot help thinking of Levinas' ethics of the face which operates the very central shift from modernity's principle-based ethics—whether the principle is external as in Hobbes, or internal as in Kant—to a people-based ethics, where the command is found not in a law concocted by reason but in the vulnerable, needy face of the other. In Levinas it is no more reason which pushes us to do the moral thing, as in Kant, but an emotional response to the other's face and the plea for help one finds in it.
10. This idea of the Song of Songs having ethical value in spite of its unconventionality has been observed by Ginsburg who describes the Shulamite as a prime example of virtue and this even though she breaks every rule in the book: "The individual who passes through the extraordinary temptations recorded in the Song and yet remains faithful is a woman. Who can find a virtuous woman? This was a question for the Ancients, was reiterated in the Middle Ages and is still asked by many. Here is a reply to Solomon's own inquiry. He has found one at least of spotless integrity, and her virtue is recorded in Scripture, for the defense of woman against a prevalent but unjust suspicion" (C. D. Ginsburg, "The Importance of the Book," in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 1st series, edited by Athalya Brenner [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 47).

11. This is also Carol Fontaine's observation: "The Song is a harsh critic of the status quo, religious or secular. It presents an internal hermeneutic on sexuality that needs to be fore-grounded in any Biblical ethics of sexuality and in any use of the marriage metaphor" (Carol Fontaine, "Song? Songs? Whose Song? Reflections of a Radical Reader," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, edited by Lesleigh Cushing Strahlberg and Peter S. Hawkins [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], 305).
12. Cf. Saint Augustine and his seventh homily on First John (cf. *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, translated by Boniface Ramsey [New York: New City Press, 2008]).
13. Rumi. *Bridge to the Soul*, 46.
14. Cf. Ephesians 5:22–24.
15. Carol Fontaine also observes this: "The Song's conversation with the reader concerns a partnership in Eros, rather than subjugation to social codes and expectations. The beloved asks him to set her as a seal upon her heart; this is an invitation not a command. It pierces the veil of religious language more powerfully to me than any other speech in the Bible" (Carol Fontaine, *Scrolls of Love*. "Song? Songs? Whose Song? Reflections of a Radical Reader," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, edited by Lesleigh Cushing Strahlberg and Peter S. Hawkins [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], 304).
16. Søren Kierkegaard. *Works of Love*, 49.
17. Ibid., p. 53.
18. Cf. Kierkegaard's Prayer in the very first page of *Works of Love*.
19. Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 167.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 156.
22. Ibid.
23. Søren Kierkegaard. *Works of Love*, 9.
24. Richard Davidson. *Flame of Yahweh* (Peabody, MA Hendrickson, 2007), 629–630.
25. André Lacocque also notes: "Love is here compared to a flame of Yahweh. … This indicates precisely that human love can only be described with terms commonly used for divine love" (*Romance She Wrote*, 171).
26. I'm borrowing an expression here from Pete Scazzero, founder of the Emotionally Healthy Spirituality movement. In his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), he describes the marriage between a man and woman as a sign and wonder pointing to the deeper mystery of God's love.

Is God a Woman?

A reflection on the Song of Songs would not be complete if it did not address the traditional mystical reading of the text.[1] And although the approach of this chapter has been to read the text on a strictly horizontal level as the stage of a human love shared between a man and a woman, there is, I believe, a dimension of depth to the Song that has been noted by both rabbinic and ecclesiastic commentaries alike. There is a deeper layer in our Song which reveals an even more profound wisdom, a deeper secret, than the one we have been excavating so far. This secret has to do with our text being read as an allegory for the shocking, unheard of, preposterous *love story* between God and humanity. Read in this light, our text would lift the veil on a romance that has for the most part remained hidden and undisclosed in the pages of human history. A love that dare not come to the light of day, that prefers the intimacy of poetry whispered between kisses to the official recordings of historians.

Such is the secret love that the traditional allegorical interpretation has tried to systematically unveil in our Song and this in both the Jewish and Christian traditions of interpretation. Thus, according to the allegorical interpretation, God is played by the man in our story and humanity is represented by the woman. This interpretation is in turn confirmed by the Hebrew Bible itself where God is oft depicted as a bridegroom and Israel as his bride.[2] Thus, deep beneath the twists and turns of this love story, one might then read the deeper drama of the love between God and humanity. As such, the woman represents the pining of humanity for God

A. Doukhan, *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4_8

and the man represents the God who is finally conquered by the unrelenting faith and worship of his creation. The erotic encounters between the lovers must then be re-interpreted as those between God and his people, giving rise to new and fecund new interpretations of the way that God relates to humans.[3]

As such, the Song anticipates the experiences of the great mystics in both traditions, who, in fact, often refer back to our text in order to make sense of their own search for God.[4] Again, it is interesting to note that in most cases, if not all, the mystic is described much like that of the woman in our Song: As one engaged on a long, painful quest for her beloved; in this case, the divine presence which, after a long dark night of the soul, manifests itself fully and in all of its light. Moreover, the stance of the mystics is often described as a feminine stance of receptivity and openness to divine light, again strengthening the case that God is male and that the faithful believer is female. As such, it is no wonder that our Song, with its predominant feminine character, has become one of the main references in the works of the mystics, again in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

This is not, however, the line of interpretation that I wish to adopt here in this mystical reading of our text. Our Song is, in my view, way too subversive in character to bend to this kind of patriarchal reading. On the contrary, I would suggest that a number of clues in our text point to a reading of the Song in which it is the *woman* who represents *God* and the man who represents humanity.[5]

The first clue that in the divine romance the woman plays a central role,[6] and as such, perhaps a divine role, is the centrality given to the woman in our text. The woman is in control of the relationship from beginning to end, she is the alpha and omega of our Song. The text opens and concludes with her words whereby she lures the man to herself: "Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth," and whereby she releases him at the end of the Song: "Come away my lover, be like a gazelle" (Song 8:14).[7] As such, she resembles the God of Israel much more than the man who is given a rather secondary role in our text. Moreover, the woman is given a central role in arousing the man and not vice versa: "Under the apple tree I roused you; there your mother conceived you" (Song 8:5). In this passage, the man is not only roused by the woman, he is birthed by her. Both roles however are divine roles: God birthing humanity in an act of creation and then arousing it to love him.

The second clue which, in my view, points to the woman playing the divine part is the passion that animates her. She is clearly the more

emotional one, constantly pining, suffering, longing for her beloved. The Song climaxes in the end with her passionate plea for a love as strong as death, which no waters can conquer. As such, however, she again resembles the God of Israel in a more profound way than the man who seems rather dispassionate throughout the Song. A glimpse at the poetic rants of the prophets reveal striking similarities between the woman and a God himself always pining, suffering, longing after an elusive, dispassionate people: "My people … have forsaken me,"[8] "have I been a desert to Israel … why do my people say 'we are free to roam,'"[9] "I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her."[10] The God here depicted by the prophets of Israel is much closer in character to the passionate woman of our Song, who is "sick with love" than to the man.

This line of interpretation of God as woman puts me at odds however with more traditional lines of interpretation. But I believe that this inversion of the roles—God as woman and the human race as male—is in line with the Song of Song's general impulse. We have seen how our Song calls for a re-evaluation and re-imagining of traditional roles and patterns. Its reversal of the male and female roles—the woman playing a more active role and the male a more passive one—opens a whole new era of interpretation, opens up a scope of new possibilities, of new dynamics of interactions between men and women. Why not prolong this line of thought where traditional *roles* are reversed to dare attempt a reversal of traditional *metaphors* for God too? Perhaps renewed understandings of God and of his love for us might be disclosed were we to venture on this new ground.

To think of God as woman, and especially of God as embodied by the woman in our Song, paints a totally new picture of God than the one we are used to. As such, a healthy iconoclasm might result from this in which rigid definitions of God might be shattered for fresh new insights on his nature and on his love for us. We are so used to thinking of God as a male warrior figure ever ready to fight our battles and redeem us from evil, that the idea of him being embodied by an African Princess in love seems unthinkable, even blasphemous. But why is that? The Hebrew Bible contains as many feminine metaphors as masculine ones for our exploration, notably in the prophetic works. There, God can be seen depicted as a mother feeding her infant,[11] as a woman giving birth,[12] as a mother comforting her child.[13] To depict God as woman is as such not so far-fetched.

To depict God as an African princess, however, is a rather extraordinary turn of events! This is not a metaphor that anyone could have anticipated from reading the Hebrew Bible. And yet, our Song seems to draw the

curtain on this yet undisclosed face of God. I personally rather like the idea. Have we not for far too long imprisoned God in the persona of an imperialistic and authoritarian dictator that is controlling, judgmental, superior and detached? But "God is not a Christian" judiciously affirms Desmond Tutu. "Indeed he isn't!" would agree our Song. God is a woman in love, and an emotional woman at that! And as such, a completely different portrait of God emerges: A God who loves passionately, even recklessly without a thought for the "shoulds" and "should nots" of society. But likewise, a portrait emerges of a God who is shy, who does not want to overstep his boundaries, who understands, like the Shulamite, that patience is needed in order for his beloved to grow fond of him.[14] And so, just like the Shulamite, God has two ways of approaching his beloved: Reckless abandon and discrete reserve. The exploration of these two responses to love will, in turn, draw up the portrait of a profoundly feminine God. We turn then to the first one of these: The reckless abandon of God.

The first thing that one notices about the Shulamite is her lack of prudence. She is pictured in the beginning of the text as one who has neglected her "vineyard" (Song 1:6), making her brothers angry with her. We have seen how the vineyard represents here the woman's sexuality. To neglect the vineyard thus clearly implies that the Shulamite has not kept herself "pure," she has not guarded her sexuality. As such, the brothers—whose job is to protect their sister's sexual purity—are angry with her. She has not only dishonored herself but as such, she has dishonored *them*. That is why they are angry rather than merely concerned and pained. The woman that we encounter in the first pages of our Song is someone who clearly has no thought to her own purity, to her own honor. She does not "keep" herself, guard or protect herself as she is supposed to. Likewise, she does not wait for the man to take the initiative in the traditional way of modesty. Rather, she brazenly initiates the relationship with the shocking words: "Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth" (Song 1:1). Rather than prayerfully waiting for the man to initiate romance, the woman takes matters in her own hands and plunges, without a thought to the risks involved, into a relationship with him.

As such, she shatters all religious stereotypes as to how a God-fearing woman should act. She evades any ideal that religion might want to project upon her. She does not keep herself as required of her, she lacks modesty and discretion and she openly expresses her passion in a way that is uncharacteristic of Biblical feminine characters. And yet, here she is in the

Bible. And if we were to believe Rabbi Akiba, in the holiest part of the Bible! As though we might also learn something from her, something in fact of utmost importance. As though something might be discovered here about love in its primal and wild form, before it finds itself harnessed and contained by conventions and social constructs. As such, the Shulamite's love, although inappropriate and unconventional, does not constitute a degraded form of love, but rather must be seen as a revelation of love in its original state, in all of its wildness, before human fallenness, when all things were still new. Phyllis Trible makes precisely this observation when she defines the Song of Songs as a return to Eden.[15] This is why perhaps Rabbi Akiba celebrates our Song as the holy of holies: Because the love that is found there is not the "old wine" that social conventions and constructs must constantly try to keep fresh, but rather the "new wine" that does not need additives or preservatives to keep the freshness of its taste.

But there is more. Inasmuch as the Shulamite ushers us into the holy of holies, that is to say, into the very presence of God, as intuited by Rabbi Akiba, perhaps her behavior might draw the veil upon the very essence of God's love. As such, the Shulamite's reckless ways might well give us a certain insight into the way that God himself loves. But here every traditional concept of God must be swept away and the curtain drawn on a wild, reckless and passionate God who loves us, who longs for us, pines for us and is willing to break every rule of propriety, every command, in order to reach us! A God who is ready to sacrifice his dignity, his honor, his transcendence—yes, even his holiness—in order to be close to us. But this brings us behind the scenes of traditional perceptions of God as a distant, invisible, transcendent God, who thunders commands from Sinai and draws boundaries around his holiness—the God who must be sought with all of one's heart, who commands us to love *him*. The Shulamite sheds a whole new light on this seemingly exacting, revealing the unspoken love and passion behind the apparent sternness and severity of a God who commands us to love him perhaps because his desire for us cannot withstand rejection! Who commands us to love him out of a place of deep love and longing, rather than out of a sentiment of his own power and majesty.

And so, through the Shulamite, we are given access to the hidden heart of God, to his undisclosed passion, to the part of him that he could only partially reveal to the hardened, calloused and bitter slaves that he had just redeemed from their Egyptian bondage. Such a God comes closer to the

passionate God of the prophets who is portrayed desperately seeking out his people rather than commanding them to seek him. A God who breaks with propriety, a violent God who does not play by the rules and who will go to any extent to have his beloved back. André Neher speaks of the "scandal" of the God of the prophets who describe him as an "irruption into the edifice of Hebrew temporality,"[16] sweeping away all personal plans and projects. The God of the prophets is a game-changer, who, with violence, intrudes upon the self and profoundly traumatizes it, disturbing its status quo, its complacency, its false securities. Such is the God depicted by the prophet Hosea who makes his beloved into "a parched land and [slays] her with thirst"[17] that she might remember her Lord, and who corners her in the desert that she might be compelled by default to remember her first love.[18] Such is also the God depicted by the prophet Amos who violently shatters Israel's comfortable and prosperous life in order to awaken her to his love, striking down "gardens and vineyards," devouring "fig and olive trees," and yes, even killing her "young men" and filling her "nostrils with the stench."[19]

But such a God still suffers from a certain machismo[20] that we do not find in the Shulamite.[21] The Shulamite does not do violence to her beloved; she does not wall him in,[22] humiliate him in public[23] or threaten him.[24] Her love is in fact much closer to that depicted in the Kabbalistic writings of Judaism.[25] The God intuited in the minds of the mystics of Safed is not the masculine God depicted in the prophets who with violence imposes his love and his decrees. The God of the Kabbalistic writings is, far to the contrary, depicted as having feminine attributes, and as such, a feminine heart and emotionality.[26] As such, he loves not in the violent and volatile way depicted in the prophets, but in a deeply enduring, compassionate and long-suffering way. Thus, whereas the God of the prophets tend to see God as a passionate male figure who demands love from his people or else, the Kabbalistic writings depict a God whose essence is female and whose proximity is found at the very heart of transgression and exile. For the Kabbalists, this feminine essence of God, or the *Shekhinah*, suffers with Israel, pursues Israel and goes with it in exile even as it finds itself expulsed from the face of God because of its sins.

Such a feminine presence of God also finds itself moved with passion toward her people; not a jealous and violent passion as we find in the prophets, but rather a profound, painful longing for her people. Thus, according to Catherine Chalier, "the divinity … sympathizes with its creatures, it suffers and rejoices with them."[27] Such a God is a far cry from the

God of the prophets, who in his pain, rejects and expulses Israel from its presence. No! Such a God follows Israel in its exile, pining after her people, even as she has been rejected by them. This is a God who has lost all self-respect, who does not hesitate to humble herself for the sake of love. And as such, we are faced with a divinity which strangely resembles our Shulamite venturing out into the unfriendly streets at night searching for her lover who has just rejected her (Song 5:6–7). This proximity between the Shulamite and the *Shekhinah* in exile is in fact noted by Moses Cordovero who does not hesitate to quote our Song and refer to the Shulamite in his description of God as "sick with love,"[28] thus paving the way to an understanding of God as feminine and as being capable of emotions and passions. Thus, God is here directly related to the woman in our Song, thereby strengthening the case that God's love is better embodied by the woman than by the man in the Song.

And so, we have a God who not only longs for the love of his people, but who is willing to recklessly pursue that love even to the point of sacrificing his holiness, that is to say, his separation and transcendence. The *Shekhinah* sacrifices all for the sake of her people. This portrait of God as passionately and recklessly searching for man does not, incidentally, begin with the Kabbalists. It is found in the very first pages of the Hebrew Bible when God calls out to Adam and Eve "where are you?" In these first pages, we already can get a sense of a God who yearns for his people and who is willing to pursue them. Thus, as Abraham Heschel beautifully puts it, the Hebrew Bible speaks "not only of man's search for God but of God's search for man."[29] Such a God is not concerned with the boundaries of his holiness, nor in what might be deemed appropriate for a deity to do. But, forsaking his own glory and height, he ventures into the garden, looking for his beloved. Martin Buber notes this willingness of God to sacrifice his loftiness for the sake of humanity when he exclaims: "How are we to understand that God, the All-Knowing, said to Adam, Where art thou?"[30] How are we to understand such a God, who sacrifices his divinity, his omnipotence and his omniscience, in order to bend down and look for his creatures?

Such a question explodes the borders of Hebrew thought, bringing us at the very frontiers of the Hebrew Bible to the uncanny and outrageous territory explored by the gospels. The Buberian question lies at the heart of the mystery which the gospels attempt to describe. Does not the encounter with such a God, willing to part with his holiness for the sake of his people, bring us to the fringes of what the gospels were trying to

intimate? Does not such a willingness to lose everything for the sake of love come eerily close to the God depicted in the words of the witnesses present during the strange and marvelous times when the divine presence itself walked the earth? This presence is depicted as having forfeited everything for the sake of love, "who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with god a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant."[31] This is a God who for the sake of love exchanges its garment of glory for the rags of a servant![32] This is a God who has come out of the holy of holies and is found walking in the streets of Jerusalem still wearing his priestly garment.[33] This is a God who is not afraid of being touched, of being pressed against by the human throng. Is this not precisely what our Shulamite is doing when she leaves the safe walls of her dwelling to take to the streets at night in search of her beloved? And is she not ready to sacrifice everything, to break through every limit, every boundary, every rule of propriety and chastity for the sake of love? Does not her love overflow any human attempt to place limits upon it?

To open the pages of the gospels is to find oneself drawn into a profoundly unruly love that is not afraid to break the rules in order to quench the desperate human thirst for compassion. The story of the woman at the well features as one of the most exemplary manifestations of this love that breaks not only with Jewish custom which forbade eating and drinking with non-Jews but also with the rules of modesty which forbade a man to have a conversation with a woman in a solitary place. Both customs are here discarded for the sake of a woman's abandoned heart. The laws of ritual purity also find themselves suspended for the sake of love when lepers are not only healed but *touched*. The laws of the Sabbath are broken seven times for the sake of alleviating human pain and human shame. Whores, traitors and pagans become disciples of God. The love portrayed in the gospels destroys every wall, breaks every boundary, every convention and every law, in order to draw near to its beloved. It is not afraid of being criticized, misunderstood, humiliated, shamed and even killed for the sake of love. Very much like the Shulamite's, the love depicted in the gospels has no concern for its public image, its honor or even its safety. It recklessly pursues its beloved without a thought to the risks involved.

Thus, far from constituting a lesser form of love, the Shulamite's love reveals the originary form of divine love in all of its wildness, recklessness and abandon. Such a love is too much for human propriety; it exceeds all the limitations placed upon it by human convention and etiquette. As Kierkegaard pointedly notes: "When an oak nut is planted in a clay pot,

the pot breaks; when new wine is poured into old leather bottles, they burst. What happens when the god plants himself in the frailty of a human being if he does not become a new person and a new vessel?"[34] Likewise, the love of the Shulamite, because it is sourced in the wild and reckless love of God, breaks all limits, bursts all conventions: It cannot be controlled, it cannot be contained. As such, it resembles closely the Hebrew concept of *hesed*, that is to say, of a love which vastly exceeds the demands of the law, which bursts out of the seams of legality. André Neher gives us a beautiful portrait of this kind of love: "*Hesed* … is not reduced to the strict letter of the law, or by ethical rules. It is a sympathy which goes beyond divine ordinance. … It constitutes an attempt to awaken that which in the human soul is akin to the infinite, and to draw into the divine covenant human resources yet untapped and undisclosed … *hesed* opposes itself to the sacrifices in its exigency of inner piety, of a stance taken by the heart … it always goes beyond the straight and narrow way of the law."[35]

As *hesed*, the Shulamite's love has no concern for its own rights and benefits; it does not seek justice and fairness for itself. No, such a love belongs to the dimension of grace or of *hesed*. Such is the love that Kierkegaard praises in his *Works of Love* when observing how true love overthrows justice and thus although "justice tries in vain to secure for each person his own; it cannot maintain the distinction between mine and yours; in the confusion it cannot keep the balance and therefore throws away the scales—it despairs. Terrible spectacle. Yet does not love in a certain sense, even if in the most blissful way, produce the same confusion … love is a revolution, the most profound of all, but the most blessed."[36] Thus, according to Kierkegaard, where there is love, there is no calculations of dues, of what is to be "mine and yours." Love "throws away the scales." But as such, love is a revolution—it overturns the human order of justice; all that society has worked toward in order to create a safe and orderly space for humans to thrive, love overturns in the name of something higher, in the name of grace.[37]

And it is precisely this love that the watchmen in our Song do not understand. Mistaking the Shulamite's passion for inappropriateness and for a breach in ethics, they give her a stern, violent rebuke. The brothers' anger against her not keeping her vineyard is of the same order. Their protective impulse is described at the end of the our Song where the Shulamite is referred as the "little sister" who must become a wall with "towers of silver" and a door enclosed with "panels of cedar" (Song 8:9). In other words, her heart must be guarded and protected until the day

that she is "spoken for," that is to say, until the day that her love finds a safe resting place in the marriage contract. What the watchmen do not understand is that love has no resting place, and that, like any form of wildlife, it cannot survive within the enclosure of walls and doors. The love that seeks its own, that fears for its life, has never truly spread its wings, has never tasted freedom. This kind of love is described in the gospels as seeking desperately to gain its life and, precisely because of this, losing it in the end: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."[38] The great Sufi poet Rumi makes a similar point when he sighs: "Why does the soul not fly when it hears the call? Why does a fish gasping on land but near the water no move back into the sea? … We are out of our cages with our wings spread yet we do not lift off."[39]

Ultimately what the watchmen and the brothers do not understand is that in the outpour of her love, the Shulamite does not lose herself but rather finds herself. We have already observed how the woman in the beginning of the Song is radically different from the woman in the end of the Song. In the beginning the Shulamite comes across as a needy, obsessive, insecure girl longing for her beloved to spread "his banner" (Song 2:4) over her, that is to say, to give her a sense of belonging and security. The woman at the end of the Song however has attained the maturity to give her beloved the freedom to come and go as he pleases. She is at home in herself and does not need her beloved to give her a sense of identity. In the outpouring of her love, she has not been depleted but rather filled. Kierkegaard makes a similar observation: "Then the wondrous thing occurs that is heaven's blessing upon self-denying love—in salvation's mysterious understanding all things become his, his who had no *mine* at all, his who in self-denial made yours all that was his. In other words, God is all things, and by having no *mine* at all, self-denial's love won God and won all things. The person who loses his soul will gain it."[40] Thus in choosing to love in the very way that God loves, the Shulamite has "won God and all things." Her act of *imitatio dei* brings her to a hereto unfathomed proximity with God. In loving like God—with reckless abandon, without a thought to the self—the Shulamite receives everything back; in emptying herself, she is filled. For it is out of the cinders of the self, that the one who loves, like the firebird, is reborn. And it is in throwing off the protective cloak of society's approval that the Shulamite finds herself receiving a garment of divine light.[41] As such, she is perfectly safe—safe in the embrace of the very divine love that she has become a vessel for.

But there is another side of God, just as there is another side to our Shulamite. Although she is indeed, for the most part, depicted in the Song as a passionate, reckless lover, the woman at times also shows a certain discretion and even reserve. For example, the woman withdraws from her lover's advances in a passage that might have been overlooked if it had not been set at the very heart of the poem. In the scene where the man is seen knocking ardently, even violently on his beloved's door, desiring passionately to enter and be with her, the woman refuses herself to him in a gesture that we have decrypted in the preceding chapter as an essential moment of the love encounter. For the first time in the Song, the woman is seen in a stance of discretion and even shyness—she hesitates to open to her lover even though her heart longs for him. We saw however that her refusal is not an indication of her lack of love; rather it stems from a certain reserve—a reserve that our Song seems to understand as an essential constituent of love.

And so likewise, inasmuch as the woman constitutes a metaphor for God, we get a portrait of a God who is also at times discrete, reserved and shy. A God who in the midst of his passionate pursuit of our heart will at times withdraw, fall silent, show a certain reserve, even distance toward the one that he loves. The silence of God is a theme that has been observed in certain historical times, when God seems unforgivingly absent, even disengaged, from the oppression and violence inflicted on his people. Such is the silence that the famous Partisan Song, composed in the Jewish ghetto of Vilna during the Nazi occupation, describes when it speaks of "skies of lead." But this silence is also experienced in the temporality of individuals. Mystics such as Saint John of the Cross have described this silence as the "dark night of the soul" when darkness has taken over the heart and mind of the mystic and it seems that God has forsaken him. Yet, if we are to understand these moments of silence on the part of God in the light of the Shulamite's behavior, we ought to avoid interpreting these moments when God is silent as an indication of a lack of love on his part. Just like the Shulamite's heart longs for her beloved, even while she withdraws from him, God's heart also remains "awake" with a love unexpressed, even while he remains silent.

But then why does he withdraw? Why does he sometimes recede from our vision, remain hidden, distant, and this often at the times that we most passionately need and desire him? Why such seeming cruelty?[42] A subtle analysis is needed here, one that is able to read between the lines, to grasp the unsaid—that is to say, a hermeneutical approach is needed in order to

understand what lies behind this seeming cruel silence of God. Again, the Shulamite's behavior and motives behind this behavior is here particularly illuminating. Perhaps, like the Shulamite's, God's withdrawal is a function of his approach; it is a moment of his love. But how does this work? What does silence and withdrawal have to do with love? Are they not precisely the signs of a dysfunctional relationship, that something has gone horribly wrong? How does this reserve, this distance on the part of God, constitute in fact an approach?

The answer has to do with the structure of desire. Indeed, inasmuch as desire feeds on distance, the lover intent on kindling and protecting the flame of love will have to take this into account. A good lover then is one who knows how to maintain the delicate balance between presence and absence, proximity and withdrawal. The seductive lover is one who knows how to remain somewhat aloof, mysterious and who knows to keep his feelings partially hidden until the right time and place. He knows that too much of him might in fact stifle the love that he is attempting to nurture in his beloved. He knows that there are times that he needs to withdraw, give his beloved some space, make room for her to develop feelings for him in her own time. She will desire him to the degree that he knows how to both give and withhold of himself. And that were he to make himself too obvious, too evident, too soon, this would signify the death of desire. The lover's hiddenness is then here revealed as a form of respect for his beloved's emotional space; it is a form of attention to the space she needs for her desire to be kindled and to mature.

In his essay "Enigma and Phenomenon," Emmanuel Levinas observes precisely this discrete gesture of a God seeking after his beloved. Comparing God to a lover, Levinas describes vividly this necessary reserve on the part of the one seeking out the affections of his beloved: "A lover makes an advance, but the provocative or seductive gesture has, if one likes, not interrupted the decency of the conversation and attitudes; it withdraws as lightly as it had slipped in."[43] In other words, God as a lover knows that to be too forward, too present, too overwhelming, might from the onset ruin everything. And so he chooses to make an advance, but in a way that maintains a certain reserve—he chooses to carefully and meticulously balance forwardness with withdrawal. Both are needed. The art of seduction is that which knows how to maintain the delicate balance between giving and withdrawing. Such is also the way of the enigma according to Levinas: "This way the Other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his *incognito*, disdaining recourse to a wink-of-the-eye of understanding or

complicity, this way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself, we call enigma."[44]

The seductive lover is one who has learned the art of cultivating the enigma in his persona—in carefully balancing approach with withdrawal, the latter constituting as such an integral part of the approach. But the lover does not do this in order to cultivate an artificial sense of his own mystery and aloofness, but for the sake of the beloved—that she might not feel pressured or intruded upon, that her desire might be gently kindled and that she might be given the space and time for her feelings to gradually mature and grow. But, more specifically, that she might be given the space to also act upon her feelings, to respond, to herself dare approach her beloved and express her love for him. The lover withdraws his love in order to allow for the beloved to love him back in a gesture of extraordinary nobility which elevates the beloved from the rank of a passive receptacle of his love, to the status of becoming herself a lover and daring to approach her lover in a stance of full equality.

And such is perhaps the hidden intention of this God who sometimes withdraws or falls silent. He hides that we might seek him, he falls silent that we might beseech him. Not in order to torture us or to kindle our despair, but in order that our love might mature to the status of lover—that we might become equal partners in this relationship and love him back with a passion and desire of our own. I am reminded here of the transformation which occurred within Queen Esther as she morphed from a simple passive object of her King's love and desire, as she rose from a status no higher than that of the concubines of his harem, to a woman unafraid to go to her king, wearing her "royal robes" in order to speak to him face to face in a stance of unparalleled equality in the Biblical world. Such is the transformation that God is awaiting from us when he withdraws—a morphing from the regressive status of being a mere passive object of his love, to that of an equal partner with one's own passion and initiative.

Levinas speaks rightly of a religion for adults where the silence of God gives rise to human speech, human action and human justice. The silence of God need not remain unanswered, but can open the way for a human passion, a human word and deed. As Levinas states beautifully: "It is up to us, or more exactly, it is up to *me* to retain this God without boldness, exiled because allied with the conquered, hunted down and hence absolute, thus articulating the very moment in which he is presented and proclaimed, unrepresentable."[45] God's withdrawal has the deeper purpose

of making room and space for human passion. Passion for God himself, but also, and by extension, passion for what matters to God—passion for justice, for the liberation of the captives, the healing of the wounded and the resurrection of those whose spirits have been broken down to the point of death. Such is perhaps the only proper response to the silence of God. For in that silence, is it not the human response, word, and deed, that is desperately awaited by a God who seems to "sleep but his heart is awake," ever ready to again flood our lives with his healing and comforting presence if only we were to desire him passionately enough?

And so, just like the Shulamite's withdrawal into her solitude has kindled an uncharacteristic passion in her lover who, for the first time, takes the initiative to seek after *her*, God's withdrawal is meant to make us come alive for him and for what makes his own heart burn. It is meant to mature us into adult partners of his love and not mere receptacles of his love. If God were always to do the pursuing, we would never grow a passion for him or for what matters to him. This is precisely what the Shulamite, in her wisdom, understands and so she chooses to withdraw, to interrupt her passionate and reckless pursuit of her lover in order to allow *him* to take the initiative and come to her. And this is precisely what happens. For the first time, the man shows interest, takes the initiative and seeks her out in a moment of passion that is uncharacteristic of his general persona. Her withdrawal has created the space for his desire to mature and intensify. And so here he is, knocking passionately, even violently, at her door. But there is yet another reason for God's silence.

God's distance is also sometimes needed in order to preserve *his* otherness. While it is true that God's withdrawal opens up a space for the beloved to mature her love in her own time and way, it likewise opens up a space for the lover to be encountered as an other and not just as one that is easily manipulated into giving in to the beloved's every desire and caprice. And so, just like the Shulamite refuses herself to her lover in order to be treasured as a person and not just as a mere object of desire, God also sometimes withdraws from his beloved's grasp. We can knock and we can seek, but we cannot storm into God's presence and make demands on him. I am reminded here of the God encountered in the story of Job—this wild, uncontrollable God who will not be controlled or manipulated. He is like the dawn, like the gates of death, like the torrents of rain, the Pleiades, the lioness and the wild donkey. He does not take orders, show himself, he is not bound nor held captive. It is this wildness of nature which constitutes the backdrop of God's answer to Job, perhaps in order

to awaken him to the very wildness and untamable character of God himself, the Creator of all wild things.

Thus, God's silence and withdrawal has the effect of revealing him as more than just provider, redeemer and nurturer. God is not a mere butler in our lives, ever ready to serve and fulfill our every whim and desire. In Buber's language, he is more than a mere It, something that we might rely on, use and control. His distance reveals him as a Thou, as having a mind of his own, an intelligence, a will which infinitely transcends our own. In Buber's words, "whoever has Thou does not have something. He has nothing. But he stands in relation."[46] In other words, the Thou of a person is revealed not so much when it gives itself to us, but precisely when nothing is given; when we awaken to the fact that this person has so much more to offer than the mere satisfaction of our desires. At that precise moment, one "stands in relation," that is to say, a genuine relationship becomes possible, one where both partners have risen to the level of an I-Thou relationship. Irigaray puts it beautifully when she says to her beloved: "You who are not and will never be me or mine are transcendent to me."[47]

Then again, God does not withdraw solely for his own sake, but for the sake of his beloved. Indeed, a passionate relationship, one where the flame of desire is safeguarded, requires that there be a strong duality, that is to say, that there be two persons "standing in relation" and not merging in an act of fusion. We saw how God's distance opens up the possibility for the beloved to develop her love to the point of becoming an equal partner in the relationship, one that also loves, seeks and pursues back. But God also must "stand in relation." And for his to happen he must be seen as more than a mere extension of the self's volitions. For as such, he would be no more than a mere projection of the self's desires and needs. Thus, God at times withdraws from our grasp, recedes from our desires and destroys our expectations. Yet he does not do this to torture us, but rather that we might see *him*, that we might relate to *him* and not merely to his gifts and favors. Thus, having burst out of the seams of our objectifications and projections, God stands as himself before us, in his naked truth: "He stands in relation." There can be no mature relationship between God and his beloved until he finds himself freed from her own projections and expectations. In Irigaray's words, there can be no "alliance" without first opening up a "place of transcendence."[48]

Thus for a genuine alliance to take place between God and his beloved, he must be more to her than the mere fulfillment of her own fantasies

about him and about what he must bring into her life. But for this to happen, the beloved's love needs to undergo a profound transformation. She needs to learn to love in a way that does not revolve anymore around herself, in a way that is capable of encountering an other beyond her own self. Her love must become deep enough to come to respect God's own time and his own way of doing things. Her love must become pure of self-interest; it must become disinterested. In Irigaray's words: "To remain between two requires the renunciation of this sort of unity: fusional, regressive, autistic, narcissistic."[49] In other words, the beloved's love must become purified of all regressive, that is to say, infantile narcissism. It must break through its own autistic self-absorption. For only as such, does this love rise above the fusional conception of God as an extension of her own projections. And only then can there be "two," and as such, a mature relationship.

Thus God withdraws that we might come to love him for himself and not merely for the use he might be to us. And thus he distances himself from us, dries up his providences and ushers us into the wilderness of his silence so that we might taste his presence in an even deeper way. The Hebrew prophet Hoseah spoke thus of God's seeming cruelty toward his beloved when he projects to "lure her into the desert." But the desert, in all of its treacherousness, becomes, in the mouth of the prophet, a place of courtship and of romance. God lures his beloved into the desert in order to "speak tenderly to her" and "give her back her vineyards and … make the Valley of Achor a door of hope."[50] Thus, it is in the wildernesses in our lives, where God seems to be absent and idle, that he is in fact the most present, the most active. God is found in the desert. And so he lures us there that we might learn to love *him* and not merely his gifts. That we might come to love him who is in fact the fullness of all that we desire. Thus, the withdrawal of God becomes, paradoxically, a place of a deeper encounter.

Saint John of the Cross was right to say that the dark night of the soul is really a light so bright and so dazzling that it blinds us into thinking that we are in darkness. What seems to be darkness is in fact light. What seems to be a desert is in fact a place of deeper abundance where we might find the Giver himself. What seems to be distance might in fact be the closest proximity. This is perhaps what Job meant when, at the heart of his own desert, he exclaims: "I had heard of you with my ears but now my eyes have seen you."[51] When Job still lived in prosperity, God was a mere It that could be worshiped into fulfilling his desires. But in the desert of his pain,

having lost everything, Job comes to meet God as a Thou whose very presence quenches every desire and longing of the heart. This is perhaps why he falls silent: "Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust."[52] A silence which perhaps testifies to the fact that he has received an answer, a consolation, a healing balm for his pain, not conceptually, but existentially in the very presence of God.

The question remains as to how one might get *through* this wilderness of God's absence. How does one again draw God's presence into one's life? How might one again come to hear his voice and witness his saving hand? In other words, is it possible, when finding oneself in the desert, to find a way out? And if so, how? How might one draw God's living presence back into one's life? Again, our Song opens up an illuminating perspective on this question. The bedroom scene where the man is seen violently knocking on the door and pleading with his beloved holds a number of interesting details that shed light on these questions in a beautiful way. The first thing we learn is that the beloved is certainly not roused through active and willful action. The man's efforts bring him absolutely no result. He first tries to seduce her into opening the door through sweet words. When that does not work he acts, his actions growing more and more violent: "My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening" (Song 5:4). We saw how the Hebrew word translated here as "thrust" in fact signifies pounding violently. But again, the man's efforts come to no avail. The beloved is still not ready to open the door. So what would it take to get her to open, and by extension, what must we do in order to be again welcomed back and received into God's grace and favor?

Again, our Song offers us an indication of what might have worked for the man for eventually the Shulamite opens the door. But he has already gone. One wonders what might have occurred had he waited, had he opted for a different stance or attitude? And indeed, the same goes for us. Too often, when we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness where God seems hopelessly absent from our lives, we do all that we can to fill up that silence—we fret, we worry, we act rashly, only to eventually give up. Just like the lover in our Song, we "pound" on the door, attempt to force things into bending to our will, and when they do not, we angrily declare that there is no God. But as in our Song, all of our aggressive efforts and reactions come to naught. One even wonders at times whether our agitated doing, ceaseless worrying and rash decisions do not in fact obstruct God's re-entry into our lives. How then should we act? How should we come to dwell in this desert in a way that opens up a space for God to

again speak and act into our lives? How might we attract God's favor anew? What stance must we come to adopt in order to again hear God's voice?

Irigaray's reflections on dialogue are here particularly illuminating. In her *Sharing the World*, Irigaray speaks of how one might welcome the other into our lives: "The renunciation of speaking … is a word of welcome to the one who comes to us from beyond the horizon that has been opened … it is a welcoming to another world, to another manner of speaking, another saying than the one we know. It is the laying out of space-time that must still be virgin in order for a meeting to happen."[53] Thus, in order for God's word or promise to be uttered in our lives, we must interrupt our doings. Interestingly, the Hebrew word *davar* which translates our concept of "word" also means "event" or "action." We learn from this that words have power in the Hebrew context. To speak is to usher in an event and not just a wish or a fantasy. But in order for the divine word, the divine *davar* which will usher in new beginnings to be spoken over our lives, we need to withhold our own words and actions, our own *davar*. Silence is needed for God's word to make an entry into our lives. Silence is the sign that we are ready to receive, that we are available and ready for divine intervention. As such, silence becomes the ultimate prayer: "Welcoming cannot be reduced to a tone of voice, to a choice of kind words … welcoming requires an availability for that which has not yet occurred, an ability and a wanting to open ourselves to the unknown, to that which is still unfamiliar to us and in a sense will always remain unfamiliar."[54]

The ability to keep one's peace testifies however to a profound psychological shift or transformation. To withhold from speaking or from action when we find ourselves in the wilderness amounts to relinquishing all control over our own lives. This is why falling silent is so difficult. To do so amounts to admitting to our complete helplessness and inability to leave the desert on our own. Yet it is precisely this stance of helplessness that is needed before help can come. It is this inaction on our part which precipitates divine action. Simone Weil puts it beautifully: "In our acts of obedience of God we are passive; whatever difficulties we have to surmount, however great our activity my appear to be, there is nothing analogous to muscular effort; there is only waiting, attention, silence, immobility, constant through suffering and joy."[55] Attracting the divine *davar*, the divine word-event back into our lives necessitates only this: The ability to patiently wait for it. Such a waiting is however "something more intense

than searching"[56]; it does not amount to doing nothing. Indeed, it is more difficult than searching and acting. Yet it is precisely what we need to do. And it is what the man in our Song might have done too—had he fallen silent, had he patiently waited there at the door for his beloved, he would have still been there when she opened the door. Who knows what might have ensued then between the two lovers.

Ultimately, this patient waiting on our part in the face of God's silence is an act of love. It is an act whereby we create the right conditions for *him* to speak or to act. To wait is an act of love whereby we open up a space for God to act in his own time and way. As such, the patient act of waiting constitutes an act of respect toward God's own timing and will—we respect his way of doing things, we give him space to decide things too. As such, there is an ethical sense to waiting. To wait patiently, to remain silent, has ethical repercussions. Irigaray puts it beautifully when she compares waiting to a form of letting-be: "Such a flowering, letting be is as important as mastering. Our tradition has encouraged us to be effective, to make or fabricate but no to let be born or let be … such a letting be is what is most difficult for us. It forces us to relinquish the ideal of mastery that has been taught to us … to dominate everything and everyone—including the world and the other—without letting them blossom according to what or who they are. Moved by nature, by the other, it will be difficult for us to leave them to their becoming until our next meeting. Now this can only happen if we run such a risk—letting go of any ascendancy over them, indeed any link with them."[57]

Thus, according to Irigaray, the act of waiting or of letting-be constitutes an ethical gesture whereby we make room for the other to blossom in their own time and way. We suspend our will in order to make way for their initiative, thereby honoring their own way of doing things. To wait for God constitutes then an act of profound respect whereby we tell him that we trust his judgment, that we trust *him*. There is no greater testimony to love as this kind of child-like trust that he has what it takes to come through for us. There is no greater love than this surrender of our lives into his hands. Such a love does not go unheeded. It resounds through the universe like a prayer, crystalizes into a vessel longing to be filled and as such powerfully attracts the divine light. This suspension of our projects before the divine word opens up the space for God to act, to bestow, to give. The book of Daniel ends on these words: "Blessed is the one who waits."[58] The act of waiting constitutes a powerful magnet for God's actions. Just like a negative charge attracts a positive charge, the

humble and destitute act of waiting calls forth a blessing, calls forth the divine *davar*, the word-event that could change everything.

Our mystical reading of the Song has now come to an end. Our African princess has revealed to us the secret face of God—the one that does not come out in the usual portrayal of God in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Over and against a God who loves order, who legislates commands and forges structure, we are shown a reckless passionate God who breaks all the rules in order to come close to his beloved. Over and against a mighty God who violently makes his word the rule of law, imposing and exhibiting his saving power and strength, we witness here a shy God, a God who precisely does not want to impose, who hides, who withdraws in his modesty, all the while secretly longing to be found by us. In the beginning of our world, God created man—male and female—in his image. Is it not time that we retrieve the feminine side of God if we are indeed to approach a more complete perspective on his likeness, of his essence? Our African princess boldly draws the veil on the femininity of God, thereby ushering us still deeper into the mystery of his being.

Notes

1. Or what Rabbi Akiba has called "the *sod* meaning of the text, in which he saw the profoundest mystery revealed to humanity or the Holy of Holies of Scripture" (André Lacocque, *Romance she Wrote* [Salem, OR: Trinity Press International, 1998], 10).
2. Cf. Chana Bloch who observes that "for twenty centuries, the Song was almost universally read as a religious or historical allegory." She then mentions a number of commentators such as Rabbi Akiba, Ibn Ezra and Origen as examples of this kind of allegorical reading, adding that these "found support in the Old Testament metaphor of God's marriage to Israel" ("In the Garden of Delights," in *The Song of Songs: The World's First Great Love Poem*, edited by Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch [New York: The Modern Library, 2006], 30).
3. As such, a lot of wisdom might be gathered as to the nature of the human-divine relationship just from reading our Song in this new, exquisite light. This has been the work of philosophers such as Franz Rosenzweig who, in his *Star of Redemption*, gives one of the most revealing interpretations on the nature of faith based on our Song. His whole chapter on "Revelation" would merit a close reading, but suffice it to say here that he gives a beautiful interpretation of the woman's quiet trust and affirmation—"my beloved is mine and I am his"—as depicting the faith that is required of humanity

if it is to gain access to divine light. Rosenzweig goes on to say that this faith has such potency that without it there would be no divine light or presence at all. The believer's faith is thus what makes the difference between the divine presence and absence in this world.

4. Bloch also mentions the mystical interpretation in her introduction to her new translation of the Song of Songs: "The Song fared better at the hands of the mystics, Jewish and Christian, who honored its literal meaning as symbolic of the human longing for union with God. The Zohar (a mystical commentary of the Pentateuch written in the late thirteenth century) speculated about intercourse between the male and female aspects of God, believing that this could actually be influenced by the way in which human sexual relations were conducted; for this exalted purpose, the Cabbalists were encouraged to have intercourse with their wives on Sabbath eve. Christian mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century, or St. Teresa of Avila and the poet St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century, contemplating the love of God and the soul, found in the Song a source of inspiration for their ecstatic spirituality. St. Bernard, who wrote 86 sermons on the first two chapters of the Song set the tone: 'O strong and burning love, O love urgent and impetuous, which does not allow me to think of anything but you … You laugh at all considerations of fitness, reason, modesty and prudence, and tread them underfoot.' The mystics read the Song allegorically, to be sure, but they remained true to its intensity and passion, its emotional power" (Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: The World's First Great Love Poem*, 32).
5. This idea of God being represented as a woman is not at all an idea foreign to the Biblical narrative, as is observed by Marvin Pope who, quoting Phyllis Trible, observes that "in the interest of disavowing sexism in translation for the Biblical faith, Trible stresses both the asexual and effeminate traits of God … [often depicted as a] midwife, seamstress, housekeeper, nurse, mother … As creator and Lord of both sexes, Yahweh embraces and transcends both sexes" (Marvin Pope, "The Song of Songs and Women's Liberation: An Outsider's Critique," in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 1st series, edited by Athalya Brenner [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 122).
6. This centrality of the woman has also been observed by Chana Bloch: "Indeed she [the woman] often seems more than his equal. Most of the lines are hers, including the first word in the poem and the last. As a rule she is the more forceful of the two. … She isn't shy about pursuing her lover: She goes out into the streets of Jerusalem at night to search for him—bold and unusual behavior for an unmarried woman … she is the one who takes the initiative in their lovemaking" (Bloch, *Song of Songs: The World's First Great Love Poem*, 4).

7. According to Alicia Ostriker, "the woman speaks more lines of the dialogue including the opening and final ones. She is as well more aggressive, more introspective and more philosophical than her lover. Hers is the quest for the beloved in the city streets, hers the adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love until it is ripe … hers the pronouncement that love is as fierce as death and that the attempt to purchase it should be despised" (Alicia Ostriker. "A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext." In *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, edited by Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 45).
8. Isaiah 2:13.
9. Jeremiah 2:31.
10. Hoseah 2:14.
11. Hoseah 11:3–4.
12. Deut. 32:18, Isaiah 42:14.
13. Isaiah 66:13, Psalm 131.
14. Although I have been sorely tempted to proceed in my descriptions of God using feminine pronouns (she, her), I finally opted—for the sake of readers for whom such a shift might be too abrupt—for keeping the traditional masculine pronouns even as I develop the idea of a feminine God.
15. For more on this, see Phyllis Trible's beautiful essay "Love's Lyrics Redeemed" where she shows parallels between the story of a love gone awry in the garden of Eden as depicted in Genesis 2–3 and our Song: "Clearly Genesis 2–3 offers no return to the garden of creation. And yet, as scripture interpreting scripture, it provides my clue for entering another garden of Eros, the Song of Songs. Through expansions, omissions and reversals, this poetry recovers the love that is bone of bone and flesh of flesh. In other words the Song of Songs redeems a love story gone awry" (in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978], 144).
16. André Neher, *L'essence du prophétisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 252 [My translation].
17. Hoseah 2:3.
18. Hoseah 2:6–7.
19. Amos 4:9–10.
20. André Lacocque also observes the coarseness of prophetic texts when referring to the woman: "The prophet's metaphorical expression insisted not only on the staunch fidelity of the male God, it also denounced the stubborn whoring of the female partner and also the degrading chastisement to which she would be submitted. At some point, the imagery becomes highly disparaging. With good conscience and total self-complacency, the husband strips his wife naked, exposes her pudenda for all to

watch, beats her, humiliates her, exposes her to every outrage … there is not much progress towards gender equality" (André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote*, 34).

21. And indeed, commentators have seen in the Song of Songs a corrective of the often derogatory view of women in the prophets. Thus, according to Carol Fontaine, "the Song is a Biblical corrective to the patriarchal denigration of women, their bodies, their capacities and their loves … The Song lives alongside the books of the prophets, offering a reminder of other Biblical perspectives on human love—ones that do not equate it with moral corruption inevitably associated with women" (Carol Fontaine, "Song? Songs? Whose Song? Reflections of a Radical Reader," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, edited by Lesleigh Cushing Strahlberg and Peter S. Hawkins [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], 296).
22. Hoseah 2:6.
23. Hoseah 2:3.
24. Hoseah 2:11–13.
25. This connection between the woman in the Song and the Kabbalah is not as far-fetched as it might seem when one realizes how much influence the former has had on the latter. According to Arthur Green, "one might say that it [the Zohar] was written under the spell of the Song of Songs, for the canticle is quoted and commented upon with great frequency within its pages and is present everywhere in allusion and echo" (Arthur Green, "Intradivine Romance: The Song of Songs in the Zohar," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, 215).
26. In fact, according to Arthur Green, the kabbalist saw himself as a "devotee of the *Shekhinah* … [whose] primary function was to rouse the *Shekhinah* into a state of love" (Arthur Green, *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, 218). Thus, the kabbalist has a concept of God as a woman that it is his duty to arouse through righteous and holy works.
27. Catherine Chalier, *Traité des larmes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003), 27 [My translation].
28. For more on this comparison between God and the feminine *Shekhinah* presence see Chalier's *Traité des larmes*, 27. In this beautiful essay, Chalier shows how "for the Kabbalists, in his proximity to humans, God sympathizes with them, is affected by their actions and feels emotions and passions. Such is, they observe, his feminine aspect to which, borrowing from a Talmudic tradition, they give the name of *Shekhinah*. This introduction of emotions in the divine life is decisive for the present reflection, since in this perspective, one must not think anymore of the Biblical anthropomorphisms attributing to God sadness or joy, anger or compassion, worry for the humble or concern for those who are succumbing under the yoke, as a language destined for those whose intelligence remains a prisoner of the

affects and who cannot understand that God might be a stranger to what they are feeling. The divinity, according to the Kabbalists, is not beyond passion, she sympathizes with the creatures, suffers and rejoices with them" (Chalier, *Traité des larmes*, 27). [My translation].

29. Abraham Heschel. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 136.
30. Martin Buber, *The Way of Man* (New York: Citadel Press Books, 2006), 5.
31. Philippians 2:6–8.
32. See here Rumi's beautiful rendition of this concept in his poem "A King Dressed as a Servant," in *Bridge to the Soul*, translated by Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 36–37.
33. This image came to me, ironically, while sitting in a synagogue listening to a sermon on Leviticus 16:23 where the priest is ordered, upon leaving the holy of holies to "take off the linen garments he put on before he entered the Most Holy Place, and he is to leave them there." There is a powerful contrast between this need to keep the garments of the priest holy and separate from the sin of the people and Jesus' garments being worn outside in the street to be touched by the sick and emitting healing power (Luke 8:43–48).
34. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 34.
35. André Neher, *L'essence du prophétisme*, 268. [My translation].
36. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964), 265.
37. This is also Ricoeur's understanding of love: "Eros is not institutional. It is an offense to reduce it to a contract or to a conjugal duty … Eros' law—which is not law anymore—is the reciprocity of the gift. It is thus infra-juridical, parajuridical, suprajuridical. It belongs to the nature of its demonism to threaten the institution—any institution, including marriage" ("Sexualité, ma merveille, l'errance, l'énigme," in *Histoire et Vérité* [Paris: Seuil, 1955] 198–209).
38. Matthew 16:25.
39. Rumi. *Bridge to the Soul*, 44.
40. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 268.
41. André Lacocque makes a similar observation regarding the Shulamite's unconventional virtue in contrasting her with Gomer in the book of Hosea: "Defiantly, the Shulamite gives the appearance of being a loose woman, but she upsets all the conventions. Her love, in contradistinction to Gomer's is true; rather than being a source of shame it is gloriously proclaimed … The Shulamite is untroubled by the perception that she has strayed. Over against the prophetic censure that she critiques throughout

the Song, she proudly trumpets her own sexuality. Her vineyard is her own; it is under no one else's control, especially not the guardians of public morality" (André Lacocque, "I am Black and Beautiful," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, 170).

42. Schellenberg's attitude toward this contradiction between divine love and divine distance has been to conclude that God does not exist. In his pioneering book *The Hiddenness Argument*, he asks: "Why we may ask would God be hidden from us? Surely a morally perfect being—good, just and loving—would show himself more clearly. Hence the weakness of our evidence for God is not a sign that God is hidden; it is a revelation that God does not exist" (J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press], 2).
43. Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 70.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 55.
47. Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2001), 18.
48. Ibid., 19.
49. Ibid., 57.
50. Hoseah 2:14–15.
51. *The Book of Job*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 88.
52. Cf. Stephen Mitchell's beautiful translation of Job, *The Book of Job*, 88.
53. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 18.
54. Ibid.
55. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 126.
56. Ibid., 128.
57. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 58.
58. Daniel 12:12.

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30052-4