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*Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire:
Medieval Jewish Philosophy and the
Possibility of a Feminist Ground*

*dew drops ambiguously
withering saplings adrift
opening mouths asunder
(reception in revelation {receive / reveal})
(conception in concealment {conceive / conceal})
outpouring and indwelling
the pooling tears of eros¹*



Introduction

As placeholder for the secondary, the subordinate, and the recalcitrant, the *feminine* survives ancient and medieval philosophy, Jewish medieval philosophy notwithstanding, under a suppressive stronghold. Despite Dillon's optimistic conclusion that "*Chercher la femme* can be a rewarding activity for the Platonic philosopher,"² even the most well-intentioned glance at the Greek roots of medieval Jewish philosophy seems to suggest otherwise.

Subjugating the feminine principle to the masculine from its very beginnings, and plotting a conceptual space in which the history of philosophy grows, there stands the well-known Pythagorean "Table of Opposites" in which the pair "male and female" is structurally correlated with the pair "good and bad." As recounted by Aristotle at the very start of his *Metaphysics*,

[the Pythagoreans] say there are ten principles, which they arrange in two columns of cognates—limit (*péras*) and unlimited (*ápeiron*), odd (*perritón*) and even (*ártion*), one (*hen*) and plurality (*pleitbos*), right (*deksiôn*) and left (*aristerôn*), male (*árren*) and female (*theilu*), resting (*eimeroun*) and moving (*kinoumenon*), straight (*euthú*) and curved (*kampúlon*), light (*phōs*) and darkness (*skótos*), good (*agathón*) and bad (*kakón*), square (*tetrágōnon*) and oblong (*heterómeikes*).³

Translated also as “good and evil,” this *agathón/kakón* coupling sets a stage upon which the feminine signals the negation of goodness. Standing in her opposition to the *árren*, the masculine Strongman (*árren* from *érrōmai*, “to put forth strength”), the feminine *theilu* is the Nurturer (*theilu* from *thāō*, “to suckle”). And yet, despite the positive connotations of nurturing, she is made to become the locus of loss. Here, *theilu* emerges under her definition as “soft,” “yielding,” and “weak.” And so, the feminine lives on as correlate of evil on the Pythagorean table of opposites, as impotent mother and erratic nurse in Plato’s *Timaus*, as obedient helper (and mother of recalcitrant temptation) in Philo, and as the imaginary whore-of-matter in Maimonides. We have entered upon the “feminine-as-loss” dynamic.

The main question of our study is whether the feminine can in any way be redeemed through an engagement with such texts. I suggest that in the philosophy of Solomon ibn Gabirol, especially his discourse on matter, we may uncover the possibility of a feminist ground. I will show how there emerges in Gabirol, rather unexpectedly, (a) a championing of materiality, (b) a conceptual coupling of material passivity with divine essentiality, and as such, (c) a positive valuation of passivity. In this way, while he himself does not draw out implications for the feminine, the very pages of Gabirol’s metaphysics can be shown to invite a reversal of the feminine-as-loss thematic. From marker of loss, the feminine as passive can be revaluated now as the locus of presence—as that which is most sacred, as the very mark of the Divine Essence itself. This reversal of passivity from loss to presence will be further linked to what I will argue is an existential stance of erotic receptivity in Gabirol’s philosophy, a stance in which the expectant potency of *eros* (signaled, I will suggest, by the feminine) replaces the active potency of power (or, the masculine stance) in the estimation of the highest existential possibility of human being. Through an engagement with the metaphysics of Gabirol in which we encounter a positive valuation of the material as the receptive mark of *eros* itself, I find the grounds for redeeming the feminine passive—from loss to presence.

A brief word about my methodology and goals is in order. Except for a comment on Aristotle’s biological theory, this paper does not discuss actual

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

remarks about women, nor does it impute misogynist assumptions—or conversely, feminist intents—to the authors in question. In finding a feminist ground in Gabirol's metaphysics, I am not suggesting that Gabirol was himself a feminist. Rather, I uncover a feminist ground by allowing the textual constructions—including the valuation of the feminine therein—to speak for themselves. Gabirol's text is thus seen to signal a moment of rupture within the medieval Jewish philosophical (as well as kabbalistic) corpus, offering an internal critique of the feminine-as-loss motif in medieval Jewish thought.



Feminine-as-Loss: The Rupture of the Feminine

In the feminine-as-loss symbolic order, there emerges a triple rupture: the feminine is correlated with evil, Womb-Creation emerges as a devalued False-Creation, and maternal/material creative sustenance is completely subordinated to paternal/seminal universalizing form and function. In addition to the correspondence of the feminine (*theilu*) with evil (*kakón*), we also find the devaluation of maternity/materiality. In depictions of maternal life-giving itself, feminine vitality is suppressed. Despite her portrayal as both the nurturing suckler, as well as the birth-giving womb—the very source of life itself—the feminine is still devalued and robbed of all her life-giving energy. In Plato's *Timaeus*, she is *both* the suckling wet nurse (*titbēnē*)⁴ and the life-giving mother.⁵ And yet, it is precisely in this dual role as Creator (mother) and Sustainer (wet nurse) that she is subordinated to the masculine principle of Reason—that which, in the context of the *Timaeus*, is made to emerge as the *true* Creator and Sustainer. Whereas the feminine role of mother (and not simply wet nurse) invokes, to be sure, the conceptual space of vitality and creation, the philosophical imagination, in its insistence on subordinating the feminine, construes the maternal creation as a “mere creation”—an organic Womb-Creation (which we might call “Internal Creation”) to be subordinated to the Demiurgic paradigm of contra-natural, rule-imposing ordering (which we might call “External Creation”). Ironically, it is the female character Diotima who, in Plato's *Symposium*, emerges as the champion of this “external creation” over the maternal business of “internal creation.” It is Diotima, after all,⁶ who puts forth the value of philosophy as a kind of spiritually procreative act, as the “soul's conception of wisdom and virtue” over and above the maternal, internal creation, viz. being “pregnant in the body only” (here, interestingly, described by Diotima as a characteristic not of women per se, but of men whose powers of reasoning are weak).⁷

Aristotle's developmental biology further illustrates this feminine-as-

loss theme in Greek philosophy. For Aristotle, the formal principle, which is associated with reason, is given to the developing fetus by the father's sperm, whereas the mother provides only the material element to the future human.⁸ She at once serves as the material receptacle for the child during its gestation, as she additionally gives to the child the "material stuff" of its bodily constitution; the father's sperm, on the contrary, is the forming principle that makes this "lump of blood and tissue" into a human being with the capacity for rational thought. In the making of a new life, the father is the true generator of that life; the mother, on the contrary, can be said only to be "that in which" the new life is generated:

For there must needs be that which generates and that from which it generates; even if these be one, still they must be distinct in form and their essence must be different; and in those animals that have these powers separate in two sexes the body and nature of the active and the passive sex must also differ. If, then, the male stands for the effective and active, and the female, considered as female, for the passive, it follows that what the female would contribute to the semen of the male would not be semen but material for the semen to work upon.⁹

In describing semen's communicating to the embryo its power to move and grow (into a human being), Aristotle adds:

the female, as female, is passive, and the male, as male, is active, and the principle of the movement comes from him. Therefore, if we take the highest genera under which they each fall, the one being active and motive and the other passive and moved, that one thing which is produced comes from them only in the sense in which a bed comes into being from the carpenter and the wood.¹⁰

While, to be sure, both the maternal and paternal elements (the material and formal causes) are necessary (as is seen more broadly in the Aristotelian hylomorphic metaphysics in the joint presence of a formal and a material element in any substance), it is clear that the maternal plays not only the passive and receptive, but as such, the *subordinate* role in the formula. She provides raw material; he provides functional coherence. She is the wood; he is the carpenter. Hers is the realm of reason-deprived materiality; his is the realm of rational ordering.¹¹ In the registers of Creation, it is the male Demiurgic father who, in his external role as inseminator of order (or tamer of chaos), has title to True Creator. Once again, as above, the organic Internal Creation of the womb is erased; no principle of creation per se, the mother is merely *site of* creation; she is simply the *condition for* the True Cre-

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

ation of a human in the unfolding of the male seminal principle of human Form in the developing embryo.¹²

Even though form and matter both emerge as necessary elements within Aristotle's thought—both in his biological theory and in his metaphysics more broadly—it becomes clear that form trumps matter, and that matter corresponds to the female.¹³ Contributing to a devaluation of the feminine, this opposition between matter and form¹⁴ parallels oppositions between disorder (or chaos) and reason, as well as between potency and act. Flourishing in the Neoplatonic tradition, we find this dynamic in Plotinus's own focus on materiality-as-source-of-evil (itself related to a discourse of matter as privation). In Plato's work, while absent a "form-over-matter" discourse per se, a similar dynamic surfaces. Returning again to the *Timaeus*, we find the masculine reasoning principle of order claiming victory over the feminine principle of chaos and/or disorder. The order—or Reason[ing]—principle of the cosmos (itself aligned with the masculine Demiurge, or Craftsman) is described in contrast to the Nurse of Becoming—the Receptacle principle, itself sometimes described as chaotic¹⁵ and at other times described as purely inactive.¹⁶ While itself not necessarily best equated with matter,¹⁷ the receptacle mother—as passive inactivity and/or chaos—is here clearly devalued—devalued, moreover, qua emasculated other—to the take-charge Demiurge.¹⁸ What's more, the negative depiction of the feminine passivity comes in stages. As inactivity, the feminine takes on a relationally negative valence (as compared to the activity of the masculine principle), and as chaos, the feminine takes on an essential—and not merely relational—negative valence all her own. Linked with the feminine, passivity as privation of activity is a negative and subordinate state: it is at best a *deprived* state (of inactivity, in relational contrast to the Craftsman's [demi]urging), and it is at worst a *depraved* state (of chaotic, essential disorder). Here, privation, deprivation, and depravity all go hand in hand.¹⁹ The victory here, as in the Pythagorean table of opposites above, clearly goes to the masculine, and to the victor go the spoils: Reason, Stability, Truth, and Being belong to the Demiurge, and the mother-of-all may enjoy only anticipatory glances at the weak reflections of his riches as their shadowy reflections cast themselves upon her lap.

This construal of the feminine as the ground between deprivation and depravity resonates with the dual-edged devaluation of the feminine described by Luce Irigaray:

[T]he articulation of the reality of my sex is impossible in discourse, and for a structural, eidetic reason. My sex is removed, as least as the property of a subject, from the predicative mechanism that assures discursive coherence.

I can thus speak intelligently as sexualized male . . . or as asexualized. Otherwise, I shall succumb to the illogicality that is proverbially attributed to women. All the statements I make are thus either borrowed from a model that leaves my sex aside— . . . signifying . . . that . . . I must be quite inferior to someone who has ideas or models on his own account—or else my utterances are unintelligible according to the code in force. In that case they are likely to be labeled abnormal, even pathological.²⁰

Enabling the virile acts of Demiurgic creation by receiving his order[ing]s within herself, the Receptacle is “quite inferior to someone who has ideas or models on his own account.” Relationally, she is deprived—precisely inferior, moreover, to the one whom Timaeus describes as having the Model, as having the Paradigm, as having the Platonic Ideas before him. But yet, in the description of her which leaves out the relational fact of her receptivity (her waiting-to-be-filled by the Demiurge), the Receptacle, in being identified as sheer chaos, is, we might say, “labeled abnormal, even pathological”; she is identified in this way with the sheer disordered hysteria of Irigaray’s feminine other.

This feminine-as-loss thematic in encounter with Irigaray’s feminine other poignantly emerges from Maimonides’s own metaphorical depiction of matter as the “married harlot” of Proverbs 6:26.²¹ While the whore image in one sense does not implicate the feminine as such (after all, the married harlot is contrasted with another feminine image, viz. the woman of valor of Proverbs 31:10), there is yet another sense in which the married harlot image speaks quite directly to what is a conception of the feminine essence in general: viz. she is (a) in need of being ruled, but also (and this really isolates her inferiority), she is (b) recalcitrant to that rule. The notion of feminine otherness is complete. She must be subordinated, and the proof of that is that she does not easily submit to subordination. Quite a bind, and conceptually airtight: if she is submissive, that shows that her nature must be submissive; if she is not submissive, that shows that her nature must be recalcitrant (again, with the assumption still in place, and unshakeable, that she is supposed to submit). And so, even the positive valuation of the material in the feminine image of the woman of valor continues along within these parameters, only here, she is praised for finally embracing and living up to her submissive nature; here, she is praised for finally allowing herself to be dominated by the masculine-centric Forms/Reason. matter is negatively valenced when seen in her recalcitrance as the unstable, fickle taker-on of many different forms; in this regard, she is the faithless married harlot who takes on many different partners, and, as such, the destructive Siren who lures men to their undoing:

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

All man's acts of disobedience and sins are consequent upon his matter.²²

And further,

Whenever the impulses of matter impel such an individual toward the dirt and the generally admitted shame inherent in matter, he feels pain because of his entanglement, is ashamed and abashed because of what he has gone through, and desires to diminish this shame with all his power and to be preserved from it in every way.²³

Matter is, on the other hand, positively valenced when seen in her eventual submission to the powers of Reason; in this regard, she is the woman of valor who quietly submits to her master's rule:

For if it so happens that the matter of a man is excellent, and suitable, neither dominating him nor corrupting his constitution, that matter is a divine gift.²⁴

Here, then, it is ultimately a phallogentric foundation that grounds even the most positive feminine image of the Maimonidean woman of valor, in that, ultimately, the very identity of the feminine is defined in relation (in fact, in *subordination*) to the masculine. The feminine thus emerges as the masculine's other—in fact, as the masculine's subordinated other—with the masculine emerging as the primary and central source of identity and value.²⁵

This motif is radicalized in medieval Kabbalah. Far from breaking away from the feminine-as-loss dynamic, even the *Zohar's* own elaboration of a divine femininity actively devalues the feminine. As Elliot Wolfson has clearly shown, the feminine aspect of God in the *Zohar* is ultimately fulfilled through a conversion:

Erotic yearning for the feminine is indicative of the beginning of the redemptive process, which overcomes duality and division, but the consummation is marked by the restoration of the feminine to the masculine, which entails the transformation of the *Shekhinah* from feminine other to the sign of the covenant or the corona of the phallus.²⁶

Here, the full completion of the feminine emerges as a self-eradication, clearing the way for a new locus of masculinity. Wolfson speaks of a "crossing of gender identities"²⁷ in which the feminine *Shekhinah* aspect of the Godhead transforms from "impoverished feminine"²⁸ into the "enriched feminine" precisely in metamorphosizing into a male. Stressing the implications of this, Wolfson adds that these feminine images "must be seen as part of an

androcentric, indeed phallogentric, perspective whereby the female is part of the masculine.”²⁹ Despite initial appearances to the contrary, the kabbalistic text does not break through the feminine-as-loss dynamic. Indeed, Kabbalah actively contributes to the feminine-as-loss dynamic precisely in its giving voice to its vision of the divine within phallogentric parameters in which “the female is part of the masculine.”

In his forthcoming *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*,³⁰ Wolfson further examines kabbalistic images of divine femininity, cautioning us to remember that “even these images must be understood as expressive of a prevailing phallogentric worldview.” Wolfson cites Elizabeth Grosz’s own insightful formulation of the problem:

Phallogentrism is explicitly *not* the refusal of an identity for women (on the contrary, there seems to be a proliferation of identities—wife, mother, nun, secretary, etc.), but rather, the containment of that identity by other definitions and identities.³¹

While Jewish medieval philosophy does not rehearse the kabbalistic idea of the feminine’s complete eradicating absorption into the masculine, the phallogentrism of its feminine-as-loss dynamic is itself, as we have seen, quite strong. A case in point, Maimonides’s “matter-as-woman-of-valor” discourse not only privileges the masculine, but phallogentrically defines the feminine in relation to him. The feminine is not only that in need of being broken by the masculine, but is herself essentially a kind of broken-masculine.

Maimonides is not the first Jewish philosopher to engage the feminine-as-loss dynamic. We find in Jewish philosophy as early as Philo an employment of the feminine image to demarcate that aspect of soul which is, although necessary, itself subordinated to the truly ideal soul-state, viz. Reason—itself symbolized through the male figure of Adam:

First [God] made mind, the man, for mind is most venerable in a human being, then bodily sense (*aisthēsis*, or perception), the woman.³²

In his allegorical interpretation of Genesis 2:18–3:1, Philo explicates scriptural Adam as the rational part of soul. By contrast, Eve emerges as the symbolic placeholder for the Senses (sense perception), as well as the symbolic mother of the Passions (the main passion, pleasure, itself symbolized by the Serpent). Both Sense and Passions are treated as aspects of soul that are subordinate to the reasoning aspect of soul, and, furthermore, as irrational:

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

[T]he princely (*bēgemonikón*, lit. "ruling") part of the soul is older than [in the sense of ontologically prior to] the soul as a whole, and the irrational portion younger [in the sense of ontologically posterior]. . . . The irrational portion is sense and the passions which are the offspring of sense.³³

Reason, symbolized by Adam, is, then, also described through further images as the "princely," literally, the "*bēgemonikón*," or, the one who leads and/or commands,³⁴ as well as soul's "starting principle," or "ruling part" (*árchon*).³⁵ In Philo's account, these concepts become inextricably linked to Adamic masculinity, and hence the very notions of *starting*, *leading*, and *ruling* become undisputedly engendered as masculine (and, desirable) traits. The Adamic ruler, himself symbolizing the Reasoning part of soul, emerges as authoritarian and controlling, the husband and father who, as lord of the household, must keep the wife and children in line.

In its relation to the mother (Sense) and the offspring (Passions), the symbolic Adam/male takes on the role of both husband and father. Interestingly, Philo also labels God himself as *Father*.³⁶ This clearly illustrates a most positive valuation of the masculine, including a particular championing of fatherhood (itself an act of External Creation, as above). As maker and keeper of souls, God is the Father of each individual soul; as orderer of the individual soul, Reason—as the vestige of Divine Logos—is described as soul's father as well.

Returning to the idea that the masculine lord's virtue lies in keeping the wife and children in line, of Sense, we are told:

[F]or none of the things which perception experiences [as impressions] are submitted to without the mind, for it is a fountain-head (*pēgē*) to it and a foundation (*themelios*) upon which it leans (*epereidetai*).³⁷

Philo further says:

[W]hen bodily sense (*aisthēsis*, or perception) is in command, the mind is in a state of slavery heeding none of its proper objects; but when the mind is in the ascendant, the bodily sense (*aisthēsis*, or perception) is seen to have nothing to do and to be powerless to lay hold of any objects of sense perception (*aisthēsis*).³⁸

Eve-as-Sense stands in reverse correlation to Adamic Reason's ascendancy; his strength entails her powerlessness; in his mastery, her enslavement is complete. And, in similar manner, Adamic Reason must sublimate the Passions, those Eve-begotten offspring. In a brilliant moment of exegetical artistry, Philo joins the Genesis 3:1 Serpent to the later Mosaic "serpent of

brass,” expositing the first as pleasure and the second as self-mastery, pleasure’s cure:

The man [i.e., reasoning soul] whose eyes are open determines to run away from this serpent [viz. pleasure], and he fashions another, the principle of self-mastery (*sōphrosúnē*), that serpent of brass, in order that the man who has been bitten by pleasure may, on seeing self-mastery, live the real life (*ton alēthē bíos*).³⁹

Phallogcentrically identified, the wife and daughter (Sense and Passions)⁴⁰ share no power with masculine Reason. The irrational mother–daughter coupling of Sense and Passions is only brought into the conceptual fold to the extent that they serve as “helpers” towards Reason’s proper function.

[I]t was requisite (*édei*) that the creation⁴¹ of mind (*nous*) should be followed immediately by that of sense perception (*aisthēsis*), to be a helper (*boēthós*) and ally (*súmmaxos*) to it.⁴²

To be true to themselves, the mother–daughter pair of Sense and Passions must be “helpers,” an identification that is itself only possible if they become “the ruled” (*to archómenon*).⁴³ Revealingly, Philo expositis this notion of *to archómenon* with the further term *to laōdes*—the masses (from *laō*, to look or to behold, together with the term *eidos*, or “that which is seen”).⁴⁴ In effect, the populace are “the ones who see that which is seen.” In a Platonic–Philonian context, this takes on a decidedly negative connotation, conjuring up the contrast between the ones who have opinions (*doxa*) only as opposed to the ones who know what is true. In this context, “the ones who see what is seen” takes on the sense of “those who don’t know.” They are the “vulgar masses.” And in our current context, it is Sense and Passions, the mother and her offspring, who are, as those ruled and in need of being ruled, the vulgar masses. Their functional success is, in this sense, relational and subordinating: to be what they are designed (by God) to be is for them to submit willingly to (masculine) Reason and, in so doing, to help Reason be all that it can be.

In the very claim that Eve/Sense is a helper designed to be part and parcel of the properly functioning Adam/Reason, we have a phallogcentric construction of the feminine in terms of the masculine (a dynamic appropriately mirroring the very Genesis account of Eve’s own creation from Adam’s side). Additionally subordinating the feminine, and here similar to Maimonides’s own sense of the harlotry of matter, Philo stresses how Eve/Sense in fact stands opposed to Reason’s function. While, to be sure, Eve/Sense provides

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

Adam/Reason with important information about the outside world, it would appear, nonetheless, that her very existence represents a threat of sorts to Reason: her very activity signals the inactivity—we might say, the death—of Reason:

As a matter of fact it is when the mind has gone to sleep that perception begins, for conversely, when the mind wakes up perception is quenched (*sbénnutai*). A proof of this is afforded by the fact that whenever we wish to get an accurate understanding of a subject (*bótan ti boulōmetha akribōs noēsai*)⁴⁵ we hurry off to a lonely spot; we close our eyes; we stop our ears; we say “good-bye”⁴⁶ to our perceptive faculties (*apotattōmetha tais aisthēsin*). So then, we see that, when the mind is astir and awake, the power of perception is suppressed (*phtheiretai aisthēsis*).⁴⁷

Here we have the hint that the feminine, in her proper role, must ultimately not only submit, but be eradicated. Translated above as “is suppressed,” the actual Greek “*phtheiretai*” may simply be translated as “is destroyed.”⁴⁸ And so, the terms of Adamic Reason’s ascendancy are themselves predicated upon the destruction, the death, of Eve-as-Sense. In similar fashion, reconsider the claim that, “[a]s a matter of fact it is when the mind has gone to sleep that perception begins, for conversely, when the mind wakes up perception is quenched (*sbénnutai*).” More than a mere “quenching,” we might note that when used of persons, the verb “*sbénnutai*” can metaphorically mean “to die.” Again, it is not merely subordination or suppression, but the demise of the feminine other that marks the Adamic vitality.

In light of such harsh reverse correlations between the very life of the one and the very death of the other, might we not add the converse sentiment? Might we not at least be led to wonder whether the moment of her ascendancy marks for him a moment of death? Taken in this further converse sense, Eve emerges as the locus of Adam’s death: in her very birth from the life of Adam, it would appear that Eve has signaled his death. This stark theme might be found in Maimonides’s matter-as-married-harlot discourse as well, in his reminder that

every living being dies and becomes ill solely because of its matter.⁴⁹

Where matter is seen as the faithless feminine harlot, we here too find the dramatic suggestion that the feminine marks the spot of man’s death. To the notion, then, that the death of femininity marks the birth of the masculine (a dynamic at play most dramatically in the Kabbalah’s suggestion that the feminine become the masculine, but also in Philo’s own suggestion of Eve-

as-Sense's death and destruction in the face of Adamic Reason), we have found a complementary phallogocentric trope: from the conceptual possibility of Eve as vital, life-affirming mother-to-all, the philosophical imagination has instead come to find in the feminine the roots of man's demise.



*On the Possibility of a Feminist Ground:
Solomon Ibn Gabirol and the Transfiguration of Erotic Longing*

The Neoplatonic writings of Solomon ibn Gabirol (d. 1056) reveal a blend of philosophical and mystical Jewish and Islamic influences, featuring many standard Platonic and Neoplatonic themes. In many respects, Gabirol's works can be seen to engage the feminine-as-loss dynamic just as robustly as the authors we have already considered. And yet, amongst those standard tropes (including ideas of matter as disordered and privative), he additionally develops a very unique doctrine of matter that offers a philosophical departure from the standard Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic discussions. Developing an idea of various grades of matter (along with various grades of form), Gabirol's discourse couples the standard negative estimations of regular (corporeal) materiality with a decidedly positive evaluation of a higher, sublime grade of materiality. More exalted than either terrestrial or celestial materiality, Gabirol's highest conception of matter offers us an unexpected space for turning the standard table of oppositions on its head, for privileging the passivity of the material, and in this way, we will argue, the passivity of the feminine.

PRIVILEGING MATTER

Gabirol's systematization of matter is complex and manifold, and many of the negative associations of materiality can still be found in his arrangement. Nonetheless, there does emerge an important sense in which, within Gabirol's discourse, materiality—divorced from and prior to any form—is sublime. In fact, in its pre-form state, matter emerges as more sublime than form within Gabirol's analysis. An extended analysis of this theme goes beyond the scope of this paper, but the sublimity of matter over form can begin to be seen in the following claim in Gabirol's *magnum opus*, the *Fons Vitae* (*Fountain of Life*, or *Meqôr Hayyîm*):⁵⁰

*materia est creata ab essentia, et forma est a proprietate essentiae, id est sapientia et unitate. . . .*⁵¹

. . . Matter is created from Essence, and form is from the property of Essence, that is to say, from Wisdom and unity.

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

"Essence" here refers to the Divine Essence, as Gabirol (following on Mutazilite as well as Sufi leads)⁵² describes God as *al-Dhāt al-'ulā* (the First Essence). Here, then, Gabirol's account is clear: where God Himself is construed in terms of two "moments"—an essential moment, and an active one—then, it is to the more essential moment of divine reality that we must connect materiality, with form being related, rather, to God's second—or active—moment.

In a move that turns the treatment of matter in the bulk of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic traditions on its head,⁵³ Gabirol thus creates a conceptual space in which matter trumps form. Given the usual correlation within these traditions of matter and the feminine (as we have already seen), Gabirol's move provides an unexpected space: from a correlation of matter/feminine at best with what is secondary in reality and at worst with the very origin of evil itself, we find here instead her identification as the very outgrowth of Divine Essence. As outgrowth of God's own most essential nature, the material here emerges under the positive valence as the hidden reality in which the moment of divine truth is most fully encountered—encountered, that is, in the shadow of unknowing. It is in the darkness of the "nothing" of matter that God most fully is revealed—revealed, that is, through matter's own nature as "the concealed." As Elliot Wolfson has taught us in the context of kabbalistic sources, we must understand God's own hidden nature as concealed in being revealed, and revealed through concealment.⁵⁴ Reflecting this idea, Gabirol links the material to the divine through what we may call a "discourse of hiddenness" in which both matter⁵⁵ and God are the *occulta*—the hidden aspects of reality, with form (and actuality) instead taking second place as the manifest aspect of encountered reality. And so, regarding the hiddenness of matter, we learn that

the more remote [something] is from the senses, the more similar it is to matter, and as such it is more hidden according to the hiddenness of matter.⁵⁶

Linking the material to the divine through a continuation of this "discourse of hiddenness," we may turn to the pages of Gabirol's *Keter Malkhūt*⁵⁷ poem to be reminded of the link between the divine and the hidden:

Keter Malkhūt §24: Who can understand the *hidden* secrets (*sōdōt*) of your creation . . . the *concealed* (*ḥevyōn*) lies therein.

Keter Malkhūt §26: Who can approach your dwelling place (*tekhūnatekha*), in your having raised the Throne of Glory (*Kissē ha-Kavōd*) above the sphere of Intellect. There lie the fields of *concealment* (*ba-ḥevyōn*) and the *hidden* secret (*sōd*).

Clearly, in its link to the divine both through a “discourse of hiddenness,” but also more overtly in the claim that matter is derived from God’s own essence, Gabirol has privileged the material. And so, in the most immediate sense, given the ancient and medieval association of the feminine with matter, Gabirol’s discourse of matter can be seen as providing a space for the feminine voice. However, let us take this a step further.

EROTIC TRANSFIGURATION

In coming to appreciate the fuller implications of Gabirol’s privileging of the material, we arrive at the moment of erotic transfiguration, an even deeper feminist ground. In the erotic transfiguration, we go from an active (masculine) desire-for-power to a passive, feminine desire-to-become, a longing for receptivity and presence. Here, a feminist voice emerges not by denying the coupling of passivity and the feminine, but by redeeming the passive stance⁵⁸ as an essentially erotic desire-to-be-completed. Unlike the masculine desire-for-power, here the erotic stance is one of receptivity—a *receptive willingness to engage the self through an engagement with the other*.⁵⁹

The contours of this sort of receptive stance within Neoplatonism can already be seen in Pierre Hadot’s own description of Plotinus’s existential comportment (and the difference that may hence be discerned between Platonic and Plotinian desire). While, in the case of Plotinus, this receptive stance is not engaged through a discourse on matter (as we argue is the case for Gabirol), it might help to hear Hadot’s own reflections on the Plotinian desire-to-be-filled. In his careful treatments of Plotinus,⁶⁰ Hadot describes Plotinus’s own philosophical endeavor in terms of an erotic receptivity to divine presence. Hadot explains the core of Plotinian metaphysics as an erotic or receptive—in the sense of “desiring-to-be-filled”—comportment to the world; it is, in Hadot’s language, an “intuition of the mystery of Life.”⁶¹ This erotic ground is itself a state of receptivity, of openness—something that Hadot describes as a “complete passivity” and readiness to “receive the divine invasion.”⁶² This erotic composure is what, for Plotinus, gives the human being its essential starting and end point.⁶³

In my own reading of Gabirol’s discourse on matter, it is precisely this receptive desire-to-be-filled—as a most genuine description of the self in its highest, most sublime essence—that emerges as key. In Gabirol’s description of the sublime nature of passive materiality as the hidden site of divinity, we have opened a space for privileging the passive as the receptive stance of openness-in-the-face-of-the-other. Existentially speaking, this receptive comportment is an erotic stance, a starting place in the world in which we

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

ask to be filled, in which we ask to become—because acknowledging the necessity of becoming—created by the other. This erotic longing is no longer a (masculine) desire for (masculine) power, but a desire for being desired—a presence open to receive the presence of the other. An existential receptivity, this presence and openness to receive presence is a desire to be loved.

A careful investigation of Gabirol's text—and in particular, its philosophical underpinnings—allows us to explicitly uncover not only a positive valuation of materiality/passivity, but also this fuller notion of material-as-erotic-presence. For, struck by Gabirol's notion of a first, purest occurrence of matter derived directly from the Divine Essence, Shem Tov ibn Falaquera (Gabirol's thirteenth-century Hebrew translator and editor), is led to remark that Gabirol is following in the tradition of the Empedoclean *Book of Five Substances*. Referred to in contemporary scholarship as "Pseudo Empedoclean" for its false attribution to the Greek philosopher Empedocles, the precise nature of this textual tradition, and its doctrine of a First Matter between God and the existent universe, remains something of a mystery. Yet traces of such a tradition surface in a number of Islamic and some Jewish mystical sources, such as the writings of ibn Masarra (tenth century), al-Sijistānī (d. 1000), al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), al-Shahrastānī (d. ca. 1281), and the fourteenth-century Hebrew mystical works of Elhanan ben Avraham. Without here worrying about the origin and reception(s) of this Ps. Empedoclean tradition (or traditions),⁶⁴ what characterizes these texts is their reporting of a First 'Unṣur, literally a First Element, which follows directly from the Godhead, and which precedes even the so-called "First Creation," viz. the (Plotinian) Universal Intellect.

In the extant Arabic fragments of the *Fons Vitae*, we can see Gabirol's explicit relation to this textual tradition. There we find that Gabirol's discussion of a spiritual *materia prima* (First Matter) is in fact a somewhat misleading Latin translation of what is in the Arabic a directly Ps. Empedoclean description of a First 'Unṣur—*al-'unṣur al-awwal*—literally, a First Element. This First 'Unṣur (First Matter,⁶⁵ if we follow the Latin terminology) is also described by Gabirol—in his Hebrew poetry—in a number of ways, most notably as *Yesōd* (or Foundation). Poetically giving voice to material and formal elements of reality, Gabirol speaks of the Foundation (*Yesōd*) and the Secret (*Sōd*), of the Foundation (*Yesōd*) and the Root, of the Hidden and the Manifest, as well as of the Kernel and its Shell. He also, in what is itself a moment of artistic verbal embroidery, speaks of matter and form as the Essence and its Embroidery.⁶⁶

Here, then, is where I directly root my suggestion of material-as-erotic-presence within Gabirol's textual dynamic. Looking further to at least some

versions of the Ps. Empedoclean tradition,⁶⁷ we find the Empedoclean ideas of Love (*maḥabba*) and Strife,⁶⁸ along with the following series of correlations:

Spirit (*rūḥ*) / Kernel (*lubb*) / Love (*maḥabba*)
vs.
Shell (*qisḥr*) / Strife

While Gabirol himself does not correlate matter with love directly, I suggest drawing precisely this conceptual link within Gabirol's corpus. For, as we have seen, Gabirol himself correlates Spirit and Kernel with matter, and Shell with manifest form. Given, then, his own text's relation to a tradition at play in his Arabic philosophical milieu that directly links "kernel" with "love," we suggest discerning within Gabirol's discourse on matter—as hidden essence and spark of divine simplicity within each reality—a discourse on the grounding presence of love (here, not a [masculine] love-of-[masculine]-power, but the Neoplatonic desire-to-be-filled) within each existent reality. In the case of a human being, this would suggest that *it is through love that each person encounters his or her own truest, most divine reality, and ultimately, that through which one encounters God himself.*

The transfiguration is complete, and the feminine ground is revealed. Far from a valuation of masculine-as-power at the ground of human subjectivity, Gabirol's "matter-as-love" dynamic frees the "feminine-as-passive" from its bind. For in this turn from "matter-as-evil" to "matter-as-erotic-ground," the feminine-as-loss becomes transfigured to feminine-as-presence. The feminine passive is redeemed in its new role as erotic ground of being itself.

Looking at Gabirol's Ps. Empedoclean matter discourse in this existential way as revealing truths about the very nature of human being, we are far from an Aristotelian analysis of matter. Whereas Aristotle's discourse on Matter and Form aims to demarcate principles needed to explain the workings of physical reality, our reading of Gabirol's own matter/form discourse suggests, on the contrary, a philosophical exploration of the very nature of human existence itself. For Gabirol, as we have argued, the matter discourse explores and rehearses the proper stance for we, who are thrown into this existence. And, as we have argued, for Gabirol this stance is a stance of love—an erotic (feminine) receptivity to the presence of the divine in oneself and in the face of the other. Gabirol's discourse on matter, hence, is no mere chapter in natural science; *it is, on the contrary, at once an existential, theological, and ethical exploration of the very grounds of being and living in and through erotic {feminine} receptivity.* In this regard, we may note Freud's own understanding of the philosophical scope of the historical Em-

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

pedocles's own discourses on Love and Strife; far from some "natural science" project, Empedocles's project too, according to Freud, must be seen as an existential investigation of the deepest human truths.⁶⁹



Conclusion

We have uncovered in Gabirol's matter discourse the emergence of matter over form, the correlation of matter with the Divine Essence, and, furthermore, the link between matter—as the hidden kernel at the core of existence—and love, a stance of erotic [feminine] receptivity, that passive, expectant longing-to-be-completed that replaces (or transfigures) the masculine longing for active, completing power. It is in this manifold way that we may discover in Gabirol a ground for the feminine voice. Not only does Gabirol's work give us grounds for heralding the material passivity of the feminine over the active masculine force, with the feminine passive emerging now as the very vestige in the world of the hidden Divine Essence itself, but, as we have shown, this hidden passivity may, in light of Gabirol's Ps. Empedoclean context, be explicitly described as a foundational *erotic* (and precisely feminine) kernel at the core of human being—no longer a masculine love-of-power, but rather, an expectant desire-to-be-filled which, following Hadot on Plotinus, we have described as an erotic receptivity and presence. In this way, through an encounter with Gabirol's matter discourse, the feminine passive may be transformed from its historical role as signal-of-loss to a fresh new role as signal-of-presence—it may be valued now as that most divine, because most receptive, aspect of all human being. In our encounter with Gabirol's text, the passivity and receptivity of the feminine stance may be given new voice; she may be allowed finally to sing the song of life itself.

In light of this turn, it is interesting to return for but a moment to the Greek *theilu* (for "feminine"), and to reflect on its conceptual root in the notion of nurturing. Taking a lead from the Greek term itself, note how the Greek adjectives *theilos*, *theila*, *theilu* (for "feminine") can be used not only (as mentioned earlier) in the sense of "weak," but also in the sense of "fresh" or "refreshing" (as in the case of dew),⁷⁰ as well as in the sense of "tender, delicate, gentle." Whereas "weak" marks the devaluation of the feminine in its subordination to the masculine longing for active power, in our new dynamic—one in which the longing is itself a receptive desire not to overtake but to become—we may speak now instead of the nurturing, refreshing, delicate *theilu*, the "*theilu*-as-presence." Here, then, the *theilu* marks the very ground of living subjectivity—the erotic kernel of the man, and of the woman, and of the Divine Essence itself.

NOTES

I would like to thank Hava Tirosh-Samuelson for providing useful comments and suggestions for the paper. I am grateful also to Rick Furtak and Elliot Wolfson for many engaging philosophical conversations on these and related themes.

1. [This poem is by the essay's author—Ed.]
2. John Dillon, "Female Principles in Platonism," in John Dillon, *The Golden Chain* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1990), IV, 123.
3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 986a22–26, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 698. For Greek text, see W. D. Ross, *Aristotle: Metaphysics*, vol. I (Oxford, 1924).
4. Plato, *Timaeus* 49a.
5. Of course, the point is that within Plato's Greek context (as we will see in the case of Aristotle below), the mother is not really much more than a wet nurse, contributing, as she does, nothing of any real import to the actual offspring. Mother, nurse, hostess: she is the "space" in which a life grows, and nothing more. On this point in Plato and other ancient thinkers, see Francis M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 187.
6. Interestingly, it might also be noted that in Plato's *Menexenus*, it is once again a female character, Aspasia, to whom Socrates credits a particular discourse in which the actual procreative role of woman, while receiving some sort of positive praise as an ability to contribute to life, is ultimately (as above, though in a different way) devalued in the claim that "the woman in her conception and generation is but the imitation of the earth" (*Menexenus*, 238a). Thanks to Rick Furtak for drawing my attention to this particular Platonic passage.
7. In this regard, consider Genevieve Lloyd's exposition: "In the *Symposium*, Plato elaborates the interconnections between love, in its various forms, and knowledge. . . . [On Diotima's account] Love's aim is birth in beauty, whether of body or soul. This aim in all its form expresses mortal nature's longing for immortality; and knowledge is one of these forms. It is through being a form of love that knowledge is connected with immortality. The pursuit of wisdom is a spiritual procreation, which shares with physical procreation the desire for immortality through generation—the desire to leave behind a new and different existence in place of the 'old worn-out mortality.' The pursuit of wisdom thus shares a common structure with physical procreation; but its aim is a superior form of immortality. Men who are 'pregnant in the body only' betake themselves to women and beget children. But there are men who are 'more creative in their soul than in their bodies, creative of that which is proper for the soul to conceive and bring forth—wisdom and virtue'" (Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], 21).
8. For a treatment of the relation of Aristotle's embryological theory with his larger system of physics and metaphysics (as well as further references to relevant sites in Aristotle's *De Generatione Animalium* on this issue), see Alan Code's "Soul as Efficient Cause in Aristotle's Embryology," *Philosophical Topics* XV, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 51–59. For a feminist treatment, see also Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "Aristotle and Women," *History of Biology* 9 (1976): 181–233.
9. Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, 729a25–32; cf. McKeon's *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 676.
10. Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, 729b10–18; cf. McKeon, *ibid.*, 676.
11. In remarks on *Gen. An.* 775a15 and *Politics* 1260a8–14, Aristotle additionally sug-

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

gests, as Charlotte Witt puts it, not "that women, or their reproductive organs are matter" (as is Aristotle's idea in the embryological biology that we have been discussing above) but additionally, "that there is something wrong with their forms. There is the vague implication that form is really and fully at home in men . . . and not in women. In these statements Aristotle conveys that there is something compromised about the forms that women have, or about the way that they have forms" (p. 123, in Charlotte Witt, "Form, Normativity, and Gender in Aristotle: A Feminist Perspective," in *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland [Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998], 118–37).

12. See earlier note on the similarity of a mother and a nurse in this regard, as discussed by Cornford in the context of Plato's *Timaeus* (Cornford, 187). Looking in particular at Aristotle's sense of the mother's rather insignificant contribution to the offspring, Cornford references Frazer's *Totemism and Exogamy* i, 338 for a contemporary vestige of this idea that "children emanate from the father alone and are merely nurtured by the mother" in the doctrines of native S.E. Australians (Cornford, 187, n. 1).

13. Contrary to those who see Aristotle's hylomorphic association of the inferior principle of matter with the female as revealing a confused construction on his part of what is an inherently non-normative metaphysics out of the social gender norms of his day, Witt argues instead that Aristotle's hylomorphism is inherently normative in and of itself, and that his association of matter with the female merely reflects the social values of his day in which females were portrayed as inferior. Cf. Witt, op. cit.

14. But, for a view opposing a gendered reading of matter and form in Aristotle, see Marguerite Deslauriers, "Sex and Essence in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Biology," in *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 138–67.

15. At *Timaeus* 30a, she is described as a "discordant and unordered motion" (see Cornford, 33). For a further elaboration of this chaos, see *Timaeus* 52d–53c (cf. Cornford, 197–210).

16. And so, for example, at *Timaeus* 50b–c, she is denied any characteristics of her own, taking on, rather, the characteristics of "the things that enter" her (cf. Cornford, 182).

17. Cf. Cornford, 181.

18. Focusing on a somewhat different aspect of the *Timaeus* account, Robin May Schott reveals yet another way in which the feminine is not only inferior to, but defined in terms of, the masculine: "In the *Timaeus*, Plato offers a version of the story of creation that posits male superiority over female nature by virtue of men's ability to control sensations and feelings. In the first act of creation, in which all souls are born without disadvantage, human nature appeared in the form of the 'superior race' that would be called 'man' (*Timaeus* 42a). . . . According to this account, then, primordial human nature is male, and those souls who have conquered bodily passions retain the privileges of this superior race. Women are by definition the embodiment of those souls who have succumbed to temptation and live unrighteously. The creation myth in the *Timaeus* vividly portrays the projection onto woman's nature of man's failure to control his sensations and feelings." Robin May Schott, *Cognition and Eros: A Critique of the Kantian Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 5.

19. One can additionally find a Platonic subordination of the depravity of the feminine to the reasonableness of the masculine in the *Gorgias's* treatment of unruly (feminine) rhetoric's subordination to orderly (masculine) reasoning/philosophy/dialectic. For a discussion of this Platonic theme, see Susan E. Shapiro, "A Matter of Discipline: Reading for

Gender in Jewish Philosophy," in *Judaism since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 158–73.

20. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, excerpt cited in *French Feminism Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 206–207.

21. For a treatment of the existential implications of this thematic in Maimonides, see my "Matter, Metaphor, and Privative Pointing: Maimonides on the Complexity of Human Being," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no.1 (2002): 75–88. For an extended illuminating treatment of the hermeneutical implications of Maimonides's use of these and related biblical prooftexts in the construction of his Guide, see James Arthur Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in The Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

22. Maimonides, *Guide* 3.8, 431. References are to Shlomo Pines's *The Guide of the Perplexed, Moses Maimonides* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

23. Maimonides, *Guide* 3.8, 432.

24. Ibid.

25. In her own feminist hermeneutical consideration of Maimonides's discourse of matter-as-married-harlot, Susan Shapiro makes the further point that this metaphorical depiction of matter, predicated as it is on an asymmetrical "man-rules-wife" scenario, has the effect of "fail[ing] to offer corrective resistance to [Maimonides's] understandings of marriage in the *Mishneh Torah* and that it further reinforces, rationalizes, and justifies such violence against wives and women" (Shapiro, 165). In her essay, Shapiro additionally examines Maimonides's matter metaphor in light of Platonic theories of rhetoric (as unruly feminine), exploring the crucial role that the metaphor plays within Maimonides's argument against idolatry. Shapiro offers a "redemptive critique" (166) in which the (secondary, feminine) technique of rhetoric (in this case, the use of a metaphor) actually winds up enabling the very possibility of the (masculine, reason-based) philosophical argument in Maimonides's text.

26. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath: Becoming Male and the Ascetic Ideal in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997), 154.

27. Ibid., 154.

28. Ibid., 169.

29. Ibid., 173–74.

30. I would like to express my gratefulness for having been given the opportunity to preview parts of this project.

31. Elizabeth Grosz, "Histories of the Present and Future: Feminism, Power, Bodies," in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 22 (italics in original).

32. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis*, Book II, section 18.73; Colson and Whitaker, 271.

33. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis*, Book II, section III, 67.6, lines 9–13; cf. *Philo I*, trans. Colson and Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library (no. 226) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 229. Square bracketed comments are my own.

34. From *bēgemōn*, a guide, a leader, a commander.

35. See, e.g., *Alleg. Interp.* II, section 19.78, Colson and Whitaker, 273; they translate "*archon*" of the soul here as "ruling part" of the soul.

36. See, e.g., Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, section 14.46, Colson and Whitaker, 35.

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

37. Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* II, section 12.41 [lines 5–7]–12.42 [line 1]; Colson and Whitaker, 250. Translation is my own.

38. Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* II, section 17.70; Colson and Whitaker, 269.

39. Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* II, section 23.93–94; Colson and Whitaker, 283–85.

40. Philo does not suggest that the “offspring” of Sense is a daughter; I am just using that language to stand in for the similar image of irrational offspring. Offspring in general—male or female—are irrational as they are not yet full grown virtuous humans within the Philonic system. It is, hence, conceptually apt to speak, as I am, of offspring in feminine terms.

41. The Greek is *dēmiourgēbēnai*, to make, or to create—but often with the sense of to fabricate or craft (recall Plato’s Demiurge craftsman . . .). Colson and Whitaker translate *creation*; this seems conceptually acceptable given that elsewhere, Philo describes the creation of mind and of sense perception with the Greek term *genesis*, or creation (see, e.g., *Allegor. Interpr.* Book I, section I.43 [line 3]; Colson and Whitaker, 146). As such, while the Greek “*dēmiourgōō*” verb can be taken in more of the sense of crafting, conceptually, it would seem that Philo is referring to an act of divine *genesis*.

42. *Ibid.*, 241.

43. Philo, *Alleg. Interpr.* II, section 19.78; Colson and Whitaker, 272.

44. *Ibid.*; Philo makes this point here in conjunction with the Passions, though I see no reason not to extend the idea at least in a general way to include Sense, the other non-Reason aspect of soul, especially in light of Philo’s clear sense (already seen above) in which Reason’s moment of ascendancy entails Sense’s moment of sublimation.

45. Or, more literally: “whenever we wish to think something out precisely.”

46. Greek: *apotattómetha*; middle voice of “*apotátōō*,” “to set apart.” And so, “saying good-bye” literally as “setting someone apart from oneself.”

47. *Ibid.*, 241, 243.

48. From *phtheirō*, to ruin, waste, spoil, destroy. Furthermore, in its passive form, this verb is used as a curse: “*phtheiresthe!*” meaning “may ye perish!” Also worth noting is a special meaning of the passive form of this Greek verb when used of women in particular; it is the term used to refer to a women’s “pining away” (used, e.g., in Sophocles to refer to women’s pining away in barrenness).

49. Maimonides, *Guide* 3.8, 431.

50. This text, originally written by Gabirol in the eleventh century in Arabic, is extant in a complete Latin version (trans. into Latin in the twelfth century by the translation team of Dominicus Gundissalinus and John of Spain), as well as in an abbreviated thirteenth-century Hebrew version (trans. and abridged by Shem Tov ibn Falaquera). Some bits of the Arabic original of the work can be found as citations in Moses ibn Ezra’s *Arugat ha-Bosem*. As Gabirol’s full original Arabic text is non-extant, references in this paper are to the Latin translation of the *Fons Vitae* (FV), which is earlier and more complete than Falaquera’s Hebrew translation; cf. Baeumker’s edition: *Avencebrolis (ibn Gabirol) Fons Vitae, ex Arabico in Latinum Translatus ab Johanne Hispano et Dominico Gundissalino*, ed. Baeumker (Münster, 1892), in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, Texte und Untersuchungen*, ed. Baeumker and Hertling (Münster, 1895). For a partial French translation and commentary, see *La source de vie; livre III*, trans. with commentary by Fernand Brunner (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1950). For a partial English translation, see *The Fountain of Life* (Book 3), trans. Henry E. Wedeck (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962). For a sometimes idiosyncratic, but complete English translation, see *The Fountain of Life (Fons Vitae) by Solomon Ben Judah Ibn Gabirol (Avicbron)*, trans. Alfred B. Jacob (Stanwood: Sabian Publishing Society, 1987). For a

contemporary Hebrew translation of the Latin text, as well as the Hebrew text of Falaquera's thirteenth-century abridged translation from the Arabic, see *Rabbi Shlomo ben Gabirol, Sefer Meqor Hayyim*, trans. [into Hebrew] by Yaakov Blovstein, in *Ötsar Ha-Maḥshavah shel Ha-Yabadūt*, ed. Abraham Sifroni (Israel: Mosad Ha-Rav Kuk, n.d.), or *Extraits de la source de vie de Salomon Ibn Gebirol*, in Solomon Munk's, *Mélanges de philosophie juive et arabe* (Paris: Chez A. Franck, Libraire, 1859) for Falaquera's Hebrew text with Munk's French translation and commentary. For the Arabic fragments of the original text as found in Moses ibn Ezra, see Shlomo Pines, "Sefer 'Arugat ha-Bosem': ha-Qetaim mi-tokh Sefer 'Meqor Hayyim'," *Tarbiz* 27 (1957–58) reprinted in *Shlomo Pines, Bein Maḥshevet Yisroel le-Maḥshevet ha-ʿAmim* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1977), 44–60; see also Paul Fenton's "Gleanings from Moses Ibn Ezra's *Maqalat al-Hadiqa, Sefarad* 36 (1976): 285–98.

51. Gabirol, *Fons Vitae* 5.42, 333, 4–5.

52. Turning to the surrounding Kalām debates in Gabirol's context, "Essence"—or *al-Dhāt*—is one of the most characteristic terms used to talk about God, and in particular, as part of a debate about the nature or absence of divine Attributes that most vigorously stresses God's complete unity and utter Transcendence. Also, Michael Sells notes that in Sufism "the first mode of the real is the *dhāt* (identity), the absolute unity beyond the dualistic structures of language and thought, beyond all relation" (Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 64). Sells also speaks of *al-Dhāt* in terms of "the Plotinian One and Eckhart's Godhead (*Gotttheit*) in the sense that it is beyond all dualism, all name, and all quiddity" (Sells, 244, n. 7).

53. For a relevantly similar notion of positively valenced Matter in Neoplatonism, though, see John Dillon, "Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Doctrine of Intelligible Matter," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn Goodman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); see also Jean Trouillard, "La genèse de l'hylémorphisme selon Proclus," in *Dialogue (Canadian Philosophical Review)* VI (June 1967), 1–17.

54. Wolfson refers in this regard to the deep "ontological" esotericism of Kabbalah (in contrast to an "epistemic esotericism") as addressing "the secret that cannot be kept"; cf. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 52. See also *Through a Speculum that Shines* (Trenton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and for an engagement with this theme in Derrida, cf. "Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida," *JAAR* 70, no. 3, 2002.

55. Matter is "*occulta*" (*Fons Vitae* 5.23, p. 299, 17); Matter is the "*summu occultum*" (*Fons Vitae* 1.15, p. 19, 19; 4.8, p. 230, 12.13); Matter is the "*essentia occulta*" (*Fons Vitae* 1.12, p. 15, 22); Matter is the "*finis occultus*" (*Fons Vitae* 1.11, p. 14, 23–26).

56. Gabirol, *Fons Vitae*, 4. 8, p. 230, 8.

57. For text of the poem in Hebrew, see *Shirei Shlomo ben Yehudah Ibn Gevirol (Shirei qodesh)*, vol. 2, ed. Bialik and Ravnitsky (Tel Aviv and Berlin: Dwir-Verlags-Gesellschaft, 1925), or *Shirei ha-hol le-Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gevirol*, ed. Dov Yarden (Jerusalem: Kiryat Noar, 1975), or *ha-Shirah ha-Ivrit be-Sefarad u-be-Provence*, vol. 1, ed. Jefim (Hayyim) Shirmann (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1954), 257–85. For English translations, see Bernard Lewis, *Solomon ibn Gabirol: The Kingly Crown* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1961); Peter Cole, *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Raphael Loewe, *Ibn Gabirol* (London: Peter Halban, 1989).

58. In reading in Gabirol this positive valuation of feminine passivity, my project can be seen in a conceptual kinship with Daniel Boyarin's own project, one which he has described as "reclaiming the eroticized Jewish male sissy" (p. 135 in Daniel Boyarin, "Justify

Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire

My Love," in *Judaism since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt [New York: Routledge, 1997], 131–37).

59. In this regard, one might consider the infinite responsibility of a Levinasian ethics; I hope to explore the relevance of Levinas for my reading of Gabirol elsewhere. Of interest to note here too is Sabina Lovibond's analysis of the "Hebraic" (by which she means Judeo-Christian, in contrast to Graeco-Roman) ethics of obedience [to an infinite God] as an ethics of limitlessness—an ethics of, as Nietzsche puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "infinite demands." Lovibond usefully correlates this Hebraic ethics of infinite obedience with an "ethics of care" (as opposed to one "of justice"). See Sabina Lovibond, "Feminism in ancient philosophy: The feminist stake in Greek rationalism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism*, ed. Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10–28. Inclined myself towards Levinas in my own interpretation of Gabirol's limitless ground of being, I additionally see a link between my own reading of Gabirol's erotic receptivity and this "ethics of care." It is worth noting, though, that Lovibond herself is critical of associating this notion of care with feminine virtue, wary, as she is, of making women "'hostage' to the needs (or demands) of others" (Lovibond, 23). In my own treatment of Gabirol, I would see a completely positive valence to such an infinite ethics of care, where in the Gabirol context, of course, it would represent the "feminine core" of all humans, and as such, the demand for infinite receptivity and responsiveness would be made of men and women alike.

60. Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

61. *Ibid.*, 40.

62. *Ibid.*, 56.

63. For a moving treatment of this theme in Plotinus, see also Frederic M. Schroeder, *Form and Transformation: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

64. For some discussion of this tradition, see the "Anbaduklis" entry by S.M. Stern in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, volume I, new edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill), 483–84, as well as the "Empedocles" entry in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. See also David Kaufmann, *Studien über Salomon Ibn Gabirol, (Jahresbericht der Landes-Rabbinerschule in Budapest für das Schuljahr 1898–1899)* (Budapest, 1899); in David Kaufmann, *Die Spuren Al-Batlajusi's, Studien über Salomon ibn Gabirol and Die Sinne* (with an Introduction by Louis Jacobs) ([London, (?): Gregg International Publishers, 1972), and his essay "Ha-Pseudo Empedocles ka-Mekor le-R' Shlomo ibn Gabirol," *Mekharim ba-Sifrut ha-Ivrit*, 78–164. For a possible link between this so-called Empedoclean philosophy and the mystical tradition of Ibn Masarra, but also for helpful elaborations (including some translations) of the relevant doctrines, see Miguel Asín Palacios, *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Masarra and his Followers*, trans. Elmer H. Douglas and Howard W. Yoder, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).

65. For various different occurrences of terms for Matter in Islamic thought, and their implications, see L. Gardet, "Hayūlā," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

66. Hence the title of my forthcoming study of *apophysis* and *eros* in Gabirol, *Embroidering the Hidden*.

67. I am working here in particular with al-Shahrastānī's Arabic text, *Kitāb al-Milal wal-Nihal (Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects)*, Part II, ed. W. Cureton (Leipzig, 1923), 260–65.

68. The Arabic in the Ps. Empedoclean source (as recounted by Shahrastani) has the word "ghalaba." Literally, this does not mean *strife*, but *victory* (or also: *idle talk, chatter*). I

am not sure what to make of this, but am simply translating *strife* for now since the actual Arabic root in question (“*ghalaba*” = to subdue, to conquer) is indeed the *root* for the Arabic word *strife*, just under a different construction (*strife* = “*ghilāb*”). This, together with the fact that the Arabic source invokes the name of Empedocles and opposes this “*ghalaba*” to the principle of Love (“*mahabba*”), leads me to translate *strife*, at least for the present time.

69. See Freud’s “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (1937).

70. Here it is interesting to note that the root of *male* (“*ārren*” relates also to the Greek “*bē ersē*,” meaning *deu*; with “*erseieis*,—*essa*, —*en*” for *deu*y as well as *fresh* (though here in the metaphorical sense to describe a “fresh corpse”).