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## On love

*Unpublished manuscript fragments*

### **Male and Female**

Love can only be spoken of in terms of its effects, those traces of it that are accessible to memory and reason. They are only the reflection of one in the other; the essence therefore is not captured in those traces which appear as unintelligibility and madness. In order to reckon correctly, the speaker must classify and sift through these traces: whatever is not madness is retained, the rest is denied and discarded. To speak of love is only to interpret its traces and its carrying over to the other side of the current of love, where it exists as if on some distant horizon. Whatever can be said of love is not love itself. For this very reason, irrationality and madness are the true marks of love in the ordered world. The lover has a beloved who is concealed. He desires a full unveiling and identification with the beloved. When all concealment disappears, even duality ceases to exist.

The story goes that when Samnûn<sup>1</sup>, who was in love, talked about love, the oil lamps were swaying hither and thither, right and left. He would be asked: "Say something on the subject of love." He replied: "I don't know anyone on the face of the earth for whom it is easy to speak of love." And at that point a bird landed in front of him. He said: "If love exists, then this is it." And he started speaking of love, and the bird pecked at the earth with its beak until it began to bleed and died.<sup>2</sup>

This talk of love is stamped with an image whose very essence evades reason. It seems intelligible only to a type of knowledge which sees the limits and changeable nature of all that comes with it. This knowledge may be found by various approaches.

This is why speaking of love is both a testament of madness and an orderly attempt to portray the rhythms of that which cannot be ordered. Love enters as a reflection into our speech about humankind, the world, and God. Following this order, it is human love for others — men and women, the world, and God. In duality, though, two directions exist — giving and receiving. All of creation may be understood as the presence of two elements — male and female. Each one of these elements embraces the other in perfect harmony. Their unity produces or creates everything that exists. The relationship between these two elements, from the perspective of oneness, constantly changes. In the same way, all of creation, all the worlds, change from one moment to the next, like rivers. "Change" is the flow in which the heavens and the earth, and all that exists between them, are created anew again and again. Male and female are the elements of this change and the symbols of all movement in the world. This mutuality of oneness and the flow of days can be seen in the following

verse:

Say: "He is God, One,  
God, the Everlasting Refuge,  
who has not begotten, and has not begotten,  
And equal to Him is not any one."<sup>3</sup>

All phenomena flow in this Current. Even when they stand "still", they do not capture the Current itself, nor do they exist outside of it. The Current cannot be defined, but its existence is declared by everything it contains. Our longing for it is a denial of the illusory independence of its separate phenomena. In it and with it, any individuality outside of it disappears: the bird flies toward the limit of the horizon and attempts to go beyond it, demonstrating its inner nature as part of the Current. The struggle of the bird to go further, to reach the Current in which everything flows, opens the way; at the boundary the inner nature is revealed and the outward nature "dies away". There always exists a mutuality of acting and being acted upon. These two elements are present throughout all the worlds as the whole of creation, and in each individual part of creation. Their presence drives the change and transformation of everything in every moment.

Everything exists in duality, as He tells us: *And of everything created We two kinds;*<sup>4</sup> *He Himself created the two kinds, male and female.*<sup>5</sup> All phenomena in the many worlds come in pairs. Some are the elements of creation: stylus and tablet, heaven and earth, body and soul. Such dualities are different faces of the same thing. One remains utterly dependent on the other. The relationship between them establishes the harmony of creation. One needs the other: *they are a vestment for you, and you are a vestment for them.*<sup>6</sup>

To speak of love is to accept God's commandment to make no graven images of His countenance. Whatever men and women can attain in their quest for God is but an image. Such images are never God. Humans are called upon to purify their surroundings of all images, to make room for the one who has made them in His own image.

In this ceaseless work of purification, casting off and destroying the images they have surrounded themselves with, men and women come closer and closer to their Beloved. No single image can satisfy them. Again and again they remake themselves to become beautiful in the eyes of their Beloved and to be loved by Him. Any state they can achieve is only a brief moment in this remaking; they die from moment to moment and are reborn in new states, ever more beautiful and closer to the Beloved. They draw endlessly nearer; new and more beautiful images follow one upon the other, bringing new life, while the old ones float away lifeless and forgotten.

This continues until everything dies away but the Face of the Beloved. So long as the loving self exists, the Beloved remains out of reach. The goal is to die away, to gain in return the Beloved alone.

## Loving

In the Bosnian language, "love" is a hard knot to untie. The concept involves three overlapping semantic fields, with a verb at the centre of each: *htjeti*, *voljeti*, and *ljubiti*. We use the verb *voljeti* to say that we "love" somebody, positing a relationship between a self that loves and a self that is loved, bound by the verbal noun *voljenje*, or "loving". This bond of loving can also be called

*ljubav*, a noun which is cognate to the English word "love". Unlike in English, the verb form corresponding to this particular noun — *ljubit* — has the primary meaning of "to kiss". Again we see a relationship between two selves, one that kisses and another that receives the kiss. The verb signifies that one self has achieved full closeness to the other in the act of pressing the lips together. At such a moment, even speech — the best proof of thought — must fall silent, and the duality of the subject–object relationship ceases to exist. From this it can be seen that the will, or *volja*, means orienting the self towards the beloved, the *voljeni*; that is, the lover "wills" the beloved, but cannot reach the other by sheer will alone — no matter how strongly the lover wants and desires to overcome their separation.

In the semantic difference between "will" and "love" — the nouns *volja* and *ljubav* — and between their corresponding verbs, *voljeti* and *ljubiti*, it is possible to detect the relationship between two constitutive elements of the self. By looking deeper into the semantic cluster around the morpheme *ljub*— and the verb *ljubiti*, we see that it is inextricably bound up with connotations of closeness and similarity, kindness and tenderness, touching and caressing, joy and beauty, and so on. In all such relationships, there exists a separation and the longing to join together. However, the object of the lover's desire is not a stable and determinate object — even though all inner and outer signs may seem to indicate otherwise. The lover may believe that he or she loves a particular phenomenon or person, and that the distance between them is being bridged, but nothing the lover can achieve will ever bring absolute and abiding peace.

The beloved may exist in bodily form, but is always greater than the form in which it appears. Whenever the beloved is seen in the form of a person, and the will moves toward it, the apparent goal will prove to be like the far horizon — receding before the steps of the lover, unreachable by any way travelled. Nothing can satisfy the lover who is separated from the beloved. Wherever the will is present, fear also exists. The will turns to what can be loved; the deepest memory of a being longs for the beloved. Because it is separated from the Self, the self exists in terror of oblivion, of hurtling into non–Being.

The Bosnian word *volja*, cognate with English "will" and "volition", contradicts easy logic by not denoting the relationship between the connected words for "lover" — *volitel* — and "beloved" — *voljeni*. The term "will" is unable to grasp the fullness of such a relationship. It is adequate to express only one level, or only one degree, of that relationship in duality. In the same way, the word *htijenje* — "wanting" — is inadequate to describe the relationship of the one who wants and the object of that desire. The verb form *hoće*, related to the verbal noun *htijenje*, here means "wants, desires" but is also used to form the future tense and would then be translated as "will". The will is the difference between wanting and love. The will includes wanting but goes beyond desire. Love includes the will but is greater than the will. To think of love means to reduce it to the will in thought or to translate it from one level of human nature to another.

When love manifests as attraction between the lover and the beloved — even though the true goal remains indeterminate — the lover must have a definite and recognizable form to orient the self towards, if the will is to be expressed within that love. But whatever the will can strive towards is not and cannot be the definite goal of love: it is only one of the stops along the endless way towards Oneness.

There are three levels: the will, love, and knowledge. Expressed differently, there are three possibilities: submission or revolt, belief or denial, sanctity or profanation. When confronted with immensity and power, wrath and punishment, the will is transformed into fear. Such fear spurs the will to fight or flee. With this response to greatness and might, fear becomes acceptance or refusal; the will is reduced to a trace of the inner peace which has withdrawn into the depths of the self.

The self in retreat gathers its strength. If fear spurs the self to strike against everything that is not the Self or the Fullness of Being, until coming at last to rest in this One, then the self expands violently. The self touches certain ultimate limits in both contracting and expanding. The limits of one's own skin, senses, and consciousness force the question of what exists "beyond". Visible phenomena testify to roots that lie beyond the reach of the eye. Reason and the senses cannot penetrate to these roots. The journey beyond can be made in faith — the call from the other side of visible phenomena, the need to raise up what has been lowered, to give back to the Creator every created thing. When the unseen is felt as certain, a great relaxation takes place and the self is filled with peace. All things are seen in their perfect order and confirm oneness. But this revelation cannot be frozen or seized. Although the perfect peace of oneness is within reach, it flows unceasingly between inner and outer, first and last. Never stopping, again it pushes the self onwards.

For humans, every form shows forth both the world of infinite multiplicity and its one true essence. Recognizing the countless forms, none of which ever denies the one true essence, requires differentiating the unreal from the real, the non-Self from the Self. Phenomena and their many forms are nothing if they do not show us the Real, for nothing is real but the Real Itself. Coming to the Real means listening to it and accepting its commandments. Although no eye has seen its essence, there is nothing which does not show it forth. To know the Real is to be real. To be real is to know the Real. Phenomena in the world are only the proof of it. For this reason, the visible world is most real on its invisible side.

The query, *Do you not see how everything in the world hastens to obey?* shows that the Sun and the Moon, the mountains and the stars, the trees of the forest and all the wild beasts conform their wills in perfect obedience to His. Both together and separately, they are thus the visible aspect of His love for being known. By extinguishing their own wills, which they have by force of existing apart, the phenomena of this world show His love. The potential of the human self to have its own will is shown in duality — being near and being far away. When submission to Him is absolute, then the will comes to be identified with His will. This is the attainment of utter closeness in which separation is overcome. No longer can the lover be said to be moving towards the Beloved. Quite simply, the self and the Self are united at a point which is no longer a single point, in a peaceful flow and flowing peace.

When something attracts us as beauty, but remains free of our definition and control, it shows us that knowledge of many things, or the various possible relationships between the subject and object of knowledge, are only more screens of light and dark hiding the face of Oneness. To deny this is to reduce the self to a thing in the world that exists only for its own sake. The self is then "deprived" of its vertical extension to the first mind in which knowledge and being are united. This is the clash of love and the will.

## Heart

The will must both deny and affirm: objects which the self grasps at must be denied because their nature is illusory — this is shown by their changeability; at the same time, they must be affirmed as the products of free choice. Denial is made in freedom; it is the means by which the self establishes its separate nature: propensity towards evil, correction, constant reminders of greater potential, then peace at last, when the human and Divine wills are reconciled and rejoice in one and the same truth — that there is no will outside the Will.

Turning freely towards the Will includes struggle and warfare by the higher parts of the self against the lower, in order to rectify and better them. The self fights back with all the provocations and snares of the world and its very own being. The contingent existence of the self aspires to acquire its own sufficiency, to harden and toughen into a lasting thing — the scriptural "hardening of the heart" or "sickness of heart" — which hinders the will and forces its actions downward.

In this way, the self is distinguished in its vertical orientation between the body as a hardening into nothingness and the soul as the highest plane of existence.

The horizons of the external world show the separate nature of things, from infinity and eternity to existence at a specific point and time. Scattered to the far limits of the outer world, all things are gathered together again in human nature: in the body, which in the outer world corresponds to the earth; in the soul, which corresponds to what exists in between; and in the spirit, which corresponds to the heavens. The points where these potentialities intersect determine human destiny. Mind and spirit illuminate every part of the self, but that light must pass through the heart. The state of a person's soul depends on the unobstructed passage of this light. The soul can turn towards peace, which is found in the mind and spirit, or towards passions, which are found in the body and soul.

The scattered nature of things is a phenomenon in the external world, corresponding to the countless multiplicity of names; since these many things are gathered together in human nature, the human environment includes countless points-of-view. For this reason, the heart is the "place" of turning, return, change, flow, etc. In the same way that a cube offers endless pictures to the eye with each change in position, bearing witness to the oneness of space, the heart also appears as oneness in multiplicity. The heart is open to oneness as the possibility of multiple names; differentiated phenomena enter the heart as signs, and the heart takes these signs and names from multiplicity and recognizes oneness in them.

The heart is simultaneously both the action of gathering together and distinguishing separately. It is turned towards both oneness and multiplicity, meaning towards both greatness and distance as well as towards nearness and beauty. When differentiation takes place within the heart, love as the source of what is shown is transmitted to phenomena. Once transmitted, love becomes a permanent spur towards attaining oneness again. The heart is where love and knowledge unite as faith. They are differentiated outside the heart, but both also show that which exists first and last, the inner and the outer.

The heart is born of the union of spirit and soul. In the multiple possibilities of this relationship, the soul appears as the force which draws the self away from the light of the mind and instruction, while the spirit pulls it towards God. Seen in this way, the relationship of soul and spirit appears to be one of tension and struggle. However, if the soul submits to the light of the spirit, then the

relationship is one of balance and harmony. The harmonious relationship between soul and spirit can be compared to the marriage of the First Mind and the All–Spirit.

From the happy union of spirit and soul is born the heart, a child in the form of the Merciful One. In this way, all the signs that exist on the horizons and in the many selves enter into that heart. The heart is the beginning and the end of all that exists in the self, and its movement towards everything in the external world. All names also exist in it, both as potentiality and as revelation. Separation and union happen by and within it. Since the Essence is always one and the same, all that exists is in endless flux in the relationship between the active and the passive. Nothing in creation is exactly the same as any other thing. Within the encircling heart, the duality of creation finds balance; both oneness and multiplicity are seen at the same time.

The heart is the link to the uncreated within human beings, to the mysterious highest level of human existence. This core of human existence is submerged in the Mind, and is therefore "in touch" with its roots. Since the self is in constant change, the heart makes it possible to draw on this centre and return to it. In this way, the heart both stands above all change and is the very element of change within the totality of selfhood. This is the meaning of what is written: "The hearts of all the children of Adam are like a single heart between two fingers of the All–merciful. He turns it wherever He desires."<sup>7</sup>

The "sickness" or "hardness" of the heart is to be closed to the Highest and turned in the opposite direction, towards nothingness, away from the "ray of light" which connects the highest to each and every phenomenon; when this occurs, the reason is no longer able to accurately gauge the compatibility of its relationships to other phenomena with the true purpose of human existence.

The virtues of resisting and struggling against this error of turning away require decisiveness, vigilance, and perseverance. This is a spiritual act: and it is in turn conditioned by them, not in its unique actuality, but in its relationship with duration, which demands repetition, rhythm, the transmutation of time into instantaneity; the spiritual act is, on its own plan, a participation in Omnipotence, in the divine Liberty, in the pure and eternal Act. What has to be Actively conquered is natural and habitual passivity towards the world and towards the images and impulses of the soul; spiritual laziness, inattention, dreaming, all have to be overcome; what gives victory is all divine Presence which is "incarnate" as it were in the sacred act — prayer in all its forms — and thus regenerates the individual substance.<sup>8</sup>

## Beauty

Nothing in all the many worlds is like unto God. And yet nothing in them has any realness apart from Him. Thus, over against this incomparability exists a similarity, since every word spoken proclaims His glory.<sup>9</sup> Incomparability and similarity coexist, corresponding to the way all creation tells what it is and what it is not. Every phenomenon in creation has a visible and an invisible nature. Phenomena are differentiated in their visible nature by the outlines in which they appear. In their invisible nature they are closer to a higher and undifferentiated plane, where their very existence speaks of a hidden store of riches. This duality of the visible and the invisible, the inner and the outer, forms the many worlds. All phenomena have this dividing–line between the two oceans they are immersed in simultaneously. At this border, the visible and the invisible, the inner and the outer, touch and unite in a mysterious way.

Duality is the revelation and the confirmation of oneness. If any single phenomenon should lose this connection or contact by which it exists "with truth", it would face only nothingness. As such it appears to human understanding in its corrupted or fallen form. Every phenomenon, linked originally to the secret treasury, is a revelation of beauty. In its corrupt or fallen state, it no longer proclaims Beauty, and manifests itself as ugliness. Incomparability and similarity are the nature of all phenomena. They become corrupted when the duality which maintains their connection to the secret storehouse of riches is no longer understood as a confirmation of oneness.

The following Names correspond to this similarity: The Beautiful, the Near, the Merciful, the Most Gracious, the Loving, the Tender, the Forgiving, the Giver, etc. They are known as the names for beauty, tenderness, abundance and mercy. They are the names for the receiver's openness or for the feminine attributes of the giver. They express subordination to the desires of others, thus softness, acceptance, and receptivity. In comparison to these, there are names for active movement and the seeker's masculine attributes. As such they turn the self towards externality, towards the world as everything that exists outside the self, everything which lies beyond the borders of individuality. But He is with the self, wherever it may be.<sup>10</sup> This is confirmed by the illusory nature of the boundary between the self and the external world, and by the fact that there is no self but the Self, confirming the similarity in which duality is denied.

The human response to this tenderness and closeness lies in intimacy, hope, and extending the self. Intimacy is being together and uniting. This is gained through loving. Total union is the goal of love. However, existence as a phenomenon in the world of creation means to exist in separateness. Each phenomenon seeks its counterpart in order to see itself as it really is. This is its movement through space and time, confirming that behind all names lies one and the same essence. Love is the yearning for the oneness behind all phenomena.

The one who loves self-knowledge shows a desire to regard the self as reflected in the other. He or she makes threats and promises, seeing the other person only as a means to reveal the self without giving up the fullness of individuality. In the same way, the other person — beautiful and beloved to the first — is also a self that wants to know itself. But each person is only necessary to the other as a *he* or a *she*. Selfhood wants only fullness. The grace bestowed by one on the other is thus elementary and all-embracing. Union is only possible in the fullness of that grace.

Separateness and the pain which is inseparable from it are only stages on the path towards union, which is simply the return of one to the other, the confirmation of Oneness, as in the words of the Prophet: "The good, all of it, is in Thy two hands, while evil does not go back to Thee."<sup>11</sup> The pain of separation stokes the fires of love:

Passion is the elixir that makes (things) new: how (can there be) weariness where passion has arisen?  
Oh, do not sigh heavily from weariness: seek passion, seek passion, passion!<sup>12</sup>

No discussion of love can bypass the question of separation and union. Love is always present in true closeness and true distance. Though love is primarily associated with God's beauty and tenderness, it also requires might and intensity. In the endless play of duality, everything that exists shows forth the

beauty and power of God. In her synthesis of the poet Rumi, Annemarie Schimmel writes: "God's twofold aspects are revealed in everything on earth: He is the Merciful and the Wrathful; His is *jamal*, Beauty beyond all beauties, and *jalal*, Majesty transcending all majesties."<sup>13</sup>

Love is always internal. It allows the self to recognize the beauty of its deepest being, the undifferentiated nature shown in its creation. This is shown directly. Wherever the self finds beauty, it recognizes the love that seeks for its original fullness to be seen. For this reason beauty has the power to attract; it is the love shown in the other and which can be satisfied only in becoming real through union. It is no wonder that beauty and love are semantically close to touching, contact, drawing together, and joining.

Beauty reveals that the multitudes of creation come from one undifferentiated source and remain oriented towards it. Love fires the self, and beauty draws it closer. This is so because the fullness of the self lies in unrevealed secrecy. The arising and return of creation, in accord with this, are in oneness, love, and beauty.

When the individual self encounters beauty in another and sees it as the other's "possession", this is a stimulus to envy. The eye grows dark with this feeling. It is easy to understand why the Prophet seeks refuge in God from the "envious eye"<sup>14</sup>, and why imam Ali son of Hussein prays:

Blind the eyes of our hearts  
toward everything opposed to Thy love!<sup>15</sup>

### Loving Women

By seeing beauty in a woman's face, a man reveals himself. This is allowing the possibility of clearly revealing the self in the outer world. The self is revealed as separate. In it he sees a sign of God. From sober abstention in the face of that sign he passes to drunkenness: he loves God, but that which is shown to him takes flight and vanishes. Wherever the drunkard turns, he finds a trace of the Beloved. But this trace endures no more than a moment in any one form, and refuses the lover's attempts to grasp it. He is everywhere and nowhere, and the lover stumbles from one encounter to the next.

He loves God, but has nothing to show in return for this love. He asks — Does God love me? The mutuality of Praiser and Praised reveals itself as the answer of the latter to the former: *If you love God, follow me, and God will love you*. To follow the Praiser means to know oneself, to establish that there is no selfhood but the Self. From this springs God's love towards the one who reveals himself before God, following in the footsteps of the Praiser.

The sequence of loving God and following the Praiser appears here to be the condition for receiving God's love. However, the real terms are utterly different: God's love for us is unconditional and elemental, for He made us so that He might reveal Himself. God's love is both eternal and in time: *He is with you wherever you are*.<sup>16</sup>

God is one and the same from all time and forever. All phenomena, whether undifferentiated in the secret ground of His being or differentiated in His creation, can only be His unchanging I AM. God loves the one who praises Him, and the one who praises loves Him.

Women are precious to the Praiser. Humanity is the presence of both soul and spirit. The highest humanity is a harmony between the spirit as masculine, active element and the soul as feminine, receptive element. Such harmony reveals Oneness, as the ever-present Face of God. To know the soul or the self means to know the Lord. The need to know is love, meaning love towards God. To love women is to love God. Here is the greatest secret of love. There is no greater satisfaction than the greatest possible closeness to a woman and union with her. But this satisfaction is really the uncovering of God. If the partners assign the pleasure to anything other than to closeness with God, this is concentrating on the time and place of the revelation rather than on the one who has revealed Himself. A full washing of the body is required after every such experience, so that the partners may not ascribe any of it to themselves.

The time and place in which beauty and goodness are revealed must not take precedence over the content of the revelation. Union and its attendant pleasures can only mean knowledge by returning to multiplicity and conditional existence. Purity is the non-acceptance of that multiplicity for any purpose other than the oneness revealed in it. Love transforms the hidden into knowledge. In this way, oneness is shown in multiplicity. And when it is shown, multiplicity is that very same oneness. The act of washing after having joined together confirms this oneness in multiplicity and the many in one.

Attributing pleasure to other causes during such a momentary revelation incites jealousy and wrath in the One who has revealed Himself. To do so is to bow down before the many selves instead of to the Self, against His revelation in the Torah: "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God."<sup>17</sup>

Coming to one's senses after drunkenness and confusion means understanding that all horizons, both heaven and earth, have been created and spread far apart in order to be brought together in humans. Not even the endless horizons of heaven and earth can contain the One who is the goal of human knowledge. For this reason, human love, the force that impels us down the road of knowledge, is equipped to pass through and around the many worlds, until it reaches the One who has revealed His oneness in the greatness of the heavens and the earth, and in the human heart — which can hold them all. All of creation is subject to humankind, conditioned on the human essence of praising God.

God does not abandon His human creatures even in the depths of oblivion. Human remembering is the discovery of the

elementally unforgettable: God's love for making Himself known. The discovery of this element means professing that there is no self but the Self. The prophet says: "Who discovers himself has discovered his Lord. He loves them, and they love Him"<sup>18</sup> — this is the element of love which allows humans to discover and possess themselves. Following in the footsteps of the Praiser, the lover draws near to God.

Drawing nearer is the discovery of perfection as the highest human potential. Such perfection lies in submission. Every good begins with openness and acceptance. This is the relationship of speaking and listening. The one who speaks counts on having a listener who remains silent. And the speaker also wishes to hear and understand the listener in the fullness of beauty. The speaker expects the listener to be fully open to receive the words spoken. Speaking demonstrates the masculine principle; it is regarded from the "place" where it is received, from the feminine point of view. In this way, the active principle is satisfied by the passivity of the receiver, or "the self at rest".

In the sexual act the self is overcome by powerful pleasure, an intimation of heavenly closeness to God. Such pleasure reveals the fierce power of God as opposed to His tenderness. The intensity and tenderness correspond to God's greatness and beauty, wrath and mercy. In pursuit of union, surrendering before the might and wrath of God leads not to greater distance but to incomparable joys.

Man recognizes his selfhood in woman; he desires to see it unveiled before him, to not stop at duality:

If the soul were stripped of all her sheaths, God would be discovered all naked to her view and would give himself to her, withholding nothing. As long as the soul has not thrown off all her veils, however thin, she is unable to see God.<sup>19</sup>

The differentiation of heaven and earth, as a duality which confirms oneness, resolves itself in man, who is at home in the highest potentialities. He returns again and again as a traveller to this home. He forms ties to this home through woman, who reveals herself to him in everything along the way:

A forenoon journey of an afternoon journey in Allah's Cause is better than the whole world and whatever is in it; and a place equal to an arrow bow of anyone of you, or a place equal to a foot in Paradise is better than the whole world and whatever is in it; and if one of the women of Paradise looked at the earth, she would fill the whole space between them (the earth and the heaven) with light, and would fill whatever is in between them, with perfume, and the veil of her face is better than the whole world and whatever is in it.<sup>20</sup>

## Stripping bare and joining together

Whatever is lowered must also be raised high. Coming down must include going up. This is the case with separating and joining together. The beginning of separation is when the partners are at their closest. Their forms do not quite reach far enough to cover the oneness of their essence. As it moves away from this oneness, form closes in on itself and loses transparency. As a child grows in its mother's womb, besides acquiring its own individuality, it continues to be a part of her. The union of mother and child in the womb witnesses to the grace of oneness: the unborn child is subject to the world of inner grace, but also governs within it. The transformation of the union of mother and child into individuality and separation manifests as love.

The memory of that togetherness, then undergoing separation, spurs a need for a name that can bridge the growing distance. One who is physically absent remains near in memory and name. Children are born into the world naked. Their nakedness is prolonged as a continual reminder of the original oneness. But separation grows greater and greater; from the standpoint of this distance, union has been lost and is thereafter attainable only by recognizing the real nature of individuality and separate existence. This is the act of arraying oneself in clothing.

Men and women conceal their nakedness. Their garments confirm their separate nature, but also a return to oneness. When the world is a screen through which everything is acknowledged as a symbol, man does not know his own nakedness. As soon as this transparency was lost with the first man, the recognition of the world as creation required clothing for the body, as well as turning inwards and outwards to the two halves of the self. As separation increased and people forgot how it was to be united, outer garments and coverings became the most important means of showing the self.

The love that exists between parents and children, brothers, sisters, and other relatives, springs from the sense of being near in that receding oneness. Love for people as such testifies to the feeling that oneness must have existed at the beginning. But all of these feelings, forgotten to a greater or lesser degree, always lag behind the human orientation towards time. Garments and coverings demarcate the limits of this orientation.

The original oneness has not been forgotten for all time. It lies within the potential of every human being, since it was fullness itself. For this reason, separate existence is simultaneously the possibility of laying oneself bare in this original fullness. Joining together is the necessity of separating, and vice versa. Such joining together is oriented towards fullness and nearness. It is shown in the act of drawing near to the screen of concealment, then passing through it. The many are only the sign of oneness. Relating to all the participants in the multiplicity of creation is being connected to that oneness.

The forms of friendship are the discovery and confirmation of what is near and common to all. The force which seeks to overcome separation and reach the other side is called love. The source of love is that very same oneness. Human beings and all that exists are created by and within the Real; It is with them wherever they go, closer than the very beating of their hearts, wherever they turn, and It makes haste to answer when called; It remembers them whenever they remember It. This allows them to return from the many to the one over and over again, in ways without number.

The first man was utterly close to God and naked. The forbidden tree and his own heart were not yet separate. Whatever was forbidden in the outer world was forbidden within his own being. By the purity of these two spheres — which were truly one and the same — the entire Garden existed in purity. When man wilfully disobeyed God, the prohibition within himself was shown to be different from the prohibition in the external world. By disobeying, man lost his original closeness to the Creator which had existed along with consciousness of his status as a mere creature.

Until the moment of this loss, man had seen the divine Face in everything — contemplating both the woman's face and the entirety of creation. His transgression "separated" him from the fullness of grace; the Face was veiled, and his gaze sought unceasingly to pierce the veil of signs which had suddenly become opaque to him. Before the transgression in the Garden, all signs had been clear to him. All had revealed the Truth in which they were created. The nakedness of his wife had also been clear and had contained only the beauty in which the Creator revealed Himself. Satan whispered in their ears against the commandment, so that the woman's transgression would render their bodies opaque, to show them their own

nakedness, as well as their limits and separateness.

When they saw that they were naked, they took leaves from the divine garden to cover their nakedness, and to preserve the inner nature of their individuality for the new unity in which they hoped.<sup>21</sup> This union presupposes stripping the self bare and joining together. It confirms that they, unlike anything else in the world, reveal all the Names of God. Human nature is fullness; everything else is only a part. Human nature at its most elemental exists at the heart of creation; all else is at the edges. When man and woman strip away their garments and join together, oneness is confirmed as both beginning and end. The two principles are revealed — the active and the passive, male and female — which make the oneness of all creation, but always as a separateness which seeks and proves that oneness.

Separation and distance point, in different ways, towards the act of drawing close and joining together. One person can lay the self bare to another. The very act of revealing the self is also an act of concealment. By this concealment within revelation, of being covered in the act of stripping bare, each person becomes a covering for the other. They turn their backs on the world and turn towards themselves in order to discover the heavenly state of purity and nearness. With the touch of their bodies they turn speech into being.

The ceasing of listening, speaking, and regarding turns into the ceasing of touching. They seek to "set" the boundaries of their selves and to unite their essence beyond their individual forms. The greater the proximity, the shorter its duration. The peak of their union is momentary and fleeting. Afterwards, oneness is again revealed in the palpable sense of separateness, along with a forceful sadness and exhaustion. The unending flow of being is shown by both separation and touching, but also remains a relentless oneness that both casts out and takes in everything that is not itself. In comparison to eternity exists time, with all the noisiness of actuality. The clamour of time both testifies to and denies grace. It falls silent when union is reached. And nothing other than unity can overcome separation.

### **The language of the skin**

Whenever someone would praise him, the imam Ali would reply that he knew himself better than others did, and that God knew him better than he himself.<sup>22</sup> As this shows, people may hide from

each other, or even from themselves, but not from God. Since the ears, eyes, and skin are the limits at which the relationship of the self to the non-self is established, they are also a barrier to other people's knowledge of one's inner nature. Hearing, sight, and touch are witnesses to what may be hidden away from others. Only the one who can speak may bear witness.

Human confidence that the other cannot know one's inner being presupposes the powerlessness of the ears, eyes, and skin to speak. They are subjected to human control by the power of speech. They are stripped of their nature as a sign which returns to the signified in order to give back all that it has received from it. Whatever is hidden inside humans, their ears, eyes, and skin, cannot be unknown to their Maker. Concealing things from others in the outer world is tantamount to making humans into gods, if they deny that nothing is ever hidden from God's sight.

By uncovering their bodies, opening their eyes, and listening, humans stand naked before each other. They can also hide from each other: shutting the eyes or turning away, not listening, blocking up the ears. But none of these actions will hide them from God. Everything that is His stands before Him always.

Upon the day when God's enemies are mustered to the Fire, duly disposed, till when they are come to it, their hearing, their eyes, and their skins bear witness against them concerning what they have been doing, and they will say to their skins. "Why bore you witness against us?" They shall say. "God gave us speech, as He gave everything speech. He created you the first time, and unto Him you shall be returned. Not so did you cover yourselves, that your hearing, your eyes, and your skins should not bear witness against you; but you thought that God would never know much of the things that you were working. That then, the thought you thought about your Lord, has destroyed you, and therefore you find yourselves this morning among the losers"<sup>23</sup>

Human presence in the world, through touch and exchange, includes the skin as boundary. But human wholeness is contact with the outer world

through open and closed boundaries. People are never completely open or completely closed to the external world. This marks their place at the border between this world and a higher one. If they are closed to the higher world, externality forces its way into their inner beings as if into a gaping chasm. If they are open to the higher world, however, even their inner natures are illuminated by the elemental light which is greater than any in the external world. Then even the outer world is illuminated through them.

God is the greatest Witness. Everything which makes its way from the outer world through the sealed or open borders of the self serves as a witness to these boundaries. Only thought can deny this, but only at the cost of sealing itself off from the Most High. Then people find themselves separated from the Real. They sentence themselves, by the level of their thoughts, to separation from the Real. The consequence of this is no answer to the question of good and evil. They posit two forces in endless conflict. The moment the self opens towards the one true element, that seemingly endless struggle takes on a completely different aspect:

Not equal are the good deed and the evil deed.  
Repel with that which is fairer.<sup>24</sup>

To exist within the limits of the skin means the separation of the self from the world. These separate beings regard one another: everything in the world which seems differentiated finds its unity in the human being. The human centre or heart "stands" at the threshold between spirit and body. The light of the spirit shines through it into the world of the soul. When human separateness turns towards Oneness as its goal, only this can outstrip all changes. No enduring nature is allowed to any single form, which can only be a sign pointing towards Oneness. For this reason, union means stripping away all outer garments and coverings, laying bare the skin to the other, in order to touch and deny separateness. Touching and kissing are like crossing over from one side of existence to the other, so that the self may come closer to the Self. But Oneness can only exist in the pure heart. Touching, kissing, and joining together in the moment when the highest pleasure is reached, when fierce power and tenderness are united and separateness is extinguished, only show that all separateness and all nearness are only different revelations of the same Oneness.

When the words of the separated speaker and listener turn into the language of the skin, drawing near and joining together are reflected in peace: *their skins and their hearts soften to the remembrance of God.*<sup>25</sup> This "memory of God" is in the centre or heart of the human being. Every individually created being has the other half of its duality, from which it is separated. Existence in duality is a sign of Oneness and becomes real in Its love. The skin is a screen which is necessary for knowledge, but love will have no barriers between itself and the Face of the Beloved. Nothing but union can satisfy love.

The Prophet says: "God's veil is light. Were He to remove it, the glories of His face would burn away everything perceived by the sight of His creatures."<sup>26</sup> Love wants only to be consumed in the flames of that Self; it will stop at no other satisfaction. The memory of Oneness, like orgasm<sup>27</sup>, confirms differentiation as a sign of the Real, and union as a return to It. The pleasure of "touching Oneness" in the moment of orgasm cannot be transformed into Oneness itself. It is only reachable when the layers of the self have burned away. This is the meaning of washing the entire body after uniting in orgasm: the skin testifies to Oneness in multiplicity and multiplicity in Oneness. The separateness of man and woman testifies to Oneness as their complete otherness in the act of undressing, caressing, kissing, and orgasm. All of this is the way towards the original Oneness. After the union of man and woman and the momentary transformation of their duality into Oneness, a return to duality occurs. This return requires a fresh confirmation of water as the sign of creation, the presence of Oneness in all multiplicity. In crossing the boundaries of the flesh, in the touching, kissing, and orgasm, a return occurs to the water which is the source of life itself,<sup>28</sup> the drop from which humans are created.<sup>29</sup>

Both the water and the droplet conceal the potentialities which reveal themselves at human maturity. The act of love and orgasm unite this potential at its first and last point, in its inner and outer nature. In this way, creation and the revelation of Oneness are bound to the Hidden from which everything proceeds and to which everything returns. To love means to kill the self for life in the other, in that other who is unlike any other, who has no other, who is infinitely near to everything. All life is received as a gift from this One who lives, and is given back to Him.

- <sup>1</sup> Samnūn is a well-known spiritual teacher from Iraq. For more information on him see Abu' Abd al-Rahman Muhammad al-Sulami, *Tabaqât al-sufiyya*, Cairo: Mektaba al Khânjî, 1986, 195–99.
- <sup>2</sup> Najm al-din Kubra, *Les Eclotions de la beaute et les parfums de la majeste*, Nimes: L'eclat 2001, 165, see Najm al-din Kubra, *La pratique du soufisme, Quatorze petits traités*, trans. Paul Ballanfat, Nimes: L' éclat, 2002, 79. The main contradiction that love faces is that between life and death. "To love life as it really is", as Thomas Merton asserts, "means to accept it in its total reality, which includes death; to accept not only the idea of death but also those acts which anticipate death, in the offering and giving of ourselves" (Thomas Merton, "Preface" in Ernesto Cardenal, *Love*, London: Search Press, 1974, 16).
- <sup>3</sup> 112:1–4.
- <sup>4</sup> 51:49
- <sup>5</sup> 53:45. This statement regarding male and female as a created duality is the key to posing the question of God's oneness. Man addresses God using language as one of His signs (30:22) Grammatical gender in language must therefore be understood as addressing Oneness from a manifold creation which reveals that Oneness. Every act of addressing God includes the duality of all creation, but also the incomparability and non-likeness of anything else to the Creator. If the forms He, Him, His, etc, include gender, the necessary consequence of this is duality or the existence of a "consort", giving birth, and being born. He/She denies this possibility, offering this as the highest principle (6–163). For this reason, He/She is the Only One. Male and female are a duality, and this means existing as a creation. But He/She is not created, does not give birth, is not born. Addressing God as male includes the possibility of ascribing a female partner to Him, and offspring. This is to deny God's single nature, and consequently God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence to all creation. Now the meaning of what is written can be understood: *Creator of the heavens and the earth. How should He have a son when he Had no consort?! (6:101) He -- exalted be the glory of our Lord -- has taken no consort, nor has He begotten any children (72:3).*
- <sup>6</sup> 2:188
- <sup>7</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, IV, p. 1397.
- <sup>8</sup> Frithjof, Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 148.
- <sup>9</sup> See Denis Gril, "There is no work in the world that does not indicate His praise", *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, no. XXI, 1997, 31–43.
- <sup>10</sup> See 57:4.
- <sup>11</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, I, p. 373.
- <sup>12</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, VI, edited and translated by R. A. Nicholson, London: Luzac, 1925–40, verse 4303–4.
- <sup>13</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*, London: Fine Books 1978, 231.
- <sup>14</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, IV, 385–6.
- <sup>15</sup> Imam Ali Ibn el-Husejn, Zejnul-Abidin, *Sahifa: Potpuna knjiga Sedzadova*, translated by Rusmir Mahmutcehajic and Mehmedalija Hadzic, Sarajevo: Did, 1997, 38. Envy is equating the site of the revelation of beauty with beauty itself. This is impurity and, thus, it is understandable why St. Maximos the Confessor states: "If we detect any trace of hatred in our hearts against any

man whatsoever for committing any fault, we are utterly estranged from love for God, since love for God absolutely precludes us from hating any man." (*The Philocalia: The Complete Text*, II, collected by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Phillip Sherrard, Kalistos Ware, London: Faber and Faber 1981, 54).

<sup>16</sup> 57:4.

<sup>17</sup> Izl 20:5. This can be also read in light of the Koranic message as (4:48) *God forgives not that aught should be with Him associated*. Prophet said: "You people are astonished at Sa'd's jealousy. By God, I am more jealous than he, and God is more jealous than I, and because of God's jealousy, He has made unlawful, shameful deeds and sins done in open and in secret" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, IX, pp. 378–79). On God's jealousy as not accepting as real anything apart from that which comes from Him see in Ibn al-'Arabija (William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*, 295). The Prophet's statement comprises the story of "The interpretation of Hakima's statement" in *The Mathnawi* (See Jalalu'ddin Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson, London: Luzac 1977, II, 96–99).

<sup>18</sup> 5:54.

<sup>19</sup> Franz Pfeiffer, *Meister Eckhart*, I, translated by C. de B. Evans, London: John M Watkins 1924, 114.

<sup>20</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, VIII, 372.

<sup>21</sup> 7:20 i 20:120.

<sup>22</sup> See 'Ali ibn Ebi Talib, *Nahj al-Balagha (Staza rjecitosti): Govori, pisma i izreke*, collected by es–Sejjid es–Serif er–Radi, translated by Rusmir Mahmutcehajic and Mehmedalija Hadzic, Zagreb: Odbor Islamske zajednice 1994, 161.

<sup>23</sup> 41:19–23

<sup>24</sup> 41:34.

<sup>25</sup> 39:23.

<sup>26</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, I, p. 113.

<sup>27</sup> The Greek term *orgasmos* is derived from *orgân* ("to swell up"). It signifies "intense ecstasy", "great excitement", and especially "the highest point of union in the sexual act". The term *sex* can be traced to the Old French *sexe*, after the Latin *sexus*, from the earlier *secus* and *secare* ("to cut off", "to separate"). This meaning is understandable because oneness appears in duality — active and passive, male and female, etc. The connection to the Latin *sex* ("six") should also be pointed out, as every individual phenomenon appears in six spatial dimensions which originate in oneness and which return to it as to reality. Sex is the core of marriage as the framework for fulfilment — both of human nature and the Debt. "When one marries, he fulfils," says the Prophet "half of the Debt. Let him keep the thought of God before him to fulfil the other half." (This is the same teaching, with slight variations, of both Taberani and Beiheki. See Shams al-Din Abu al-Khayr Muhammad al-Sakhawi, *Al-Maqasid al-Hasana fi Bayan min al-Ahadith al-Mushtahira 'ala al-Sunna*, Cairo: Maktab al-Khanji 1991, 407, teaching no. 1098).

<sup>28</sup> The Most High reveals the following in the Teaching: *Are the disbelievers unaware that the heavens and the earth were but one solid mass which We tore asunder, and that We made every living thing from water? (21:30) And It was He who created man from water, and gave him kindred of blood and of marriage (25:54).*

<sup>29</sup> The Merciful One speaks in the Teaching of the creation of man from a drop (c.f. 18:37), while that drop contains the potentialities which arise in human life. Turning towards that creation is a call to the self: *Recite in the name of your Lord who created -- created man from a clot of blood (96:1-2).*

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