PASSIONATE READING

The Book of Ruth

CAROLINE SAUTER

THE NARRATIVE CONTAINED in the biblical Book of Ruth fits the topic of this volume, "neighbor-love," perfectly: A young woman flees her home country, where hunger and destruction threaten, and comes to a land whose customs, language, and religion are unknown to her, facing a very uncertain future. Yet a twofold love rescues her and provides her with safety, security, and posterity: The love and loyalty she shows her mother-in-law, and the love she receives from a neighbor who decides to become her "redeemer." In fact, Ruth's very name makes her a neighbor and connects her with the idea of "neighbor-love" as mapped out in its many aspects in this volume: Etymologically, the name Ruth possibly means "friend," "companion," or possibly "neighbor" (in the sense of the German *Nächste*).[1]

In this story of a love that seems to be neighborly in the first place, one word runs as a leitmotif, a red thread through the entire narrative: The Hebrew word חֶסֶד (*hesed*)[2]—which is often translated as "love," but which also means "kindness," "charity," "loyalty," "grace," "mercy," "faithfulness," "goodness," or "solidarity."[3] Landy remarks that חֶסֶד is "characterized by selflessness," thus resembling the Greek and Christian concept of *agape* or "neighbor-love."[4] However, the word allows for many different translations and interpretations: "kindness,"[5] "solidarity,"[6] "kind act," "charity," or "loyalty."[7] It is the complexity of חֶסֶד, which encompasses neighborly love but also goes beyond it, that will be at the center of my close readings in the Book of Ruth, in which love is narrated and expressed in manifold ways.

Ruth is a story about kinship and family, intimacy and sexuality, marriage and romance. Love is manifest as attachment, affection, and

devotion in a number of varieties, encompassing "the four loves" that C.S. Lewis famously presented in his 1960 study: *storge*, *philia*, *agape*, and *eros*, or—in Lewis's translation—*affection*, *friendship*, *charity*, and *eros*.[8] On a plot level, the Book of Ruth is a seemingly mundane love story that finds itself—quite surprisingly, to some[9]—within the biblical canon. In Phyllis Trible's words, it is "a human comedy,"[10] deeply rooted in the human world with human affairs and human relations, and hence, as Francis Landy remarks sarcastically, this "romantic idyll" has mostly been "neglected by scholars enamoured of the serious matters of history and theology."[11]

It is therefore unsurprising that *Ruth* has brought about myriads of—seemingly more "serious"—interpretations that read the supposedly naïve romanticism of its love story symbolically, metaphorically, or allegorically: Throughout the centuries, both Jewish and Christian interpreters have understood the language and the symbolism of love in the Book of Ruth as pointing to God's kindness towards his people, whether this is perceived as Israel or as the Church. Among Christian readers, for instance, the figure of Boaz has often been interpreted as "prefiguring Christ,"[12] or as "a figure of YHWH,"[13] and the way he is "dealing kindly" (2:10) with Ruth is often understood as the direct fulfilment of Naomi's blessing of her daughters-in-law: "May the Lord deal kindly with you" (1:8), thus equating Boaz and God.[14] Ruth's fervent and radical statement of loyalty to Naomi (1:16–17) is sometimes understood as a symbol for Christian conversion, and Ruth herself as a figure of Christ.[15]

It has also been observed in most, if not all commentaries that all characters in the Book of Ruth have "telling names"[16]—*Ruth* means "friend" or "companion," *Naomi* "sweet one" or "dear one" but attempts to call herself *Mara*, "bitter one" (1:20);[17] *Boaz* means "powerful" or "potent"[18]—so that the characters themselves are often read as allegories.[19] And even the nighttime encounter between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor, bristling with eroticism, has been sublimized in allegorical interpretations that see a divine/human analogy at work.

Rather than following allegorical interpretations, my reading, in contrast, will depart from the very material of the text: The words the

text is made of, specifically the words used for expressing love. Instead of deciphering the "hidden meaning" "behind" the Ruth narrative, I am interested in the verbal, textual expression of love. My following close readings of the biblical text will focus on two different aspects of love in the Book of Ruth: Family relations and kinship (I), and sexuality and eroticism (II). In conclusion (III), I will reflect on the poetological implications of love in the Book of Ruth.

Love and kinship: discourses of destabilization

The web of love relationships within the Naomi–Ruth–Boaz "love triangle" is complex, and the range of options for loving is wide.[20] Different layers of love interweave, yet kinship-love (*storge*) seems to be one of the strongest motifs structuring the narrative of the Book of Ruth. There are, however, perplexing moments, where the kinship relations, and thus the love relations, are not as clear-cut as they seem at first glance. In fact, none of the kinship relations, and none of the love relations is unequivocal. Love brings about ambiguities—first and foremost, on a textual level. For instance, when Ruth affirms her loyalty, attachment, and devotion to her mother-in-law in a beautiful poem in chapter 1, she uses terms that are referring to the institution of marriage in *Genesis*, and that are in fact most often quoted—even today—in marriage ceremonies,[21] and thus have become a familiar, almost commonplace expression of romantic love (*eros*), rather than kinship-love (*storge*), friendship-love (*philia*), or neighbor-love (*agape*). Ruth's poem reads (1:16–17):

> [. . .]
> "Where you go, I will go;
> where you lodge, I will lodge;
> your people shall be my people,
> and your God my God.
> [17]Where you die, I will die—
> there will I be buried.
> May the Lord do thus and so to me,

and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

In his rich and thought-provoking study *Love: A History*, Simon May has pointed out that we are likely to recoil today at the intensity of Ruth's passion for Naomi, because in the Western world, we tend to compartmentalize love, "especially under the influence of Lutheran theology," and to distinguish eros-love from neighbor-love and friendship-love, following the Christian (Protestant) tradition of a love triad.[22] However, in *Ruth* this distinction is not valid, and kinship-love, *agape*, friendship, and erotic passion become indistinguishable in her finely crafted words. In fact, in her "love poem" Ruth forsakes every aspect of ancient Middle Eastern identity—land, family, tribe, God, legacy—and "clings" to her mother-in-law, Naomi, as stated a few verses earlier: "Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth *clung* [דָּבְקָה] to her." (1:14) "To cling" or "to cleave" (דָּבַק, *dabaq*) is the Hebrew verb used for Ruth's attachment to Naomi.[23] It is indeed "a very strong one," as Mieke Bal observed:[24] The same verb that is famously used in *Genesis* 2:24 for the first human couple and the institution of marriage: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and *clings* [וְדָבַק] to his wife, and they become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24)

In the case of Ruth, it is not "a man," but a young *woman* who leaves her father and mother, by her own choice and decision, and "clings" to another, older woman.[25] This verb seems to be a very conscious word choice and an intertextual play with several layers of meaning. In fact, the *Ruth* text repeats *Genesis* allusions on numerous occasions, and the connection to *Genesis* is even made explicit in Boaz's later praise of Ruth, when he says: "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and *how you left your father and mother* and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." (2:11)[26] In the *Genesis* passage quoted here by Boaz, and even throughout the Hebrew Bible more generally, the verb דָּבַק (*dabaq*) is used exclusively in relation to persons of male gender:[27] The Hebrew word in *Genesis* 2:24 is אִישׁ (*ish*, man/male), not אָדָם (*adam*, mankind).[28] If דָּבַק (*dabaq*) is "normally" used in re-

lation to men and referring to heterosexual relationships,[29] the text attributes the role of the man to Ruth by referencing the well-known *Genesis* passage and hence, the context of opposite-sex marriage: She leaves her mother and father and "clings" to Naomi, thereby acting as only men can in the context of the Hebrew Bible. On the level of the textual signifier, Ruth is assigned the role of a man and husband in this act of textual marriage, while Naomi takes the textual position of the wife (as the one "being clung to").[30]

Ruth and Naomi's relationship is far from clear. And this is true for the entire narrative, from beginning to the end. All traditional kinship relations are, in fact, unsettled by the way the text expresses love in the Book of Ruth. Another example from chapter 4, the conclusion of the narrative, can shed light on this:

> [13]So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. [14]Then the women of Bethlehem said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! [15]He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." [16]Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. [17]The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. (4:13–17)

This strangely public scene of marriage (and its consummation), of birth celebration, of blessing, and of name-giving is indeed very complex. It is noteworthy that none of the main characters speak in this all-decisive scene. In fact, it is only the women of Bethlehem, the "women of the neighborhood," a collective voice, "representing, as does the chorus in classical tragedy, public opinion,"[31] that have narrative agency: They bless, they name, they reason on the parents' behalf. None of the characters have a say (quite literally) in what is being said.

When the women's chorus announces in 4:17 that Ruth's son "has been born" to Naomi—which has, understandably, been understood as "the most scandalous verse in this text"[32]—they use the verb formula יֻלַּד־בֵּן (*yulad-ben*) that is usually reserved for men in the Hebrew Bible, more specifically for the father of the child in question.[33] In fact, Ruth 4:17 is the only instance in the entire Hebrew Bible where this formula is used in relation to a woman, and not in relation to a man or a father.[34] It is as if the child born of a woman to a woman did not even have a (male) father. In other words, Obed (whose name means "servant [of God]," thus announcing the messianic potential of his birth[35]) seems to have been born into an all-female world—and indeed, the scene of public birthing, announcing, blessing, and naming in chapter 4 takes place among women only.[36] Boaz, the father, is strangely absent—his only action in this passage is to "take" (לָקַח) Ruth (4:13). In his place, Naomi is referenced with a verb form that is usually reserved for the child's father.[37] Hence, the figures of Naomi and Boaz blur and merge, as both are identified as the fathers of Obed on a textual level.[38]

Yet the woman referenced with the verb formula יֻלַּד־בֵּן (*yulad-ben*) is not even the actual mother or even the biological grandmother of the child, but rather the child's mother's (former) mother-in-law. In fact, there is no blood relation between Naomi and Obed—and yet, "[a] son has been born to Naomi" (4:17), as the female chorus announces, thus legitimizing the child as Naomi's own posterity.[39] Kinship relations become overwhelmingly complex. On the level of textual signifiers, even the seemingly clear kinship roles of mother and father are challenged when the text, by choosing the verb form יֻלַּד־בֵּן (*yulad-ben*), literally assigns Naomi (an elderly woman who is no blood relation of Obed's) the role of the father that the child "has been born to."

However, again on a very literal, textual level, Naomi is not only Obed's father, but also his mother: Naomi, the text says, "took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse" (4:16). The Hebrew word translated as "in her bosom," בְּחֵיקָהּ (*behaqah*, from חֵיק, *heq*), can also mean "breast," or "lap," or "vagina," or "womb."[40] The

word choice implies the possibilities of Naomi's setting the child on her breast, taking him on her lap, sitting him over her vagina, or placing him over her womb, and thus locates the child at the center of her (probably long-gone) fertility. In fact, the language of the text suggests that she is birthing the baby,[41] even if only on a textual level, the level of signifiers. In this sense, textually speaking, indeed the two women "become one flesh," as *Genesis* 2:24 has it and the very bodies of Ruth and Naomi blur and merge: The text has just affirmed that it is *Ruth* "who has borne the child" (4:15), and directly following that statement, *Naomi* is taking the child and laying him in her bosom/breast/lap/vagina/womb and nursing him (4:16). In this sense, the two women become one, until even motherhood, which seems to be one of the few kinship relations that can be established without doubt, becomes uncertain and fragile. In the text, by the text, and through the text, both women birth and nurse baby Obed. Both Ruth and Naomi are, textually speaking, his mothers.

In addition, in 4:16, the word translated as "nurse," אֹמֶנֶת (*omenet*) in Hebrew, has two aspects: It can, on the one hand, mean "guardian,"[42] but on the other hand, it can also mean "wet-nurse" in the sense that Naomi would actually breast-feed the baby.[43] Yet in chapter 1:12, at the beginning of the narrative, Naomi has stated very clearly and in great despair that she is "too old to have a husband" (1:12), hinting at her own menopause, and thus, at her inability to conceive, birth, and nurse children.[44] And in fact, her old or at least advanced age is highlighted throughout the narrative (1:12, 4:15).[45] Thus, while Naomi's ability to conceive and to nurse a baby seems long gone at the plot level, the very words used literally in this passage tell a different story: They let her regain her fertility. The text ascribes qualities to Naomi that are usually reserved for younger, fertile women (*behaqa*, *omenet*), thus identifying her as birthing and breast-feeding Ruth's child in place of his mother. Therefore, Naomi is indeed made Obed's mother as well as his father by the language of the text, on a very literal level. Reading the word material in this passage literally, the seemingly contrasting figures of the two women—the elderly, lonely, non-fertile Naomi, and the youthful, vital, fertile

Ruth—merge in their "joint motherhood."[46] And hence, Naomi becomes fertile not within the plot, but on a textual level, in so far as she engenders new text—namely, a genealogy seeking to "build up the house of Israel" (4:11): It is Obed, the son that "has been born" to Naomi (4:17), that would establish the royal, messianic line of Israel by fathering King David's father. The very conclusion of the narrative, in fact its last words, read:

> And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David. (4:17–22)

Out of the motherhood or fatherhood explicitly ascribed to Naomi within and through the text ("A son has been born to Naomi"), a genealogy is developed—a family line encompassing ancestors that have not been mentioned in the narrative so far. The only ancestors in *Ruth* are Naomi's late husband Elimelech and her two late sons, Mahlon and Chilion (1:2–3), yet Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon (4:18–21) have not appeared in the narrative, nor were they ever mentioned by name.[47] Naomi's regained fertility on the level of the text—her textual fertility—is reflected in the fact that the text proliferates, brings forth more text, creating *more* family, in fact a surplus of family members. The power of fertility that Naomi is missing within the plot is ascribed to her *within and through the text*. In this sense, she (re)gains textual, instead of sexual, fertility.

Obed is a child of love—love between two women who "share not only a husband and a son, but also textual subjectivity."[48] Yet the love relationship between Ruth and Naomi (and "their" child, Obed) cannot be grasped in the traditional terms that are commonly associated

with kinship relations, such as mother, father, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, or grandmother. On the contrary, love—and the verbal, textual expression of love within a text—complicates family relations and makes them ambiguous. In their blessing of Naomi, the women of Bethlehem exclaim in 4:15, "He [Obed] shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." As Ilana Pardes observed, "[t]he Book of Ruth is the only biblical text in which the word 'love' is used to define a relationship between two women."[49] In fact, this verse—occurring towards the conclusion of the narrative—is the only time in the Book of Ruth that the emotions involved between Naomi and Ruth are literally described as love. And unlike in all other occurrences in the Book of Ruth, the word translated as "love" here is the verb אָהַב (*ahav*), not חֶסֶד (*hesed*), which runs through *Ruth* as a leitmotif.[50] The word אָהַב (*ahav*) stresses the deeply emotional aspect of affection and attraction rather than the social aspect of love implied in חֶסֶד (*hesed*).[51]

What is more, אָהַב (*ahav*) is a verb that is consistently used for the (erotic) love between a man and a woman throughout the Hebrew Bible. This verse is the only exception. In fact, Zakovitch remarks in surprise that אָהַב (*ahav*)—used only this one time in Ruth—is not used to describe the relation between Ruth and Boaz, but rather between Ruth and Naomi.[52] In this sense, אָהַב (*ahav*)—a verb usually referring to the love between man and woman—relates back to the series of gender transgressions in *Ruth*[53] that we have already observed in looking closely at the text on a very literal level: Naomi and Ruth form a loving couple, a unit described with the word אָהַב (*ahav*). While the text explicitly mentions their kinship relation here ("your daughter-in-law"), אָהַב (*ahav*) undermines the stability of this relation's meaning by pointing to a man/woman relation, rather than that of a mother-in-law/daughter-in-law. It is impossible to determine exactly what "kind" of love unites the characters. The verbal expression of love complicates relations and makes them ambiguous, rather than clarifying, determining, or establishing them.

Sexuality and eroticism: body and ambiguity

The ambiguity that love brings about on the level of *storge* also plays out in the area of *eros*. A deeply ambiguous scene of what could possibly be called seduction[54] is found in chapter 3 of *Ruth*, the turning point of the Ruth drama, indeed a "momentous" scene.[55] Here, textual ambiguities are performed in terms of sexuality and eroticism:

> Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 3Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." 5She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do." 6So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. 7When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. 8At midnight the man was startled [in Hebrew וַיֶּחֱרַד from חָרַד (verb) meaning tremble, shiver, quake, be afraid, be in dread], and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! 9He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." 10He said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty [love] is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. 11And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. [. . .] 13Remain this night. [. . .] Lie down until the morning." 14So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said,

> "It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." (Ruth 3:1–15)

What a daring scene. In the still and darkness of night, "another reality" than daylit reality,[56] a young woman quietly slips into a much older man's make-shift bed on the open field, under the starry skies. Sleepily, the man stirs, trembles—as a more accurate translation might have it—, he wakes up, they talk, the couple spends the night together in the field, but early in the morning, before anyone can recognize her, she is gone. Was she even here? And who was she? What did she do to him? What did he promise to her? The darkness of the setting in this deeply intimate scene creeps into the plot of this dream-like narrative.[57] Everything is blurry and dreamy. As readers, we rub our eyes, trying to make sense of this extraordinarily evasive, obscure, and opaque text.

Hence, it is certainly no coincidence that this scene is very controversially debated in all the commentaries on the Book of Ruth whether Jewish or Christian.[58] All of them exhibit the desire, the urgency to make sense when faced with the text's darkness, which is mirroring the darkness of night within the plot. The encounter takes place on the threshing floor at midnight, after a night of hard work and celebration. Landy remarked insightfully that "[a]s the place where the chaff is separated from the grain, the threshing floor is a symbol of interpretation [. . .]."[59] Yet the text refuses to lend itself to an easy reading and a smooth interpretation. And therefore, as Landy has it, "[a] close reading becomes a disintegrative reading."[60] The text—and our understanding of it—remains as dreamy and blurry as the tale it tells. It leaves us in the dark of the unknown, it stubbornly remains ambiguous, dark and obscure, and it does not fulfil our desire for an easy, clear-cut reading. On the contrary, once we think we are on track with our interpretation, the text sends us right into a dead end. For instance, in 3:3–4, Naomi gives Ruth the following instructions:

> "[3][. . .] wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself

known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.
[4]When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then,
go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what
to do."

Puzzling as those instructions are in and of themselves—they might be "an outrageous scheme, dangerous and delicate"[61]—the words become even more mysterious when we look at the biblical text closely, particularly at a quite remarkable *ketiv/qere* difference that Cheryl Exum and Ilana Pardes have both pointed out in their respective readings. According to Exum, "if we pursue certain implications of a curious textual feature, we can find the three major characters—Ruth, Naomi, Boaz—somehow all involved in the intimacy of the threshing floor scene. A fascinating instance of the blurring of roles is created by a *ketiv/qere* problem."[62] This is a very strong, possibly daring reading, but it is text-based and pertinent, and its interpretative consequences are immense. In the New Revised Standard Version and most other renderings, the vocalized text (*qere*) reads,

"[3]Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your finest dress
and *go* down to the threshing floor [. . .] [4]When he lies down,
[. . .] go and uncover his feet and *lie down* [. . .]."

However, the consonantal text (*ketiv*) reads,

"wash and anoint yourself, put on your finest dress, and *I will go*
down to the threshing floor. [. . .] When he lies down, [. . .] go
and uncover his feet and *I will lie down* [. . .]."

If we consider the *ketiv*, there is a textual possibility of Naomi inserting herself into the text and thus, into the plot, participating physically in the intimacy of the nighttime encounter between Ruth and Boaz—at least on a textual level. The couple embracing sleepily in the dark of night might, textually speaking, not be alone. As Cheryl Exum says, "[b]y having Naomi put herself into the scene twice, in a sort of

pre-Freudian slip, the consonantal text conflates Naomi with Ruth as the 'seducer' of Boaz."[63] Who is crawling in with Boaz, "lying at his feet" until morning? Naomi? Ruth? Both? We are as puzzled as Boaz is when he wakes up at midnight, startled, shivering,[64] turning over, discovering a woman, and asking: "Who are you?" (3:9)

Who are you? Landy reads Boaz's question as an attempt at distancing himself from the dream-like appearance of a woman slipping under his covers in the dark of night, by using language: "Boaz rouses himself from his confusion and fear to speak; speech will define who this woman is, what the appropriate response will be, and thus is a means of distantiation."[65] However, even if a seemingly clear answer is given to Boaz in the text, we cannot say with certainty that the mysterious female figure uttering those words in the total darkness of an open field by night is indeed Ruth—it might as well be Naomi, if we consider the possibilities of the *ketiv*. What she says is: "I am [אָנֹכִי, *anoki*] Ruth" (3:9), thus "establishing her presence, her voice" by using the "emphatic first-person pronoun, *anoki*."[66] Yet this is not the end of the sentence, nor the end of her speech in response to his question. Rather than illuminating Boaz about her identity, her intention seems to hide it rather than to disclose it: She explicitly asks him to cover her: "I am Ruth, your servant; *spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin*." (3:9; my emphasis) This mysterious request, which is again very controversially debated within commentaries,[67] plays with the theological symbolism of *apo-kalypsis*, revelation or *revelatio*: Veiling and unveiling, hiding and revealing, disclosing and covering the face of truth.[68] Yet it also has erotic undertones: Irmtraut Fischer, for instance, reads it plainly "sexual," since the "spreading" of Boaz's cloak to cover Ruth implies the possible exposure of his genitals.[69] The text itself, however, remains obscure and in suspense.

It is irresolvable, on a textual basis, to determine what exactly transpires between the man and the woman out in the field by night. And it is exactly that ambiguity which makes the text, one of the "most intimate scenes within the Old Testament,"[70] so erotic. After all, "[i]s not the most erotic part of the body *where the garment gapes*?"[71] According to Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "it is the flash"—the

flash of skin that flashes between garment and nudity—"it is the flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance."[72] In that sense, the scene in *Ruth* which possibly stages seduction also seduces its readers. While Boaz's "garment gapes," and while metaphors of covering/uncovering are very dominant within this scene, the exact meanings of words, and the relation between signifier and signified, become doubtful and ambiguous. In other words, readers are lured and seduced into following a certain path of interpretation, yet the text is too evasive and ambiguous to allow for an unequivocal reading. The garment gapes, there is a possibility of nudity or clarity—and yet another textual layer of the meaning covers and veils what seemed to be unveiled.[73]

This textual feature of evasiveness is most striking when it comes to identity. Ruth does not reveal herself: She answers a "basic identity question"[74] with her request to be covered. Who is she? In fact, Boaz himself does not seem to know. Not even after she has (seemingly) declared her identity and spent the entire night with him, does he call her by her name; in verse 14 he says rather vaguely, early in the morning: "It must not be known that the woman [הָאִשָּׁה, *ha-isha*] came to the threshing floor" (3:14)[75]—not "Ruth," the name she herself has used to refer to herself (3:9). However, "the woman," after introducing herself as Ruth, asks Boaz to "spread his cloak" over her, "for you are next-of-kin." (3:9)[76] Yet in fact, according to the text, Boaz is not *Ruth's* "next-of-kin," but *Naomi's*.[77] Throughout the narrative, the text consistently stresses that Ruth is a foreigner, a stranger, not part of the family of Naomi, and not part of the Jewish community of Bethlehem. She is consistently called "Ruth the Moabite" by the narrator as well as by the characters—her foreignness and strangeness is starkly articulated throughout the narrative (e.g., 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). In fact, when Boaz first meets her in his field by day and enquires about her, his servant replies *not* by giving him her name, but by presenting her as a foreigner in a double formula ("the Moabite from the country of Moab"), a displaced person: "She is *the Moabite* who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab." (2:6; my emphasis) And at the beginning of chapter 2, when Boaz is first intro-

duced as a character within the narrative, he is presented as a relative of Naomi's, not Ruth's: "Now *Naomi* had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." (2:1; my emphasis) So whose "next-of-kin" is "the woman" claiming to be? Which raises the question: Who is speaking? Is it Ruth, who has no kinship relation with Boaz or anyone within the Jewish community of Bethlehem at all, as the text makes abundantly clear? Is it Naomi, who would have all textual rights to claim, "you are next-of-kin"?

Who are you? We cannot say for sure. Nor can we ascertain clearly what exactly is happening between the man and the woman on the threshing floor by night. What is Naomi telling Ruth to do when she instructs her to "uncover Boaz's feet and lie down" (3:4)? It is very plausible to read the term מַרְגְּלֹתָיו (*margelotaw*, his feet) here as a euphemism for Boaz's genitals.[78] Is Naomi telling Ruth to uncover Boaz' private parts, to expose his genitals? If so, what does it mean that Ruth, as 3:14 says, "lay at his feet until morning" (3:14)? In addition, the verb translated as "lay" or "lie down" here—שָׁכַב (*shakab*), which is frequently used of sexual intercourse in the Hebrew Bible[79]—is clearly a leitmotif of the narrative: It is used four times in our passage (3:4, 7, 13, 14) and nine times throughout chapter 3.[80] What is the woman doing when "she came and uncovered his feet [מַרְגְּלֹתָיו, *margelotaw*] and lay down [שָׁכַב, *shakab*]" (3:7)? What is Boaz asking her for when he implores her: "Lie down [שִׁכְבִי, *shikbi*] until the morning" (3:13)?

What is "the woman" doing?[81] Another leitmotif in chapter 3 is the verb יָדַע (*yada*), which also has a double sense: It can mean both intellectual knowledge and sexual intercourse.[82] In our passage from the Book of Ruth, it appears in 3:3, when Naomi says, "do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking" (3:3). What exactly is happening between the man and the woman in the dark of night? It remains teasingly ambiguous. The text *covers* a clear meaning of this encounter as "the woman" "*uncovers* Boaz's feet" (3:4, 3:7; my emphasis). So much so that Mieke Bal consistently speaks of Ruth "uncovering Boaz's feet *and/or* sexual parts,"[83] and Phyllis Trible

tells us that "just how much of the lower part of his body she is to uncover remains tantalizingly unclear."[84] The only thing that *is* clear is that the text carries erotic under- and overtones, and is "rife with sexual innuendo"[85]—a layer of meaning that many commentaries take great trouble to explain away, while others celebrate and extol it. Yet it is in no way certain that those innuendos are anything more than just that—a hint, a possibility of reading, interpretating, and understanding this highly ambiguous, obscure, and opaque text.

Passionate reading

The Book of Ruth is very decidedly a work of literature with an aesthetic dimension,[86] a short yet rich literary masterpiece of the Hebrew Bible. All commentators—whether Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant[87]—agree on its extraordinary literary quality, "unmatched in the Old Testament."[88] *Ruth* is hailed as a "literary work of art," the "artistic culmination point of the Hebrew Bible,"[89] with an "extraordinary beauty of expression."[90] As Francis Landy has it in his fine and detailed reading of the Book of Ruth, "[l]overs make fictions of their lives, construct romance artfully [. . .]."[91] It also entails, as is widely agreed, "one of literature's most poignant declarations of affection and love"[92]—Ruth's poem expressing her oath of fidelity to Naomi in 1:16–17. In her *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva has remarked very insightfully: "the language of love is impossible, inadequate, immediately allusive when one would like it to be most straightforward; it is a flight of metaphors—it is literature."[93] Hence, the genre of love literature—including the Book of Ruth—is literature in its most "literary" form. Taking the Book of Ruth seriously as love *literature*—rather than seeing it (only) as an allegorical love story pointing towards an edifying theological content—can give us clues in understanding what Derek Attridge called "the work of literature."[94]

How does love literature "work"? In my close readings, we have seen that it is the love expressed in the Book of Ruth that faces us with a twofold challenge: A linguistic challenge, and a hermeneutic challenge. We struggle to determine the words' meanings, yet they are elusive. Our desire is to make sense of this love story, but how?

The uncertainties and ambiguities on the plot level are reinforced by a deeply ambiguous language when it comes to expressing love verbally within the text (at least in the Hebrew original). It is the textual expression of love that uncovers the poetics generally at work in the Book of Ruth: The text is deeply elusive, equivocal, and unstable. There is no stability of meaning, no stability of plot, and no stability of identity in the love story of *Ruth*. This elusiveness and instability ignite our desire to make sense. In this way, the Book of Ruth is a "text of bliss," as Roland Barthes has it in *The Pleasure of the Text*—a "text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [...], unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language."[95] It is, however, highly counter-intuitive, that it is loss, discomfort, and crisis that would make a text—such as *Ruth*—"blissful," according to Barthes. What is this bliss? In Barthes's reading, it is, as Dominik Zechner has pointed out, by no means "pure delight. Instead, it marks a rich, multi-faceted affective experience whose embrace is not necessarily pleasurable."[96] It is this elusive quality of the text, brimful with potentiality, that makes the Book of Ruth highly poetic.

In fact, the Book of Ruth leaves us struggling and at a loss—the text quite literally leaves us in the dark, as we have seen in the seduction scene on the threshing floor in chapter 3. Again and again, the textual material of *Ruth* evades and flees our desire to understand and make sense of it. And yet, this loss, discomfort, and possibly crisis at work in the linguistic ambiguity of the text has an almost erotic effect: *Ruth* plays with different notions of desire—on the one hand, by narrating and depicting erotic desire, and on the other hand, by creating an ambiguous, multi-layered text, so that our interpretative desire is spurred. Groping in the dark, our reading, our interpretation becomes blissful and passionate—we want to know more, and more, and more, we want to see more, uncover more, understand better.

Interpretation is a relation—a relation of desire. According to Werner Hamacher, it rests on the assumption of discomfort, loss, and crisis, just like Barthes's "text of bliss": In our attempts at understand-

ing, "[o]nly what is disconcerting can be loved; only the beloved that remains disconcerting while growing closer can be loved lastingly."[97] In other words, the closer I grow to a text, the stranger and more disconcerting it becomes for me; the more I am "into" a text, an author, a work, the more my desire for it is awakened, because I am more and more aware of its potentialities and its incongruities that are yet beyond my reach. This is the point of my close readings uncovering the evasive textual strategies in *Ruth*: Rather than pointing a finger at some sort of "exact" or "clear" meaning, my readings aim at uncovering the highly disconcerting potential of the very material body of the text—which would then have immense interpretative consequences. We might call them passionate readings, in the double sense of the word *passion*—meaning both erotic rapture and intense pain.

It is the passion of reading, the passion of interpretation that we can see at work in the Book of Ruth. In *Ruth*, the deeply intimate experience of loving cannot be expressed with words that are subject to certain aesthetic, grammatical, or language-bound conventions—not even when the words of love break, challenge, subvert, or play with these very conventions. Words of love entail a potential, a surplus, an abundance of meaning. The passion of love (in the double sense of the word) is what makes *Ruth* so deeply ambiguous.

NOTES

1 Zakovitch 1999, p. 80; Fischer 2001, p. 34; Köhlmoos 2010, p. 7.
2 See Fischer 2001, p. 37; Goodman-Thau 2006, p. 11.
3 On the many facets of the Hebrew *hesed*, see the reflections in Trible 1978, pp. 169, 197, also Glueck 1967; Landy 2001, p. 225.
4 Landy 2001, p. 225.
5 Phyllis Trible uses the translation "kindness" throughout her analysis, pointing out, however, that "*kindness* is hardly an adequate translation of *hesed*" (Trible 1978, p. 197).
6 Bal 1987, p. 80.
7 Landy 2001, p. 225.
8 See Lewis 1960. Quite surprisingly, Lewis does not mention the Book of Ruth.
9 Ilana Pardes—in a gesture of irony, to be sure—quotes Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1794–1807), as the motto to her own analysis of *Ruth*: "the book of Ruth, an idle, bungling story, foolishly told, nobody knows by whom, about a strolling country girl, creeping slyly to be with her cousin Boaz. Pretty stuff indeed, to be called the Word of God!" (Pardes 1992, p. 98).
10 Trible 1978, ch. 6: 'A human comedy.'

11 Landy 2001, p. 218.
12 For a critical reading, see Bal 1987, p. 72.
13 See Landy 2001, p. 232.
14 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the Bible follow the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
15 Even Trible calls her "the mediator of this transformation to life" (Trible 1978, p. 194).
16 According to Mieke Bal, "aspects of names in Ruth *tell*" (see Bal 1987, p. 74). However, the exact meanings and purposes of the "telling names" remain a matter of debate. Fischer points out that the main character's name, Ruth, is not clearly understandable (Fischer 2001, p. 35), Zakovitch even holds that only minor characters have symbolic names (Zakovitch 1999, p. 80), while Köhlmoos suggests that names remain consciously ambiguous to create more narrative tension (Köhlmoos 2010, p. 7).
17 For Mieke Bal, this is a sign that "the character is not completely defenseless against the name," but takes narrative agency (Bal 1987, p. 74). Hence, she reads "the use of a proper name" in an "explicitly narrative" way (p. 76).
18 See Bal 1987, p. 75; Fischer 2001, pp. 33–36.
19 See a detailed overview in Landy 2001, pp. 218–249, 240, n. 60.
20 Not least, options are anywhere between same-sex and opposite-sex. See Exum 1996, p. 5. Exum is interested not in the "correctness" of asserting same- vs. opposite-sex love in *Ruth*, but rather in how "advocates for both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships can and do lay claim to this text" (Exum 1996, p. 5).
21 See e.g., Exum 1996, p. 6. According to Exum (p. 6, n. 14), these verses from *Ruth* are part of the religious wedding vow in the USA, UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and Israel.
22 May 2011, p. 25.
23 According to Strong's Concordance, *dabaq* can also mean "to keep close," "hold fast," or "stick to."
24 Bal 1987, p. 72.
25 Even if it is a man, namely Naomi's late son, who establishes the relation between the two women in the first place. Both women, in fact, are widows: "Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. [. . .] and both Mahlon and Chilion [Naomi's sons] died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband" (1:3–5). In other words, the mutual love of the two women is established by the shared experience of loss.
26 My emphasis. As Phyllis Trible writes, with the radical and remarkable decision to "cling" to Naomi, Ruth "has also reversed sexual allegiance. [. . .] One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men." (Trible 1978, p. 173.)
27 See Bal 1987, p. 72 (the verb "to cleave" (1:14), "exclusively used with a male subject, in reference to the matrimonial bond"); see also Exum 1996, p. 8.
28 Ilana Pardes has pointed out that "while in *Genesis*, such cleaving defines the institution of marriage, in the Book of Ruth it depicts female bonding" (Pardes 1992, p. 102).
29 Bal 1987, p. 83.
30 Cf. Exum 1996, p. 8. However, Exum only points out the "sexual ambivalence" of all characters and does not necessarily make the textual identification I am suggesting here.
31 Bal 1987, p. 77.
32 Pardes 1992, p. 106.
33 See Exum 1996, p. 35, who quotes many parallel passages (n. 117); Pardes 1992, p. 106; Fischer 2001, pp. 255–256.
34 Zakovitch 1999, p. 171.

35 Zakovitch 1999, p. 171; Goodman-Thau 2006, pp. 100, 102; Köhlmoos rather sees a subtle irony at work, since the legitimized son of a free woman is given the name "servant" or "slave" (Köhlmoos 2010, p. 84). However, she agrees with the other commentators about the messianic significance of Obed's name.

36 See Trible 1978, p. 193. This all-female setting is even more remarkable because the right to name a child is usually reserved to the father within the Hebrew Bible (Zakovitch 1999, p. 170); in exceptional cases, children have been named by their mothers or midwives (see Fischer 2001, p. 257), but never by a collective of female neighbors (Zakovitch 1999, pp. 170–171). Moreover, Fischer suggests that in the few instances of female naming, the name is usually given in relation to the life and context of the mother, while here, it is Naomi's life (not Ruth's) that serves as an explanation for the act of name-giving (Fischer 2001, p. 257).

37 Köhlmoos 2010, p. 83 points out that this public announcement also, quite literally, makes Naomi Obed's "legal" father ("Rechtlich wird sie damit zum 'Vater' des Kindes").

38 Mieke Bal remarks that while there is a strong textual basis for identifications between Naomi and Boaz, the same merging or blurring is true—as I will demonstrate in more detail below—between Naomi and Ruth, which leads Bal to conclude: "in marrying Ruth, he [Boaz] marries Naomi a little too, while also identifying with her. For unto her clave Ruth. This is why the neighbors can say: to Naomi, a son is born." (Bal 1987, p. 85.)

39 See Fischer 2001, p. 256 for the legitimizing function of mentioning the father's name in the formula *yulad-ben*.

40 See Gesenius 1962, p. 205 ("Busen, aber eher d. v. den Hüften umschlossenen Teil des Körpers"). According to Gesenius, the etymology of *heq* can be traced to an Assyrian verb meaning "embrace," "unite, merge" ("umfassen," "sich vereinigen, sich mischen"), which would highlight the sexual connotation (Gesenius 1962, p. 205).

41 In that sense, Pardes speaks of Naomi's and Ruth's "shared parenthood" (Pardes 1992, p. 106).

42 This aspect of Naomi as Obed's guardian or caregiver is highlighted in Köhlmoos's detailed philological analysis. Köhlmoos traces the etymology of *omenet* to the verb *aman*, "to stand firmly," thus highlighting Naomi's absolute faithfulness that even entails the theological dimension of truth (cf. *Amen*): Naomi, in her view, "represents YHWH's faithfulness" (Köhlmoos 2010, p. 82). Fischer also holds that the term *omenet* "cannot possibly mean wet-nurse, but rather adoptive mother or guardian-nurse" (Fischer 2001, p. 255). Exum refutes that view by pointing to parallel uses of the term *omenet* as "wet-nurse" in the Hebrew Bible (Exum 1996, pp. 35–36).

43 In his translation ("und säugte es an ihrem Busen und wurde seine Pflegemutter"), Zakovitch makes this aspect very clear, yet his interpretation neglects the fact that this act of nursing and nourishing is biologically impossible considering Naomi's own words in 1:12 (see Zakovitch 1999, p. 170).

44 Exum 1996, pp. 15–16 (esp. n. 41), 35–36; Pardes also discusses *Ruth* in terms of "the plot of fertility" (Pardes 1992, p. 106).

45 Mieke Bal argues that "the solidarity (*hesed*) between Ruth and Naomi gives social security and posterity to the one by means of the sexuality and fertility of the other" (Bal 1987, p. 85).

46 Pardes 1992, p. 106.

47 It is highly interesting that the text begins and ends with genealogies. Yet while the beginning family line ends in

loss and singularity, the concluding family line highlights the messianic, redemptive potential.

48 Pardes 1992, p. 108.

49 Pardes 1992, p. 102. Yet it is noteworthy that this word—*ahav*, "(to) love"—is used not in the direct speech of the characters to define their attachment towards each other, but rather, in the collective speech of the women of Bethlehem.

50 Zakovitch 1999, p. 169 points out that this is the only reference to *ahavah* in Ruth.

51 Köhlmoos 2010, p. 82 ("der wesentlich emotionalere Begriff, der die engstmögliche Beziehung zwischen zwei Menschen ausdrückt").

52 He therefore infers that it cannot therefore refer to "carnal love" (Zakovitch 1999, p. 169). According to Köhlmoos, however, *ahav* can also encompass the emotional bond between parents and children, husband and wife, and between friends, and even between Israel and YHWH, so that Ruth, in her reading, would "realize the all-encompassing dimension of love" (Köhlmoos 2010, p. 82).

53 See Fischer 2001, p. 254. Fischer's example of how gender roles are transgressed is when ascribing Ruth the role of the husband in "clinging" to Naomi (1:14) in reference to *Genesis* 2:24, which she understands as going against patriarchal structures.

54 Bal calls Ruth 3:6–16 "the seduction scene" (Bal 1987, p. 71).

55 Exum 1996, p. 22.

56 Landy 2001, p. 222.

57 Landy emphasizes the dream-like setting of night and solitude: "It is a time for sleep, for unconsciousness, and for dream. [...] Whether or not Boaz sleeps in the open to dream, the narrative possibility arises that such a dream will befall him." (Landy 2001, p. 222.)

58 Fischer considers allegorical readings, but refutes them (Fischer 2001, p. 211); Köhlmoos emphasizes the sexual connotations, but reads Ruth's actual request to Boaz as "symbolic-theological" (Köhlmoos 2010, p. 62). Trible stresses the "sexual overtones" (Trible 1978, p. 182); Exum calls it "the vital scene for romantic interpretation," "rife with sexual innuendo" (Exum 1996, pp. 22, 23); Landy points out its "intimacy" and "sexual possibilities" and calls this scene "the seduction and sexual invitation" (Landy 2001, pp. 226, 232); Köhlmoos reads it explicitly as a "sexual encounter," "sexual contact" or "sexual arousal" (Köhlmoos 2010, pp. 57, 61); Fischer highlights Naomi's "instructions for seduction," the "sexual connotations" and the connection between food/drink and eroticism ("lustvoller Beischlaf", Fischer 2001, pp. 201–202). Zakovitch, on the other hand, holds that "nothing transpires" between Ruth and Boaz in their "innocent affection" ("sittsame Zuneigung", Zakovitch 1999, p. 138).

59 Landy 2001, p. 222.

60 Landy 2001, p. 220.

61 Trible 1978, p. 182.

62 Exum 1996, p. 36; see also Pardes 1992, pp. 104–105. The Hebrew terms *ketiv* and *qere* are used for different possibilities of readings in printed editions of the Hebrew Bible (as opposed to the handwritten originals). The transmitted text of the Hebrew Bible consisted of consonants only, but in the 7th to 10th centuries, the Masoretes edited, copied and "vocalized" it—they added vowel points and reading signs. Whenever the consonantal text (*ketiv* = "what is written") differs from the vocalized Masorete editing (*qere* = "what is to be read"), they provided notes in the margin (*masora* in Hebrew, hence the term *Masoretes*). Those margin notes mark differences between the consonantal text (*ketiv*) and the Masoretic reading (*qere*), which is the authoritative text in Rabbinic Judaism to

this day. On *ketiv/qere* and the possibilities of "double writing," see Barr 1981. In Ruth 3:3–4, we find such a difference between *ketiv* and *qere* that is open for two-fold interpretative possibilities. However, in commentaries the *ketiv* is usually not read as a first-person singular, but rather as "archaic" second-person female forms (see Exum 1996, p. 36, quoting Campbell 1975, p. 120 and Sasson 1979 in their commentaries on Ruth).

63 Exum 1996, p. 36.

64 Fischer hints at Boaz's possible orgasm in 3:8: "einige Midraschim denken an einen Orgasmus aufgrund des Verbs חָרַד, 'erbeben'" (Fischer 2001, p. 209); Trible highlights Boaz's bodily reaction as "no doubt feeling the chill of the night air upon his exposed body" (Trible 1978, p. 183).

65 Landy 2001, p. 230.

66 Landy 2001, p. 230.

67 For example, Zakovitch (referencing Rashi) reads it as an open and plain proposal of marriage (Zakovitch 1999, p. 141), while Köhlmoos, in contrast, understands it "symbolically-theologically," as asking Boaz to take YHWH's position towards her (Köhlmoos 2010, p. 62). Landy offers a very illuminating and interesting rhetorical reading of Ruth's answer to Boaz: "Rhetorically, Ruth literalizes metaphor, in that she makes Boaz physically take her 'under his wing [. . .].'" (Landy 2001, p. 232.)

68 On the notion of *apo-kalypsis*, revelation as unveiling, in the sense of taking away a covering veil (*velum*), see Forte 2003, pp. 18–19.

69 Fischer 2001, pp. 210–211. In her reading, Ruth is not only requesting marriage, but the consummation of marriage.

70 Köhlmoos 2010, p. 65.

71 Barthes 1990, p. 9; emphasis in original.

72 Barthes 1990, p. 10.

73 The metaphor of uncovering and revealing nudity is prominent in Jewish mysticism, describing the hermeneutics of 'dis-covering,' 'un-covering,' or revealing *torah*. According to Elliot Wolfson, "the search for the deepest truth of Scripture is a gradual stripping away of the external forms of garments until one gets to the inner core, but when one gets to that inner core what one finds is nothing other than the *peschat*, i.e. the text as it is" (Wolfson 1993, pp. 155–203; 171–172).

74 Landy 2001, p. 230.

75 Fischer suggests that the use of *ish* (woman) here, instead of *na'arah* (young woman) used throughout chapter 2, could point to a sexual encounter between Ruth and Boaz: in this night, she has become "the woman" for him, "his woman" (Fischer 2001, p. 218).

76 Landy also remarks very insightfully that rather than answering his question about *her* identity, Ruth answers by reminding Boaz about *his* identity: "you are next-of-kin." (Landy 2001, p. 235.)

77 Even if, as most commentators have pointed out (Zakovitch 1999, p. 129; Fischer 2001, p. 190; Köhlmoos 2010, p. 49), Naomi herself relativizes this statement in 2:20: "Naomi also said to her, 'The man is a relative of *ours*, one of *our* nearest kin.'"; my emphasis.

78 See Fischer 2001, p. 203; Exum 1996, p. 23. Even Zakovitch, referencing Josephus, admits a sexual possibility (Zakovitch 1999, p. 137). Köhlmoos, however, while admitting that *margelot* can refer to the feet or any other body part below the hips, especially the abdomen, strongly rejects that Naomi would instruct Ruth to expose Boaz's nakedness (Köhlmoos 2010, p. 56). There are two parallel passages in the Hebrew Bible where the semantically opposite formula "(to) cover his feet" (*lehaset-raglaw*) is used: for Saul (in 1 Samuel 24:3) and Ehud (in Judges 3:24). In both instances, "covering their feet" is a euphemism for performing the necessity

of nature: those men are "covering their feet" whilst *un*covering their private parts to relieve themselves.

79 Exum 1996, p. 23. Zakovitch holds that there is no sexual meaning intended in 3:4 but offers no textual proof for that view (Zakovitch 1999, p. 137).

80 Fischer 2001, pp. 202–203.

81 Exum has suggested a reading in which Ruth uncovers herself once she slipped into Boaz's bed, and her request to have Boaz's cloak "spread over her" (3:9) indeed makes sense when she is naked (Exum 1996, p. 23). This view is, however, strongly refuted in Köhlmoos 2010, p. 56.

82 See Fischer 2001, p. 201; Köhlmoos 2010, p. 55. For instance, Gen 4:1 famously reads, "And Adam knew (*yada*) Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore a son" (KJV), and this formula for being intimate appears throughout the Hebrew Bible.

83 Bal 1987, p. 81; my emphasis.

84 Trible 1978, p. 182.

85 Exum 1996, p. 23.

86 Landy also emphasizes the "aesthetic potential" of *hesed*-love in so far as exhibiting *hesed* may be viewed as acting beautifully (Landy 2001, p. 225).

87 See, for instance, three recent examples: Zakovitch 1999; Fischer 2001; Köhlmoos 2010.

88 Köhlmoos 2010, p. xi ("Das Ruthbuch ist ein Meisterwerk der Erzählkunst, unerreicht im Alten Testament").

89 Fischer 2001, pp. 24–25 ("ein literarisches Kunstwerk"; "künstlerische[r] Höhepunkt der Hebräischen Bibel").

90 Zakovitch 1999, p. 12 ("Schönheit seines Ausdrucks").

91 Landy 2001, p. 230.

92 Sasson 1979, p. 28.

93 Kristeva 1987, p. 1. The French original reads: "Impossible, inadéquat, immédiatement allusive quand on le voudrait le plus direct, le langage amoureux est envol de metaphors: il est de la littérature." (Kristeva 1983, p. 9.)

94 See Attridge 2015.

95 Barthes 1990, p. 14.

96 Zechner 2024, p. 23, in reference to Barthes 1990.

97 Hamacher 2015, p. 68.

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