

Article

Femininity, Motherhood, and Feminism: Reflections on Paul Mendes-Flohr's Biography *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* §

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§ This essay is dedicated to my beloved friend and teacher Paul Mendes-Flohr on his 80th birthday.

Abstract: In his intellectual biography of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, *A Life of Faith and Dissent* written in 2019, Paul Mendes-Flohr offers us an intimate view of Buber's life and thought without neglecting the story of the women in his life and their contributions to shaping his thought. In this short reflection essay, I wish to present a crosscutting perspective on the important biography written by Paul Mendes-Flohr, by highlighting Buber's relation to women, feminism, and femininity, a perspective that emerges in almost every chapter of the biography. This angle, I hope, will illuminate not only the personal–psychological dimension of Buber's inner life but also the deep currents of his intellectual life and thought.

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1. Introduction

In his intellectual biography of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, *A Life of Faith and Dissent* (2019), Paul Mendes-Flohr offers us an intimate view of Buber's life and thought with respect to the places, times, encounters, and the geopolitical circumstances he experienced. Buber's intellectual life has, of course, been subject to many biographies, such as the classic works of his contemporaries Hans Kohn and Maurice Friedman. Unlike previous biographies, however, Mendes-Flohr's book describes Buber's intellectual development without neglecting the story of the women in his life and their contribution to shaping his thought. In this short reflection essay, I wish to present a crosscutting perspective on the important biography written by Paul Mendes-Flohr by highlighting Buber's relation to women, feminism, and femininity, a perspective that emerges in almost every chapter of the biography.¹ This angle, I hope, will illuminate not only the personal–psychological dimension of Buber's inner life but also the deep currents of his intellectual life and thought.

Mendes-Flohr opens his biography on Martin Buber with words of his German Jewish contemporary Hannah Arendt:² “I do not believe that there is any thought process without personal experience”, writes Arendt. “Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event”. (Cited in [Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), p. xi).

This quote also expresses the choice of Mendes-Flohr, as a biographer, to convey Buber's spiritual temper and intellectual development through his personal life experiences. It is, of course, up to the biographer to decide which experiences and events left their mark on someone's intellectual development. For Mendes-Flohr, it is the mark of foundational and formative relationships that best captures Buber's intellectual path: On the one hand, there is the transformative impact of his friends Gustav Landauer and Franz Rosenzweig. On the other hand, there were prominent women in Buber's life, who profoundly shaped his thought: His mother Elise Wurgast, his grandmother Adele Buber, and his wife Paula Winkler-Buber. In later chapters of the biography, we learn more about Buber's relationships

with other female figures, such as the physiotherapist Naamah Beer-Hoffman (the daughter of the Austrian-Jewish poet Richard Beer Hoffman), the psychotherapist Anna Maria Jokel, the researcher Grete Schaeder, and others. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, pp. 313–14).

In addition, Mendes-Flohr dedicates a lengthy discussion to the poet Hedwig Lachmann and her influence on the life and thought of her husband, Gustav Landauer. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, pp. 122–23).

Moreover, Mendes-Flohr tells us that the sociologist Georg Simmel, Buber's teacher, was among the first academics to actually encourage women to attend his seminars, and that his wife, Gertrude, an artist with an impressive and distinct intellectual presence, probably played a significant part in that decision. Gertrude and Georg Simmel opened a private seminar at their home in Berlin, which was visited by distinguished guests such as Max Weber and his wife Marianne, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the philosopher Edmund Husserl, and many others. Buber, who regularly attended these seminars, met the essayist and poet Margarete Susman there. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 47; see also: Susman 1994, pp. 144–54; Rubin 2016).

Buber, in fact, corresponded with many prominent women of his time, such as the writer Lou Andreas-Salomé; the poet Else Lasker-Schüler; Bertha Pappenheim, the feminist activist and translator of the autobiography of Glöckel of Hameln; the Swedish educator Ellen Key; the politician Eleanor Roosevelt; and many others. (Buber 1972, 1975).

These extraordinary women—intellectuals, humanists, and artists—wrote and acted against the conventions and gender expectations of the women of their time. Indeed, as Mendes-Flohr reminds us, it was no small feat for young women of the early twentieth century to become university students and take an active part in the spiritual life of their society. One must remember that, at the end of the eighteenth century, women in Central Europe were still not allowed to enter the gates of the university and were largely excluded from public intellectual life. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 47; Elior 2018, pp. 458–510). It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that women were allowed to attend university lectures as free listeners, provided they had previously obtained the consent of the professor or lecturer. By the early 1920s, women were finally allowed to enroll as fulltime students at universities in Western Europe. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 47). And so they did.

It is well known that in response to this exclusion, some educated and well-to-do women of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as Rachel Varnhagen, Henriette Hertz, or Dorothea von Schlegel (the eldest daughter of Moses Mendelssohn), opened literary salons as spaces of intellectual exchange on philosophical and political issues. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 47). At a time when most options for acquiring an education were blocked for women, the Jewish salons played an important role and gave women the opportunity to design and take part in modern bourgeois life. (Hertz 2005, pp. 156–203; Lowenstein 1994, pp. 104–10; Weissberg 2011, pp. 24–43; Naimark–Goldberg 2013, pp. 180–215). Unlike other salons and private societies, however, which usually involved a certain social class and featured predominantly male attendees, the Jewish salons were usually grouped around a privileged woman and included people of different social classes who socialized in an informal manner without fixed protocol. Thus, Jewish salons tended to bring together social groups that normally did not come together (aristocrats and commoners, Jews and non-Jews, men and women). (Lowenstein 1994, pp. 104–6). These salons also changed the fixed perception of identity. It was not gender, class, or family pedigree that defined who you were but, as Arendt says, “The salons were the meeting places of those who had learned how to represent themselves through conversation”. (Arendt 1974, p. 38).

It should be noted that it was in this context that Hannah Arendt, in fact, wrote the first biography of Rachel Varnhagen, a work she began in 1929 and finished only in 1938. Her identification with Varnhagen is well known (Goldstein 2009, pp. 1–8): “[Varnhagen] was my closest friend, though she had been dead over one hundred years”. (Cited in Young-Bruehl 2004, p. 56). Arendt's biography, then, functioned as “a kind of autobiography” expressing strong identification with the subject of its study. (Young-Bruehl 2004, p. 139). But this did not necessarily compromise the credibility and scientific value of her work. It

could also be viewed as a strength and authenticity, much like Buber's technique of retelling, which infused the historical material with a sense of immediate relevance and intimacy.

Like Arendt, whom he quotes in his introduction, Mendes-Flohr could also be seen as a biographer identifying with his subject and retelling a story in the most intimate and personal way. It is therefore not surprising that, on the occasion of the biography's book launch at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, Mendes-Flohr remarked: "I must admit that the biography I have written is largely an autobiography. The story I am telling penetrated and was perceived through my soul and the whispering of my own heart. That is a story of the dialogue that I had with Buber's soul, at least to the extent I could listen to the still, beating voice in his writings that guided Buber's public activities".³

2. Femininity and *Fraundenken* in Buber's Thought

The important Jewish thinker and Israeli public intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz once noted that "the greatest revolution in the history of mankind occurred when social and spiritual civilization ceased to be a male civilization and became a *human* civilization".⁴ However, it was the same Leibowitz who notoriously called Buber a "ladies' philosopher" (Warren 1995, pp. 39–46), insinuating, thereby, the alleged "softness" and lack of rigor in Buber's philosophical thought. Being a "ladies' philosopher", for Leibowitz, was certainly no compliment and should be regarded as beyond the pale of political correctness. But he was not the first to attribute femininity to Buber's thought, nor did femininity always carry connotations of philosophical weakness. Gustav Landauer wrote in response to Buber's book *Daniel* published in 1913 that Buber "awakens and advocates a specific feminine form of thought without which our exhausted and collapsed culture cannot be renewed and replenished. Only . . . when abstract thought is conjoined and submerged in the depths of feeling, will our thought engender deeds, will a true life emerge from our logical desert. Towards that objective women will help us". (Cited in Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 78). A few days later, on 19 March 1913, Gustav Landauer wrote to Buber again about woman-thinking (*Fraundenken*), which he saw as a commandment that "has not yet taken its appropriate full share" in human thought. (Buber 1972, p. 326). Landauer associates the virtue of *Fraundenken* with peace and humanism. "For the sake of human thinking", wonders Landauer, "should one expect the increasing of the specific woman-thinking within this human thinking? And I say: indeed yes, and I notice something like this with joy. I notice it in Goethe and his Iphigenia kingdom, which is embodied in our whole culture, [. . .] in me, though I am quite masculine, in you, I notice it in Rachel (Varnhagen), Bettina (Armin-Brentano), Margarete Susman etc. All these are the doers of humanity, the doers of oneness, whole, because in them dwells the woman-thinking (*Fraundenken*) vividly and because they are unique (Einmalige) [. . .]". (Buber 1972, p. 326).

Contrary to Leibowitz, Landauer (as well as Mendes-Flohr) saw the female element in Buber's philosophy not as a lack but as an advantage. Emotion, according to Landauer, so lacking in the intellectual world of thought in his time, may redeem modern thinking from the aridity into which abstract thought has fallen.⁵ Landauer concludes that "Buber belongs to the spiritual family of the feminine" (Cited in Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 78), a statement that may remind us of the tension between the heavenly elements—the female element versus the male element in the Lurianic Kabbalah—a tension that will be resolved when the two elements take their place in spiritual reality. (Idel 2019, pp. 148–58; Tirosch-Samuelson 2011, pp. 191–230; Horwitz 2016, pp. 193–207; Wolfson 1995, pp. 209–28).

But the tension between emotion and reason in Jewish tradition can be found even earlier. Take, for instance, the Midrash to the biblical verse "But wisdom, where shall it be found?" (Job 28:12). The sages were divided on this question. Rabbi Eliezer answered: "The head is the seat of wisdom; Rabbi Joshua answered, the heart". (Yalkut Shimoni Mishlei 1, 929). As Paul Mendes-Flohr noted in an earlier text, Gustav Landauer, who was a nonobservant liberal and assimilated Jew, came closer to Judaism, Hasidism, and Jewish Mysticism only later in his life through his friendship with Buber and was especially touched by Buber's earlier Hasidic legends. (Seeligmann 2015, pp. 205–12). Whether

consciously or not, Landauer applied the abovementioned Jewish *sugia* to the context of twentieth-century modern western thought. And Landauer's answer aligns with Jewish tradition: The collaboration between emotion and intellect will redeem abstract thinking. The power of Buber's thought corresponds to Landauer's view and may be considered "feminine" in its synthesis of emotion and intellect.

3. Fatherland, War Psychosis and Spiritual Fantasies

While Gustav Landauer described Buber's philosophy as feminine, there also existed distinctly "masculine" elements in Buber's thought. In his initial approach to World War I, Buber attached himself forcefully to masculine stereotypes commonly used at the time. In contrast to other Jewish intellectuals, such as Margarete Susmann, Gershom Scholem, Rosa Luxemburg, Kurt Eisner, and Gustav Landauer, Buber adopted chauvinistic attitudes and images, linking nationalism and patriotism to heroism and masculinity. This stands in paradoxical contrast to Buber's physical appearance as described by the poet Van Eeden: "slender, fragile but strong, Buber, with his straight look and soft eyes, weak and velvety, yet deep and sharp. A rabbi, but without a narrow mind, a philosopher, but without aridity, a scholar but without self-conceit". (Cited in [Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), pp. 94–95). Margarete Susman, who was deeply impressed by Buber's presence, both by the young man's intellect and his physical appearance, described him as having a "delicate, slight" build structure. Buber's fragile appearance created in her the feeling that he was a kind of "pure spirit". ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), p. 48; in this context see also: [Susman 1994](#), pp. 144–54).

Perhaps precisely because of his self-perception as someone who is far away from fulfilling the ideal of masculinity, Buber, as hinted to us by Mendes-Flohr, was captivated by the dominant images of masculinity. Dissatisfied with his poor physical condition, Buber wrote to his student and friend Hans Kohn, who was later known as a prime historian of nationalism, how sorry he was that he himself could not enlist and serve in the army during WWI. ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), p. 97).

In his earlier work *From Mysticism to Dialogue* (1989), as well as in this recent biography, Paul Mendes-Flohr stressed that Buber's nationalism and mysticism were profoundly entangled. He explains the burst of nationalist enthusiasm on Buber's part as being associated with his hope for a fraternity that would emerge from the bonding of warriors. ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), pp. 96–98). Like many other Jewish and German intellectuals, Buber supported the war, perceiving it as the essential *Kriegserlebnis* (experience of war) needed to transform humanity. He glorified the spiritual value of war and fatherland, as well as the seemingly transcendental unity that was to paradoxically emerge from the dialectic between the ideal of unity and the reality of war. ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), pp. 98–100). The war, Buber believed, was an external event, but it symbolized a hidden, cosmic, internal act that would eventually play an important role in the redemption of the nations. ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), p. 105). Mendes-Flohr reminds us that many German intellectuals supported the war in astounding opposition to their previously pacifist views. For example, Buber's admired teacher, the sociologist Georg Simmel, detested Prussian militancy and yet supported the war as promoting the ideal of a healthy community. Buber, sadly, followed this intellectual trend—until his friend Gustav Landauer, who refused to compromise on his pacifism and remained staunchly opposed to Germany's war propaganda, confronted him with sharp criticism. ([Mendes-Flohr 1989](#); [Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), pp. 101–8; see also: [Wiese 2014](#), pp. 235–67).

Landauer accused Buber of aestheticizing the war. ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), p. 101) Deeply troubled by Buber's heroic language, Landauer chastised him as a *Kriegsbuber* or, in free translation, a warmonger. ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), pp. 103–5). Buber, he claimed, had used his philosophical prowess to justify the war ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), p. 104) and turned the vulgar confusion of belligerent ideology and tragic reality into something of spiritual greatness. ([Mendes-Flohr 2019](#), p. 108). The harsh debate between Landauer and Buber brought about a significant upheaval in the latter's thinking. As Mendes-Flohr argued in his biography and earlier work, the introspective reckoning with *Erlebnis* mysticism

and the disillusionment with the psychosis of war and all its spiritual fantasies would eventually pave the way to Buber's mature philosophy of dialogue. (Mendes-Flohr 1989; Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 108).

Indeed, after 1916, Buber expressed strong reservations about chauvinistic nationalism and articulated his complete opposition to the war. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 108). Paraphrasing the myth of the Golem created by the Maharal of Prague, he warned against a redemptive reading of events: "Friends, it is not yet Sabbath. We must first remove the holy name from under the Golem's tongue". (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 109). War now appeared as madness to him, one that had to be freed from the supposed holiness attached to it. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 109). To Mendes-Flohr, Buber's turning illustrates the formative connections between his spiritual life and friendships and, no less, the enduring relationship between the political and the personal in Buber's life and thought.

In November 1918, at the end of World War I, Kurt Eisner, a journalist and critic of German Jewish theater, led the Socialist Revolution in Bavaria. Surprisingly, the pacifist Gustav Landauer joined this revolution, which soon turned violent, and even tried to recruit Buber into its efforts. The reasons for Landauer's sudden change of heart are still perplexing to many scholars. Mendes-Flohr contemplates the possibility that the loss of Landauer's beloved wife, the poet Hedwig Lachman, who died unexpectedly from an influenza pandemic during that time, played a factor in his decision to join the ranks of the revolution. Landauer was devastated after Hedwig's death and lost all passion for life. Buber tried in vain to help him by integrating him into various projects. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 123). Yet, Landauer seemed drawn to the adventure of politics from the depths of his bereavement, believing in Eisner's promise that his government would create a spiritual revolution, a kind of resurrection of souls. Despite the turbulent events, Landauer managed to compile an anthology of Lachman's poems. Shortly afterward, he was brutally assassinated by counterrevolutionary militias who also murdered the Marxist-anarchists Rosa Luxemburg, Kurt Eisner, and Karl Liebknecht. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 123). Even in this revolutionary moment, argues Mendes-Flohr, the political remained tightly tethered to the personal. The loss of his close friend Landauer only strengthened Buber's belief that politics cannot be severed from love and that utopian hopes must be grounded in concrete human experience.

4. Motherhood and the Role of the Zionist Woman in the Jewish Revival

The importance of the concrete human experience has given rise to peace and environmental activism, as well as social justice movements, in our day. This development has rendered dialogical relationships more relevant than ever before (Biemann 2022). In addition, recent scholarship has linked Buber's *I and Thou* to Jewish "green" thought, vegetarianism, and animal rights activism (although Buber, unlike A. D. Gordon, was neither vegetarian nor vegan, and, unlike Abraham Kook, did not consider vegetarianism a messianic ideal). Dialogical thought also aligns with a feminist *ethics of care* and resonates with other feminist ideas of inclusion and empathy. (Noddings 1986; Batnitzky 2004; Walters 2003). But this should not lead us to assume that Buber himself should be considered a feminist. On the contrary, Buber frequently expressed conservative ideas regarding women and did not necessarily criticize the prevalent norms of his time.

That said, Buber was certainly no misogynist, and his positions are far from those encountered in contemporaries such as Otto Weininger, whose misogynic and auto-antisemitic book *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Weininger 1912) gained major popularity postmortem. Weininger introduced gender as a distinct dichotomy of the feminine-maternal ("Weib") and the spiritual element of the masculine-creator ("Mann"). Like many other intellectuals at the time, Buber internalized and left unquestioned such prejudices of gender dichotomy, but his view on women was scarcely negative as such. Nevertheless, while contemporary gender theories view gender as a fluid range rather than a binary category, considering it an identity that can be adopted rather than a predetermined biological essence (Butler 1990; Butler 1993), Buber, like many scholars and intellectuals in his generation, saw femininity

as an “essence”. Gender still belonged to the stiff categories of biological sex for him, and femininity and masculinity appeared as essentialized qualities that should be nurtured rather than subjected to critique.

Similarly, Paula Winkler-Buber, like other conservative feminists, believed that femininity was an essence uniquely defined by motherhood. The Jewish feminist Bertha Pappenheim, with whom Buber corresponded on several occasions, shared this idea. (Gillman 2018, pp. 200–7; Kaplan 1979, p. 32; Elior 2018, pp. 543–52). While Pappenheim never had children of her own, she emphasized motherhood as the highest self-fulfillment of women. For the women she designated as *childless-mothers*, she recommended the practice of “spiritual motherhood”. (Loentz 2007, pp. 182–83). In an 1898 letter to Buber, Paula Winkler-Buber articulated her feminism over against nationalism and cosmopolitanism, calling for a celebration of fruitful “contradictions”, or what we would call today diversity. For her, cosmopolitanism signified the merging of all diversity into oneness, a loss of diversity in nationalities, religions, and gender. Cosmopolitanism, she argued, not only ignores national diversity but also “seeks to minimize the differences between men and women and blur the contrasts between them in a way that, like bees, creates a sexless third sex. [...] Why not develop the man in the man and the woman in the woman to highest perfection to an extraordinary blossom [...]?” (Sharir 2011, p. 128, my translation YH; Buber 1972, pp. 148–49). A similar concern about losing diversity on behalf of one humanity also appears in Hannah Arendt about half a century later and may explain her reluctance toward early feminism as a force that aimed to level gender differences. (Markus 1987).

The gender dichotomy mentioned above also informed Buber’s views on Zionism. Introducing the female dimension to Zionism, Buber expressed a critique of the Zionist male model of redeeming the land, of conquest and land ownership, which was often accompanied by militant and heroic images. His attempt to imagine Zionism in more feminine terms merged these ideas with “nature” and care for the land and its inhabitants instead of occupation and control. Like Gordon (2020), Buber viewed nature as a feminine element that served as an alternative to the ideals of technocracy and in opposition to militarism and violent struggle.

In his 1901 lecture “The Jewish Women’s Zion” at the Young Women’s Organization in Vienna, Buber assigned a central role to the Jewish woman; however, it was not one that would “endear him with feminists” today, to quote Gilya G. Schmidt, for he blamed emancipated Jewish women for the demise of the Jewish community. (Buber 1999, p. 111). It should be noted that, in the same year, Paula Winkler-Buber published an article on the role of the Jewish woman in Zionism that gave women much greater agency than in Buber’s own essay. (Buber 1999, pp. 111–17; Stair 2018).

Still, Buber did assign a particular role to women in Zionism. National revival, he argued, can occur only with the participation of the woman returning to being a mother (“she will again be a mother”). (Buber 1999, p. 117). Rearticulating existing role stereotypes, Buber insisted that the Jewish woman should make her home the living center of the Jewish revival, a place of power and recovery, to nourish her children, nurture them, and shield them from the ills of modernity. While the Bible and Talmud offered women certain powers of leadership and prophecy, exile, according to Buber, concentrated the power of women precisely on the establishment of family life. (Buber 1997, pp. 135–38). In exile, the family becomes a substitute for the homeland, and Buber assigns women the role of family care within the Zionist project. Moreover, the woman, who traditionally strengthened the man to face his Jewish fate during thousands of years of Jewish exile, proved to be a weak link from the time of emancipation to the rise of modernity. (Buber 1999, pp. 111–17).

In the pursuit of modern culture, which Buber viewed as narcissistic, egotistical, and materialistic, the Jewish woman became herself “modern”, thereby weakening the Jewish family. The woman abandoned her children for a life of luxury, and in the absence of warmth and home—according to Buber—her husband follows her and loses himself in work. (Buber 1999, pp. 111–17). In his biography, Mendes-Flohr chooses not to confront

Buber's anachronistic views with our contemporary sensibilities, but reminds his readers how spiritual and intellectual life is inextricably linked to personal experience: "One cannot but hear autobiographical murmurs in this troubling, damning indictment of the modern Jewish female, and see Buber's vision of 'the Zion of the Jewish woman' as a lingering longing for what he regarded as the fundamental missing piece of his childhood." (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 28).

Needless to say, Buber's mother was the complete opposite of the image Buber espoused for the Jewish woman, and one might, perhaps, detect some of the resentment Buber felt for his own mother abandoning him as a child. His mother, a theater actress, left the family home when Buber was at the age of three to move with her lover to Moscow, where she started a new life and family. Mendes-Flohr suspects a connection between Buber's "theatrical" public appearances and his love for the theater, both of which can be interpreted as a cry for an absent mother. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, pp. 6, 269; Buber 2002, p. 37). In his memoirs, Buber described his return to the city of his birth in his first year at the university and the frequent visits to the Vienna Burgtheater in these words:

I spent my first year of university studies in Vienna, the city of my birth and my earliest childhood. [...] The lectures of those two semesters, even the significant scholarly ones, did not have a decisive effect on me. [...] What affected me most strongly, however, was the Burgtheater into which at times, day after day, I rushed up three flights after several hours of "posting myself" in order to capture a place in the highest gallery. (Buber 2002, pp. 36–38).

It is no accident that Buber often used the dialogue form in his writings, and, later in life, he composed a theater play called *Elijah* (Buber 2016, p. 370).⁶ As for his mother, Buber did indeed meet her eventually, 30 years after she left him and his father. He later called this meeting a mismeeting: a Buberian neologism conjoining the words error and meeting (in German, *Vergegnung* instead of *Begegnung*):

Later I once made up the word "*Vergegnung*"—"mismeting", or "miscounter"—to designate the failure of a real meeting between men. When after another twenty years I again saw my mother, who had come from a distance to visit me, my wife, and my children, I could not gaze into her still astonishingly beautiful eyes without hearing from somewhere the word "*Vergegnung*" as a word spoken to me. (Buber 2002, pp. 22–23).

Buber never forgave his mother. This *Anna Karenina* story is told in only a few lines of his autobiographical memoir, but between the lines, the fact that the philosopher of dialogue failed to go beyond his "I" perspective stands out. Unable to see the mother's point of view on the separation that shaped his life, he failed to understand that it was a separation largely decided by a conservative and oppressive patriarchal order, which prevented his mother from receiving custody of her child. (Sharir 2011, p. 19). Judith Buber-Agassi, Buber's granddaughter, maintains that Buber may have judged his mother too harshly: "In the divorce case between Martin Buber's parents, the court ruled that since Elsa (his mother) is guilty of divorce, she is barred from any visiting arrangements of her son". (Sharir 2011, p. 19, my translation YH).

Sure enough, history repeated itself in Buber's family, as the marriage of his son Rafael and his wife Margarete Thuring failed, and they divorced in 1925 (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 182). The two granddaughters, Barbara and Judith, were taken from their parents by a court decision and placed in the custody of their grandparents: Martin and Paula. Judith Buber-Agassi recounts that her relationship with her mother continued until 1934 and then stopped until it resumed in 1945. Her grandfather (Martin Buber), she recalls, used to tell her that their mother had abandoned them, but she did not accept his explanation: "I viewed it as a projection of his own frustration—for he also grew up at his grandmother and grandfather when his parents divorced". (Sharir 2011, p. 20; my translation YH). Compared to her grandfather, Buber-Agassi expressed a conciliatory attitude toward

the forced separation, attributing it to political and social circumstances. (Sharir 2011, pp. 20, 133).

In the dark hour of Nazi rule, and with respect to the antisemitic experiences his granddaughters were exposed to at school and outside, Buber wrote an essay entitled “The Children” (Die Kinder), concluding that: “It is up to us to make the world reliable again for the children. It depends on us where we can say to them and ourselves: ‘Don’t worry. Mother is here’”. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, pp. 183–84).

5. A Wife and a Mother: Love and Marriage, Trauma and Tikkun

It can be argued that the traumatic absence of a mother for the three-year-old Buber later gave birth not only to an anachronistic and desperate call for the Jewish woman to establish a home and become a mother again but, more importantly, to the philosophy of dialogue. Buber’s Magnum Opus, *Ich und Du* published in 1923, allows us to learn something about his relationship with the women in his life, which played a constitutive role in formulating the philosophy of dialogue. Buber’s intellectual biography thus begins in the most personal place, with the childhood trauma of separation and the subsequent transferal into the custody of his grandparents. It begins precisely at the moment of detachment and the possibility of an encounter. (Buber 2002, pp. 7–19).

Buber recalled this moment in his autobiographical fragments: As the days and months passed by, young Buber eagerly awaited, in vain, the return of the beloved mother. When the four-year-old asked the neighbor’s daughter the very question he was afraid to ask his grandparents—when his mother would return—the girl, who was just a few years older than him, replied: “No, she will never come back”. (Buber 2002, p. 22). And Buber tells us the significance of this event in his life: “I suspect that all that I have learned about the genuine meeting in the course of my life had its first origin in that hour on the balcony”. (Buber 2002, p. 23).

Referring to this story, Mendes-Flohr argues that everything Buber learned in the course of his life about the meaning of meeting and dialogue springs from this very moment when he was at the age of four. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 2). Thus, when Buber explains the importance of Dilthey’s *Lebensphilosophie*, from which he adopted the methodology of *Verstehen* and *Erlebnis* (understanding and experience), he does so in an almost autobiographical fashion. In order to understand a crying child, he writes, one does not need to analyze the chemical composition of the tears or understand the physiological process of crying, but rather to experience what is experienced by the child: one needs empathy. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, pp. 44–45). The lack of such empathy shaped Buber’s early experiences. His relationship with his wife Paula, as the biography suggests, was a correction, a tikkun, to the child’s earlier experience. In her, Buber found what he had always sought: the love of the mother (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 3): “There is a mother in you, my faith lies in that. Now I know: ever and always I have been seeking my mother”. (Buber 1991, p. 79; Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 3).

Buber’s mother was not the only independent and rebellious woman in his life. Both his grandmother and his wife were strong and unconventional in their own ways and in their very different worlds. Adele, Buber’s grandmother, grew up in a strictly Orthodox Jewish home, learned the German language secretly as a child, and violated the ban on reading secular, “foreign” literature. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 5). Buber describes his grandmother in an autobiographical fragment:

Among the Jews in the small Galician town where my grandmother grew up the reading of “alien” literature was proscribed, but for the girls all readings, with the exception of edifying popular books, were held unseemly. As a fifteen-year-old she had set up for herself in the storehouse a hiding place in which stood volumes of Schiller’s periodical “*Die Horen*”, Jean Paul’s book on education, *Levana*, and many other German books which had been secretly and thoroughly read by her. (Buber 2002, p. 23).

She was given the freedom to read German literature as she pleased when she married Salomon Buber at the age of seventeen. Martin's knowledge of the German language and his love for this language originated largely from his grandmother, who spoke to him and corresponded with him in German, introducing him also to the world of German literature.

Buber always insisted that his love affair, his *Liebschaft*, with the German language was an "objective fact", as he wrote in 1949, which continued to shape his thinking and feeling, even as he later considered Hebrew his "true mother tongue". (Buber 1975, p. 223). The paradox of a mother tongue being less familiar than a foreign language occupied Buber for most of his life. (Buber 1999, p. 198). The truth is that his "true mother tongue", like his true mother, never quite became his own and always remained somewhat foreign to him, whereas German, a language he learned from his grandmother, and which he considered a "love-affair" rather than a faithful relationship, became much more familiar. Because Buber acquired the language primarily from reading and writing, his spoken German was somewhat slow and theatrical. Paula, his wife, helped him overcome that. Buber met Paula Winkler in 1899 at the University of Zurich. Paula, a young Catholic woman born in Munich, was described by Tamar Goldschmidt, her great-granddaughter, in these words: "Paula was only 19 when she left home, fleeing her home and family ties with literary nothing but the clothes she was wearing; not common then, and especially not for women. Her lifestyle was never accepted by her family. Not to say having her two children out of wedlock, and only then marrying their father, a Jew. When I think back, I believe this wild, independent, free-spirited young person, was always there, present in whom and what she later became".⁷

Paula was one of the few women to enter the university gates in those years. She was an independent woman, a young intellectual full of vitality who attracted much attention for her elegant, bohemian appearance. Paula was a member of a mystical colony in Southern Tyrol led by Omar al-Rashid Bey, a Jewish convert to Islam, who attracted young poets and philosophers and taught them a mixture of religious ideas from Islam, Buddhism, and other religions. She stood out in the circle and was described by the German-Jewish philosopher Theodore Lessing as "the only beautiful woman in the small colony". After a brief affair with al-Rashid, Paula met Buber at a seminar on German literature. Some thought it was incomprehensible that the beautiful Paula was attracted to Buber, who was slender as well as shorter and younger than her. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 7).

For the first time, Paula ignited in Buber an interest in mysticism. Prior to their acquaintance, Buber was interested in philosophy, psychology, literature, and art. In this sense, it was Paula, a Catholic student of Indian religions, who brought him closer to Jewish mysticism and Hasidism. We see her influence in his book *Ekstatische Konfessionen* published in 1909, in which Buber focuses on many mystical woman figures in a tradition that was considered quite masculine. (Verman 1985, pp. 470–72). Moreover, Mendes-Flohr also draws our attention to the fact that the love relationship presented in Buber's book *Daniel: Gespräche von der Verwirklichung* published in 1913 is primarily autobiographical and relates to his love for his wife as a mother and companion. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 74).

But Paula Winkler-Buber was not only a muse and source of inspiration to Buber, which would suggest a one-sided, fetishized relationship. She was also a source of inspiration in a dialogical sense and a creator in her own right. As such, she coauthored Buber's first books on Hasidism: *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* and *The Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*. Moreover, Paula wrote many books under the penname Georg Munk because she wanted them to be judged by their intrinsic value and not as being authored by "Buber's wife". (Sharir 2011, p. 125; Baur 2019). Yet, as a writer, Paula never gained real recognition in her lifetime. Judith Buber-Agassi recalls that "our neighbors [at Heppenheim] tended to say that Buber writes books and Paula takes care of the garden . . . They did not take her writing seriously, and they were wrong, of course". (Sharir 2011, p. 26; my translation YH).

But the neighbors were right to observe the harmony in Buber's marriage to Paula. When Buber spoke about love and marriage, he spoke about Paula, and it is no accident that he dedicated his most intimate book, *Zwiesprache*, to her. In *I and Thou*, he reflects on

marriage: “Marriage can never be renewed except by that which is always the source of all true marriage: that two human beings reveal the You to the another. It is of this that the You that is I for neither of them builds a marriage”. (Buber 1970, p. 95). All this suggests that the kind of love Buber and Paula experienced was not only romantic, but also religious. Buber’s critical response to Kierkegaard’s rejection of marriage may also illuminate his own love for Paula. (Buber 2002, p. 66). Admiel Kosman explains: “Unlike Kierkegaard, who gave up marriage in order to dedicate himself to divinity, Buber argues that man should know how to dedicate himself to a woman with the same fervor with which the ancient religious man devoted himself to God”. (Kosman 2008).

Until the day she died, as Mendes-Flohr emphasizes, Paula took an active part in her husband’s writing enterprise—in writing, correcting, and editing his writings in terms of content, grammar, and style. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 6). Mendes-Flohr rebukes Buber for disguising Paula’s involvement in his literary enterprise and for not giving her proper recognition for her contribution as an author and careful editor of his writings. It must be recognized that Paula was Buber’s lifelong Gesprächspartner, his interlocutor and intellectual partner in dialogue. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 164).

This dialogue was interrupted in 1958, when Paula collapsed on their way to Venice due to a blood clot and died with her children and husband by her side. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 287). Hans Jonas, who was close to the couple, wrote to Buber after her death that they had exemplified a life of dialogue for him: “I have never seen a more perfect community of two who remained what they were while affirming the other. [...] Such a success is the highest tribute to those to whom this possibility was entrusted by the *tyche* [chance in Greek] of the original encounter . . . It was always beautiful every time to see you together. The blessing of that infinite community has to extend into your present, finite loneliness”. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 288).

6. Mind and Heart

Buber grieved the death of his wife, canceling his travels and lectures abroad. (Mendes-Flohr 2014). His granddaughter Barbara integrated him into the life of her family, and Buber seemed to enjoy the new arrangement. Barbara, whom he had raised as a child, took care of him and accompanied him from then on for his travels abroad, a role that Paula had occupied before. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 288). Thus, Buber spent the final years of his life in the presence and care of strong women who continued to shape his intellectual journey.

As our brief glimpse at Buber’s life suggests, the presence of women had a profound impact on Buber’s philosophical formation, his sensibilities, and possibly his literary style. What distinguishes Mendes-Flohr’s biography from previous intellectual biographies, those written by Hans Kohn, Maurice Friedman, Dominique Bourel, and Zohar Maor, is the great emphasis on Buber’s interpersonal relationships as a source of his intellectual development (Friedman 1988; Kohn 1930; Bourel 2015; Maor 2016). In Mendes-Flohr’s biography, Buber’s human face is exposed through the formative and anecdotal moments of encounters and mismeetings—*Begegnungen* and *Vergegnungen*—that would shape his philosophical thought. (Buber 2002, p. 22). One may think in this context also of his complicated encounters and exchanges with Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Franz Kafka. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, pp. 118–19). However, it is the role of women in Buber’s life in particular that sheds light on Buber’s spiritual universe. Thus, Mendes-Flohr opens a window into understanding the close connection between philosophical ideas and the personal experiences that beget them. Throughout the biography, Mendes-Flohr adopts an epistemology of empathy accompanied by critical distance, which allows the readers to rethink the intellectual ideas against the test of time.

The beauty of Mendes-Flohr’s biography lies in its intimacy and honesty, in presenting the great philosopher in his deepest humanity. Alongside Buber’s achievements, Mendes-Flohr also discusses his failures and weaknesses. But what emerges as a leading theme throughout Buber’s life and work is the same theme that rendered his thought “feminine” and, supposedly, “soft”: The theme of emotion and love. Paraphrasing, perhaps, Friedrich

Nietzsche's 'gay science', Buber once spoke of "loving science". "True art is a loving art", he writes, "True science is loving science [...] True philosophy is loving philosophy [...] Every true deed is a loving deed". (Buber 1957, pp. 29–30). What Buber sought to challenge was the notion that love is an anti-intellectual force. That love has its own episteme and that thought cannot be separated from it, was the core assumption in Buber's dialogical philosophy. The power of the biography before us is that it is indeed a loving biography—a tribute that does not hide its critique of the beloved.

Thus, Mendes-Flohr offers the reader an intimate look at a thinker who was not always able to see beyond the norms of his time and thus failed to fully rise above them, but who, in other cases, surpassed the zeitgeist and its conventions. There were moments when Buber overcame the prejudices of the historical period and others when the intellectual fashion of his time overcame and controlled his views. As a writer deeply influenced by the voices of women, Buber left us with a body of work that remains relevant to our own day and ought to be read again by women in our time.

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Notes

- ¹ This essay is based on a lecture given in the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem in honor of Mendes-Flohr's biography of Buber on 6 February 2020 with the participation of Paul Mendes-Flohr, Benjamin Pollock, Shalom Ratzabi, and David Ohana. This essay is a translation and extension of an earlier essay published in Hebrew in the journal *Alpayim Ve'Od* 3 2021, edited by Nitza Drori-Pereman (Hadaad 2020). My special thanks to Avihu Zakai, who encouraged me to translate it into English. I thank Yuval Jobani, Nadav Avruch, and Ronen Pinkas for reading and commenting on the earlier Hebrew version.
- ² Arendt was enthusiastic about Buber in the 1930s, but she changed her mind later. Arendt recognized Buber's influence on her in an essay that she wrote dedicated to Buber's Jewish revival, entitled "A Guide for Youth: Martin Buber", which one can find in her collection *The Jewish Writings*. This essay shows considerable admiration for Buber's cultural enterprise. See also (Arendt 2007, p. 31).
- ³ I thank Paul Mendes-Flohr for sending me his unpublished reply by email on 7 February 2020. (my translation from Hebrew YH).
- ⁴ See the interview at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCgZOzikoz4> (accessed on 21 July 2022).
- ⁵ Naturally, Landauer's essentializing of feminine thought is highly problematic. However, I believe it can be read as an effort to stress the possibility of philosophy and thought to be empathetic, creative, and understanding. I take this to be a statement less about women than about the possibilities of thought.
- ⁶ Buber's theater play *Elijah* (Buber 2016, p. 370) would be set to music in the 1980s by Antal Doráti and recorded for the first time in 2021 (Der Kunder: Oper in Drei Akten nach Texten von Martin Buber, The Beethoven Academy Orchestra, conductor Martin Fischer-Dieskau. Orpheo 2021).
- ⁷ I thank Tamar Goldschmidt for her permission to cite her unpublished lecture given at the Jewish Museum in Augsburg in 2017 in honor of Paula Winkler-Buber.

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