

≡ Book Reviews ≡

Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered. By Leora Batnitzky (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), x + 281 pp. \$23.95 paper.

In this work, originally published in 2000, Leora Batnitzky interprets the thought of Franz Rosenzweig in order to shed light on modern idolatry, so that it might be better understood and more effectively combated. She focuses on his most important work, *The Star of Redemption*, but she does not neglect his other writings or activities. She brings into focus Rosenzweig's theory and practice of translation, especially as it was carried out in collaboration with Martin Buber.

The book consists of three parts. In "Ethics and Monotheism," Batnitzky examines Rosenzweig as a modern ethical monotheist and how this ethical stance is realized in his hermeneutics, which enables her to offer a fresh reading of *The Star of Redemption*. The second part, "Art and Language," builds on the first by adding an aesthetic dimension to the ethical structure. The third part, "Religion and Politics," completes the work by showing how the forms of idolatry peculiar to Christianity on the one side and to Judaism on the other bring with them peculiar challenges to each religion. With Christianity it is the risk of what Rosenzweig calls "religion" (an empty formalism) and with Judaism it is the risk of what he calls "politics" (a loss of transcendence). These necessary risks can lead each side to a deeper grasp of its own truth and thus prepare the way for a more fruitful, if fraught, encounter with the other.

Perhaps Batnitzky's most fundamental insight is that for Rosenzweig both idolatry and representation are ultimately ethical rather than epistemological categories. She clearly delineates the way in which idolatry is a form of false worship and false practice. It is not a misapprehension of who God is, but a mistaken

way of relating to God. By using the example of the golden calf, she points out the difference in understanding of idolatry between Herman Cohen and Rosenzweig: "From...Cohen's point of view, the sin of the golden calf is primarily a mistake about *thinking about* what God *is*. The underlying mistake of those who made the golden calf was that they thought God could be represented by a golden calf.... From...Rosenzweig's perspective...the sin of the golden calf is not about what the Israelites thought about God, but about what the Israelites were and were not commanded to do at a particular time.... Idolatry is misunderstanding of how God *relates* to the human being in *time*" (27).

Representation is not absent in this ethical form of idolatry; rather, it is also transformed into an ethical category. This becomes clear when one considers that Rosenzweig did not use the German word *Vorstellung* to talk about representation, but used *Vertreter* to mean a representative "*in a political and ethical sense*" (29).

This remains an important and accessible interpretation of Rosenzweig's thought.

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Women Write Back: Strategies of Response and the Dynamics of European Literary Culture, 1790–1805. By Stephanie M. Hilger (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 175 pp. €35.00/\$51.00 paper.

Salvador Dali's *Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* adorns the front cover of Stephanie M. Hilger's book, providing an oblique though fitting visual foretaste of what is to come. Under the gaze of an ambiguously

marginalised slave girl in the left of the picture, the bust of Voltaire “disappears” or, rather, is disclosed to be not a solid, discrete object, but a space—a ruinous gap in once-monumental architecture, in fact—animated by a motley human gathering. There is, then, something transformative, indeed rather subversive, about the slave girl’s gaze. Yet, there is another gaze that must also be taken into consideration, namely that of the person viewing the painting who takes in the whole scene, viewing the girl’s subjective gaze objectively, comprehending at a distance the revisionary and appropriative mechanisms at work. It is this latter perspective that Hilger, with admirable skill and compelling clarity, seeks to open up in relation to women authors writing in the fraught social and political period immediately following the French Revolution.

What could easily have been an unwieldy topic is given definition and direction by the Introduction, which establishes the historical and intellectual context and puts in place an interpretative framework, and by the case study approach adopted in the ensuing chapters, which allows Hilger to focus in particular on four women and four texts: Helen Maria Williams’ *Julia, a Novel*, Ellis Cornelia Knight’s *Dinarbas; a Tale: Being a Continuation of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, Karoline von Günderrode’s *Mahomed, der Prophet von Mekka*, and Julie de Krüdener’s *Valérie*. One notable characteristic that all four fictional works have in common is that they each engage with a well-known text by a canonical male author—Rousseau’s *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, Samuel Johnson’s *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, Voltaire’s *Mahomed, der Prophet von Mekka*, and Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, respectively.

This strategy of inhabiting a previously established fictional space was not, in itself, particularly uncommon in the eighteenth century. For women writers, the implied acknowledgement of a male literary master that this move entailed provided an acceptable way of entering into the world of literature, serving as a premise that would preserve and, indeed, reinforce, the mores of the day, which called for female humility and passivity in the public realm. Thus, Williams writes *Julia, a Novel* (1790), a “virtue-in-distress” (38) narrative that takes many of its cues from Rousseau’s *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and from works by

other canonical authors. However, whilst this apparent literary servility might have facilitated publication, it has subsequently been used as a reason to deny Williams and the other authors examined in *Women Write Back* any lasting artistic merit.

Hilger seeks to challenge this received view by reinterpreting the relationship these four women writers had with the literary canon and, specifically, their strategy of engaging with texts by renowned male authors. As the author is quick to acknowledge, this sort of re-reading and recuperation of female authors previously deemed largely unworthy of academic attention owes a considerable debt to the emergence of feminist literary theory and criticism towards the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, Hilger positions *Women Write Back* as a continuation of that movement and, borrowing from postcolonial theory, refashions the women authors’ engagement with canonical writers as a sort of critical *writing back* that simultaneously acknowledges, inhabits and yet questions the master’s discourse.

So Williams’ *Julia, a Novel*, for instance, is reinterpreted as being in fact rather subversive, using a virtue-in-distress narrative as a ruse to distract the wrong sort of attention away from the numerous political references and the daringly liberal attitudes that are entertained (if only to be then weakly rejected in the name of propriety). The sheer artifice involved in giving room to political commentary and progressive ideas whilst at the same time seeming to endorse a literary model at odds with such things, invites a reconsideration of the complexity of the novelistic art of Williams and the other authors under consideration. And this is vitally important because a common criticism of re-readings of this sort is that they tend to offer little in the way of aesthetic justification for the renewed interest that they advocate. In other words, authors previously excluded from the canon on grounds that are purportedly aesthetic, but which are in fact likely to be shaded by political and gender considerations, are often recovered solely on the basis of politics and gender. There is, of course, an undeniable and important logic to this, but if the authors’ artistic merit is not addressed as part of such a reappraisal, troubling questions about their literary value will remain. Happily, one of the strengths of Hilger’s impressively-argued and well-researched study

is that it persuasively shows how literary invention and political intervention are often inextricably intertwined and that blindness to one can mean blindness to the other.

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The EU-Russia Strategic Partnership: The Limits of Post-Sovereignty in International Relations. By Hiski Haukkala (London: Routledge, 2010), xix + 249 pp. £80.00 cloth; £24.95 paper.

Hiski Haukkala's work seeks to provide a conceptual framework to explain why the relations between the European Union and Russia have proved to be so problematic. He attributes this to the fact that most of the literature on EU-Russia relations from 1991 to 2009 has not been based on International Relations (IR) studies, which would enable a fair judgement of the current and future relationship between these two major actors on European territory. The framework he uses derives from academic debates on international institutionalization, and he devotes three chapters to IR theory before the actual research question is studied. The analysis is presented in the next five chapters, each consisting of a case-study of the EU-Russia relationship. These case-studies are respectively: "Establishing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)" (1991–94); "Comparing Strategy Documents" (1995–99); "The Second Chechen War" (1999–2000); "The Four Common Spaces of Cooperation" (2001–5) (i.e. economy, freedom/security/justice, external security, and research/education/culture); and finally a chapter on "The Northern Dimension" (1997–2009), a Finnish-initiated common EU policy on cooperation with Russia, Iceland, and Norway.

In his introduction the author already brings up what might be the biggest problem in gaining closer cooperation between the EU and Russia: the fact that Brussels has usually treated Moscow as the junior partner that should adapt itself to the EU's values package. Inevitably, this has been a major obstacle in

the relationship. In his main findings the author answers his research questions by stating that the different—even asymmetric—ways in which the EU and Russia approach their relationship have basically remained unchanged in the two decades of their cooperation. The Union has insisted that Russia should transform itself along EU values, with the Union acting more and more as a post-sovereign institution. Conversely, Russia has continued to follow a much more traditional sovereign approach towards the EU, applying the PCA selectively to promote Moscow's interests. This "antagonistic" attitude has resulted in disagreements and the subsequent lack of development in cooperation.

Haukkala has written a thorough and very detailed but—due to the choice of a heavy theoretical approach—also a rather complicated analysis of the development of EU-Russia cooperation since the Cold War. This work is a valuable addition to the literature on this topic. Nevertheless, I think too much emphasis is laid on IR theoretical approaches, which takes up 60 out of some 180 pages. Either one drafts a work on IR, with EU-Russia as a case-study, or one writes a study on EU-Russia, without devoting a third of it to IR theory. Furthermore, the author's choice of the five case-studies could be debated: for example, they do not include a separate study of the August 2008 Russian-Georgian War, which has had a tremendous impact on EU-Russia relations as well as on the division within the Union. The author not only concludes that the Russian-Georgian War had no impact on EU-Russia relations but also denies that military power in general is an important issue between Brussels and Moscow (178). My own analysis of this domain of cooperation shows the contrary. Even given Russia's zero-sum game on security, a number of areas of beneficial cooperation are evident (*Russia's Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century: Putin, Medvedev and Beyond*, [London: Routledge, 2010], 56–59 and 120–22). Furthermore, given the increasing importance of energy (security and scarcity) in international politics, a chapter on this crucial factor in the EU-Russia relations (e.g. the Ukraine energy cut-offs), would have been justified. In contrast, although the "Northern Dimension" is undoubtedly important from a Finnish point of view, in the overall EU-Russia relationship