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“‘Perhaps Redeemed’: the Premise and Necessity of the Absolute Aleph”

In *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem introduces readers to a little known tradition of kabbalah that had at the time of Scholem’s publication, little purchase if any in popular and scholarly knowledge, about Jewish literature and religion. Even among observant Jews, it was the province of a small sect and not available to congregations globally. No one went to Hebrew school to learn about it.

The substance of that tradition revolved around the Hebrew letter of Aleph, that Scholem pointed out was considered an “absolute” entity: the mind focused on the Aleph, the faculties absolutely bound to the letter, would collapse and lose their basic quality of holding mental space together, constraining them, to force the world within to conform to the world without. That mechanism had to be suppressed so that the Aleph could direct the mind to another space and time. In other words, human perception of “reality” was considered a safeguard of the faculties because it prevented the mind from slipping into divine time and coming to the conclusion that redemption was forever lost.

However, this little known sect began to contemplate the possibility of recovering a lost time through an intense meditation on the Aleph. That recovery promised then that in exchange for human transcendence, its forfeiture, one could reauthorize and attain a primordial redemption before the Fall. One could see time and space in a manner akin to the first Adam, but the path to human transcendence had to be abandoned. The space and time of the first Adam was not available in the familiar ways modes of human enlightenment.

This essay looks at three texts, Borges’ “El Alef,” the “Prolegomena” to the *Zohar,* and its Zoharic antecedent, *Ha-Bahir,* to think about Aleph in this function of erasing human transcendence in order to produce a “novel, living intuition,” and what this might imply for the mind and its capacities. By analysing these three texts, I will look at why the “novel, living intuition,” is necessary to human experience in spite of its rejection of transcendence.

Maria Rethelyi, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.

Title: ‘For the relief of unbearable urges’: The intervention of literature in the ethics of suicide in early twentieth century Hungarian Jewish writings

The paper investigates how literature among turn of the twentieth century Hungarian Jews shifts the boundaries of the sacred by proposing new ethical outlook on suicide. This shift is an outcome of the influence of Hungarian literature that influences the minority (i.e. the Hungarian Jews) who are eager to show their willingness to accept the majority’s influences and adopt to their host culture in their quest of assimilation. In this quest, literature functions as a game changer in the ethical outlook on life and its sacred untouchability and promotes to take back the power from the sacred over human life. The way literature achieves this is through evoking an aesthetic response from the consumers of literature to create literature that reflects the internalization of the new ethics as well as indorses the action of suicide. That is, the aesthetic response (in a Schopenhauerian sense) to literature promotes new ways of thinking about the morality of suicide that results in a mutually co-dependent nature of literature/ethics/ aesthetics, where literature proposes new ethics. The response is to execute the call of new ethics promoted by literature through joining in the calling into question the boundaries of the sacred and limiting it through the writing of literature. Literature becomes an agent of ethics, but by the shifting of ethical boundaries it advocates autonomy over ethics for itself as well. In this way the role of literature in ethics via aesthetics becomes that of an agent of change.

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Title: The Rape of Dinah, #MeToo, and the Silencing of Women

Genesis 34 narrates the rape of Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, at the hands of Shechem, a local Canaanite prince. Midrashic commentaries understand Dinah’s rape as a punishment of Jacob for his having withheld her from Esau. In this paper I critique biblical and rabbinic obliteration of Dinah’s agency, as exemplified in the biblical and rabbinic narratives, and argue that the silencing of victimized women persists in our society crossculturally. Rather than hearing and seeing Dinah’s trauma, biblical and rabbinic authors instead highlight men’s desires: Shechem’s lust for and rape of Dinah, the brother’s desire for revenge, their eventual rape of the women of the city, and finally, Jacob’s feelings and punishment. I will advance that hegemonic male authorship and power pertaining to objectifying women is finally subverted in Anita Diamont’s 90’s novel, The Red Tent, in which she gives voice to Dinah, and reflect on persisting issues of sexual violence and the silencing of women in the #MeToo era.

Ipshita Chanda, Professor of Comparative Literature, EFL University, Hyderabad, India

Title: Reading the Sacred and the Aesthetic : a Comparative Exercise

This paper considers the boundaries between the experiential and the conceptual domains as the source of the sacred and the aesthetic, exploring the concretisation of these domains through and in the literary event . The larger theoretical question is whether a substance ontology or an event ontology for literature is useful to think through the issues like cultural relativism and literary invariants which form elements of the “broader theory of literary intervention” that the focus of this panel ascribes to comparative literature. Locating the literary event in the condition of ontological and epistemological plurality, we attempt to understand how through this frame, reading as an activity is predicated on an ethics, neither absolute nor essentialist, which characterises the “comparative” approach to literature.

Soelve Curdts, Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature, Dusseldorf University

Paper Title: Magnificent Disarticulation: The Sacred and The Fallen in Dostoevsky and Baudelaire

Abstract

This paper revisits the idea of the sacred in conjunction with the idea of fallenness. These two notions, I argue, are often linked by conceptions of beauty/the aesthetic. Thus, thematically, the fallen archangel Lucifer is marked by his former (light bearing) magnificence (Milton) which contrasts even as it appears to precipitate his fall. The present paper pursues this linkage not in its thematic, but in its formal manifestations in two texts which ostensibly have nothing in common except ‘punishment of pride’, Baudelaire’s poem from Les Fleurs du Mal with the same title, and The Brothers Karamazov, specifically Ivan. I argue that the motif of madness shared by both texts neither constitutes a purely ‘moral’ punishment for the pride of intellectual/spiritual magnificence, nor does it replay the cliché of the ‘mad genius’. Rather, Baudelaire’s and Dostoevsky’s texts—precisely in their difference from one another—point to a peculiar predicament of modernity, in which the mind finds itself muted in its attempts (the most magnificent ones perhaps) at (self-)articulation.