

REVS UP THE ENGINE: Mazya tweaks the nerve-racking action through a number of comically cunning devices

Yes, two potent strikes against “Love Burns.” Yet on the third pitch, Edna Mazya smacks the ball smartly out of the park. Again without revealing the plot, I’ll just say she pours on a series of episodes in which the cuckolded Ilan makes bad move after bad move, each time leaving the reader crying frantically, “No, no, don’t do that — oh, Lord — now what can possibly happen?”

Mazya moreover tweaks the action through a number of comically cunning devices. One — which is so quintessentially Israeli — is denying Ilan any privacy. Our hero can do virtually nothing, even in the dead of night, without being observed. One mild example is when he roots through the trash bins in his apartment block to find something his wife has tossed away. In doing so Ilan discovers he is being watched by two neighborhood children who demand to know what he is doing. Told he is looking for something, the children demand to know what it is. Told what it is, the children demand to know why he must find it. Told why he must find it, the children demand to help him look. And when the object — a pregnancy testing kit — is found, the children demand to know the test results. And on it goes.

SIMILARLY, MAZYA GLEEFULLY conjures dramatic conjunctions that would drive anyone crazy. A major revelation occurs for Ilan and Naomi — the sort of thing that will likely alter their future forever — just as a horde of important dinner guests arrives. Ilan seethes with secrets — but often in the company of his best friend, a wily police detective in whom for reasons of plot Ilan dare not confide. And more than once, just as Ilan is about to take some fateful step, someone dies on him, and by doing so affects his fate profoundly.

The cover blurb compares “Love Burns” to certain darker works by Woody Allen. In fact, “Love Burns” would make a better Woody Allen movie than many a recent Woody Allen movie. Meanwhile, it makes for a terrific read. ●

Contributing Editor Matt Nesvisky writes frequently about books for The Report.

The Philosopher, the Heretic, the Jew and His Lovers

How did Spinoza, one of the wildest and most unmanageable thinkers of all time, become domesticated?

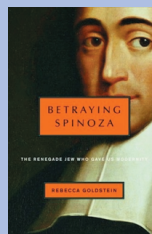
Benjamin Lazier

S PINOZA-BEAR IS CUTE. HE’S cuddly. He has a cassette player in his tummy. Touch his shiny, red heart, and he will speak to your disabled child about loss, grief, fear, pain and nap time, tasks for which he is specially trained. And for 150 bucks, he’s yours.

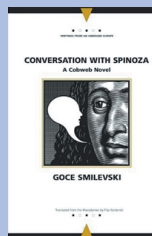
Spinoza-Bear is but the latest stage in the domestication of perhaps the most wild and unmanageable thinker in history. Wild, because Spinoza rebuffed all social entrapment: Expelled from the Jewish community of Amsterdam in 1656, he declined to return, refused Christianity, and so lived a secular life before it was (institutionally) possible to do so. Unmanageable, because Spinoza has been appropriated by just about everyone, but in incompatible ways and never for long: To judge by his reception, he is both rationalist and mystic, materialist and pantheist, ascetic and hedonist, philosopher and Jew. He is the father of both liberal democracy and the totalitarian state. He is Hegel and Marx, devil and Christ, atheist and intoxicated with God. David Ben-Gurion hoped to rescind his ban, Leo Strauss to reinstate it. Even the German dental association once felt obliged to put in a few good words for the venerable Jewish heretic.

Rebecca Goldstein improvises on one of the standard themes of Spinoza interpretation in her book, “Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity.” Her Spinoza presents himself more as Tin Man than Spinoza-Bear. That is, he has no

heart. He is reason incarnate. He lacks passion and personality, or what Goldstein calls the “pounding pulse of subjectivity.” But her Spinoza does not feel this lack as loss. He seeks it, as gain. He has set out systematically to purge every particularity, every feeling, every contingency of circumstance that makes up his sense of who he is in favor of a “view from eternity.” By estranging ourselves from what most of us understand as most emphatically us, Spinoza thinks we achieve something more satisfying and true — proximity to the divine. Spinoza calls it amor dei intellectualis, the intellectual love of God. We might call it ecstasy or ek-stasis, a “standing outside” of the self. It is akin to mysticism, pursued not through ritual, not through hal-



Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity
By Rebecca Goldstein
Schocken/Nextbook
289 pp.; \$20



Conversation with Spinoza: A Cobweb Novel
By Goce Smilevski
(translated from the Macedonian by Filip Korzenski)
Northwestern University Press
152 pp.; \$17 (paperback)

lucinogens, but through reason. It will leave you transformed.

This, in the tiniest of nutshells, sums up one prominent theme of Spinoza’s “Ethics.” The book was published in 1677, but posthumously, since its teachings spelled danger for its author. It denied a providen-

tial God, a transcendent God, a personal God. It equated God instead with the active and creative force in nature, not beyond it. If there is a Spinozistic slogan, it is this: *Deus sive natura*. God, or nature. They are one and same. For these reasons and others, Spinoza's ideas threatened the monotheistic orthodoxies, and invited the charge of pantheism, that all is divine.

The "Ethics" also cemented Spinoza's reputation (among some, but by no means all or most) as the coldest and most imperious of thinkers, given his suspicion of the passions and the waywardness they produce — religious superstition for example, or romantic love. Enter now Goldstein the psychoanalyst. What kind of heartbreak was so terrible to endure that its prospect led a man to protect himself by ripping his own heart from his chest? That is the question Goldstein poses in her book.

To pose the question about the origins of Spinoza's thought is already, Goldstein thinks, to betray him. It presumes that Spinoza's counsel to transcend the particular was itself prompted by the accidents of his birth, his home and his history, rather than the product of pure deduction in the style of a mathematical proof. Spinoza was famous for pursuing philosophy *more geometrico*, in the manner of geometry, and he once remarked that he knew the truth of his philosophy as he knew the sum of the angles of a triangle. He asked after human appetites as he did lines, planes and bodies. But would the truth of such a theorem be any less if its discovery or its need were born not of the mind but the heart? Goldstein fears it would. She sets out nonetheless to discover the life pulsing between its lines. And so she reads the "Ethics" as an autobiography writ large.

Very large. She thinks of the "Ethics" as one response to the heartbreak of Jewish history itself, and so we are treated to a romp through a thousand years: from the eighth century, when Muslims first conquered chunks of Spain, to the flowering of Jewish culture under Muslim rule, to the efforts by Maimonides to reconcile Judaism with Aristotle, to the advent of Spanish kabbalism, to the origins of the Inquisition, ideologies of blood-purity, and the converso phenomenon, to the exodus first to Portugal in 1492 and then around the globe, and finally to the lurching attempts by "New Christians" to reinvent themselves as newly old Jews in Amsterdam and elsewhere.

What does any of this have to do with the "Ethics"? A philosophy that dissolves

all sectarian forms of identity, Goldstein suggests, tackles the historical problem of Jewish suffering by rendering meaningless the categories used to justify anti-Jewish violence in the first place, the kind used to classify Jews as "in" or "out" or somewhere in between. A cynic might retort: Spinoza's plan to save the Jews came at the cost of whatever made them Jewish.

Whatever the case, neither the classifications nor the violence they spawned were imposed exclusively by Christians. They were a fixture also among the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam, many of them former marranos, and shaped Spinoza in unexpected ways. He must have known of Uriel da Costa, driven to suicide by a community intolerant of his preference for Biblical over rabbinic Judaism. Soon thereafter, Spinoza would bear the brunt of that fury himself. But he would not plead for clemency. Instead, he embraced his ban, the story goes, as that which he would have chosen for himself. Goldstein recounts all this and more. But she betrays Spinoza, she claims, by crafting a memoir of a Benedictus indebted always to his Baruch, of a philosopher who would always remain a Jew.

In the process, Goldstein writes another memoir — her own. She introduces us to Spinoza through the remonstrations of a teacher from her Orthodox day school on the Lower East Side of New York: the well-intentioned but hapless Mrs. Schoenfeld. Poor Mrs. Schoenfeld. She warns against heresy. She counsels against the hubris of raising reason above God. She despairs that Jews like Spinoza and Marx have done more for goyische philosophy than the goyim. But in the act of protecting her charges, she corrupts them instead. Or at least the ones like Goldstein, who earned a PhD in goyische philosophy at Princeton, and who takes some pleasure in correcting her erstwhile teacher with what she since has learned. Spinoza, Goldstein imagines, must have been a lot like herself — a Hebrew school renegade, unpersuaded by the Mrs. Schoenfelds of his day, and suffering like Goldstein from a "telltale gnaw in his chest," a sign of infestation by the sharp-toothed rodents of doubt.

In Spinoza's case, the pestilence

proved a boon. His doubt about one religion predisposed him to have doubts about them all. This led him in turn to reflect on the sort of political order best suited to protecting those who doubt, and to enabling those who do not to live together in peace. Hence perhaps his



greatest legacy. Spinoza came down on the side of liberal democracy, and to the theocrats of his day committed to the fusion of church and state he had this to say: You are *ultimi barbarorum* — the greatest of barbarians.

Goldstein may well have betrayed Spinoza. But in so doing, she maintains a fealty to much of what Spinoza has become, Spinoza-Bear not least. Part of Spinoza's message, after all, is that we are necessarily disabled in our learning and hence our living, but that the emendation of the intellect may yet be in our grasp.

Goldstein's book is akin to a work of "fanfic," a genre of writing in which the devotees of a fictional world — say, the universe of Harry Potter — extend the original in unexpected and unauthorized directions. "Slash" is a sub-genre of fanfic. Its hallmark is to force the original characters into

sexually compromising positions, the more outlandish the better — say, Harry Potter with Severus Snape, or Dumbledore with his big, red bird. Think of it as fanfic with an X-rated twist. You can find it on the Internet, or so I'm told.

GOCE SMILEVSKI has produced something that is unprecedented in several

of thoughts that make having a body a bother. But that's all. He has no interest in Spinoza the liberal democrat, Spinoza the non-Jewish Jew, Spinoza the first secular human being, or Spinoza the founder of modernity. Those are not his stories.

Still, along the way, the Macedonian Novel of the Year (2002) introduces the argument of the "Ethics" and also a surprise, a fresh take on the origins of Spinoza's ban. To understand, we must familiarize ourselves with a figure hitherto unknown to scholars of the 17th century — a (fictitious) man by the name of Accipiter Beagle.

Accipiter Beagle. What kind of a name is that? Accipiter is Latin for hawk. The Beagle was a famous research vessel. The allusions are important, because Accipiter Beagle turns out to have authored a book called "A Brief History of Time," lost to posterity until a fraud named Stephen Hawking discovered it in the Cambridge

No. Spinoza gets the boot when he meets the itinerant canine, imitates his yelps and howls for his friends, and then forgets to mention that the howls were Beagle's and not his own when his friends — some friends! — rat him out to the Jewish council of Amsterdam. This is not revisionist history, but revisionist historical fiction at its worst, and so in a weird way at its best. After all, if you're going to revise, you might as well revise big.

For all that, the story is occasionally endearing. Smilevski claims to have known at an early age that he would one day write about Spinoza. If the novel seems born in part of adolescent depravity, it seems born also of a pre-pubescent sense that Spinoza was a lonely boy, and that he could have used some friends. This is cute.

But Smilevski takes it upon himself to provide them by conscripting each and every reader of his book for the job. The

Spinoza has been appropriated by just about everyone: He is both rationalist and mystic, ascetic and hedonist, philosopher and Jew. He is Hegel and Marx, devil and Christ, atheist and intoxicated with God.

centuries of reflection upon Spinoza. "Conversation with Spinoza: A Cobweb Novel" is no less than the first documented instance of Spinozasmash ever to find its way into print, at least with a reputable publisher. The Jewish heretic is no stranger to calumny. Satan incarnate, leader of errant men, wretched pygmy, vile worm of the earth: He has suffered these and other slanders

from former co-religionists and Christians alike. But I think it safe to say that no one — until Smilevski — has fabricated a portrait of the philosopher that would have made even the parnasim of Amsterdam blush: Spinoza as a bisexual pederast with a penchant for necrophilia, self-love and sometimes both at once.

Oy.

In impulse, Smilevski's book is not so different from Goldstein's. He wants to humanize the most impersonal and to sensualize the least creaturely of thinkers. So he imparts to Spinoza a body and the kind

archives and published it under his name. Accipiter Beagle also has weird ideas about the origins of man. He thinks we descend from apes! Later, a poseur called Charles Darwin would pay homage to the forebear from whom he stole his theory by adopting Beagle's name for his boat.

Accipiter Beagle hails from Macedonia. He is also the following: a martial-arts expert abducted as a child by Ottoman Janissaries, who turned to science after inadvertently murdering his parents and siblings at the behest of the vile Turks, whose teachings combine what will in time become 20th-century cosmology with 19th-century evolution with hermeticism, freemasonry, kabbala, and the pre-Adamite theory of the 19th-century marrano Isaac de la Peyrere, who would meet his end at the hands of the Inquisition for declaring men born of apes rather than the product of intelligent design, and who therefore prefigures the situation of beleaguered evolutionists everywhere, from John Scopes to the few *maskilim* left in Kansas, Tehran or B'nei Brak.

Spinoza is excommunicated, as it turns out, not because he denied the immortality of the soul, and not, as Goldstein suggests, for bringing suit against his sister over their father's assets in a civil, non-Jewish court.

conversation to which the title refers turns out to transpire between Spinoza and — you. This is less cute. It means that you will be the one who gets Spinoza to admit to fantasies about the 12-year-old girl who teaches him Latin, or about the 15-year-old boy whom he instructs in Descartes, or — may God (or nature) help us — about ejaculating on the corpse of his pupil. Smilevski likens his novel to a cobweb, but the reader is not so much spider as prey.

The book does not lack cause for praise, and will prove especially fun for those interested in what happens when one Balkan intellectual feasts on the postwar reception of Spinoza in France, not to mention a host of academostars like Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva, Shoshana Felman, Richard Rorty and Mieke Bal. But in the end, there is something unseemly about needling the most reserved and Apollonian of philosophers to cop to the most Dionysian of wants. It just makes you feel icky to read. ●

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AVI KATZ