

The Mind-Body Problem

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September 27 - October 2, 2010

Novels tend to be autobiographical, and first novels especially, and there is no reason not to assume that this does not hold for Goldstein. Autobiographical does not mean documentary of course, factials may have been made up, but those are details, the general drift is taken from life, more or less literally. In the case of Goldstein we have a girl with luggage. Luggage is in her case an Orthodox Jewish upbringing, to which she maintains an ambivalent attitude. One on hand it is part of her innermost identity, no matter how embarrassing at times, and as such a source of fondness and warmth; on the other hand it is clearly something to rebel against, there is after all a bigger world out there, a world of reason and lack of constraint. This is of course the standard dramaturgy of any 'Bildungsroman', a happy limited origin serving as a point of departure into the large universe around. In the case of Goldstein, or her alter ego Renee Feuer¹ this form of rebellion takes that of philosophy. Not the 'wooly' kind of so called continental philosophy, but the hard-core analytic kind, that supposedly push the power of thought to its very limit. Now study is of course a very respected activity in Jewish tradition, although its most exalted form is religiously motivated, so the choice of philosophy is in a sense natural if subversive in its actual pursuit. Now those strands are not taken from thin air, they are very much part of the authors background as well, this is a fact that is well-known. Goldstein or, to be careful, rather Feuer becomes something of a 'groupie'. She wants to hang out with the brightest. She does well in undergraduate studies and becomes accepted as a philosophy student at Princeton, where most of the action of the novel is going to take place. This too can be checked a as a piece of biographical fact, further emphasizing the factual closeness with the main protagonist. Now, as many of us can testify, to be a graduate student at a prestigious institution is a trauma. Do you measure up? Are you smart enough? Or maybe you do not belong there at all? Such so called narcissistic obsessions are of course counterproductive and may eventually prove to be self-fulfilling, but on the other hand hard to avoid if you identify your worth as a human being with your mental potential. Happy indeed is the individual who can entirely neglect the personal component of vanity in his or her pursuits and fully concentrate on the pursuit itself. Now this is not the lot of Feuer, instead she finds herself loosing the grip and drifting out. What can save her? Marriage? In fact! Around the academic philosophical world, there is another one, that of theoretical physics and mathematics, in many ways even more cerebral pursuits than even analytic philosophy, or at least vastly more successful² And in this world

¹ the names in her book have significance, 'Renee' points to the first name of Descartes, and can incidentally also be seen as a slight distortion of 'Reine', pure in German, or more to the point in Yiddish. 'Feuer' likewise refer to fire, indicating a burning passion.

² One is reminded of the mathematician Polya, who claimed that he was too smart for philosophy but not smart enough for physics, so he chose mathematics.

of mathematics she meets a genius. A true certified genius, a certain Noam Himmel³. No minding that he is totally wrapped up in mathematics, and that he is also considerably older than her, as long as he has it, something will no doubt rub off on her. After all, if he is such a certified smart guy and is interested in her and her mind as well, surely she cannot be an intellectual nobody. His interest, not to say desire, justifies her, not only in her own eyes, but almost equally important in those of society at large. Being married to a genius makes her if not exactly one, if so she would not receive all those well-meant inquiries as how it is like to be married to a genius, at least some kind of intermediary.

Now what does she know about mathematics? Or rephrasing the question what does Goldstein know about mathematics? Precious little it appears. The author is not afraid of showing off her knowledge, in fact part of the novel works as a transmitter of straightforward factual information, such as the founding of the Institute for Advanced study. And if she knows some anecdote about mathematics or mathematicians she is sure to convey it. Thus had her acquaintance with mathematics been more intimate, we surely would have seen proofs of it, just as we are treated to philosophy. True, the latter is far easier to convey in a novelistic vein, on the other hand the challenge to do the same with mathematics ought to have been irresistible to her. Thus the intrigue of mathematics is enough for her (as well as for Renee Feuer), when she is forced to give some substance she simply rather crudely makes it up. In the case of Himmel, it concerns something referred to as supernatural numbers, the exact definition of which mercifully left obscure. So Goldstein (and Feuer) become privileged observers of mathematicians, as seen from the outside. This should interest a reader who is a mathematician. How are we seen from the outside, by people who have had a lot of time to observe and also been very sympathetic? The picture, if sympathetic, is not exactly flattering. The mathematicians tend to have little personality, some of them even devoid of an inner life, others having nothing but an inner life (veritable monads in the terminology of Leibniz). They can be very articulate in reasoning, sorting out things unsentimentally, quickly getting to the chore; obsessed with precise definitions, but showing a total lack of interest in matters which cannot be thought of analytically. (Music, possibly being an exception, in Goldsteins universe, most mathematicians are uncannily musical). This stereotype, if not caricature, is amply illustrated by the character of the genius Himmel. He is totally dismissive of Freud and finds it strange that someone should take the trouble to think about sex. Sex is just sensation, nothing more.

To Goldstein, or maybe rather Feuer, sex is not just sensation. It is something more. True it is body, and body plays at least as in important role as mind does in the novel, at least if we should take the title seriously. Feuer is a beautiful woman, and she has always been able to attract men. (Is this true of Goldstein too? Having been convinced that there is such a tight fit between author and narrator, one starts wondering how far this fit extends?) But to her sex is ultimately about the mind. She speculates whether men and women look at sex in fundamental way. To a man a good body may be enough, while to the woman if there is no meeting of minds, there is no sex, only at most an act of awkward, not to say inept, masturbation. A woman needs to be seen by a man, engaged by him. If she is truly seen and appreciated, the man becomes irresistible to her, regardless of his

³ Himmel means heaven and/or sky in Germanic languages, including, I assume, Yiddish as well.

physical attributes. And this of course brings us to the chore of the novel, the relation between the mind and the body, a classical philosophical problem, which has so far reached no closure, except perhaps an almost universal rejection of Descartes solution of duality. Now, I believe, that in spite of the lipservice so often made, most people, and especially philosophers are Cartesian dualists at heart, or at least in everyday life. Feuer needs a philosophical problem, what better and more apt problem than the mind-body?

In a way the plot is predictable. Being married to a genius may be initially exciting but eventually the charm wears thin, especially as her genius mathematician husband redraws from her and leaves her alone and miserable. Some affairs follow naturally, the last of which is so serious that she is desperate to leave her hell of a marriage and join her lover, a theoretical physicist by the way. He turns her down though, she is only allowed to take up so much space in his life. She is a wonderful diversion admittedly, at least in appropriate doses, but he does not want the whole package. Skimming off the cream is enough. He is cool and clear sighted, delighted and charmed by passion, but not gripped by it. As Thackeray remarked, and which I took to heart as a young man, in every relationship there is one who loves and one who allows him- or herself to be loved. She (Feuer) considers suicide, but eventually decides that she should just leave her husband and get on with her life. She breaks up with her spouse, only to learn that he is already devastated. In the past years he had noticed his mathematical powers slipping, and his constant work in recent time has produced nothing but elaborate doodles. After all he is past forty, over the hill, and there nothing remains for him to do, except possibly, as he grimly announces, to pursue something second-rate, such as philosophy. She realises for the first time that he is a human being after all. And the plot takes a twist. She decides to allow a reconciliation.

Is it a good book? It is a first novel, and as such there is bound to be awkwardness and lack of a sleek professional touch. On the other hand that very awkwardness and lack of professionalism also provides the main charm of the novel. A first novel, unless written by an inveterate cynic, is bound to be sincere, and as such genuine. (Especially when it comes to the autobiographical touches?). It is interesting, at least to an academic, the narrators voice is intimate and engaging, there are nice evocations, although the delineation of character may be faulted. None but the narrator herself does really come to life, which in a sense may be natural, after all she claims that only she is not body, everybody else is. (An attitude shared by most people deep down, but few would have the audacity to voice it tongue not in cheek.). There are flaws of course, some of which have been gently alluded to above, but maybe flaws are to be forgiven in a first novel?

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