

ALL MEN ARE (NOT) MY BROTHERS: ANDREA COOPER'S *GENDERING MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT*

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**Andrea Dara Cooper. *Gendering Modern Jewish Thought*.
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Gendering Modern Jewish Thought is an excellent book, but poorly named. While titles almost invariably promise a more expansive and general treatment than they deliver, this case is particularly unfortunate because it obscures the book's focus and strengths. *Gendering* is not so much about Jewish Thought writ large but rather about a specific trajectory in Jewish thought, leading from Rosenzweig, to Levinas, and onward to Derrida. Other figures (Arendt, Buber, Freud, etc.) are referred to throughout, but the book's core is a set of close readings of close readings. The book contains several excellent meditations and analyses of Rosenzweig's readings of the *Song of Songs*, but a reader in search of these would get no clue from the title. However, the book does "gender" this philosophical trajectory and goes a long way to showing the androcentric

and phallogocentric underpinnings of Rosenzweig, Levinas, and their inheritors.

That Levinas has a gender problem is no secret; indeed, no less an authority than de Beauvoir calls him out for it in the opening pages of *The Second Sex*: “When [Levinas] writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.”¹ Analyses of gender and otherness in Levinas have flourished and grown more nuanced since de Beauvoir’s classic, and Cooper’s volume should be ranked among the most important of these. In no small part this is because it is steadfastly unpolemical. She is explicit that this book was written not as an attempt to dismiss these texts “as hopelessly passé and patriarchal but . . . to address them as a reader, with everything that responsible addressing implies” (214). More specifically, her focus is on gendered *familial relations* in all their incestuous and violent glory. It is here that the strength of her book lies.

Cooper takes the tradition to task for the way it has engendered women in a manner that both uses and then erases them, noting that the tradition asserts a homosocial ideal while eliding the fact that the subject of Modern Jewish Thought is invisibly male. But she goes beyond this layer of critique to shows what work gender *does* for the thinkers in question. And, as her work shows, for Rosenzweig and Levinas gender works through familial categories. Even when sexualized, all the most important relations occur within the family.

Whereas thinkers such as Cohen and Buber are often (but not always) content to pretend that gender and families don’t exist (leaving them unaddressed), this is not the case for Rosenzweig and Levinas. For both, gender in the familial context is part of the machine they construct, and without it, the machine doesn’t work. Cooper is to be thanked for the painstaking detail with which she demonstrates the conceptual action performed by gender and family in Rosenzweig and Levinas’ work, and

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. by H.M. Parshley (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1953), 16.

she asks us to consider what would happen if we were to change, queer, or even eliminate these mechanisms.

The primary relations she interprets occur between siblings, especially the incestuous brother-sister relations culled from the *Song of Songs* by Rosenzweig, but then radically transformed to serve his project. Crudely simplifying her precise reading: Rosenzweig's *Star* (and the model of *eros* Levinas inherits from it) moves from "heteroerotic sibling-spouses" to "neighbourly blood-brother" (43). This mirrors the move from hierarchy to equality: the sister-brother relationship is unequal, with the brother in the position of authority. This love is transfigured and transformed as the *Star* progresses, ending in "equality," but this is an equality of brothers. So equality is gained, but women are lost. This is mirrored in Levinas, and his expulsion of *eros* from the erotic plane, insofar as "Erotic relationships involve the desire for reciprocity, whereas ethical relationships cannot be based on reciprocity" (111).

This reading seems accurate to my eyes, but what is of greater interest is Cooper's focus on mechanics: "Incestuous sibling desire is the *mechanism* but not the telos of the relationship. The model of male-female marriage/siblinghood is ultimately divested of this erotic energy as the neighborly plane approaches" (61, emphasis added). After several decades of texts lauding the "ethics of the neighbour," it is nice to see a lengthy treatment of the dark side of this model: underneath neighbourliness is brotherhood. And brotherhood is hardly innocuous. This is for two obvious reasons, the first being the cliché that "if all men are my brothers, than those who are not my brothers are not men," the second being that the blood relationship between men requires women to sustain and perpetuate it, but not participate in it. Cooper's book treats both of these: the former through an unfortunately short excursus on animality, the second through a study of the place co-sanguinity occupies in Modern Jewish Thought.

Here maternity enters the (primal) scene, and Cooper's book is well read alongside Mara Benjamin's recent work,² as well as Claire Katz's classic volume on Levinas.³ But Rosenzweig remains Cooper's focus, holding that Rosenzweig's troubling comments about blood should be read through the lens of gender (68). It is not merely that the neighbour-brother who is gendered, but the "blood" which underpins and creates him, moves according to a logic of sexual difference and hierarchy. Thus the problem is twofold. First, women are used as vehicles for the production of more brothers, which Cooper illustrates through the never-ending panic over Jewish inter-marriage, and the "system of blood community that relies on the regulation of Jewish women's bodies" (69). Second, once women have fulfilled their roles as brother-producers, they are excluded from the "fratriarchy" or transformed into brothers themselves.

This is the story Cooper tells, but she does not leave it there. Thinkers like Wolfson, Derrida, and Arendt are mobilized to present alternatives to the fratriarchal-political model given to us by this trajectory in Modern Jewish Thought, but these are largely presented as potentials. For instance, Arendt's claim that friendship "should be the basis of the political realm" is clearly and precisely articulated, but not developed at any great length. This is more than fair insofar as it is a book about Rosenzweig's heirs and brothers, but I was left hoping for more in a volume on "Modern Jewish Thought." The other figure I had hoped to see more of is Cooper herself: *Gendering Jewish Thought* is a series of readings, but they are clearly guided by a strong philosophical position. I often found myself wishing that instead of another (admittedly excellent) reading of Hegel, we would be given a *précis* of her own commitments and arguments. But perhaps this is unfair: another case of a reviewer asking for more and less at the same time.

² See, for example, Mara H. Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

³ Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

Gendering Jewish Thought is a book that can be proudly placed alongside works by Imhoff, Benjamin, and Katz, and is of interest not just for anyone who wishes to think about gender in Modern Jewish Thought, but also anyone who wants to see how familial and sexual relations pervade its mechanisms and structure.