

“Brief Reviews”

*Goldberg: Variations*

Gabriel Josipovici

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by Jeff Bursey

It sounds like an ideal job for an author, to put a man to sleep by reading to him, but Samuel Goldberg’s task is made more difficult by the stipulation that he can’t read from works already written. Instead, he is asked to come up with new material every night for his employer, Tobias Westfield, a condescending pseudo-philosopher who is unable to find rest. This is the conceit which begins the latest novel from Gabriel Josipovici, who has had published fiction, plays, criticism, essays and a memoir.

Novels about writers often read as an inside joke, and can be tediously self-reflective. *Goldberg: Variations* does not escape the last problem, particularly when the Goldberg story is revealed to be a fiction created by another writer, Gerald, who struggles to find a shape for a novel set in the nineteenth century that would include elements such as incest, the Orkneys, marital strife, and philosophy. When Gerald debates with a nameless muse, the narrative steps back even further from the Goldberg story. The author thereby risks boring a reader, or overusing a conceit the way John Barth sometimes does, especially as neither Goldberg nor Gerald are as inventive as Scheherazade.

While it does gaze into its own navel, *Goldberg: Variations* manages to avoid serious problems through its elegant style and restrained tone, and its graceful engagement with metaphysical and aesthetic questions. As in *Contre-Jour: A Triptych after Pierre Bonnard* (1986), where a visual image helps to provide the structure, this novel relies on Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* as Josipovici defines and redefines events, and approaches topics from several directions. The first ninety-four pages are conditional, as if a bridge was being built from one fixed spot, extending to the other side that can’t be seen but surely must be there. With the introduction of Gerald, the reader is provided with an alternative view of what has come before. The structure of the fugue, where “[t]he pursuer turns into the pursued and the pursued into the pursuer, and the headlong flight ceases to be a flight and becomes a dance,” allows Josipovici the opportunity to explore in a variety of ways the fragility of marriage, the use of language (there is a discussion on the character of Odysseus) and the act of creation.

In Westfield the author offers a persuasive depiction of the intellectual who considers friends, family and sentiments less valuable than ideas. While his nature doesn’t elicit empathy, his predicament compels the reader to take interest, as does Goldberg’s attempt at a talking cure. To Westfield the world appears dead, but he still believes that hearing new stories will reinvigorate him. (*The Odyssey* is used throughout the novel as a demonstration of an old tale that continually engages people in productive discussion.) This hope of being woken to life is revealed by Goldberg to be groundless. Instead of writing new works for each night, Goldberg offers conversation, such as what follows:

—I have the feeling, I said, and you will forgive me, sir, if I am speaking out of turn, that your life has always been governed by a kind of anxiety and that in order to overcome that anxiety you have constantly rushed forward, in both thought and deed, instead of allowing each moment its full value.

—Go on, he said quietly, since I had come to a stop.

—Each moment, for you, I said, has only been a bridge between one thing and another. You call that thinking. I would prefer to call it anxiety.

A few lines down, Goldberg asks:

—Do you hear my voice?

—Yes, he said. Of course.

—Do you hear your own?

He was a long while answering. Then he said, very quietly:

—Yes, I think so.

—In the dark, I said.

I could sense that now he was waiting for me to continue.

—That is enough, I said.

—Yes, he said.

After a long time he said:

—This is the moment, then?

—It is, I said.

—Now?

—Yes.

—Our two voices in the dark?

I was silent.

—Nothing more?

—No.

I did not move. His breathing grew deeper.

—I see, he said again, after a while, in a whisper.

This dialogue could be seen as indicating the universe is godless, that ultimately everyone is alone, or that two strangers can communicate and comfort one another despite the darkness (and all that word connotes). That the exchange can come across as soothing, sobering, and at the same time chilling, is partly Josipovici's point. He is a craftsman who makes sure the structure of *Goldberg: Variations* is present at the level of the sentence. Every re-read of this trim novel will invite a fresh interpretation.

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