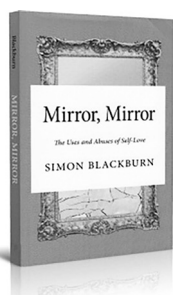


This book is a treat of a read. Thank you Carl Jung and Craig E Stephenson.

*Subhasis Chattopadhyay*



### **Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love**

Simon Blackburn

Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540, USA. Website: <https://www.press.princeton.edu>. 2014. 224 PP. \$19.95. PB. ISBN 9780691169118.

Jean-Luc Nancy (b. 1940) has done for literature and philosophy what much earlier Plato (ca 424/423–348/347 BCE) fumbled to do for these two discourses. Then, in the West, we had the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88 CE), enact for literature and theology what John Milton (1608–74 CE) did in his *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671). Earlier Edmund Spenser (1552–99 AD) yoked literature and theo-philosophy together.

Nearer to us, Iris Murdoch (1919–99 CE), as it were, brought together von Balthasar's and Jean-Luc Nancy's projects of proceeding with Plato's burden of unifying literature with philosophy as being contingent to our times in Murdoch's own corpus. It is within this realm of High Art that we have Simon Blackburn (b. 1944) commenting on that eternal verity: self-love. Other than Jean-Luc Nancy, Blackburn comments on all the writers mentioned so far. Blackburn's opening chapter (12–34) on Iris Murdoch is one of the best critiques till date of Murdoch's oeuvre.

Blackburn, like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Nancy, successfully erases the false distinction between literature and philosophy. This is no easy task since more often than not, literature and philosophy are conflated and confused as one by indiscrete readers. One is afraid, we shall soon see a rise in apocalyptic fiction and modes of philosophising which will see in the rise of COVID-19, all sorts of fatalistic philosophies deriving from Stoicism. To convey to future generations that literature and philosophy are both abstractions and should have little to do with the temporary, however disconcerting, we must turn to Blackburn's

excellent book since we need again the consolations and therapies that philosophy provides.

One can read Boethius's (ca 477–524 CE) *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (*The Consolation of Philosophy* probably written in 524 CE) and Martha Nussbaum's (b. 1947) *The Therapy of Desire* (1994) in this new world, where we need to look at ourselves as a species in the mirrors of the humanities. Otherwise, the automata of life amid social distancing mediated by the inhuman will obscure the humanities once for all. We will be informed that we need economics more than art. Before Corona, if this book were reviewed, as it has been by other critics, then one would follow the old methods of seeing this book as a chastisement to humanity. Now, reviewing within the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, sitting in his sanitised room in the heart of Kolkata, Simon Blackburn's book reveals a different truth to this reviewer. Blackburn's insights should not be covered, though our eyes dazzle (see *The Duchess of Malfi*, 1612–3 CE).

Blackburn's chapter titled 'Temptation' (132–62) details the archaeology of beliefs, which are now certainly shaken by the current pandemic. Thus, Blackburn's observations are of greater relevance today, probably more poignant than he could have imagined when he wrote this book:

Since many people find it difficult to conceive of religion without ontotheology, or in other words, doctrines about the extra entity or entities inhabiting the universe, it is perhaps necessary to pause to explain the alternative. Most people know of religions, such as the purer forms of Buddhism, or Jainism in India, that exist without the doctrine of a personal guiding deity or deities. But they may find it puzzling to know what sets these apart as genuine religions, if this element of belief is lacking.

So let us think about this a little. The fire-breathing atheists about whom we have heard so much recently—the celebrated quartet of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Dan Dennett—think of religious commitments in terms of mistaken or at least hopelessly improbable and therefore irrational ontology. Believers think that something exists, but the overwhelmingly probable truth is that it does not. This is their take-home message. Yet this

interpretation of the issue is itself mistaken, and indeed doubly so. It is mistaken, or perhaps it would be better to say unimaginative or off-key, to think of religious frames of mind primarily in terms of belief. ... The religious practice is a kind of social yoga that cements and fortifies our aesthetic and moral stances toward our lives and the world we live in (138–40).

It is this fortifying of our aesthetic and moral stances that will protect us in the coming days, when during future winters, at least in the global north, COVID-19 will force us to rethink life once again, since vaccines take time to be discovered and developed. Thus, Blackburn's solution to the ontology of fear and, by extrapolation of the epistemology newly, though forcibly fashioned by this pandemic, which was non-existent when Blackburn wrote this gem of a book, is worth studying:

We can now notice that the term 'atheist', so carefully avoided by [David] Hume himself, is no longer appropriate (whether we put the word 'new' in front of it or not). It implies that there is a definite ontological belief that some people have and others do not, but this mislocates the issue. The term 'agnostic' is no better, since it has the same implication of a definite ontological question, only one to which we do not know the answer.

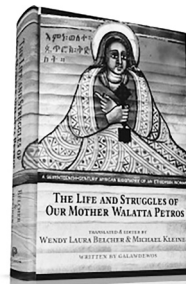
Instead of waving theistic or atheistic banners, we should pick up Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, or its successors in the works of Kant, Feuerbach, Marx, or Durkheim. And if we want to wean people away from their myths, or the particular coloration their myths have taken at particular times and places, then we must do what Nietzsche did at the end of the nineteenth century, which was to recognize moral corruption when we find it, and then to rail, preach, inveigh, fulminate, or thunder against it (141–2).

This should be our clarion call for the dogs, hawks, and the vultures of war are let loose again. P Sainath's (b. 1957) *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* (1996) along with Simon Blackburn's book should alert us to the Eichmanns among us. For understanding Eichmann, read Hannah Arendt's (1906–75) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

This is a rollercoaster of a book: Blackburn forces us to rethink everyone from Shakespeare to Lewis Carroll to James Joyce to Iris Murdoch, to name a few authors only. And obviously classical literature leading to Milton's presentation of Narcissus in his *Paradise Lost*. Maybe, this book will help us see anew our socially distant selves.

For comfort in solipsism, Blackburn is best when he comments on that taciturn of all men, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951 CE).

*Subhasis Chattopadhyay*



***The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman***

Galawdewos

Edited and translated by  
Wendy Laura Belcher and  
Michael Kleiner

Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540, USA. Website: <https://www.press.princeton.edu>. 2015. 544 pp. \$39.95. HB. ISBN 9780691164212.

Wendy Laura Belcher's 'Introduction' to this biography of the Ethiopian nun, Mother Walatta Petros is an eye-opener to anyone remotely interested either in Christianity or in monasticism. Belcher's remarks on Mother Walatta Petros are enough to highlight this meticulously researched book. Belcher writes that the book under review is a translation of 'the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*. It was written in 1672 in an African language by Africans for Africans about Africans—in particular, about a revered African religious leader who led a successful nonviolent movement against European protocolonialism in Ethiopia. This is the first time this remarkable text has appeared in English' (1). Generally, authors tend to overstate their achievements. Still, after reading this book, one is convinced that Belcher has been successfully able to present to the world the nuanced life of Mother Walatta Petros and her struggles through this

*(Continued on page 582)*