Labeled as one of the most controversial thinkers in pre-revolutionary Russia, and heavily censored in the Soviet Union, Vasily Rozanov finally starts to enjoy popularity in contemporary Russia, but still remains relatively unknown outside of Russia. Henrietta Mondry’s recent study is a most valuable attempt to make Rozanov’s unique thought known to Western readership. The originality of Rozanov’s body of thought – his writings are at times too aphoristic, personal and unfinished to label them as systematic philosophy – is in his constant aspirations to create a synthesis of religion and sexuality. Once dubbed the “Rasputin of the Russian intelligentsia”, Rozanov thought up a philosophy of sexuality, composed around his favorite topics of gender, race, family and religion. Long before Foucault developed his “archeology of sex”, Rozanov reflected on sexuality in similar terms: his interest in sexuality was based on a concern with procreation and family life, as well as with the effects of sexuality – or attitudes towards sexuality – on culture and society. Criticizing Christianity for its suppression of human sexuality and denial of this earthly life, Rozanov extolled Judaism for its belief in the mystical nature of sexuality and its emphasis on the importance of a strong family life. Transposing Judaic religion to Jews in general, in turn conceptualizing them as a race, he thus regards the Jewish people as holding some secret knowledge concerning sexuality that could be beneficial for Russian culture and society. However, Rozanov’s admiration of Judaism is only limited to its positive attitude towards sex; he strongly opposed to the Jews’ involvement in Russian politics and their growing presence on the Russian literary scene – an attitude that fed his antisemitic reputation and aroused much controversy among his peers. Based on his “sermon of sex”, Rozanov formulated a socio-political philosophy, or “body politics” (1), centering around the view that
a state or society that represses sexuality is not politically healthy. In order to heal Russian society, he tried to find ways to restore sexuality in Russian cultural and religious consciousness. Since in those days literature was the most powerful medium to echo and spread ideas, Rozanov reverted to literary criticism in his mission of propagating his “sermon of sex.” In particular, he re-considered the “giants” of nineteenth-century Russian literature through the lens of sexuality, and, *vice versa*, used their literary works – well-known to the Russian public – to explain his philosophy of sexuality in an accessible manner. In this book, Mondry investigates how Rozanov distilled from the writings of “the great five” of Russian literature – Aleksandr Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Fëdor Dostoevsky and Lev Tolstoy – the themes that were at the heart of his thought. Along the lines, she emphatically reveals the paradoxes and contradictions that mark Rozanov’s thought: depending on his current ideological agenda, he sometimes embraced, but at other times rigorously criticized, the same writers.

Before engaging in Rozanov’s separate analyses of each of the great five writers, Mondry devotes a chapter to Rozanov’s view of “racial hybridity” in Russian literature (by which he meant both creative writing and broader literary media, such as literary and cultural journals and the press in general). Focusing on the notorious Beilis affair (1911-1913), in which a Ukrainian Jew was accused of the ritual murder of a Christian boy but then acquitted, Mondry investigates Rozanov’s views on Jewish ethnicity. Much attention is devoted to Rozanov’s symbolic interpretation of blood – and fluids in general – and his consequential socio-political view that “impure, mixed blood” contaminates Russian society (21). In chapter 2, Mondry shows how Rozanov used the tumultuous life of Russia’s national poet Pushkin to confirm and illustrate his ideas on sexuality and family life. Chapter 3 offers an analysis of Rozanov’s interpretation of Gogol’ through the prism of his unconventional sexuality, i.e. his alleged homosexuality and sexual pathology. Mondry shows how Rozanov constructed a
parallel between Gogol’s sexuality and Jewish sexuality that enabled him to demonize both. Chapter 4 explores Rozanov’s various strategies to force an alliance between himself and Dostoevskii. On top of his notorious marriage to Dostoevskii’s former mistress Apollinaria Suslova, Rozanov longed to identify himself ideologically with Dostoevskii. Explaining Rozanov’s extreme fascination with Dostoevskii in terms of what Rene Girard called “mimetic desire” (80), Mondry shows how Rozanov subtly moulded Dostoevskii into a “fellow traveler” (83) in his mission to infuse Russian society with his views on sexuality. Without any scruples, he manipulated Dostoevskii’s texts to support even his most radical fantasies about sexual transgression of the boundaries between humans and animals, family members and the gods. Chapter 5 investigates Rozanov’s changing interpretation of the theme of love in Turgenev’s personal life and his literary writings. While he extolled Turgenev at first as a “teacher of love” and thus “the predecessor of Rozanov himself” (103-104), he later accused him for staging heroes who pursued romantic love out of wedlock, thus undermining the institution of marriage and family life. Chapter 6 focuses on Rozanov’s appropriation of Tolstoy, among the other “giants” no doubt the one who was most preoccupied with human sexuality. Mondry shows how Rozanov not only admired Tolstoy for his distinctive views on religion, sexuality and the family, but also adds an ethnic motive to his appraisal: for Rozanov, Tolstoy epitomized the essence of Russianness. In the final chapter, Mondry exposes how Rozanov’s views on race, Russian ethnicity and Judaism are in contemporary Russia appropriated by right-wing ideologues. In the end, Rozanov, who appropriated and often distorted the original texts of the Russian writers to fit them into his own ideological agenda, becomes now himself the object of political manipulation.

In her engaging study, Mondry shows that, although Rozanov considered literature as “rubbish” and even “superfluous” at the end of his life (102), he sought in all great five of nineteenth-century literature for confirmation of his idiosyncratic views, thus – ironically –
underscoring their importance. Written in a clear and lucid style, Mondry’s book will surely be a fascinating read for anyone interested in the thought-provoking views of Rozanov, as well as for those interested in the history of Russian literature.

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