

Franz Rosenzweig and New Thinking, Again

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In North America, Franz Rosenzweig has had a steady readership, and he has influenced many thinkers since the end of the Second World War. In many interesting ways, his reception has generated quite different “Rosenzweig’s,” and it is clear that his importance as a philosopher is no longer disputed. But in the first instance, the reception focused on his place as an existentialist Jew. The story was told (with key elements repressed and others exaggerated) of his near-conversion to Christianity and his rejection of the academy for service to the renaissance of the Jewish community. In that context, his heroic struggle with Lou Gehrig’s Disease (ALS) emerged as a stunning proof of his personal return to Judaism. Steven Schwarzschild (1960) and Nahum Glatzer (1953) both contributed to a reading of Rosenzweig the existentialist.

Through this appropriation, Rosenzweig soon became a leading voice for the Jewish community—he offered a move back to tradition (or at least a limited modern tradition) from the edge of total assimilation. His own absence from the Shoah due to his death in 1929 meant that his German Jewish identity posed little problem. But most important was his conviction not only to remain Jewish, but to devote himself to Jewish adult education. The rabbinical communities of both Reformed and Conservative Judaism were drawn to this obviously smart thinker who vindicated an engagement with Jewish study and intellectual tradition.

In that context, the dialogue between Buber and Rosenzweig was considered to be of central importance. Interestingly, this was not based on their translation of the Bible, which occupied them together for the last several years of Rosenzweig’s life; instead, it was based on their dialogue about law and command, which reflected Rosenzweig’s creative interpretation of being commanded as distinct from being obliged by the law as a whole. In a poor English translation, Buber and Rosenzweig seemed much more like Reform and Conservative Jews than the great minds locked in a complex debate about the nature of obligation and the interpersonal dimension of responsibility. Moreover, while Buber had the largest following of any Jewish thinker in the middle of the 20th Century, Rosenzweig stood for a reflection on commandments that had more social and historical connection.

It would take me beyond these pages to offer a full overview of the Rosenzweig scholarship—looking to scholars in Europe, North America, and now beyond. Even only within the confines of the University of Toronto,

where I am at home and whence this journal comes, one could devote several pages to Emil Fackenheim's engagement with Rosenzweig and its crucial role in his own evolving thought. But what I can offer is some reflections on the thematic issues that have arisen, since Rosenzweig emerged into the university from under the shadow of his role in the synagogue.

The scene changed dramatically with the emergence of Levinas as a reader of Rosenzweig, beginning in France in the 1960s, and burgeoning in North America after 1980. Levinas' debt to Rosenzweig was open and explicit, and it created a new context in which to read Rosenzweig. The "opposition to the idea of totality" produced a reading that focused on Rosenzweig and the philosophy of language, considering *The Star of Redemption* as "a system of revelation." Levinas not only offered a philosophical appropriation of Rosenzweig, but he generated interest, first in France, and then in the wider world, in Rosenzweig as a thinker.

Primary among philosophers' interest has been the attention to speech thinking (and not to religious experience). While few philosophers today would subscribe to grammatical thinking of the sort Rosenzweig's closest friend, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, developed (and Rosenzweig appropriated)¹, the reflections on first and second person perspectives, as well as the philosophy of dialogue, have accentuated the way that thinking can trace along the paths of conversation, and indeed, of writing. When Rosenzweig's correspondence was first published, and then augmented by the massive volume of his letters to Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy, we were on the verge of a further discovery that letter-thinking might also accentuate the challenges of thinking in relation to others, to particular addressed others. For Rosenzweig, the revelation of one person to another in speech and writing is the core of our knowledge, and these forms of expression provide insights and principles—for epistemology as well as for ethics.

Over the last several years, attention has returned to Rosenzweig's relation to German Idealism, both in the context of his dissertation on Hegel, *Hegel and the State*, and in connection to *The Star*. For while it is clear that Levinas' emphasis on the break with totality is key to interpreting the gap between those two works, it is also clear that Rosenzweig thought systematically, and the claim that he is a philosopher revolves around the systematic quality of his thought. This issue also forces us to reconsider Rosenzweig's relation to his teacher, Hermann Cohen. Cohen's work spread from commentary on Kant's critical philosophy, to the production of his own system, to a series of Jewish writings, culminating in a posthumous interpretation of religion. While Rosenzweig disconnected Cohen's last work

¹See Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Angewandte Seelenkunde. Eine Programmatische Ubersetzung* (Darmstadt: Roether Verlag, 1924), which Rosenzweig read in manuscript for a rich engagement in grammatical thinking.

from his system; the key issue in Rosenzweig is how to think the whole in different ways, of which only one is totalitarian. Rosenzweig struggled to think of a plurality of beings (God, Human, World) related or even unified in a system of action. He invites us to consider whether we can engage pluralism in different registers and still think or even envision our way to a whole?

Last, if early discussions of Rosenzweig's collaboration with Buber overlooked the translation project, current discussions focus on this endeavor. Together Rosenzweig and Buber framed a theory and practice of translation that directly engages contemporary translation theory. By showing how translation challenges and changes the target language, Rosenzweig explored the limits of any particular language, as well as the historical Protestant tradition of the German language. Both thinkers wanted to hebraicize German, and in doing so, present the alienation of Jews in German. Benjamin and Derrida pursue this line of thought, by asking whether anyone is truly monolingual. Levinas takes these reflections on translation in a different direction, for the concept of Jewish Philosophy also can be seen as a mode of translation: from Hebrew to Greek—or concretely, to Greek, to Arabic, to German, to French, even to English. In other words, Jewish philosophy speaks both Hebrew and Greek in many languages, and the specific dynamics and perils of Biblical translation are reiterated in the project of exploring in a philosophical idiom the concepts, principles, ideas, and ethics of Jewish tradition.