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**Revelation Camp: Gender, Franz Rosenzweig, and The Con-fusion of Concepts**

“Judaism is saturated with femininity.”

*Otto Weininger*

About “reading for gender” as “A matter of discipline” in Jewish philosophy, Susan Shapiro reflects not simply on gender as some putatively brute biological fact but on the representation or figuring of gender as a philosophical category, as a figure of reason and unreason in relation to logic, rhetoric and textuality. Rooted in representation and reason, both feminist thought and Jewish thought are steeped in aesthetics and aesthetic theory. Aesthetics, as such, represents a *sine qua non* of philosophical discourse, its first condition of possibility as a mode of thinking. Writing about the importance of aesthetics in the philosophical discourse of Plato, Aristotle, and Maimonides, Shapiro insists that figures and tropes are primary intellectual data, not just secondary in importance to logic and concepts. In her view, concepts and logic depend upon the figure as much as if not more than vice-versa.<sup>1</sup> The identical claim was made many years prior by Susan Sontag in “Notes on Camp.” There Sontag argued, “Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason... But this attitude is naïve. And even worse... For taste governs every free – as opposed to rote – human response.”<sup>2</sup>

Reading for gender in Jewish philosophy should be as simple as identifying figures around which to orient theoretical reflection. But how do you read for gender in Jewish philosophy when it hides in plain sight, right before the very eye of the reader? Do we even realize what it is that we’re looking at? Consider in this light *The Star of Redemption*, published almost one hundred years ago, in 1921. In the history of Jewish philosophy, few texts are as immersed in the world of images. It stands out as a work immersed in the hothouse visual environs of early twentieth-century *Jugendstil* and German Expressionism. Previous readings of its author, Franz Rosenzweig, particularly those indebted to Levinas, tend to overestimate the importance

of ethics in Rosenzweig's system. What goes missing in most readings is the ambiguous figure of a woman at the center of the text on revelation and the planting of that revelation into the calendar time of the people of Israel. That female figure is the Shulamite, the beloved and ultimately forlorn persona drawn from the biblical book, the Song of Songs. She would seem to be a woman, but it's not clear. Who is the Shulamite? Is she a woman? Do women even exist in *The Star of Redemption*? Do they exist at all?

After decades of critical gender theory, it should be understood that the problem with reading for gender in Rosenzweig's text or in Jewish philosophy has much to do with just how destabilized and destabilizing a category gender turns out to be. The more you look for it, the more it begins to lose definite or determinate shape. For its part, Jewish philosophy has yet to negotiate the conceptual slippages theorized by Judith Butler, the notion that gender is a performative gesture, scripted and habituated, not a "stable" or "abiding" substance.<sup>3</sup> Apart from a few lone voices such as Shapiro, the case for recognizing not just the importance of gender, but the problem of gender trouble actually afoot in Jewish philosophy, has not yet fully been made. One would have thought one knew that the project of Jewish philosophy is both masculinist and heteronormative. And yet, one discovers that in Rosenzweig's text this masculinity relates primarily back to the figure of a woman, that her desire represents the author's own desire for a homosocial community of men. When one believes one has finally identified a woman, voilà, she turns out to be a man in drag. No sooner does she appear in a Jewish philosophical text than "the woman" disappears. Her appearance is more representation, an illusion, than anything real. The imagistic character of Rosenzweig's text should have already given any reader critical pause. It remains unclear what a female Jewish philosophical or theological figure might look like. In Rosenzweig's text, the more you look at her, this figure of a woman, the more "she" begins to look like something else.

In "Notes on Camp," Sontag divided twentieth-century culture in the west across prisms cut by "Jewish moral seriousness" and "homosexual aestheticism and irony." These are represented by Sontag as "[t]he two pioneering forces of modern sensibility."<sup>4</sup> With this structure in place, one might have thought that camp would have nothing to do with Jewishness and Judaism, that these concepts were as distinct as Athens and Jerusalem in the thought of Leo Strauss. What, then, is camp? Sontag identifies it as "*one* way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon...not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization."<sup>5</sup> Some of

her examples are Tiffany Lamps, drawings by Aubrey Beardsley, Visconti's direction of *Salome*. Not in the business of Jewish philosophy and culture, Sontag was unable to ascertain how so-called Jewish moral seriousness and so-called homosexual aestheticism and irony might inter-tangle, how the one might give way to the other in an emblematic work of Jewish philosophy such as *The Star of Redemption*. On close inspection, I will argue, *The Star of Redemption*, a cornerstone of modern Jewish philosophy, reveals itself as theological camp. One way of looking at God, world, person, creation, revelation, and redemption shows their constitution as aesthetic phenomena, i.e., de-naturalized, highly stylized, artificial, artfully performed and constructed. But what then is the impact on Jewish philosophy when one can no longer consider its concepts as "straight," namely philosophically or morally "serious" in a straightforward manner? Either one can brush away the system as piffle. Or one might begin to think through the notion that, on human terms, the difference between truth and appearance is not absolute, especially when it comes to religion or "revelation."

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Central to the act of reading for gender and other acts of philosophical-aesthetic appropriation is careful attention to figures, to their appearance and transformation, to their congealing and re-congealing in a philosophical text. To look for this in *The Star of Redemption* is to understand first of all its construction as a constellation of figures, and that this constellating self-constitutes prior to the text's character as philosophical system. Take for instance the most basic geometric elements structuring the text. On the combination of triangles ( $\triangle$ ) ( $\nabla$ ) that compose the "star of redemption" ( $\star$ ) Rosenzweig explained in a 1918 letter to his lover Margrit (Gritli) Rosenstock-Huessy, "I think in figures."<sup>6</sup> An aesthetic thinker through and through, he was to claim later that the miracle of existence is not as per Heidegger that something "is." The miracle that astounds us would rather be that "there is yet something that has form." The movement of time in "the real world" congeals into an image or a group of images that stand apart from time. About what God, world, and "man" "are," about that we know nothing but how they *look* in a system of revelation. About that "we can know exactly."<sup>7</sup>

Alongside God, world, and "man," what then might a "woman" look like as a theological figure in modern Jewish thought and culture? We ac-

tually do not know. In *The Star of Redemption* she is going to look like the Shulamite, the heroine of the biblical book, the Song of Songs. Presented as ready-made out of the pages of Scripture, she was more than just that. Alongside other kindred souls like Salome or Judith, the Shulamite was an emblem of Art Nouveau, that emblematic style in the history of fin de siècle art to which the German-Jewish Renaissance owed itself, and which, not incidentally, Sontag understood to be the epitome of camp. Again writing about camp, Sontag explains, “The best example is in Art Nouveau, the most typical and fully realized Camp style. Art Nouveau objects, typically, convert one thing into something else: the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto.” More examples mentioned by Sontag are “the swooning, slim, sinuous figures of pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry; the thin, flowing, sexless bodies in Art Nouveau prints and posters.” The Shulamite was ready-made to fit the bill. As Sontag remarks, “[T]he most refined form of sexual attractiveness... consists in going against the grain of one’s sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine” aligned with “the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.”<sup>8</sup>

A chapter on Jewish camp circa 1900 would have to take the Shulamite as its central figure. Perhaps more easily than contemporary Jewish philosophers, art historians will recognize the exaggerated sexual characteristics of the Shulamite in pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist-Art Nouveau paintings, in works of art by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Roddam Spencer-Stanhope, Odilon Redon, Frantisek Kupkl, George Barbier, as well as in works by nineteenth-century and fin de siècle Jewish artists such as Maurycy Gottlieb, E.M. Lilien, Ze’ev Raban. They all painted the Shulamite in bright oriental colors. Add to the list as well the dark-haired Jewish oriental beauties, dappled in gold and jewel-like patterns in works by Gustav Klimt. As painted by him, *Judith I* and *Judith II*, the femme fatale in *The Kiss*, Adele Bloch-Bauer, Klimt’s Jewish model, stands in as an honorary Shulamite. A stock figure, she represents sex and sexiness, and everything associated with sexuality, including death, a figure with generative power opposed to the age of modern degeneration.

In art history it is perhaps easier to identify the Shulamite, but what is one to make of a woman, such a woman, when identified in the margins of or at the center of a work of philosophical thought? A figure of a concept, she stands in opposition to another figure, another concept, always doubled. As

Shapiro suggests about the *Guide of the Perplexed* by Moses Maimonides, when the female figure does indeed appear in a work of Jewish philosophy there will always be at least two “women.” We will find the same to be true of Rosenzweig’s text also. The one woman assumes an erotic charge; the other woman stands in for something else, usually reason. In the case of Maimonides, that would be the married harlot and the woman of virtue or the beloved in the Song of Songs. It’s the former, not the latter, who carries the erotic pulse, who represents the sensation and imagination that reason must discipline. In *The Star of Redemption*, the roles are reversed. The system of revelation depends not upon reason but upon imagination, including the imagination of sexual difference. By “difference” one means both the difference between these two kinds of “women” and also the difference between “women” and “men.” The Shulamite is the “first woman,” the one who commands the erotic attention of the author and his readers. The “second woman” is the good wife at the center of the household. Cutting a dull figure, she does nothing to animate the system, except perhaps to prepare dinner for the feasts of “revelation” and “redemption,” and to bear children. In the third part of Rosenzweig’s text, she appears entirely domesticated. Whatever erotic trace was generated by the figure of the Shulamite has been transferred over to the company of men assembled in the synagogue.

In her own reading of these two figures, Claire Katz underestimates the tense relationship between love and matrimony for Rosenzweig. Katz sees in marriage a continuum and intensification of love.<sup>9</sup> My own suspicion is otherwise. In *The Star of Redemption*, marriage might rather be looked upon in terms of opposition and disappointment, whereas intensity of presence is reserved for the first female figure, the Shulamite. As a figure of revelation in part II of our text, the eros surrounding the Shulamite distills into an intense form of expression without content. The entire content of revelation has been sharpened into the shape of God’s commandment to love Him. For Rosenzweig, creation constitutes itself linguistically as a fixed and intelligible world. It begins with a chaos of attributes offering no stable substance, emerging into a world of real objects generated by the gradual introduction of the definite article, verb, verb tense, and noun.

With the world crowned by created death, it will take a new “grammar of eros” to reveal a human soul, to prove that love is “stronger than death.” In the account of revelation, a defiant “I” declares itself to be a subject, to be this way and not otherwise. With this declaration, the defiant self is drawn into confrontation. God responds, “WHERE ART THOU?,” to which the subject

must finally declare, “Here I am.” The self is now “wholly receptive, as yet unlocked, only empty, without content, without nature, pure readiness, pure obedience, all ears” to the divine mouth.<sup>10</sup> She waits to hear “that one commandment which is not the highest, which is in truth the only commandment, the sum and substance (*Sinn und Wesen*) of all commandments ever to leave God’s mouth,” the commandment by which God declares, “LOVE ME!” The self must confess, “I have sinned,” “I am a sinner.” Confident in His love, she declares before God, “I am yours” to which God replies “I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME.” The soul now cries, “my God My God” and pleads and cries for the coming of the Kingdom, for this groundless miracle to repeat itself.<sup>11</sup>

Love is a scripted, exaggerated, artfully performed and campy figure. It transcends objective and object-like content. It cultivates instead the space between two stylized figures: God and the beloved soul. Everything else, the entire gamut of society, moral community, and the world of objects, remains outside the unfolding dialogue. At this precise moment, nothing else matters, only the deep presence of its expression, a language of love without any descriptive or determinate content apart from its own declaration. The content of revelation has been reduced from 613 mitzvot and their possible interpretations and counter-interpretations to the one single commandment, the essential sum and substance of all commandments, “Love Me!” Moses demands, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). To Rosenzweig, this imperative form represents a “wholly perfect expression, wholly pure [*ganz reine*] language of love.”<sup>12</sup> A distilled, minimum core to revelation, barely a content, the commandment contains but two words.

Eluding the representation of empirical reality and material substance, the dialogue between God and soul in the “grammar of eros” will repeat itself in Rosenzweig’s analysis of the Song of Songs. The biblical love song par excellence, it declares the only thing that love can know outside its own self. Love is stronger than death. “This,” according to Rosenzweig, “is the only thing that can be stated, pre-dicated, re-counted about love. Everything else can only be spoken by love itself, not stated ‘about’ it. For love is – speech, wholly active, wholly personal, wholly living, wholly – speaking.” The Song of Songs re-enforces the pure character of love in its intense activity. A lover’s voice, God bears down in a “downpour of imperatives,” not descriptive contents. “Draw me after you, open to me, arise, come away, hurry – it is always one and the same imperative of love.” And the lover “lifts his

love above the fleeting moment,” out of and beyond the temporal context of flux, decay, and death. So now she knows at least this, that “he is mine.” By itself, love is not “real.” It demands the reality of “the street.”<sup>13</sup> But this only makes our own point about revelation without real contents. Unreal, love lacks content at its highest pitch.

With its own starry look back to Genesis and male issue, Rosenzweig’s eroticism proved just active, severe, and violent. In his account, pagan self-creation forms around the violence of an assault. “This speechless, sightless, introverted *daimon*,” the image of one’s defiant self, “assaults man first in the guise of *Eros*...until the moment when he removes his disguise and reveals himself to him as *Thanatos*.”<sup>14</sup> The event of revelation displays no more tenderness. “Against whom does love display its strength? Against *him* whom it seizes...It originates in the lover. The beloved is seized, *her* love is already a response to being seized.”<sup>15</sup> The switch in gender is deliberate. God’s “untrammelled passion” bursts forth “into the light of the new day.”<sup>16</sup> It assumes the guise of a “fateful domination over the heart in which it stirs.”<sup>17</sup> Revelation is a “shock.” The beloved soul is “moved,” “gripped,” “seared.”<sup>18</sup> “Love is as strong as death.” The eros of revelation is violent. The death-crowned world of creation “is conquered” and “laid at the feet of love.” Death and the netherworld “collapse before the strength of love” and “the hardness of its zeal.”<sup>19</sup>

Over the top and dramatic, the violent form of Rosenzweig’s declamatory literary expression comports with love’s zeal in its relation to death. The agon is dramatized in exclamatory, declarative pathos. The subject terrified by death creeps like a worm “into the folds of the naked earth” before “the fast-approaching volleys of a blind death from which there is no appeal.” An image of violent death, “Let him sense there, forcibly, inexorably” that “his I would be but an It if it died.” At which we hear the subject’s own declarative “roar” of “Me! Me! Me!”<sup>20</sup> Love sounds no less declamatory. “Where are You?”<sup>21</sup> “Love me!” “You are mine.”<sup>22</sup> “I have sinned,” “I am a sinner,” “I am thine,” “my god, my God.”<sup>23</sup> The violent expression forms around pronouns – I, you, he, the repetition of sin and of the phrase “my God” building up the pressure. As George Mosse so keenly put it, “death was the final sensuous experience, the necessary climax of a fully lived life.”<sup>24</sup>

The relative place of men and women in Rosenzweig’s life and thought was itself fraught. A woman’s presence does not mean anything, not in *The Star of Redemption* and not in the published letters sent by Rosenzweig to his lover Margrit (Gritli) Rosenstock-Huessy and to her husband,

Rosenzweig's beloved friend Eugen Rosenstock. The real tensions occur, not between men and women, but between men. What Rosenzweig came to call "my Judaism" was a homoerotic compact marked by four features that are basic to *fin de siècle* homoeroticism: intensive homosocial circles, overwhelming male authority, open erotic discourse, and self-conscious devotion to beauty. All these justify a look at "the role of the erotic in male society" – the title of a 1920 text by Hans Blüher – to shed new light upon images of male presence, young boys, and the appearance of an exceptional female figure in the cast of characters crowding the body of Rosenzweig's writing.

Blüher's text in particular highlights male compacts (*Männerbünde*) centered around a predominant male figure. He based his analysis on the German Youth Movement, of which he was a leading member, and the men's huts used by indigenous people in the South Sea Islands. As he understood it, the *Männerbund* is a highly differentiated product of "male-male eros" (*mannmännlichen Eros*).<sup>25</sup> This male-male eros is bisexual, caught between wife and home, on the one hand, and the community of men, on the other. Although erotic life between husband and wife perpetuates the species, a fully formed, richly developed collective life, in all its forms, political and religious, depends on the erotic attachment formed between men with each other. The *Männerbund* has no primary purpose apart from men wanting to be with each other. Every other purpose, political or religious, that devolves from that primary basis represents mere rationalization.

If there are no women in a *Männerbund*, then who is the Shulamite if not Rosenzweig himself, dressed up to play the part? The notion that *The Star of Redemption* is itself a *Männerbund* from which women are effectively excluded would be only strengthened, not contradicted by the central appearance there of the Shulamite. Perhaps, after all, she's not even a woman. In Rosenzweig's reading of the Song of Songs in the discourse on revelation, she is the figure from the "grammar of eros" who declares herself to God. An extra-ordinary female figure, she assumes a major place, mid-point in the entire book. As a centrally located persona, she masks the author's own presence, speaks his desire, not her own. The Shulamite is *not* Gritli, to whom Rosenzweig ostensibly dedicated part II of *The Star of Redemption*. The Shulamite is Rosenzweig himself, a female avatar of his own eros, his passion for male authority, passive receptivity, his own desire to be a woman with the force of her own character. Unlike the "womb," her passivity is not unambiguous. The Shulamite's eros is like the young boy's described



by Blüher in the *Männerbund* as equally vinous, radiant, and possessive (*weinhaft, strahlhaft, besitzergreifend*).<sup>26</sup>

As a figure, the Shulamite's identity undergoes a series of subtle textual transpositions. Her first appearance was in female form. She was the beloved soul in part II in a subsection to the chapter on revelation entitled "atonement," which accompanies the "grammar of eros." She then appeared in the analysis of the Song of Songs at the end of the conclusion of the chapter. However, when the Shulamite re-appears in part III, she does so in altered form. A subsection with the exact same title, "atonement," heads the depiction of Yom Kippur in the Judaism chapter. In part II, the Shulamite declared her love for God. Now in part III, the community of men reenacts her avowal. Linked by "atonement," their eros is her eros. In the final transposition, the oblique reference to God's face in part III ("the eyes of his judge") anticipates the consummate appearance of God's face with which Rosenzweig concludes his text. From the Shulamite, the text proceeds to the homosocial Yom Kippur crowd of men, to God kissing Moses mouth to mouth.<sup>27</sup>

While it might be surprising to see Rosenzweig dressed up as a woman, it is less surprising to observe how he dressed up himself and dressed up Jewish thought in exotic garb. In German-Jewish culture one hundred years ago, the orient itself would have appeared as a Jewish identity, both broadly ascribed and assumed in German culture at the fin de siècle. Already in the nineteenth century German Jews were dressing Judaism up like Orientals. In *The History of the Jews*, Graetz will have swooned before the image of romantic Jewish Arabs and the flowering of Jewish poetry in Moorish Spain. Add to this neo-Ottoman synagogue design, the image of Herzl as "Bedouin sheik of the desert" as described by Stefan Zweig, the Orient in Buber, Rosenzweig's own wandering after a young Sephardic boy named Immanuel Noah in Uskub during his military service at the Macedonian front, Else Lasker-Schüler dressed up as Prince Yussef of Thebes, Raschid Bey, the enchanting sheik from Araby who showed up in Berlin and turned out to be an Ukrainian Jew from Baku, Azerbaijan named Lev Nussenbaum. There were also Sarah Bernhardt dressed up as an Egyptian, and Moritz Freud in Arab costume, in addition to Sigmund Freud's Egyptian Moses. German Jews had a rich history of dressing up in oriental drag. The Jewish philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig as a dress-up phenomenon clearly belongs in their distinguished cultural company.

A campy art nouveau figure, the Shulamite belongs to the orient. About this Rosenzweig was aware. Reflecting upon the text itself, the Song of

Songs, Rosenzweig wrote against biblical text critics who sought to separate the figure of the shepherd from the figure of the king in the Song of Songs. They did so in order to press their point about composite biblical authorship. Against the scholarly grain in biblical studies, Rosenzweig writes that only now “it was suddenly discovered that among the peasants of Syria the wedding is celebrated on the analogy of a royal wedding to this day, with the groom as the king and the bride as the royal choice” (200). With this little bit of orientalist ethnographic detail from his own day, Rosenzweig sought to justify the alternating juxtaposition of a single subject in the Bible, the lover, with two figures, shepherd and king. Upon this ethnographic detail, Rosenzweig then cued images from the Song, “like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains,” the Shulamite “dark and comely,” “the tents of Kedar,” and “the curtains of Solomon.”<sup>28</sup>

As soon as Rosenzweig placed revelation at the heart of the Song of Songs, he placed revelation, automatically, given the time and place of his own culture in Germany, into an oriental place or stage setting. We never once left the orient in *The Star of Redemption*. In part I of the text, the passage begins in China and India, which it leaves as it passes through the Islamic East in part II. In part III of *The Star of Redemption*, Judaism as a diaspora constellation (*Gestalt*) floats like an über-world above the history dominated by Occidental Christendom, touching upon the shores of Greece only in order to reject German Idealism. Positioned at the center of the world, where are we? In Syria, in Palestine, in Jerusalem, in the garden at the textual pivot of the revelation chapter, Holy Land, Song of Songs, Holy of Holies, there she is, the orient, in the central chapter of the middle part of Rosenzweig’s text. There is no getting past the orientalism in *The Star of Redemption*, and there is no getting Judaism out of the Orient. Rosenzweig never once left it, or if he did, he did so only in order to follow revelation on its historical path. As Christianity conquers the occident and occidental historical time, Judaism was dressed up theatrically as form of auto-Orientalism as Rosenzweig dressed himself up like a woman.

As pointed out by Marjorie Garber, great theater calls naturalness into question.<sup>29</sup> Great religion does the same thing. The Shulamite is a stage character, the synagogue a theater. The move that couples this hothouse expression of modern religion and human sexuality is made possible by the presence of self-dramatizing figures and by the dissemblance about female figuration. In the transvestite theater that is *The Star of Redemption* and its subsequent transposition into the ritual life of the homosocial congregation

of men, the first central figure on stage is now understood to be a female impersonator. This does nothing to undercut the theological positioning of the text's authority. In fact, it underscores it. Making the same claims about gender as made by Butler, Garber rejects the figure of core identity as a ground for "complex interplay, slippage, and parodic recontextualization of gender markers and gender categories that characterize transvestite fantasy... [T]he transvestite keeps the fantasy in play, though often in a ritualized way, by deploying a rhetoric of *clothing, naming, and performance or acting out*."<sup>30</sup>

Let one think that we're simply playing around with camp, Garber notes that this profoundly serious exploration of borderlines is not a game, not "wholly discretionary, optional, and playful."<sup>31</sup> In part it is a game, just not completely. Nothing less is at stake here than revelation, understood in terms of visual or visionary knowledge and self-knowledge. The declamatory pathos is a means to bring out a visual figure, speaking to the power of language as a form of emergent knowledge. In the emergence out of a self-enclosed type of defiant self or substance, our heroine the Shulamite, our hero Franz Rosenzweig, comes to the knowledge of God, comes to know herself as "soul." Such would be the subject-positioning remarked upon by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her classic study, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, which links coming out of the closet with what she calls "the drama of Jewish self-identification." With her eye on Queen Esther as a "model of highly potent imagination of coming out and its transformative potential," Sedgwick holds up the "[r]evelation of identity in the space of intimate love" as "effortlessly [overturning] an entire... systematic of the natural and the unnatural, the pure and the impure."<sup>32</sup> This is the epistemology of the closet in Jewish philosophy. As traced by Rosenzweig, coming out of the closet here contributes to the emergence from out of our ignorance, from the fact that we know "nothing" about God into knowing "something" about God and about one's own transformed status in relation to God in passionate devotion and giving.

As Sedgwick also notes regarding the book of Esther, there is as well in this instance of Jewish philosophy a "conservative reinscription of gender roles" into a firmly grounded, patriarchal community and gender subordination.<sup>33</sup> The exceptional female mask that is the Shulamite reinforces the strong emphasis upon men, the paterfamilias, and the relationship between old men and young boys. Like Blüher's analysis of male eros, "my Judaism" swings back and forth between home and the community of men. Its account of the Sabbath shifts from the synagogue service to the father at

home. Six days he has worked, attending to his affairs. Now the manservant and maidservant must also rest. "All the house" is free from noise. As for the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, while the meal is eaten at home in a family setting, it compares, not to occasions when men and women mingle, but to those enjoyed in exclusively male fellowship at a monastery, lodge, club, or fraternity. "The sweet, fully ripened fruit of humanity craves the community of man with man."<sup>34</sup> Afterwards, guests from the previous night greet each other in the street. The gesture of greeting evoked by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is matched up to such all-male venues as the military parade, saluting the flag, in review before the commander-in-chief.<sup>35</sup> The collective meal and greeting have turned a heterosocial community into a *Männerbund*.

Garber makes the same point made by Sedgwick. Male cross-dressing does not undermine male elite authority, but confirms and expresses it.<sup>36</sup> Or as Sontag might have easily noted, the esoteric quality of Rosenzweig is not unrelated to its character as camp, characterized as "something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques."<sup>37</sup> None of this is unrelated to male authority, which reigned supreme in his small social circle. It was a harrowing encounter with his dear friend Eugen Rosenstock in 1913 that forced the young Rosenzweig to come to terms with revelation. It was Eugen, along with his cousins Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg, who sought his conversion to Christianity. It was Eugen whose very humanity (*Menschlichkeit*) "tore up my roots," namely Rosenzweig's.<sup>38</sup> While Gritli occupies the more obvious sexual focus, the letters testify to Eugen's magnetic power over Rosenzweig. In an early letter from 1917, Rosenzweig explained to Gritli how for more than seven years, the very noxious friendship (*böses Freundschaftserlebnis*) with Eugen had eaten at him. And while he claimed to actually have felt free from it over the last few years, he confided that a person becomes new only with new people.<sup>39</sup> By this he meant being with Gritli.

Nevertheless, the husband's presence dominates the letters even to Gritli, confirming Sedgwick's insight that "gender asymmetry and erotic triangles" intensify erotic attachments between men. In response to Eugen's discovery of the affair in June 1918, Rosenzweig wrote to Gritli, "[I] have never before loved without any creator-feeling (*Schöpfergefühle*); I have had at no moment with you the feeling of having *made* something in you, let alone *of* you; I have only *found* you, entirely finished, entirely 'already made.' And because you are surely made and somebody must have made you, so have I loved in

you your creator, he who is in heaven and he who is on earth, Eugen.” It was Eugen’s humanity, not Gritli’s, that overflowed to Rosenzweig when her love gave itself to him, and that it was only since meeting her that Rosenzweig’s love for Eugen was complete.<sup>40</sup> A few days later, he insisted, “Eugen must know that he is the master of our love, that it would fall into the abyss were he to turn away.”<sup>41</sup> And then, a few more days later, Rosenzweig sought to describe how he and Eugen had come to lose sight of each other. He had always felt that “in writing to [Gritli] I was writing to him.”<sup>42</sup> Gritli was not the “mistress” of Rosenzweig’s heart (“my heart has no mistress and only one master and against him it rebels”).<sup>43</sup>

Less about sex, the sense is that relation between the two was based more on Rosenzweig’s “identification” with Gritli. To see this more clearly, consider the possible comparison. In a discussion too involved for these pages, Diana Fuss tracks the dream of the butcher’s wife that appears in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. Inverting Freud’s analysis, Fuss describes what she sees to be a homoerotic triangulation between two women around a man. In her reading of Freud’s case, the butcher’s wife identifies with the presumed object of her husband’s desire (namely, with another woman). It is this act of identification that “opens up a space for a forbidden homo-erotic object-choice.”<sup>44</sup> In our case what is relevant is Rosenzweig’s “identification” with Gritli’s desire for Eugen, which opens up a space for Rosenzweig’s erotic attachment to Eugen. In a letter dated December 26, 1919, Rosenzweig explained to Gritli how his cousin Gertrud Oppenheim had come to replace for Rosenzweig his mother, a difficult and psychologically unbalanced woman, whose relationship with her son was strained by bouts of jealousy. In his love for Gritli, he saw first and foremost the feeling for a sister, his “sister soul,” with whom he had grown and suffered in common.<sup>45</sup> Writing soon after his engagement with Edith Hahn, Rosenzweig professed in a letter from January 7, 1920 that his love for his fiancé was “not at all sisterly. The love reaches out over a chasm. Here stands a man and there a woman.” As for Gritli, he alleged, “I never felt with you that I am a man or that furthermore you are a woman, so much do our hearts beat as one. Edith’s and mine beat not at all at the same time. It is painful for me to listen to hers; it must no doubt be painful for her to see mine beat, so must my heart run over in order to wash over hers and so must hers grow...in order to be contained in mine.”<sup>46</sup>

By his own admission here, there was something unconventionally “manly” in this erotic entanglement and identification not just with Gritli but with

“my Judaism” as well. In one crucial respect, the a-rhythmic relationship with Edith, defined by unbridgeable antinomies, mimicked the one with Eugen and his mother, both of whom were jealous of Rosenzweig’s active embrace of Judaism and other women. Indeed, Eugen was not at all pleased by Rosenzweig’s engagement with Edith. In his letter to Eugen from January 15, 1920, Rosenzweig suspected that for Eugen, the engagement with Edith repeated his earlier refusal to convert to Christianity (although it may just be that, in this case, as Rosenzweig went on to suggest, that both Eugen and his mother noticed the same lack of visible joy in his relationship with Edith).<sup>47</sup> The same painful distance characterized Rosenzweig’s relationship with both Eugen and Edith, the same inability of one heart to make room for another. With Eugen and Edith, Rosenzweig was a “man.” But not with Gritli. In the letter to Gritli from January 7, Rosenzweig proceeded to explain that it was Judaism that allowed him and Edith to go together step in step, an explanation that deepens the suspicion that what bound Gritli and Rosenzweig was the jealous master whom they shared together.

“My Judaism” was subject to lines, in this case the one between Gritli and Eugen, between “homoeroticism” and “homosexuality,” which, in the end, as Mosse and Sedgwick point out, remain impossible to control.<sup>48</sup> Strongly drawn to the image of men, Rosenzweig advanced a Judaism that was openly erotic and intensively homosocial, the precise combination that constitutes the homoerotic element to his thinking. The death shroud worn by men in this world directs him away from the women who do not wear it. It is the man at his wedding and at the *seder*, not his wife, who “challenges death and becomes as strong as death.” The exclusion is even more emphatic on Yom Kippur and the sight of man “utterly alone on the day of his death...lonely and naked, straight before the throne of God,” to the “united and lonely pleading of men in their shrouds, men beyond the grave” who constitute “a community of souls.”<sup>49</sup> It is this community of men that has been made possible by the exclusion of women, who are taken for granted, their own presence effaced.

In a gendered body of work from which actual women are explicitly excluded, “man” is more than a generic of human community. Rosenzweig insisted that, “Only man needs to be aware that the Torah is the basis of life. When a daughter is born, the father simply prays that he may lead her to the bridal canopy and to good works. For a woman has this basis of Jewish life without having to learn it deliberately over and over, as the man who is less securely rooted in the depth of nature is compelled to do. According to ancient

law, it is the woman who propagates Jewish blood.”<sup>50</sup> In this sex-differentiated conception, the woman determines the Jewish character of blood in that “her” blood and womb carry “his” seed. She does so in utter passivity and invisibility. Our author has advanced the standard apologetic used to justify the exclusion of women from the study of Torah and its commandments, the all important and active center of Jewish religious life, the one that requires constant deliberation “over and over.” Perhaps he did so not because he hated women, there is surely no indication of that, but because he loved men more.

The more one looks into the image-work of the Shulamite, especially as it cuts across and subverts clearly constructed lines between “men” and “women,” the more one suspects that the point has been to re-establish on pseudo-philosophical grounds a binary construct of ancient law and custom. Its construct has nothing to do with the relational ethics of care or the call to responsibility as postulated by Leora Batnitzky and Claire Katz.<sup>51</sup> It seems much more the case that gender has only muddied for Rosenzweig the ethical lines of relation upon which a more classically construed feminist philosophy depends. The figure of the Shulamite has not so much to do with relational ethics. Rather, she has more in common with the images of violent conflict and severe judgment identified by Batnitzky herself when reading out the relation established by Rosenzweig between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>52</sup>

As for the drifting between male and female voices in the Song of Songs, Katz notes the way in which “the roles of giver and receiver of love go back and forth.” Except they do so in ways that are even more confusing than Katz imagines.<sup>53</sup> The marks that define gender difference are not always easy to read. Indeed, the very misidentification regarding gender and relational ethics in *The Star of Redemption* underscores the tricky nature of reading for gender in a text like this, one which is equally conceptual and theatrical. A feminist relational ethics of care will get lost in this kind of performance, one which presents a pattern of thought in which “men” turn into “women” and “women” turn into “men,” but where the valence is dominated always by men, including the author himself who masquerades as women in order to draw close to his lover’s husband. Much more than relational ethics, Sontag’s notes on camp cut close to the bone of the performative-conceptual work driving *The Star of Redemption*. The Shulamite’s dialogue with her lover in tandem with the rites of the lonely crowd of naked men under their prayer shawls on Yom Kippur contributes to the sense of unnatural artifice observed by Sontag about camp – unnatural in its exaggeration, disengaged, and meta-ethical.<sup>54</sup> Whether it be the Shulamite or the lonely crowd of naked men on

Yom Kippur or the mask work at the end of the *The Star of Redemption*, the emphasis on form, texture and sensual surface, not relational ethics, proves to be the true content of revelation.

The hot campy eros of the Shulamite has been transferred over to the homosocial space of the synagogue. It turns that most heightened liturgical moment of Jewish seriousness, Yom Kippur, back into drag. Butler's fundamental point holds even and especially here – in modern Jewish philosophy and its reflection on Yom Kippur, what Emil Fackenheim once called “the apex of revelation.” As per Butler, the gendering of revelation is constituted by the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts with a highly rigid regulatory frame, congealing over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.<sup>55</sup> As if to prove Butler's precise point, the gender trouble in evidence in *The Star of Redemption* has to do with just how uncongealed this female figure in fact is. A closer look at the Shulamite reveals that there is nothing natural at work here, the whole performance being over the top. “Real” women, “the woman” is sorely a disappointment, giving way to the community of men who supersede her. This has everything to do with what Sontag identified with camp, “the off, of things-being-what-they-are-not.”<sup>56</sup>

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Does this particular form of gender displacement in *The Star of Redemption* signify what Butler wants it to be – “a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization ... [depriving] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities”?<sup>57</sup> In the case at hand, that might be too much to hope for, as the question depends upon what kind of use these uncouplings produce. While I can say nothing about the future of Jewish thought and philosophy, its history is no place for women. As soon as you think you have caught sight of a woman, she's gone. One should have seen this coming. This suggestion by Butler seems right to the point. Understanding that there is no place outside a representational field, the task at hand is critical genealogy.<sup>58</sup> But how “serious” do we need to be if, looking back to Sontag, we want to subvert the categorical divide between “Jewish moral seriousness” and “homosexual irony,” and what is to happen to Jewish philosophical concepts if they turn out to be not so “serious” after all?

Let's assume for the moment with Shapiro that philosophical contents are



inseparable from the surfaces upon which they play. It would be then that the instability of the surface in Rosenzweig's text signifies, for all that this text has meant for modern Jewish thought, the conceptual instability at the heart of Jewish philosophical and religious thought. Indeed, a fundamental query for Rosenzweig, as it was for Buber, has to do with the character of the signs that mediate revelation. As Rosenzweig asks about the Song of Songs and other texts of revelation, are these the word of God or the word of "man," to which we might add, the word of "man" or the figure of "a woman"? What might have once seemed clearly "serious" now longer looks that way. What is one to make of critical concepts like "revelation," "redemption," "community," "messianism," and "eschatology" now that we understand them to be not just performative, but also "over the top"? Perhaps one can now read these things with a little suspicion or smile. All modern religion and modern Jewish philosophy are as much a performative masquerading as they are the careful deliberation of concepts. Are these the words of God or the words of "man" dressed up as "woman"? There is no way to verify any answer to this question. The concepts will appear in self-styling shapes. They appear not in relation to anything "real," but rather in relation to images, groups of images and to other concepts whose relation to reality is at best tenuous. They are no more solid than the play of gender in Rosenzweig's text.

This is not to say that these concepts are not serious. They are very serious, if not "morally" serious. They enjoy the seriousness conveyed instead by a little "homosexual irony." There is indeed something comic about how seriously Jewish philosophy takes itself vis-à-vis the ethical, political, or theological positions assumed by any given author, and even more amusing when that author is Rosenzweig. As a discipline, Jewish philosophy seems constitutionally unable to distinguish between posture (without which there is no such thing as discourse) and mere posing (of which there is too much). It's the hiding behind hermeneutics and the utter seriousness by which positions are staked that compares so unfavorably with rabbinic practice, or at least with the methodological approach by some of its best contemporary students. One example would be the stance taken by Rachel Adler in *Engendering Judaism*. Writing about the rabbis and rabbinic misogyny, she came to the surprising conclusion that these things were in some way funny. When Adler writes about the homosocial world of the rabbis, what she says could just as easily apply to Rosenzweig: "their homosocial world, their frantic scramble to preserve a patriarchal power they see as infinitely fragile, their own sense of mutilation as patriarchs,

their reconstruction of their own longings for the outcast Other as a terrifying appetite the Other turns upon them. All that we initially concealed and repressed and reversed is naked here. All that was banished and yet haunted them unceasingly.”<sup>59</sup> Rather than “identify” with her object, Adler laughs at them with a laugh that is gentle, not cruel.

Should Jewish philosophy identify with its object, in this case with Franz Rosenzweig as an emblematic figure? With Rosenzweig looked at through the prism of camp, Jewish philosophy might want to do the same as Adler by laughing at its object with the same deft touch showed by her. Viewed as a whole, Jewish philosophy has yet to learn the virtue of a little “homosexual irony,” a little surface irregularity, a wink and nod and tongue in cheek expression. Jewish philosophy has been too morally serious for that, too butch, and not always necessarily to its own good. Overinvested in categories and concepts, Jewish philosophers tend to hyper-moralize, which is a further reason why it sometimes seems that few people outside the field take the discipline seriously, if they know anything about it all. With a few notable exceptions, there has been practically no critical attention to “rhetoric” in contemporary Jewish philosophy, and very little understanding of its art, be it subversive or constructive. And yet, we know that Jewish philosophers like Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Rosenzweig himself were steeped in the art and culture of their own place and time in Germany one hundred years ago.

One final word – what Sontag calls pure camp is always “naïve,” “unintentional,” and “dead serious,” whereas “[c]amp which knows itself to be camp (‘camping’) is usually less satisfying.” But even here, the seriousness in naïve camp is “a seriousness that fails.”<sup>60</sup> About this failure in Rosenzweig, the heavy philosophical hand and conceptual gesticulations, contemporary Jewish philosophy should contend with the seriousness and irony that his book, *The Star of Redemption*, both entails and demands. Like pure camp, *The Star of Redemption* constitutes itself as an “art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much.’” As Sontag understood, the objects prized by Art Nouveau and other forms of camp taste are always “old-fashioned, out-of-date, and *démodé*.”<sup>61</sup> This is true of Rosenzweig’s identification with the Shulamite, or with his sister Gritli. It is also true of our own philosophical attraction, as contemporary Jewish philosophers, who so often would seek to see ourselves in and as the old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé* figure from the first quarter of the twentieth century... Franz Rosenzweig.

There is something deeply non-actual, or virtual in the variety of images that captivated German-Jewish philosophers. In Hermann Cohen's chapter on prayer in *Religion of Reason*, prayer is identified with lyric poetry as the dialectical de-idealization of the idea whose purpose is to suffuse the real with ideality. In the more full-blooded German-Jewish philosophy of Buber and Rosenzweig, figures like "the Orient" or "the Shulamite" are supposed "to realize" their object, be it "the Jew" or "God's presence," to give it a form or *Gestalt*, to make the object more "real" and in the world, as opposed to ideal. But it's not so simple. A virtual Judaism realized in dressed up figures works against the very principle of "realization" for which they are employed. These figures make the projects of liberal Judaism or post-liberal German-Jewish renaissance all the more non-actual, fantastic, and lyrical. For as much as they wanted to situate figures Jewish life or religious life, even the presence of God, in the real, physical world of space and time, what comes out in the end is the recognition of how steeped in the non-actual the actual actually is. In Rosenzweig's case, the more real he tried to be, the less real the result. It is the unreality of the real in his work and in the German-Jewish philosophical tradition that continues to animate its concepts and its discourse.

### Notes

- 1 Susan Shapiro, "A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy" in: Naomi Zack (et al.), *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions* (Blackwell, 1998), 212.
- 2 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1961), 276.
- 3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 1.
- 4 Sontag, 290.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 277.
- 6 Franz Rosenzweig, *Die "Gritli" Briefe* (Tübingen: Bilam Verlag, 2002), 124.
- 7 Franz Rosenzweig, *Franz Rosenzweig's "The New Thinking"*, edited and translated by Alan Udoff and Barnbara E. Galli (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 92-3.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 83.
- 10 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translated by William W. Hallo (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1970), 176.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 173-185.

- 12 Ibid., 177.
- 13 Ibid., 202-3.
- 14 Ibid., 71.
- 15 Ibid., 156 (emphasis added).
- 16 Ibid., 159.
- 17 Ibid., 160.
- 18 Ibid., 179.
- 19 Ibid., 202.
- 20 Ibid., 3.
- 21 Ibid., 175.
- 22 Ibid., 175, 177, 183.
- 23 Ibid., 179, 180, 182, 183, 184.
- 24 George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), 44.
- 25 Hans Blüher, *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft*, vol.II (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1919-1920), 38.
- 26 Ibid., 39.
- 27 Maimonides used the image of the kiss (*Guide of the Perplexed* III: 51) to symbolize the philosophically perfected soul at its death as it unites with the Active Intellect. His use of the image speaks *against* sensation. Any sexual trace has been so radically sublimated as to bear no reference to any human facet.
- 28 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 202-3.
- 29 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 40.
- 30 Ibid., 134.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 75-6.
- 33 Ibid., 81-2.
- 34 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 316, 315.
- 35 Ibid., 322-23.
- 36 Garber, 66.
- 37 Sontag, 275.
- 38 Rosenzweig, *Die "Gritli" Briefe*, 105.
- 39 Ibid., 17-8.
- 40 Ibid., 105.
- 41 Rosenzweig, *Die "Gritli" Briefe*, 106.
- 42 Ibid., 108, cf. 113. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), chapter 1. See especially Michael Zank, "The Rosenzweig-Rosenstock Triangle, Or, What Can We Learn from *Letters to Gritli?: A Review Essay*" in *Modern Judaism*, 23 (2003). In his thorough and excellent analysis of the letters, Michael Zank notes the "virtual exchangeability of the [parties]" (80). For more on the critical role played by Rosenstock in the affair, see Zank, 79-84.
- 43 Rosenzweig, *Die "Gritli" Briefe*, 505.

- 44 Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 29.
- 45 Rosenzweig, *Die "Gritli" Briefe*, 509.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 524.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 528-9.
- 48 George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 60, 67.
- 49 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 327.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 326.
- 51 Leora Batnitzky, "Dependency and Vulnerability: Jewish and Feminist Existentialist Constructions of the Human," in: Hava Tirosh-Samuels (ed.), *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 127-52; Katz, 81.
- 52 Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapter 6.
- 53 Katz, 82, 170n.15.
- 54 Sontag, 255, 277.
- 55 Butler, 33.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 279.
- 57 Butler, 138.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 59 Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) 16-7.
- 60 Sontag, 282-3.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 284-5.