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No Place for Old Women, or Young Women Either

First, let me express my gratitude to Zak and Mara, both of whom I know, and Gesine, whom I do not know, for writing such wonderfully provocative essays, and to Susan Shapiro for inviting me to respond to them. What I found most interesting about all three papers is how they circle around the same theme: love and gender in Rosenzweig's *Star* are not what they appear to be. Before I begin my more detailed comments, I would like to offer a few initial observations. All of the papers focus on the Second Book. Most interesting is how each author sees something just slightly different from the others, which then yields a lovely new reading – as if one took a panoramic shot and we are given three different slices of that panorama. The two women writers confess at the very beginning of their papers how much Rosenzweig's book bothered them. Mara confides, "*The Star of Redemption* has annoyed, even disturbed, me since I first read it" (10). She admits that she chose instead to focus on Rosenzweig's later works and simply avoid *The Star* altogether. Gesine sees her approach to the text as a parallel task to the one Rosenzweig set for himself. Recognizing that Rosenzweig pushed his way through the anti-Judaism of the texts he was reading and the times in which he was living, so too, Gesine will approach head on the sexism of the same texts. We might call this a Nietzschean approach: that which doesn't kill me will make me stronger. Thankfully, both Gesine and Mara, each in her own way, address *The Star* directly – or we would certainly be missing two significant voices and two provocative readings of that book. Zak's approach, though different from the one offered by Mara and Gesine, nonetheless signals a discomfort with the sexism embedded in the text. Zak addresses this disturbing feature by taking it to its logical conclusion and winds up reading the narrative not only *as* but also *through* the aesthetic style of camp – that is, he reads the narrative as performance. Although all three writers expressly admit their discomfort with how the second book of *The Star* is written, they are nonetheless motivated to address that discomfort in very different, yet very illuminating ways. My initial difficulty in responding to the three pieces was an organizational puzzle: In what order would my response make the

most sense? I decided on Palmer, Braiterman, and then Benjamin – but this might change by the end.

In her essay, Palmer intends to make sense of the gap between life and work. She uses the lover-beloved relationship as the prism through which to consider this gap, or maybe more aptly, as a way to bridge the gap. She turns to the correspondence, now known as the Gritli letters, to reveal not only that Rosenzweig had not forgotten – or given up – on Gritli, but also to reveal the ways in which this memory pushes into the philosophical text. Indeed, where the text is in a sense Rosenzweig's response to Christianity – his apologia for not converting to Christianity – the text may also serve as a response to his friend, Eugen Rosenstock, not only the Christian who was once a Jew but also the man whose wife Rosenzweig still loves (we might not need to turn to Zak's essay – the campiness is already apparent). Palmer observes, "It is true first for the beloved that love is as strong as death. Moreover, nature has given only the woman, and not the man, the capacity to die of love."[1] Palmer's investigation into the role of gender reveals a parallel structure to what Rosenzweig did with regard to the anti-semitism in the texts he was reading (30). Palmer writes, "And here, our subjects cross: At the center of his resistance against Rosenstock's permanent pressing towards conversion, is Rosenzweig's definition, description and speaking of love – the very *leitmotif* of Christian religion, if you believe its believers. Love, with Rosenzweig, seems to have been both at the same time: a heartfelt real love and a weapon in a fight, a means of resistance or even more. In attempting to describe his struggle with Eugen Rosenstock in work and life, we might feel tempted to state that in life he lost the fight he won in philosophy" (30). In other words, the book signifies as much more than as a text about Jewish philosophy – and Judaism's triumph over Christianity insofar as Christianity needs Judaism in order for Christianity to be meaningful. That is, in spite of Christianity's claims to superseding Judaism, Rosenzweig establishes the utter dependence of Christianity on Judaism. On another level, however, the book also reveals what Rosenzweig lost in love.

Using the Gritli letters and several sections from book two of *The Star*, Palmer persuasively makes her case. The dueling religions become a metaphor for the duel between two men fighting for the love of one woman. If one reads *The Star* as only about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, the book reads rather benignly. There is no poke or jab at Christianity; only the obvious – Judaism creates the base, or foundation

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– even the content, and thus Christianity needs Judaism to exist. But if one looks below the surface, one sees something more prickly than what is initially apparent. Palmer writes, "I am not going to start a revolution here. However, I think that in all of the harmony there remains a point of disagreement, a point of disturbance, a remnant of remnants, that still says *no* to the smooth resolution of the affair, to the fate of the good sick man, and to death itself" (31). The imagery however is not so neat – it is not consistent, and it does not only refer to two lovers. Palmer observes that on occasion Rosenzweig writes to Gritli as though he feels that he were her child, and it is a child who demands that unconditional love. Just as Freud identified, our first trauma is the realization that when we cry for the mother, she does not come – she has other interests. And yet in the end Palmer reads much of the text of *The Star* as the expression of the unfulfilled love between Rosenzweig and Gritli. Indeed, she insightfully writes of the complicated intertwining of lives not only playing a role in this love story/triangle but also in the Jewish-Christian relationships:

> Had Gritli – in real life – spoken her love and decided in favor of Franz as her husband, this could have been seen as a plain victory and a real change. Eugen, the Jew, "one of the best," as Rosenzweig was convinced, who had been lost to Christianity not for pragmatic reasons in an anti-Semitic society but because he was a real believer, would lose his Christian wife to the very Jew whom he had urged in vain to convert to Christianity. It would be a victory won not in plain rivalry, but in the middle of love! To fulfill the very moment of love and revelation emphasized in the centerpiece of the *Star*, it was all in Gritli's hand. She held the key to the "*Bewährung*" of love – and maybe, she could thus have converted or even inverted their "sinful" relationship into a matter of redemption (43).

And yet, the affair was neither fulfilled nor concluded. Instead, their affair, like the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, continued, bringing happiness and suffering to all the participants caught in its grip. When Rosenzweig moved from writing the second to the third part of the book, he wrote to her:

> I am going on to write in this half numbness so that I can hardly remember what I have written, but it all grows together nicely. But I long for you much more than I did when writing II 2. When I wrote that it was all the while as if you were with me when I was writing, that was beautiful. Now you are not with me when I'm writing, so I have to see you otherwise during the day (43).[2]

Palmer concludes that the *Star* "is still definitely a love letter, and still definitely a letter of a love, which is very much an imaginary love, as the lovers don't share much real time together. But the imagination of fusion and permanent presence has given way to the language of longing – which both presupposes and includes knowledge about the reality of distance" (43). Where Rosenzweig failed in fulfilling his affair with Gritli, he triumphed over Eugen in his relationship to Judaism .

Turning to Zak Braiterman's piece, we can see a parallel theme to Gesine's insofar as he tends to the layers of the book that typically go unnoticed. Zak remarks that the claims Susan Shapiro makes in her classic essay, "A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy," could easily have come from Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp." Thus, using Sontag's essay, Braiterman considers the way that reading gender in Rosenzweig's *Star* might be more effectively understood if read through camp. Hiding in plain sight, to use Zak's expression, is the Shulamite, the female lover in the Song of Songs. She is the beloved. She is at once obvious and hidden, central and yet ignored. And yet, Zak asks, "Is she a woman? Do women even exist in *The Star*?" (54) Zak rightly identifies a significant difficulty with reading for gender not only in *The Star*, but also more generally in Jewish philosophy. Now that we understand just how destabilizing the category of gender is, how does one read for gender, when gender itself is a moving target? Yet, in spite of this point, or maybe in light of it, Zak also insightfully suggests that the masculine image apparent in *The Star* is drawn in contrast to the figure of the woman, noting that "her desire represents the author's own desire for the homosocial community of men." He continues, "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 then 'the woman' disappears. Her appearance is more representation, an illusion, than anything real" (54).

After asking how a female figure in Jewish philosophy might look, Zak turns to Sontag's work for help. "Camp", as Sontag identifies it, is an aesthetic phenomenon. It does not refer to beauty per se, but rather to a stylization of appearance – often a hyper-stylization. Sontag's focus when she offered examples of camp was not Jewish philosophy. Her description nonetheless allows Zak to include the way Jewish philosophy deals with gender as an example of his own. Indeed, this reading provides an original contribution to this field. If, as Sontag suggests, the most "refined form of

sexual attractiveness" is when gender is bent, when the hyper-masculine is feminine and the hyper-feminine is masculine, then, as Zak suggests, the Shulamite is the perfect example of this point.

In one section, Zak remarks that my own reading of Rosenzweig on this point is understated, not expressing the depth of this relationship and this inversion of gender. Yet, my reading of Rosenzweig here was a starting point for examining Levinas's appropriation of Rosenzweig's reading of the Song of Songs for his description of love – eros – in his 1961 book, *Totality and Infinity*. And yet, here is where the connection between the two books becomes even more fascinating. The inversion of gender that Zak identifies in *The Star*, I identified not only in *Totality and Infinity* but as a running theme in all of Levinas's works.

In a strangely parallel move, the same can be said of the woman in Levinas's project as a whole. Where for Zak, the subtext of the *Star* is a love story, and more specifically a love triangle, with Gritli as the lover, the seductive mistress, and Edith, the plain woman, the wife, Raissa, Levinas's wife, plays both roles. But the plain woman and the lover, if you will, play different roles in Levinas's text, even if they are played by the same woman. The wife, *la femme*, creates the home, the domicile for the man who becomes the ethical subject. At the end of *Totality and Infinity*, in the section titled, "Beyond the Face," the description of eros plays a role in the move to the ethical relationship and the political community. The abundance and overflowing of love leads to the birth of the child, not in a moralistic, puritanical way, but rather in a structural way. The abundance of love needs a place to go and it needs to find a way to make itself permanent. There is evidence from the recently published war notebooks that Levinas was writing a love story during his years in the P.O.W. camp. Although *Totality and Infinity* is unmistakably a philosophy book and a book that expresses an ethical project, there is the camp subtext of a love story that runs through it. And in the same way that Zak reads Sontag's claim about gender-bending, gender-swapping, and sexuality within Jewish philosophy, so too do we find this theme in Levinas's project. Levinas is clear that virility needs to be tempered, that the masculine needs to become more feminine. I read Levinas's ethical project as progressing such that the ethical relationship, in particular, the ethical subject had no choice but to be defined in terms of the feminine – and in a relationship that was distinctly feminine – e.g., the maternal body. Thus, in a sense, the woman in Levinas's project becomes both more and less instantiated. No longer simply a gendered trait, the feminine, the ethical is now the maternal

body – unmistakably a woman, even if not all women. The masculine, the male ethical subject, is now feminized, in drag.

Thus in contrast to Mara's paper, the ethical relation that Levinas describes is not mothering, it is not like mothering. Indeed, even though Levinas uses the simile, and maybe precisely because he uses the simile – we are all to be like the maternal body – he falls even deeper into the campy camp than Rosenzweig. Levinas's ethical project takes Jewish philosophy to its furthest point and declares that the most ethical posture to take is for men to become like women – to be in [ethical] drag. Let me then turn to Mara's paper where she takes up the theme of love, in contrast to eros, in Rosenzweig's *Star*.

Mara begins her paper with the following claim: "Many scholars have assumed that one of the major themes of the *Star* is love. I must disagree. I do not think that love is what we find in the *Star*. The famous trope in the middle section of the second part of the *Star* is not a discourse of 'love' but rather of a violent and dominating eros" (11). Mara then expresses her concern that this particular reading – love over eros – may occlude viewing other central relationships. As a result, Mara's paper refocuses our attention so that we re-read the book through eros in order to see what interpretations this particular kind of relationship yields. Using the language of intersubjectivity, common to many post-Hegelian 20th century European philosophers, Mara alters the conversation to have us consider a very particular intersubjective relationship, namely, one of maternal love and maternal practice (12). She suggests that turning our attention in this direction will reveal the limits to particular conventional readings of *The Star*'s central section. Mara circumscribes her analysis to agency and volition and then asymmetry in relationship to maternal intersubjectivity. She then turns her examination to the *Star*. Using Sara Ruddick's landmark book, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Mara explains how maternal care is neither the result of biological determinism nor is it a simplistic social construct.[3] Because it eludes both of these constraints, it is ripe for philosophical examination. What is it and what makes it distinctive? Using various examples of mothers and children, Mara recites the argument for volition and agency as central to maternal care. In the example Mara cites, the mother recognizes this wish and places herself in a situation where she believes she would be less likely to fulfill it – thus enacting an almost Kantian morality to resist her inclination. The example richly demonstrates the complexity of maternal love – not operating on

unmediated instinct, but rather mediated reflection (14-15). As Mara notes, this kind of love is not known in its immediacy, thus setting it in opposition to the love that Rosenzweig offers.

As Mara observes, the view offered here of course also speaks to the less treated topic of maternal violence – or the wish to harm a child and how a mother might or might not overcome that wish. In an interesting twist on this feature of maternal care, Mara suggests that in this sense, all motherhood is adoptive. That is, rather than accept the distinction between "natural" progeny and those we adopt, which often leads to a discussion of biological instinct and "learned" care, Mara's reading of Ruddick suggests that all maternal care is adoptive – we all choose to act in particular ways toward our children, regardless of whether we birthed them or adopted them. All maternal activity is then a variation on a mediated, reflective, willed activity, speaking to the agency of the mother.

Mara next turns her attention to asymmetry in the maternal relationship. She argues that while on some level the relationship is clearly asymmetrical – if there is not at least one mother caring for a young child, the child is likely to die – the mutual exchange or influence must also be acknowledged. Even if we acknowledge the kind of transformation that each party undergoes, we can still acknowledge that the influence is dynamic and not unidirectional. Yet, given the previous discussion of agency and volition, we must also acknowledge that as a parent knows her child, she might also refuse "to meet her child." Such is the beauty and horror of maternal care.

Mara's concern then is how the central section of the *Star*, typically read as love, is really a description of eros that cannot be separated from domination (17). And here, given the theological underpinnings of this text, the relationship cannot be separated from God. On Mara's reading, the potential disappointment results from an inadequacy or disappointment in the relationship between human and human – this is not the contact for which the soul has been yearning. Thus, Mara notes that the encounter with the other in the *Star* does not yield fecundity, as we find in Levinas's reading of eros. Instead, she argues that Zak Braiterman's reading gives way precisely to a homosocial community of men, that is, a community that on its own, without women at all, would not reproduce. As an aside, one might say that this is far from what was intended in the story of creation. The gift or creation of the woman, while disruptive and read as the means for a punishment, in actuality provides the means for reproduction – something that was not clear could happen for the hermaphrodite. The

gift that keeps on giving, if you will. Mara sides with Zak on the "darker", less sanguine reading of the *Star* – the eros of revelation is violent. And I would add that if it is, as Zak suggests, moving toward the homosocial community of men, and only men, the theology here is also apocalyptic.

Mara's essay is most powerful in her interpretation of the fundamental power relations present when we read the central section of the *Star* as a discussion of eros and not of love. The male is active and divine while the female is acquiescent and merely human. There is no way out of the domination that must condition this particular relationship. In conclusion, Mara suggests that "we would do well to hold the *Star*'s intersubjectivity up to an intersubjectivity that begins not in exercises of erotic power but rather in the care and responsibility adults exercise toward young children. I believe an expansive notion of love and revelation that includes and foregrounds the maternal can and should help us redraw Rosenzweig's concepts of agency and asymmetry and find a more salutary space between the divine and the terrestrial" (22).

In spirit, I agree with Mara's conclusion. But we may find other problems with this approach. Mara's earlier example from Ruddick illustrates the mother who wishes something bad – to harm her child – and takes steps to mitigate that bad action. Not all mothers do this. That is, where the example works to show volition and agency, it also must serve the possible scene where a mother does not take those precautions – willfully or not. And we must be careful not to describe that woman as crazy lest we fall back into biological determinism. In other words, while I am sympathetic to Mara's position, I also know that we must be careful about the essentializing turn that such a position can take – and in taking this turn, undermine the very position she wished to outline initially, the mediated reflective posture that mothering involves. Indeed, we need only look to the feminist response to Levinas's work when he included the maternal image – and here he included it as a simile likening the ethical relationship to the maternal body. The response was swift and direct that Levinas had crossed the line of essentialism. And yet, in many ways, his project is exactly as Zak describes of Rosenzweig, and in some ways, he avoids the traps that Mara sees. The ethical relationship, though it undeniably involves something divine, is clearly a relationship between humans. The ethical obligation is from one human to another, even if sparked or initiated or provided a warrant by the divine. That said, the description that Levinas offers from beginning to end, moves from a feminine description to the feminine

itself – one is hard-pressed to find a more precise image of a woman than a maternal body, even if not all women become maternal bodies. Indeed, as I mentioned above, the concept of drag squarely fits Levinas's ethical project, which led me to ask Zak, after reading his paper, if all modern Jewish philosophy is not some version of drag – where else is Jewish philosophy to go in its opposition to the autonomous, virile male of western Europe? I do not know the answer, but these three papers have provoked me to continue thinking about the question.

Toward the end of his essay, Zak writes, "While I can say nothing about the future of Jewish thought and philosophy, its history is no place for women […] 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'?[4] […] 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"[5] (68). And then later he writes, "Should Jewish philosophy identify with its object, in this case with Franz Rosenzweig as an emblematic figure? With Rosenzweig viewed through the prism of camp, Jewish philosophy might want to mimic Rachel 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" (70). The examinations of the *Star* offered by all three writers ask us to consider – is Jewish philosophy a discipline for women? And if so, how?

Notes

1 *The Star of Redemption*, trans B Galli, 169.
2 Letter from November 21rst 1918, Rühle/Mayer 2002, 197.
3 Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 40.
4 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 138.
5 Ibid., 5.