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What Do We Owe Rosenzweig?

At this point, it is safe to assume that Rosenzweig will not be dislodged from the canon in the near future. I contest neither his place there nor the place of *The Star of Redemption* among his achievements. I seek to challenge, instead, the nature of the authority this status confers. Must it exert an authority that, like Rosenzweig's God, forces the individual into relationship, perhaps against her will, through the sheer exercise of power? If so, the range of possible responses on the reader's part is restricted to compliance or resistance. Or might we imagine the authority as that of an anchor, or of gravity itself, that tethers us to a place and to a set of questions and ideas? This kind of power, inexorable as it may be, nonetheless enables a certain range of motion that is inaccessible in structures of domination.

The hagiographical approach to Rosenzweig that characterizes the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of *The Star of Redemption* in the United States indicates the need to distinguish between two sensibilities that orient the approaches to this text and its author. The first of these sensibilities acknowledges no debt to Rosenzweig beyond the imperative to analyze him, an obligation that derives from his stature in the canon. Historicist scholarship remains the foundational tool with which we make sense of the past, and thus of the *Star* and Rosenzweig himself. In historicist scholarship, we bring our full critical faculties to bear by analyzing the circumstances, the conventions, the particular range of intellectual options that characterize the book's substance. When we apply this method today, we do not encounter the same text presented by Will Herberg or Nahum Glatzer, or any of the other figures who translated Rosenzweig into "American Jewish" a half century or more ago. Instead, we are just as likely to encounter the strange concoction that is the *Star*. The text, viewed through historicist lenses, appears as the product of a robust, eccentric imagination, one marinated in a little too much German Idealism and bourgeois male privilege and then seared by a complicated, unfulfillable erotic longing. So too may we regard the theocentrism we encounter in the *Star*, which remains a powerful testimony to the imagination of its author and to a

particular kind of theological discourse in which he was immersed, but does not demand fealty for that reason.

The question of *value* the *Star* bequeaths for the present and future of Jewish thought and for individuals is distinct from the intellectual-historical one. It happens to be a question that I find compelling and which, I think, has been at the heart of the scholarly – no less than the public – reception of the *Star*. A sensibility oriented toward this question invites the scholarly reader to weigh the central theological, philosophical, and ethical claims of the *Star* as if they were addressed to her, and as if her evaluation of them matters. Kavka refers to this approach as according to oneself “the right to set the terms of which reading Rosenzweig is, or would be, worthwhile.” Indeed. But should this trouble us? If Rosenzweig’s particular understanding of God and of God’s place is the tapestry born not only of his immersion in German Idealism but also born of his knowledge of love, does that not demonstrate what might emerge when others generate their own knowledge of the divine and its operations? And why not then allow for a process of calibration, in which one’s own knowledge and that of Rosenzweig engage in a mutually affecting encounter, with the possibility that critique as well as endorsement may result? To affirm the right of refusal as well as confirmation is not to declare the death of theocentrism. Rather, it is to call into question the sufficiency of a definition of theocentrism that never was nor could ever truly be theocentric. In the most optimistic reading of the postmodern condition, we can only hope for a dialectical relationship between the knower and the known, the theologian and the theology.

The point that Katz raises regarding the danger of essentializing “the maternal” is well taken, but not in principle a challenge to the practice of reading I recommend to those who wish to evaluate what we find in the *Star*. Maternal practice is fundamentally ambiguous; the capacity for inflicting harm, as Katz rightly notes, must be included alongside the work of what Ruddick called the “protective love” that is core to maternity and the kinds of philosophical commitments it facilitates. Once again, then, the task is evaluative and not only descriptive: What kinds of relationships to the Other do we call ethical? Where do we look to find them? Perhaps Rosenzweig’s most useful insight – if we can rescue the *Star* from sanctimony – is that there are relationships that are generative even as they inflict violence, and that we participate in just such relationships with other human beings no less than we might with God.

The task of engaging the *Star* explicitly with regard to its ongoing value for the contemporary reader – one I do not presume to be obligatory for any interpreter – is not to replace hagiographical reverence with castigation. Rather, it is to become conscious of the limitations of an important text and then to *use* it, just as D.W. Winnicott described a child’s “use” of an object as the productive work that occurs after her “destruction” of it.¹ Here I am in agreement with Kafka’s felicitous formulation of this “use” in terms of *Federkraft*, in which the scholar determines her own authority by reacting to the strength imposed by others. What we “owe” Rosenzweig, in this sense, is neither outright acquiescence nor rebellion. We might better acknowledge both the gravitational pull of this particular *Star* and the distance – for us, the distance of a century – that its light must now traverse to reach us.

Note

- 1 D.W. Winnicott, “The Use of an Object,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 50 (1969).