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The True, the Real, and the Constructed. Response to Claire Katz and Martin Kavka

It has been a great honor and pleasure to write a contribution for this issue of *Bamidbar* on Gender and Rosenzweig. As I am obviously the only author who is neither Jewish nor (in spite of some years of considerable activity in the field) professionally anchored in Jewish philosophy as an academic studies subject, I felt a particular challenge when dealing with the process of editing and adjusting to the demands and challenges of the editors as well as of the other authors. I wish to thank you all for this opportunity. I learned a lot from your contributions and also from the entire process of debate that began with *Susan Shapiro* and *Willi Goetschel* commenting on my draft and certainly doesn't end with this response.

After having considered the response given by *Claire Katz* and *Martin Kavka* and read the essays written by *Mara Benjamin* and *Zak Braiterman*, I am sure there is one presupposition that makes up my difference to the other essays and responses: To me, raised as a Lutheran protestant, Rosenzweig was not canonical. Neither was he supposed to be an authority. Hence, this part of the problem, which occupies a lot of the other contributions, seems to me strange.¹ At first reading, some 30 years ago, Rosenzweig helped me lift from over my head a mountain of Christian theology that albeit always seemed to have already been there, like Mount Sinai in the *drasha* evoked by *Benjamin* in her essay and reiterated by Martin Kavka in his response. Rosenzweig was the author who convinced me that Christian superiority is not granted philosophically. I liked to take notice of alternatives to what had presented to me as given till then – as Rosenzweig must have liked many of Rosenstock's ideas, which helped him stand up against an all overwhelming Hegelianism and transcendental idealism. At the same time, Rosenzweig seemed to demand self-sacrifice for love's sake, alas only for women – in the way that Rosenstock demanded Rosenzweig to sacrifice his Judaism, alas only Judaism, whereas his Christian belief had to remain in honor. At this point, *Katz* is right: I see a parallel in the struggles.

Kavka, in his response, states that the three of us challenge more than the authority of Rosenzweig as a canonical author, and in dismissing the

hagiographic talk on Rosenzweig, we challenge “not just theocentrism, but divine revelation itself.” This seems, at first sight, to somehow delegitimize what both Benjamin and I did, though in oppositional ways: to introduce the language of parenting into the interpretation of Rosenzweig’s work. But in the end of his response, Kavka goes even further than we do. He does not only use the language of parenting in order to make sense of the “heartbook” of the *Star* – but draws the entire business of interpreting “canonical texts” from the nursery into the realm of scholarship. He ends up justifying both canon and the scholarly challenging of it by the idea of developing a child/student to autonomy *through* the heteronomy of canonical teaching.

Okay, so far. But then the question arises: What is external to what, what develops out of what, what is in, what is out? Am I *in* a psycho-biographical discourse and ready to value Rosenzweig because of his perceptiveness for the latter (as Kavka claims I do)? Is Rosenzweig really *in* a theological discourse that of right could be labeled as theocentric? I take recourse to *Zak Braiterman’s* essay here, for a moment, because he shows us how far you can go, once you take gender-constructivism à la Butler as a starting point. From a psychoanalytical point of view, I’d fully agree with his argument that “the Shulamit” is a male fantasy, a mask for Rosenzweig himself, rather than a “real woman.” Certainly, Gritli was, in psychoanalytical terms, hardly more than a catalyzing force to strengthen and heal the homoerotic bonds between Franz and Eugen. But then: How can one, in all this fluidity, conceive of a real woman anyway? That could smash my point: If there is no real woman anyway, I wouldn’t have to bother with the Gritli-story nor with the gendering of the question of “Dying for Love” at all.

Here, my point comes in again, first from a strict philosophical angle: If there is anything about Rosenzweig’s work that makes it relevant *beyond* an inner circle of Jewish tradition alone (and hence relevant for an outsider like me), it is his defense of the singular real person. The crying “Me” who fears death and is not to be comforted by some lofty or sublime idea of a general truth in which he (with Rosenzweig it is a “he”) will be resolved after his individual death. Rosenzweig’s systematic move consists, therefore, in denying the entire right of mere “constructivism”.² Now, if you approach his gendered talk with a gender-constructivism à la Butler, you’ll certainly identify his attitude as clearly essentialist. Is there a way to transcend the switching of positions, in which either a claimed “real”

is reduced to a construction, or a claimed “construction” is revealed to be an actual real essence, both in the name of “truth”?

I am sure that – all of the *Star* is about how experienced individual reality can be defended against the claim that it is anything *but* a real individual experience. At the core of his argument is the second part of the second book, as we all agree upon. I read this text first of all as a strict opposition (or should I say antithesis) to the dogma of incarnation, or even as an inversion of incarnation. And that is why I have to take real Gritli into account. If there must be an unconscious (or, even more disturbing, a conscious) homoerotic story in the foundation of the affair – who would entitle us to state that this is *more* true or *more* real than the surface of the affair, in which Rosenzweig simultaneously whines for Gritli like a baby crying for its mother and like a full-grown forsaken lover yearning for his beloved? Whence would we take our criterion to say the one aspect is *truer* than the other, if it is all about construction anyway? Rosenzweig believes that he has found a way to accomplish that which is, according to his philosophy, the most complicated task in human life: to believe in *each other's* reality.³

This is, above all, an argument against the alleged “theocentrism”. His theology (and I admit, a theology it is) claims the reality of God not in order to pronounce God’s authority, as hagiography (and its adversaries) would have it, but because of the Cohenian logic of “origin”. The something springs out of its specific nothing: the “Aught” (“Ichts”). It is this process, which is described and revealed in one act in the second part of the second book, and the entire gender question in this symbolic order that amounts to the question: Whether the female/motherly entity involved has to be ready to turn into nothing in order to make the male human real. But, as Rosenzweig denies reduction in general, he also denies, at the end of the day, that the female be reduced to the male or to the mere ground that will make a good nurturing fluid for the male and then vanish. Instead, he has a God who is in need of being acknowledged as real by his creatures in order to be real. In all this, Rosenzweig knows all the time that he is constructing another philosophical system.

But at the same time he seems to be revealing his “real” experience. The creator and highest of highest, for whose self-sufficiency libraries have struggled over the centuries, reveals himself at the heart of Rosenzweig’s system as someone who is yearning for an answer by his beloved creature.

But why does this “construction” (and certainly it *is* a conscious con-

struction, but at the same time, one that emerges out of an encounter perceived as a real encounter between Rosenzweig, the real man, and God, the real God) make Rosenzweig's work so compelling?

At this point I introduce the *language* of primeval love, not so much to *explain* Rosenzweig, but rather to understand the *perception* of his readers. If we translate his talk about love from the realm of the erotic (that certainly in real life is usually less petty than some folks would have it, but nevertheless bares some weird features with Rosenzweig, who ascribed Eugen Rosenstock a weird eroticism, one he tries to protect and seeks to empower Gritli against in his very first letters to her) into the realm of mothering, we immediately understand what convinces us even against our brains in this chapter.

Does this mean that in my view “God is mother” or the “God seeker always seeks Mama”, as Martin Kavka suggests? *Me genoito*, I'd say, in order to at least by quotation hint at the greatest rival whom Rosenzweig (in my view: successfully!) challenges: St. Paul. *God forbid*. It is only that Rosenzweig's description – or should I say, analysis – of the asymmetrical, yet mutual call into life between God and man looks very much like psychoanalytical descriptions of the respective procedure between mother and child. That is, if their first relationship succeeds in real life. Of course, in every later love relationship, things happen to trigger similar emotions. While we are free to exchange places and return to fully developed mature erotic desire in the adult relationship, we are horribly/pleasingly and “existentially” exposed on *both* sides of the relationship between mother and child. In no other relationship (aside from the mother/child relationship) is it more crucial that we “believe” in the very existence of the respective other in an emphatic meaning of the word. It is a question of real life and death. (And here *Mara's* recourse to the mother who “knows” this and protects her child from her own destructive impulse is illuminating).

If there is one “gender” tragedy in Rosenzweig's work *and* in his life, then it certainly is that he, who founded this “emotional proof of the existence of God”⁴ – or, rather, the “necessity to believe” in someone and someone's love – so tragically failed in his personal love-life (as *Katz* rightly states) because he could not get himself and his love-life out of the entanglement of dogma and reality.

Notes

- 1 Last authority in general comes firsthand. If the authority does not come from your „own“ folks, you can answer it in a comparatively relaxed way. Paradoxically, it was Rosenzweig himself in his brilliant essay on apologetics, who stated this matter-of-factly. Other than the Christian tradition, beginning with the Jewish-Christian Gospel of St. Mathew (7,3) has it, we happen (according to Rosenzweig) to see the *other* rather in good shape while we know the faults of our own respective traditions all too well.
- 2 *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* – incidentally the first book of Rosenzweig I've ever read – cannot be mistaken in this question.
- 3 Cf. his letter to Gritli from June 24th, 1918.
- 4 A somewhat strange, but highly illustrative notion might be this one: „Jetzt höre ich plötzlich, daß nichts stimmt. Die Eskimos wohnen nicht in Iglus, sie küssen nicht dadurch, daß sie die Nasenspitzen aneinander reiben, und der Hausherr bietet dem Gast nicht die eigene Frau an.
Gegen 11 Uhr muß ich meistens niesen.
Immer ein Partner zu wenig, mehr ist nicht nötig für einen Gottesbeweis.“
(Tagebuchnotiz Martin Walsers vom 12. April 1968)