



Peter Eli Gordon. *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy.* Weimar and Now: University of California Press, 2003. 357 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23611-0; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24636-2.



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The Radical Horizon of German-Jewish Thought

In his recent book, Peter Gordon makes an excellent case for the relevance of German-Jewish thought, pointing out the seminal role it played in the development of modern critical theory and intellectual history. The new role of German-Jewish studies, according to Gordon, is to blaze a new critical path: at the end of protracted efforts to erect a decisive barrier between supporters and critics of humanism, we now need to reconsider the radical and shared legacy of such names as Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Heidegger. For Gordon, the current interest in Rosenzweig's "negative theology" is largely political, a classic case of enlightened society questioning norms and conventions. Heidegger sets the stage and allows Gordon to emphasize the "positive possibility" of radical thinking. However, while examining the suppressed topics of the past, Gordon ignores the might-have-beens and the inevitable theoretical horizon of his own investigation. The reader is left to wonder: at what point would Rosenzweig have recognized the terrifying connections between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics?

When *Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Heidegger* was

published three years ago, it was received enthusiastically and immediately added to syllabi in Jewish history and Jewish studies. It joined a growing literature on Rosenzweig that demonstrates both the relevance of German-Jewish studies and the inherent affiliation between intellectual history and political theory. As Charles Bambach demonstrated in a laudatory review article, a more contextual history of the shared philosophical grounds should be accompanied by an acute sensitivity to theory.[1] Recent "Rosenzweig literature" seems to represent a pioneering attempt: Leora Batinzky's *Idolatry and Representation* (2000), which appeared three years prior to Gordon's book, emphasized the aestheticism and hermeneutics in an intellectual program that Rosenzweig himself called "sneaking Judaism into [German] general education." [2] Ernest Rubinstein and Myriam Bienenstock have examined Rosenzweig's investment in Idealism and Romanticism, while Paul Mendes-Flohr and, more recently, David Myers, have pinpointed the antihistoricist bent in Rosenzweig's work and its heavy debt to German philosophy in general and to Protestant theology and post-idealist philosophy in

particular.[3] Eric Santner—following in Robert Gibbs’s footsteps—considered the growing relevance of Rosenzweig’s radical “creaturliness” for current political philosophy and social ethics.[4] Among the difficult issues this range of scholars have confronted are the surprising and unsettling similarities between radical Jewish thinkers and supporters of the Nazi regime, such as Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. In contrast to the more tentative studies of the past, whose authors appear to have been more worried about pedagogical lessons than about historical accuracy, these recent works emphasize the dialog between the radical German side and the radical Jewish side, often in unexpected places, such as in Rosenzweig’s use of blood metaphors and Wagnerian aesthetics.[5] Rosenzweig’s radical thinking, as well as his personality, make him an ideal “case study” for such experiments.

Gordon’s argument moves one step further, pressing all of its weight against a single relationship, suggestive but also tangible. The book relies on two important pieces of evidence: a short essay by Rosenzweig entitled “Exchanged Fronts” (1929) and a review written by Karl Löwith in 1942. After the famous confrontation between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos, Rosenzweig sided decisively (albeit telegraphically) with Heidegger against the neo-Kantian, ethics-minded Cassirer. Rosenzweig defended this position in the essay of 1929—one of the last things he wrote before his death. Löwith’s piece posited an affinity between Rosenzweig’s theological philosophy and Heidegger’s ontology. Whether or not the two men ever met is not a question of great moment for intellectual history; it is enough to show that they shared similar standpoints, intellectual assumptions and a method. In his exemplary exploration of these connections, Gordon identifies countless intermediary ideas and figures, conveying a tale with numerous twists and turns. By framing his book with the Davos confrontation, the author sets it up for a grand finale, a symbolic if only temporary conclusion to this philosophical drama.

After a preliminary chapter on methodology, Gordon leads us chronologically through the positions Rosenzweig occupied within the major debates of his time. He traces Rosenzweig’s footsteps along the alpine path leading from the neo-Hegelianism of an early teacher, Friedrich Meinecke, to the Marburg-style neo-Kantianism of his admired teacher and intellectual father figure, Hermann Cohen. From there the final stage of the journey climaxes in the “post-theological” existentialism of Friedrich Nietzsche, embodied in Rosenzweig’s semi-

nal *Star of Redemption* (1921).

Following this general survey, Gordon devotes a long chapter to Rosenzweig’s dissertation, *Hegel and the State* (completed in 1913, it was not published until 1920). Gordon sets out to prove that a range of continuities implies a smoother and more gradual transition from this early study to the later work than is usually admitted: “Rosenzweig’s *Hegel and the State* represents [his] earliest sustained reflection on the philosophical themes that would predominate in his later works” (p. 84). In Gordon’s reading, Wilhelm Dilthey served as a philosophical handmaiden; his explorations of Hegel’s theological thought led Rosenzweig to study Hegel’s opposition between Judaism and Christianity, as well as the notion of Christian fate as *Weltgeist*. These ideas would later form the basis of the idealist credo. Dilthey’s interpretation was indeed crucial for Rosenzweig’s book, as the latter made clear when he wrote that “in Dilthey a new generation of youths found its leader” (p. 89). Gordon states that *Hegel and the State* represented a “grand narrative ... an innovative synthesis of Dilthey’s *Lebensphilosophie* and Meinecke’s historical method” (p. 104).

As part of his effort to trace continuities, Gordon emphasizes the idea of unity in Rosenzweig’s early definition of life, seeing this notion as a hint of the fusion of theological symbols and aesthetic forms to come. For him, the Hegelian state was “the highest theater of life” and represented “the power of the general over the individual,” lending sovereignty its “necessary character” (p. 109). Needless to say, Rosenzweig rejected both the Christian overtones and the explicit nationalism in Hegelianism, which he sadly concluded was “lost in the froth of the waves now flooding all life”—a comment made shortly before the outbreak of World War I. From Hegel’s understanding of the Jew as the Christian’s opposite, Rosenzweig seized a theme that he never let go: “Redemption,” Gordon writes, “now became a category of immanence,” a lesson from Judaism, that “form of collective life without the metaphysical dangers of statehood” (p. 116). In spite of the clear reference to *Lebensphilosophie* and neo-idealism, Gordon is less interested in context than in the development of Rosenzweig’s private and independent existence, and his ability to draw on both German philosophy and Jewish faith in developing his own radical thinking.

This orientation permits Gordon to avoid the conventional discourse of “influence,” and focus instead on a near contemporaneous genealogy of “great thinkers.” Gordon relies then on an argument about the historical

succession of ideas, while ignoring the reception of the ideas in wider circles. The advantages of the approach are clear: it produces a relatively clean and comprehensible narrative that reveals why many flocked from idealism (Hegel) to *Lebensphilosophie* (Dilthey and Nietzsche), and from there to existentialism or fundamental phenomenology (Heidegger). However, such an approach involves problematic implications, for while a genealogical approach does much to illuminate the close relationship between Hegel and Schelling in Rosenzweig's reading, it says little about the more marginal and less scientific streams of thinking. For instance: a few references to the George circle and its stark presence behind Rosenzweig's notion of life are left unclarified, overshadowed by the more systematic philosophies.

Having traced Rosenzweig's intellectual career to this crucial turning point beyond Hegelianism, Gordon then pursues the theological theme through a more detailed treatment of *The Star of Redemption*. At the center of the discussion are the concepts of revelation, redemption and the language of prayer. If Batnitzky stresses aesthetics and hermeneutics, Gordon opts for a less focused reading in order to push "the entire opening passage of *The Star of Redemption* as an ironic commentary on idealism," while avoiding any association with the metaphysical tradition (p. 147). In 1925, Gordon reminds us, Rosenzweig stated flatly: "The word 'religion' cannot be found in *The Star*" (p. 134). He preferred to observe religion from a phenomenological perspective. Much like Idealism earlier, religion forms here an absence that is in fact a very decisive presence. One's gaze is directed again at Rosenzweig's notion of life.

Like Santner, Gordon emphasizes Rosenzweig's notion of life not as idealist humanism or the sacred in theology, but as what "remains always within the bounds of creaturliness." In this world, "death serves merely to disclose the radical priority of life" (p. 149). But Gordon resists the temptation to turn this creaturliness into "the collapse of the symbolic"; he insists "Rosenzweig was not a postmodernist" (p. 181). In other words, Gordon strongly rejects Santner and Gibbs—referring to them obliquely as "recent critics who borrow from Rosenzweig to lay the foundations for a new Jewish ethics" (p. 311). By decontextualizing Rosenzweig's philosophy, he says, such scholars miss the point. They separate out the earlier work on Hegel, slighting it as "still shackled by the methods of conventional research" (p. 84) and therefore miss the larger picture. This last turn did include a strong rejection of idealism, but this was "not the same as liberating oneself fully from its grasp" (p. 84). An empha-

sis on the later "nothingness" does not negate the earlier emphasis on life, as mediated by Dilthey's admiration for the young Hegel. The deeper dimension of "death or nothingness," instead, grounds the Heideggerian "existential analytic" by juxtaposing the progressive liberalism of some Rosenzweigians with the aestheticism of others. Thanks to this fundamental notion of an existence that is cultural, historical and "theological," Gordon concludes: "If life is the final word of the book, it is also in a certain sense the first" (p. 175). If, as Rosenzweig indicated in *Das BÄ¼chlein vom gesunden und kranken Menschenverstand* (*Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*, 1922), life was to be grasped, it should be done from the perspective of a temporal "flow of life" (*Ablauf des Lebens*) (p. 179). Indeed, Gordon puts his finger on an important element in Rosenzweig's thinking, and traces the subtle signs linking the notion of life and its hidden temporality. However, the question to be asked at this point is whether the alternative emphasis on life or, more accurately, *Lebensphilosophie*, stands in line with Heideggerian existential analysis. One thinks of those passages from *Sein und Zeit* where Heidegger vigorously censures *Lebensphilosophie* for its "superficial" notion of living-time. And what of *Lebensphilosophie's* own stark rejection of Hegelian idealism?[6]

Finally, Gordon shows that *The Star* uses the radical concepts deemed inimical to philosophy by idealist thinkers as the center of a new post-Nietzschean philosophy. "As a philosophical heir to Nietzsche," writes Gordon, "Rosenzweig was committed to the view that the metaphysical tradition had reached a point of collapse" (p. 143). Nevertheless, even here "Rosenzweig's philosophy is unthinkable without Hegel as its foil" (p. 154). The cornerstone of a new metaphysics of existence and authenticity is nothingness: "Death is, in each and every case, death of some specific existence. Man, insofar as he is alive, is singled out by what Heidegger called Being-towards-Death (*Sein-zum-Tode*)" (p. 166). But when Heidegger used the concepts of nothingness and authenticity to describe "the exceptional condition of human being, or Dasein" (p. 223) they were already marked with a decisive Germanic tone of voice. Where exactly would Rosenzweig diverge? According to Batnitzky, the point of divergence was the ethics behind the shared symbolic world. Gordon leaves the point more ambiguous and unresolved.

After a short chapter about Rosenzweig and Heidegger on language and translation, the book culminates with a description of the confrontation between Heidegger and Cassirer in Davos, shortly before Rosenzweig's

death. Gordon emphasizes the differences between the two: a brash and argumentative young Heidegger maintaining an existentialist position and his eminent neo-Kantian opponent, who is depicted as far less antagonistic, far more intent on bridging the gap. Gordon's captivating storyline takes us back to the short but loaded "Exchanged Fronts" to prove that Rosenzweig judged Heidegger the victor in this contest.[7] Heidegger rejected Cassirer's fundamental concepts of finality and the eternal, claiming he configured the two only by opposing them to each other, hence taking an overly literal and simplistic approach—using the negative "Un" in order to rob the eternal from its own independent existence as a simpler "non-final" or "un-ending" (*Un-Endlichkeit*). He also rejected the neo-Kantian usage of "form" in a discussion of endlessness (p. 285). Opposing Cassirer, Gordon sees both Heidegger and Rosenzweig as believers in radical intellectual freedom, while skeptical about the progress so central to idealism and liberal philosophy (p. 286). "The Davos encounter," Gordon writes, "thus provided Rosenzweig with an allegory for describing the emergence of two radically distinct philosophical tendencies in Cohen's wake" (p. 298).

While there is no doubt that Gordon is correct in his evaluation of the debate and Rosenzweig's reaction to it, he exaggerates the gap between Cassirer and Rosenzweig. One need only check Cassirer's *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte* (1995) to find many musing references to the same topics: he is closer in this respect to Rosenzweig's radical intellect than to Heidegger's "rooted" Germanisms.

The Davos confrontation clarified how earlier gaps between the "Jewish" and the "German" received discursive names and titles. In this respect, Rosenzweig can be seen as one of the first to formalize the confrontation, even more than its content. In 1917, Rosenzweig published "Time for Action," a plea for the establishment of higher education for Jews in Germany; this work was a reply to Cohen's "Germanness and Jewishness" (1915). Rosenzweig objected to Cohen's call for a German-Jewish symbiosis, focusing instead on Jewish culture as a paradigmatic case. When he came under fire for his supposedly exclusive approach, Rosenzweig wrote a letter of clarification in which he noted that Cohen's use of the conjunction "and" squeezed between "Germanness" and "Jewishness" presumed two opposite views of history and time. In other words, the connecting "and" expanded the distance between the German idealist "world history" and the Jewish particularist "end of history." The juxtaposition shattered the

myths of the idealist tradition: "History as a whole is night," he wrote; "only the end of history is the day." In the same letter, Rosenzweig described world history (*Weltgeschichte*) in terms of the rhythm of sleeping and awakening, of life (*vita*) and study (*schola*). Identifying Judaism as starting with the latter—a paradigm for a "German-Jewish" investigation—he argued that education would enable Jews "to seek and not simply comply with what is found."

Rosenzweig insisted that only the Jewish theological imagination could waken one from the "night" of history to a new day, to a new kind of life.[8] In other words—essential for any discussion of a shared legacy—only Jews possessed a critical consciousness and the redemptive sense of awakening from the illusory Hegelian absolute and the global perspective of the *Weltgeschichte*. The essence of the modern Jewish mentality, in contrast to the metaphysical darkness lying at the heart of idealism, is a brilliantly illuminated critical apparatus that sees through nationalist and racist claims to autonomous Jewish culture. Rosenzweig signed the letter "Franz Rosenzweig, a German *and* a Jew ... the second indicated by the exercise of free choice and personal will—*ecce deus fortior me* [Behold a god more powerful than I]." One might add—a god greater than all other gods, greater than the idea of godliness itself: the godly method (sometimes destructive and occasionally creative) of critical, awakened, and finally a "living" observation.

To conclude, discussing the *connections* between Rosenzweig and Heidegger must entail a discussion of the temporality of the critical "and" emphasized by Rosenzweig as both destructive and redemptive. And one wonders what became of Jewishness *as* Germanness during the 1920s—an idea rejected by both Rosenzweig and Heidegger. Rosenzweig (who seems to have fancied himself the lone voice of modern Jewish consciousness) embraced a radical "ethical monotheism" and embarked on a biblical translation project with Buber. Analogously, Heidegger became convinced that only his own reading could expose the rootedness of Germanness, its essential connection to man and things in the *Dasein* as revealed by Nietzsche and Hölderlin. Given the deep connection that Gordon skillfully details between Rosenzweig and Heidegger's thought, where does it end? If, as Gordon shows, they share an ontology of time, is this ontology necessarily related to Heidegger's understanding of radical politics? Is it related to Rosenzweig's notion of Jewish critique? If Rosenzweig's "flow of life" and Heidegger's *Dasein* stem from the same temporality, the conclusion must be extreme, to say the least. If Rosenzweig

and Heidegger shared a view of Judaism as a formalized *uncanniness* (*Unheimlichkeit*), disagreeing only in their descriptions of this strangeness, then the Holocaust—and Heidegger’s Nazism with it—take on an inevitable emancipatory tone—not retroactively, but initially, as a vision. Once again catastrophe and redemption meet at the intersection of the temporality of “total power” and the temporality of ethical monotheism. This is a hard and a legitimate conclusion, but it must be drawn into the open.

Gordon does not conceal his sympathies with German-Jewish thought, dedicating most of his book to Rosenzweig, with Heidegger acting in the role of a “radical horizon” demonstrating Rosenzweig’s own intellectual courage. This daring approach has resulted in an innovative and a challenging narrative that is a must-read for experts in the field. While choosing such a positive tone, the book signals a change from “critique” to “reform” and from pure history or theory, to coalescence. Yet, compelling as it may be, the book would have benefited at some points from a heavier critical tone. When Gershom Scholem undermined—under the guise of high complimentary tone—Rosenzweig’s own commitment to Jewish theology at the memorial service at the Hebrew University in 1930, a movement questioning the role of German-Jewish thinkers at the heart of critical studies was born.[9] Gordon has sidestepped this issue in order to avoid many of the thorny debates that have accumulated in the decades that have followed Rosenzweig’s death. While following Scholem’s lead is not a sacred obligation, it would be a mistake to ignore it.

Notes

[1]. Charles Bambach, “Athens and Jerusalem: Rosenzweig, Heidegger and the Search for an Origin,” *Review of Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy, History and Theory* 44 (2005): pp. 271-288.

[2]. Franz Rosenzweig to Hedwig Cohen, March 7, 1918, in Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), pp. 283-286. My translation.

[3]. Ernest Rubinstein, *An Episode of Jewish Romanticism: Franz Rosenzweig’s “The Star of Redemption”* (New

York: State University of New York Press, 1999); Myriam Bienenstock, “Recalling the Past in Rosenzweig’s ‘Star of Redemption,’” *Modern Judaism* 23 (2003): pp. 226-242; Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism,” in *Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), pp. 138-161; David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 68-105.

[4]. Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). See also Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[5]. Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation*, p. 90.

[6]. Georg Misch, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie. Eine Auseinandersetzung der Dilthey’schen Richtung mit Heidegger und Husserl*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1931). Otto Friedrich Bollnow, a disciple of the Dilthey school (his principle teachers count Georg Misch and Hermann Nohl) argued in favor of separating Dilthey from the idealist tradition: “Dilthey has a similar view; together with Misch he supports Husserl’s rejection of the concept of *Ideen*, which resists grounding in historical thought” (Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Die Lebensphilosophie* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1958), p. 15).

[7]. Franz Rosenzweig, “Vertauschte Fronten,” *Der Morgen* 6, no. 6 (April 1930). I would like to thank Thomas Meyer for pointing out that no title appears above the original hand-written essay, meaning that the title by which it is now known was most probably given by the editors of *Der Morgen*.

[8]. Franz Rosenzweig to Helene Sommer, January 16, 1918, in Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe*, ed. Edith Rosenzweig (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), p. 279. My translation.

[9]. “Franz Rosenzweig and His Book ‘The Star of Redemption,’” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1988), pp. 20-41.

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