

## NOTES ON GÉRARD BENSUSSAN'S TALK ON FRANZ ROSENZWEIG, 2/21/08

[Due to ongoing technical problems, we couldn't get a camera there to record the talk, so I took relatively close notes, based on Nick Nesbitt's live translation. The mistakes are mine, and if you'd can correct them please do. I'll put these notes up as a web page soon.]

### INTRODUCTION BY CHRISTOPHER FYNSK:

Bensussan has published extensively on Rosenzweig, and translated his work. He has succeeded in the very particular challenge of writing on Rosenzweig, an immensely important figure in the history of Jewish thought. Rosenzweig's principal work comes just after the First World War, drafted during the war and written very rapidly, almost immediately afterward. He followed it with a few other texts, and then left philosophy to found a school. He famously converted, in some sense, back to Judaism without first converting to Christianity, attending a Yom Kippur service a week before his planned Christian conversion.

### TALK BY GÉRARD BENSUSSAN:

In this presentation, GB is going to present an introduction to Rosenzweig; not at the level of generalities about his work, but through two or three key elements of his thought in the 20th century.

His intellectual life covers 15 years from the end of WWI to the 1933 Nazi takeover; coming out of WWI, he wrote out *The Star of Redemption* on the back of postcards (practically). A key biographical dimension of this period is that there were two Rosenzweigs, effectively: on the one hand, the one who published *Star*, and the other who published *Hegel and the State*; there were really thought to be two different people, the one who wrote university treatises, and the other these marginal, extravagant texts.

In a 1923 letter he wrote—he was by that time ill and paralyzed—that *Star* is a present to the German spirit, *esprit*, and this German *Geist* owes much to its *enclave juive*, its Jewish community, that this German spirit will continue to be the case as long as that community continues to exist.

This discussion is an attempt to interrogate the destiny of this gift that Rosenzweig offers the German spirit, after the separation represented by the Shoah: what then is the status of the book itself? So we turn to a short text, *Pensée nouvelle*, new thought, an orientation course, a show of method, for those overwhelmed by *The Star*, and this book will provide a way to understand *Star* and its importance and history.

The first readings of the book, in its reception, have two moments. In the 1950s, starting then, in the Germanophone and the American sphere, there was an ecumenical usage of the book, occurring within the political juncture: it offered an analytic of Jewish/Christian relations, and so was taken as a comparative theology. That process occurred within two different moments, the first the postwar rebirth of a Jewish/Christian dialog, after the Shoah, and the second the rebirth of a European and EU project, and then the combination in the formation of the nation of Israel. All of this is leading to the theological reading of the book.

This first theological interpretation of the book is not to be seen as a closed phase of historical interest, though; for example, Rosenzweig doesn't only speak of Jewish/Christian relations but of Islam. There's material there to nourish a continuing reflection on critique and culture—he also talks China, of India.

But there's a second moment of this reception, a French one, more strictly philosophical; the effort is to place Rosenzweig's new thought in two places: in a post-Hegelian one, and in relation to Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas. In France, it was Levinas who introduced Rosenzweig's thought.

The attempt, then, is to understand Rosenzweig within this post-Hegelian context of philosophy. Building on conversations with Derrida, the question is how can we understand:

1. Rosenzweig's relation to the project of deconstruction, and
2. The interrogation and deconstruction of Judaism; and, for this, Rosenzweig's comment in *PN* that *The Star* is to be taken as a philosophical system and not a Jewish book

Another comment that Rosenzweig makes about *Star* is that Jewishness is not an "object," as would be the philosophy of right or of law; *das jüdische* [sp?] is an element, the source of his thought itself, an idiom that resonates with him.

*Das jüdische*, for Rosenzweig, insofar as it is the element of his thought itself, provides no possibility for a philosophy of Judaism, or of a Jewish philosophy, as one could speak of national spheres of *logos*: Anglo-Saxon philosophy, German philosophy. Instead there's an attempt to interrupt this global model of *logos*.

This *pensée nouvelle*, new thought, that Rosenzweig is attempting, is not equivalent to a new philosophy. Instead it's an exit (using yesterday's terms), instead it exceeds philosophy, and perhaps even exceeds Levinas' program—as Levinas said his ambition was to announce, in Greek, principles that Greece was ignorant of, to translate into the language of concepts principles that might be in the Bible or the Talmud. Beyond that project, Rosenzweig was to "make speak," to give voice to, *das jüdische*; not to make concepts (face, visage), but to make a refusal of philosophy.

A few biographical elements in that project, a few moments:

A refusal to pursue even a university career, to become a professor of philosophy. He passed from "habilitable" to "un-habilitable." Instead of serving oneself of one's mastery, to put oneself at the service of philosophy; to start a free Jewish studies center and a translation of the Hebrew Bible.

To offer a figure of this radicality of refusal that constitutes another exit or *sortie*, this presents a different type of *sortie*:

- a. the anti-political dimension of this radicality, extra-historical
- b. the anti-philosophical, following a logic of dissimulation, a retroactive movement within the Jewish tradition, rather than assimilating: a cessation, a way of drawing-back, becoming dissimilar, beyond Judaism and the dissemination of philosophy in the tradition of metaphysics.

To discuss the anti-political, the source of it, this idea, is in *The Star*, and the theory he

gives there of the Jewish people as extra-historical, out of history. Not just as a diaspora, but following Ricoeur's reading of Rosenzweig, the metaphysical portrait of the Jewish people, they are extra-historical in three ways:

- they anticipate eternity (in their rites)
- they're outsiders to laws in the regions they inhabit
- and thus have a separate existence.

This extra-historicity, outside of history, implies a certain type of thought, of history, the state, the political, but at a more general level than the history of Jewish political experience, and his thought here forms a counterpoint to the philosophy of Hegel. This extra-historicity is in relation to the question of totality, and all historical totality contains an untotalizable remainder: what to do with it? How to incorporate it? It's Hegel's problem too. And here we can look towards a Jewish prophetic tradition to think this politics exterior to the state.

We can pursue this in discussion: Two phenomena within Jewish culture, on the one hand the historical process of assimilation vs. dissimulation, and on the other the historical movement of Zionism. These are both Jewish forms of forgetting, which stand for a re-investment in a Jewish historical destiny, to re-historicize Jewish destiny.

On the theme of the anti-political and the excess, two quotes that take the form of a weak thought, *pensée faible*:

1. A reference to the imperative limitation of all politics, a politics that must be pursued nonetheless, despite everything
2. From a letter where he's explicating a passage from the Talmud, "Act all actions as if the destiny of humanity depended on it," and here we see an obvious messianic dimension to his views—a complex relation to Derrida, and a politics of the instant, and the question of whether a particular moment is messianic or not: a time of *passerelle*, passageways or instances, and *trampoline*, [sp?] leaps beyond, moments of transformation or interruption.

In regard to this anti-philosophical or extra-speculative moment, this is an undertaking that uses a 3-part equation:

1. speech, and a speaking-thought
2. a relation to time
3. a relation the other, and alterity.

"I can't know in advance what the other will say to me because I don't know myself what I will say. To need time means not to need everything, ... to depend upon the other for what is most intimate to myself. [I couldn't get all of this, sorry] It takes time seriously."

So, then, this project is taking up explicitly the terms of Heidegger and Derrida, of a deconstruction of metaphysics, from Iona to Jena, Greece to Germany. In Rosenzweig's terms maybe we should speak of a dissimulation of tradition, a substitution for *logos* of a thought that is forced to alter itself, to speak itself, to temporalize.

## DISCUSSION.

CF: This form of dissimulation which Rosenzweig attempts in *Star*, described as leaving

philosophy, and founding the school: to what extent does this movement that you're describing, of resistance and dissimulation, continue as long as one is no longer doing thought or philosophy? Is it enough to translate with the Hebrew Bible with Buber, or work in the school: does that still accomplish this dissimulation of thought?

GB: At the level of his life and biography, he's emphatically not to be understood as Kierkegaard said of the philosopher: he thinks what he doesn't do, and does what he doesn't think. After WWI, he breaks with the university system, and it's explicit for him. He founds the school in France and starts the translations; it's good school; Leo Strauss taught there; but Rosenzweig found great difficulties in confronting the bourgeois French Jewish establishment, he had enormous difficulties. There's a process of dissimulation with Rosenzweig around the philosophical projects, encounters and crossings, and the profound debt Levinas owes and evoked to Rosenzweig—from Heidegger and Rosenzweig. In fact, there's a whole series of intuitions that move between Heidegger and Rosenzweig, of a shared situation of thinking, particularly time. Biographically, for example, at the encounter between Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos, one would have thought Rosenzweig would have taken the side of Cassirer, but he (and Levinas) turned to Heidegger, and a renewal of philosophy.

CF [en français, couldn't keep up completely]: My question comes from the problem, with such radical thought, of living the thought, to be a writer without being a philosopher. How does—can this—accomplish the dissimulation?

GB: His thought is a sort of provocation that persists beyond the moment of its annunciation. It persists as a heterogeneous speech. In his last texts, he answers, as though he were a rabbi, questions like “How does one respect the sabbath if you're a philosopher or a doctor?” How do you carry a speech that is heterogeneous to philosophy, but in philosophy, in some sense? That persists in its association with Judaism: how does one re-Judaicise Judaism? Of the Bible translations, Kracauer said that one could trace the German-Jewish culture from the Mendels [?] translation of the Bible, to bring it within German language and culture, to the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, at the other end, where Hebrew was forgotten and they wanted to give a literal experience of the Jewish text. There's the persistence of a legacy in relation to Derrida and Levinas, in contemporary French philosophy, a Jewish dimension of Rosenzweig's speaking-thought. A student said that there was something in French philosophy that bothered him, and we eventually determined it was that French philosophy was in some sense a Jewish philosophy. And one can't sustain this idea, but there was something of it in Rosenzweig.

JS: This re-Judaizing of German Judaism? This was also driving Scholem, to reach totally assimilated friends and family, reclaim the tradition. There's a parallel. What I found stunning is this business in the messianic moment is that there are similar ideas in Protestant theology, as in the *kairos*. But what is it exactly? How does he conceive the messianic moment?

GB: What would constitute a determination of a political instant or moment by us, Rosenzweig says, is the primacy of an ethical instant or moment, the subordination of politics to this ethical moment; politics must be limited. A great world-historical politics, in Hegel or Marx's terms, a grand politics, is one where a rational project subordinates the suffering of subjects. If in the instant there is a sacrifice to a teleology, then there is the ruin of politics, and instead one has to

articulate a politics that gives the right to suffering subjectivity, that gives rights to interruption and to taking up again, to reprise; against a grand project, a master narrative, to a politics that responds to the call of a subject. See Rousseau, on the philosopher who sits in an armchair while in the street a throat is cut; he plugs his ears and *il s'argument*, he rationalizes. To argue this way, to rationalize, is for the philosopher to say why he plugs his ears as the throats are cut: the police are to blame, the state, society. There must be a politics that confronts this suffering. And politics in the grand sense has to be limited by this call of the other.

When Rosenzweig comments on this Talmudic text—that we have to act our actions “as if the destiny of humanity depended on it”—it’s a text that tells the story of a prophet in a cave. A doctor comes to him and asks when the messiah will come, and the prophet says “Tomorrow.” The doctor announces the news, “the messiah is coming!” The doctor comes back the next day, to ask why nothing happened, why the messiah did not come; the prophet replies, “He was here in voice, speaking, and wasn’t heard, so he went away again.” It’s only in the instant when suffering occurs, when there’s a call for help, and it’s not heard by us—often for legitimate reasons, but they lead us not to hear. And ethically, there has to be a moment for this listening.

NN: There are striking similarities with Benjamin; can we read this alongside his writings?

GB: One should make the link with Benjamin, and with Bloch and *The Spirit of Utopia*; Benjamin said *The Star of Redemption* was one of the 4 or 5 greatest books of the 20th century. Bloch, too, insofar as the style and extravagance and Expressionist mode occupied his writing (and Benjamin more Surrealist): all are linked by a messianic attention to what has not been, occurred, taken place; what distinguishes them is different philosophical temperaments.