

Death, Love, and Life in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig

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Franz Rosenzweig 1886-1929

1886 Born in Kassel

1912 Completes doctorate on Hegel and the State

1913 Almost converts to Christianity

1914 Studies in Berlin with Hermann Cohen

Volunteers for the Red Cross in WWI

1919 Writes the Star of Redemption

1920 Appointed head of Lehrhaus in Frankfurt

1922 Diagnosed with ALS

Gershom Scholem. From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth, 139-41.

I had been in Frankfurt for three days the previous year and had seen Franz Rosenzweig there several times. Rudolf Hallo, a young man who, like Rosenzweig, was from Kassel and had for some time been deeply influenced by him, had been my fellow student in Munich. From Hallo I learned much about Rosenzweig, his development and turning to Judaism, and early in 1920 Hallo brought me a copy of Rosenzweig's recently published main work *Der Stern der Erlösung* [The Star of Redemption], undoubtedly one of the central creations of Jewish religious thought in this century. Thus I started corresponding with Rosenzweig, who had in the meantime heard about me from various sources. At that time Rosenzweig still had his health and had started to study the Talmud with the famous rabbi Dr. Nobel in Frankfurt. Every encounter with him furnished evidence that he was a man of genius. I regard the abolition of this category, which is popular today, as altogether foolish and the "reasons" adduced for it as valueless.

Jacques Derrida. Acts of Religion, p. 192

There would be much to say about this remark made in passing... [It is a] critique of a kind of secularizing rationalization that flattens, levels, evens out, with the language, the resistance of any singularity or any exception, a certain geniality which could be shown to be not unrelated to sacredness

Letter to Frederick Meineke, August 30, 1920

In 1913 something happened to me for which collapse is the only fitting name. I suddenly found myself on a heap of wreckage, or rather I realized that the road I was then pursuing was flanked by unrealities...

Amidst the shreds of my talents I began to search for my self, amidst the manifold for the One. It was then (one can speak of such matters in metaphors only) that I descended into the vaults of my being, to a place whither talents could not follow me; that I approached the ancient treasure chest whose existence I had never wholly forgotten, for I was in the habit of going down at certain times of the year to examine what lay uppermost in the chest; moments had all along been the supreme moments of my life. But now tins cursory inspection n" longer satisfied me; my hands dug in and turned over layer after layer, hoping to reach the bottom of the chest. They never did. They dug out whatever they could and I went away with armfuls of stuff—forgetting, in my excitement, that it was the vaults of myself I was thus plundering! Then I climbed back again to the upper stories and spread out before me what treasures I had found: they did not fade in the sheer light of day. These, indeed, were my own treasures, my most personal possessions, things inherited, not borrowed! By owning them and ruling over them I had gained something entirely new, namely the right to live— and even to have talents; for now it was I who had the talents, not they who had me...

I wish to make clear is: that scholarship no longer holds the center of my attention, and that my life has fallen under the rule of a “dark drive” which rm aware that I merely name- by calling it “my Judaism.”

Franz Rosenzweig. *The Star of Redemption* (Galli translation)

FROM DEATH, it is from the fear of death that all cognition of the All begins.

Sigmund Freud. *The Question of a Weltanschauung*

‘Weltanschauung’ is, I am afraid, a specifically German concept, the translation of which into foreign languages might well raise difficulties. If I try to give you a definition of it, it is bound to seem clumsy to you. In my opinion, then, a Weltanschauung is an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place. It will easily be understood that the possession of a Weltanschauung of this kind is among the ideal wishes of human beings. Believing in it one can feel secure in life, one can know what to strive for, and how one can deal most expediently with one’s emotions and interests...

Philosophy... by clinging to the illusion of being able to present a picture of the universe which is without gaps and is coherent, though one which is bound to collapse with every fresh advance in our knowledge. It goes astray in its method by overestimating the epistemological value of our logical operations and by accepting other sources of knowledge such as intuitions. And it often seems that the poet’s derisive comment is not unjustified when he says of the philosopher: “With his nightcaps and the tatters of his dressing gown he patches up the gaps in the structure of the universe.” (Heinrich Heine)

Star of Redemption

Philosophy has the audacity to cast off the fear of the earthly, to remove from death its poisonous sting, from Hades his pestilential breath... But philosophy refutes these earthly fears. It breaks free above the grave that opens up under our feet before each step. It abandons the body to the power of the abyss, but above it the free soul floats off in the wind.

That the fear of death knows nothing of such a separation in body and soul, that it yells I, I, I and wants to hear nothing about a deflection of the fear onto a mere “body”—matters little to philosophy. That man may crawl like a worm into the folds of the naked earth before the whizzing projectiles of blind, pitiless death, or that there he may feel as violently inevitable that which he never feels otherwise: his I would be only an It if it were to die... upon all this misery, philosophy smiles its empty smile and, with its outstretched index finger, shows the creature, whose limbs are trembling in fear for its life in this world, a world beyond, of which it wants to know nothing at all. For man does not at all want to escape from some chain; he wants to stay, he wants—to live.

Star of Redemption

Man should not cast aside from him the fear of the earthly; in his fear of death he should—stay. He should stay. He should therefore do nothing other than what he already wants: to stay. The fear of the earthly should be removed from him only with the earthly itself. But as long as he lives on earth, he should also remain in fear of the earthly.

And philosophy dupes him of this should when around the earthly it weaves the thick blue haze of its idea of the All. For clearly: an All would not die, and in the All, nothing would die. **Only that which is singular can die**, and everything that is mortal is solitary. This, the fact that philosophy must exclude from the world that which is singular, this exclusion of the something is also the reason why it has to be idealistic...

But actually, this is not an ultimate conclusion, but a first beginning, and death is truly not what it seems, not nothing, but a pitiless something that cannot be excluded... The nothing is not nothing, it is something... the reality of death that cannot be banished from the world, and announcing itself in its victim's cry that cannot be stifled, it is this that makes a lie of the basic thought of philosophy... We do not want a philosophy that puts itself in the service of death and deludes us about its lasting reign due to the one and universal harmony of its dance. We do not want any illusions. If death is something, then no philosophy is again going to make us avert our eyes...

Letter to his mother. April 5, 1918

It isn't simply the difference in age that makes me think it impossible that any contingency, any loss, whether present or future, could alienate me from life, it is true that every loss makes us more familiar with our own death, but none can bring me closer to it, none has the power to turn me out of the house of life. In spite of all losses I still retain Myself, with the unfathomable and continually surprising store of tasks that each new day brings. And each loss, by making me more familiar with death, makes me more ready for life. The less I fear death, indeed the more I love it, the more freely I can live. That is to say, the more I cease to expect happiness on this earth. Happiness and life are two different things, and it's no wonder that men finally came to ascribe bliss to the dead alone. In any event, it is not the portion of the living.

Hans Trüb's Letter to Martin Buber. August 31, 1926

Dear Friend, [...]

I recently read Franz Rosenzweig's essay "The New Thinking" in *Der Morgen*. [...] One derives an exceedingly compelling inspiration from him and his position. I am looking forward to read his *Star of Redemption* soon. How is he doing? I hardly dare ask you. I often think of him. The past summer was marked by my visit to him. When I was in his room, something touched me that I cannot name. Is it the human being that is stirred in his totality and immobilized at the same time? What was for me the most meaningful moment of this year occurred in that room. I must not interpret this significance; I can only indicate it. That day is ever present to me. I can see Rosenzweig before me in the flesh, immured in his paralyzed body: the highest measure of disability for a person still to turn toward this world. Rosenzweig does not turn away from it. Day by day he places himself into his suffering and brings us tidings of the imperishable life of the human person. This existence of his, the way it spoke to me—does it not bear witness to the life of man in this world? Does it not show us how all of us, placed into this world and attached to it, endure our being sent away from it? Must not the world, the Creation, be redeemed at some temporal point after all? To be sure, we must submit to the extinction of this light before our eyes, to this human being growing mute. Has the world shown us again that God and man must give way to it? Has he really given way? Or is he not really recreated by God at this moment, newly placed into the world? I am asking this exactly as I am truly experiencing it. I am present at this death with all my heart. I acknowledge the unshakable reality of the progressive course of his illness and am always profoundly sad about it. But I am shaken to the depth of my being by the fact that, during all this, the man himself remains an undiminished and complete presence. From the moment he closes his eyes, when he can no longer give any sign, will he be less present than at an earlier time, when he was still able to walk and talk, or than now, when only a thin thread of communicative possibility connects him with us?