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Rosenzweig's Messianic Aesthetics

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„Rosenzweig’s Messianic Aesthetics“

by Jules Simon

“Zum Denken gehört nicht nur die Bewegung der Gedanken sondern ebenso ihre Stellstellung. Wo das Denken in einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation plötzlich einhält, da erteilt es derselben einen Chock, durch den es sich als Monade Kristallisiert. Der historische Materialist geht an einen geschichtlichen Gegenstand einzig und allein da heran, wo er ihm als Monade entgegentritt. In dieser Struktur erkennt er das Zeichen einer messianischen Stillstellung des Geschehens, anders gesagt, einer revolutionären Chance im des Geschehen, anders gesagt, einer revolutionären Chance im Kampfe für die unterdrückte Vergangenheit. Er nimmt sie wahr, um eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte herauszusprengen; so sprengt er ein bestimmtes Leben aus der Epoche, so ein bestimmtes Werk aus dem Lebenswerk. Der Ertrag seines Verfahrens besteht darin, daß *im* Werk das Lebenswerk, *im* Lebenswerk die Epoche und *in* der Epoche der gesamte Geschichtsverlauf aufbewahrt ist und aufgehoben.“
(*Illuminationen*, 260)

Considering Rosenzweig’s *Der Stern der Erlösung* as a historical work, as a kind of monadological constellation saturated with tensions, I am impelled to think of it in terms of that kind of a chance to engage in the revolutionary fight for an oppressed past intimated by Benjamin. I propose that the Benjaminian “shock” that occurs in approaching Rosenzweig’s work crystallizes as a “messianic arrest of happening” while stimulating the performance of a sensual/supersensual occurrence of encounter. Aesthetically, that specific historical object, *Der Stern*, promises us a pleasing engagement in its status as a monadological object, as a self-contained and completed work. Thus my confrontation with it as Gestalt or figure. But, additionally, as historical object in the life-work of a particular person drawn from the homogenous course of an historical epoch, it unsettles us in the dual sense of the inherent incompleteness of any temporal occurrence and as the carrier of an ethical imperative of work yet to be done. Thus, its messianic intent. In other words, Rosenzweig’s work, as a messianic aesthetic, both arrests the flux of happening while simultaneously impelling one to ethical action as

a carrier of lament for the past and, thus, simultaneously stimulating present action to transform the status quo for an as-yet unrealized better, that is, more ethical future state.

The general response to Rosenzweig's *Stern* when the issue of history and historical effectivity arises is to take Rosenzweig at his word as promoting some kind of an a-historical or historical neutrality, and thus political irrelevancy, with regard to the course of humans and their histories. Unfortunately, such a response contributes to the dismissiveness already in play when confronted with any philosophical work and that is confounded by the peculiarity of Rosenzweig's constellation itself. Of course there are some who would make Rosenzweig's work an iconic fetish of a sainted life, a life marked by academic, ethnic, cultural and political marginality complicated even further by the stories of how he heroically and diligently worked right up until the moment of his death by the progressive paralysis of ALS. But there are many more who are simply impatient and dismissive. There are compelling reasons, however, for contesting such dismissiveness because of what Rosenzweig has to offer us in better responding to our own socio-historical demands by way of his critical analyses of those relationships within which he found himself. Such a reading has to do with historical effectiveness.

What constitutes historical effectiveness, what Gadamer termed *Wirkungsgeschichte* in *Wahrheit und Methode*, is precisely the complex process of ongoing assessment and reordering that occurs guided by or inspired by authoritative works, but simultaneously impelling us to consciously attend to what separates the 'new' work from the 'old', that is, specifically the kind of work done by Rosenzweig—despite his own comments about

the a-historical. But with what warrant can we say that with Rosenzweig's work we are provided with the kind of shock meant by Benjamin that results in actively engaging in effecting historical productions that are ultimately transformative of our social order? Or is Rosenzweig's work merely a neo-conservative validation of an existing social order? That is, of traditional Jewish life and of traditional modes of diasporic existence? Well, perhaps it is. For Benjamin, breaking with the linear progression of a socio-political tradition that not only oppresses the past but oppresses the working class entails, in some way, interrupting the familiar train of linear progress that marks the writing of history by the victors and the marginalizing of the losers, or failures, to the oppressed fragments of historical desiderata. Contesting the "perhaps" in judging Rosenzweig's work, I would begin by noting the relative marginality of the text itself but also draw attention to the argument Rosenzweig presents in that text and its historical horizons.

Following his disillusioning experience in World War I, Rosenzweig came to the conclusion that in order to challenge the progressive course of history, the dialectical production of wars and imperialist totalizations rooted in desires for land, sovereignty and ensuring the continuity of generations of ethnic relations, we need to cultivate and nourish forms of community life other than those that support the violent suppression of communities of difference. Specifically, we should revive and revise those kinds of myths of redemption that encourage complementary and corresponding social structures rather than those kinds that rely on grand narrative myth-making that create a homogenous and monological history, violently subsuming other political entities to enforce their ultimate justifications and independent and autonomous isolations.

Rosenzweig's social re-vision in the latter sections of *Der Stern* relies on just such an implicit messianic socio-political structure based on his *midrash* of a pagan love poem, as the ethical heartbeat to support exilic community life. If what it means to be at home is to violently take from the other in order to appropriate the material means to enjoy one's own place and space under the sun, then the only true just situation is one that finds joy in embracing different forms of exile as a way to create non-violent forms of community experiences, at least until the world—and the humans who construct it—is redeemed from its violence. A Rosenzweigian would approach such a redemption from violence by asserting that one's founding myths should be grounded on sacrificial acts of responding to the desires, and thus the needs, of an other as other, thus reordering our historical relations. Indeed, inspired by Rosenzweig's work, Emmanuel Levinas would later contend that it is only by taking the bread from one's own mouth to feed the other that we begin to interrupt the existing order of established ethical norms that make it materially more difficult to nourish the kinds of social life that do not rely on domination and the violence of enforced assimilation for their ultimate justification.¹ I would contend, with Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Levinas, that only with such actual directives can we disrupt the social orders that have ultimately resulted in the Shoa, other genocides, and the many imperialisms, colonialisms, and fascisms which have characterized our most recent history of violent human relations.

But what is the plausibility for implementing such an imperative out of Rosenzweig's work, an imperative that appears anachronistic and perhaps simply naive? For Rosenzweig, the conditions for creating a new, messianic, world order are indeed already

at work, in part, in the actual historical development of already existing ethically and aesthetically ordered Jewish, Christian, and pagan/secular communities. A depiction of the phenomena of these historical communities and their critical-ethical potentials constitutes the kind of socially relevant art that Rosenzweig sets out in his text and has to do with the performative aspects of liturgical rituals, architectural constructions, and the aesthetics of speech, song, sharing meals, and storytelling. The revising entails those sorts of historically relevant aesthetic acts, in the words of Edith Wyschogrod, recalling Borges, that are not ‘fictions’ but ‘*ficciones*,’ namely, the use of myths that take into account the empirical historicalities of war and politics and of the materiality of economic distribution and house and community building.

Thus, in terms of a messianic aesthetic, historical effectiveness depends upon developing communal relationships in such a way that intra-, and inter-communal relations are able to become occasions to contest whether or not the material aesthetic of our relations are good, helpful and healthful or bad, harmful and damaging. Proposing that his aesthetic constructions are able to provide us with such occasions for measuring social justice then means considering in what ways Rosenzweig’s aesthetic choices are both ethically informed and ethically conducive. Obviously, my primary intent is not to “situate his work in the history of ideas”², i.e., as a cipher in a catalogue of past works, appropriately and neatly filed away in the archival work of an intellectual historian. Nor do I believe that a case can convincingly be made for situating Rosenzweig as an ally in arms in the ontological project of his more famous contemporary, Martin Heidegger. Rather, in order to test the work itself as such an aesthetic stimulant for effecting the status quo of an

oppressive and exploitative historical progression, Rosenzweig's work should be read phenomenologically as itself a sort of ethically informed philosophical work of art, that is, as a messianic aesthetic.

This entails considering the terms of how he engaged with the most basic conditions of being human, namely, how he took up and transformed the most complex results of ordering our lives as historical beings, both personally and publically. Simply put, I ask myself, in what ways has reading Rosenzweig's work changed my life? Additionally, I ask, in what ways has reading and studying his work changed others as well or is able to change others' lives for the better, at least in my best estimation? Setting all silly complaints about hagiography and triviality aside and the extent to which Rosenzweig has been inappropriately idolized or maligned, of complaints about pretentiousness or bombastic style, the greatest achievement of Rosenzweig's work is that, in fact, he engages our interest in those concerns which are most significant to us. Those concerns include, first, our condition as loved and loving beings; second, that we are finite beings that come from and live in communities that continue on without us; and third, that we play significant and instrumental roles in forming the intellectual, spiritual, and material socio-political conditions of those various communities. Basically, that's it. Well, not quite. What remains for us to do is to figure out what loving others is all about and how some communities seem to cultivate such dispositions better than others. In other words, what constitutes community membership and why stay in one community and not another? Further, what constitutes the conditions for transformative change, and how do we come to agreements on the results of those changes? These are, of course, questions

of exile and extermination, of alienation and exploitation, of inclusion and exclusion, and of economic distributive justice and material well-being. And these questions are also at the heart of Rosenzweig's work, just not explicitly stated or theoretically articulated; rather, they are entailed in the peculiar aesthetic character of the work that confronts us, unsettles us, and even shocks us.

In other words, questions about intent and effectiveness would not even arise if Rosenzweig had not written his work keenly attuned to both its aesthetic and messianic import, that is, by constructing his work with a certain aesthetic form and with an ethical content. By contrast, his work should not be construed in the Heideggerian sense of providing us with an ontological framework for deconstructing the philosophical history of metaphysics as a propaedeutic for authentically raising the question of being, or of, in some way, apologetically emphasizing the unassailable finitude of our lives. It is not, ultimately, about puzzling through an existential analytic or even in giving up one's life for the sake of the destiny of one's people, or in straining to coordinate evidence to ground a thesis about "being-towards-redemption" as Rosenzweig's mirroring counterpart to Heidegger's famous dictum of being-toward-death.³

Above all, the key to Rosenzweig's work is his *midrash* on Shir HaSharim, on a pagan love poem. Clearly, this heartbeat of his work accounts for and promotes the radical and interruptive encounters with others, as Other, encounters when one is called out of the homogeneity of self-reflective, tragic, and speechless isolation, out of the isolation of a negation-structured self-identity. In other words, at the heart of his work is a

phenomenological recounting of an aesthetic experience, an *Erlebnis* of sensually lived distinction and approach that plays out in a process of word and answer that does not set one at conflictual odds with the other, nor that individualizes someone as an integral whole self, but in fact prioritizes the other as one attends to the call of that other. To read Rosenzweig's work otherwise simply misses the most obvious effect of his work and its most significant philosophical contribution as a messianic aesthetic, as an ethical aesthetic. Thus, the work itself, as an aesthetic production, functions performatively through enacting series of stimuli that produce in the reader a variety of experiences of incompleteness, but which nonetheless precipitates a series of incremental but historically verifiable messianic fulfillments that nonetheless disturbs any static state of apparently total or final completion.

Returning to the quote from Benjamin, one way to understand messianism is that the term refers to a completed state of rest, a still-stand of accomplished balance, but with—nonetheless—an outstanding task that remains before us. What 'remains' is not a clinging to the survival of mere finite existence; what 'remains' is the task yet to be completed, that task that still remains before us—the imperative to 'love me' and to 'love the other' as that which remains as an outstanding directive. With the interruption provided by Rosenzweig's work we are also given a directive and a direction for our acts (*Handeln*)—that is, we are directed towards the face of the other who unpredictably happens by. The general guidelines are provided by communal structure and the 'content' is the ethical imperative to, in fact, in deed, and in act, love the next one as rehearsed in the text, and as done by Rosenzweig himself with the production of a text that has had, arguably,

marginal historical effectiveness. Rosenzweig's ideal Jewish community, empirically echoing actual Jewish and other community praxes, is the marginal but materially resistant factor that disrupts—not by their very presence but by their disturbing rituals—that are shocking because they call attention to ethical shortfalls and look forward to an ideal, utopic, messianic state of peace. Performing such incremental completions of rest and peace in the context of a greater whole of in-completion, is part of the prophetic happening of the aesthetic production played out in the ritual practices of community life marking a resistance to the train of historical progress, that is, a progress that must “oppress the past” in order to effect its ownmost future of domination and assimilative integration.

But why the intervention of a text? This is where reading Benjamin again helps out with interpreting Rosenzweig. This is also how interpreting the text by way of my current historical context is likewise an unavoidable, that is, *midrashic*, necessity. Post-Shoah, post-Rwanda, post-Bosnia, post-Enron, post-Six Day War, post-9/11, post-Iraqi invasion, post-Madrid, post-rape and post-murder of the women from Juarez, Mexico, from the marginalized desiderata of the Maquiladora industry and drug culture of the border situation of my daily life in El Paso, Texas, we read Rosenzweig and Benjamin differently; faced with the shock of an oppressed past we read with a heightened sense of socio-political urgency and with the tools of critical social theory. Indeed, one way *not* to handle such a text is as an instrument of commodification, a tactic which nonetheless fails with *Der Stern*. Such a text will never make the New York Times Best Seller List nor Oprah's Reading Club. The more that we take it up and assess it in its merely formal

aspects, that is, along the lines of mere aesthetic ornamentation or as an exercise in analysis and self-contained problem solving, the more we lose touch with its meaningful function as a carrier of ethical content. But it is the aesthetic form that significantly carries, or figures, the ethical content for us. To make this final point about ethical content, consider the short section of Rosenzweig's text that deals specifically with the issue of content, specifically the central part of his text that deals with content in the context of the presentation of what constellates the aspect of post-shock in the concept of revelation.

In Rosenzweig's formal aesthetic categories, the concept of revelation (*Offenbarung*) has less to do with the elements as 'stuff' than with how humans-as-elements relate. In other words, Rosenzweig's choice, like Levinas' after him, is to prioritize ethics over ontology, which means that in his aesthetics he establishes the grounds of an epistemology that is derived from an already established ethical relationship. Standing in an ethical relationship with another means that the "breach in thingness" has been already effected, and that concern for one's referent converts from an anonymous concern for the third person objective (it/he/she), to a personal concern for the one I address as you and who addresses me in return.⁴ Indeed, the aesthetic categories themselves, as revelatory-relational concepts, have to do not with breadth of "content," defined as *Inhalt*, which would have to do with creation, but rather with the evaluative intensity of content defined as *Gehalt*.⁵ While *Inhalt* connotes that which is contained in something else, as liquid is contained in a vessel, *Gehalt* connotes that which is earned, experienced, and held—and entails a temporal association. Hence, to denote such evaluative-intensive kind of

“content,” Rosenzweig refers to revelation as a temporal/aesthetic process of sensual en-souling.⁶ Unlike creation, the revelatory process of ensouling is not one of a “setting-free-from” but, rather, one which takes the form of a wrestling-out-of the pre-aesthetic wholeness. Such a process contrasts with the epistemological method established in the hypothetical element ‘god’ where the distinction is made between modes of thinking determined as a “staying-at-home” versus a “running-away-from.”⁷ In view of the pre-enacted wholeness of the conceptual vision, Rosenzweig maintains that “the pre-aesthetic whole has to sacrifice itself for the sake of aesthetic ensoulment.” In Rosenzweig’s *midrash*, such a sacrificial act is analogously similar to that of god as lover forgetting (it)self in intending towards the other as beloved ‘object.’ A relationship of ‘tension’ occurs, of attention and intensifying intensification. But beyond analogy, any lover who turns out of and away from her or himself and attends to the other prioritizes that other, thus ‘ensouling’ the other with an intensity of value, of ‘holding’ or ‘embracing’ the other in consideration—along the lines of a Benjaminian auratic relationship. But for Rosenzweig, this is not merely a subject-object, dialectical process with a happy and mutually beneficial ‘return’ function; rather, it is one in which both subjects (lover and beloved) stand in immediate relation to the whole of their cohering relationship, just differently, and alternating the embracing and thus enlivening acts for and with each other.⁸ What was previously mere *stuff* or *content* as *Inhalt* becomes ensouled content with particular value as *Gehalt*. The revelatory process is a way of talking about how those involved in relating to one another from their respectively isolated and relatively differentiated status as individually created object-things experience irruption and undergo conversion into a differentiating process of particular

subjects endowed with value—so endowed because each is loved/named/identified in and for her/himself—uniquely and historically attended to, that is, messianically chosen.⁹

But just how does such an ensouling occur? Are we not again faced with some variation of the Hegelian three-step dialectic logic, namely, from general being through nothing to individualized being, that is, from Sein to Nichts to Dasein? In contradistinction, the initial ‘stuff’ corresponds to a Cohenian infinitesimal nothing, initially designated as non-relational *Inhalt*, on its differential way to becoming its own something, as valorized *Gehalt*, because of having gone through the process of intending relational attention through engaging with a variable but necessarily unpredictable other. In order to bridge the gap between self and other, Rosenzweig inserts the author, as ‘variable’ artist, into the differential process, as that one who sacrifices part of her own humanity for the sake of addressing the other, thus bringing the individual detail to ensouled life with attentive love. Significantly, Rosenzweig’s enactment entails that each “moment” (*Augenblick*) of the process draws on the wholeness of the human mediated through the human as author:

It is quite clear, that this ensouling of the stuff, this becoming of the quantitative content to qualitative content does not come from the human as author, rather, it comes from the whole human, in whom the author himself could first originate (*entstehen*).¹⁰

It is not the author who loses herself in her work but the self, as ‘manifold totality’, that forfeits its ‘wholeness and closedness’ through the self-negating act of self-forgetting, sinking into the “sleeping” stuff until it awakens with life. Thus, through the restraint and shock-inducing response of an author in the face of the other and for the sake of the other,

dead *Inhalt*, the oppressed past, becomes enlivened *Gehalt*—redeemed and redeeming soul.

¹ In order to document this claim, much of Levinas' work could be cited. Just to begin with, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 21ff. In the "Preface" Levinas begins by posing the problem of sincerity of moral discourse in the context of a discourse, and social reality, conditioned by "the permanent possibility of war."

² See Peter Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, xxiv

³ Ibid.

⁴ Such an address and counter-address is not unlike what Walter Benjamin in another context refers to as "aura," namely, that "Derivation of aura as the projection of a human social experience onto nature: the gaze is returned." See Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vo. 4 – 1938-1940*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Eng.: Belknap Press, 2003), 173.

⁵ SE 212. The entire quote is: "*des Ganzen auf den zu ver-dichtenden seelischen Gehalt.*" "*Inhalt*" connotes that which is contained in something else, as liquid is contained in a vessel, for example. Whereas, "*Gehalt*" connotes that which is earned, experienced, and held.

⁶ Op. Cit. 32 for how "Inhalt" is distinguished from "Gehalt" and SE 213f. At the end, Rosenzweig depicts the Star of Redemption whose "content of Judaism" (*Gehalt des Judentums*) flames forth with the truth of the oneness of God". See SE 457.

⁷ See the concepts "*Anwohner des Nichts*" versus the "*Entronnener*" at SE, 26.

⁸ As an aside, note the respective emergence of the "Yes" and "No" from the Nothing in the section on metaphysics in Book One, Part One of *Der Stern* for Rosenzweig's presentation of an analysis of the logic of "wrestled out conceptual meaning." This is a *re-soundence* of that process on another, more complex, level. In terms of chaos theory, the application can be compared to that of a scaling of structures of similarity. The success of Rosenzweig's project depends in no small measure on the way these anti-dialectical structures permeate his text.

⁹ Through listening to and responding to the other's story.

¹⁰ SE, 214. "Es ist ganz deutlich, daß diese Beseelung des Stoffes, dieses Werden des Inhalts zum Gehalt nicht vom Menschen als Urheber ausgeht, sondern von dem ganzen Menschen, in dem der Urheber selber erst entstehen konnte."