

FRANZ ROSENZWEIG (1886–1929)

by STEPHANE MOSES

On December 10 of this year it will be 53 years since Franz Rosenzweig, one of the outstanding and most original Jewish thinkers of our time, died at Frankfurt. Four years after his death the rise of Nazism spelled the end of Germany Jewry which, from Moses Mendelssohn to Martin Buber, via Heine and Kafka, Marx and Freud, Einstein and Schoenberg, had made such an exceptional contribution to modern European civilization, and of which Rosenzweig was one of the greatest representatives. Hitler's seizure of power marked the beginning of a long period during which Rosenzweig's oeuvre, and in particular his main work *The Star of Redemption*, was suppressed. It was not until the 1950s that his work was again brought to the attention of the public, first in the United States and Israel, then in Germany, and finally in France. A third reprint of the original 1921 German edition of the *Stern der Erlösung* has appeared; the book has been translated into Hebrew and English; and a French translation will be published before the end of this year. Rosenzweig's complete works in German are in the process of being published for the first time.

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This article was translated from the French by Yohanan Eldad; a German version of it has also appeared: "Franz Rosenzweig Heute," *Leo Baeck Institute Bulletin* 58 (1981), pp. 11–16.

Rosenzweig's thought is difficult, paradoxical and, notwithstanding its systematic appearance, often contradictory. To understand it one must first become acquainted with the author's personal history, his cultural and historical background, and the decisive events of his life. Although it is unusual to elucidate a philosophy with the aid of biographical data, in the case of Rosenzweig this is entirely in accordance with his own philosophical premises. To him, as to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, philosophy means the total and unconditional dedication to the search for truth. Subjectivity is not considered a disadvantage; on the contrary, living thought has the same status as the spoken word: precisely because it proceeds from the *hic et nunc*, from a given situation and moment, it may claim to be a facet of truth.

Rosenzweig's *hic et nunc*, the situation and moment that saw the birth of his thought, were the years 1917 and 1918 and the trenches of the Balkans where he spent his army service and conceived and began to write the *Star of Redemption*. Rosenzweig was born in 1886 into an assimilated German middle-class family who knew Judaism only as a ritual relic devoid of life and meaning. From 1908 to 1912 he studied history and political philosophy under Friedrich Meinecke, one of the outstanding German historiographers of the early 20th century. Meinecke was first and foremost interested in the history of political ideas in 19th-century Germany, and in particular in the dialectical relationships between universalism and nationalism and their implications for the moulding of German unity. A great admirer of Bismarck, Meinecke contended that the German *Reich* could not have come into being if the universalist aspirations — a legacy from the age of Enlightenment — had not given way to the conviction that the historical behavior of the states is guided by the supreme law of political realism. Hence his vindication of the sacred egoism of the nation-state, not only *de facto*, but also *de jure*.

Rosenzweig's last two year years at Freiburg were devoted to his doctor's thesis on Hegel's political philosophy, which was published in 1920 under the title *Hegel and the State*. In this book he showed that Hegel regarded the state as the political incarnation of the absolute Idea. The state is the highest manifestation of collective existence, since only within its framework can the life of a nation be concretized; to live as a rational being the individual citizen needs the protection of law which is enforced by the powers of the state. For Hegel the Prussian monarchy of which he was a citizen was the paradigm of the ideal state; or, in more general terms, modern European civilization, which is also the highest stage of Christian culture, is the most advanced period in universal history and thus the ideal model of political reality. As he saw it, every great European nation is, at some time or other, destined to perform the role of manifestation of the absolute Idea on the stage of history. This Hegelian concept of the unique, historical mission of every nation is regarded by Rosenzweig as the source of modern nationalism. As it is an essential tendency of both the state and the individual to

affirm themselves, even at the expense of others, the law governing their coexistence is therefore inevitably the law of war.

Rosenzweig does not conceal his reservations about Hegel's political philosophy. But it was the war of 1914, experienced by Rosenzweig, as by all his contemporaries, as a catastrophe of historical dimension, which brought home to him the tragic truth of the Hegelian concepts and the consequent necessity of rejecting them. World War I, fought for the sake of the national principle, which led to the collapse of fragmented Europe in blood and fire, was decisive for Rosenzweig's thought. It explains his rejection of the Western political model with its nationalism, wars and violence, and his adoption of the idea of collective existence, totally detached from history, of which, according to him, the Jewish people is the exponent. The central thesis of the *Star of Redemption* is thus as follows: unlike the nations of the world, whose fate is linked to the turbulences of history, the Jewish people, immersed in a purely ritual existence, has always lived *sub specie eternitatis*. This extreme view (which Rosenzweig himself was subsequently to alter considerably) negates the links of the Jewish people with the temporal world and empties Jewish messianism of its historical substance; it is therefore doubtless the most questionable thesis of the *Star of Redemption*. On the other hand, however, this concept of a collective vocation of the Jewish people, differing from that of the other nations insofar as it distances itself, in the name of its absolute demands, from the contingencies of politics and history, is still extremely fruitful.

Before arriving at this conclusion, Rosenzweig went through a spiritual crisis which led to his renunciation of the relativism and scepticism of his student years and the adoption of a religious world view centering upon an authentic, elementary experience of Revelation. Under the influence of Eugen Rosenstock, one of his Jewish friends who had converted to Protestantism, he acknowledged that one can escape nihilism only by placing oneself in the centre of a coordinate system of absolute values which conveys meaning to time and direction to space; in other words, by proceeding from the point of origin of a sacred history and geography from which the world derives its orientation. In Western civilization, only the Judaeo-Christian tradition provides such a sacred time and space. Revelation is thus the moment in a man's personal life when he finds himself face to face with the God of Judaism and Christianity, or rather when God enables him to give meaning to the world.

When Rosenzweig adopted this world view, in July 1913, he at first nurtured the idea of converting to Christianity. As a disciple of Hegel, he believed that in the context of Western culture religion is synonymous with Christianity and that "there is no room for Judaism" in this culture. But three months later an event took place that was to be decisive for his spiritual development. After attending

the Yom Kippur services in a small orthodox synagogue in Berlin, he decided to remain a Jew. He witnessed how an entire congregation, absorbed in prayer, disengaged itself for a whole day from the temporal world. This experience taught him that, although in Western civilization “no man comes unto the Father but by Christ”, Israel does not have to come unto the Father, because it is already with Him. In the exceptional moments in which it identifies with its religious vocation, the Jewish people reveals its true essence which transcends historical time and the profane world. Its absence from the world, the fact that Western civilization has “no room for it”, does not reduce it to something archaic and obsolete but, on the contrary, signifies its lofty vocation.

The point of departure of *The Star of Redemption*, written in the six months between Autumn 1918 and Spring 1919, is the observation that the war of 1914 has invalidated the central concept of the Western philosophical tradition, that of a universe ruled by the Logos in accordance with the same laws that apply to our thought and which assigns man his place in the harmonious general order of things. Rosenzweig rejects this philosophical tradition, which culminated in German Idealism, and relates to a different system of thought, more directly rooted in concrete experience and therefore more faithfully reflecting the realities of man and his world: that of religious thought, which first found expression in the mythical world of Greek Antiquity and subsequently in the faith-worlds of Judaism and Christianity. Although these three perspectives each occupy an equally necessary place in the general plan of the book, Judaism is nevertheless the keynote of the system.

Mythical thought constitutes a direct perception of reality in its three elementary aspects: man, the world and God. These categories, which are expressions of the reality of man's presence in the world, remain the basic categories of Judeo-Christian consciousness as well, and strengthen its roots in reality. At the same time, however, Judaism and Christianity transform the pagan notions in a very real manner by placing the three aspects, which the mythical mind can only perceive in their original dissociation, into relation with one another. The Judeo-Christian conception postulates a twofold emanation of God: towards the world — Creation; and towards man — Revelation; and a movement of man towards the world — Redemption. According to Rosenzweig, these three relations constitute the pattern of man's most profound experience. Creation is the immediate experience that it is good that the world exists; Revelation is his experience, in prayer and ritual, of God's presence-absence; Redemption is the utopian aspiration underlying all human activities. These three relations, ignored by classical philosophy, are immediately present in language which, unlike conceptual thought, is the authentic expression of human experience. Proceeding from an analysis of biblical texts Rosenzweig shows that the categories of the narrative (symbolized by the pronoun *He*) correspond to the experience of Creation, those

of the dialogue (*I, Thou*) to that of Revelation, and those of the plurl pronoun (*We*) to the experience of Redemption.

This image of man as a being responsive to these two poles — the world (that is, his fellow-man) and God — which is characteristic of Judaism and Christianity, is objectively expressed in the notions, or rather the utopias, of Redemption of each of the two religions. Rosenzweig does not find these notions in the theoretical doctrines of Judaism and Christianity, but rather in their communal life, their calendar, liturgy and institutions. Both are characterized by the creation of sacred time which enables them to evade the vicissitudes of historical time and be assured of their eternity. Christianity, however, lives simultaneously in eternity and in the temporal world; it is always at the “crossroads”. Associated in certain respects with the destinies of nations and of society, it accompanies them through history and endeavours to gradually bring them nearer to the Kingdom of God. This means that by its very nature it is always compromised by the impurity of history. The Jewish people, on the other hand, is beyond history, in an eternity acquired by its own accomplishment, and it holds up to mankind a paradigm of spiritual life in community remote from the vicissitudes of historical time. The relationship between Judaism and Christianity may thus be described as that between design and history. In this sense both are equally essential in the vista of truth.

A year after the publication of the *Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig fell victim to a disease which soon led to the loss of speech and eventually paralysed him entirely. However, his creative faculties remained unaffected. By almost superhuman will-power, he was able to produce during the next six years an important and rich oeuvre, partly composed of philosophical and theological studies, but primarily devoted to a German translation of Judah Halevi's Hebrew poems and, above all, to a new German translation of the Bible in cooperation with Martin Buber. In 1920 he had founded the Frankfurt Jüdische Lehrhaus where Martin Buber, Ernst Simon, Erich Fromm and others lectured. During the last years of his life, he gradually became a spiritual authority among a small circle of Jewish intellectuals on the fringes of the official Jewish community who were attracted by the world of Jewish tradition. Beyond the diversity of pathways open to his contemporaries, he tried above all to show them the “common picture”.

Today, more than 50 years after his death, it is not difficult to see to what extent Rosenzweig's thought bears the mark of its time. In most respects, and not least because of its “quietism”, it must be regarded as a pre-Holocaust philosophy. Nevertheless, from its sublime position, his work poses to our generation its own truest questions.

*Immanuel* 14 (Spring 1982)