

A REVIEW OF YUDIT KORNBERG GREENBERG, *BETTER THAN WINE: LOVE, POETRY, AND PRAYER IN THE THOUGHT OF FRANZ ROSENZWEIG*

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Yudit Greenberg. *Better than Wine: Love, Poetry, and Prayer in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 184 pp.

Yudit Greenberg's *Better than Wine: Love, Poetry, and Prayer in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig* represents an indispensable contribution to the burgeoning secondary literature on this important early twentieth Jewish thinker. Readers of the "Textual Reasoning" list will take particular interest in the attention Greenberg pays to the relationship between Rosenzweig and postmodernism and to the hermeneutical foci that inform this work. Throughout this rich text, Greenberg looks to the situated self, revelatory language and gesture, the interpretation of text and liturgical life. In the process, she seeks to bind Rosenzweig to Jewish tradition while

showing how he anticipates intellectual currents prevalent among post-modern and feminist circles.

Three major parts structure Greenberg's text.

In Part I, Greenberg sets what Rosenzweig called "new thinking" within the contexts of the German philosophical tradition (Feuerbach and Schelling in particular), Jewish mysticism, and the contemporary intellectual scene (Cohen, Rosenstock-Huussy, Buber, Ebner). Her comparison of Rosenzweig with Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger proves particularly noteworthy. She shows the similarity between Rosenzweig's theory regarding the metaphysical status of human/poetic/liturgic language, Benjamin's notion of "Original Language" (*Ursprache*), and the later Heidegger's understanding of poetry (according to which Being speaks through the receptive soundboard of human poesis).

Greenberg proceeds to open up Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* in Part II of her text. She follows Rosenzweig's analysis unfolding through the course of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. A strong reader, Greenberg adds her own voice into the mix. She pays particular attention to the "sensual" dimension in Rosenzweig's religious thought with a fine analysis of hearing/speech and vision/gesture as modes of religious knowledge. I found this latter of particular interest. Greenberg's concern with vision compliments Eliot Wolfson's analysis of visionary experience in Kabbalah and as such brings this important facet of religious life into the twentieth century.

In Part III Greenberg turns a critical eye on Rosenzweig's thought. In a particularly interesting defense of Greek mythology, she points out the limitations undergirding Rosenzweig's understanding of "pagan" religions and Islam. Her text ends with a discussion of how contemporary post-modern Jewish religious thinkers might critically extend Rosenzweig's project. Greenberg suggests that this entails coupling the notion of the situated self with mythic thinking. In her view, Rosenzweig ultimately failed to meet the primary and daunting challenge of how one might link personal religious experience within the world of particular Jewish obligations.

The strength of *Better than Wine* lies in the attention its author pays throughout the entirety of the text to the hermeneutical and aesthetic turn in Rosenzweig's thought. As such, it moves the Rosenzweig literature beyond the two-dimensionality of epistemology and ethics.

I consider more dubious Greenberg's call to myth making. The approach to myth and her own turn to aesthetics betray an underlying weak point: the relative absence of an integrated and thoroughgoing critique that would advance Rosenzweig's thought by leaving it behind. This weakness is, of course, not limited to Greenberg's text. Indeed, a hagiographic glow (a myth making in its own right that turns Rosenzweig into an exemplar of postmodern intellectual spirit and virtue) inundates the secondary literature on Rosenzweig. This hagiography goes back to Nahum Glatzer who first introduced Rosenzweig to the English-speaking world in the 1950s. Unfortunately, Greenberg helps advance the trend to lionize Rosenzweig as a faithful Jewish philosopher-hero-sage (as opposed to the Jewish dilettante that he himself claimed to be in his letters).

For instance, Greenberg expends a great amount of energy trying to link Rosenzweig more directly to the past of Jewish mysticism than actually makes sense. To be sure, she herself admits that Rosenzweig's understanding of kabbalah was bought second hand (via Boheme, Schelling, and nineteenth century Jewish scholarship). Nevertheless she tries, I think unsuccessfully, the harder pitch of drawing direct thematic links between Rosenzweig and that tradition. It is not enough to show that Rosenzweig and many kabbalists linked redemption liturgy. When all is said and done, Rosenzweig self-consciously mythologized. In contrast, kabbalah shows a much more particular understanding of Israel and active belief in the theurgic power of ritual than one would ever find in Rosenzweig's work. This suggests, to me at least, the need to attend more strictly to the difference between mysticism and poetry (despite the resemblance they share).

I would rather root Rosenzweig's understanding of liturgy and gesture in Hegel rather than look for it in medieval mystical sources and Scholem's research. Perhaps this might wreak a little havoc on

Rosenzweig's image among Jewish readers by rudely drawing him out of the context of tradition. That the author of *The Star of Redemption* knew Bible, Maimonides, and some midrash cannot be doubted. But I see no reason to rifle Cordovero, the Zohar, or Hayim Vital to find possible parallels between Rosenzweig and mysticism. This means more than noting the by now obvious debt Rosenzweig owed Schelling in formulating the theosophical material in Part I of *The Star of Redemption*. Re-reading Hegel's lectures on religion would remind us of the importance both Hegel and Rosenzweig invested in "religious community" and its "ritual." Community and ritual are for both thinkers the loci of religious truth becoming concrete and manifest. Likewise, Rosenzweig's thought shares with Hegel's lectures on fine art a keen interest in "the face" and a critique of the frozen, self-contained quality of Greek sculpture. To find these influences in Hegel, rather than kabbalah, would help divest Rosenzweig of the sanctity that so many of his readers have sought to bestow upon him.

Linking Rosenzweig's work with modern intellectual currents at the turn of the twentieth century would provide similar tonic. Greenberg repeats the typical assertion that Rosenzweig's turn to tradition and myth marked a departure from modern intellectual currents. Rosenzweig thus appears to us as a baal tshuva breaking from "modern" or "modernist" intellectual paradigms. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Indeed, a diverse array of mythical, mystical, and theosophical currents characterized early twentieth century modernism. The work of Kandinsky, Klee, Marc, Mondrian, Kafka, Hesse, and Lasker-Schuler come immediately to mind. The self-conscious turn to myth and mysticism makes Rosenzweig quite "moderne" if not quite "modern" in the narrower sense of enlightenment, scientism, and positivism. Indeed, the power of mysticism and myth was taken even more seriously than it is today. What, after all, are we to make of Rosenzweig's claim regarding the metaphysical status of human language? Do we really want to suggest the human tongue reflects God's own? Who among us would pretend to "see" the gestalt of truth reflected in the mirror of Jewish ritual? Indeed,

there is great reason to suspect the lure of mystical and mythological thinking following this century's proxyisms.

I would only close by thanking Greenberg for a marvelous text that reveals the aesthetic turn made by such an important figure in the history of twentieth century religious thought. And just as important: Greenberg's analysis unwittingly provokes strong suspicions regarding the coherence of Rosenzweig's thought. Ideas that may have once made sense at the last *fin de siecle* (infused as it was with so many theosophical currents) may make less sense today. Indeed, their obvious attractions may strike many critics as downright pernicious. In the end, Greenberg has shown us that love, poetry, and prayer may be "better" than wine. But perhaps only insofar as they outstrip the latter's own intoxicating powers.