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Rosenzweig as Postcritical Jewish Philosopher

a review of *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered*, by Leora Batnitzky (Princeton University Press, 2000); \$41.50.

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Leora Batnitzky has revised her Ph.D. dissertation into a book that is of great significance for those who think about religion, theology, philosophy and culture from a postmodern perspective. Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps the most widely read 20th century Jewish philosopher, both among Jewish and also Christian postmodern and postliberal thinkers. But Levinas considered his own work an extension of Franz Rosenzweig's, and more technically minded scholars of modern Jewish thought devote as much attention to Rosenzweig as to Levinas ' to both the teacher and his prize student. Along with his own teacher Hermann Cohen and his peer Martin Buber, Rosenzweig played a dominant role in wresting modern Jewish philosophy and theology from its exilic wanderings within the conceptual architectonic of Kant, Hegel and other disciples of post-Kantian idealism and conceptualism. Because his work emerges from deep within this architectonic, some critics read Rosenzweig as still too much a Hegelian (or phenomenologist or Schellingian Kantian in the broader sense). But this is to mistake the context of his work for its claims. Like those of any pioneering thinker, his writings deliver innovations and reformations in a doubly coded language: on one side the language of his own formation and intellectual culture, but on the other side the new-old language of his reforms. His reform, in other words, is not a new claim within the terms of the old language, but a transformed language for delivering claims. Such a reform can be difficult to read or to read well. Batnisky reads Rosenzweig very well and enables a broad audience of readers to read well, and clearly, along with her.

An Overview of Batnitzky's Theses

3. The central thesis of *Idolatry and Representation* is that Rosenzweig criticized the idolatries of religion, as well as of modern secularism, as errors of worship and of hermeneutics. In both cases, he judged idolatry to be a sin and error of practice, rather than of mere thinking. Idolatrous worship is to worship God by way of fixed *representations* (*Vorstellung*) of God's *being*. In non-idolatrous worship, God is known by way of *acts*, each of which is interpreted as a *representative sign* (*Vertreten*) of how humans should act in God's image or by God's command. For Rosenzweig, "religion" therefore tends to be idolatrous when, as a "projective symbolism," it signifies a community's adoption of certain fixed images and concepts as adequate representations of what God is (23). In *place* of this human "religion," Rosenzweig promotes "Revelation" ' "God's religion" ' as the relation to God that interrupts religion's fixity, commanding action in ever-new ways. Idolatry therefore emerges from the hermeneutical error of reducing the on-going and active relation between God and the community of worshippers to humanly constructed or selected systems of images and concepts *about* God. To worship God properly is to respect the relationality and polysemy of all representative signs of God: each of which marks an historically concrete relationship between God and

the community of worshippers and each of which finds its meanings in the ways a given community acts, in the future, in relation to the sign.

4. One sub-thesis of *Idolatry and Representation* concerns the logic, ethics, and aesthetics of images. On behalf of Rosenzweig, Batnitzky argues that, since proper representation of God is a matter of performance rather than of mere perception/conception, image-making is not in itself an idolatrous act. The issue is how images are *used*. According to Rosenzweig/Batnitzky, Maimonides and Hermann Cohen cannot make sense of biblical and rabbinic Judaism's own tendencies to anthropomorphism, because they misrepresent biblical *Vertreten* as if it were mere *Vorstellung* (21). Following Judah Halevi, however, Rosenzweig identifies the Bible's ban on idols as a ban only on fixed or monovalent images. He celebrates anthropomorphism as an essential vehicle of biblical revelation: bearing the message that the God of Israel is a God humans know palpably through the myriad and ever renewed ways in which God enters into their experiences and history. For this reason, Rosenzweig considered *vision* to be Israel's goal and not merely an errant temptation. The error is to attempt to see God as one sees things in the world. But the goal, as Batnitzky explains it, is to see God by way of counter-factual visions of how the world might yet be. This is to see miracles, or signs in this world of new worlds that are yet to be and that may be realized through the actions we take in imitation of God.
5. A second sub-thesis concerns Christianity's unique contribution to this goal. Batnitzky argues that, for Rosenzweig, Christian images 'the cross above all' have great redemptive potential, because they alone can redeem the "pagan" 'or human bound by worldly finitude' from his/her alienation from the world (149, following *Star of Redemption*, 393/354). The image of the cross raises the suffering of the individual into that of a shared humanity and thereby becomes a stimulus to human relationship and community formation (150, following 420/377). The image loses its redemptive potential, however, if Christians employ it, idolatrously, as a fixed image of God's being rather than as a representative of God's work on earth. One of Judaism's tasks is to keep Christianity from fixing its images in this manner (167). Christianity, too, has a responsibility to keep Judaism away from its own capacity for idolatry. For Rosenzweig, "Judaism IS God's artwork *gi' ven* to the world for the sake of the world's response" (95), but the redemptive capacity of this artwork is lost when the Jewish community misrepresents itself, in its historical nationhood, as a fixed and final image of the divine on earth. Judaism and the Jewish people, like a work of art, remains a representative of God only when it remains uncanny (*unheimlich*): never fully at home in itself in the world, but always an incomplete sign of what is yet to be.

Batnitzky's Rosenzweig as Postcritical Jewish Philosopher

6. Interpreted according to its own categories, Batnitzky's work may be judged by its capacity to serve as a representative 'rather than mere representation or portrayal (*Vorstellung*)' of Rosenzweig's hermeneutical critique of idolatry. One may judge a portrayal against our views of its object, but a representing (*Vertreten*) has to be judged by its fruits, or at least by what we imagine its fruits would be. Over the next few paragraphs, I will trace one series of reasons why I believe *Idolatry and Representation* succeeds very well as a representative of Rosenzweig's critique, particularly through the strong contribution it makes to current movements in both Jewish and Christian post-critical philosophical theology.

7. Batnitzky examines Rosenzweig within the context of 19-20th century German Judaism and German philosophy, but the immediate context of her work is, more broadly, within American disciplines of religious studies and, more specifically, within what she, in two places, terms “postcritical” approaches to the biblical traditions. She says these approaches take “seriously the internal interpretative dynamics of a tradition while nonetheless taking into account a critical-historical and scientific approach to texts” (7). In the case of Buber and Rosenzweig, she says this means to approach the biblical text from the outside in, reading from out of academic traditions of critical study and then from within (129). To begin to work “within the tradition” is therefore already to have been disciplined *by* the discourses of modern inquiry, but to have come, as well, to recognize their limitations. It is, then, to have initiated a third form of discourse that is irreducible both to the sciences and ethics of the modern academy and to the religious and philosophic traditions from which modern scholarship has sought to distance itself. Batnitzky has reintroduced Rosenzweig’s hermeneutic to us as such a third form of discourse. From the perspectives she offers, Rosenzweig’s critique of idolatry may be received, anew, as a critique of the idolatrous consequences of representing the religion of Israel exclusively through either of the other two discourses’ that is, through modern scholarship alone, or through efforts to reassert traditional religious claims independently of academic inquiry.
8. As noted earlier, Levinas is Rosenzweig’s most influential disciple, so that the succession of inquiries that links Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas now constitutes the most influential source of contemporary Jewish studies of this third discourse. Most of the North American disciples of these four thinkers (including Batnitzky) have, in fact, joined a single society of inquiry’ The Society for Textual Reasoning (STR), joined by annual meetings, an electronic discussion group, and the electronic journal, *Textual Reasoning*. This means that it is reasonable to identify the network of dialogues and writings shared by STR members as the most conspicuous single representative (*Vertreten*) today of Rosenzweig’s third discourse and, in the context of STR, to label this discourse “textual reasoning.” In this sense, one of the fruits of Batnitzky’s work will be to refocus contemporary understanding of the hermeneutics of textual reasoning. To reapply Batnitzky’s terms, the STR has developed “from outside in.” Its founding members were modern Jewish philosophers in the academy whose disappointments with modern philosophy led them’ through the guidance of Rosenzweig and peers’ to reappropriate traditional biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic discourses as sources of Jewish philosophy’s first premises, rather than as mere subject-matters for philosophic examination. They sought Jewish text scholars as partners in this effort and eventually gained them. The text scholars who joined them had experienced complementary disappointments with the regnant modern paradigms of text scholarship, prototypically, the modern Jewish sciences of historical-critical study or *das Wissenschaft des Judentums*. While equally wary of modern Jewish philosophy, these text scholars have found in textual reasoning an appropriate vehicle of interpretive dialogue between textual and critical discourses. I mention these institutional details because, in the terms Batnitzky has offered, one should identify textual reasoning with the actual performance of a society like this, rather than with some individual thinkers’ efforts to reduce the performance, as representation (*Vorstellung*) of Jewish thinking, to a few principles.
9. Batnitzky draws striking parallels between Rosenzweig’s third discourse and the postcritical Christian theology of George Lindbeck (210ff). She notes, for example, how Rosenzweig’s critique of fixed concepts and images complements Lindbeck’s critique of merely propositional or

merely expressivist theologies, and how Rosenzweig's hermeneutic complements Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" model of religious language. And, indeed, Rosenzweig's capacity to help stimulate a movement of Jewish textual reasoning also parallels Lindbeck's capacity to help stimulate a movement of what is called, variously, "postcritical," or "postliberal" Christian theology. Participants in the two movements have also formed several bridging institutions, one of which is the Society for Scriptural Reasoning (for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim studies of scripture and philosophy, consciously complementing the STR).

10. At the same time, Batnitzky's discussion of Lindbeck also introduces terms for identifying differences within the textual reasoning movement. While all members of the STR participate in various ways in Rosenzweig's third discourse, different members also tend to pull that discourse in either of two directions. Batnitzky's study is representative of what we might call the "postliberal" wing of STR: those who share the Rosenzweig/Lindbeck tendency to appear relatively more wary of the idolatries of the academy than of the biblical traditions. On the other side is what we might call the "postmodern" wing of STR: those whose work in poststructuralist and deconstructive philosophies makes them appear relatively more wary of the idolatries of religious communities than of academic critics. Some differences between these two poles of STR are illustrated in Batnitzky's occasional disagreements with one of her mentors, Robert Gibbs. For example, she disagrees! with his portrayal of Rosenzweig as a "postmodern philosopher" (4, 227 n. 2, f). Indeed, along with Edith Wyschogrod, Yudit Greenberg, Elliot Wolfson and others, Gibbs often voices caution, within the STR, about the dangers of romanticizing the religious/communal cure for the alienation of the modern individual; and, along with Steven Kepnes, Batnitzky and others in the STR, I also voice caution, more often, about the dangers of academic indifference to communal dialogue and religious authority. However, these differences fall within the dialogic life of textual reasoning. Since they are essential to that life, it may be misleading to portray them as "disagreements," which is a term more appropriate to differences about how to represent an object (*Vorstellung*) than how to represent a movement (*Vertreten*). For example, through our years of studying texts and reasonings together, Gibbs and I have come to count on our differences to make the other side of any text and any reason come to life, and often we change sides. But we cannot reason without the other, or a comparable other. As long as we are joined by the third-ness of Rosenzweig's discourse, or a comparable hermeneutic, our differences remain essential to the discourse. Such differences become divisive only when we lose contact with this hermeneutic and fall into the binary logics of either modern rationality alone or some purportedly "pre-modern" textuality alone.
11. This reference to "logics" introduces my concluding comment. Batnitzky has shown how Rosenzweig introduced a new language for philosophic theology rather than new claims within the philosophic or theological language of his day. In her terms, this is a new "hermeneutic," or a new-old one, drawing critically but affirmatively on the hermeneutics of classical scriptural interpretation. Her most powerful contribution to religious studies and theology is to have shown how the new hermeneutic both replaces and supplements the hermeneutic of object-representation (*Vorstellung*) with the hermeneutic of performative representation (*Vertreten*). One appropriate next step would be to explore the varieties of logic ' meaning patterns of interpretation or rules of reasoning ' that serve this hermeneutic. In this regard, Batnitzky mentions Rosenzweig's treatment of signs and symbols, and it would be important to extend this treatment as much as possible. Semiotics, for example, appears to offer a helpful language for postcritical logic ' not the semiotics of de Saussure, which serves only the dyadic

logic of object-representation or its negation, but the semiotics of Charles Peirce. Peirce's triadic semiotic is offered specifically as a logic of performative-representation and would therefore contribute very well to the profound theological work of Batnitzky/Rosenzweig.

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