

2. Letters of Love. Franz Rosenzweig's Spiritual Biography and Oeuvre in Light of the Gritli Letters

Martin Brassler's review in *Shofar* 27, 1 (2008), pp. 197-198:

When Derrida was asked which question he wished to ask Heidegger if Heidegger were still alive, after a short hesitation Derrida answered: I would ask him about his sexual life. This answer of Derrida's is not an answer based on mere curiosity. Rather, his answer supposes that there is no border between life and thinking – and if there is one then this border is arbitrary and rethinking it would be most illuminating. This is what Ephraim Meir does with Franz Rosenzweig in his book. His exploration confirms the supposition of Derrida's interest in Heidegger's sexual life: Rosenzweig's love with Gritli, the wife of his best friend Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, is very much at the root of Rosenzweig's intellectual inspiration. Rosenzweig's highest interest was to rethink revelation in a radically new way. His friend Rosenstock-Huessy helped him to conceive of revelation as orientation. The wife of his friend helped to make this orientation for him an experience. That is because Rosenzweig knew that to have an orientation meant to love and to be loved. Out of this starting point Rosenzweig developed his philosophical system in the „Star of Redemption“ (1921). The author shows convincingly how Rosenzweig's way of schematizing revelation as love is founded on Rosenzweig's love with Gritli and Eugen. However, the author never reduces thinking to pure biography since he is not interested in the private details of the two individuals and their more or less secret amorousness. What he works out is a better understanding of Rosenzweig's fundamental insight into the core of Jewish (and Christian) existence by exploring the limits between his life and his thinking.

To provide this understanding, Meir proceeds in the following way. In Chapter 1 he reconstructs the intellectual biography of Franz Rosenzweig focusing on the dialogical and existential aspects of his thinking. Most readers will feel that Meir is very sympathetic with Rosenzweig, although for some of his readers, perhaps too sympathetic. For instance he reasserts Rosenzweig's identification of „old“ and „new thinking“ with „dead“ and „living thinking“ as if there were no problems (page 2). In Chapter 2, Meir provides an insight into the main influences on Rosenzweig and the „Star of Redemption“. The letters reveal Rosenzweig's attitude to his philosophical teachers and sources in a way which complements our knowledge based on the other letters of Rosenzweig published in 1979 while never losing sight of the fact that the letters do not reveal more than Rosenzweig's self-assessments, limited by the fact that Gritli was not a trained philosopher. We also find assessments which seem restricted by Rosenzweig's context because, on first glance, they do not fit very well with other assessments on the same topic, such as when Rosenzweig writes to Gritli that

Nietzsche was „never important“ (37) for him. A letter to Gertrud Oppenheim, written on August 27, 1918 -- five days later -- sounds rather different. Meir stresses another point which leads me to rank this correspondence among the outstanding documents of Jewish-Christian dialogue: Gritli was a Christian and Rosenzweig had complete confidence that she was able to profoundly understand his attitude towards his Jewish religion. This encouraged him to write on this subject in a more relaxed way. With Gritli as his counterpart, Rosenzweig achieved insights of general relevance into his personal role as a Jew who walks along the border of being Jewish and being Christian. It would be fine work to bring the relevant passages on interreligious topics from the Gritli-letters together with similar passages from the correspondence between Rosenzweig and Rosenstock from 1916 into one single volume under the heading: “the first Jewish-Christian encounter in the 20th century”.

If I understand the Gritli-Letters and Ephraim Meir’s comments well, the basis of this encounter seems to be that Rosenzweig did not separate the fact of being head over heels in love with Gritli on the one hand and the theological proposition of God’s essence as love on the other hand. It even seems that he may have thought that his situation provided him with a chance to live what until then had been a pure (and therefore dead) proposition alone: God is love. Thinking through this proposition synthesizing factual ‘human’ love and essential ‘divine’ love could then have contributed to what in later days he called the „new thinking“.

Meir follows this path in his third chapter. He shows how these love-letters are to be understood as expression of the principles of „concrete speech-thinking“ („konkretes Sprachdenken“). In Chapter 4, Meir refers to the „keywords and central ideas“ (97) of Rosenzweig’s „Star of Redemption“ and to the many allusions in the Gritli-letters. This chapter is so full of key observations that no future commentary on the „Star“ will be complete without a close reading of at least these few pages of Meir’s work.

At the end of his book, Meir takes a look at the years from 1921 until the end of Franz’s contact with Gritli in 1925. The love towards Gritli expired and was replaced by a permanent seesaw of reproach and apology. In 1921, Rosenzweig established a Jewish household together with his wife Edith. The reader of the Gritli-letters never doubts that in this household there was much more construction being done than life being lived which, according to the „new thinking,“ had to be found beyond any constructive theorizing. With the help of Meir’s considerations, the reader of these letters will better understand why Rosenzweig simultaneously released himself from his relationship with Gritli and committed himself to the Jewish law. This was his way of extending the limits of how to live and think his love: from love of God as pure occurrence between two individuals in the sense of amourness to love of God as living the law which God imposed on the Jewish people for the sake of mankind.

We do not know what Derrida would have worked out knowing Heidegger’s answer to his question. But with the help of Ephraim Meir’s book we know more about the

way in which the limits within Rosenzweig's Jewish thinking enlarged, namely, that his thinking was always moved by the intention of expanding the limits of love.