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LOVE STRONG AS DEATH: JEWS AGAINST HEIDEGGER, ON
THE ISSUE OF FINITUDE

I have set before you life and death: choose life. – Deuteronomy 30:19

Finitude is not the being-finished-off of an existent [...] butting up against and stumbling over its own limit (its contingency, error, imperfection, or fault). Finitude is not privation. There is perhaps no proposition it is more necessary to articulate today, to scrutinize and test in all ways. Everything at stake at the end of philosophy comes together there: in the need of having to open the thought of finitude, that is, to reopen to itself this thought, which haunts and mesmerizes our entire tradition. – Jean-Luc Nancy, "Infinite Finitude"¹

In his critique of Heidegger in *Entre Nous*, Lévinas complains that in his death-dominated and death-oriented thought there is no place for being-with-the-other. *Sein-zum-Tode*, being-unto-death, is a solitary enterprise, and the only *Mitsein* (being-with) which Heidegger envisages in the end boils down, as Lévinas maliciously remarks, to *Zusammenmarchieren*, marching-with: an army of isolated *Daseins* exercising their authenticity in their totally mobilised *Todesbereitschaft*, "readiness for death."²

Lévinas is not the first and not the only Jewish philosopher who uttered his objection to Heidegger's *overestimation of death* by drawing "out of the sources of Judaism." In fact, there is a whole secret alliance of thinkers, more or less explicitly inspired by this alternative tradition, which can be opposed to what Harold Bloom, himself a member of the group, called somewhat derisively "Heidegger and his French flock."³

Despite all the differences between them, Franz Rosenzweig (provided we do not read him through the "Heideggerizing"

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 29.

² "In Heidegger, the ethical relation, the *Miteinandersein*, the being-with-another-person, is only one moment of our presence in the world. It does not have the central place. Mit is always being next to... it is not in the first instance the Face, it is *zusammensein* [being-together], perhaps *zusammenmarschieren* [marching-together]": Emmanuel Lévinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous, Thinking of The Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 116 (*Entre Nous: Essays sur le penser-a-l'autre*, Editions Grasset & Fasquelle 1991).

³ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry (With a New Preface on Shakespeare)*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997, p. xxvii.

lenses of Karl Löwith), Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Harold Bloom form an unofficial coalition of thinkers firmly opposed to the Heideggerian mode of doing philosophy solely under the auspices of death.

There is also one further feature which they share: the importance of the intellectual heritage of the *Song of Songs*. Rosenzweig based the whole second part of *The Star of Redemption*, devoted to revelation, on the grammar of the *Song of Songs*; Lévinas borrowed from the *Song* the notion of radical asymmetry between the subject and the Other; Bloom, by fusing it with Shakespeare's sonnets, turned the *Song* into a dramatic canvas of his poetic love-hate relationship between the precursor and the *ephebe*; and it is possible that Hannah Arendt was inspired by its praise of love too.

In all these approaches, *Shir ha-Shirim's* famous 'love as strong as death' (*azzah kamavet ahava*) lends itself to the philosophical speculation which offers a different conception of the finite existence, destined to die but no means exhausted by its lethal destiny; determined to resist the final verdict and gain an intense 'life before death,' marked by passionate relations with others. While, as Rosenzweig claims, the whole Western philosophical thought "from Ionia to Jena" (and beyond), is incurably infected with the thanatic (or even thanatophilic) tendency which perceives human finitude only through death – the Hebrew thought offers a striking alternative which substitutes love for death and makes it equally strong.

Heidegger's Overestimation of Death

Let me begin with Rosenzweig who was never properly exposed to Heidegger's own thought, but who nonetheless reacted to the general thanatic climate of his epoch by trying to resist it. Rosenzweig's main question, especially in his later period, is: is it possible at all to think about our finitude differently, not under the auspices of death – the end, the goal, the final destiny, the ultimate verdict? The whole stake of Rosenzweig's *Neues Denken* is to venture precisely such an endeavour: to try to think finitude *positively*.

Although often seen as a parallel to Heidegger's analytics of *Dasein*, Rosenzweig's New Thinking is actually the very opposite: despite many deceptively similar formulations, which also portray life as issuing towards death, it is uniquely concerned with the question which could never be properly answered by Heidegger, namely – *Is life before death possible? Can living assert itself as such and not be immediately identified with "dying"?*

The seeming paradox, therefore, consists in the defense of life as *finite* and as *life*: not the shadow of death which informs and paralyses the vital forces at the moment of their inception, but a

full “healthy” life which affirms itself as a separate category and simultaneously recognizes “sovereignty of death.”⁴ The little book of Rosenzweig called *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* endeavours to teach life the lesson of maintaining itself in the paradox without solving or sublating it:

By teaching man to live again, we have taught him to move towards death; we have taught him to live, though each step he takes brings him closer to death [...] There is no remedy for death; not even health. A healthy man, however, has the strength to continue towards the grave. The sick man invokes death and lets himself be carried away in mortal fear. In health, even death comes at the “proper” time (USH, 102-3).

All appearances to the contrary, this is *not* Heidegger’s *Sein-zum-Tode*. The little, yet decisive, difference lies in the emphasis Rosenzweig puts on the active resistance of life against death’s “chilling” influence: on the way the “healthy” subject *moves* or *continues* towards death, despite the constant danger of “the paralysis of artificial death,” or the “death in life” which stops him from moving on. Despite death’s declared sovereignty, the life, which eventually succumbs to death, is not to learn anything from his “absolute Master”: it is to accept its overruling presence, but not to allow itself to be overwhelmed by it. Accept the verdict, but not the authority; take on the sentence, but not the wisdom which underlies it.

Death may thus be an end – even a goal – but it is pictured here as a limit, which is not invited to the center of life, *inmittens des Lebens*, but delegated outside, only to intervene in its own “proper” time. Whereas in Heidegger’s original construction of “being-towards-death,” death penetrates into the very midst of *Dasein*; it is the very motor of its self-transcending *ex-sistence*, the teacher of the heroic decision-making which is as groundless, abyssal and pervaded by nothingness as death itself. Here, death is indeed a *telos* of life which runs its course according to this lofty submission, or as Jean-Luc Nancy aptly calls it, “sublime self-offering.”⁵

Death is let in in the middle of life as its thanatic guide; either in the existential function of a catalyst (heroic decision), or, after the Heidegger’s *Kehre*, as the demobilising event-horizon which works through the *Gelassenheit*, the quietistic anti-force of appeasement. None of it figures in Rosenzweig’s project of New Thinking which wants to give death its proper due, but absolutely nothing more: it wants to acknowledge the fact of the finite life without *overestimating* its impact on the process of

⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*, trans. Nahum Glatzer, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 103. Later in the text as USH.

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003 (*Une pensee finie*, Editions Galillee 1990), p. 75.

living. Finding the right measure, the right ratio in death's relationship with life, is the sole purpose here, which makes Rosenzweig's endeavour opposite to Heidegger's one which, from the perspective of *Neues Denken*, may indeed be characterised as a *systematic overestimation of death*.⁶

But, before I proceed any further into the difference between Heidegger and Rosenzweig, I have to dispel one objection: that it is not Heidegger who systematically overestimates death, but rather all those commentators of his project (me included), who fail to see the vital function of *Todesbewusstsein*, having nothing to do with any existential paralysis. According to this line of thought, death in Heidegger's *Being and Time* is just a neutral marker of finitude, while finitude as such works as a catalyzing and intensifying factor; all that passes through this narrow "opening," which is *Dasein* aware of its finite existence, acquires infinite urgency and pathos of absolute intensity.

As if in the inverted reading of Saint Paul, whom Heidegger studied assiduously, it is indeed the Paulian "glass," but not "darkly," not distorted by the finitude – rather a magnifying lens, or a slit in the *camera obscura* which condenses and refracts the dispersed light, thus forming a microcosmic image of the whole world. The Heideggerian "being-towards-death," is thus not about "dying": it is, just like in Rosenzweig, all about the intense living, conditioned into the existential intensity by the awareness of its finite limits.

Among many followers of Heidegger, who remain loyal to such positive account of the death-driven finitude, there is certainly Jean-Luc Nancy who sees his own project of "finite thinking" as the direct continuation of Heidegger's original idea. Nancy takes for granted Heidegger's presentation of *Dasein* as a finite "access" to the world, thanks to which the world can "originate" in all its infinite singularity; the slit of the "finite thinking," which, precisely because of its "narrowing," is also an "opening," always new and original, of the countless multitude of beings. In *Being Singular Plural*, he thus defines the Heideggerian notion of finitude solely in terms of "access," thus carefully avoiding any emphasis on death:

⁶ That it is the case may be well testified by Alphonso Lingis who in his Heidegger inspired book, *Deathbound Subjectivity*, sings an unceasing praise of death: "That the human spirit is mortal, deathbound, that death does not befall our existence by accident or as a catastrophe, but that our existence, of its own nature, projects itself, with all its forces, unto its death – this conviction is at the core of Heidegger's thought. Death is the law – the imperative – of our existence [...] that the deathbound propulsion of our existence is the spirit itself is what makes our movements comprehending and our existence exultant, ecstatic [...] Death is the law – the ordinance of our existence": Alphonso Lingis, *Deathbound Subjectivity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 109.

We only have access to ourselves – and to the world. It is only ever a question of the following: full access is there, access to the whole of the origin. This is called “finitude” in Heideggerian terminology. But it has become clear since then that “finitude” signifies the infinite singularity of meaning, the infinite singularity of access to truth. Finitude *is* the origin; that is, it is an infinity of origins. “Origin” does not signify that from which the world comes, but rather the coming of each presence of the world, each time singular.⁷

This interpretation may indeed be in harmony with Heidegger’s own declarations – according to which death is the fundamental possibility of human Dasein, intensifying the modal dimension of freedom, resoluteness, and inventiveness – but it is incapable of reading Heidegger “against the grain.” The opposite interpretation, already informed by deconstructive suspicion, was offered by Maurice Blanchot, Kojève’s pupil, who reread Heidegger’s “being-towards-death” in a different, non-German, context and the whole mobilizing effect of death immediately evaporated, together with its alleged highest “possibility” giving way to impossibility and incapacitation.

What primarily appeared as a *Lichtung*, a “narrowing” still capable of an intensified “opening” and “access,” eventually turns into *closure*, aporia, blockage. What was meant as a slit, transposing extension into intensity, becomes yet another reiteration of the arch-old topos of death as the *seal*. What promised the authenticity of “living,” ultimately ends up as – “dying.”

Blanchot’s deconstruction consists in reversing the original *Being and Time* formula of death as the “possibility of impossibility” into its very opposite: the “impossibility of possibility.” Heidegger writes on the ultimate *Möglichkeit*:

The more unveiledly this possibility gets understood – the more purely does the understanding penetrate into Dasein the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all. Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be “actualized,” nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself be... Being-toward-death, as anticipation of possibility, is what first makes this possibility possible, and sets it free as possibility.⁸

⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 15. (*Etre singular pluriel*, 1996).

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, p. 307. Later in the text as BT.

Prima facie, it would indeed appear that death works here as a positive and catalyzing factor. Death, the paradigmatic possibility defying any actualization, lies at the core of all other possibilities *as* possibilities: *Dasein* learns what it means to *be able* to become this or that by understanding the *ability* as such, the pure modal dimension of being. Yet Blanchot insists on inverting the Heideggerian formula to show the essential ungroundedness of its heroic resoluteness.

The necessity of death cuts through all of *Dasein's* projects and reveals their truth, as *mere* possibilities, as something possessing only a passing kind of being that pales in comparison to what is truly unconditional. Death, therefore, is not something possible. It is instead a primordial necessity that manifests itself as the impossibility of any possibility. For, if possibility is a possibility-to-actualization, then death, defying all actualization, negates also possibility. As such, death signals an altogether different way of existing, an alternative side of existence, which Blanchot designates in *Space of Literature* as a *nunc stans* of "dying," captured in the never-ending present continuous:

It is the fact of dying that includes a radical reversal, through which the death that was the extreme form of my power not only becomes what loosens my hold upon myself by casting me out of my power to begin and even to finish, but also becomes that which is without any relation to me, without power over me—that which is stripped of all possibility—the unreality of the indefinite. I cannot represent this reversal to myself, I cannot even conceive of it as definitive. It is not the irreversible step beyond which there would be no return, for it is that which is not accomplished, the interminable and the incessant [...] It is inevitable but inaccessible death; it is the abyss of the present, time without a present, with which I have no relationships; it is that toward which I cannot go forth for in it I do not die, I have fallen from the power to die. In it they die; they do not cease, and they do not finish dying.⁹

⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln & London: Nebraska University Press, 1982, p. 106; 154-5, my emphasis. Yet another version of the deconstructive interpretation of Heidegger's formula is offered by Giorgio Agamben in his reading of Melville's *Bartleby*, where it is the latter's 'formula' (*I'd prefer not to*) which helps to explain how death may indeed be a possibility of impossibility – that is, only as 'potentiality to not-be.' Only when possibility becomes separated from the urge towards actualisation, can 'dying' become the teacher of the right kind of existing faithful to a pure potentiality. See Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or on Contingency," in *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Rozen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 243-274.

In Blanchot, already influenced by Heidegger's *Kehre*, death becomes a factor that is decidedly less enabling and more disempowering, paralyzing. The impossibility of possibility announces from the start that all projects-actualizations undertaken by *Dasein* are futile; the (non)presence of death discloses the fundamental impossibility of the moment of *decision* in which *Dasein* resolves to be rather something than nothing. This resolution appears insignificant when confronted with the verdict of finitude; death, instead of mobilizing *Dasein* to activity, reveals the irremovable *Nichtigkeit* that pervades and therefore *nichtet*, annihilates, its inner possibilities.

Hence the step *Dasein* takes to make its decision to be something rather than nothing is, in fact, impossible. Overshadowed by the higher truth of death, every step emerges as false, as an error in the need of correction. By problematizing every decision as decision, death invalidates every possibility as possibility, and, above all else, it negates the basic ambition of *Dasein* to lead *its own*, truly authentic existence. "Dying" is an abyss of anonymity, in which it becomes impossible to say "I." This very step, the most fundamental among *Dasein's* projects, which strives to confirm the *Jemeinigkeit* of its *Angst und Sorge*, meets the strictest prohibition. There is no escape from the verdict of anonymity, from the "unreality of the indefinite": "I never die but *one dies*," says Blanchot (*ibid.*, 241).¹⁰

Blanchot's deconstruction of Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tode* is based on one fundamental suspicion: that Heidegger, despite all the declarations to the contrary, cannot leave the *Dasein's* opening truly open, and instinctively presses towards the closure; that he, although ready to redefine human existence as an "open question," nonetheless cannot tolerate philosophically such indefiniteness and surreptitiously presents death as the missing essence of *Dasein*, which is now identified as "dying." Blanchot's reading is thus faithful to the *arcana* of the deconstructive art, as formulated by Paul de Man. Heidegger's text as performance does precisely the opposite to its intended and stated meaning, while death becomes the crux of the major *aporia*.

Death is meant to open *Dasein* and maintain it in its indefinite realm of possibilities, whereas in fact it closes and reduces its

¹⁰ In *Aporias*, a book explicitly devoted to the raise of *thanatology* as a properly philosophical discipline, Derrida comments on the significance of the 'turn' made by Blanchot: "When Blanchot constantly repeats - and it is a long complaint and not a triumph of life - the impossible dying, the impossibility, alas, of dying, he says at once the same thing and something completely different from Heidegger. It is just a question of knowing in which sense (in the sense of direction and trajectory) one reads the expression of the possibility of impossibility. If death, the most proper possibility of *Dasein*, is the possibility of its impossibility, death becomes the most improper possibility and the most expropriating, the most inauthenticating one": Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 77.

indefiniteness, by submitting *Dasein* to the impending necessity of dying, its “apodictic evidence” (BT, 309): “*Dasein*, as thrown Being-in-the-world, has in every case already been delivered over to its death. In being towards its death, *Dasein* is *dying* factually and indeed constantly, as long as it has not yet come to its demise” (BT, 303); “... ‘ending,’ as dying, is constitutive for *Dasein*’s totality” (BT, 284); “Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially...” (ibid.); “Factually, *Dasein* is dying as long as it exists...” (BT, 295).

Blanchot’s suspicion, therefore, consists in not taking Heidegger for face value when he declares that he is giving us the true and definite account of the proper *Sein-zum-Tode*. In fact, what he *does* is the very opposite: it is rather the description of *Sein-gegen-Tode*, in which *Dasein* not so much adopts the death-dominated mode of being (which would be “dying”) as defends itself against the verdict, by resolutely trying to become *something* against the tide of overwhelming abyssal nothingness. Let’s have a closer look at Heidegger’s quote from *Being and Time*:

Death, as possibility, gives *Dasein* nothing to be ‘actualized,’ nothing which *Dasein*, as actual, could itself be. It is the possibility of impossibility of every way of comporting oneself toward anything, of every way of existing. In the anticipation of this possibility it becomes ‘greater and greater’; that is to say, the possibility reveals itself to be such that it knows no measure at all, no more or less, but signifies the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence. In accordance with its essence, this possibility offers no support for becoming intent on something, ‘picturing’ to oneself the actuality which is possible, and so forgetting its possibility. Being-towards-death, as anticipation of possibility, is what first makes this possibility possible, and sets it free as possibility (BT, 307).

This is Heidegger’s own emphasis, enhancing the active and the positive: *being, making, possibility*, which can never be forgotten as such and thus open *Dasein* “measurelessly to ever ‘greater and greater’” tasks. But for Blanchot, the emphasis lies elsewhere, on negativity and closure: *nothing, impossibility, non-actualization*. The “impending” (BT, 294) and “measureless” impossibility of existence, which is forbidden to be pictured in any actualized shape (all affinities with the “jealous God” of the Second Commandment non-accidental!), immediately dissolves any actuality *Dasein* has happened to assume into *nothing*.

Having been “delivered over” to this new deadly divine, *Dasein* can never assert itself in what it actually *is*, but is always forced to be-no-longer, to undergo constant and constitutive “dying” in the service of this unpictureable and measureless abyss that

defies any actualization. Thus, when read “theologically” (and this is certainly Blanchot’s perspective), Heidegger’s death steps into the traditional role of the deity in relation to which no other being can assert itself in existence and has to sacrifice its actuality; the possibility so immense and infinite that it excludes any finite actualization.

And, indeed, Heidegger says: “Anticipation discloses to existence that its uttermost possibility lies in *giving itself up*, and thus it *shatters* all one’s tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached” (BT, 308; my emphasis). Therefore, if *Dasein* decides on becoming *something*, the “anticipatory resoluteness,” formed in face of the impending certainty of death, immediately “takes it back,” because death, as “taking back” everything, is not just an end of the process, but its very medium, the constant and constitutive “dying”: “The certainty of resolution signifies that one *holds oneself free* for the possibility of *taking it back* – a possibility which is factually necessary” (BT, 355).

And even if Heidegger adds immediately that such certitude of “taking back” and “shattering” only strengthens the resolute will to repeat itself, Blanchot will treat it merely as a defensive evasion of what to him seems inevitable, namely the dissolution into “irresoluteness.” To be authentic, for Blanchot, is not to leap into decisions resulting in passing actualizations, but to stay “dying” and “irresolute,” to let death truly take power over life – again, according to Heidegger’s own letter: “Anticipatory resoluteness is not a way of escape, fabricated for the ‘overcoming’ of death; it is rather that understanding which follows the call of conscience and which frees for death the possibility of acquiring *power* over *Dasein’s existence* and of basically dispersing all fugitive Self-concealments” (BT, 357).

For Blanchot, all decisions to be rather something than nothing belong to the realm of “fugitive Self-concealments,” fabricated not *zum* but *gegen Tode*. If there is an “unshakable joy” in serving “Death, the absolute Master” (we have to remember that in his reading of Heidegger, Blanchot already fuses him with Hegel whom he learned through Kojève), then it consists in staying rather nothing than something.

And again, Heidegger provides the textual evidence: “the ecstatic character of the primordial future lies precisely in the fact that the future *closes* one’s potentiality-for-Being [...] Primordial and authentic coming-towards-oneself is the meaning of existing in *one’s ownmost nullity*” (BT, 379; my emphasis). In the end, it is precisely this “ownmost nullity” which substitutes for the initially open essence of *Dasein*.

Another Finitude – Rosenzweig versus Heidegger

Thus, even if not completely in accord with Heidegger’s “letter,” Blanchot’s deconstructive reading allows to see the shadow

thrown by his thanatic “spirit”: in Derrida’s words, death, instead of forming *Dasein*’s “most proper possibility,” can turn into an absolute *aporia*: “the most improper possibility and the most ex-propriating, the most inauthenticating one.”¹¹

This aporetic tendency is precisely the reason why Rosenzweig’s project appears more promising. It liberates the notion of *positive finitude* from the dubious supremacy of death and focuses *instead* on love. This *instead* is the clue of the whole operation: while love bears some affinities to death, it also brings an irreducible difference. While it may be as *indefinite* as the Blanchotian “dying,” it is also “hard as Sheol,” which protects it from dissolving into abyssal and measureless “unreality”; it may not have a well-defined essence, but it remains in its open indefiniteness, and does not slide back into “nothingness” or “nullity.”

As such, love works better as the “mobilizing” factor in the conditions of finitude; *instead* of sealing the finite life with the non-negotiable *arrêt*, which, as Blanchot had demonstrated, is always its latent potency, love actually offers an “opening” in the form of an affective mood that opens “access” to as many beings as possible, knowing that there will be no infinite time given for their contemplation. Thus, if finitude exerts a pressure on the subject who then simply must make a decision, this “narrowing” expresses itself better in the *decisionism of love*.¹²

We could thus sum up the confrontation between Heidegger and Rosenzweig on the issue of finite life and the role of death in approaching the finitude, by stating: while for Heidegger, the role of death will always be central – whether as the “mobilizing” factor of *Entschlossenheit* or the “appeasing” factor of *Gelassenheit* – for Rosenzweig, to the contrary, it will always be downplayed, almost to the point of indifference.¹³ This

¹¹ Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 77.

¹² This alternative form of “resoluteness,” playing itself out in Rosenzweig, was well spotted by Levinas: “What interests Rosenzweig himself is the discovery of *being as life*, of *being as life-in-relation*: the discovery of a thought which is the very life of this being. The person no longer goes back into the system he conceives, as in Hegel, in order to become fixed and renounce his singularity. Singularity is necessary to the exercise of this thought and this life precisely as an irreplaceable singularity, the only one capable of love, the only one that can be loved, that knows how to love, that can form a religious community”: Emmanuel Levinas, “*Between Two Worlds (The Way of Franz Rosenzweig)*,” in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 192.

¹³ To the possible objection that I tend to conflate here two completely different visions of death – before and after the “turn” – I can only answer that, to me, they are not that different. In both cases, the issue of death is dominant because it allows access to the highest truth of Being: before it is the “throwness” of an isolated *Dasein*; after it is the totality of Being as “the side of life averted from us” where “death and the realm of the dead belong to the whole of beings as its other side.”

confrontation never took place in reality, but we can try to stage it as follows.

First, we focus on Heidegger. In the series of lectures composed in 1935 and then edited under the title *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger only confirms Blanchot's suspicion as to the aporetic nature of death within his system. Here, he openly presents death as the *ultimate aporia*, by drawing on the original Greek meaning of the word as "no way-out," "no exit," the unsurpassable "blocking of the passage." Man, who likes to see himself as *pantoporos*, the most resourceful creature which "begets in itself its own un-essence, the versatility (*Vielwendigkeit*) of many twists and turns,"¹⁴ deep down appears to be, in fact, *aporos*: a priori blocked and thwarted –

There is only *one* thing against which all violence-doing [of the *pantoporos* hubristic human *Dasein*] directly shatters. That is death. It is an end beyond all completion, a limit beyond all limits. Here there is no breaking forth and breaking up, no capturing and subjugating. But this un-canny thing, which sets us simply and suddenly out from everything homely once and for all, is not a special event that must also be mentioned among others, because it, too, ultimately does occur. *The human being has no way out in the face of death, not only when it is time to die, but constantly and essentially.* Insofar as humans are, they stand in the no-exit of death (IM, 168-9; my emphasis).

For Rosenzweig, just like for Heidegger, human life is with no pre-established essence: indefinite, open, question-like. The latter, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, states firmly that "the determination of the essence of the human being is *never* an answer, but is essentially a question" (IM, 149). Yet, the two thinkers play it out very differently.

Heidegger, as we have already seen, *nolens volens* gravitates towards the closure, the seal, the dead-assuredness of death, which then substitutes for the missing essence of the *Dasein*: *Seinsdenken* and *Todesdenken* become in the end indistinguishable synonyms. After all, it is death which tears away man from the familiar homeliness of the world of seeming and throws him in the nearness of Being, the most un-canny – *un-heimlich* – of all thoughts. It is the annihilating, *nichtende*, power of death, which

Still systematically overestimated, death merely changes the function: before it individuated *Dasein*, after it negates all separation, by reconciling us with the hidden holistic aspect of Being. See Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p. 125. In what follows I quote Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* which, written in 1935, offers a perfect example of the passage from the pre-turn to the post-turn stage in his thought.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000, p. 168. Later in the text as IM.

puts man in touch with the *Nichts des Seins*, the nothingness of Being's pure potentiality, which underlies the realm of actualised beings.

Death, therefore, becomes the vehicle of the highest spiritual transport which defines the destiny of human *Dasein*. *The human being has no way out in the face of death, not only when it is time to die, but constantly and essentially*; this, for Rosenzweig, is precisely the sickness – “sickness unto death” – which pushes death into the very centre of human life, as its defining moment, giving it constancy and essence. In Heidegger, no being, no positive content can ever fill the gap of nothingness which constitutes human being and, thus, offer an answer to its glaring questioning abyss; this *Nichts* can only be matched by the *Nichts* of death which helps to disclose the abyssal *Nichts* of Being.

Rosenzweig's intention is precisely to counteract the mastery of this deadly triad which turns the ordinary “un-essence” of human life into a hypostatized sublime “Nothing.” To avoid this hypostasis, the life must agree to be the thing of “un-essence,” a flow without form, a meandering story with many twists and turns: a “life which is content to be an in-between state, merely a transition from one thing to another” (USH, 80).

Rosenzweig explores the essential *Nichts* of human life in the form of a horizontal narrative which evolves only thanks to its indefiniteness; by refusing to turn the singular life into something easily definable, he lets it assume a meandering structure, containing many *peripeteias*, the resourceful twists and turns, which postpone the final verdict; here the *erzählendes Sprachdenken* becomes a synonym of *Lebensdenken*, life-thinking.

As in Heidegger, the human life emerges here as open, indefinite, with no pre-given essence, but all this negative characteristic merely serves as the canvas for a new narrative philosophy, the new drama of time and its unpredictability, which can only evolve in the living dialogue between human being and his neighbours.

When commenting on affinities and divergences between Rosenzweig and Heidegger, Karl Löwith, who actually argues that they have much more in common than I want to claim, spots one crucial difference: while they both emphasize the *Endlichkeit* of human life, Heidegger dissolves it all in the immanent temporality, offering no resistance to transience, yet Rosenzweig insists on the infinite moment: the perfect fulfillment of life which truly and finally comes to be and thus eternalizes itself.¹⁵

True, but this eternal completion (which can never be attained by man, the self-contradicting *pantoporos aporos*, in Heidegger) is

¹⁵ See Karl Löwith, “M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig. Or Temporality and Eternity,” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 3, nr 1 (Sept. 1942).

possible only on the grounds of the more fundamental form of infinity which plays itself out in human life, despite its finitude. We may call it *in/definiteness* or even *infinitiveness* (deriving from the grammatical concept of the infinitive which alludes to the potentially infinite uses into which the verb may be put): the peculiar condition of human life which refuses the be concrete “something” without actually slipping into a lethal “nothing” or the Blanchotian “unreality” -

...we must daringly seize upon a life which is content to be an in-between state, merely a transition from one thing to another. Let us reject the ever-present answer, “Life is,” “Man is - ” and let us become part of the onward-moving life of man. Here life “is” not, it simply occurs [geschieht] (USH, 80).

This is an outright apology of the inessential life: something very adversarial to Heidegger, who called it a wrong type of “un-essence,” superficial and resourceful as Odysseus (to whom this phrase originally refers) and as such incapable to plunge metaphysically into the abysses of Being.

But with this apology, we are immediately reminded that, in *The Star of Redemption*, this seemingly derogatory characteristic was given to what Rosenzweig regards as the highest and most valuable content of the revelation, that is, *love*. For it is love which goes from one neighbour to another and paces restlessly the whole world in the constant transition, oblivious to its own “essence” and not at all interested in the centering self-reflection.

It is love which, in Goethe’s words, “connects all” without creating a hypostatic *Allheit*, totality, itself indefinite and, because of that, infinitely open to embrace each being, one after another, nominally and nominalistically - just like God himself who knows every creature by name as a unique singularity.

For Rosenzweig, therefore, the life-in-transition, life-in-between, does not indicate dispersion, impurity or incompleteness, as it does for Heidegger: it is inessential, so it can fill itself with intense neighborly relations; it is lacking essence, so it can be full of love.

As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it in his *Finite Thinking*, in the fragment inspired more by Rosenzweig than Heidegger: “Love cuts across finitude, always from the other to the other, which never returns to the same - and all loves, so humbly alike, are superbly singular. *Love offers finitude in its truth*; it is finitude’s dazzling presentation.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, p. 264; my emphasis.

We could thus sum up the difference between Rosenzweig and Heidegger by evoking the biblical line, which is also the guiding motif of *The Star: azzah hamavet ahavah*, love strong as death. The vital, incomplete, exposed in/de/finitude of love versus the definite closure, is sealed by the verdict of death. Both these visions of life are finite, but while the Heideggerian one overestimates the defining moment of the ending as “constant and essential,” the Rosenzweigian one evades it as merely secondary, because Rosenzweig is not looking for *any* definition of human life.

Agreeing that human life must remain a “thing of un-essence,” he rather goes for love which thrives on everything non-essential: strictly singular, transitory, non-identitarian, exposed. Here, human being is not a death-bound “nothing,” collapsing into his inner nothingness, but a lively bundle of energy which easily flows into “the energies of the world” (USH, 92). Love turns the negativity of “un-essence” into positivity of intense singular relation. This is what Rosenzweig calls *die Umkehr*: the “turn,” but also, more theologically – a “conversion.”

In the Beginning is My End – Arendt, Bloom, and the Finitude of Origins

There seems to be no much love in philosophy: in Hegel, Rosenzweig’s main adversary, as well as in Heidegger, the later enemy of Levinas, human finite life is spent under the solitary auspices of death. Jean-Luc Nancy, who follows the analytics of *Dasein* only to a certain point, knows it well and for this very reason enlists for his “finite thinking” another ally, coming from the corner opposite to Heidegger – Hannah Arendt.

As he rightly points out, Arendt is the first thinker to consciously and deliberately move away from Heidegger without regressing into an idealistic illusion of the Husserlian “transcendental life”: the first thinker to elaborate a parallel project of *another finitude* which does not exclude infinity but transposes it into the original plurality of love relations, “the infinite singularity among others.”

Thus, in the footnote explaining the idea of his essay, *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy announces that his “finite thinking” is not going to be just a commentary on Heidegger but also a “move on from him”: “in the relation to Heidegger, one must remember the singular role played by Hannah Arendt and her reflection on ‘human plurality.’”¹⁷ This singular role comes to the fore most spectacularly in Hannah Arendt’s doctoral dissertation, *Augustins Liebesbegriff: “On the Concept of Love in Saint Augustine,”* written in the ‘20’s under Martin Heidegger’s supervision.

¹⁷ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 194.

The first part of Arendt's dissertation is devoted to the critique of Augustine's idea of love which, in her interpretation, turns out to be a *Thanatos in disguise*: it is hard not to see that this is, in fact, a veiled critique of Heidegger himself. Arendt shows how Augustine, caught in the terminological net of Neoplatonic thought, which defines love as craving (*appetitus*), runs into trouble with his account of the concept coming from a different tradition: the neighbourly love (*caritas*).

Augustine's thinking is thus wholly inscribed into a metaphysical craving for the eternal and the infinite, which completely disregards the finite dimension of the creaturely life. In the passage which strongly reminds of Blanchot's analogical take on Heidegger, Arendt states that for Augustine, "life on earth is a living death, *mors vitalis*, or *vita mortalis*. It is altogether determined by death; indeed, it is more properly called death."¹⁸

But then, she also detects another stream of thought in Augustine – less "Greek" and more "Paulian" – which connects love not with the Platonic lack of being and craving, but with a *fulness of being* as given by the Maker in the moment of man's birth. Says Arendt:

The decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or "natality," that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth. The decisive fact determining man as a desiring being was death or mortality, the fact that we shall leave the world in death. Fear of death and inadequacy of life are the springs of desire.

In contrast, gratitude for life having been given at all is the spring of remembrance, for a life is cherished even in misery: "Now you are miserable and still you do not want to die for no other reason that you want to be." What ultimately stills the fear of death is not hope or desire, but remembrance and gratitude: "Give thanks for wanting to be as you are that you may be delivered from an existence that you do not want. For you are willing to be and unwilling to be miserable." This will to be under all circumstances is the hallmark of man's attachment to the transmundane source of his existence (LA, 52).

It is precisely in this context that Augustine draws his distinction between *principium* and *initium*: the beginning of the world and time and the beginning of man. Arendt quotes the famous fragment from *The City of God* (XII, 20): *Initium ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nemo fuit*: "That a beginning be made, man was created." Whereas *principium* grounds the universe in the manner of the Greek *arche*, i.e. as the first arch-principle of perpetual order of being, *initium* allows for a creative disruption

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, trans. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 11. Later in the text as LA.

of the cosmic monotony, into which there suddenly enters a *novitas*, something radically new.

But what is the role of remembrance and gratitude as opposed to hope and desire? Arendt attempts an alternative anthropology of human finitude, based not so much on the Heideggerian, thanatic recognition of one's inevitable end-in-death, as on the *biophilic*, life-loving recognition of one's beginning-in-birth, here understood as the "gift-of-life." The finite being does not have to think about itself as "running towards its death"; it can also think about its moment of springing into being, its "whence," where it was bestowed with life, and revert the sequence of expectation by *substituting the beginning for the end*; or, in other words, by eliminating the obsessive thinking-of-death and replacing it with the contemplating remembrance of one's origin.

The Augustinian man says: "I want to return where I came from. In my beginning is my proper end: the promised fullness of life." Remembrance and gratitude, therefore, are not strictly opposed to hope and desire; rather they engender their own structure of hope and desire, this time not driven by the recognition of death, but by the wish to cherish the original gift of life, to intensify it, to hope for "more life" yet to come –

Since our expectations and desires are prompted by what we remember and guided by a previous knowledge, it is memory and not expectation (for instance, the expectation of death as in Heidegger's approach) that gives unity and wholeness to human existence [...] Only man, but no other mortal being, lives toward his ultimate origin while living toward the final boundary of death [...] By virtue of man's quest for his own being, the beginning and end of his life become exchangeable (LA, 56-57; my emphasis).

It is this fundamental *reversal* which makes human finite existence truly human: Arendt's notion of exchangeability between the beginning and the end, structurally resembles the Rosenzweigian *Umkehr* where love, given by the Maker, replaces death, sealing the creaturely existence with the heavy mark of mortality (given the fact that Arendt knew *The Star of Redemption* at the time when she wrote about Augustine, her natalism may in fact be derivative from Rosenzweig's existential lesson on the "conversion").

We will find some later variants of this reversal in other thinkers inspired by the Jewish heritage. In Levinas, it is precisely this reversed temporality which creates a counter-current against death, a human life as *Sein-gegen-Tode*; instead of running

straight towards its end, the human life creates an “eddy,” or an “interiority,” in the stream of time, which resists the flow of transience, and by reaching freely towards its origins in memory, it separates itself from being’s general participation in the *flux*, thus making itself free.¹⁹

Poising himself against Heidegger even more explicitly, Harold Bloom argues that the poetic life (which, for him, serves as the intensified *pars pro toto* of human life as such) is structured according to the rhetorical trope of *metalepsis* or the “reversal”: the substitution of an origin for an end, which allows for the emancipation of a creative impulse from the thanatic repetition of “more of the same.”

Only when cause and effect are metaleptically reversed and the poetic self, instead of going with the flow “unto-death,” works stubbornly towards his own origins, a new creation can happen at all; only when the poet dwells within and elaborates on the powers of *origination*, can he hope to become truly *original*, not just a copy or replica of what was before. The Arendtian-Levinasian-Bloomian focus on the origins is thus the necessary precondition of freedom, creativity, and (why not) “resoluteness,” which, in Nietzsche’s words, rebel against the time’s “It was” – that is, against the time’s empty accumulation and repetition.²⁰

¹⁹ See most of all Emmanuel Levinas’ openly anti-Heideggerian discussion on death in *Totality and Infinity*, where he defends human life’s own dimension of delaying death: “This is why the life between birth and death is neither folly nor absurdity nor flight nor cowardice. It flows on in a dimension of its own where it has meaning, and where the triumph over death can have meaning” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1991, p. 56). And further: “The postponement of death in a mortal will – time – is the mode of existence and reality of a separated being that has entered in the relation with the Other. This space of time has to be taken as the point of departure. In it is enacted a meaningful life which one must not measure against the ideal of eternity, taking its duration and its interests to be absurd or illusory” (*ibid.*, 232). In Levinas, human life is consciously finite, not aspiring to eternity, yet its finitude is not determined solely by mortality, but also by a resistance against death, drawn from the sources of memory which pulls against the time’s seemingly irreversible “it was.” His vision of the triumph over death (ultimately exercised in the love of the neighbour) remains strictly within the confines of the finite life.

²⁰ The natalistic structure of reversal or *metalepsis* allows for the fruitful “revenge against time,” that is, precisely for what Nietzsche deemed absolutely impossible: “Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? “It was” – that is the name of the will’s gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. *The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time’s covetousness, that is the will’s loneliest melancholy...* This, indeed this alone, is what *revenge* is: the will’s resentment against time and time’s

This is where, as it seems, Hegel, Heidegger, and Kojève, the three masters of modern thanaticism, get it wrong: it is not *just* the consciousness of death, which acts as an anthropogenic factor which makes human beings truly human. A mere consciousness of death only adds a reflexive dimension to the animal way of living, which inevitably ends with dying; as indeed in Hegel's description of the Master who once challenged death fully consciously but then leads an idle life of a *verblödet*, stupefied, beast.

What truly constitutes the anthropogenic moment is the *reversal of temporality*, which ignores the end for the sake of the *doubled origin*: the renewal of the gift of being. For Paul and Augustine, due to this reversal-renewal, death as such completely dissolves by showing its true face of a *rebirth* into a truly eternal way of living. But this is only an extreme, Christian, version of the anthropogenic reversal, which goes as far as to annul altogether the initial condition of finitude; by turning death simply into a new birth, this time giving life eternal and infinite, the Christian "impatient heart" (Rosenzweig) evacuates itself from the realm of creatureliness, inescapably marked with death.

What Arendt, but also Rosenzweig, Levinas, and Bloom, have in mind is more modest, and more in harmony with the finite being: the reversal does not prolong the moment of "natality" *ad infinitum*, offering a birth without death and life without loss, but complicates the temporality of human finite existence by giving it a non-natural, or reverse, *causa finalis*. It lets human origin shine on and organise the whole of life by de-privileging the natural end.

Contrary to the thanatic condition, which indeed overestimates death as the *ownmost*, organizing and defining, goal-center-essence of human life, this vision of finitude, focused on natality, ignores the natural end by replacing it with the counter-rhythm of a constant renewal, working on and through the original "gift of life": a gift not be defined and pinned down to its "essence," but to be shared and diffused, as a "thing of un-essence," in intense relation with others.

"it was""; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common, New York: Modern Library 1917, p. 53; my emphasis. For Nietzsche, the only way of "willing backwards" is the consensual and conciliatory *so wollte Ich*: "To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all "it was" into a "thus I willed it" – that alone should I call redemption" (ibid.). But for Bloom, who bases his whole system on his polemic with Nietzsche, such resignation of will in face of time's transience would never do. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, he defines creativity as a combination of repetition and memory, where the latter is always a remembrance of one's origins, pulling against the temporal flow: "Creativity is thus always the mode of repetition *and* of memory and also of what Nietzsche called the will's revenge against time and against time's statement of "It was.""; Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 98.

Thus, the very idea of the gift itself immediately implies sociality inherent in the moment of origin – versus the absence of others, obliterated in the solitary (*unbezüglich*) moment of dying, so often emphasized and extolled by Heidegger. The focus on the beginning of human life, rather than on its end, brings in the *original heterogeneity* of human existence: the constant company of others who gave me life and sustained its precarious growth with their love, the company summarised in the ideal image of the Augustinian “God, who made me.”

Seen from the perspective of its beginning, the finite human life is immediately dialogic – while seen from the perspective of its end it sinks into the soliloquy of death, always too *jemeinig* and *einzigst* to be shared.²¹ This is Arendt’s major *piece de resistance* against Heidegger’s influence: a resistance demonstrating an elective affinity with the one offered first, half-unknowingly by Rosenzweig, and then, already fully deliberately by Levinas and Bloom. Their new affirmation of finite life, which can be put collectively under the Rosenzweigian heading of New Thinking, takes roots in the united anti-Heideggerian impulse which manages to mobilize latent reserves of alternative vitalistic traditions, among which the Jewish heritage with its imperative “choose life!” is certainly not to be ignored.

²¹ However, Arendt never properly developed her theme of natality, though it remained one of her most frequent “thought trains”; see Scott and Stark, the editors of the Augustine thesis, in their essay “Rediscovering Hannah Arendt,” LA, p. 147. Scott and Stark enumerate all the instances of Arendt’s return to the theme of natality. First, in “What Is Freedom?” from 1960 (reprinted in *Between Past and Future* 1977, p. 167): “Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom.” The same line is repeated almost *verbatim* in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (p. 479), where she persistently (though perhaps not fully consistently with her own chosen Greek idiom, dominating her thought from *Human Condition* onwards) uses theological terminology and calls such outbursts of freedom “miracles.” And finally in *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, *Willing*: “This very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, and by no means in creativity, not in a gift but in a fact that human begins, new men, again and again appear in the world by virtue of birth” (p. 217) (in LA, pp. 147-148). But Arendt never explains how it actually happens. Whereas it is, in fact, far from obvious. For, how from the general fact that we all are born in the same way can there spring something truly new and fresh? Arendt never addresses this question, but it is a starting point for Harold Bloom, the master of paradoxes inevitably issuing from his *general* theory of *individual* creativity: how is it that *the same* initial conditions, resulting in *the same* psychogenic strategies, can eventually produce something truly new? It is not enough to be born and know about it; it is also a question of a peculiar *working-through* of this awareness, which is the main theme of Bloom’s interpretation of the Freudian family romance.

Far from being obedient, “Heidegger’s children,” Rosenzweig, Arendt and Bloom, offer instead a promise of a different thinking which is not fated with the Heideggerian thanatic closure and as such still full of an unexplored future potential.

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