KING'S THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Volume II Number 1 Spring 1979

incorporating The Kingsman

MARTIN BUBER REVISITED

Ulrich Simon

When Buber died in 1965 Arab students placed a wreath at the funeral of the old sage who had worked, fought, and suffered for the peace of Jerusalem. Since then two further wars have taken place, and Buber's reputation in Israel has become even more ambiguous than it had been at the time of his death. The prophet is not generally well liked in his own country. Buber always enjoyed a far higher esteem in, say, England than in Israel. I remember, for example, when he gave an almost inaudible and unintelligible lecture at King's College, London, and the audience of several hundred submitted to his charismatic spell to such an extent that criticism was out of the question. In Israel, on the contrary, the charisma was pierced by daily contact, quarrels of a very common nature, about money, administration, and honours. Many Jews found fault with Buber when he accepted German prizes not many years after Hitler's genocide. Yet a picture in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* shows with what warm enthusiasm Jewish youth celebrated the professor's eightieth birthday. Indeed, the article is a friendly tribute and evaluates Buber's standing after his death in terms not dissimilar to the writer's in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, whereas Italian, Spanish, and French reference works remain silent. I have wondered whether oblivion would altogether encompass Buber's work, but now that the critical first decade is over one may be reasonably certain that Buber has come to stay in the annals of religious thought.

This survival may have been helped by critical and even hostile appraisals. One of the most penetrating has come from the pen of Gershom Scholem, himself an authority on Jewish mysticism. A paper 'Martin Buber's Conception of Judaism' (*Eranos Jahrbuch*, XXV, Zuerich 1967) has just been republished.[1] Scholem makes the point that this existentialist thinker cannot be evaluated apart from his personality and intellectual biography. Scholem knew Buber well for a period of fifty years and acknowledges the 'strong radiance emanating from him'. But he attacks his former hero for what almost looks like opportunism and cowardice 'when the chips were down'. Scholem exaggerates when he claims that Buber's 'total lack of influence in the Jewish world contrasts strangely with his recognition among non-Jews'. Only the future can prove or disprove whether Buber must be classed a Moses or Elijah manqué. Scholem's criticism cannot be directed against Buber's lack of orthodoxy, for he, too, is a non-observing sage, and religious allegiance to party, or attendance at synagogue, cannot be used by him as criteria. Buber never disguised his opposition to *halakhah* and ritualistic demands of religion. In the so-called battle between priests and prophets Buber certainly stood for a spirituality which still owed much to German idealism, i.e. the period before the catastrophe. Scholem admires his 'self-assured subjectivity and sovereignty' with which he blended his grandfather's chassidic treasures with the post-Kantian school. But soon the elements of mysticism and myth ('whose relation to each other never became wholly clear in Buber') had to yield to a new, and more lasting, realisation or actualisation of Judaism, distilled in the famous I-Thou, after years of disenchantment, war, and alienation.

Much has been written about the 'life of dialogue', the great discovery of Israel according to Buber. I am afraid much of our religious jargon (e.g. 'revelation in every Here and Now') stems from Buber's deployment of old theological tags. Scholem is highly critical of Buber's claim to have left mystical definitions behind and accuses him of distorting kabbalistic concepts of revelation. 'Encounter' is an example of what amounts to cheating, used by Buber to avoid the stringency of historical analysis, so that the Exodus is mixed up with 'the anarchic ground of the soul' rather than facts. Scholem hates 'pneumatic constructions', and even when Buber wishes to free Messianism from apocalyptic fanaticism his critic puts him in the company of Karl Barth, 'to minimize the factor of history'.

None of Buber's famous antitheses escape unscathed. Scholem can hardly go wrong in his throw-away condemnation of the *Emunah-Pistis* dialectic found in *Two Faiths* (i.e. the old Fiducia-Trust versus Fides-Faith polemic, now attributed to Judaism and Christianity, though with edges blurred). But the ungenerous final verdict to

place Buber among the prophets who 'sow but do not reap' will, I think, be reversed when Scholem is in all probability forgotten, despite certain 'factual' corrections which are in order. Indeed, Buber belongs to the long line of writers who shine and continue to influence, not on the grounds of accurate information, or scientific analysis, but a less definable quality. I have had a delectable taste of this by a study of his letters, which have appeared in three fat volumes, covering the years 1897-1965. This remarkable publication (1972-5)[2], subsidised by several foundations and not yet available in English, overflows with new riches.

The best thing about this Correspondence is its spaciousness which allows Buber's correspondents to query and answer the striving young Zionist (with Herzl), the maturing scholar (Barth, Brunner, Hesse *inter alia*), and the ageing exile in Jerusalem (Maurice Friedman et al.). It is indeed a superb dialogue, humane, rational, and unpredictable. Grete Schaeder, aided by Ernst Simon and Buber's son Rafael (whose mother was a German Gentile, converted to Judaism), and others, has achieved a miracle of editing from the immense archives in Jerusalem. The whole story of our time, its tragic and even its comic dimensions, unfolds before our eyes through the pens of all kinds of people, mostly now distinguished after their deaths in theology, literature, and the arts. Alas, why do such correspondences *never* contain letters to and from the great villains of the age? But have you ever written to, say, Hitler, or Stalin, or Mao or any of the criminal murderers—and received a reply? The great evil remains still shrouded in our documentation, and even here one cannot help detecting the gulf which separates the 'men of good will', with their sharp minds and warm feelings, from the unthinking and unfeeling bureaucrats. Buber certainly belongs to the class of letter-writers who approach every subject in a civilised manner and who have not yet learnt to score points by clever journalism. He is, of course, one of the greatest stylists of our time. His Bible translation, begun in cooperation with Franz Rosenzweig, author of the *Star of Redemption*, already sick and paralysed in 1925, when the enterprise got under way, and continued after his death in 1929, is one of the monumental marvels of the century. I have hailed it elsewhere (e.g. *The Old Testament Book List*) and cannot do justice to it here.

The production of *I and Thou* occurs before our eyes thanks to the letters exchanged between Buber and Rosenzweig.[3] The former submits his pages to the latter, for approval and critical comment. This correspondence begins in August 1922 when Buber taught part-time in a Jewish academy in Frankfurt. Rosenzweig quotes Eccles. XI, 1, and these famous words—'Cast your bread upon the waters!'—seem just right to express the hope that despite all former shortcomings and later reservations as expressed by Scholem Buber will fulfil a massive task. His interest, as he says, lies in the *Ur*-forms of the religious life, with special emphasis on community and personal existence. Magic, sacrifice, mystery and prayer are topics which demand to be included. Both men are aware of the pagan sub-structure of the religious passion, whose 'I will' is contrasted with 'Thy will be done', and which can so easily be denuded of passion and become an inferior, weary self-submission. Institutions, too, are always questionable, as religious buildings, be they temples, synagogues, or churches. Buber faces the irony of these paradoxes quite simply when he visits Rosenzweig, the genius of the word who can no longer speak, but only articulates by gesture or a most painful way of indirect writing. Thus the lengthy comments on *I and Thou* may almost be said to be written in blood.

After a few remarks on structural infelicities he takes the bull by the horns: 'You give to your I-Thou a mere cripple in the opposing I-It.' This programmatic censure takes us to the heart of the enduring debate. What about the IT? Is it the modern world, or the government of the modern world? If so, judges Rosenzweig, you can easily cripple IT, the product of a great deception, only 300 years old in Europe. I-IT cannot be articulated, except as a philosophical postulate. Only He (God), maintains Rosenzweig, can pronounce the given I-IT, being the author of life and death. Buber is reminded that he is intoxicated and thus consigns IT to the area of death and dying. But, no, Death belongs to the IT, i.e. the order of HIS creation.

Lest this sound like puns and word-splitting Rosenzweig alludes to a story in the Talmud (Cag.14b) which refers to four scribes in a garden (Paradise), one of whom saw and died, another saw and was wounded, yet another

started hacking away the buds (image of the apostate), and only one (Akiba) found the right way out. Buber is drugged and therefore plays havoc with the creation. And what is the proper exit, according to Rosenzweig? It is WE-IT, corresponding to the He-IT way in. When you add all these formulae you fulfil Schelling's great word: 'And then Pantheism will have become true'.

Pronouns aside, this problem of the I-Thou in a world of WE and IT has surely gained in scale since Buber wrote to his friend. His reply to the 'altruistic knight of the IT', though written in 1922, is therefore worthy of our consideration, with the knowledge of the unprecedented growth of IT constantly before our eyes and ears. Buber wrote in an age without computers, electronic communications of our sort, ecological perils, nuclear threats, and totalitarian organisation of society. The IT has grown to such an extent that only Kafka (whom Buber knew and valued) seems to have anticipated, transcribing the images of dreams in story form.

Buber tells his friend that he is grateful for. and receptive to, his uncompromising criticism, hoping that Rosenzweig will acknowledge that first IT, and then HE and WE, are being given their rightful place as the work proceeds. When you deal with the WORD, HISTORY, and GOD you cannot anticipate the complications which must follow. But even before this happens, Buber pinpoints the problem: what is the *Reich* (regnum, reign)? The answer is not to be found in the realm of 'religion' or soulful piety. Buber is now heading for the actualisation of holiness, the way and transformation of real life.

At this stage there appears a letter from F.C. Rang, a Protestant pastor, who after patriotic deviations during the war had returned to a radical Christian stance. He senses a breath of holiness in *I and Thou*, but also gets involved in a discussion about IT. Rang is already talking the language of a later (our) generation when he criticises too much secularity, or the false optimism which so easily permeates an 'openness to the world'. True, he argues, theological tradition as well as a pagan and tragic awareness of the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* are also to be condemned. A prayerful language, rather than scientific discourse (as Buber's), is appropriate for the *THOU*. Otherwise among the many *thous* God becomes just another thou, and his Unity is lost. Love, obedience, faith, repentance cannot thrive in empty talk about relationships. This is Augustine's greatness (in the Confessions) that he addresses HIM as THOU. How can one find a language between the altar and the scientific market?

Rosenzweig by this time has got used to the ever-growing book as one gets used to living in a new house, and what attracts him most is that which he regards as mistaken. He touches here upon the mysterious nature of 'dialogue': mere agreement elicits no real response, but when we think towards the unthinkable we establish a community, even of disagreement, which cannot be unscrambled. However, the IT remains troublesome, a kind of sorry remainder after the THOU has evaporated, but reality cannot be disposed of so lightly. Rosenzweig teases Buber by remarking that if he had honestly his way how gladly he would accept Buddha in his paradise, yes, and also the cat and all the pious good souls, just as Dante puts the pre-Christian philosophers in limbo. But they need not be constrained in this ante-hell, it would be a proper ante-heaven, if only Buber had not been bewitched by the diabolical I-IT of the philosophers and had been content with the blessed HE-IT of children, of Goethe, of the Creator himself. Having said that, Rosenzweig wonders, after some silence in the correspondence, if his friend and author feels hurt and sulks.

Buber returns to the fray and movingly states in such a relationship as theirs there can be no question of 'being hurt'. He could not say anything, let alone write. Not being a 'writing man' by nature Buber is again perplexed by the very nature of articulation as part of our reality. Our inner and our external history inevitably contribute to, and blend in, our thinking, and of this not everything can be made clear. For a Jew this is always an acute problem, since the external world clashes with the traditional heritage. Christians in the West have now also been made aware of this gulf and have to question, as they did not in Buber's day, what really constitutes the IT which confronts them under HIM.

The discussion, however, ends here, or rather continues on a different level. After I-and-Thou Buber, who soon declares himself to be 'far away from it', turns to Gog and Magog, and leads such a busy life that he envies Paul's 'clear conscience towards God and Men' (Acts 24, 16). Contacts

with Christians abound: Gogarten, Ragaz, Guardini. Hence the letters are shorter and concern individual points and even practical matters, such as conferences. However, a letter from Ernst Simon returns to the attack. Buber's I-and-Thou is too 'metaphysical', lacks the sense of the tragic. We have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and our knowledge is in itself tragic. We know shame: hence sex is tragic. We are expelled from Paradise. hence work is tragic, for we are helplessly delivered to it. But this is precisely what makes us into human beings: we speak not to animals nor to angels, but to men as they are. The Law must be accepted as a tragic necessity. Yes, religion does become religiosity, it becomes IT, just because we are human beings. Buber, alleges Simon, overvalues human relationships at the expense of Law (Halacha). We do not stand 'naked before God', but rather need clothes to stand at all, in our middle mediocrity. Only the preacher can afford to stand before the holy community without reservations, i.e. holy. There is no Messianic world where we can naively presuppose a receptivity for I-Thou directness. The crowd prefer cheap, hysterical sensations, and the religious lust is perhaps the worst. This poison—perhaps now in the nineteen seventies still better known—destroys. Buber did not reply, but is said to have commented that all this is quite right—*but only beyond Love* (my italics).

In 1924 the letters show that these topics are not academic but directly relevant to the Jewish problem in Germany. As Rosenzweig says: 'Christians ignore Jews in order to tolerate them; Jews ignore Christians, in order to let themselves be tolerated.' In these pre-Hitler days these voices long for meaningful dialogue in the Messiah. It was never achieved, as we know to our cost. Buber meantime remains more God-centred than his friends, just because he rejects human traditions. The Pauline Law-Revelation controversy flares up between the friends, but not in the New Testament context. Once again, Buber tackles the ancient and modern problem, namely, of the dividing line between God's self-revelation and human laws, commandments, statutes, regulations. Buber insists that God is not Law-Giver in a universal sense, but man is recipient of laws in a sense of personal acceptance. For the eaves-dropping Christian the debate is fascinating, for it provides just the kind of background which St Paul must have had himself. The complexity of the argument is reminiscent of *Romans*, and it is not just an accident that Rosenzweig, as against Buber's concept of Revelation, denounces a Barthian stance, which he himself seems to have flirted with earlier. For the Jew the Law is part of the contract, *tout court*, whereas for Buber Law and culture are secondary and disposable. Then, in May 1925, the young Lambert Schneider writes, apparently out of the blue, to fly the kite of a new translation of the Bible—'commercially risky', but to be taken seriously. I love Rosenzweig's first comment on the German Genesis text, presumably sent to him by Buber in June 1925 '. . . amazingly German; Luther sounds almost jiddish by way of contrast. Is this getting too German?'

A sense of humour is hardly one of Buber's great assets, almost as if he avoided a light touch. Similarly, though a lover of music, he reserves all his music for the translation. How much all our translators could profit from a thorough study of his principles which derive from the theological foundation of I-and-Thou. The verb, not the noun, holds the secret of divine and human speech: the Spirit does not 'hover' but 'broods' over the deep, concretely. Nothing is left to chance, no mere acceptable verbiage is allowed to slip through. Rosenzweig, most suggestively, sees the work as a weapon against the Christian Marcionites (Harnack!), who only accept the N.T. with an admixture of the Psalms. Scholem's reaction to this great 'missionary' enterprise moves from sincere praise to certain reservations regarding the 'pathos' of the style. Should Biblical prose have an aura of solemnity, a pathos which demands that the text be sung? Does the intonation resemble that of an incantation? Buber, while welcoming informed criticism, replies that style is not the matter for discussion, but the text which inspires the style. This 'elementary' prose is not to be confused with 'art'. And while these discussions continue Max Brod sends Buber the last novel of Kafka's life, *The Castle*. Had Kafka been alive, replies Buber, this is what he would have said to him: 'Yes, indeed, so it is: in order to achieve meaning the meaningless enters existence, and with that we have to deal here, right to the last moment. But in coming to terms with

it, and enduring its confusions, in concrete contradiction, do we not become aware of meaning, in cruel sanctification, not of our kind, and yet turned towards us, piercing at the right time, and filling our hearts?' *The Castle* was for Buber 'not reading matter but real happening, an incarnation or embodiment of the secret which concerns Kafka's survivors in their own inmost experience'. Brod replies that the echo to Kafka's work is yet weak and reminds Buber that the author had asked his lady friend Dora Dymant to burn twenty thick notebooks and from his bed watched the flames engulf these manuscripts.

These late nineteen-twenties present us with a last flowering of great minds in Germany. Buber is continually under pressure and responds richly to Jewish, Christian, and secular enquiries. Never again could there be such a hectic dialogue between I-and-Thou. Rosenzweig reminds Buber not to yield to expectations of a work of art though *it is one*. The elegance of mathematical proof is only open to those who understand mathematics, and not to those who seek elegance for its own sake. The Bible cannot be subjected to aesthetic controls, though the texts establish aesthetic norms. In 1927 Alfred Jeremias welcomes the work not as a 'beautiful' success but as a Jewish Bible which exposes 'the mystique of daily life and the sacredness of the profane'. Luther, with all his genius, could not render the hebraic Pneuma, and this did not matter because Luther wrote for Christians who were convinced that *novum testamentum in vetere latet*. But Christendom in its present state profits from new life in the Old Testament. Herman Hesse gives three reasons for his praise (1) The translation lives as a living creature; (2) it is a real person, not a personality; (3) it is a friend, not always a friendly friend, but just a friend.

Buber's life seemed to end in triumph when he celebrated his fiftieth birthday in 1928. For a moment it seems as if all the enlightened spirits of the age (Ragaz, Schweitzer, Weizmann etc.) converge upon a humane commonwealth of religion and peace. Buber is invited to accept a professorship in Jerusalem and he reflects on the offer while he visits the great French cathedrals. But the first rumblings of the violence of the next decade can be heard. Jews and Arabs fight in Palestine. Buber protests in vain against executions. Then the ailing Rosenzweig dies on December 10th 1929. One profound and creative dialogue ends, and, to crown it all, a project in Berlin elects Torczyner (later Tur Sinai) as chief editor of another translation of the Bible. But underterred by setbacks and the menacing advent of Nazism (the first reference to Hitler occurs not before January 1933) the work continues. The doors are still open and Buber makes contact with, or is asked for information by, men like Lohmeyer, K.L. Schmidt, Gogarten, Barth, and Brunner. How is it, and why is it, that this symphony of truth was, for a time at least, drowned by the yells of totalitarian terror? Why was there never the remotest chance of dialogue with, say, Hitler and his henchmen, or indeed Stalin and his gang? Why did the dialogue not extend to the hopeless cynicism and naked despair in the 'twenties, as, for example, shown now in an exhibition in London, at the Hayward Gallery, called NEUE SACHLICHKEIT? Does the *Ich* in the final count only speak to the *Du* which wants to listen anyhow? Or do I only dare address the Thou which I anticipate to be on my side?—I ask the question again, for it haunts the reader with increasing poignancy.

In 1938 Buber leaves at last for Jerusalem, on the eve of the beginning of the Final Solution. Hesse wishes him God-speed on his sixtieth birthday: work and community is to welcome him. He leaves the Diaspora, after a serious attack of influenza, bare of self-assurance and yet with a certain 'confidence arising out of friendship'. I detect here the culmination of the tradition of wise men, who, like Joseph in and out of prison, dreamers and interpreters, utopians and practical at the same time, experience endless disasters and never lose hope. This very Jewish attitude to life answers to the Lukan Christian soteriology, which, far from suppressing the abyss over which we tread, elegantly mounts hurdle after hurdle to reach the end, where life and death meet in triumph. Buber's correspondence is a document of our times which reflects acutely this mad optimism of faith and serious effort on every level of human existence. Two types of faith—Emunah and Pistis—truly meet.

NOTES

1 Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, Schocken Books, 1978.

2 *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, Heidelberg, Lambert Schneider.

3 First draft of *I and Thou* dates back to 1919. Buber does not acknowledge Rosenweig's direct influence (Cf. Letter 302, of 16.2.1954).