
Braiterman’s book is the latest of recent efforts to revisit an alleged oxymoron: Jewish art. Catherine Sousslof’s reader on *Jewish Identity and Modern Art* (1999), Vivian B. Mann’s, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (2000), Margaret Olin’s *The Nation without Art* (2001), Kalman P. Bland’s *The Artless Jew* (2001), to name but a few, seek to rebut the Jewish’s putative lack of aesthetic sensibilities. Leora Batnitzky’s *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (2000) tackles the question of aesthetics in the context of ethical monotheism’s ban on image-making and image-worship. This debate is as much about perceptions of the Jew as it is about Jewish self-understanding. Braiterman’s book adds a stunning twist to these overlapping discourses. Locating aesthetic sensation at the heart of religious thought, he challenges the reader to consider anew the “image-making power” of religion.

Braiterman’s aim is “to articulate a set of philosophical points about the composition of religion and revelation” (xvii). To that end, he reconsiders “the relationship between aesthetic form and spiritual reality that drove German-Jewish thought and the aesthetics of German expressionism in the early twentieth century” (xix). Unlike any other trend in modern art, expressionism “created visual and poetic conditions of possibility for the emergence of new religious discourse” (245). The new “symbiotic” relation between “verbal and graphic image” (xxiv), makes sense perception and conceptual abstraction interdependent. The main argument of the book is that revelation and art do not constitute two radically divergent discourses. Rather, and here the author follows Mark C. Taylor, “the form carved out and covered up by image, act, or word,” is a “mediating figure” and hence “indispensable link between religion and art” (xxxi). Aesthetics takes its place between the rational and the sensual. Braiterman shifts attention away from the “outmoded [Jewish] discourse about aesthetics” (xxvi) of the 19th century. He critiques contemporary Jewish thinkers for still perpetuating the position of German philosophical idealism associated with the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen. Determined to keep the ideal apart from the empirical, Cohen upheld a “uniquely Jewish approach to art,” which only considers non-mimetic representation as art (xxvii). But Braiterman and others have recently argued, Exodus 20:4–5 was not understood by Jews as a total ban on images. He turns to the religious thought of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig for a fresh approach. They share the concern of German expressionism in art to bring out the presence of the invisible. Their distinctive perspective on the “form-construction of revelation” guards the metaphysical orientation against the “purely material conception of art” (14).

Braiterman maps the positions of Kant, Lessing, and Schiller on the visible/invisible and brings them into creative dialogue with Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and other masters and theorists of abstract expressionist art. Kandinsky’s aesthetic theory focused on the spiritual in art commands Braiterman’s re-reading of Buber and Rosenzweig on form. They recognized the role of form in creating content and meaning; form “lends sensual shape to the image of revelation” (26). Contrary to the common view, Buber did not recoil from form. For Buber and Rosenzweig, “[f]orm constitutes the linchpin of encounter, the in-between place without which there is no revelation in this world. “Realization,” a key word for the Buber of the Jewish Renaissance, denotes “the intentional act of perception,” a fundamental (existential) decision whereby the divine presence is made real, transformed “into a sensual shape subject to sensation” (40). Rather than a reproduction of the visible, “[t]he absolute deed makes divine reality real by providing visible form to the invisible Godhead” (40–41, emphasis Braiterman). Reluctant “to narrow revelation down to one particular form” (44), the early Buber discerns the same capacity in the form of myth and act of mythmaking. The criticism leveled against him for his conflation of history, aestheticism and formalism by his anarchist friend Gustav Landauer marked a turning point. The “aesthetic of unity and unification, revelation and form creation now received the rougher visage of an elemental dualism” (42). Revelation now precedes the creative act of formgiving. But human will in *I and Thou* (1923) is not as Braiterman suggests, secondary to divine grace. It is misleading to contend that “revelation will [now] create its own form” (42). Rather the will is met by divine...
The individual becomes a recipient of a presence. By virtue of this encounter revelation may take on new forms, though, not necessarily aesthetic forms. Braiterman reads *I and Thou* analogous to Kandinsky's theory of composition as a "visual composition... in which persons, physical objects, spiritual creations, and God are reduced to three graphic signifiers: YOU, IT, and I," with "God's countenance" as "the formal dynamic element" (43).

Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (1920) displays an "anti-aesthetic... in which the visual art of Greek paganism is used as a negative foil with which to maximize the potency of revelation" (47). A self-contained art cannot capture the interconnected whole that characterizes the aesthetics of redemption in its lyrical composition. Rosenzweig's aesthetic theory of creation evolves around "a unified exposition of detail" (49), in which creation is epic. "Religion is itself a compositional form in which a variety of figures take up a position vis-à-vis each other" (51). Rosenzweig eventually abandoned the form of totality, claiming that "God's face is an extraordinary figure whose image resists total figuration" (54). The concern with the detail for grasping the unified whole comes to the fore in Buber's and Rosenzweig's Bible translation which in opening Scripture to "odd-sounding effects" is paradoxically as much beyond aesthetic as it is aesthetic. With respect to the "linguistic form of revelation," Buber and Rosenzweig paid heed that "no aesthetic frame can isolate formal expression from everyday human life and existential mysteries" (60). This renders translation even more than "more-than-a-work-of-art," as Rosenzweig put it. This position resonates strikingly with Kandinsky's compositional theory of art, according to which composition hinges "upon the variability, down to the tiniest detail, of every individual form" (26).

Focusing on the semantics of the God-man relation distinctive of biblical religion, Buber and Rosenzweig "restricted themselves to a more indeterminate set of claims about God" (91). Revelation means that in that moment "something happens," the "pure presence of encounter" (80). For Rosenzweig, the content of revelation consists in the commandment to love God (83) which "transcends objective and objectlike content" and "cultivates instead the space between two stylized figures: God and the beloved soul" (81). This contentless view of revelation, what Kant circumscribed as "purposiveness without purpose," is compelling in that it "skirts around the limits of critical reason" (91). "The play of signs, light, and love sufficiently manifest a bare divine presence that yields no more than its bare presence. But is revelation really for Rosenzweig "only just this: revelation" (84), void of all content? Not quite.

In a correspondence with Buber from 1925 on the revealed Law, he speaks of the "primary content of revelation" as "revelation itself." Although God is not a "lawgiver," God "commands," addressing the individual Jew personally through ritual precepts. This is what Rosenzweig means in *The Builders*, when he declares "Law [halakhah] must again become commandment." With recourse to Buber's presentation of the event of revelation in his *Moses*, Braiterman observes that "The memory at Sinai hinges upon and image, not data... The presence of God becomes manifest through nothing more than ordinary unsubstantial light" (77). In that sense, Buber's shape of revelation captures and guards the paradox of the manifestation of the invisible.

The topological parameters of the discourse on the metaphysical in modernism are pathos, time, space, and eros. For German expressionism, art could no longer be mute or insulated from color. Buber's "mystical pathos" (103), and Rosenzweig's "lyrical pathos" are attempts to reproduce the "sound of revelation." In Rosenzweig's thought, specifically in his "speech-thinking," sound and silence were "key to the interval between revelation and redemption" (98). In their re-reading of the text of revelation, "sound and color, voice and score, audibility and legibility are inscribed into one another" (98). Here it would have been valuable to point out the emphasis Judaism places on *hearing over seeing*—so emphatically expressed in the "Hear, O Israel" prayer.

The new realism of the Weimar period marked a caesura: "the exile of religion and metaphysics from modern society" (15). With the "demise of its image-making power" religion and revelation became "culturally incongruous" (245). Siegfried Kracauer's Weimar-style nihilist modernity meant an "unambiguous commitment to the visible and the profane" (246) which stood in stark contrast to the reverberation of the form elements of abstract expressionism in Buber's *I and Thou* and