In 1986, the city of Kassel honored Franz Rosenzweig, a native son, by hosting an international conference to mark the centenary of his birth. Scholars from Germany, Israel, and the United States met to analyze the philosophical weight of this contemporary of Ernst Cassirer, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger. Talks presented (and later published in a two volume set entitled Der Philosoph Franz Rosenzweig) addressed Rosenzweig's contributions to epistemology, theology, ethics, hermeneutics, and the German-Jewish cultural scene. But what justified the conference organizers calling Rosenzweig a Philosop? The appellation ill fits a thinker who professed active hostility towards academic philosophy, one who never formally addressed the neo-Kantian and phenomenological movements then current. In fact, Rosenzweig's interest in philosophy appears decidedly antiquarian, absorbed by the movements and counter-movements of the early to mid nineteenth century. Philosoph may have been the wrong word. Indeed, Ginacarlo Baffo argues that the secondary literature on Rosenzweig has paid too much attention to epistemological questions (965). Instead, his article in the centenary collection ("Die ästhetische Dimension im Denken Rosenzweig") suggests that the editors might have better characterized its honoree as Der Ästhet Franz Rosenzweig. Taking our cue from Baffo, we will turn away from epistemology and ethics to find Rosenzweig consistently...
following an aesthetic method: by which he moved from apprehending beautiful detail (i.e. form) in order to grasp phenomena (e.g. art objects, the face of God, the Hebrew Bible) as a whole (i.e. luminous totality).

In the pages to follow, I will identify and assess the pronounced “aestheticism” that marked Rosenzweig’s letters and diaries, The Star of Redemption, and his contributions to Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutscherung (most recently translated into English as Scripture and Translation). The discussion builds upon Allan Megill’s distinction between the terms “aestheticism” and “aesthetic.” By the latter, Megill refers to a so-called, self-contained, and separate realm of delimited aesthetic objects (e.g. paintings, sculptures, poems). In particular, Megill points to Kant’s sundering the relationship between representation and ontology. That is, the artistic image no longer refers to actually existing objects or underlying realities external to it. As such, it bears no representational truth content. In contrast, Megill has the term “aestheticism” evoke Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. Aestheticism refers to thought in which aesthetic factors (art, language, discourse, interpretation, and text) do not simply refer to, but rather constitute primary and overarching spectrums of existence. In Heidegger’s late work, for instance, art and poetry uncover truth otherwise unavailable to communicative reason (Megill, 2, 158–9). The same has been observed in Rosenzweig’s thought (Greenberg, 52–6). In pursuing this avenue of exploration I am not primarily interested in what Rosenzweig wrote about art, beauty, or the sublime per se. Rather, I want to see how words like form, content, part and whole constitute “religious life.” In the process, we will find Rosenzweig’s own expression seeking to show supersensual truth (eternity, revelation, the face of God) in aesthetic shape.  

1 In the pages to follow, readers will note my occasionally placing the terms “the aesthetic” and “religion” within quotation marks. I do so in order to isolate the particular understandings of religion and aesthetics that Rosenzweig himself resisted. Rosenzweig rejected “the aesthetic” just as he rejected the terms “religion” qua independent and sundered components of experience. But this rejection of “the aesthetic” does not mean that Rosenzweig’s own thought was not itself aesthetic; just as little would one suggest that Rosenzweig’s thought does not touch deeply upon religion because he rejected “religion” in the narrow sense of the word.