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BUBER'S RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

I

A Personal Approach. Most serious authors we encounter after our basic attitudes have taken shape; but there are a few whom we meet earlier—writers who neither become grist for our mill nor evoke a sense of congeniality, but who do something to us. For me, Martin Buber is one of this small number.

It might be inappropriate to even mention this; writing about a philosopher, we generally try to be impartial, putting out of mind all personal involvement. Yet Buber differs from other philosophers. His major contribution to philosophy is *I and Thou*, in which the two relationships I-It and I-Thou are contrasted. There is something problematic in writing "about" the author of this work, treating him as an object for reflection, carving up his works into such fields as ethics and epistemology, philosophy of history and social thought, or even philosophy in general as separate from Buber's other interests. In this manner one stands to lose what is most distinctive about him. To perceive his significance, we must try to listen to his voice.

It is sometimes said that Buber is an existentialist, and the term is so vague that this statement is not false. Some of the differences between Buber and other so-called existentialists will be considered below. What Buber clearly has in common with some others influenced by Kierkegaard and, above all, with Kierkegaard himself, is his impassioned protest against the kind of philosophy to which he and the others are being reduced today by some of their admirers. Neo-Thomists write books on Kierkegaard and Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre, forcing their rebellions against all traditional philosophy into an almost scholastic mold. When one writes on Kierkegaard today, one must begin by breaking down the systematic walls in which a growing literature is trying to confine him, to set free the individual.

The present volume on Buber, which I myself strongly urged years ago, in 1951, presents a similar danger. To bring together many different views of Buber's work within the framework of a single volume, one simply has to carve up Buber's thought more or less systematically to avoid egregious repetition, and one must proceed as if he had a system which can be considered branch by branch. I am not objecting to this method. Neither do I feel apologetic for my own attempt to seek a different approach. Both procedures may be complementary, and my own, though of necessity it will involve some overlapping with the thoughts of others, may yet fill a crucial gap.

II

Buber's Central Question. Buber, like Kierkegaard, is at heart a religious thinker rather more than a philosopher. His primary concern is not with the elaboration of a system, with the quest for certainty or the solution of some problems in epistemology or ethics, but, if it is not too bold to formulate it in a single question: what does the religion of my fathers mean to me today?

What distinguishes Buber is not this question which is on many lips today. His significance lies in the fact that few, if any, others have said so much of such importance in answer to this question. Not only *I and Thou*, *Dialogue*, and *Two Types of Faith* are relevant to his central question, but also Buber's studies of the Bible and of Hasidism, his translation of the Hebrew Scripture, and his collection of the lore of the Hasidim. Almost everything else he has written also has some bearing on this question. More than any other writer of our time, specifically including those theologians whose wide popularity is such a distinctive feature of our age, Buber has shown in great detail what religion can mean at its best.

Buber is certainly not an authoritative spokesman for Judaism. It is one of the blessings of Judaism that it does not have any authoritative spokesmen. Millions of Jews disagree with Buber about their Scriptures, about Hasidism, about Judaism, and about whatever else is interesting. But he has shown a possible meaning of religion today—which sounds like faint praise until one looks around and finds how exceedingly difficult it has become for those who are loath to part with their critical spirit to find a worthwhile meaning for religion here and now.

III

Buber versus Jaspers and Heidegger. Buber's faults are not hard to find but relatively unimportant. It has been charged against him that as a teacher of social philosophy he did not give some of his students what a less subjective teacher would have given them, and that, when he retired, they still had to acquire some fundamentals of sociology. Whether this is true or not, Buber's stature certainly does not rest on his ability to coach his students for examinations.

In a similar vein, his discussions of the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre—to give only three examples—are open to objections. At important points he seems to be mistaken in his views of their views. But again this is unimportant. If he had never written about these men, his stature would be unimpaired.

Buber is not a model of impartial reading. Nietzsche once spoke of "what a man has written with his blood." Buber might be said to *read* with his blood. Or, to use a more conventional term, with his heart. He involves himself in what he reads to the point where he finds what other readers would not find. As a result, his readings are often controversial.

This is true also of Buber's Biblical interpretations and of the picture he has given us of the Hasidim. There is something intuitive, personal, partial about his readings. And this may seem to be a crucial criticism.

A comparison with Jaspers and, even more, with Heidegger seems obvious at this point. They, too, have devoted a large part of their own writings to interpretations; and their exegeses too, are open to a vast array of critical objections.

In the case of Jaspers I have tried to show in detail in another volume in this series that his two books and his several essays on Nietzsche are founded on an unsound method and his long reply to my critique confirmed my thesis that he is at least occasionally quite unable to read even a plain text. Instead of replying to the specific criticisms which I summarized in less than two pages toward the end of my essay, Jaspers devoted five pages to a piqued attempt to saddle me with views which I had not expressed and with a philosophic outlook quite at variance with the one I do profess. Whether he deals with Schelling, Kierkegaard, or Freud, the procedure is always essentially the same: nobody is accepted as he is; everybody is remodeled to play a part assigned to him. Schelling's protean develop-

ment is dismissed; Kierkegaard's "forced Christianity" and Nietzsche's "forced anti-Christianity" do not really matter; and Freud becomes, next to Marx, *the* representative of "anti-reason in our age." What matters most to a man does not necessarily matter to Jaspers: Jaspers' interpretations depend on what matters to *him*.

Jaspers himself stresses communication, which he defines as a "loving struggle," but he never really exposes himself to another point of view. He is always the judge, not a combatant—or as an admirer once put it: Jaspers has remained true to his training; he has never abandoned the psychiatrist's condescension.

Nothing of the sort could be alleged of Buber. Can anyone who has ever asked him a question imagine him replying, as Jaspers occasionally answers serious questions, "I shall deal with this point in one of my books"? Buber may occasionally seem highhanded in interpretation, but as soon as he confronts a question from another human being he insists on the achievement of communication or, as he says, dialogue. Emphatically, he is not the judge nor a psychiatrist but a fellow human being, a fellow seeker, eager to speak man to man.

Buber's dialogue is not Socratic: it quite lacks the mordant sarcasm, the frank delight in the opponent's weakness, and the air of a contest. With Buber, question and answer have a religious dimension: it is not a match of intellects he seeks but an approach between two human beings which seems connected with the Biblical injunction, "love thy fellow as thyself." There is a feeling of fellowship and a vivid sense that the other human being is as myself. Listening with the heart, and not merely the intellect, means the total involvement of both participants in the dialogue: it allows heart to speak to heart and illuminates the idea of neighbor-love.

One experiences nothing like this with the other so-called existentialists. Though they begin with a protest against the academic and insist, in different ways, on staying with human existence, they soon become involved in curious modes of speech, in a conceptual machinery quite as forbidding as that of avowed academicians, and, alas, in more or less impressive monologues. Questions become scarcely possible: asked in the philosopher's own language, they answer themselves; asked in a less pretentious idiom, they are rarely answered. At best, one is offered an oral footnote to a published text.

A contrast with Heidegger proves especially illuminating. If you associate Buber above all with Judaism, and Heidegger with Hitler,

the idea of comparing both will seem far-fetched. Yet there is a striking similarity between Heidegger's later writings and Buber's earlier work. The following sentences from *I and Thou* (1923) might have been written by Heidegger thirty years later: "*Man sagt, der Mensch erfahre seine Welt. Was heisst das? Der Mensch befährt die Fläche der Dinge und erfährt sie.*" (11) The preoccupation with the roots of words which is so startling in Heidegger's interpretations, the attempt to penetrate the too familiar readings which allegedly impede a genuine perception of the text, and the bold departure from ordinary language are all encountered much earlier in Buber's and Rosenzweig's German translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Nevertheless, Buber and Heidegger differ decisively. Buber and Rosenzweig dealt with texts which really had been obscured by familiarity. By recovering some degree of strangeness, they created the conditions under which it became possible to hear again. Heidegger, picking out some all but unknown hymns of the late Hölderlin and a relatively little known poem by Rilke, could hardly explain his eccentric essays on these poems in parallel fashion. Indeed, the striking charges against his interpretations entered by Walter Muschg in the essay on "Zerschwatze Dichtung" in his book, *Die Zerstörung der deutschen Literatur*, must be sustained for the most part. Heidegger does not always use the best available text; he disregards the author's intentions; he shows extraordinarily little feeling for poetry and for the personalities of the poets with whom he deals; and he regularly reads his own ideas into the poems he interprets. In his Rilke interpretation he actually finds the crucial message in a passage he interpolates where the poet left three dots. Quite generally, he concentrates on obscure poems or on fragments which facilitate his highly arbitrary procedure.

Heidegger's interpretations of some of the fragments of the pre-Socratics resemble Buber's translations of the Hebrew Scriptures in the resolve to strip away facile misinterpretations and to penetrate to the roots. But in the first place the pre-Socratics had never been as much obscured by familiarity as the Bible; they had never ceased to be mysterious. Secondly, Buber has not concentrated, like Heidegger, on a few obscure passages, to point up the inadequacy of previous translations and to remind us of their overwhelming difficulty: Buber has succeeded in giving us a really new translation of the Hebrew Bible. Finally, as a stylist Buber is above comparison with Heidegger whose prose—not to speak of his thin volume of poetry—is

gradually becoming more and more indistinguishable from the parodies published here and there.

IV

Buber as a Translator. Buber's principles of translation differ widely from those generally accepted in the English-speaking world. He developed his ideas about translation in the course of his collaboration with Rosenzweig; and in 1936 he published a volume of essays, replies to reviewers, notes, and letters—some written by Rosenzweig, some by Buber, and some jointly: *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*. This book derives its unique vitality not only from its enthusiastic concern with the Bible, which comes to life for us, too, but also from the rare intensity of Buber, Rosenzweig, and their relationship. The book, though little known, is a major contribution to our understanding of the Bible and to the fine art of translation. And Rosenzweig's ready wit, at its acid best when he rebuts the strictures of reviewers, makes one forget temporarily that he was fatally ill and long unable to speak when he resolved to join with Buber to make a really new translation of the Hebrew Bible: "on some tortuous machinery he would indicate, with unsteady finger, one, two, three letters of each word; and his wife would guess it." (319)

The importance of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation and its principles is twofold. First, it represents an achievement sadly lacking in the English-speaking world: a really new translation of the Bible. Both the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament and the Bible of the Jewish Publication Society of America represent mere revisions of the King James Bible and do not at all breathe the spirit of the original Hebrew books. Neither do they strip away the familiar veils of an idiom designed "to be read in churches"—an idiom not altogether different, in spite of its magnificence, from the holy tone by which one instantly recognizes preachers on the radio. Of the unaffected immediacy and stark power of much of the Hebrew Scriptures, few English readers have an inkling, nor is there any translation to which one can refer them. In German there are two: that of Buber and Rosenzweig and that of Harry Torczyner (now Tur-Sinai) which was begun at about the same time, but completed rapidly, owing to the collaboration of fourteen scholars, and reprinted in a single volume, revised once more by Torczyner, in 1937.

Secondly, Buber and Rosenzweig revolutionized the art of translation. This art is much more highly developed in Germany than in the English-speaking world. Voss' translation of the Iliad and the Odyssey into German dactylic hexameters comes to mind immediately as an achievement without parallel in English. Before that, Luther's translation of the Old Testament came incomparably closer to the style and sensibility of the original than the King James Bible. After Voss, there are the incredibly successful Shakespeare translations of August Wilhelm Schlegel, there are Hölderlin's versions of two of Sophocles' plays, Goethe's efforts at translation, Rückert's virtuosity, and, more recently, the translations of Buddhist scriptures by Karl Eugen Neumann and the several volumes of frequently inspired translations by Stefan George and Rilke.

In English there is no comparable tradition of responsibility and faithfulness to the original texts. There is no adequate translation yet of either Homer or the Greek tragedies.¹ The last few years have seen a rash of new translations of Greek classics; but as soon as they approach poetry they arrogate liberties which seem irresponsible compared to the best German efforts. In English it is considered a truism that every age must make its own translation, and it is considered perfectly all right for the contemporary translator of—never mind what, to recast it in the idiom of T. S. Eliot or W. H. Auden. Would those who hold these principles condone translations of Shakespeare into Rilke's idiom or Brecht's?

Another almost undoubted maxim of most English translators—and especially publishers—is that the translation must read as if the work had been written in idiomatic English. The idiom may be colloquial or it may be that of Eliot, but it must not be unprece-

¹ This essay was contributed in 1957, before Robert Fitzgerald's version of the Odyssey and the Chicago edition of The Complete Greek Tragedies appeared. But the translations of the tragedies are uneven, and that of *Antigone* (first published in 1954) exemplifies, like other English versions of this play, the pitfalls of not accepting Buber's methods of translation. Line 332, the beginning of the famous Chorus is rendered: "Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man." Although completely different words are employed to translate the Greek *deina* and *deinoteron*, this version comes closer to Sophocles' meaning than the popular translation that finds nothing "more wonderful than man." But what has been quite generally overlooked is that the same word occurs a third time, only nine lines earlier, where the Chicago translation renders it as "terrible." Quite especially in a line as often quoted as that of the Chorus, a translator should find a word that will serve in all three places; e.g., uncanny.

dented; it must avoid neologisms, coinages, and anything that is strange or baffling—even if the original is notable for its striking departure from the idiom of its time, even if it abounds in unusual words, even if in places it is profoundly difficult to understand or clearly ambiguous. Where the best German translators would not rest content until they had found a way of preserving every ambiguity of the original, most English-speaking publishers will expect their translators to resolve every ambiguity, to venture an interpretation which will make things easy for the reader, and, by all means, to produce a text which is smoother than the original.

Buber and Rosenzweig went much further than any previous translators of comparable stature in flouting these hallowed maxims and in going to the opposite extreme. "With the pedantry of a genius" (323), Rosenzweig insisted on Buber's faithfulness to the original in the minutest detail; and Buber brought off this feat and created a style which is equally far from ordinary German and from the holy tone of the English Bible.

A few of the Buber-Rosenzweig principles may be enumerated explicitly. The first, which is of the utmost importance, is that every word must always be translated, as far as at all possible, by the same word—not by one word here and another one there, and a third word elsewhere. This strikes many people as strange; some even think that this amounts to renouncing true translation in favor of creating a mere "crib." It does indeed amount to that, or worse, if you simply take the first "equivalent" that comes to mind and then stick by that. Obviously, this principle obliges you to try to find a truly equivalent word, one which reproduces as many of the shades of the original word as possible. If you succeed, you enrich every single sentence containing that word by animating it with all the overtones and ambiguities, allusions, echoes, and suggestions lost by translators who make it easy for themselves.

If you translate an author who has little feeling for his language and a text that lacks style and all but the barest meaning, there is no need for all this trouble. If you deal with the Bible, on the other hand, the price you pay for taking less pains than this is that your text cannot be used as the basis of any serious discussion. Any study of the love of God, or the justice of God, on the basis of the King James Bible, which translates the same word now as love and then as justice, is bound to be irrelevant to the Hebrew Scriptures.

The second principle, closely related to the first, is that you must

go back to the root of the word, seeing that, especially in Hebrew, the same root may connect—quite obviously to the reader of the original—two nouns, or, even more frequently, a noun and a verb or an adjective. And this leads to a search for the, generally sensuous, basic meaning of this root which, once found, revitalizes its derivatives and enriches the meaning of the text with scores of new associations and connections. One becomes aware—and the excitement of the volume of essays on *Die Schrift* is partly due to the fact that we see Buber and Rosenzweig becoming aware—of all sorts of things which had escaped the notice of previous translators.

The third principle—another corollary of the first—is that a rare word must be rendered by a rare word. This is connected with a characteristic device of Biblical narration which Buber and Rosenzweig, varying Wagner's word, leitmotif, called *Leitwort-Stil*. A single illustration may explain it better than any attempt at definition.

After Jacob has taken advantage of Isaac's inability to see and has obtained the blessing intended for his older brother, Isaac says that he came "with guile." Later, when Laban has taken advantage of Jacob's inability to see in the dark and brought to his bed Leah to receive the love intended for her younger sister, Jacob reproaches him: "Why have you beguiled me?" As Buber points out in *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (p. 224), this word root "occurs only in one other place in the Pentateuch: Genesis 34.13, where it refers to Jacob's sons."

Another similar device, common in the Bible, is the repetition of the same root for purposes of emphasis. And then there is the frequent use of alliteration. Buber and Rosenzweig, trying to recreate the Bible for the ear, too, felt a responsibility to the sound and rhythm which brings to life the Hebrew Scriptures, liberating them from the majestic monotony of the Authorized Version.

As an example, consider a sentence from Genesis 37. Joseph has been sold into slavery by his brothers, and they have dipped his coat in the blood of a goat and brought it to their father, saying: "This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no." The Authorized Version goes on: "And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces." The words "It is" are scrupulously italicized to indicate their absence from the original Hebrew text; and, as often in such cases, their omission constitutes a vast improvement. The words "without doubt" do not disfigure the original either; but

the passage in the King James Bible has a sublime rhythm of its own which is eminently suitable "to be read in Churches," as the title page proclaims.

The Revised Standard Version does not aspire to recapture the poetry of the original; it merely tries to correct outright errors—by changing "the coat of many colors" into "a long robe with sleeves," for example—and it tries to bring the King James Bible up to date by changing "knew it" to "recognized it," "coat" to "robe," "hath" to "has," and "rent" to "torn." But "It is" and "without doubt" are both retained. All this is better than the Moffat translation which shows no feeling for the situation whatever: "Jacob recognized it. 'It is my son's tunic,' he said; 'some evil beast has devoured him. Joseph must have been torn to pieces.'" One feels like adding: "Elementary, my dear Watson."

Buber, in the latest edition of his version (1954) *translates* the text, instead of trying to improve on it. "He saw it and said: My son's coat! an evil beast has devoured him; torn, torn is Joseph!" This may show what it means to let the Hebrew original speak to us.

In the first edition, Buber still had the disturbing "it is"; and Torczyner preceded him in rendering Jacob's outcry faithfully. What matters is that those who know the Bible only from English translations have little idea of its elementary power: they do not know how the text cries out to communicate the immediacy of experiences.

One further example may show how much is at stake. Take a verse from Hosea—14.1 in the Hebrew Bible, 13.16 in the English:

King James

Samaria shall become desolate;
for she hath rebelled against her
God: they shall fall by the sword:
their infants shall be dashed in
pieces, and their women with child
shall be ripped up.

Revised Standard

Samaria shall bear her guilt,
because she has rebelled against her God;
they shall fall by the sword,
their little ones shall be dashed in pieces,
and their pregnant women ripped open.

after Buber

Atone must Samaria the guilt
that it was obstinate to its God,

by the sword they must fall,
 their toddlers are smashed,
 their pregnant women slashed.

after Torczyner

Damned is Shomron
 for defying her God.
 They fall by the sword,
 smashed are their infants,
 their pregnant women slashed.

Buber's translation is not definitive, and he deserves our admiration precisely for his innumerable changes in the second edition. (My English translation of his German version does not do full justice to him.)

The Authorized Version has sacrificed the sensibility of the Hebrew Bible with its unique poetry and power to its own profoundly different conception of rhetoric. In the process the translators produced the most sumptuous monument of English prose. It has its own stylistic unity, even to the extent of boldly assimilating the books of the New Testament, too, to the same style. In the end, Jacob beholding the bloody garment of Joseph, Hosea envisaging the destruction of his people, Luke telling stories, and Paul writing a letter to the Galatians all sound like early 17th Century English divines with a flair for oratory.

The Epistle to the Galatians has at last come to life in the Revised Standard Version, so we can hear Paul; but the Old Testament suffers from a half-hearted compromise between Elizabethan rhetoric and a more modern idiom. The English here does not at all approach the sublime economy of the Hebrew. In many ways, it is much easier to translate into German than it is to translate into English; but precisely the succinctness, the terse, laconic quality of much of the Hebrew text is more readily rendered in English. In the Hosea verse, the original consists of 11 words—30 syllables in all. The King James Bible requires 33 words, 43 syllables, and the Revised Standard Version one less of each. Buber, in German, uses 23 words, 44 syllables; Torczyner, respectively, 20 and 34; and my English version of Torczyner, 20 words and 26 syllables.

This method of counting may seem pedantic, but it fixes in figures the striking difference between the resplendent rhetoric of the

"Authorized" prophet who speaks "to be read in Churches" and the austere immediacy of the Hebrew prophet who cries out over what he sees—even as Jacob in Genesis cries out. In English we hear a great orator who prides himself on his imposing cadences and his rich imagery. In Hebrew we hear a voice without aesthetic ambitions; a voice that cries out because it cannot contain itself, a voice that addresses us and by the sheer force of its uninhibited directness tears the heart out of its sloth.

It is easy to hear the English Bible without listening, to be edified by it without understanding. The Hebrew Bible does not speak in some special holy tone, appropriate on the Sabbath but rather out of place on weekdays—and irrelevant and almost blasphemous after Belsen and Auschwitz. There is nothing unctuous about it. It speaks to us with a singular lack of manner. The primary significance of Buber's translation is that he has let the text speak to us again.

One of the most important things one can teach any student is to read—to read not merely after the fashion of the world but with mind, heart, and soul. Torczyner's Bible has been available in a single volume since 1937, while Buber's Bible was first published book by book, volume by volume, and then, still incomplete, collected in three imposing tomes. Only in the 1950s these were replaced by three pleasant thin-paper volumes, and the fourth and last volume appeared in 1962. So far, Torczyner's edition is far handier; and it is debatable which is preferable. But it was Buber's epic struggle with the text and with the public, first jointly with Franz Rosenzweig, and later alone, that has taught thousands of young men to read—first, the Bible, and then other books, too.

My own translations are unthinkable without Buber and Rosenzweig. When I translated four of Nietzsche's books—*Zarathustra*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *Antichrist*, and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*—as well as selections from his other works, his letters, and his notes, for a one-volume edition in The Viking Portable Library, I referred to Buber and Rosenzweig and tried to explain why it was essential to be faithful to Nietzsche's stylistic peculiarities, why his terms must be rendered consistently by the same words, and how full his works are of allusions both to his own previous works and to various classics, above all the Bible. Any failure to capture a pun, however indifferent, in translation, creates the false presumption that the author said in all seriousness what but for the pun he might never have said that way. (pp. 3-6, 107-110)

Translating several of Leo Baeck's essays at the same time, I must not let Baeck sound like Nietzsche, or Nietzsche like Baeck, or either of them like myself. Baeck's peculiar and difficult style had to be re-created. And the same was true a few years later when I published *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* and translated Nietzsche, Rilke, and Heidegger. Heidegger must not sound like Nietzsche or Rilke, or, worse, Rilke like Heidegger.

Heidegger has the ambition to teach people how to read, but in many younger men he has encouraged a lack of respect for philological correctness, a penchant for an almost comic jargon, and a flair for the obscure—even an outright contempt for the whole plane of correctness. From Buber, on the other hand, one *can* learn how to read.

Heidegger—even more than Jaspers—disregards the context and prefers pliant fragments and notes. Interpretation becomes a device for having his own say, and the text a mere means. In Heidegger's readings there is no Thou.

Buber is always alive to the context—not only the immediate context: when he considers a Biblical sentence, the whole of the Hebrew Bible is the context. He is always struggling to hear the voice of the Thou. And he teaches a deep reverence for the voice that addresses us, and the patient resolve to listen and to let oneself be addressed. Few men could possibly teach anything of equal significance.

V

Buber and Hasidism. Buber's work on the Hasidim, including his collection of their lore, is probably more impressive for those of us who have no first-hand knowledge of Hasidism than it is either for the specialist scholar or for those who know it from their childhood. Here more than anywhere else the question arises to what extent Buber has projected himself into his subject matter: is he allowing Hasidism to speak to us, or is it he himself that is speaking?

Clearly, it is not a case in which the author makes the men about whom he writes mouthpieces of his own ideas. His own ideas were changed in the course of his concern with the Hasidim, and what we hear as we read is what Buber heard. Others, before him, did not hear it just like that. But he himself had not heard it just like

that either until he came to listen to the Hasidim. He tells us what he heard, not what he had to say all along.

If you compare Buber's *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim* with Chagall's *Illustrations for the Bible*, you find two different worlds. Chagall's etchings and lithographs mirror a world of fantasy, magic, and ecstasy—closer to the Greek Orthodox church than to the Protestant, almost Puritan, simplicity and moral emphasis of Buber's tales of the Hasidim.

Soon after the death of Rabbi Mosheh of Kobryn, one of his students was asked by the 'old Kozker,' Rabbi Mendel: 'What did your teacher consider most important?' He reflected and gave his answer: 'Whatever he was doing at the moment.' (647)

Rabbi Mosheh Loeb related: How one should love men I have learned from a peasant. He sat in an inn with some other peasants, drinking. A long time he was silent like the rest, but when his heart was moved by the wine, he spoke to his neighbor: 'Tell me: do you love me or don't you?' And he replied: 'I love you very much.' But the first peasant answered: 'You say: I love you; and yet you do not know what hurts me. If you loved me in truth, you would know.' The other man could not say a word, and the peasant who had asked the question relapsed into silence, too. But I understood: that is love of men, to sense their wants and to bear their grief.(533)

Stories like these are definitive in their simplicity. That Buber did not make them up is clear. Similar ideas can be found elsewhere in the religious literature of the world. But it is the form that makes these stories, and hundreds like them, definitive. It was Buber who cut these diamonds. The fact that he did not add anything does not mean that he gave us what he found: he achieved perfection by cutting.

Rabbi Bunam once said: "Yes, I can bring all sinners to the point of return—except liars." (751)

There is courage in setting down a dictum like that, letting it stand alone. Surely, Buber was influenced, whether consciously or not, by Nietzsche's aphoristic style. He abandoned the non-functional opulence of the Victorian era and dared to end a story at the right point. Such courage is rare, not only among our contemporaries but even in the sacred books of the world. Luke, for example, generally makes up stories to frame sayings which in Matthew lack any such setting.

Consider the story of the anointing at Bethany which is found in all four Gospels. The four evangelists understand it very differently, and David Daube has discussed their diverse treatments in a very

illuminating section of his book on *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*.

Both Mark and John take care to point out that the burial rite of anointing was performed. For Mark, it was performed at Bethany—by virtue of a fiction—and nothing was done after Jesus' death. For John, Jesus' body was actually anointed after his death, and the action at Bethany is not represented as performance of the rite. (314)

Daube shows how Matthew follows Mark and is demonstrably much more comfortable with this solution than Mark was. But what concerns me here is a dictum for which Luke finds a place in this story—a dictum which Daube does not discuss: "her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much." (7.47)

These striking words are found nowhere else in the New Testament. If we assume that Jesus actually spoke them on this occasion, that amounts to a serious indictment of the other three evangelists who have put into their master's mouth so many unlovely sayings while suppressing words like these. If we assume that Luke invented these words or—as is much more likely—that they formed part of an oral tradition but lacked any context, and that he worked these words into the present story, then we must go on to ask how effectively he did this. Unless, in other words, we assume that he told the story as it actually happened while the other three distorted the story seriously, we must admit that Luke's story represents his own particular way of blending and shaping various traditions. Among these is a gem: what does he do with it?

Looked at critically in this perspective, Luke's story will satisfy few readers. The immediately preceding reproof which is not found in the other three Gospels and the immediately following words—"but he who is forgiven little, loves little"—greatly weaken the central dictum. And the two following verses detract still further from the weight of the word of love.

This approach may seem excessively subjective; but it is a historic fact that the words "her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much," and a few others like them, have long shaken off the shackles of their context and have gone far toward creating an image of Jesus and Christianity which is quite at variance with the full text of each of the four Gospels. In *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim* Buber presents gem upon gem without mounting each in a setting of inferior quality. Buber's stories cannot be improved by

cutting. That is more than one can say of the art of any of the four evangelists.

The obvious objection to Buber is that he gives us too glowing a picture of Hasidism. The opponents of the movement, the Mitnaggdim, had some reasons on their side: miracles and magic, superstitions and authoritarianism were present in Hasidism from the start. As a historian, Buber is by no means above criticism.

The reply to such criticisms is implicit in the comparison with the Gospels which, no doubt, will strike some readers as blasphemous. What saves Buber's work is its perfection. He has given us one of the great religious books of all time, a work that invites comparison with the great Scriptures of mankind. This estimate must seem fantastic to those who have not read *The Tales of the Hasidim*. But if it should be justified, then the criticism that Buber is not an impartial historian can be accepted cheerfully without being considered very damning.

We can read the Book of Genesis and the discourses of the Buddha as reports of "how it actually happened," to cite Ranke's words, or we can read them as religious literature. The question of historical accuracy is always worth raising, and a detailed answer is both interesting and important. But the rank of these works does not depend on their positivistic accuracy but on their profundity. And that is true also of *The Tales of the Hasidim*.

Buber's collection resembles the great religious Scriptures in drawing on a living religious tradition, in selecting, in giving form. Sacred Scriptures are not so much written as they grow. Buber's collection has grown out of his own long dialogue with a tradition, and it loses none of its initial impressiveness after one has lived with it for a generation. Here the adolescent can find voices that speak to him, answer him, and help him to form his notions of the meaning of religion. A growing skepticism does not mute these voices or destroy this meaning. Here is religion that stands up to philosophic questions as the sophisticated discourses of theologians don't.

There are whole books on prayer which make less sense than these few lines:

Rabbi Shneur Zalman once asked his son: 'With what do you pray?' The son understood the meaning of the question: on what he concentrated, on what he based his prayer. He replied: 'The verse: May every height bow down before thee.' Then he asked his father: 'And with what do you pray?' He said: 'With the floor and with the bench.'(418)

The Kozker shouted at some of his Hasidim: 'What is this chatter about praying seriously? What do they mean: praying seriously?' They did not understand him. So he said: 'Is there anything that one should do without seriousness?' (791)

One may safely agree with Hermann Hesse that Buber, "like no other living author, has enriched world literature with a genuine treasure." (*Briefe*, January 1950) Although Hesse has won the Nobel Prize, his great novels are hardly known in the English-speaking world—partly for the same reasons which account for the comparative neglect of Buber's great collection of Hasidic lore: the lack of translations which equal the perfection of the originals and above all the present lack in the English-speaking world of any wide-spread sense for the kind of religion which has found expression in Buber's stories or in Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

In the United States, *intense* religion tends to be either revivalist or theological. The pseudo-religion of the bestsellers and the most popular magazines, which finds its place between stories of wise animals and miracle drugs, reports on the latest gadgets and cosmetics, and whatever is of human interest and wholesome for the family, need not detain us here. Serious religion that produces crises in men's lives, converts men, and profoundly influences them is best represented in America by Reinhold Niebuhr and by Billy Graham: Graham is the poor man's Niebuhr and speaks to the hearts of those who cannot afford ten-dollar words. Niebuhr, in spite of his years as a preacher in Detroit, speaks mainly to the intellectuals and offers them a Christian version of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and all the latest intellectual developments.

There is no revivalism and no theology in Buber's Hasidic lore. And for the still small voice of this religion which speaks to the emotions without rhetoric and to the mind without any imposing jargon, there are few ears in the English-speaking world.

That there will ever be a very large audience to hear Buber's Hasidim with an open heart is unlikely; but, before long, these stories will, no doubt, become part of the repertoire of educated people who have now begun to read selections from the Buddha's speeches and the Upanishads, and a free version of the Bhagavadgita, in huge popular editions. And these stories will surely be remembered widely when the theologians of our time have gone the way of Harnack and Schleiermacher, not to mention lesser names that have long been forgotten by all but specialists.

VI

I and Thou. In the United States, Buber is best known for a small book that has profoundly influenced Protestant theology. In German it was *Ich und Du*, and one could read quite far without being aware that Buber was concerned with religion: indeed, the point of the book was partly to break down the division between the everyday world and religion. Eventually, God is found *in* the everyday world, in the *Du*, in a primary relation paralleled in the relation *Between Man and Man*, to cite the English title of the sequel.

Buber himself considers the English title *I and Thou* inevitable. Partly, this is surely due to the fact that men with a German background feel more at home with Thou and Thee and Thy than Americans. By now the Revised Standard Version has all but purged the Bible of these words. It is also relevant that the child says You and not Thou. But what matters here is not a positive suggestion about a point of translation; rather, two serious pitfalls due to the translation *I and Thou*.

The first is that the phrase suggests the holy tone which just Buber has done so much to eliminate from religion. We are immediately put on our guard.

The second pitfall is exactly paralleled by the reception in the English-speaking world of a book that appeared in the same year, 1923: *Das Ich und das Es* by Sigmund Freud. Surely, this should have been translated as *The I and the It*; but the translator chose *The Ego and the Id*. And *das Über-ich* became the super-ego. A jargon developed and obscured the work of Freud. And a jargon developed and obscured the thought of Buber.

People began to talk of "the I-Thou relationship" and "the I-Thou" as they talk of "original sin" and the "natural man"—as if Buber's achievement had not been in part that he had managed to bring religion to life without the dubious benefit of an abstract terminology about whose meaning one is not completely sure. Buber had taken his stand not on concepts like "revelation" and "redemption" or even "God" but had started from an elementary experience about which no skeptic need have any qualms.

Most important, Buber had not just talked *about* it. Even as Freud had developed the major body of his work with its profound originality without the benefit of any Id or Ego, and then, more or less in retrospect, inquired whether one could summarize and syste-

matize his results in terms of a few simple vivid concepts with which his findings neither stand nor fall, so Buber, mid-way in his work on the Hasidim, tried to state a central theme in *Ich und Du*. What he meant is not only developed in his later writings on the dialogical principle, but also in his work on the Hasidim and his translation of the Hebrew Bible.

How Buber has taught us to read can be summarized by saying that he impressed on us that the text must not be treated as a mere It; the text must become a Thou. But any jargon tends to falsify. We must learn to listen and let the text speak to us, instead of resting content with manipulating it or carving it up as the Higher Critics did.

If one approaches *I and Thou* as a philosophic essay, trying to reconstruct an argument and testing that, it is not hard to criticize the book. But if instead of examining the book as an object, an It, we open our hearts to it to hear what it has to say to us, we are confronted with a crucial question: if God is to mean something to us, can it be anything but what Buber suggests in this little book, namely *das ewige Du* (the eternal Thou)? All superstitions about God, all talk about him, all theology is sacrificed to the voice that speaks to us, the *Du* to which some cry out "when," as Goethe says, "man in his agony grows mute." And not only in agony.

Any formulation is disturbing; but has there ever been a better one than "the eternal Thou" (or You)? How meaningless compared to it are the "being-itself" and even "the ground of being" of Paul Tillich! The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel was not "being-itself"; nor was it "the ground of being" that told Abraham to leave his father's house or that commanded men "You shall be holy; for I, the Lord your God am holy" or to whom the Psalmist and, according to two of the evangelists, Jesus, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If we do not take such a phrase as "the eternal Thou" for a concept, but rather understand what it tries to say plainly, it is probably the most illuminating suggestion about the meaning of "God" ever ventured.

VII

Summary. Buber's current success in the United States is deceptive. One is conscious of his stature, one pays tribute to him, but few have ears for what Buber is saying. One attributes to him an anthropology and a theology, an ethic and epistemology, seeks "principles"

of Biblical faith from him, and is a little irritated by the lack of systematic content, of clearly formulated principles, and by his excessively personal interpretations.

The Jews are proud of him and do not give full vent to their irritation, and the Christians, almost hungry for a venerable Jewish figure to whom they can show their respect, their freedom from prejudice, and their horror of the wrongs done to his people, also suppress their exasperation. Moreover, it is not fashionable to criticize religious figures. But Buber's judgments about New Testament questions are annoying to most Jews and Christians: some Jews find him not Jewish enough, while many young Jewish intellectuals are sufficiently under the influence of modern Protestant theology to question him from a curiously Christian point of view.

Buber stands in an essentially Jewish tradition, and his religion, which is opposed alike to rationalism, mysticism, and theology, is clearly continuous with central elements in the thought of the prophets, of Akiba and Maimonides, of the Hasidim, Hermann Cohen, and Leo Baeck. He speaks for himself, but he is by no means a marginal phenomenon of Judaism.

Even during World War I, at a time when baptism was no longer rare among German Jews and assimilation accepted as a goal by most of the unbaptized, too, Buber published a periodical he called *Der Jude*. Who has the right to say of him today, as some Protestants do, that he is really not a Jew? On the other hand, if some Christians consider him "the" representative spokesman for Judaism, one can only say that his present lack of rivals is not his fault.

Any such over-all estimate of a man's significance is necessarily controversial. Others are bound to see him differently—but the present attempt may help them to arrive at their own estimate. Alas, Buber may well see himself differently in many ways. If so, it may be of some interest to readers of this volume to find out not only how Buber answers specific criticisms by the other contributors to this volume but also where precisely he is displeased with this attempt at an integrated picture. Corrections of specific errors are always worthwhile—but it would also be interesting to have Buber's response to the way in which I have placed accents, light, and shade.

Buber tells of the Hasid who, asked what impressed him most about some Zaddik, said: how he tied his shoes. One gathers that this Zaddik, like another one I have mentioned, considered most important whatever he happened to be doing. Another Hasid might

have been most impressed with the way the Zaddik did some other little or big thing.

What impresses me most about Buber is the way he answers questions, the way he goes about translating the Bible, the way he has opened up to us the world of the Hasidim, fashioning one of the great religious books of all time out of their lore, and the pervasive concern not with theories but with the living *Du*.

Little is gained by calling Buber an existentialist and by lumping him with men with whom he disagrees as much as he does with Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre. But if we find the heart of existentialism in the protest against systems, concepts, and abstractions, coupled with a resolve to remain faithful to concrete experience and above all to the challenge of human existence—should we not find in that case that Kierkegaard and Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre had all betrayed their own central resolve? That they had all become enmeshed in sticky webs of dialectic that impede communication? that the high abstractness of their idiom and their strange addiction to outlandish concepts far surpassed the same faults in Descartes or Plato? that not one of them was able any more to listen to the challenge of another human reality as it has found expression in a text? and that their writings have, without exception, become monologues?

One might well conclude that in reality there is only one existentialist, and he is no existentialist but Martin Buber.

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