

Martin Buber

Of His Failures & Triumph—By WALTER KAUFMANN

MARTIN BUBER'S many-sidedness distinguished him even in his own time. In 1978, on the hundredth anniversary of his birth, such variety had become an outright anomaly. Specialisation has grown rapidly during the 20th century, especially since the Second World War. No religious writer today invites comparison with Martin Buber—no Jew, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim. We may feel that religion and perhaps also philosophy are the poorer for that; or we may wonder whether there are not good reasons for the increase in specialisation; or both. In any case, to gain an understanding of Buber, we should recall not only particular themes in his work but also the whole man.

When Buber was in his eighties, he collected his works in three volumes, devoting each volume to one of his central concerns. In the first volume he collected his writings on philosophy, in the second his writings on the Bible, and in the last his writings on Hasidism. Simultaneously, another publisher brought out, also in German, his essays and lectures on *Der Jude und sein Judentum* ("The Jew and His Judaism"). Even these four tomes do not represent the whole of his work. We must add to them the four volumes that contain his German translation of the Hebrew Bible.

His major writings, then, by which he wished to be remembered can be found in eight volumes which span five major concerns. Yet we must add a sixth dimension, for Buber was not only a writer but also a teacher, and what was best in his teaching was not necessarily the content of his lectures that survives in print. He was, at least part of the time, a charismatic teacher who impressed his listeners profoundly during informal sessions and during the discussions that sometimes followed his lectures. On such occasions the point was less to communicate knowledge than it was to change the participants in the dialogue.

At the very least, then, we must distinguish six major endeavours: translating the Bible, writing about the Bible, about Hasidism, about Jewishness and Zionism, philosophy, and dialogical teaching.

But it would be better to add a seventh project. Even as we must distinguish Buber's translation of the Bible from his more or less scholarly writings about the Bible, we should also distinguish Buber's more or less scholarly writings about the Hasidim from his one-volume collection of their tales and his novel *Gog and Magog* (1949).

HIS MANY-SIDEDNESS should be plain by now. Buber confronts us with an imposing and multi-dimensional achievement that has won him countless admirers. If one is satisfied with what Kierkegaard called the aesthetic orientation—that is, if one is content to pay homage to what is profound and beautiful, but *ganz unverbindlich*, without incurring any obligation, merely as a spectator who enjoys a diversion applauds, and goes home—then one has an easy time of it. There is much in Buber that is profound and beautiful, and it is a pleasure to express one's gratitude for that. But Buber presumably did not write or teach in order to win gratitude or appreciation. A serious author and teacher is no mere entertainer; his aim transcends applause; he wants to make an enduring difference. To be appreciated is child's play compared to that.

We must ask to what extent Buber succeeded in what he tried to do. This is an uncomfortable question and therefore mostly avoided. It brings us face to face with Buber's failures.

WE SHOULD FACE UP to them to learn something not only about Buber but also about success and failure and what it means to be human. The failures that concern us here are not mistakes; it is not as if Buber had taken examinations and failed them. The most devastating failures in life are different. We set our own goals, and those who aim low enough often succeed; those who aim at applause often get it; those who aim to win riches often do. Buber's goals were exceptionally ambitious. Even taken

singly, his aims were extraordinarily high, making success unlikely from the beginning. But Buber did not confine himself to one or two of these aims. I have distinguished seven major endeavours and I want to consider them one by one, not in a censorious spirit but recalling the splendid line in Goethe's *Faust*:

Den lieb ich, der unmögliches begehrt.
(I love him who desires the impossible.)

IN ALL OF his seven major endeavours Buber accomplished a great deal and came nowhere near total failure. Consider his Bible translation. The first volume appeared in 1926; by 1933 there were twelve volumes, and when Buber left Germany in 1938, fifteen. For almost two decades this was probably his most quixotic undertaking. It tells us a great deal about the state of German Jewry in the 1930s that Buber's continued work on his German translation was not considered grotesque. The strange style that Buber (and Franz Rosenzweig) developed for this project was criticised, and many people preferred Torczyner's version, which also appeared in Germany in the 1930s. But the need for a new German Bible was felt intensely at that time. Thousands of Jews in Germany went back to reading the Bible and did not know Hebrew enough to study it in the original; and many turned to Buber's version.

When the War ended, scarcely any Jews were left in Germany, and Buber might have written off this undertaking as a noble failure. Yet a German publisher asked him to finish the project, and Buber began by revising what he had done years ago, before he completed the remaining books, and the whole translation was finally finished in 1962, almost forty years after it was begun. During his last years Buber kept revising his German Bible, enabling his son to publish in 1976 the ninth edition, again revised and improved, of the new edition of 1954 of Buber's German *Torah*, and the fourth revised edition of the new edition of 1962 of the *Schriftwerke (Ktuvim)*. Obviously there is a market though it does not consist of the readers whom Buber and Rosenzweig had had in mind when they started "*In the beginning*." The culture that this translation was meant to change has perished. In an important sense this undertaking was a tragic failure.

The German Jews who survived the War are widely scattered. Few of those living in Israel read the Bible in German, and of those who went elsewhere some no longer read the Bible at all while others no longer have enough German to wrestle with Buber's version which was never meant to be read without effort. It was meant to be studied by people who wished to "learn Bible" (and I still recall Buber talking about "*Bibel lernen*" in 1934).

I do not know *who* reads Buber's version in Germany in the 1970s, or *how* it is read. That it keeps being read is surely a triumph.

Buber's way of translating, which owes a great deal to Rosenzweig, has many roots in Germany and invites comparison with Rudolf Borchardt, whose translations have had even less influence, and with Martin Heidegger, whose versions of the Greek materials he quotes have found many imitators among German academics. But all such comparisons only redound to Buber's credit. While Heidegger insisted that an interpreter must use "violence" and made a practice of ripping short texts from their context, Buber paid more attention to the context than previous translators and tried to teach respect for the distinctive voice of the original. Far from concentrating merely on fragmentary quotations, like Heidegger, Buber always felt a responsibility to the Hebrew Bible as a whole. He insisted that we must ask where else a word occurs. Though there may be few who have learned from this approach to translation, I am one of them and am glad to acknowledge my debt to Buber and Rosenzweig.

Buber's way has not prevailed. Publishers still press translators to give them easily readable versions that are idiomatic, and any profound concern for the original voice is equally rare in prose and in poetry. While I often prefer other versions to Buber's, it was Buber who taught me to listen for the original voice; and if he failed to impress this lesson on many others, I cannot help feeling that it was better to stand for noble principles than to adopt a more popular position and have more influence.

BUBER'S WRITINGS *about* the Bible present a similar picture. His books on the kingship of God, Moses, and the faith of the prophets have not become standard works and have not succeeded in redirecting Biblical scholarship. Scholars have largely ignored his Biblical studies, which are considered excessively impressionistic and personal. Yet much that was more highly regarded when Buber's studies appeared has by now been forgotten. Buber remains.

BUBER ON "The Jew and his Judaism" can be seen as another failure. He was one of the leading Zionists of his time but stayed in Germany until 1938; and when he finally went to Palestine he never gained anything like the influence that he had had on the German Jews in the 1930s. In Palestine he was—and in Israel he remained—a marginal figure. Yet the writings in which he developed concepts of Zionism and of Judaism different from the more widely accepted ones still confront us. Some

of the Hebrew prophets were failures, too; but their writings still haunt humanity.

Success is no proof of virtue, nor is failure. But we come nowhere near an understanding of Buber if we ignore the brute fact of his repeated failures. The Judaism and the Zionism that he espoused have not gained wide acceptance. The culture that has developed and the policies that are espoused in Israel today are not what Buber had hoped for.

One might have thought that as a teacher Buber must have had a great impact. It is surprising how little he changed most of the listeners who sat at his feet in Germany, Israel, and the United States. Of course, he did make a profound difference in the lives of a few, but it is sad how few eminent men and women were changed by being his students. Was Buber's insistence on personal contact misguided? Can even a charismatic teacher accomplish little in person?

Counter-examples abound. Some charismatic teachers have had many followers who became teachers in their own right and wrote books. Ludwig Wittgenstein did, for example, but as one talks to people who knew him one gains the impression that he may have considered his disciples proof of his failure. Nor did Buber envy Martin Heidegger his followers.

It may be objected that one can teach a method, which is true. Freud certainly did; yet he said to Binswanger, who came from Switzerland to visit him and attended one of the evening sessions of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society: "*So, haben Sie jetzt diese Bande gesehen! (Well, have you seen these gangsters now?)*".¹

Craftsmen can teach many students their craft. Teachers whose stature is inseparable from their individuality will often have a wide appeal but cannot hope to turn out many students who have much in common with them. Followers of widely different teachers usually have more in common with each other than they do with their masters.² And if the disciples emulate their master and he retains his integrity, he will probably feel as Freud did.

Buber's failure as a teacher is poignant but not accidental; it is a corollary of the kind of man he was. And it may remind us that no major modern philosopher could point to students he had taught

as some measure of his success. The greatest philosophers from Descartes to Hume did not teach philosophy. Kant was the first great philosopher of modern times who was also a professor, and he taught only one student who became a major figure: Herder. But when Herder published a major philosophical work, Kant reviewed it disparagingly,³ and later on Herder published a two-volume attack on Kant.⁴ Hegel had some remarkable students, but those who became philosophers in their own right, like Ludwig Feuerbach, did not remain Hegelians. Some of Schelling's lectures in Berlin were attended by Engels, Bakunin, and Kierkegaard, but he would surely have felt dismayed by all of them.

In sum, no great philosopher of modern times was a successful teacher in the sense that he turned out disciples who carried on and developed his work. But whether Buber was a great philosopher is, of course, another question.

BUBER CONFRONTS posterity as, above all, a philosopher. The most important book about him bears the title *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*;⁵ he himself contributed to it. And most people would say, if asked to identify him, that he was a Jewish philosopher. He himself considered *I and Thou* his most important book, and he saw it as his contribution to philosophy.

In some ways *I and Thou* has been a great success. Tens of thousands of students still read it year after year in the USA alone, and philosophers keep writing articles and books about it. The books differ widely but have one thing in common: all are many times as long as *I and Thou*. To be sure, interest in Buber's *I and Thou* is not confined to philosophers and philosophy students. The first English version of the book was the work of a Christian clergyman, and it has long enjoyed a marked popularity among Protestant theologians.

We have finally reached a drastic reversal. In the areas where Buber failed to have as wide an impact as he might have wished we could say that this may actually be to his credit. Conversely, the relative popularity of *I and Thou* is not necessarily to its credit. It is a flawed work and owes its success not least to its timely failings.

The most obvious of these is the style, which is affected rather than ruthlessly honest. To compare it with *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran, which was published the very same year (1923) and has enjoyed an enormous success, might be too unkind; but both books are influenced by the pose of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* without remotely approaching its riches or its irony. Authenticity is not everything, and the very category of authenticity is simplistic. Nietzsche, for example, used masks and knew and said that he did. But the inauthenticity of

¹ Ludwig Binswanger, *Erinnerungen an Sigmund Freud* (1956), p. 13.

² See §21, "Followers", in Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (1958).

³ *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (4 vols, 1784-91). Kant reviewed volume 1 in *Jenaische Allgemeine Literaturzeitung* (4 January 1785).

⁴ *Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1799).

⁵ Ed. P. A. Schilpp and M. Friedman (LaSalle, Ill., 1967).

Buber's *I and Thou* is a serious flaw in a book that is simplistic. We are confronted by a pose without any redeeming wit or irony; it approximates the oracular tone of false prophets.

It is not fashionable to pay attention to style in philosophy, but as long as we do not we cannot fully understand a philosopher. Kant or Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger in another style would no longer be the same men. For better or worse, their philosophy and their language belong together. Those who think of philosophy as a science may wish to deny this, but Buber himself never considered language as merely accidental and external but attached immense importance to it.⁶ Hence the note of falseness in *I and Thou* cannot be discounted; it is a warning sign.

Discussing *I and Thou* in his "Replies to My Critics" at the end of *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, he claimed to have written the book

"under the spell of an irresistible enthusiasm. And the inspiration of such enthusiasm one may not change any more, not even for the sake of exactness. For one can only estimate what one would gain, but not what would be lost."⁷

Although Nietzsche had not paused to revise his *Zarathustra*, he did revise his other books before publication. On 8 December 1888, less than a month before his final breakdown, Nietzsche wrote Peter Gast that he had returned the manuscript of *Ecce Homo* to the publisher "the day before yesterday after laying it once more on the gold scales from the first to the last word to set my conscience finally at rest."⁸ Such scrupulous weighing of every word was not in fashion in 1923 when *I and Thou* first appeared. Nor was the point Nietzsche made in section 319 of *The Gay Science* popular:⁹

"One sort of honesty has been alien to all founders of religions and their kind: They have never made their experiences a matter of conscience for knowledge, 'What did I really experience? What happened in me and around me at that time? Was my reason bright enough . . . ' But we, we others who thirst after reason, are determined to scrutinise our experiences as severely as a scientific experiment—hour after hour, day after day. We ourselves wish to be our experiments and guinea pigs."

⁶ See, e.g., *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (1936), p. 137: "As if a genuine message . . . contained a What that could be detached without any damage from its How; as if the spirit of a speech could be discovered anywhere else than in its linguistic body . . ."

⁷ P. 706; p. 604 of the German ed.; my translation.

⁸ See W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche* (4th ed., 1974), p. 435.

⁹ Translated, with Commentary, by Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1974).

¹⁰ Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot* (1937).

It was also in 1923 that Rilke published both his *Duino Elegies* and his *Sonnets to Orpheus*. In a letter from Muzot (11 February 1922) he claimed that both had been written "in a few days, it was a nameless gale, a hurricane in the mind."¹⁰ There was much in these volumes that belongs with the best verse ever written in German; and yet, as any reader of Rilke's letters knows even if it goes unnoticed in Rilke's poetry, he was addicted to poses, and one often encounters a disturbing note of falseness in his letters.

In Heidegger, who wrote *Being and Time* in the 1920s, this falseness is more pronounced and took a different, much more scholastic but no less oracular form. Walter Benjamin's affectations and obscurantism were different again but equally palpable. We should reject the claim that "the inspiration of such enthusiasm one may not change any more, not even for the sake of exactness . . ." Even in poetry that is not true, and in philosophy it is quite unacceptable. Goethe kept revising the products of his inspiration, including the original versions of his *Iphigenie* and *Faust*, and did not even take pains to preserve the text of the *Urfaust*, which was discovered only in 1887 in a copy made by someone else. It is arguable that in places the *Urfaust* is preferable to the final version, but a truly inspired writer will not shrink from the experiment of rewriting and will try to see what can be improved, unless the first draft seems more or less perfect. Those who keep having intuitions, hunches, and inspirations can afford to be ruthless with themselves, while the writer who has been under the spell of an irresistible enthusiasm only once will naturally guard its fruit more anxiously.

WAS, THEN, *I and Thou* more or less perfect? Is it credible that the reason for not changing anything was that it could have been changed only for the worse? Surely, the central dichotomy of the book did not bear close examination. Buber refused to go over his text critically, feeling, if only dimly, that genuine self-criticism might have required him to abandon the central idea.

It is not true—and this is the crux of my criticism—that a genuine relationship to another human being can be achieved only in brief encounters from which we must always relapse into states in which the other human being becomes for us merely an object of experience and use. If one takes this dichotomy seriously and identifies with the person who championed it instead of treating it scholastically, one realises that it reveals a deep existential malaise both in the writer and in the young people who clasp his book to their bosoms. In Buber's case one can scarcely resist the surmise that he was permanently damaged by his mother's abandonment of him when he was a small child.

My relationship to students who come to ask me

something—and to other partners in a conversation, whether a man or woman in a store or Ernst Simon or Gershom Scholem—is not punctuated by brief moments of genuine encounter. Neither—and this is crucial—do I confront them as mere objects of experience or use. Precisely if they matter much to me, I also find myself reflecting *about* them, sometimes in an effort to understand better how they feel and think. Such thoughts are not a fall from grace, a relapse into inauthenticity, or a betrayal to be atoned for only in another ecstasy.

Some of the photographs which I have published may help to show what I mean.¹¹ When I photograph a person—and most of my photographs of people are of poor men, women, and children whose names I do not know—they become objects of experience for me, but most certainly not merely objects. The ethos of the photographs is to reveal the “You.”

Think of some of the most eloquent Rembrandt portraits, like that of his mother in Vienna or that of his father in Boston, the two of Margaretha Trip in London, or the Woman Holding a Carnation in New York, and ask whether the following passage from *I and Thou* stands up.¹² These paragraphs summarise what is said repeatedly elsewhere:

“This, however, is the sublime melancholy of our lot that every You must become an It in our world. However exclusively present it may have been in the direct relationship—as soon as the relationship has run its course or is permeated by *means*, the You becomes an object among objects, possibly the noblest one and yet one of them, assigned its measure and boundary. The actualisation of the work involves a loss of actuality. Genuine contemplation never lasts long; the natural being that only now revealed itself to me in the mystery of reciprocity has again become describable, analysable, classifiable—the point at which manifold systems of laws intersect. And even love cannot persist in direct relation; it endures, but only in the alternation of actuality and latency. The human being who but now was unique and devoid of qualities, not at hand but only present, not experienceable, only touchable, has again become a He or She, an aggregate of qualities, a quantum with a shape. Now I can again abstract from him the color of his hair, of his speech, of his graciousness; but as long as I can do that he is my You no longer and not yet again.

Every You in the world is doomed by its

nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again. In the language of objects: every thing in the world can—either before or after it becomes a thing—appear to some I as its You. But the language of objects catches only one corner of actual life.

The It is the chrysalis, the You the butterfly. Only it is not always as if these states took turns so neatly; often it is an intricately entangled series of events that is tortuously dual.”

To be painted or photographed, “You must become an It in our world”, and the portrait is, of course, “an object among objects.” But does seeing the portrait involve a fall into the realm of the “describable, analysable, classifiable” and a loss of the “You”? Is a “He” or “She” necessarily an “It”, that is “an aggregate of qualities, a quantum with a shape”? On the contrary, I can look at a portrait of an old man or woman, mindful that this human being is old, and feel addressed by him or her, knowing that this is a “He” or a “She” while not at all admitting that “Every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing.”

To be sure, Buber himself says that “every thing in the world can . . . appear to some I as its You”, and this obviously includes portraits as well as van Gogh’s paintings of flowers and trees. But the painter does not lapse from the genuine I-You relationship into a deplorable attitude in which he notes the colour of the hair or other qualities, reducing the You to a mere It. On the contrary, he must pay some attention to qualities and details to reveal the You on the canvas. It is not “the sublime melancholy of our lot” that we cannot help thinking about the You that confronts us. Those who refuse to do this live in illusions and cultivate a relationship to an idol instead of truly confronting a You.

THERE IS A Manichaeian strain in *I and Thou* that is unworthy of Buber, and he himself might have eliminated it if he had been more severe with the child of his inspiration. His faults here are of one piece. In line with his Manichaeian denigration of the I-It and his unduly romantic and ecstatic notion of the I-Thou, he refused to treat his brainchild as a good painter treats one of his paintings or as Goethe treated his poetry (even *Faust*), subjecting it to rigorous criticism until it becomes the better for that. Buber mistook intense emotion for revelation and did not realise how much rational reflection is needed if we really want to encounter the You rather than an illusion.

If ever a great artist worked under the spell of ecstasy and inspiration, it was Vincent van Gogh. Of his high emotional tension and total, self-sacrificing devotion there can be no doubt, yet his copious letters show how far he was from regarding the fruits of his inspiration as sacrosanct. Even

¹¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Religions in Four Dimensions* (New York, 1976); also the trilogy *Man’s Lot* (New York, 1978), especially the third part, *What is Man?*

¹² Buber, *I and Thou* (a New Translation with a Prologue “I and You” and Notes by W. Kaufmann, (1970), p. 68f.

when committed to an asylum, he never lost or disparaged his critical powers. He discussed his paintings as well as his situation with a rarely equalled lucidity that furnishes a really startling contrast to Buber. Freud's and Kafka's letters are equally free of falseness, pretence, and murkiness.

All three men—van Gogh, Kafka, and Freud—were distinguished by a capacity for detachment from themselves so as to see themselves from above.

It is really not surprising that Rilke liked Buber's books while Freud and Kafka did not; but the vehemence of Kafka's dislike is astonishing. In January 1918 he wrote Max Brod what he thought of

"Buber's last books. Revolting, repulsive [*Abscheuliche, widerwärtige*] books, all three of them."¹³

Yet only three days after Kafka had written his friend, Felice, on 16 January 1913, that he had heard Buber lecture and "he makes a dreary impression on me; everything he says lacks something", Kafka wrote to her: "Yesterday I also spoke with Buber, who is in person fresh and simple and remarkable [*bedeutend*] and seems to have nothing to do with the lukewarm things he has written."¹⁴ But this did not change his view of Buber's books, and only a day or two later he wrote Felice that he found Buber's reworking of the tales of Rabbi Nachman (1906) and the Baalshem (1908) "insufferable."

Many others, including Gershom Scholem who described much the same ambivalence in his autobiographical book, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem* (Frankfurt, 1977), felt that in person, though not necessarily when he was lecturing, Buber was truly impressive, but that the tone of some of his writings was affected and not genuine. His later treatment of Hasidic materials was very different from his first two efforts, but in *Ich und Du* his affectation was, I think, especially disturbing. My fundamental criticism, however, does not concern Buber's style but his claim that

¹³ Franz Kafka, *Briefe 1902–1924* (1958), p. 224.

¹⁴ Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* (1967), pp. 252ff. Cf. Kafka's letter to Buber, 29 November, 1915. In Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten* (ed. Grete Schaeder, vol. I, 1972), he fondly recalls the afternoon he spent with Buber almost two years before—"in every respect the purest memory I retain of Berlin, and it has often been a kind of refuge for me."

¹⁵ T. W. Adorno, *Der Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (1964), *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1973).

¹⁶ Grete Schaeder, *Briefwechsel*, vol. II.

¹⁷ Buber's outline of the five-volume project was first published in facsimile and English translation in my version of *I and Thou* (1970), pp. 49f. Cf. Schaeder, vol. I (1972), p. 73. Yet Buber's admirers have for the most part ignored the fact that *I and Thou* was the first volume of a work Buber abandoned.

"Every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again."

This unacceptable claim was meant to prepare the ground for the eternal You or God of whom Buber said in the last part of the book

"Only one You never ceases, in accordance with its nature to be You for us."

I HESITATE TO COMPARE Buber with other philosophers because he so clearly differed from them. But something needs to be said in his defence. In the 1920s when "authenticity" became a watchword in philosophy, authenticity actually declined. One might suppose that it declined first and that the philosophers then called attention to this *malaise*. But the melancholy fact is that precisely those who made the most of it exhibited nothing short of a cultivated inauthenticity. Compared to some of the others—Adorno and Benjamin, Heidegger and Sartre (in his philosophic books)—Buber remained relatively clear, and certainly unambiguous in his stand against totalitarianism from both the Right and the Left. *The Jargon of Authenticity*¹⁵ may well be one of the best things Adorno ever wrote; it contains a splendid attack on Heidegger; but Adorno evidently failed to notice how much of this critique was applicable to himself.

The whole complex of problems relating to authenticity is too vast to be unravelled here. What should be said is that Buber ought to be compared with his contemporaries; and he fares better as a philosopher when we do that than he does when we measure him against major thinkers of the past, like Kant, Hegel, or Nietzsche.

THIS CRITIQUE of *I and Thou* is corroborated by Buber's correspondence with Rosenzweig (published in 1973).¹⁶ In September 1922 Rosenzweig wrote Buber after reading the first instalment of the printer's proofs of *I and Thou* that he found the central dichotomy of the book unacceptable. "With the I-It you give the I-You a cripple as an opponent." Rosenzweig then introduced God as *Er* ("He") and reproached Buber for his undue "narrowing down to the I-You."

In his reply of September 14, Buber told Rosenzweig of his plans for volumes II through V,¹⁷ and five days later he wrote Rosenzweig that *I and Thou*

"is after all not a whole but a scanty and rough beginning and yet must go out into the world like that. The second volume, on which I am working hard and which... is to be called, non-

religiously [*religionslos*], *Holy Action*, will become simpler and more transparent, it seems to me."

But the second volume never appeared any more than the third, fourth, and fifth, for Buber could not build on the foundation he had laid.

Against Rosenzweig's criticism one could cite passages in which the I-It does not seem to be a cripple, but in his letter of September 22 Rosenzweig himself replied:

"Yes, the It receives its full rights in a few places, but that is not to your credit but to its own, for these passages fall out of the line of your thought."

My concern in any case is not to eulogise the I-It but rather to insist that it is false that every You except for God must again and again become a mere thing for us. To be sure, we are not eternal, and in death we become dust and ashes; but as long as I live the dead whom I love are not mere things for me; and thanks to Rembrandt's art his father and mother are not mere things for me either. Nor are Buber and Rosenzweig. They still address me, and I am not trying to score points but rather to respond to them.

I am much closer to Buber's more humanistic orientation than to Rosenzweig's philosophical theology. But Rosenzweig was Buber's close friend and an extraordinarily perceptive reader. He questioned Buber's central contrast of the I-You and I-It before *I and Thou* was published. Buber kept insisting that after all this was only the first volume; a few weeks later (as Buber reported on 10 February) 2,000 copies had been sold, and Buber, though he kept considering *I and Thou* his major contribution to philosophy, abandoned the project of which it had been meant to be no more than a scanty beginning.

Two dimensions of Buber's work remain for brief discussion: his writings on Hasidism and his collections of Hasidic lore. It is now widely acknowledged that Buber's portrait of Hasidism

does not stand up under scholarly scrutiny; it was rather partisan and impressionistic. Far from being in a position to dispute this verdict, I can only say that this was surely obvious from the beginning. Buber's Hasidim bore little resemblance to any Hasidim to be found anywhere nowadays, and the inherent likelihood that people like that should have lived in the places where Hasidism flourished around 1800 was surely nil. Still, Buber's writings on the Hasidim had three crucial functions.

First, they served as introductions and commentaries to his collections. (If the collections were worth having, then these writings filled an important place.) Secondly, these essays explored a possible meaning of religiousness and expanded our conception of the religious life. If we compare them with William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*, and the vast literature on mysticism that appeared during the first half of this century, Buber's essays easily hold their own as an important and illuminating contribution. Finally, it was Buber who opened up the subject.

Die Erzählungen der Chassidim and *Gog und Magog* are Buber's most enduring creations, and are indeed masterpieces of religious literature. I once argued at some length that Buber's *Erzählungen* was "one of the great religious books of all time",¹⁸ and that estimate was connected with my assumption that great religious books rarely stand or fall with their historical accuracy. The question of "what really happened" is always interesting, and when a religious book departs from the facts that is worth pointing out. But religious works have other dimensions as well, and Buber's two books have a literary quality that leads me to cite the original German titles. To do him justice, one must read the originals. I still feel that Hesse was right when he said that Buber, "like no other living author, has enriched world literature with a genuine treasure."¹⁹

¹⁸ The essay has been reprinted in W. Kaufmann, *Existentialism, Religion, and Death* (New York, 1976). It was originally published in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (1957).

¹⁹ Hermann Hesse, *Briefe* (1951).

²⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Die Jugendgeschichte Hegels* (1906). *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften* (ed. Herman Nohl, 1907). The earliest manuscripts in this volume have not been included in the English version of Hegel's *Early Theological Writings* (trans. T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner, Chicago, 1948), but I have included some quotations from this material in an essay on "The Young Hegel and Religion", which appeared in Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Boston, 1959, and Garden City, N.Y., 1960), and also in *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays* (ed. Alasdair MacIntyre, Garden City, N.Y., 1972). An earlier and shorter version of the essay was published in *The Philosophical Review* (January 1954).

BUBER'S MOTIVATION has been overlooked not only by his critics but also by most of his admirers. Wilhelm Dilthey was his teacher, and Dilthey struggled his life long to spell out the difference between the natural sciences and the mental sciences, or rather what he called *die Geisteswissenschaften*. But Dilthey also wrote a remarkable book on the young Hegel (reporting on unpublished Hegel manuscripts that one of Dilthey's students published a year later, in 1907).²⁰ In the 1790s the young Hegel, then in his twenties, was interested in the possibility of a "folk religion" that would be free of all irrational elements. It was Dilthey who made this known in 1905, in a lecture a few months before his book appeared; and it was then that Martin Buber began

his efforts to construct a Jewish folk religion that would contain nothing contrary to reason. His work on the Hasidim and his Biblical studies are misunderstood when they are viewed as historical studies, just as *I and Thou* is misunderstood when it is considered as a contribution to epistemology.

Indeed the young Hegel wrote a "Life of Jesus" in which Jesus teaches Kant's moral philosophy; but this was grotesque, and Hegel did not publish it. This had been *his* attempt to furnish a scripture for his "folk religion." Buber's Hasidic tales are not grotesque, and he did publish them; but they have to be understood along with his Biblical studies and *I and Thou* as parts of an epic effort to create a viable humanistic religion—a non-theological, non-halachic Judaism. That was Buber's most ambitious and fascinating undertaking, and it failed.

One aspect of *I and Thou* that was much more important to Buber than to most of his readers was that the book ruled out all discourse about God, including all of theology. He did not like to be called a theologian or a mystic. He associated mysticism with the drowning of the I in the divine Thou, and theology with the reduction of the divine Thou to an It. He wanted a religion in which the individual could address God and be addressed by God, but a religion that left no room for talk about God. Nor did Buber attend religious services. The only rabbis, not to speak of ministers and priests, for whom Buber had any use were dead rabbis. Of course, he respected men who happened to be rabbis (Leo Baeck, for example); but as a religious person he had no need of rabbis. What he wanted to create was a new humanistic religion.

It is easy to register Buber's failures as a scholar and a teacher, as a translator and a philosopher, and as a Zionist. But, as Gilbert Murray once remarked, "There is not one play of Euripides in which a critic cannot find serious flaws. . . ." The

same could be said of Buber's books; but one should add, as Murray did: "the worse the critic, the more he will find."²¹ Faults are really not hard to discover, and the critic who gloats over them is likely to be so immersed in details that he fails to see what transcends such faults.

One flaw, in my view, remains crucial. This is not, as one might suppose, that Buber did too many things and did not specialise enough. It is rather the false dichotomy that Buber presented to us in *I and Thou* and henceforth assumed to be fundamental instead of questioning it: that of the I-You and the I-It. By associating the former with a kind of ecstasy while relegating all objectification, reflection, examination, and careful thought to the I-It, he provided a philosophical justification for excessive subjectivity, illusions, and murkiness.

THAT BUBER RANGED as widely as he did was precisely what still makes him interesting and important. That he was not more rigorous, self-critical, and scholarly is regrettable but not a price one must necessarily pay for breadth.

If we compare Buber with our contemporaries and above all with the teachers and scholars at our universities today, his stature seems secure. As specialisation has increased, something important has been lost. Buber created a cosmos from the chaos of the modern world, and when one encountered him one encountered his world as well. It was not small or merely academic, but a world that embraced past and present. It was not oppressive because it was not a finished system to be handed over to students. The soul of this world was Buber's ceaseless striving through the whole length of his rich life. He was not free from vanity, but he was never self-satisfied or complacent (and kept trying to improve his translation of the Bible, for example, until he died). I am moved to say of him,

*He was a man, take him for all in all.
I shall not look upon his like again.*

²¹ *The Literature of Ancient Greece* (1897; 1956), p. 273.