Franz Rosenzweig

SCRIPTURE AND WORD:
ON THE NEW BIBLE TRANSLATION[1]

Every word is a spoken word. The book originally served the word, whether declaimed, sung, or spoken; it sometimes still serves it today, as in theatrically living drama or opera. Opera people talk of the score and theatre people talk of the script, as something technical, instrumental, provisional; once, that was how people characterized the rank and condition of books generally, vis-à-vis the spoken word. But technique has a dangerous power over those who wield it; all unintentionally the means become an end, the provisional becomes the permanent, the technical becomes a magic spell. The book no longer serves the word. It becomes the word's ruler and hindrance; it becomes Holy Scripture. And with Holy Scripture, with letter-by-letter commentaries on the soundless and dumb word—the Alexandrians' Homer, the Neoplatonists's Plato, the Jewish and the Christian Bibles—we have the end of the book subservient to the word, the book unproblematically read aloud, as it was known everywhere in antiquity and is known even today where ancient tradition still lives, e.g., in the orthodox study of the Talmud. Holy Scriptures are the precursors of the modern book—dumb, and because dumb detached from man, full of unlimited possibility, but therefore damned to exile in space and time. Scripture in the charged sense of the term, Holy Scripture, opens up the unsurveyable territory of *Schrifttum*[2], no longer bound to any human receptive power. This native word *Schrifttum* has an apparently (but not only apparently) nobler tone than the foreign import "literature," whose place it takes here; in reality both mirror in their abstract suffixes our hopeless despair of ever coming to fit end of the accumulated heap of books.

Where there is a curse, people necessarily seek to be delivered from it. When what is written becomes Scripture, at once there arises everywhere an oral teaching joined to it. This teaching—however dubious in itself, like the *pilpul* of the Talmud, the dialectic of the scholastics, the lecturing at modern universities, the administrative control of the word in Protestant preaching—offers through the very fact of its orality the deliverance of humankind. However merciless a mouth may be, it is still of flesh and blood and not of paper; it becomes weary, and so accepts the alternation of day and night; it must eat, and at least then it will find a moment to chat. But the book is indefatigable, cares nothing for day and night, has no sense of the human need for relaxation and change. True, the mouth may "say nothing but what is in the book"; the "holy spirit" of Mephistophelean mockery, the spirit of spiritual grace may flow from it only trickingly.

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[1] Published in *Die Kreatur*, first year.

[2] The German *Schrifttum* is often translated "literature"; but it is, as Rosenzweig goes on to suggest, simply an extension of *Schrift*; if *Schrift* is "writing", *Schrifttum* is "writingness". "Writingness", however, transgresses what Rosenzweig call the "boundaries of linguistic possibility"; so the translation retains the German term.

But the genuine holy spirit, the spirit of mankind, is nonetheless delivered by it. Even elegant party-talk about the newest novel, indeed even the newspaper *feuilleton*, however shrunk to fit the capacities of the breakfast hour, has something of the blessed oral power to banish his curse of literature: its timelessness.

But one book—and precisely the book from which in our Judeo-Christian culture this fateful scripturalization and literarization of the word had its beginning, and in connection with which the antidotes of oral teaching and of tradition were first tried out—one book alone among all the books of our cultural horizon cannot content itself with the antidote of an oral tradition to complement it. This book alone must not, even *qua* book, enter entirely into *Schrifttum*, into literature. Its unique content forbids it to become entirely *Schrift*. It must remain word. It cannot attain the autonomous, aesthetic value of *Schrift* because it cannot attain the distance that is the precondition of this value. Its content, the essential part of its content refuses displacement into the objectivity, the separatedness, the madness that characterize all that becomes literature. Only its accessories are capable of becoming literature, and it is these accessories that a literary consideration must content itself with. But the essential content is precisely what escapes the specifying and distancing power of *Schrift*: the word of God to man, the word of man to God, the word of men before God. We have only to consider the letter—the most legitimate form of writing, the form always addressed to an immediate need and necessity,[3] the form from which all other forms borrow whatever legitimacy they have—to see that this legitimation of writing can never pertain to the word of and to and before God; God is *present*, and if he acts through messengers, they are not postmen bringing yesterday's news, which perhaps in the meantime has already been overtaken by the intervening events; rather in this moment of theirs God is what acts immediately in them and speaks immediately through them.

It is, accordingly, a vital question for Scripture, for this one *Schrift*, whether the word is to be merely adjacent to it or within it. The word of God cannot dispense with the word of man—the true, spoken, sounding word of man. The Bible alone, among all books of the literary epoch, whether literary or pre-literary mode of reading—demands, that is, what the Hebrew expression for reading means, which is familiar in the West from the Koran and which has also yielded what words pertaining to writing have not yielded, namely the most familiar term denoting the Old testament: the *qeri'ah*, the "calling out". It is in response to this command that in all worship Scripture is customarily read aloud; it is in the service of this command that Luther in his translation has recourse to the spoken language of the people. The crucial question to ask of any new translation is whether this command has been fulfilled at a given time and for a given people.

The fetters that today hold all written German mute are constituted by the semantic system in which the words are embedded: punctuation. Even when a thoughtful and self-willed writer like Hermann Grimm has broken free of the purely logical

[3] There is a crucial pun here: because, Rosenzweig writes, the letter comes in aid and of an immediate need (*Not*, "need"), it is truly necessary (*not-wending*, "necessary"). Not *wending* means "averting" or "turning"; so by separating the two components of the word Rosenzweig suggests that it is necessary which averts our need, or which we turn to in our need [eds.].

framework of this system—and almost all German writers transgress more or less against their former schoolteachers on this point—even then the most we get is an approximation to the French punctuation system, which is based on a musical principle rather that a logical one but which is not suited to the contours of German from falling easily into consistently recurring melodies. Where, therefore, these fetters must be loosed at any cost—as they must be in the German Bible, for today's reading public, which public has in reading been read off, read wrong, and read under—we need more drastic measures. Martin Buber has found these measures. The bond of the tongue must be loosed by the eye. We must free from beneath the logical punctuation that is sometimes its ally and sometimes its foe the fundamental principle of natural, oral punctuation: the act of breathing.

Breath is the stuff of speech; the drawing of breath is accordingly the natural segmenting of speech. It is subject to its own law: that we cannot speak more than twenty, at most thirty words without taking a deep breath (and not just a catch-breath)—often indeed we can say only five to ten words. But within this boundary the distribution of breath-renewing silences follows the inner order of speech, which is only occasionally determined by its logical structure, and which for the most part mirrors directly the movements and arousals of the soul itself in it gradations of energy and above all in its gradations of time.

Thus the movement of speech is segmented into units of equal value, temporally equal breaths, so to speak (but *only* so to speak)—from the isolated "Yes" of God's confirmation of human disobedience (Gen. 3:22) to the elaborate naming of the five kings against whom the four went out (Gen. 14:2). Sentences that in unambiguous logic are distinct and so separated by periods—say, Cain's appalling answer, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"— are by the rendering of the vital, breathing course of speech brought together into a single movement, and thus given their full horror, previously half covered-over by the logical punctuation. Commas retain their logical function as subordinate distinctions; but through the added modulation of breathing they acquire a quiet resonance which in the press of adjacent clauses and the throng of subordinate clauses would otherwise get lost.

But this segmentation can only arise from the text itself. It remains, in the final analysis, like so much in translation, "arbitrary", an "experiment." In the New Testament, where the division of verses is a late addition of the sixteenth century (and where also the distinction into breathing units has been advocated from various standpoints[4]), it is clear that no traditional basis for these distinctions exists. The situation for the Old Testament is only apparently different. Here there is indeed a received system of punctuation, established more than a thousand years, on which the usual verse-divisions are based. It is an extremely fine-grained system; it does not make evident the structure of the sentences, but by pressing into all the chinks of the individual sentence it directly indicates the relation of each individual word to its successor, and only indirectly and as a

[4] See Norden, *Agnostos Theos*, p. 361; Roland Schutz, "Die Bedeutung der Kolometrie fur das Neue Testament" (*Zeitschrift fur die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 1992, 161ff.); and Roman Woerner's translations of the Gospels and Revelations.

consequence explains the connections among the sentence-components. But it is chiefly a comprehensive logical analysis of the text—a work, by the way, of philological interpretation to which all later philological work on this text must do homage. It does of course have a musical significance as well; but the musical significance is almost entirely—aside from certain individual passages of numerous sequences of names—a functional expression of the logical element. The apparent singsong of Talmud study, i.e., the musical "setting" of the sentence as read, sets up the logical understanding of it; Hermann Cohen similarly "set" difficult sentences of Plato and Kant even in reading them aloud. Those who comprehend such experiences will understand how logical meaning can be based on musical value in the biblical punctuation as well.

But these signs, the so-called accents—for they *are* accents, as well as marks of punctuation and musical notes, or rather note-groups—have never been, not at any rate before the violently reactionary orthodoxy of the Emancipation, anything more than the accomplishment of great and honorable predecessors, whom the later-born follow cheerfully and trustingly, but from whom they may and must in all modesty be permitted to diverge. When the classical Jewish commentator, whose almost nine-century old commentary accompanies almost every Jewish Bible ever printed—when Rashi, that is, with his incomparable balance of childlike absorption in the popular tradition and clear-eyed independent insight into the text, interprets the very first sentence of the Bible in clear contradiction to the traditional punctuation, he gives direction and measure for all interpreters who come after.

In the Old Testament, then, the traditional punctuation is, for the translator who recognizes the obligation to let the Scripture be suffused once again with the breath of the word, not so helpful as at first it seemed to be. The punctuation thus fares differently than does the traditional vocalization (and indeed consonization) of the Hebrew text, which to an extent surprising to us today with our scholarly prejudices turns out to be almost entirely reliable—or, more prudently put, almost entirely usable. Remember that our task in making the lineation is not the task of those who placed the accents in the first place: that task was simply not present for them, since for them the orality of the *miqra'*, the “calling out” was assured by the laws of worship, and they needed accordingly to attend only *within* this assured orality to the need for comprehensibility. In the matter of the received verbal text, on the other hand, today’s Old Testament scholar is in a tricky situation; with all his charismatic professional expertise, with all this knowledge of biblical Hebrew, developed beyond that of the ancient Jews for more than a millennium, he nonetheless has before him the *same* task as did his ancient predecessors, and must like them substitute in the most vexed passages of the text what is at best probable for what was at least possible.

The obligation of freedom that accrues to the translator in connection with this pint, the obligation of hearing the breathing movement of the word from the pen-strokes of the Scripture, is clearest when the passage is not only segmented according to its content, but

also obeys a self-imposed formal law in the metrical rhythms of poetry.[5] The metrical linkage generates of itself—at least in a poetry that like the poetic parts of the Bible eschews the charms of cross-relations between verse-ending and thought-ending—an upper limit for the length of the "breathing-colon"; when the line ends, the reader breathes. Now in other cases this upper limit is also the lower limit; the metrical pattern is thus immediately legible from the typography, and the poetic structure has as many lines as it does verses. But in our translation this is only preponderantly the case, and not systematically. For us the respiratory movement of natural speech must sometimes break the metrical dance-step of the poetry. So for example, in the dying Jacob's proclamations to his twelve tribal sons (Genesis 49). In each case there, the first two *cola* of the translation correspond only to a single verse of the meter, most strikingly in the prophecy to Judah. The inwardly rhythmic speech of the word wins out over the discrete pulses of the song; prose wins out over poetry.

For poetry is indeed the mother tongue of the human race; we need not reject here the insights of Hamann and Herder. But *only* of the race. Even today the language of every child is originally lyrical and magical, the enraptured outburst of feeling and the powerful instrument of desire, both often in the same sound, and if in the same word then only, precisely, in sounding that word. But the child only becomes an adult when through his *Ursprache* there breaks the unlyrical and the unmagical fullness of the word, equally alien to song and proverbial saying alike—a breakthrough that like every genuine revelation is perceived only in retrospect, and avoids being assigned to a particular moment of the past. Just so, one day—and afterwards on one knows what day it has been—through the original language of the human race breaks the language of humanity in the human being, the language of the word. The Bible is the hoard of this language of the human being because it is prose, prose in the enraptured song of the prophecy and in the powerful declaration of the law. It is as Scripture supplementary, a deposit, a deposition of that breaking through of the word which occurs in the history of the race just where it occurs in the history of the individual: at the moment of becoming human. The word that cannot tolerate meter because in the soul breaks free of measure is spoken into it, and speaks out from it. There was prose before and outside the Bible: unpoetry, not freed speech but only unbound, not measureless but only unmeasured. All poetry that has been written in the Bible's light—and indeed poetry more than prose, Judah Halevi more than Maimonides, Dante more than Aquinas, Goethe more than Kant—has been animated by the Bible's spirit of prose. Henceforth the gate into the nocturnal silence that enveloped the human race in its origins, dividing each other, an all from what was outside and what was beyond—henceforth the gate is broken and cannot altogether be closed again: the gate of the word.

Franz Rosenzweig, (1994), *Scripture and Translation.* Indiana University Press, p. 40-46.

[5] One technical adjective for referring to metrical verse, and one which Rosenzweig likes a lot, is *gebunden*, "bound". Some of the meaning of the ensuing passage depends on the association that word implies between metricality and enslavement. English, of course, has "free verse"; but it has no technical term to indicate the enslaved metricality to which "free verse" is opposed [eds.].