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On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig

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But this dimension of Nietzsche's personality can also be seen as an aspect of his philosophy. For example, his well-known attack on Christian morality was at least partly an attack on very strong religious elements within himself; it is only by viewing the philosopher as a "moralist," and not, as poststructuralists and postmodernists would have it, an "amoralist," that this attack can be understood. In Safranski's words, Nietzsche

... had no intention of relinquishing the principle of morality just because its implicit metaphysics had become untenable. Morality remained essential. Nietzsche placed a high value on the power of morality to direct our drives and create a second nature. He therefore felt confident in his contention that "without the errors that underlie the assumptions of morality, man would have remained an animal." (190)

Such passages show not only how far Nietzsche was from embracing the pious atheism of some of his twentieth-century followers, but the extraordinary extent to which he forced himself, even in his moral concerns, to live "within the arena of the bull," inside the perimeter of the greatest possible dangers and difficulties to himself. Such an effort, sustained over many years in solitude, could have only resulted eventually in his being gored and trampled. His final defeat, nonetheless, does not negate the many victories he won. The value of Nietzsche's work, after all, lies not in the conclusions he arrived at, but in the process he went through to reach such conclusions. As Safranski says, "There is no point of arrival in Nietzsche's philosophy, no outcome, and no end result. There is only the will to an unceasing adventure in thinking" (350).¹

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1. See Nietzsche's 28 May 1873 letter to Marie Baumgartner in *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (trans. and ed. Christopher Middleton, Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1969).

Santner, Eric L. *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Pp.146.

Eric Santner's title is meant to call to mind Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), in which pathology is brought into the everyday, and by which the particular nature of the psyche is elucidated. Freud points to such phenomena as dreams, forgetfulness, parapraxes (e.g., slips of the tongue), and a host of other similarly manifest symptoms to make his case for the existence of an unconscious that refuses to be explained or contained by consciousness. In other words, the Freudian subject is in part at the behest of unconscious urges that steal their way into daily life, manifesting as

symptoms or “psychopathology.” These unconscious “instincts” or “drives” (*Triebe*) are more than just physiological forces (e.g., the sex drive); in addition, they represent what Santner figures as an excess, a surplus charge that is better understood within its wider historical social and cultural contexts. While a sexual object may be invested with a subject’s biological drive, this object is also “overdetermined” symbolically, vis-à-vis the myriad social and institutional norms that lend the object its particular significance or charge within the life of the subject. And so, in addition to the unconscious excess or “too much” released as the “psychopathology of everyday life,” Santner investigates the excess significance that comes from outside the subject, from the world, and from the *Other*—capitalized, he tells us, “to underscore and to keep in view the *problem* of alterity, the *question* of what makes another human being or culture strange” (*Psychotheology*, 8, note 8). This strangeness of the Other—his or her alterity—is, it is claimed, a “theological” question, rather than a mere psychological one. Santner’s title plays on Freud’s, supplanting pathology by theology; his book is a meditation on the “theological” excess that informs everyday psychic life and defines subjectivity in wider, existential terms.

Santner’s notion of “theology” relies in part on his reading of Franz Rosenzweig, a Jewish philosopher who is critical of both organized “religion” and canonical “philosophy.” For Rosenzweig, the theological aspect of everyday life takes on wider, existential valences, extending into social, political, ethical, and religious spheres. In contrast to Freud, for whom any religious perspective is “*nothing but psychology projected into the external world*” (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1960, 6: 258), for Rosenzweig “theology” is almost the reverse of this, signifying the incursion of a radical alterity, an Other introjected *into* the life of the subject. Otherwise said, where Freud will explain the world anthropomorphically, Rosenzweig understands the *subject* as *theomorphic*.

Thus, despite its title, I find Santner’s *Psychotheology* to be decidedly un-Freudian in its inspiration. Following Rosenzweig, Santner asks, Who is my neighbor? The perspective is monotheistic, countering Freud’s atheism and pessimism. For Freud, of course, the neighbor is more worthy of my hostility and even my hatred; like me, the neighbor’s barely contained unconscious aggressivity and masochism begs me “to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to

kill him" (*Civilization and its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961, 21: 111). Santner expresses greater optimism, citing the poet Friedrich Hölderlin: "Yet where danger lies,/ Grows that which saves" (*Psychotheology*, 81). For Santner, the unconscious drives also harbor a "saving power" by virtue of their very excess. While we are at the behest of such dangerous aggressive and masochistic drives, they represent an internal "otherness" within each of us—one that opens us to what is other in the Other. The psychoanalyst's technique for listening provides a rough model here; Freud's methodology was to listen for traces of unconscious desires cryptically emerging in the speech of his patients. If Santner's book is a self-confessed "technique for listening" (interview, *The University of Chicago Magazine*, 94.2 [Dec. 2001]. <http://www.alumni.uchicago.edu/magazine/0112/research/invest-bugging.html>), it will radicalize Freud's therapeutic enterprise: by recognizing my own internal "otherness," I am better able to attend to the Other not just where he or she is most "stuck" or most neurotic, but by hearing what is "other" in the Other, and identifying with what alienates the Other from his or her being-in-the-world, from a fictional self, and from historical social and cultural norms that provide the framework of intelligibility whereby that self will find its meaningful place in the world. Santner therefore departs from Freud and recasts psychic life in existential—and ultimately, "theological"—terms.

Santner demonstrates the theological and existential valences of mental illness through the example of Daniel Paul Schreber, the paranoiac whose *Memoirs* were the subject of a famous Freudian case study, and who was himself the subject of Santner's last book, *My Own Private Germany* (Princeton, 1996). While Freud's Schreber helped us to understand the nature of paranoia, Santner's Schreber exposes a world whose social laws and institutions are essentially groundless, and thus he reveals the crazy "rationality" behind Schreber's psychosis. Whether or not we agree that the mentally ill are "born theologians" as Santner somewhat playfully suggests, we do learn something by taking seriously the elaborate theology of Schreber's *Memoirs*. Theology is not a form of madness, Santner is quick to assert, but madness is nonetheless a form of theology. Madness opens us onto a world understood "theologically," a world whose symbolic order is founded and maintained through an incomprehensible symbolic authority, by a God who installs the Law, a traumatic kernel as tyrannical and as unjustifiable as the demands of the superego. Like the unconscious, the world understood theologically is the bearer of a "too much," an excess, a constitutive "outside" that remains

theoretically indigestible, incomprehensible to reason. So, what sort of madness is Schreber's? In one sense, a privileged one, since he is face to face with the secret history of modernity: its terrible groundlessness. Santner says: "Schreber was, at a profound level, unable to recognize himself in the call to be *Senatspräsident*, unable to metabolize his investiture" (*Psychotheology*, 49). Schreber was unable to answer the call, unable to see himself in the terms and symbols by which society would name him, unable to occupy the position set out for him according to social and cultural norms and institutions. Santner calls Schreber's madness a crisis of symbolic investiture—essentially, a crisis of meaning. Not only does Schreber fail to be "invested" by, or to internalize, the terms and symbols that would name him in a socially intelligible way (his psychosis thus representing a "refusal" of such investiture), in a much more profound sense he also shows the utter groundlessness and lack of authority in just these symbolic networks of intelligibility. By pulling the rug out from under modernity, as it were, Schreber has a mad understanding that we must turn to theology if we are to dwell meaningfully in the world.

Santner's discussion of Schreber segues into a consideration of Franz Rosenzweig and the theological. While Schreber was left unable to metabolize the world's symbolic excess, to a certain extent it is precisely such a *failure* of metabolization that facilitates my loving openness to what is other in the Other, to what he or she fails to metabolize, "to the Other's touch of madness, to the way in which the Other is disoriented in the world, destitute, divested of an identity . . ." (82). In fact, there is a danger in complete metabolization—what Santner calls "globalization," an arrogant hyperrationality that reduces the Other to the logic of the Same and negates the "outside." Such globalization is the program of an Enlightenment philosophy, the consequences of which have proved disastrous when adopted as a global political strategy. Santner turns to Rosenzweig whom he reads as offering not just a radical critique of this Enlightenment rationality, but whose text, *The Star of Redemption* (trans. William W. Hallo. Notre Dame, 1985), offers a viable "redemptive" alternative. If there is to be redemption for Rosenzweig, it is redemption from what he calls the "disease of philosophy," this hyperrationality. He sees philosophy as one manner in which we abstract from life, a defense against life's "theological" excess—from what Santner calls being in the "midst of life." For Rosenzweig, this withdrawal from life is akin to Heidegger's notion of inauthenticity, what we might call an absorption *by* life, motivated for Heidegger, as for Rosenzweig, in the singularizing anxiety surrounding one's death.

Rosenzweig, echoing perhaps the paradoxical phrasing of the mystics, implores us “to be free in life from life” (*God, Man, and the World: Lectures and Essays*, ed. and trans. Barbara E. Galli, Syracuse, 1998, 117), a formula reminiscent of Meister Eckhart and other mystics who have similarly exclaimed, “I pray to God to rid me of God!” The distinction here is between a life that is lived, and one that is merely contemplated, subsumed under some concept or generality. While we may say that Life = Life, significantly, for Rosenzweig, it is of vital consequence whether we mean as $B = A$, or as $B = B$ (the “calculus” here is Rosenzweig’s). In the first instance, the definition of Life is informed by the philosophical attitude, subsumed as positive knowledge, defined by a heap of exchangeable predicates, a generality (*das Allgemeine*). This is the realm of one’s “personality,” a form of death in life because it is a defensive reaction against living “in the midst” of a meaningful life. With $B = B$, however, we have the formula for what Rosenzweig calls a “meta-ethical self,” a kernel of “tautological nonsense,” that which admits no derivative predications, what is otherwise understood as a “gap” in a series of identifications, a differential, a “stain” on the horizon of cultural intelligibility—that which is utterly unsubsumable, unhistoricizable, a radical singularity (*das Besondere*).

These are difficult theoretical concepts, and not, perhaps, for the uninitiated. If the reader is stuck within an Enlightenment (“modern”) rationality and refuses to acknowledge the existence of an inherent *irrationality* operating within networks of meaning, then Santner’s book will sound like so much nonsense. Indeed, Santner follows much recent critical theory by insisting on an unmetabolizable something that, once again, like Freud’s unconscious, refuses to be rationally explained or contained. This is what is “other” in the Other, an unsubsumable alterity, the “theological.” We can begin to see how such a radical singularity might provide the necessary condition for any form of ethical comportment toward the Other. My singular difference is, so to speak, the basis of my understanding of the Other’s difference, whether that Other is another person or another culture. And so Santner’s project gestures far beyond its contribution to psychoanalytic thought. In response to a politics of identity in which I understand myself negatively, in opposition to others (x is not y), Santner here offers a conception of the subject in terms distinct from the identities proffered by ethnic, religious, or national institutions (among others). Reflecting on how, for Schreber, the dominant symbolic order failed to consolidate a socially intelligible identity, Santner’s book comments on anyone whose identity is here or there only marginally consolidated, or

consolidated at a great cost, or, indeed, altogether impossible in those instances where institutional norms are driven home with a hegemonic logic. Opposing a globalizing consciousness in which “conflicts are generated through *external* differences between cultures and societies” (5), Santner optimistically suggests a “universal” consciousness, “a shared opening to the agitation and turbulence *immanent* to any construction of identity” (5).

Santner suggests that the structure of personal identity is fantasmatic, produced in part by the symbolic investiture of social institutions, and ultimately an elaborate defense against the terrible groundlessness of these very institutions, the crisis of their symbolic authority. The path to redemption would entail remaining open and vulnerable, refusing the fantasmatic closure that a fixed and definable identity proffers, and greeting the Other in crisis, in the “midst of life.” Ethics relies on just such an answerability to the Other. Santner characterizes this openness as an “aliveness to the world.” Moreover, it is in the context of such “redemption” that we can justly call for a therapeutic approach in which the subject must work through the fantasies that close it off from the Other—what Lacan characterized in the mirror stage as the fictional and armor-like identity of the ego.

Indeed, it is useful to recall Jacques Lacan and his more recent popularization by Slavoj Žižek, whose work infuses Santner’s text. Lacanian terminology abounds, and we find such concepts as “desire,” “*jouissance*,” “gap,” “the real,” and “the stain” as ways of referencing an excess that, by definition, is non-semantic and therefore recedes from concrete inscriptions. In addition to Lacan and Žižek, there are frequent references to Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben, among others. The work of these “post-identity” theorists provides an indispensable tool for Santner, who reads Rosenzweig and (to a lesser extent) Freud through contemporary theory and its preoccupations. The list of theorists deployed by Santner is impressive, and so too is his handling of them. But I worry a little over the institutional authority they bring to Santner’s text, since it is precisely such a “symbolic investiture,” if you will, that Santner has taken pains to problematize.

We might ask of Santner the same question he asks of psychoanalysis: does it work on the side of institutional authority, to further reinforce recognized structures of social intelligibility so that we might better “metabolize” our symbolic investiture, and in the end conform as good (but uncritical) social subjects? Or, can psychoanalysis be said to intervene, breaking with this particular deployment of authority, by offering a type of “new thinking,” to borrow from the title of Rosenzweig’s 1921 essay? The

question is applicable to Santner: if he relies too heavily upon the legion of theorists he deploys, he falls victim to his own critique. Can he break from the institutional authority these theorists represent or in the end must he subscribe to an ethics of conformity that further reinforces these theoretical structures of intelligibility?

If there is a crisis of authority—of authorship—in Santner’s text, I suggest that it is instructive. And it will depend on the form of answerability each reader will see the text as eliciting. The sheer number of philosophers and citations is at times phantasmagoric. But are these multiple voices listened to as unrelated *fragments* forcibly metabolized into a theoretical whole, or, more importantly, are they heard as *remnants* of some larger universal, as bearing within them a non-semantic kernel that remains philosophically and culturally indigestible? If Santner’s *Psychotheology* succeeds in this latter regard, he will have spoken of the remnant’s ontological irreplaceability, its utter alterity, and hence of the saving power Rosenzweig calls the density of the singularity to whom I am answerable—that whom I love. And here we get a glimpse of the psychotheology of everyday life; while unrelated fragments bear their own significance, the remnant bears a theological excess that is greater than the mere sum of its parts. The “new thinking,” of course, is somewhat of a misnomer: an ethics of singularity has less to do with thinking than with listening, answerability, attending to the Other—in brief, it is a practice, and perhaps not in the end so “new.”

Santner’s short text only alludes to the wider implications of his project, although this in itself would be a false criticism. An ethics of singularity cannot be prescriptive, and so to demand a more explicit topography will mean we have misunderstood the command to love our neighbor. How am I meant to inscribe a non-cognitive, non-ideological self? In general terms, what is called for is “a suspension of the haunting ‘undead’ supplement of the law” (64)—a suspension of fantasy, since it is fantasy that binds the supplemental remainder as much as it cements for us a socially intelligible identity. We are asked to become unbound, so that we might open possibilities for new meaning “beyond” life, such that social, political, and ethical bonds might be refigured not through greater relations of knowledge, but through a redemptive and loving non-relationality—in which the Other is not knowledge but acknowledged. “Our opening to this ‘beyond,’” Santner tells us, “is the very thing that places us in the midst of life, in proximity to our neighbor” (66). This in no way suggests a wholesale destruction of those social, political, and institutional norms that inform social reality; this would be impossible, since while my neighbor has an excess of life “beyond” his or

her symbolic inscription, paradoxically, that excess comes to me by virtue of its inadequate inscriptive form. Without a theological dimension, without the neighbor to intervene in mere political or cultural practices, these norms alone can result in nothing but the tragic struggles of hegemony that mark our world today.

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Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Ecrits de linguistique générale*. Ed. Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler. Paris: Gallimard, 2002. Pp. 353.

That honored contributor to the nineteenth-century disciplines of historical and comparative philology and inventor of such twentieth-century ones as semiotics and structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, is often cast as the erratic discoverer who never made the most of his own insights. We hear that Saussure's enunciation of the principle of functional opposition in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, though clearly and memorably made, left the hard work of systematization to be done by Trubetzkoy and the phonologists of the Prague Linguistic Circle; the consequences of the "zero sign," alluded to fleetingly in the *Cours*, had to be drawn by Jakobson in the 1930s; the definition that makes language "a form and not a substance" is surrounded in the *Cours* by such muddled uses of the terms "form" and "substance" that it took Hjelmslev's glossematic approach to sort out the issue into the tetrad of form/substance // content/expression (these examples are drawn from the copious commentary by Tullio de Mauro that makes up the last third of Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, eds. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, Paris: Payot, 1980). And even worse, we often catch Saussure in flagrant contradiction of his own theories. As Jacques Derrida commented in 1967, it is often necessary "to read Saussure against Saussure" (*De la grammatologie*, Paris: Minuit, 1967, 77; for similar expressions see also 67, 81, 86, 96, 105-106).

And as Derrida went on to note, Saussure's authorship is something of a public fiction: "it is not unthinkable that one day the wording of the *Cours*... will take on a suspect appearance in the light of unpublished materials now in preparation. [. . .] Up to what point is Saussure responsible for the *Cours* compiled and issued after his death? The question is not a new one" (*De la grammatologie*, 107, note 38). When we read Saussure against Saussure, it is