



Dana Hollander. *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the Nation of Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. xx + 267 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5521-4.

Reviewed by Jay Geller (Department of Religious Studies, Vanderbilt University )

Published on H-German (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Eve M. Duffy

## Translating an Exemplary Choice

Dana Hollander's *Exemplarity and Chosenness* opens with a fundamental disciplinary conundrum: "How may we account for the possibility of philosophy, of universalism in thinking, without denying that all thinking is also idiomatic and particular?" (p. 2). Hollander approaches this investigation of the conditions for philosophic thinking by focusing on an exemplary instance of apparent philosophic contradiction. Hollander singles out Jacques Derrida's notion of "philosophical nationality," which, even in its naming, enacts this paradoxical condition. Not to be confused with philosophic notions of nationhood, the notion of "philosophical nationality" invokes both the universal claims proffered by any particular nationalism and the identification by philosophers of particular national discourses as singularly appropriate for making universal philosophic claims. "Philosophical nationality" is not merely an example, a particular that could be replaced by any other member of a general set (whether understood in this case as the set of all philosophic notions or as the set of "philosophic" hybrids of the universal and the particular, which therefore do not belong to philosophy proper) and that serves merely to illustrate something (in this case, either the internal contradictoriness of all philosophical notions or the assumed pure universality of the properly philosophic). Rather, it is an exemplar, the singular (though not necessarily single) instance that portends the whole. It "exceeds" (p. 23) the particular without being subsumed by the universal and "steps out of" (p. 24) the universal without being reduced to a mere particular thing or absolute other. The exemplar is neither a contingent particularity nor a necessary universality; it abides neither in tautological self-sameness nor in absolute (and therefore unknowable) dif-

ference. It is what "still remains" (p. 38) rather than the remains of what once was and then could have been (or may still become). Hollander then finds the exemplar of the exemplar in specific engagements by Franz Rosenzweig and Derrida with Jewish "chosenness," according to which Jewish particularity is neither the contingent bearer of universal truths (such as monotheism) or traits nor the signifier of ideal humanity—nor is it absolutely other. In the end, Hollander's double or "duplicious" (p. 135)—but no less valid—answer to the question of philosophy's possibility is that far from presenting fundamental contradictions, the necessity of the particular to think the universal (together with the other of the particular) present the fundamental and exemplary conditions of thinking.

As well as of history. Not only does Hollander ably explicate how Rosenzweig and Derrida seek to articulate and engage in a "history in an uncommon sense" (p. 43) as something else besides the alternatives of factuality or relativism (of teleology or a history of the idea of history), she *performs* such a history. Taking "history," for example, as a singularity that at times erupts into these writers' discourse(s), she is able to question the view that Rosenzweig's reading of Hermann Cohen and Derrida's reading of Edmund Husserl adopted the conventional static periodization (and accompanying valuation) ascribed to their predecessors: the Kantian Cohen followed by and distinguished from the religious, the "static phenomenologist" Husserl followed by and distinguished from the "genetic" or "historical" (but not historicist). Further, rather than reading Rosenzweig as positing a Christianity that acts in opposition to a Judaism that dwells outside it, Hollander finds a Jewish historicity in

Rosenzweig's understanding of chosenness, so that Judaism's eternity is "already-with" but not subsumed by Christianity's own temporality. Moreover, rather than finding in Derrida's original readings of Husserl an earlier misrecognition of the metaphysical character of history that he later overcame, Hollander pinpoints in those readings the ways in which Derrida's notion of the exemplar portends an uncommon understanding of history: as how an always already-present moment effects a particular past as its necessary origin—a necessity that could only be recognized in relation to this present moment—and projects (but does not necessitate) an "ideal" telos. Exemplifying this historical effect in the work is Derrida's critique of Emile Benveniste's reductions of Aristotle's categories and Martin Heidegger's "being" to translations of characteristics of the Greek or German language. This critique sees Benveniste as blind to the question of what had allowed him to conceive this factual identity as the only explanation, blind to the act of translation that allowed him (Benveniste) to recognize the characteristics of language as characteristics reproduced in the characterizations of being.

When Hollander shifts from her uncommon thematization of Derrida's early writings (in terms of the question of history) to the more familiar territory of language and naming, she finds Derrida confronting a question of history, that of the doing of history. Just as the iteration of the proper name can only be recognized as such by its relation to (that is, its necessary difference from) what it is not, so it is with historical knowledge—it always betrays its own impropriety. What allows a recovery of the singular meaning of a past (one that will not be affected by its wrenching out of time)—that is, to recover its possible ideality—is its iteration in the present as this particular sign. This recovered past, however, can only be recognized as such in its relationship to what it is not, which thereby prevents its (the past's) absolute recovery. History is a shibboleth; what allows the past to cross the boundary into the present is not the content of that past but its means of transmission.

Hollander then explores Derrida's seminars on "philosophic nationalism" (1984-88) in the work of, among others, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and Cohen. She points out that instead of dismissing as mere chauvinism the apparent contradiction in their work of making universal claims for particular nationalities, Derrida chooses instead to address the question of how the objects of such claims always already exceed any delimitation to mere empirical determinants of that nationality (birth, territory, or language).

Moreover, since the universal can only be signified by the particular in its ideality (that is, by the possible iteration of that particular), and since the particular can only signify the universal by always already being called forth by that which it (the particular) is not (that is, by the other), Derrida insinuates an ethical dimension. Hollander argues that he thus demonstrates that the conditions for the possibility of philosophic nationalism make ethical demands, even as such nationalism seems to assert a totalizing universality. She finds a comparable move in Rosenzweig's conception of chosenness.

The threads of history, nationality, and language become interwoven like the fringes of a tallis when Hollander examines how Rosenzweig and Derrida bear witness to the conception of *Judentum* in the rhizomic movement of "Zeugen—Erzeugen—Bezeugen" (testimony and natural/notional generation; pp. 121-122, 139, 178) through their texts. She herself bears witness to how Rosenzweig's identification of the eternal Jews as "a community of blood"[1] and Derrida's self-identification as "the last Jew"[2] are both more and less than the frequent accusation of racism and chutzpah respectively when she situates both singularities as always already citations of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Rosenzweig respectively (pp. 172-73, 235-236 n. 26). By such a citational hermeneutic, Hollander has Rosenzweig's "chosenness" and Derrida's "exemplarity" enact both a history that does not limit itself to the opposition between necessity and contingency and an individuality that is always also divided against itself. She translates Rosenzweig and Derrida as engaged in an ongoing translation: the "Zeugen" of a *Judentum* "in and as the Umfremdung" (pp. 145-147) of, respectively, Christianity and Europe. Identity (individual, *Judentum*, Christianity, Europe) is neither the total appropriation of the other nor the absolute difference from it, but can only articulate itself as such by the incorporation of the foreign. Translation is never total.

Hollander's thematization without closure of the imbrication of the particular with the universal in Rosenzweig's and Derrida's works offers a proleptic performance of the Derridean notion, elaborated in his *Specters of Marx* (1994), of "the messianic without messianism" (pp. 195-200). To make her final move to messianicity, Hollander implicitly relocates Rosenzweig's figuration of this ongoing translation as "[we Jews] are guests even at our own table"[3] to a seder at which those present simultaneously abide in ancient Egypt and leave a place for Elijah, that is, for the announcement of the messiah. And thus, to cite her final citation of Derrida, simultaneously

the final words of the body of her text: “the impossible translation could nevertheless announce itself.”[4]

The dexterity and detail of Hollander’s presentation, the extensive iteration of Rosenzweig’s and Derrida’s texts and their intertextual contexts, as well as her weaving of Derrida’s explorations of “philosophical nationality” with Rosenzweig’s reflections on “chosenness,” facilitated a translation of sorts by me. I jumped at the opportunity to review Hollander’s monograph, I jumped at the chance because the book’s title drew me to hope that I would be able to use the book to explore extensive excerpts of Derrida’s seminar on the third chapter of Baruch Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*(1670), “On the Election of the Hebrews,” about which I had heard rumors but, in part due to the legal wrangling over the Derrida archive, had never seen in print. Neither my first nor my second reading of *Exemplarity and Chosenness* saw my hope redeemed. The question that had generated that desire, however, still found an exemplary venue to be posed in Hollander’s selection of texts: why have the Jews been the object of “the hatred of the nations”? My question is, perhaps, both a less disciplinary and a more existential one than Hollander’s own (although as Hollander demonstrates, these are not mutually exclusive determinations). It turns on whether the persistence of the Jewish people was the greater threat to the gentiles (and their claims for universality) than chosenness—especially once the soteriological necessity for the preservation of a Jewish remnant was no longer hegemonic for them. The relationships of chosenness to persistence and of both to antisemitism emerge when Hollander reads Rosenzweig’s posthumously published essay, “Atheistic Theology” (1914).[5] She finds Rosenzweig reading the Jewish wrong-headed abandonment of the fundamental dogma of Jewish chosenness as a response to the question of why the Jews still exist. European Jews assumed that their stubborn refusal to abandon chosenness (a claim to absolute otherness that affronted the universal), and in its stead recognize their apparent otherness as one example among many (as one of the different instances that

made up the whole), generated hatred against them. They hoped that notions of Jewish essence would counter the telos of the fundamental philosophic question of the relationship between particular peoples and universal humanity: the necessary dissolution of the former into the latter. Their mistake: thinking that persistence was a sign of Jewish chosenness and that removing the purported signified would save the signifier-bearing people. The answer for Rosenzweig, however, was not to assume a semiotic relationship between persistence and chosenness, but to recognize this relationship as a synthetic *a priori* one in which gentile-perceived persistence was abiding in eternity. And, to adopt Hollander’s reading of Derrida’s reading of him, Rosenzweig conceived of a chosenness as exemplar rather than as other. In sum, *Exemplarity and Chosenness* provides not only remarkable exegeses of Rosenzweig and Derrida but itself portends the messianic without messianism by opening its readers to the work of these two difficult thinkers.

#### Notes

[1]. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985; orig, 1979), 299.

[2]. Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 24, 30, 36.

[3]. Franz Rosenzweig, Letter to Gershom Scholem dated March 10, 1921, in *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften*, 4 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976-1984), I.2: 699-700.

[4]. Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 18.

[5]. In Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 10-24.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Jay Geller. Review of Hollander, Dana, *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the Nation of Philosophy*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24044>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.