

Article

The Prague-Frankfurt Orient Express: Eschatology, New Humanism, and the Birth of Dialogical Thinking

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Abstract: The Prague Circle, under the leadership of Max Brod (1884–1968), was a prominent literary group that flourished from 1900 to 1939. This era witnessed a struggle between emancipation and assimilation for German-speaking Jews within the Habsburg and German Empires. The Prague literati possessed a unique capacity for *Dialogfähigkeit*, which played a crucial role in safeguarding them against aggressive nationalism. The Patmos Circle, led by Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), transformed this readiness for dialogue into dialogical thinking: a distinct capability and an action-plan to combat the prevailing forms of confessionalism and nationalism during that period. Taking the concept of *Dialogfähigkeit* as a crucial cornerstone of Prague and Patmos literary groups, this paper analyzes some of the key moments in its development. The aim of this paper is to highlight a certain cross-pollination of ideas between the Prague and Patmos groups without arguing for explicit vectors of influence between them. This article places the Patmos Circle in its proper context through an examination of their publication, the quarterly magazine *Die Kreatur* (1926–1930). By focusing on the concept of New Humanism and the end of history, this research will analyze two modernist masterpieces authored by members of the Patmos Circle: Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* (1919) and Franz Rosenzweig's *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1919). Through a study of the evolution of dialogical thinking within the Patmos Circle, I contend that the term "circle" is more appropriate than "school" to describe such associations, as it acknowledges the diverse and overlapping group interests that united its various members. What distinguishes the Patmos group from the literary-aesthetic circles in Prague is their commitment to eschatology within a critique of progress and their pursuit of a New Humanism based on the value of dialogue as a vital occurrence.

Keywords: Patmos circle; Martin Buber; Franz Rosenzweig; German-Jewish thought; community; humanism



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1. Introduction: On the Significance of *Dialogfähigkeit* in the Prague and Patmos Circles

The concept of *Dialogfähigkeit*, which translates to "dialogical capability," is crucial in the context of the Prague and Patmos Circles as it embodies their commitment to open dialogue and cultural exchange (Jungmayr 2014). This capability was particularly significant for the Prague Circle, where members engaged with various philosophical and literary traditions. The Prague literati's ability to navigate different cultural narratives and legacies helped protect them against aggressive nationalism. In a similar vein, the Patmos Circle, led by figures such as Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), transformed this readiness for dialogue into a structured form of dialogical thinking. This approach served as a means to counteract the prevailing nationalism and confessionalism of the period. The cross-pollination of ideas between these circles illustrates how *Dialogfähigkeit* served as a foundational element that encouraged a broader engagement with diverse philosophical ideas and the promotion of a New Humanism, which sought to integrate various religious traditions within a secular framework.

In this article, I argue that the Prague and Patmos Circles shared a commitment to philosophical inquiry and interfaith dialogue. Both circles responded to the "crisis of Bildung" in the Weimar Republic, focusing on education and cultural rebirth as central themes

in their works. They both sought to transcend nationalist narratives, promoting a universal approach to knowledge and identity that remained faithful to gaps in particularism—the elements of each culture that cannot be fully understood or captured by any overarching framework. The Patmos Circle’s emphasis on dialogue was influenced by the Prague Circle’s literary output, specifically Max Brod’s theological ideas about Judaism, Christianity, and Paganism. Ideas surrounding eschatology emerged prominently in both circles, reflecting on the implications of time and human destiny. Both groups critiqued prevailing notions of progress, instead advocating for a renewed humanistic ethos that acknowledged historical struggles. Through these engagements, both the Prague and Patmos Circles contributed significantly to the evolution of dialogical thinking and the philosophical discourse of their time.

2. A Postcard from the Trenches

In a letter from 1916 dispatched in the trenches of World War I, Franz Rosenzweig—theologian, philosopher, and member of the Patmos Circle—polemicizes against the project of Jewish assimilation: “There is no such thing as the problem of East European Jews; there’s only the Jewish problem—and strictly speaking even that does not exist. Bear in mind that the whole German fear of the East European Jews does not refer to him as such, but to him as a potential Western Jew” (Glatzer 1998, p. 37). Rosenzweig has his own addressees, his parents, in mind: assimilated German Jews who, such as Kafka and his compatriots, embraced multiculturalism and hybrid forms of identity.

Ethnic, religious, and social groups were complexly intertwined in Prague. Much to the dismay of purists, these groups could not be clearly separated from each other. They overlapped, intersected, complemented each other, formed temporary alliances, and then dissolved to form new groups. Brod, who worked as a dramaturg at the time, recounts his encounter with a “miserable” ensemble of East-Jewish actors, whom he stumbled upon not in a proper theatre but in the humble “Café Savoy” (Kuehn 1993). This troupe revealed to him the genuine essence of Jewish folklore—simultaneously “terrifying and repulsive”—yet irresistibly enchanting. As Margarita Pazi remarks in her biography of Max Brod, these individuals shared little in common with Brod’s assimilated and cultured Jewish associates, aside from a nominal Jewish identity. For these actors, Jewishness was not a learned knowledge but rather a lived reality in the face of other forms of cultural hegemony, nourished by religious devotion and an impassioned yearning of the heart.

Harnessing the energies of their Czech counterparts, the German-Jewish intelligentsia in and around Frankfurt would go on to organize literary alliances, form publication houses, stage Yiddish plays, criticize the haute-bourgeoisie for being hostile toward Eastern Jewry, etc. without falling into the trappings of a rigid, predominantly German, and dogmatic *Weltanschauung* constructed around a national identity. They availed themselves of what one might call the gaps in particularism: the interstitial possibilities opened up by the consolidation of particular identity groups, which troubled a universalist framework.

The Patmos Circle (and the Forte Circle before them) were not, strictly speaking, “literary” associations. They were composed of renowned intellectuals—theologians, philosophers, medical professionals, and jurists—such as Leo Weismantel (1888–1964), Hans Ehrenberg (1883–1958), Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888–1973), Martin Buber (1878–1965), and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929). The task with which they were confronted might be characterized as religious in orientation yet literary in its core import: to envision a republic of letters centered on dialogical thinking while embracing secular values with the aim of guiding a public readership through turbulent times. Their writings were often secondary to the public debates they initiated and the popular initiatives they undertook for disseminating writings geared towards adult education. The journal *Die Kreatur* (1926–1930) might be cited as one such initiative, a signpost to the utopias they polyvocally advocated for.

Instead of focusing on reconstructing the identity disputes and the culture wars that might have fuelled the establishment of overlapping German-Jewish and Czech-German circles in German-speaking worlds at the turn of the century, I want to focus on the

distinctive challenges they pose to what I will provisionally call gaps in particularism: the interstices and peripheries within sites of identity construction that allow for diverse social and political perspectives and position-taking. The lifeworld of Patmos and other German-Jewish intellectual circles in the wake of the collapse of the German Empire provides a powerful contrast to that of the Prague circles after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. By virtue of their acute awareness of the need for a philosophy of dialogue in times of crisis, the Patmos and Forte circles opened the doors of public debate on apocalyptic and eschatological perspectives on creation, revelation, and redemption—theologically-inflected categories for thinking about those impasses of secularism that remained opaque in the context of assimilationist thinking and, for the most part, invisible under Czech cosmopolitanism.

3. Setting the Stage: Max Brod at the End of History

The Austro-Hungarian era was marked by a quasi-autonomous structure, with Prague as a significant center. The city was a tripartite composition of Czechs, Germans, and Jews, often engaging in polemics against each other (Kuehn 1993). Max Brod, known primarily as Franz Kafka's friend and literary executor, was a thinker and writer in his own right. Brod, a significant figure in the Austro-Hungarian era, was part of a tripartite composition of Czechs, Germans, and Jews in Prague. The city was a cross-cultural site of encounter where these three nations confronted each other in polemics. Religion played a minimal role in Brod's family life, although his father still observed the rituals of the major Jewish holidays.

Brod's *Paganism, Christianity, Judaism* (1921) interrogates the nature and differences between the three Abrahamic religions as spiritual powers. It begins by cautioning against the false humility of confessing a partial view of reality when it comes to religious experience. Brod criticizes the tendency to belittle readers who seek in each religion a focal point and stance from which to understand the whole of history at once. He boldly claims that although "the earth is dominated by three spiritual powers—paganism, Christianity, and Judaism," each of these represents distinct ways of interpreting the ultimate telos of world history (Brod 1921, p. 3).

The three dominant religions offer varying modes of correlating the visible with the transcendent, coordinating the human souls' reactions to religious experience, and harmonizing their own unique standpoints into a hierarchy of powers and spheres. Early on, Brod alludes to the "universal destruction of human civilization" and the impact of world wars. He sees these events as "secret vibrations" (p. 4) resulting from the shifting geo-political relations among these three religious possibilities. An imbalance in power dominance can lead to misunderstandings, particularly affecting Judaism.

Similar to Rosenzweig, Brod defines the situation from which he writes, his own situatedness, as one that calls for delineating "three paths" toward "absolute value" (Brod 1921, p. 4). He references Max Weber, who defines inner religious experience as irrational. Then, William James is enlisted to defend the same argument. James describes religious experience in terms of "absolute incommunicability," simultaneously specific and beyond verbal expression. Brod identifies three such spiritual attitudes oriented around ineffability, which he terms "three systems." Paganism is devoted to the continuum between the human and the divine worlds. Christianity, on the other hand, denies the world, seeking its sublation in a spiritual order. Judaism defies easy categorization; it neither fully affirms nor negates the world.

Brod's prognosis suggests that the denial of the world is a fundamental trend in European development. The inclusion of the synoptic Gospels in the works of Christian thinkers such as Dante and Kierkegaard reorients Christian dogma toward the social good—an essential topic for Brod concerning the harmonization of the three powers. Paganism, in Brod's view, archaizes the world, leading to the Hellenization of the entire globe, the Renaissance, and the resurgence of the Olympian Greek world in German thought. Paganism's archaization renders it a broad category that includes proto-Marxism, laissez-faire Capitalism, the ideal of the ancient polis, the Prussian spirit, monism, biologism, and even

Treitschke's concept of the State as the deification of world history's telos. Brod's polemic against paganism primarily concerns the viral character of paganism: "the evolutionary forms of the same Pagan idea" pivot around the end of history as its actualization (p. 6).

4. Brod's Theological Ideas and the Patmos Circle's Agenda

Brod's exploration of the three spiritual powers—Christianity, Judaism, and Paganism—provides a thought-provoking perspective from which to historicize the Patmos Circle's predominant concerns. Eschatology as the framework within which a philosophy of time could be conceptualized formed the ground out of which the promotion of a renewed humanistic ethos became possible in the context of Patmos' program for cultural rebirth. The tripartite path toward absolute value, as Brod calls it, gave birth to ideas that were initially taken up by Patmos' own publication house. Tasked with raising consciousness about just what the end of war entailed, these ideas came to fruition later on in the quarterly affiliated with a group of Patmos writers known as *Die Kreatur* (1926–1929).

Die Kreatur was an ecumenical quarterly publication that emerged under the joint editorship of Martin Buber, Joseph Wittig (1879–1949), and Viktor von Weizsäcker (1886–1957). Operating from 1926 to 1930, the journal was an integral part of a circle loosely referred to by Franz Rosenzweig as "my group." This circle, in Rosenzweig's view, was in need of crystallization rather than growth at the time.¹ The quarterly's thematic organization revolved around issues relevant to the circle, with the first issue featuring posthumous works by Florens Christian Rang (1864–1924), a theologian and thinker affiliate of the Patmos, such as "Das Reich," "Freundschaft," and "Vom Weltbuch der Person," while the final issue in 1930 was dedicated to Rosenzweig's memory after his early death due to Lou Gehrig's disease.

Distinct from and yet affiliated with the Patmos Circle, *Die Kreatur* was characterized by its multifocal nature without a centralized program. It embraced dialogical thinking and celebrated the rebellion of individuals against established institutions. With the publication of the quarterly a decade after the Circle's dissolution, Rosenzweig, who had only been a distant affiliate of Patmos, came to assume a more central position. The journal in fact obtained its name from Rosenzweig's concern with creatureliness in the meta-ethical world as delineated in his *magnum opus*, *The Star of Redemption* (1919).

The concept of "creatureliness" in human existence, as elucidated by Franz Rosenzweig and to some extent Walter Benjamin (1892–1940),² goes beyond a mere acknowledgment of nature or living beings as biological life. Instead, it harks back to a dimension specific to the irreducibility of human existence, distinguished by its unique exposure to what sets the human being apart from other forms of life: ethical life. This exposure is not merely to the elements or about the fragility of an existentially attuned being aware of finitude; rather, it extends to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that define human communities.

Creatureliness is more about where the closure of ontology ends, reaches its limit, and where particularity and vulnerability begin to take on human features. It is more about the gaps in the construction of particular identities than incarnation as such. It signifies the vulnerability permeating human existence shaped by contingent, fragile, and transient forms of life. In the Lutheran tradition, particularly according to Luther's beliefs, fallen humanity lost the ability to understand the meaning of God's revealed word after the fall. The univocal relationship between God's word and human languages was definitively severed. To bridge this gap, Lutherans turned to the idea of the "Book of Nature," suggesting that deciphering the natural language of creatures could reveal the divine order without relying solely on scripture (Benjamin 1998).

This perspective aligns with Rosenzweig's differentiation between mere "existence" (*Dasein*) and "living being" (*Lebendigsein*) in the world (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 258). The creaturely weakness of mere existence, susceptible to constant change and decay, contrasts with the stability of living beings. The connection between creaturely life and the word of God, as expressed by Luther, further resonates with Rosenzweig's exploration of redemption and

the distinction between existence and living being. Walter Benjamin, whose impressions of Moscow were printed in a piece entitled “Moscow” in the first issue of the quarterly, *Die Kreatur*, similarly introduces a hierarchy of the creaturely world in his commentary in this piece and other writings (Benjamin 2005). From the righteous man to the inanimate world, this world speaks not with the human voice but with what Benjamin calls “the voice of Nature.” This emphasizes a connection between the creaturely realm and the natural order, echoing Luther’s idea of deciphering God’s word through the language of creatures.

It was the Nietzschean thinker and theologian, Florens Christian Rang, who originally conceived the idea for the journal. This occurred at a time when Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy had proposed a project for Patmos. Their initial vision centred around a triune publication house: *Eleusis*, *Moriah*, and *Patmosverlag*—vaguely reflecting the three major cultural-confessional tendencies of the interwar years—Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity (Stünkel 2015). *Die Kreatur* would subsequently be tasked by Rosenstock-Huessy with the rebirth of the German language as an idiom of many tongues. The aim was to give voice to the creature in its creatureliness, speaking in a condition marked by the downfall of the world. This postlapsarian language is unlike the Adamic language of a prelapsarian world, where names coincide with the essence of things and naming materializes the essence of entities. Speaking in this context is a drama. Rang contributes to the idea about the dramaturgy of living speech in his work, “Agon and Theatre,” where speech is compared to a *Wettlauf*, a “competition” with juridical connotations in the context of Greek tragedy and civic tribunals.³ But the overarching goal of the journal was “to go together without joining together, enabling the greeting of different standpoints or spheres of truth motivated by the common concern of the creaturely being” (Weidner 2016, p. 116). This reflects the intentionality of diverging vectors with a common destination, reaching a common language for dialogue.

Die Kreatur was a multivocal, heterogeneous, and pluralistic platform, featuring texts by authors such as Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Eugen Rosenstock, Rudolf Ehrenberg, Florens Christian Rang, Leo Shestov, and Hans Trüb. These essayistic texts strived for a new anthropology beyond either naturalism or idealist philosophy. In his seminal essay for the 1926–27 issue, “Scripture and Word: On the New Bible Translation,” Franz Rosenzweig writes: “Scripture, in the charged sense of the term, Holy Scripture, opens up the unsurveyable sense of the territory of *Schrifttum*, no longer bound to any human receptive power. This native word *Schrifttum* has an apparently (but 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 the end of the accumulated heap of books” (Buber and Rosenzweig 1994, p. 41). The journal would neither be an established oeuvre nor a systematic collection of differing viewpoints and essayistic endeavours; it would institute a new anthropology for a being that reads voraciously and in general; it would be a “Janus-faced” entity that did not concern itself with daily affairs in the way a newspaper and even the feuilleton does, nor would it possess the aura of finality that a book does (Weidner 2016). Inherently a dialogic medium, it would find room for different languages, idiolects, and discourses. Marking the epochal end of the book and the beginning of writing, text, textuality, and fiction, *Die Kreatur* established a new paradigm for reading and criticism at the end of history and after the end of the epoch of the book.

5. The Patmos Circle and the Birth of Dialogical Thinking

The Patmos Circle started off as a publishing house affiliated with an eclectic group of German-Jewish intellectuals, some of whom were Jewish converts to Catholicism. Their aim was to create a new community of readers in the aftermath of the First World War. When the Patmos Circle disbanded, its members went on to create *die Kreatur*. Among the topics central to both publishing endeavors was education, or *Bildung*. In the inaugural issue of *die Kreatur*, no fewer than three of the eight contributions dealt programmatically with education. This was a response to the “crisis of *Bildung*,” a debate of central importance in the early Weimar republic. The journal belonged to the contemporary context, linking it

to the leading journals of Progressive Cultural Catholicism (*Hochland*) and of Protestant Dialectical Theology (*Zwischen den Zeiten*). It formed part of a broader movement of cultural periodicals that programmatically avoided specialization and sought to provide the new function of “orientation” for their readers. After scrutinizing the volumes, one notices that the coherence among these texts is of a different order. It lies in part in a certain principle of montage, a montage of affinities and attractions that guides the eye of the reader, in part unconsciously.

Martin Buber, the German-Jewish philosopher, collaborated with the Protestant theologian Karl Barth as a member of the Patmos Circle, publishing notable works. Leo Weismantel, the group’s founding figure, played a crucial role in popularizing Barth’s early theological writings. However, Barth later criticized the group for promoting pan-Hellenism and Gnosticism—in essence, for being too lenient toward the myriad mystical trends that prevailed during the Weimar years. He responded with fervent attacks against the presentist and incarnationist currents exploited by the Patmos.

In many ways, the Patmos was the first association of its kind—a pioneering group of emancipated intellectuals, including theologians, jurists, philosophers, and medical professionals. Their shared commitment revolved around the idea of adult education and spiritual renewal in the aftermath of the Great War. Their inspiration had its source in the experience of translation as a task. Rosenzweig made the argument that “the true goal of the mind is translating; only when a thing has been translated does it become truly vocal” (Rosenzweig cited in Glatzer 1998, p. 62). Building upon this insight and inspired by the spirit of speech as bridge-building, Rosenstock-Huessy coined the term “symblysmia” to describe the event of speech as what made the community speak responsibly (Stünkel 2015).

As a pioneering member of the group, Rosenstock-Huessy envisioned a tripartite symblysmatic structure that would encompass the three ‘confessions’: Jews, Christians, and pagans. This structure aimed to unite their distinct worldviews around a common purpose. By the time of *Die Kreatur*, this vision had evolved into multifaceted endeavours. What initially began as a plan for running three publishing houses transformed into the task of translating the Hebrew bible again into German (Buber and Rosenzweig), publishing essayistic articles on art and culture (Rang and Benjamin), and disseminating the polemical aspects of the Patmos Circle’s wartime publications.

The members of the Patmos Circle criticized the eschatological perspective of Christianity as the culmination and purpose of history. Their perspective stood in opposition to the wartime nihilism of Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* and other apocalyptic trends that permeated post-War debates on the end of history. The Patmos Circle acted as a countervailing force against the pessimism of a decadent culture in decay. They were the proponents of a fierce belief in a new creaturely life. Rosenzweig expresses this idea in his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption* (1919), which unfolded the symblysmatic division of Rosenstock-Huessy’s event of speech into a rigorous philosophical and theological edifice, with the question of communal obligation and the living experience of ethical life at its centre. Ironically, the group’s commitment to interfaith dialogue meant that the Patmos publishing house’s own publications would serve as the organization’s “paratexts”: “parerga,” or leftover discursive desiderata, occasional writings more meant as provocations than as criticism. The titles of some of the earlier publications, such as *Bücher von Kreuzweg* and *Die Hochzeit des Kriegs und der Revolution*, reflect their engagement with popular discourses constructed around interwar nationalism, as well as the juridical and economic stakes of the debate.

6. New Humanism and Its Prehistory: The Fortekreis

Brod called the consciousness of a pattern of consistency in history and tradition, coupled with a deep concern for human values and dignity, “supranational humanism” (Kuehn 271). Prior to the outbreak of the war, it was the Forte Circle that had spearheaded such a notion through the interrogation of Johannine eschatology in connection with Jewish messianism. Established in Potsdam between 1910 and 1915, the Forte Circle emerged as a

utopian association of like-minded individuals fueled by the optimistic ideals prevalent before World War I. The circle's genesis can be traced back to the summer of 1914 when Martin Buber and other luminaries, including Henri Borel (1869–1933), Theodor Däubler (1876–1934), Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932), Erich Gutkind (1877–1965), Gustav Landauer (1870–1919), and Florens Christian Rang, convened for a pivotal three-day conference. Their primary objective was to lay the groundwork for an organization advocating the unification of all nations, especially during crucial historical conjunctures. Initial discussions involved prominent intellectuals such as Romain Rolland (1866–1944), reflecting the global scope of their aspirations.

However, the outbreak of the war in 1914 posed a profound challenge to the cohesiveness of the mission upheld by the Forte Circle. Gustav Landauer, a committed pacifist who wavered between anarchy and discipline, viewed the war as a disastrous departure from humanistic values. In letters to Buber, Landauer expressed his unwavering commitment to end the war and forestall its recurrence. The disillusionment reached its peak when the Prussian Ministry of War issued a census registering Jews as aliens, undermining the German-Jewish members' hope for acceptance in the new German polity.

Under Buber's guidance, dialogical thinking came to express an orientation that would steer clear of the revolutionary fervour that had by then cast its spell on Landauer and others. In 1919, Gustav Landauer tested his visionary ideals in the context of the Bavarian revolution, furthering his dream of utopian socialism. He met with a tragic end (Pisano 2022). During this turbulent period, Martin Buber was engaged in crafting *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, a work centred on the pursuit of heroic life. Buber's polemics turned toward the historical juncture by utilizing the Aristotelian concept of *kinesis*, which marks the transition from potentiality to actuality. He reformulated this idea in historical terms, challenging the cosmopolitanism of Landauer. With Buber eventually detaching from the Aristotelian paradigm, dialogical thinking was elevated to the forefront. Dialogic discourse was to be repositioned as the definitive guiding emotion and orientation for thinking what is new in philosophy and theology in ways that transcended epochal terms.⁴ It was roughly around the same time that Franz Rosenzweig started developing the rudiments of his New Thinking (*Das Neue Denken*), which took seriously the challenges presented by Barth's systematic theology and logical positivism to philosophical and religious traditions. Buber's *Zwiesprache* (1932) would later on present a dialectical recuperation of these ideas.

The Forte Circle, driven by the ambitious goal of assuming spiritual ascendancy over Europe, eventually collapsed, and the renowned figures who were working in its orbit scattered in unforeseeable directions. Various perspectives attribute the demise to issues such as intercultural disputes and the increasingly belligerent German-chauvinistic rhetoric of Buber (Poorthuis 2017). Erich Gutkind's role, especially concerning his work *Siderische Geburt* (1910), remains deeply ambiguous and raises questions about the significance to the circle of the idea that a new mankind would want to assert its spiritual ascendancy over Europe. The question of the framework of a philosophy of history within which the idea of a new humanity could be pursued was elided by the group. The collapse of the Forte Circle remains a complex chapter in the history of literary pan-European utopian endeavours, revealing the challenges posed by the socio-political realities of the time (Holste and Faber 2001).

7. Karl Barth and the Challenge of Dialectical Theology

The members of the Patmos Circle, although predominantly Jewish, sought to create a genuinely Christian sense of worldliness through their work and ideas. Based on the foundational concept of *symblysmá*, the event of speech that enabled the community to speak responsibly, they emancipated themselves from the shackles of a tradition that had rigidified into empty ritual. They welcomed the ideas of Karl Barth about a fallen humanity in an abyssal state deserted by even the last vestiges of the holy and the sacred, just as they welcomed other, more optimistic accounts of the condition of fallenness. However, Barth's emphasis on the radical transcendence of God and the paradoxical nature of faith

it entails was fundamentally at odds with their more tolerant attitude toward mystical and other-cultural trends of their milieu. While some members eventually abandoned the group and even joined the Nazi propaganda machine later on, others criticized the idea of abstract pacifism and humanism for lacking heroism and political significance. For all their differences, they shared a fierce commitment to adult education. For them, education served as the main avenue for disseminating the new thinking and constructing a refuge for learning in the context of an evolving, new public sphere.

Barth and his followers indeed shared a vision with the Patmos Circle up to a point, but they also vehemently criticized them after a certain point. They accused the Patmos members of arrogance and an overvaluation of incarnationist dogma: in their critique of the ideology of progress and the eschatological dimension of Christianity, the Patmos Circle had inevitably ahistoricized the 'now' of revelation as a sensuous moment, a pleromatic moment of fullness, in which through prayer, study, and inspiration, the end of the old regimes and world-orders could be hastened. This was Rosenzweig's argument in the *Star*.

Gerschom Scholem, the scholar of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, criticized both perspectives: the Barthian as well as that of Rosenzweig. According to Barth, it was preferable to defer the moment of action to an ever-receding future than actualize it here and now. In contrast, Rosenzweig believed that the final *telos* of history needed to be breached by forcing eternity into the empty now of the moment. According to Scholem in his review of Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, both perspectives tamed the "anarchic element" in Jewish apocalypticism (Scholem 1971). However, by forcing redemption into the clockwork of life as its prosaic innerworkings, Jewish messianism, unlike Barthian dialectical theology, refuses to abandon the world and its redemption. And yet an incarnationist theology of the sensuous 'now' in immediate union with the divine, and the expectation that such a mystical reconciliation was possible at any moment, would prove to be anathema to the more legalistic strains of Jewish messianism as well.⁵

Rosenstock-Huessy and Barth engaged in heated debates about the history of revelation, specifically the question of whether revelation was a historical occurrence that happened once in the distant past or whether it could recur again. Barth's *Römerbrief* or *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919) contains a passage directed at the Patmos Circle, where he condemns their "fabulous elasticity" that distorts revelation's impossible possibility into the mere possibility of a circle "which may found a publishing house whose name bears witness to arrogance and inevitable failure" (Stünkel 2015). In that seminal work, by contrast, faith emerges as a profound and self-initiating experience, not bound by a prescribed ladder to climb. It is a non-pleromatic moment centred on the apprehension of the extraordinary "'loveless' love of God" for the creature and the willingness to carry out the scandalous will of God (Barth 1968, p. 99). This faith is described in high modernist terms as a leap into the darkness, a flight into empty air, and it defies mature and assured possession. Barth draws on Kierkegaard's notion that the call to be an apostle lies beyond personal self-identity, emphasizing the paradoxical nature of its occurrence. The historical significance of Christianity is an event that marks the intersection of the unknown and known worlds, yet it is not a merging of the two. A nodal point. The resurrection, rather than the incarnation of revealed truth, becomes the central category. Barth underscores the resurrection as an occurrence in history that, such as the birth of the new man, transcends being a merely historical event. This proclamation extends to affirming the individual's worth and soul. The 'moment' transcends the past and future, proclaiming the likeness of all times in its participation in the dignity and meaning of human purpose.

Barth's departure from the circle signalled a decisive break with dialogical thinking. His mature dialectical theology argues for the ineffability of transcendence and the value of silence. Despite this departure, his theology remains deeply rooted in his personal and religious journey. During World War I, Barth's disillusionment with liberal experientialism became evident as well. Adolf von Harnack's public statement in support of Germany's military mission conflicted with his own systematic-theological understanding of the radical separation between divine and human purposes. Barth's rejection of the merging

of divine and human purposes led him to emphasize the radical chasm between God's transcendent reality and human experience. Barth challenges the Christian Gnostic idea of divine power as *pleroma*, offering a different perspective on God's power. Instead of emphasizing divine overflow into human nature, Barth sees God's power as manifested in faithfulness to the creature during moments of dejection and destitution.

In the different prefaces to his work, Barth outlines his evolving perspectives. He distances himself from liberal historicism as well as Gnosticism, emphasizing the preliminary nature of all human endeavors. Barth voices his intention for the book to be not only read but also heard, emphasizing a multisensory engagement with the text, as Rosenzweig and Buber later would in the context of their own new translation of the Hebrew Bible. His critique of religious experience and his emphasis on faith as a dynamic force that maintains the tension between fallenness and the intermittent presence of the kingdom of God emphasize the paradoxical coexistence of fallenness and the potential for redemption through faith. But above all, it is the centrality of the resurrection in Barth's theology that becomes the axis around which his insights revolve. The resurrection, for Barth, is not just an event in history but a transformative act that defies the conventional understanding of the incarnation, revealing the ineradicable uniqueness of the divine act. By the time Barth was clarifying his own position, Rosenzweig was deeply immersed in the affairs of the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* (1920), which he founded and directed in Frankfurt as a centre for adult Jewish learning at the periphery of the official university system.

8. Rosenzweig and the New Thinking

Franz Rosenzweig's academic journey was marked by two pivotal works: his dissertation on Hegel's theory of the state and *The Star of Redemption*. Despite securing a prominent academic position, the latter work led him to an altogether different calling at a removal from the official university system. It convinced him of the nobility of teaching as a task that transcends academic teaching. He founded the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* for adult learners in 1920 and took over its leadership with remarkable humility.

Written on the back of a set of postcards during the War at the Balkan fronts, *The Star of Redemption* takes as its point of departure the shattering of totality and the experience of the ubiquity of death in times of war. It systematizes a triadic structure that correlates philosophy and theology with the creaturely experience of finitude. Bringing together the theological concepts of creation, revelation, and redemption as the correlates of what philosophy has traditionally understood in terms of the structure of totality—God, world, and man—Rosenzweig reduces the traditional totalities of philosophy (Kant's transcendental ideas) to a determinate nothing in each case. In terms of its methodological commitments, the New Thinking put forth in the *Star* was an empiricism that sought to do justice to that which evades universality yet remains unsubsumable as particularity in the context of a dialectic of part and whole. While showing that the claim of individuality to totality in the system is irreducible to a dialectical process of integration, the work charts new categories not in terms of religious experience but based on the universally accessible experience of the grammar of speaking.

Rosenzweig's justification for the work is that the thought of the absolute, wrapped in an incomprehensibility surrounding death, forms the "atmosphere" or ether of the will to system (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 72). The Hegelian system's self-completion fantasy brings into view a new type of being created at the closing arch of its structure, one for whom laws and commandments collapse in the challenge of ordering the chaos of the world. Rosenzweig introduces the metaethical concept of man, emphasizing that the law was given to man, not vice versa, leading to a profound shift in our common sense understanding of the moral personality. The triadic structure becomes more apparent as Rosenzweig explores the symbols A and B, where A represents divine freedom and B stands for particularity as character. The space between A and B lacks a defined relationship, highlighting the distinction between divine freedom and worldly phenomena. The pre-reflective self, going beyond will and being, embodies the likeness of Adam: it is not just one among the children

of men but a unique creation in the image of God. Defiance emerges as a key experience in the confrontation of the finitude of the new self and the world.

Rosenzweig, such as Barth and Rosenstock-Huessy, delves with his work into debates about the concept of time and incarnation, asserting that the birthdate of the self differs from that of personality. The self invests man “like a soldier,” taking possession of all his possessions (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 80). The daimon, representing the self, is introduced as a blind and mute force that surprises man in the guise of Eros, eventually revealing itself as Thanatos. The metaethical man becomes a tragic hero, akin to the heroes of antiquity, immortalized as his character dissolves into the heroic self. Regarding the new orientation of the self, Rosenzweig writes: “Das Neue, dass wir suchen, muß ein Nunc stans sein, kein verfliegender also, sondern ein ‘stehender’ Augenblick” (The new thing that we are seeking must be a nunc stans, not a moment that flies away, but a “fixed” moment, Rosenzweig 2002, p. 322; 2005, p. 307). But having linked this fixed temporality to Jewish liturgical service, the contrast is with the “crammed time” or the “halting place” of the epochal “in-between” of Christian faith, the standstill of Christianity which takes itself to have achieved the end of history and the goal of salvation. What emerges out of this systematic polemic against soteriology and Barth’s notion of the abandonment of the world by God is the outlines of two ways of anchoring the flow time (nunc fluens) in two directions that lay competing claims on the nature of revelation and the eternity of anchored time in redemption.

9. Conclusions

Although the Patmos idea was inspired by eschatology and its critique in the context of the idea of the birth of a new reading republic, these trends were taken up by the members of the group in a modernist and literary vein and constructed around the notion of a new humanism, namely, creatureliness. Barth’s famous assertion captures the essence of the debate with Rosenzweig well: “If I have a ‘system,’ then it consists in the fact that I keep what Kierkegaard has called the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between time and eternity consistently in mind. God is in heaven, and you are on earth” (Herskowitz 2017). Rosenzweig sees this position as accurate and yet monstrous in its abandonment of the world: the “result of this monstrous accuracy” is that “we accurate people today all stand together, such as children in a circle. One person asserts one accurate point: his neighbour scorns him with an even more accurate statement that this utterance was false because it was accurate. And so it goes around the circle until we arrive back at the first: the whole thing is called theology” (Herskowitz 2017). In spite of or perhaps because of their differences, Rosenzweig and Barth shared an overarching aim: to trace, rather than negate, the borders of confessions, groups, and circles—indeed, schools of thought and religious coalitions—and to fold them back into the lived experience of truth, resembling a microcosm of the world of creation in which redemption was intended and included as the very possibility of personal interchange and public discourse.

Rosenzweig’s influence on *die Kreatur* became evident in the quarterly’s emphasis on hermeneutics and perspectival reading. Buber’s influence was evident in the genesis of the very idea of Patmos and Forte as “circles” with overlapping constituents and programs: dialogical thinking. While the journal *Die Kreatur* served as an intellectual habitat for those who forged their own unique paths to Patmos, embodying an island of exegetical thought and distant reflection, it was the forum’s structured transiency, as Rosenstock-Huessy describes it, that ensured how the overlapping group interests of the circles coincided and intersected. As a journal, *Die Kreatur* represented a “Janus-faced entity,” neither an established oeuvre nor a systematic collection of essays. It avoided daily affairs such as newspapers and lacked the finality associated with books. In linguistic terms, the journal form is more of a discourse than a singular enunciation, embodying the essential features of multiplicity and sequentiality, serving as a dialogic medium, and accommodating different languages, idiolects, and discourses.

The intellectual ferment of the interwar years, embodied by the Patmos Circle and its dialogical ethos, represents a compelling narrative of philosophical inquiry and interfaith dialogue. This period saw a concerted effort to transcend the confines of nationalist narratives and embrace a more capacious universalism: an approach to knowledge and identity within the interstices of universalizing claims to self-coherence and particular identities. The core principles of the Patmos Circle, rooted in the idea of rebirth and commitment to open dialogue, provided fertile ground for the integration of diverse religious traditions within a secular society. By navigating the complex negotiations of identity in an increasingly atheistic world, Patmos exemplified the malleability of its ethos, allowing Catholicism, Calvinism, and other ‘confessions’ to advance their universal messages. Furthermore, through their respective works, Rosenzweig and Barth not only challenged prevailing orthodoxies but also laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and interconnected worldview, where the task of translation served as a bridge over the chasm of words and the pursuit of truth transcended traditional boundaries. If there was one overarching sentiment that brought together their differing viewpoints, it was the crisis that was vitiating the social and cultural realms of the interwar years: the virulent fiction of a nationally pure language and body politic. Despite or perhaps because of their differences, the German-Jewish intellectuals of the interwar years and their counterparts across the world seem to have been advocates for a radical porosity, both between the boundaries separating different polities in Europe and within this research field separating the Humanities from the Sciences.

If I have rehearsed this fraught history of circles, their creation and destruction, and the scissions and factions to which they are susceptible, it is mostly because in the German-speaking context they contribute a significant foil against which one might gauge the secularizing impulse at work in the Prague circles’ preoccupation with values such as literary worldliness, creatureliness, and world literature. This impetus is informed by the multifaceted ways in which the Patmos Circle’s core ideas juxtapose a republic of letters after the end of the book with something such as world literature as a non-relativizing constant reference point of comparison. Therefore, instead of offering discrete readings of Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* (1919) and Karl Barth’s *The Epistle to Romans* (1919), I have examined how these works constellate around the shared existential projects that emerged out of the dissolution of the Patmos Circle and the ideals of reading in concert and dialogue they brought into fruition in the journal *Die Kreatur*.

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Notes

- ¹ This is in a letter of 19 June 1925, addressed to Buber (Buber 2013, p. 329).
- ² See the early essays on language, called “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” in the first volume of the Selected Writings (Benjamin 2002, pp. 62–75). Benjamin sees language as the spiritual essence of man, or “geistiges Wesen”. Language is reflected as a medium for communicating the content of the mind, or “geistiger Inhalt”. This communication is not merely an expression of what is conveyed through it, but a direct manifestation of the spiritual essence that reveals itself within it. The spiritual essence, while communicating itself in language, is distinct from language. It corresponds to language in a sense of similarity rather than identity. The spiritual essence is immediately included in the linguistic being, or “sprachliches Wesen”, as a potentiality to be communicated.
- ³ See Walter Benjamin’s letter to Florens Christian Rang, dated 20 January 1924, and the pursuant conversation in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940* (Benjamin 2019, p. 231). For the German, see *Walter Benjamin: Briefe I* (Benjamin 1978, p. 333).
- ⁴ Buber engages with the hyperbolic notion of a dialogical war against the violent imposition of the dogma of silence in situations of religion and moral responsibility. He sees the need for genuine dialogue to remedy such situations, insisting on a true exchange of certainty and uncertainty between open-hearted individuals.
- ⁵ See Scholem’s review of Rosenzweig’s *Star* (Scholem 1971, pp. 320–25).

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