

Reviews

MARTIN BUBER'S LIFE AND WORK: THE EARLY YEARS 1878-1923 by Maurice Friedman. Search Press, 1982. pp xxiii + 455. £14.95.

Not since Hans Kohn published *Martin Buber: sein Werk und seine Zeit* in 1929 (it was re-issued with a supplement by Robert Weltsch in 1961 but in German only) has there been any study of him of similar merit. Kohn was equal to the task of accounting for the first fifty years of Buber's life in a style and on a level not encountered since then. More plainly still, a perusal of the many commentaries on Buber, among them those of your reviewer, and of the relatively few biographies of him, will show that intellectually he towers head and shoulders above most of his admirers and critics alike. As part perhaps of the downward slide into the mediocrity, or worse, so noticeable in our own time, this sage of two generations ago, cultured, erudite and important to us for what he has to say about living religiously, has not yet attracted to his cause, to explicate it adequately, and to carry it on and develop it further, anyone remotely measuring up to his own stature.

Maurice Friedman describes his own endeavour as a "dialography", intending thus to differentiate his approach from the general run. "Biography", he tells us, "leads us to see events as clustered about a life – as if the event were contained in the life rather than, as is actually the case, the life in the events. To see the event – the meeting with other persons and situations – as merely part of a life process or development is necessarily to see it one sidedly. To see the life in the event is to begin to glimpse the profound two sidedness of every event" (p xiv).

Be this as it may – and the cited passage rather illustrates the tone of the book – the 455 pages of this first instalment of a planned two-volume work chronicles in full detail the events of Buber's career until the publication in

1923 of his key work, *Ich und Du*. With material from the correspondence edited by his friend Grete Schaeder (*Martin Buber: Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, Heidelberg 1972-1975), joined to the recollections of colleagues, family and friends of Buber, not to speak of his own memories from a long association with him, Friedman has been able to lay hands on all the ingredients of a good story. Or all except one: Buber was a private man and so far nothing has been divulged concerning him that might be described as in any way intimate.

In line with the aims of his "dialography" (dialogography?), much attention is paid in these pages to the people who surrounded Buber or were responsible for contributing to the formation of his ideas. Very full treatment is given in this connection to Gustav Landauer, the revolutionary writer and anarchist murdered in Munich after World War I, to Buber's shock and sorrow, and to Franz Rosenzweig, who will doubtless play a larger part in Volume II as Buber's collaborator in their work on the re-translation of the Hebrew Bible into German. Buber is seen also in the company of Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha'am and Chaim Weizmann in his role as Zionist; in communication with a variety of prominent men in his capacity as editor for eight years, from 1916-1924, of *Der Jude*, the leading organ of German Jewry; at the side of Rosenzweig, teaching in Frankfurt at the Jewish Lehrhaus there; and with Hugo Bergmann, Ernst Simon and Judah Magnes, among others, in the political and educational fields.

Bearing in mind Buber's vast literary output – his collected works fill four tomes, three of them more than a thousand pages long – it goes without saying that scattered throughout this life-story

are the titles of his books, articles, addresses, with accompanying summaries of their contents. It will in fact not be Friedman's fault if the reader, by the time he has finished, has not added substantially to the knowledge of the themes with which Buber was concerned. On the other hand, it cannot be guaranteed that he will have acquired a real and lasting understanding of the spirit informing them, or even of the essential ideas conveyed by them. The cause is hard to determine. It may be that since one of the two burning sources of Buber's vision and energy was eighteenth century Hasidism, anything resembling an authentic representation of his outlook requires a shared sympathy for, and insight into, its teachings. The same applies to the other source, the Hebrew Bible; but it is not yet possible to pronounce on Friedman's treatment of it because, as has been said, Buber's preoccupation with Scripture falls within the scope of Volume II rather than the present one. In the case of Hasidism, however, chapter 6, "The Discovery of Hasidism", occupies under thirty pages of the whole; and Kabbala, with its exciting doctrine of the indwelling Presence of God, the doctrine of the "sparks" central to the beliefs of the Hasidim, receives according to the index no more than six mentions in all. Granted that this is not a reliable indication in itself, but if Maurice Friedman in fact participates in Buber's passion for the spirituality of the *Baal Shem Tov and his followers*, all one can say is that his enthusiasm is unlikely to prove contagious.

Another obstruction to understanding has to do with language. As is frequently emphasised in these pages, Buber was a master of the written word, a noble and fluent literary man, even a poet; yet few would guess as much from the English into which his work is rendered by Friedman – with the utmost unselfconsciousness, one should add. This is a disservice if only on aesthetic grounds; but even more

gravely, it raises a barrier of possible incomprehension between Buber and his would-be reader.

One more word on the subject of balance. A prolix and tiresome piece called *Daniel*, dating back to Buber's youth and of which the least said the better – or so many may judge – is entered into in the earlier part of this study with loving care. By contrast, if on reaching the end of it we look for illumination on *Ich und Du*, we are likely to be disappointed. A little book of one hundred and twenty pages or so, it falls into three parts. The first turns on relation between the *I* and the three realms of nature, humanity and the immaterial, i.e. art, knowledge and spirit. The second discusses the irrelation resulting from holding these three realms at a distance, an attitude of mind which Buber calls *I-it*. The third introduces and explores the concept of perfect relation with the everlasting *You*, into which all other *you*-relation is gathered and made whole. In Friedman's handling, Buber's wise meditation, with its taut construction and profound implications, becomes "Spirit as Response: Knowledge and Art"; "Love and Marriage, Politics and Community"; "The Self and the World: Psychologism and Psychotherapy". Finally, it is true, we get a chapter headed "The 'Eternal Thou': The 'God of the Philosophers' versus the Living God", which seems safe enough. But even this includes the odd sub-section, "The Jewish Jesus versus the Pauline Christ".

These remarks notwithstanding, one would not wish to appear unduly critical. Maurice Friedman's latest offering, which follows more than thirty years of indefatigable labour in the field of Buber studies (from which Christian readers in particular have greatly benefited) undeniably makes for a good read and we look forward now to the publication of Volume II.

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