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New Perspectives on Martin Buber

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of my dearly beloved mother, Henriette Rosel Zank, née Koch, who passed away on January 15, 2003.

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Introduction

The thought and writings of Martin Buber (1878-1965) are so widely known that they hardly seem to need any introduction. He was an original thinker, an intellectual who, over the course of a long and productive life, contributed to a wide array of disciplines, ranging from biblical studies to translation theory, from Jewish mysticism to comparative religion, from social philosophy to psychology, and from education to politics. There is hardly a better known Jewish philosopher than Buber, and he ranks among the foremost German-language authors of the 20th century.

It is precisely because Buber's writings cover such a vast array of subjects that the continued appreciation of his legacy may have been rather muted. To be sure, Buber's name continues to be widely known. But are his writings still accessible to our students or have they become too cryptic and antiquated in form and content? Are scholarly references to Buber more than polite nods and has his influence not long since been eclipsed by that of other, more contemporary names? And what about the substance of his philosophy of dialogue? While it cannot be denied that Buber's I and Thou offered spiritual inspiration to many of his readers, it is fair to ask whether it provides a sound description of how we relate to other beings, from stones to gods. How conversant was Buber with the methods of social theory, psychology, education, or religious studies, and are his contributions to research in the fields of biblical studies, Hasidism, and other areas still important today? Did he ever outgrow the expressionism of his early re-narrations of Hasidic stories – as he asserted later on – and why is it that he is much better known for his problematic earlier writings than for his more carefully annotated later ones? When all is said and done, was Buber simply a brilliant raconteur, an essayist infatuated with his own style, a speaker/performer with a knack for theatrical self-inscenation, or was he a scholar in one or several areas in which he truly mastered the relevant texts and secondary literature and contributed to the discourse of an established academic discipline? Finally, has his utopian or anarchist approach to Zionism any value in the ongoing political debates on the future of the Jewish state?

Criticism and suspicions of this sort accompanied Buber's prolific output throughout his long and productive life. His early writings inspired a Jewish renaissance, but eventually his mystical tone rang hollow. I and Thou, the first of his mature writings, the book for which he is world fa-