

Université de Montréal

Poststructuralism and Ontological Hermeneutics: Two Non-Theoretical
Approaches to Literature and their Roots in Jewish Thought

par
Yael Perets

Département d'études anglaises
Faculté des arts et des sciences

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Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé :

Poststructuralism and Ontological Hermeneutics: Two Non-Theoretical
Approaches to Literature and their Roots in Jewish Thought

présenté par:
Yael Perets

a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

Michael Eberle-Sinatra
président-rapporteur

Andrew John Miller
directeur de recherche

Robert Schwartzwald
membre du jury

Resumé

Dès sa début, la philosophie contemporaine de littérature a été dominée par divers courants, dont le formalisme russe, la nouvelle critique, le structuralisme, le freudisme et le marxisme, ancrés dans la métaphysique ou la tradition philosophique « théorique », qui tire ses origines des théoriciens de la Grèce anciennes. Ce mémoire s'attaque à démontrer que les deux alternatives contemporaines préférées sont les poststructuralisme et l'herméneutique ontologique. La philosophie de Jacques Derrida est un excellent exemple de la première approche, tandis que celle de Hans-Georg Gadamer représente la seconde. Ces deux approches, toutefois, sont souvent confondues. Le but de ce travail est d'établir une distinction entre elles en démontrant qu'elles descendent de deux formes distinctes de la pensée judaïque ancienne. On montre que le post-structuralisme de Derrida partage plusieurs éléments fondamentaux avec la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas, qui repose essentiellement sur l'ancienne tradition rabbinique du Judaïsme. De son côté, l'herméneutique de Gadamer a beaucoup en commun avec la philosophie de Martin Buber, basée sur l'ancienne tradition juive « lévitique ». Ce mémoire termine en affirmant que ces deux approches ont des buts très différents : le poststructuralisme vise la « création » et l'herméneutique « l'interprétation ».

Mots-clés : philosophie de la littérature, poststructuralisme, herméneutique ontologique, métaphysique, Judaïsme rabbinique, Judaïsme lévitique, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Buber.

Resumé

From the outset, contemporary philosophy of literature has been dominated by approaches, including Russian Formalism, New Criticism, structuralism, Freudianism, and Marxism, that are rooted in the metaphysical or “theoretical” philosophical tradition, which originated with the theorists of ancient Greece. This thesis argues that the two leading contemporary alternatives are poststructuralism and ontological hermeneutics. Jacques Derrida’s philosophy is shown to exemplify the former and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s the latter. The two, however, are often conflated. This work aims to distinguish between them by demonstrating their roots in two distinct forms of ancient Jewish thought. Derrida’s poststructuralism is shown to share many fundamentals with Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy, one which draws fundamentally upon the ancient tradition of rabbinic Judaism. Gadamer’s hermeneutics, by contrast, shares much with Martin Buber’s philosophy, which is rooted in the ancient “Levitical” Jewish tradition. The thesis concludes with the claim that the two approaches have very different ends: poststructuralism aims for “creation” and hermeneutics for “interpretation.”

Key words: philosophy of literature, poststructuralism, ontological hermeneutics, metaphysics, rabbinic Judaism, levitical Judaism, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Buber.

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To my family

להוריי, משה וחנה

ולאביגיל, שמרית ואלמוג

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Introduction

For the most part, twentieth century philosophy of literature was dominated by “theoretical” approaches – among them Russian Formalism, New Criticism, structuralism, Freudianism, and Marxism. By “theory” I mean to invoke the idea that these are all, ultimately, *methods* for approaching texts, systems of rules that dictate how interpreters should read. Such systems are precisely what Susan Sontag opposes in her justly famous essay, “Against Interpretation,” in which she stipulates that “[b]y interpretation I mean . . . a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain ‘rules’ of interpretation” (5). The danger of taking such theoretical approaches to literature is that they carry the risk of reductivism and hence of distorting the text. That is one reason why many have come to argue that criticism should move towards a stage of “post-,” or even “anti-,” theory – although it should be said that by this some mean to include any and all philosophical reflection about literature, not only the systematic, theoretical kind.¹ Regardless, the fact is that many have become concerned that criticism has failed to remain open to the texts it interprets and that behind this lies philosophical doctrine, especially of the theoretical or methodological kind.

In this thesis, I shall argue that there are two major “non-theoretical” alternatives to theory, namely, poststructuralism and ontological hermeneutics (hereafter “hermeneutics”). As describing their differences, I shall also distinguish between them by showing how each is rooted in a distinct form of Jewish thought. This project is important because many have failed to distinguish between them at all.

¹ This tendency is clearly manifested in the titles of many publications during the past twenty five years. See, for example, the collections *Against Theory* and *Post-Theory*, edited by W. J. T. Mitchell and Martin McQuillan et al., respectively, Valentine Cunningham’s *Reading After Theory* and Terry Eagleton’s recent *After Theory*.

One reason for this, of course, is that both indeed oppose the theoretical tradition. The latter's roots are to be found in Athens rather than Jerusalem, in particular, in ancient Greek metaphysics (indeed some have even taken to calling it just that: "metaphysics"). The major founders of this metaphysics were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and, as is well known, they proclaimed *logos* to be at the centre of their endeavours. But what did they mean by this term? In ancient Greek, the word connotes both "thought" and "language," although the founders invariably placed the emphasis on thought.² This allowed them virtually to equate *logos* with theoretical reasoning or contemplation (the ancient Greek word *theōria* means "viewing" or "contemplation") and indeed, as Matthew Arnold would much later famously specify, the theoretician's aim is to attain a "perfect intellectual vision," to grasp things as part of a unity, "as they really are" (31, 34). Greek metaphysics, then, may be said to affirm a transparent, monistic conception of truth.³

Theorists often articulate this with metaphors of light and the seeing eye, which for them stand for truth and knowledge. Surely the most famous example of this is the cave allegory in Plato's *Republic*. In it, Plato tells of the philosopher who leaves the world, represented by a dark, shadow-filled cave, in order to look at the truth, the light of the sun (Plato 515e-516b, 532b). To the metaphysician, just as the eye views objects from an external point of reference, capturing it in a frame and thus isolating it from its context, the theorist must aim to do the same vis-à-vis his or her object of knowledge.

² For more on the etymology of *logos*, see Giambattista Vico's *The New Science* (127-8).

³ Ancient Greek theory was, at base, a reaction against the Homeric polytheistic world view. As A.W.H. Adkins argues, the former represents a movement "from the many to the one" (*From the Many to the One*).

Ancient Greek metaphysics was the foundation upon which modern theory, which originated with Descartes, is based. While the former's ocularism and monism is retained, that monism is nevertheless transformed: from an "organic" to a "systematic" conception of unity. No longer is the whole organically present in each part, with the parts "integrated" together; now each is like a separable atom and the whole is considered a product of their systematic "interlocking" (Blattberg, "Loving Wisdom" 7). As many have pointed out, modern theory's favouring of systematic unity is inspired by the successes of modern natural science's quest for mechanistic, measurable knowledge. Hence those such as Immanuel Kant: "systematic unity is what first raises ordinary knowledge to the rank of science, that is, makes a system out of a mere aggregate of knowledge" (*Critique of Pure Reason* A 832, B 860). Or consider the literary theorist Northrop Frye, for whom even fictional texts may be interpreted through the lens of a systematic theory. Indeed Frye has developed one such theory himself, a system of literary archetypes (Frye refers to his "system" in *Anatomy of Criticism* [3, 7, 8, 10]) that, he claims, can assist literary critics because it supplies them with a "coherent and comprehensive theory of literature, logically and scientifically organized . . . [Otherwise put] a unified structure of knowledge" (11).

Modern theory is also distinct as regards its conception of knowledge. The ancient idea according to which the knower must, in a sense, "participate" in the idea (*eidos*) of the known has been replaced with a mechanistic approach that assumes a dualism – and so the complete separation – of subject and object (Taylor, "Overcoming" 467). Truth, then, has become a matter not of participation but of "correspondence,"

which is to say of achieving correct representations in the mind of an independent, external reality.⁴

All of this is associated with a particular conception of language. As Jonathan Culler has pointed out, what I am calling modern theory asserts that language should be as transparent as possible (*On Deconstruction* 91), for only this way can it serve as an effective tool for capturing, through representation, the independent objects of reality. To be useful language must, like the objects it represents, be fully controlled by its users. Hence the need for a systematic theory of linguistics, among the most sophisticated of which is one that I will examine to a degree in the first chapter below, Ferdinand Saussure's structuralism.

When one thinks of the opposition to such theoretical approaches in Anglo-American literature departments today, the tendency is to invoke Jacques Derrida's poststructuralism as well as the approaches of those who came to be known as the Yale critics. To them might be added schools such as New Historicism and post-Colonialism, which, though distinct, nevertheless share many of their fundamentals with the Derridean poststructuralists and Yale critics. Indeed, one would not be wrong to include all of these approaches under a label such as the "philosophy of difference." For they all oppose the distinctive world view of the theorist since they see the latter as distorting the "other," i.e., the object that the theorist attempts to represent. To difference philosophers, there is something violent, because "totalising" about the projects of theory.

⁴ Richard Rorty also describes this change in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (3).

Most of the thinkers that could be described as theorists, as well as their difference-affirming opponents, agree that there are indeed only two alternatives (their own).⁵ Those who I would identify as hermeneuticists, that is, tend to be reduced to one or the other of these two, usually to theory by the difference philosophers and to difference by the theorists. But hermeneutics, as I shall argue, rejects the theorist's emphasis on transparency and control as well as, at least in the human sciences or humanities, his or her attempt to achieve correspondence with a reality "out there." Moreover, hermeneuticists also, like the philosophers of difference, object to modern theory's dualist world view as well as to the primacy it awards to thought as distinct from practice. Yet their approach usually gets short shrift within literary studies: as a survey of recent texts in the philosophy of literature will reveal, the approach is either overlooked altogether⁶ or, when not, is nevertheless given far from its due.

Terry Eagleton is among those guilty of doing the latter. Though his now classic text, *Literary Theory*, does contain a discussion of hermeneutics, it is hardly adequate. In particular, Eagleton presents it as assuming a purely idealist conception of history, i.e., that history is a product of nothing other than the interpretations of the mind. He thus dismisses it for failing to grant a place to materialist considerations (73). In so doing, however, Eagleton only echoes the Marxist critique of "vulgar Hegelianism" – as if there ever was such a thing. For though hermeneutics' conception of *tradition* may indeed be somewhat idealist, hermeneuticists are well aware that tradition is merely a

⁵ To cite but one example: Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels divide the field of the philosophy of literature into two: the "positive theory" of those I call theorists and the "negative theory" of poststructuralists (735-36).

⁶ See, for example, David Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*; Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*; and Jonathan D. Culler, *Literary Theory*.

part of history, and that much more happens in the latter (e.g., wars, weather, etc.) than can be considered the product of some interpretation.

Other accounts of hermeneutics fail to identify the fundamental differences between the romantic hermeneutics of a Friedrich Schleiermacher or a Wilhelm Dilthey and the ontological hermeneutics established by Martin Heidegger and developed by, among others, his student Hans-Georg Gadamer. In so doing, those such as Paul de Man (188) and K.M. Newton (119) only reduce the latter to the former and thus end up criticizing the amalgam as simply another version of metaphysics. As I shall show in this thesis' second chapter, however, this is a major distortion.

Still others, as I already mentioned, conflate hermeneutics with the textual approaches of difference philosophers. A common tendency is to assume a smooth continuation between Gadamer's thinking, for example, and that of the reader-response theorist Hans Robert Jauss.⁷ It is true that, as Peter Zima points out in his *The Philosophy of Modern Literary Theory*, both Gadamer and Jauss favour the active and alert interpreter, the reader who goes beyond "the rejection and assimilation" of a literary text by recognizing its "innovative nature" and "by reacting to it in a creative mode through changes in their horizon of expectations" (61). Yet Zima is ultimately wrong to lump Jauss together with Gadamer, for the latter's notion of pre-reflective interpretation makes room for an unconscious or implicit response to a text – a response that Jauss, who emphasises the reader's productive role, simply has no place for.⁸ Indeed, as I shall show in Chapter 2, Jauss explicitly rejects Gadamer's assumption that

⁷ Rainer Warning, for example, describes Jauss' reception aesthetics as an "application of Gadamer's a-methodical hermeneutics" (qtd. in Weinsheimer 128).

⁸ Cunningham also makes this mistake (149).

we can interpret a text pre-reflectively, prior to any conscious constitution of its meaning (Jauss 30).

Not that all hermeneuticists have managed to adequately account for difference philosophies such as poststructuralism. George Steiner, for example, has emphasized poststructuralism's deconstructive side to the neglect of its creative, constructive one. Indeed, his account may be said to border on caricature since he claims that poststructuralism is a meaningless, empty approach that encourages nihilism (119-34). This, too, is an error that must be avoided. That is why, again, my aim in this work will be to present *both* of these distinct approaches to literature in all of their integrity. Given the restrictions of space, however, I have chosen to focus on particular cases of each. Thus Chapter 1 is, for the most part, dedicated to the poststructuralism of Derrida, and Chapter 2, again for the most part, to the hermeneutics of Gadamer.

My arguments for their distinctiveness proceed as follows. In the first section of each chapter, I give an account of the fundamentals of the approach in question by, in particular, contrasting it with those of the theoretical tradition. In my description of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the second chapter, however, I also include a contrast between it and the Derridean poststructuralism outlined in Chapter 1. In each chapter's second section, I go on to trace the connections between each approach and a distinct form of Jewish thought. I show that poststructuralism, as regards both its basic principles and its exegetical practice, shares a great deal with the approach of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who strongly influenced Derrida. As for hermeneutics, I outline the parallels that I believe exist between it and the Jewish philosophy of Martin Buber. Both Levinas and Buber, moreover, hence the poststructuralism and hermeneutics that,

respectively, share their spirits, are also shown to be rooted in ancient forms of Judaism: rabbinic Judaism for the former and levitical Judaism for the latter. The struggle between metaphysical theory and the anti-theoretical approaches in contemporary literary studies, then, needs to be seen as much more complex than simply another manifestation of that old division between Athens and Jerusalem: for at the very least we need to speak of a divide between Athens and Jerusalems.

Yet those who have themselves explored the Jewish roots of contemporary literary studies have tended to miss this complexity. For example, in her *The Slayers of Moses* Susan Handelman asserts a basic division between two approaches to texts: what she calls the “Christian patristic” and the “rabbinic.” While the former has recognizably theoretical attributes, the latter is said to include not only Derrida’s poststructuralism but also the hermeneutics of Gadamer as well as of Paul Ricoeur (Handelman 3-25). According to her, all share in the rabbinic model’s assertion of metaphor as fundamental to meaning, as well as in the rejection of Aristotelian logic’s principle of non-contradiction (21-25). As I will show, however, hermeneuticists follow the romantics in favouring the symbol over the metaphor. Moreover, Handelman does not do much for the cause of clarity when she also goes on to associate both Gadamer and Ricoeur with the patristic tradition of affirming the spirit over the letter. The same must be said of Gerald Bruns’ claim that the rabbinic tradition may be considered a form of hermeneutics (104-23) and Donald G. Marshall’s that Gadamer shares great affinities with both Buber *and* Levinas (206-14).

Just such confusing ambiguities are the targets of this thesis. As I want to show, Gadamer and Ricoeur are neither rabbinic nor patristic but represent a totally different

category: their hermeneutics is a form of what we might refer to as “dialogical,” as distinct from theoretical or difference, philosophy. Dialogical philosophers do indeed affirm the spirit over the letter, but not in a way that allows that spirit to be equated with Greek thought (i.e., *nous*, which means pure thought) and hence theory. Handelman, Bruns and Marshall’s approaches, then, are but more examples of the failure to adequately appreciate the fundamental differences between poststructuralism and hermeneutics, not to mention those between the rabbinic and levitical forms of Judaism.

I will nevertheless advance my arguments in this work by posing the very same kinds of questions that those such as Handelman do, questions such as “What is a text?” “How is meaning conceived and expressed (i.e., should we speak of signs or symbols)?” and “How should we understand the act of interpretation?” Ultimately, I plan to answer these questions not so much by tracing historical influences as by employing a comparative approach, one that is designed to examine the general structure of these two non-theoretical approaches to interpretation. Of course, given that I hope to develop a coherent interpretation that clearly distinguishes the two, my own methodology could itself be characterized as hermeneutical. Despite that, I still believe that I have managed to give not only hermeneutics but also poststructuralism its due. Yet it is, of course, for the reader to judge whether I have been successful in my aim.

Chapter 2

Poststructuralism and Rabbinic Judaism

Introduction

In *The Slayers of Moses*, Susan Handelman describes what she believes to be the profound structural affinities between the ideas of such influential thinkers as Freud, Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom on the one hand and the practitioners of the rabbinic Jewish tradition of interpretation on the other.¹ This leads Handelman to argue that literary studies has, for some time now, been dominated by a mode of thought that largely resembles rabbinic Judaism. On the whole, this chapter consists of an elaboration of Handelman's basic thesis. But rather than discuss the relation between the ideas of a number of modern thinkers and rabbinic thought, I shall limit my focus to Derrida's poststructuralism with the aim of demonstrating its rabbinic characteristics. I want to identify the fundamentals shared by both approaches, and to do so in such a way as to set the stage for the contrast between both of them and the hermeneutical approach that I shall develop in the following chapter.

This chapter has two sections, each of which are further sub-divided into two parts. In the first section, I begin by giving a detailed account of Derrida's poststructuralism as a whole, emphasizing, in particular, its critique of the principles and practice of structuralist semiotics. Then, in this section's second part, I develop an account of the ramifications of this critique for the practice of textual interpretation. The following section begins with a presentation of rabbinic Jewish thought, one that highlights the parallels between it and poststructuralism. I then go on to examine the

¹ Similar connections are also made in Geoffrey Hartman's *Midrash and Literature* and José Faur's *Golden Doves with Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition*.

practice of rabbinic exegesis, focusing on the affinities between it and poststructuralism's exegetical approach. I should mention that, throughout the chapter, I occasionally allude to the ideas of the twentieth century Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. For I believe that Levinas, who was both an orthodox Jew and a leading "postmodernist" thinker, serves as an excellent intellectual bridge between the rabbinic and poststructuralist approaches.

Section I – Poststructuralism

Part (i) – Critique of the Metaphysics of Presence: The Case of Structuralist Semiotics

The label "poststructuralism" is, to a degree, inadequate. Its prefix invokes the notion of temporal continuity, but poststructuralist thinkers do not, in fact, see themselves as merely following, not to mention superseding, structuralism. This is because they also, in a sense, admit to continue in the spirit of the latter, which is something indicative of the fundamental paradox at the heart of their approach: on the one hand, it adheres to structuralism's core idea, the Saussurean notion of language as a semiotic system of difference; on the other, it rejects the structuralist principle according to which a linguistic system can constitute a coherent whole (e.g., Culler, *On Deconstruction* 23-4). Occasionally, poststructuralist thinkers will be heard expressing this paradox when they suggest that structuralists fail to have the courage of their own convictions (e.g., Barry 61). Poststructuralism, then, can be said to view itself as both a critique of structuralism as well as a more authentic form of it.

Though I will, for the most part, focus on both of these approaches, I intend for the contrast between them to have a much wider application. For poststructuralists

themselves portray their project as something much grander than a critique of their structuralist forbearers; to them, it is a way of subverting the entire Western theoretical or metaphysical tradition. As they see it, structuralism is merely one expression of that tradition. No surprise, then, that a brief survey of Derrida's three chief poststructuralist texts – *Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference* – shows him to target not only Saussure but also, among others, such major figures in the history of thought as Plato and Rousseau. There is, it should be evident, something much more fundamental going on than the attack of one linguistic theory on another.

In all three of these texts, Derrida declares that we have reached the end of an intellectual era. It is the time of the end of “philosophy” (the metaphysical tradition) along with its attendant logocentrism.² According to Derrida, it is the metaphysician's pursuit of pure, unified knowledge that is responsible for his or her conception of Being, of everything that is, as “presence.” In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida shows that this conception has taken many forms throughout the history of the tradition, including “presence of the thing to sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence . . . the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth” (12). Metaphysicians cherish this “presence,” Derrida claims, because they wish to achieve a form of power – to master, capture or control whatever “other” has been placed in their theoretical sights. In so doing, they assume a fundamental hierarchy of binary oppositions, all of which are meant to support the idea that the theorizing subject has power over the theorized object. Among these

² This is most clearly stated in his “The Ends of Man,” where Derrida denounces both Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism and Martin Heidegger's philosophy of Being as part of the metaphysical tradition (indeed, Heidegger is described as the “last of the great metaphysicians” [36]).

oppositions are the affirmations of *logos* over *mythos*, logic over rhetoric, the intelligible over the sensible, speech over writing, the literal over the figurative, and the essential over the contingent (Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy 119).

Following Nietzsche, Derrida claims that all this is but a form of “will to power,” one tied up with a certain dialectics of vision (Boman 206). Hence the tendency of metaphysicians to allude metaphorically to light and the seeing eye, which, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter, they see as representing truth and knowledge.

Derrida’s opposition to this is based on his rejection of the metaphysical claim that its conceptual orderings are truly reflective of the nature of things. To Derrida, far from being neutral, metaphysics in fact consists of strategies of exclusion and repression. Everything that is “other,” everything that cannot be contained within a unified theory, metaphysics expels as “non-presence” or “non-being” since it assumes that such things are not really “there.” Derrida can be said to follow Emmanuel Levinas with this claim, Levinas having asserted that the philosophical tradition has a tendency to “totalize,” to reduce the “Other” by forcibly incorporating it into its theoretical strictures. In so doing, the challenging differences of the Other, its “infinity” of meaning, become limited by virtue of their transformation into a self-affirming, containable Same (Levinas, *Totality* I.A.4). To Levinas, and Derrida following him, the metaphysical tradition has a tendency to “universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought” (*Ethics* 75). As Simon Critchley describes this process,

[i]n seeking to think the Other, we reduce its otherness to our understanding, we comprehend (as in the verbs *comprendre*, to understand, include and comprise, and *comprehendere*, to grasp or seize) and surround the Other, thereby reducing its otherness and failing to acknowledge the otherness of the Other. (95)

Derrida adheres to this claim when he emphasizes the totalizing dangers of philosophical systems. To him, the latter are able to maintain their binary oppositions only at the cost of hidden internal contradictions, of suppressed paradoxes. That is why he sees his task as not so much that of reversing the oppositions asserted as of undoing them. This requires identifying the aporias present within a given metaphysical theory's structure. In doing this, Derrida sees himself as calling into question the basic thesis underlying all such theories – the notion, again, that Being is presence. To affirm it is to assume that knowledge is something both universal and fixed, untainted by context and so never relative or in flux.

Derrida believes that this aspect of logocentrism is manifested, above all, in its “phonocentrism,” its assertion of speech over writing. To make this assertion is to assume that one can make the spoken word immediately and transparently present, since the speakers are always there to correct those who would misinterpret their intended meaning. Only during the moment of speech, then, can one's intention be fully and directly conveyed. With writing, by contrast, the distance between the writer and reader is made manifest and the result is that writers have much less control over how their texts are interpreted, hence over how their intended meaning is manifested in the world. With writing, then, metaphysics loses the power and control that, as we have seen, is its central aim (*Of Grammatology* 144-57).

Derrida's three paradigmatic phonocentric thinkers are Plato, Rousseau and Saussure. To Plato, writing is philosophy's illegitimate, bastard child, while Rousseau portrays it as a dangerous, though necessary, supplement to speech (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 1844; *Of Grammatology* 34-43, 151, 159). As for Saussure, he systematically excludes writing from the general study of linguistics, claiming that it usurps the "natural bond" between the phonic signifier and the signified (Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy 121). Below, I shall focus on Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure, as it serves not only as an excellent example of Derrida's method but also allows me to describe in more detail the paradox of poststructuralism's debt to and divergence from structuralism. Here, however, I wish to elaborate on Derrida's notion that the metaphysician's prioritizing of presence is associated with his or her desire to have power over an object of knowledge.

Like Nietzsche, as we have seen, Derrida claims that the metaphysician's hierarchies are but manifestations of his or her will to power; they are constructs, products of systems designed to provide their makers with control over the world.³ To Derrida, in consequence, we must conceive of presence "no longer as the absolute matrix form of being but rather as a 'particularization' and 'effect.' A determination and effect within a system that is no longer that of presence but of difference" (*Speech* 147). In so doing, as Culler has pointed out, we deprive metaphysics of its authority (*On Deconstruction* 94). For we show it to be not some innocent, impartial means whereby

³ This is just one of the many things Derrida has learned from Nietzsche, who is often read as having inaugurated the project of deconstructing metaphysics. Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, for example, deconstructs the metaphysical conception of causation by showing that what is believed to be a cause is in fact an effect (293-300). And his *Genealogy of Morals* demonstrates how the assumption that there is a doer behind any deed is a fictive construct, a result of the imposition of language's subject-predicate structure (45). Hence Frank Lentricchia's description of Derrida's project of liberating the signifier from the tyranny of the signified as but an elaboration of Nietzsche's own project (175).

we obtain universal knowledge but a power-hungry tool designed to achieve control within a world whose reality is constituted as much by non-being as by being. Derrida's aim, then, is to unmask the metaphysician's dream of mastery through pure knowledge, doing so by demonstrating how the dream is impossible. For there can be no truly decontextualised, fixed knowledge, no truth of origins that is not in some way "contaminated" by what has followed, no "pure" reality lying there waiting to be discovered.

As I have suggested, one of the means by which Derrida chooses to advance this (anti)thesis is through a kind of complicitous critique, a continuance through supersession, of structuralism. To see how, we must first understand structuralism's conception of language. According to Saussure, language is a self-enclosed system. It consists of "unmotivated signs," that is, signs whose meanings are arbitrary and conventional: the relation between the signifier and the signified are said to be a product of nothing more than cultural convention. Furthermore, the meaning of a given sign is relational or differential, since the definition of any word is a matter not of the essential properties of what it represents but of the differences that distinguish it from other words (Eagleton, *Literary* 84). Hence Saussure's claim that "in the linguistic system there are only differences, *without positive terms*" (120). Given these realities, talk of language as a means of representing the world must be mistaken, since no sign can correspond to some "thing" outside of the system. Language, in consequence, does not so much represent as constitute our world.

Yet we can still get at the truth of the system that language is. That is the central aim of Saussure's semiotics, his science of linguistic signs. For given language's

systematic nature, its structures can be analyzed scientifically and hence captured by a theory. This, of course, is just the kind of assumption typical of the metaphysics of presence.

Enter poststructuralism. It accepts two of the aforementioned Saussurean principles: that signs are arbitrary and conventional and that their meanings are grounded in difference. Yet it conceives of their significance, especially that of the second principle, very differently. To the poststructuralist, the “system” that language is is anything but unified, and that is how it must be if there is to be meaning based upon difference. The whole, that is, is a whole precisely because its parts *do not* fully cohere, and this means that any scientific attempt to capture it with a systematic theory will necessarily fail. What we have with a text like Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, then, is an attempt at *deconstructing* Saussure’s semiotics.

Here is how it is done. Derrida claims that Saussure’s conception of the sign, the arbitrarily connected signifier and signified, is but another case of the ancient metaphysical opposition between the intelligible and the sensible. Derrida’s first move is to highlight this, and he then follow it by undermining the ostensibly scientific binary hierarchical relation. To Saussure, the signified is always prior since the signifier exists only in order to access the signified; the signifier, that is, is merely an instrument. Moreover, in order to distinguish between different signs the linguist must assume the possibility of starting by differentiating between the different signifieds, for it is these differentiations that constitute his or her point of departure. Hence their priority as individual “foundations” or points of “origin” (*Of Grammatology* 35; Culler, *On Deconstruction* 99). What we have here, then, is another case of the affirmation of a

binary hierarchy typical of the metaphysics of presence, one that is only echoed by the aforementioned Saussurean variant of phonocentrism. For Saussure conceives of writing as but a derivative means of representing speech, as but “an artificial and oblique representation of a representation” (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 100). Writing, then, is considered dangerous because it infects or corrupts the ostensibly natural spoken form (for example, it does nothing to prevent mispronunciation). It is thus, as Derrida points out, but a threat to the *purity* of the linguistic system (*Of Grammatology* 34-43).

Derrida hence sets out to disrupt Saussure’s ostensibly naturalistic linguistic hierarchy by showing how Saussure himself undercuts the priority given to speech. Saussure can be said to do this when he uses the example of writing to illustrate the nature of linguistic units as differential (*Of Grammatology* 34) because this makes speech appear to be simply a form of writing. Derrida, then, reverses the structuralist favouring of speech over writing, and does so by relying on the structuralist’s own arguments. But more than that, he also argues for collapsing any distinction whatsoever between speech and writing. He does this by showing how Saussure’s own moves imply that both speech and writing are but species of a generalized writing, a genus he calls “arch-writing.” This arises from a general linguistic structure that Derrida calls the logic of the “supplement” (*Of Grammatology* 44, 157-64): whatever is to be considered a “supplement” is, Derrida explains, always posited as secondary to that which it supplies. Yet Derrida shows that the latter is itself also a “mere” supplement. What was at one point considered a supplement as well as its primary source are now both supplements; as Derrida writes in regards to one of Rousseau’s texts: “there have never been anything but supplements” (*Of Grammatology* 159). This means that writing can be a derivative

of speech only on the condition that the originally spoken meanings never existed independently of or were untouched by writing. Speech, in consequence, must itself have always been a form of writing (*Of Grammatology* 56).

This self-undercutting logic of the supplement is crucial to poststructuralism as a whole. For it implies that there cannot be any perfect representation of some “origin” or “foundation” since supplementation is possible only by virtue of its absence. Hence Derrida’s famous slogans: “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (there is no outside of the text) or “il n’y a rien hors du texte” (there is nothing outside of the text) (*Of Grammatology* 227, 233). These proclaim the absence of any external reference point, of any origin outside of the signifying structure of language and hence of any means whereby the linguist might “capture” a given linguistic system within some all-embracing theory. As Frank Lentricchia has put it, there is “no ‘point,’ no origin, no end, no place outside discourse from which to fix, make determinate, and establish metaphysical boundaries for the play of linguistic signifiers” (160-61). This means that linguistic structures based on difference constitute endless chains of dissemination, endless deferrals of signifieds and the differentiation of signifiers. As a result, no theory of presence is possible because, as Culler puts it, any such theory must undo itself since “the supposed foundation or ground proves to be the product of a differential system, or rather, of differences, differentiation, and deferral” (*On Deconstruction* 109).

This is precisely the point of Derrida’s use of the neologism “différance.” As he explains:

Différance is the systematic play of differences, of traces of difference, of the spacing [*espacement*] by which elements relate to one another. This spacing is

the production, simultaneously active and passive . . . of intervals without which the “full” terms could not signify, could not function. (*Positions* 27)

Nothing, that is, exists outside of the intricate web of textuality. Any theory of presence is, in consequence, a product or effect of the “spacing” by which texts relate to one another, i.e., a product of intertextuality. “Intertextuality” here does not refer merely to the method of reading one text with another but to the fact that “every text is itself already an intertextual event” (qtd. in Lentricchia 175). The implication is that nothing is – or ever could be – “purely original” since any given meaning is always already a result of intertextual events/texts. Among other things, this leads Derrida to explore the notions of “property” and “theft,” as he does in his *Glas*, a text that is informed by Jean Genet’s own self-identification as a thief. To Derrida, any text is always a form of theft or bricolage, which is why property “even in the form of the *nom propre*, is [always a] *non-propre*” (Hartman, *Criticism* 205).

Derrida’s deconstructive method, the basic aim of which can be summarized as seeking to reveal the aporetic logic within any theory of meaning (Eagleton, *Literary* 116; Miller 338), can thus be shown to have relevance far beyond structuralism. To say that deconstruction’s goal is simply that of frustrating structuralism’s systematic projects is thus, as J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, only partially true (4), since poststructuralism goes so far as to claim that what we call “world” is in fact a floating concept, one without any theoretically definable centre of gravity. That is why Derrida can suggest, as he does in his essay “Differance,” that “[n]ot only is there no realm of differance, but differance is even the subversion of every realm. This is obviously what makes it threatening and necessarily dreaded by everything in us that desires a realm” (qtd. in

Lentricchia 156). Derrida's poststructuralism, then, can be said to constitute a radical critique of *all* systematic theories, for all such theories are implicated in the assumptions about meaning that underlie that of structuralism. The latter, in consequence, should be considered as but one symptom of the larger sickness that Derrida identifies with the entire Occidental metaphysical tradition.

Part (ii) – Exegetical Implications

The poststructuralist (anti)thesis has direct implications for the practice of textual interpretation. How does poststructuralism answer the question of how we should approach texts?

To begin with, it should be evident that, given claims such as *Il n'y a pas de hors texte*, a universe of textuality is being assumed, one within which, moreover, travel can never be shown to begin from any *necessary* departure point. For there is no external theoretical foundation from which the interpreter must approach a text or text-analogue. Any critique, in consequence, must be understood as a form of immanent critique. This accounts for why poststructuralist readings usually attend to the minute details of a text, invoking its own affirmations and linguistic strategies throughout the interpretive process. No claims are ever made on behalf of some external standard. Yet the approach does have a definite end: that of "opening up" a given text's "spaces," showing, by highlighting the contradictions within it, that the text contains aporias that allow for its meanings as *différance* to become manifest.

As one might expect, the first move in such a reading will tend to consist of demonstrating how a given text exemplifies the theoretical assumptions of the

metaphysical tradition. For example, the set of hierarchical oppositions it affirms will be highlighted: what the text “means,” the text would have us believe, is a product of all of its parts coming together to support those oppositions. Yet the poststructuralist reader’s next step consists of nothing other than undoing the hierarchies by showing how *the text itself* supports their reversal. This is then followed by their reinscription, albeit in a displaced manner, the oppositions in question being situated differently from how they originally appeared (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 150). Deconstruction is thus very different from the “destruction” that a hermeneutical thinker such as Martin Heidegger recommends; given its concern for truth, Heidegger’s famous “destruction” of the metaphysical tradition in *Being and Time* (41-49) is, as I shall show in the following chapter, much more a case of its authentic continuance through transformation.

Here it is essential to recognize how the point of such poststructuralist readings inevitably coincides with a larger philosophical message. It is that there is no escape from the linguistic signifying system since there are no affirmations absent the “spaces” which reveal themselves when it turns out that one can reverse any text’s binaries. Thus does the poststructuralist aim to repeatedly, if momentarily, highlight such “blind spots” in order to make “the non-seen accessible to light” (*Of Grammatology* 163). As Culler observes, however, the point is not to “offer a firm ground for the construction of a new order or synthesis” since deconstruction itself “remains implicated in or attached to the system it criticizes and attempts to displace” (*On Deconstruction* 151). What we have here, then, is a practice of reading and writing that is concerned, above all, with our attunement to the aporias assumed to be present in any text, to what Lentricchia has aptly called “the undecidable textual moment[s]” (181) and what Eagleton has referred

to as the “symptomatic” impasses of meaning (*Literary* 116). The aim is not to develop some new philosophical framework or alternative but to move back and forth “between nonsynthesizable moments of a general economy” (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 155) in order to highlight their existence and thus encourage a form of openness. In many ways, this is the opposite of Hegelian dialectics, with its struggle for the fusion of thesis and anti-thesis in a synthesis; indeed Derrida considers Hegel’s approach, given its obvious involvement in notions of directional progress, to be but another version of metaphysics (*Glas*). To Derrida, genuine openness requires not syncretism but the accentuation of aporia, the revelation of the fissures and breaches present between the parts of any text or text-analogue.

It is important to emphasize the “double movement” aspect of this poststructuralist (anti)dialectics (note the affinity here with Theodor Adorno’s notion of *Negative Dialectics* – Adorno shares much of Derrida’s critique of Hegel). For there is indeed a double move when it comes to the poststructuralist reader’s back and forth shifts between a text’s nonsynthesizable moments. These shifts aim to critique both the text’s affirmations as well as, as we have seen, their (albeit displaced) reinscription. This is the basis for the unique poststructuralist form of complicitous critique that I mentioned above, one that has been well described by Linda Hutcheon for whom poststructuralism is one of the major forms of “postmodernism.” As Hutcheon writes,

Postmodernism’s distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as

much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. (1)

This statement may be said to echo Culler's account of deconstruction's double movement as a form of "sawing off the branch on which one is sitting" (*On Deconstruction* 149), or Rodolphe Gasché's claim that it provides "both the conditions for the possibility and impossibility of philosophical discourse" (100). Derrida, however, describes it best when he writes:

to take up a position exterior to logocentrism would be to risk starving oneself of the very discursive or linguistic resources with which one must, of necessity, deconstruct the tradition. The deconstructor is like a tight-rope walker who risks 'ceaselessly falling back inside that which he deconstructs.' (*Of Grammatology* 25)

That deconstruction is, largely, a form of immanent critique suggests that there is something parasitic about it. Hence Critchley: "Derrida's writing's are parasitic because they are close reading of texts that draw their sustenance from within the flesh of the host" and that a deconstructive reading "hatch[es] its eggs within the flesh of . . . [its] host" (92-3). Yet one must be careful not to go too far with this metaphor, as it risks relegating deconstruction to a secondary status vis-à-vis the text, making it simply another form of criticism in the ordinary sense. For ordinarily, criticism, of course, always follows – never leads – its subject; its task is the rearticulation of meanings already present within the original text. Appreciating the full implications of deconstruction's "logic" of the supplement, however, suggests that the notion of originality assumed by ordinary criticism is fallacious. Since the claim, again, is that

there is no such thing as a truly original text, only an endless chain of interrelated texts, all texts being, in a sense, supplements. Otherwise put, all texts, even those that ostensibly serve as hosts, are in fact parasitic, and this includes those texts that are deconstructed.⁴ As Adorno once wrote of criticism, it certainly does “do violence to the works, but they cannot survive without it” (*Aesthetic* 480).⁵

There is another way of describing the (anti)dialectical “logic” at the heart of deconstruction, one that highlights its implication in (as well as subversion of) the ocular metaphors that play such a fundamental role in the metaphysical tradition.

Deconstruction, one might say, affirms the image of the “blinking eye” (McCumber 248; Blattberg, “Loving Wisdom” 16); this is how we might capture its alternating – as Paul de Man has famously emphasized – between blindness and insight. As such, deconstruction, as I suggested in the introductory chapter, can be considered a form of difference philosophy, long an opponent of mainstream, metaphysical or theoretical philosophy.⁶ Difference philosophy does not, of course, simply reject “vision” altogether; rather, it paradoxically embraces it as well as its opposite, the darkness associated with blindness. Derrida’s alternating, complicit criticizing, his subverting and reinscribing, is thus only a case in point, one that, as we have seen, is designed to both

⁴ In his article, “The Critic as a Host,” J. Hillis Miller deconstructs M. H. Abrams’ claim that deconstructionist reading is “plainly and simply parasitical” (qtd. in Miller 217). To Miller, the boundary Abrams posits between “host” (literature) and “parasite” (criticism) functions as a “permeable membrane” (219) such that any text-host is also a parasite for it will participate in “the perpetual reversal of parasite and host” (225). Miller, then, does not deny the notion of the “parasite,” rather, he embraces it by showing how all texts are parasitical.

⁵ This paradoxical relationship is also expressed by Hartman when he writes that criticism “conserves even as it criticizes” and that “explication becomes a genre that maintains the art work itself” (*Criticism* 170, 173).

⁶ See, for example, Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; Martin Jay’s *The Downcast Eye: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*; and David Michael Levin’s *Modernity and The Hegemony of Vision*.

affirm and deny the “shadows” that he believes exist amidst the “lights” of any text (consider the subtitle of one of his collections of essays: *Between the Blinds*). Whereas metaphysicians strive to keep their eyes wide open, to take in knowledge and thus achieve power over their objects, the difference philosopher aims instead to “highlight” these attempts’ intrinsic limits. And difference philosophy does so, ironically enough, by making visible the aporias that metaphysicians would keep hidden, shunted away in the dark. Evidently, we are dealing with yet another form of paradox here.

What are the practical implications of all this for textual exegesis? First, it is important to note again the contrast between the point of a deconstructionist reading and that of more ordinary criticism, wherein interpretations strive for understanding. Indeed, Derrida is quite explicit that, to him, such standard interpretations really constitute nothing more than illusory readings (Critchley 93). Deconstruction, by contrast, is said to aim for the “dissemination” of meaning, by which is meant the proliferation of textual readings. This is assumed possible, of course, because of its corresponding assumption, described above, that any signifying structure contains inexhaustible meaning. As Derrida suggestively asks,

[What if] the meaning of meaning (in the general sense of meaning and not in the sense of signalization) is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier? And that its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs? (“Force” 25)

This claim on behalf of the infinity of meanings is one reason why Derrida and other poststructuralists prefer such tropes as irony and parody, which exploit linguistic

polysemy.⁷ Interestingly, metaphysicians reject them for the very same reason. Hence their constant checking and rechecking of definitions in order to ensure language's efficacy as a tool for fixing meaning (Taylor, "Language" 226). As Culler points out, word play such as the pun is among the forms of language most undermining of the metaphysician's project since, with the pun, "an 'accident' or external relationship between signifiers is treated as a conceptual relationship, identifying 'history' as 'his story' or connecting meaning (*sens*) and absence (*sans*). We [if we are metaphysicians, that is, must] treat the pun as a joke, lest signifiers infect thought" (*On Deconstruction* 92). This wariness of the playfulness of language is thus revealing of the metaphysician's fear that the thought dimension of *logos* will become "contaminated" or "infected" by its linguistic dimension. Language must remain a thoroughly transparent instrument of thought if it is to serve the epistemological ends of universal and a-contextual theory. That, again, is why the poststructuralist can be said to see his or her task as that of undermining notions of "pure knowledge" or "pure meaning" by demonstrating the impossibility of keeping language wholly subservient to thought. For words, poststructuralists constantly remind us, are always already contaminated by their opposites (Barry 64).

Hence the frequency of Derrida's emphasizing the contexts of his texts. Again and again we find him beginning a paper with references either to the locations or situations of its writing or to its delivery should it be lectures, or both. And this is always done in a way that emphasizes how, had the situation been otherwise, so too would the text. The point, evidently, is to underscore the historicity of his text's

⁷ See, especially, Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, and Derrida's "Psyche: The Invention of the Other" and "Différance."

meanings and, in consequence, to yet again reject the universally objective pretensions of the metaphysics of presence.

Rejecting the idea of “origin” and so of original, in the sense of authoritative, texts also contributes to this goal. The rejection can be said to have at least three implications for exegetical practice. First, as Roland Barthes has asserted in his famous “The Death of the Author,” if there is no one original or transcendental meaning then there is no reason for the critic to grant priority to the author’s intention.⁸ Second, as we have seen, the notion of a critical text or commentary as having a secondary status vis-à-vis the original interpreted text is undermined.⁹ And third, the very idea of marginal texts is put into question, for the absence of a sense of origin undercuts claims on behalf of a canon of texts, texts somehow said to be closer to the “universal origin” (recall Alfred North Whitehead’s famous quip about how the European philosophical tradition consists of but “footnotes to Plato”). Hence the poststructuralist rejection of the assumption that those elements of a text relegated, say, to the footnotes are less significant, less central or essential than those present in the main body, for there is simply no centre or essence.¹⁰ We may even go as far as to say that poststructuralist practice celebrates the marginal, the peripheral and the incidental.

⁸ To be clear, what is rejected is the notion of authorial intention as something fixed, as a transcendent signification that one aims to reveal. As Culler explains, the rejection of the latter is done in favour of a notion of authorial intention as textual effect, one that can still play an important role in the process of reading (*On Deconstruction* 216).

⁹ For a discussion about the fluid boundaries between art and criticism, see Hartman’s “Literary Commentary as Literature” (*Criticism* 189-213). Hartman refers to Derrida and Adorno, for example, as “frustrated poets” (198).

¹⁰ Kant, who is, of course, one of the greatest metaphysicians, describes the *parergon* in his *Critique of Judgement* as “what is only an adjunct” (68). Derrida asserts the diametrically opposite position in his “The Parergon” (26, 33).

Derrida's exegetical writings exemplify all three of these qualities. For example, both the general notion of intertextuality and the celebration of marginal textual elements are clearly evident in his "Living On: Border Lines," which consists of two texts presented side by side on the same pages rather than sequentially. Moreover, these texts are not situated neutrally on the page; there is a "lower" and a "higher" text, and the former, at least at first, appears to be but a commentary on the latter. In fact, however, the lower text is a distinct work in its own right, and thus ought not to be considered as in any sense subordinate to the higher. Or consider Derrida's *Glas*, whose writings on Hegel and Jean Genet are each awarded distinct columns on the page. Between each exists an "empty" space, which leads Hartman to assert that "the page fractures itself with blank spaces" (*Saving the Text* 7). To Derrida, these spaces are evidently as meaningful as the writing within the columns, for they constitute "the space of writing, space *as* writing" ("Plato's Pharmacy" 1857). And as he writes elsewhere: "[t]he spacing is not the simple negativity of a lacuna but rather the emergence of the mark" ("Signature" 182).

As we might expect, poststructuralist exegetical practice is also notable for its emphasis on the contingent elements of any text. By attending to the text's rhetorical figures (its metaphors, the etymology of some of its key words, their morphological characteristics, etc.), the poststructuralist dramatizes the contingent associations between them, connections that repeat themselves in various guises in ways that contribute to the paradoxical logic that is assumed to be present (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 146). The notions of intertextuality and the dissemination of signifiers is furthermore highlighted by invocations of what Derrida calls the logic of "paleonymics," i.e., the use of old

names in order to graft new meanings upon them. In regards to this technique, one that we will examine in more detail below, Derrida writes,

[t]o leave the new concept the old name of writing is to maintain the structure of the *graft*, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective *intervention* in the constituted historical field. It is to give everything at stake in the operations of deconstruction the chance, the force, the power of *communication* (“Signature” 195).

This identification of the structure of given grafts, i.e., the points of juncture and stress where one scion or line of argument has been spliced with another (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 135), is but one means whereby poststructuralists undermine the binary oppositions asserted by a given text. This is possible because the structure of the graft allows a plurality of voices (or signifiers) to simultaneously coexist. The same effect is produced by Derrida’s technique of writing “*sous rature*,” or under erasure, in which superimposed “X’s” are used to strike out words or larger parts of the text in order to indicate the author’s intention to erase them. Here the point is to remind the reader that all “final” drafts inevitably contain traces of their previous versions and that the latter do not share exactly the same meanings as those of the “latest” version. It is also, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, to suggest that something is “inaccurate yet necessary to say,” i.e., that there is no one “correct” signifier that points perfectly to its signified (*Of Grammatology* xiii-xiv). By implication, since there is no “original” meaning to reveal but merely chains of signifying signifiers, meaning is always provisional, always like momentary “drafts.” Indeed, Spivak continues, “the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace; contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our

language at the same time” (xviii). Or, as Derrida himself has put it, “[a]t each step I was obliged to proceed by ellipses, corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment that I needed to use it” (xviii). Furthermore, by emphasizing how the boundary between “presence” and “absence” is not as clear cut as the metaphysician would have us believe, “[w]hat has been excluded is allowed to cross the line, or to be present even when absent, like a horizon” (Hartman, *Criticism* 213). Graft structures, then, allow for the usually covert traces of meaning to come to the fore, reminding the reader that the present is necessarily connected to the past (and its own meanings) just as much as it is connected to any future expression of meaning that is sure to come along. Once again, we can see this as means of subverting the metaphysician’s desire to achieve control through the assertion of meaning as presence.

This underscoring of the provisional nature of all signification suggests that interpretation is, necessarily, a never-ending process, there being no final fixed product or meaning to be discovered by the reader. “The death of the author,” then, is coeval with the “revival of the reader,” for the latter must be recognized as an equal (or more) “producer of the text” (Barthes 74) since he or she determines the differential meanings and hence creates the text’s “message” (Hartman, *Criticism* 161-88).

That, ultimately, is why I believe the poststructuralist aims to identify, indeed accentuate, the paradoxes latent within given texts, their moments of conflict. For in carefully “teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text” (Johnson 5), the way is made for the openness necessary for creative dissemination. Hence the reference to “war,” for the creativity of deconstruction is evidently a violent affair. Indeed Derrida has himself described it as a “violence against violence,” (“Violence” 117), as a justified

violent response to the totalizing violence of metaphysics. Elsewhere: “[t]he space of writing, space *as* writing, is opened up in the violent movement of [deconstruction’s] surrogation” (“Plato Pharmacy” 1857). Others have also noted deconstruction’s violent nature, as with Eagleton’s reference to Barthes’ poststructuralist text, *S/Z*, as amounting to a form of “semiotic” or “interpretive violence” (*Literary* 120-21), or Lentricchia’s claim that deconstructive reading is simply “an act of hermeneutical violence . . . a violence of mastery and substitution” (169, 179).

Section II – Rabbinic Judaism

Part (i) – Rabbinic Judaism and the Deconstruction of Biblical Judaism

In this section, I want to identify the affinities that I believe exist between poststructuralism and rabbinic Judaism. My claim is that the former is best understood as part of the tradition that begins with the latter.

In order to emphasize their similarities, my account of rabbinic Judaism will closely parallel that of the poststructuralism just described. I shall begin by suggesting that Derrida’s philosophical project of deconstructing metaphysics shares a great deal with rabbinic Judaism’s own deconstructive endeavor, namely, its deconstruction of biblical Judaism. Biblical Judaism was defended by the Sadducees of the 1st century ACE, a sect that affirmed principles very similar to those of the metaphysical theoreticians (indeed, they were often accused of being “Hellenist”). I shall then describe rabbinic Talmudic practice, i.e., its approach to textual interpretation, demonstrating its remarkable echoes in poststructuralism. This discussion shall lead to a revisiting, and a reevaluating, of poststructuralism within the field of contemporary

literary studies. In so doing, I plan to emphasize the constructive qualities of both it and difference philosophy in general, as my aim is to show that these (anti)theoretical projects are not only matters of critique but also, as with the ancient rabbis, of creativity.

Early Judaism was never a monolithic phenomenon. Aside from the various minority traditions and sects, there exists a classic overarching distinction between its biblical and postbiblical or rabbinic eras. The transition from one to the other, which arose in response to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 ACE, was the outcome of the conflict between the Sadducees' defense of biblical Judaism and another sect's, the Pharisees, championing of a postbiblical or rabbinic alternative. Sadducees and Pharisees each advocated very different conceptions of how Jews could and should achieve proximity to the divine. Each of these were based upon very different conceptions of scripture, of both its interpretation and its application. It is not for nothing that Jews have been dubbed the "people of the book."

There was, however, never any disagreement about the bible's creation. All considered it a product of the prophets, the greatest of whom was, of course, Moses. Like artists, the prophets were assumed to have been inspired to write the sacred texts, their inspirations arising from their mystical encounters with God. Thus may the bible be seen a work of art; indeed, it encourages us to do so itself when we read that "Moses spake in the ears of all the congregation of Israel the words of this poem" (Deut. 31:30; my translation). That the inspirations behind it are often described with ocular metaphors suggests that the prophets were seen to share something of the spirit of the ancient Greek theorist. For it appears that the prophets, too, needed to leave a "cave"

and ascend in order to receive their visions of truth: think of Moses departing from the Israelites' camp in order to climb Mount Sinai to receive the Commandments.

As Charles Blattberg has explained, it was fundamentally as regards the question of *how* to apply these commandments, known to ancient Jews as the Written Law, that the Sadducees and Pharisees clashed ("Loving Wisdom" 11-12). The Sadducees, who constituted the priesthood that was responsible for the operations of the Temple, saw the biblical texts as constituting a self-enclosed, perfect unity, one amenable to literalist readings and hence to strict, inflexible application. As Ahad Ha-am observes, the priests of the era aimed to apply the bible in a way that knew of "no restriction either on the side of social necessities or on that of human feelings" ("Moses" 313). Once again we may draw a parallel between this conception of the bible and the metaphysician's theory, for both are said to be meaningful in a fundamentally nonrelative, non-contextual sense.

Hence the Pharisees' complaint that the Sadducean approach was "too Greek." Partly, of course, this reflected a desire to lead the movement against the Hellenist colonial rule of the day. Yet one also cannot ignore the many Phariseic exhortations against applying sacred texts in a literal way. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud we find: "Jerusalem was only destroyed because judgments were given strictly upon biblical law and did not go beyond the requirements of the law" (Epstein, *Baba Mezia* 30b). To the Pharisees, it is clear, the bible's perfection needed to be conceived differently: instead of the simple unity of the Sadducees, it was believed to be unified in a paradoxical way. As Ha-am has described it, such a whole

captivates us by its many-sided beauty . . . [it is] the result of a struggle between certain primal forces, which are themselves simple and one-sided; and it is just this one-sidedness of the elements, each of which strives solely for its own end, but never attains it, that produces the complex unity, the established harmony of the whole. (“Prophet and Priest” 119-20)

If one is to read such a text and remain true to its “complex unity,” then, one must read in a way that emphasizes the conflict, and hence the spaces, between its parts. Otherwise put, there is nothing here to be applied literally because the whole is essentially a set of paradoxes, a work whose parts are fundamentally in conflict with each other.

Faced with the Sadducean assertion of monistic unity, then, the Pharisee attempted its deconstruction, thus revealing the presence of a complex unity instead. Levinas, a great rabbinic reader of the bible and the Talmud, has suggested that this Phariseic approach resembles Derrida’s (Davis 111).¹¹ And what is the Talmud if not a collection of conflicting biblical interpretations, few of which can be said to cohere with each other? To the rabbinic Jew, it only shares this quality with the bible.

This divergence between the Sadducees and Pharisees over how to conceive of the bible can be associated with divergent epistemologies. On the one hand, as we have seen, the Sadducee sees a text capable of being read literally, given that all of its parts cohere perfectly within a simple unity. The bible is thus assumed to be accessible to a rational process much like that required for comprehending a metaphysical theory – its meaning is present as a fixed entity, “out there” and thus accessible to the disengaged

¹¹ For more on this, see Martin C. Srajek’s *In the Margins of Deconstruction: Jewish Conceptions of Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida* (246-84).

rational interpreter. Given the centrality of that bible to the life of the Jew, we may say that the Sadducean approach is as logocentric as that of any Greek metaphysician.

To the Pharisee, however, the meaning of biblical text cannot be “present” in this way, as like some unified object waiting to be discovered. Rather, it must be *created*, something that is possible specifically because of the “cracks” or “spaces” that lie between its conflicting parts. These serve as invitations for the sacred, for God’s spirit (the *Shekhinah*) to flow through them and inspire those who would “read” the text. To approach that text with the unifying reasoning of *logos*, then, would only close those cracks and make the whole into a “totality.” Hence the Phariseic need to deconstruct Sadducean readings, much as the poststructuralist would later call for a violent response to the violence of metaphysical theory.

As José Faur has explained, all of this assumes a semiotic conception of meaning in which, as we have seen, language is conceived as a system of signs. Consider the metaphors contained in the biblical expression “golden doves with silver dots” (Songs 1:11). “Golden doves” designates “ideality,” the pristine stage of the idea as it exists, ostensibly, in pure thought, prior to articulation in language. This is identified with the divine *oraculum*, with God’s meaning before it has been expressed in human language. “Silver dots,” by contrast, refers to the signifiers of this meaning, to the *oraculum* as reflected in language and communicated to the people of Israel (Faur 114-15). Together, then, we get signs, connections between signifiers and signifieds.

Yet to the Pharisee, such signs are only constituted as meaningful because of the creative process described above. For nothing meaningful is simply there, present and waiting to be reflected by reason; rather, it must be the product of received revelation.

Faur himself points to the affinity between this Phariseic notion and Saussure's distinction between the concept of the sign and its linguistic value: the latter arises only when an association or opposition of a term to other terms in a linguistic system has been produced. To the rabbis, this parallels their distinction between the linguistic concept (*sharah*) and the generation of new meaning through the relation between terms in the whole linguistic system (*ma'na*) (Faur 72-5). For an example of how the rabbinic interpretive process is a matter of creatively modifying the signified, consider the Talmud's treatment of the incident of Jacob's wrestling with the angel (Gen 32:25). As Rabbi Joshua ben Levi comments: "It teaches . . . that they raised dust with their feet until it reached the Devine Throne." The Hebrew term for "and wrestled" (*vayye'abeq*) is etymologically associated with that for "dust" (*abaq*). Hence the Talmud's extrapolation: "and they [wrestled] raising dust with their feet." Thus does ben Levi modify the usual sense of "wrestling," a move that makes way for granting it a sacred aspect since, as the rabbi goes on, "they raised dust with their feet until it reached the heavens." This very same image, moreover, serves as an allusion to the later journey of the Israelites in the Sinai desert, continuing the creative associations (Faur xix).¹²

This kind of creativity is exactly what's aimed for by the Phariseic conception of the "study" of *Torah* (sacred texts). Whereas the Sadducees would apply a complete, unified product, the Pharisees emphasize how a text's meaning, absent its interpreter, is necessarily incomplete. The difference here has been well captured by Faur's distinction between an approach that emphasizes "product," which he identifies with the metaphysics of presence, and one – the rabbinic – that emphasizes "process" (xxvii).

¹² For more on rabbinic semiotics, see Faur (139-42).

Moreover, instead of endorsing biblical Judaism's duo of prophet and priest, the former making and the latter adhering to the letter of the law, the Pharisees celebrate the sages, the rabbis, for their creative contributions to *Torah*. As the Talmud declares: "since the day when the temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to the wise" (Epstein, *Baba Bathra* 12b). The sages' creativity is understood to come from their participating in highly polemical debate about a sacred text's meaning. The idea here is that the adversity will serve to augment the divisions, and so the spaces, between the interpreters as well as the parts of the text that they are interpreting. Such spaces, as we have noted, are considered essential for revelation, for the reception of creative inspiration. So the aim is never to arrive at a consensus over any single interpretation of the text, to reconcile opposing positions; rather, as Levinas has described, it is

to rub in such a way that blood spurts out is perhaps the way one must 'rub' the text to arrive at the life it conceals. . . . [reading] can only consist in this violence done to words to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimentations, a process begun as soon as these words appear in the open air of history. One must, by rubbing, remove this layer which corrodes them.

("Temptation" 46-7)

Elsewhere, Levinas even refers to the debate between the students of sacred text as a "combat that trades verses like blows" (*Difficult Freedom* 72). The result of such struggle? New, creative interpretations and hence new laws, the basis of what the rabbis called "Oral," as distinct from "Written," Law (the former, ironically enough, were written down with the redaction of the Talmud during the second century ACE). And these texts

are then, in turn, themselves subject to the very same kind of adversarial polemics, making way for yet more such revelatory creativity.

There is a theological dimension to all this, of course. The rabbinic emphasis on revelatory exegesis is based upon a belief that God Himself is *inscribed* in the Jewish texts (this inscription, it goes without saying, being distinct from the incarnated God of Christianity [Davis 106-7]). Contrary to the classic Christian caricature of the Pharisees, then, one that Matthew Arnold invokes in his classic distinction between Hellenism and Hebraism (136),¹³ rabbinic Judaism is *not* simply a matter of the strict observance of law in the sense of obedience to its letter and not its spirit. What is exacting and rigorous about it is not how it applies the law but its determination to do so through revelatory exegesis (Davis 103). This, moreover, is assumed to be something that will be done differently by every interpreter, since each individual must receive given inspirations in their own way. Revelation, in consequence, is not seen as something that occurred once and for all on Mount Sinai; rather, it is assumed to be repeated and modified with every act of exegesis (Davis 112). There is thus a kind of (creative) freedom here, albeit one that will always be “*difficult*,” as Levinas describes, for it is said to require both intensive and adversarial “study, debate and deliberation” (*Difficult Freedom* 15).

Let us restrict our focus for a moment to Levinas’ thought since, as I suggested above, it serves as an excellent bridge between the two approaches whose affinities I am striving to identify here: the difference philosophy exemplified by poststructuralism and rabbinic Judaism. In his book, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas criticizes metaphysical

¹³ Arnold also fails to distinguish between different forms of Hebraism, the rabbinic being not the only one. Other Judaisms include Chasidism, a form of mysticism combined with magical rites and, as we will see in the next chapter, Levitical or dialogical Judaism. Contemporary secular Judaism, too, has an integrity all its own.

philosophy's assumptions about phenomenology and ontology. As Davis specifies, Levinas' central question is: what is there apart from Being? Or, given that Being is coextensive with the whole of reality itself: what is there apart from everything? (34). Western philosophy, Levinas claims, has been occupied exclusively with that which can be incorporated into a system of knowledge. Yet it does so in a way which assumes that there is nothing that cannot be known and hence controlled. Levinas refers to the epistemological stance underlying this as the "totality of the Same," (*Totality* 40) for anything that has been incorporated into a system of knowledge may be said to have been reduced, commensurated – no longer is any aspect of it worthy of the designation "other." Levinas, however, would have us make room for just such an "Other," for that which is "out-side-of-everything," which he invokes with such terms as alterity, transcendence, exteriority, or infinity (*Totality* 34). This otherness is not simply opposed to the Same, for the relation between the two is not a matter of either-or (Levinas's book's title, after all, is *Totality and Infinity*). Levinas rejects such stark oppositions because, as he puts it, "[i]f the Same were to establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other* [or vice versa], it would already be part of a totality encompassing the Same and the Other" (*Totality* 38). Hence the main defect with the metaphysical tradition: "[t]he Other is acknowledged only in order to be suppressed or possessed; as in the workings of the Hegelian dialectic, the characteristic gesture of philosophy is to acknowledge the Other in order to incorporate it within the expanding circles of the same" (*Totality* 40). To resist the totalizing this implies, it is thus necessary to recognize that the Other must not, indeed cannot, become an object of knowledge or experience since that would be to appropriate it, to take control over it for oneself and hence to negate its otherness: "knowledge is always *my* knowledge, experience always *my*

experience; the object is encountered only in so far as it exists for *me*, and immediately its alterity is diminished” (Davis 41). Instead of affirming only unified totality, then, Levinas calls on us to grant a place to infinity – infinite meaning – by recognizing that “[t]he infinite is the absolute other.” (*Totality* 49) It is, of course, a short step from this to the unabashedly religious claim, namely, that “God is the Other” (*Totality* 211).

Otherwise than Being, Levinas’ second major work,¹⁴ continues on in this vein, although in it Levinas substitutes the terminology of Same and Other with that of “the said” and “the saying.” “The said” comprises statements and propositions about the world, truth, Being, personal identity, etc., that are susceptible to established rational protocols of dispute and verification, i.e., to the strictures of metaphysics. As Levinas stresses, Western philosophy is preoccupied with this “said,” ignoring “the saying” altogether, by which he means turning away from any genuine encounter with the Other. “The saying” is the site wherein exposure to the Other takes place; it is the place (which is also a no-place, a utopia [*Otherwise* 45]) wherein one gets close to it, and thereby to an infinity of meaning that cannot be reduced to what is, to Being (Davis 76).¹⁵ The saying, then, is a form of creation.

How can one manage to overcome the metaphysical tendency to grant primacy to “the said” and occlude “the saying” of the Other? Levinas’ response, as the reader might by now expect, is to call for a deconstructing form of violence: “[i]n order to suppress violence,” [i.e., the violence done by the reduction of ‘the saying’ to the strictures of a

¹⁴ The book, it is worth mentioning, was largely a response to Derrida’s critique of *Totality and Infinity* in his article “Violence and Metaphysics.” That text consists of a deconstruction of Levinas’, showing it to still share many of the aspirations of metaphysics. Indeed, as Robert Bernasconi has pointed out, Derrida is Levinas’ chief interlocutor in *Otherwise than Being* (149). I will examine Derrida’s text below.

¹⁵ Levinas stresses that while “the said” is susceptible to protocols of dispute, “the saying’s” infinity of meaning cannot be reduced to such verifying procedures (*Otherwise* 179). Note the similarities with Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of “the differend,” about which Lyotard asks “What tribunal can know and rule on the differend between the ethical phrase (infinity) and the speculative phrase (totality)?” (115). Lyotard’s *Doctorat d’État*, it is worth mentioning, was heavily influenced by Levinas’ writings.

theory of knowledge] “it is necessary to have recourse to violence” (“Transcendence and hauteur” 92, my translation). The echo of Phariseic practice here should be unmistakable. Just as the Pharisees call for “violent” polemical study of the Written Law contained in the Hebrew bible, one designed to accentuate the conflicts, the paradoxes, latent in the text, Levinas calls for the same vis-à-vis the totalizing affirmations of metaphysics. Only this way, he believes, can the West manage to achieve openness to its others and so to new meanings. As Levinas writes in *Beyond the Verse*:

[the] inexhaustible surplus of meaning remains locked in the syntactic structures of the sentence, in its word-groups, its actual words, phonemes and letters, in all this materiality of the saying which is potentially signifying all the time. Exegesis would come to free, in these signs, a bewitched significance that smoulders beneath the characters or coils up in all this literature of letters. (109)

To Levinas, it is evident, all texts, not only sacred Jewish ones, can serve as the bases of creativity, for “every text is inspired: it contains more than it contains” (*Beyond* 171).

This creation through exegesis must welcome paradox, the conflicts, hence the spaces, internal to any text. For revelation is but an “an unforeseen and unforeseeable *breach* within what is known and knowable” (Davis 47). The same may be said of Levinas’ own texts. Their purposively elusive and highly disorienting style, their “saying[s] that must also be unsaid” (*Otherwise* 7), are designed to encourage the reader to be open to their own spaces, and so to the inspirations that may flow through them. As such, they mimic the plurality of conflicting and always unresolved assertions present in the bible and, more explicitly, in the Talmud.

Revelation is not limited to such texts. To Levinas, it is also associated with what he calls the “face” of the other. By this he means to allude to the spaces that he believes are situated within the soul of each and every individual human being. Openness to them, then, can make way for “an epiphany or revelation” (Davis 46). The encounter with such “faces” is not a matter of phenomenological perception since it is a “relation without relation” (*Totality* 80): it is a relation because an encounter does, after all, take place, but it is “without relation” because it is not a matter of parity or of achieving understanding or recognition. For that, Levinas suggests, would be to employ the rational, totalizing means that deny the otherness of the Other and thus to close ourselves off from the creativity that can only come from being open to it.

This creativity is also, for Levinas, a matter of ethics. For just as the first commandment revealed to the ancient Israelites was “Thou shalt not kill,” Levinas believes this to be the first message one receives from a revelation that arises from being open to the “face” of a given other (*Totality* 199). And as between God and the Israelites, there is an asymmetrical relation between self and other in all such revelation, for “since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility *is incumbent on me*” (*Ethics* 96).

It should be evident that the practice of Talmudic exegesis or openness to the other is not only a matter of opposing metaphysics’ denial of the “Other,” and so of destroying, through deconstruction, the barriers it sets up. For the point of bringing down those barriers is that something productive may arise, namely, creative revelation inspired by (or, better, through) the other. Subversion is thus only a first step, a “highlighting” of shadows, of dark aporias, in order to make way for the light of inspiration. Once again it becomes appropriate

to refer to the metaphor of the “blinking eye” in order to sum up this approach, for the point of its closure, and so of darkness, is to clear the way for the inspirational light, something, as we have seen, that is cherished as much by Greek metaphysics as by rabbinic revelation.

Of course, this double movement of subversion and reinscription is also central to Derrida’s poststructuralism. Recognizing this only adds irony to Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics,” which, again, is essentially a commentary on Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*. In this essay, Derrida suggests that Levinas’ work fails in its intent to overcome the metaphysical tradition. Yet it could be said that Derrida does so only in order that the accusation will rebound back on his own writings, for they, too, are equally guilty of the same offence. There is an important reason for this, one that has been well described by Étienne Feron when he says that Derrida’s argument “consists of recognizing that philosophical discourse can only say the Other in the language of the Same” (260, my translation). All this is in keeping with rabbinic Judaism, since without the Written Law, and so the Greek or Sadducean pretensions to unity, the rabbinic work of accentuating aporias would have no setting. Indeed, those settings are all the more appropriate for their authors’ attempt to present them as unified, as this only makes their deconstruction that much more effective, that much more fragmenting. After all, the boomerang always comes back harder the further it is originally thrown.

Derrida’s critique is often considered to be responsible for the further radicalizations of aporetic style and structure evident in Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being*. As Levinas writes of that text, it aims to achieve “an incessant un-saying of the Said [as a result of] movement going from said to unsaid in which the meaning shows itself, eclipses and shows itself. In this navigation the element that bears the embarkation is also the element that submerges it

and threatens to sink it” (*Otherwise* 181). There is clearly no attempt here to realize metaphysics’ goal of moving unidirectionally from darkness (which, it is assumed, equates with ignorance) to light (knowledge). Rather, we have an alternating interplay of shadow and reflection, one which implies that “light (or enlightenment) is [merely] an occasional, perhaps even accidental, effect of philosophical enquiry” (Davis 86). Yet it is just as much an essential effect, as this accounts for why, to Levinas, there can be no Saying without the Said: though the Saying “is never fully present in the Said, yet the Said also constitutes the only access we have to it; it leaves a *trace* on the Said but is never revealed in it; it is not a theme, but can only be discussed in terms of themes” (emphasis added, *Otherwise* 37-8; 45-8). What we have here, one might thus say, is a practice that does not so much affirm Jerusalem against Athens, as Jerusalem *and* Athens against Athens.

Part (ii) – Exegetical Implications

On, then, to the topic of rabbinic Judaism and exegetical practice. As I shall show, the parallels with poststructuralism are striking.

To begin with, there is the question of the authoritative status of given texts. As we have seen, the Pharisees called for replacing the application of biblical, Written Law by its “study,” by which is meant the creation of new, Oral Law. One result of this was that it meant that both the new and the old laws were equally authoritative. This is a position that is strikingly different from that of most approaches in literary criticism, according to which critical texts are by definition derivative, the true “genius” residing in the original objects of interpretation. The Talmud, however, is viewed as a set of “secondary” texts only in terms of sequence: it is as holy as the bible (indeed, until relatively recently, at least within the

circles of contemporary ultra-orthodox Jewry, the latter has been relatively neglected). This parallels the poststructuralist's call for blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, not to mention for skeptically interrogating the contemporary canon. And who can miss the way in which, for many poststructuralists, their projects should be considered creative works in their own right? This is fully in keeping with rabbinic Judaism's emphasis on the process over the product of a reading, for the aim of the poststructuralist critic is not to "get it right," to construct a "true" account of the meaning of a text, as to use the spaces in that text to create anew.

Moreover, for similar reasons, both approaches can be said to demote, or at least reconceive, the authority of the author's intent. "Demotion" is obviously going to be inappropriate when it comes to rabbinic Judaism's prime author, namely God, yet it is nevertheless clear that, unlike with the Sadducees, God is not seen to have monopoly over the meaning of His sacred texts. There is a wonderful Talmudic tale, described by Gershom Sholem as one of the most famous passages in Jewish literature, which illustrates precisely this point. It tells of an interpretive dispute among a group of rabbis, and is worth quoting at length:

On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward all the arguments in the world, but they were not accepted. He said to them: "If the *Halakha* [the proper decision] agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it." Thereupon the carob tree was uprooted a hundred cubits from its place; some say, four hundred cubits. They replied: "No proof may be brought from a carob tree." Then he said: "If the *Halakha* agrees with me, let this stream of water prove it." Thereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. They replied: "No proof may be brought from a stream of water." Then

he said: “If the *Halakha* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it.” Thereupon the walls of the schoolhouse began to totter. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them and said: “When scholars are engaged in *halakhic* dispute, what concern is it of yours?” Thus the walls did not topple, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, but neither did they return to their upright position, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer; still today they stand inclined. Then he said: “If the *Halakha* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven.” Thereupon a heavenly voice was heard saying: “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer? The *Halakhah* always agrees with him.” But Rabbi Joshua arose and said (Deut. 30:12): “It is not in heaven.” What did he mean by that? Rabbi Jeremiah replied: “The Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai [and is thus no longer in Heaven]. We pay no heed to any heavenly voice, because already at Mount Sinai You wrote in the Torah (Exod. 23:2): ‘One must incline after the majority.’” Rabbi Nathan met the prophet Elijah and asked him: “What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do in that hour?” He replied: “God smiled and said: My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.” (Sholem 291-2)

The determination of meaning, it is evident, is something that must be done in the midst of the (ever-changing traditions of the) community. There is no single, fixed, perfect interpretation, for the point is not, as hermeneuticists from Baruch Spinoza to E.D. Hirsch have claimed, to get at the author’s original intention. Rather it is, again, to create anew. Indeed the Talmud presents itself as a text independent of its authors (Faur 119, 122). Yet another famous Talmudic tale corroborates this: after his death, Moses is said to have been brought before a lecture being delivered by the great sage Rabbi Akiba. Disconcerted by his failure to understand the lesson, Moses is surprised to hear Akiba attribute his

wisdom to the revelation made to Moses himself long ago at the foot of Mount Sinai (Levinas, *Beyond* 134). The moral? The author not only does not decide the meaning of his text, he may not even understand it. Of course, all this is only echoed by the famous claims of poststructuralists about the “death of the author” (e.g., again, Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”; or see also Michel Foucault’s “What is an author?”).

The reader, then, is not only a receiver; he or she is also a producer. To Levinas, we ought to see the relationship between reader and text as one of mutual solicitation. Readers solicit the text with their particular interests in mind, and they are in turn solicited by the text to explore its meaning, one to which that reader’s interests make an indispensable contribution (*Beyond* 134). Consider Levinas’ own Talmudic commentaries. As Colin Davis points out, they often begin by addressing themes that appear to have little or no connection to the text in question (110). Levinas also highlights the Talmud’s own emphasis on the indispensable nature of each and every commentary, each of which is seen as adding to the meaning of the text, as realizing something that would never have come into being if not for the unique identity of the given interpreter. On its own, then, a text is a dead thing, one brought to life only when the reader approaches it with an openness to what it might inspire. There is an evident celebration of the plurality of possible readings here, the assumption being that contrary views may all have validity because their proponents all have access to a unique aspect of the truth, one emanating from the text. This is certainly a relativist conception, although Davis is right to distinguish it from relativism in the “anything goes” sense (115). For as Levinas explains, we need to distinguish between a genuinely creative reading and the fantasies of amateurs:

this is made both by a necessary reference of the subjective to the historical continuity of reading, and by the tradition of commentaries that cannot be ignored under the pretext that inspirations come to you directly from the text. A ‘renewal’ worthy of the name cannot avoid these references, any more than it can avoid reference to what is known as the oral Law.” (*Beyond* 135)

The parallel with poststructuralism’s practice of openness and yet respect for certain protocols of conduct (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 189) is striking.

The Talmudic story about Moses cited above can also be read as pointing to the rabbinic stress on the context dependant nature of any and all textual commentary. Both the bible and the Talmud are often portrayed as invitations to explore the relationship between their context and that of their current readers. This exploration is considered part of the “motor” that generates revelatory creativity. So as the reader’s context changes over time, so too will his or her readings, this making way for new textual interpretations. Meaning, then, is inexhaustible and commentary a never ending process. Levinas can be read as implying these very points by his frequent employment of such deictics, indicators of time and place, as “now,” and “here” (Davis 113). That textual meaning is always provisional in just such ways is, of course, also central to poststructuralism, Derrida’s texts being thoroughly suffused with anecdotes and, as we have seen, references to their contexts of both composition and delivery.¹⁶

The circumstantial nature of meaning is also emphasized by Talmudic readers when they give careful attention to such minute textual elements as the similarities between words, unusual spellings, the numerical values of words, etymologies, and other details that

¹⁶ Consider just his “Ulysses Gramophone,” which contains a description of his trip to a post office in Japan.

derive from Hebrew syntax. As David Banon has pointed out, for example, Talmudic readers often explore highly diverse possible readings of a single word, an exercise facilitated by Hebrew's being a consonantal language (89-90). This can be considered an example of focusing on what poststructuralists refer to as contingent textual characteristics, since poststructuralists often assume the significance of what others tend to consider merely "ornamental" or "accessory" aspects of a text. The tendency of poststructuralists to emphasize the parergon of a text is a case in point; in so doing, they only echo their ancient Talmudic forbearers for, as Faur has pointed out, the rabbis also often strove to generate meaning "from elements devoid of lexical sense, [from the] 'external' or 'circumstantial'"(xxviii).

Derrida's notion of meaning as a product of iteration may be considered another species of this genus, one that recalls the fact that the Hebrew root of the word *Mishna* (which is the title of texts containing authoritative accounts of the Oral Law), SHaNaH, means both "to repeat" and "to change." This points to the dual nature of iteration as both *transmission* and *change*. For one can never truly simply "repeat" since each and every iteration will always exist in an at least somewhat different context. As Faur suggests, this is how we should conceive of the notion of traditions: they cannot be inert, unchanging things simply passed on from one generation to the next, for those generations' different contexts will ensure that each transmission also brings about change (52-4, 146).

It is in this context that we can understand the famous Talmudic saying that "there are seventy faces to the Torah." For this is certainly a polysemic work, one that celebrates the diversity of possible interpretations and our ability to unlock its "inexhaustible

surplus of meaning.” (Levinas, *Beyond* 109). The Talmud, then, should be seen as a network of texts that continually refer to each other as part of a restless immanent polemic. This intertextuality is evident even in the structure of the Talmudic page, upon which different commentaries are situated side by side within different columns. Should one not have a Talmudic tractate handy, it is enough to glance at a page of Derrida’s *Glass* for an example of this.

Furthermore, it was always fundamental to the rabbinic tradition that blank spaces between the letters were meaningful in their own right and not merely means of keeping letters distinct. As Faur puts it, “whiteness of the parchment between the letters is what contains (and in effect gives expression to) . . . writing” (116). Indeed, if it is determined that even a single letter of sacred text has been displaced due to the need to print around a hole that has punctured the parchment, then the scroll in question is said to be invalid and hence wholly unfit for liturgical purposes (Faur 116). For that is what the paradox of complex unity demands.

Conclusion: “Greek-Jew, Jew-Greek”

In this chapter, I have attempted to draw a series of parallels between the metaphysical, theoretical philosophy tradition and biblical Judaism, on the one hand, and poststructuralism and rabbinic Judaism, on the other. Moreover, I have also tried to emphasize the similarities between the critiques advanced by the partisans of the second pair against the first. Both of the latter fear that the former encourage a form of “totalization” that closes us off from the “otherness” of meaning in (and beyond) the world, and so from creativity. To rabbinic Jews, of course, this otherness is always a function of the Other, namely, God, a religious position

that is certainly not shared by all poststructuralists. But it does not have to be, since the arguments made are, as we have seen, inescapably linguistic, their validity (or lack thereof) resting upon nothing other than their success (or failure) at accounting for phenomena that can be conceived in a wholly secular fashion. As the rabbis themselves have told us, “it is not in Heaven.”

No surprise, then, that many have identified Derrida, the father of poststructuralism, with some form or other of Hebraism.¹⁷ More significant, however, is Derrida’s own decision to close his two essays on the Jewish poet Edmond Jabès with signatures that allude to the rabbinic inheritance of his ideas: “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book” is signed by “Reb Dida,” and “Ellipse” by Reb Derissa. Anagrammatically, as Allan Megill has pointed out, it is clear that the writer in question means to identify himself as non other than Rabbi Derrida (319).

¹⁷ In *Saving the Text*, Geoffrey Hartman characterizes Derrida as “Hebrew rather than Hellene” (17). Moreover, Douglas G. Atkins specifically associates Derrida (and his poststructuralist allies) with what he calls the project of dehellenization, an attack on the values of clarity, transparency, and intellectual mastery that are so deeply imbedded within Western consciousness (774).

Chapter 3

Ontological Hermeneutics and Levitical Judaism

Introduction

In its broadest sense, “hermeneutics” means “the science of interpretation.” This science has, of course, been with us for a very long time. As Robert Holub points out, the etymology of “hermeneutics” recalls Hermes, Greek mythology’s wing-footed messenger of the gods (255). Much later, during the Restoration, hermeneutics came to be associated with the enterprise of biblical exegesis. Then, thanks to the works of Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, hermeneutics’ scope was expanded. Its focus became understanding in general, including those approaches to it found within the human sciences and humanities. After this transformation, still another one, this time led by the philosophers Martin Heidegger and, following him, Hans-Georg Gadamer, inaugurated the era of post-romantic or “ontological hermeneutics.” That is the form of it that I shall be focusing on in this chapter.¹

The chapter’s central argument – indeed that of the thesis as a whole – is that this hermeneutics ought to be distinguished from the approaches to exegesis that are at home in the theoretical, metaphysical tradition as well as from those of their poststructuralist opponents. To support this here, I shall develop an account of this hermeneutics’ fundamental characteristics, one that contrasts them with both the metaphysical and poststructuralist approaches. I shall then describe the affinities between hermeneutics and the “dialogical” philosophy of Martin Buber. The latter’s thought, moreover, will be

¹ For an account of the history of hermeneutics, see Gerald Bruns’ *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*.

shown to have roots in a particular form of ancient Judaism: not the rabbinic Judaism that is the source of poststructuralism but an alternative “levitical” Judaism.

The chapter consists of two sections. The first contains a two-part account of the hermeneutical enterprise. First, I shall examine the particular conception of linguistic meaning assumed by hermeneutics, i.e., that language is, at base, meaningful in a “symbolic” rather than semiotic way. As I will show, different conceptions of meaning are associated with different conceptions of interpretation: for the hermeneuticist (unlike the metaphysician or poststructuralist) we ought to affirm a methodological distinction between the kind of interpretation appropriate to the humanities and human sciences on the one hand and that relevant to the natural sciences on the other. Then, in the second part, I shall explore the particular way in which hermeneutics accounts for the relationship between subject and object or the self and the other and follow this with a brief demonstration of its implications for interpretive practice. Finally, in the chapter’s next section, I shall suggest that there is a connection between hermeneutics, Buber’s dialogical philosophy, and levitical Judaism.

Section I – Ontological Hermeneutics

Part (i) – Linguistic Meaning: Symbolic Expressivism vs. Semiotic Representationalism

In chapter I, I described poststructuralism’s conception of language as fundamentally semiotic. Meaning, according to this view, is at base designative: signs consist of signifiers that *signify* signifieds, i.e., they *point* towards them. For example, by seeing a friend’s bicycle in front of his house (the signifier), one apprehends that he is at home

(the meaning signified). The sign thus points to a meaning that is situated elsewhere,² the connection established between the signifier and signified being ultimately considered a matter of arbitrary convention. Yet whereas structuralist linguistics assumes that signs are commensurable and hence that it is possible to construct a representation of the whole system of a given language's signs, the poststructuralist denies this. To the poststructuralist, there will always be some differed meaning in any signifying process; no totalizing representation of the whole can ever be possible.

In hermeneutics, by contrast, meaning is, at base, a matter of the *expression of symbols* rather than the designation of signs. Whereas semioticians emphasize the potential independence of distinct signifiers and signifieds, hermeneuticists assert instead the consubstantiality of the symbolizing and the symbolized. The idea here is that *what* is expressed (i.e., the symbolized) is integrated with *how* it is expressed (i.e., the symbolizing) – meaning, that is, is always “right there” since it is tied to a particular symbolic embodiment. For example, seeing a smiling, happy face allows one to apprehend the particular way in which all the features of that face come together to manifest, to make present, a particular meaning: that the person whose face it is is happy. The meaning, then, arises not from some pointing away but from “within” the symbol. Hence Coleridge, who can be read as affirming this symbolic connection between form and content when he writes: “such as the life is, such is the form” (46). Adopting this principle for its conception of the fundamental basis of meaning,

² Other examples of designative meaning can be found in Taylor's “Language and Human Nature” (218-19).

hermeneutics can thus be said to reject the separation between signifier and signified that is assumed by semiotics, whether structuralist or poststructuralist.³

That linguistic meaning is ultimately a matter of symbolic expressivism is something that, as the citation from Coleridge indicates, contemporary hermeneuticists inherited from their romantic forbearers. Yet there is a fundamental difference between the romantic and the post-romantic hermeneuticists, one that tends to be overlooked by poststructuralists. The latter tend to lump both romantic and ontological hermeneutics together and thus make the mistake of assuming that the latter is as much a part of the metaphysical tradition as the former.

We can avoid this mistake by examining the nature of the symbol. In his *Theories of the Symbol*, Tzvetan Todorov describes how the romantics inaugurated their conception of the symbol by contrasting it with allegory. According to the romantics, symbol and allegory differ in at least five respects. First, as we have already noted, both diverge as regards the locus of meaning production. Allegory is said to produce its meanings through designation, by alluding to a narrative or other art form that is external to it; as such, it is like the sign in which the signifier and signified are, as we have noted, separate. Allegorical meaning, then, can be accessed by employing the rational intellect in order to make the necessary connection (Todorov 201, 203). The apprehension of a symbol's meaning, however, requires not only intellection but also perception, for one must actually *see* the symbol if its meaning is to be manifest. As Charles Taylor puts it in his "Language and Human Nature": "what expression manifests can *only* be manifested in expression" (219).

³ Taylor explores the contrast between these two modes of linguistic meaning in his "Language and Human Nature," "Theories of Meaning," and "The Importance of Herder."

Note that the romantic perceiver of the symbol is said to immediately comprehend two levels of meanings: the particular, that which is manifested by the symbol in itself, e.g., the happiness of the person whose face it is, and the general, in this case, happiness in general. The combining of this duality within immediate comprehension is said to be something surprising to the interpreter. With the allegory, by contrast, its meaning is assumed to be strictly functional or utilitarian: it exists as a particular and yet only as an example of the general, i.e., it is meant to serve as simply an instrument through which one can perceive the general. This suggests a second difference between symbol and allegory: the symbol is a self-contained entity, the product of a “synthesis” or “fusion” of symbolizer and symbolized, particular and general, while the allegory, in keeping with the separation of signifier and signified, entails a signified meaning that, ultimately, points to some independent and abstract universal (Todorov 201, 203).

The third difference has to do with the purpose of interpretation. To the romantic, the interpretation of allegory has a transparent end. For once the connection with whatever has been allegorized has been made, the meaning in question has been fully grasped. Not so when it comes to the perceiver of the symbol, who the romantic conceives as receiving a kind of invitation from it, an invitation to an unending task of symbolic interpretation. This is because the parts of a symbolic whole are understood to combine in such a way as to provide an inexhaustible source of meaning, this being a function of their ability to “express the inexpressible.” To the romantics, then, whereas the meaning of the allegory is something already made, already defined, and hence

finite, complete, even “dead,” that of the symbol is infinite and “lives” forever (Todorov 206).

The fourth difference arises from *how* meaning is constituted: with the symbol, meaning is produced by the particular “organic” way in which all of its features combine. For example, all parts of the face must work together in a particular way to manifest the particular happiness. With the allegory, by contrast, the possibility that one can invoke a number of very different – indeed separate – designations to communicate the same meaning means that there is no need to invoke an organic unity (Todorov 206).

This points us towards the fifth difference: intransitivity. The bicycle locked outside someone’s house signifies that its owner is probably home. But since some other signifier could have equally done the work, e.g., the light on in the window of her room, the assumption is that all of the different potential signifiers are transitive. Allegorical meaning is considered similarly transitive, since in allegory the whole point is that another story, or more than one, is equally capable of conveying the very same meaning. With the symbol, however, the “fusion” of symbolizer and symbolized entails that only *that particular* symbol can convey *that particular* meaning; no other smiling face, for example, could express happiness in exactly the same way (Todorov 203).

Although they championed the symbol, this does not mean that the romantics rejected allegory altogether. As Todorov points out, some granted it a secondary role (201). Precisely this binary opposition, however, has led Paul de Man, one of the leading poststructuralist thinkers, to raise an objection. In his “Rhetoric of Temporality,” de Man criticizes the assumption that the symbol, in contrast with the allegory, is the predominant characteristic of romantic diction. The notion, he claims, is a “self-

mystification,” a veil thrown “over a light one no longer wishes to perceive” (208).

Against the grain, de Man claims that not only did allegory still prevail (at least in early) romanticism but that, in fact, the allegorical mode expresses the genuine romantic voice, one that assumes that there is always distance between self (subject) and non-self (object). Indeed, de Man’s radical rethinking of romantic rhetoric leads him to claim that the very assumption of romantic substitution of the symbol for the allegory reveals a totalizing desire (188), one that constitutes an act of ontological bad faith (211).

As noted above, the romantic assumption of organic unity in expression assumes that there is a total fusion between the symbolizing and the symbolized or form and content. This unification implies that the symbol does not depend on things outside of it, i.e., on the context, for its meaning. As such, it allows the romantic to claim that given symbols are meaningfully self-sufficient, which is to say meaningful in both an autonomous and universal way. Given this, I think de Man is correct when he complains that there is something totalizing and hence dogmatic about the romantic symbol. More specifically, as he points out, the organically unified symbol does not allow for the intervention of time and context, which is to say, for historical temporality (207). This, again, is a result of its self-enclosed nature. In consequence, de Man prefers the allegory since he believes that time is its fundamental constitutive category (207). We can see why by recognizing how the separation between the signifier and the signified entails a distance, one that allows the linguistic sign to support an allegory that works through repetition and iteration. As de Man explains,

We have . . . [in the world of allegory] a relationship between signs in which the reference to their respective meanings has become of

secondary importance. But this relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refers to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition . . .* of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this *temporal difference*. In so doing it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self (emphasis added 207).

The allegorical sign can represent meaning, then, only because it is amenable to iteration over time. Yet this does not happen, as structuralist semioticians assume, within a systematic unity. For to de Man, as we have seen, meaning is established “in the void” of the temporal differences between the signifier and the signified; if there to be meaning, that is, the system must, in a sense, be “cracked.” De Man, then, rejects *both* systematic and organic unity, both structuralist semiotics and romantic expressivism.

As I said, de Man seems to be correct in his claim that there is something totalizing about affirming the symbol as a self-enclosed autonomous entity. But his own total rejection of symbolic expressivism is simply too-quick. I believe that there is a form of it that should not be identified with the metaphysical tradition. It departs from

the romantic notion that interpretation is an act of almost mystical empathy, in which one “jumps” out of one’s self “into the shoes” of the object of interpretation or those of its creator. To the romantic, the point is to reconstruct or recreate the moment in which, driven by an author’s intention, the meaning of a symbol manifests itself in the fusion between symbolizing and symbolized (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 131).⁴ Yet there is another symbolic alternative.

It is the one defended by the post-romantic hermeneuticist. While still asserting the centrality of symbolic expressivism, he or she nevertheless does not conceive of the symbol as a fully fused, totally consubstantial entity. To philosophers such as Heidegger and Gadamer, interpretation is more a matter of re-articulation than reconstruction, and symbolic meaning is considered something inherently contextual. They can claim this because they assume that the symbolizer and the symbolized, though organically related, are nevertheless not unified. To them, there is always room for the symbolized to be expressed somewhat differently, i.e., by a different, though never wholly unrelated, symbolizer.

De Man himself appears to recognize something of the distinction between the two forms of hermeneutics when he writes of how Gadamer’s understanding of symbolism can “no longer [be] seen as a configuration of entities that designate a plurality of distinct and isolated meanings [i.e., of self-enclosed symbols], but a

⁴ As Gadamer puts it, for Schleiermacher, for example, interpretation is “ultimately a divinary procedure, a placing oneself inside the whole outlook of the author, a comprehension of the ‘inner immergence’ of the composition of a work, a recreation of the creative act” (*Truth* 164). In sum, as Weinsheimer indicates, interpretation for the romantic hermeneuticist consists of a “psychological reconstruction of the genius of the author,” wherein the interpreter transposes himself into the author’s horizon (*Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 141). E. D. Hirsch’s hermeneutics, which emphasizes the importance of capturing the author’s intention, can thus be considered a part of the Romantic hermeneutical tradition.

configuration of symbols ultimately leading to a total, single, and universal meaning” (188). Yet, as the reference to total universal meaning indicates, de Man still misconceives Gadamer’s alternative. For one thing, he misses Gadamer’s own rejection of romantic symbolism’s totalizing tendencies (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 131). For another, he fails to appreciate the inherently contextual, hence historical, nature of post-romantic hermeneutics. This is because Gadamer’s hermeneutics assumes that, since the fusion of the symbolizing and symbolized is never complete (there being other symbols that could articulate similar meanings), context necessarily enters into the constitution of symbolic meaning. Given this, we need to recognize how that meaning evolves in history.

Meaning as so understood makes way, as we have noted, for a different conception of its interpretation. Rather than reconstruction, the point now is re-articulation. Rather than intuiting meaning in the blink of one’s “mind’s eye,” one engages in a kind of conversation with the object of interpretation, an ongoing dialogical process. There can be no “jumping out of” one’s self since that self is one of the interlocutors necessary for the dialogue; it is what brings the “enabling prejudices,” to use Gadamer’s expression, necessary for meaning to show up in the first place.

That this is itself a fundamentally temporal process should be evident. Unlike poststructuralist temporality, however, time is not a matter of the iteration of discrete moments. On the contrary, it is conceived as an organically continuous flow, in which the past flows into the present and the present into future. This is time as Henri Bergson famously conceived of it, what he called “*durée*.”⁵

⁵ As Bergson defines this notion of time:

Interpretation as re-articulation, however, is relevant only when it comes to symbolic meaning. As we have noted, the expressivist tradition, whether in its romantic or post-romantic forms, asserts the centrality or fundamentality of the symbol but not its exclusivity. Language can indeed also designate meaning, and when it does so another kind of interpretation is required (Taylor, "Importance" 86-87). Hence the methodological distinction that all expressivists assert between the human sciences and humanities on the one hand and the natural sciences on the other. The former are those disciplines that aim to understand texts or text-analogues (the latter being the personal and social practices that are the subjects of the human sciences) that are, for the most part, expressed symbolically rather than designated. The latter studies things as they exist in nature, governed by culturally independent and universal physical laws.

This suggests that, for the ontological hermeneuticist, when humans designate, they may be understood to communicate as animals do. The assumption here is that animals do not have language in its fullest sense, that their means of communication is different and that this difference is, as Taylor has argued, not only a question of degree of sophistication.

To Taylor, chimpanzees, for example, are certainly capable of learning to correlate between signs, say between a goal representable as "want banana" and the task required to achieve it. To learn to use the representation in question is "to learn to apply it appropriately in the furtherance of some non-linguistically-defined purpose or task"

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary, it would no longer *endure*. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the note of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another. (99)

(“Importance” 84). By “non-linguistically-defined” Taylor means to invoke something that could be sufficiently defined otherwise, for example, by the representation of a series of instrumental steps. In non-linguistic definitions, there is no *intrinsically right* representation since other representations may be equally adequate to the task. Not so when it comes to expressive language, as when one reaches for a particular metaphor to convey a particular emotion: here there is indeed a strict sense of what is required to “get it right.” Unlike with the instrumental signals used by animals, then, expressive rightness cannot be explained in terms of success at a task that is not itself linguistically defined (Taylor, “Importance” 84). The ability to use expressive terms correctly is thus something that relies on those terms being situated in what Taylor calls the “linguistic dimension,” a place to which animals simply do not have access. As he puts it, animals are simply incapable of using and responding to words “in terms of their truth, or descriptive rightness, or power to evoke some mood, or recreate a scene, or express some emotion, or carry some nuance of feeling, or in some such way to be *le mot juste*” (“Importance” 84).

Consider how, when we converse, even about factual matters, we establish a particular stance as a result of the way we stand and speak. For example, we form an objective stance when we coldly examine something, and this is expressed by our style of speech, by the words we use, and by the particular way in which our aloof air manages to hold our interlocutor at a certain distance. However unconscious we may be of what we are doing, Taylor suggests, we must still be sensitive to the rightness of this mien as expressing a particular stance (“Importance” 86-87). This is very different from how, for example, one’s facial twitches might show one to be agitated, as they do so by signaling or

designating rather than expressing the condition. The symptoms of any physiological condition are, in consequence, semiotic rather than symbolic.

Indeed, even when humans use words only to designate meaning, it is still possible to enquire about the intention expressed by the signal. As Taylor points out, for example, there is an expressive difference between saying “Watch out for the bull!” or just “Tiger!” Yet there is no sense to posing a question about underlying expressive meaning when it comes to the signals that can be used to communicate with animals. There is no point, for example, in asking whether a red triangle means “run here” or “cheese” or “run here for cheese” and so on to a rat, just as there is nothing gained by distinguishing between two possible meanings of a bird’s cry, say “danger” or “skedaddle.” Meaning in these examples can only refer to the response aroused rather than to anything that, again, is intrinsically linguistic. Not so when it comes to the gamut of illocutionary forces present in a human’s linguistic repertoire (Taylor, “Importance” 87).

Those who take metaphysical or poststructuralist approaches, however, do not make this strong distinction between the expressivist, strictly human use of language on the one hand and the non-human use of it on the other. For their assumption that language is at base semiotic recognizes only the designative conception of meaning. Hence the absence in their thinking of the methodological distinction between the human and natural sciences, a distinction, again, that is central to hermeneutics. Affirming it, as I shall show below, has major implications for how one ought to conceive of textual interpretation.

First, however, I wish the reader to recall that, whereas the metaphysician assumes that reason can employ language, i.e., signs, to capture meaning, the poststructuralist rejects this project as unfeasible. For the latter language is not merely an instrument of reason, and meaning cannot simply be “captured” by it since meaning is endlessly differed. The science or knowledge aimed for by the metaphysician is thus considered unattainable. And yet the poststructuralists can be said to echo the metaphysicians in their claim that their beliefs apply equally across all of the sciences, both human and natural.

To the hermeneuticist, however, it is because some meanings, being symbolically based, are historically and culturally relative while others, being semiotic, are not (or at least not necessarily) that two distinct forms of reasoning about them are required: the interpretation of the former relies upon a “warm” engaged reason that is unlike the cold disengaged reason essential to the natural scientist (Blattberg, *Pluralist* 20-21). This engaged reason, as Gadamer, in particular, emphasizes, shares something of the spirit of Aristotle’s notion of practical reason or *phronesis*, a form of judgment that aims for a kind of objectivity that is engaged with rather than disengaged from the context. Aristotelian *phronesis* is, in consequence, central to his account of interpretation (*Truth* 19, 314, 316-17, 322). It allows him to claim that interpretation is indeed a rational affair and hence that there are better or worse interpretations – a result of the degree to which they are *true* to what they are about. Moreover, in making practical, rather than theoretical, reason the more basic, hermeneuticists such as Gadamer may be said to have extricated themselves from the metaphysical tradition. For whereas the metaphysician, as we have seen, conceives of *logos* as more a matter of

thought than of language, the hermeneuticist does not distinguish between the two terms at all.

It is important to note that this methodological distinction does not rely upon a naïve, positivist conception of natural science, one which assumes that research techniques, indeed the very questions the researcher asks, are somehow culture-free. Nevertheless, as Blattberg argues (*Pluralist* 14-25), post-positivist or post-empiricist conceptions of natural science, advanced by such thinkers as Karl Popper and Willard Quine, still assume that research is about phenomena that are meaningful in a semiotic way. Ironically enough, this is a position they share with their difference-inspired opponents in the philosophy of science, thinkers such as Richard Rorty and Mary Hesse. Hermeneuticists such as Taylor (“Understanding Human” 25-38) and Hubert L. Dreyfus (“Why” 3-22), however, have contributed to the establishment of a third way, the only one that distinguishes the work of the scholars of human science and the humanities from those of the natural sciences. It is as a result of his failure to follow Taylor and Dreyfus that the literary theorist Joel Weinsheimer, in his *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, assumes that the move to post-empiricist philosophies of natural science have “rendered inconsequential one aspect of the critical thrust of *Truth and Method* – its attempt to legitimize an avenue to truth that lies outside and in opposition to the methodological control of the natural sciences” (64; see also 16-36, 41, 43, 49-53). Weinsheimer even goes so far as to echo the “hermeneutics of suspicion” of the poststructuralists when he claims that in “both the natural and human sciences, the process of understanding is the process of disillusionment” (*Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 24). But the methodological distinction in question rests upon more than the differentiation of

“application in the historical sciences from the subsumption under laws that is typical of application in the natural sciences” (*Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 35); it has to do with the very nature of the meaning one is trying to interpret. Weinsheimer, however, misses precisely this.

Part (ii) – Self and Other

Corresponding to the above differences between metaphysics, poststructuralism and hermeneutics is an epistemological one concerned with the conceptions of and the relations between subject and object or self and other. In short, whereas the modern metaphysician subscribes to a dualist epistemology in which subject and object are independent of each other, and whereas the poststructuralist critiques this dualism in an albeit complicit way, the hermeneuticist rejects, or rather subordinates, the dualism altogether. To the hermeneuticist, subject and object always begin as parts of a greater whole.

Systematic theory, as I mentioned in the Introduction, can be associated with the metaphysics of Cartesian dualism. It assumes a separation between a reflective “I” that struggles for mastery or control over a “non-I” or object. Poststructuralism, as we have seen, rejects this aim and its associated division between subject and object. To the poststructuralist, any “capturing” of the object by a subject necessitates the reduction of the former’s “otherness” to the “same” of the subject. As Colin Davis has put it, the other gets acknowledged “only in order to be suppressed or possessed; as in the workings of the Hegelian dialectic, the characteristic gesture of [metaphysical] philosophy is to acknowledge the Other in order to incorporate it within the expanding circles of the same”

(40). Appreciating this means appreciating that the world can never be completely known, that it contains fissures or cracks – hence aporias – before which reason is helpless.

At the heart of this philosophy lies, as we have seen, a paradoxical movement of subversion and re-inscription, one in which the relation between self and other striven for by the metaphysician is reversed. The asymmetry between the two is thus maintained but turned upside-down: now the other is understood to have power over the self – at least in those “blinking” moments of blindness present within all insight. These are the times when the other, not the self, is doing the looking (Blattberg, “Loving Wisdom” 17). Thus, as Levinas puts this, “[t]here is a commandment in the appearance of the face [of the other], as if a master spoke to me,” for “since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility *is incumbent on me*” (*Ethics* 89, 96).⁶

Gadamer’s hermeneutics should also be interpreted as rejecting Cartesian dualism. As Alasdair MacIntyre has described, “Gadamer is involved in an argument against a view of aesthetic experience which has hunted us for nearly two hundred years: the isolated self reading the isolated text” (43). Or as Weinsheimer has put it, to Gadamer “[b]oth subject and object are derivative and secondary, in that both precipitate out of the more primordial unity of being at home in the world. Further, both are determined negatively: the knowing subject no longer understands, and the object to be known no longer fits” (*Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 5). In this, Gadamer follows Heidegger’s claim that anything meaningful – including the distinction between self and other – necessarily emerges out of a pre-reflective background, one to which all meaningful things remain

⁶ Or, as Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: “Goodness consists in taking up a position such that the other counts more than myself” (247).

somewhat attached. Thinking, the point of departure for the metaphysical tradition, is thus secondary to Being: as Kierkegaard once put it, we should say “I am therefore I think” rather than Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” (qtd in Dreyfus 3). This implies that our primordial mode of being is that of participation in the flow of pre-reflective practice, in what Heidegger has called “average everydayness” (*Being and Time* 67-71, 421-23). Reflection, then, can begin only *after* something has “shown up” out of the pre-reflective background. The metaphysician misses precisely this, however, as Heidegger suggests in his “Letter on Humanism” when he compares the metaphysician’s obsession with thought to “the procedure of trying to evaluate the nature and powers of a fish by seeing how long it can live on dry land. For a long time now,” Heidegger continues, “thinking has been stranded on dry land” (195).

All this has implications for how we should conceive of interpretation. For one thing, it implies that interpretation, at least when it is engaged, is also always self-interpretation. This is because the other, given its own connection to the background, is always also partly integrated with the self. As Paul Ricoeur puts it,

[t]he subject that interprets himself while interpreting signs is no longer the *cogito*: rather, he is a being who discovers, by the exegesis of his own life, that he is placed in being before he places and possesses himself. In this way, hermeneutics would discover a manner of existing which would remain from start to finish a *being-interpreted*.” (11)

So unlike with either theoretical metaphysics or its poststructuralist alternative, the assumption is that there is always some mutuality between self and other, a result of their both sharing a pre-reflective background. Moreover, the relation between them is

fundamentally symmetrical, the symmetry characteristic of the genuine back-and-forth necessary for any real dialogue. This means that just as the metaphysician's reduction of the other to the same is shunned – for dialogue requires an openness of self that is incompatible with reductiveness – so too is the difference philosopher's belief that the other is necessarily always an "absolute Other," one that is in principle beyond comprehension. The other, then, does not always have a power over the self; sometimes, at least, the two can be reconciled.

Indeed reconciliation is the point of hermeneutical dialogue. The aim is to convert an initial state of misunderstanding into one of understanding, of even greater sharing. That is why Gadamer tells us that "[t]o find one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the fundamental movement of spirit, whose being is only return to itself from being otherwise" (*Truth* 15); or, as Ricoeur has put it, "[i]t is thus the growth of [the interpreter's] own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of the other. Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others" (17). The event of interpretation, in consequence, is necessarily ontological (hence "*ontological* hermeneutics") for it has an impact on the world, whether that part of it which is the identity of the interpreter, or the object interpreted, or both. So when Gadamer writes that "[a]ll understanding is ultimately self-understanding," for "[in] every case the fact is that whoever understands understands himself, projects himself on his own possibilities" (*Truth* 231), we can see how hermeneutical interpretation has the potential to change the interpreter. An interpretation is never the "possession" of some consciousness since interpreting

subjects do not stand aloof and objective, as the metaphysician assumes; rather, what they interpret is itself partly constituted by their own horizon, their “selves.”

The point here, again, is not reductiveness towards either the self or the other, but a reconciling, a coming together that is represented by an understanding shared by both self and other. “This between,” Gadamer writes, “is the true locus of hermeneutics” (*Truth* 263).

Of course, to the philosopher of difference, this hermeneutical mutuality constitutes but another form of the metaphysician’s reduction of the other to the same. As I have tried to show, however, it is anything but. Consider Weinsheimer’s contrast of Gadamer’s approach with the totalizing of Hegel’s dialectic:

Gadamer departs from Hegel in that he envisions no end point where the movement of alienation and return can cease in a total self-appropriation. For Gadamer the spirit is at home only elsewhere; and though this does not mean that it is a homeless vagabond, nevertheless the spirit remains perpetually on the way home: it exists as a movement toward being more fully what it is. (*Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 71)

Thus is the hermeneuticist always “on the way.”⁷ One never completes one’s understanding of a text, never truly “captures” it; on the contrary, the process of learning from it, and so of changing oneself on the basis of what one learns, is endless. No reconciliation is ever final.

I now want to describe the implications of this hermeneutical conception of interpretation for textual exegesis. To begin, note how aspects of a text “show up” to us as in need of interpretation only when there is a conflict, which is to say when

⁷ As in the title of Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language*.

something in the text appears to us as confusing or contradictory. In aiming to rearticulate what has shown up, the hermeneutical interpreter aims to transform it so that the features in conflict can be reconciled and hence “make sense.” Thus is understanding achieved, an understanding that, as we have seen, requires change, whether of the text, or of its interpreter, or both. Only then does the problem that initially confronted the interpreter fade back into the pre-reflective background, making way for something else to emerge and hold his or her attention.

Moreover, “what” is interpreted in this process is not some fixed, independent meaning, comparable, as the New Critics would have it, with the “words on the page.” Rather, the conscious, intellectual sort of interpretation that drives re-articulation is itself preceded by what we might identify as a passive, unconscious interpretive act. That is when the “horizon” of the self is fused with that of the text on the page (as in Gadamer’s famous expression about the “fusion of horizons”), this constituting the meaning to be interpreted in the more explicit or conscious sense. On their own, self and text are “meaningless,” at least in an expressivist sense. That is why Gadamer would have us reject the conception of the artwork as an object presented to a conscious subject, in which the latter interprets the former from some external standpoint (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 118). Since when Gadamer writes that “production is in truth the *original* mode of being of all transitory arts” (*Truth* 143), he means that it makes no sense to speak of an original work in any primordial sense. This is because a work only exists as meaningful during the fusion of horizons and this, given the constant change of contexts, is going to be somewhat different each and every time. For the very same reason, Gadamer rejects the notion of art as mimesis, since no artwork can represent

something that exists in itself, outside of its perception by the artist. Production, in consequence, is always considered a kind of reproduction, as with Gadamer's claim that "it is first through the picture that the original becomes original" (*Truth* 125). Like the poststructuralist, then, the hermeneuticist would collapse the separation between a work and what it represents (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics* 120-25, 129-30), there being no "original," in a primordial sense, for the same reason that, as Derrida once put it, all words act as a "supplement."

So at least when it comes to texts or text-analogues that are meaningful in an expressive sense, we can see why, to the Gadamerian, it is impossible to step outside of the interpreted world and developing neutral or literal readings. There is no such thing as literal expressive meaning, just as there can be no final authoritative interpretation, say, one that captures an author's intention. For the latter is itself but an interpretation, something always "on the way." Otherwise put, even creation always contains some interpretation in it (humans, after all, never create *ex nihilo*).

None of this means that there is anything wrong with speaking of "truth" when it comes to interpretation. The truth that corresponds to some external object, the truth of the modern epistemologist, certainly has its place, but only, as we have seen, in the natural sciences. The interpretation of expressive, symbolic meaning requires a different understanding of truth, one that is inherently contextual. This is a matter of being true to meaning as it appears to given interpreters in a given interpretive situation. Not that this should be considered subjectivist. Indeed, there are at least two reasons why P. D. Juhl, for one, is wrong to claim that "it follows [from Gadamer's hermeneutics] that a statement about the meaning of a work is a statement about a particular critic's

subjective understanding” (*Interpretation* 8). First, because the meaning the interpreter strives to be faithful to is not simply his or her’s alone; as we have noted, it is constituted by the fusion of his or her horizon *with that* of the text or text-analogue. *Pace* Rainer Warning, among others (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* 128), Gadamer’s hermeneutics is thus not at all comparable to reception theory. This is most evident when the reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss argues against Gadamer’s contention that the artwork first speaks to us before we interrogate it, i.e., that we interpret it pre-reflectively before we ever interpret it consciously or explicitly (Jauss 30). To Jauss, for whom meaning is only constituted by the reader, we might say that a text cannot “speak” before an interpreter has made it do so. To the hermeneuticist, as we have seen, this is two-sided: neither the text nor the reader is sovereign over meaning; both, together, must constitute it.

The second reason this hermeneutics is not subjectivist is associated with the fact that one’s own horizon is not wholly one’s own. For it is always partly shared with others, those of the linguistic community within which one has been brought up and shares certain traditions. As Gadamer writes: “[u]nderstanding itself is not to be considered as an act of subjectivity but as joining in with an event of tradition in which past and present are constantly mediated” (*Truth* 258). The subject’s self, then, never exists in isolation, as if like some independent atom.⁸ Indeed that is why two or more subjects are able to converse about the “same” text in the first place, since the meaning that shows up to each of them always has some aspects in common. Otherwise their coming to agreement, not to mention their initial disagreement, would never be possible.

⁸ Thus does Heidegger, in his “Letter on Humanism,” reject essentialist or existential conceptions of human being, those that offer ahistorical answers to the question “What is the essence of man?” (204-10). On the problems with affirming such atomistic social ontologies, see Taylor’s “Atomism.”

Yet the dialogue, the exchange of interpretations, recommended by the hermeneuticist as the best way for reaching understanding should not be conceived, as Stanley Fish does conceive of it, as restricted to a given “interpretive community.” To Fish, “[y]ou will agree with me (that is, understand), only if you already agree with me” (173). But the very reason for entering into dialogue is that something has shown up to potential interlocutors, something that, as we have seen, is expressive of a conflict, a disagreement (otherwise it would have remained invisible, part of their shared pre-reflective background). This suggests that the borders of a community, of a given set of shared understandings, are not only porous but also often themselves in question. When people disagree, that is, there is a sense in which their community itself is the subject of that disagreement. The common good that constitutes a community, in consequence, never represent a consensus – or, rather, even if it does, we must speak of a consensus around a set of interpretations that are never final and thus always open to question. The community of interlocutors is thus, again, always “on the way.” Weinsheimer, then, is right to point out that Fish’s conception of community leaves no room for genuine conflict, hence for the attempt at reconciliation through the exchange of interpretations. As he points out, in Fish’s world, “[t]hose within the community do not discuss, only nod in recognition; and those outside of the community do not even share the same text with those within, and hence have nothing in common to talk about” (“Suppose Theory is Dead” 265).

It is because members of the same community share something, even if only disagreements, in common that they are able to converse, to interpret together. Each brings partly shared prejudices to bear on a given matter, constituting it in a certain way.

That is why Gadamer has famously attempted to rehabilitate the concept of prejudice, especially as against what he has referred to as the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" (*Truth* 239). To Gadamer, we ought to conceive of prejudice as pre-judgment, i.e., as the bringing to bear of one's self, including the pre-reflective background associated with it, on a given subject. Otherwise put, prejudice refers to the self's horizon, a necessary half of the function if meaning is to be constituted in the first place. Moreover, since that self is at least partly inherited, we can see why prejudice may be considered either a "gift" of tradition or, otherwise, that we always remain somewhat "owned" by it. As Gadamer writes:

[h]istory does not belong to us but instead we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves reflectively, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way through the family, society, and state in which we live. . . . The self-consciousness of the individual is only a flickering in the close circuits of historical life. For this reason the prejudices of the single individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. (*Truth* 245)

Of course, the fact that a given pre-judgment has been handed down to us and is essential to interpretation says nothing about whether it is right or wrong. To the followers of enlightenment, all prejudices are false just because they are predetermined by tradition; hence their call for eliminating all prejudices.

But this, as Gadamer points out, would be to cripple tradition (*Truth* 240) and thus make interpretation – hence critical judgment – impossible. It is only on the basis of prejudices that a given prejudice may be criticized, subjected to the sometimes radical

transformations called for if there is to be understanding. Indeed, it is just because something has, thanks to the prejudices of interpreters, shown up as problematic that interpretation is necessary in the first place. Understanding, then, can only come with transformation, which is why interpretation implies criticism. As Taylor puts it, for instance, “understanding is inseparable from criticism” (“Understanding” 131). We should thus dismiss the complaint of those, such as the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, that Gadamer’s hermeneutics is necessarily conservative.⁹ On the contrary, a conflict of interpretations implies an opposition between different potential paths of transformation: the real question is “Which is the better way to go?” or, “Which interpretation makes the most sense and hence would bring the most understanding?”¹⁰ And these questions mean: how shall we change?

This returns us to the centrality of truth to hermeneutical interpretation. *Pace* Harold Bloom, for whom all readings are necessarily misreadings (3-6), or Culler, who asserts that interpretation is a “necessary error” (*Pursuit* 14), the hermeneuticist assumes that some interpretations are always better – more true – than others. For some are going to be more faithful to the text as a whole.

To invoke the notion of the text *as a whole* is to appeal to the principle of the hermeneutical circle. Things show up, as we have seen, because they emerge out of the pre-reflective background, the whole of which all aspects of a given text or text-analogue are a part. The movement of hermeneutical interpretation, then, begins with that whole and only then moves on to the part or parts that have shown up. It then

⁹ See Habermas’ “A Review of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*.”

¹⁰ Jean Grondin, following Schleiermacher, describes the hermeneutical endeavor as one which consists of a transformation of an initial state of misunderstanding into an understanding (70).

returns to the whole as the interpreter searches for the account that is the most true to it.

As Gadamer writes:

[a]nyone who wants to understand a text always performs an act of projection. He projects in advance a sense of the whole as soon as an initial sense appears. Likewise the initial sense appears only because one is already reading with certain expectations of a definite meaning. In working out such a fore-projection, which is of course continually revised, consists the understanding of what is there. (*Truth* 236)

Unlike the fragmentation emphasized by the poststructuralist, then, the hermeneuticist endeavor is thoroughly holistic, both in the sense that it is supported by a conception of the whole and because it aims to reconcile, to integrate, those parts that have shown up in conflict. Yet this holism is far from the systematic holism of the modern metaphysician; there is no reduction of conflicting parts to some systematically unified theory. As we have seen, understanding requires an openness to change, to transforming one's prejudices. That is the fore-projection, as Gadamer writes above, which must be continually revisited, continually re-examined and if necessary revised if there is to be understanding. This openness, moreover, takes the form of a "listening" that leads the hermeneuticist to affirm the centrality of the aural rather than the ocular. As Gadamer has put it, "the primacy of hearing is the basis of the hermeneutical phenomena" (*Truth* 420). In consequence, while the "eye" may be an apt metaphor for conveying the metaphysician's will to power, and its "blinking" for expressing the poststructuralist double movement of inscription and subversion, the hermeneuticist believes that, if

there is to be understanding, we must turn instead to the “ear” (Blattberg, “Loving Wisdom” 20).

Section II – Buber’s Dialogical Philosophy and Levitical Judaism

Martin Buber’s thinking underwent a major transformation when he rejected mysticism, the focus of his early work, in favor of what he calls “dialogical philosophy.”¹¹ This change tends to be dated around 1923, the year he published his most famous work, *I and Thou*. In that text, as elsewhere, Buber substituted the mystic’s highly individualist approach with one that emphasizes interpersonal relations. The struggle of the isolated visionary to transcend the world was thus replaced by dialogical man, someone who is embedded within the context of a given social situation.

Buber’s dialogical approach shares fundamental affinities with Gadamer’s hermeneutics; indeed, I would go so far as to identify Buber as a hermeneuticist himself. I shall support this in a way that parallels my account of hermeneutics above. Thus, this section will consist of two parts. First, I shall show how Buber, who incidentally was a student of Dilthey’s, conceives of linguistic meaning in expressivist rather than designative terms and adopts the latter’s methodological distinction between the human and natural sciences. I shall then examine Buber’s dialogical philosophy more directly, focusing, as with my account of hermeneutics above, on its conception of the proper relation between self and other. My aim here will be to demonstrate how Buber, like Heidegger and Gadamer, rejects the dualism of modern metaphysical epistemology.

¹¹ It is a common usage among Buber’s scholars to divide his life into two stages: his mystical period and his dialogical one (e.g., Paul Mendes-Flohr’s *From Mysticism to Dialogue* 93-126). Dan Avnon, however, divides the dialogical period into two: dialogue between 1923 and 1938 and attentive silence between 1938 and 1965 (19-49).

Against it, Buber posits his dialogical philosophy of the I and Thou/You.¹² In so doing, moreover, he also affirms symmetry between interlocutors. I shall then close this part with a brief account of the ramifications of Buber's approach for reading texts, in particular, the Bible, for Buber's biblical readings are a model of hermeneutical endeavor. Finally, following Blattberg, I will suggest that Buber's approach has roots in a "levitical" form of ancient Judaism. Given Buber's similarities with the other hermeneuticists, this implies that hermeneutics is much older than most of its proponents have appreciated.

Part (i) – Linguistic Meaning Revisited

Central to Buber's *I and Thou* is his distinction – declared right at the beginning of the text – between two modes of relation: the I-It and the I-You. Each of these two word couplets (or "basic words" in Buber's terminology) are meant to be read as one unit, as articulating aspects of a single concept; each, he stresses, denotes a different quality of interpersonal space. As Buber writes:

[b]asic words do not state something that might exist outside them; by being spoken they establish a mode of existence. . . . The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being. (*I and Thou* 53-54)

By "I-You" Buber means a quality wherein self and other are features of a single inclusive reality. By "I-It," however, he wishes to invoke a separation between the "I"

¹² Walter Kaufmann, who did the second translation of *I and Thou* into English, translates the German *Du* as "You" rather than, as with Ronald Gregor Smith's previous translation, "Thou" (Kaufmann 14-15). I follow Kaufmann as I think his choice more faithfully expresses the mutuality of the "I-You" mode. I shall explain why below.

and the other, between the subject and the object. I-It is thus exemplified by the instrumental relation between two relatively independent entities, while I-You affirms instead a shared relationship. Indeed, as Buber emphasizes, the I-You is implicit in any movement towards relation. It thus establishes in the interpersonal sphere a quality that he refers to as “the Between” (*I and Thou* 65-66; Avnon 39).

It is important to note that, as Walter Kaufman points out in one of his annotations to *I and Thou*, the first edition of the book has the sentences quoted above preceded by one that is absent in all of the further editions. The sentence is as follows: “Basic words do not *signify* things but relations” (emphasis added 53). Now given that, as Steven Kepnes asserts, Buber in *I and Thou* “makes the distinction between the ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’ relationships on the basis of language” (ix), I suggest that his decision to change the text in this way - in particular, by dropping the reference to signifying - indicates that he wishes to affirm a symbolic or expressivist conception of meaning. As we have seen, expressivism assumes that symbolizing, rather than signifying, is the more fundamental, that the sign is necessarily derivative of the symbol. Buber, I believe, makes this very point when he claims that basic words do not state things that exist “outside them,” i.e., they do not designate some separate signified but rather manifest meaning that is at least partly expressive of the self doing the manifesting. Hence Buber’s reference to the ability of basic words to “*establish* a mode of existence.” To this we can add the point he makes in another book, *Moses*, where he claims that biblical “content” cannot be separated from its “form” (9). This implies a consubstantiality of meaning that, once again, is at home in the expressivist tradition.

Expressivism, as we have seen, also goes with the assertion of a methodological distinction between the natural sciences on the one hand and the humanities and human sciences on the other. Here, as I hinted above, Dilthey's influence on Buber is decisive. As Maurice Friedman has explained, however, Buber also criticizes his predecessor's romantic hermeneutics, especially as regards what Dilthey has to say about how researchers should proceed in the human sciences. For Buber's philosophy of the interhuman, Friedman argues, led him "to a more dialogical understanding of the task of philosophical anthropology . . . [an understanding that] goes beyond cultural [i.e., romantic] anthropology" (16).¹³ While the latter, as we have seen, advocates a form of understanding that requires reconstructing meaning through a kind of empathy with or "jumping into the shoes of" the other, the object to be known, Buber shares with hermeneuticists the idea that interpreting subjects necessarily *participate* in what they interpret, making themselves a part of what they seek to understand. For Buber, in consequence, the detached observer's place is, for the most part, in the natural sciences.

This methodological difference is also paralleled by Buber's distinction between "dialogue" and "dialectics," each of which he considers a kind of reasoning. As Friedman points out, "dialogue" denotes the mutual knowing of the I-You relationship while "dialectics" invokes the subject-object dualism of the I-It relation (18). Buber does not wish completely to ban dialectics or technical reasoning from the human sciences or humanities; the point is only that, because the most fundamental questions in these disciplines are about matters that are meaningful in an expressivist way, they will have to be approached dialogically. The problem for the contemporary Buberian, of

¹³ Steven Kepnes similarly refers to Buber's move from "romantic hermeneutic method to what . . . [he] call[s] his 'dialogical hermeneutic method' " (xiii). Elsewhere Kepnes refers to the latter as Buber's "post-romantic hermeneutics" (44).

course, is that the tendency in the academy has been to move in the opposite direction. Hence Gadamer's worry, which we can now identify as echoing Buber, about the rise of scientism in all disciplines.¹⁴ Perhaps Iris Murdoch best described what is being missed here when she declared that “[w]e are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists” (34).

Part (ii) – Self and Other Revisited

On, now, to Buber's critique of modern epistemology. As I shall show, it also shares fundamental affinities with those of the hermeneuticists. In his essay, “Behayat Ha'adam, Iyunim Betoldote'a” (The Problem of the Human Being), Buber criticizes modern metaphysics' essentialist stance as epitomized in the Descartes' cogito “I think therefore I am.” Like Heidegger, Buber aims to show that this is complicit in a “forgetfulness of being,” although Buber, of course, does not use Heidegger's terminology.¹⁵

Buber's argument is that modern metaphysics overlooks the concrete relation to being, the one that takes place prior to thought. In his “The Word That is Spoken,” he specifies that this primordial form of relation can only be grasped as a movement of attention, one that “wander[s] without meeting a word” (113). This, I suggest, is none

¹⁴ Indeed, Kepnes, also argues that “Buber anticipated some of the most significant hermeneutic principles developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his *Wahrheit und Methode*” (xiii).

¹⁵ As Buber writes about metaphysics' “forgetfulness of being”:

“אין הוא יכול להכיר את האישיות בשלמותה וללמוד ממנה על האדם בשלימותו, אלא אם כן הוא מכניס מדעת לתוך עצם עיונו את כל הסובייקטיביות שלו ללא שיור. . . כל זמן שאני ינתון לעצמי, כל עוד אני בחינת מושא לעצמי, איני נודע את האדם אלא כעצם מן העצמים והשלימות המבוקשת אינה נוכחת עדיין. רק כשאני יהווה – הווה בלבד, = הרי היא עמי, הרי היא ניתנת לתפיסתי. אין אנו נודעים אלא מה שהממשות של יהיות-נוכחי, של הנכחה מעניקה לנו” (11).

“One can no longer recognize the whole personality and learn about the whole person from it unless one consciously participates in it . . . As long as I am but ‘data’ to myself, as long as I am but an ‘object,’ I only know the Adam [the generic person] as a thing among things. The wished for knowledge of the whole is yet to come. Only when I am ‘present’ – present alone – is it with me, is it conceivable. We do not know anything but the actuality of being present” (my translation).

other than what contemporary hermeneuticists identify as the pre-reflective practical background, the Being of which all beings-in-the-world are a part. Consider commentator Dan Avnon's claim that, to Buber, one can have a relation to what one is a part of only because what is distant is also present; this, Avnon asserts, "constitutes a complete dialogical relation" (6). Everything, that is, interpreting man included, is connected to the background, i.e., to Being. Thought, then, when it arises, must *follow* the more primordial relation, and indeed Avnon himself describes Buber's "primal form of relation" as a "background" (42). That said, there is a problem with Avnon's account when he claims that the more primal form of relation to being is, for Buber, somehow pre-linguistic: "[i]n the background of a world mediated by thought is an original position, that in which what is to be seen prior to the construct of thought is revealed. . . . [Buber advocates] a direct relation to what is present, an attitude to being that is prior to, and unmediated by, language" (3). Avnon, it seems to me, can only equate the "prior to the construct of thought" with the "prior to, and unmediated by language" or the "prelinguistic relation to being" (9) because he fails to see that, for Buber, language is at base symbolic rather than semiotic. Buber, that is, would surely object to Avnon's claim that "in Buber's understanding, language" is "the external form of the movement of thought" (9). For Buber, pre-reflective practice is still interpretive, albeit unconsciously or implicitly so, and thus still expressivist, still dialogical. Otherwise put, pre-reflective agency, in which one participates in practices out of habit, is still linguistic, which is why practices are worthy analogues to texts (*I and Thou* 58-59).

Behind the Cartesian cogito, as I noted earlier, is modern metaphysics' desire to master, to have power over the other by "capturing" it in a theory. Poststructuralism, as

we have seen, would deconstruct this “will to power” by reversing, to a degree, the asymmetrical relation between self and other that it asserts. And hermeneutics affirms instead the symmetrical relation between genuine interlocutors. Now Buber’s I-You mode of relation is, it seems to me, a version of the latter. Consider Buber’s emphasis on the reciprocity and mutuality of the dialogical relation. As he puts it, the I-You relation is “the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another” (qtd. in Friedman 18). Elsewhere, he writes that genuine dialogue, as distinct from monologue, is a state in which “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them” (“Dialogue” 19). “Being, lived in dialogue,” he continues, “receives even in extreme dereliction a harsh and strengthening sense of reciprocity; being, lived in monologue, will not, even in the tenderest intimacy, grope out over the outlines of the self” (“Dialogue” 20).

Buber’s conception of reciprocity is key. By it he does not mean to refer to the reciprocal “give and take” of individuals involved in a purely instrumental relationship. Rather, he wishes to invoke nothing other than “the Between” fundamental to the genuine I-You interpersonal relation. As Avnon describes it, “the Between,” is “a refined essence that permeates the social sphere when a person’s attitude to being originates in transformed relation to self and others” (8). The Between, then, is a mode of relation in which there is no independent self/subject opposed to some independent other/object but a background shared by both “self” and “other.” Buber sometimes likes to articulate this by saying that, when two people meet, “there is an essential remainder

common to each of them that reaches out beyond the specific sphere of each. That remainder is the basic interhuman reality, the ‘sphere of the between’ ” (Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman 2). Hence the importance of referring to an I-“You” rather than an I-“Thou” relation, for the latter has asymmetrical connotations, the respect due to a Thou being that accorded to a being – or rather an “otherwise than being” – that transcends the everyday. This is not at all Buber’s intention.

Reference to the “otherwise than being” recalls Levinas, and it is interesting to note that Levinas has explicitly criticized the reciprocity central to Buber’s *I-Thou* relation (“Martin Buber” 32). Levinas does so because he believes that this reciprocity “remains the tie between two separated freedoms . . . [where] the ineluctable character of isolated subjectivity is underestimated” (*Time* 93-94). Levinas’s complaint, that is, is that the I-You relationship is insensitive to the real *otherness* of the other. In attempting to know that other dialogically, Levinas believes, one only confines him or her and, ultimately, succumbs to the temptations of the metaphysical tradition.

But while there may be something to this, I think Levinas is wrong to reduce the I-You relation to the asymmetrical “power over” so dear to metaphysics. Consider Buber’s opposition of the kind of dialogue he favors to what he calls “reflexion”:

[w]hen a man withdraws from accepting with his essential being another person in his particularity – a particularity which is by no means to be circumscribed by the circle of his own self, and though it substantially touches and moves his soul is in no way immanent in it – and lets the other exist only as his own experience, only as a “part of myself.” (23-24)

The intent here, surely, is anything but reductive. Where Levinas went astray, I suspect, is in imparting the notion of “two separate freedoms” to Buber’s interlocutors. But Buberian reciprocity, as we have seen, is not a quality of relation between two separate entities. Perhaps Levinas himself came to recognize this, for in a later work he had something very complimentary to say about Buber’s approach: “[a]ny reflection on the alterity of the other in his or her irreducibility to the objectivity of objects and the beings of beings must recognize the new perspective Buber opened – and find encouragement in it” (*Outside* 41).

I believe that that perspective is nowhere better exemplified than in Buber’s exegetical practice, especially in his many writings on the Bible as well as Hasidic narratives. In order to give an account of this practice, as well as to demonstrate its fundamental similarity to that of the hermeneuticists, I turn now to an identification of what seem to me to be the three most fundamental characteristics of Buber’s approach to interpretation.

First, there is the fact that Buber’s criticism does not adhere to any logical argumentative structure. Indeed, he may even be accused of going to the opposite extreme, since his texts are sometimes as enigmatic and allusive as those of Heidegger’s or, for that matter, Derrida’s. Like these two, moreover, Buber often chooses to present his own philosophy through his interpretations of texts, thus emphasizing how we can learn from fiction as much as, perhaps even more than, from non-fiction.¹⁶

Second, Buber emphasizes the centrality of “listening” to good interpretation. As Michael Fishbane has put it, Buber’s biblical hermeneutics constitute “training for

¹⁶ See, for instance, his account of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve’s first sin in *Israel and the World* (73), in which he criticizes modern metaphysics, and his *Tales of the Masters*, a translation of many Hasidic stories.

human listening” (88). The Buberian interpreter, it is clear, must listen to the text in order to arrive at a good account of its meaning. Consider Buber on the repeated use of the term “to open” in a particular biblical text:

[y]ou pose and listen to this repetition, to what it says. This is the way of *Torah bamiqra* [i.e., instruction, teaching, in the scripture], which frequently does not interpret the substance of the virtue discussed but rather enables it *to open* of itself, not in the language of secret or allegory but in this significant repetition, perceptible to every reader and every hearer who listens with the heart. (“People” 14)

In order to truly hear a text, Buber claims, one has to be open to its “voice,” the reader of the Bible has to let “himself be addressed by the voice that speaks to him in the Hebrew language” (“Biblical Humanism” 213). Thus does he call for readers to read with an “openness to believe” (21) or an “open-heartedness” (the “literal” translation of the Hebrew *b'feetchon lev*).¹⁷ Indeed, in this particular essay, the Hebrew root PaTaCH (to open, פתח) is repeated several times (42, 58, 60) and as Steven Kepnes has written – and as his book’s title, *The Text as Thou*, suggests, Buber considers his dialogical approach as paradigmatic for interpreting texts (xiii, 58).

This openness to the text is manifested in the interpreter’s willingness to transform himself. Again and again this point appears in Buber’s writings on the Bible.

For example:

¹⁷ See Buber’s “Ben Doraynu Vehamiqra,” where he writes:

“לא חזרה אל המקרא אנו תובעים . . . אנו נתבעים לעמוד במענה, שאנו חייבים לשעות זמננו, בפתרון לב של אמונה ובתום לבב ככתוב” (58).

“I am not demanding a return to scripture . . . only that we face up to our contemporary obligations with an open heartedness of belief, as it is written” (my translation).

[The reader] must place himself anew before the book which has become new, withhold nothing, and allow what happens between it and himself to happen. He does not know which saying, which image from this source will seize and remold him, from where the spirit will rush in and penetrate him in order to embody itself anew in his life; but he is open.

(qtd. in Kepnes 53-53)

Elsewhere: the interpreter of “the biblical Word [interprets] in order to hearken to or to take offense at it . . . to [confront] . . . his life with the Word” (“Man” 4). Then “[w]henever we truly read it [i.e. the Biblical text], our self-understanding is renewed and deepened” (“Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth” 216).

Third and finally, Buber, in his biblical interpretations, as elsewhere in his philosophical works, emphasizes the importance of the concrete, of the context to genuine dialogue (“Between” 12; Friedman 10, 12, 19). Buber, then, rejects the metaphysical tradition’s favoring of abstract, universal, “detached and formally perfected” words, for it “tends [toward the] monological” (“Biblical Humanism” 215).¹⁸ As such, we may say that Buber’s biblical hermeneutics aims to situate the text in a concrete and dynamic living context.

Conclusion – Buber’s Levitical Judaism: A Dialogical Approach

Hermeneutics is mainly associated today with thinkers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Taylor. The first two of these, in particular, have written of the ancient Greek sources of their approach. But recognizing Buber’s place among this group

¹⁸ Indeed he claims that Plato’s *Dialogues* are in fact monological in nature, as they manifest an “element of immutability in communication” (“Biblical Humanism” 215).

suggests the existence of a different source, one rooted in Jerusalem and not Athens.¹⁹ Not the Jerusalem of the rabbis, however, the forerunners of contemporary difference philosophy, since, following Blattberg, I want to suggest that we recognize the approach of the Levitical priests of biblical Judaism's pre-monarchic period as a forerunner to contemporary hermeneutics.

Who were the Levites? In pre-monarchic Israeli society, there were basically two types of priests. The first, the Levites, can be traced from Moses through to Abiathar, one of two high priests of David's temple, and his followers; the second, the Aaronites, from Moses' brother Aaron to Abiathar's rival the high priest Zadok and his followers. The Levites essentially dominated the priesthood in pre-monarchic times, prior to its centralization in Jerusalem by King David. The Aaronites, by contrast, especially when Zadok took over as the high priest following Solomon's exile of Abiathar, took a highly theoretical, one might even say metaphysical, approach (they are the Sadducees against whom, as we recall from the previous chapter, the Pharisees rebelled).

As Blattberg suggests, Levite practice affirmed many fundamentals that reappear in contemporary hermeneutics. The Levitical priests, we have been told, were teachers of the law: "They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law" (Deut. 33:10; qtd. in Blattberg, "Loving Wisdom" 27; see also Lev. 10:8-11; Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26). And if one adds to this the reference to priests in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* as "the authoritative *interpreters* of the Law," one begins to suspect that hermeneutics was central to their profession (emphasis added 193). Indeed, as Blattberg points out, one of the Levites' roles was to receive confessions, during which they were responsible for

¹⁹ Both Grondin and Blattberg point to the Greek sources of hermeneutics, but where Grondin follows Gadamer in identifying them with Plato's thought (21-22), Blattberg points instead to Plato's rivals, the Sophists ("Loving Wisdom" 25-27).

“reconciling” the guilty with God (“Loving Wisdom” 28; Num. 5:6ff; Lev. 4:20, 31; 5:10; 6:7). This was done by their manipulation of the Urim and Tummim, a kind of dice that gave yes or no answers to inquiries (Deut. 33:8; Judges 17:5-13). Yet as Max Weber has shown, the role of the Levite priests was far more complicated than simply applying the rules of some game, for “everything depended on the way that the question was put” (179). Indeed so many preliminary questions had to be settled before a particular one could be placed before God that not much was left to be determined by the Urim and Tummim. What we have here, then, is a highly dialogical, and thus interpretive, process. Indeed the emphasis on questions echoes Gadamer, for whom “[t]he hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things” (*Truth* 238). This all suggests that the Levitical priests had to be attentive to the particularity of each person’s unique situation, hence sensitive to the context in which they made their judgments. No surprise, then, that Weber identifies the central characteristic of priesthood in general as an enterprise “permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups” (qtd. in Blattberg, “Loving Wisdom” 28). And as we have seen, sensitivity to the particularities of the context requires the hermeneuticist to be open to transform himself and thus genuinely to listen to his or her interlocutor. No wonder, then, that when Buber refers to the Jewish tradition he asserts that “[t]he Jew of antiquity is more of a ‘hearing-man,’ than a ‘seeing-man’ ” (qtd. in Kepnes 167). So, like the Hermes of Greek mythology, the messenger of the gods, the Levites may be described as the dialogical bridge between the Israelites and their God. Perhaps, then, they were the first hermeneuticists.

Conclusion

In a certain sense interpretation probably is re-creation.

Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

The original opening of interpretation essentially
signifies that there will always be rabbis and poets.
And two interpretations of interpretation.

Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*

In April 1981, at the Goethe Institute in Paris, Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer met for the first time in a public, academic setting. The encounter has been the subject of much speculation. All agree that, though each followed the other (Gadamer presented first, then Derrida, and then Gadamer followed by Derrida again) it is difficult to claim that the two participated in a genuine “dialogue.”¹ As Derrida himself described his first response to Gadamer, it was doubtful whether “anything was taking place here other than improbable debates, counter-questioning, and inquiries into unfindable objects of thought” (“Three Questions” 52).

In his opening presentation, Gadamer defended Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche as a metaphysical thinker. In so doing, he was suggesting that Heidegger was the more radical of the two thinkers. Given Nietzsche’s influential role on the development of contemporary difference philosophy, Gadamer was thus implying that, contrary to the claims of poststructuralists such as Derrida, the hermeneutics that Heidegger inaugurated should not be situated within the metaphysical tradition. When it came to Derrida’s turn to respond, however, he posed three questions, none of which dealt with Gadamer’s arguments. Rather, they invoked a point that Gadamer mentioned

¹ Fred R. Dallmayr, for example, has characterized the exchange as “disjointed and non-dialogical” (77).

only briefly, one about the necessity of interlocutors to be open to what the other has to say. Moreover, Derrida merely reiterated his position as regards Heidegger and Nietzsche, thus appearing to ignore Gadamer's presentation. Indeed, Derrida did not even mention the latter's name once.

Given what I have written above about poststructuralism, Derrida's response should not come as such a surprise – though it is clear that Gadamer did not expect it. If anything, what *is* surprising is Gadamer's disappointment, expressed in a letter he later wrote about the encounter, that “a conversation between two totally independent developers” of Heidegger's thought did not arise (“Letter to Dallmayr” 93). This suggests that Gadamer simply does not appreciate the extent to which Derrida's approach differs from his own. Indeed, the goal of this thesis was not *to oppose* the two but *to distinguish* between them; as Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer have put it as regards Gadamer and Derrida's encounter in Paris, “their paths unfold on different planes” for they stand to each other “in a relationship of alterity, of non-oppositional difference” (9).

As we have seen, Gadamer's hermeneutics, along with Buber's own dialogical philosophy, emphasize not only the importance of the willingness of interlocutors to engage in dialogue but also how that dialogue relies upon a certain commonality, a shared background that both have referred to as the “between.” This between, we recall, Gadamer has defined as “the true locus of hermeneutics” (*Truth* 263), and it is something characterized by mutuality and symmetry, by the desire to reconcile disagreement and hence achieve a shared, if albeit always provisional, understanding. Hence the question posed by Gadamer during his presentation: “How do the

commonality of meaning, which is built up in conversation, and the impenetrability of the otherness of the other mediate each other?" ("Text and Interpretation" 27). Yet as Joseph Simon points out in his commentary on the encounter, this question already presupposes that "the commonality of meaning" and "the otherness of the other" is something that can, in principle, be mediated, i.e., that otherness is something that is meant to be understood (164). Hence Gadamer's claim that "[w]hoever opens his mouth wants to be understood; otherwise, one would neither speak nor write" ("Reply" 55).

Yet this goes too far. Derrida's non-response to Gadamer makes exactly this point. Indeed, Derrida does so because he believes that, ultimately, Gadamer's claim on behalf of the universality of hermeneutics is metaphysical and hence should not be abided.² Although I have argued in this work that this is a mistake, Derrida still seems to me to be correct if we interpret him as rejecting this universality. For the fact is that there are "others" out there which lie beyond even hermeneutics' wide bounds of understanding.

In a sense, however, Derrida himself can be faulted with making his own false claim on behalf of universality. As we have seen, he ultimately wants to suggest that there are no interpretations, only illusory readings (Critchley 93). Ostensibly, these all need to be deconstructed, for we must aim for the creativity, the openness to the other, that comes from the back and forth of deconstructive subversion and reinscription. As we have seen, like Levinas' philosophy and the rabbinic Judaism upon which it draws,

² I would suggest that Derrida is making the same point when, in his encounter with the theoretical philosopher John Searle, he asserts that "[w]hat I like about this 'confrontation' is that I don't know if it is quite taking place, if it ever will be able, or will have been able, quite, to take place; or if it does, between whom or what?" ("Limited, Inc." 72).

this creativity is Derrida's central aim. It is why, for him, all interpretations are merely misinterpretations waiting to be unveiled.

Both poststructuralism and hermeneutics, then, can be accused of failing to distinguish adequately between creation and interpretation, something evident in the quotations serving as epigraphs for this chapter. No wonder Derrida refuses to converse with Gadamer: while the latter sits there listening intently, striving to understand, the former wishes instead to create. The two are simply at cross purposes.

This suggests that it would be wrong to claim that either is in any sense superior to the other. For their ends are utterly different. They cannot be ranked because there is surely a time and place to create as much as there is to interpret. It all depends on who, and where, one is.

Of late, it has become fashionable to decry the "fashion" of "theory" within departments of literary studies, as well as to proclaim its demise. It may indeed be true that more philosophical approaches to the study of literature are today on the wane. However, this cannot be, as many have suggested, because these were simply a mistake. On the contrary, all who are open to their message must recognize that they have, in their own ways, contributed to both the creation and interpretation of literature. The beauty of poststructuralism and the truth of hermeneutics should not be denied.

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