The Tail or the String of the Kite? Hans-Georg Gadamer, Steven S. Schwarzschild, and Jewish Hermeneutics

Massimo Giuliani

In a brief, acute evaluation of the developments of modern Jewish thought in the context of the history of Western philosophy, the German-American Jewish thinker and rabbi Steven S. Schwarzschild (Frankfurt 1924-St. Louis 1989) affirmed that Jewish thought played not only a complementary, but also a driving, a guiding role in the intellectual processes that contributed, on the one hand, to the deconstruction or even the dissolution of the subject (from Freud to Derrida, via Lévi-Strauss), and, on the other hand, to the reconstruction of a form of subjectivity that, on a hermeneutical basis, represents an alternative to Heidegger's ontological and historicist approach (from Bloch to Jonas and Levinas, via Cohen, Rosenzweig, and Buber). Two main elements can be found at the core of such elaboration: the overcoming of a certain historicist interpretation of the hermeneutical circle – a circle from which the subject cannot really be emancipated, given its entanglement with the object – and a new form of heteronomy (theological and/or halakhic) developed in the name of "practical reason," that is, in the name of a concrete universal law – politically necessary in the light of the totalitarian deviations of the 20th century – prior to and beyond a "theoretical reason," prior to and beyond the "question of Being." According to the philosopher-rabbi, all of this may seem an updated confrontation between Kantism and Hegelism. Moreover, its re-elaboration in Jewish garb, based on "Jewish existence and experience," could lead to the conclusion that "Jewish philosophy is […] a tail, so to speak, on the kite of secular philosophy" (Schwarzschild 1990b: 233), that is, of philosophy as such. On the contrary, the idea of heteronomy – stigmatized as infantile by an "enlightened vulgarization" at war with any form of tradition and authority – can act as a correction to the fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity and thus be seen

as the most significant contribution of Jewish thought in getting out of the vicious circle of that "historical reason" that is forged by Heidegger's ontologism. In this regard, one may just consider the debates on the pretentions of enlightenment, not only in Heidegger, but also in Adorno, Horkheimer, and Foucault, up to the recent dialogue between Habermas and Ratzinger (2007). Now, according to Schwarzschild:

> At the outset of modernity Mendelssohn discerned Jewish particularity in the law, itself an expression of essentially rational morality. We have seen how even the Jewish Hegelians of the nineteenth century and certainly Cohen and his disciples proclaimed Kant's "primacy of practical reason." The traditionalist Jewish thinkers like Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik must, of course, always uphold the centrality of Halakhah. Buber's and Heschel's thought emphasizes the ethical and social demands made by the reality of the human–divine encounter. And at the present time all of Levinas' work centers on the ultimacy of the ethical God "beyond essence." […] The claim may thus be that Jewish philosophy is not finally the tail on the kite but the string that leads it. (Schwarzschild 1990b: 233)

It is within this framework that Schwarzschild's critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer needs to be considered. Especially *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1975) is for Schwarzschild a work in which the most representative interpreter of Heidegger's hermeneutical *kehre* or paradigm shift aims to recover, to rehabilitate, the ideas of tradition and authority. A few years later, the French philosopher Paul Ricœur synthesized this issue as follows: "Gadamer inevitably turned hermeneutic philosophy towards the rehabilitation of prejudice and the defense of tradition and authority, placing this philosophy in a conflictual relation to any critique of ideology." (Ricœur 1981: 26)[1]

Here "prejudice" means "pre-comprehension" in the most genuinely Heideggerian sense of the term, and this connects with the concepts of "tradition" and "authority" (for example, the authority of a sacred text or a political constitution) in order to establish the horizon – a metaphor beloved by Gadamer – and the hermeneutical conditions of comprehensibility of that reality that is

1 In this essay, Ricœur forces Gadamer's hermeneutics to interact with the critique of ideology Jürgen Habermas elaborates along the rationalistic line of the Enlightenment. Ricœur positions himself in a middle position, a sort of "French" way between the two "German".

called "historical consciousness." Schwarzschild immediately grasped the importance of this revival of Heidegger's hermeneutic circle in Gadamer's masterpiece and singled out the chapter "Rehabilitation of Authority and Tradition" (in Gadamer 1975: 278–285). The order of the two terms is not negligible – in fact, it is a crucial issue from a Jewish point of view, not *despite* but precisely *by virtue of* the fact that the two notions, tradition and authority, are at the root of the complex architecture of any Jewish hermeneutics. In fact, this latter is also based on the authoritative value of a tradition – the *shalshelet ha-qabbalah*. This is conceived of as the oral Torah (*Torah she-be-'al peh*), which, according to the written Torah (*Torah she-bi-ktav*), is derived from divine revelation, that is, from the highest possible source of authority. But while Gadamer's rehabilitation is aimed against Enlightenment's *raison critique*, Schwarzschild's Jewish hermeneutics is rather involved in a positive dialectical exchange with such modern reason and its critical approaches. It almost forms a symbiosis with it, as has always been the case in the history of Jewish philosophy, at least from the Middle Ages onward (from Sa'adia Gaon to Maimonides, among others).

Starting from these premises, the goal of this chapter is to explore the Jewish interpretation of the hermeneutic circle, that is, the specific form of pre-comprehension through which a Jew approaches the knowledge of the world. Another point at issue, then, is how the idea and praxis of authority – both ethical (exegetical-noetic) and halakhic (juridical-political) – should be understood in a tradition that is centered on the art of interpreting texts. But first it is necessary to underline the prejudice, or the pre-comprehension, that inspires Schwarzschild's critique of Gadamer – a critique that is deeply affected by the existential but also historical fact that Gadamer was a loyal student of (never) repentant national-socialist Heidegger, or in other words, that "Gadamer was, to put the best fact on it, not an anti-Nazi" (Schwarzschild 1987: 165). Of course, this fact may not or should not have direct philosophical implications. But nonetheless, those implications are precisely what Schwarzschild is looking for. For example, one of them has to do with Gadamer's evaluation of Hermann Cohen – in fact, a total devaluation, almost a nullification of Cohen's role, if one considers that he is never mentioned in *Truth and Method*. Actually, such Jewish thinkers as Spinoza, Marx, Rosenzweig, Simmel, Bergson, Husserl, Cassirer, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse can be found throughout Gadamer's work, but Cohen is completely ignored. Thus, a drastic conclusion can be drawn: that "Gadamer completes the process of the relegation of Cohen to oblivion that Heidegger began" (ibid: 166). What does this mean? Nothing personal, Schwarzschild suggests, but a radical philosophical divergence on

the topics of method and truth, which are at stake when the place of the human being in the hermeneutic circle is investigated. According to Cohen, the truth we are aiming at remains an ideal that transcends any human ontological-existential dimension, while according to Heidegger – and to Gadamer, who follows in his footsteps – truth is the expression of that dimension, its original substance, and – just like a root or a seed that is destined to disappear under the tree to which it gives life – truth is eventually revealed to its searcher. In the first case, truth is a process of approximation that keeps an asymptotic form; in the second case, truth is a "gift" obtained through a sort of illumination, something one can only be awakened to. The phenomenological *epoché* helped Heidegger "discover" such a truth in oneself and made him emphasize this root as the very rediscovering of Being, that is, his ontological revolution. This led to the ontological characterization of the hermeneutic circle itself as emblematic of the co-belonging of subject and object within the dimension of being – of the truth and its searcher, of a text and its interpreter. The interpreter, in other words, "belongs" to the text and vice versa. In Schwarzschild's words: "The substance of the argument always remained in the foreground, however, and it is again the core of *Truth and Method*: truth is not rationally or methodologically constructed but ontologically and experientially unveiled. All authority derives from that phenomeno-logico-existentialist truth." (ibid: 166)

Heidegger's and Gadamer's perspective cannot but be at odds with that of Hermann Cohen. Schwarzschild, however, sides with Cohen's point of view and tries to rescue it from the oblivion it is relegated to by existentialist currents and hermeneutic schools of thought that depend on *Being and Time* (cf. Heidegger 1966) – currents and schools that, in the end, bring grist to the mill of pan-historicism. Avoiding pan-historicism was the theoretical effort Ricœur made with the help of Habermas, but in order to achieve it, the way to follow is an almost necessary "return to Kant," a return that in Germany, in the first part of the 20th century, implied the recognition of the role played by the Marburg School and above all by Hermann Cohen. Unfortunately, though, Cohen was Jewish. Schwarzschild thinks that *Wahrheit und Methode* can be read as a kind of "guide for the perplexed" of *Sein und Zeit*, at least judging by the linguistic difficulties it presents and the obscurity of many of its passages. A B/being that is resolved into B/being-there (*Da-sein*) and temporality ends up reducing the issue of truth to history, showing the impossibility of a way out of the hermeneutic circle – that is, the horizon of traditions, prejudices, and the authority that expresses and guarantees them. Where is reason in such a phe-

nomeno-logical–existential concatenation of ideas? Or better, what is reason reduced to in a horizon, where truth is brought into the "house of B/being"? Schwarzschild asks ironically: Is every "tradition" true just because it is "traditional"? Has every "authority" to be respected and obeyed because of the mere fact of being established as "authority," without appeal to any other criterion of control or verification, without resorting to any external judgement other than prejudice? By keeping a hermeneutic perspective, for example that of text interpretation – so beloved by Heidegger and Gadamer as readers of poets, but also cherished by the Jewish tradition as a "studying community" – a threefold question arises: "How do you distinguish between authentic revelation and false claims of revelation? [And, supposed you know the difference,] how do you distinguish between valid and invalid interpretation of that authentic revelation?" (Schwarzschild 1987: 167) Hence, a third question, a profoundly rabbinical one, can provide orientation in addressing the two previous questions: "How do we know that a given set of hermeneutic rules is valid?" (ibid: 167) As acutely noted by the philosopher-rabbi, this third question is grafted onto the first, thus showing the authentic nature of the hermeneutic circle: its heteronomy, its coming from outside, from Sinai, disproving the claim that truth, any revealed truth, coincides with the historical process in which and through which it has been acquired. It is the interpretative effort that generates truth. But at the same time, truth is not such by virtue of that effort; rather, it is "given" as law, as a command, able to order, demand, prescribe – literary, "scribe-in-advance," ancestrally, Levinas would say: an-anarchically – in an extreme effort to break the Heideggerian pan-historicism which, in the intoxication of his ontological existentialism, has forgotten that the "truth of being" is external to any being, even to the Being. The power of the anti-idolatrous precept forbidding any representation of the Divine can be recognized here, along with a key to understanding biblical anthropomorphism (as Maimonides and Rosenzweig argued in different ages). More precisely, such power can best be appreciated in the state of the "should be," in the "not-yet" of an existence given and lived in the paradox of its incompleteness, of its structural infinitude; an existence given and lived as a task never fully achieved; an existence given and lived only in an ethical perspective, in a moral horizon. Incidentally, it is not by chance that, in 1985, Schwarzschild defined Emmanuel Levinas as "at present, perhaps, the most creative, specifically Jewish philosopher" (Schwarzschild 1990b: 232).

This critique of Heidegger's and Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, based on the limits of interpretation and the possibility that the B/being is (heteronomously) governed by a "should-be" or a "must-be," brings "the question

[the issue] of the historicality of reason" to the very center of the hermeneutic discourse. It is a topic – Schwarzschild maintains – that Kant addressed in his first *Critique*, in which the chapter "History of Pure Reason" (*Geschichte der reinen Vernunft*) explores "the ineluctably historical character of the cognitive (and other) categories" (Schwarzschild 1987 [1981]: 168). But is this not precisely that pan-historicism (implicit in Heidegger's hermeneutic circle) that must be overcome as amoral, as a self-centered tradition, self-appointed as "the authority"? And now the same horizon seems to be found in Kant. The meaning of "historical reason" is derived from the ability to locate reason *within* human history, without transforming it into the *ratio of* history, the law of time. In some Christian theologies: "In the world, not of the world." Here is the "meaning of reason," formulated by Schwarzschild in the neo-Kantian language of Hermann Cohen:

> All of reason, including the very notion of reason itself, is regulative: this is to say, *reason* is the notion of a non-existent canon, such that, if it existed, all the propositions made under its authority would be not only consistent with one another but also true. All historical forms of reason – that is to say, all rationalities actually used at any and all times – fall short of that regulative notion of reason. History, including the history of philosophy and of logic itself, is, if useful, progressive toward that reason; if retrogressive or even only static, it is to be rejected. In other words, a-historical reason is really post-historical reason – or, if you please, messianic reason – but as such it is a necessarily postulated possibility. As such [it is Schwarzschild's conclusion], as a necessary possibility, it also legitimately breaks the hermeneutic circle of pan-historicism. (ibid: 169)

The only way to open history to any progress is a radical break with the idea that history is itself progress, regardless of a rational evaluation of where the historical processes are going. In Jewish terms, it can be said: Only in so far as history is not the messianic age, but just time-oriented to the coming of the Messiah, it remains open to real improvements, it gets closer to the Kingdom, and perhaps even hastens its coming through the effort, the creativity, and the search for a perfect ideal that can never be fully achieved, but only approached through Torah and *mitzwot*, study and observance. In non-Jewish terms, and keeping within a German debate, Schwarzschild's critique of Gadamer is similar to that advanced by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. On the one hand,

> Habermas shows that a distinction between any true speech and any "universally accepted false speech" is possible only on the regulative presupposition of an "idealized" speech of a life-form yet to be realized in the future – that without such a regulative [rationality] we are subject to always violent authority, rather than to reason. (ibid: 184)

On the other hand, in a different perspective, Apel comes to the same conclusion, criticizing Gadamer and underlining the necessity of "a community of interpretation." Its members are supposed to agree on some practical regulative principles which enable them to recognize the drift toward violence of those who enjoy the, albeit legitimate, authority.

We always live and think in a tradition that is rich in values and ideals. However, we are unable to represent and implement them completely. A margin will always remain. We are constantly in a gap, in a state between the real and the ideal, between historical facticity and ethical expectation (which can be called "redemption" from a religious point of view). This in-between state can be useful, though, as it makes us aware of where and what we really are – *benonim*, in the middle; *dor be-dorot*, a generation among the generations, a ring of a chain (*sharsheret*) in a long history of reception and transmission (*qabbalà*, *masorà*, *moreshet*) – because, as Rabbi Tarfon said: "it is not up to us to finish the work, yet we are not free to avoid it" – *Rabbi Tarfon omer: lo 'alekhà hamelakà lighmor ve lo attà ben-chorin lehibbatel mimmena* (Avot II,16).

Only on this condition, in a messianic openness of history – meaning open to progress, but ready to transcend any possible goal established in that progress – the issue of authority may be rehabilitated in terms that are neither authoritarian nor coercive; neither absolutistic nor violent, for the topic of authority is always combined with that of violence. Who can stop the violence of an authority that is legally and legitimately established (by regular elections, for example) and recognized as such? Nobody should have known better than Heidegger and Gadamer (and maybe also explained) how central such a question was in the 20th century. Authoritarianism that degenerates into violence can be stopped only by the same force that has legitimated it as authority in the first place. But the force of authority and tradition is based on the structure of their ratio, on the idea of a regulative ratio, as a law or a normative system. Hobbes' aphorism from *Leviathan* is well-known: "*Auctoritas not veritas facit legem*" (Hobbes 1996: 175–192); but, at the same time, it is true that only a stronger law, or a different law, can curb the arrogance of an authority that claims to be a law to itself. This is why, in the biblical tradition, the king

was anointed by a prophet and, according to an icon idealized in Devarim/Deuteronomy, a king "should keep with himself a copy of this Law and read it all of the days of his life" (17: 18–20). The primacy of the Law means the priority of the ideal over the real, of the ethical over the useful or the desired.

In this context, Schwarzschild refers to Leo Strauss' critique of Heidegger's philosophy, which he considers a form of "de-ethicization of being" (Schwarzschild 1987: 171).[2] But he also quotes the *naturaliter Jew*, as he calls Jean-Paul Sartre. If Gadamer clarifies the Heideggerian hermeneutic circle, Sartre singles out the dizzy paradoxes of the ontological existentialism of *Sein und Zein* and, at the same time, makes a stand against the dissolution of the "dialectics of freedom" in the horizon of the historical "given," the temporal "thrownness." Schwarzschild understands Sartre's criticism and explains it as a jolt of ethical consciousness, a philosophical will to keep human history ethically open. As the rabbi-thinker writes:

> The fundamental difference between *Being and Nothingness* and *Being and Time* is, one can say, that on Heidegger's view time – history – exhaustively determines the location of man's thrownness (therefore, the absence of ethics in his philosophy) and his self-realization within that "given," whereas Sartre always struggles to extract human freedom, and therewith ethics, from the tight networks of history, causality, science. Marxist dialectics, etc. […] so that the world […] would be, at least in small part, a world which he himself had intentionally made. Man chooses the meaning of what he is and the situation into which he is thrown. (Schwarzschild 1990a: 170–171)

It is arguable that such a Sartrean position toward the world, in Schwarzschild's mind, is consistent with and inspired by the fundamental Jewish ethical imperative that can be read in Devarim/Deuteronomy 30, 19: "choose life!" That means that everyone can forge the meaning of their own lives, regardless of the situations they find themselves in. Through such a choice, it is possible to change the course of events, or at least to shape their ultimate sense. Schwarzschild concludes his appreciation of Sartre by quoting a powerful statement from *Being and Nothingness*: "Thus reflective consciousness can be properly called a moral consciousness" (Sartre 2003: 119). And adds:

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2 Schwarzschild remarks – and does not forgive – the Freudian *lapsus* Gadamer makes in referring to Leo Strauss' *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1988 [1952]): instead of "persecution", Gadamer talks about "understanding".

> Sartre was always painfully conscious of how difficult the philosophical struggle had to be for him of jumping, as it were, over the shadow of both Heidegger and (later) Marx. He admits, in his last interview, that he did not really succeed in working his way forward to a philosophical ethic until he arrived at his views on Jewish Messianic ethics at the very end of his life […]. In other words, the search for an ethics led from *Being and Nothingness* to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and from there to Jewish Messianic ethics. (Schwarzschild 1990a: 171)

Another substantial point of Gadamer's hermeneutics (ontologically inspired by Heidegger) is subjected to Schwarzschild's harsh criticism, thus showing how far Gadamer is from a biblical-Jewish *Weltanschauung*. As is well-known, *Truth and Method* is divided into three parts, the first being entirely dedicated to aesthetics. The sub-chapter criticized is that devoted to "the ontological valence of the picture" (cf. Gadamer 1975: 130–138) and, in particular, to the ontological significance of the religious pictures. Gadamer argues that the picture is not a copy of a represented being but is in ontological communion with the depicted being. Word and image are not simple illustrative additions; rather, they make the represented reality achieve its authentic being.

Such an aesthetic ontologism – or ontological aesthetics – sounds to Schwarzschild's Jewish ears as a conception that is deeply indebted to the Christian "incarnationism" and ends up abolishing the gap between the real and the ideal, the "thing" and its representation, between "what is" and "what is represented" (be it depicted or sculptured). "Jewish aesthetics turn precisely on the contradictory [that is, the opposite] thesis, that God is such that he logically cannot and ethico-aesthetically, axiologically, may not be depicted (that is, God is beyond ontology, and depictive art in fact practices idolatry)." (Schwarzschild 1987: 173)

Here is one of the pillars in Schwarzschild's thought: the *Menschwerdung* (incarnation), so dear to the German idealism and to the (post-Kantian) romantics, is for him the major road that leads to idolatry. Its beautification by means of long reflections on art, genius, and ingenuity (both individual and national), on the sublimity of music (as, for example, in Schopenhauer's view), does not change the fact that incarnation is always at least conducive to idolatry. To be more precise, idolatry, in this context, means the identification of being with the good, of nature with the ethics and/or with the supernatural law, which are rather supposed to govern nature and being, giving them their true value. In aesthetics, as well as in ethics, the principle of *creatio continua* is at

work. But it is conceived of as an invitation to adhere to and imitate the Creator, rather than celebrating an ontologically perfect order without any striving for improvement. Schwarzschild is convinced that Gadamer's ontological conservativism in art – which is "conservative" in an aesthetic sense, if one considers that *Truth and Method* was written in the 1960s and is based on a hermeneutics of factuality as well as on a historicistic given, all-determining origin called Being – results in an idolization of Being, which sometimes is platonically identified with beauty (the supreme aesthetic-artistic value), sometimes with the good (the supreme ethical quality), and finally is confirmed in its character as an idol. Messianic ethics – the regulatory ideal, the drive, and the *telos* of the revealed law (the goal, not the end of the law, to interpret the famous dictum in Paul's *Epistle to the Galatians*) – is not only an-iconic, but also anti-iconic, in so far as the *eikon*, the icon or the representation, claims to be worshipped in place of the *eidos*, the idea or the represented.

At this juncture, Schwarzschild quotes a Hassidic *rebbe*, Israel di Ruzhin, who died in 1850 and taught – *ex abundantia cordis*, as he was lacking profound rabbinical erudition – that "the Messianic era will be without images" (ibid: 189), meaning that when redemption is completed, the possibility will emerge that the "aesthetic-ontological difference" between *eidos* and *eikon*, idea and reality, represented and representation is eventually overcome. Perhaps the *rebbe* was just trying to say that, with the coming of the Messiah, reality will be so new and beautiful that it will no longer be in need of any representation, of any artistic mediation. Perhaps. But until then, until the advent of the Messiah, representation remains, and cannot be identified, or "confused," with the represented. Here, Gadamer's horizons cannot at all fuse with one another, and should rather remain ontologically distinct. By way of summary, Schwarzschild writes:

> I think my argument illustrates, though I admit that it does not by itself prove, that the only ultimate authority that Judaism can acknowledge is no authority that "is" (be it a person or an institution or a book – "bibliolatry") but only an authority that "ought" to be, and that that regulative authority [...] cannot but be rational – whatever form that rationality may take. (ibid: 175–176)

Finally, it is possible to try to answer the question about what characterizes the hermeneutic circle from a *Jewish point of view*, and how the idea and praxis of an authority can be understood that is ethical (exegetical-noetic) and ha-

lakhic (legal-political) at the same time, within a tradition based on text interpretation. Schwarzschild answers obliquely, by providing a contemporary example: the debate between Levinas and Derrida, whom he ironically named "Reb Derrida," revolving around the value of the Book. The main point at issue is whether Revelation is just "in history" or rather "history in itself" – in other words, whether the Torah is *eidos* or just *eikos*. The relevant essays considered are: "Violence and Metaphysics" (1978a [1964]), in which Derrida, for the first time, ponders over Levinas' thought, but also "Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book" (1978b). These two essays are later included in the anthology *The Scripture and the Difference*. This latter title is ambivalent, as is often the case with Derrida's prose, because the French "*et*" (that is, the English "end") sounds and may be also understood as a *copula*, that is: scripture is difference, makes the difference.

Edmund Jabès left Egypt in 1957 and settled in Paris. His main work, *The Book of Questions* (1976), is a poetic-philosophical symphony in seven parts (called "books," as in the Middle Ages), all dealing with one, gigantic issue: the relationship between Judaism and S/scripture. From Jabès' point of view, every book is but a refraction of sparks of the Book, and even God – Jabès writes – does not exist, but for the Book He is in (ibid: 31). Judaism teaches the grammar that is necessary to read that Book; the Jews have been its first readers, out loud, and have been the first to learn how that Book has to be listened to, and chanted, and interpreted; they were and are the custodians of the bibliophilia as the archetype for every textuality and, in the same breath, for the protest and demythization against any scriptural claim to become biblio-latry. A text – that is, a book, a scripture – is only a pre-text or an *ur-text* for comments, explorations, exegeses, interpretations, *ein sof*, without an end. Caught in this task of custody and protest, Derrida notes,

> the Jew is split, and split first of all between the two dimensions of the letter: allegory and literality. His history would be but one empirical history among others if he established or nationalized himself within difference and literality. He would have no history at all if he let himself be attenuated within the algebra of an abstract universalism. Between the too warm flesh of the literal event and the cold skin of the concept runs meaning. This is how it enters into the book. Everything enters into, transpires in the book. This is why the book is never finite. It always remains suffering and vigilant. (Derrida 1978b: 75)

Although Derrida's prose is often quite enigmatic, a clear, significant reflection on Jabès can be found here:

> Poetry is to prophecy what the idol is to truth. It is perhaps for this reason that in Jabès the poet and the Jew seem at once so united and disunited.
>
> And Reb Lima: Freedom, at first, was engraved ten times in the Tables of the Law, but we deserve it so little that the Prophet broke them in his anger.[3]
>
> Between the fragments of the broken Tables the poem grows and the right to speech takes root. Once more begins the adventure of the text [...]. The necessity of commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of exiled speech. In the beginning is hermeneutics. (ibid: 67)

From a Jewish point of view, the hermeneutic circle is foremost between the Book and its interpreter. Thus conceived, its shape is always that of a "broken circle," a "fragmented circle," consciously experienced and thought of in the necessary brokenness of the scripture – so that the scripture itself is not transformed into an idol. That circle, moreover, preserves the symbolic, empty space among the letters, because such a space is the very condition for those letters to have a meaning. That circle is formed by the never-ending dialectics between center and periphery, between "divine saying" and "human said," word and comment. Without the exiled words of the comment, the original word would be inaccessible or incomprehensible. That circle affirms the primacy of (Pharisaic) orality over (Sadducean) textuality. This is a conflict that has being going on for 2000 years, between those who, through study and *ars interpretandi* (*chiddush*), make the letter of the text alive, and those who, in the name of the spirit of the text, tend to mortify – or to ignore – the letter. As Derrida says, once again:

> The original opening of interpretation essentially signifies that there will always be rabbis and poets. And two interpretations of interpretation. The Law then becomes Question and the right to speech coincides with the duty to interrogate. The book of man is a book of question. (ibid)

Is this not an invitation to break the "divine saying" through the "human said"? Is it not a call to embracing an open circularity made of scripture and orality,

3 The sentence in italics is Derrida's quote from Jabès' work. Cf. Jabès 1976: 115.

of *mah-she-bi-ktav* and *mah-she-be-'al-pè* – a circularity that is typical of the Jewish tradition? Is this not an invitation to practice interpretation as the most authentic form of reading, broadly construed?

Schwarzschild writes:

> 1) "Interpretation," free reading, is required so that God (being, truth) may be (re-)constructed and 2) contrary to Levinas' Rosenzweigianism, God (and Jewish authenticity) may be not outside of, but in history (and all that history comprises). (Schwarzschild 1987: 176)

In different ways, Jabès, Derrida, and Schwarzschild deal with such circularity, and warn against the risk of an idolatrous use of the Book, and even of revelation. Here is the meaning of the "messianic difference" the rabbi-philosopher speaks about, along with the perennial message of the Jewish-Kantian legacy of Hermann Cohen.

In conclusion, it is arguable that Schwarzschild delineates a hermeneutic circle thought of in terms of a constant dialectics between the text and its reader/interpreter, a dialectics aimed at preventing the always lurking risks of solipsism and historicism. In order to break such a vicious circle, a regulative reason that governs history becomes necessary – an external question, an ethical-spiritual interest that is not prone to defend the subject *qua talis*. In more Jewish terms, it is the necessity of biblical and halakhic precepts, the *mitzwot* or, adopting Levinas' terminology, the primacy of ethics, or also the primacy of practical reason, as Kant would say. All of these are instances and criteria able to overcome the solipsism of authority and the authoritarianism of solipsistic thought, in the name of a call, or a reason, or a God that resound through history, but do not belong to history. They represent the only form of resistance against any offence to human dignity and to the world. Only on that condition, finally, Jewish philosophy can be the string, and not the tail, of the kite. "For the rest, as Hillel said […], 'go and learn!'" (Schwarzschild 1990c: 256).

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