

Adam Lipszyc
Silence Incribed: Derrida Reading Rosenzweig, While Reading Kierkegaard

I.

Let me begin with a rather well-known idea: Kierkegaard's distinction between the tragic hero and the knight of faith,¹ based on the relationship of the two figures to language and moral law. The tragic hero decides in favor of universal moral law over the particular laws of his community, thereby generating the tragic conflict. However painful and lethal the results of this conflict may be, the tragic hero participates in discourse – with his point of reference being the universal moral law, he is able to extensively argue for his position. As represented by the Biblical Abraham obeying the divine order to sacrifice his son, the knight of faith contrastingly rises above the universal moral law through an address to a wholly singular point of reference – God. Therefore, the knight of faith would be unable to justify his actions when confronted by the bewilderment of the community, which is why Kierkegaard claims that Abraham is essentially silent or mute.

This analysis provoked a radical response by various Jewish thinkers in the 20th century. Although these reactions might have differed in depth and style, they appear to maintain a general pattern of argumentation that is consistent and easily identifiable. If revelation is primarily perceived as ritual and moral law, even in a more abstract philosophical paraphrase, then it is difficult to conceive of the relationship between man and God as transcending the sphere of the ethical in some mysterious domain of an individual encounter, rather than realizing itself in the realm of ethics. Moreover, if revelation is assumed to be the linguistic foundation of the moral and discursive order of the religious community, perhaps even responsible for creating human reason as a moral and linguistic agency, then there seems to be little need to look for the realm of religious life beyond the sphere of *Sprachdenken*.² In short, the partition of ethics from language and religious act, the “teleological suspension of the ethical” posited by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, looked highly suspicious for thinkers drawing on the Jewish religious tradition.

A straightforward example of this stance can be found in Martin Buber's brief essay "On the Suspension of the Ethical", included in *Eclipse of God*.³ Buber focuses on the dangers involved in looking for true religiosity beyond the ethical – especially in the modern world, in which it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish the still small voice of God from the numerous voices of immanent false idols demanding that we sacrifice our ethical principles. Arguing for the awakening of a "new conscience" which will enable us to tell the relative from the Absolute, Buber expresses his deep mistrust towards Kierkegaard's position. In the key passage he says quite openly:

Moloch imitates the voice of God. In contrast to this, God Himself demands of this as of every man (not of Abraham, His chosen one, but of you and me) nothing more than justice and love, and that he 'walk humbly' with Him, with God (Micah 6:8) – in other words, not much more than the fundamental ethical.⁴

A more subtle argument in the same vein is expounded by Emmanuel Levinas in two short pieces on Kierkegaard included in *Proper Names*: "Existence and Ethics" and "A propos *Kierkegaard vivant*".⁵ Levinas praises Kierkegaard for his defense of the singular human existence against the claims of the total Hegelian system of idealism and for his vision of weak and persecuted truth, manifesting itself only in association with this singular subjectivity. However, Levinas is appalled by what he identifies as Kierkegaard's violence, namely the anti-philosophical mode of philosophizing which accompanies this defense of the singular subject: the violence of the universal is exchanged for the violence of the singular, the Hegelian egotism of the idealist absolute subject is exchanged for an existentialist egotism of the singular mortal subject that is excessively preoccupied with his own uniqueness. According to Levinas, this violence comes to the fore precisely when Kierkegaard claims that true singularity can only be achieved in the religious existence that transcends the realm of ethics. Unlike Kierkegaard, Levinas does not perceive the ethical as the sphere of universality. On the contrary, only in the ethical domain can I gain my true singularity: namely, as the singular subject of responsibility for an equally singular other, which first breaks the magic circle of generality. What we call religious existence realizes itself precisely in the domain of ethics – nowhere else.

This allows Levinas to challenge Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham's story. First, Levinas calls for a shift of emphasis in the story of the Binding

of Isaac. It is not Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son that is the climax of the story. This is certainly an essential element, given that it shows the absolute religious obedience of the patriarch. Nevertheless, the true stress lies elsewhere: "Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point of the drama."⁶ Moreover, Levinas critically notes that while Kierkegaard remains preoccupied with model of the knight of faith in the figure of Abraham, he neglects the truly ethical and religious moment when the patriarch argues with God on the way to Sodom. It is here that Abraham fully acknowledges his finitude and mortality, while simultaneously showing his singularity in acting as a moral subject responsible for others. Consequently, Levinas writes: "It is here, in ethics, that there is an appeal to the uniqueness of the subject and a bestowal of meaning to life, despite death."⁷

It is quite evident that identifying the ethical concern of a mortal creature for the other (rather than the concern for its own being) as the true source of singularity and individual meaning, offering a relative and temporal victory of life over death, owes much to Franz Rosenzweig. Not surprisingly, it is in Rosenzweig that we find one of the most elaborate Jewish responses to Kierkegaard's separation between the ethical/linguistic and the religious through his reading of Abraham. Together with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Kierkegaard is praised in the *Star of Redemption* as one of the founding fathers of the new thinking which opposes the systematic tendencies that dominated Western thought from Iona to Jena.⁸ His name later disappears, along with most of the names of other thinkers in Rosenzweig's book. However, it is rather obvious that two crucial elements in Rosenzweig's argument can or perhaps must be read as a criticism of Kierkegaard. This is certainly clear in the case of Rosenzweig's analysis of the tragic hero.⁹ Whereas it was the knight of faith that kept silent for Kierkegaard, in Rosenzweig's account it is rather the tragic hero who is devoid of speech. This is because tragic subjectivity establishes itself in the act of resistance to the world in general and to the discourse of the community in particular. Contrary to what Kierkegaard claimed, this resistance is just a stubborn act of defiance and does not refer to any universal discursive order of morality. Hence, the tragic hero gains his singular "self", but must remain silent and meta-ethical – an extra-ethical state which is definitely not religious. It is only in this way that he preserves his separation from the external world and constitution as a singular subject.

While slightly less evident, it is still plausible that this implicit criticism of Kierkegaard is complemented by another crucial element in Rosenzweig's argument: the demonstration of how the mute self turns into the speaking soul in response to revelation and dialogue with God.¹⁰ In the *Star of Redemption*, revelation is perceived as an act that combines the expression of God's love towards the soul, the imperative of love addressed to the soul, the actual creation of the soul and the triggering of *Sprachdenken* in human mind. In fact, all four of these moments are not combined in revelation, but identical with it and therefore with each other. By an act of *t'shuva*, *Umkehr*, the transcendent God turns towards the mute self and tries to make it turn towards Him. To this end, He calls man. Yet, at first, this call remains unanswered in the first person, and dialogue fails to begin – in correspondence with the failure between God and man following the sin of Adam. Dialogue finally succeeds when God addresses man twice with the name He Himself gave, signaling that man is no longer a part of the world or natural order. However miraculous, a singular event does not go beyond the sphere of natural occurrences. It is only when an event is repeated that it emerges in the sphere of language, in the system of repetitive signs. In the Bible, the first address of this kind occurs right after Isaac has been saved at Mount Moriah. God addresses Abraham twice by name and receives the answer "Here I am." Abraham has obeyed the cruel order, but he has also listened for the second time and thereby truly entered the domain of the ethical. It is here that the mute, meta-ethical self of the tragic hero turns into the speaking, ethical, and religious soul embodied by Abraham. This soul is also part of the community bound together by the law, for Rosenzweig implicitly superimposes Mount Moriah on Mount Sinai by identifying the content of God's subsequent address with the text of the *Sh'ma*. In direct contrast to the claims of Kierkegaard, revelation therefore establishes the legal, ethical, and linguistic order of the community that is precisely the true element of religious life and human subjectivity.

2.

It is against this backdrop that I propose reading Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Kierkegaard's account of the story of Abraham. In fact, the true meaning and significance of Derrida's interpretation can only be grasped if we see the place that Rosenzweig's reading of Abraham and criticism

of Kierkegaard occupies between Derrida and Kierkegaard. For reasons that ought to become clear during the course of my analysis, it appears far more productive to reference the work of Rosenzweig rather than Levinas, whom Derrida regularly cites. My general claim is that it is best to see Derrida's reading as the result of a mutual deconstruction of Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig's respective analyses of religious existence, in both cases embodied by Abraham. In particular, Derrida inscribes the moment of silence, characteristic of true religious existence for Kierkegaard, *into* the dense texture of the linguistic and communal order envisioned by Rosenzweig. In other words, while belonging to the tradition of Jewish criticism of Kierkegaard, Derrida uses Kierkegaard to balance certain inadequacies and dangers inherent in this criticism that are best exemplified by Rosenzweig. The result is yet another vision of our philosophically abused father Abraham and yet another vision of religious community: a deconstructed – which does not mean destroyed – synagogue.

Perhaps this is not the most obvious perspective to adopt when reading *The Gift of Death*, the book that will be my main concern here. The tradition of Jewish thought does not seem to be the most important point of reference: Rosenzweig goes unmentioned and references to Levinas occur rather outside of the Jewish context. Two modes of thinking seem to hold a primacy of place. First, if not most significant, there is the early Heidegger of *Being and Time* with his vision of man as being-towards-death. More visibly, there is also the Christian tradition represented by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, Kierkegaard with his reading of Abraham, and even Jesus himself by the Sermon on the Mount. All three Christian figures seem to be subject to a great deal of praise. However, it is only when read against the background of the Jewish critique of Kierkegaard that Derrida's argument manifests its true strength and meaning. In the end, Christianity might not be what is really at stake.

The first two chapters of *The Gift of Death* quite sympathetically reconstruct and analyze some of the ideas expounded by Patočka in his *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*.¹¹ Most importantly, Derrida traces Patočka's development of the issue of responsibility in the context of the Christian tradition. The argument sketches a line that goes from cult and mythos through Platonic logos down to Christian ethics. The two respective twists or conversions – two acts of *t'shuva*, so to speak – that form the passage from mythos to logos and then from logos to Christianity, are the founding historico-philosophical moves that constitute the transcendental

condition of responsibility. Taken as a whole, the passage from mythos to the Christian perspective is described as the passage from mystery to secrecy, in which Derrida finds an analogy to Levinas's opposition between the sacred and the holy. Mythical, cultic, sacred mystery defines the domain of the tribal, orgiastic, demonic immanence in which the subject connects to the divine source of meaning without being forced or being able to take the ethical stance of responsibility towards fellow human creatures. The passage from mythos to Platonic logos, the Platonic *periagoge*, is an exodus from the orgiastic, demonic cave of the myth into the light of the ethical sun and rational individuation. However, this passage seems to be insufficient, either for the true constitution of an ethics of responsibility or for the constitution of the singular subject. What is still needed is the move towards the Good as God, towards the one who sees me without being seen, who sees me from the inside and calls me to responsibility for the Other. Only in relation to this divine eye and voice am I responsible, free and truly singular.

Incidentally, this scheme is linked to the issue of death. If the collectivism of the orgiastic does not care for an individual death, Plato's philosophy conversely presents itself as the concern for death. Patočka seems to be reading this motive in the Heideggerian vein of care for one's own being and staring death in the face, which enables us to gain our soul and thereby triumph over death. However, the second turn is linked to ethical responsibility that enables the full constitution of the free and singular subject. Derrida traces Patočka's sometimes uncertain movement between the Heideggerian being-towards-death and Levinas-like ethical constitution of the subject, finally arriving at the point of intersection of the paths pursued by all three thinkers: even if what defines me as the singular subject is my absolute responsibility for the Other and the demand to substitute myself for him in death, it will be my own and not his death that I will be dying, because no-one's death can really be given. Paradoxically enough, this untradeable nature of death is the condition of responsibility. Only a finite, mortal being can be responsible.

It must be noted that already in the first two chapters of the book Derrida subtly enforces a deconstructive reading of Patočka's historico-philosophical scheme, a reading which will soon be paralleled and completed by his reading of Kierkegaard. He tries to explain the necessary transition from Platonism to Christianity by identifying it as the locus of the key aporia of responsibility. If the Platonic perspective defines the Good as the highest

being, it always does so in the rigid context of the Socratic link between goodness and wisdom. In the Platonic realm, an ethical gesture is therefore only possible when founded upon universal rational knowledge. However, if responsibility is understood as the singular subject taking responsibility for the singular other, then it cannot be grounded in fully thematized universal knowledge – paradoxically enough, to be truly responsible consequently necessitates a step into the irresponsible. This means that gaining access to responsibility and singularity requires another *t'shuva*, an exodus from philosophical logos. This exodus will never lead us to the Promised Land of a stable ethics that would be identical with the Platonic generality of knowledge. Instead, it will always leave as *bamidbar*, in the wilderness of ethical aporia, which seems to be the only non-realm to be truly desired. Of course, this is already a deconstructive extrapolation of Patočka, whose own vision of ethical responsibility and singular freedom under the gaze of the Christian God seems to define a more or less secure and non-aporetic domain. However this may be, with this second passage to the religious world we also touch upon the realm of the secret that – contrary to the communal, tribal, orgiastic mystery – defines the internal sphere of our singular self watched by the invisible God. In other words, we touch upon the realm of *mysterium tremendum* and Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham.

Not unlike Derrida's account of Patočka, his interpretation of Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham's story proceeds gently, seemingly in full agreement and showing admiration for the text at hand. However, a deconstructive "bang!" can be heard behind the smoothness and ostensible piety of the reading. If the crucial gesture in Derrida's reading of Patočka was to turn the Promised Land of Christian ethics into the wilderness of aporia, understood as the true non-homeland of responsibility and singularity, then something similar but clearer and more powerful is done in the third chapter of the book concerning Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham. At the outset, Derrida seems to unhesitatingly reconstruct Kierkegaard's idea that Abraham's decision to obey God's order must be surrounded or covered by silence, that Abraham must turn mute and leave the domain of discursive universality of ethical order – the very idea that was so fiercely objected by the Jewish critics of Kierkegaard discussed above. For Derrida, the Kierkegaardian silence of Abraham defines the secret of the singular subject of responsibility, which according to Patočka was made possible and necessary by Christianity, and therefore Kierkegaard's analysis seems to brilliantly complement the model proposed by the Czech thinker.

However, having patiently reconstructed Kierkegaard's argument, Derrida opts for a deconstructive turn. Abraham must leave the order of moral duties with respect to Isaac and his family in order to fulfill his duty to God. However, if Abraham did not *at the same time* accept the very order he seems to be leaving the sacrifice of Isaac would not be a sacrifice at all. Derrida says:

The contradiction and the paradox must be endured *in the instant itself*. The two duties must contradict, one must subordinate (incorporate, repress) the other. Abraham must assume the absolute responsibility for sacrificing his son by sacrificing ethics, but in order for there to be a sacrifice, the ethical must retain all its value; the love for his son must remain intact, and the order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights.¹²

The all too well ordered house of Kierkegaard's three stages of existence seem to be turned upside down with this one simple gesture. On this reading, which is deconstructive in this precise sense that it is an immanent criticism of Kierkegaard's text, as it plays certain moments of the text against what apparently seems to be its main contention, religious existence cannot be seen as a separate stage above the ethical and linguistic. By accepting the movement towards silence as the essence of Abraham's gesture, Derrida shows that this gesture must be inscribed in the very fields of language and ethics. And if anyone would like to argue – certainly with some justification – that the religious stage of existence is also not stable according to Kierkegaard, as it is always reached through a leap of faith, then we should respond that the image that would be more fitting for Derrida's vision is less a leap above the ethical than the insertion of a break, the inscription of a rift in it. In other words, if in Kierkegaard the religious is truly established above the ethical and reached by a radical, irrational, and silent decision, in Derrida we are bound to remain on the same plane, in the sphere of the ethical, while violating its law.

Yet this is only the first of three movements in Derrida's deconstruction. For what is the nature of this violation? In Kierkegaard, the gesture marked the passage to the religious domain. However, once it is inscribed in the field of ethics by the first movement of deconstruction, Derrida can decide to read it as the very gesture of ethical responsibility and duty. At first, still keeping almost faithful to Kierkegaard's text, the violation is cited as the gesture of absolute duty towards the transcendent God. In a long and splendid passage, Derrida writes:

Absolute duty demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery and betrayal), while still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the very thing one sacrifices, namely, the order of human ethics and responsibility. In a word, ethics must be sacrificed in the name of duty. It is a duty not to respect, out of duty, ethical duty. One must behave not only in an ethical or responsible manner, but in a nonethical, nonresponsible manner, and one must do that *in the name of* absolute duty, of an infinite duty, *in the name of* duty. And this name which must always be singular is here none other than the name of God as completely other, the nameless name of God, the unpronounceable name of God as other to which I am bound by an absolute, unconditional obligation, by an incomparable, nonnegotiable duty. The other as absolute other, namely, God, must remain transcendent, hidden, secret, and jealous of the love, requests, and commands that he gives and that he asks to be kept secret. Secrecy is essential to the exercise of this absolute responsibility as sacrificial responsibility.¹³

However, if by virtue of the first move the leap above is turned into the inscription of a rift within the ethical plane, and by virtue of the second move this act of inscription is recognized as the very act of duty in the name of God, then the third and final move is already at hand: it will recognize every true act of responsibility towards every other as, simultaneously, an act of irresponsibility. For if religious existence is not a separate domain, and the religious gesture is a gesture inside the ethical domain, though a rather paradoxical gesture of disobeying the law the religious act is then not in any way separate from the ethical act. Derrida writes:

If God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every one is every bit other. *Tout autre est tout autre*. This formula disturbs Kierkegaard's discourse on one level while at the same time reinforcing its most extreme ramifications. It implies that God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere there is something wholly other. [...] There is no longer any ethical generality that does not fall prey to the paradox of Abraham. At the instant of every decision and through the relation to *every other (one) as every (bit) other*, every one else asks us at every moment to behave like knights of faith. [...] What seems to universalize or disseminate the exception or the extraordinary by imposing a supplementary complication upon ethical generality, that very thing ensures that Kierkegaard's text gains added force.¹⁴

Hence, in the undeconstructed text of Kierkegaard's analysis there is a well defined and localized moment of exception, the very moment of the leap of faith when Abraham falls silent and in the act of the absolute decision leaves the sphere of the ethical in order to stand face to face with God on the plane of religious existence and gain his true singularity. Whereas in the deconstructed version offered by Derrida, the religious act is identical

with the ethical act, but the ethical act consists in a paradoxical break within the ethical laws. “In order to fulfill my duty towards God, I must not act out of duty.”¹⁵ Every act towards the other is an expression of duty towards God: this singular other demands precedence over any other other and hence is chosen against the law. Thus, the religious/ethical act does go beyond the law and language and hence is defined by silence and secrecy, the muteness that Kierkegaard ascribed to Abraham. But this happens at every single moment and always in the domain of ethics and language. Faithfulness to the structure of the field of ethics requires the inscription of a rift of silence, and therefore responsibility requires a questioning of the very rules of responsibility. Or to use another set of terms favored by Derrida, one must deconstruct the law in the name of singular justice. The last formulation shows that Derrida’s position does not only emerge by means of the deconstruction of Kierkegaard’s views, but that it identifies the very ethico-religious gesture as the act of deconstructing the ethical law.

3.

Having reconstructed the main line of Derrida’s argument, we can finally revert to the context sketched at the beginning concerning Jewish criticism of Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig’s embedded dialogue with *Fear and Trembling* in particular. We may now ask: Where does Derrida stand in the argument between Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig? Whose side does he take? In short, he takes both sides and neither at the same time. On the one hand, Derrida seems to agree with Jewish critics of Kierkegaard. He recognizes no religious stage of existence established above the ethical and reached through the teleological suspension of ethics and language. On the other hand, he does accept Kierkegaard’s suggestion that the true act of transcendence – which in Derrida is identical with the ethical act – can be described as silent, as going beyond the ethical discourse of the law. But this silence is inscribed in the very field of language as the sign of a break within given discursive structures, the break of silence that is the very life of language defined by the deconstructive force of *differance*. The act of responsibility for the other happens within language, but always as a deconstructive break of silence that questions the automatisms of ethical duty. Justice always appears at the tip of the tongue.

This is why Derrida’s reading of the story of Abraham can be best seen as the effect of a mutual deconstruction and “negative synthesis” of Kierke-

gaard and Rosenzweig's readings of the same story. Kierkegaard offers us a model in which we start from the universal ethical and linguistic order to reach the silent peak of religious existence, whereas Rosenzweig suggests a reverse scheme in which the silence of the tragic hero, cut off from the community and God, is superseded by the communal, ethical life of the speaking, religious soul. Derrida confronts these two with a model in which the silence of the ethical, religious decision is inscribed in the very field of language and ethics, the only plane on which anything religious may be realized. It is as if Derrida followed Rosenzweig's implicit criticism of Kierkegaard, but at the same time revolutionized Rosenzweig's own scheme with the crucial element of Kierkegaard's vision: the idea of silence – displaced into the ethical domain. This perspective enables us to see Derrida's position as a peculiar and rather attractive element in the tradition of Jewish criticism of Kierkegaard – a line extending from Buber and Rosenzweig to Levinas – and perhaps in the tradition of Jewish thought as such. In particular, it enables us to see this position as an important correction of a certain weakness of Rosenzweig's vision.

Reviewing the second edition of the *Star of Redemption*, Gershom Scholem criticized Rosenzweig for the church-like character of the Jewish community he envisions.¹⁶ This objection is far from being shallow or unjustified. Rosenzweig promises us the community of the ethical, speaking, singular souls who come into being thanks to the call of revelation. These souls are in touch with transcendence through the medium of the revealed element of love, constituting the very life of the law. However, this extremely well ordered law might turn the community into a closed, immanent structure and once again isolate it from transcendence. If so, this excessively dense church-like community does not leave any space for the singular existence of the ethical subject, for the difference of the other, the truly ethical decision not governed by predetermined mechanisms and finally, for the workings of language itself. Indeed, Rosenzweig seems to be heading in this direction. For whereas in the second part of his book the prescribed human action is identified as the ethical act of love towards the other, in the third part the stress is put mostly on ritual gesture. Parallel to this is the transition from the linguistic nature of life of the soul in the second part to the communal and *silent* ritual gesture in the third one. Ultimately, Rosenzweig does therefore identify silence as the highest mode of religious life, and yet it is not a sign of the transcendent rift in the structure of language but the silence of an excessively dense

community, the *entelecheia* of the language of people who do not have anything more to say to each other. They remain enclosed in the ahistorical, already-redeemed church-like community, all-too certain that the essence of law that governs their life guarantees them the contact with transcendence. The open, speaking soul falls silent in the closed community. The very element that was supposed to offer us contact with transcendence isolates us from it.

It is precisely this danger that Derrida may be seen as trying to avoid by his recourse to Kierkegaard's idea of silence, by grafting this silence into the soil of ethics and language. Derrida's argument may be "Christian" in character, but only if Christianity means nothing more or less than the constant correction of legal Judaism, a constant deconstructive call: not to enter the Promised Land of some second covenant, but to keep going out to the desert in order to remain faithful to the first one. Derrida pierces the substance of language and the law with the moment of decision, with the deconstructive moment of silence, and only there locates the true act of justice. Deconstruction prevents the community from becoming too dense and – paradoxically, but logically – by means of silence prevents language from falling silent. It also prevents the life of the law from becoming too self-sufficient and hence closed to transcendence. For this excessive self-sufficiency was precisely why Kierkegaard found the ethical order not sufficient enough. Derrida does not want to follow Kierkegaard to a silent, supra-ethical plane whose transcendence is not guaranteed in any way, but, again, inscribes the moment of silence into the texture of language and community, in order to shake it out of its own possible self-sufficiency. This moment of silence is the very deconstructive soul of language, just as the act of justice is the very soul of the law it questions.¹⁷

Hence, if Rosenzweig superimposes Mount Moriah on Mount Sinai and identifies this double peak as the place where the speaking, ethical soul is created and law and language given, we may say that Derrida could easily accept this superposition and this identification with this small, but crucial difference: the very moment of giving and making the law and language is also the moment of breaking them, inscribing in them the moment of the indefinite and silent which prevents them from closing into immanent structures. This inscription thereby prevents us, the heirs of Abraham, from feeling too safe and self-sufficient with this tool of law in our hands and these smooth words on our tongues. This would be the true meaning of God's intervention on Moriah. This is also why Derrida is so deeply

interested in another Biblical figure, this time of an artificial nature, the Tower of Babel. According to his interpretation expounded in “Des Tours de Babel,”¹⁸ God destroys the Tower with His own name, breaking the all too stable character of language and dismantling our imperial, immanent projects of making a name for ourselves. Thus, the destruction of the Tower also seems to be identical with the very act of revelation, which makes and breaks our language by inscribing within its fabric the deconstructive moment of silence. With this final superposition of Sinai, Moriah and Babel, the imperative of continuing deconstructive work and thereby searching for justice which is always only at the tip of our tongues, turns out to be our true Messianic responsibility.

Notes

- 1 Søren KIERKEGAARD: *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin Books, 2003, 83–195.
- 2 In perhaps the clearest manner, it was Hermann Cohen who defined revelation as the creation of reason – by which he first of all meant moral reason. It must be admitted that Cohen did not establish an equally clear link between rationality and language, but his followers – such as Rosenzweig and Benjamin – certainly did, while preserving his vision of the relationship between rationality and revelation. Hermann COHEN: *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995, 72.
- 3 Martin BUBER: *Eclipse of God*, New York: Harper and Row, 1957, 113–1120.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 5 Emmanuel LEVINAS: *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, 66-74 and 75–179.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Franz ROSENZWEIG: *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993, 7–18.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 83–187.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 193–1206.
- 11 Jacques DERRIDA: *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago&London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 1–152.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 66–167.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 77–179.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 16 Gershom SCHOLEM: *On the Messianic Idea in Judaism*, New York: Schocken Books 1971, 323.

- 17 In his later essay entitled “Abraham, the Other” Derrida openly links the moment of secrecy and silence to his paradoxical relationship with Jewishness. The deconstructive moment of a rift, of silence, keeps him apart from any community and from Judaism itself, but also keeps in him “a certain Jewishness”. And yet Jewishness and Judaism are not separable: by tearing apart the texture of Judaism one can be most true to it and hence Judaism survives in the deconstructive Jewishness. It is in this sense that Derrida can ultimately identify the experience of being Jewish and the experience of deconstruction. Jacques DERRIDA: “Abraham, the Other” in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, ed. Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, Raphael Zagury-Orly, New York: Fortham University Press, 2007, 1–135.
- 18 Jacques DERRIDA: *The Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, New York: Routledge, 2002, 104–111.