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# The “Torah” of Criticism and the Criticism of Torah: Recuperating the Pedagogical Moment\*

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Literature is written for the sake only of those who are in the process of development, and of that in each of us which is still developing. Hebrew, knowing no word for “reading” that does not mean “learning” as well, has given this, the secret of all literature away. For it is a secret, though a quite open one, to these times of ours—obsessed and suffocated as they are by education—that books exist only to transmit that which has been achieved to those who are still developing. [FRANZ ROSEN-ZWEIG]<sup>1</sup>

Over facile opinion notwithstanding, teaching is not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved. The only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly, not personal. [PAUL DE MAN]<sup>2</sup>

These statements represent two fundamentally different notions of “literature,” “teaching,” and “knowing”—terms which are central for both literary and religious studies. In Judaism especially, the notion of “teaching” is intimately bound up with the meaning of “text”: the very word “Torah,” often mistranslated as “law,” comes from the Hebrew root *yud*,

\* I wish to thank several friends and colleagues for helping me think through the ideas of this essay: Ellen Spolsky for inviting me to a conference at Bar-Ilan University in Israel on “Literature and Epistemology,” for which an early draft of this piece was written as a lecture; Marc Bregman, Barry Holtz, William Cutter, and José Faur for help and encouragement in thinking about the rabbinic materials; and Mary Alice Delia, whose many years as a superb high school teacher and as a student of literary theory have resulted in abundant wisdom about pedagogy and epistemology.

<sup>1</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1965), p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 4.

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*reish, hey* [yarah] and means “instruction” or “teaching.” But epistemology and hermeneutics—not pedagogy—have been the primary loci for recent interdisciplinary work in literature and religion. I would like in this essay, however, to begin to recuperate for this study of “literature and religion,” and for the dialogue of Jewish tradition and literary theory, the notion of texts as “teachings.”

The recent turn of much poststructuralist thought to politics has influenced many critics to assert that every interpretive position, every mode of knowing, rests on an implicit ideology. But we also need to ask: doesn't every theory or account of knowing also have an implied pedagogy—which is often unconscious or covert? Could we speak, then, of a pedagogical epistemology or of a way in which teaching talks back to theory? Or, put still another way, is teaching not only the conveying of knowledge but itself a way of knowing in excess of whatever it conveys? And don't these questions need to be asked of the literary text as well: What does it mean to say a text “teaches us something”? Can the idea of the “literary” incorporate the notion of “teaching”? Does a text “teach” us how to teach it?

The central idea I want to try to work out here might be phrased as follows: *epistemology is itself produced out of the teaching relation*. Now at first glance this may sound like a truism, but I mean to examine it on a deeper level—to look at teaching or pedagogy not as a set of devices or as the handmaiden to theory but as itself a way of knowing. This is a different focus from many of the books published in the last several years which conceive the relation of literary theory to pedagogy as either ideological or pragmatic. In most of those volumes, the main issue is how to “apply” literary theory to the classroom, or open the canon, or change the curriculum. Epistemology precedes pedagogy, whereas I want to look at it from the reverse perspective, so to speak.<sup>3</sup>

### THE STUDENT/TEACHER/TEXT RELATION

There have been a few contemporary literary and cultural theorists who have looked at pedagogy epistemologically and vice versa. Among the most interesting are Pierre Bourdieu and Shoshana Felman. Bourdieu,

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Darryl Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, eds., *The Politics of Liberal Education* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992); James Cahalan and David Downing, eds., *Practicing Theory in Introductory Literature Courses* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1991); Charles Moran and Elizabeth Penfield, eds., *Conversations: Contemporary Critical Theory and the Teaching of Literature* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990); Cary Nelson, ed., *Theory in the Classroom* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Susan Gabriel and Isaiah Smithson, eds., *Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Robert Scholes, *Textual Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985). See also Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An*

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in his *Reproduction in Education*, writes that “no one acquires a language without thereby acquiring a *relation to language*” (italics his) and that “pedagogy involves the entire relation to language and culture.”<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu’s analysis of pedagogy focuses on a cultural critique of the institution of learning in France, and he well demonstrates the “symbolic violence” involved in specific teaching practices. While I admire many of his insights, my purpose here is not a sociology of knowledge, or ideology critique, or quest for the “political unconscious.” Rather, I am after a kind of “pedagogical unconscious.”

Bourdieu, however, has some very incisive words about the way teachers operate: “Teachers are themselves former model pupils who would like to have no pupils except future teachers. Teachers are predisposed by their whole training and all their education and experience to play the game of the institution.”<sup>5</sup> The teacher, moreover, is able to maintain within his own discourse, his pupil’s discourse, and his pupil’s relation to his own discourse. Now Bourdieu means this in a negative sense—that the teacher’s discourse limits and constrains, even as it constructs, the student’s discourse. Yet it seems to me that there is an additional lesson here, that the common characterization of the interpretive process as something that occurs between a “reader” and a “text” is inadequate. This notion of a dialogue, or the duality of text and reader, comes out of a tradition of epistemology that considers knowledge to be a bilateral relation between a subject and an object. If the relation of the student to the teacher is also the relation to language and culture itself, then *the “subject position” of the “student” is not equivalent or reducible to that of the “reader.”* (Perhaps Wolfgang Iser’s idea of an “implied reader” needs to be revised to incorporate the notion of the “implied student.”)

If we ask about the teaching relation, the model would need to be changed to a trilogical one—“teacher-student-text” instead of “reader-text” (or “subject-object” or “knower-known”). In other words, the relation to the teacher is the relation to the text (teacher could be defined here both as “person” and/or the “text” in its teaching person or function). And no text is independent of its teacher or its teaching function.

Shoshana Felman has a remarkable essay on pedagogy entitled “Psy-

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*Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Bruce Henrickson and Thais Morgan, eds., *Reorientations: Critical Theories and Pedagogies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Mas’ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Maria-Regina Kecht, *Pedagogy Is Politics: Literary Theory and Critical Thinking* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). The bibliography and bibliographic essay in Cahalan and Downing is especially comprehensive.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 116, 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135, n. 7.

choanalysis and Education.” The essay is essentially a deconstructive analysis of teaching and knowledge in which she argues that “every true pedagogue is an anti-pedagogue” confronted with the impossibility of teaching.<sup>6</sup> Or, as Freud once wryly remarked, education—like psychoanalysis—is an “impossible profession.” Just as the unconscious conditions consciousness, ignorance, Felman asserts, would be a radical condition of the very structure of knowledge. What Freud understood so well was how the patient’s active resistance to knowledge can *teach us* something. And Freud, we remember, also listened to and learned from the voices of those who had been muted, such as hysterical or neurotic women.

In psychoanalysis, Felman writes, the analyst becomes “the student of the patient’s knowledge,” and it is precisely *what the patient does not know that she knows* that is key.<sup>7</sup> The patient thinks the analyst knows and looks to the analyst for answers, but, unbeknownst to the patient, it is the reverse. Roland Barthes also wrote an insightful essay on teaching, “Students, Intellectuals, Teachers,” in which he compared the position of the teacher not to that of the *analyst* but to that of the *patient*. For it is the *patient* who talks talks talks compulsively to the silent audience of the analyst, like the teacher talking compulsively to the class. Felman adds that, just as the psychoanalyst becomes the student of the patient’s knowledge, so, too, “the teacher is the one who learns and teaches nothing other than the way he learns. The subject of teaching is an interminable learning.”<sup>8</sup>

In Felman’s schema, then, literary knowledge (like psychoanalytic insight) is distinguished from philosophical knowledge in that literary knowledge is “non-authoritative knowledge not-in-possession of itself,” whereas philosophical knowledge attempts to be in mastery of its own meaning. “Literature” knows it knows but does not know the meaning of its knowledge. This conclusion, of course, is vintage deconstruction and parallels much of de Man’s work. On the subject of teaching, however, de Man’s ideas were disastrous—precisely because of his obsession with certain epistemological questions and his neglect of the relations out of which that epistemology is produced.<sup>9</sup> De Man’s impersonal model for teaching, cited at the beginning of this essay, is a chilling one. Like his

<sup>6</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable,” *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 21–44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), pp. 190–215; Felman, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Where Felman differs from de Man is in her affirmation that “pedagogy in psychoanalysis is not just a theme, but a rhetoric; not just a meaning but an action which may belie the stated meaning, the didactic thesis” (p. 26). Using Austin’s speech-act theory, she adds that, in looking for the pedagogical moment, one should look not necessarily to statements about pedagogy but rather to the illocutionary force of their utterance. There are pedagogical

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theory of language, it deals with an autonomous world of signs independent of persons. He appropriated the epistemological critique of Derrida as mainly a *cognitive* problem; the ultimate problem of interpretation then became “undecidability,” and one can go no further than ironic aporias. For de Man, “rhetoric” became the “other” of philosophy as a kind of post-Cartesian epistemology, but he deprived rhetoric of its fundamental sense of language as an *action* or effect on a public audience . . . and by extension as *teaching*.

### THE OTHER AS MY TEACHER

To de Man’s critique of epistemology and his statement that teaching has nothing of the interpersonal about it, I would juxtapose another of Franz Rosenzweig’s statements: “But all this that can and should be known is not really knowledge. All that can and should be taught is not teaching. Teaching begins where the subject matter ceases to be subject matter and changes into inner power. . . . The *way* to the teaching leads through what is ‘knowable’; at least that is the high road, the sole road one can in good faith recommend to every questioner.”<sup>10</sup> When Rosenzweig talks about “the teaching” in the preceding quote, he is invoking, of course, a Jewish notion of Torah, and I return to Rosenzweig here for several reasons. Rosenzweig was an extraordinary German-Jewish philosopher, critic, theologian, and educator who lived an all-too-brief life (1886–1929). He was stricken in 1921 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and became completely paralyzed by 1923, losing all faculty of movement and speech. One of the most extraordinary things about Rosenzweig was that even before his illness he abandoned what promised to be a glorious career in the German University in order to found an Institute for Adult Jewish Education in Frankfurt, the “Lehrhaus.” In so doing, and in the way he coped with his paralysis, he became a quite different kind of “teacher.” His move out of the realm of abstract philosophy and academic life was also in accord with the critique of Hegelian thought he had worked out in *The Star of Redemption* (1921).<sup>11</sup> *The Star* was also a reworking of the

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speech-acts and ways in which statements perform certain gestures often in spite of themselves. Now this framework, while better than de Man’s, still subordinates the pedagogical to another category—speech-act theory. I would not want to subsume the teaching relation purely under the category of rhetorical analysis because it seems to me that, even though the rhetor must adapt herself or himself to the audience in order to persuade, this model lacks the reciprocity of the teaching relation and the solicitation of the “otherness” of the student—and the way in which the student is also outside the teacher’s frames of reference, other, disruptive.

<sup>10</sup> Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 347.

<sup>11</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1970; reprint, Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1985).

relations between philosophy and theology, Judaism and Christianity, religion and art.

Rosenzweig was also a major influence on a contemporary French-Jewish theorist, Emmanuel Levinas, whose work is a crossing of philosophical phenomenology with Jewish thought, and whose critique of epistemology leads in another direction than de Man's—precisely to the relation with the other as "teaching." Levinas is a fresh resource for thinking about the relation of literature and religion. His own life has been marked by theoretical and pedagogical doubleness: he was a professor of philosophy in French universities, and also the director of the Paris school of the Alliance Israelite Orientale and a practicing Jewish pedagogue. He became well-known for his lectures on Talmudic texts and was also gratefully acknowledged by Derrida to be an important source for Derrida's own critique of Western metaphysics.<sup>12</sup>

Levinas's talmudic lectures are commentaries on the Talmud yet are subtly permeated by the philosophical themes of his work in phenomenology. His philosophical work, in turn, is permeated by Jewish ideas while not overtly mentioning Judaism. In the philosophical work, there are some extraordinary passages dealing with the nature of teaching, and these, too, are attempts to "translate" into phenomenological terms the Jewish concept of "Torah."

A brief (and crude) sketch of how this "translation" is accomplished might go as follows. Like many postmodern thinkers, Levinas critiques ontology and systems of thought which attempt to grasp the totality of being. The apprehension of Being, he argues, is not reducible to representation by a consciousness grasping its objects: "The relation between same and other is not always reducible to the knowledge of the other by the same, nor even to the *revelation* of the other to the same."<sup>13</sup> Levinas is interested in the "non-knowing with which philosophical knowing begins," that place where totality breaks up but which also conditions the totality itself.<sup>14</sup> And one of those places is what he terms "the face of the other." The "face" is the way the other represents herself or himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*. In part, Levinas is drawing on Descartes's "idea of infinity," that is, an idea which "overflows" the thought that thinks it, remains exterior to it—and in part on the biblical notion of the "face" (*panim*).

The "face of the other" is not for him a visual image; it is, rather, a

<sup>12</sup> I have completed a long study of Levinas and elaborated on these issues in my *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

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facing *relation*. The other faces my own separate and narcissistic ego, interrupts and shames it—a calling into question which is the call of conscience as both an appeal and an order. The connotations of the Hebrew word for “face” in biblical and rabbinic tradition are all important here. The verbal root *panah* in Hebrew connotes a “turning” toward something, and also a kind of personal presence.<sup>15</sup> In Levinas, facing is being confronted with, turned toward, facing up to, and being judged and called to by the other. Facing is a disruption of that free, autonomous self which through its reasoning and consciousness thinks it can construct the world out of itself or know the world *from* itself.

In other words, the “other” is the one who disturbs my being at home with myself. This other, though, is neutralized when she or he becomes a theme or object of knowledge, because that reduces her or him to the same. And that reduction reflects the project of reason to be autonomous, a knowledge of-and-for-itself versus a knowledge for-the-other.<sup>16</sup> Socratic truth would represent just this kind of self-sufficiency, and so Levinas critiques the Socratic notion of truth and Socratic pedagogy as an “ego-logy” because Socrates claimed to be only a midwife, eliciting from his interlocutor what the interlocutor *already* knows. Nothing new, nothing other, can break in—nothing from the outside.

For Levinas, “the condition for theoretical truth and error is the word of the other,” and to approach the other in conversation is to welcome the expression of the other, “in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the other beyond the capacity of the I.” Here are the key sentences: “But this also means: ‘to be taught.’ The relation with the other, or conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [enseignement]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I can contain.”<sup>17</sup> Epistemology would then be produced out of the teaching relation. As Levinas then writes, “The objectification and theme upon which objective knowledge opens already rests on teaching. The calling into question of things in a dialectic is not a modifying of the perception of them; it coincides with their *objectification*. The object is *presented*

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Moses Maimonides’ discussion of the meaning of the trope “face,” in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover, 1956), pt. 1, sec. 37. Among the biblical significations Maimonides enumerates for “face” (*panim*) are “the presence and existence of a person,” “the hearing of a voice without seeing any similitude” (i.e., the inability to comprehend God’s true existence as such), and “attention or regard” for the other person.

<sup>16</sup> Levinas, *Totality*, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

when we have welcomed an interlocutor. The master, the coincidence of the teaching and the teacher, is not in turn a fact among others.”<sup>18</sup>

From this point of view, the other who disrupts the knowing subject becomes the “teacher,” and the knowledge the knowing subject grasps is a *relation to the other*. For Levinas, this is exemplified in language because “language maintains the other—to *whom* it is addressed, whom it calls upon and *invokes*.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation; the revealing function of language is not limited to its coherence or to conveying the coherence of concepts: “The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the other in the face, we call language. The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching. . . . This voice coming from another shore teaches transcendence itself. Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced, to then teach: teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical.”<sup>20</sup> Now this redefinition of knowledge as always a relation to the other, not a reflection of some essential independent substance, accords with much postmodern thought; that is, meaning is always a function of relation rather than the identification of any independent essence. For postmodern theology, such a position has led in many directions: to a God defined as the “play of signs,” or “name of the Abyss,” or to a “God beyond/otherwise than Being.”<sup>21</sup> For Levinas, a God otherwise than Being is traced in the relation to the human other and the other’s calling me to accountability and responsibility. He then redefines “ethics” as the primary relation and binding to the other which precedes and conditions any epistemology—and any politics if that politics is not to revert to violence.

### MIDRASH AS PEDAGOGY

To this point, I have been working out some of the relations of pedagogy and epistemology in postmodern theory and Jewish thought but have not applied any of this to Jewish texts. It is now time to look at some rabbinic texts and some current attempts to understand them in light of literary theory. Deconstruction, semiotics, cultural poetics, anthropology,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 69–70.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., the work of the theologian Mark C. Taylor, especially his *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and the collection *Deconstruction and Theology*, ed. Carl Raschke (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

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and hermeneutic theory have all recently been applied to the rabbinic genre of midrash with interesting results, but the intense pedagogical self-consciousness of midrashic texts has been little discussed.<sup>22</sup> The relation of the midrashic hermeneutic to the midrashic pedagogy needs much more examination.

Judah Goldin has perceptively written, "Midrash is not just device. It is pedagogy. Pedagogy makes use of devices, devices do not make pedagogy."<sup>23</sup> Now the pedagogical self-consciousness of midrash is due in part to its background in orally delivered sermons. And as George Steiner has further pointed out, rabbinic interpretation does not see textual explication as its ultimate goal; it has a strong moral-pedagogical thrust: "The rabbinic answer to the dilemma of unending commentary is one of moral action and enlightened conduct. The hermeneutic exposition is not an end in itself. It aims to translate into normative instruction meanings indwelling in the manifold previsions of the sacred message."<sup>24</sup> I would even venture to say that hermeneutics and homiletics cannot be separated and that they are brought together under the category of the pedagogical. Again, I am trying to shift the ground and ask, What if we took the social relation of teaching or preaching as a ground for epistemology rather than the reverse? (Even the most avowedly secular and materialist literary theories contain exhortations about the need to battle political oppression. Ideological and cultural criticism is intensely homiletic.)

And of course, the meaning of the word "Talmud"—the name given to the major corpus of Jewish exegesis, commentary, and law—is "study" or "learning"—from the Hebrew root *lamed*, *mem dalet* [*lamad*]. The very form of the Talmud makes it indeed difficult for someone who has never learned a page of it to pick it up and just start "reading." It is not only that the Talmud assumes all kinds of background knowledge or that it speaks in a kind of shorthand code to the already initiated or that it has a particular kind of redaction history. The key issue here is the relation of rabbinic hermeneutics to rabbinic pedagogy. What is the relation between the rabbis as "readers" of revelation and the rabbis as its "teach-

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., the work of Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); José Faur, *Golden Dots with Silver Doves* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); David Stern, *Parables in Midrash* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986); Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Judah Goldin, *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, ed. Barry Eichler and Jeffrey Tigay (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), p. 280.

<sup>24</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 30.

ers”? For the relation of teacher and student is not the same thing as the relation of text and reader.

The Talmud presents itself as the dialogue and debate of teachers, and it indeed is a “knowledge produced out of the teaching relation.” As Steven Fraade emphasizes in his excellent recent book on midrash, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy*, “ancient scriptural commentary is not simply a series of *declarative* assertions about the meanings of words . . . but an attempt to effect a relation between that text overall and those for whom it is ‘scripture.’” In other words, these commentaries “are not simply constative conduits of meaning, but also performative media, by which the polymorphic ‘World’ of the text and its students are transformatively brought towards each other.”<sup>25</sup> Fraade is taking the idea of performative versus constative utterances, of course, from J. L. Austin and speech-act theory. Fraade’s argument, though, is that it is the *redactor* of the midrashic collections who sets up what I would call a “pedagogical hermeneutic”: the redactor juxtaposes and arranges the multiple interpretations to “draw and direct the text’s students into a dialogical engagement with these voices.”<sup>26</sup> That is, the very genre of the anthology that constitutes the redacted midrashic collections subtly directs the student to sort, reshape, and transmit the heterogeneous interpretations and traditions through continuous study and teaching.

As Fraade notes, in the rabbinic perspective the word of God is itself polyphonous, filled with multiple meanings, and the task of Israel is to continue Sinai, to reenact the revelation by uncovering those meanings. So the divine-human dialogue is reenacted in the very *structure* of midrashic anthologies. The relation of student to text and the “dialogical struggle of interpretation becomes a continual re-enactment of the original struggle of revelation at Sinai.”<sup>27</sup> The students “socially enact the text” through their study of it and “advance its unfinished work by filling out the anonymous narrative voice.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, “as they work through the commentary, the commentary works through them.” In the process, the disciples become sages, who teach the broader Jewish society as well, for the “sages knew their success or failure . . . depended not so much on their own exegetical genius as on their ability to raise the next generation of sages that would continue their exegetical work.”<sup>29</sup>

All of which is to say that the “literary form” of the midrash (and the

<sup>25</sup> Steven Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 20.

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Talmud) teaches us how it must be taught. This is a knowledge that requires a teacher—that is produced out of the very teaching relation which it itself often thematizes. The content of its teaching is inseparable from the form of its teaching. This absolute necessity for a teacher also preserves the tradition, even as the Written Torah is being transformed by the interpretations of the Oral Torah; and it also makes learning personal and links the student with the teachers and students whose debates and doings are described within its pages.

As Fraade puts it, “the *Sifre* in describing the study activity of the sages and their disciples also describes how its own text of Torah teaching ought to be studied by its students.” If that is true, “then we cannot understand the social work of that commentary without attempting to pose ourselves in the place of such students, even as we employ the distancing tools.”<sup>30</sup> Yet what does it mean to “pose ourselves in the place of such students”? And is there a way to even more deeply connect Austin’s notion of “performative speech-acts” with the pedagogical moment in midrash and in the teacher-student situation?

In a penetrating study of the relation of postmodern theory to the classroom, Mary Alice Delia has written that the “performative” in the pedagogical moment might be better described (and enacted) as a “staging.”<sup>31</sup> Now, “staging” is not repeating what “is there,” but generating, enacting, and embodying living relations between a text and its audience or actors. When something is staged, it is put into motion, recreated, transformed. To return to the psychoanalytic model, the cure comes about through a “staging” which Freud called “transference.” Transference is the unconscious “transfer” onto the analyst of key figures and early dramas in the patient’s life. The analyst becomes a screen onto

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Alice Delia, “Killer English: Postmodern Theory and the High School Classroom” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1991), p. 124:

“Stagings” [are not] attempts to manipulate or control students. By “stage” or “staging” I mean the act of displaying or exhibiting an idea, setting it up (in the stage sense) for examination, raising the idea or concept for *trial*. Teachers, of course, put ideas on trial as a matter of course, but without recourse to the full apparatus and machinery of the stage. . . . A good staging makes a spectacle of itself. Like any production, it makes dramatic use of props, machinery, movement, scenes, action. A good staging, by grammatological definition, is the work, edifice, achievement of the *bricoleur*, tinkering, thinking. [Pp. 124–25]

Delia also notes the relation between the “stages” adolescents go through, the staging of ideas in a drama, and the stages of knowledge in pedagogical action: “But to ‘stage’ means also, according to the Oxford Dictionary, ‘to cause (a person) to pass through stages; to bring about (something) in stages’” (p. 125). See also pp. 161, 164. She also acknowledges (p. 164) her debt to and differences from Gregory Ulmer’s *Applied Grammatology: Post(e) Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). Ulmer’s is one of the few books to examine pedagogy epistemologically.

which are projected the patient's unconscious conflicts, and these are then *reenacted* in the relation with the analyst. When this unconscious "staging" is brought to light and interpreted, the conflicts "play out" and can be resolved.

So perhaps we could further say that the knowledge produced out of the teaching relation is a knowledge that is "staged." And further, that *knowledge itself is that which can be staged between teacher and student*. There, in that relationship, it is given life, and it comes to be knowledge. Indeed, many midrashim teach, preach, and interpret by "staging" the scene, dramatizing it. Midrashic hermeneutics "stage" the Bible and beckon the students onto the stage, which is also the scene of revelation and its unfolding history. This hermeneutic calls us to participate in that unfolding, not only to intellectually interpret a text, but also to perform it, to practice it in the stages of our own lives.

### THE TEACHER-STUDENT BOND

A special bond is created between student and teacher in this mutual staging and engendering of knowledge. There is an intriguing text on this relation in the Talmudic tractate Makkot 10a. The context of the passage is a discussion of the three "cities of refuge" to which persons guilty of involuntary manslaughter could flee for asylum from the revenge of the blood relatives (Deut. 19:2–4, 4:42). The text discusses the case of a student who must go into exile to one of these cities:

A Tanna taught: A student who is exiled—his teacher is exiled with him in accordance with the text, "and that fleeing . . . he might live" [Deut. 4:42] which means—provide him with whatever he needs to live. R. Zeira remarked that this is the basis for the saying, "Let no one teach Mishnah to a student who is unworthy." R. Yochanan said: "A teacher who goes into exile—his students are exiled with him." But this cannot be correct, since R. Yochanan also said: "Where do we derive from Scripture that the study of the Torah itself affords asylum? From the verse 'Then Moses separated three cities . . . Bezer in the wilderness . . . Ramoth . . . and Golan . . . ' which is immediately followed by the verse 'and this is the Torah which Moses set before the children of Israel'" [Deut. 4:42]. This discrepancy is not difficult to explain. One of his sayings applies to the scholar who maintains his learning in practice, while the other applies to one who does not maintain it in practice.<sup>32</sup>

Maimonides, the great medieval philosopher and Talmudist, then codifies as law this mutual exile of student and teacher in his classic Jewish legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, where he writes, "A student who goes into exile into a city of refuge—his teacher is exiled with him, as it is said 'that

<sup>32</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1936).

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he might live,' which means—provide him with whatever he needs to live." Maimonides then adds, "For without the study of Torah, those who possess wisdom and those who seek after it are considered as dead. And thus the teacher who goes into exile—his students are exiled with him."<sup>33</sup> He is alluding here to a verse in Eccles. 7:12, that "the excellence of knowledge is that *wisdom gives life* to those who have it." In other words, the teacher-student relation is not simply a matter of conveying knowledge, but of life itself; and they are so interdependent that one's teacher must join one in exile.

In his philosophical masterwork, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides also refers to this teacher-student relation in discussing the meaning of the word *yalad*, "to bear" or "give birth." One of its figurative uses is "the formation of thoughts and ideas," and, says Maimonides, "One who has instructed another in any subject, and has improved his knowledge, may be regarded as the parent of the person taught."<sup>34</sup> José Faur interprets this comment of Maimonides and this generative metaphor for teaching Torah (that the teacher is as if he gives birth to the student) to mean that knowledge is generative, not static, and that Torah itself is not "knowledge" but what *produces* knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

### TEACHING AS CREATIVE WITHDRAWAL

In the Jewish mystical tradition, there are other interesting analogies between the act of teaching and that of creative birth. And in some chassidic sources, the process of teaching is used to explain the kabbalistic concept of the creation of the universe through the divine "self-contraction," known as the *tzimtzum*. The basic idea is that infinite God had to "contract" himself, so to speak, in order to allow a "space" for finite creation to occur. A teacher, the analogy goes, must perform the same kind of act. If a teacher tries to transmit an idea with all the complexity of her or his own understanding of it, the student will be overwhelmed and confused. The teacher needs to take her or his knowledge and "contract" or condense it so that the student, after intensely studying the condensed points, can eventually grasp the teacher's idea in its original depth and detail.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, only *by virtue of* the condensation and concealment

<sup>33</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, beginning of chap. 7 (my translation).

<sup>34</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (n. 15 above), pt. 1, chap. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Comments made in personal conversation, April 1992. I also thank José Faur for highlighting these references.

<sup>36</sup> To enable a student to receive, appreciate, and internalize the teacher's idea, the teacher has first to "entirely remove the light of his intellect and conceive an intellectual light that is on the receiver's level. [Therefore, he will make] a number of *Tzimtzumim* and will conceal [his own thought process] in order that it be appreciated by the receiver. But this *Tzimtzum* does not affect the teacher, for [he] sees the depth and breadth of the idea

can the idea can be transmitted to, and eventually unfolded by, the student.

It indeed seems that all the great teachers have taught in parables—forms in which meaning is highly condensed and contracted—and that the deepest knowledge can *only* be conveyed in that indirect way. And perhaps that also is what constitutes “literary knowledge”: It, too, is knowledge teachable only through condensation, story, and parable.

Perhaps one could also use the kabbalistic model to say further that just as the act of *tzimtzum* precedes and makes possible any specific finite creation, so, too, the teaching relation is the possibility of any specific knowledge. In the kabbalistic model, the condensation is a *self-contraction* which creates an “empty space” for the creation of the universe. And to return to the notion of staging—the “empty space” necessary for creation is in a sense like the space of a stage, which is itself an “empty space” to be filled by the interactions of the performers. The foundational pedagogical act, similarly, would also be an act of creative self-limitation (as in Levinas, an openness to the other), not an act of self-expansion and assertion of mastery of teacher over the student. In a way, Felman’s definition of literary knowledge as “non-authoritative knowledge not-in-possession of itself” also reflects a type of “self-contraction.” But the kabbalistic model takes it further, for the *purpose* of this self-contraction is to give birth to the other—that is, to “make a space” for the reader/interpreter/student. This would make literary knowledge not a paralytic aporia but a positive pedagogy.

If the student-teacher relation reflects the principle of creation, there is also a sense in which it embodies revelation and redemption. Levinas, in his role of rabbinic commentator and Jewish pedagogue, notes this in one of his earliest Talmudic lectures, which deals with comments at the end of the tractate *Sanhedrin* on the nature of the Messiah. I can here only discuss a fragment of his analysis and the Talmudic text he analyzes. Says the Talmud:

Rav said: The word was created only on David’s account. Shmuel said: On Moses’ account; R. Yochanan said: For the sake of the Messiah. What is his [the Messiah’s] name? The School of R. Shila said: His name is Shiloh, for it is written, “until Shiloh come” [Gen. 49:10]. The School of R. Yannai said: His name is Yinnon, for it is written, “May his name endure for ever: as long as the sun may his name be perpetuated [*yinnon*]” [Ps. 72:17]. The School of R. Haninah maintained: His name is Haninah, as it is written, “for I will show you no favor [*haninah*]” [Jer. 16:13]. Others say: His name is Menahem the son of Hezekiah, for it is written,

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even in its limited form. Therefore, for him the *Tzimtzum* does not conceal at all” (Joseph Issac Schneerson, *Bosi L’Gani-5710* [Brooklyn, N.Y.: Sichos in English, 1989], p. 65).

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“Because Menahem [‘the comforter’], that would relieve my soul, is far” [Lam. 1:16]. The Rabbis said: His name is “the leper scholar,” as it is written, “Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God, and afflicted” [Isa. 53:4].

The question concerns the identity of the Messiah, and the sages are offering different possible names: Shilo, Yinnon, Haninah, Menachem. Levinas astutely points out that the names the students ascribe to the Messiah are the names of their *teachers*, the heads of the rabbinical schools, and Levinas finds an extraordinary implication here: “The experience in which the messianic personality is revealed . . . comes back to the relationship between student and teacher. The student-teacher relationship, which seemingly remains rigorously intellectual, contains all the riches of a meeting with the Messiah. This is the truly remarkable thing: the fact that the relationship between student and teacher can confirm the promises made by the prophetic texts in all their grandeur and tenderness is perhaps the most surprising novelty in this passage.”<sup>37</sup> He adds that the plays on words each school uses to name the Messiah are themselves significant. It is not just a matter of finding a resemblance in the sound of the teacher’s name to the proof text, but each proof text characterizes something about the teaching relation. “Shiloh,” for example—from *shalvah*, meaning “peace”—indicates “the presence in the teacher’s lessons of peace and abundance.” Psalm 72, the proof text for “Yinnon,” speaks of justice and aid for the downtrodden and of a king who gives to the poor and whose dominion covers the earth, who subordinates peace and abundance to this social justice—indeed, a “messianic vision.” “The teacher-pupil relationship does not consist in communicating ideas to one another. It is the first radiant sign of messianism itself.”<sup>38</sup>

Now this is a view of the teacher-student relation in its most ideal sense, and at the opposite extreme from Bourdieu’s elaboration of the symbolic violence in academic institutional life. But it well accords with Levinas’s notion of the other as teacher and of ethics as a “non-allergic relation” to the other, an “eschatology of peace” prior to epistemology, and prior to politics. Without this prior possibility (or eschatology) of a nonviolent relation to the other, Levinas argues, even the most idealistic politics will degenerate into violence against the other.

Since the Talmud also declares that “one should always teach one’s students in a concise manner” (Pesachim 3b), it is more than time to conclude. The final words belong to a midrash which beautifully embodies the Levinasian idea that the “other” is my teacher, down to even the least

<sup>37</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 85.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

learned person. The Sifre (Piska 41) is commenting on Deut. 11:13: “And it shall come to pass, if you hearken diligently to my commandments which I command you this day. . . .”:

“Which I command you this day” (11:13): Whence do you learn that even if one learns an interpretation from the least learned of the Israelites, he should consider it as if he had learned it from a Sage? From the verse, “Which I command you. . . .” And furthermore, as if he had learned it not from [many ordinary] Sages but from the [most learned seventy members of the] Sanhedrin, as it is said, “Masters of assemblies” [*asufot*; Eccles. 12:11], “assemblies” meaning the Sanhedrin, as it is said, “Gather [*esfah*] unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel” [Num. 11:16]. And still further, as if he had learned it not from the Sanhedrin but from Moses, as it is said, “They are given from one shepherd” [Eccles. 12:11]. . . . And finally, as if he had learned it not from Moses but from the Almighty One, as it is said, “They are given from one shepherd,” and “Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, you that lead Joseph like a flock” [Ps. 80:2], and “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” [Deut. 6:4].<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. Reuven Hammer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 84.