Edmond Jabès's 'Infinite', 'Exploded' Book

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Contents

SUMMARY

This thesis aims to examine the literary legacy of the Egyptian-French, atheist Jewish poet and writer Edmond Jabès, in particular his concept of 'the Book' as an open-ended system of 'infinite' and 'exploded', fragmentary, non-linear nature.

This thesis will in turn examine the reasons behind, origins of and influences upon Jabès's concept of 'the Book', in his life and in the impressions made on him by the surrounding historical events of the time. These events include the Shoah, and the Suez crisis, with the poet's resulting exile. The thesis also marks out and traces the most important characteristics of Jabès's unique Book (which incorporates all 26 volumes of his life's work – most notably, the seven-volume series of *Le Livre des Questions*.)

Also, Jabès's friendships with some of the key French intellectuals of the 20th century – Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas – will be considered in relation to the four writers' field of mutual influence with respect to relevant literary and philosophical questions on, most particularly: the 'trace', the 'Other', the poet/writer and the Jew, and Judaism and the Book.

It is hoped that the outcome of this research project will be a wider appreciation of Jabès's literary work, with its unique voice and techniques, and its poetic, philosophical and semi-religious ideas. In addition I hope to demonstrate that Jabès's literary-philosophical ideas remain directly relevant to the ways in which we experience literature, poetry and the book in the 21st century, and that his ideas have ongoing significance.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....

Date.....

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ABBREVIATIONS

LQ1: *Le Livre des Questions* vol. 1 LQ2: *Le Livre des Questions* vol. 2
BQ1: *The Book of Questions* vol. 1 BQ2: *The Book of Questions* vol. 2
FTBTTB: *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*
PEJ: *Portrait(s) d'Edmond Jabès*
LSLS*: Le Seuil Le Sable*
JE: *Jabès l'Egyptien*
JPS: Jewish Publication Society
EJTHOE: *Edmond Jabès: The Hazard of Exile*
CNRS: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
LEJ*: Lettres à Edmond Jabès*
SL: *The Space of Literature*
LM: *Le Livre des Marges*
BM*: The Book of Margins*
WD: *Writing and Difference*
OG: *Of Grammatology*
RB*: Return to the Book*
FTDTTB*: From the Desert to the Book*

1. INTRODUCTION

Edmond Jabès was born in Cairo on April 16, 1912 and died in Paris on January 2nd, 1991. Forced to leave his native Egypt during the Suez crisis of 1956-57, he lived as an exile in Paris and opted to take French nationality. During his lifetime, after leaving Egypt, he published twenty-six books, mostly with the publisher Gallimard. In these books he would pursue a relentless questioning of a God in whom, as an atheist, he did not believe, but who nevertheless inexplicably allowed the Shoah to happen; and espoused a vision of the secular Book as 'exploded' and as 'infinite' as the vast desert sands surrounding the Cairo of his youth. Jabès's atheism involves a thorough interrogation of the false God and argumentation with Him over the evils He has allowed to occur. Jabès had never been a particularly religiously observant Jew in Cairo; it was not until 1956-7, when due to the events following the Suez crisis, his Jewishness meant that he had to leave his home country, that the Jewish factor took on prime importance in his life. This resulted directly in the pre-eminently Jewish focus, for the first time in his *oeuvre*, of *The Book of Questions*. Moreover, it was always a certain Judaism, one centred in and lived through 'the Book', that interested Jabès. Ultimately, it could be argued (as this thesis does, in its final chapter) that this secular notion of the Book prefigures contemporary hypertext, with its fragmentary nature based around a core set of keywords. Throughout his career, friendships with Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, among others, coloured his writings in what amounted to a rich field of mutual influence within postwar twentieth-century French thought and writing.

In the thesis that follows I examine these disparate elements of Jabès's life and literary career in an attempt to uncover the essential features of his literary legacy. In

Chapter One, 'An Egyptian-French Poet', Jabès's familial and literary origins (as a young verse poet inspired by the Surrealists and Max Jacob) are traced. Though Jabès would later retract much of his early verse, we can see in this first chapter the beginnings of themes and techniques that would recur throughout his more mature *oeuvre*. Chapter Two, 'The Book of Questions', takes a close look at the seven-volume cycle of that name which in many ways is the defining work of Jabès's career, tackling as it does such themes as the Shoah and the death of God. In Chapter Three, 'Silence and the Word; the Blank Space and the Letter,' the constituent elements of Jabès's literary techniques and style are examined. Multivocality, multi-genre, alternations in typography and attention to blank space and the individual component letters and spaces that make up a word, are all features of his literary style examined here. Chapters Four, Five and Six each examine Jabès's friendship with respectively, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, going deeply into the shared themes and correspondences found in their respective works. Negation is the issue with Blanchot; while absence, exile, the dichotomy of the poet and the Rabbi, and the question of the Book are central themes for Derrida with respect to his critique of Jabès. Levinas looks at the trace, the face and the inclusion of the 'Other'. In Chapter Seven, 'The Jabèsian Book', I examine differing notions of the Book found in Europe across previous centuries, from Leibniz to Mallarmé, and compare these with Jabès's ideal Book. Chapters Eight and Nine of this thesis are especially devoted to an exploration of the Jewish themes found in Jabès's *oeuvre*. Firstly, in 'Exile and the Desert: the Wound and the wandering Jew', the theme of exile and in particular its Egyptian desert setting is examined as it shows up both in Jabès's work and in its earlier Biblical provenance. In Chapter Nine, 'Atheistic Judaism, post-Shoah: 'the centre of a rupture,' the character of Jabès's overall project is seen through the varying lenses of negative theology and apophatic theology on the one

hand, and 'atheistic theology' and Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) on the other. We shall see that Jabès's works fall into the latter category.

A word on Jabès's atheism is apposite here. Firstly, Jabès is clearly worlds away from the 'new atheism' of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and others. Jabès's atheism was never that of a combative polemicist. He is far more sensitive to subtleties in the argument, and he spent the best part of a lifetime's work agonising over its details. We shall see further on in this thesis how Jabès is engaged in a compelling relationship to God-in-His-absence which veers just this side of apophaticism. It is an example of the kind of sensitive atheism which, we shall again see further below, Deleuze has called 'the artistic power at work on religion' (Goodchild 156).

Finally, in Chapter Ten, the possibility of adding Jabès's name to the list of literary precursors to hypertext is examined and argued for, as we see that the elements of textuality he favoured in his writing later turn up as basic constituents of twenty-first century hypertext, as invented and laid out by such luminaries as Ted Nelson in works such as his *Literary Machines*. Throughout this thesis, what is at stake fundamentally is the question of what constitutes The Book, for Jabès, who faithfully enquired into its nature more profoundly and extensively than most. We find that, for Jabès, the Book is not something that can be confined within its covers; that it is always straining beyond the printed page. What follows, then, is an approach to the Jabèsian Book that fully honours what he called its 'infinite', 'exploded' nature, while remaining faithful to the contexts, both in Cairo and in postwar Paris, that gave it birth.

Definition of Key Terms

A definition of key terms relevant to this thesis is in order. Terms such as 'knowledge,' 'truth' and 'subject,' as well as 'Otherness', are used in a particular way in the thesis that follows and will be defined directly below:

KNOWLEDGE: The philosopher Plato defined knowledge as 'justified true belief,' (as cited in Pritchard et al.) which is the definition this thesis follows, backed by knowledge by description and knowledge by association. Knowledge gained by reading trusts that the signifier refers back to a valid signified, in Saussure's terms. Such knowledge also exists by means of the relation between the signifiers themselves, in this case within the Jabèsian text as a whole. Plato's definition in turn requires a definition of truth, which will be undertaken below.

TRUTH: According to contributors to Bill Meacham and Jon Wainright, a true theory is a) congruent with our experience; b) internally consistent; c) coherent with everything else we consider true; and d) useful, in that it gives us mastery. In the same issue, Jon Wainwright states that 'Truth is the single currency of the sovereign mind, the knowing subject, and the best thinking – in philosophy, science, art – discriminates between the objective and subjective sides of the coin, and appreciates both the unity of reality and the diversity of experience.' These definitions will be followed in this thesis as relates to, for example, 'the true God,' 'Jabès's quest for Truth.'

THE SUBJECT: The 'I', the observer, as opposed to 'the Other,' the object, the observed. While 'the subject' is a contested term in Continental philosophy, for Jabès the knowing, perceiving subject is his narrative persona, or the persona of his main character, whereby ultimately the subject is pitted against the 'ultimate Other,' or God. Also, in Jabès's works,

the subject itself is often 'Othered,' as being a member of a marginalised group, such as the Jews, writers, or outsiders (or all three at once).

OTHERNESS: The concept of 'the Other' has been through several iterations throughout the history of philosophy.[1] Hegel introduced the term in the late 18th century as the counterpart required in order to define the Self (Edwards 76). Husserl (1859-1938) used the concept of 'the Other' as a basis for intersubjectivity, or the psychological relations between people. In his *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (1931), Husserl wrote that the Other makes up an alter ego , an other self. The Other is thus only a perception of the Self (Honderich 637). In an Existentialist detour, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) both applied the concept of the Other in varying ways. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943) wrote of intersubjectivity and of how the world is changed by the appearance of the Other, appearing thenceforth to be oriented toward the Other and not to the Self. De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), used the concept of Otherness in Hegel's dialectic of the 'Lord and Bondsman' (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft)* to apply to the Man-Woman relationship, thereby explaining patriarchal society's mistreatment of women. More importantly for a consideration of Jabès's work, Lacan and Levinas brought the concept of the Other further still. For the psychoanalyst Lacan (1901-1981) the Other was implicated in language itself and thus with the symbolic order of things. For Levinas (1906-1995), as shall be seen in more detail below in this thesis, the Other was ethically prior to the Self and more important than it, following Jewish tradition and scripture. Levinas described the 'face to face' encounter with the Other whereby, following Derrida (1930-2004), alterity as pure metaphysical presence, described

[1] The following section is in large part indebted to Wikipedia's page on 'Other (philosophy)' in the History section. See https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Other_(philosophy)/#History.

in classificatory language, is impossible. We are thus responsible for the Other, and as Levinas would put it, I moreso than anyone else. Jabès would put these ideas to fruitful use in his Levinasian idea of 'hospitality' towards the stranger, or an end to Otherness, which is, prior to all the above thinkers, a Jewish tradition.

Methodological Approach

This thesis project follows a qualitative research approach which in its initial stages I modelled on Terence Rosenberg's concept of 'poetic research' (Rosenberg) (adapted from the field of design/visual arts research) with its 'centrifugal' approach (Ibid.) based on using key conceptual terms (in my case, Jabès's favoured keywords) to generate new directions and original ideas. Additionally, Rosenberg's idea of 'inventive translations' (Ibid.), adapted from the design field to the literary/digital context, was to facilitate my 'moving from an abstract to a material situation' (Ibid.) to create a work of electronic literature from selections of Jabès's writings, in my previously-proposed thesis project. The basic approach, using keywords, still proved useful for my thesis throughout the course of its various stages of development.

Rosenberg's 'centrifugal' keywords approach can be likened to the sighting of the first major landmark in my journey through the 'desert' of the Jabèsian text. The Egyptian desert, so familiar a feature to Jabès in his early life, would remain a key motif throughout his life's work. And it was just such a metaphorical desert I found myself confronted with – and initially lost in – as I commenced my study of the overall Jabèsian text. The philosophical profundity, bleakness and poetic depth of Jabès's works were in places truly impenetrable to me at first, though with repeated rereading in both the original French and in English translation, the fog lifted somewhat and the landscape became clear, though no less bleak.

Navigating this seemingly infinite landscape became the next step. The chapter headings, obtained through my application of Rosenberg's 'centrifugal' research method, helped immensely. They were like gallon drums placed on each succeeding horizon of the desert; as soon as I made it to one, the next one became visible on the horizon, a seemingly vast distance away. By navigating from one 'gallon drum' or chapter heading to the next chapter, bit by bit I arrived at my destination – an overarching knowledge of Jabès's life and works, in particular a 'deciphering' of the Jabèsian text. I still found myself in the 'desert', but this time I knew and could trace my way.

It should be clear from the above 'desert' analogy that the method used here, as in Jabès's own searching and works, has been an apophatic one, that is, proceeding by negation towards a definition of the issue at hand, by first defining what the issue is *not*. Jabès denies logocentrism and the unreal God of the Covenant to uncover the real God, whom he addresses on virtually every page of his books. Derridean deconstruction has been useful here, as it was to Jabès on his 'quest.' As Jabès, on the fourth page of *El, ou le dernier livre* quotes Franz Kafka's *Notes and Aphorisms*: 'It is up to us to accomplish the negative. The positive is given.' Already deconstructed, Jabès's works leave little for a deconstructionist to do, and in fact Derrida's 1964 critique in praise of *The Book of Questions* was not actually a deconstruction. Instead, it interrogated and explored the Jabèsian figures of the rabbi, the poet, the Jew, and the Book. Such keywords as these formed the basis for the chapter headings (and 'landmarks') of the present thesis.

Methodologically, beyond the chapter headings, this thesis orients to key terms like biography, close reading, intellectual history (in postwar 20th century Paris), and the synergy and dialogue between poetry and theory. The overall project is in some ways an author

study, but it also aims to broaden out onto the relationship between poetics, theory and poetic/theoretical thinking about the theological, philosophical and technological aspects of literary discourse. So, rather than theory as a template, this thesis aims to foreground the dialogue between poetics and theory, and the way in which key theoretical concepts (such as the trace, place, exile, the face and the Other, and hospitality as ethical imperative following the death of God) develop out of it.

The 'trace', in Derridean philosophy, equates to the presence of absence or the absence of presence; an always-already absent presence in language or in a concept or sign. Being generated by the difference between itself and other signs, the sign must always contain a trace of what it does not say. Also used in the sense of Derridean 'arche-writing', Jabès would make much of this concept in his later works especially.

'Place' is one of the names of God in Hebrew ('Makom'). It usually connotes the entire universe as a whole, but can also be used for a specific place in the sense of 'spirit of place.' In connection with exile as a concept, both are important to Jabès given his exile from Egypt and the sense of that place as significant both in a biblical sense with respect to the origins of Judaism and its Torah, and also as crucial historically with regard to the origins of written language.

The 'face' of the 'Other' is a Levinasian concept whereby we are said to confront 'infinity' in the face of the Other. This leads to another Levinasian concept, that of 'hospitality' towards the Other as a Jewish and philosophical ethical imperative. For Jabès this was doubly important following the 'death of God', in Nietzsche's terminology, but especially true following the horrors of the Shoah in World War Two, as well as with respect to both immigration and his own forced exile as a result of the Suez crisis in Egypt in 1956-7.

The issue of translation should also be discussed here. While I read and translate French adequately, I have relied upon authoritative translations alongside the original texts where both of these were available. It is almost impossible to translate Jabès, given the poetry and philosophy entailed in his work. I have done my own translations where no prior translation was available, with the aim of merely being serviceable. Rosmarie Waldrop's Columbia University award-winning translations of Jabès have been extensively quoted from, but even her translations, most notably of the poetry, have been slightly modified at times to highlight what I have seen as Jabès's overall philosophical and poetic concerns. Likewise, Keith Waldrop's translations of the poetry have been used and slightly modified where I have seen them as slightly inadequate. I therefore take full responsibility for the correctness of all translations provided in this thesis. The norm for this thesis is bilingual quotations, but at times, to suit the context of the thesis or in rare cases where I have not been able to access the original texts, I have merely provided the Engish. I hope to have struck a balance between ease of reading for those who do not read French, and fuller context and understanding of the original texts for those who do.

Literature Review

In the literature review that follows I present some of the main texts I have been working with in the creation of this thesis. Subsequent close analysis is focused on Jabès's primary texts alongside a necessarily small pool of interlocutors. In what follows, then, I present the main secondary sources I have consulted, followed by a brief summary of each of Jabès's main works.

The secondary sources on Jabès fall fairly naturally into two main groups: French and European, and later (after the translations had trickled down) American. The former group can further be subdivided into the initial, classical French theorists who responded to Jabès's works – Blanchot, Derrida and Gabriel Bounoure – and later critics.

The main critics working with a focus on Jabès include, in France and Europe: Didier Cahen, Aurèle Crasson, Marcel Cohen, Daniel Lançon, Jean-Pierre Faye, Alberto Folin, Antonio Prete, Farid Laroussi, Joseph Guglielmi, Éric Benoit, Olivier Goujat, Catherine Mayaux, Ariane Kalfa, Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, Claude Rouyet-Journaud, Adolfo Fernandez Zoïla, and, in the 1960s, Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot and Gabriel Bounoure. In the English-speaking world Jabès critics include: Steven Jaron, Gary D. Mole, Matthew Del Nevo, Rosmarie Waldrop (Jabès's principal translator into English), Richard Stamelman, Mary Anne Caws, Warren F. Motte, Jr., Daniel Oppenheim, Myriam Laifer, Edward K. Kaplan, Beth Hawkins, and Paul Auster. Robert Duncan also wrote *The Delirium of Meaning* (*c.*1985), an extended prose meditation on Jabès's *The Book of Questions*.

Didier Cahen (also a Derrida scholar, and poet) is the principal biographer and arguably the leading French critic on Jabès. Like many readers (both in French and English), he came to Jabès's work via Derrida's two chapters on Jabès in *L'Écriture et la différence*, a

book which, as Cahen has said (and it is undoubtedly also true for many), he first read feeling 'as if it had been written for him.'[2] Cahen's *Edmond Jabès* (*c.*1991) remains the landmark full-length biography (see also Cahen's more brief *Edmond Jabès* (*c.*2007)), to be supplemented by Daniel Lançon's detailed *Jabès L'Égyptien* (*c.*1998) and (the writer and close friend of Jabès) Marcel Cohen's important book-length interview with Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*. Cahen is very much of the traditional *l'homme et l'oeuvre* literary historical approach, and carries it off with aplomb.

Equally, Steven Jaron's *Portrait(s) d'Edmond Jabès*, published in 1999, presents multiple perspectives (both literary and photographic) on Jabès's life and writings, and makes great use of the available archival material from the *Fonds Edmond Jabès* at the Bibliothèque Nationale Française, which was donated to the library by Jabès himself, shortly before his death in 1991, and completed a few months later by his wife, Arlette Jabès. Also, Jaron's *Edmond Jabès: The Hazard of Exile* (*c.*2003) uses archival manuscript and rare published (Jabès's early, Cairo poetry) sources to argue that Jabès's feelings of exile, of 'not belonging', began while he was still living in his homeland of Egypt, thus predating his actual enforced exile (due to the Suez crisis) of 1957; and thus, for Jaron, Jabès's work needs to be considered as a whole, including the early poetry publications from Cairo, which Jabès had retracted as not properly belonging to his *œuvre.* Jabès had felt that the sometimes sentimental excesses of his youthful poetry did not belong in his *oeuvre* proper, especially since he had published the poetry he did wish to retain in *Je Bâtis Ma Demeure* (*c.*1959). Jaron, however, sees essential similarities in themes and techniques between the very early and the later work, and so seeks to recuperate the very early poetry in his own criticism.

[2] Remark by Didier Cahen at *journée d'études* mini-conference on Edmond Jabès, BNF, Paris, May 2012.

Aurèle Crasson – one of Jabès's five granddaughters and also (like Jaron) an academic at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique laboratory, specialising in the textual genesis and digitisation of manuscripts, with a particular focus on those of Jabès – has been working on an electronic edition of Jabès's works which has been in the pipeline since 2002. In more recent years she has co-authored *Edmond Jabès . (* with Anne Marywhich is a book accompanying the BNF exhibition of manuscripts, letters and relevant artworks, commemorating the centenary since Jabès's birth; and has edited *Edmond Jabès: l'exil en partage* (*c.*2013), which is a record of the mini-conference (*journée d'études*) which took place at the BNF on the same occasion, on 11th May 2012. (I had the good fortune of being an audience member at this event, and of meeting both Crasson and her mother, Viviane Jabès-Crasson, a practising psychoanalyst who is one of Jabès's two daughters). In her own work, Crasson focusses on the 'material traces' of the various stages of a manuscript, and on their rendering in electronic form, to elucidate the process of creation of the work under analysis. This can perhaps best be seen in *Récit: les cinq états du manuscrit*, her genetic analysis of a long Jabès poem in various stages of its handwritten and typed manuscript forms.

Turning to the Americans briefly, a number of studies situate Jabès's work alongside other authors, placing him in a wider cultural context. Gary D. Mole's *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (*c.*1997) looks at the figures of the writer, the Jew, the *étranger*, notions of exile and (especially) alterity and the ethical imperative in relation to post-Shoah Judaism, performing a useful elucidation of Jabès's literary and philosophical influences and positions. Christian Saint-Germain follows the thread of the 'ethics of the

Book' in Lévinas and Jabès, in his *Écrire Sur La Nuit Blanche: l'éthique du livre chez Emmanuel Lévinas et Edmond Jabès* (*c.*1992).

Beth Hawkins compares Kafka, Celan and Jabès as both post-Nietzsche ('God is dead') and post-Shoah atheistic Jews in her *Reluctant Theologians: Kafka, Celan, Jabès* (*c.*2003), and finds each featured author both resisting and honouring their Jewishness as the basis for an ethical imperative grounded in inclusion of 'the Other' (cf. Lévinas), that could in turn inform a universal, global ethics. She highlights the tension between the universal and the specific that is maintained in each of these authors' works.

Also taking the religious angle, but from the other side of the Atlantic, Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller examines Jabès's concept of God from a French perspective in *Envisager Dieu avec Edmond Jabès* (*c.*2007), while Ariane Kalfa delves into a meditative Jewish interpretation of Jabès's work, including his concept of the Book, in *Pour Edmond Jab*ès (*c.*2004). Debrauwere-Miller takes as her point of departure a question posed by Jabès in *Aely*:

> *Mon oeuvre […] tiendrait-elle dans les innombrables et contradictoires définitions de Dieu et ma solitude, dans la mort de ce mot?* (*'Aely'* 175)
>
> Do my works consist in the innumerable and contradictory definitions of God and my solitude, in the death of that word?'

She looks at the absence and presence of God in varying forms throughout Jabès's work, particularly in *The Book of Questions* cycle, and finds there a 'God after God, without divinity' (277). Kalfa undertakes a subtle and poetic 'Hebraic hermeneutic' of the Jabèsian text, looking at the relation or the dialogue, between the Divine and the Poet, the writer and the Jew, in Jabès's work, as well as the place held by the Covenant in the wake of the Shoah. The 'Absent Presence' of God, as seen by Jabès, is fully discussed here. The

importance of the blank space in Jabès is underlined, as the 'two solitudes' of God and of the Poet, face each other through the words, the 'address', of the text.

Highly esteemed 20th century French literary critics Gabriel Bounoure (lived 1886-1969) and Maurice Blanchot (lived 1907-2003) both provide classic literary and semi-religious cultural commentary on Jabès's 1963 *Le Livre des Questions*. Both were friends of Jabès: he and Bounoure worked closely together in Cairo in the 1950s, and Bounoure contributed the preface to Jabès's first serious collection of poems, *Je bâtis ma demeure* (*c.*1959). Bounoure also closely critiqued the first drafts of *Le Livre des Questions* (*c.*1963) by correspondence, causing Jabès to refer to him as 'une planche de salut' (*PEJ* 45); and provided one of the first major critical works on Jabès in the form of 'Edmond Jabès: la demeure et le livre', in January 1965, in *Les lettres nouvelles* (Ibid.).

Blanchot, who maintained his friendship with Jabès purely by means of correspondence,from the early 1960s until at least 1972, wrote of him in the essay 'L'Interruption' in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* of May 1964. The article was later split for publication between Blanchot's *L'Amitié* and *L'Entretien Infini*, appearing alongside Blanchot's consideration of the post-Shoah 'Jewish condition', 'Être Juif'; it marks already a significant turnaround from Blanchot's right-wing revolutionary nationalist, though never anti-Semitic, political position of the 1930s. While Blanchot hesitates to bring Jabès's *Livre des Questions* out of a 'necessary silence and reserve' imposed by friendship with its author, he writes of the 'interruption' characteristic of the book's style as a 'mode of communication' differing from the habitual, and notes 'the cry' characteristic of a certain Judaism, particularly post-Shoah, of which Jabès has, he says, found precisely the 'fitness.'

Also first published in 1964, in February, was Jacques Derrida's critique of *Le Livre des Questions*, 'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre' (in *Critique* #201). It was later included in Derrida's seminal *L'Écriture et le différence* (*c.*1967), along with the short chapter 'Ellipsis…' (devoted to Jabès's follow-up volumes, *Le Livre de Yukel* and *Le Retour au Livre*), which closed the book. Derrida's essay remains an important source of philosophical (and, in its own way, poetic) conjecture on the nature and implications of *Le Livre des Questions*. At stake, for Derrida here, is what it means to be a writer, a 'rabbi-poet' (the term is Jabès's; it appears in the dedicatory opening pages of *Le Livre des Questions)* and a Jew; how Jabès conflates the figures of the writer and the Jew, as feelings and functions. At stake also is the questioning of God, of the Law and of the Book (both religious and secular); and of how the Book, writing and Jewishness 'take root in a wound', following Jabès's exploration – or, as Derrida puts it, 'exhumation' of the common wound of exile that the (circumcised) Jew and the writer (who is for Jabès 'l'étranger par excellence' (Crasson et al. *Edmond Jabès . ()* back cover)) share. Both Jabès and Derrida extend the wound's significance, in both senses, universally; and Derrida takes the Book beyond Judaism, seeing it as an 'epoch' in itself – an 'epoch' that has, for Derrida in 1964, perhaps already had its day.

Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* compares and contrasts the prevailing 'discourse networks' at the beginning of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Circa 1800, universal alphabetization is transmitted via 'the Mother's Mouth', from mother to child, in a semi-erotic orality that resulted, according to Kittler, in a proliferation of poetry, authors and books around that time (particularly in Kittler's native Germany). In 1900, or from around 1890 on, writing lost its supremacy as a means of data storage and transmission to sound and image in the phonograph, gramophone, photography and

cinema. This happened just as writing began to grasp itself (as a result) as an autonomous media system. This latter point proves important to this thesis as it is in large part the reason for the obsession with scriptural economies (and their biblical provenance) in Jabès and Derrida et al.. This thesis further transfers Kittler's concept of 'discourse networks' a century forward to 1990-2000, with the increasing predominance of the personal computer, the internet and hypertext systems.

Based on a talk, given at the Eighth World Computer Congress, called 'Replacing the Printed Word', Theodor describes Project Xanadu, a blueprint for the forerunner of today's internet, 'the original (perhaps the ultimate) HYPERTEXT SYSTEM.' Nelson invented the term 'hypertext', and shared credit for the discovery of the text link with Douglas Engelbart, the original inventor of word processing. Nelson defines hypertext as 'non-sequential writing' (page 0/2), and the book is itself written in hypertext format, though in print. Hypertext is a 'non-linear text system.' Nelson's vision was to have all the world's various literature, in all media, online and interconnected by means of links. As he writes on page 4/41, 'there is essentially nothing in the Xanadu system except documents and their arbitrary links.' (A document could be text, graphics, music, video, etc.). The documents thus become fragments of a greater whole; and the links are keywords. These two central elements of the overarching hypertext system are also key elements of Jabès's work, especially in his *Desire for a Beginning Dread of One Single End*.

Jay David Bolter's *Writing Space: the Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing* (*c.*1991) analyses computer and hypertext systems in relation to the history of writing, from stone and clay tablets through papyrus rolls and medieval illuminated manuscripts to the printed book and on to today's electronic writing. After examining features of the 'new

writing space' of the computer, including examples of literary hypertexts, the book looks at critical theory in relation to electronic writing; literary (print) precursors to hypertext, including Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and the work of James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges, among others. Bolter also examines artificial intelligence, semiosis, the mind as 'writing space' and as 'text', and the changing nature of cultural literacy in a world where a culture of networks is replacing the old culture of hierarchy. In many places, from its early statement that 'electronic writing will probably be aphoristic rather than periodic' (p. IX) to where he states that 'the computer as hypertext is the newest in a long line of candidates for the universal book' (206), Bolter's book is directly relevant to the concerns of Chapter 10 in this thesis. Not least in that it acknowledges several literary print precursors to contemporary hypertext – a list to which I'd like to add the name of Edmond Jabès.

On the subject of the Kabbalah in relation to Jabès's use of it in his books, the most authoritative source is Professor Gershom G. Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (*c.*1961). A contemporary of Jung's, Scholem was present at the Euranos lectures, and was one of the great scholars of the twentieth century. In this book he presents his findings on all of the major aspects of Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah), based on his years of unearthing and interpreting rare original manuscripts. From the earliest 'Merkabah (Chariot) mystics' through the medieval Hasids, Abraham Abulafia and prophetic Kabbalah (including Abulafia's word games, which inspired Jabès), through the Zohar, Isaac Luria and the Safed school of mystics, the heresy of Sabbatian messianism and on to the latest phase of Eastern European Hasidism, with its mystical Rebbes, Scholem presents a detailed and thorough investigation into the nature of the Kabbalah. While I have studied the Kabbalah for twenty-five years, the broad gist of what I have learned in terms of the history of various

movements within the Kabbalah is contained within this book. It therefore serves as the basis of general knowledge about the Kabbalah underlying this thesis.

Moreover, it is possible, though not verified, that Jabès had read a French translation of Scholem's book prior to writing *The Book of Questions* in 1963. Several points made by Scholem make this possibility clear. Firstly, on pages 218-219 Scholem mentions the 'primordial point' from Nothing as 'the mystical centre around which the theogonical processes crystallize … Beyond this point nothing may be known or understood, and therefore it is called *Reshith*, that is 'Beginning', the first word of creation.' Scholem remarks: 'Itself without dimensions and as it were placed between Nothing and Being, the point serves to illustrate what the Kabbalists of the thirteenth century call 'the Origin of Being', that 'Beginning' of which the first word of the Bible speaks.' At the beginning of *El, ou le dernier livre*, which in fact has the point as its original title, Jabès places as an epigraph: 'Dieu, *El*, pour se révéler, Se manifesta par un point. – La Kabbale.' ('God, *El*, in order to reveal Himself, manifested Himself by a point. – the Kabbalah.'). Also on page 218 of Scholem's book, mention is made of a 'mystical *jeu de mots*' used by the Kabbalist Joseph Gikatila, in which it is noted that 'the Hebrew word for nothing, *ain* has the same consonants as the word for I, *ani*.' As Scholem puts it:

> the passage from *ain* to *ani* is symbolical of the transformation by which the Nothing passes through the progressive manifestation of its essence in the Sefiroth, into the I – a dialectical process whose thesis and antithesis begin and end in God: surely a remarkable instance of dialectical thought (218).

An appreciation of such matters is seen in Jabès's own wordplay in *The Book of Questions* series, particularly in the final volume *El, ou le dernier livre*, where we see a page devoted to '*L'Un / Nul*' (One/ None). In addition, the fourth chapter of Scholem's book is devoted to Abraham Abulafia and prophetic Kabbalism, in which word and letter permutations and

combinations form part of a mystical method of meditation on the letters. Also, the third and ninth chapters are devoted to the Hasidic Rebbes of Germany, Poland and the Ukraine, of whom Jabès makes such creative use throughout *The Book of Questions*. And the idea of the Rebbes as 'commentators,' a formulation used by the author of the Zohar, Moses de Leon, is remarked upon by Scholem (198). In sum, while there can be no doubt that Jabès immersed himself in the study of the Talmud and the Zohar prior to writing *The Book of Questions*, it is also possible that this particular book of Scholem's did not escape his notice.

In *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989), Kevin Hart provides a comprehensive analysis of negative theology, deconstruction and mysticism in the philosophies of Hegel, Kant, Heidegger and Derrida. Through a rigorous argument he finds that, while deconstruction is not a form of negative theology, the latter serves to deconstruct positive theology and is thus a mode of deconstruction in itself. Hart finds that both Heidegger (through his claim that God is not the same as Being) and Kant (in repudiating mysticism) espouse a restricted negative theology; but Hart comes down firmly on the side of 'the Derridean problematic' and finds that if we add this to theology, 'what results is a general negative theology … and thus provides us with an account of the only possible way in which a theology can resist the illusions of metaphysics' (269). Altogether, this would suggest that Jabès, in embracing Derrida and deconstruction, espouses a general negative theology at the same time as undertaking an apophatic quest for the real God throughout his books. I discuss this in the present thesis in the chapter on negative theology while eventually siding with Del Nevo and Kaplan in suggesting that Jabès's 'atheistic theology' is not precisely a negative theology but leans more toward Kabbalism in a poetic quality of Jewish mysticism.

In ‘The Atheistic Theology of Edmond Jabès,’ Edward K. Kaplan shows how Jabès’s position cannot be reduced to mere nihilism. Rather, as he closes his article, ‘the Jabès Book nourishes a prophetic impetus beneath its methodical negativism, a vision of justice and world community. … Edmond Jabès, as exile, as writer, speaks for our identity with and responsibility for all humanity.’ Comparing and contrasting Jabès with Abraham Heschel, an activist rabbi famous for marching alongside Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 1960s, Kaplan finds that Jabès ‘helps preserve the legacy. His insistent questioning replenishes the lifeblood of our eternally unfinished tasks,’ and that ‘his post-Auschwitz spirituality does not come from a Voice beyond but from the still, small voice within: that of relentless devotion to truth.’ Kaplan finds in Jabès a ‘prophetic radicalism’ that ‘would not dismay our Biblical ancestors.’ (Ibid.) Thus Jabès’s ‘atheistic theology’ revitalises theology as well. This contrasts sharply with the negativism of William Franke’s conclusions in ‘Edmond Jabès, or the Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God’, in which Franke asserts that ‘the work of Jabès calls to be read in a tradition of apophatic discourse that reaches back to Neoplatonic sources on the ineffable One, as well as to the tradition of reflection on the Name of God as the Ineffable par excellence that one finds in the Kabbalah.’ Franke finds that ultimately in Jabès’s works, ‘the Name of God thereby emerges as the vanity of language in the heart of every word.’ (Franke “Edmond Jabès, or The Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God”) While such is true, it does not do much to assert the positivity resulting from the Jabèsian opus as a whole, unlike what we see in Kaplan and Del Nevo.

Matthew Del Nevo, in his ‘Edmond Jabès and Kabbalism After God,’ finds that Jabès’s atheism is atheism ‘of a religious order.’ He writes:

> God is not 'there' for Jabes, but this is atheism of a religious order. Just because the pole star has fallen from the sky and disappeared-the star by which the navigator across the dangerous seas of existence steers his course-the direction of that ultimate point of all orientation, which the star once marked, remains (403-442-online reference, page numbers not specified).

Del Nevo too prefers Kaplan's label of 'atheistic theology' to describe Jabès's works, rather than Franke's (and others') 'negative theology.' It is a more kabbalistic and poetic designation which rings truer to the author of the present thesis as well.

Miryam Laifer titles her book *Edmond Jabès: Un Judaïsme Après Dieu* (Edmond Jabès: A Judaism after God) and states on page 130 that

> *la possibilité même de mettre en question les principes fondamentaux de la religion tout en continuant de se sentir juif, c'est cela, l'essence même du 'Judaïsme après Dieu' de Jabès*.
>
> the very possibility of putting in question the fundamental principles of the religion while continuing to feel himself to be Jewish, that is the very essence of Jabès's 'Judaism after God'.

Laifer sees Judaism as fundamental to the entire works of Jabès, concluding on page 135 with the claim that 'les livres d'Edmond Jabès ressemblent donc, à bien des égards, aux premiers textes hébreux. L'oeuvre dans son ensemble constitue une sorte de Midrash vivant.' ('Edmond Jabès's books resemble therefore, in many respects, the first Hebrew texts. The *oeuvre* in its totality constitutes a sort of living Midrash.'). She thus disagrees with both Joseph Guglielmi, who sees Jabès in his atheism as completely breaking from Jewish tradition, and Adolfo Fernandez Zoïla, who, in *Le Livre, Recherche Autre d'Edmond Jabès*, acknowledges that Jewish traditional texts serve as a starting-point for Jabès, but claims that he takes his Judaism into autonomous directions, towards 'une destinée autonome, specifiquement humaine, insérée dans le développement et l'évolution de l'humain (102).' (towards 'an autonomous destiny, specifically humane, inserted into the development and

evolution of the human.'). While I agree with Laifer on many points in her book, which skilfully analyses Jabès's work under the themes of the Desert, Love, Judaism, the Holocaust, Mysticism and *Écriture*, I am here inclined to side with Fernandez Zoïla. Jabès's vision is a humanistic one, more than purely Jewish in any limited, or non-universal, sense.

Joseph Guglielmi in *La Ressemblance impossible: Edmond Jabès* sees Jabès as taking an altogether negative view, 'impiously' taking refuge in negativity and oblivion, 'l'oubli', and seeing only the 'pas-Dieu', the 'not-God.' Adolfo Fernandez Zoïla's purpose in his book, *Le Livre, Recherche autre d'Edmond Jabès*, seems to be, following on from Guglielmi's poetically and negatively-charged effort, to show Jabès's humanity and life-affirming, sensual, positive side. Zoïla also explicates the 'exploded' quality of Jabès's writing, which he compares with other 20th century movements in art, music and literature (such as atonalism, Cubism, Antonin Artaud, Deleuze and Guattari, Blanchot and Mallarmé). The book is a breathless flow of words, all on the breakages, ruptures, explosions and 'forces pulsionelles' involved in Jabès's writing. In typically French critical style it undertakes a more thoroughly contemporary take on Jabès's *oeuvre* than Guglielmi manages. He underscores it as a postmodern and life-affirming, sensually positive body of work.

Two edited collections of chapters on Jabès's work as a whole may serve to summarise the secondary sources. The first, in English, is *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès*, edited by Eric Gould (*c.*1985). It contains several original pieces by Jabès, translated into English by Rosmarie Waldrop and unpublished elsewhere in French or English, on the topic of Jewish writing and of the writing of the Book, generally; an interview of Jabès with Paul Auster; an English translation of Maurice Blanchot's writing on Jabès; a short, highly charged poetic piece of Jabès criticism by Jean Starobinski; Susan Handelman on Jabès and the

Rabbinic tradition; a piece on 'nomadic writing' and the 'poetics of exile' by Richard Stamelman; Edward Kaplan on the 'problematic humanism of Edmond Jabès'; a piece by Rosmarie Waldrop on paradox in Jabès's work; Sydney Lévy writing on absence; Eric Gould writing on the question of God in Jabès; Mary Ann Caws on the Question; importantly, Berel Lang on 'writing-the-Holocaust', who claims that Jabès fails as an author in completing, and even in attempting to complete, this task; and 'The Delirium of Meaning', a prose exploration of and response to Jabès's works by the (late) poet Robert Duncan.

The second of the two edited collections is *Ecrire Le Livre Autour d'Edmond Jabès* (*c.*1989), edited by two Americans, Richard Stamelman and Mary Ann Caws, who both organised the conference on Jabès at Cerisy-La Salle in 1987, of which this book is a record of the proceedings, all in French. Here a roll-call of the leading Jabès critics of that time present conference piece chapters on varied aspects of Jabès's work. René Major talks about the Derridean and Jabèsian concept of proper names; Helena Shillony speaks on metaphors of negation in Jabès's work; Elizabeth Gardaz, Guy Walter and Alberto Folin all contribute separate pieces on the importance of silence in Jabès's work; Didier Cahen talks about the Book; Joseph Guglielmi offers his journal of reading Jabès over the course of the previous two years; Adolfo Fernandez-Zoïla writes about dialogue and the Book; François Laruelle compares Hebrew, Greek and Jabèsian concepts of the One; Serge Meitinger along with Walter A. Strauss compare the Mallarméen and Jabèsian ideas on the Book; José Angel Valente speaks of the memory of fire in Jabès's works while Warren Motte analyses *Récit*, the book-length poem Jabès first published in 1980. As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, Riccardo de Benedetti writes on Blanchot and Jabès in the uncondition of writing (see the chapter on Jabès and Blanchot in this thesis for more on this 'uncondition'). Rosy Pinhas-

Delpuech writes lyrically about the desert in Jabès's books, while Agnès Chalier compares the Jabèsian desert to the concept of the void in classical Chinese Taoist philosophy. Richard Stamelman speaks of dialogue and absence; Edward Kaplan talks on a 'prophetism without God' in analysing the 'atheological theology' of Edmond Jabès's atheism (also discussed elsewhere in this thesis). Marcel Cohen writes on Sarah and Yukel in *The Book of Questions*; Max Bilen talks about Jabès's conflation of the roles of the Jew and the Writer. Hélène Trivouss-Haïk takes a psychoanalytic approach to the book of *Yaël,* while Viviane Jabès-Crasson, the writer's daughter (and a practicing psychoanalyst) offers a sensitive reading of the act of listening to Jabès's books. Ronnie Scharfman analyses the vocable '*mort-né*' (stillborn) as a metaphor for Jabès's work; Mary Ann Caws reflects on *The Book of Margins* and *The Book of Shares*. The book closes with a dialogue between Jabès and the other participants at the end of the conference. In typical conference style the book as a whole constitutes a 'mixed bag' of offerings, and the style is more conversational than these writers engage with elsewhere. Nevertheless there are some fine insights which arise from the proceedings, especially from Edward Kaplan, Didier Cahen and Riccardo de Benedetti, who write from a more clearly and classically theoretically-grounded standpoint.

Where my own present work fits into this picture is that it follows up on the work of Jabès's granddaughter, textual genesis specialist Aurèle Crasson, in looking at the relation between Jabès's writing, with its keywords and concept of the unlimited Book, and hypertext digital literature. In 'L'oeuvre d'Edmond Jabès peut-elle se lire sous forme de 0 et de 1?' (*c.*1999), Crasson examines the suitability and possibilities of a Jabèsian hypertext as a heuristic device. She poses several other questions throughout the article, and in the chapter on Jabèsian hypertext in this thesis, I pick up where Crasson left off in her article on

the same subject, attempting to provide answers for some of the hypothetical questions she was posing back in 1999. In that chapter, I also go deeper into the changing phases of technology over the last century or more, looking at why the loss of printed writing's supremacy as an autonomous media system affected theorists such as Derrida so much in the twentieth century, and how in turn that influenced the work of Jabès.

Also, the notion that Jabès, Blanchot, Derrida and Levinas were united in what amounts to what I have called a 'complicit dissidence', is I believe original to the present thesis. While Gary D. Mole analyses Jabès, Blanchot and Levinas in his book *Figures of Estrangement*, Derrida is perhaps 'le nerf du noeud' (in Jabès's words on Blanchot's 'neutre' concept), the 'nerve [or 'strength'] of the knot' in what ties together these theorists, and it is not the issue of dissidence that Mole focusses on in his book.

Primary Source Texts by Edmond Jabès

In what follows I provide a brief overview of primary sources by Jabès, excluding those that have been thoroughly discussed and analysed in chapters of their own in this thesis (namely, *The Book of Questions* seven-volume series, and *Le Seuil Le Sable* (including *Je Bâtis Ma Demeure*), the collection of Jabès's poetry, which is discussed in the first chapter of this thesis). Jabès's *oeuvre* as a whole, which, along the lines traced by Blanchot, is more of a *désouvrement*, seeks to uncover the textual relationship between on the one hand, writing and the writer, and on the other, Jewishness and the Jew, both with their common roots in Egypt (specifically the Egyptian desert), in the history of writing and of Judaism, as well as personally for the Egyptian Jew Jabès. It is a certain notion of Judaism explored by Jabès, a Judaism centred around and rooted in 'the Book' both as sacred text of Law and as factic object. The *oeuvre* as a whole draws to a close with a plea for hospitality and openness

toward the foreigner, the Other, whether this person be Jew or Black or Muslim or a member of any minority group, as an antidote to the horrors of the Shoah, the injustices of the period of the Suez crisis, and similar events.

Jabès's work falls into several main sections. There is the early verse, influenced by the Surrealists and Max Jacob. Then there is the seven volumes of *The Book of Questions*, written in Paris. This is followed by the three volumes of *The Book of Resemblances*, then the four volumes of *The Book of Limits* (consisting of *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*, *The Book of Dialogue*, *Le Parcours* and *The Book of Shares*.) A number of extraneous volumes, including a children's book, a book of interviews, and editions of illustrated prose poetry or essays, make up the total, but the above is the outline of the main body of work by Jabès.

The poetry and *The Book of Questions* will be discussed in their own chapters in this thesis, below. What follows here is a brief outline of the primary sources.

A revisiting of *The Book of Questions*, *The Book of Resemblances (Le Livre des Ressemblances)* plays on the idea of resemblance and difference, featuring the sayings of the same imaginary rabbis throughout, and including summaries of the earlier volumes of *The Book of Questions*. Significantly, it ends with a trial of the author, as I discuss elsewhere in this thesis.

In *The Book of Resemblances II: Intimations The Desert*, a book of 'nomadic writing', Jabès uses the motif of resemblance to continue his reflections on the relation between thinking and writing, language and being, reader and read, knowing and known. As with his previous works, Jabès uses a mix of aphorisms, questions, multiple voices and fragmentary

narratives to create a poetically-charged and suggestive whole, with a sparseness of style evocative of the desert he so often speaks about in this book. 'What is a book but a bit of fine sand taken from the desert one day and returned a few steps farther on?', he asks on page one. There is a second trial of the author at the end of this second volume of the trilogy.

In *The Book of Resemblances III: The Ineffaceable The Unperceived*, the final volume of The Book of Resemblances, through continued questions of representation, language and meaning, Jabès comes to approach 'the last book', a work which in its transcendence is both 'ineffaceable' and 'unperceived.' Throughout the book is a continued search for the Book's 'threshold.' In Jabès's words: 'It might be that all books are contained in, and were drawn from, the last. Book before all books. Book of unlikeness which the others try to resemble. Intimate model unmatched by any copy. Mythical book. Unique.' At the end of the book there is the 'Impossible Trial', in which all involved 'resign themselves … to leaving the crime unpunished.' In this way Jabès, having taken his philosophical, religious and poetic liberties, may proceed 'unpunished.'

Taking its title, though not its content, from a section within volume two of *The Book of Resemblances*, *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982) is made up almost entirely of aphorisms, widely-spaced. This 'little book' is perhaps the most raw and sparse outlining of Jabès's philosophy. It contains the necessary element of subversion, of dissidence, as Jabès heads for uncharted regions of the previously 'unthought.' Starting with reflections on the principle of subversion, the book weaves its way through philosophising on solitude, the Book, thought and the unthought, the Infinite, the Other, God and the desert sands that preceded and will outlive His Word. Absence is present as a

concept throughout, both in the topics discussed and in the ample white spaces of the book. 'What is beyond the book is still the book,' (79), as the 'unthought' is still teeming with ideas.

In *The Book of Dialogue*, a book of meditations through dialogue, Jabès discusses death, life, Jewishness, questioning, light and dark, the desert, the Abyss, writing and the Book. Gone are the rabbis, but the pithy aphoristic style remains. Divided into 'pre-dialogue,' 'Dialogue' and 'post-dialogue' sections, the book is nevertheless full of dialogue from beginning to end, and dialogue on the topic of dialogue. The reader gets the impression that Jabès feels he could be near death as the book comes to a close; that this book may, in his view, be his last (it wasn't). But the book remains open-ended, resistant to closure.

The Book of Margins (*c.*1984) reflects on the works of several of Jabès's fellow writers and philosophers, contemporaries of his, such as Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Roger Caillois, Paul Celan, Michel Leiris, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Rosmarie Waldrop (his translator, and a poet). Open to the currents of contemporary thought of its time, the book reads more like non-fiction than almost anything else Jabès has written. I discuss and analyse the contents of the book in the chapters of this thesis concerning, respectively, Derrida, Blanchot and Levinas.

In *Le Parcours* (*c.*1985), untranslated into English, Jabès rethinks his ideas on Judaism and writing (on a certain Judaism 'of the Book'). Questioning death, the death of God, and the 'sacred,' the book deals throughout with Jewish themes, seeing God 'through Jewish eyes'. It remains, paradoxically, an atheistic Judaism for Jabès, all the while valuing the sacred, the book and the question. The founding statement of the book, appearing near its

end, is ‘Nier le Rien’ (‘Deny Nothingness’). It is as such an affirmation of life, despite the realities of exile and suffering, and of the ever-present memory of Auschwitz.

Le Livre de l’Hospitalité (*c.*1991) includes Jabès’s response to the profanation of the Jewish cemetery at the French town of Carpentras, which had been in the news at the time of Jabès’s writing. It is an inclusive, anti-racist, humanitarian response. A plea for hospitality, like the rest of this book. From ‘divine hospitality’ to the hospitality of the nomad (a requisite for survival itself, in the desert), the book closes with an exploration of the idea of the ‘hospitality of the book,’ which is where Jabès found his place. This time, he knows it is his last book, and it ends with a humble ‘Adieu’: ‘À Dieu, le fardeau du Tout. À l’homme, la part du peu.’ (To God, the burden of All. To man, the part of the little.’) This is Jabès’s first posthumously published book, and his last major work. It is a compassionate and generous close to a profound lifetime’s career. Touching on issues of ‘death and life’, Jabès also characteristically still cries out against the injustices of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. In exile, though of French nationality since 1967, he relies on ‘the hospitality of language,’ his native French; although some native French citizens may not agree or understand.

Bâtir au Quotidien (*c.*1992) contains ‘L’enfer de Dante’, a reflection on Dante’s *Inferno* and on the question of evil; more reflections on evil; on revolution; on famine in Africa; on Nelson Mandela; and on poetry, philosophy, writing and Judaism, through the lens of his literary and artistic friendships with Michel de Certeau, Jacques Dupin and Luigi Nono (these are obituaries of sorts for these writers/artists). It is an ‘engaged’ and engaging collection, forming the third volume, posthumously, of *Le Livre des Marges*, with a preface by Viviane Jabès-Crasson..

La mémoire et la main (*c.*1987) is a book of aphorisms and poetry centred around hands, specifically the writer's hands, illustrated with line drawings of hands by Eduardo Chillida. Philosophical and poetical reflections illuminate and rediscover the closed and the open hand; death, the void, life and writing.

Un regard (*c.*1992), another posthumous work, is a collection of short pieces by Jabès on the visual arts, on the works of artists who were close to him both in friendship and in the themes of their works. These written pieces eloquently demonstrate not only Jabès's love for the visual arts (painting, photography, sculpture) but also the close correlation between these artists' chosen themes and subject matter, and that of Jabès's own works, whether it be the Infinite, the desert, or writing as a mode of art.

Les deux livres suivi de Aigle et chouette (*c.*1995) is a slim volume containing two books of aphorisms with monstrous, volcanic, energetic drawings by Jean Capdeville. In France this was Jabès's final posthumously published book. It opens with:

> *penser que la dernière heure n'est pas, forcément, l'ultime mais, peut-être, celle du dernier mot* (11).
>
> to think that the final hour is not, necessarily, the ultimate, but perhaps that of the last word.

And later:

> *Tant d'adieux dans chaque adieu* (16).
>
> So many adieus in each adieu.

It is a book about the limits of the book which are questioned to the very end.

> *La limite imite la limite* (35).
>
> The limit imitates the limit.

Aigle et chouette deals with truth, the infinite, and writing.

> *Écrire, c'est voir aussi distinctement de jour que de nuit.*
> *Aigle et chouette.*
> *Aigle dans la lumière du matin:* l'écrivain*:*
> *Chouette, au coeur de la nuit:* le vocable*.*
> *Fondus dans le même et infini regard* (31)*.*
>
> To write, is to see as distinctly by day as by night.
> Eagle and owl.
> Eagle in the light of morning: *the writer*:
> Owl, at the heart of the night: *the word*.
> Merged in the same and infinite regard.

Fixing the limits of the book is here compared with fixing the 'limits of thought' – impossible. '*Fluctuantes sont les lisières de la vie et de la mort.' (35). 'La limite imite la limite. / Il n'y a d'espace que truqué*.' (Ibid.). ('Fluctuating are the borders of life and of death.' 'The limit imitates the limit. / There is no space but that which is rigged.') These are the words with which Jabès closes his final book, appearing four years after his death.

Works in English Translation

In *The Book of Shares* (*c.*1989), Edmond Jabès continues his meditations on Judaism and the book; on death, on writing, and this time on sharing and the hope of sharing; on what can and cannot be shared. The book is divided into five sections: a pre-book, entitled 'The Torment of the Book'; 'The Book' itself; 'The Unlimited The Limit'; 'Liason'; and finally, 'Burned Pages', a conflagration of books, and an examination of what remains after the book has been through the flames. In this way the 'death of the book' is played out.

A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Book (*c.*1993) circles around the concept and lived reality of the Foreigner, advocating understanding, compassion, acceptance and hospitality, with a respecting of difference; but it is also more. It speaks of

the All and the Nothing; words, vocables, writing and the Book; of the desert; of poetry as sublime reason and of metamorphosis as Truth. Of God, and of His Absence. 'The one is light of the One and shadow of His double', closes the book, which is one that resonates long after its completion.

Desire for a Beginning Dread of One Single End (*c.*2001) is Jabès's final posthumously published book in English translation (by Rosmarie Waldrop). It is designed and given digital images by Ed Epping. The book deals with approaching death, old age, the soul and the body; writing, the book, and silence. 'There is no true silence except in the symbol's heart of hearts, unexplored.' (49). 'Not to see. Not to know. To be. / To go all the way, then plunge. Chosen.' (Ibid.). 'The void is more daring than the whole', closes the book (51), but for the single word 'dread' in the middle of page 52. This is a book made up entirely of widely-spaced aphorisms. It has all the mental toughness of Jabès's previous works. There is the familiar sense of 'one humble man against all the force of God', all the way to the end. Jabès keeps up the fight.

An Egyptian-French Poet: Origins

Je suis à la recherche
d'un homme que je ne connais pas
qui jamais ne fut tant moi-même
que depuis que je le cherche.
…
Arrachez la soif au grain de sel
qu'aucune boisson ne désaltère.
Avec les pierres, un monde se ronge
d'être, comme moi, de nulle part.

'*Chanson de l'Étranger*' (*LSLS* 46)

I'm looking for
a man I don't know,
who's never been more myself
than since I started to look for him.
…
Let us wrench the thirst from the grain of salt
that no drink can quench.
Along with the stones, a whole world eats its heart out,
to be from nowhere, like me.

'Song of the Stranger'.

To search for the meaning of Edmond Jabès's written works, twenty-six years after his death in Paris , is an enigmatic proposition. While this atheist Egyptian Jewish poet, born in Cairo on the 16th April 1912, may have felt as if he came 'from nowhere', in fact his Egyptian and Jewish origins seep through his literary life's work, which is shot through with a playful yet profound spirit of questioning and poetic philosophising haunted by a sense of infinite vastness seemingly arising from his sojourns in the Egyptian desert during his youth and early adulthood in Cairo. Jabès puts it this way:

> *L'Égypte, le Caire, le désert, c'est tout le paysage de mon enfance; à peine mes yeux ouverts, c'est, avec le visage des êtres qui me sont chers, ce qui s'est présenté à ma vue. J'en ai été profondément marqué. Tant de souvenirs gisent au fond de mes écrits. Je continue de vivre avec eux et ce vécu échappe au temps* (*JE* back cover).

> Egypt, Cairo, the desert, it's all the landscape of my childhood; from when my eyes had barely opened, it is, along with the faces of those beings who are dear to me, that which presented itself to my view. I was profoundly marked by it. So many memories rest at the core of my writings. I continue to live with them and that lived experience escapes time.

As the notion of origins is important here, we may begin by examining the origins of the Jabès family name. Firstly, from the biblical 1 Chronicles 4:9-10, we find, in a description of the sons and descendants of Judah:

> Jabez was more esteemed than his brothers; and his mother named him Jabez, 'Because,' she said, 'I bore him in pain.' [fn: 'Heb. 'oseb, connected with 'Jabez']. Jabez invoked the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh, bless me, enlarge my territory, stand by me, and make me not suffer pain from misfortune!' And God granted what he asked (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* 1897).

Daniel Lançon in his *Jabès l'Egyptien* explains:

> *Jabez/Yabez/Yavetz est le nom d'un clan de Jabesh-Gilead, ville antique dont le nom est preservé dans celui de Wadi Yabis en Jordanie. Un théologien espagnol nommé Joseph Jabez est connu pour s'être installé après 1492 à Mantoue. Au XVIe siècle, des Jabez sont imprimeurs et éditeurs à Salonique et à Istamboul. Edmond Jabès declare lui-même 'Il y a aussi un kabbaliste fameux: Yossef Yavetz ou Jabez au XVIIe siècle, dont la famille, chassé d'Espagne par l'Inquisition, s'était fixé en Turquie.' Un Barzillai Ben Baruch Jabès est en effet talmudiste quelque part en Turquie et un de ses descendants à Smyrne en 1749* (21).
>
> Jabez/Yabez/Yavetz is the surname of a clan of Jabesh-Gilead, ancient village of which the name is preserved in that of the Wadi Yabis in Jordan. A Spanish theologian named Joseph Jabez is known to have moved to Mantua after 1492. In the 16th century, a Jabès family were printers and editors in Salonique [Thessalonia] and in Istanbul. Edmond Jabès himself declared 'There is also a famous kabbalist: Yossef Yavetz or Jabez in the 17th century, whose family, expulsed from Spain by the Inquisition, settled in Turkey.' A Barzillai Ben Baruch Jabès was indeed a talmudist somewhere in Turkey and one of his descendants at Smyrna in 1749.

According to Lançon, Edmond Jabès's family first moved to Egypt in the 19th century, and became quite an important part of a Sephardic Jewish community in Cairo which numbered thirty thousand people in 1890 (Ibid.). Lançon writes that, as early as 1863, the Jewish traveller Ibn Safir mentioned as some of the 'notables of the community': 'Yom Tob

ben Elishah Israël, juge; Jacob Shalom, la famille Ya'abes, Jacob Cattawi, Saadia and Abraham Rossano,', noting also that 'it is possible that these Ya'abes were the only ones by that name at that time,', and that 'the Western inscription of the family name varied during the course of the 19th century' (*JE* 21f). In 1950, poet and journalist Marius Schemeil wrote in a Cairo periodical: 'Among the youngest poets, Georges Henein, Edmond Yabès, Mounir Hafez, and Horus Schenouda distinguish themselves by their modern and striking sense of poetry' ()[3] In a November 1990 interview, Edmond Jabès states:

> *Tous deux, ma femme et moi, provenons de familles sépharades très connues, et bourgeoises : mon père était banquier et la famille de ma femme qui est très religieuse, avait un certain poids dans la communauté juive* (*JE* 22).
>
> Both my wife and I came from very well-known, and bourgeois, Sephardic families: my father was a banker and my wife's family, who are very religious, had a certain standing in the Jewish community.

Edmond Jabès was born to Berthe Arditi and Chaim Vita Jabès on 16 April 1912. He had an older sister, Rose (Marcelle), with whom he was very close and by whose deathbed he conversed alone with her when he was twelve years old. An older brother, Henri, would in later years commit suicide. Edmond met his wife-to-be, Arlette Cohen, when he was seventeen, and they would not part until his death in January 1991 at the age of 78. During that time, Jabès fought in Palestine alongside the British during WWII; and the young family were forced to leave Egypt around the time of the Suez crisis in 1957 with the rise of Egyptian nationalism under Nasser, when all Jews (among others) were forced to leave the country (*JE* 250-9). It was made increasingly difficult, and then suddenly impossible, for Jews to stay there. They had to leave almost all of their belongings and their house in Cairo. Jabès was able to take with him the eleven-volume edition of the Schwab translation of the

[3] *Images*, no. 1084, 17 June 1950.è

Jerusalem Talmud, left to him by his father. Being francophone, they chose to live in Paris. Edmond and Arlette Jabès had two daughters, Viviane and Nimet, both of whom live in Paris today.[4]There are also granddaughters, among them the textual genesis specialist academic Aurèle Crasson, and a young great-grandughter, all of whom live in Paris.

The Importance of Origins

The characteristic trajectory and story of Jabès's literary career can mainly be traced in Paris and from the 1963 publication of the first volume of *Le Livre des Questions* onward through a 'thirty-year project' as Steven Jaron puts it, which aimed to, in his words, 'trace the textual relations between the act of writing and Jewish identity, all of which have biographical and historical roots in Egypt' (*EJTHOE* 1). These first prose works also marked a departure from the lyrical Surrealist-influenced earlier verse, written in Cairo, to a fragmented multi-vocal narrative, a multi-genre *récit éclaté* or 'exploded story.' However, as Jaron takes pains to point out, even the stylistic nature and characteristics of the later works can be seen in embryonic form in Jabès's Cairo poetry, such as the use of aphorisms and multivocality, despite the fact that, once in Paris, Jabès retracted his earliest chapbooks of poetry (published in the 1930s). He would start 'with a clean slate' from the 1959 publication of *Je bâtis ma demeure* with its selection of poems dating from 1943.

It is the poet Jabès whose work will be discussed in the rest of this chapter, in order to trace the origins of his *oeuvre* in the youthful Egyptian-French verse. Before embarking on an analysis of a selection of Jabès's Cairo poems, I will first 'set the scene' of Jabès as an

[4] I had the good fortune of meeting Viviane Jabès-Crasson, her daughter academic Aurèle Crasson (who specialises in the textual genesis and digitisation of manuscripts, including those of her grandfather Jabès, at the CNRS laboratory) and other members of the family, at an exhibition opening and mini-conference on Jabès celebrating the centenary since his birth, at the BNF in Paris in 2012.

Egyptian poet by considering his political and literary activities of the era, in addition to discussing the significant role played by mentors such as Max Jacob and Gabriel Bounoure in his writing life.

As a youth Jabès participated in demonstrations and distributed pamphlets against anti-Semitism and (Italian) Fascism, in the streets of Cairo. He also started various literary endeavours with his older brother Henri, including organising visiting lectures from French authors, some of them extremely high-profile (such as André Gide and the Belgian poet Henri Michaux), and otherwise promoting the spread of French literary culture in Cairo (cf. Jaron; *JE*).

Max Jacob (Quimper, 1876 – Drancy, 1944)

The young Jabès kept up a useful correspondence with Max Jacob, who was a French poet, writer, critic, and artist.s Jacob was an important link between the Symbolists and the Surrealists. This can be seen in his prose poems, collected under the name *Le cornet à dés (The Dice Box, c.*1917), and in his paintings, which were exhibited in New York City in 1930 and 1938. Jacob was Jewish, but converted to Catholicism following a vision of Christ in 1909.

Jabès had his first lesson on the importance of originality in literature in a striking manner at the hands of his early mentor Max Jacob (who died in the Nazi camps in 1944, and whose letters to the young Jabès have been published in a separate volume). On their first meeting, in June 1935 in Paris, Jacob insisted on drawing up Edmond and his wife Arlette's astrological charts; then he tore up the manuscript Jabès had given him and threw

it in the bin, saying, 'It's excellent, but it's not you. You imitate me, and I've had my day' (Jaron 91). After that, they could freely discuss poetry. Jabès later related:

> *Durant une heure et demie il me donna la plus extraordinaire leçon de poésie. En substance, il me poussait à avoir le courage d'être moi-même, en dehors de toute mode. Il m'incitait aussi à briser les idoles et, notamment, à rencontrer Eluard – alors que les surréalistes vomissaient Max—pour mieux venir à bout d'une proximité qu'il devinait dans mes textes* (Jaron 29).
>
> For an hour and a half he gave me the most extraordinary poetry lesson. In substance, he pushed me to have the courage to be myself, beyond all fashion. He also incited me to break idols and, among other things , to meet Eluard – despite the fact that the Surrealists regurgitated Max – in order to better make the most of a kinship he divined in my texts.

Jacob continued to seriously encourage Jabès's poetry, writing to him in response to an early chapbook, *Arrhes poétiques* (*c.*1935), which according to Jacob was a 'petit volume si magnifiquement édité… Il est comme une preuve de votre riche sensibilité et une promesse d'une grande production future' (*LEJ* 34f) ('slim volume, so magnificently published… It is like a proof of your rich sensibility and a promise of a great future output'). Following the tragedy of Jacob's death at Drancy in 1944, Jabès published, in the second (*c.*1975) edition of *Je bâtis ma demeure*, at the front of *Chansons pour le repas de l'ogre* (*c.*1943-45):

> *A la mémoire de Max Jacob*
>
> *parce qu'il y a peut-être une*
> *chanson liée à l'enfance qui, aux*
> *heures les plus sanglantes, toute*
> *seule défit le malheur et la mort* (*LSLS* 30).
>
> In memory of Max Jacob
>
> because there is perhaps a
> song reminiscent of childhood which, in
> the bloodiest of hours , all by
> itself undid sorrow and death.

Max Jacob's death certainly brought home to Jabès in a personal sense a greater appreciation of the depth and magnitude of the loss caused by the Nazi genocide. Having completed his major cycle of seven volumes of *The Book of Questions*, and thus completed his examination of issues surrounding the Shoah, Jabès could in 1975 movingly and understatedly pay tribute to his mentor in the second edition of *Je bâtis ma demeure.*

'*Je bâtis ma demeure*': Jabès 'Builds His Dwelling'

Meanwhile Jabès was publishing chapbooks and poems, both in Egypt and in Paris: *Illusions sentimentales* (*c.*1930); *Je t'attends!* (*c.*1931); '*Maman*' (*c.*1932*); Les pieds en l'air,* note by Max Jacob, (*c.*1934); *Arrhes poétiques* (*c.*1935); 'L'obscurité potable' (*c.*1936); *Chansons pour le repas de l'ogre* (*c.*1947); *La voix de l'encre* (*c.*1949); *La Clef de voûte* (*c.*1950); *Les mots tracent* (*c.*1951); *L'Ecorce du monde* (*c.*1955); and finally, after his forced exile to Paris, *Je bâtis ma demeure, poèmes 1943-1957* (*c.*1959). It is a significant title; 'bâtir' (build) and 'demeure' (dwelling) were important terms for the German philosopher Heidegger, via the poet Hölderlin. This perhaps signals an influence upon Jabès of both Heidegger and Hölderlin's writings. The influence of Heidegger, while likely, is problematic – and perhaps for Jabès as for Levinas and many other thinkers, a cause of profound suffering if not trauma-inducing – due to the philosopher's Nazism, though he was a widespread influence for many thinkers (including Derrida and Arendt) in the 1950s and 60s. I will further discuss *Je bâtis ma demeure* in the chapter entitled 'Silence and the Word; the White Page and the Letter.' The book is the first milestone in Jabès's literary career, summing up the past and clearing the way ahead for future developments. These early poems were to an extent influenced by the Surrealists (Jabès was friends with Paul Eluard, but never wanted to join the group) and also by Max Jacob (particularly the first four books), though less so with

time. A small selection of the poems will now be analysed, in particular those which show techniques or thematic concerns which would later become significant in Jabès's *oeuvre*.

'*L'Auberge du sommeil*'/ Slumber Inn (*c.*1949)

This eleven-page poem first appeared in *La Voix d'encre*, and the phrase 'Je bâtis ma demeure' originates here, in a recurring stanza in which the poet stakes a bold claim:

> *Avec mes poignards*
> *volés à l'ange*
> *je bâtis ma demeure* (*LSLS* 99).
>
> With my daggers
> stolen from the angel
> I build my dwelling.

In this way, and throughout the poem, Jabès, with youthful force and ambition, sets himself firmly on the side of the Surrealist rebel. Fluid verbal streams made up of odd juxtapositions of images run between repetitions of the above refrain. The storyline of a bohemian female artist sojourning in Tibet provides the pretext for a steady flow of surrealistic imagery.

> *Thibet lointain où nul ne t'atteint où tu retrouves intact ton âme*
> *verte et belle*
> *échappé aux églises parmi les bâtons de réglisse que savourent*
> *nonchalamment les sages*
> *les frêles crayons d'ennui avec lesquels tu illumines d'éclairs la nuit*
> *Tu joins la mort à l'amour le désir des roses*
> *à la terre terrible du passé l'araignée à la pie insupportable*
>
> Faraway Tibet where no one reaches you where you find intact your
> soul green and thriving
> and freed from churches among sticks of licorice which sages are
> nonchalantly licking
> fragile pencils of dullness with which you brighten the night in flashes
> You mix death with love the desire for roses
> with the terrible earth of the past the spider with the aggravating magpie.

The poem as a whole travels from its opening salvo to its final repeated cries of 'Gypsies' ('Gitanes' – possibly indicating the French cigarette brand) across an at-times bewildering array of disheartened surrealistic imagery to a point where, after eleven pages, the reader's mind is left spinning. It is a love story at pains to dismiss the other party (what would in

today's pop music be called a 'pay-out song'), which hurtles relentlessly toward its culmination.

What strikes me as characteristically interesting about Jabès's poetry is its prophetic quality, or in other words its timeless specific relevance, its ability to 'speak to now.' This is true of each one of the books making up his life's work, whether poetry or prose. In fact this is the very quality that makes even Jabès's prose, such as the *Book of Questions* series, clearly the work of a true poet. The particular extracts that supply evidence for this point will naturally vary for each individual reader, thus rendering citation out of context almost meaningless here. However, in the remainder of this chapter I will highlight what I see as an emblematic, though small, selection of Jabès's verse (or, indeed, aphoristic) poems.

'*Après le Déluge*' / After the Deluge (*c.*1954)

The poetry of Arthur Rimbaud (lived 1854-1891) exerted a sustained influence upon that of Jabès, and this can partially be seen in poems like (the latter's) '*Après le Déluge'* (as distinct from Rimbaud's poem of the same title), which is from the book *L'écorce du monde*. The lineage has continued via the still-deeply-relevant Surrealism, as can also be seen here, where the full poem is quoted:

> *La paix est dans la clé*
> *des contradictions dans le soufre*
> *des clartés fugitives Tu es là*
> *pour un instant Désert bleu*
> *aux dunes de pluie La soif est exaucée*
> *L'espace est une brèche. Tu brûles dans la nuit*
> *sans murailles Je vois par ton huile*
> *par la mèche de feu qui fleurit au milieu*
> *Je vois par ton amour La paix jeune pie*
> *a l'allégresse multicolore de nos yeux*
> *après le deluge*
>
> Peace lies in the key

of contradictions in the sulphur
of fleeting lights You are there
for an instant Blue desert
with dunes of rain Thirst is granted
Space is a breach You burn in the night
whose walls are down I see by your oil
by the wick in the middle where a flame blossoms
I see by your love Peace young magpie
with the varicoloured joy of our eyes
after the deluge.

Further analysis of the above poem will be pursued here after a brief discussion of its context and surrounding poems in the book. This poem closes the book *L'écorce du monde* (*c.*1953-4), and it is preceded by both the blazing flames of '*La métamorphose du monde*' ('Metamorphosis of the World'), in which

Les oiseaux participent à la métamorphose du monde
S'envoler pour permettre à l'étoile de voler enfin
La tête en bas les pieds n'ont plus leur raison d'être
sinon de crever les nuages
Le feu a pris dans les maisons L'homme pour lui
ne réclamait pas tant de chaleur
mais

Birds have a part in the world's metamorphosis
Taking off to allow the star at last to soar
Head down the feet lose all reason for being
except to break through clouds
The houses have caught fire Man on his
own would not clamour for so much heat
but.

The emotional warmth and heat seen in '*Après le déluge*' domesticates the flame after it has been well and truly doused and extinguished by the drowned corpses seen in the immediately preceding, penultimate poem of the collection, '*L'écran pulvérisé*', where the narrator says, mixing a tender love with a morbid scene of nautical corpses:

J'ai vu les morts mourir une seconde fois
couchés sur la mer
J'ai vu les morts inventer les ponts

Si tu passais
je te suivrais

I've seen the dead die a second time
asleep on the sea
I've seen the dead invent bridges
If you would pass
I would follow you

Following on from this shipwreck, then, '*Après le déluge*' harmonises the elements and equalises the seasons ('*Saisons*' is another Rimbaldien poem appearing halfway through the same collection), restoring the essential '*chaleur*'(warmth and heat) of love and interpersonal human feelings. The desert also makes a characteristic appearance in this poem. Somehow there still remains an undercurrent of metaphorical potential elemental menace, but that seems to 'go with the poetic territory', so to speak. *L'écorce du monde* (The Crust of the World) is quite a visceral, almost alchemical book in its terrestrial, elemental portrayal of emotions and of emotional and psychic crisis-points.

'*Spectacle*'/ Show (1950)

With *Les mots tracent* (*c.*1951), the aphoristic, non-linear side of Jabès's poetry comes into its own, in particular with the opening poem, '*Portes de secours'*(emergency exits) and with the poem I will examine here, '*Spectacle*' (Show).

'*Spectacle*' is made up entirely of aphorisms, except for its opening prelude, a paragraph of memorable philosophising on the fickle nature of 'the word':

> *Parfois, aidé d'un complice, le mot change de sexe et d'âme. Il rit, alors, de notre stupeur et de notre terreur. Une foule d'admirateurs se précipite pour l'applaudir. Qui jamais dira la cruauté de ces applaudissements? J'ai mis longtemps à m'apercevoir que, pour mieux jouir de ses tours, il nous entraînait à notre insu sur la scène d'un théâtre choisi. Au programme, la page de prose ou de vers que nous revendiquerons, une fois le spectacle terminé.*

> Sometimes, aided and abetted, the word changes sex and soul. Then it laughs at our amazement and our terror. A crowd of admirers rushes to applaud it. Who will ever recite the cruelty of such applause? It took me a long time to notice how, to get more enjoyment out of its tricks, it inveigles us – without our knowing – onto the stage of a particular theatre. On the program: the page of prose or verse which we will claim as ours, once the show is over.

The analogy is well-placed, for Jabès was familiar with the world of local theatre, playwriting and stage performance from his youth in Cairo (*JE* 83). What follows in 'Spectacle' is a series of aphorisms, a feature which would become characteristic of his later work: 'In a poem, the echo is as important as silence' (Waldrop 29). The significance of blank space would become increasingly important in Jabès's work from the time of this collection on into his prose works right through until the end of his career. The following quotes display the already aphoristic nature of his writing at that time: 'Words roll out ribbons of shadow around the light we've won.' 'Sex is always a vowel.' … 'Snow whitens the eye.' 'The writer's art consists in enticing words, little by little, to take an interest in his books.' 'Words elect the poet.' 'With the poet, manly words join the resistance.' 'Hand-to-hand combats, bloody sometimes, mark the stages of a work.' Some of the lines show Jabès's gentle, playful nature, his love of children: 'A girl puffs out her cheeks: the face is discovered.' 'Children's copy-books are filled with mis-shapen creatures, whose deformity most often owes its origin to some spelling error.' Others trace the nature of the relationship between thought and words: 'Thought makes it possible for words to come into power.' 'A madman is a victim of the revolt of words.' 'To externalise: giving the universe one's voice.'

Water gives itself to fire, to extinguish it.

…

Thanks to rhythm, the poet maintains an equilibrium that words fight against.

*

Always in a foreign land, the poet uses poetry as interpreter (Waldrop 29).

A gentle, good-humoured poetic wisdom suffuses Jabès's aphorisms, and as a writer he is well-suited to this form, which makes many further appearances in the remainder of his life's work. The multivocality first seen in 1949's *La clef de voûte*, in '*Le Rocher de la Solitude*' ('The Rock of Solitude'), would also later prove important, particularly in the cycle of *The Book of Questions* series. *Les mots tracent* closes with a more somber, if not morbid, poem which is marked by the experience of the Egyptian desert. '*Le Sel Noir*' ('Black Salt') is divided into two sections: '*Au Coeur De La Vue*' ('At the Heart of the View') in which five short paragraphs present a kind of 'soft gallows humour'; and '*Seuls Signaux*' ('Sole Signals'), a long series of aphorisms. Quoted below are the first paragraph and the closing five lines of the book:

LE SEL NOIR

AU COEUR DE LA VUE

Je vis parmi des oiseaux coupés de leur bec. Les oiseaux sont entourés de chiens et les chiens de forçats. Quelquefois, au matin, on voit les barreaux. Mais toujours, à toute heure, des mains tendues ou crispées. Le chiens s'écorche aux rires de la mort et l'oiseau à l'heureux temps des guillotines. J'écris, dans le sang, sous leur dictée.

BLACK SALT

AT THE HEART OF THE VIEW

I live among birds with their beaks cut off. The birds are surrounded by dogs and the dogs by convicts. Sometimes, in the morning, you see the bars. But always, at every hour, tightened or clenched hands. The dogs scratch to the laughs of the dead and the bird at the guillotines' happy hour. I write, in blood, under their dictation.

SEULS SIGNAUX

Tirer son épingle de feu.
…
Le jour multiplie les miroirs. La nuit les abolit.
Une ombre dans le désert est synonyme de vie.
La faim, c'est le jour.
…
L'infini est noir (*LSLS* 189-194)*.*

SOLE SIGNALS

To pull out his pin of fire / to 'pull out one's shot of fire'.
…
Day multiplies mirrors. Night abolishes them.
A shadow in the desert is a synonym of life.
Hunger is the day. / 'Hunger, it's daytime.'
…
The infinite is black.

The above poem may indicate time spent in Cairo prison, or at least in imagined prison. Or it could refer to a wartime experience (during the Second World War, Jabès fought in Palestine alongside the British). This can be seen in such phrases as '*La faim, c'est le jour*', '*Tirer son épingle de feu'*, and 'I live among birds with their beaks cut off. The birds are surrounded by dogs and the dogs by convicts. Sometimes, in the morning, you see the bars.' In any event, the poem closes *Les mots tracent* (poems written 1943-1951) in a tough and striking manner.

To return now to the poem with which we started this chapter, '*Chanson de L'Étranger*' ('Song of the Stranger'), from *Chansons pour le repas de l'ogre (*Songs for the ogre's feast) – poems from 1943-1945 – where we see more traces of the infinite and the desert, in conjunction with the sense of *étrangeté* or foreigness (or 'outsider-ness'). In order to effectively analyse this poem it will here be quoted in full.

CHANSON DE L'ÉTRANGER

Je suis à la recherche
d'un homme que je ne connais pas
qui jamais ne fut tant moi-même
que depuis que je le cherche.
A-t-il mes yeux, mes mains
et toutes ces pensées pareilles
aux épaves de ce temps?
Saison des mille naufrages,
la mer cesse d'être la mer,
devenue l'eau glacée des tombes.
Mais, plus loin, qui sait plus loin?
Une fillette chante à reculons
et règne la nuit sur les arbres,
bergère au milieu des moutons.
Arrachez la soif au grain de sel
Qu'aucune boisson ne désaltère.
Avec les pierres, un monde se ronge
d'être, comme moi, de nul part.

SONG OF THE STRANGER

I'm looking for
a man I don't know,
who's never been more myself
than since I started to look for him.
Does he have my eyes, my hands
and all those thoughts like
flotsam of time?
Season of a thousand wrecks,
the sea no longer a sea,
but an icy watery grave.
Yet farther on, who knows how it goes on?
A little girl sings backward
and nightly reigns over trees
a shepherdess among her sheep.
Let us wrench thirst from the grain
of salt no drink can quench.
Along with the stones, a whole world eats
its heart out, being
from nowhere, like me (*FTBTTB* 11).

In the first stanza the poet describes the experience that is the simple (and heartfelt) enigma of searching for oneself, one's true self. The rest of the poem describes the nature of such a doppelganger – 'season of a thousand wrecks' – and the elusive difficulty of such a

search (‘Let us wrench thirst from the grain / of salt no drink can quench.’). The ‘stranger’ of the poem is ‘from nowhere,’ and a ‘world eats its heart out’ ‘along with the stones’, sharing as they do this condition. Quasi-Surrealism highlights the eeriness of what is essentially a game of mirrors; as the poet looks over the course of his lifetime, and thoughts, past, present and future, ‘A little girl sings backward / and nightly reigns over trees / a shepherdess among her sheep.’ Hauntingly, with its simple but arresting images and pensive tone, the poem captures the quality of *étrangeté*. This would develop into a recurring theme in Jabès’s later works.

Gabriel Bounoure and Jabès: a Friendship across Borders

Despite the recurring theme of *étrangeté* in Jabès’s work, far be it from this thesis to give the impression that the writer was some sort of permanently estranged outsider or loner. Quite the opposite in fact; although mildly reclusive, Jabès had many warm friendships throughout his life, some of them culturally important such as those with Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Not the least of these was the friendship that developed in Egypt and France in the 1950s between Jabès and the esteemed French author, essayist and critic Gabriel Bounoure, which was to last until the latter’s death in 1969. Bounoure wrote the preface to Jabès’s 1959 collected poems, *Je bâtis ma demeure* , introducing him to the French literary public and readership. Jacques Derrida would dedicate the final chapter, ‘Ellipsis,’ of his book *L’écriture et la différence*, a chapter which is a kind of postscript on the work of Jabès, to Gabriel Bounoure. Moreover, it was during a prolonged correspondence between Jabès and Bounoure that the final form of the first volumes of *Le Livre des Questions* took shape, in response to Bounoure’s critical comments and questioning process of his own. The following chapter of this thesis will examine the

gestation period as well as the birth and reception, among other factors, of *The Book of Questions* (*c.*1963).

'*Récit*': A Summation

After *Le Livre des Questions*, Jabès would for the most part publish prose works, with scraps of poetry hidden inside for those who cared to look. A major exception was the untranslatable verse poem of some length (80 short stanzas), '*Récit*'(1980), which acts as a kind of poetic summation, the essence and 'capping off' of his life's work in verse poetry. A love story of sorts between an island and the ocean surrounding it, the poetic depths of the relationship are plumbed. Recently, 2005 saw the publication of all versions of the extant manuscripts of the poem, both handwritten and typed, in *Récit: Les Cinq États du Manuscrit*, presentation, transcriptions et lectures de Marcel Cohen, Aurèle Crasson et Irène Fenoglio. The complete textual genesis of the poem from initial handwritten drafts to typed final versions can thus be traced, though such a project is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present thesis, as its purpose is not in the strictest sense philological.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how Jabès rose from bourgeois Jewish origins to become a poet of what seems now to be strikingly postmodern verse forms. The aphoristic and multivocal nature of some of his early work would recur throughout his mature *oeuvre*. Jabès's time as a poet in Cairo was marked by political and literary activity; protesting against anti-Semitism and Fascism, and organising lectures from visiting French authors, promoting the spread of French literary culture in Cairo. His friendship with early mentor Max Jacob would push him into the individuality of his own work. This friendship sadly came to an end in 1944 with Max's death at the hands of the Nazis. Meanwhile Jabès's friendship

with the critic Gabriel Bounoure would lead into a fruitful correspondence as Jabès started to write *The Book of Questions*, after being forced to leave his native Egypt. Jabès would return to the verse form in 1980 with the 80-stanza poem 'Récit', which remains untranslateable.

Moreover, we were able to follow Jabès's evolution from the beginning to his arrival in Paris, and out of this journey, some very important themes were becoming so powerful which he would continue building on in his future career as a poet, for example '*Demeure*' (Dwelling), Desert, Egypt, and Fire. It is important to further explore some of these themes, which this thesis builds on in later chapters. Jabès was working as a poet with the French language which is quite dense and esoteric. This also brought him to the frontiers of being a philosopher-poet with his use of words like '*être*' (to be), '*demeure*' (dwelling) and '*désert*', he captured the essence of what was going on in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and later in philosophy at the time. He was ultimately dealing with what could possibly be said in poetry after Auschwitz, to give a twist to Adorno's famous dictum.

2. THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS CYCLE

Tu es celui qui écrit est qui est écrit (*LQ1* 14).

You are the one who writes and the one who is written.

This cycle made up of seven volumes, first published between 1963 and 1973, traces, and blows open, the wound at the heart of the Word – which Jabès renames 'the vocable' in more linguistic terminology, in order to remove any religious connotations attached to the former term. 'He thinks of *vocable* as the spoken (and heard) word in the book, the oral dimension preserved within the written,' says Rosmarie Waldrop (see following citation for source). As Jabès stated at the colloquium of Cérisy-la-Salle: 'I am sensitive to this phenomenon of listening and the voice. To such a point that I wanted to distinguish the utterance (*parole*) of the book from other utterances. The utterance of the book, *this word of silence*, I have called vocable'(Waldrop 64). After in the first three books equating the word, or the writer, with the Jew – and putting the word itself, as with the Jew, through the horrors of the Holocaust, of fundamental severing from any ties to belief in God or overarching Logos – the final two books in particular eviscerate the word of all cultural richness of association, paring it down to each individual letter, ultimately exploding (or de-nucleatising) the word even further to leave only a single full-stop representing the origin and end-point of all manifest creation. This travesty of the word takes the form of an heroic poetic and philosophical quest for ultimate Truth carried to its conclusion by Jabès as he reaches the Infinite, the Void, pure emptiness.

The above is accomplished in *The Book of Questions* via the telling of two love stories. One story, that of Sarah and Yukel, is youthful, innocent and yet devastated by the horrors of the Nazi camps. The other, that of Yaël and her husband and other lover, is

almost unbearably adult in its jealousies and loyalties beyond the grave. This story culminates in the birth of a stillborn baby and in Yaël's seeming murder at the hands of her husband, creating two 'ghost-children', Elya and Aely, each of whom has whole books devoted to them, in an attempt to discover, recover and trace what is ultimately their blank, absent faces. The Jewish God, with Its unpronounceable four-letter sacred Name, a dead entity which Jabès argumentatively and exploratively mourns throughout the books, is the sixth main character in the cycle. This God, in whom as an atheist, Jabès does not believe, appears on nearly every page. 'If God is, it is because He is in the book,' says Jabès (*LQ1* 36). This book-centred Judaism is the only kind in which Jabès believes.

In what follows I will trace some of the main threads running through *The Book of Questions* cycle in an attempt to tease out the significance and ramifications of the poetic quest here carried out by Jabès. Taking each volume in turn, this section amounts to a fundamentally poetic and somewhat personal response to the core issues raised by Jabès in *The Book of Questions*.

The Book of Questions; The Book of Yukel; The Return to the Book

These first three volumes of the seven-part Book of Questions series form a discrete entity, a trilogy, complete in themselves. All three are based on the story of the two young lovers and Holocaust survivors Sarah and Yukel; all three feature commentary provided by Jabès's imaginary Rabbis, who function like a kind of extended Greek chorus to the main action of the books, a testament to the lost voices of European Jewry, providing the author with ghostly mouthpieces for pithy, axiomatic poetic-philosophical musings. Multi-genre as well as multi-vocal, these works are made up of a mix of aphorisms and poetry; prose and fragment; italicised pieces in parenthesis; journals, letters, dialogue, shifting scenes.

Recognised as postmodern in the 1960s by Derrida and other French critics, the texts still speak to now as a poetic witness to the post-Shoah historical period.

The Book of Questions: Volume One

> *Mon livre a sept jours et sept nuits multipliés par autant d'années qu'il a fallu à l'univers pour s'en délier. Reb Aloum* (*LQ1* 24)*.*
>
> My book has seven days and seven nights times the number of years it took the universe to let it go. Reb Aloum (Ibid. 20).
>
> *Cette part de cendres que l'écrivain porte en lui comme mémoire enfouie des meurtres de l'histoire, le relie à la multitude anonyme des autres morts, à leur absence douloureuse… C'est là le seul héritage, ce manque multiple, cette communauté de la mort, de l'absence, du vide qui défait le moi, comme l'innocence se brise* dans les marges morcelées du Livre… sans titre… (Guglielmi 9).
>
> This part of ashes which the writer carries inside himself like the buried memory of the murders of history, ties it to the anonymous multitude of other dead, to their painful absence… That's the only heritage, that multiple loss, that community of the dead, of absence, of emptiness which undoes the 'me', as innocence breaks up *in the margins of the split-up Book… with no title…*

In *La resemblance impossible* Guglielmi draws attention to the background of the whole *Book of Questions*, which responds to the Holocaust and its ghostly community of six million dead. Perhaps this first book of the seven-volume cycle, the 1963 Parisian literary 'hit', is best summed up by Jabès himself, within its own pages:

> *Le roman de Sarah et de Yukel, à travers divers dialogues et méditations attribués aux rabbins imaginaires, est le récit d'un amour détruit par les hommes et par les mots. Il a la dimension du livre et l'amère obstination d'une question errante* (*LQ1* 30).
>
> The story of Sarah and Yukel is the account, through various dialogues and meditations attributed to imaginary rabbis, of a love destroyed by men and by words. It has the dimensions of the book and the bitter stubbornness of a wandering question (Ibid. 26).

Sarah Schwall, and her lover the young writer Yukel Serafi, are both sent to the Nazi camps. Sarah returns having gone insane, while Yukel later commits suicide. Their story is

told through their journal entries and through the letters they write to each other, with Talmudic-style commentary from numerous imaginary Rabbis interspersed throughout. In this way the emotional and philosophical shock of the Shoah is gently and dramatically illustrated.

Jabès's distinct narrative mode is also a significant factor in the book. Early on in *The Book of Questions* he tells of the graffiti on a Paris wall that initially prompted him to write it:

> *Il a suffi de quelques graffiti sur un mur pour que les souvenirs qui sommeillaient dans mes mains s'emparent de ma plume. Et pour que les doigts commandent la vue.*
>
> *…*
>
> *Les phares d'une automobile éclairent la façade d'un immeuble – Dans quelle rue? Il y en a tant derrière lui et devant qu'il ne le sait plus – sur lequel il lit:*
>
> *MORT AUX JUIFS*
>
> *JEWS GO HOME*
>
> *écrit à la craie blanche, écrit en lettres majuscules.*
>
> *…Il y a eu les sirènes traçant un arc de détresse dans l'air glissant. Il y a eu l'éclatement des obus autour de l'homme et dans sa chair. Il y a eu les exodes sur la terre et sur la mer et les retours solitaires dans des logis pillés ou au coeur désaffecté de l'âme.*
>
> *Il y a eu les charniers et l'herbe dessus, le champ. Les fleurs sont dans le coup. Elles ont été nourries d'os et de pensées d'os. Leur parfum est perjuré.*
>
> *Mon Dieu, murmure-t-il. Les aiguilles des années marquent la même heure* (*LQ1* 30, 56f)*.*

> A few graffiti on a wall were enough for the dormant memories in my hand to take over my pen, for my fingers to determine what I see.
>
> …

> Car beams light up the front of a building. (In which street? There are so many behind and before him that he cannot remember). He reads:
>
> DEATH TO JEWS
>
> JEWS GO HOME
>
> scrawled in white chalk, in caps.
>
> …There have been sirens tracing an arc of anguish into the slithery air. There have been shells exploding around a man and in his flesh. There has been many an exodus on land and on sea, with solitary returns to pillaged rooms or to the heart of a soul long put to other uses.
>
> There have been graveyards, with grass over them, vast fields. The flowers are in cahoots. They have fed on bones and on bone thoughts. Their perfume is perjured.
>
> 'My God,' he murmurs. 'The hands of the years show always the same hour' (*BQ1* 26, 52).

The above quote, in particular the graffiti lit up by car lights, shows the impulse that led Jabès to write the whole *Book of Questions*. The words made him an outsider in his cultural homeland of France. This, after all the experiences of World War II, this after Auschwitz. Hence the necessity – and it is an ever-recurring one – for the cry, the scream that is *The Book of Questions.* '*Je crie. Je crie, Yukel. Nous sommes l'innocence du cri. (Journal de Sarah)*' 'I scream. I scream, Yukel. We are the innocence of the scream. (Sarah's Journal)' (*LQ1* 17). Indeed, the fundamental, underlying and unspoken 'question' (among all the others) of the book is a questioning of the state of humanity and the mindset of Western civilisation that made the horrors of the Holocaust possible and sat by and allowed it to happen.

Part of the book's success lies in the fact that Jabès universalises the Jewish experience. Jabès takes the figure of the post-Shoah Jew as a metaphor for the existential plight of modern man, stripped bare of any saving God and of all meaning. Straight after the dedication, alone on the first page is the line: '*Tu es celui qui écrit et qui est écrit.'* 'You are the one who writes and the one who is written.' To a certain extent this helps to personalise

the reader's experience of the text, which is not just aimed at Jews. It is, as Jabès has elsewhere stated, a 'book of identity' (Jabès "Edmond Jabès"), which helps to explain why it has been a perennial favourite of young French readers. In the same interview, Jabès relates the story of a young religious Jew who, after reading the book, insisted on including a reading from it in his daily prayers (he normally read nothing outside his prayerbook, but saw *The Book of Questions* as sacred, or at least as a kind of extended post-Holocaust prayer).

The impact of the Holocaust, in *The Book of Questions*, is demonstrated by the mental and emotional havoc it wreaks on the lives of the young lovers Sarah and Yukel. What it means to be a Jew is illustrated – at once universalised and specifically explicated – through Yukel's narration, with all its poetic and writerly, anguished sensitivity and care. Indeed, the nature and function of the archetypal or metaphorical Jew is here, by Jabès, conflated with the existential experience of being a writer. They both amount to 'the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out':

> Sarah*: Je t'ai écrit. Je t'écris. Je t'ai écrit. Je t'écris. Réfugiée dans mes paroles, dans les mots que pleure ma plume, ma douleur, le temps que je parle, le temps que j'écris, est moins vive. J'épouse chaque syllabe au point de n'être plus qu'un corps de consonnes, une âme de voyelles. Est-ce sorcier? J'écris son nom et il devient l'homme que j'aime. Il suffit qu'une plume trempée dans l'encre obéisse au movement de la main, que la voix se plie une seconde au caprice des lèvres, aux injonctions de la pensée, pour passer de la nuit au jour, du jour à la nuit. Je taille ma demeure dans le désir. J'écris: 'Je te rejoins, mon amour… ' Et déjà, je suis l'aile qui me rend mon aimé. Je dis: 'Patiente, mon amour…' Et permets, aussitôt, aux murs de ma prison de me reprendre* (*BQ1* 122).
>
> *Sarah*: I wrote you. I write you. I wrote you. I write you. I take refuge in my words, the words my pen weeps. As long as I am speaking, as long as I am writing, my pain is less keen. I join with each syllable to the point of being but a body of consonants, a soul of vowels. Is it magic? I write his name, and it becomes the man I love. All it takes to pass from night to day, and from day to night, is that a pen dipped in ink obey the movement of my hand, that the voice yield for a second to the whim of the lips, to the orders of thought. I hollow out a dwelling in desire. I write: 'I am

> going to join you, my love…' And instantly, I am wings which give me back my beloved. I say: 'Be patient, my love…' and let the walls of my prison take me in again.

Sarah's (very Hebrew, Song-of-Songs-like) lyricism is all the more poignant here when considering her later, post-camp madness, when she expresses her horror in screams, strange questions, and brief shards of strange talk. It must be said, the above-quoted passages are by far the most sentimental section of the book. Importantly, as was pointed out by Derrida, the act of writing in itselfalways-already involves and implies absence and delay. The presence of absence and the absence of presence. The trace, as explored by both Derrida and (originally) Levinas, becomes especially relevant here. The 'red marker' that marks the beginning of *The Book of Questions* ('for in the beginning, the wound is invisible') is matched at its end by the small black point that is God, and the trace or spot of blood carries through the final four books of the series (*Yaël, Elya, Aely and (.) El, ou le dernier livre*.), as we shall see further below.

More importantly, however, the emblematic tragedy of the Holocaust's destruction of Sarah and Yukel's lives, and young love, is commentated on throughout the book in poetical-philosophical musings by imaginary (or, post-Shoah, ghostly) Rabbis, in quasi-Talmudic style. In this way a profound aspect of European Jewishness is expressed, and thus memorialised, if not in spirit maintained and restored after the camps. Such is the redemptive quality of the Book; of the Book's *Law* (as in the Torah), which also harmonises with the Law of the Book (structure and quality; character). Thus the 'broken book' is as fragmented as the Broken Tablets of the Law.

Yaël; Elya ; Aely ; El (.)

The front cover of my 2008 *L'Imaginaire* (Gallimard) edition of volume 2 of the *Livre des Questions* series bears its title in two distinctly blood-red shades: '*Le Livre des Questions*' written in a dark burgundy which is distinctly the colour of venous blood, and the '2', signifying volume 2, in a bright scarlet recalling the blood of the arteries (The publishers carrying out Jabès's earlier written command to 'Mark the front of the book with a red marker. For in the beginning, the wound is invisible.' (*LQ1*)). And this proves fitting for the cover of *Yaël*, which opens so (gradually, creepily) horrifically, so murderously, so 'verging-on-necrophilia' and intent on death and bloodshed. But it seems all this is for an overarchingly redemptive purpose. On page eleven of the English translation, section 4 opens

> (Have I, in my hope to undo the evil that eats us, held your head too long
> under water? Your child's-head, lissom dawn and sponge?
> Shore of absence where the body ran aground, the light, free of bandied
> words, spreads from mouth to ear for you, O living-dead.
> You, half open at the core. In your flesh I violate the void.) (*LQ2* 11)
>
> *(Espérant éliminer le mal qui nous mine, ai-je retenu sous l'eau trop*
> *longtemps ta tête d'enfant, molle aurore, éponge?*
> *Rivage de l'absence où le corps s'est échoué, la lumière, dégagée de la*
> *parole échangée, pour vous se répond, ô morts vivants, de bouche à*
> *oreille.*
> *Tu t'entrouvres en ton milieu. Dans ta chair, je force le néant.)* (*LQ2* 21f).

Thus the narrator, Yael's husband, seeks murderous revenge upon her for her infidelity. But he only imagines he does so. In reality, it is his own life he brings to an end. What immediately follows this passage is a graphic though poetic description of the violation, which to me reads like something out of an imaginary 'Lost Tales from Central Drainage':

Un cercle
et, dans ce cercle, un autre
cercle
et, dans ce nouveau cercle, un cercle
nouveau
et ainsi de suite
jusqu'à l'ultime cercle devenu un point
assujettissant,
puis un imperceptible point ;
mais incroyablement présent ;
mais majestueusement absent.
Une femme et une parole.
Une femme tournant en rond,
autour d'une parole tournant en rond ;
lentement d'abord, puis vite ;
incroyablement vite
jusqu'à n'être plus, dans l'espace où elles furent soulevées,
qu'un cercle,
à la poursuite d'un cercle plus petit,
de plus en plus petit,
grotesquement, à présent, petit.
Un trou, un oeil vide ;
un oeil de nuit ;
un oeil crevé.
Et quoi? On y regarde.
On s'y enfonce.
Est-ce cela qu'on appelle : Unité ?
Un cercle désagrégé ?
Un cri, un pas, un aveu
circulaires ? (*LQ2* 22f).

A circle

and in the circle another
circle
and in the new circle still
another circle
and so on till
the last: a forceful
point,
then an invisible point
unbelievably present,
majestically absent.
A woman and a word.
A woman turning
around a word turning
slowly, faster
unbelievably fast

till they are but
one circle in the space that spawned them
pursuing a smaller
and ever smaller,
grotesquely tiny circle.
A hole. An empty socket.
An eye of night.
A shattered eyeball.
And then? You look.
You plunge.
Is this what is called unity:
a circle undone?
A circular scream,
step,
and avowal? (*LQ2* 22f).

This seems to me like it could be the killer's description of something like The Shower Scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. But alas, it is all in the narrator's mind. He hasn't killed his wife at all. It is merely jealous fantasies gnawing at his brain, due to his wife's open infidelity with 'the Other.' The quotation above is quite a subtly grotesque exhibition of an imagined murder, taking place by the narrator in the narrator's own mind.

And then, more graphically (after some pages describing the author's 'tackling' words, e.g. 'We face each other like dog and cat.' (Ibid. 15)):

Femme, couche-toi. Tu es une vraie femme et je suis homme à t'éveiller.
Je ne puis accepter Dieu que mort, comme je t'ai désirée morte, Yaël, au ciel qui défaille.
O combien.
Le soleil épargne l'infini.
(On prétend que la parole voit où nul ne l'entend.
Les sons silencieusement l'éclairent.
Ceci pour tes yeux, Yaël.
Ceci pour notre route.) (*LQ2* 27f).

Lie down, woman. You are a real woman, and I am man enough to wake you.
I can accept God only dead, just as I wanted you dead, Yaël, against a fading sky.
O how much.
The sun spares the infinite.

(*It is said that the word can see even where nobody hears it*
The sounds quietly shed light.
This for your eyes, Yaël.
This for our road.) (*BQ2* 15).

It must be pointed out here that the narrator of *Yaël* is the husband of the title character and he mistakenly believes he has strangled her to death. (It is, in fact, his own life he has brought to an end). In this way, among other things, the book zeroes in on a singular killing, after the first three books' (in the series) dwelling on the six million dead of the Shoah. Both the death of God and the death of Yaël (a death of the mother, of Woman as Mother) are entailed. It is, naturally, not just a matter of the narrator having his 'Others' confused. As we read:

Yaël est passage et usage de Dieu, elle est
le corps dont Il s'est détourné pour une définitive retraite
et qui pourrira pour Lui de l'instant impitoyable.
Ah être l'instant.
Arracher la peau à toute parole.
Hâter l'intérieure junction avec le vide.
Faséyer la flamme (*LQ2* 28f).

Yaël is passage and use of God, she is
the body He turned from in final retreat,
body which rots for Him of the merciless moment.
Ah, to be the moment.
To tear the skin off all words.
To speed their insides on toward the void.
To shake the flame (Ibid. 16).

However at no point in the book does Jabès condone or justify the murder, or see it in any way as anything other than horrific. But, by way of confirmation and support of its inclusion as one of the book and cycle's central features, as Jabès's friend Maurice Blanchot put it in his 'Literature and the Right to Death':

> Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free and silent existence; literature is their innocence and forbidden presence, it is the being which protests against revelation, it is the defiance of what does not want to take

> place. In this way, it sympathises with darkness (*l'obscurité)*, with aimless passion, with lawless violence, with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world. In this way, too, it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces – through its refusal to say anything – that it comes from the night and will return to the night (Bruns ix).

Of course, Jabès's book is not all off-colour nor blood-red, or indeed it could be said that the book's blood fertilises and gives rise to pure flowers, in a post-Baudelairean (*Fleurs du Mal)* manner. The author explains:

> *(Ces espaces ombreux, tu les ourles de temps, où l'infini trace.)*
> *…*
> *Le livre est-il le lieu où, dans le temps, l'heure s'absente ? En ce cas, il est ce rectangle réservé, dans les jardins persans, à la meditation où le monde, des quatre horizons descend confronter son destin de corps céleste avec celui, plus obscur, de l'homme.*
> *(Ceux qui parlent de littérature décadente ou de littérature engagée m'ont toujours fait sourire. …)*
> *…*
> *Ah! ëtre couleur pour qui peint ; note musicale, pour qui compose ; vocable, pour qui écrit, comme en scrutant, à l'aube l'horizon, nous sommes, à notre insu, l'initial flamboiement de la mort.)*
> *Tout raison de vivre est dans le livre ; mais le livre d'une vie est lame aiguisée de raison.*
> *Le vocable brûle de son encre, Yaël, comme au soleil brille, de ton malheur, le miroir brisé* (*LQ2* 31-3).
>
> (These dark spaces. You hem them with time where the infinite traces...)
> ...
> Is the book the place where the hour fades into time? Then it is also the rectangle reserved for meditation in Persian gardens, where the world comes down from the four horizons to confront its fate as a celestial body with the darker fate of man.
> (Talk of decadent literature or militant literature always makes me smile.
> …)
> …
> Ah, to be colour for the painter, tone for the composer, word for the writer, as, when we scan the horizon at dawn, we are without knowing it the first blaze of death.)
> All reasons for living are in the book. But the book of a life is reason's honed blade.
> The word burns with its ink, Yaël, as the broken mirror of your misfortune glitters in the sun (*LBQ2* 18).

The 'broken mirror' mentioned above is, in the book, the scene of Yaël's giving birth to her still-born child (this scene is quoted and discussed, with brief allusions to the work of Lacan, in further detail below in this thesis). Yaël, the female title character of the book, is the only personage actually named throughout; her partner, who is the narrator who kills her, and her other lover remain unnamed. The death of Yaël (preceded by that of her stillborn baby) necessarily (if not by moral force) takes centre stage in this work, a fact concerning which its author has occasion to voice his regret:

> *Yaël est dans le livre et, déjà, à l'hiver du livre.*
> *La parole est celle de léloignement, autour de la mort.*
>
> *Au soleil déchu, la nuit répond par une salve de myriads d'astres reconnus.*
> *Ah! que le chant soit celui de l'enfance où scintillent nos peines, pareilles à*
> *des épées croisées au plafond d'une chambre exiguë.*
> *(Je retrouve le livre. Si cruel, dans sa dépossession, est l'acculement progressif à la mort.)* (*LBQ2* 42).
>
> Yaël is in the book and already in the winter of the book.
> The word is a word of distance, around death.
>
> Night answers sundown with a salvo of a myriad familiar stars.
> Ah, that the song be the song of our childhood when our pains glittered
> like crossed swords on the ceiling of a tiny room.
> (I rediscover the book. So cruelly evicted, so steadily brought to bay by death.)
> (*LBQ2* 26f).

How can the Book go on, after this horrific murder within its pages? However, it does continue, for another three volumes. And it is precisely in the above-quoted passage where the turnaround can be said to begin. The 'winter' of the book opens up the possibility for further seasons – the spring and the summer, as well as the autumn, of the book. The very word 'distance', in the above passage, both opens up a comforting distance of the word from death and simultaneously closes the gap between the two, by filling it with the entity named 'distance.' (On page 23 of the English translation of *Yaël*: 'The book is always beyond the word. It is the place where the word dies.') This comforting distance from (as well as

into?) death takes on cosmic proportions with the succeeding image of 'night' with its 'salvo of familiar stars.' Following this, by the everyday magic that is 'song' and specifically 'the song of our childhood,' Jabès brings the proportions back to 'the ceiling of a tiny room', a book-like image almost, as we can imagine a book being in the room and also the nature of a physical printed book being somehow, as in an openable box, 'room-like.' Thus Jabès here 'rediscover[s] the book', after its having been 'so cruelly evicted' and 'so steadily brought to bay' by the murderous death of Yaël, a murder which will have its undercurrent of emotional turmoil untangled in the pages of the novel that follow. 'Novel' is almost the wrong word for the book *Yaël*. It is an extended poem in prose and free verse which is, as implied phonetically by the title (and the name of the main character), also an extended and only partially metaphorical scream. In this way Jabès underlines, after the six million dead of the Shoah in The Book of Questions volumes one to three, and after Sarah and Yukel survive the camps (partially), just how horrific (and complex) the death of one single person can be. Herein lies the book's redemptive function. It remains a love triangle, and within that a love story, though one of a fundamentally warped and obsessive, elemental and adult, passionately liberated love. It is a love taken to its logical and illogical, its religious and irreligious conclusions. Textual murder and death are textually redeemed before the end of the book, as the narrator's journal entries describing Yaël bring her back to life, an archetypal life lived beyond the borders of the everyday life-and-death world, beyond Earth-time love-politics. At one point it is suggested that the murder took place in a dream ('une songe'). The blood is somehow all washed away, permanently.

Elya; Aely; El (.)

It is really, by extension, God who is killed in these final four books of the *Book of Questions* series, and a prolonged mourning ('Dieu/Deuil') of God (God's own mourning, as well as ours?) takes place throughout their pages. Jabès has not stepped far in concern for and from the God (both *El* and *Ya(h*) in Hebrew) whose existence, as an atheist, he both denies and disputes. ('Man is All. God is Nothing. Here is the riddle. / To glide towards Nothing. Perennial slope.' (*BQ2* 129)). I personally as a reader find the 'poetic fact' of God both reaffirmed and rejuvenated following Jabès's insistent and 'bare-bones''-fundamental calling-to-question, in a nature following Judaism's biblical Abraham's questioning-with and bargaining-with as well as praying and offering thanks and tribute to his One God. The *oeuvre* of Jabès functions in one sense as a redemption and renewal of that very personal relationship, by means of (internal and exteriorly-directed) poetic dialogue, indeed a 'stubborn questioning.' 'God faces God, and the book the book. … God leans on God, the book on the book, man on his shadow.'(*LQ2* 138). The series of books making up the second half of *The Book of Questions* whittles away the concern (the 'Grave Concern') of a murdered God from the reawakened filled-out story of Yaël's stillborn son, Elya (who has a book devoted to him), through the redemption of Aely, the narrator's other child, and down in *(.) El, ou le dernier livre* to the bare bones of grief over God, and simultaneously of God's grief. With this effort the primal relationship between God and human, or between humanity and Other, is restored to wholeness and, especially, to Truth.

There is also conveyed in these books a geometrical progression over the course of the series, from the concentric circles in *Yaël* quoted above, through to the point at the centre of a circle which represents God in *(.) El, ou le dernier livre.* The image first appears

on page 144 of *The Book of Questions* volume 2, in the book *Elya*, where we also find its elaboration, from its beginnings as an outcrop of one of the writer's meditative musings before the blank page:

> *Le sage trempa sa plume de roseau dans l'encrier, la retira, la garda quelques instants comme en suspens, au-dessus du feuillet sur laquel il n'avait rien noté de la journée puis, à l'étonnement de son disciple, dessina un petit cercle dans un coin du buvard qui était toujours à sa portée.*
>
> *Ce cercle, dit-il, dont le buvard a fait un point envahi de nuit, c'est Dieu.*
>
> *Pourqui as-tu voulu que ce cercle devienne un point noir et pourquoi cette tache, au milieu de tant d'autres sur ton buvard, est-elle Dieu? demanda le disciple.*
>
> *Ta question est celle du Seigneur, lui répondit le sage.*
>
> *Si ma question est celle du Seigneur, dit le disciple, je sais, maintenant, que Dieu m'a créé à Son image.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *En ce temps, avant le temps, où la vie n'était qu'une base mort en mal de poumon, un point insignifiant dans l'espace, comme une boule, contenait toute l'errance des mondes.*
>
> *En éclatant, elle libéra l'univers, mais donna forme à l'exil.*
>
> *Dieu venait de disparaître, n'ayant existé que dans la Création.*
>
> *Principe de l'Unité ---- le cercle se resserrant dans l'infaillible mémoire du cercle ---- , Il allait devenir le centre éblouissant d'une absence élucidée.*
>
> *Plus jamais nous n'échapperons à l'exil.*
>
> *Le livre est véridiques étapes d'exil* (*LQ2* 204f)*.*

> The sage dipped his reed pen into the inkwell, pulled it out, and held it for a few moments, as if in doubt, above the page where he had not noted anything yet that day. Then, to his pupil's surprise, he drew a small circle in a corner of the blotter he always kept within reach.
>
> 'This circle,' he said, 'which the blotter has made into a point invaded by night, is God.'
>
> 'Why did you want the circle to be turned into a black point? And why should this stain among so many others on your blotter be God?' the disciple asked.
>
> 'Your question is that of the Lord,' replied the sage.
>
> 'If my question is that of the Lord,' said the disciple, 'I know now that God has created me in His image.'
>
> […]
>
> At this time before time, when life was only a sickly death with weak lungs, one small point in space contained, like a bubble, all the wanderings of the worlds.
>
> When it burst it freed the universe, but gave form to exile.

> God had disappeared, existing only in Creation.
> Being the principle of Unity – a circle tightening in the infallible memory of the circle – He was going to become the dazzling centre of clear absence.
> Never again will we escape exile.
> The book is among exile's true stages (*BQ2* 144).

True to Jabèsian form, the structure and form of the book is discussed within its own pages alongside and also closely related to the plot movements and elaboration of characters. So God (El and Yah) exists in Creation as Yaël, as Elya, as Aely, and as stripped back to the single point of El, dead (or at least absent) in its singular distinction. The word '*Deuil*' ('Mourning; grief') shown in a pictographic on page 543 of *LQ2* alongside '*Dieu*', whose letters have been crossed out, is a combination of '*El*', '*Dieu*', '*Oeuil*' (Eye) and '*Loi*.'(Law). This is what remains after God's absence, His withdrawal back into the point which, according to the Kabbalah, as quoted by Jabès at the beginning of *(.) El*, was the form of His original manifestation prior to Creation. 'Every day helps us lose the last. / God remains our largest erasure.' (*BQ2* 164). 'It is to be asked if God is not the one inadmissible question, the deep avowal of this inadmissibility through which the world is cut off from the world and man from his divine ancestry.' (*BQ2* 158). Is the book then an attempt to wrest humankind's lost power back from God, (after God's betrayal of humankind in the Shoah or in any murder), in using His own words against Him, in a book to rival 'His own' (the Torah)? In which by means of poetry and meditation and dialogue and commentary, the reclaiming of previously-abdicated (transferred to God) power from God is, through words, attempted and described? Is this not one of poetry's strange goals? Jabès feels and thinks his way through the process instinctively, consciously and to the very core of the matter, as well as 'out the other side.' Joseph Guglielmi ties it all together as follows:

> *…J'écris, je risque la mort, ma mort, la mort du livre…*

> *Jusqu'aux quatres caractères* imprononçables*, joue le movement d'encre et de sang, déferle l'écriture et l'histoire dramatiquement conjuguées en la dévorante* loi du livre*, laquelle, inscrite contre Dieu, l'évacue, l'exclut comme signe anéanti,* l'abîme dans le verbe*, le rend invisible pour lui substituer la part la plus avancée de l'activité humaine,* ce jour blanc du livre qui n'arrive à poindre qu'en effaçant la trace divine, *dans sa mutation, son déchirement infinis…*
>
> *Extrême liberté d'Edmond Jabès*' (*BQ2* 20).
>
> …I write, and I risk death, my death, the death of the book…
>
> Up until the four *unpronounceable* letters, plays the movement of ink and blood, unfurling writing and history dramatically conjugated in the devouring *law of the book*, which, inscribed against God, evacuates Him, excludes Him as an abolished sign, *abysses Him in the word*, makes Him invisible to substitute for him the most advanced part of human activity*, that blank day of the book which arrives at no point but in effacing the divine trace*, in its mutation, its infinite tearing apart…
>
> Extreme liberty of Edmond Jabès.

In this way the movement of writing itself, as well as God, is questioned. It is a liberty which Jabès has earned the right to take, due to his status as a (questioning) Jew, and one who has been deported from his homeland by virtue of being Jewish, though religiously unobservant. The genius, in the sense of presiding spirit, lies in the way Jabès conflates the experience of being a Jew with that of being a writer, and proceeds to use this as a starting-point for a poetic quest through and across the limits of the word up to the void left by the absence of God. This constitutes, in completion, his way of memorialising the impact of the Shoah, on the shattered word, and the broken tablets of the law of the book which encloses them. We have seen how the Book progresses from the Shoah through to the concentric circles of Yaël and on to the single central point of *El, ou le dernier livre*. This progression is captured, in *El*, by the word 'Deuil' ('Mourning'), mixing the letters of 'Dieu', 'Oeil' and 'Loi' ('God', 'Eye' and 'Law'). It is indeed a seven-volume cycle of mourning for the death of God, in a post-Shoah, more than Nietzschean, sense.

Silence and the Word; the White Space and the Letter

To an extent the concerns of this section deal primarily with language use, with Jabès's (nuclear or sub-atomic, metaphorically) breakdown of written language into its component forms. They also deal with a philosophising by Jabès (within the field and period of 'the spatial turn' as far as intellectual trends go) of every aspect of writing itself. Such literary concerns demand a separate analysis.

Helena Shillony, in her *Edmond Jabès: une rhétorique de la subversion* (Paris: Minard, 1991) performs a formal analysis of Jabès's literary techniques, starting from the Point (of Jabès's (*.) El, ou le dernier livre*) and moving on through the vocable, stressing that it is with words that Jabès 'builds his dwelling' in literature (Shillony 5).

> *Avec mes poignards*
> *volés à l'ange*
> *Je bâtis ma demeure* (*LSLS* 99)
>
> With my daggers
> stolen from an angel
> I build my dwelling

The above poem, first published in 1949, marks the first appearance of the phrase 'Je bâtis ma demeure' in Jabès's work. After its use as the title of his selected poems in 1959, Jabès would return to the motif in 1963's *Le Livre des Questions*, in the following passage:

> *Pouvoir déclarer: 'Je suis dans le livre. Le livre est mon univers, mon pays, mon toit et mon énigme. Le livre est ma respiration et mon repos.'*
>
> *Je me lève avec la page qu'on tourne, je me couche avec la page que l'on couche. Pouvoir répondre: 'Je suis de la race des mots avec lesquels on bâtit les demeures', sachant pertinemment que cette réponse est encore une question, que cette demeure est menacée sans cesse* (*LQ1* 36).

> To be able to say: 'I am in the book. The book is my world, my country, my roof, and my riddle. The book is my breath and my rest.'
>
> I get up with the page that is turned. I lie down with the page put down. To be able to reply: 'I belong to the race of words, which homes are built with' – when I know full well that this answer is still another question, that this home is constantly threatened (Ibid. 31).

What is evident from the above quotation is Jabès's lifelong love affair with the book. He lives and breathes it. What may not be so obvious from the above quotation, from a technical point of view, is the fact that Jabès does indeed, throughout his writings, evince a consciousness of and a concern for the word – or, the 'vocable', as he usually calls it, emphasising the (potential or incipient) role of the voice – that extends even to 'sub-atomic' levels of the individual letter and the point (punctuation, or as Jabès notes, Hebrew vowel mark), taking into account the supreme importance of the blank, white, page itself. His puns and frequent changes of style, from lyrical to aphoristic to anagrammatic, through commentary to question-and-response, his kabbalistic letter-substitution puzzle-games and his occasional use of archaic words (which are sprinkled judiciously throughout all of his books) all display the depth of Jabès's playful yet serious care for the 'vocable' in such a way that these technical 'formalities' are never divorced from the sense, the overall meaning, of the words and/or passage, indeed the book (and Jabès's 'philosophical/poetic project' as a whole), in which they appear.

In the following analysis, I depart from Shillony by starting with the silence and the blank page which both provide for Jabès a constantly-important background to the words and the works which are thereby placed in greater relief. As Jabès has noted, written language would not work at all if it were not for the blank spaces between the words. Consciousness of this fact is probably more acute for a francophone poet like Jabès, using a language where in speech all words elide, in contrast to the written 'vocables', separated by

a rhythmic series of 'stops' or blank spaces. While it is a fact that ancient Hebrew, as well as Greek and Roman, manuscripts lacked such spaces, this merely proves to be another example of Jabès's timeliness and postmodernity.

Silence, the Blank Page and the Point

> *'Dieu, le premier, brisa le silence,' dit-il. C'est cette brisure que nous essayons de traduire en langage humain.'* (*LQ2* 477).
>
> *Maîtriser l'espace entre les mots; s'assurer de la neutralité du silence* (Ibid. 542).
>
> *Du livre au livre, le blanc est le lieu et le lien* (Ibid. 495).

> 'God was the first to break the silence,' he said. 'It is this breakage we try to translate into human languages.'
>
> To master the space between the words; to assure oneself of the neutrality of silence.
>
> From book to book, the blank is the place and the link.

'In the beginning', for Jabès (as poet, and as Jew), there is silence and the infinite nothingness or emptiness (*le néant*) represented for the writer by the blank page. This expanse of (blank) space is then pierced by the Point, alpha and omega of creation for Jabès as for the Kabbalah, which he cites to open *(.) El, ou le dernier livre*, seventh and final volume of *Le Livre des Questions*: '*Dieu, El, pour se révéler, Se manifesta par un point.*' (*LQ2* 465) 'God, *El,* in order to reveal Himself, manifested Himself as a point.' In a similar way does writing itself begin: writing which is, for Talmudic and Kabbalistic Jewish traditions, 'black fire on white fire', as Jabès highlights in his 'open letter to Derrida' published in *Le Livre des Marges* (*LM* 49). The 'point' is simultaneously '*Rien et Tout' for Jabès, 'le Tout du Rien et le Rien du Tout*' (Ibid. 17) 'The All of Nothing, the Nothing of the All and the Nothing at All.' It is in fact the 'point final', the full stop at the end of a sentence, being the title of

the book that comes at the end of the seven-volume series of *Le Livre des Questions.* But in its kabbalistic creation-myth sense, it joins end with beginning, beginning with end.

A heightened awareness of '*l'origine'* – as well as, conversely, a gaze intent on the Infinite, past the horizon – shows itself to be at work in the writings of Jabès. Implicit in Jabès's use of the (most recently only linguistic) term 'vocable' is the fact that, as Shillony points out, '*Le mot est d'abord un son, une voix qui clame ou qui chuchote dans le désert*' (*RS* 12). 'The word is first of all a sound, a voice which clamours or that which whispers in the desert.' The desert is a vast and unlimited expanse of blank space, of absence, which is for Jabès a book written and erased by the winds. It is a book 'as infinite as the desert' of which Jabès dreams, which haunts him across and throughout his literary works. A book which, no sooner written, would be erased and replaced by the book-to-come, *le livre à-venir*, the 'future book'. Also, it is a book filled with the 'breathing-space' so important for the author, as he has stated in numerous interviews, for him personally as an asthmatic, who feels that 'the book breathes through its words on every page, through every one and all of its individual letters.' And through its blank spaces, its breathing-spaces – when a book approached its end or was finished, Jabès's breathing would become more strained…'someday the book will finish me off', he once noted with an irony acknowledging that his stressful concern was, in his later career, that he might not live to finish each succeeding book. (This notion of 'breathing-space, especially in poetry, would be emphatically taken up by Jabès's friend and younger protégé, the French poet Anne-Marie Albiach).[5]

[5] See, for example, Anne-Marie Albiach, *Two Poems: Flammigère & The Line the Loss*.

Deferred Origins; Point, Letter, Word and Void

Important here, before coming to the 'vocable' or word itself, and most pointedly to Jabès's 'vocables obsessionels' like 'Dieu', 'Juif', 'Livre', 'Loi', 'Oeil', 'Nom', (as he has stated them) – 'God', 'Jew', 'Book', 'Law', 'Eye', 'Name'— is a consideration of firstly, creation myths or stories of origin in Jabès, and secondly, an analysis of his treatment of (or the significance for Jabès of) the letter within the word. For these purposes two passages in *Le parcours* (1984) will be examined. No English translation of this book has yet been published, and it is not one of his major works. However it is of importance for its explication of what constitutes, for Jabès, the relation between Judaism (a Judaism 'of and through the Book') and writing.

> *Au commencement était l'utopie.*
> *Et l'utopie était image.*
>
> *Au commencement était le Rien.*
> *Et le Rien était silence.*
>
> *Au commencement était le silence.*
> *Et le silence était l'oubli* (Jabès *Le Parcours* 22).
>
> In the beginning was utopia.
> And the utopia was image.
>
> In the beginning was Nothingness.
> And the Nothingness was silence.
>
> In the beginning was silence.
> And the silence was oblivion.

What is obvious here is a playful yet serious parody of the Book of Genesis from the Torah. As usual, in books by Jabès, '' – the section which the above lines open – does not appear at the very beginning of the book (Jabès *Le Parcours* 22). There is always, in Jabès, an *'arrière-livre*'; several sections containing *Avant-Propos*, *Avant-Dire*, or other preliminary chapters 'before the book-proper'.

Is this *arrière-livre* material, which shows up in each of Jabès's books, due to the nature of his life and writing career, with its preliminary, Egyptian 'chapters' cut off from the French part of his life by the forced exile of 1957? As quoted further above, Jabès has confirmed that – as for many exiled writers – he 'lives', in a sense, 'in the book. The book is my world, my country, my roof, and my riddle. The book is my breath and my rest' (*BQ1* 31). In 1959, Jabès published his Egyptian-period poems in *Je bâtis ma demeure*, as above noted, 'building' his 'dwelling-place' (the Book) with words, and thus clearing a space for all that would come afterwards, starting with *Le Livre des Questions* and continuing through *Le Livre des Ressemblances*, *Le Livre des Limites*, *Le Livre des Marges*, to finish up with *Le Livre de l'Hospitalité* – and that is only to mention the names of the larger groups of 'series', each in several volumes (seven; three; four; three, respectively). These titles faintly outline a trajectory (though unplanned); the thread of a broad storyline of increasing 'approchement' to the Other.

> *Ô solitude! La vie n'est-elle, d'une lisière à l'autre de la trame serrée des jours, que longeur et finesse d'un fil:* une duite? (Jabès *Le Parcours* 45).
>
> O solitude! Isn't life, from one edge to the other of the tight weft of days, only the longeur and finesse of a thread: *une duite*?

'*Une duite'* – a thread which passes through a shuttle, with etymological origins in '*conduite'*, 'driven' or 'directed' (from the *Littré*, one of the dictionaries which was for Jabès bedside reading, and from which he would utilise, or 'resurrect', many archaic or 'retired' words).

So, after twenty-two pages of preliminary 'approach' to the 'threshold'/ '*seuil'* of the book itself, in *Le Parcours*, Jabès makes multiple attempts at defining an origin to the symbolic 'route' or course (*parcours*). Origins of creation, and origins of the Book. For, in

the Jewish mystical text, the *Zohar*, the two are combined; the first things God creates are the letters of the (Hebrew) alphabet, and the Torah, in Jewish mysticism, exists eternally, before the creation of the world. Thus, on page 23 we find a consideration of 'Le nom' – it is a response to Derrida, though more religious in tone:

> *Dieu nomme. Le livre dénomme.*
>
> *Pas un nom d'emprunt mais d'empreinte.*
> *Ô traces; atemporelles traces.*
>
> *… Rompant avec l'étymologie – ce qui n'est pas, aujourd'hui, pour me déplaire – j'entends 'dénommer' comme un mot formé, dans sa double allégeance, par 'défaire' et 'déployer'* (Jabès *Le Parcours* 23).
>
> God names. The book denominates.
>
> Not a borrowed name, but an *imprinted* one.
> O traces, atemporal traces.
>
> ….Breaking with etymology – which is not, these days, displeasing to me – I understand 'dénommer' to be a word formed, in its double allegiance, by 'undo' and 'deploy.'

This is still, evidently, before the creation of humans. The book 'unmakes' what God has created (in and by naming), by a 'deployment' of its letters. Following a long section on the Letter (Sumerian) in its relation to the Name, of/and God, Jabès continues the Genesis reference with his own initial recurring series of '*Au commencement*'/ 'In the Beginning's with the creation of 'life'. But Jabès continues to see everything in relation to writing:

> *Au commencement était la vie, puis la vie se fit* verbe*. Il m'est arrivé, une fois, d'écrire ce mot :* v'herbe*.*
> *Le brin d'herbe est premier indice, timide annonce du surgissement prochain de la Parole divine; sa prévisible – naturelle – consequence: la précaire chance d'une écriture avant l'écrit.*
> *Dieu, ensuite, se tut et l'herbe sécha.*
> *Mais le desert était Son Livre. Il lui sacrifia Son image, laissant le soin, à chaque vocable, de la reconstituer, un jour.*
> *Telle est l'histoire qui me fut contée* (Jabès *Le Parcours* 26f).

> In the beginning was life, and life made itself word [*verbe*]. Once I happened to write the word: *v'herbe*. [*herbe* = grass].
> The blade of grass is the first sign, timid announcement of the imminent surging up of the Divine Word; its foreseeable – natural – consequence : the precarious chance of a writing before the written work.
> Then God was quiet and the grass dried up.
> But the desert was His Book. To it he sacrificed His image, leaving it up to each word to reconstitute it, one day.
> Such is the story that was told to me.

In like pattern follow other important references to beginnings: '*Au commencement était le tracé sans la trace.' [cf. Lévinas and Derrida]. De Son index, Dieu désigna le chemin. Il imposa une direction à la lecture – un ordre – que l'homme fera siens, persuadé de les avoir conçus*.

> *Livre, non du sable, mais de sable que son absence de mots tenait en respect – Le livre respire par ses lettres, comme la peau, par ses pores -- .*
> *Livre d'un nom ensablé dans le desert du Nom. Dieu S'y détourna, fuyant Sa proper mort.*
> *Telle est l'histoire qui me fut contée* (Ibid. 27).

> In the beginning was the traced without the trace. With his index finger, God designated the path. He imposed a direction to the reading – an order – which man would make his own, persuaded to have conceived them himself.
> Book, not of sand, but of sand which its absence of words held in respect – The book breathes by its letters, as the skin by its pores -- .
> …..Book of a name covered in sand in the desert of the Name. God turned Himself away, fleeing His own death.
> Such is the story that was told to me.

The Book, made of the desert sands and equally as vast, is present from the beginning. Next, '*Au commencement était la ténébre, la nuit du livre*.' 'In the beginning was darkness, the night of the book.' The only light is a glimmer in Adam's eye; '*Cette lueur était-elle la clé?*' (Jabès *Le Parcours 27*) 'That glimmer, was it the key?' So, then, in the beginning is the key – a glimmer which

> *ressemblait étonnamment à la pomme de l'arbre convoité de la Connaissance, ronde comme un point; ce point dont le juif, plus tard, devina qu'il était voyelle avant la voyelle, clé du livre avant la clé* (Ibid.).
>
> resembled astonishingly the apple of the longed-for tree of Knowledge, round like a point; that point of which the Jew would later figure out that it was vowel before the vowel, key of the book before the key.

There follows an Adam and Eve story which finishes not with the couple being kicked out of the Garden, but instead with God 'closing the Book on them' just when they had been at the point of 'decoding the universe' with their newfound Knowledge: 'Irrité de leur pouvoir qu'Il avait, pourtant, envisagé de leur accorder, Dieu referma, sur eux, le Livre. … Telle est l'histoire qui me fut contée' (Ibid. 28). 'Irritated by their power which He had, nonetheless, envisaged to accord them, God closed up, on them, the Book. … Such is the story which I was told.' Finally, Jabès sums up each of these stories by returning to the 'point final', the full stop, the geometric and grammatical Point, which in its fullness embraces everything:

> *Au commencement était le point et ce point cachait un jardin.*
>
> *Motivés par leur passé, les juifs, dans leur pratique quotidienne du Texte, s'aperçurent que chaque mot avait ses propres racines. Ils firent, de la consonne, le tronc et, de la voyelle, la branche nourricière, comme Dieu avait fait, d'un point brillant, l'astre du jour et d'un point ébloui, l'astre de la nuit.*
>
> *Le livre prit la place de l'arbre. Le monde pouvait, désormais, lire le monde et croître d'autant.*
>
> In the beginning was the point and that point hid a garden.
>
> Motivated by their past, the Jews, in their everyday practice of the Text, noticed that each word had its own roots. Of the consonant, they made the trunk and of the vowel, the nourishing branch, as God had made, of a shining point, the star of the day, and of a dazzling point, the star of the night.

Thus, in a series of slightly displaced metaphors, Jabès restates the Zoharic myth of original creation through the letters of the alphabet and through the pre-existent Book (in the Zohar, this book is the Torah) (Zohar), beginning with 'le point' which echoes the

kabbalistic theory-of-origins, that is, the *tzimtzum* (Matt 90-7). From here, Jabès finishes the section by speculating that Eve's eating of the apple, her primordial mistake, was nothing but an anticipation of the later 'sin of reading and writing' (Jabès *Le Parcours* 28). A breaking of the commandment against representation through images, as Jabès explores in *Le Livre des Ressemblances* and *Le Livre des Marges*? All of language would constitute such a break. In the subsection on 'Le secret La lettre' in 'Les Commencements' (*Le Parcours*), this 'image' – an image of 'l'utopie', with which creation here 'begins' – is generalised to become 'the sign':

> *Étant l'origine, aurait-Il [Dieu] admis que tout commencement pouvait avoir débuté bien avant d'être reconnu comme origine?*
>
> *Ayant dénoncé l'origine, Dieu renonça au nom.*
>
> *Frustré, l'homme inventa le signe qui n'était, d'abord, qu'image d'une image, representation d'un irreprésentable en quête de soi-même.*
>
> *Image, figure contre lesquelles le signe réagira, plus tard, jusqu'à les abolir pour accéder, à son apogée, à la dignité de lettre* (Jabès *Le Parcours* 25f).

> Being the origin, could God have admitted that every beginning could have begun well before being recognised as an origin?
>
> Having denounced the origin, God renounced the name.
>
> Frustrated, man invented the sign which at first was nothing but the image of an image, representation of an unrepresentable in search of itself.
>
> Image, figure against which the sign reacted, later, up until abolishing them to accede, at its apogee, to the dignity of the letter.

For Jabès (and in the Jewish mystical tradition generally), as William Franke uncovered in 'Edmond Jabès, or the Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God': 'all language is engendered by the divine Name, and

> consequently language in general proves in Jabès's work to be inhabited by a silent instance that it cannot name or say. The Name of God thereby emerges as the vanity of language in the heart of every word' (Franke "Edmond Jabès, or The Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God" 102)

Two points here: firstly, this 'silent instance' at the heart of language was, according to Jabès, first revealed to him through the nature of his conversation with his dying older sister, when he was twelve years old (he was alone with his sister at her deathbed). In an interview with Marcel Cohen in 1980, Jabès stated:

> One doesn't speak to a dying person the way one speaks to a living being. And the dying person doesn't answer you as he or she might have done only a few moments earlier. Their speech is different. It has nearly reached self-oblivion. Later, I would come across it again in the desert: the ultimate reflection, one could say, of a broken mirror.
>
> It is a speaking with the impress of great distance, like a dimension added to everyday words. This tone, this distance has never left me. … My sister's voice on her deathbed may be partially responsible for the gravity I feel is inseparable from speech, for the sundered aspect it takes on in my eyes (*FTDTTB* 6-8).

Speaking of *Le Livre des Questions,* Jabès tells Cohen that 'though it didn't come about knowingly … it is true that the Biblical tone of certain passages, those rabbi's voices

that appear and disappear, come from very far away' (*FTDTTB* 8). In all of his books, the reader may get the impression that each word, for Jabès, is strangely 'haunted'.

Secondly, the divine Name which, for Franke, 'engenders all language' is the Unpronounceable Name, the Tetragrammaton – but Jabès also mentions in his writings a Name of God that is made up of all the words in the language, placed end-to-end (*FTDTT*). One of God's Names is therefore the totality of all words, all language. Once again, as Jabès puts it, '*Dieu nomme. Le livre dénomme*' (Jabès *Le Parcours* 23). Again, via Derrida (but, again, more Biblically), Franke writes:

> In language, as [Jabès] sees it, we are essentially estranged from ourselves and from every possible source or ground for our world. In keeping with a traditional biblical imaginary, Jabès represents this condition as one of nomadism. Fundamentally, he understands it as resulting from an endless self-emptying of the word—what in biblical language can be called 'kenosis'.
>
> The word is perpetually underway in a nomadic movement inscribed into the very name of the name ('nom-ade'), perpetually exiled from the reality it intends but in fact can present only as absent, for language can never make present what it represents. This separation of language from the reality it projects is indeed infinite, for the proliferation of words is always only a further deferral and dispersion of meaning. This description of the human predicament in language reflects—or deflects—an eminently and expressly Jewish sense of distance and difference from a transcendent deity. Language in general, like the unpronounceable Name of God, is beholden to a silent instance within it that it cannot grasp or say (Franke "Edmond Jabès, or The Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God" 102f).

This 'silent instance' echoes, or refers to the 'bleeding' of, the 'wound' which is at the heart of language, as Jabès and Derrida both saw it, most pertinently in *Le Livre des Questions* (1963) and in Derrida's response to that book ('Edmond Jabès et la Question du Livre' (1964), in *L'écriture et la difference*, 1967) – and which is examined elsewhere in this thesis. It also reflects the eloquent silence and 'hidden infinity' of both the Egyptian desert and the white space of the blank page – at once emptiness, *le néant*, absence, and a

(Lévinas-inspired) Infinite. I disagree with Franke's drawing of an analogy to the 'expressly Jewish sense of distance and difference from a transcendent deity'; agreeing more with Jabès when he writes: '*Le juif vit dans l'intimité de Dieu et Dieu dans l'intimité du juif au sein des même mots*' (Jabès *Le Parcours* 88). 'The Jew lives in the intimacy of God and God in the intimacy of the Jew at the heart of the same words.'

A Single Letter, Surrounded by Empty Space

To return to *Le Parcours* and Jabès's stories of the origins of creation, we can now turn to a consideration of the Letter. While this may at first appear to be an overly-reductive, too-literal an approach to take to Jabès's work, in fact the texts as a whole demand it due to Jabès's near-constant concentration, throughout his *oeuvre*, on the key significance, in its creative properties, of the letter itself. Jabès portrays himself, in *Elya*, as 'homme de la Lettre' (*LQ2* 185), and this preoccupation was already evident in *Je bâtis ma demeure* (1959), though here it took a more negating turn:

> *La lettre vole le mot qui vole l'image qui vole.*
> *La lettre ment au mot qui ment à la phrase qui ment à l'auteur qui ment.*
> *La lettre rêve le mot qui rêve la phrase qui exauce le mot qui exauce la lettre.*
> *La lettre délie le mot qui délie l'image qui délie le jour.*
> *La phrase pare le mot qui pare la lettre qui pare l'absence.*
> *La lettre dépense le mot qui dépense la phrase qui dépense le livre qui dépense l'écrivain qui se ruine* (*LSLS* 301).
>
> The letter steals the word which steals the image which steals.
> The letter lies to the word which lies to the sentence which lies to the author who lies.
> The letter dreams the word which dreams the sentence which answers the prayer of the word which answers the prayer of the letter.
> The letter unties the word which unties the image which unties the day.
> The sentence dresses up the word which dresses up the letter which dresses up absence.
> The letter uses up the word which uses up the sentence which uses up the book which uses up the writer who is ruined (Jabès *A Share of Ink* 38).

Here already, the letter, in 'stealing the word', takes precedence over the word, the basic unit of meaning. As Jabès writes in *El, ou le dernier livre*, 'The letter is the grandmother of the word', *'La lettre est l'aïeule du mot'* (*LQ2* 532). This order of priority is particularly Jewish, in that in the Kabbalah – in the text of the Zohar – God creates the world using the 'individual energy forces, which express themselves as Hebrew letters' (the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet) (Zohar), and they each approach Him with their arguments as to why they should be the first letter of the sacred alphabet. Each letter, in the Hebrew Kabbalah, is full to bursting with mystical and magical significance, associations and resonances. In fact, in the *Zohar* it is stated that

> when the Holy One, blessed be He, was about to create the world, all the letters were STILL hidden. For two thousand years before the creation of the world, the Holy One, blessed be He, watched the letters and amused Himself with them (Zohar 22).

Jabès thus follows the Jewish Kabbalists in his fidelity to the Letter. It is a prioritising that privileges the written text over speech, as Warren F. Motte, Jr. has noted 'So with each letter in the word, with each word in the sentence, the Book begins', Motte quotes Jabès from *Aely* (31), and goes on to clarify to what extent this semi-'*Lettrisme'* (though Motte doesn't mention Lettrism) is due to Jabès being a poet (in the tradition of Surrealism, Lettrism, Oulipo, and the novelist Georges Perec, whose book *La Disparition* was composed entirely without any use of the letter 'e') and to what extent it is due to Jabès's Jewishness, only to find that Jabès completely conflates the two roles of writer and Jew. As Jabès wrote in *Aely*: 'I repeat: The sign is Jewish. /The word is Jewish. /The book is Jewish' (*LQ2* 400). And in *Le Livre des Questions*: '*la difficulté d'être Juif, qui se confond avec la difficulté d'écrire; car le judaïsme et l'écriture ne sont qu'une même attente, un même espoir, un même usure*' (*LQ1* 136) 'The difficulty of being Jewish, which merges with the difficulty of writing; for

Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out.' Jabès has pointed out in *Du Désert au Livre*, that he is not saying that all writers are Jews, or that all Jewish people are writers; he is merely noting that the two categories of people – or 'two callings,' in his case a 'double calling' – share a common destiny of closeness to the Book and the word.

Kabbalistic wordplay or 'letter-substitution' runs throughout Jabès's work and features especially in the second half of the *Livre des Questions* series, culminating in *El, ou le dernier livre*. Most noticeably, the titles of the series' final four books (*Yaël, Elya, Aely,* and *El*) are an anagrammatic play on two Hebrew names of God – Yah, and El.

In *Aely* (*LQ2* 423) Jabès writes: '*Le seuil est, à la fois, le sol et le ciel.*' And on page 456:

> *Il est evident, disait-il, encore, que le mot Mort et le mot Univers sont lies l'un à l'autre par la lettre R qui, par ailleurs, les oppose.*
>
> *R pour RESPIRATION.*
>
> *L'air de l'univers est l'air pris à nos poumons par la mort*.

This would be extended in *El*, where we find: '*Privé d'R, la mort meurt d'asphyxie dans le mot*' (*LQ2* 497). Or, again in *Aely*, after a play of letters connecting '*Soif*' with '*sable'*, '*sel'*, '*silence'* (all desert words) and then with '*Foi'*, a desert-born 'faith':

> *Un mot, sans en avoir été empêché, aura traversé le livre. Soif est ce mot, frère du sel et du sable et, aussi, à son ineluctable fin, frère desséché du silence.*
> *… J'ai regardé tomber et se dissoudre dans sa chute, d'abord la lettre S; les trois autres, ensuite. Je crus lire, alors, dans le miroir du vide où, au passage, elles s'étaient un moment contemplées : FOI.*
> *Foi dans la livre. Foi dans la lettre.*
> *…*
> *Dieu est désir inaltéré de la lettre* (*LQ2* 457).

Also in *El*, Jabès makes connections such as: '*Dieu = Vide = Vie d'yeux. Il disait: 'Dieu est vide du vide. Dieu est vie du vide. Il est vide d'une vie d'yeux. La mort est l'oeil du deuil*.' (*LQ2* 542). He also finds '*Dieu'* in the word '*Cieux'*, skies or heavens,

> *Cieux, pluriel silencieux de Dieu.*
> *Dieu. Di eu. Dis (à) eux. Vide entre deux syllabes. Dieu nous donne à dire le deuil* (*LQ2* 542).

And on the following page we find another graphic 'magic rectangle' linking the letters of '*Dieu'* and '*Deuil'*, each letter crossed-out with an X to leave just a final L, recalling the title of the book, or that particular divine Name. Other examples of such 'letter-play' abound throughout Jabès's work, with words and sounds, along with letters, often subtly linked and altered in surprising but harmonious ways. Sometimes, as we have earlier seen with '*Soif'*/*'Foi'* in *Aely*, Jabès sees the letters three-dimensionally, even anthropomorphising them as he does in the following final example, from *El*:

> 'La lettre I, disait-il, trait vertical soutenant, par le milieu, deux toutes petites barres horizontals, est un chalumeau dans la bouche du vide d'où part une bulle si limpide, que seule la lumiere peut, un moment, en trahir la presence.
> 'Point, comme une tête soudain séparée de son corps, pour éclater, redevenue âme dans sa fugace et savonneuse rondeur, au contact de l'espace.
> 'L'écriture est enfance du néant, exorcisation de la lettre, du mot.
> 'A sa seconde phase, le néant n'est plus que silence, vocable gratté, gommé' (*BQ2* 532).

> 'The letter I,' he said, 'this vertical line with its two tiny horizontal serifs, is a straw in the mouth of emptiness which blows so limpid a bubble that only a momentary reflection of the light can betray its presence.
> A point like a head cut off its body and become soul again in its fleeting, soapy roundness, only to burst on contact with space.
> Writing is the childhood of the void, an exorcism of letters, of words.
> In the second stage, the void is pure silence, the words scratched out, erased' (Ibid. 402).

In this '*exorcisation de la lettre, du mot*' (exorcism of the letter, of the word) we again see the 'unmaking' of the word, through its constituent letters, that is performed by the Book (as was earlier quoted from *Le Parcours* in the section on naming). Edmond Jabès saw the initials of his name mirrored in '*Je'*: ''The French word for 'I', *JE*, consists of my initials. Even absent, I would thus have gained the status of living,' he said' (Jabès *The Book of Dialogue* 1). He recognises, in Aely, that 'chaque lettre est un nom.' (LQ2, p.391). So we can see that, even here, Jabès uses attention to the individual letters to literally 'deconstruct', or 'unmake' a word, through a kind of affirmation-through-negation that reflects the apophatic nature of his approach to God (Franke "Edmond Jabès, or The Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God" 102-17).

Maurice Blanchot went further, in a most appropriate reading, when he argued in L'interruption that it is the empty spaces within Jabès's oeuvre, as a whole, which enable and assure the reader's understanding (Blanchot *L'Interruption* 870). Certainly Jabès's work is built on '*le vide'*, the void. Letters come together to form words, phrases, sentences, books – only to fly apart again later as individual letters flying around in the empty space of the void. '*Le blanc qui l'isole fait, de la lettre, un tout. Ce tout est une clé*.'('The blank space which isolates it makes, of the letter, a whole. That whole is a key,' Jabès writes in *Le Parcours*, in the section '*Les Commencements'* under the subheading '*Le secret La lettre'* (24). In this section, Jabès valorises '*l'écrit*', as ultimately elsewhere in his work he affirms the value of the Book ('*si Dieu existe, c'est parce qu'il est dans le Livre'* (*LQ1* 36) 'If God exists, it is because he is in the Book.'). Jabès is, once again, retracing the origins: '*Sumérien est le mot écrit. Dieu à Sumer, en Se dissimulant dans la lettre, a soulévé une partie de Son voile*.' (Jabès *Le Parcours* 24) 'Sumerian is the written word. God at Sumer, in concealing

Himself in the letter, has lifted a part of His veil.' He then returns to the Jewish Kabbalistic creation story: '*Avant la lettre, il y eut le mot; après le mot, il y eut le monde*.' 'Before the letter, there was the word; after the word, there was the world.'

> *Si, grace à l'espace qui, limitant le mot à lui-même, le distinguee des autres et, le confortant dans sa dimension de véhicule de la pensée, en favorise l'épanouissement; si, grace au même espace, mais à l'intérieur du vocable, la lettre, confirmée dans sa plenitude, épouse son destin de lettre, qui peut certifier que ces utiles – indispensables – espaces ne leur paraissent pas, quelquefois, excessifs, démesurés?*
>
> *On pourrait, alors, imaginer un mot seul, une seule lettre dans le vide.*
>
> *Il pourrait y avoir une solitude du mot, de la lettre, coupés de l'origine* (Jabès *Le Parcours* 24f).

If, thanks to the space which, limiting the word to itself, distinguishes it others and, confirming it in its dimension of vehicle of thought, favors its fulfillment; if, thanks to the same space, but at the interior of the vocable, the letter, confirmed in its fullness, espouses its destiny of being a letter, who can certify that these useful – indispensable – spaces don't seem to them, sometimes, excessive, out of all proportion?

> One could, then, imagine a lone word, a lone letter in the void.
>
> There could be a solitude of the word, of the letter, cut from the origin.

Here Jabès has completely reversed – 'made' and 'unmade' – the process whereby letters combine to form words which combine to form sentences which combine to form the Book (both secular and/or Biblical) and the totality of God's extended Name, in a kabbalistic manner, technically 'exploding' the Book (and God's Name) into each of its constituent letters, as the kabbalists do in works such as the *Zohar* and as Midrashic scholars do with Torah interpretation.

> *Et si l'intérêt porté à la lettre n'était que le divin attrait exercé, sur nous, par le secret?*
>
> *La vérité est secrete. Nous aurons, dans notre ferveur, interpellé la lettre en tant que gardienne du secret et, à travers son énigme, comme créatrice du mot à conquérir* (Jabès *Le Parcours* 26).
>
> And if the interest the letter holds for us was only the divine attraction exercised on us by the secret?
>
> The truth is secret. We would have, in our fervour, interpellated the letter as guardian of the secret and, through its enigma, as creatrice of the word to conquer.

'Conquering the word' would always remain, for Jabès, an eternally open-ended project; after all, as he wrote in *El, ou le dernier livre*, '*Une vingt-septième lettre reste, peut-être, à inventer*' (*LQ2* 485) 'A twenty-seventh letter is yet, perhaps, to be invented.'

Conclusion

In this chapter Jabès's various literary techniques have been discussed, from his use of the blank page as breathing space and silence, to his use of the individual letter and the word or 'vocable'; to Kabbalistic word-play and echoings of the Torah. Issues of voice and repetition have been examined. As important to Jabès as these constituent parts of the Book are, the overarching significance of the Book itself for Jabès is not to be denied. The Book is the result of the cumulative use of such techniques as have been discussed in this chapter, in addition to the content that ties it all together. It is to Jabès's ideal concept of the Book that we will turn in the following chapter, comparing it with other idealised notions of the Book across previous centuries, in order to find out what makes the Jabèsian Book unique.

3. THE JABÈSIAN BOOK

In earlier chapters we have already had occasion to discuss Jabès's notion of the 'Book', but here we will discuss it more systematically. Edmond Jabès developed a unique concept of what, ideally for him, constitutes 'the Book.' His 'Book' is secular but 'infinite' (Rothenberg et al. 124-34) and, in contrast to Mallarmé's ideal Book (which will be discussed below), not closed-off and sealed but rather open-ended as the vast Egyptian desert. Jabès examined and interrogated every aspect of the Book – from the point or 'eye' of a full stop, to the manner of placing each word and individual letter within each word, including the blank white space so often liberally surrounding even the prose in his works, and extending to the most profound and complex thematic and poetico-philosophical literary concerns. It is thus, as he stated, an 'exploded' (Ibid.) Book in two senses: firstly, each textual element (graphically or typographically) is separated ('blown apart') and magnified in its isolation, in its poetic and philosophised significance; secondly, the Book is 'exploded' by virtue of the shock of Auschwitz, the experience of Nazi persecution and genocide which that name connotes, and the light in which this places the position of the Jews as a people (the 'people of the Book', as that cliché or truism would have it) from the mid-twentieth century on. 'Never forget that you are the nucleus of a rupture,' (*LQ1* 141) Jabès has one of his imaginary rabbis state in *The Book of Questions* (*c.*1963).

An 'Exploded' Book – Antecedents in French Literature; and Global Followers

Previous exponents of the book as (typographically) 'exploded' include, in France, the Dadaists, and the Surrealists who followed them; the Lettrisme of Isidore Isou; the 'post-verbal' work of Henri Michaux; along with fragmentary work by French poets such as Réné Char – these latter two, as well as the Surrealist Paul Eluard, were personal acquaintances of

Jabès. 'Global followers' include the worldwide 'asemic writing' movement, to use the term coined by Jim Leftwich decades after the styles' inception in isolated instances in North and South America, Europe, and Asia throughout the twentieth century. Asemic writing is essentially mark-making that is extra-alphabetic, or uses imaginary alphabets; it is any writing that is illegible in the semantic, alphabetic sense, to its reader. As a genre it clearly shows Derridean and post-Derridean influences.

It was Derrida who contributed one of the most perceptive critiques of *The Book of Questions* ever published, central to which was 'the Question of the Book' referred to in the essay's title (*WD* chapter 3). Here Derrida explores both the Jewish component of the Book, and the notion of the Book itself, as a technology, as an 'epoch.' The critique is examined in some depth in Chapter Six of this thesis, but several of its main points also will be used as part of the discussion in the present chapter. In what follows I will first outline some of the other cultural and literary concepts of the Book held prior to that of Jabès, such as those of Judaism, of the philosopher Leibniz, and of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (who famously declared that 'everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book') (Huret 135), which defined the turning of an epoch in marked and decisive ways.

Meanwhile, the Book itself, as concept and as artefact or learning device or 'Book of the Law' or paperback, has helped to define humanity in perhaps the most pervasive of ways, across the centuries of its existence. For Jerome Rothenberg, '… there is a primal book as there is a primal voice, and it is the task of our poetry and art to recover it – in our minds and in the world at large' (Rothenberg et al. 13). This is one example of a view that has clearly been significantly influenced by Edmond Jabès's concept of the Book, and by his

authorial voice, both of which are indeed 'primal' – as well as by the prevailing cultural concerns of the 1990s.

Casting an eye over the literary and publishing scenes of the past thirty years, it is as if Rothenberg was recognising that something had 'gone wrong' with the book, and with publishing (at about the same time that the internet went mainstream), and that in the 1990s it was time to reclaim the 'primal' Book. To perhaps save it from the contemporary onrush of digital forms of publishing and from the increasing commercialisation of publishing generally as many small presses went down and the big publishing companies increasingly merged. (And of course poetry was particularly affected by this). Again, this chapter is not the place for a discussion of contemporary publishing industry crises. But, if an analysis of Jabès's Book of Questions led Derrida, in 1964, to see the Book as an almost-outdated 'epoch', here I will cast the net backwards from Jabès to consider 'Book'-theorising throughout past centuries in Europe. We will end up by seeing how Jabès's own concept of the Book differs from its predecessors and in what ways it is uniquely shaped by his own ethnic and cultural background, political experience (as a youth in Cairo, he campaigned against European anti-Semitism), poetics and philosophical ideas, into his own distinct brand of 'Book'-theory and (arte)fact.

To quote Rothenberg once again, on the timely symbiosis between speech, thought, and the written word: ' 'Thought is made in the mouth,' said Tristan Tzara, and Edmond Jabès: 'The book is as old as fire and water' – and both, we know, were right' (Rothenberg et al. 7).

Leibniz's 'Book'

The German philosopher, mathematician and polymath Gottfried Wilhem Leibniz (1646-1716) wrote in his *Théodicée* (*c.*1710) of 'the book of the eternal verities, which contains the things possible before any decree of God' (173); and also of 'the book of fates' -- what is now known as the Akashic Records, the fourth-dimensional astral library of all history and knowledge, past, present and future:

> There was a great volume of writings in this hall: Theodorus could not refrain from asking what that meant. It is the history of this world which we are now visiting, the Goddess told him; it is the book of its fates. You have [372] seen a number on the forehead of Sextus. Look in this book for the place which it indicates. Theodorus looked for it, and found there the history of Sextus in a form more ample than the outline he had seen. Put your finger on any line you please, Pallas said to him, and you will see represented actually in all its detail that which the line broadly indicates. He obeyed, and he saw coming into view all the characteristics of a portion of the life of that Sextus (Liebniz 174).

The above passage both refers to an astral library of books containing all knowledge and history from the beginning to the end of time (existing in a dimension outside time), known to mystics and contemporary scientists (such as Ervin Laszlo[6]) as the Akashic Records, on the one hand, and can be seen as anticipating Ted Nelson's twentieth-century hypertext, on the other. Such prefiguring will prove significant at various points throughout the present thesis, especially in Chapter Ten, where hypertext precursors, including Jabès, are more fully discussed. Suffice to say, at this point, that the Book, to writers such as Liebniz, Mallarmé and Jabès, exists in an eternal dimension, 'old as fire and water', outside time. And for Jabès, as here, in a different manner, for Leibniz, this Book is not necessarily confined between its two covers, in a closed-system fashion; there is thus, for them, no end

[6] See Ervin Laszlo, *The Akasha Paradigm: Revolution in Science, Evolution in Consciousness*; *l'Ipotesi del Campo Psi*; *The Interconnected Universe*; *The Connectivity Hypothesis*; and many others.

to the Book – it is, as Jabès put it, 'Infinite.' As Jabès said in a 1980 interview with Philippe Boyer from *Libération*:

> The ground of these books is the desert, that infinity where there is nothing. It's fundamentally the white page. My questioning, my obsession with the book, may very well have been born from that white page, which becomes written. I never thought of a Mallarméan book, of a totality. To think of a book in advance, as a project, is to limit it. The book for me should be without limits, like the desert, thus an exploded book.
>
> The form imposed itself of itself, a desert form whose only limits are the four horizons. The persons [characters] themselves are engaged in an immense dialogue, in the form of aphorisms, in time and outside of time. They are the voices which explode the book and the place (Rothenberg et al. 124-34).

Thus Jabès's books, including the whole *Book of Questions* series and later works (as we have discussed in Chapters Two and Three of the present thesis), as Philippe Boyer puts it in his opening question of the same interview, seem to 'come from far away, not only geographically but with respect to language and history as well' (Ibid. 124).

It is also important to note, in relation to the passage quoted directly above, that Jabès has stated in *The Book of Margins*, in his 'Open Letter to Jacques Derrida', the significance for him of one of the first early Provençal Kabbalists Rabbi Isaac the Blind's comments on how the Jewish Torah was written by God 'in black fire on white fire', equating to the black ink on white pages of printed books, or writing on screens. This piece of kabbalistic writing will be examined further below in this chapter, in the section on the significance of conceptions of the Book in relation to Judaism. For now, suffice it to add the fact that in Judaism, the Hebrew word for PLACE is one of the names of God, and this was also a crucial and neuralgic point for Jabès, as we shall see in the chapter on Exile.

Mallarmé's All-Inclusive, Enclosed Book

While Mallarmé's ideal Book was to contain everything in the world, it was a closed system – not Infinite. It was, however, to return to Jabès's terms, 'exploded,' in every sense of the word. In fact, a phrase by Mallarmé, following the attack of 9th December 1893 in Paris, where the anarchist Vaillant had thrown a bomb at the Palais Bourbon, expresses this notion fittingly. The attack took place on the evening of the 11th banquet of the literary review *La Plume*, presided over by Auguste Rodin, with a hundred guests in a restaurant on the Place Saint Michel. Following the explosion, the journalist Paul Brulat formally asked the guests their opinion of what had happened: '*Mon cher confrère, veuillez nous donner, en une phrase écrite de votre main, votre impression sur l'explosion de ce soir à la Chambre des Députés.*' To which Mallarmé responded: '*Je ne sais pas d'autre bombe qu'un beau livre*.' And, as Jacques Donguy writes, it is Sartre who took this formula to its most succinct conclusion when he wrote: 'Le poème est la seule bombe', in a 1952 text titled *Mallarmé – La lucidité et sa face d'ombre* (Ancel 41f).

The poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) marked a turning point in French verse, like that of the revolutionary Baudelaire and Rimbaud, before him; and Jabès, as a poet, essentially from 1930-1960, can be seen to be following in the Rimbaldian and Mallarméan tradition, via the Surrealists. As Jabès put it in the 1980 *Libération* interview:

> I recognised myself in a thread that you can find in my poems, *I Build My Dwelling*: I was very early influenced by Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Then my meeting with Max Jacob was a crucial one. … Finally there were the Surrealists. All those poets were my family. On arriving in France I thought I would be able to integrate myself into that literary family but on the contrary a schism occurred. This is even more paradoxical considering that *I Build My Dwelling*, appearing in 1959, two years after I'd come to Paris, was so well received by my friends, writers I respected and who accepted me entirely (Rothenberg et al. 124).

It is intimated here that the 'schism' was related to Jabès's newfound (post-Suez crisis) consciousness of himself as a Jew, and, specifically, to his seeing some Parisian graffiti which said, bilingually, 'MORT AUX JUIFS. JEWS GO HOME' (*LQ1* 56f) We have already seen in Chapter Two of the present thesis how Jabès included this in the text of *The Book of Questions*. He states in the 1980 Boyer interview that he began to write *The Book of Questions*, with its Jewish themes, in response to this incident. Such themes will be explored further at a later point in this chapter, as well as elsewhere in the thesis as a whole; but for now let us return to Mallarmé and his ideas about the Book.

Following in the same experimental, somewhat 'underground' cultural tradition which we traced earlier in this chapter, the great Brazilian intellectual Haroldo de Campos insists on the importance of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* in an unpublished interview from 1992: '*Mallarmé, c'est le Dante de notre âge….La poésie concrète, c'est, disons, le dernier pli de cet espace cosmique, galactique, ouvert par* Un coup de dés *de Mallarmé en 1897*' (Ibid. 28) 'Mallarmé is the Dante of our age….Concrete poetry is, let us say, the last fold [or unfoldment, or extension] of that cosmic, galactic space opened up by Mallarmé's *A Roll of the Dice* in 1897.' Both Maurice Blanchot and Isidore Isou (and indeed a cohort of scholars) have echoed this sentiment; Blanchot said that '*Devant ce poème, nous éprouvons combien les notions du livre, d'oeuvre et d'art répondent mal à toutes les possibilités*.' (Ibid. 29) 'In front of this poem, we see just how badly the notions of the book, of the work and of art answer to all of the possibilities.' Similarly, the depth and extent of Mallarmé's influence upon Jabès, both as a poet and, more partially, in his conception of the Book, cannot be overestimated.

Examples of such influence can be seen in Mallarmé's *Quant au Livre* when he writes of 'The unopened virginal book, moreover, ready for a sacrifice from which the red edges of ancient books bleed; the introduction of a weapon, or page cutter, to establish the taking of possession' (Ruthenberg et al. 19) This reference to the fact that (still today) sometimes French books are sold with the pages still folded together rather than cut, necessitating a page cutter or knife to individually cut the pages to separate them, recalls the line at the very opening of Jabès's first volume of *Le Livre des Questions*: 'Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible. – *Reb Alcé*' (*BQ* 13).

Numerous conceptions of an ideal Book by Mallarmé, such as the project of, as Donguy puts it, '*un livre composé de feuillets mobiles … où un opérateur devait utiliser un nombre fixe de feuillets et reprendre chaque fois les mêmes pages, mais dans un ordre different*,'[7] anticipate digital literature of the 21st century, as Donguy notes: '*Décliner tous les possibles, donc tous les hasards, cela correspond aux possibilités d'un autre médium: l'ordinateur*.' 'To unfold all the possibilities, therefore every chance combination, corresponds to the possibilities of another medium: the computer.' Such a (contemporary) project might fulfil Mallarmé's vision of a poetry composed like music, seeing both as a 'fragmented notation' connected by 'the initiative of whoever receives its lightning bolt.' As he wrote,

> Through reading, a solitary tacit concert presents itself to the spirit that regains, at a lower volume, the meaning – no mental means will be lacking to extol the symphony, rarefied, and that's everything – the act of thinking. Poetry, next to the idea, is Music par excellence – it does not consent to inferiority (Rothenberg et al.).

[7] 'a book composed of moving sheets/ mobile pages … whereby an operator had to utilise a fixed number of sheets and re-use the same pages each time, but in a different order.' (my translation).

Donguy, in seeing Mallarmé's ideas as prefiguring digital forms of poetry, quotes in this context the (Berliner) Dadaist Raoul Hausmann:

> *Notre intention est de réussir l'optophonétique comme dépassement de notre conscience temporelle-spatiale et atteindre à une perfection technique que nous ne sommes pas capables d'atteindre, si nous ne voulons pas reconnaïtre les relations entre l'art pictural et la musique qui, séparément, sont des formes dépassées* (Ancel 43f).
>
> Our intention is to realise the 'optophonetic' as an overtaking of our temporal-spatial consciousness and attain a technical perfection that we are not capable of attaining, if we don't want to recognise the relations between pictoral art and music which, taken separately, are outdated forms.

Such ambitions may be realised today via digital artforms and digital literature. Further, according to André Gide, Mallarmé '*rêva d'un livre qu'il composerait tout entier à la manière d'un tableau et d'une symphonie*.' (Ibid. 44) 'dreamed of a book that he would compose entirely in the manner of a painting and of a symphony.' Such 'multi-media' resonances already implied or latent in the arts may, again, be rendered explicit (even graphically explicit) in 21st century digital poetry or digital art, as we shall see in relation to the writings of Jabès.

As we have seen, in his *Quant au Livre* / *As For the Book*, Mallarmé writes, in the section called 'The Book, Spiritual Instrument,' the 'proposition' that 'everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book' (Rothenberg et al. 14). This result of Mallarmé's so eloquently expressed love affair with the book, takes on whole new dimensions of meaning when combined, as Jabès combines it, with the conception of the Book native to Judaism (Jews have been called, we may remember, the 'People of the Book.'). Additionally, the fact that Jabès's interpretation appeared in France less than twenty years after the events of the Shoah (and France's collaborationist Vichy regime) gave his books added relevance, and resonance, in the Parisian literary, cultural and intellectual scene of the early 1960s.

Jews as the 'People of the Book': Significance of the Book in Judaism, and the Effects of this on Jabès and his Writings

The central significance of 'the Book' in relation to Judaism (though the significance of the Torah as received utterance predates this) really stems from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and the ensuing exile of the Jewish people from their homeland. Ritual animal sacrifices, which could only be performed at the Temple, could no longer take place, and thus from this point on the focus of collective worship centred around Torah study. This observance was what kept the Jews united as a people from the time of exile continuing on to the present day, throughout 2000 years of history, while many other cultures and civilisations of that earlier time were to crumble (Levenson *passim.*).

It is important to note that it is not just, literally, one single book which is denoted by the term Torah – although due to the centrality of the Five Books of Moses, the term 'Torah' often refers to just those books; nor is it solely the Tanakh (or Torah plus Prophetic writings; in other words, what is known to Christians as the 'Old Testament') that makes up the Holy Books of the Jews. There is also what is known as the 'Oral Torah', comprising the Books of the Mishna and the Gemara, both together known as the Talmud (whether the Babylonian Talmud, which is the version used by Jews today; or the more obscure, though shorter (at eleven volumes) Jerusalem Talmud, which held a particular personal and sentimental significance for Jabès, as we shall see below). In addition to the Torah, both written and Oral, there are the Books of Midrash (texts used to shed light on various texts from the Bible), divided into Halakhah (Law) and Haggidah (Commentary – a word, and a notion, which was highly important for Jabès's work); and numerous Kabbalistic (mystical) holy texts such as the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (the Zohar) and the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Kabbalistic Book of Creation). All of the above-mentioned books (as well as many not mentioned above, such as

the Chassidic *Tanya*, or various Mussar study texts) come under the umbrella term of 'received teachings' and thus are holy texts for Judaism.

Of the origins of the Torah, both Written and Oral, in 'black fire on white fire,' one of the first early Provençal Kabbalists, Rabbi Isaac the Blind, writes anthropomorphically, yet symbolically:

> In God's right hand were engraved all the engravings [innermost forms] that were destined someday to rise from potency to act. From the emanation of all [higher] *sefiroth* they were graven, scratched, and molded into the sefirah of Grace (hesed), which is also called God's right hand, and this was done in an inward, inconceivably subtle way. This formation is called the concentrated, not yet unfolded Torah, and also the Torah of Grace. Along with all the other engravings, [principally] two engravings were made in it. The one has the form of the written Torah, the other the form of the Oral Torah. The form of the Written Torah is that of the colours of white fire, and the form of the Oral Torah has coloured forms as of black fire. And all these engravings and the not yet unfolded Torah existed potentially, perceptible neither to a spiritual nor to a sensory eye, until the will [of God] inspired the idea of activating them by means of primordial wisdom and hidden knowledge. Thus at the beginning of all acts there was pre-existentially the not yet unfolded truth [torah kelulah], which is in God's right hand with all the primordial forms [literally: inscriptions and engravings] that are hidden in it, and this is what the Midrash implies when it says that God took the primordial Torah [torah kedumah], which stems from the quarry of 'repentance' and the source of original wisdom, and in one spiritual act emanated the not yet unfolded Torah in order to give permanence to the foundations of all the worlds (Scholem 136-8).

This explains the origins of the Torah. The centrality of Torah study to Jews, and the extreme levels of devotion felt by Jews toward the Torah, has – it may be anecdotally noted – 'seeped out' to extend to other books in printed form, even secular books. There is an almost religious devotion and respect towards the printed volume, both sacred and secular, felt by Jews, as also among non-Jewish booklovers – such as, for example, among writers, poets, and teachers, but also general readers. But it is possible that book-devotion and respect for the book reach unparalleled heights within the Jewish community, where the Book is 'dressed' with ornaments before being paraded around the synagogue by the Rabbi

and others, including children (when it is not held secure within the Holy of Holies); and devotedly touched with one's prayer-shawl, which is then kissed. It is held aloft before and after Torah study, with the congregation directing prayers toward it. [8]The Torah deserves such devotion in part because it is indeed what has kept the Jewish people united and surviving as a people, into the 21st century and, God willing, on into the future.

How did this affect Jabès and his Works?

Jabès relates, in *From the Desert to the Book: Dialogues with Marcel Cohen* (*Du désert au livre: entretiens avec Marcel Cohen*), the story of how he discovered the Talmud:

> My father kept the eleven bound volumes of the Jerusalem Talmud in the Schwab translation on his desk. He had the books from his father and, like him, often immersed himself in them. I believe his cartesian mind found reason for profound jubilation in the Talmud. I'm led to think that it was the implacable logic of rabbinic argumentation that seduced him, rather than the actual content.
>
> My father made me a present of these books – they are among the rare ones I was able to save – a few years before my departure from Egypt. I immersed myself in them only after having started the composition of *The Book of Questions*, as if wanting to check the intuition I had regarding a certain Judaism. Indeed, though I believed myself capable of answering for everything I proposed in my writings, as a writer I also needed to know if I could seriously tie this reflection to that of a traditional Judaism whose questioning also uses the book (*FTDTTB* 72F).

That Jabès did in fact succeed in this endeavour to be true to the spirit, if not the letter, of rabbinic Judaism in *The Book of Questions* and later works, is attested to by the literary and commercial success enjoyed by these books in Europe, as well as in the United States. Such success would not have occurred had the books not been 'spiritually accurate' and felt by the public to 'ring true.' His work is still studied at mini-conferences at, for

[8] This ritual was witnessed and taken part in by myself and others during many Shabbat (Saturday morning) services at Beit Shalom progressive synagogue, Hackney Road, Adelaide. For the universality of the tradition beyond Beit Shalom, see *Mishkan T'Filah A Reform Siddur* (362-70).

example, the Foundation of Jewish Art and History, in Paris's Marais quarter.[9] However, as an atheist, and as one who invented and spoke through the mouthpieces of 'imaginary Rabbis', his works' reception within the observant Jewish community was and is otherwise subdued. But what the above quotation points to is the parallel (and in turn the cultural and factic 'roots' of the parallel) Jabès draws – and Derrida reiterates this in his essay on Jabès – between the Jew and the writer.

Susan Handelman, in her book *The Slayers of Moses: the emergence of Rabbinic interpretation in modern literary theory* (*c.*1982), eloquently summarises this cluster of concepts in a passage which I present here in lieu of the closer examination and discussion of these issues which I go into elsewhere in this thesis (such as in Chapter 6, in the section on Derrida). Handelman first quotes from Derrida's essay on Jabès, where he sees 'a certain Judaism:'

> as the birth and passion of writing. The passion of writing, the love and endurance of the letter itself whose subject is not decidedly the Jew or the Letter itself. Perhaps the common root of a people and of writing. In any event, the incommensurable destiny which grafts the history of a 'race born of the book' onto the radical origin of meaning as literality, that is, onto historicity itself, for there could be no history without the gravity and labour of literality (Derrida *Writing and Difference* 64f).

Derrida thus links Judaism, written meaning and the book in ways that Jabès, for all the profundity of his poetic associations and resonances, had not previously articulated. In relation to Judaism and the Book, Handelman continues:

> The Jew, says Derrida, chooses Scripture (Writing-Écriture), which chooses the Jew. Jabès is correct in perceiving that the difficulty of being a Jew is confused with the difficulty of writing, for Judaism and Scripture (or Writing) are nothing but the same expectation, the same hope. This exchange between the Jew and Scripture makes

[9] I attended one such mini-conference (on Jabès's work) there in May 2012.

> the book a 'long metonymy,' wherein, writes Derrida, the Jewish situation becomes exemplary of the situation of the poet, the man of the word and of writing.

Handelman goes on, paraphrasing Jabès as much as the stated Derrida:

> The poet, too is *chosen*, selected by words, and engages in an arduous labour of deliverance by the poem of which he is the father. The poet is also a *subject* of the book, its substance and its master, its servant and its theme'; and the book is the subject of the poet. For both the Jew and the poet, the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, reflecting on itself. The poet and the Jew, Derrida continues, are not rooted in any empirical, natural present; they are never *here*, but always *there*, where the immemorial past is the future. They are natives only to the word and to Scripture, sons of a land to come.

These preceding ideas also originated with Jabès, in *Le Livre des Questions*, as opposed to with Derrida. To return to Handelman:

> The home of the Jews is a sacred text in the middle of commentaries. Barthes would probably substitute the word *critic* for *poet* here. In his (Rabbinic) words, 'The book creates meaning; the meaning creates life' (Barthes 36).
>
> As both Barthes and Derrida are well aware, this conception of text, commentary and Scripture, of the plurality and infinite play of signifiers, is most disturbing to monist philosophy (Handelman 81).

Handelman's *Slayers of Moses* contrasts the cultural primacy (at least until Derrida), methods and emphases of Aristotelian-based Western philosophy with the plurality and playfulness, and also the poetry, of the Judaic, Rabbinic strand of literary criticism, as seen in Barthes, Derrida, Bloomfield and others. While it is indeed true that some have seen this as a threat to the established order (much as Plato removed the poets from his ideal city), the veracity and profundity of the poetico-philosophical conclusions (and points of departure) of a writer such as Jabès, for example, have never been in question, though they by no means neatly fit into the Jewish side of the equation any more than they do that of philosophy. The 'trump card', for Jabès, is always and forever 'the question,' the spirit of original inquiry, that, with foundations shifting as the desert sands, and equally stripped

bare of all but the essential, animates the paradoxically united, whole non-totality of his literary works. This primacy of the question, in Greek (and hence Western) philosophy, was itself interrogated by Derrida, and an answer to Derrida's question of 'what precedes the question' was found by Emmanuel Levinas, that being the prior fundamental and necessary relation between self and other, and the desire to communicate, to talk, to pose questions to one another.

Conclusion

Derrida, Levinas and Jabès, all three being immigrants to France, all three being writers and thinkers, and all three being Jewish (though in each case, they were outsiders to the community of observant Jews; they were 'Jews to the non-Jews, and considerably less Jewish to the religious Jewish community') – were each, in remarkably different ways, embodiments of the Other, each doubly or even triply so. Along with their fourth mutual friend Maurice Blanchot, it can be said that the very strong thread or tie which united them was that of a complicit and variously radical religious, philosophical, cultural (and even ethnic) dissidence which was so amicably shared between the four writers. They were dissidents in relation to prevailing logocentrisms and orthodoxies in these religious, philosophical, political, cultural and ethnic fields. Meanwhile, it is important to underline the fact that Jabès and Blanchot maintained the necessary curse of a more or less creative, more or less agonised undercurrent of inner solitude (Levinas 20-3; Blanchot 13-32). Details of the creative and philosophical tensions involved in such a 'complicit dissidence' will be examined in the following three chapters of this thesis.

4. MAURICE BLANCHOT AND JABÈS

The Question of (an Exteriority and Interiority of) Literature, and a Complicity in Dissidence of Literary Thought

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Blanchot's influence upon Jabès, especially at that crucial point just after Jabès's arrival in Paris in 1957 when he was starting to write *The Book of Questions* and simultaneously turning into much more of a serious creator of literature. It was Blanchot who in 1949 (in *La Part du Feu*) had written that 'literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question' (Blanchot "Literature and the Right to Death" 300). Steven Jaron (136) has shown how epistolary evidence indicates that Jabès was familiar with Blanchot's literary criticism by 1953. In 1957, literary Paris would still have been registering the effects of Blanchot's *L'Espace littéraire* (*c.*1955), one of his most important theoretical works, and from the publication that year of his novel *Le Dernier Homme*. Jabès's writings, from that point on, show evidence of a prolonged and serious engagement with the writings and ideas of Blanchot – and at times, vice versa, as we shall see. The two authors were friends by correspondence, Blanchot being a towering figure in French literary culture, having retired from public life and leading a reclusive, solitary existence from around 1940. He did this following what remains for critics a problematic period of his life, when he wrote inflammatory nationalist articles for several right-wing, fascist and anti-Semitic journals during the mid-1930s. This aspect of his career was later repudiated by Blanchot as of 1938, and there is no direct anti-Semitism in any of his own writings for these papers.

Negativity at the Heart of Literature

It was Blanchot, before both Derrida and Jabès, who, in his theoretical work, first articulated the negativity, death and absence, the silence and peculiar solitude, at the heart and origin of literature, of literary writing. According to Blanchot, this emptiness is rooted in language itself:

> *Le langage ne commence qu'avec le vide ; nulle plénitude, nulle certitude ne parle ; à qui s'exprime, quelque chose d'essentiel fait défaut. La négation est liée au langage. Au point de départ, je ne parle pas pour dire quelque chose, mais c'est un rien qui demande à parler, rien ne parle, rien trouve son être dans la parole et l'être de la parole n'est rien. (…) Le langage aperçoit qu'il doit son sens, non à ce qui existe, mais à son recul devant l'existence, et il subit la tentation de s'en tenir à ce recul* (Blanchot "La Littérature et la droit à la mort" 38).
>
> Language only starts with the void; no plenitude, no certitude speaks; for the one who expresses themselves, something essential is lacking. Negation is linked to language. From the start, I don't speak to say something, but rather it's a nothing which demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech and the being of speech is nothing. (…) Language notices that it owes its sense, not to that which exists, but to its dropping away in the face of existence, and it suffers the temptation of holding itself to that dropping away.

For Blanchot, 'Night is the book: the silence and inaction of the book' (*SL* 113f), and 'words…' – referring only to each other, rather than to anything outside the text; and nullifying the 'real thing' in its idea, and (in literature, as opposed to everyday speech) nullifying also the concept in the word itself –

> Words, we know, have the power to make things disappear… But words, having the power to make things 'arise' at the heart of their absence – words which are masters of this absence – also have the power to disappear in themselves, to absent themselves marvellously in the midst of the totality which they realise, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves there endlessly (Ibid. 43).

Textual Violence and 'le neutre'

This seems quite a violent or nihilistic way of describing transparency of text (and speech – though in *L'Éspace littéraire* Blanchot would draw a strong line of demarcation between the two, and further, between language as commonly used, and literary language), while giving some insight into the truth or actuality of the process. As Jabès put it (in his Open Letter to Derrida) with regard to the reading of a text, which seems to underscore Blanchot's influence on both writers, '*La lecture du texte se fait à plusieurs niveaux du violence'* (*LM* 48) 'The reading of the text happens on several levels of violence'. It has been noted with respect to Blanchot that the etymological root of the word 'comprehension' means 'to grasp' (com-prendre: to take with), and that there is thus a certain violence inherent in the process of comprehension by which the reader of a text assimilates it to themselves (Haase et al. 338). This is due to what Blanchot sees as literature's opaqueness (its self-reflexivity; its delight in the use of heightened language for its own sake) and its consequent ability to resist comprehension. Moreover, the literary text's 'neutral' voice (as Blanchot termed it, '*le neutre'*; he also called it the 'narrative voice'), which speaks for itself alone and not for the writer or the reader, dislodges or intrudes upon the I-centred subjectivity of both (hence, for Blanchot, its relation to Levinasian ethics, with its openness to the Other). This notion of a certain 'textual violence' in the production and (especially) comprehension of literary writing can be seen to pervade Blanchot's earlier theoretical works (of the 1940s and 1950s), and it finds an echo in Jabès's *Livre des Questions* series of the 1960s, as well as in Jabès's later work. For Jabès, as he writes to Blanchot in *Le Livre des Marges*, '*tout mon sang est d'encre; car l'encre est mon sang*' (*LM* 99) 'All my blood is of ink; because ink is my

blood'. This speaks of a fundamental engagement with writing at the deepest level over the course of a lifetime's work – which both of these writers embodied, in different but mutually influential, and necessarily solitary ways.

Blanchot's Semi-Plagiarism of a Line by Jabès

Before examining that portion of Jabès's writings dedicated to Blanchot, and those of Blanchot's which discuss Jabès, it is important to get closer to the core of an understanding of the nature of the friendship shared by the two writers. For it is precisely a kind of shared solitude, and precisely that solitude specified by Blanchot in the first chapter of *L'espace littéraire*, a shared interiority of writing and of literature and philosophy. More fundamentally, it is also a shared non-direct experience of the Shoah (living through the time of the camps and the deportations) and a shared compassion, horror and despair for its victims and for the fate of humanity and Western culture and thought in the wake of it (in the face of it, in perhaps the Levinasian sense). As the two men never met, to Jabès's great regret, it was indeed a friendship based around and through the edges of a core of (physical) absence – a notion which parallels their philosophies of literature, of writing (*écriture*). Jabès would address this in both of the two books collected in *Le Livre des Marges*.

The first of these two books, *Ça suit son cours*, takes its title from a text by Blanchot (*LM* 55), and its epigraph simply displays, without comment, a curious phenomenon. Juxtaposed are two quotations, the first from Jabès's *Aely* (*c.*1972): '*Mourir, est-ce, dans le livre, devenir invisible pour chacun et, pour soi-même, déchiffrable?*' 'Is it that to die, in the book, is to become invisible for everyone and, for oneself, decipherable?' followed by Blanchot, from *Discours sur la patience* (*c.*1975): '*Écrire, serait-ce, dans le livre, devenir*

lisible pour chacun et, pour soi-même, indéchiffrable?' '…c'est que mourir est une manière de voir l'invisible…' (*LM* 10) 'Would to write be, in the book, to become readable for everyone and, for oneself, indecipherable?' '… it's that *dying* is a manner of seeing the invisible…'. Blanchot was most definitely above and beyond plagiarism, and his reply to, or development or paralleling of Jabès's text can be seen as a tribute to Jabès and his work, not least in the way that in the act of semi-quotation, Blanchot's text enacts what it speaks. Imitation as the sincerest form of flattery? Nonetheless, it remains an incident of literary 'theft' and thus of the kind of 'textual violence' I spoke of earlier as being characteristic of the literary philosophy of both writers. While it could indeed be seen as a more venal theft, the two writers involved, being friends, were both part of the larger philosophical conversation in France to which both texts belong.

Jabès's Writings on Blanchot

This fact is emphasised by Jabès in the page that follows, opening *Ça suit son cours*. First he paraphrases the great Talmudic Jewish authority Hillel's most famous quote, which runs: 'If not I for myself, who then? And being for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?' (Goldin 69f) Jabès's response to Blanchot is, in the current context, worthy of extensive citation:

> *Si ma liberté n'était pas dans le livre, où serait-elle?*
> *Si mon livre n'était pas ma liberté, que serait-il?*
>
> *La vérité ne peut être que violente. Il n'y a pas de vérité paisible.*
> *Toute violence est dans le jour.*
> *La mort qui est la fin du jour est aussi violence arrivée à son terme.*
> *(…)*
> *La violence du livre s'exerce contre le livre: une lutte sans merci.*
> Écrire, serait peut-être épouser dans le verbe les imprévisibles phases de ce combat *où Dieu qui est reserve insoupçonnée de forces agressives, est l'indicible enjeu* (*LM* 11).
>
> If my freedom were not in the book, where would it be?
> If my book were not my freedom, what would it be?

> The truth cannot but be violent. There is no peaceful truth.
> All violence is in the day.
> Death which is the end of the day is also violence arrived at its term.
> (…)
> The violence of the book exercises itself against the book: a fight without mercy.
> To write, would be perhaps to espouse in the word the unforeseeable phases of that combat where God who is unsuspected reserve of aggressive forces, is the indescribable stakes of the game.

This concept of 'textual violence', in every sense, supplies an undercurrent of perhaps unexpected dynamism to Blanchot's formulation of '*le neutre'*, the disembodied voice of the literary text. As Jabès (in part at least) learned from Blanchot, and as he writes in his 'Open Letter to Jacques Derrida', in the same book currently under discussion, *'Tout est remis en mouvement – en cause – par l'écriture'* (Ibid. 50) 'Everything is once again put in motion – in question – by writing.' Later in the same letter he admires Derrida's way of *'[m]ettant sans cesse en question, et avec une rigeur sans pareille, toute réponse entendue*' (Ibid. 51) 'putting relentlessly in question, and with an unparalleled rigour, every understood response' and this is indeed a quality possessed by each of these three authors. What drives this 'incessant', 'interminable' (to employ Blanchot's terms, in a slightly different context and manner) questioning, is not nihilism, textual violence or existential despair but the very foundation (the disappointed expectation) and inverse of these. It is the (search for a basis for) essential and foundational *hope*, the continuing belief in the possibility (even inevitability) of finding an answer to the problem(s) posed by the event-outside-history of the Shoah. An answer that would not be in any sense of the words a 'final solution' (always impossible) but would prove itself in the response of 'hospitality' (*Le Livre de L'Hospitalité* was the title of Jabès's final book) , an openness to 'the Other' (via Levinas's ethics) and to the *étranger* which bespeaks of the kind of post-Nietzschean and post-Shoah humanism which was so warmly espoused by Jabès, and which ensures that, for everyone, whether

there's a God or not, we may all treat one another with kindness and basic humanity, and events such as the Shoah might not happen.

In '*L'inconditionnel*', the first of Jabès's three articles dedicated to Blanchot in *Le Livre des Marges*, he 'gently attacks' – or rather seeks to understand and remedy – a certain coldness (or is it merely a vast expanse of infinite '*blancheur*', whiteness, blank-ness) in Blanchot. He does this by tying together the latter's self-imposed solitude and silence and the concept of '*le neutre*', as he analyses what exactly it is that links himself with Blanchot in a friendship that, at Blanchot's insistence, lacked physical presence or togetherness.

Jabès begins: '*Le neutre est, en quelque sorte, le nerf du noeud. […] Dénuer le neutre ; reculer à l'infini les frontiers de la solitude. […] Inconditionelle presence, absence. Partout, toujours le même vide*' (*LM* 83) 'The neutral is, in a way, the nerve at the heart of the problem. To undo the neutral; to push back to infinity the frontiers of solitude. […] Unconditional presence, absence. Everywhere, always the same void'. After quoting Blanchot, and their mutual friend Lévinas '*Les hommes se cherchent dans leur incondition d'étrangers*.' (Ibid. 84), 'Men search for each other in their incondition of being strangers' from *Humanisme de l'autre homme.* IV. L'étrangeté de l'être), Jabès states '*Nous lie le livre, où plutôt ce qui tend à se faire livre* et qui jamais ne se fera' (Ibid. 86) 'The book unites us, or rather that which tends towards making itself book *and which never will*.' Thus he begins the process of turning the '*inconditionnel*' space of absence into '*l'illimité*', a positive quality, the infinite 'unlimited.' He then paraphrases and applauds Blanchot's *La Folie du jour* (*'Un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais.'* 'A story? No, no story, never again.'), before directly posing the question: '*Comment dire ce qui nous lie? – En me référant à l'exil, peut-être, qui est le centre, la tache d'huile. / L'écriture est toujours réfoulée. / Outre-vie, outre-nuit se*

tient le livre.' (*LM* 86) 'How to say what unites us? – By referring to exile, perhaps, which is the centre, the stain of oil. / Writing is always repressed. / Outside-life, outside-night stays the book.' A little further on, Jabès answers his own question, in poetic fashion:

> *Nous lient encore le silence ; l'insolence du puits sec ; les longs apartés du sable avec le sable.*
> *Nous lient le blanc de la blancheur du signe et le noir du signe devenu lisible à l'apogée de sa blancheur.*
> *Nous lie l'écartèlement de la pensée aux lisières de l'impensée ; l'impossibilité de dire et d'être dits.*
> *Nous lient des siècles d'inquiétude et cette petite lueur vers laquelle convergent nos mâles énergies:* la dissidence (Ibid. 87).
>
> What unites us still is the silence; the insolence of the dry well; the long asides in a private conversation of the sand with the sand.
> What unites us is the white of the whiteness of the sign and the black of the sign become legible at the height of its whiteness.
> What unites us is the tearing apart of thought to the boundaries of the unthought; the impossibility of saying and of being said.
> What unites us is centuries of concern and that little glimmer towards which our male energies converge: *dissidence.*[10]

This shared dissidence of the questioning spirit, the pursuit of the fundamental question of human civilisation (which could be summed up, or paraphrased, by Adorno's famous dictum that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Weber et al.), or impossible) to its root – indeed, as Derrida put it in his essay on *The Book of Questions*, to 'exhume' the 'ancient root' that is the history of the 'People of the Book', the Judaism which is, as Jabès put it, 'the nucleus of a rupture' – such a profound and all-encompassing yet interior, inwardly directed, intellectual, poetic, literary and solitary (yet, in its own way, communal, a way of engaging with the national and wider community, in Blanchot's post-1968 sense of the word 'political') dissidence, was obviously held in common by the four thinkers mentioned in this paragraph, and by many more of their epoch besides them.

[10] My translation.

For Jabès, importantly, it was also a religious and spiritual dissidence. His was a 'Judaism after God', he was no longer able to belong to any normative Judaism (he was not religiously observant; though he kept a menorah – seven-cup Jewish candelabra – in front of him on his writing desk). He studied Talmud and Kabbalah, yet did not attend synagogue services. He was deported from his homeland of Egypt for being Jewish, and he felt the sting of French postwar anti-Semitism as an exile in Paris. His Jewishness was both historically-based—determined by external events—and timeless. His roots lie in the infinite sands of the Egyptian desert, where it is said, and written, that God spoke to Moses, and indeed to the entire collective of Israelites with the proclamation of the Commandments at Sinai. Jabès, in his books, questions and argues with God – as did Abraham and Moses, among many others in the tradition and/or lineage; but his God does not exist. Perhaps He exists only as a figure in that interior expanse, the very 'literary space' that Blanchot delineates in his book of that title, the space of solitude that (for him) belongs to the literary work. 'If God is, it is because he is in the Book,' (*LQ* 36) wrote Jabès.

Blanchot, despite his youthful mistaken fascism, was always something of a philo-Semite, and in any case was genuinely horrified by the inhumanity of the Nazis. We will discuss his relationship with Judaism further below. At question was the scope of what it meant to be human, what moral extremes or extent to which human behaviour could sink, as well as what it meant to be a Jew in the modern era. The Shoah sundered any notion of civilizational 'progress', showing the barbarism of a world culture or society in which recent advances in technology only served to increase the capacity of those in power to slaughter exponentially more and more innocent people, under the guise that they were foreigners, or an embodiment of the 'Other.' The dehumanisation of the Other can be seen as the

central problem. Hence the crucial relevance of the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas as a turning-point in this equation, which we will pursue further below.

Blanchot on The Book of Questions and on What it Means to be a Jew

Turning to Blanchot's chapter, '*Être Juif*' (in *L'entretien infini*, 1969) (Blanchot "L'entretien infini" 180-90; Blanchot "Interruptions" 43-54)), we can see evidence of his in-depth appreciation of, and insight into, some of the textual and existential subtleties of the Jewish experience, pre- and post-Shoah, and similarly those of Jabès's *Livre des Questions* books in particular. Blanchot prefaces his remarks on Jabès with a related, more generic point about the differing nature of the pauses that necessarily occur in a conversation, as the talk shifts from one speaker to another. He categorises (in phenomenological fashion) two forms of pause. The first is the naturally-occurring 'breathing of discourse,' where 'the break … still plays into the hands of the common speech' (Blanchot "Interruptions" 44). This is the play of the dialectic: 'To stop in order to understand' (Ibid.). The second type of pause Blanchot distinguishes as more of a disjunct; it is a silence that 'introduces waiting', which 'measures the distance between two speakers, and not the reducible distance, but the irreducible' (Ibid. 45). This he equates with what is delineated as the fourth type of communication within 'interrelational space' (Blanchot "Interruptions"), naming the first three types as: 1) objective communication; 2) subject-to-subject; 3) the close relation of the familiar form of speech. Each of these three forms of communication, Blanchot notes, 'tend toward unity,' where 'the 'I' wants to … identify him with myself' (Ibid.). The fourth type, however, is one in which

> there is no unifying effort. I no longer try to recognise in the other the person or the thing which a common measure (belonging to the same space) still keeps in a continuous or uniting relation to me. Now, what is at stake is the strangeness

> between us, and not only that obscure part which escapes our mutual knowledge and is nothing but the obscurity of being within the 'I' – the singularity of the singular 'I' – a strangeness which is still relative (an 'I is always close to another 'I', even in difference, competition, desire, and need). What is at stake now and has to be accounted for is all that separates me from the other, that is to say, the other as I am infinitely separate from him: separation, cleft, gap which leaves him infinitely outside me, but also claims to found my relation with him on this very interruption which is an interruption of being – otherness through which he is, I must repeat, for me neither I, nor another existence, nor a modality or moment of universal existence, nor a superexistence (god or non-god), but the unknown in its infinite distance.
>
> Otherness which is under the sign of the neutral (Blanchot "Interruptions" 45).

It could be argued that this quite clinical taxonomy implicates (and doubly so, by implication of context) the Jew in his/her own 'otherness'; both parties are responsible for the nature of the pause. However, leaving that aside, it can be noted that this is the sense of '*le neutre'* to which Jabès was referring when in *Le Livre des Marges* he called it '*le nerf du noeud*' (*LM* 83)('the nerve of the knot'/'the very crux of the heart of the problem'.

Blanchot goes on to delineate three different types of this 'waiting' pause. Such 'waiting assures not only the beautiful hiatus that prepares the poetic act, but also … other forms of cessation, very deep, very perverse, more and more perverse:'

> We have 'distinguished' three: one where the void becomes achievement; another where the void is tiredness, misery; and another ultimate, hyperbolic one where idleness shows (and perhaps thought). To interrupt yourself in order to hear yourself. To hear yourself in order to speak. Finally, to speak only in order to interrupt yourself and make possible this impossible interruption (Blanchot "Interruptions" 47).

It is in just such 'interruptions' that Blanchot locates Jabès's *Livre des Questions*.

In the second part of Blanchot's essay (which was originally published separately, in *L'Amitié*), he discusses Jabès's *Book of Questions* directly, while implying that this pause of 'infinite silence', this underlying distance of the 'irreducible' type, (what Blanchot calls 'the

empty, desertlike waiting' (Ibid. 49)) in fact is what speaks through Jabès's book and is part of what makes up its resonance and gravity of tone. (This however could be seen as stereotyping Jabès, through his Jewishness, by too readily equating 'the Jew' with 'the Other'; Blanchot thus falling victim to the very error he is at pains to point out).

Blanchot begins with an admission that he 'had promised … to say nothing about the book, the books of Edmond Jabès –

> a silence I prefer to keep in regard to certain austere, even remote works that have been talked about too quickly and, as a result of their strange renown, are reduced to a fixed and categorised meaning. There are thus certain works which trust in our discretion. We do them a disservice by pointing to them or more exactly, we take from them the space which had been that of reserve and friendship (Blanchot "Interruptions" 47f).

The 'fixed and categorised meaning' spoken of here would probably have been that of 'Holocaust representation', the post-Shoah literary novelty of a Jew speaking about what constitutes the 'Jewish situation/condition.' Or simply that of 'the latest sensational/fashionable book.' *Le Livre des Questions* spoke to its place and time, and was in the mid-1960s a 'literary hit.'

Blanchot, summing up the book's form, continues:

> In the totality of fragments, thoughts, dialogues, invocations, narrative movements, and scattered words that make up the detour of a single poem, I find the powers of interruption at work, so that the writing, and what is proposed to writing (the uninterrupted murmur, what does not stop), must be accomplished in the act of interrupting itself (Ibid. 48).

The space between fragments or differing genres/forms in The Book of Questions, the generous white space in his (poetic) work, indeed parallels Blanchot's neutral, infinite pause of 'waiting.' (It must be remembered that Blanchot's later works, too, were in themselves increasingly fragmentary). As Jabès's oft-quoted comparison would have it,

'Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing down.' It is '*le cri'* (the scream, or cry) that seeps faintly through the silence (or white space) which must, perforce, hold itself down while the words of the text are permitted their turn to speak (following the logic of Blanchot's 'Interruptions'). Yet, like the white space, the silence and the cry both permeate and seep out through the words also. Like the Hasid from Martin Buber's collected Jewish tales, who Blanchot mentions at the end of his chapter:

> I can explain myself better by what Martin Buber tells us of one of the last representatives of Hassidism, who was a contemporary of the crisis, a crisis whose essence is still very much with us: he was, we are told, capable of a modest silence without pretension, but nevertheless infinite; neither the authority of ecstasy nor the effusion of prayer was expressed in the silence, only a 'voiceless cry,' the holding back of 'mute tears.' This voiceless cry, adds Buber, is the universal reaction of the Jews to their great suffering: when 'it's going badly,' the cry 'is fitting.' It is also, at all times, the word that is fitting for the poem, and it is in this word, its hidden solitude, its feverish pain, and its friendship, that Edmond Jabès has found, precisely, the fitness (Blanchot "Interruptions" 51f).

It was in no way superficially, then, that with *Le Livre des Questions* Jabès became something of a spokesperson for his people in his generation, as part of the literary community in Paris in the 1960s. He had poignantly presented the right message at the right moment: the humanity, in its suffering, of the desecrated Other. It is in the shared, vast space of just such a 'modest silence' as that referenced above by Blanchot, that he and Jabès found their friendship. '*Votre lettre n'interrompt pas le silence*,' Jabès quotes, in one of his pieces dedicated to Blanchot (Blanchot "Interruptions" 51f) 'Your letter does not interrupt the silence'. Perhaps the significance of Blanchot's example, for Jabès, lies, above all, in the tone of his writing (in the original, very dignified, French), more even than in anything he actually said, or any particular points he got across (as piquantly and deeply insightful as these were).

'*Être Juif*' clearly contains several sources and precursors that Derrida would later take up in his own writings on Jabès, such as where Blanchot writes:

> Here, in *The Book of Questions* – the very title speaks of its insecurity, its painful force – the rupture is not only marked by poetic fragmentation at its various levels of meaning but also questioned, suffered, regrasped, and made to speak, always twice, and each time doubled: in history, and in the writing in the margins of history. In history, where the centre of the rupture is called Judaism. In the writing, which is the very difficulty of the poet, the man who wants to speak justly – but which is also the difficult justice of Jewish law, the inscribed word that cannot be played with, and which is spirit, because it is the burden and fatigue of the letter (Blanchot "Interruptions" 48).

These are some of the exact points, and in several cases the exact turns of phrase, which Derrida makes use of in '*Edmond Jabès et la Question du Livre*' (they are, of course, the salient themes of Jabès's book). Blanchot enunciates for the first time what would become some of the key concepts, for Jabès, (and for Derrida discussing him), of writing 'in the margins', of 'the inscribed word … which is spirit' and 'the burden and fatigue of the letter'; he highlights the Judaism which is, as Jabès put it in *The Book of Questions*, 'the centre of a rupture', and the importance of the link between the justice of its Law and the poetic and 'historic' 'fact' of the Broken Tablets – which, as Blanchot writes, mean that 'it is from an already destroyed word that man learns the demand that must speak to him: there is no real first understanding, no initial and unbroken word, as if one could never speak except the second time, after having refused to listen and having taken a distance in regard to the origin' (Ibid. 49). These are themes that were important to the genesis of Derrida's deconstruction.

The concept (or ideal, or practice) of poetic freedom, as opposed to rabbinic exegetical authority, (so important to Derrida's essay), is also first developed here by Blanchot. First he explicates one of the central 'roots' of Jabès's text:

> ‘The homeland of the Jews,’ says Edmond Jabès ‘is a sacred text in the middle of the commentaries it inspired.’ The dignity and importance of exegesis in the rabbinic tradition: the written law, the unoriginal text of the origin, must always be taken on by the commenting voice – reaffirmed by the oral commentary, which does not come after it, but is contemporaneous with it – taken on, but unjoined, in this disjunction that is the measure of its infinity. Thus, the simultaneity of the first scriptural text and the context of the second word that interprets it introduce a new form, a new interval in which it is now the sacred itself, in its too immediate power, that is held at a distance and, if we dare to say it, execrated (Blanchot “Interruptions” 49f).

The above quote shows the importance of *commentary* to Jabès, and to the Jewish tradition. It must be said that the measure of the philosophical and poetic depth of empathy with which Blanchot takes on the Jewish side of the tradition in this essay (as contrasted with the ‘Hellenic’, or the Heideggerian side) is nothing short of remarkable. His longtime close friendship with Emmanuel Levinas (and support for him during the Nazi era) no doubt accounts for this. But Jabès (perhaps unlike Levinas) has taught Blanchot, through *The Book of Questions*, that poetic freedom may demand (or be ruled by) a different kind of heteronomy than strict allegiance to the letter of the Law. To continue tracing the way in which Blanchot discerns (or untangles/de-fuses) here the dichotomy represented by the figures of the poet and the rabbi, I must quote from what is, in my view, perhaps the most important (page-long) paragraph in ‘*Être Juif*.’ Blanchot continues:

> By the arduous and scathing experience that Judaism carries with it – a shattering that continually rises, not only up to the Tablets of the Law but on this side of creation (the breaking of the Vessels) and up to loftiness itself; by a tradition of exegesis that does not worship signs, but which sets itself up in the gaps they indicate – the man of words, the poet, feels involved, confirmed, but also contested and in his turn contesting. We can do nothing concerning his interruption. On the one hand, we cannot answer his austere criticism, since he is the guardian of strictness, and has denounced poetic affirmation, the neutral word that attests to no one, neither recognises nor leaves any traces, and dwells without guarantee (Ibid. 50).

'There is no trace but in the desert,' as Jabès later wrote (with Levinas, in *Le Livre des Marges*) – and the poet's (or the Jew's) dwelling made of words remains as unstable and threatened as any dwelling in the desert –

> But on the other hand [Blanchot continues], how can the poet – the man without authority and without control, who accepts as his most personal duty the task of answering this interruption that continually breaks the seal of his word and makes it faithfully unfaithful – rely on a first message, the reference to the unique, the affirmation of the Transcendent Being which, through the distance between Creator and created, pretends to give us the exact dimension of the interruption, and thus its foundation, while at the same time intercepting the message? (*LM*).

It is at this point that I question Blanchot's equation of the 'interruption' which is according to him the 'foundation' of the interrelational perception of another person (or people) as 'Other' (the 'irreducible distance', as we have seen above) with the Jewish notion or perception of 'the distance between Creator and created.' To see the one as cause of the other (so to speak) is a fundamental philosophical error (a bias towards the Hellenic and the Christian – where the Divine is embodied in a living person, rather than transcendent – way of seeing things), and moreover one which is characteristic of a certain brand of anti-Semitism which Blanchot quite definitely distanced himself from, even throughout the 1930s. It is a manner of philosophically blaming the Jews for their own persecution at the hands of racists. I do not see this as Blanchot's conscious intent, rather that he is adhering to such a brand of culturally sanctioned, reflex anti-Semitism despite his declarations to the contrary, although of course he remains responsible for it. To return to the (related) discussion of poetic autonomy / heteronomy. Blanchot continues:

> And doubtless the poet is neither the support nor the substitute of multiple gods, nor the unseeing face of their absence. And neither is he the one, dedicated to the word, who would turn this vocation and devotion into something arrogant, an idolatrous power, a privilege of enchantment, or a kind of magic that could be manipulated, even in illusion, with absolute freedom. He is neither free nor in heteronomy, or more exactly, the heteronomy he is in is not that of a moral law.

> His discourse is dis-course [‘*dis-cours*’]. And this dis-course makes him responsible for the interruption on all its levels – as work; as fatigue, pain, unhappiness; as inaction of the work’s absence – and constantly urges him to carry through the act of breaking (a rupture that is the skill of rhythm), for he knows that the word, too, can become power and violence, a power, even though forbidden and bearing interdiction, that risks becoming the simple power that forbids (as perhaps comes to pass in all ethical systems).
>
> ‘Do not forget that you are the essence of a rupture (Blanchot “Interruptions” 50).

It perhaps needs to be made clear that Blanchot has already, prior to this point in the essay, written of and against the ‘rupture suffered in history, where catastrophe still speaks, and where the infinite violence of pain is always near: the rupture of violent power that has tried to make and mark an entire era’ (Ibid. 48). This passage which I have so extensively quoted from, above, bears a number of difficult truths; difficult, and problematic, on more than one level. It is clear that Blanchot’s ‘*Être Juif*’ in a sense necessitated Derrida’s clarifying essays on Jabès (and on the poet and the rabbi) in *Writing and Difference*.

Jabès on Étrangeté, Death and ‘Le neutre’

If, as Jabès has written elsewhere, ‘*L’écrivain est l’étranger* par excellence’ (Jabès *Un Étranger Avec*) ‘The writer is the outsider *par excellence*’ – and both poet and Jew are emblematic of the *étranger* ; and if ‘*L’incondition de Dieu est … tributaire de cette première et ultime evidence: la condition même de son incondition:* n’être pas’ (*LM* 201) ‘the uncondition of God is … tributary of that first and ultimate evidence: the very condition of its uncondition: *not to be*’ – then Jabès perhaps resolves some of this above-mentioned difficulty when he writes (on one of Blanchot’s own favourite themes, that of death), at the conclusion of his final piece on Blanchot in *Le Livre des Marges* (‘*L’inconditionnel, II’*):

> *Y a-t-il une condition ou une incondition d’étranger? L’étrangeté serait-elle une incondition dont la mesure est celle même de la coupure qui la rejette et que la pensée investit?*
> D’un bout à l’autre de la mort*, serai-je tenté d’écrire.*

'Votre lettre n'interrompt pas le silence.'

…

Et si la parole était, elle-même, le silence?
Et si le silence n'était, au fond, que l'accomplissement d'une parole extrême ; comme l'invisible pourrait bien être le dernier état du visible?
Dieu meurt en Dieu.

(L'inconditionnel ne s'oppose pas au neutre.
Il est, dans son essence, sa radicalité …
Il est la parfait condition de la neutralité
au sein de l'incondition ou de la condition, la
vie pleine, l'absolu du lieu: il a la place
qu'occupe la mort dans la vie) (*LM* 201).

Is there a condition or an uncondition of outsider? Would outsiderness be an uncondition of which the measure is the very same as the cut which rejects it and that thought espouses?
From one end to the other of death, would I be tempted to write.
'Your letter does not interrupt the silence.'

…

And if speech was, itself, silence?
And if silence was only, at heart, but the accomplishment of some extreme speech; as the invisible could well be the final state of the visible?
God dies in God.

(*The unconditional is not opposed to the neutral.*
It is, in its essence, its radicality…
It is the perfect condition of neutrality
at the heart of the uncondition or of the condition, full
life, the absolute of place: it takes on the space
which death occupies in life.)

The above section perhaps could have been titled, 'Approaching the Invisible' (as represented in a sample of francophone Egyptian atheistic Judaism in the 20th century…). It discusses the silence and space for death and for outsider-ness, and it is Jabès's ultimate and very intimate summation of his friendship with Blanchot.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how deeply the influence of Blanchot reverberates through the work of Jabès, and vice versa. The importance of absence, solitary creativity, white space

and the pause are only a few aspects of this influence. It comes down to appreciating the ultimate seriousness of literature as literature, as an art form. This will be further developed in the following chapter when we look at Derrida's response to Jabès's *Book of Questions*, as Derrida was also profoundly influenced by Blanchot. What ties these three figures, in addition to Levinas (as we shall see further below), together, is that very sense of complicit dissidence against all prevailing logocentrisms or orthodoxies in French literary, religious and also political culture. In the next chapter we shall see how Derrida, in relation to Jabès, becomes emblematic of these concerns.

5. EDMOND JABÈS AND JACQUES DERRIDA

Edmond Jabès and Jacques Derrida, 1964-75: 'Rabbi-Poet[s] of the Book'[11]

Although Derrida's work as a whole militates against the notion of a 'central' idea, the 'central idea' of Derrida's 1964 critique of Jabès's *Book of Questions* was the way in which Jabès equated the two figures of the Poet/writer and the Jew. Central to both is the concept of the Book. But the 'heart of the question' of the Book (*WD* 69) for Derrida in 1964, was the concept of Absence. Of prime importance is the Jewish God as the absent Other, both from the origin and historically, particularly post-Shoah; as well as the issue of deferral (the presence of absence; the absence of unmitigated Presence) at the origin of creation, and in writing – from the Broken Tables on, and in the Jewish, and Jabèsian, 'necessity of commentary' as 'the very form of exiled speech' (Ibid. 67). These issues, among others (which shall be explored further in what follows), lead to Derrida's emphasis on what he sees in Jabès's work as the central 'nonquestion' of the Book, the 'unpenetrated certainty that Being is a Grammar … that the book is original, that everything belongs to the book before being and in order to come into the world' (*WD* 76f) This is not far from Derrida's famous, indeed notorious, statement that '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'—'there is nothing outside the text' (*OG* 158). As Jabès puts it, 'The world exists because the book exists' (*LQ* 37); and, 'If God is, it is because He is in the book' (Ibid. 36). Before both of them, Hasidic master, R. Zadoq ha-Kohen of Lublin, has been quoted as saying: 'Thus I have received that the world in its entirety is a book that God, blessed be He, made, and the Torah is the commentary that he composed on that book' (Wolfson 497).

[11] Though the phrase 'Rabbi-Poets of the Book' was first written by Jabès in the forepages of *The Book of Questions* volume one, I am indebted to Terry Veling for the title; see his article,'Edmond Jabès: Rabbi-Poet of the Book' (13-30), for a good introduction to the work of Jabès.

Derrida situates *The Book of Questions* 'in the margins' of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit,* with its philosophising of the figure of the Jew and of the Jewish God. Along with Jabès, Derrida posits a uniquely 'Jewish writing' which would be at odds with the logocentric, metaphysical 'literature' of the Christian mainstream worldview (Kronick *passim.*). To perform another Hegelian reading of Jabès (alongside Derrida's, and Kronick's) is outside the scope of the present study; however, in what follows I will outline my interpretation of how Derrida reaches this position.

Derrida on Jabès: on Judaism and Writing

Jabès always insisted on the ultimate universality of the Jewish condition in his works. ('You are all Jews, even the anti-Semites, for you have all been designated for martyrdom,' (*LQ* 184) yells an S.S. officer near the end of *The Book of Questions*.) It is a particular extension of this idea of universality to see the figure of the Jew in that of the writer, and vice versa. Jabès speaks of the 'difficulty of being a Jew, which coincides with the difficulty of writing; for Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out' (*BQ*122; *LQ1* 136). Such a conflation would seem to rest on stereotypes, on essentialisms (at least half of which would be racially-based, if we accept Judaism as being an ethnic category as well as a religion, which the existence of atheist Jews such as Jabès would necessitate) – and there have been those who have disagreed with Jabès's drawing of this parallel.[12]

Derrida writes that '[f]or Jabès, … the Jew is but the suffering allegory', and goes on to describe, in Hegelian fashion, how 'the Jew is split, and split first of all between the two dimensions of the letter: allegory and literality' (*WD* 75). (Allegory and historicity – two

[12] To quote Joseph G. Kronick in *Derrida and the Future of Literature* (193): 'In France, Henri Meschonnic has attacked 'the conjunction of the Jew and writing' in Jabès and Derrida'

entwined dimensions of the Torah, and indeed also of *The Book of Questions*.) It is these 'two dimensions of the letter' that give rise to Derrida's 'two interpretations of interpretation' (WD, 67): that of the rabbi, and that of the poet. The first prioritises the Law, the Truth, literality, history, the referent behind words; the second affirms the free play of language, of signs. As Jewish intellectuals, philosophers, and writers, both Derrida and Jabès are 'split' between the two; hence, rabbi-poets of the Book. 'But', asks Derrida, (and its importance to this thesis's central argument necessitates the lengthy quotation),

> what if the Book was only, in all senses of the word, an epoch of Being (an epoch coming to an end which would permit us to see Being in the glow of its agony or the relaxation of its grasp …)? … If the form of the book was no longer to be the model of meaning? If Being was radically outside the book, outside its letter? … If Being lost itself in books? If books were the dissipation of being? If the Being of the world, its presence and the meaning of its Being, revealed itself only in illegibility, in a radical illegibility which would not be the accomplice of a lost or sought after legibility, of a page not yet cut from some divine encyclopedia? If the world were not even, according to Jaspers's expression, 'the manuscript of another', but primarily the other of every possible manuscript? … And if Death did not let *itself* be inscribed in the book in which, as is well known moreover, the God of the Jews every year inscribes only the names of those who may live? And if the dead soul were more or less, something other in any event, than the dead letter of the law which should always be capable of being reawakened? The dissimulation of an older or younger writing, from an age other than the age of the book, the age of grammar, the age of everything announced under the heading of the meaning of Being? The dissimulation of a still illegible writing? (*WD* 77).

Such a 'radical illegibility' exists '[p]rior to the book (in the nonchronological sense)' (*WD* 77); '[o]riginal illegibility is not simply a moment interior to the book, to reason or to logos; nor is it any more their opposite, having no relationship of symmetry to them …' (Ibid.). This is one step beyond Jabès's book, though its 'Jewish writing' originates from and simultaneously approaches it, as it tells the Shoah story of two lovers: Sarah, returned mad from Auschwitz, and the poet Yukel, who later commits suicide. To return to Derrida: '[O]riginal illegibility is therefore the very possibility of the book and, within it, of the ulterior and eventual opposition of 'rationalism' and 'irrationalism' (Ibid.). The Being that is

announced within the illegible is beyond these categories, beyond, as it writes itself, its own name.' (*WD* 77) In thus describing the split, the *différance*, at the very origin or root of written language (the necessity of the Broken Tablets), which is exposed by Jabès in *The Book of Questions,* this Derrida passage anticipates Michaux and the post-verbal, to the global asemic writing movement, and to mainstream 21st-century visual culture in which the majority of people do not read books. But the philosopher is clearly talking about something different here.

It was Hegel who situated Jews and Judaism in the past, in and as 'history'; for Derrida, the Book as historical 'epoch' parallels this, the centrality of the Book being a particularly Jewish concept. As he writes of *The Book of Questions*:

> in question is a certain Judaism as the birth and passion of writing … Perhaps the common root of a people and of writing. In any event, the incommensurable destiny which grafts the history of a '*race born of the book*' (*Livre des Questions*, p.26) onto the radical origin of meaning as literality, that is, onto historicity itself (*WD* 64).

Yet *The Book of Questions* is also, and primarily, the book of a poet: both the book of the poet-author Jabès, and the book of the narrator, the character of the poet Yukel Serafi. After writing that the Jew is the self-reflexive 'fold'/*'pli'* that is history, and noting how, in Jabès's book, 'the situation of the Jew becomes exemplary of the situation of the poet,' Derrida goes on to clarify:

> The poet is indeed the *subject* of the book, its substance and its master, its servant and its theme. And the book is indeed the subject of the poet, the speaking and knowing being who *in* the book writes *on* the book. This movement through which the book, *articulated* by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history. For in its representation of itself the subject is shattered and opened. Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation (Ibid. 65).

It is in this (non-philosophical, non-speculative, non-Hegelian) way that Jabès does indeed attempt to inscribe Death, and the shock of the Shoah, into *The Book of Questions*; into the fabric of the writing itself – its spaces, its fragmentary forms of prose, poetry, *récit* and (imaginary) rabbinical commentary, interspersed throughout. In every word, he writes down to the very bone of the letter. And at the heart (or should I say the marrow) of the letter, of the origins of writing, and of the book itself, -- as Derrida states – is fundamental Absence, silence, and the abyss. This is true both on the metaphysical andexistential and on the physical levels. Each letter is shaped by the white space of the page, space separates and therefore creates words, and so on; while, metaphysically, at the origins of writing, for Derrida, is *différance*, the split, the absence of the Other and the mere 'trace' of a Presence that was never truly present. 'All letters form absence. / Thus God is the child of His Name,' (*LQ* 51) Jabès has Reb Tal comment at the front of '*Le livre de l'absent*' (one of the 'books inside the book' of *The Book of Questions*). And, as he later wrote in his open letter of reply to Derrida's article, 'The absence of the book is located both before and beyond the word. But it is also written in the margin of writing, as its erasure' (*BM* 41).

Absence, Exile and the Desert

At base, for Jabès, 'Il n'y a de trace que dans le désert,' (*LM* 168) as he would later title an essay on Lévinas and 'the Other'. The sense of deferral implied in the concept of the trace was of great importance to Derrida. According to Derrida:

> [w]riting is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation … The Judaic experience as reflection, as separation of life and thought, signifies the crossing of the book as an *infinite* anchoritism placed between two immediacies and two self-identifications (*WD* 68).

Between the Garden and the Promised Land, between the beginning and the end of the Book, lies the infinite, unlimited Desert of exile. 'The desert-book is made of sand, '*of mad sand*,' of infinite, innumerable and vain sand. '*Pick up a little sand, wrote Reb Ivri … then you will know the vanity of the verb*" (*WD* 68, citing *LQ* 126). In his analysis of the absence at the heart of *The Book of Questions*, Derrida first distinguishes an 'absence of locale' – which, I suggest, is a feature of the universalising element Jabès places in the book – and makes much of the way of the desert, the way of wandering paths, of endless detours, within the book and within Judaism.

> The poet – or the Jew — protects the desert which protects both his speech (which can speak only in the desert), and his writing (which can be traced only in the desert). That is to say, by inventing, alone, an unfindable and unspecifiable pathway to which no Cartesian *resolution* can impart rectilinearity and issuance (*WD* 69).

The Egyptian desert is the pathless place of infinite paths, and the site of a very Jewish exile, which naturally breeds stories, songs and (especially) commentary. For, as Derrida writes, '[n]othing flourishes in sand or between cobblestones, if not words' (Ibid.) Jabès, too, knows how to read the desert: 'In each grain of sand a sign surprises' (*LQ* 168). And 'a blank sheet of paper is full of pathways' (Ibid.) to be taken and re-taken 'ten times, a hundred times' (Ibid.). Derrida, in the section of his article quoted above, is here positioning both the poet and the Jew (and doubly so the Jewish poet) as the Other of Western, Christian, logocentric, metaphysically-(Presence/Being)-based 'literature', or sociocultural 'worldview' itself. But this 'Other' (like God) is an absent other; both the Other and its absence are present only in the form of their 'trace' (this will be further discussed in the section on Lévinas, who introduced the term in this context; see below).

The absence of the writer, and by extension, that of God, is the second aspect of absence noted here by Derrida. God is indeed absent for the post-Shoah atheist Jew in *The Book of Questions*; but He is mentioned on almost every page. And the writer is absent, as one can only accomplish in writing (not in speech); the writer must be able to 'leave speech,' according to Derrida, to step back and separate themselves from it, as one 'leaves something behind.' 'For the work,' Derrida states, 'the writer is at once everything and nothing. Like God.' He quotes Jabès speaking through Yukel Serafi: 'I, Serafi, the absent one, I was born to write books. (I am absent because I am the storyteller. Only the story is real.)' (*LQ* 64). Yukel continues: '*J'ai fait le tour du monde de l'absence*.'(Ibid.) 'I've done the world tour of absence.'

In *The Book of Questions,* despite its autobiographical passages, Jabès is in part the transparent author privileging the historicity of his Shoah-time narrative, though two factors complicate this. One is that, as Derrida puts it in his critique, this very historicity – the 'fold' of it, 'ce pli' – *is* the Jew, embodying the complete story of all that that entails. The second factor is the way in which the thematic content of the book necessitates its technical literary form, which is fragmentary and non-linear, open-ended, and multi-genre (incorporating letters, poems, rabbinical commentary, aphorisms, songs, stories and so on). As Derrida puts it:

> The fragment is neither a determined style nor a failure, but the form of that which is written. … As opposed to Being and to the Leibnizian Book, the rationality of the Logos, for which our writing is responsible, obeys the principle of discontinuity. The caesura does not simply finish and fix meaning … But, primarily, the caesura makes meaning emerge. … Jabès is very attentive to this generous distance between signs (*WD* 71).

It is a question, once again, and in a very literal sense, of absence. The absence of the writer, the absence of signs, the absence in which each word and letter and segment

swims; the absence at the heart of each letter; finally, the absence of God. One almost wonders how there remains so much to be discussed, or on which to provide a commentary or critique. Yet, 'ça suit son cours d'encre…' as Jabès wrote at the end of his open 'Letter to Jacques Derrida on the Question of the Book' (*LM* 42) and, as Derrida had already written, 'The necessity of commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of exiled speech' (*WD* 67). For both Derrida and Jabès, writing itself is not just 'exiled speech', writing is itself exile.

Writing in, and as, Exile

As Derrida notes, writing as exile (in addition to other themes of *The Book of Questions*) was already a Kabbalist concept (Ibid. 74). And, as always, the exiled Jewish immigrants find their homeland in the Book (though not necessarily the same book; like the Broken Tablets, they are 'the same but different', to use a Derridean phrase partially describing *différance* – 'origin and repetition' (Ibid. 67)). But of course the exile is not merely geographical, not merely that form of exile which makes it such that both '[t]he Poet and the Jew are not born *here* but *elsewhere*. They wander, separated from their true birth. Autochthons only of speech and writing, of Law. '*Race born of the book*' because sons of the Land to come.' It is also not only a matter of exile from God, or God's exile from the Jew or from humanity. Derrida writes:

> The breaking of the Tables articulates, first of all, a rupture within God as the origin of history.
>
> *Do not forget that you are the nucleus of a rupture* [quoting *LQ* 137].
>
> God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak, in order to astonish and to interrogate us. He did so not by speaking but by keeping still, by letting silence interrupt his voice and his signs, by letting the Tables be broken. In *Exodus* God repented and said so at least twice, before the first and before the new Tables, between original speech and writing and, within Scripture, between the origin and the repetition (*Exodus* 32:14; 33:17). Writing is, thus, originally hermetic and secondary. Our writing, certainly, but already His, which starts with the stifling of

> his voice and the dissimulation of his Face. This difference, this negativity in God is our freedom, the transcendence and the verb which can relocate the purity of their negative origin only in the possibility of the Question (*WD* 66f).

In drawing such apophatic conclusions Derrida is in fact affirming 'poetic autonomy,' as he puts it; for 'the difference between the horizon of the original text and exegetic writing makes the difference between the rabbi and the poet irreducible,' and as a result of this split – 'the original opening 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' (*WD* 66f). For the way of the rabbi, representing the Law, and that of the poet (creative play) are so disjunct that '[p]oetic autonomy, comparable to none other, presupposes broken Tables,' as Derrida writes, recalling Nietzsche's Broken Tables of the Law as well as the original Biblical version. And (finally) '[t]he wisdom of the poet thus culminates its freedom in the passion of translating obedience to the law of the word into autonomy' (Ibid.). An autonomy so necessary, according to Derrida, that without it, 'and if passion becomes subjection, the poet is mad' (Ibid.). So the wandering of exile, and the questioning, and the 'wandering question' (*LQ* 26; where Jabès describes the story of Sarah and Yukel, portrayed in the very novel in which this passage appears, as having 'the dimensions of a book and the bitter obstinacy of a wandering question.') is actually the 'ticket to freedom'; the exiles are on-their-way to the Land-to-come (on the condition of distance, freedom and space to wander and question; that is, on the condition that the Land-to-come never actually arrives) – which the writer Jabès, along with Blanchot, would turn into 'The Book-to-come'/ '*Le Livre à venir*' (which is the title of a book of Blanchot's). In the case of Derrida, it foreshadows his later 'non-religious messianism', which could be interpreted as a generalised zeal for an ideal collective future. Paris turned out to be his 'Promised Land', in a sense; but for Jabès, a true exile following Egypt's 1956 expulsion of its

Jews, the dream of finally residing in his true cultural 'patrie', the capital city of his mother-tongue, came to an abrupt halt when he saw some anti-Semitic graffiti on a Paris wall (saying 'MORT AUX JUIFS. JEWS GO HOME.')[13], which brought home the fact that as a Jew (and as a writer) he didn't really belong in post-Vichy Paris either.

An Intellectual Kinship in Paris

Exile, then, was something the two thinkers and writers lived out on a real and practical level as well as philosophically, metaphysically and existentially, and in religious or spiritual terms. As fellow North African-born and bred (secular, atheist) Jews turned Parisian intellectuals and writers, sharing many of the same concepts and concerns in their work (the 'fold', the 'trace', commentary, Jewish atheism and the God concept, the concept of the Book, the question of what constitutes writing and 'literature' itself, and so on), Derrida and Jabès shared a close intellectual kinship and were friends in Paris from the mid-1960s up until Jabès's death in 1991. As well as reading each other's work, they corresponded (Crasson et al. *Edmond Jabès . ()(*66-9), and according to French writer, friend and biographer of Jabès, and Derrida scholar Didier Cahen, Derrida 'often visited Jabès on the way back from teaching at the *École Normale Supérieure in rue d'Ulm'* (*PEJ* 46f). The passage is worth quoting in full (in the original French) in order to establish the nature of the friendship between Derrida and Jabès:

> *Le philosophe consacre* au Livre des Questions *un essai d'une profondeur sans équivalent; 'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre' est publiée dans la revue* Critique *en février 1964, puis repris dans son grand livre* L'Écriture et la Différence *(1967). Les liens entre les deux hommes sont très forts. Derrida rend souvent visite aux Jabès, en sortant de l'ENS, rue d'Ulm, où il enseigne. En retour Jabès publie dans* Ça suit son cours *une 'Lettre à Jacques Derrida sur la question du livre' qui lui permet de faire le point sur l'une de ses rencontres les plus décisives de l'époque. Autant*

[13] This story is told in greater detail in the *Book of Questions* Cycle chapter, above.

> *qu'au philosophe, c'est à l'homme que Jabès s'addresse, ayant choisi l'intimité de la correspondence pour situer l'échange au plus près de l'entente. La lettre témoigne de l'attention la plus vive à l'inquiétude et à l'angoisse de l'autre comme ferment de questions et de l'échange: 'Tout est remis en movement – en cause – par l'écriture' lira le destinataire. C'est bien cette radicalité qui unit si fort les deux amis* (Cahen "Écrire Sa Vie" 46f).
>
> The philosopher consecrates to The Book of Questions an essay of a profundity without equivalent; 'Edmond Jabès and the question of the book' is published in the review *Critique* in February 1964, then again in his great book *Writing and Difference* (1967). The ties between the two men are very strong. Derrida often visits Jabès, upon leaving the ENS, rue d'Ulm, where he teaches. In return Jabès publishes in Ça suit son cours a 'Letter to Jacques Derrida on the question of the book' which permits him to bring to a point one of his most decisive meetings of the era. As much as to the philosopher, it's to the man that Jabès addresses himself, having chosen the intimacy of correspondence to situate the exchange at the closest understanding. The letter testifies to the most vivid attention to the anxious concern and anguish over the other as a ferment of questions and of exchange: 'All is again put in motion – in question – by writing' the recipient would read. It is truly this radicality which unites so strongly the two friends.

It was indeed this shared 'radicality' (though in ultimately divergent directions) of their approaches to literature and to writing, including a fundamental interrogation into exactly what constituted these, (and in fact what was the 'price' or the 'hidden cost' of what each really entailed), which united Jabès and Derrida in their literary and philosophical pursuits. This is evident even in Derrida's letter to Jabès of 1/1/66, despite the part on the second page where he admits: '*Je ne suis pas 'poète*.'

So perhaps, given his statement in the letter, I am remiss in calling Derrida another 'Rabbi-Poet of the Book' (following Terry Veling's description of Jabès); perhaps 'Reb Rida'[14] had more of the Rebbe in him. I still think that so much of Derrida's writing is pure poetry in its playfulness with language, even in the early days of his article on Jabès. This is not to diminish its relevance as serious philosophy. For example: 'Entre la chair trop vive de l'événement littéral et la peau froide du concept court le sens. C'est ainsi qu'il passe dans le

[14] As Jabès names one of his imaginary rabbis; Derrida ends his article by quoting Reb Rida's aphorism.

Livre.'/ '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' (Derrida 75). While the metaphors here are highly poetic, the passage has a seriousness as philosophy in the way that it states that meaning itself runs 'between' the warmth of raw everyday reality and the coldness of conceptual thought – and thus it finds its way into the Book. The Book is perhaps the most overarching of these metaphors, which is to take nothing from its denotation as a humble paper artefact handled regularly by almost all people in day-to-day life.

Jabès's 'Open Letter to Jacques Derrida on the Question of the Book' (*c.*1975)

Jabès starts his return letter to Derrida with the statement that 'To speak, to be silent, is already to evoke difference' (*LM* 43); he further discusses 'differance', deconstruction, absence, writing and the Book in its later pages. He initially continues with a comparison between (to evoke Lévinas) the 'totality' and 'the fragment' ('where the totality is blank, the fragment must also be blank' (Ibid.); or, later, 'Only in fragments can we read the immeasurable totality' (Ibid.) – we are once again at the infinite blank page with its many paths, and it seems as if, in spiritual terms, Jabès has already (through literature, through a process of profoundly Jewish writing) passed into what in Vedic terms is called the *brahmajyoti* or 'realm of infinite white light'); with 'a drop of blood' which is 'the sun of the book'; with an 'incendiary letter' and 'the word' as a 'world in flames' (Ibid.). (After such 'alchemy of the word'[15], there is thus no doubt about which of the two is the real poet, though Jabès was taking his inspiration from the phrase 'word-fires', which Derrida had used in an interview (*BM* 43)). The 'drop of blood', from the wound of circumcision which

[15] 'Alchimie du verbe' is a phrase from Rimbaud's 'Une Saison en Enfer'; the reference is quite appropriate given that Jabès has stated in interviews how Rimbaud was one of his great influences as a poet. See *FTDTTB*.

marks Jabès as a Jew (shared with Derrida), recalls the 'signet rouge' which opens *The Book of Questions* (in the first section, titled 'Au Seuil du Livre'): '*Marque d'un signet rouge la première page du livre, car la blessure est invisible à son commencement.* Reb Alcé' (*LQ* 15). As the 'drop of blood' is the 'sun of the book' which lights up its 'white totality' (in which the real 'fragments' are the white spaces), so the entire *Book of Questions* is saturated with its author's unique but essential Jewishness, which seeps through every one of its words and letters. The wound at the beginning of the book is also the wound at the origin of writing. In his 'Open Letter .. ', Jabès compares the flames of the *menorah* (Jewish candelabra) which illumines his desk, to the flame of pure fire with which God writes (and in which the letters of His name are written), for – as he quotes a Kabbalist rabbi (who was originally referring to the Torah), to answer his 'burning question' of 'What is the book?': *'le Livre serait cela qui 'est gravé avec le noir du feu sur le blanc du feu*'', 'the Book would be that which 'the black of fire carves into the white of fire'') (*LM* 49). Indeed, vivid images of fire, flames and light run throughout this letter – from the opening's 'incendiary letter' of the 'word' w; the image of 'God' who 'never finishes burning' in the 'quatre incendies de Son Nom' (Ibid. 43); the idea of God's Book (written in flames) being consumed in 'the blaze' that is the 'little fires' that constitute 'all our books' (Ibid. 44); the phrase 'Fire is virginity of desire' (Ibid.); and the image of the lighthouse, 'its stone tower and its beacon', of which Jabès or Derrida 'become the honourable *gardien;*

> *mais on oublie que la phare n'est là que pour bilayer de sa lumière l'océan et pour diriger le navire dans la nuit où il baigne, afin de lui permettre de jeter l'ancre à bon port.*
>
> *Le movement du livre est celui des vagues amoureuses, agressives que le plume, tel un faisceau de feux, vient éclairer dans le soir où s'épanouit l'écriture et dont le gardien du phare et l'écrivain enregistrent à distance les soupirs, les grondements, les cris et les râles;*

> *c'est pourquoi il n'y a pas* de plaisir – *seul* – du texte*, ni d'ennui, ni d'effroi, ni de rage* (Ibid.)*.*
>
> but one forgets that the lighthouse is only there to bathe the ocean with its light and to direct the ship in the night where it sails, in order to enable anchoring at its allocated port of call.
>
> The movement of the book is one of loving, aggressive waves that the pen, like a ray of fire, comes to light up in the evening where literature lights up and of which the lighthouse keeper and the writer register at a distance the sighs, groanings, cries and railings;
>
> That's why there is no *pleasure* – alone – *of the text*, neither boredom, nor terror, nor rage.

Thus Jabès cautions the Derrida of the at times endlessly tangential and impassioned texts of deconstruction. He compares them, later in the same letter, and approvingly, to *'la propagation d'innombrables foyers d'incendie à l'extension desquels contribuent vos philosophes, vos penseurs, vos écrivains favoris ramenés à leurs écrits*' (*LM* 50), 'the propagation of innumerable bushfires to the extension of which contribute your philosophers, your thinkers, your favourite writers reduced to their writings.' Derrida is for Jabès here the origin of all this fire and light imagery. Deconstruction is a blazing fire, and later he states that Derrida's term différance is a '*synonyme de mine. Mine, baton de graphite pour la trace; mine, richesse du sous-sol; mine, explosif*' (Ibid. 53) 'synonym of mine. Mine, stick of graphite for the trace; mine, richness of the subsoil; mine, explosive.') For, in every sense, 'there is no protected preserve of writing,' according to Jabès here, who attributes the words to an 'unappreciated rabbi' who wrote 'three centuries ago' (Ibid. 44), recalling Derrida's words (from his 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book'): 'Jabès knows that the Book is possessed and threatened' (*WD* 76). For, as Jabès states near the start of his letter, while its prevailing tone and purpose is that of 'dialogue in time' between two 'incessant questioners of the letter and the sign seized in their perilous becoming of the word and the book' (*LM* 45), it is also '*afin de contenir mon irritation de ce que*

l'interrogation de la parole soit devenue, soudain, pour beaucoup, objet de jeu truqué dans sa hardiesse manquée, savante mainmise sur ce qui ne se laisse jamais saisir de front' (*LM* 45), 'so as to contain my irritation at that which the interrogation of speech may have become, suddenly, for many, object of a rigged game in its audacity manqué, cunning sleight-of-hand on that which never lets itself be seized front-on.' Jabès, though by all accounts a man of great humour, play and fun[16], was on a literary/philosophical/spiritual or mystical (if not religious) 'quest' which he took very seriously. Questions about the Book were questions of the utmost seriousness and indeed gravity, and Jabès's writing (with its sober, ascetic quality) reflects this at all times. For him, criticism and literature were far from being merely a game or a bag of tricks to be deployed and purveyed by the larger-than-life personality of a very public intellectual. Such notions were anathema to Jabès, who, like his early mentor Max Jacob (who had converted to Catholicism), was ever the reclusive, monkish writer in his cell. He places a Derrida quote as the epigraph to his open letter: *'… j'ai régulièrement essayé de remettre la philosophie en scène, dans une scène qu'elle ne gouverne pas*.' (*LM* 42), '…I have regularly tried to put philosophy back on the stage, on a stage which she doesn't control.' The image brings to mind theatrical improvisors on stage; in his early days in Egypt, Jabès had strong theatrical interests.

I do not want to give the erroneous impression that Jabès was not firmly in favour of both Derrida and deconstruction. Indeed, it was precisely the seriousness, rigour and radicality of both writers' literary 'quests' that made the two such firm friends, exchanging

[16] As discussed by those who knew him personally at the 2012 'Journée des études' devoted to Jabès upon the centenary of his birth, which took place at the BNF in Paris (and which I was fortunate enough to attend).

ideas from the 1960s up until Jabès's death in 1991. It is in this same 'Open Letter …' that Jabès pays tribute to Derrida with the following words:

> You always, and with unequalled rigor, question anything that is taken for granted. What immediately won me over in your writings and the resolve they convey, what commands our respect in your profound attempt to overcome all obstacles and grasp the ungraspable, is the total acceptance of risk that runs through all your work and quickly wears out those who would nail you down. It is precisely the kind of risk that the book in process of being made and unmade forces us to take at each stage of its evolution, its articulation, and its abandonment (*BM* 44).

The metaphors used by Jabès throughout this piece, as we have seen, show that he saw Derrida as (metaphorically!) a rich and explosive source of intellectual fire and light ('*Vous brûlez ce qui se tenait en bordure des flames. Rares, très rares, sont ceux qui vivent avec autant d'intensité l'écriture*' (*LM* 53), 'You burn that which flitted from the flames[/was about to burst into flames/ hovered above the flames]. Rare, very rare, are those who live writing with such intensity.'), a 'blood brother' of sorts due to their shared atheism and Jewishness, their shared faith in the Book, and to their shared status as 'lighthouse keepers' at the 'extreme outpost of the coast', their 'pens casting a searchlight' over literature and the true nature of the Book. Jabès brings the letter to a close on a very friendly note:

> So that it is in the distance where we embrace our differences, in the detours, the backs and forths where we come up against 'difference,' that the book presents itself as a book printed on an absence disseminated by the page. Absence of an absence dismissed and unravelled by presence (*BM* 47f).

It is the nature of a similar presence – of self and other, initiating hospitality, dialogue and the possibility of questioning – which will be explored in the next chapter, in relation to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

Conclusion

Thus we have seen how Derrida and Jabès shared concerns such as the trace and Absence; the Book as 'epoch'; the Rabbi and the Poet, and the Jew. Derrida was, alongside Blanchot, perhaps the most perceptive of Jabès's early critics, though he did not use deconstruction in his approach, as this had in a sense already been undertaken by Jabès prior to his writing process. The amicable relationship between the two writers is clear, and is also expressed by the way they respond in print to one another's works: with the highest admiration, fellow-feeling and regard. This would also prove to be the case with respect to both writers' response to Emmanuel Levinas, as we shall explore next.

6. JABÈS AND LEVINAS, AND THE QUESTION OF 'THE OTHER'

This chapter examines the relationship between Jabès and Emmanuel Levinas and the nature of the influence of Levinas's work and ideas upon Jabès, such as the Levinasian concepts of the 'trace', 'the face', and 'the Other'. In elucidating these concepts I refer to Jacques Derrida, in particular his extension of the Levinasian 'trace' and its relation to 'the Other'; in addition, references to Todorov and Lacan help highlight the way in which selections from Jabès's writing blend theoretical concepts such as Levinas's 'Other' via Lacan's 'mirror stage' to create a depth of poetic significance. The chapter also posits the partial origins of Levinas's idea of 'the trace' in a Jewish Torah story which is also discussed herein. The chapter consists in large part of a close reading of Jabès's written piece on Levinas, 'Il n'y a de trace que dans le desert' (first published in *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas* in 1980), and also examines Levinas's short piece on Jabès in *Noms Propres*. It can be seen, as a result of the above elements, that the Levinasian concepts of 'trace', 'face', 'place' and 'Other' had a highly significant influence on Jabès's work – though they by no means went unquestioned -- and were developed and deepened in their significance by the poet, at times even to the point of good-humoured parody. Additionally, the chapter shows the importance of Derrida as a linking figure and important developer of Levinas's ideas; and the crucial but not formative extent of the influence upon their work of the Judaism which was one of the factors that linked both Derrida and, particularly, Levinas, with Jabès.

Levinas

Although the figure of Emmanuel Levinas has been somewhat marginalised in Anglo-American philosophy until the last two decades, and even sidelined in at least one

important French overview of 20th century philosophy[17], his cultural and multidisciplinary influence has expanded exponentially since his death in 1995. In France, where Levinas was the first to introduce the work of phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger, in his own right he has long been acknowledged as something like the godfather (or bogeyman) of 20th century ethics, whose work (in breaking from Husserl and Heidegger's privileging of ontology, of 'Being' and (the very un-Jewish) 'presence') inaugurated the recognition of the place of 'the Other' – with the concomitant ethical imperative (grounded in, but not limited to, Levinas's own Jewish tradition and heritage). It is in this capacity that we see him as a penetrating and pervading influence upon the writings and thought of Jabès. This was the case in particular following the latter's arrival in Paris in 1957 where the two writers (also the two Jewish men) were later to become acquainted.

When considering the (amicable) relationship between these two writers, it is as if a certain tension evinced between Jabès and Levinas (and perhaps also between Levinas and Derrida) in the two articles under discussion in this section of the thesis, lies directly in the specifically Jewish tension between the compulsion felt from God and the strictness and literality of the Law, on the one hand, and the relaxation and broader humanity implied by the Broken Tablets of the Law, the 'broken tables' which was for Derrida in *L'ecriture et la difference* a Nietzschean surpassing and sundering of any obligation to or ties with previous authority (such as, for example, Heidegger). Levinas obeyed Jewish authority much more closely, with considerable gravity and attempted persuasion, while for Derrida and Jabès,

[17] Although this work depends on Levinas for its title, while avoiding any mention of him in the text: Vincent Descombes, *Le même et l'autre: Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933-1978)*.

what mattered was 'the book', and 'the wound at its root'[18] in the secular but quasi-religiously respected, if not fetishized, sense.

Importantly, Levinas believed in God and was an actively religious Jew, whereas Jabès and Derrida were both (Jewish) atheists. This goes beyond being merely a question of religious background, as the forms and styles of thinking implicit in each side of the cultural / philosophical Hebraic / Greek dichotomy are fundamental to an understanding of both Derrida's philosophical project and the thought and literary work of Jabès. Levinas too, with his positing of an 'outside' or 'otherwise than Being', 'beyond Essence', reached the same conclusions via his Hebraic track, and thus plays a crucial role in the development of this philosophical schema.

Derrida on 'the Question', 'Being', 'the Other' and 'the Trace'

In a recorded outtake from the film *Derrida*,[19] titled 'On Being', Derrida explains, firstly, that it is the predominant Western view that philosophy began with the Ancient Greeks and thus with their privileging of the *question*, for example '*Ti esti?*' or 'What is the sense or meaning of this?'; 'What is this?' This entails a privileging of 'Being', of what it means that something 'is' (or, in French terms, what is the real meaning of *être* / 'to be'?), which has dictated the terms of Western philosophy since its inception, all the way through to Heidegger who, importantly, challenged it and interrogated (as would Derrida after him) both the primacy of the question itself, questioning itself as the primary mode of thought, and the implicitness and all-inclusivity of Being. Heidegger, and Derrida, asked, through their work, 'what precedes the question?' and found as an answer the relation between one person and

[18] *WD* 77: 'For what Jabès teaches us is that roots speak, that words want to grow, and that poetic discourse takes root in a wound.'

[19] Dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, Jane Doe Films Inc., 2002.

another (an 'other') providing the possibility of discourse. (See Blanchot's 'L'entretien infini' and 'L'interruption' for a significant analysis of this that directly relates to Jewish issues via a consideration of certain stylistic and technical features of Jabès's *Book of Questions*.)

As for 'Being', we have seen how Levinas 'escaped' the previously all-inclusive Being or 'presence' of ontology to find an 'otherwise than Being' through his concepts of the Other and the trace. For Derrida, the trace – which he calls in this outtake 'the non-presence of presence', or the presence of absence (which Jabes made concrete throughout his work, both stylistically, typographically, and thematically – in both philosophical and religious terms) – bears evidence of 'a past before the past' and 'a future beyond the future', in other words it escapes the 'presence' of the 'present' moment. The 'trace', for Derrida, bears witness to what has always been, since the very origins, and to what will always remain and still be there to haunt whoever or whatever is around 'after the future'.

'Pas un nom d'emprunt mais d'*empreinte*. / Ô traces; atemporelles traces,' writes Jabès in *Le Parcours* (23), evoking Derrida's extended sense of the term to include writing and other forms of 'mark-making.' Jabès's authorial voice always speaks from a (humble) standpoint of eternity, as if from the other side of the grave. From *The Book of Questions* on, it is a voice marked by death and by the presence of absence – both for personal, biographical reasons but equally due to the impact of the Shoah. Levinas, too, devoted most of his career to the thinking-through of an adequate philosophical response to the Shoah, and much of his work (not least the anti-Heideggerian turn) can be seen as being dedicated to the memory of its millions of victims.

Levinas's Influence on Jabès's Work

Levinas's great insight was that, as he wrote in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), 'pre-existing the plane of ontology is the ethical plane' (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 201; Ibid. *Totalité et infini* 175). In the simplest sense, a Levinasian, and before that, specifically Jewish – more than, for example, Greek – notion of hospitality towards the stranger, of openness toward the 'Other', would become in Jabès's later work a large part of a solution to some of the questions and problems earlier posed in *The Book of Questions* and subsequent volumes. It provides an 'answer' to what used to be called 'the Jewish question', or rather the 'problem' that Is/was the 'position' of the Jew as being 'the centre of a rupture' (Jabès *Le Livre des Questions* 141) or the site of a 'rupture' (or, before the rupture, in Derridean terms, a 'fold') at the centre of (particularly 20th-century) history.[20] As Elliot R. Wolfson wrote, in discussing his fellow Levinas scholar Edith Wyschogrod,

> the claim that the individual destiny of the Israelite nation expresses its universalism is the conceptual underpinning of the reciprocity between philosophy and Judaism that runs its course throughout the Levinasian corpus, even if on occasion he insisted that he kept his confessional and philosophical writings distinct. Wyschogrod succinctly summarized the Levinasian position: If Judaism is to do its job, it must be understood; it must somehow enter into this universal language that it cannot do without; philosophy, in turn, must become Judaized (Wolfson 328-47 – online reference, specific page numbers not available).

For philosophy to 'become Judaized' would demand a resolution of the tension we have already seen between the Hebraic and the Greek dimensions of philosophy. We have seen how, for Jabès, the universality of the Jewish condition was a crucial component of his

[20] See Jacques Derrida, '*Edmond Jabès et la Question du Livre'*, p.100: '*Car il ne saurait y avoir d'histoire sans le sérieux et le labour de la littéralité. Pli douloureux de soi par lequel l'histoire se réfléchit elle-même en se donnant le chiffre. Cette reflexion est son commencement. La seule chose qui commence par le reflexion, c'est l'histoire. Et ce pli, et cette ride, c'est le Juif. Le Juif qui élit l'écriture qui élit le Juif en un échange par lequel la vérité de part en part se transit d'historicité et l'histoire s'assigne en son empiricité*.' 'For there could be no history without the seriousness and labour of literality. The painful fold of itself by which history reflects itself as it ciphers itself. This reflection is its beginning. The only thing which begins by reflection, is history. And this fold, and this furrow, is the Jew. The Jew who elects writing which elects the Jew, in an exchange by which truth thoroughly suffuses itself with historicity and history *assigns itself* in its empiricity.' See section on Jabès and Derrida, below, for further comment on this passage.

thought. In any case, in terms of Jabès's work we arrive at the 'answer' of 'hospitality' via another Levinasian term (which Derrida would also take in interesting directions, some of which will prove relevant here), the *trace*.

The Levinasian 'Trace' and 'the Other'

To Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology, Levinas would effectively oppose, throughout his foregrounding of ethics, an *aphanology* – a kind of internal impression, a subtle experience, or, in B.G. Bergo's explicatory words, 'that which is described as undergone but which does not become phenomenal' (Bergo 88). It is this kind of borderline experience which constitutes or is revealed in the 'trace'. According to Bergo in this passage, as she paraphrases Levinas, it is the 'aphanology' of 'passive sensibility' that makes 'the experience of alterity', or 'Other-ness', 'possible'. For clarity's sake I will provide the full quote:

> The experience of alterity … is possible by virtue of the aphanology – that which is described as undergone but which does not become phenomenal – of passive sensibility: first, as the sensibility to the good of natural elements; second, as the sensibility to the call of the other which permits us to receive him and give account of ourselves (Ibid.).

I hope I am not too grossly distorting the philosophical argument if I put forward the following interpretation: that it is precisely this kind of *incommunicable* internal experience that does indeed create the perception of 'Otherness', its alienation and separation – such as, for example, the fundamental incommunicability of the horrors of the experience of Auschwitz and the extermination camps for the Jews (and Poles, homosexuals and dissident intellectuals, among other minorities) in the 20th century during the Nazi era. Moreover, it is art – including poetry and literature such as those books by Jabès which directly and poetically dealt with precisely the position of the Jews and the above-mentioned horrors of Auschwitz – it is art which militates against such separation and the creation of social or

racial 'Otherness', by attempting to share the (otherwise incommunicable) internal experience. The artist or poet both portrays the internal experience through the viewpoints of the work's characters, and relates the otherwise incommunicable experience to that of the reader's ordinary life by comparing common elements that the two may share, or by providing parallels between similar experiences. This is partly why Jabès so insistently conflates the nature and function of being Jewish on the one hand, and being a writer on the other. Art may also, as does the work of Jabès (along with much 20th century postwar art), go further and (attempt to) communicate the very incommunicability of the experience itself. The use of fragments and ample blank space, as well as a spare or sparse authorial voice 'from the other side of death', as well as the use of multiple genres, multivocality and the use of imaginary rabbis' voices and commentary, all function to this effect (and affect) in Jabès's work. (All of these factors also reveal a sustained engagement on Jabès's part with Levinas's concepts of the Saying as opposed to the Said). And to communicate incommunicability, to indicate the vestige of the 'presence' of absence, the absence of 'Being's' – and 'beings's'—presence (Levinas *De l'existence à l' éxistant*), (also, in Jabès's case, to hint at the totality of loss), this is the function of the Levinasian 'trace'.

Jabès on Levinas: 'Il n'y a de trace que dans le desert'

In examining Jabès's direct discussion of this term (and surrounding Levinasian concepts) in his tribute to Levinas (Jabès "Il N'y a de Trace que dans le Desert") we will also be considering the ways in which Jabès, in his work, attempts to share the 'incommunicable' experience that is, for example, the Desert; the Book; exile; the experience of the writer/stranger/Jew (and, via Levinas, the essential 'incommunicability', in its 'overflow', of the relation between self and other). For Jabès, these constitute one linked, multifaceted

experience. It is, indeed, the Jewish experience, across history; however, like Levinas, Jabès seeks to point out the universality of this human experience of exile, of separation, and of a sort of exile and refuge in 'the Book' (or art, or rather, contained and 'mediated experience' as a package). For if the 1960s French philosophical lesson of, say, existentialism, was that the human experience is fundamentally and universally one of alienation, separation and exile – a kind of 'uprootedness' or 'root dispossession' at the core of human reality, we see here the 20th-century valorisation of the experience of exile, as Todorov has noted (Todorov 113-26), for its states of 'detachment' and 'non-belonging' (*non-appartenance*) – then the earlier (and continuing) lesson of Auschwitz was that dispossession and persecution of 'the Other' could in fact potentially happen to anyone, to any group. Anyone, any group could be perceived as Other; 'the Other', in fact, could turn out to be *you*! Hence the necessity of (compassionate) ethics and the extension of hospitality, as proposed by both Levinas and, differently (and more simply), by Jabès.

'Il n'y a de trace que dans le desert' was first published in the 1980 collection *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas* (ed. François Laruelle) alongside pieces by Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Jean Halperin, Jean-François Lyotard, André Neher and Paul Ricoeur (among other luminaries); it was later included in the second half of Jabès's *The Book of Margins* (*Le Livre des Marges)*, namely the separate volume *Dans la double dépendance du dit* ('Doubly dependent on the said'; in addition to the title's allusions to Levinas, the book is a compilation of Jabès's responses to other writers). Colin Davis, in his introductory book on Levinas, argues that the essays in the 1980 tribute could be placed on a continuum ranging from 'prophetism to orthodoxy' (Davis 136f), with Derrida and Jabès at the end of prophecy, and writers such as Ricoeur, who contributed a detailed academic piece on Husserl, at the

other end. Of Jabès's piece, Davis notes only that it is a 'poem-meditation' (Ibid.). It is that, and it is also an understated poetic pummelling (with moments of gentle parody) of Levinas's key concepts of the trace, the face, the Other, the saying and the said, and takes the emphasis Levinas places on bodily sensation and impressions in relation to these concepts to poetic heights and depths where Levinas himself may not have dared to go. Truly an exercise in complicit dissidence, the piece is pervaded by Jewish resonances, from desert wanderings through the question of God ('the Other of all others') and including, towards the end, a kabbalistic-Hasidic touch in relation to the path of the exile ('Le passage. Le pas du sage, de la sagesse – ou du fou? – .'[21]).

Jabès begins with a personal approach to 'the Other.' Both writers belonging to the major 'Other' that is the Jewish people, Jabès dissolves the impersonal broad racial grouping by personalising and individualising the encounter, equalising it (whereas Levinas always maintained the assymmetricality of the fundamental relation between self and other) by describing it as taking place between two 'others'. Firstly:

> *Je sais qu'il existe. Je le vois. Je le touche ; mais qui est-il et qui suis-je? Nous le savons l'un de l'autre, l'un pour l'autre. A partir de là…*
>
> *Ce visage qui est, peut-être, le visage d'un visage oublié, retrouvé. – Le mien avant le mien, après? –*
>
> *Le dire de cette voix qui n'est, peut-être, que la voix d'un indicible dire, qui dit son infortune, donc qui ne dit rien.*
>
> *Le vide du dit où se perd le dit, où nous nous perdons* (*LM* 168).

[21] 'The passage. The footstep (le pas) of the sage, of wisdom [la sagesse] – or of the madman? – .'

> I know that he exists. I see him. I touch him ; but who is he and who am I? We knowit, one from the other, one for the Other. From there…
>
> This face which is, perhaps, the face of a forgotten face, found again. – My own before my own, after? –
>
> The saying of that voice which is perhaps nothing but the voice of an unsayable saying, which says its own misfortune, therefore which says nothing.
>
> The void of the said where the said loses itself, where we lose one another.

All this talk of being 'lost' is by way of reply to Levinas's piece on Jabès in *Noms* Propres (*c.*1976), where, when asked by Les Nouveaux Cahiers what 'place' he saw Jabès as occupying in the literary scene of that time, Levinas replies: 'Is it certain that a true poet occupies a place? Is he not that which, in the eminent sense of the term, *loses its place…*?' (Levinas *Noms propres* 63).

Thus Jabès introduces, sense by sense, in the course of an approach, the 'other', the 'face', the 'saying' and the 'said.' Soon after – after 'losing each other' in 'the void of the said' – comes the 'trace', and the desert: *'Il n'y a de trace que dans le desert, de voix que dans le desert. / La mise en acte est le passage, l'errance. / De l'indicible à l'indicible*.' (Ibid.), [22] 'There is no trace but in the desert, no voice but in the desert. / The *mise en acte* is the crossing-over, wandering. / From the unspeakable to the unspeakable.' In addition to the reference to Judaism and the biblical wandering in the desert (as well as his own youthful Egyptian desert wanderings, where the desert was for Jabès a place of psychological and spiritual as well as physical refuge), Jabès seems to be indicating here the trajectory of a philosophical career, from phenomenology with its privileging of ontology to the less stable grounds of ethics. There is of course also the parallel with Jabès's own passage from Egypt

[22] 'There is no trace but in the desert, no voice but in the desert. / The enactment is the crossing-over, the wandering. / From the unsayable to the unsayable.'

to France, and with that of Levinas from his native Lithuania. However, here it is the biblical reference which resonates the loudest – all the while maintaining the trope of the face-to-face encounter with the other (for Levinas, the face reveals an 'infinity' of exteriority):

> *Quitter le lieu connu, vécu – le paysage, le visage – pour le lieu inconnu – le desert, le visage nouveau, le mirage? – .*
>
> *L'infini visage du Rien, avec son poids de Rien, de tous les visages réduits à un seul, le mien, perdu* (Levinas *Noms propres*).

> To leave the place that's known, lived – the country, the face – for the unknown place – the desert, the new face, the mirage? – .
>
> The infinite face of Nothing, with its weight of Nothing, of all faces reduced to one alone, mine, lost.

Jabès continues holding the Ariadne's thread of the 'trace' throughout this passage, which becomes the launching-point for a vital exploration of the significance of the term and some of its (poetic and philosophical) associations:

> *Alors, le passage? – Peut-être ce qui n'a ni fin ni commencement, le tracé infixé, la non-trace d'une trace brûlante; sensibilité à vif du sable et de la peau à leurs extrémités.*
>
> *Dans la peau, la trace; dans le coeur.*
>
> *Peut-être cette trace est-elle l'approche du visage, l'approche toujours différée, révélée; ce qui nous porte à l'infini.*
>
> *Ce qui bat dans nos poitrines.*
>
> *Le rhythme serait, alors, l'intuition de la trace. Nous serions la trace* (*LM* 169).

> So, the crossing-over? – Perhaps that which has neither end nor beginning, the unfixed trace, the non-trace of a burning trace; sharp sensibility of sand and of skin at their extremities.
>
> In the skin, the trace; in the heart.

> Perhaps this trace is the approach of the face, the always-deferred, revealed approach; that which carries us to the infinite.
>
> That which beats in our chests.
>
> The rhythm, then, would be the intuition of the trace. We would be the trace.

'Nous serions la trace.' / 'We would be the trace.' Jabès, in the act and physical fact of his writing, is the trace (and the rhythm of his heartbeat, or of his writing, is the Husserlian 'intuition' of the trace) – he is in his body and mind the trace of the encounter, and he, for us, exists only in and as his written/printed words on the page. ('Would – perhaps – be', rather than the ontological 'is'; Jabès as always here, like Levinas, favours the cautious conditional tense of the verb). In this sense the words 'Nous serions la trace' 'speak themselves', in the sense of the Levinasian concept of 'Saying' (le 'dire'). At this point the Levinasian sense of 'the trace' converges, via Jabès, with the Derridean sense of the term 'trace', elaborated as applying to inscription, written history, in the sense of 'arche-writing' , as well as 'inscription' in the Levinasian sense of traces or internal impressions 'inscribed upon the body'. Important here is the distinction between the physical and the non-physical; body, heart and mind (if such a distinction can be said to exist; if it is not all rather a spectrum or continuum of sensations or (scientifically; physically as well as metaphysically) energies of varying densities or degrees of refinement or subtle calibration); also between the present moment, as experienced by both 'subject' and 'other', and (written) history. Between absence (writing, history, trace) and presence (present moment, ontology's 'Being', Levinas's 'invasion of Infinity' through the infinite exteriority of the face of the other in the encounter). Jabès, in this piece, through and similar to the concept of 'the trace', seeks to dissolve the dichotomy.

Jabès continues, humourously attempting to harmonise Levinas's concepts and terms until poetically positing 'the Other' as 'the abyss of the trace', in the interpersonal encounter:

> *Si je suis la trace, je ne puis l'être que pour l'autre ; mais si l'autre est autrui, un autre de l'autre, qui relèvera la trace? Autrui est, peut-être, l'âbime de la trace.*
>
> *Pensée en âbime, écriture de l'âbime. En bordure. Mais si la trace est en moi, coule, bat en moi? Chaque pulsion de mon corps est trace enregistrée, comptée. La fièvre – l'amour, la douleur, le délire – multiplie la trace. La trace est liée à l'être, à l'essence, comme au vide dont elle pourrait être la sonorité* (*LM* 169)*.*

> If I am the trace [also: 'if I follow the trace], I can only be it for the other; but if the other is 'Others' [or: 'the Other one'], an other to the other, who will report the trace? Others are ['the Other one' is'], perhaps, the abyss of the trace.
>
> Thinking in abyss, writing of the abyss. On edge. But if the trace is in me, flows, beats in me? Each instinct [or 'urge', or 'pulsation'] of my body is a recorded, counted trace. Fever – love, pain, delirium – multiplies the trace. The trace is linked to being, to essence, as to the void of which it could be the sonority.

This brings us back to the quotation from Bettina Bergo[23] where she states that 'the experience of alterity … is possible by virtue of the aphanology … of passive sensibility: first, as the sensibility to the good of natural elements; second, as the sensibility to the call of the other which permits us to receive him and give account of ourselves' (Bergo 88). Jabès opens up precisely this same space in this text, and particularly in the passage quoted above, along with some insightful but good-humoured wordplay at Levinas's expense, for example in relation to the latter's at-times unclear distinction between '*l'autre', 'l'Autre' and 'Autrui*' / 'other', 'Other', and 'Others' or 'the Other one'.

[23] See the section titled 'The Levinasian Trace, and the Other,' above in this chapter.

Être and Autre; Auschwitz; and a Detour via Todorov and Lacan

As can be seen, Levinas's whole cluster of concepts, his 'complex' or complexity, is ripe for parody (as is his own, very Jewish, tortuous writing style, his mode of 'Saying'). Jabès, for example, makes insightful use of poetic technique, in the passage quoted above, by juxtaposing 'l'être' (the self, or 'being') with 'l'autre' (the other), exposing through the French words' feminine rhyme their ultimately common identity – the 'self' and 'being,' as the big ontological project of phenomenology that Levinas so emphatically attempted to break away from, and 'the other' as the crucially external element (providing access to the Infinite via the exteriority of the face of the 'other' in the interpersonal relation) and the concept through which he made that very break. Tzvetan Todorov would later (1983) use these terms as the title, and foundationally Levinasian conceptual structure, for an essay on Montaigne (Todorov *passim.*).

At this point I would like to take a slight detour, which might justifiably be called a Deleuzian 'schizo stroll' (Deleuze et al. 2), while maintaining the centrality of Levinasian alterity to/and Jabès's literary project, via the felicitous reference to Todorov, who also wrote (with a post-Levinasian consciousness) about prisoners in the Nazi death camps helping each other to survive (thereby disproving the myth that everything about the camps was of the utmost brutality, that it was 'every man for himself', and thereby showing that some of the best aspects of humanity can exist side-by-side with the very worst); proceeding through Todorov's notion of the 'fantastic' (the borderline blurred between the Real and the Imaginary) in relation to the relevance of Lacan's 'mirror stage' (also Irigaray's notion of the 'speculum') to one of Jabès's most explicit uses of Levinasian references to 'the other', in *Yaël* (*c.*1967; the fourth volume of the *Le Livre des Questions* series), most

particularly as these issues appear and are 'brought to a head' in the 'mirror scene' ('*La glace aux trois miroirs',* in *Yaël* (69-72) in which Yaël, in front of three mirrors, begins the process of giving birth to her stillborn baby.

Jabès's Lacanian 'Mirror Scene' in *Yaël*: Self as Other, and Other as Self

This Lacanian mirror scene refracts and shatters both the image of (Yaël's) self and the here already-fragile distinction between self and other. This fundamental refraction of self into selves (for example Yaël, Elya, Aely), self into other, and other into Others, which Jabès performs in varying manners throughout the whole multivocal *Book of Questions* series, recalls (philosophically) a veritable Necker's Cube (a drawing of a cube with a dot in one corner: '*dans combien de faces se trouve le trou?*' 'In how many faces of the cube do we find a hole?' – in several, as a result of one dot). Similarly, in relation to ontology, phenomenology and Levinasian alterity, if there is one Being, or one Self, in how many human faces do we find an Other? In every face but our own? What of the mirror? – the self as other, and the other in the self, as has been posited by Paul Ricoeur (387-93). And what of Yaël as mother – the self or the other as the mother? Important parallels may also be drawn between Levinasian and Lacanian notions of desire in relation to this particular novel by Jabès, based as it is on a love triangle between the narrator, Yaël, and her lover, who the narrator refers to only as '*l'autre*' (Jabès's italics, used throughout the book for this word). All of these issues resonate, through conscious deployment, in Jabès's mirror scene in *Yaël*. We can also see ourself, or the Self, in each 'Other' 's face, as this metaphorical Cube of Necker illustration demonstrates – and as Yael would have done in this scene, as three mirrors can reflect each other and refract into an infinity. This is in some sense perhaps a twist on an illustration of Levinas's encounter between self and Other, where as he terms it there is an 'invasion of the Infinite' through the pure exteriority of the face of the Other. In fact, the whole of Jabès's *Yaël* can be read as an extended meditation on, and elaboration of, Levinas's writings on 'the other' in *Le temps et l'autre* (*c.*1948) and more particularly in *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'éxteriorité* (*c.*1961).

Origins of Levinas's 'Trace', 'Face' and 'Other' in Passages from the Jewish Torah

Before returning to Jabès's '*Il n'y a de trace que dans le desert*', we can note that what links 'the face', 'the trace' and 'the Other' for Levinas is a seed story from the Jewish Torah (Biblical five books of Moses) in which the figure of God, here presented as a speaking figure, though the nature of that figure is ineffable and also up for debate says to Moses, in reply to the prophet's request to see Him: 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name YHVH, and I will grant the grace that I will grant and show the compassion that I will show. But,' He said, 'you cannot see My face, for man may not see me and live.' (*JPS Tanakh,*Exodus 33: 19-20). The passage goes on:

> And the Lord [YHVH] said, 'See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen' *JPS Tanakh*(Exodus 33: 21-23).

Immediately following that is Chapter 34 of Exodus and God's command to Moses to 'carve two tablets of stone like the first' so He can 'inscribe' the Ten Commandments on them again, after Moses had 'shattered' the first iteration of the Tablets prior to being in the 'Presence' of God and registering, to use the Levinasian term, the 'trace' of His presence (as opposed to, and as a substitution for, seeing God's 'face', which 'must not be seen'). So the episode of Moses's registering of the internal sensation or the 'trace' of God's presence occurs chronologically between the two iterations of the Tablets (of the Ten Commandments). This fact is important for a consideration of Jabès's work (in which the Broken Tablets play a vital role[24]), as it was for Derrida in his critique of Jabès's *Le Livre des*

[24] As Jabès has Reb Lima state in the first volume of *Le Livre des Questions*: '*La liberté fut, à l'origine, gravée dix fois dans les tables de la Loi, mais nous la méritons si peu que le Prophète les brisa dans sa colère.'*

Questions (*WD* 81). The notion of 'God's writing', God's 'inscribing', was seminal for Jabès as it was for Levinas and, especially, for Derrida – who used it in expanding the concept of the 'trace' to include inscription and, as he termed it, 'arche-writing.' This can be broadened to include all 'mark making' (that is, non-alphabetic, including what would today be called 'asemic writing'), that included the potential for (Husserlian) infinite iterability. An iterability that makes each person's unique handwritten mark, or 'inscription', stand out all the more.

Levinas, Jabès and Derridean 'Traces'

'*Marque d'un signet rouge la première page du livre, car la blessure est invisible à son commencement. Reb Alcé*.' 'Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible. – Reb Alcé.' (*BQ1* 15). Thus writes Jabès in the 'forepages' of the first volume of Book of Questions (in a section called 'At the threshold of the book'). It is the only line of writing on the page, and the only sentence that precedes it in the book, after the dedications, is a single haunting line on the previous page: Tu es celui qui écrit et qui est écrit. You are the one who writes and the one who is written. (Waldrop's translation). Thus, in the sense of the trace as inscription (following Derrida), self is other, other is self. Both these lines of Jabès bear Jewish associations – the red mark of the invisible wound, to circumcision (I sometimes think of The Book of Questions series as 'the circumfession of the kabbalistic Rabbi-Poet,' borrowing terms from both Derrida and Jabès – starting as it does with an invisible wound, a red mark, and ending with the single point (.) that was the original title of El, ou le dernier livre (*c.*1973)). And in the second case, the 'you-are-both-subject-and-object-with-respect-to-the-writing', in regard to 'it is written' and

(*LQ* 128) 'Freedom was, originally, engraved ten times in the Tablets of the Law, but we merited it so little that the Prophet broke them in his anger.'

the Jew's particular personal relation to scripture, to the written word, to the sacred as well as to the secular 'Book' and to books in general. And to history, as noted by Derrida (see the quotation in footnote 3 of this section). 'The book', as book, is also 'a fold in history' (as Derrida said of the Jew, in his 1964 article on Jabès). A 'fold' which, as with the 'face' of the 'other' for Levinas, opens up a space that is potentially a portal for an experience of the Infinite to stream into and be transmitted through, and thus shared with the reader or other person in the encounter.

Levinas's Writing on Jabès

This brings us back to Jabès's 'vertiginous place of the book', as quoted (and elaborated on) by Levinas in his short piece on Jabès in *Noms Propres* (65). In response to two questions posed to the philosopher by *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, Levinas quasi-poeticises (in a post-Derridean fashion) elements of his own philosophical concerns in what amounts to a stellar tribute to Jabès as a poet of the Book, and as a fellow 'writer-who-is-also-a-Jew' (to avoid, as Jabès always did, the distinctly different term of 'Jewish writer'). Levinas brings his own concepts to his appreciation of Jabès's work: the saying, the 'outside', the other, the face, and God-as-Other. He implies that, in Jabès's writing, in 'its de-nucleatisation,' 'its transcendence,' 'nothing more is missing but one's fellow man. 'I am nothing but the spoken word,' says Jabès. 'I need a face' (Ibid. 64). We have seen how Jabès responds to this in his tribute article to Levinas, speaking of '*L'infini visage de Rien, avec son poids de Rien, de tous les visages réduits à un seul, le mien, perdu.*' (*LM* 168) 'The infinite face of Nothing, with its weight of Nothing, of all the faces reduced to one alone, mine, lost.' More than a decade previously, in *Le Livre des Questions* (vol. 1), he had Yukel say: 'Moi, j'appartiens à une generation sans visage' (*LQ1* 181) 'I belong to a faceless generation'.

In an accurate and almost psychological reading, (physiological too – he alludes to Jabès's asthma) Levinas here speaks of Jabès's work in relation to its 'opening of space,' which for him is an 'opening in the superlative – produced in the guise of an inspired subjectivity (inspired to the point of uttering its own saying as a quotation)' (*LQ1* 181). When asked to comment on Jabès's 'place' in French literature of the time, Levinas writes:

> The fact that that opening occurs in the clauses of Jabès that retain their syntactic decency and as it were uncork the words, not in order that they may give off some secret meaning, but rather that, undergoing fission, they may be broken up into their sense and letters and give off the non-place of an absolutely unprotected space, a kind of intra-nuclear space devoid of images, without mirages or prestige or imaginary foyers of extension for a dioptrics, but a field besieged by God – that is what would prompt me to say that Jabès's work occupies no place (Ibid.).

In the passage above we can see Levinas evoke both Blanchot's 'literary space' (Blanchot *L'espace littéraire*) and his own concept of 'the outside' – that would appear for the first time in *Beyond Essence, or Otherwise than Being*, which was published the following year. Jabès himself had written, in the *Book of Questions* series, of '*Dieu'* as '*lieu'* (place – God as Place is a Hebrew concept), '*oeuil'* (eye), '*loi'* (law) and '*deuil'* (grief), and Levinas mentions precisely this example of wordplay in his response to the journal's second question, on how Levinas would define Jabès's work in relation to Judaism and Jewish themes. Comparing Jabès's image of God as 'eye' to the 'sleepless', all-seeing 'Guardian of Israel', Levinas then refers to an image which appears in a Talmudic summary of Psalm 139 (which is the one about how well and how closely God knows the psalmist) – 'the strange symbol of Adam created with two faces: with one head – all face—without any background, any shadow for secret thoughts or mental reservations, without any possible break with this God, even by the choice of Evil?' (Levinas *Proper Names* 65).

Conclusion

It is true that despite his atheism, Jabès writes as if locked into a compelling, if not compulsive, apophatic relation to God-in-His-absence, and to the victims of the Shoah, in the wake of the entirety and singularity of their absence. Both of these issues also held a central significance and weight for Levinas in his work. But, as the latter concludes, 'in Jabès,' any Jewish themes 'are still turning in the vertigo that comes from what he calls 'the vertiginous place of the book' (Levinas *Proper Names* 65).

7. EXILE AND THE DESERT: THE WOUND AND THE WANDERING JEW

> Being Jewish means exiling yourself in the word and, at the same time, weeping for your exile. The return to the book is a return to forgotten sites. God's heritage could only be handed on in the death He ushered in (*BQ2* 143).

Central to the work and life of Edmond Jabès is the concept and lived reality of exile. 'Always in a foreign country, the poet uses poetry as interpreter,' he had already written in 1951 (*LSLS* 176). While his compatriot Biblical Jews were exiled *in* Egypt, Jabès, whose family had lived in Egypt for generations (despite the fact that they were technically of Italian nationality), was exiled *from* Egypt following the 1956 Suez crisis and the rise of Egyptian nationalism under Nasser, when all Jews were effectively forced to leave the country. He thus (as Derrida noted in 1964) also had his 'exodus from Egypt' (Derrida *'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre'* 104). After moving to Paris with his young family, Jabès was soon shocked by the reality of lingering French anti-Semitism in the cultural homeland of his mother tongue. Newly conscious of himself as a Jew (while an atheist, and not religiously observant) following these events, he would spend the rest of his literary life's work exploring and examining the issues of exile, the desert, Jewishness and Judaism, *étrangeté* in relation to writing and Jewishness, and related themes.

This chapter starts with a brief consideration of the symbolic nature of the very actual Egyptian desert in which Jabès often sought solace during his youth in Cairo, and the place of this desert in the Biblical narrative in relation to exodus and exile. Following on from this is a presentation of Jabès's views on the political State of Israel and the prospect of a homeland for the Jews as an either more or less possible 'end to exile.' Finding this proposed solution problematic, the chapter hones in, via more Biblical interpretation, on the main cause of exile as a fundamental separation, split or schism between humanity and

God, or between various groups or sections of humanity (the latter two possibly having a relation of partial cause and effect). The chapter then proceeds to trace Jabès's conflation of the role of the Jew with that of the writer, with the experience of *étrangeté* (foreigner-hood, foreignness) being common to both. This leads us to a consideration of the 'ancient wound' that Derrida says was 'laid bare' in the writings of Jabès; the nature of the wound's 'Jewishness' as well as its universality when considered as a basic and crucial fact of the experience of writing (Derrida, *'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre'* 99). Jabès is quoted as seeing this to some extent through Derridean concepts of the 'trace' and the 'hymen', in that the page is presented as a 'membrane' or 'hymen' which is pierced and 'plowed by the pen.' The pen's ink is compared to drops of the writer's blood, using another sense of Derrida's 'trace', thus linking 'trace' with 'wound' and 'hymen'. The wound, which Joseph G. Kronick has called the 'cipher of the covenant' (Kronick 142f), thus being a mark of belonging as much as of collective exclusion, is, if we take circumcision symbolically, a cutting or carving ('trace') of an enclosing circle, thus penetrated by God or the Other ('the *wholly Other*', as Paul Celan put it); as the hymen – the very dividing line or membrane separating two separate things, selves, or groups – is penetrated or pierced (as cited in Derrida *Sovereignties in Question* 23). As with the page (which has been called 'the skin of God' by a poet), the penetration or piercing of God or the Other leaves its trace in a wound, or in this case words on a page, washed away though they may be by the ceaseless white frothy waves of the eternal ocean (to reference Jabès as he is quoted below). Only the Torah, written, according to Provençal kabbalist Isaac the Blind, in 'black fire on white fire,' may use these blank spaces, this whiteness or void, creatively to advantage, and thus (so far at least) not be so easily 'worn away' by the white waves of time. Joseph G. Kronick

captures, in this explication, the universality of the 'wound' which was also the key fact(or) emphasised by Jabès, when he writes:

> This circumcision of the word [in relation to Paul Celan's poetry], the mark that defines and decides, like the shibboleth, is a doorway, a promise that is at once singular and dated, and therefore universal. It is a wound, a cipher of the covenant, and what distinguishes the community. But if all poets are Jews [as Marina Tsvetaeva pronounced], then it is as much universal as singular, a trope or mark naming the wound of singularity (*LQ1* 141).

Thus the wound, the circumcision of the word, is in this same way universally shared, though attenuated in the Jewish examples of Jabès and Derrida (and Paul Celan).

The Desert: Infinite and All-Pervading, even in Its Absence

Though he never saw it again after 1957, the Egyptian desert, as a symbol of infinite emptiness, would remain a haunting presence in Jabès's writing for the rest of his career. He gives ample evidence of having carried the desert with him in his heart, a sense of desolate vastness that proved the eventual futility of all human endeavour and civilisation. To take just two illustrative statements from Jabès's imaginary rabbis (or 'archetypal wise old mystical men') in *The Book of Questions*: 'J'appelle désert une vie morte, la vie exemplaire du grain de sable. Reb Nevi.' 'I call desert a dead life, the exemplary life of the grain of sand. Reb Nevi.' 'Ramasse un peu de sable, écrivait Reb Ivri, puis laisse-le glisser entre tes doigts; tu connaîtras, alors, la vanité du verbe' (*LQ1* 141) 'Scoop up a bit of sand,' wrote Reb Ivri, 'then let it slip between your fingers; then you will know the vanity of the word.'

But the desert in Jabès's writings is not always so bleak, even for the Jews: 'Le fardeau du Juif errant est une voix incorruptible. *Reb Atem. … 'Tu viens de Jérusalem, innombrable cité d'où tu as été mille fois chassé.'Reb Jourda. … 'D'une poignée de sable nous ferons un commencement de jardin comme, de toutes les grains de silence, nous avons fait,*

depuis l'exode, notre ciel.' Reb Ati' (*LQ1* 150) *'The burden of the wandering Jew is an incorruptible voice.* Reb Atem. .. 'You come from Jerusalem, innumerable city from whence you have been chased a thousand times.' Reb Jourda. … 'From one fistful of sand we will make a beginning of a garden as, of all the grains of silence, we made, since the exodus, our sky.' Reb Ati.' Here Jabès embraces in a few lines the whole history of the Jews, from the Egyptian exodus to the twentieth century Holocaust survivors' exodus from Europe. It is in many ways the desert that, for Jabès at least, in large part encapsulates that history, and in a more secular way it forms a pervasive part of his own personal story – both marked, as they are, by the fact of exile.

An End to Exile? The 'Promised Land', and the Book as Sanctuary

Significantly, and for cultural and linguistic reasons as we have seen, Jabès did not choose to emigrate to Israel upon his departure from Egypt in 1957, though he had fought there, alongside the British, during the Second World War. The creation of the political State of Israel in 1948 would seem to provide an answer for the exile of the Jews; however, regional political and religious tensions and prejudices in the Middle East render that situation problematic. Jabès held firm views on the subject, as he related to Marcel Cohen in 1980. He begins:

> Today no Jew can stand aloof from the fate of Israel. … I never thought that the solution of the Jewish problem had necessarily to involve Israel, yet I would say that, for me, the State of Israel, modelled on the sufferings of so many martyrs, is the reflection of the exemplary bankruptcy of Western liberalism. That it had to be created to save Western Jews is, and remains, the shame of the West. … The creation of the State of Israel, before any other philosophical, political, religious consideration, is thus less a point of justice in the abstract – which for me is a grave matter – than the single and predictable retort of a wounded Judaism to a general injustice (*FTDTTB* 26).

Jabès continues, considering the present state of that country, its dangers and possible solutions:

> All this having been said, when I think about that country I still feel vivid admiration and infinite worry: admiration, given the results obtained, on its soil, by this young millennial people left to its own devices – it has given the world a new image of the Jew; anxiety, given the dangers Israel is exposed to at each moment, dangers that grow year by year, as much, we believe, because of its leaders' lack of objectivity and the rejection of any kind of critical attitude on the part of the main representatives of the Diaspora's world Judaism, as by the flare-up of exacerbated nationalism, manipulated from the outside, of the peoples that surround it.

Jabès shows himself here to be dispassionate in relation to the State of Israel, seeing the problem as existing on both sides of the debate or indeed of the war.

> We have to be aware that the survival of the State of Israel depends entirely on a wider, more intimate and hence more durable entente with the Arab countries than the entente that usually links states.
>
> No reciprocal recognition will be possible until each concerned state behaves like a doubly responsible state, that is, a state eminently conscious of its limits, with every gain understood as subject to the response it gets from the others. The open book occupies only a little space on the table, yet the space it engages is huge. The place of a great idea is the universe. What parcel of earth, however appropriate, however worthy, however clearly designated, could hope to substitute for that infinite place? Each people has its history. The history of the Jewish people is the history of a book that, like all works, can be read only page after page, in chronological order. The history of the Jewish people spans five millennia; the Israelis are very recent; their history is inscribed on the most recently composed pages of the same book, while on the verso of those pages the history of Jews in the diaspora continues to be written. The book is a whole, but each page takes charge at first only of itself. One has to return it each time to its initial whiteness in order to permit other words to fix themselves upon it.
>
> The problem, as you see, does not lack complexity. … If I tremble for Israel it is because three million of my fellow beings live, breathe, love there with a love so often wounded it has become only the despair of love (*FTDTTB* 27f).

Jabès makes the important distinction between Israeli and Jew in the above passage. While it is a subtle difference it is a crucial one. Israeli does not equal Jew, nor does Jew equal Israeli. It is also significant that Jabès followed his French mother tongue to choose

exile in Paris rather than in Israel. The Jewish community in Cairo spoke French and Jabès was educated in French culture, including French literary culture, while growing up in Egypt. But when he discovered anti-Semitism in France, through graffiti on a wall, he realised that he would be an *étranger* even in the native homeland of his mother tongue.

Finally, on the question of why he never chose to live in Israel, Jabès gets to the core of the answer in his own feelings of 'non-belonging', in a sense his own inborn *étrangeté*. It is related to, but not confined to, his Jewishness. It is also, importantly, because he was francophone and had been educated in French culture as he grew up in Cairo.

> To stand by the side of Israel means to have become conscious of it. Its freedom to act and our own freedom depend on it.
>
> There remains however this fact: since I have always considered myself a writer working in the French language, the idea of living in Israel has never entered my mind. Maybe there is something deeper still, something I constantly broach in my books, and that is my visceral repugnance to being rooted anywhere. I feel that I exist only outside of any belonging. That non-belonging is my very substance. Maybe I have nothing else to say but that painful contradiction: like everyone else, I aspire to a place, a dwelling-place, while being at the same time unable to accept what offers itself. You must understand that this refusal is not a deliberate attitude but a deep-seated disposition against which I struggle and which of course I try to elucidate. That non-belonging – with the availability it allows me – is also what brings me close to the very essence of Judaism and, generally, to the Jewish destiny. In a certain way, Judaism is but questions asked of History. By asking himself 'Who am I?,' every Jew also puts the question of the ambient culture, in the West. The two questions are inextricably linked. For the Jew, to question means always to keep open the question of the difference (*FTDTTB* 28f).

Here Jabès explicates his own deep feelings of inborn *étrangété*. It is indeed a feeling that brings him close to the 'very essence of Judaism,' as to be Jewish is for Jabès to be an outsider, an *étranger*. The questions asked by Jabès, or by the Jew, to the surrounding culture – and the basic question posed by the State of Israel to the surrounding nations and wider world – may be what continues to ensure their exilic condition in relation to the

world, but at the same time it is surely also the sole means by which such fundamental exile or 'non-belonging' can be faced and eventually overcome.

In the meantime, like Jabès, the still-exiled Jew finds his homeland – or his *mishkan*, his 'portable sanctuary' and dwelling-place – in the Book, and in the French language itself.

Jewish Exile in Egypt, in the Torah

> *Je suis allé à Dieu parce que Dieu était mon destin.*
> *Je suis allé à la parole de Dieu parce que la parole de Dieu était mon destin.*
> *Je suis allé à la parole*
> *pour qu'elle soit mon geste.*
> *Je suis allé*
> *et je vais* (*LQ1* 50).
>
> I went to God because God was my destiny.
> I went to the word of God because the word of God was my destiny.
> I went to the word
> so that it would be my gesture.
> I went
> And I am going.

Toutes les lettres forment l'absence.
Ainsi Dieu est l'enfant de Son Nom.
Reb Tal (*LQ1* 51).

All letters form Absence.
Thus God is the child of His Name.
Reb Tal.

The Egyptian desert, site of Jabès's youthful wanderings, is of course a central motif related to exile in the Torah narrative. According to the Torah, the Israelites were exiled in Egypt for four hundred years, enslaved there, and then led out of Egypt towards freedom by the prophet Moses through a process of wandering through the Egyptian desert for forty years, the high point of which was Moses's receiving of the Torah and tablets of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. The significance of this, in terms of personal resonances with his own life, was by no means lost on Jabès – take, for example, his meditations on the meaning of the Broken Tablets of the Law – although, living in the twentieth century as he did, the Nazi genocide was a far more potent presence in his and the collective cultural memory.

A cause of the original Egyptian exile was the youthful arrogance of Jacob's son Joseph who, after having been given a 'coat of many colours' by his father, and after having spoken of his symbolic dreams of pre-eminence over the other members of his family, was sold into Egyptian slavery by his older brothers. Later, when Joseph had risen up through the ranks to become a senior aide to the Pharoah, and was in control of the famine-era food supply, the rest of Jacob's family and attendants joined him in Egypt, eventually growing into a large nation which the Egyptians, to avert any threat, enslaved. So the core issue was this perceived arrogance, this outcome of an essential separation, as the Hebrews grew into a people, and a people who would be defined by their attachment and worship to (but fundamental separation from) their One God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the

same core separation spoken of above in this section, that fundamental (though mostly defined by others, externally*) étrangeté*, or foreignness, which is both the mark of an internal and genuinely 'high calling' and a mark of social, cultural, ethnic and religious difference which cuts the group off from others and renders them subject to persecution in vulnerable times. Indeed, the notion of religious 'observance' can be said to depend on such a separation, such a 'split'.

The Writer and The Jew: Étrangers

Jabès compared this aspect of Jewishness especially to the vocation or 'calling' of the writer, stating that in *Un étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format (A foreigner carrying in the crook of his arm a tiny book)*: '*L'écrivain est l'étranger par excellence. Interdit, partout, de séjour, il se réfugie dans le livre d'où le mot l'expulsera*.' (Crasson et al. *Edmond Jabès . (.)* back cover) 'The writer is the foreigner [or 'outsider'/'stranger'] par excellence. Denied domicile everywhere, he takes refuge in the book, from which the word will evict him' (*FCCATB* 12). It is in the conflation of these two roles, the writer and the Jew, through the figure of the *étranger* (especially at a time in France where the responses to increasing immigration were an issue[25]), that Jabès both humanises the Jew for a wider audience and estranges the writer (if the figure of the writer was not sufficiently estranged already), in what could be seen as encouraging in his readers an almost Buddhist compassionate practice of 'exchanging oneself with others.' Or rather, in this case, a humanist atheist, and also definitely Levinasian, practice. But despite this openness and 'hospitality', Jabès never diminishes the profound and distinct 'otherness' of the 'other' (an 'other' which he himself doubly is, being both a writer and a Jew). On the contrary, he heightens and accentuates it,

[25] Jabès's *Un Étranger…* was first published in France in 1989.

as in the lines quoted directly above. At the same time, the shared basic humanity of the *étranger*-figure is brought to light and emphasised. This 'apparent contradiction, which isn't' can be seen in the passage which immediately follows those lines:

> 'He said: 'The writer is the foreigner par excellence. Denied domicile everywhere, he takes refuge in the book, from which the word will evict him. Every new book is his temporary salvation.
>
> ''Eternal pariah.''
>
> 'Is he Jewish?'
>
> 'Yes. Why do you ask?'
>
> 'It's not peculiar. When one says 'foreigner', one thinks 'Jew.''
>
> 'A primitive reaction. Unhealthy. With tragic consequences. Nobody is born a foreigner. You become one by declaring yourself.'
>
> 'Who would want to become one?'
>
> 'The Jew, first of all, for he is the hope and wearing away of a book he can never exhaust. You and me next, having made of the infinite space of this book, the infinite book of our questions.'
>
> 'All three of us have the same bent back' (Rosenberg np).

Perhaps here, writing only a few years before his death in 1991, Jabès is starting to see the elderly as (collectively) another kind of *étranger* or foreigner. He examined the impact of old age on his own body and sense of self in a posthumously published short book, *Désir d'un commencement Angoisse d'une seule fin*.

Origins of Jabès's Exile and *étrangeté*

Jabès's own literal 'foreignness', along with his conscious sense of being a Jew, did not begin until after his own enforced exile following the 1956 Suez crisis in Egypt.The rise of Egyptian nationalism under the leadership of Nasser meant that all non-Egyptian nationals had to leave, and life for Egyptian Jews became extremely constrained until their only option was

to leave the country. Up until that time, like most Egyptians, Jabès (who had been to an extent politically active until 1948) despised the British Mandate, and at first applauded the independence movement until later realising what it entailed. In *From the Desert to the Book*, he tells Marcel Cohen:

> The advent of Nasser would of course represent the crowning moment of that desire for cultural independence, for independence as such. I must say that I enthusiastically welcomed the movement that brought Nasser to power, not realizing the negative aspects it harboured… Of course, the advent of Nasser first meant a major disruption in the life of what one could call the non-Muslim community. Let us not forget that even the Copts – who are the only ones who can claim to be true Egyptians, as they are the descendants of the pharaohs, while those who claim to be more Egyptian than the Copts, owe their presence only to the Arab invasion in 640 – all of a sudden saw their status as a minority transformed into that of foreigners. Many of them preferred to settle elsewhere, in Canada for instance, which took in several thousand. … What one has to remember from this is simply that for any chauvinistic nationalist, no matter where he's from, anybody belonging to a minority is a foreigner (*FTDTTB* 22).

Jabès's family had lived in Egypt for generations, but he was technically of Italian nationality as his parents were of Italian background. However, French was his mother-tongue, he received a French education and went to Paris for holidays, and felt himself part of the French literary tradition and culture. The Jewish community in Cairo were francophone, and it was ultimately his Jewishness that constrained Jabès to leave Egypt in 1957, spending the rest of his life as an exile in Paris. Like many Egyptians forced to leave at that time, Jabès never returned. When asked why he didn't want to see Egypt again, Jabès told Marcel Cohen: 'I can't explain it to myself. Maybe I have simply invented a mythic Egypt for myself. Maybe I'm afraid of confronting Egypt as it has entered my books with a reality that could no longer correspond to the one I experienced. It would mean losing that country a second time' (Ibid. 26). Cohen notes, in his book-length interview with Jabès:

C: I remember one day mentioning your arrival in Paris, and you answered that, in a way, you felt relieved: you were finally totally married to one condition: that of the exile.

J: Properly speaking it was not a relief, but rather the revelation of my deepest destiny: the confirmation also of the collective Jewish destiny.

That revelation, that confirmation, because of its very brutality, paradoxically appeased me, because there was no way around it: maybe it was absurd, but there was nothing that anybody could do about it.

Yes, I felt nearly serene, certainly relieved, even indifferent for the first time – that indifference that can get the better of us when faced with fatality.

There is, certainly, a wound; but strangely enough there is also a lessening of anxiety in the face of everything that henceforth has become possible and against which we are defenceless, because the event is beyond our control, as are its possible consequences (*FTDTTB* 26).

While taking an almost existentialist attitude on the surface (Albert Camus was a friend upon Jabès's arrival in Paris), the above quote also speaks of the seriousness, and archetypal Jewishness, of how Jabès saw his exilic condition. 'There is, certainly, a wound', he acknowledges – and we shall explore the nature of the wound in the following section – but Jabès took it stoically, indeed existentially, as being unavoidable.

The Jewish Wound

There is a very Jewish wound at the heart of Jabès's poetry, and it is not merely that of circumcision (though that wound is significant here), to take as one example that emblematic mark of (male) Jewishness. As Derrida wrote of *The Book of Questions* in 1964:

> *Dans Le livre des questions, la voix ne s'altère pas, ni l'intention ne se rompt, mais l'accent s'aggrave. Une puissante et antique racine est exhumée et sur elle une blessure sans âge dénudée (car ce que Jabès nous apprend, c'est que les racines parlent, que les paroles veut pousser et que le discours poétique est entamé dans une blessure) : il s'agit d'un certain judaïsme comme naissance et passion de l'écriture* (Derrida *'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre'* 99)*.*
>
> In *The Book of Questions*, the voice doesn't alter, neither does the intention break, but the accent gets deeper. A powerful and ancient root is exhumed and on it an

> ageless wound is exposed (for what Jabès teaches us is that roots speak, that words want to grow and that poetic discourse *takes root* in a wound): it's a question of a certain Judaism as birth and passion for writing.

The above passage ties in with a quote from Jabès in which he sees ink as being like drops of the writer's blood on the page – a notion which ties in with Derrida's later propensity towards meditations on bodily fluids in relation to the concept of the 'trace' as sensorially-felt 'mark-making'. It appears in Jabès's *Ça suit son cours*, for example the following passage found in a meditation on Blanchot:

> *Bientôt je mourrai d'avoir bu tout mon sang; je périrai de m'être vu et entendu ; car tout mon sang est d'encre; car l'encre est mong sang. Où commence mon corps? En quel lieu caché, obscur, a pris naissance l'aventure écrite, lisible, de mon corps? … Voici que le temps est venu de perdre jusqu'à l'appui du dernier jour* (*LM* 99f)*.*
>
> Soon I will die from having drunk all my blood ; I will perish from having seen and heard myself ; for all my blood is ink; for ink is my blood. Where does my body begin? In what hidden, obscure place, has the written, readable adventure of my body taken birth? … Now the time has come to lose, up until the support of the last day.

And earlier in the same book, in a piece devoted to Michel Leiris: *'Le silence est sang séché de la plaie'* (Ibid. 75) 'Silence is the dried blood of the wound.' (complete with a veiled reference to 'les sept plaies d'Egypte' or 'the seven plagues of Egypt', Biblically speaking). Such passages bespeak of what for Jabès was the pain of writing, the pain of thinking which is at the root of writing, both of which, for him, are inseparable from the pain of 'being', because he must be, due to his birth, both a writer and a Jew. These issues are explored fully in the first three volumes of *Le Livre des Questions*, in particular.

To return to Derrida*, Ça suit son cours*, and bodily fluids in connection with the 'trace', however, and following the trail of drops of blood, in his '*Lettre à Jacques Derrida sur La question du Livre*', Jabès writes: *'Où la totalité est blanche, le fragment ne peut être que blanc. Une goutte de sang, c'est le soleil du livre*.' 'Where the totality is blank, the fragment

cannot but be blank. A drop of blood is the sun of the book.' Further on in the letter, and having emphasised that '*la page blanche n'est pas une grille dont il faut s'accommoder*,' (the blank page is not a grid to which one must make do with' [or: 'a gate which one must put up with'), he writes, to Derrida, of the blank page in the following terms (recalling the wound, the fluids, and the trace):

> *La blancheur n'est pas la couleur du repos, vous le savez, vous le dites. Tant de sang vierge est dans le blanc. Désir et blessure, étreinte et combat s'y confondent et y sombrent. La page à laquelle nous nous appuyons, lorsqu'elle n'est pas le vide, elle est 'l'hymen' ou le 'tympan' d'une incarnation émerveillée ou apeurée du vide que la plume troue. L'instant de plaisir ou de sacrifice est consommé, mais l'acte charnel est perpétué et le silence empli, désormais, de sonorités étranges et ténues.*
>
> *Une contre-écriture portée, cependant, par l'écriture – comme son contraire éprouvant ou sa contrariété auxquels elle se cogne, contre lesquels elle se brise – tente, où la reflexion déborde le déferlement, de s'imposer ; mais c'est déjà la plage, le sable, l'effacement progressif d'une trace reproduite qui n'était que la téméraire empreinte d'une question en suspens. La plage est inondée du 'sang blanc' de la mer. La trace est noyée dans le sang. L'effacement ne serait que lames de sang sur une grève abandonee, toute écrite, toute peuplée de pas* (*LM* 52)*.*

> Whiteness is not the colour of rest, you know it, you say it. So much virgin blood is in the blank [/'white']. Desire and wound, restraint and combat blend themselves there and darken there. The page to which we bend ourselves, when it's not the void [or: 'when it's not empty'], is 'the hymen' [in Derrida's sense of the term] or the 'membrane' of an incarnation amazed or frightened by the void which is plowed by the plume. The instant of pleasure or of sacrifice is consummated, but the carnal act is perpetuated and the silence fills up, henceforth, with strange and tenuous sonorities.
>
> A counter-writing carried, nevertheless, by writing – as its confirming opposite or its opposition which it bumps into [or: 'hits'], against which it breaks itself – tries, where the reflection gives itself to unfolding, to imposing itself; but it's already the beach, the sand, the progressive effacement of a reproduced trace which was only the rash [or:'reckless'] imprint of a question in suspense. The beach is inundated with the 'white blood' of the sea. The trace is drowned in blood. The effacement would only be waves of blood on an abandoned shore, all written on, all peopled with footprints.

The sexual imagery linked physically as well as conceptually, and metaphorically, with writing here (à la Derrida), is not without a certain (poetic) violence, it must be said.. But it is the primordial violence of 'Nature'. Comparing and contrasting this (more archetypally feminine? – according to, for example, Hindu '*shakti*' and '*prkriti*') violence of 'Nature' with the human social violence of say, fascist totalitarianism may prove fruitful in and towards the analysis of Jabès's work, most notably the *Book of Questions* series, but additionally the earlier Cairene verse poetry. But in relation to the whiteness and emptiness, the void, of the blank page – its very 'blankness' or '*blancheur*' – there is an adequate, if hotly polemical, elaboration of this in Craig Dworkin's *No Medium* (*c.*2013), which leans on Blanchot, Mallarmé and Beckett, but ignores Jabès. Nonetheless, Dworkin's whole book is replete with ample illustrations and literary, artistic and musical examples of the 'blankness', 'void', 'empty space' or 'no medium' concept. The vitalising link here between the aforementioned two forms of violence, both primordially Natural and human / social (and, most significantly here, the relation of both these to the act of writing), can be traced in the work of Blanchot. Elsewhere in this thesis (in the section on Jabès and Blanchot) it has been seen how Blanchot's works elaborate a kind of 'textual violence' as an expression of the societal violence involved in the political Fascism of his day (both Italian and German). Jabès observes this dynamic in Blanchot's texts, and provides commentary on it rather than reproducing it in his own books, with the possible exception of the novel *Yaël*, volume four of *The Book of Questions* series, as has been discussed further in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Étrangeté and Differing Forms of Exile

What, then, is the real nature of the 'wound' that is at the heart of writing, according to both Derrida and Jabès? 'A certain Judaism as the origin and passion of writing', as Derrida put it; but this is a 'Judaism more Jewish than normative Judaism', where the atheist Jew questions God, argues with God, in print and therefore both in the private home space of 'writing' and the public space of the published words. It is a Judaism where the atheist Jew is an outsider, an *étranger*, even to the communities of other, believing, theistic, observant Jews, as well as to the wider communities of non-Jews, whether they be more or less fashionably anti-Semitic or not. It is the very 'figure on the boundary line', the same 'boundary line between contraries' which, according to Jabès in the passage quoted above, stands and unfolds itself, like a shoreline, between 'counter-writing' and 'writing' itself. Is it the felt wound, the trace, of exclusion or forced exile? Or an exclusion which is in reality the mark (like circumcision) of devotion and belonging to a higher, transcendent cause or calling? A cause or calling that is also felt immanently, in the heart or core, and that, like the shoreline, gives itself out, offers itself, is traced or etched out, in lines of printed words over a blank page? The Book as the Torah, as 'black fire on white fire', as the Kabbalist Isaac the Blind put it, makes productive use of the 'blank spaces' within and between the printed words, in the Hebrew. Kabbalists make use of this in their meditations on the letters and on the permutations and combinations of words, including dots or other vowel marks and cantillation marks, which are found beneath, within and above (respectively) the consonantal letters. These Kabbalistic techniques are made use of by Jabès throughout his works, particularly in *El, ou le dernier livre*, which is the final volume of the *Book of Questions* series. For example, on page 542 of that book, a number of *gematria*-style word games are employed, in order to make some valid poetic and theological points:

Dieu = Vide = Vie d'yeux.

Il disait: 'Dieu est vide du vide. Dieu est vie du vide. Il est vide d'une vie d'yeux. La mort est l'oeil du deuil.'

…

Dieu. Di eu. Dis (à) eux. Vide entre deux syllables. Dieu nous donne à dire le deuil.

Tu écriras indifférement Dieux pour Dieu et Lieux pour Lieu; car Dieu est Dieux en Dieu et Lieux en Lieu.

Tout deuil est d'abord deuil de Dieu (*LQ2* 542).

Paraphrase/translation is difficult here due to Jabès's wordplay in French, but my version runs as follows:

God=Void= Life of Eyes.

He used to say: 'God is void of voids. God is life of void. He is void of a life of the eyes. Death is the eye of mourning.

…

God. [*Dieu*]. *Di* [tell] *eu* [them]. *Dis (à) eux*. [Say (to) them]. Void between two syllables. God gives us to say grief [*deuil*].

You will write indifferently 'Gods' for God and 'Places' for Place; for God is Gods in God and Places in Place.

All grief is first of all grief of God.

The associations made here between '*Dieu*' (God), '*vide*' (void or emptiness), '*lieu*'('Place', one of the names of God in Hebrew), and '*deuil*' (mourning, grief) could be seen as tracing an outline of the notion of exile, particularly in the Jewish sense. This latter notion implies not just the recurring experience of persecution and forced exile experienced by Jews historically, but also, in the Kabbalistic religious sense, the exile of the *Shekinah* (or feminine presence/ immanence of the Divine) from God and from the rest of the ten *sefirot* (primordial and eternal divine emanations of distinct energies or qualities expressed

through the world). The exile of the Shekinah parallels the exile (from God, or from Paradise/Heaven) of humanity generally, and is said to date from the original sin and expulsion from the Garden of Eden (and the Mechilta of Rabbi Yishmael quotes Rabbi Akiva as saying that 'everywhere that the people of Israel are exiled, the Shekinah is in exile along with them') (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* 140). This exile actually stretches back before the concept of original sin to the creation of the universe, in kabbalistic theory (or creation mythology) depicted as the *tzimtzum* or primordial 'contraction and expansion' of the universe from a single infinitely condensed point (paralleling the more recent 'Big Bang' theory). (Hence the literal 'point' (.) that was the initial title of Jabès's book *El, ou le dernier livre*, referred to by this subtitle rather than the punctuation mark, at his publisher's insistence. The book opens with: 'When God, El, wanted to reveal himself, He appeared as a point. – The Kabbalah' (*BQ2* 341)). Gabriel Bounoure, literary critic and friend of Jabès, makes this paragraph's point beautifully:

> *Notre monde, celui où nous sommes jetés et qui est le lieu de notre exil, reste un monde de fragments perdus, de morceaux éclatés et coupants, de salissures et d'horreur. Mais le silence nous reste et les mots que le poète recueille au sortir du silence. Alors le monde peut devenir notre patrie, si ma presence au monde se montre capable de transformer le monde et moi; si je puis faire un acquis de ce qui est donné. En tout cas, puisque nos pourquoi sortent sans fin les uns des autres, il nous faut partir du monde comme d'un fait insurpassable. Le poète, après les longues épreuves, après les déserts traverses, se confie à la lettre qui porte un autre univers* (Bounoure 33).
>
> Our world, the one where we are thrown and which is the place of our exile, remains a world of lost fragments, of exploded pieces that cut, of stains and of horror. But we still have the silence and the words which the poet brings back upon leaving the silence. So the world can become our motherland, if my presence in the world shows itself capable of transforming the world and myself; if I can make an experience out of that which is given. In any case, since our 'why's escape endlessly one after another, we must start from the world as from an unsurpassable fact. The poet, after long tests, after the deserts traversed, trusts in the letter which opens up another universe.

Finally, this fundamental 'exile' is, in kabbalistic terms, rectified and resolved by humanity's performance of good deeds and spiritualisation, and/ or (especially, for Jewish kabbalists) by the Jewish people's performance of *mitzvot* (613 commandments) and Torah study. For Edmond Jabès, however, the state of political and geographic exile was permanent; there could be no going back. What remained was only an intellectually relentless and poetically precise 'bitter questioning' of the Jewish God, in order, perhaps, to ascertain or uncover the true nature of the exile's cause, or what it really meant to be a Jew.

8. ATHEISTIC JUDAISM, POST-SHOAH: THE 'CENTRE OF A RUPTURE'

Never forget you are the nucleus of a rupture (*BQ1*).

The rupture of the twentieth century was the Shoah; the rupture eternally, within Judaism and in Lurianic Kabbalah (developed by Isaac Luria, 16th century) is the *tzimtzum* or withdrawal and contraction of God to enable creation to occur. The Jew is the centre of a rupture in both post-Shoah atheistic Judaism as well as in the more apophatic mystical Kabbalah. In this chapter I will discuss the apophatic (defining God by what God is not, or by negation) nature of Jabès's atheism, his 'Judaism after God,' and how he deals with that in a kabbalistic, mystical manner. Jabès throughout *The Book of Questions* series and later works espouses what he has called a 'Judaism after God', entailing what Kaplan has labelled an 'atheistic theology'[26] which can in broad terms be described as negative or, more particularly, apophatic in that God is here defined by what God is not. Specifically, Jabès's addressed God is emphatically not the saving, speaking God of the original covenant. This latter, prior God is the one whose death Jabès laments and symbolically reconstructs through the murder of Yaël in the book of that title, the fourth volume of the *Book of Questions* series. The redemptive focus of the final three volumes centres on the discovery of a new relation between both God and the individual on the one hand, and self and other in human-to-human relationships on the other. This amounts to a revaluation of the covenant in which all responsibility is placed squarely on the side of humanity to find a way out of the mess that, particularly post-Shoah, both Jews as a collective and by extension the wider human community, may find themselves in. So while the imaged God of the covenant

[26] Giving a nod to Franz Rosenzweig's 1914 essay of that title. See Franz Rosenzweig, 'Atheistic Theology' (10-24). Rosenzweig in that essay famously attacks Martin Buber (without saying so explicitly) and other religiophilosophical thinkers for watering down religion and overly humanising the divine.

is iconoclastically destroyed, a new God who may or may not exist and which can best be described as the Void, is discovered in Jabès's books. This God, which 'manifests itself as a point' in *El*, the final book of the series – a centre for the void – is necessary to humankind mainly as a guarantor of the ethical imperative. Hence the new covenant is, Levinas-style, between man and man, self and other, amounting to what Kaplan calls a 'problematic humanism' (Kaplan "The Problematic Humanism of Edmond Jabès" 2234). It is problematic because of its differences to prior Enlightenment humanism or positivism, grounded as it is on the shifting sands of inevitable uncertainty, emptiness and the prior fact of humanity's collective moral vacuum, post-Shoah – which takes refuge in ethics and the notion of 'hospitality', both coming from a decidedly Jewish angle but stretching outwards towards a universal application.

Atheism, Monotheism and 'Judaism after God.'

Indeed it is this brand of atheism, this 'Judaism after God', which – and the realities of the Shoah can only add to this – some have argued is even implicit in the structure of monotheism itself. Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, has observed that

> the unique *theos*, deprived of appearance [*figure*] and name, really represents an invention, even the invention, of 'god' in general. There is neither 'the god' nor 'the divine', nor even perhaps 'the gods': these do not come first or, again, they do not quite exist so long as there are the people or the species of immortal figures…. We must therefore suppose that the invention of 'atheism' is contemporaneous and correlative with the invention of 'theism.' Both terms, in effect, have their unity in the principal paradigm or premise [*paradigme principiel*] (Nancy *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* 15).

Nancy finds that the God of transcendence can no longer be any God worthy of the name. Along the same track, Nancy has elsewhere said that the enduring legacy of monotheism is 'the fact that divine unicity is the correlate of a presence that can no longer

be given in this world but rather must be sought beyond it (the presence in this world being that of an 'idol', the rejection of which is no doubt the great generation and federating motif of the threefold Abrahamic traditions)' (Nancy *A Deconstruction of Monotheism* 383). This surely ties in with Jabès's treatment of the same theme. It is the anguish entailed in the impossibility of the gesture of 'reaching beyond' this world to any God. Elliot R. Wolfson notes in this context that '[i]f one attends to Nancy's words carefully, one is led to the unsettling conclusion that 'monotheism is in truth atheism,' which is to say, the aniconic ramification of the monotheistic creed is the undoing and demythologization of theism' (Wolfson *The Creation of the World* 17). This is the very point Nancy was making in the quote above. Wolfson goes on to bring together the themes worked through by Jabès (and Derrida), such as absence and atheism, when he writes that

> The pairing of monotheism ideationally with polyatheism stems from the fact that both terms signify the 'absenting of presence,'[27] which is not to say an absence that is 'the negative of a presence' but rather an absence that is 'the *nihil* that opens and that disposes itself as the space of all presence,'[28] that is, the withdrawal that fosters the engendering of the nothing that is the substrate of being, the nihility that makes creation possible (Wolfson *The Creation of the World* 17).

This should by now recall to the reader the kabbalistic notion of the *tzimtzum*, or withdrawal of God in the act of creation, discussed above in this thesis (Wolfson 552).[29] Jabès was clearly writing from a familiarity with this network of ideas. What is left after such a nothingness, a nihility, can be only Derrida's notion of 'the trace,' discussed above in this thesis in the chapters on Derrida and Levinas. Thus the kabbalah, and even normative

[27] Wolfson quotes Nancy 69.

[28] Wolfson again quotes Nancy, 71.

[29] Indeed, for those who may miss the reference, Wolfson notes in a footnote to this passage that Nancy (70), 'refers briefly to the Lurianic doctrine of *simsum* to illustrate the point that 'the 'nothing' of creation is the one that opens in God when God withdraws in it … in the act of creating, God annihilates itself [*s'anéantit*] as a 'self' or as a distinct being in order to 'withdraw' in its act—which makes the opening of the world.'

monotheism, is compatible with atheism. This is also Jabès's 'Judaism after God.' The Shoah only adds to God's absence, or perhaps stems from it.

Worthy of being brought to greater attention in this context is a footnote in Wolfson's *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* in which he offers three quotes from Jean-Luc Nancy and one from Deleuze which all bring this particular brand of atheism into greater clarity. Firstly, Nancy makes a point which echoes Franz Rosenzweig's 1914 essay 'Atheistic Theology' (mentioned in the first footnote to the present chapter):

> A vector of atheism does indeed cut across the great religions, not insofar as they are religious but insofar as they are all contemporary … with the exit from human sacrifice and with the Western turn in world history, and thus also in philosophy, which is atheism articulated for itself—these religions have witnessed a complete recasting of the 'divine', a recasting whose deep driving force pushes toward the removal, if not of the 'divine', then at least of 'God' ("Preamble: In the Midst of the World" 551).

Such a 'recasting' could, as Rosenzweig argues in 'Atheistic Theology', be seen in Hegel and Goethe, and indeed Martin Buber, among others, in relation to Christianity and Judaism respectively (Goodchild 156). What Rozenzweig bemoaned has become today's fashionably apophatic theology. It is possible that Jabès's work played a part in rendering it fashionable, through its probable influence on philosophers such as Nancy. Wolfson goes on in his footnote to quote what he calls Nancy's 'revealing remark' in 'On Disenclosure and Its Gesture, Adoration: A Concluding Dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy,':

> In this book [*Adieu* by Jean-Christophe Bailly], there is an expression that I think is charming, and that I have remembered ever since I read it: 'Atheism has not managed to irrigate its own desert.' So ultimately, I am responding to the call of this phrase: I am trying to irrigate and to bring water into the desert of atheism (Wolfson 331f).

It could be argued that Jabès, too, 'irrigates the desert of atheism,' or that he fails to, but both correlations of atheism with the desert must bring to mind Jabès and his emblematic Egyptian desert motif. Also recalling the work of Jabès, Wolfson quotes Nancy on the depiction of the Catholic God as the 'god of the death of God, the god who withdraws from all religion (from every bond with a divine presence) and who departs into his own absence' (Nancy, as cited in Wolfson 331). This 'god of the death of God' recalls Jabès's *Yaël*. Finally, Wolfson leaves the last word to Deleuze: 'in a sense, atheism has never been external to religion: atheism is the artistic power at work on religion' (as cited in Goodchild 156). This is exactly Jabès's atheism: 'the artistic power at work on religion.' Confronted with his Jewishness in the face of Nasser's Egyptian nationalism and the consequent anti-Semitism, and further with the horrors of the Shoah, Jabès put his considerable artistic, poetic powers to work on Judaism and the absent God. Philosophically akin to Derrida's project of deconstruction and his extension of the Levinasian notion of the 'trace', and finding an answer in Levinas's concept of 'hospitality' towards the Other, this amounts to an outline of Jabès's whole *oeuvre*. Its literary value remains unexplained by this; but that has been addressed in other chapters of this thesis.

If the very notion of atheistic Judaism, or 'Judaism after God', still sounds strange, then equally strange is the fact that Jabès spends the best part of all his works addressing and questioning a God he professedly does not believe exists. 'God is a questioning of God,' (*BQ* 138) he writes, and the desperate and rebellious act of continual questioning where there can be no possible answer, the act of writing itself, is the glimmer of hope that pulls Jabès through the quest for the real God that is the seven-volume *Book of Questions*. As Henri Atlan has put it, 'the ultimate idol is the personal God of theology … the only discourse

about God that is not idolatrous is necessarily an atheistic discourse. Alternatively, whatever the discourse, the only God who is not an idol is a God who is not a God' (Atlan 346f). Jabès's interrogation of God, of 'the God who is not a God,' is ultimately a quest for Truth::

> The following portrayal of Judaism from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno can be taken as exemplary of this sentiment: 'It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion (Wolfson 21).

Judaism's emphasis on the second commandment (against 'graven images' or depictions of God) is a testament to its valuing of truth over falsity. Thus Jabès as an atheist can still claim to be Jewish, as well as being Jewish by birth and as well as having been effectively deported due to his Jewishness. Adorno writes in his *Negative Dialectics*: 'The idea of truth is supreme among the metaphysical ideas, and this is where it takes us. It is why one who believes in God cannot believe in God, why the possibility represented by the divine name is maintained, rather, by him who does not believe' (Adorno *Negative Dialectics* 401f). In this way, by being 'true to the Truth', an atheist is the most genuinely religious of all, and this is borne out in the case of Jabès.

This leads us into the crucial role played by language and writing (and, concomitantly, silence) in Jabès's revaluation of the covenant. There is a natural division here between the areas of writing and speech. 'The word wants to be *pro* in speech and *contra* in writing' (*RB* 339). As Beth Hawkins puts it, 'The word sought, then, is one that resists and rejects the finality of being written, a word that reflects a type of breath-like speech, which itself is breath and mirrors the divine breath of creation' (Hawkins 195). 'If God is, it is because He is in the Book,' Jabès writes – but it is emphatically the God that follows the breaking of the Tablets of the Law, where any suspect notion of original truth

can only be attempted to be recovered in the traces of the fragmentary text left behind. God as Void is the All and the Nothing which exists in the silence before all speech and all writing, according to Jabès: '*Dieu est le défi relevé du vocable; mais la parole ne mène pas à Dieu. Le silence seul le pourrait*' (*LQ2* 241) 'God is the accepted challenge of the word. But the word does not lead to God. Only silence could' (Ibid. 169) And:

> *Tu me rappelais que le livre exigeait le licenciement du vulgaire regard. Abolir la figure, ainsi que l'ordonne le second commandement, rejeter la représentation pour souligner la transparence du vocable vu et indiscernible, entendu et inaudible. La parole divine est fumée troublante. Elle ne fut jamais rapport de sons étranges et terrifiants, mais serpentement harmonieux d'une trace incendiée dans l'air chaud qui tombait du Sinaï. Trace d'une trace répercutée dans son infinite défense.*
>
> *La voix du jour est celle qui indique, proclame, dénonce; ne se passe pas d'elle-même ni ne se dépasse. La voix d'ombre est celle qui, renonçant à dire – elle n'est pas communication, ou plutôt, elle est communication d'une impossible communication –, exhume des sables le Livre du Silence.*
>
> *Ce livre, Yaël, fut notre livre* (*LQ2* 269).

> You reminded me that the book demands the disbanding of vulgar eyes. To abolish the graven image as the second commandment orders, to reject representation in order to stress the transparency of the word: seen and yet indistinguishable, heard and yet inaudible. The divine word is disquieting smoke. It has never been a blast of strange and terrifying sounds, but a harmonious coiling of a trace burning in the warm air coming down from Sinai. Trace of a trace reverberating in its infinite interdiction.
>
> The voice of day points, proclaims, denounces. It neither renounces itself nor goes beyond. The voice of the dark in forbearing to speak (it does not communicate or, rather, it communicates impossible communication) unearths the sands of the Book of Silence. This book, Yaël, was our book (*LQ2* 188).

While it is true that the narrator of the novel Yaël, who is speaking in the above quotation, is a fictional character, it is I think fair to say that Jabès in this and other works uses his characters as a mouthpiece for his own pithy philosophical and poetic observations. The passage quoted above amounts to a dramatic display of the iconoclasm involved in

Jabès's revaluation of the covenant. Only the *nihil* of the dark, of night, of the silence of the desert, of atheism even, can be faithful to the truth necessary for the Book, to the truth about God. As Beth Hawkins writes, 'In his 'smashing of idols', then, Jabès launches an attack on both the imaged God and the language that sustains this God' (Hawkins 195). The 'voice of day' belongs to the imaged God of the old covenant with its reification and fixing of the word to the thing it represents. Post-Shoah, the 'voice of the dark … forbearing to speak' is the voice of the new God, the God that is the Void. It is the only appropriate response to the horrors of the preceding murder (of Yaël and of God, and of the Shoah).

This imagery also bears out the claim of some critics (e.g. William Franke [30]) that what Jabès espouses is a brand of negative theology. As Franke writes,

> all language is engendered by the divine Name, and consequently language in general proves in Jabès's work to be inhabited by a silent instance that it cannot name or say. The Name of God thereby emerges as the vanity of language in the heart of every word. … This description of the human predicament in language reflects—or deflects—an eminently and expressly Jewish sense of distance and difference from a transcendent deity. Language in general, like the unpronounceable Name of God, is beholden to a silent instance within it that it cannot grasp or say (Franke "Edmond Jabès, or The Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God" 102f).

We can see here the importance of language, and of its undoing or remaking, to the apophatic project in general and to Jabès's work in particular. But I agree with Matthew del Nevo when he states that he believes 'Jabès lies closer to *Kabbalism* (deflected from its mystical sense) than to negative theology' and that he prefers Kaplan's term 'atheistic theology' to the prioritising of negative theology (del Nevo np), as there is always (and

[30] See Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014). Also see Franke, 'Edmond Jabès, or The Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God', *Literature & Theology* Vol. 22 No. 1, March 2008, p. 102. Franke equates apophaticism with negative theology, an error that Kevin Hart (1989) clarifies.

increasingly, as the *Book of Questions* cycle progresses) a redemptive glimmer of hope in Jabès, who reaches for a resolution that is both truthful and ethical, as well as creative (in the deepest sense of that word – the true meaning of poetry or *poesis*). This is tellingly brought out in the final two volumes of *The Book of Questions*, *Aely* and *El,* in examples of Jabès's kabbalistic wordplay in French, as has been examined above in chapter 3 in this thesis, but the kabbalism in these books, and in Jabès's worldview, goes deeper than that, as we shall see further below. Also, importantly, any taking of this stance is not to somehow de-philosophise Jabès. Indeed, Hawkins (*c.*2003) has shown how Steven Kepnes, a writer on postmodern Jewish philosophy, 'suggests that Jabès and Levinas are the most exemplary figures of postmodern Jewish philosophy, that they are in many ways the 'fathers' of this newly emerging field' (Hawkins 245). We have seen how Jabès was possibly a vital influence on the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy (and Jean-Christophe Bailly) in quoted sections above in this chapter. Additionally, Jabès's thought does seem to have contributed to what Wolfson (*c.*2014) describes as the fashionable apophasis seen in philosophical circles over the past few decades.

To return to some foundational comments of Jabès on Judaism after God, and to add to the refutation of claims of negative theology in favour of the more poetic and kabbalistic/mystical, he writes:

> It is true, the word, 'Jew,' the word, 'God,' are metaphors for me: 'God,' the metaphor for the void, 'Jew,' the metaphor for the torment of God, of the void. In parallel, I also try to close in as much as possible on the historical sense of the words, 'Jew' and 'God,' joined in one and the same becoming. Do creature and creator not prepare, together, *the coming world?*
>
> …

> Whether God exists or not is, in fact, not the essential question. It is first of all to himself – and our tradition has always insisted on the importance of free will – that the Jew must answer for the fate of the values he has pledged to spread.
>
> Approaching it on this level, we find what I would call 'Judaism after God' (Jabès "My Itinerary" 4f).

This kind of Judaism is a Judaism emphasising the second commandment against graven images or depictions of God; a Judaism wholly in service to the quest for the absolute truth (as opposed to any logocentric 'Absolute Truth'). It would appear that Jabès still holds to some absolute values, if not possibly to a re-visioned version of the Absolute itself. The nature of the above-mentioned 'pledge' (made as a writer and as a Jew) bears deeper analysis, given the nature of the 'pledge' mentioned in *Elya* in *The Book of Questions*. This latter is a 'pledge of the abyss,' the metaphorical abyss that is in fact crossed throughout the course of the books before the close of the series. Recalling the previously-quoted Horkheimer and Adorno's Jewish 'pledge of salvation,' of faithfulness only to the truth, this 'pledge of the abyss' (which is the title of one of the short sections of *Elya*) is the spirit of questioning a God who does not answer and may not exist. As Beth Hawkins again aptly summarises: 'A resistance to this saving God, this God who 'shows Himself,' entails a stringency on the part of the writer: to bear witness, to 'testify' to the God who lies perpetually outside the realm of capture' (Hawkins 204). The section titled 'The Pledge of the Abyss' opens as follows, summing up everything we have been discussing in this chapter thus far:

> 1.
>
> (God gives death the dimensions of his absence.)
>
> 2.
>
> To write as if addressing God. But what to expect from nothingness where any word is disarmed? (*LQ2* 204).

Jabès continues:

> Being means questioning. Means interrogating yourself in the labyrinths of the Question put to others and to God, and which does not expect any answer.
>
> Night of mystery, total night.
>
> Dawn will be a shock.
>
> …
>
> The man who questions takes part in a universal interrogation with an abyss at its center. The book's configuration allows for this: it is the last circle of softened words.
>
> …
>
> Hope is bound to writing. And what greater hope than that of the feverish, hungry man for whom reading and adventures are selective seeds? (*LQ2* 153).

In this section the narrator, the questioner, is, like death itself, 'anchored in the night like one single diamond' (Ibid. 153). Alone, facing the abyss following the murder of God. Facing whatever trace of God is left. 'The exordium finds its conclusion in tomorrow's stubborn silence' (Ibid. 155). There is no hope for the narrator in God. The hope lies instead in man. This is precisely because 'Being means questioning. Means interrogating yourself in the labyrinths of the Question put to others and to God, and which does not expect any answer.' This is the 'hope' which is 'bound to writing,' where 'God is always in search of God' (Ibid. 159) through man himself and through the spirit of questioning. The necessity of 'testifying' to the absent presence of a God who cannot be captured in any (graven) image. This hope, this 'pledge of the abyss' is the means by which the series survives the murder of Yaël and that of God (which it symbolises), is the lamp which Jabès offers to light the pages of the Book as he guides us through and across the abyss of empty darkness. So it is not merely a negative or apophatic theology we see in The Book of Questions, though the pervasive and stubbornly silent reality of the Void is embraced as a higher truth by Jabès. Writing is presented as the hope, the solution. As in the first trilogy of the series, which

dealt with Sarah and Yukel through the Shoah, the Jew and the writer are in the same predicament when faced with this Void of the Absolute:

> I brought you my words. I talked to you about the difficulty of being Jewish, which is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out (*BQ1* 122).

Edmond Jabès and the Kabbalah

Jabès's 'Judaism after God' is a Judaism which takes root in the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and the rabbinical commentary and argumentation found in the Talmud, even more than in the Torah itself. We have seen earlier how his kabbalistic wordplay and letter substitutions and permutations in the secular diasporic French language highlight Jabès's embracing of the crucial importance of language in both the Kabbalah and normative Judaism. The imaginary rabbis in *The Book of Questions* often touch on mystical concerns even as Talmudic structure and tonal quality is hinted at. There is also the kabbalistic philosophy of the *tzimtzum*, or initial contraction within God/Creation in order to create the space for a universe to be born. This is the God-as-single-point that we find played out in *El*, the final volume of the *Book of Questions* septology, which opens with a quotation from the Kabbalah. All of these aspects of Judaism align well with the spirit of intense questioning found in Jabès's work, and in some sense may be the source of it. The result is a sort of Jewish version of mystical literature, though with a highly philosophical as well as poetical bent. Speaking of mysticism, in a discussion of Simone Weil, Wolfson writes that

> God is most present in the absence of God, and hence, ironically, it is feasible to speak of institutionalized religion as a 'hindrance to true faith' whereas atheism heralds the purification of the notion of God and the awakening of the supernatural part of the soul to the realization that the utter dissimilarity between God and all other beings imparts theological meaning to the statement that God does not exist.

This is the philosophical version of the revelation of the atheist mystic. Again we see the union of the dichotomy of the absent and the present ('God is most present in the absence of God') which was made so much of in Derrida. Wolfson notes that, '[a]dopting a paradoxical logic typical of mystical intuition, Weil maintains that belief in God involves the denial of God insofar as subservience to the true God is predicated on the refusal to worship images of a false God.' Again we see the importance to Judaism of the commandment against graven images. We also see here the relevance of the mystical point of view, which is more closely allied with the poetic. Meister Eckhart famously invoked, 'I pray to God to make me free of God,' (Eckhart 424) wrote that the highest form of prayer was 'to pray to God … with the thought that God does not exist' (Weil 20). If we replace prayer with philosophical questioning, this is exactly what Jabès, as an atheistic mystical philosopher-poet, does in *The Book of Questions* and his later works such as *The Book of Resemblances*, *The Book of Shares*, *The Book of Dialogue* and so on.

Edmond Jabès, Prophet of Hypertext?

Shortly after I started this thesis project, Jabès's granddaughter, CNRS academic and textual genesis and development specialist Aurèle Crasson wrote in 2012 of the parallels between hypertext and her grandfather's works:

> The years that followed his death were those of the explosion of new technologies. I read Literary Machines and followed with a great curiosity the developments of networks of information and digital writing. For me, the parallel between Ted Nelson's concepts of hypertext and Edmond Jabès's fragmentary writing struck me immediately. Could it be that the work of Edmond Jabès, which I had, in the printed edition, started to read in the middle and continued reading without any sense of chronology, might be a latent hypertext, a stratified text, a network of which the nodes would be those few key-words of which Jabès said himself that they were obsessive?

Crasson has been working on an electronic edition of Jabès's works which, to the best of my knowledge as of 2017, has yet to see the light of day. In the meantime, in this chapter, I will examine further the possible parallels between Jabès's works and contemporary hypertext, with a particular emphasis on responding to Crasson's reading of the Jabèsian text as hypertext.

Three main aspects of Jabès's work place him as an important precursor of digital poetry. Firstly, his fragmentary, interrupted, spacious, multi-vocal and non-linear (quasi-Talmudic) style of writing; secondly, the emphasised significance of keywords throughout and across all of his books; and thirdly, his philosophising on the nature and future of writing and the Book. To take the last point first, as Eric Gould put it in 1985:

> Jabès has … become one of the most important contemporary allegorists of the fate of reading and writing. He is preoccupied with the status of the book, the writer and the reader. He has declared that the future of writing depends on a thorough interrogation of its own performance…. For Jabès, the contemporary Jewish writer can only be conscious of the ancient relationship of the Jew to the Word, a tradition that had known the ironies of endlessly open interpretation centuries before Derrida…

For with The Book of Questions, Jabès effectively remade the book, with its fragments of letters, journal entries, anecdotes and folk tales, poetry, and commentary by imaginary rabbis interspersed with fragments of narrative. That he did this after immersing himself in study of the eleven-volume Jerusalem Talmud he'd inherited from his father, is telling. Theodor Nelson in Literary Machines describes the Talmud in a footnote:

> Unfortunately, for thousands of years the idea of sequence has been too much with us. [fn.]
>
> [Footnote:] Except for the Talmud. This is an extraordinary hypertext, a body of accumulated comment and controversy, mostly on the Torah (the Hebrew Old Testament) and on life in general, by Jewish scholars of old. It has been accreted over centuries with commentaries on commentaries. This hypertext is a

> fundamental document of Jewish religion and culture, and the Talmudic scholar is one who knows many of its pathways.

Pathways is a word used in both Jabèsian and Jewish, and in hypertext contexts, which we shall have occasion to refer to further below. For now, here is some of Jabès's theorising (prophesying?) on the book and its future. He writes in Aely:

> This is why I have dreamed of a work that wouldn't fall into any category, which wouldn't belong to any genre, but which would contain them all; a work that it would be hard to define, but which would define itself precisely by this absence of definition; a work which wouldn't answer to any name, but that would have endorsed them all; a work of no edge, no shore; a work of the Earth in the sky and the sky in the Earth; a work that would be the rallying point of all words scattered in space, of which no-one would suspect the loneliness and distress; the place, beyond place, of a God obsession, unfulfilled desire for a foolish desire; a book finally engaging [or 'delivering itself'] by fragments of which each one would be the beginning of a book.'

This clearly, if in retrospect, aligns with Ted Nelson's vision of hypertext as outlined in Literary Machines, and by extension, with the reality of today's internet.

It is first necessary to go back to the technology that is writing itself, to Jabès's ideas of the Book, and the reasons behind them. For this we firstly turn to the theorising of Friedrich Kittler on discourse networks circa 1900, for the effects technology of that time had upon writing itself, on the printed word, on the Book, and how that in turn influenced Jabès as well as Derrida et al.. We will then return to discourse networks circa 1990-2000, to the computer and hypertext, and see how a re-visioning of this as history (looking at literary print precursors to hypertext) might compel us to re-think and reformulate the relationship between print and digital cultures.

The salient point, for our purposes here, of Kittler's Discourse Networks 1800/1900 is how, in around 1890, writing cedes its position of supremacy as a means of data storage

and transmission to cinematic film and recorded audio in the form of the phonograph and gramophone. As Kittler puts it:

> The ability to record sense data technologically shifted the entire discourse network circa 1900. For the first time in history, writing ceased to be synonymous with the serial storage of data. The technological recording of the real entered into competition with the symbolic registration of the symbolic…
>
> To counter this triumphant competition, literature has two options. One easy option tends toward 'trivializing mechanisms': namely, while underrating the technological media, to join them. Since 1900 many writers have given up on getting their names into the poetic pantheon and, intentionally or not, have worked for the media.

Far be it from me to disparage any of the many varied reasons writers may have for working 'for the media', though it seems Kittler does, labelling them 'kitsch' in contrast to the verbal play of 'high literature':

> Literature's other option in relation to the media is to reject them, along with the imaginary and real aspects of discourse to which they cater, and which have become the province of popular writers. Because 'kitsch will never be eliminated from humanity', one group of writers renounces it. After 1900 a high literature develops in which 'the word' becomes something 'too conspicuous', that is, it becomes a purely differential signifier. Once imaginary effects and real inscription have been removed, what remains are the rituals of the symbolic. These rituals take into account neither the reaction thresholds of people nor the support of Nature. 'Letters of the alphabet do not occur in nature.' Words as literal anti-nature, literature as word art, the relation between both as material equality – this is their constellation in the purest art for art's sake and in the most daring games of the avant-garde. Since December 28, 1895, there has been one infallible criterion for high literature: it cannot be filmed.

This forces the field of writing to grasp itself as an autonomous media system, from about 1890 (and Mallarmé) on. The French philosophical and literary fascination with text from that time on both obfuscates and responds to this development; hence the obsession with scriptural economies (and their biblical provenance) in Jabès and Derrida et al.. In his 1964 article, 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book' (which later turns up as the third chapter of Writing and Difference), Derrida remarks on the 'historicity' of the Jews as a

'people of the book', and goes on to describe the book as an 'epoch' that is nearing its end. This ties in strongly with our concerns here. One hundred years after the invention of cinema and recorded sound, the advent of the computer and hypertext turns the knife in the book with a further twist.

Historical Roots of the Book; and the Broken Tablets of the Law

To return to Derrida and Jabès and the field of writing, we can now see the double importance of such concepts as the Broken Tablets of the Law, received by the Jews collectively at Sinai in Egypt (a place where inscription and writing has early historical roots alongside those of Judaism). The main point of the concept, in Derrida and Jabès, is that we never have access to the original document except in broken fragments; there is always deferral, and we are only ever looking at a copy, or copies of copies, of the (suspect term) 'original.' But it is also a matter of the historical roots of the Book (and by extension, of the Law). As the Broken Tablets bear out, hypertextual writing was always there as a 'trace', pre-existing to every kind of writing. Today's internet, meanwhile, shows up the infinite iterativity of the most mundane (even onerous) hypertextual content.

Jay David Bolter, in his *Writing Space: the Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing* analyses computer and hypertext systems in relation to the history of writing, from stone, clay and wax tablets to papyrus rolls, medieval illuminated manuscripts, the printed book and contemporary electronic writing. He underlines the fact that writing itself is a technology; that we can equally 'inscribe the mind' with memory; that 'mind is a text.' Oral cultures know this particularly well. Kittler's own writings on current hypertext technology speculate that, since the system connects computers rather than humans, technology may take over the human body. 'Inscribing the mind' may take a more literal, hypertechnological

turn. But such concerns stray too far from Jabès, who – though his writings were always straining beyond the printed page – was always theorising the Book, even as he wanted to see it 'infinite' and 'exploded.'

As Bolter in the above-cited work states,'Interactive fiction is both innovative and traditional', adding that:

> in disrupting the stability of the text, interactive fiction belongs in a tradition of experimental literature … that has marked the 20th century—the era of modernism, futurism, Dada, surrealism, lettrism, the nouveau roman, concrete poetry, and other movements of greater or lesser influence.

He goes on to cite Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, and the works of Jorge Luis Borges as anticipating hypertext, in precisely the way I am claiming here for Edmond Jabès. The self-reflexive nature of such works, their multiple layers and infinity of pathways all render them print versions of hypertext literature, exhausting as they do the possibilities of the printed page. Jabès too does this, though in his own, markedly Jewish as well as French, way. He even goes beyond, in his mystic, Egyptian way, linked as the Egyptian desert is to the history of writing (as well as to the history of the Jews).

We have seen above in this chapter how Jabès prophesies a kind of hypertextual literature in 1972's Aely. But how precisely do Jabès's books anticipate hypertext and electronic literature? I could cite fragments of the whole oeuvre, but it is the overall structure of the Jabèsian literary project as a whole that suggests and plays out or performs the nature of a hypertextual literature. The work consists of fragments of multiple genres in multiple varieties of typography linked by 'obsessive' keywords which form nodal points, along with the plots' crisis points and philosophical keywords (such as 'trace', 'face', 'other' the 'neutral', 'hospitality'), to the oeuvre. An atheistic, apophatic questioning of God runs

throughout Jabès's books as a constant feature, post-Suez and post-Shoah. This is the books' ultimate subject. God as the absent presence, the presence of absence. But the form of the works is, like that of the Talmud, ultimately hypertextual.

Aurèle Crasson: *'L'oeuvre d'Edmond Jabès peut-elle se lire sous forme de 0 et de 1?'*

Aurèle Crasson, Jabès's granddaughter and textual genesis specialist at the CNRS lab, in a previously published article included in Steven Jaron (ed.) 's Portrait(s) d'Edmond Jabès, asked a number of pertinent questions about hypertext and versions of Jabès's work in these forms. In what follows in this chapter I will consider her questions one-by-one. She discusses, in her article, the feasibility of transposing Jabès's work into a hypertext version, and the various dilemmas this would entail, in order to be faithful to the spirit of Jabès's work; the notion of the 'electronic book'; the various features of Jabès's work that make it lend itself to hypertext iterations; and in particular, the notion of keywords and their importance for Jabès, and for hypertext.

Firstly, while discussing the apparently oxymoronic term 'electronic book', Crasson notes that:

> *le livre fait référence à une matérialité, une tradition, une histoire et un mode de lecture défini par sa structure et sa clôture. Le numérique, en revanche, appartient à une histoire récente liée au progrès technologique et évoquant moins la littérature que la théorie de l'information associée à une logique de production.*
>
> *Au livre numérisé, il manque ses pages, son épaisseur, ses marges, ses couvertures, l'apparente stabilité du texte. Dans ce contexte une lecture pour elle-même est-elle possible?*
>
> the book makes reference to a materiality, a tradition, a history and a mode of reading defined by its structure and its closure. Electronic writing, on the other hand, belong to a recent history linked to technological progress and evoking less literature than a theory of information associated with a logic of production.

> The electronic book lacks the book's pages, its thickness, its margins, its covers, the apparent stability of the text. In this context is a reading for its own sake possible?

First she compares the book and its cultural context to computer hypertext, and indeed the latter's infinite iterability means that the book or cultural object is juxtaposed alongside many other such objects or options for a reader to take; the book is reduced to one object in a vast array. In this context a 'reading for itself' or 'in itself' is, if possible, not going to be the same as in print. As Crasson goes on to note, 'reading itself becomes a kind of writing' in hypertextual contexts, and new versions of the text can be created each time it is 'read.'

This leads to Crasson's next question, and its prefatory context, which runs as follows:

> *Questionner la possibilité d'une transposition du livre à l'écran, tenter d'évaluer la perte qui en résulterait conduit à saisir ses qualités, les limites des nouveaux supports informatisés, tant certains traits des livres de Jabès évoquent et déstabilise tout à la fois le concept d'hypertexte.*
>
> *Jabès est un écrivain du livre; son oeuvre interroge le livre, le livre questionne l'écriture, elle-même sollicitant l'identité de l'écrivain. Est-il, dès lors, possible de porter cette oeuvre hors du livre et de prolonger l'interrogation? Ôter sa valeur d'objet au livre, est-ce le transgresser?*
>
> To question the possibility of a transposition from book to screen, to attempt to evaluate the loss which may result directs one to seize its qualities, the limits of the new computerised supports, since certain traits of Jabès's books simultaneously evoke and destabilise the concept of hypertext.
>
> Jabès is a writer of the book; his oeuvre interrogates the book, the book questions writing, itself interrogating the identity of the writer. Is it, then, possible to carry this oeuvre outside of the book and to prolong the interrogation? To remove its value as object from the book, is it to transgress it?

In this we see the centrality of the Book to Jabès's overall project. This is perhaps the reason why no electronic edition of Jabès's works has yet been undertaken. It is also, however, merely the balance to the other side of the equation, the one where fragments of

multi-vocal, multi-genre writing linked by keywords suggest a hypertext transposition. As Crasson puts it in her next paragraph,

> *La première intuition surgit dans la singularité manifeste de cette oeuvre dont les traits laissent entrevoir certaines similarités avec les hypertextes. Elle peut en effet se lire hors de toute chronologie – les sept volumes du Livre des Questions comme les trois du Livre des Ressemblances ont été réunis sous un même volume -- , les prières d'insérer, autocitations, seuils et transitions de feuillets blancs, les mots obsessionnels qui d'un recueil à l'autre se répondent en écho, témoignent d'un lien entre les espaces d'écriture et l'écriture elle-même. C'est une oeuvre qui incite le lecteur à réagir, à prolonger le processus d'interrogation en cours. Les variations de genre (narration, poésie, dialogue), le texte en continuels fragments, le brouillage des ordres temporels, les élans, les contradictions et infidèles répétitions qui portent le livre, avertissent le lecteur de l'impossible vérité stable et définitive.*
>
> The first intuition arises in the obvious singularity of this oeuvre of which the characteristics suggest certain similarities with hypertexts. It can indeed be read outside of any chronological order – the seven volumes of The Book of Questions like the three of The Book of Resemblances have been published in a single volume --, the back cover text, self-referencing, thresholds and transitions with blank pages, the obsessive words which from one book to another echo one another, bear witness to a connection between the spaces of writing and the writing itself. It's an oeuvre which incites the reader to react, to prolong the process of interrogation underway. The variations of genre (narrative, poetry, dialogue), the text in sustained fragments, the blurring of temporal orders, the élans, the contradictions and unreliable repetitions upon which the book depends, inform the reader of the impossibility of any stable and definitive truth.

Crasson's writing here amounts to a verification of my arguments for Jabès to be seen as a precursor of hypertext. That the oeuvre does not depend on being read in chronological order; the abundance of section cut-off points replete with blank pages, the 'obsessive' keywords such as '*Dieu'* (God), '*désert'* (desert), '*oeil'* (eye), '*loi'* (law), all point to this. The way the *oeuvre* 'incites' a reaction from the reader, to 'prolong the process of interrogation underway'; the variations of genre, the text in continuous fragments, the jamming of temporal orders, the contradictions and repetitions in the text all point to the suitability of a hypertext version, as well as to 'the impossibility of any stable and definitive truth' (in congruence with Derrida's views).

Moreover, where everything else is being digitised, the question becomes how and in what manner to do it rather than whether or not it should be done. Crasson's remaining questions in this article bear witness to this dilemma:

> *Comment alors opérer les ruptures lorsqu'elles sont la condition même de l'écriture de Jabès, alors que dans un hypertexte tout est rupture ou tout est flux? Comment relier les textes afin de ne pas détruire le movement d'involution, le vertige, l'écoute du mot, la 'veillée de l'écriture' dont parle Derrida?*
>
> How to bring about ruptures when they are the very condition of Jabès's writing, given that in a hypertext everything is rupture or everything is flux? How to establish connections between texts so as not to destroy the movement of involution, the vertigo, the attentiveness to the word, the 'vigilance of writing' of which Derrida speaks?

An answer to this question perhaps lies in Crasson's ninth footnote to her article, where she asks another question: *'Faire apparaître la genèse de l'oeuvre permettrait-il de restituer l'épaisseur du livre et d'évoquer la durée de l'écriture?*' 'Would making the genesis of the oeuvre apparent allow a restitution of the thickness of the book and evoke the duration of the writing?' Making the genesis of the work appararent – a possibility which hypertext easily affords, and one which Crasson herself specialises in – could well solve a number of such problems. In addition, fragments of text could be placed so as to overlap each other on the screen, and the reader/user could select a fragment to pursue a certain direction in the writing. The possibilities are literally endless, though the difficulties of a cross-media transposition will always remain for those brought up with the expectations conditioned by the use of the book. Crasson poses several more questions which it is almost impossible for the present thesis to address, namely:

> *Comment éviter un morcèllement arbitraire quand la fragmentation dans le livre va dans le sens d'une continuité assumée par Jabès? Comment rendre compte de la clôture du livre quand la caractérisation de l'hypertexte est de n'avoir aucune limite, d'être sans cesse en expansion? … Du temps immédiat de l'hypertexte, toujours au présent, peut-on aborder d'autres temporalités? Chez Jabès, la notion de limite est*

> *presque paradoxale: la question donne l'absence de limite, la réponse serait l'immobilité du livre. Les questions de l'écrivain ne s'additionnent pas, elles se retournent sur elles-mêmes, s'alimentent mutuellement, dialoguent; telle est la différence fondamentale avec cette possible prolifération des liens dans l'hypertexte.*
>
> How to avoid an arbitrary breaking into pieces when the fragmentation in the book goes in the sense of a continuity assumed by Jabès? How to justify the closure of the book when the characteristic of hypertext is to have no limit, to be endlessly in expansion? … To the asynchrony of hypertext, always in the present, can one introduce other temporalities? In Jabès's work, the notion of the limit is almost paradoxical: the question gives rise to the absence of limit, the response would be the immobility of the book. The writer's questions don't add up, they are self-reflexive, mutually feed off each other, dialogue with each other; such is the fundamental difference with this possible proliferation of links in a hypertext.

New techniques would have to be introduced to allow any hypertext to be faithful to the work of Jabès; perhaps a compromise or blend of hypertext and ordinary digitisation of text would suffice to correctly render a version of his work in the digital medium. The 2012 BNF exhibition of Jabès manuscripts, related artworks and documentary video showed that there is a plethora of images, audio and video as well as texts to choose from. Layers of text could be built up from differing manuscript versions for a hypertext, which is indeed what Crasson does in *Récit: les cinq éditions du manuscrit* (*c.*2005). Crasson's questions in this article, itself titled with a question – '*L'Oeuvre d'Edmond Jabès peut-elle se lire sous forme de 0 et de 1?*' – lead beyond the scope of this thesis and would have to be tackled by another digitisation expert like herself. Finally, we will return to her same article to discuss the crucial question of keywords in Jabès and in hypertext.

Keywords in Jabès

As Crasson writes, '*Dans un hypertexte ce sont souvent les mots clés qui constituent les 'ancres', sortes de points d'impulsion donnant accès aux informations invoquées. Chez Jabès le 'mot clé' est un mot secret dissimulé dans l'ensemble des vocables.*' 'In a hypertext it is

often the keywords which constitute the 'anchors', sort of anchoring points giving access to information called upon. In Jabès's work, the 'keyword' is a secret word hidden in the set of vocables.' There is a slight difference in function implied here in the two uses of the phrase 'keyword.' To explain this, Crasson quotes Louis Massignon, cited by Gabriel Bounoure in his book on Jabès, who found in Semitic languages 'sign-words', 'substantial words', or 'words of force.' He writes: '*Le poète, comme le prophète, est celui qui sait prononcer des mots de cette sorte,-- qui sait 'donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*.' ' 'The poet, like the prophet, is he who knows how to pronounce words in this way, -- who knows how 'to give a purer, more reified meaning to the words of the tribe.' This is the sense in which Jabès uses his keywords.

According to Crasson, Jabès distinguished between two levels of keyword: '*mots clés*' (keywords) and '*mots obsessionels*' (obsessive words). The first type are words that arise spontaneously in the course of writing and which the writer 'does not know in advance.' *In Aely, Jabès uses the term 'phrase clé' ('key phrase') as follows:*

> *Dans chaque ouvrage, il doit probablement y avoir une phrase clé, une image, quelques pages que l'on ne pourrait saisir que longtemps après qu'elles nous furent proposées, comme s'il fallait que cette clé brillât dans la nuit du vocable afin que nous ne puissions nous en servir qu'après avoir quitté le livre.*
>
> In each work, there must probably be a key phrase, an image, a few pages which one could only grasp a long time after they had been suggested, as if that key had to shine in the night of the vocable in order for us to make use of it after closing the book shut.

These 'key phrases' or 'keywords' differentiate themselves from the recurring '*mots obsessionels*' ('obsessive words'), like '*Dieu*', '*juif*', '*loi*', '*oeil*', '*deuil*', '*désert*' ('God', 'Jew', 'law', 'eye', 'mourning', 'desert'). These are the words I argue render a hypertext version of

Jabès most appropriate. Crasson points to some subtleties which render this problematic when she writes:

> *Dans un hypertexte, l'usage habituel des mots clés veut qu'ils renvoient à des occurrences qui les déterminent, les figeant presque dans une définition incontournable. Les 'mots obsessionels' de Jabès, comme 'juif', 'Dieu', 'désert', 'loi', n'appellent pourtant pas de réponses; ils reviennent comme une hantise, sans fin. Dans certains passages, ces mots parfois si pleins et parfois vides, semblent s'affranchir de toute clé; ils relancent le questionnement, le mesurent, se mesurent à la teneur du texte. Comment se fait-il que Jabès utilise le mot 'Dieu'? La relation entre les mots 'Dieu', 'juif', 'loi', 'désert' est-elle transcriptible?*
>
> *Peut-on s'aider de cette relation pour suggérer une lecture transversale de l'oeuvre de Jabès? L'enjeu de cette lecture, afin d'être fidèle à la forme du livre, serait d'en retrouver le mouvement involutif.*
>
> In a hypertext, the usual usage of keywords means that they point back to occurrences which determine them, almost fixing them in a definition which can't be overlooked. Jabès's 'obsessive words', like 'Jew', 'God', 'desert', 'law', do not, however, call forth a response; they return like a haunting, endlessly. In some passages, these words sometimes so full and sometimes empty, seem to set themselves free from any key; they revive the questioning, measure it, measure themselves to the tenor of the text. How is it that Jabès utilises the word 'God'? Is the relation between the words 'God', 'Jew', 'law', 'desert', transcriptable?
>
> Can we use this relation between words to suggest a transversal reading of the works of Jabès? The stakes of this reading, in order to be faithful to the form of the book, would lie in finding the involutionary movement.

These are certainly extremely valid concerns. However, to find the 'involutionary movement', or the necessarily complicated nature, of the Jabèsian text surely lies precisely in an appreciation of the complicated nature of his 'obsessive words'. These open the Jabèsian text like a key. It would of course be necessary in any hypertext version of Jabès's works to underline the complexity and symbolic, unstable nature of such keywords. Relevant quotes from his work, for example, could appear in connection with each keyword, perhaps even a different quotation each time, to underscore the poetic nature of the Jabèsian text. But however it is done, the fact remains that it could be done. It seems that so far, Crasson does not agree, given the complexities involved in remaining faithful to her

grandfather's works. But the fact that she has even approached the question in such an in-depth way shows that there is enough in the texts themselves to call forth such a response. It would be a pity if it were left to other, unrelated researchers to complete an electronic edition of Jabès's oeuvre. It seems that time, and the efforts of all researchers involved, will decide how the digitisation of Jabès plays out.

9. CONCLUSION

To study the texts of Jabès, especially in conjunction with those of Blanchot, is to discover that negation is perception. As Franz Kafka put it: 'It is up to us to accomplish the negative. The positive is given' (Kafka, as cited in *BQ2* 344). Also, that 'perception is deception', as we can see from a study of Derrida. Already deconstructed, the Jabèsian text did not leave that much for Derrida to do. Ultimately, Jabès would opt for a Levinasian 'hospitality' towards the Other, crossing any borders of religion, race, nationality or ethnicity to be inclusive of, yet still respectful towards the integrity of, all differences. Such was Jabès's overarching concern, transcending all questions of merely literary technique.

Yet Jabès as a writer in French was also a highly original master craftsman of the language. The ample blank spaces his poetic fragments of prose swim in, offset a multivocal, multi-genre, typographically diverse, classic literary style sprinkled with rejuvenated archaic words, matched with a philosophical and semi-religious profundity and an abundance of questioning, that altogether function to make the Jabèsian text a rare one in the field of postwar and postmodern world literature.

Writing in the wake of Auschwitz and the Shoah, and after Theodor Adorno's famous dictum that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,' Jabès replied not only that we can, but that 'we must' – though the nature of post-Auschwitz literature was by necessity irrevocably transformed. The works of Jabès are one major signpost of this transformation.

Overall, my journey through the landscape of the Jabèsian text has been an impassioned one. From his Egyptian origins as a young poet influenced by the Surrealists and Max Jacob, using techniques such as multivocality and the aphoristic style which he

would further develop in his later works; across to Paris, living in an enforced exile due to his Jewishness, and writing the seven-volume cycle of the Book of Questions; to exploring his literary techniques of silence and the isolated word, the white space and the isolated letter; on to the wider implications of his concept of the Book, his relations with Derrida, Blanchot and Levinas, and the Jewish themes and concerns of his work, ultimately ending with a plea for hospitality and openness toward the Other; and finally, the possibilities of Jabès's work being particularly well-suited to a hypertext iteration. There is no end to the possibilities and profundities within the Jabèsian text which can be mined for meaning and potential future versions. What has been explored within this thesis could not possibly tell the whole story, and is necessarily only one person's interpretation and exploration of the Jabèsian text.

This thesis has examined the literary legacy of Edmond Jabès, in particular marking out the salient features of his unique, 'infinite', 'exploded' Book. The reasons behind, origins of and influences upon Jabès's concept of the Book, in his life and surrounding historical events, have all been discussed. Jabès's work has been seen in its relation to the field of mutual influence shared between himself, Blanchot, Derrida and Levinas, and his literary and philosophical ideas have been delineated.

This work challenges William Franke's argument that Jabès espoused a purely negative, apophatic theology, confirming Kaplan and Del Nevo in preferring Kaplan's term 'atheistic theology' and a more kabbalistic-poetic designation. God is mentioned too many times throughout Jabès's works, the Talmud and the Kabbalah made too much use of in the

Jabèsian text, for negative theology to be a viable description of the *oeuvre*. This is not to say that an apophatic approach cannot be found in Jabès's works.

This thesis's contribution to knowledge is contained within the individual insights discovered by the poetic analysis it enacts upon Jabès's work. The concept of a 'complicit dissidence' linking Jabès with Blanchot, Levinas and Derrida is, I believe, original to the present thesis. In addition, to the best of my knowledge no writer in the English-speaking world has yet made explicit the links between Jabès's work and contemporary hypertext, though Jabès's granddaughter, academic Aurèle Crasson, has written of it in France.

The Jabèsian text amounts to a cry, a scream in the desert. A Book with its pages made up of the desert sands, footprints the words swimming in the dry ocean of the Infinite God. Not the Jewish God of the Covenant, but a more Egyptian-Jewish God, a desert God. Not the overarching Logos, but the word as a flame of fire. The Book of the Law, eternal in its blazing of 'black fire on white fire' like the burning bush discovered by Moses in the Egyptian desert five millennia ago. The poetry put forth by Jabès in the environs of that same desert in the twentieth century was a kind of Jewish juice wrenched from the desert stone and sand. Later, after Auschwitz, that Jewish writing would turn back into a scream, an eternal cry, a flame that would never be extinguished, Rabbis that could never be silenced, footprints made up of words that could never be erased. Edmond Jabès wrote a Book that could never be closed, and a philosophy and poetics that transcends mere words.

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