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EDMOND JABÈS, OR THE ENDLESS SELF-EMPTYING OF LANGUAGE IN THE NAME OF GOD

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Abstract

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. Such modes of thinking and writing prove to be key to the significance of Jabès's project as a whole. His *oeuvre* is exemplary of new forms that this type of discourse can assume in its revival underway today. Jabès contemplates ineffability in language in the first instance in the Name of God. But 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.

I

EDMOND JABÈS (1912–91), writing in French as a francophone Egyptian Jew, takes the diaspora as paradigmatic for the condition of exile of the modern writer. It is not just an historical accident that places Jabès in the position of an outsider coming to his own language as something of a foreigner. In language, as he 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.[1] Language in general, like the unpronounceable Name of God, is beholden to a silent instance within it that it cannot grasp or say.

The work of Jabès thereby situates itself in a long tradition of apophatic discourse that goes back to Neoplatonic speculation on the ineffable One and more specifically to the tradition of reflection on the Name of God as the Ineffable par excellence such as one finds in the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbalah. Apophatic modes of thought and discourse are paramount in Jabès's writing and offer an opportunity to gauge the new forms that this type of writing can assume when it is reinvented again today. Jabès thinks obsessively in and around an ineffability residing in the heart of language: he finds it harbouring especially in those paradigmatic instances of language—the Book and the Name of God.

For Jabès, the Book—like the Name of God in monotheistic theology—is infinite and can be manifest only in fragments and finitude, never as a whole and intact. Such is the predicament of human words. The Jews, by dwelling in this exile of the word, are veritably the people of the Book ('gens du livre'). The emptiness of the human word, as abstracted and separated from the Name of God or from the totality of the Book, opens into an omnipresent infinity of nothing. This infinity and emptiness of the word, as well as its totalisation—the Book—are unsayable. But the word is open in its emptiness, an open question and an open desert for wandering, a space of errancy. Only in this openness is there any room for human expression.

The genesis of this condition of exile in and into language isolated by silence is symbolised by Moses's breaking of the tablets of the Law. Subsequently, all human speech and writing is fallen and fragmentary; it can only attempt in vain to reconstruct the original intact tablets written with the finger of God. Human writing, in this perspective, is *per se* exiled from original, full meaning and order; it is, in Blanchot's terms, a 'writing of disaster', an 'absence of the book'. Writing henceforth delivers no Law but can only generate endless commentary on the irremediably lost and absent Word, which has become silence: indeed commentary ('comment taire', literally 'how to be silent') is *per se* a silencing of the original.[2] This language, which is exiled from its own essential meaning, is in movement through history and only by its shifts and slips allows, perhaps, a glimpse of the utopia of pure and full meaning that is forever lost. Only this endless exile, moreover, enables humans to live, giving them room to breathe. Without this distance, they would be simply smothered by the Absolute. Moses's breaking of the Book was in this sense necessary to open up a space for the finite and human.

According to the 16th century Spanish Kabbalist Isaac Luria, this human space of exilic movement is made by God's own self-exile, his withdrawal into himself (*zimzum*). It is by contracting into himself that the absolute Being, who was all in all, first created a space of nothing, a space emptied of his own infinite presence. This is the space of the universe, of Creation, a space emptied of absolute plenum, cleared for difference and for the non-divine. Such is the sphere in which human existence and history unfold. It is linguistic throughout its whole extent. Yet, it is all a relation and a reference to what remains outside it, to the unspeakable divine Name, which is the unbroken wholeness of the Law that the intact tablets *would* have revealed as if immediately in its oneness, hence without the mediation of finite, broken, human words. This utopic language of the impossible Name is what Walter Benjamin, too, in 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', envisages as glimpsed in and through translation. It is the originary, imaginary whole vase of which all the languages of the world are but the shards.[3]

The Jewish God's uncompromising transcendence renders him absent from the world and especially from the *word* in which he is revealed but at the same time concealed. The word remains as a trace of God's withdrawal from the world. The withdrawing of God is the precondition for the existence of anything else. Otherwise God is all in all, and existence is saturated by his being alone. The word makes a beginning, interrupts eternity, and in so doing marks an absence of God by opening up a gap in His eternal presence. This trace of divinity in the word is exactly the trace of eternity in time, as Saint Augustine also taught.[4] That there be meaning articulated in language requires an obliteration of the absolute presence of God, a forgetting. Forgetfulness is the condition and the 'beginning' of any articulable meaning (*El*, p. 69). So only by remembering this forgetting can we hope to regain any inkling of the eternity that reigned before time began.

All *our* meanings, as reductions to definite terms of the Boundless, *Ein Sof*, of kabbalistic tradition, are necessarily tinged with silence and absence. However, *questioning* is a mode of keeping our language open as a broken fragment addressed ultimately to the infinite and unsayable, the 'divine': 'All questions are first of all questions put to God'.[5] Indeed God is a question ('Dieu est une question') for us who are nothing ('pour nous qui ne sommes rien').[6] For us who are nothing, the truth is the void and God as our truth and our void is revealed in the open question.

All our words are images of an unspeakable Word, but ideally Jabès would eliminate all terms and images. His language, though vividly imaged, negates its own images and strives after a neutrality without image and without name. Rather than suppressing or negating imagery, he neutralises it, opens it up to an imageless abyss within its midst, the abyss of what cannot be imagined or figured or said. Moses asks God his name, hardly suspecting that

God cannot be expressed except by the absence of any name. Yet, this absence to which all names belong is figured as the Book. And hence Jabès's works are all impregnated with the sense of silence as the alpha and omega of a Book into which everything that is anything finite or determinate falls and disappears.

Jabès decomposes even the arch-figure of the Book in order to let out the silence and emptiness at its centre. By removing the central, open-ended letter V of this word LIVRE (book), he turns it into LIRE (read). A homologous excision is performed upon the word LI(B)RE (free), in order to liberate the freedom hidden in the midst of the activity of reading (LIRE). Further elimination of the letters left at the centre in each case (L[IR]E) yields LE, the definite article in French signifying a noun or name in general. It is also the Hebrew Name of God, EL, in reverse (*El*, p. 81). By such means, the Name of God is shown over and over again to be dwelling silently in the core of language, an infinity and abyss into which every manifest, finite form of speech collapses. Nothingness, the empty, unpronounceable silence of the divine Name opens a void within the core of every word that in turn opens into a desert miraculously fertile in uncontainable meanings.

Silence is thus foregrounded as the background and unique ground of all language and expression from the early stages of Jabès's project. His literary achievement is organised largely into the seven-volume *Le Livre des Questions*, followed by the three volumes of *Le Livre des Ressemblances*, and then by the four volumes of *Le Livre des Limites*. The series begins from the original and first volume entitled, like the first series itself, simply *The Book of Questions*, in which Jabès questions imaginary rabbi-poets, in order ostensibly to interrogate silence for its answers to his questions: 'Interrogate me, you for whom I speak. I draw answers to your questions from silence, where they are mounted' ('Interroge-moi, toi pour qui je parle. Du silence où elles sont enchâssées, je tire les réponses à tes questions'). True human dialogue is a silent dialogue, such as transpires between hands and eyes or, more precisely, 'pupils' ('*Le vrai dialogue humain, celui des mains, des prunelles est un dialogue silencieux*').[7]

El, ou le dernier Livre (1973), the final book or 'period' in the seven volumes making up the *Livre des Questions* (1963–73), begins by citing the Kabbalah and its use of the image of the point as a figure for God: God reveals and makes Himself manifest as a point ('Dieu, *El*, pour se révéler, Se manifesta par un point. *La Kabbale*'). This image is developed throughout the book and by the end becomes an image for the last book itself ('*Ce point*/El/*Le dernier livre*?' p. 111). This point, in fact, opens as a hole into which all disappears as into the Absolute, that is, into the absolute, imperceptible unity of the One, which coincides with Nothing, as suggested by the palindrome: ONE = NONE ('L'UN = NUL', p. 63).

Seminal for Jabès's whole discourse is the idea of God as 'the silence of all words'. God's Word is 'an unfathomable abyss beyond words toward which all words tend, as toward an unutterable obsession beset by fever and revolt'. God is 'what is unattainable within all that we attain', and His Word we experience always only in its brokenness in our words: '... only through its infinite fracture can we approach the Totality which, in itself would be neither more nor less than a flight of our fancy...'.[8] Our words are thus oriented towards the infinity of His Word, which, as broken into mortal finitude, can only convey emptiness, exile and silence.

This basic idea proves to be inexhaustible—it is, after all, the idea of the Inexpressible—and the purpose of this essay is to follow some of its most original formulations through the intricate and sometimes torturous meanderings of Jabès's texts. We will see how these texts contrive to enact the divine emptiness, the holy nothingness, and the silence of the unpronounceable Name of God that haunts every articulated word and erases every manifest form of letters in language.[9]

II

What is in a word? What lies at the core of language? It can only be the silent, empty Nothing of the tomb, the pyramid of the dead letter, as in the letter A. For language abstracts from things, it memorialises life, it voids presence. Yet, language *says* this nothingness in so many beguilingly soft, sweet, subtle and insinuating ways. The textures of words make it palpable, their sonorities render it audible and their suggestively shapely letters display it graphically. At the core of a word, beneath the crust of its consonants, is the liquid of its vowels, and these vowels in effect liquidate the word until it flows into the ocean of nothingness. This nothingness is what Jabès finds harbouring rapturously in the wings of language, and he parades and stages it in his books. But that nothingness into which all that is articulated dissolves is the unity of everything, albeit a unity that is itself nothing. As such, the inexistent totality/nullity of the Book governs every passage of the writing of words. Words are but the unfolding of this total nothingness. It turns them into a universe of emptiness: 'Le verbe est univers du vide' ('The word is a world of emptiness', *El*, p. 93).

Jabès breaks language down into its elements in order to liquidate, vaporise, pulverise and immolate it—so many different ways to reduce it to nothing by violence. He develops, in effect, a poetics of the four elements to suggest how all sensible images serve the purpose of pointing to what cannot be expressed in language without being bloodied, killed and annulled. Language is water, for it dissolves into a sea where

meaning is dispersed. Indeed, in some sense, 'all books have been written in the sea' ('Tous les livres ont été écrits dans la mer', *El*, p. 74). The watery element effects dissolution into nothing, as does also the firey element that consumes all, converting static matter to effervescence of energy, while the aerial element, 'aérien', refines mass or content to 'rien', nothing: Jabès hears this word as saying 'A e(st) rien' ('A is nothing'). Finally, the earth, the solid element, 'la terre', is the place of errancy ('errer'), as its name suggests. Earth is a place of wandering until one has lost all direction and destination and thereby evades every definition.

The Nothing evoked by all four elements in their disappearance is nothing but the word erased or scratched out. In each case, the nothingness of silence is released from the word, as its essence. The word is revealed as hollow and empty at its core. Voided of all determinations of content, the word echoes precisely in silence. By revealing the word in this way in its empty inner nature, writing gives birth to the Nothing ('L'écriture est enfance du néant', *El*, p. 74). But this Nothing is also everything, and the word in merging with Nothing rejoins the infinite, the abyss (for us) known (or rather *un*known) also as God.

By dissolving words into their elements, Jabès's writing returns them to their purity and transparency, which is to be nothing. 'All writing, then, consists in sending the word back to its initial transparency' ('Toute écriture consiste, alors, à renvoyer le vocable à sa transparence initiale', *El*, p. 28). Similarly, we could say that writing sends the word back to the original soundlessness from which all words resound. Writing releases the silence trapped within words, freeing it to rejoin the infinite silence of the ocean, or the hush of heaven (the empty air), or the muteness of earth, or the deafening siren sound of all-consuming fire.

As Jabès explains, words evaporate, taking wing on their 'air' of 'nothing': 'aérien' (aerial) releases 'rien' from its midst. Take away even this wing, 'aile', pronounced 'l', and 'voile' (veil) gives way to 'voie' (way), opening the prison of the page enclosed by its four margins to a way, an open space of day, but also an infinite emptiness. It is by such elimination and erasure that words reveal the infinite nothingness that is their secret, silent essence. It is this, their absence, that is God. In fact, the eliminated 'l', pronounced 'el', is another avatar of the Hebrew Name for God—El—that Jabès finds omnipresent as the omnipotent absence occulted within language. By recognising the unpronounceable, unspeakable divine Name dwelling in the midst of the word, Jabès restores the word's essential silence. He elicits this silence by decomposing words so that they yield up the Name of God—the unsoundable—as the pearl within their sounding shells.

As in the Kabbalah, so in Jabès's texts, letters, by anagrammatic permutations, are discovered as encoding mysterious meanings. By dismemberment into their constitutive letters, words release magical and mystical powers. For all letters ultimately represent the Name of God, the unspeakable, the all-pervasive Nothing.[10] Accordingly, the ultimate power of any letter has to be that of disappearing, of erasing its very self, and the meanings revealed have to be approximations to meaning nothing, the all-embracing meaning of language as a whole in its self-erasure, in order that it point beyond to the Unsayable. Nevertheless, an abundance of specific meanings and connexions of meanings are left by language as traces along the trail of its disappearing. This makes for great play with words in Jabès's texts. He is constantly finding words unexpectedly hidden within other words, and he elicits them in ways that suggest previously unsuspected intrinsic connexions. In other examples just from *El, ou le dernier livre*, Jabès finds 'foi' (faith) in 'folie' (madness), 'nuage' (cloud) in 'naufrage' (shipwreck), 'orgie' (orgy) in 'origine' (origin), 'mur' (wall) in 'murmure' (murmur), etc. It appears as if words could all be fit one into another—or conversely all be drawn out of one another—and as if language were nothing but an internal relation to itself. As such, it is a trace, a remembrance of oneness experienced always only as shattered and as the sheer externality of homophonic and homographic coincidences.

All words break down ultimately into the silent nothingness that haunts the Name of God. And since all categories and *genera* break down in the infinite collapse of every word into every other word, it cannot but be pointed out that 'El', when pronounced, phonemically voices equally the third-person, feminine gender pronoun 'elle'. When written, ELLE shows up graphically as the gender reversal and chiasmic doubling of the Name for God in Hebrew, El. Male and female, too, are opposites that coincide in being created one out of the other by symmetrical permutations—by either addition or subtraction—of signs for the ultimate Nothing of the divine Name.

This type of sensitivity to the graphic and phonemic body of language, as well as to the homologies between words and their component parts, is exploited by Jabès to show what an echo chamber the French language is. A handful of vowel sounds are used to say everything, and all words thus turn out to be virtually the same word, but with a marvelously diverse repertoire of inflections and variations. This one word—any word—subsuming all of language reduces further to the letter, any letter, A, for example, which is conceived as containing all the rest of the language. Such a single signifier is itself but the minimal difference disappearing into—and coinciding with—Nothing. We have already encountered Jabès saying just this with his elucidation of the word 'aérien' as meaning 'A is nothing' ('A est rien', *El*, p. 89).

In *El, ou le dernier Livre* a particular geometrical image, the point, is taken as the image of absolute unity vanishing to nothing. It is a traditional image of

the One-Nothing, the All-Nothing, used in the Kabbalah of God and his presence among humans, his *Shekkinah*. Every word is such a point ('Ponctualité de toute parole', *El*, p. 94). In this point appears the whole of language, which is the whole universe, but as collapsing and condensing to a minimal, and even infinitesimal, vanishing point, a point which itself is but an inflection or speck of Nothing. This residue of finite, determinate language is erased in the whole of language, which absorbs it like a sea. Without differentiation, this whole itself slips into definitionlessness. This 'beyond' of every definition has commonly been called 'God'.

The linchpin to Jabès's whole discourse is the idea of God as 'the silence of all words'. Our words are just the desert dust into which God's Word has been pulverised. So our words are oriented towards the infinity of his Word. This Word, however, broken into mortal finitude in our words can only be emptiness, exile and silence. God can be (to us anyway) nothing besides this infinite absence in our human words. Indeed, Jabès asks whether it could be that 'our relation to God is only a relation to ourselves so vast that no word can carry'? Not being sayable in any word we can say, this God is detected as 'a lack of words within every word we utter'.[11]

Everything here turns on Jabès's distinction between the divine and the human word. And yet divine language is characterised by being inaudible except in and through our words, like the hollow of a ring: 'The divine word is silenced just as soon as it is pronounced. It is on to its sonorous rings, which are our inspired words, that we grab hold' ('La parole divine est tue aussitôt prononcée. C'est à ses anneaux sonores, qui sont nos paroles inspirées, que nous nous accrochons').[12] In fact, a divine word is created precisely by its own absence ('L'absence d'une parole divine la crée'). It is created in human words by the abyss that inhabits them, the emptiness at their centre. It is, then, human words that create the infinite (insofar as it can be apprehended or articulated at all). Words make absolute what they name and define and thereby annihilate as extralinguistic entities, for they substitute the ideal entities, the meanings, that language projects for the supposedly real things. Thus Jabès's rabbis can maintain that anything *is* at all only by virtue of being named: yet this named ideal entity or essence itself is but a delimitation, an inflection of Nothing, the essence of language.

Language is clearly the key to the universe in Jabès, as in the Kabbalah, and silence is the essence of all language. What is true of the universe is true also of the microcosm of the soul, likewise an infinite silence suspended upon the nothingness of the human word: 'The Soul may be compared to a mountain of silence sustained by the word. A relaxation of muscles and it falls'.[13] The inestimable might, the mountain of silence, in the eternity of ideas is all sustained by the frailty vanishing into nothingness of sounds articulated by the feeble, fallible, fleshly organs from which speech issues.

Yet the flower of the word, in all its fragility, blooms in silence:

> "—Give us to meditate, my master, the lessons of your books, in order that for each leaf offered to the leaf a word learned in the heart of silence may blossom".
>
> ("—Donne-nous à méditer, mon maître, les leçons de tes livres, afin que pour chaque feuille offerte à la feuille, une parole apprise au coeur du silence fleurisse.")[14]

'God', too, comes forth, is fabricated by the power of naming, from nothing. In this sense, the God that is named is an impostor. Whereas verbal richness constitutes the lie of the language of men, nudity and poverty are the lies of God ('La nudité, la pauvreté sont mensonges de Dieu', *Livre des questions*, p. 93). The inventive, mythifying power of the word is human in its wealth of flourishes and divine in its dearth, its blankness clearing space for infinity. But in either case, language is an artifice, a lie relative to the truth of infinite silence that outstrips it and is always already there where words end. So that the saying even of nothing betrays it into the guise of something: some sound or sign is given to represent the unrepresentable. This makes language constitutively mendacious.

Jabès's books are generally spare rather than loquacious, but they give a full repertoire of images—as images for the Unrepresentable. Their words and images are presented as scars and wounds—traces of what they have wounded and scarred by saying and imaging it. Although Jabès's writing does, then, present images, they all efface and erase themselves, and vanish into Nothing—which is what they are meant merely to *evoke*. This at least mitigates the untruth inherent in their apparent attempt to represent the unrepresentable. This shyness, not to say abhorrence, of images is, of course, quintessentially Jewish. The Jews, under the interdiction on graven images, are 'the people of Nothing, of the splendid limpidity of Nothing . . .' ('le peuple du Rien, de la spendide limpidité du Rien . . .,').[15] This fate is reflected in the stony, dusty, barren, desertified landscape so common in Jabès's texts.

There are a lot of blank spaces and empty pages in Jabès's book(s). They induce the reader into communion with nothing—signified and displayed by the emptiness of the white page. Learning to read is a process of learning to see this emptiness within every written page and word and letter. The words and letters signify this emptiness that they cannot say. Jabès takes language literally to pieces in order to show this. He elicits the void, 'le vide', from between the cracks and spaces seen in language (*vide* is also 'see' in Latin), and this emptiness is the vision of God. Writing makes this divine vision possible through the 'Life of the eyes' ('Dieu = Vide = Vie d'yeux', *El*, p. 84) presumably trained on and animating the divine Book through reading.

Jabès's writing is thus also a manner of seeing: it sees and reads the silence in words, the emptiness dwelling in the heart of language. When words are opened up to the void within them, they connect together in surprising ways, discover their affinities and reveal something absolute in all their ever-so-contingent relations. They are seen to be all saying virtually the same thing, but differently, as they collapse in concert back into nothing. Jabès contemplates letters in order to see the invisible in them, for it becomes visible where they crack or are lacking. Where language breaks and bleeds, where its sense spills out beyond all boundaries, there the Infinite is intimated. This absolute, this Nothing, has only the form that language in its disintegration and decomposure and disappearing gives it. The word is a nothing, a mere convention, *vanitas voci*, a hollow artifice without any solid substance of reality, but precisely as such it reveals a certain nullity that encompasses and envelops anything at all that emerges into distinct identity and substantial reality. Distinctness, substance, and identity, after all, at least insofar as they are apprehended by us, are always linguistically defined and, to that extent, produced.

Whatever is (anything) is the result of a word: otherwise it would have no identity. Of course, every identity is but an inflection of the emptiness that infects language as a whole. As Jabès writes, 'There is no name which is not a desert. There is no desert which was not, at one time, a name' ('Il n'y a pas de nom qui ne soit un désert. Il n'y a pas de désert qui ne fut, jadis, un nom', *Le soupçon le desert*, p. 131). Yet language, on which everything depends, is itself nothing real or substantial. It is an articulation of Nothing. The linguistic is always a nullification of, but thereby also a reconnection with, the infinite and immortal. For Jabès, 'All writing is silence inscribed, crests aligned with what is beyond voice' ('Toute écriture est silence inscrit, crêtes alignés d'outre-voix', *El*, p. 14).

Only as a disappearing act is the word able to indicate the silence and infinity from which it hails. It is the word blotted out that bespeaks its birth and death in blankness. It is only in this elimination or erasure that the word as such is perceptible as truly word rather than just an empirical object like any other: ' "I no longer see the words, he wrote; I see the place of their birth and of their death, which is completely blank" ' (' "Je ne vois plus les vocables, écrivait-il; je ne vois que le lieu de leur naissance et de leur mort qui est tout blanc" ', *El*, p. 118). Paradoxically, it is the place where no letter can be articulated that actually becomes the passage of the absolute ('Où aucune lettre ne se peut articuler, le verbe se fait passage d'absolu', *El*, p. 118). The letter is already an aphorism, a caesura, an interruption within the word and its discourse.[16] The letter must be eliminated in order to set discourse free and let it return to its source. The hidden root of all words in their ramifications and declensions is something in-finite and indefinable, something like the Book.

This is the impossible, inexpressible One-Nothing to which all expressions are beholden. It is God.

Consequently, any actual finite linguistic expression, word or letter, no matter how minute, by virtue of being *some*thing, betrays God. Although all language is but a refraction of the Book and ultimately of 'God', any language for God is a betrayal and any name a misnomer. Thus Jabès writes that the Name of God is against God—it imprisons him, just as writing 'God' is 'against God' ('Dieu S'écrit contre Dieu'). God, as undelimited, unlettered, is the explosion of the word that crashes against any letter, His natural enemy ('Dieu, dans le mot explosé, Se heurte à l'hostilité de la lettre', *El*, pp. 47–8).

To this extent, language is not really a means of comprehending in order to re-present and assimilate, but rather a way of repelling in order to relate externally to what is other than itself and other to all human transactions. This way of construing language opens it to an infinite outside.[17] Most important is not that the structural integrity of language can reproduce the forms of objects, but rather that its structural incompleteness keeps it open and always on the way to what it cannot represent. One could thus just as well say that meaning slips from word to word, collapsing into an infinite outside, just as the exile or *sol*itude of the Jews is to be without soil ('sol') and without solace, wandering from place to place.

Jabès's works are all impregnated with the sense of silence as the alpha and omega of a Book into which everything that is anything falls and disappears. Their aphoristic style makes for an open-endedness where the *un*said is evoked on all sides round by the too little, too elliptical, too laconic bit, that *is* said. Emphasising the role of this apophatic rhetoric in the conclusion to her book on Jabès's rhetoric of subversion, Helena Shillony writes:

> An 'other' rhetoric is necessary to express a negative theology, which is at once a quest for the divine and a slow deciphering of the absence of God, to say the 'ancient torment' of a passionate Judaism interpreted outside of every orthodoxy. A different language is necessary to wed the same movement of a paradoxical creation, of an always deferred entry into the Book, of an always renewed attempt to evoke the unsayable, and the poignant sentiment of exil and of lack that is manifest only in an illusory presence: '*Our absence to the world is perhaps nothing but our presence to the Nothing*'.[18]

Jabès's techniques are adapted especially from procedures for interpreting the Torah. Reading the empty spaces between words and the concept of interpretation as an open-ended process, an infinite project, are familiar notions for Talmudists. Jabès's writing can thus be understood as a sort of grafting of Hebrew onto French. He expressly declares this analogy between interpretation of the Torah and the task of the writer: 'The relation

of the Jew—Talmudist, Kabbalist—to the book is, in its fervor, identical to that which the writer entertains with his text. Both have the same thirst to learn, to know, to decode their destiny engraved in each letter from which God has withdrawn' ('Le rapport du Juif—talmudiste, kabbalist—au livre est, dans sa ferveur, identique à celui que l'écrivain entretient avec son texte. Tous deux ont même soif d'apprendre, de connaître, de décrypter leur destin gravé dans chaque lettre où Dieu s'est retiré').[19] The practice of relating through letters to God's absence is deeply Jewish and Kabbalistic. Indeed *El* has been read as Jabès's Hebrew challenge to Greek thinking. It performs an absolute inversion whereby not only Being but also the One—which Neoplatonic philosophy exalted as the supreme principle of reality 'beyond Being'—is stricken with nullity as a result of the textual productions of the book.[20] It is the writing of the letter that is the agent of this nullification. Yet in the letter, every real existence, every 'is' becomes unlimited at the same time as it is eliminated. As with each of the four elements, 'letters' with which the Creation is written, each letter vanishes into its own infinity.

Jabès's own writing is, in this manner, a writing of silence, and also at a thematic level he frequently makes it explicit that he is writing about silence, absence, nothing. Of course, these (non)themes, being what one cannot say, can be approached only through metaphors. 'One does not think death, the void, the nothing, Nothingness; but their innumerable metaphors: a way of getting around the unthought' ('On ne pense pas la mort, le vide, le néant, le Rien; mais leurs innombrables métaphors: une façon de contourner l'impensé').[21] There is here a mystique of the Nothing, the Nothing, however, that contains everything:

> 'I see a word that advances towards the sea. It is not the word heaven, nor the word earth; it is not even the word salt or seed; but the word Nothing, the word Nothingness.
> And I tell myself that salt, grain, earth and heaven are in this word'.
> ('Je vois un mot qui s'avance vers la mer. Ce n'est pas le mot ciel, ni le mot terre; ce n'est pas, non plus, le mot sel ou semence; mais le mot Rien, mais le mot Néant.
> Et je me dis que sel, graine, terre et ciel sont dans ce vocable'.)[22]

All words and images are metaphors for the Nameless, for Nothing. Yet, as metaphors, they do not furnish a handle for this ultimate Nothing, but rather express the rupture of all expression with the unthinkable: 'The unthinkable has no stem' ('L'impensé n'a point de tige').

Jabès proves particularly fertile in imagining organic, vegetable metaphors for words and their life as cut by the sickle or pencil. Thus to twist free of the figures inherent in language is fundamental to his project. Like

Blanchot, Jabès seeks to cancel figures inherent in language in favour of the neuter, an 'il' (impersonal third-person pronoun) without name and without figure.

In this way, metaphor becomes a means of separation rather than of identification. Shillony analyses how Jabès's metaphors emphasise rupture and the absence of their intended significance rather than identity and union: 'The characteristic images of the poet privilege moments of rupture and obliteration. The point of intersection between two semantic fields that create a figure of similarity becomes in Jabès an asymptote of absence' ('Les images caractéristiques du poète privilègient des moments de rupture et d'oblitération. Le point d'intersection entre deux champs sémantiques qui crée une figure de similarité, devient chez Jabès une asymptote de l'absence', *Edmond Jabès*, p. 54).

In fact, these metaphors are more what Gershom Scholem describes as the Kabbalistic language of mystic symbolism, where there is no referent for the signifier except the Unsayable. Scholem contrasts the symbolic language of the Kabbalah with allegorical languages, which presuppose an immanent translatability of meanings from signifiers to signifieds: 'While in allegory one expressible stands for another, in the mystic symbol something expressible stands for something removed from the world of expression and communication'.[23]

Accordingly, rather than metaphors serving as bridges towards some other reality, it is their breaking down in the movement towards what cannot be represented at all that makes them significant . . . of what they cannot say. And hence renunciation of words proves necessary for travelling . . . to the word of God.

('*God despises memory. He travels.*'
Reb Haim.

'*Travel is the refusal of words.*
One is silent in order to listen.'
Reb Accobas.

'*You travel in order to find again the word of God and all the way, you suffocate your words.*'
Reb Benlassin.)

[('*Dieu méprise la mémoire. Il voyage.*'
Reb Haim.

'*Le voyage est le refus de la parole.*
On se tait pour écouter.'
Reb Accobas.

'*Tu voyages pour retrouver la parole de Dieu et jusqu' à elle, tu étoffes tes paroles.*'
Reb Benlassin.)][24]

The truth, our truth, our God is nothing, that is, nothing definable: it (He? She? They?) is a question. We are ourselves nothing that is not a question, yet precisely insofar as we are nothing, an emptiness in flesh and blood, God is manifest in us.

For Jabès, the unsayable is found within language, a language which wounds and bloodies itself by fragmenting into letters. The word is already a dismemberment of the book, and Jabès constantly further dissects words into letters, so as to expose their structural anatomies as homologous and thereby let their meanings bleed into one another. Written or spoken language, any expression whatever, slaughters the wholeness of the Book, which cannot emerge out of latency and be made manifest without being compromised or, to put it more dramatically, murdered: the (human, finite) book is the tomb of God, and writing is the death or even the killing of God. Hence the cry or scream (*cri*) that wells up from writing, 'é-*cri*-ture'. The significance of the whole—significance as a whole—is at stake in writing, and just this is what God is and always was about.

The unseen, unmanifest Book is presupposed by every stroke on the page, since as a whole it will affect the total meaning that any *iota* can convey. Accordingly, Jabès avows in *Aely* that every work he writes is immediately rewritten by the 'book', that is, the whole, unmanifest Book which governs all meaning in the universe of language—but it can only be presented in particular words and letters, or more precisely in their vanishing, thereby leaving open a space for the infinite, though it never appears in itself or as a whole.[25] To this extent, the Book appears only as disappearing and disintegrating, as hacked up and reduced from infinity and wholeness to finitude and fragmentariness. All language seems to be contained in every word, in every letter, as Kabbalah speculation maintained—but the containment is immediately a cancellation, an annihilation, an erasure of the word in its infinity and divinity as Book. Whatever *appears* of language in any book is the negation and *erasure* of language and the Book as such. Writing performs a cutting from and splitting apart of the whole into unbound, boundless fragments.

Accordingly, language as we know it is but the scar left on the linguistic world of humans by the prey that escapes it into uncircumscribable liberty: 'Thus the bird, drunk with liberty, bursts in its flight through the nets of the bird-catcher whose universe bears the scar' ('Ainsi l'oiseau, ivre de liberté, pourfend dans son envol les rets de l'oiseleur dont son univers porte la cicatrice', *El*, p. 84). We can have only metaphors for the 'Book' or for the divinity that escapes expression, since its 'essence' is perceptible to us at all only in this very escape.

Jabès strongly identified with his friend ("mon ami") Paul Celan, who has been accorded a certain emblematic value as the poet of poetry without images.[26] He wrote that he was united with Celan by everything ("tout me rapproche de lui"), but in particular by "one and the same interrogation and

one and the same wounded word" ("Une même interrogation nous lie, une même parole blessée").[27] Within this common project the two poets take different directions, inwards toward the unnameable Name of God at the core of language, and outwards toward the unspeakable "that which happened." Yet for both alike, language does not attain its object except in cancelling itself out: the word is but "the trace that it leaves"-Jabès.[28]

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[1] See Maurice Blanchot, 'Être Juif'. in *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

[2] Jabès, *El, ou le dernier Livre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 13.

[3] 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften* I (Frankfurt a.M.: *Suhrkamp*, 1977), pp. 50–62, trans. Harry Zohn as 'The Task of the Translator', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 69–82.

[4] Cf. Karmen MacKendrick, *Immemorial Silence* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 49ff.

[5] Jabès, 'The Question of Displacement into the Lawfulness of the Book', in Eric Gould (ed.) *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 234.

[6] *Le Livre des Questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 126. All translations, unless otherwise attributed, I have provided myself.

[7] Jabès, *Le Livre des Questions*, p. 68.

[8] Jabès, 'The Question of Displacement into the Lawfulness of the Book'. Citations, pp. 228–9 and 237.

[9] The central paragraphs of Section II are largely adapted from the introduction to Jabès in my modified anthology, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, Vol. I, (Sout Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2007). A French version corresponding in part to Section II was delivered at the 2003 Jabès colloquium at CERISY under the title 'Le nom de Dieu comme vanité du langage au fond de tout mot selon Edmond Jabes'.

[10] Cf. Gershom Scholem, 'Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala', *Eranos Jahrbuch 39* (1970): '.... *already every individual letter by itself represents a Name* [of God]'. ("... *schon jeder einzelne Buchstabe für sich selber einen Namen darstellt*," p. 270).

[11] 'The Question of Displacement into the Lawfulness of the Book', p. 230.

[12] *Livre des questions*, pp. 92–3.

[13] ('*L'âme peut être comparée à une montagne de silence que la parole soulève. Une faiblesse des muscles et elle s'écroule*'. Reb Diba.) (*Livre des questions*, p. 96).

[14] *Livre des questions*, p. 164.

[15] *Le soupçon le desert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 42.

[16] Cf. Jacques Derrida's observation that the letter lives by its solitude in 'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre', *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p. 108.

[17] Here Jabès converges with Levinas, as well as with Blanchot. On Levinas and Jabès, see Christian Saint-Germain, *Écrire sur la*

nuit blanche: L'éthique du livre chez Emmanuel Lévinas et Edmond Jabès (Québec: Presses de l'Université de Québec, 1992).

[18] Helena Shillony, *Edmond Jabès: une rhétorique de la subversion* (Paris: Archives de lettres modernes, 1991), p. 67: 'Il faut une rhétorique autre pour exprimer une théologie négative, qui est à la fois quête du divin et lent déchiffrement de l'absence de Dieu, pour dire "l'ancien tourment" d'un judaïsme passionné, mais interprété hors de toute orthodoxie. Il faut un langage différent pour épouser le mouvement même d'une création paradoxale, d'une entrée toujours différée dans le Livre, d'une tentative toujours renouvelée d'évoquer l'indicible, et le sentiment poignant de l'exil et du manque qui ne peut se manifester que par une présence illusoire: "*Notre absence au monde n'est, peut-être, que notre présence au néant.*" '.

[19] *Le livre des marges* (Paris: Le Livre de poche: 1987), p. 181. Shillony, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 12, also cites this passage. Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), likewise situates Jabès in this Jewish hermeneutical context.

[20] François Laruelle, '*Le point sur l'Un*', in Richard Stamelman and Mary Ann Caws (eds) *Écrire le Livre: Autour d'Edmond Jabès* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1989), pp. 121–32.

[21] *Le petit livre de la subversion hors de soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 77.

[22] *Un étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 13.

[23] Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1980 [1957]): 'Steht also in der Allegorie ein Ausdückbares für ein anderes Ausdrückbares, so steht im mystisichen Symbol ein Ausdrückbares für etwas, was der Welt des Ausdrucks und der Mitteilung entrückt ist' (p. 29).

[24] *Livre des questions*, pp. 134–5.

[25] *Aely* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 157.

[26] "Many theorists, many thinkers who are friends of poetry, like to speak today, and precisely in citing Celan, of poetry 'without image' and 'without metaphor' and 'outside representation.'" ("Maints poéticians, maints penseurs amis de la poésie, aiment à parler aujourd'hui, et précisément en *citant* Celan, de poésie 'sans image', et sans métaphore, et 'hors représentation'.") Michel Deguy, *La raison poétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), p. 94.

[27] Edmond Jabès, *La mémoire des mots: Comment je lis Paul Celan* (Châtillon-sous-Bagneux: fourbis, 1990), p. 9.

[28] I explore the relationship between Jabès and Celan in "The Singular and the Other at the Limits of Language in the Post-Holocaust Poetry of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan," *New Literary History* 36/4 (2005): 621–38