

# The Singular and the Other at the Limits of Language in the Apophatic Poetics of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan

William Franke

Uwe Bernhardt in memoriam

Postmodern writers and artists of all sorts have evolved radical new poetics based preeminently on the secret resources of silence. Poets have focused particularly on silences become audible in the tearing of language and the rending of sense. To a significant degree, this is a rediscovery of the oftentimes-repressed resources in the Western tradition of apophatic discourse, a discourse about what cannot be said. *Apophasis* is the Greek word for negation, and it is used here, as it has been used since ancient times, initially in Neoplatonic ambiances, specifically to designate the negation, and especially the self-negation, of discourse. Jewish writers have been particularly important in this revival, partly because the biblical interdiction on representations of the divine, denounced as idolatrous ("graven images"), gave Jewish tradition a peculiar attunement to the limits of representation and an especially acute sensibility for the Unrepresentable. Furthermore, the Holocaust experience has become recognized as a cultural code for the unspeakable par excellence.<sup>1</sup>

Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan, emerging almost contemporaneously out of widely divergent cultural backgrounds, in Egypt and Romania respectively, nevertheless share these coordinates in common. Writing as post-Holocaust Jews, each in a different way lends language to silence in order to give voice to the unspeakable. Moreover, each makes the typically Jewish predicament of ineradicable separateness from other peoples, as well as from a transcendent, wholly other God, into something more universal: it becomes a predicament of life (or oftentimes death) in language as severedness from an ultimate significance.<sup>2</sup> Originating in regions of linguistic diaspora with regard to their respective French and German tongues, moreover, both authors turn out to be exceptionally qualified to express the experience of exile as the archetypal condition not only of the Jew but of the postmodern

writer in general. This is the condition simply of human beings in language, to the extent that language per se is a signifier forever severed from its signified.

Exemplary, in this regard, of a wide range of contemporary poets, Celan and Jabès write fundamentally about what cannot be said. Their respective poetic rhetorics are most comprehensible when placed within the tradition of apophatic discourse. This sort of discourse is best known in its theological expressions, particularly in the millenary discourse of negative theology that originates with Plotinus. It was, of course, anticipated by Plato, not to mention Pythagoreanism, Orphism, and mystery cults, all of which in various ways acknowledge the inexpressibility in language of some kind of divine transcendence. Initiates typically swore vows of silence, at least partly in recognition of the futility of any attempt in language to express adequately the transcendent perfection and splendor of the supreme deity. In certain later developments of negative theology, the renunciation of all means of expression demonstrates an incipient skepticism with regard to official, orthodox discourses and a retreat to the inner, silent dimension of mystic experience.

Mysticism, with its powerfully apophatic thrust, in many instances is best understood as a secularizing reinterpretation of supposedly objective categories of religion in terms of individual experience and existence. This is manifestly the case for gnostic and hermetic mysticisms that crop up in the crises for rational philosophy and its Logos in the Hellenistic age.<sup>3</sup> However, alongside (and interpenetrating) these mysticisms are other sorts of apophatic responses to the foundering of rational discourse. These include certain kinds of poetry, as well as other art forms, as becomes especially evident in more modern times, for example, in the baroque, as well as in various versions of romanticism that reach out by rhetorics of silence and excess towards what lies beyond the farthest limits of description.

Our contemporary world and culture have been visited by a radical crisis of confidence in language and a concomitant resurgence of interest in apophatic modes of discourse. We have been ardently in search of alternatives to strictly rational speaking and logical expression, since in crucial ways the Logos has proved impotent to disclose our reality and to truly express things as we experience them. In modern apophasis, oftentimes it is not the divine that proves to be out of reach of language in its failure to attain reality so much as simply the singularity and otherness of the other person. Nevertheless, singularity and otherness have been intertwined with divinity throughout the apophatic tradition, and this nexus still obtains in contemporary authors.

Philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, as well as writers like Maurice Blanchot and Samuel Beckett, along with Celan and Jabès, consciously work in an apophatic vein still replete with theological

underpinnings. Sometimes the tendency towards negative theology in these writers turns into an impulse to negate theology *simpliciter* and escape from it altogether. However, whether and to what extent apophatic modes of discourse can be made independent of theology is controversial.<sup>4</sup> It may be that any negation of theology is still beholden to theology. Even if in a negative mode, atheism is still, in some sense, *a* theism. Jabès expresses such a suspicion, for example, in writing, “You deny God because your love for him removed him from your view—as the light hides from us the light” (Tu nies Dieu, car ton amour pour lui l’a ôté de ta vue—comme la lumière nous cache la lumière).<sup>5</sup>

Theology may be an inevitable paradigm for any discourse envisaging whatever sort of generally valid truth, universally communicable meaning, or verifiable disclosure throughout the whole extent of Western culture. Derrida, for one, held that “the sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological” (Le signe et la divinité ont le même lieu et le même temps de naissance. L’époque du signe est essentiellement théologique).<sup>6</sup> Implicitly theological concepts such as truth and meaning, presuppose some kind of total presence, as if in or to an infinite, divine mind. The postulates of infinity and totality, as in the presence of a divine mind, belong to the logical structure of language in its functions of naming and referring. These postulates need not be asserted as founding or guaranteeing the success of our acts of knowing and our communicative transactions, but simply as rendering intelligible the inevitable frustrations and misfirings of these attempts, their approximations to what they fail to convey fully or to verify unconditionally.

Whether it names God or not, language necessarily withdraws from whatever it posits or intends as its would-be object: it *is* not what it means. The movement of transcending all linguistically defined sense or meaning is what characterizes apophasis, and whether this is understood to be a recoiling before the divine or simply before the other person, or even just thing, it intimates an inviolable otherness such as has been approached from time immemorial exemplarily through discourse that acts recursively to erase itself as discourse.

This characteristically apophatic movement and gesture of withdrawal is given distinctive definition by writers, especially Jewish writers, attempting to come to terms with the unspeakable horror of the “Holocaust.” This term itself, signifying a sacred sacrifice (literally, “whole burnt offerings”), is nearly blasphemous as a term for the *Shoah*. Perhaps any term at all would be a sacrilege: hence the endeavor to express it without or against language, in artfully crafted and situated sorts of silence. In this respect, so-called Jewish Holocaust literature becomes exemplary of the motives of the broader apophatic tradition. It gives one historically specific motivation for language that denies and

deconstructs itself vis-à-vis the unspeakable that any language cannot but violate and desecrate.

The challenge of speech after the demise of Logos has been addressed in pathbreaking ways by poets after Auschwitz and philosophers after the end of philosophy alike. The motifs of the singular and the other, as vestiges of an absolutely incomparable, wholly other God, retain perhaps a certain Jewish accent, thanks to their monotheistic matrix, yet they are also of the broadest diffusion throughout Western culture. The problems of particularity and alterity that transcend language's uttermost ability to express have become urgent and pervasive throughout modern and postmodern culture as a culture of the word in crisis. The present inquiry bears upon the broad question of whether the discourse of what cannot be said, that is, language that takes itself back in its very act of utterance, the apophatic language of *unsaying*, can provide a viable approach to the problem of relation to the other and the singular as they have been rediscovered in the provocative texts of Jabès and Celan, as well as of many other recent writers.

Like so many modern poets, Celan and Jabès constantly point up the limits of language, recur to the motif of silence, and, even more tellingly, write in an aphoristic, elliptical style that effectively leaves unsaid the main target and intention of their poems. It is only by moving away from and withdrawing before what they intend to say that the unsayable burden of their poems registers at all. Is it because of the radical singularity or otherness of what they are writing about that so often, perhaps always, at least implicitly, they must acknowledge that language fails them?

Certainly singularity and otherness are two good reasons why language might run up against its limits. Might this place at the limits of language prove to be the best place for defining or adumbrating what singularity and alterity, or even oneness and otherness, could possibly mean? Although a clear, abstract grammatical sense can be assigned to both terms, what singularity or otherness might concretely mean, not just as concepts but as incarnate in discourse and as actually encountered in experience, can perhaps not be elucidated at all, except in terms of the way they exceed language and its furthest capacities to define and describe. The singularity and otherness of another individual are perhaps precisely what I cannot describe about him/her/they/it/what- or whomever. Or at least that is as much as can be thought and conceived about them. Just this singular alterity is what cannot be appropriated in any general terms, and all our language *qua* language, *langue*, is general. I cannot articulate this absolute, ownmost particularity of the other without universalizing it. Classical rhetoric expresses this in the motto *Individuum ineffabilis est*. It is only in relinquishing the claim

of language to comprehend and convey the singular, the other individual, that I can perhaps witness to an authentic experience of their alterity—or rather, it is not even an experience that is witnessed to so much as the check to experience, the experience of the impossibility of experience vis-à-vis this alterity. My language can transmit nothing of this alterity or singularity as such. It is only in dismantling its claim to represent the other that it can create a space for the singular alterity of the other, and so bear witness to it.

This account describes some ineluctable limits posed by language in the relation to another person. No universal concept or Logos can ever do justice to the singular and other. Such is the motive of Levinas's ethical critique of Logos philosophy. Are these limits confirmed by the discourses of the poets, or do the poets perhaps, in the "magic" of poetic language, manage after all to say the unsayable and communicate something of the otherness of the other in its infinite singularity? Might they betray by "indiscretion," as Levinas puts it, what logical language cannot say?<sup>7</sup> Arguably, the rational limits of language can be transcended by poetic language, which is what has given it its peculiar fascination for proponents of contemporary apophaticism, for thinkers like Derrida, Blanchot, and Levinas himself, even though Levinas aims to establish ethical limits that would not be exceeded but rather confirmed by poetry, especially the ethically engaged and absolutely intense poetry of Celan.<sup>8</sup> It seems that poetry excels only in the expression of inexpressibility and that this, paradoxically, becomes the mode in which the sense of alterity and singularity alone can be communicated. Not by being communicated, but rather by being marked as evading all linguistic formulations, the inexpressible is made at least to show up in poetry. As in Ludwig Wittgenstein's dictum, the inexpressible "*shows* itself, it is the mystical" (*Es gibt allerding's Unausprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische*).<sup>9</sup>

What, then, specifically, are the means by which Celan and Jabès evoke the unsayable as the marker of a singularity or alterity that cannot as such be expressed? One means is simply the function of language as an index—plain, unadorned referentiality in the basic sense. Although much is often made of the loss of referentiality in poetry like Celan's, in fact the unsayable horror is often enough pointed to, as if poet and reader alike were on-site, in the fields of the concentration camps. It is not what the poems say but what they point to and decline to say or prove incapable of saying that bears the burden of their pathos and perhaps exceeds even this conventional mode of poetic expression in the face of the unbearable and inexpressible.

For Celan, the unsayable is most obviously outside language, in "*das, was geschah*" (that which happened). It cannot be expressed but can be

indicated mutely, in a sort of pure, absolute reference. Accordingly, Celan counsels his reader in “Engführung” to stop reading and rather “see,” and then to stop seeing and “go.” Context overwhelms text and in fact threatens to cancel it out completely, overrunning and crushing or voiding it. The Holocaust in this way has a very direct, unmasterable pertinence for most all of what Celan writes. It is the historical context that gives meaning to his poetry, sometimes even by depriving it of literal sense. The violations of grammatical and lexical norms that make Celan’s expressions so often veer into nonsense or a surplus of sense resonate with this larger significance of bearing witness to the incomprehensible in Holocaust history and even mimetically reenacting its destructiveness on a linguistic plane.

The Holocaust experience Celan’s poetry revolves around stands as the incomparable “that which happened” that it is impossible to say or name. But this historical catastrophe is not really accessible as history, and it is not only an event in the past. In its very uniqueness and incomparability it becomes for Celan key to interpreting the situation of human beings at all times—that is, simply as in time, in time that is always catastrophic by its very nature. It is the nature of time to isolate moments of “encounter” (*Begegnung*) of the wholly Other into their strange, uncanny, incomprehensible singularity. This singular reality can be touched on only in a unique, irrecoverable, and incomprehensible encounter.

In “Einmal” (Once), Celan approaches something infinitely singular, and he does so precisely through annihilation enacted by language. It is by linguistically interrupting and destructing the One and Infinite that an unconditional singularity is allowed first to emerge:

EINMAL,  
da hörte ich ihn,  
da wusch er die Welt,  
ungesehn, nachtlang,  
wirklich.

Eins und Unendlich,  
vernichtet,  
ichten.

Licht war. Rettung.

[ONCE  
I heard him,  
he was washing the world,

unseen, nightlong.  
real.

One and Infinite,  
annihilated,  
ied.

Light was. Salvation.]<sup>10</sup>

The cleansing annihilation of the One and Infinite (Eins und Unendlich) occurs in the breakdown of language, its fragmentation into syllables, imitating time as disjunctive, as producing an incomparable, unintegratable "once." In this way, the singular once of "Einmal" can wash the world (da wusch er die Welt) of generalization and its fictions. This happens blindly, unseen in the night (nachtlang)—where language cannot grasp or reach with the light of its Logos. The word for "annihilates" (vernichtet) actually engulfs a word for "something," the particle *icht* (from Middle High German *iht*, "something," "aught," as opposed to *niht*, "nought").<sup>11</sup> However, *icht* then travels to "*ichten*," and then further to "*Licht*" (light), suggesting ways that the breakdown of language into syllables first lets something be and even show itself in the daylight. This light is itself in turn "salvation" or "redemption" (Rettung).

These rich connotations, squeezed from an act of linguistic dismemberment and reincorporation, clearly attain to a religious register of meaning. As in the kabbalistic theory of Creation by divine contraction, only the annihilation of the Infinite and One by self-withdrawal permits *something* to exist in its uniqueness. Furthermore, also embedded in *icht* is the word *Ich*, German for "I." The "I" in this way emerges in its singularity and is illuminated by the linguistic annihilation of the One and Infinite. The obliteration of the quintessentially linguistic categories or abstractions of oneness and infinity issues in the emergence into the light of a singular subject, linguistic, lyric, or existential, as the case of the "I" may be. Celan experiences the radical singularity and incommunicability of this "I" in annihilations of language, of the unity and generality and even infinity (as in the infinitive) that language alone makes possible and imposes on the world. One and Infinite may be the nature of the singular, but paradoxically these *words* must be verbally annihilated in order that the oneness and infinity of singular existence be freed, redeemed, brought to light. This can happen only in a singular moment, "Once." It can happen only in time, in the "once" that only the breaking of language can release and allow to be perceived, "heard."

In his discourses on his poetics, Celan speaks of encountering himself by writing from or to a specific date: *his* January 20—the day on which

the Nazi party met at Wannsee and formally decided on "the final solution," liquidation of the Jewish race. This time, emblematic for annihilation, is the reality Celan approaches over and over again in his poems. By breaking out of all constructions that identify us by words, we enter into real time, which is a breaking, an abolishing of every continuous, settled narrative that encloses time between the set meanings of a beginning and an end. Celan parallels (and perhaps depends on) Walter Benjamin's theory of Messianic time as a discontinuous, eruptive "now," or *Jetztzeit*. The poem, as a breaking open of language, first enables this open time of the break to transpire. In this sense, poems are "under way" (*unterwegs*). "Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality" (*Worauf? Auf etwas Offenstehendes, Besetzbares, auf ein ansprechbares Du vielleicht*).<sup>12</sup>

This you, however, is radically unknowable and can be designated only as "other": "The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an 'over-against.' It goes toward it, bespeaks it. For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the poem and everything in it is to be understood only in terms of this intention moving towards an other that no word can name, but that every word intends and adumbrates. Hence what the poem approaches is described as the "altogether Other" (*ganz Andere*). *Vis-à-vis* this wholly other, language is reduced to silence. This happens in amazing ways in virtually every poem Celan writes. As he himself puts it, the poem today exhibits "eine starke Neigung zum Verstummen" (a strong tendency towards growing dumb).<sup>14</sup>

The poem can only approach and bespeak—not say or express—this altogether other. For this, there can be no words. Only the failing and foundering of words—accentuated or seconded by their artfully deliberate dissection and destruction—can express this intention directed towards the wholly other. Language *vis-à-vis* this wholly other can grasp and express nothing properly in name and concept, but rather passes "through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech."<sup>15</sup> The language Celan writes of, and himself writes, "went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all."<sup>16</sup> Even growing dumb in relation to unspeakable happenings can enrich language by its brush with a historical reality that it cannot represent or name.<sup>17</sup>

For Jabès, by contrast, it is generally not the unutterable density or plenitude of the historically concrete, nor even of the personally incarnate, the singular individual, that is portrayed as escaping articulation, but rather the essence and reality of language itself. Everything



that is anything is such by virtue of the word, for the word alone gives it definition as *something*. In this sense, the word alone *is*, unconditionally; yet the word itself is essentially a cipher: it *is not*. Language is an articulation of nothing concrete or given, apart from the positings of language itself. Language is a regress to infinity, the Book, and as such collapses into what can never be made manifest except in and through the negation of every finite, representable form or object. Living in constant and total relation to the Book, the Jews are exiled from every would-be, concrete, definite reality, every fixed and stable home.

Exile for Jabès means primarily not being a solitary individual separate from others in history, but exile of and into the word. Language opens a space of emptiness, for all that it posits, it posits as absent, as only verbally posited, and therefore as virtual and ideal. The verbal *is*, in this sense, a “universe of emptiness” (*Le verbe est univers de vide*).<sup>18</sup> Bound to and separated by their special relation to the divine Name, the Jews are exiled into the name and become literally “nom-ades.” Where the (w)hol(l)y unsayable divine Name reigns, every given, finite form is sacrificed to the infinite, the ungraspable and incomprehensible, the totality of language in the Book. This is a purely virtual totality that is beyond all possibility of articulation. Like God, it is unencompassible in its infinity and is signified only by the silence of the Name of God. Every word, therefore, with its concrete sensorial and semantic content is given up for—and is beholden to—silence.

The Jews, then, are denizens of the name that is nowhere, at no stable or ascertainable place in real space or geography. Not only does *nom* (name), through its relation to *nomade*, intimate that language is a nomadic condition of perpetual exile: the word *nom* is also *mon* backwards, the first-person possessive pronoun, “my.”

NOM devrait se lire deux fois, de gauche à droite et de droite à gauche, car deux mots le composent : NOM et MON; mon nom. Le nom est mien. Tout nom est personnel. . . .<sup>19</sup>

[NOM should be read twice, from left to right and from right to left, because it is composed of two words: NOM and MON; my name. The name is mine. Every name is personal. . . .]

This hints at the way that the name is always an indirect, backward sort of appropriation. Whatever is named is in some manner possessed. Articulate speech begins only with such appropriation, ineluctably destruction with respect to the purity of silence abiding at the unsayable center from which language emanates. This silent source of language would be an anonymous foundation for all constructions of names, ultimately the total structure of the Book. Indeed the common noun for

book, *livre*, turns out like the adjective for free, *libre*, to be subject to voiding at the center: by suppressing their central letter, *li(v)re* (book) and *li(b)re* (free) are pared down equally to *li re* (the infinitive "to read"), and then, by further hollowing out, eliminating all but the first and last letter in each word, to *le*, the singular, masculine, definite article for generically designating whatever is anything at all. But *le* reversed is also the Hebrew name of God, namely, El. In this manner, the Hebrew name of God, which is in principle unpronounceable, silent, is found at the core of the book and of reading and of naming in general, and so of language itself.

Jabès works with French the way the kabbalah writers worked with the Hebrew language, finding presumable mystical truths of the universe inscribed within it. Mere contingencies of the French language are presented as miraculously revealing the mystery of Creation by the Name of God, the empty and unpronounceable divine Name that creates all from Nothing. But whereas kabbalists supposed Hebrew to have been the language of Creation itself, Jabès uses French to show how the self-subversive forms and fictive powers of a human language can be seen to mirror an unlimited power of creativity from Nothing. Such power of creation from Nothing was traditionally attributed to the divine Word and Name alone.

Jabès's thought unfolds entirely within the Book as the boundary and abyss of language, and the Holocaust impinges in that, in any of its manifestations, the Book is inflected as subject to destruction and infinite nullification. As well as being a contingent event befalling the Jews, holocaust is experienced at another level as evacuation of reality by the word as an offering up of beings to the Nothing of language (language by itself being but an empty representation, a mere form). This takes place already paradigmatically in the Book as a transcendent totality that cannot but be absent from any ensemble of words, however "complete," let alone from history and the world of finite entities. The obliteration in the Book of any immediately present reality unmediated by the word (and its emptiness) is a general condition of holocaust, of annihilation by and sacrifice to the Word, even apart from being a singular historical event.

Jabès's poetics of the inexpressible pivot not so much, or not so directly, on an extralinguistic singularity or otherness as on the Book. Like the Neoplatonic One, also an All-Nothing, the Book is infinite and can be manifest only in fragments and finitude, never as a whole and intact. In finite terms the Book is nothing, that is, nothing finite can express it, and every word taken as a word of the Book cannot but be empty. The emptiness of the word, as abstracted and separated from the reality of things and as belonging to the Book, opens into the omnipres-

ent infinity of Nothing, and the Jews, by dwelling in this exile of the word, are veritably the people of the Book (*gens du livre*). This infinity and emptiness of the word, as well as its totalization—the Book—is totally unsayable. But it is open in its emptiness, an open question and an open desert for wandering, a space of errancy. And only in this openness is there any room for human expression.

Whereas Celan most often approaches the unsayable from the side of what language cannot say, with the unspeakable of the Holocaust directly present before him, obliterating word and image before they begin to express it, Jabès typically approaches unsayability from the side of language itself. Jabès's problem is not that there is no language for the singular reality that beggars description, but rather that language, as it can be used by humans, is singularly nothing because it is not everything—not the Book, not God. The singularity that occupies Jabès is discovered first and foremost within language, rather than apart from and outside language, and as inaccessible to it. In Celan, the singularities inhering in language seem to function as analogues for the incomparable, unspeakable singularity of a historical catastrophe, the Holocaust that no language can reach or articulate. Jabès, by contrast, seems to acknowledge no outside of language; for him, rather, words themselves are already inhabited by singularity and alterity that nullify every positive content, every fixed territory or soil. They fall away from and destroy themselves and reduce to nothing articulable, to the silence of the absolutely singular and other in their midst, and yet also engulfing them entirely.

The allusion to the historical Holocaust is in this respect oftentimes somewhat more attenuated in Jabès than in Celan. Yet it does surface in the narrative that sporadically but insistently hints at a historical context. There is a sort of a story in the *Book of Questions* that is never actually told so much as commented upon from many different angles—though this is a way of not telling it, since, tellingly, commentary is understood by Jabès as a means of silencing, as literally “comment taire” or “how to be silent.” We infer a tragic love story between a writer, Yukel, and a young woman, Sarah, who goes insane in a concentration camp during Nazi deportations in France. Yukel, an alter-ego for Jabès as writer, is asked to comment on silence as the alpha and omega of all language: “Yukel, speak to us of the silence that is the end and the beginning, being the soul of words as the cantor and the martyr are, at the designated moment, the soul of the world.”<sup>20</sup> The Holocaust is thus alluded to by a fictive narrative sketchily adumbrated by Jabès. It is indeed at the center of the fiction: history is not left outside but is drawn into the book and its fiction. There is nothing, at least nothing imagined or representable, that is outside the Book.<sup>21</sup>

Celan's language is witness to an event; it is in a state of shock. Jabès seems rather to be witnessing to a predicament; the disaster that he expresses is there in language always already. Jabès's theoretical reflections and the glassy, cool composure, as well as the quietly fiery passion, of his sybilline aphorisms bespeak the disaster of the word as such. Every finite, human word is an annihilation of the infinite, divine Book. This annihilation is necessary to the existence of humanity, of the finite, which is otherwise totally obliterated by the infinite.

Celan considers the originary disaster from which words arise under the aspect of a happening, an occurrence, as in the following brief lyric from *Die Niemandrose*:

Was Geschah? Der Stein trat aus dem Berge.  
Wer erwachte? Du und ich.  
Sprache, Sprache. Mit-Stern. Neben-Erde.  
Ärmer. Offen. Heimatlich.

Wohin gings? Gen Unverklungen.  
Mit dem Stein gings, mit uns zwein.  
Herz und Herz. Zu schwer befunden.  
Schwerer werden. Leichter sein.

[What Occurred? The stone trod out from the mountain.  
Who awakened? You and I.  
Language, language. With-Star. Next-to-Earth.  
Poorer. Open. Homelandwise.

Where did it go? Towards the unsubsidied.  
We went with the stone, the two of us.  
Heart and heart. Found to be too heavy.  
Become more heavy. Be more light.]<sup>22</sup>

"What happened" here is depicted as a sort of separation and falling away from an inorganic mass, a "mountain." The order of language, in which there can be for the first time relations of togetherness with the stars and of nearness to the earth, creates an openness and impoverishment with respect to burrowing unawakened, unseparate, in the rich concreteness and density of the mountain. Awakening to this linguistic order, in which everything is now bound together in relation, including you and me, heart and heart, is "found to be too heavy." One is burdened with a whole universe. And yet if language, through which all this has come about, can now be shed or shaken off, amortized, then existence in the freedom of having come unstuck from the mountain may on the contrary be found to be "light," heart to heart, unencum-

bered by linguistic mediation. One goes towards what is “unsubsided” (Unverklungen), a fading sound that has not yet fully finished its vibrations, drawn towards the arriving silence. This pull of language toward its own extinction is a gravitational force taking you and me as grammatical pronouns with it. It will allow us then to be light when fully divested of language, when with its cessation we have become open in all directions and there is no longer any homeland towards which we are oriented. We will then have become heavier with the stone’s own heaviness, but we will be light because absolved from language. Mute like the stone, we will be weighed down physically, heavy, and yet lightened of the burden of language and all its mediated relations.

Jabès’s route to silence by contrast begins and ends with the Book. Whereas Celan imagines the state before and beyond language through a maximum intensity of earthiness and massiveness, Jabès does not relinquish language imagery even in opening towards absolute silence. The absolute openness and emptiness generated by language lead him to the question of the book and even of a sacred Book:

Il n’y a pas un Livre sacré mais des livres ouverts au silence du Livre sacré.

Écrire, à partir de ce silence, c’est insérer le Livre de l’éternité dans le livre mortel de nos métamorphoses.<sup>23</sup>

[There is not a sacred Book but books open to the silence of the sacred Book.

To write from this silence is to insert the Book of eternity in the mortal book of our metamorphoses.]

The absolute Book cannot as such exist, for then it would stand out from other things, be one among many, no longer absolved from all relativity. Yet all our writing must annul its limits and its very existence in opening itself towards this Book, which is not. It is nothing but silence. Yet, of course, “To say this silence would be to say the sacred, but equally, at the same time, to annul it” (Dire ce silence, c’est dire le sacré; mais c’est, également, l’abolir aussitôt).<sup>24</sup> So there is an irresolvable paradox of priority between the Book that cannot be except as refracted in our books and our books that cannot be except as fragments of it.

— Qu’est-ce qu’un livre sacré? Qu’est-ce qui confère au livre son caractère sacré?

— Le sacré dépend-il de nous?

— Un livre de savoir, serait-il un livre sacré? Non, puisque le savoir est humain.

— Nous disons : “Dans ce livre, il y a la parole de Dieu. Donc, c’est un livre sacré.” Mais n’est-ce pas nous-mêmes qui, cherchant à la révéler, formulons cette parole?

La Parole de Dieu serait-elle cette Parole silencieuse qui laisserait se rompre son silence en chacune des nôtres?

— Il n’y aurait, ainsi, pas plus de livre sacré que de livre profane : il y aurait le livre.

Mais quel livre? Le Livre absolu de Dieu, le livre inaccompli de l’homme?

Le livre est, à la fois, présentation—il présente, se présente—et représentation—il reproduit, cherche à fixer.

Mais Dieu n’a-t-il pas condamné toute représentation de Lui-même?<sup>25</sup>

[— What is a sacred book? What confers on a book its character as sacred?

— Does the sacred depend on us?

— Would a book of knowledge be a sacred book? No, because knowledge is human.

— We say: “In this book, there is the word of God. Therefore, it’s a sacred book.” But is it not we ourselves who, seeking to reveal it, form this word?

Would the Word of God be this silent Word that would let its silence be interrupted in each of our silences?

— In this way, there would be a sacred book no more than a profane: there is the book.

But which book? The absolute Book of God, the uncompleted book of man?

The book is at once presentation—it present, presents itself—and representation—it reproduces, seeks to render fixed.

But did God not condemn every representation of Himself?]

His obsession with the Book gives Jabès a different slant from Celan in his approach to the poetics of silence. Both these authors write poetry the standard of success of which is not its aesthetic quality as such, its bravura in figuring through descriptively apt images, but its capacity to intimate what it cannot figure. It is a negative capability of self-erasure by which both these types of poetry, the one predominantly lyric, the other

gnomic and mixed often with prose, excel. For both Jabès and Celan, language is important only for its giving itself up and vanishing, but what it moves from and vanishes towards is differently conceived as "What Happened" (Was Geschah) or as the Book. The one imagines the erasure of language to lead to the outside of language, whereas the figure of the Book suggests that the erasure of all words produces a result that is still determined as linguistic, still encompassed by language, even if in a purely negative mode. Of course, this is but another figure for an absolutely unutterable, unscriptable, unimaginable Nothing. It is not a determination of essence. But it is nevertheless a road marker and provides a linguistic landscape for the journey from alpha to omega.

This comparison between Jabès and Celan can help us to discriminate between what are historically two distinguishable lineages and logics of apophatic thinking, one based on the ineffability of the singular existence, whether of God or of the individual human person or event, and another based on an ineffability inherent in language itself. The latter is traditionally figured as the unutterable Name of God. The word at the origin of all words, too hol(e)y to be pronounced, is the missing ground or abyss into which all language slips. All language depends upon this ground that, however, can never itself appear, so that all language that does appear in finite fragments or words is unveiled as really nothing, as a mask for the nonappearing, indefinable Nothing of the infinite language known mythically as the Book.

The superabundant fullness of history and existence as manifest in the concretely given otherness of the other person, on the one hand, and the infinite emptiness of the word resulting in a nomadic exile into the Name with its withdrawal from lips forbidden to pronounce it—which would be, in a manner, to possess it—on the other, are two distinct motives for ineffability and two distinct roots of apophatic tradition that we are now in a position to align with Celan and Jabès respectively.

From ancient times, there has been an apophaticism of existence, of the positively and absolutely existing that language cannot comprehend, which from Philo Judaeus to Wittgenstein registers in the fact *that* something is, even though *what* it is cannot in the least be expressed. But alongside this there is also an apophaticism of the divine Name. In this latter case, it is language, paradigmatically the unpronounceable Name of God, rather than existence, that emerges as the prime instance of what cannot be said. Whereas the unsayability of existence or being has been pursued in philosophy from Plotinus and Proclus through F. W. J. Schelling and Martin Heidegger, theoretical reflection on the ineffable divine Name develops especially in the kabbalah and resurfaces recently in philosophical thinkers of language, especially those of Jewish heri-

tage, like Benjamin, Levinas, and Derrida. These two strands of tradition are marvelously conjoined and intricately intertwined in the work of Franz Rosenzweig.<sup>26</sup> Rosenzweig manages to blend together both a philosophy of existence deriving from the late Schelling and a philosophical meditation on the absolute, silent Word of Creation in the tradition of the Bible.

The synthesis of existential with linguistic apophaticism in Rosenzweig is a hint that perhaps these seeming opposites may prove to be not separable in any final and definitive way after all. Language, and in the prime instance the divine Name, is perhaps the creative core of being as it is manifest in existence, and the unsayability at the heart of both being and language might therefore, in the last analysis, be indiscernibly the same. Characteristically, in apophatic discourses distinctions posing as ultimate collapse and opposites come to coincide. Indeed, without the word, nothing is left to separate and articulate things. In an apophatic universe, all things become equally inarticulate. The fullness of existence as such and the emptiness of the pure word are each equally beyond saying. They are based on radically different, incomparable experiences. But *what* is experienced in each case is inarticulable and comes to coincide in the original indifferentiation that is manifest only in and as the neutralizing of every finite expression, every fragment of word or of being that *can* be expressed. Although these are divergent ways, they lead to what may be indiscernibly the same silence. At least, it does not seem possible to *say* the difference between them, except as a difference that disappears and a saying that is erased. Apophatic discourses of the most different sorts converge upon this point, where the singular has no stateable difference to define it or distinguish it from either All or Nothing. The ineffable concreteness of existence and the ineffable emptiness of language in this manner meet in the silence where being and language grow dumb together.

These two different paradigms of apophasis, as they develop in Jabès and Celan, can be compared both in their distinctiveness and ultimately their inseparability from one another. For in either case, the claims of difference are driven to their limit and expose its arbitrariness, so that the opposition collapses into indistinction: in different ways, Celan and Jabès both reveal an infinite, indistinct Nothing-All as underlying and swallowing up every finite form of manifestation, every articulation. All history is within Jabès's language, and conversely for Celan language is already itself a holocaust, the actual, indispensable site of annihilation. Both authors close in upon the ultimate inexpressibility at the origin of language and existence alike—where language and existence are found to be together and indistinguishable—but from opposite directions.

The two expatriate poets were colleagues at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris and actually became friends. In a sort of elegy for his friend



(mon ami), Jabès 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).<sup>27</sup> Within this common project the two poets take different directions, inward towards the unnameable Name of God at the core of language, and outward towards 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.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

#### NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Michel Rinn, *Les récits du génocide: Sémiotique de l'indicible* (Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1998).
- 2 For this notion of Jewishness, compare Maurice Blanchot, “Être Juif,” in *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).
- 3 See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).
- 4 Many of Hent de Vries's writings, particularly *Theologie im Pianissimo & Zwischen Rationalität und Dekonstruktion: Die Aktualität der Denkfiguren Adornos und Levinas* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1989) and *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), revolve around this question as it arises from the work of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Theodor Adorno.
- 5 Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 140. All translations of citations from the French and German, unless otherwise attributed, are my own.
- 6 Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 25.
- 7 Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974).
- 8 See Levinas's essay on Celan, “Tout Autrement,” in *Noms propres* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1976), 65–72.
- 9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, with introduction by Bertrand Russell (1920; London: Routledge, 1992).
- 10 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bände*, ed. Beda Allemann et al., vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972). English translation by Michael Hamburger in *The Poems of Paul Celan* (New York: Persea Books, 1995).
- 11 See Peter Horst Neumann, *Zur Lyrik Paul Celans: eine Einführung* (1968; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 25.
- 12 *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemary Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 34. The German quotation is from Celan's poetological addresses at Bremen and Darmstadt (“Der Meridian”), printed in *Gesammelte Werke*, eds. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 3:186. Much useful commentary on Celan's poetics can be found in *Word Tracings: Readings of Paul Celan*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
- 13 Waldrop, *Paul Celan*, 49. “Aber das Gedicht will zu einem Anderen, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu” (Celan, “Der Meridian,” 198).
- 14 Celan, “Der Meridian,” 48.

- 15 "Hindurchgehen durch furchtbares Verstummen, hindurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede" (Celan, "Der Meridian," 186).
- 16 Waldrop, *Paul Celan*, 34. ". . . Sie ging hindurch und gab keine Worte her für das, was geschah; aber sie ging durch dieses Geschehen. Ging hindurch und durfte wieder zutage treten, angereichert von all dem" (Celan, "Der Meridian," 186).
- 17 The last three paragraphs closely follow material that appears also in the section on Celan in my forthcoming modified anthology, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press).
- 18 Edmond Jabès, *El, ou Le dernier livre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 93.
- 19 Jabès, *Le soupçon le desert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 96.
- 20 "Yukel, parle-nous du silence qui est le terme et le commencement, étant l'âme des mots comme le chantre et le martyr sont, au moment désigné, l'âme du monde" (Jabès, *Livre des questions*, 70).
- 21 In *Du désert au livre: Entretiens avec Marcel Cohen* (1980; Paris: Belfond, 1991), Jabès admits that there are characters and a story in his books, but maintains that they belong to and finally disappear into the Book, becoming indistinct from it: "Oui, certes; mais ces personnages se confondent avec le livre" (143).
- 22 My translation, unlike Hamburger's, does not attempt to imitate Celan's rhyme scheme.
- 23 Jabès, *Le petit livre de la subversion hors de soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 50.
- 24 Jabès, *Le petit livre*, 50.
- 25 Jabès, *Le petit livre*, 51.
- 26 Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1921; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988). English translation by William W. Hallo, *The Star of Redemption* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).
- 27 Jabès, *La mémoire des mots: Comment je lis Paul Celan* (Paris: Fourbis, 1990), 9.