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Abstract

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Keywords

Edmond Jabès, dialogue, poetry, poetics, communication, isolation, self, consciousness, speech, word, identity, self, others

THE DIALOGUE OF ABSENCE

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Vital is the dialogue. The book of the living
can only be the book of dialogue.

—Edmond Jabès, *Le Parcours*

In leaving the book, one does not leave it:
one inhabits its absence.

—Edmond Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*

1. The Poetics of Dialogue.

To be human is to be in dialogue. We are surrounded by dialogue, immersed in dialogue. Alone or in society, we use words, spoken and unspoken, that are addressed to others: the unnamed, indeterminate other that exists within ourselves; the living other whose face we look at as we speak; the unseen other whose voice comes to us from afar and that our words rush to meet. Our language, whether expressed or inaudible, conscious or silent, seeks to create encounters between a self and an other, between an *I* that speaks and a *you* that, as it hears what is spoken, prepares to make a response.

Starting from the fundamental difference that separates speakers—differences of history, culture, personality, gender, life—dialogue turns that difference into a relation, an encounter. It is by the very difference of the other with whom one interrelates, a difference which dialogue seeks to preserve, that one's life comes to have meaning. As Mikhail Bakhtin has shown in his writings on dialogue and dialogism, we can only experience the constituent moments of our life through its reflections in the consciousness of an other. From birth, if not before, our identities, appearances, and even our names are bestowed by others:

Everything that touches me comes to my consciousness—starting with my name—from the exterior world, by passing through the mouth of others (the mother, etc.), with their intonation, their emotional tonality, and their values. Initially, I become conscious of myself only through others: it is from them that I receive words, forms, the tone that shapes my first image of myself. . . . As the body is initially formed in the mother's womb (in her body), so human consciousness awakens, enveloped by the consciousness of the other.¹

It is not “hell that is the others,” as one of Sartre's characters declares, but life. “Two voices,” writes Bakhtin “are the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. . . . Only in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the ‘man in man’ be revealed, for others as well as for oneself.”² The nature of human existence and of consciousness is fundamentally determined by dialogue:

The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.³

No consciousness is possible without the presence and intervention of the other. The way the *I* looks at itself, the way it perceives its actions and experiences, has no meaning if not reflected in the mirror of the other. “I am conscious of myself,” Bakhtin writes, “and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another” (“Toward a Reworking,” p. 287). The world is fundamentally *allotropic*, for it turns in response to the motions, gestures, and words of the other. But this turning toward the other also leads back to the self, which sets in motion once again the movement out toward the “extopy,” as Bakhtin calls it, of the other. A clear line of demarcation dividing self from other and consciousness from world does not exist:

To be means to communicate. . . . To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal

sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*. (“Toward a Reworking,” p. 287)

If speech is dialogic—it is “the word, the living word, . . . by its very nature want[ing] to be heard and answered” (“Toward a Reworking,” p. 300)—then so is writing. Poetry, a genre that Bakhtin rejected as too self-enclosed to express the otherness of language and world that he called “addressivity,” and which in his mind only the novel could articulate, is most certainly a scene of dialogue, according to poets who would vigorously disagree with Bakhtin’s low opinion of poetic discourse.⁴ One such dissenting voice would be that of Paul Celan. A poem, Celan argues, desires to participate in the mystery of an encounter; it is a bottle thrown into the sea, drifting toward some distant shore; it is a hand reaching out to shake another hand. The poem needs the other and searches for it in the hope of bringing the other within the compass of its language. Poetry establishes a dialogue with what it addresses. The identity of the self and that of the other have no meaning apart from their encounter or their search for an encounter, even when that meeting is ephemeral or fails to reduce the separateness each experiences. The difference between an *I* and a *you* does not disappear when the two meet; rather, such difference becomes part of the encounter’s reality. This is a dialogue that does not dissipate distance but causes it to participate in the exchange. The intimacy of an encounter cannot hide the veil separating self and other that is itself the reflection of the distance surrounding all things in the world, as Celan suggests in a poem called “Distances”:

Eye in eye, in the coolness,
 let us begin such things too:
 together
 let us breathe the veil
 that hides us from one another
 when the evening makes ready to measure
 how far it still is
 from every shape it assumes
 to every shape
 it bestows on us both.⁵

The poem, therefore, is for Celan fundamentally dialogic: it “wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs a vis-à-vis,” he

writes.⁶ Above all, it expresses the need to speak *to* and *for* an other. Fundamental to the existence of the poem—even before it can become elegy, lyric, lamentation, or celebration, even before it can express love, hope, sadness, or pain—is its reality as language moving in the direction of an other. Before it is theme, subject, content, meaning, or *signifié*, speech is a discourse addressed to and for others; it is communication and communion. Poetry opens a conversation with the otherness of the world. “Only in the realm of this dialogue,” Celan writes,

does that which is addressed take form and gather around the I who is addressing and naming it. But the one who has been addressed and who, by virtue of having been named, has, as it were, become a thou, also brings its otherness along into the present, into this present. (“The Meridian,” p. 37)

For Bakhtin and Celan the dialogic imperative is fundamental to all speech and language, although considering their different personal and intellectual backgrounds both writers would disagree as to the type of discourse in which dialogism best operates—the former privileging the novel, the latter favoring the lyric. For both, language moves out into the world of difference, of “outsidedness,” of plurivalent discourse, of foreignness and strangeness, of homelessness, as it searches for the other to whom it is addressed. Similarly, for the French poet and writer Edmond Jabès, language is a dialogue of words in exile, of words living on the “outside.” It is a nomadic writing seeking to return to a lost homeland by means of letters and words that wander across the white spaces of the open page in perpetual dialogue with each other, congregating to form questions, coalescing into quotations, merging into cries, prayers, commands, invocations, appeals, songs, poems, tales—all forms of a rich and complex allocutionary language, all turns of a discourse in which the other is invariably present, even, as we shall see, when it is absent.

Dialogue in Jabès’s books is associated with absence, separation, distance, loss, lack, and exile. It is as much constituted by speech as it is by silence. In the pages that follow I should like to examine the relationship of silence, absence, and loss to Edmond Jabès’s conception of dialogue, as this is developed in his most recent works, especially in *Le Livre du dialogue* (1984). I wish to focus attention on dialogue as a relationship with the otherness of what has been lost,

effaced, and destroyed. I should like to raise several questions. For example, why does the relationship between self and other play such a central role in Jabès's writing? How can the trace of an absent, distant, always elusive other be inscribed in the fixed spaces of a text? Why is alterity so central to Jabès's notion of the book? What is the importance in the dialogic encounter of the face of the other, of "this blind attraction for the distant face that blinds"?⁷ Furthermore, what is the nature of the dialogue between death and life, sorrow and joy, pain and laughter, exile and return? And how do these particular experiences of being converge in writing? In other words, how does the dialogue between *cri* and *rire* become joined in *écrire*?⁸ And how does the "distanced word" (*LD*, p. 57), the "errant, exiled, orphaned word" (*LD*, p. 21), initiate dialogue between what is present and what is absent? Finally, within the errant language of the Jabèsian text-world, how does a writing founded on discontinuity, interruption, and diaspora and an interrogative discourse, in which every question is answered by another question, initiate an encounter of traces and an exchange of silences? How, that is, does it open a dialogue of absence?

2. *The Mystery of the Other.*

The other is, to quote Roland Barthes, "the sign of all mysteries."⁹ It is what is unknown, different, foreign, and resistant to the self's efforts to appropriate or master it. The other is the enigma that I seek to know, name, identify, and possess, but cannot, for as Barthes explains:

The other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found; I cannot open up the other, trace back the other's origins, solve the riddle. Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear myself out, I shall never know.¹⁰

It is this otherness of the other (and of the self) that preoccupies Edmond Jabès. His writing is fundamentally allocutionary, a discourse that moves away from the egocentricity of the self—even when paradoxically, the self is clearly being addressed—and journeys out to the mysterious, sometimes distant, often absent, other. Everywhere in Jabès's world are signs of the other; every instant of life is the beginning of a dialogue. "Everything that we see, hear, draw near to, once we become aware of it, enters into dialogue with us" (*LD*, p. 13), he writes. Sometimes the other with whom we converse is outside of

ourselves and sometimes within. Sometimes it is necessary "to be oneself in the *other*" (Y, p. 146) and sometimes to discover the "*other* in myself" (LD, p. 13).

The act of writing for Jabès is fundamentally the act of speaking to another. The narrator of several of Jabès's books addresses his words to others who are fictional personages, with names like Sarah, Yukel, Yaël, and Elya. These are characters whose lives and experiences are recounted in such minimal and laconic terms that they remain mysterious beings, enshrouded in the painful, silent enigma of their lives. In Jabès's books are also found imaginary rabbis whose "existence" is founded on quotations, the invented words Jabès has them address to their disciples and readers. As a form of discourse, the quotation is endowed with alterity, for it is a fragment that has been torn from an earlier text and embedded in a foreign textual *milieu*. The quotation refers nostalgically to the homeland from which it is in exile; it remains an unintegrated sign of otherness within the new text to which it has been joined. But the primary allocutionary form in Jabès's writing is the question, from which so many of his books are constructed. "The heart of dialogue," Jabès writes, "throbs with the beats of the question" (LD, p. 36). "What," "who," "why" are words that initiate a dialogue by demanding that the other respond. "Jewish is the question," Jabès writes, "indefinitely questioning itself in the answer it provokes" (LD, p. 66). More often than not the response elicited by a question in the dialogic encounter is another question. Dialogue for Jabès is the exchange of unending, unanswerable questions: "In the dialogue I seek, the answer is abolished; but, sometimes, the question is the flash of an answer" (RL, p. 42).¹¹

Alterity dominates Jabès's books primarily because his writing is nomadic. It is the exilic speech of a wandering, deracinated people. Since exile is founded on the absence, distance, and unpossessibility of a lost homeland, as well as on the alterity and difference of the exiled nomad wandering in alien lands, the writing of exile is also charged with otherness. The very nature of writing is to be "other" than what it represents, to exist apart from the unlocatable experiences, memories, and origins that have given it life. Thus, Jabès often speaks of the book-in-the-book, that hidden, invisible writing which every book contains and which every word tries to "develop" (in the photographic sense of the term). Every one of Jabès's books is a possible fragment of a greater Book, the perfectly Other Text formed by the invisible, white writing of God. Each represents "the book imperceptibly forming itself in the book that will never be completed"

(*DDD*, p. 25). Every blank page contains hidden in its “depths” an infinity of words that become truly “other,” especially as the page becomes filled with writing. The written words push the unwritten words to the margins where they lie dormant. This silent, invisible, “other” writing also inhabits the spaces between the lines or peers out from between letters. Where there is space not covered by black ink, there otherness may lie: “White is the word for the word that writes itself” (*LD*, p. 107). Behind every congregation of letters is found “this interior word—anterior to all others” (*LD*, p. 68) or the forbidden “*arrière-parole*” (*P*, p. 39) uttered by a mute and absent God. The book is filled with holes, gaps, and lacks revealing “traces of words buried in the word” (*P*, p. 77). Book, page, line, word, letter are all inhabited by an unseen otherness, an effaced writing, a “*contre-écriture*,” trailing after the dark writing on the page like a white shadow.

Alterity is not only limited to the human spaces of the book. God Himself is other to Himself, to His Creation, and to man. He is the *thou* without a face, the incarnation of the plenitude of absence: “You are never You, being successively You begotten by You, sometimes against You,” Jabès writes (*RL*, p. 27). He is the fundamental otherness of the universe, what Jabès calls “the completely Other of the other, . . . the completely Other without face” [“*le tout Autre de l’autre. . . le tout Autre sans visage*”] (*DDD*, p. 72). At the Creation, the supremely ubiquitous God has had to hold His breath, to breathe Himself into Himself, to absent Himself from the creation of the world in order to clear a space in which to give life to what is not Himself. This withdrawal of God from Creation, which Jewish believers of Lurianic Kabbalah called *tsimtsum*, creates the other-than-God.¹² The withdrawal of God from the world, therefore, creates an empty space in which pure otherness can emerge. The universe begins with a divine absence. Genesis is the creation of alterity. In the beginning was not God, but the *otherness* of God. He is, Jabès writes, “thoroughly Himself in the immeasurable absence of Himself” (*LD*, p. 98), the “murmur of absence in absence” (*LD*, p. 120).

The relationship between self and other is, like so many things in Jabès’s work, contradictory. The other is both present and absent. It is both an accomplice and an antagonist, the *you* that the *I* encounters and the being that it defies and flees. Both in greeting the other and in withdrawing from it, the self is involved in dialogue. Which explains why, sometimes, dialogue is both communion and exchange, on the one hand, and interruption and separation on the other. But in either

event the relationship, whether altruistic or antagonistic, is one of interdependence and co-being:

—I know the other only through myself. But who am I?

—Does fire know fire?

Does wood know wood?

To the wood it burns, fire owes its having become fire; as the wood, to the fire that reduces it to ashes, owes its having ceased being wood. (*P*, p. 37)

The encounter with the other constitutes nothing less than the being and the salvation of the self. The *I* is given life and sustenance by the *you*; it longs to feel the closeness of the other that can protect and restore it and that can open its being to the world:

Where are you, who once tried to rouse me from my torpor?
Through whom I breathed this fresh air that fills my chest? From
whom blows this violent wind, wild from chasing darkness
away? . . . Two trembling fingers open my eyelids, then my lips.
Might you be there, near me? (*LD*, p. 63)

The absolute centrality of the other to the life of the self is asserted at the same time that the precariousness of the relationship and its possible absence are made evident. The interrogative quality of Jabès's words points to the longing for an other who is now distant. Between self and other a gap intrudes, a lack prevails. A similar expression of this desire for proximity—and the wish to reduce the obstacles that the ego necessarily places in the way of a perfectly realized communion with the other—is eloquently articulated by Jabès in the following passage:

Whoever you are, come in. What, impatiently, I have to tell you, you have known from the first day and what you will answer, I have repeated to myself many times.

You have come, isn't that the important thing? From so far, from so near, that, in both cases, I could not see you—but did I not see you?—nor hear you—but was I not carried away by your voice?—; from too close, having confused my soul's voice with yours; from too far, having wrapped the world in your silence so as to return it to your absence.

Move no longer. From you, I require everything. You are what is exceptional and ordinary.

Wherever you may be, you are my haven. (*LD*, p. 104)

Whether distant or close, the other protects the self's being. This occurs even though the relationship is disturbed by silence, confusion, and separation. The speaker is not certain whether he has seen or heard the beloved other. When she is close to him he confuses his being with hers so that his own self gets in the way of his perception. When she is distant, it is her being, of silence and absence, that envelops the world, tinging it with regret and loss. Either the relationship is too egocentric or too allocentric; balance is lacking. Yet, the movement toward encounter has taken place. This turning toward the other is paramount in Jabès's world, for it is the very trajectory of language and being: "This movement towards you that traverses the book, have I ever opposed it? I maintained its rhythm. It was, I know now, my life's steady beat" (*LD*, p. 104).

Allotropism is for Jabès the primary motion of the book and of human existence. The movement toward the other unleashes speech; it initiates dialogue; it celebrates love; it keeps death at bay. In sum, it defines what is fundamentally human about finite existence. The possibility that at the threshold to the desert, at the edge of the abyss, at the gateway to the void, two people will exchange a word may mean the difference between being and nothingness, life and death:

I ask you, o my beloved of an undying moment, if between you and me a dialogue might have been possible?

Between us, could a single word have slipped? And what could this word have been?

O silence! I talk to myself, through you, and I do not recognize my voice.

Who speaks for us since I began this struggle for existence where water no longer flows over the ground, where grass has stopped growing, where the sun lights only the past, where the future is forever plunged in darkness?

Speak one word. Ah, could my mouth only utter the few expected sounds that would save us from death. (*LD*, p. 62)

A poetics of rupture and interruption dominates Jabès's work. One book unwrites another book by rewriting it, by bathing its subject

in a new flood of words. Discourse moves against itself so as to ensure that no final or permanent knowledge will be constructed. A constant dialogue takes place between different kinds of writing, between different texts, typographies, and books. In fact, all of Jabès's works are in dialogue with each other. Writing itself is a form of dialogue, the response of one discourse to another, which in its turn will be undone by a counter-writing:

“When we throw a ball against a wall, what happens. The wall sends it back to us; but the act of catching the ball and throwing it back once again, according to the rules of the game, varies. . . . So it is with dialogue,” he said. (*LD*, p. 36)

Against such themes as exile, nomadism, the book, God, absence, the Jewish condition of being, and writing, each of Jabès's books throws a verbal ball which rebounds in different ways, at different angles, and with different velocities. Writing is continuously rushing to hit the ball and to get itself into position for the next bounce, the next swerving and deviation. Thus, it is very much a dialogic encounter, because, as Jabès writes, “every break opens a dialogue” (*LD*, p. 26). Dialogue is the disruption of a pattern, the veering away from an established order, the appearance of a gap in what had been a seamless web, the unwriting of what is written:

And if dialogue were only the breaking apart of an anonymous book whose parts would seek less to reunite than to underscore the breaking?

We speak to each other through a wound, about whose origin we will always know nothing. (*LD*, p. 28)

In Jabès's dialogue one expresses oneself through wounds, gaps, intervals, separations, silences, effacements, and discontinuities. The unpredictable exchange of words may push the dialogue to and fro like a cork floating in stormy seas (*LD*, p. 55). At the heart of dialogue is disorder, silence, absence, and nothingness. “At what moment can we say that we are in dialogue?” asks one of Jabès's speakers, to which another voice responds: “Perhaps at the crucial moment when the universe is already no longer anything” (*LD*, p. 47).¹³ This explains, perhaps, the primary task of dialogue, which is to undo what has been done, to dismantle what has been constructed, to disfigure what has

been represented, to teach us, as Jabès remarks, “little by little, to unlearn” (*LD*, p. 38).

3. *The Dialogue of Silence.*

In keeping with Jabès’s poetics of rupture, exile, Diaspora, and absence, the truest dialogue is the one without words, hidden, mute, and unconscious. It is an encounter in which speechlessness dominates. The only thing that the self communicates to the other, who is distant or altogether absent, is silence itself. The *I* and the *you* are linked by what is not said, by the silence of their separation. Yet so vital is this mute and absent dialogue that it does not cease to reverberate in the memory and consciousness of the solitary self: “The hidden dialogue, in its augmented and anxious inaudibility, perseveres in the inaccessible depths of ourselves” (*LD*, p. 12), Jabès writes.

“Before setting myself down at my desk,” the narrator of Jabès’s *The Book of Dialogue* informs us in a chapter entitled “Le Rêve,” “it was my habit to sit every morning in an armchair placed at the back of the room where I used to take leave of the world.” One day, the narrator explains, while in a semi-conscious state of reverie, his eyes half-closed, his thoughts moving freely and uninterrupted through his mind, he hears a knocking at the closed door of his study:

I saw a young woman appear to whom I hesitated speaking right away, so stupefied was I by her casual behaviour and by the silence she imposed; a silence more severe than that dominating the room.

She seated herself, facing me, in the armchair that matched mine, watched me for a brief moment, then, point-blank asked me if I would be good enough to disclose her name—but with so disillusioned a smile, so pained an intensity in her eyes, that I shuddered.

She noticed my uneasiness, because she immediately got up, ashamed of herself, it seemed, moved toward the corridor—in coming in she had left the door partly open—and, taking not the least notice of me, vanished. (*LD*, pp. 35–36)

To the woman’s demand for dialogue, to her call for a word, to her plea for a name, an identity, a history, the narrator responds with stunned silence. The dialogue is begun by the woman’s question, but it is left

uncompleted by the absence of a response. Dialogue, Jabès suggests, has the potential power of revealing a name and of disclosing the unknown, hidden identity of the other. But all too often, caught by surprise, we do not know how to respond. We are responsible for another human being, but we cannot find the words to bridge the gap separating us; ultimately, we are strangers to each other. We are guardians of a name for which words and sounds are lacking. This name is unpronounceable, like the Name of God, or the mute, white writing on the surface of the page, those hidden letters and words buried beneath the visible text. In many ways, this woman, whose mystery is that of otherness itself, is an incarnation of Jabès's silent, absent Book that appears for an instant and then disappears in a flash, effacing everything but the memory of its passage. The incomplete dialogue, initiated by a question left hanging in air, leaves the narrator with only the "trace" of the other. The dialogue will continue, but in the form of absence only.

Deeply affected by his encounter with the woman, the narrator will try to keep the dialogue alive; but it will be addressed to an unseizable and distant other: a *you* who haunts the life of the *I* as the irrefutable image of a lost and absent presence:

About this woman—of whom I know nothing except that one morning she suddenly entered my home only to vanish just as quickly, but whose incomprehensible question continues to plague my memory—no particular mention will be made in this book: not of the infinite softness of her voice, not, either, of this unhealable wound that she wanted to confront with my own;

yet, her face and her voice are, because of this, all the more present in these pages: her face, in order to sustain my imagination; her voice, as irrefutable proof of her reality.

Image of the book, and voice passing through it from beginning to end. Dew for an unknown desert and dream of an oasis covered by sand. (*LD*, p. 36)

No further mention will be made of the woman because she now inhabits the realm of silence that only the absence of words can express. But the woman is all the more present by virtue of this muteness; her image continues to haunt the narrator's memory and his writing. She is the void around which the writing dances, the absence to which all words are addressed, the dew quickly evaporated by the desert sun, the oasis rapidly overrun by sand. She is the sign of loss

under which all language lives. The narrator experiences loss because he is constantly in dialogue with its pain. Whatever words he uses, they all refer to the absence which this woman has opened in his life. Jabès reminds us that knowledge—provisional, partial, and forever in the process of making and unmaking itself—can come, if it arrives at all, only through an experience of deprivation:

“Know that one enters the book only after having been dispossessed of it.

“Thus, we inhabit only our loss,” he said. (*LD*, p. 11)

Dialogue, therefore, can only begin after it has disappeared; the other can only start to live after she has been lost. Dialogue exists in the absence of dialogue, for, according to Jabès, the non-existence of a reality guarantees its potential being: “Never has the advent occurred. It is in this ‘never has occurred’ that it lives.”¹⁴ In the pockets of reality that absence forms, as in the fissures between letters and the white spaces between written words, there are found the irretrievable, silent realities with which we are in dialogue. This may often take the form of a shared pain, a dialogic language of “unhealable wounds” (“*inguérissables blessures*”), for, as Jabès writes, “we speak to each other through a wound about whose origin we will always know nothing” (*LD*, p. 28). The encounter with the young woman, which may have only been a dream, a creation of the narrator’s imagination—for, as Jabès writes, “the other is a fiction” (*LD*, p. 34)—touches every page and word of *Le Livre du dialogue*. It is that book’s subtext, its hidden, invisible writing, the absence with which it is constantly in conversation. Although the encounter discloses the failure of human relationships, it also proclaims the indominability of dialogue. As Jabès explains on the back cover of the French edition:

The cause of the failure of every dialogue is located in our inability to reveal ourselves, such as we are, to the other. A stranger facing strangers.

But dialogue exists, precisely there where, by means of the silence that creates the book, it is no longer anything but the desperate confrontation of two feeble words searching for their truth.

Of particular interest in the encounter with the young woman is the narrator’s emphasis on the part silence plays in their meeting.

Silence initiates dialogue and maintains its life. In fact, the narrator of “Le Rêve” participates in three kinds of dialogue, each of which is formed by silence. The first—what Jabès calls the *avant-dialogue*, and which he describes as a “slow or feverish preparation for dialogue” that allows us to be ready for an exchange of words about whose form and content we can know nothing in advance, except that it will be a “silent dialogue with an absent interlocutor” (*LD*, p. 17)—corresponds to the moment in “Le Rêve” when the narrator opens his mind to the free associations of reverie. The appearance, or more accurately the disappearance, of the young woman sets in motion a second form of dialogue which Jabès calls simply *le dialogue*. The very nature of dialogic speech, Jabès suggests, is to begin and end in silence. Before it really gets underway, it is quickly swallowed by the surrounding silence it has tried to break through; this dialogue, he writes, is “irreplaceable, vital, but . . . , alas, will not take place, beginning at the moment when we take leave of one another, both of us returned to our solitude” (*LD*, p. 17; Jabès’s ellipsis). True dialogue begins at the moment of separation, when words can no longer be exchanged. Only at the moment of leavetaking, of departure, of exile can dialogue appear. Loss and absence are, thus, the preconditions for a dialogic encounter. It is the precipitous departure of the woman, however, that prepares the way for a third kind of dialogue, the *après-dialogue*, or “after-silence,” in which words reverberate soundlessly in memory and thought. During this stage, we contemplate the hypothetical otherness of the encounter; we realize what “we could have said to the other during our exchange of words—which is more like an apprenticeship of words—potentially expressing only this silence; a silence to which every word—unfathomable, hollow, excavated in vain, self-centered—refers us” (*LD*, p. 17).

Aside from the necessity that the dialogue with the young woman take place in silence—for only through such muteness can dialogue exist—and aside from the narrator’s surprise, ignorance, and possible inability to relate to the other, there may be yet another reason for his reluctance to give the young woman the name she asks for. By declining to answer her request, the narrator safeguards her alterity; he avoids the domination and possession that accompany nomination. To name the woman is to master her. But by refusing to reduce the woman’s mysterious being to a common name, he enables her to remain enveloped in the radical difference she embodies. Human

relationships, especially those of friendship and love, as Emmanuel Lévinas observes, are founded on the “insurmountable duality of beings,” on “a relation with what forever slips away.”¹⁵ Love is not a relationship of possession or power, he argues. Fusion, unity, communion and knowledge have no part in it. In love, the other cannot be captured or known. If we could possess or unite with the object of our love, the alterity of the other would be destroyed. We would kill the difference that is the very quality of the other that attracts us and that constitutes the essence of the other’s existence. In love, the other must remain a stranger. That is why, Lévinas writes, “the relationship with the other is founded on the absence of the other.”¹⁶ Love involves loss, distance, and separation. To think otherwise is to be enslaved to a romantic notion of erotic union, to be possessed by a nostalgia for totality. “The pathos of the erotic relation,” he writes, “is the fact of being two and that in that relationship the other is absolutely other.”¹⁷ In love, duality and alterity do not disappear.

Similarly, of Edmond Jabès’s uninterrupted series of books and of his endless writing it can be said that they too eschew nomination, that they flee the word that names, that they seek silence rather than speech, the effacement of writing rather than writing itself. As long as lines write and unwrite themselves, as long as the book constructs and deconstructs itself, as long as the page is covered with black letters that other letters disperse, as long as the sands of the desert cover the traces of a wanderer passing by in the night, as long, that is, as the writing names and inscribes its own powerlessness to name and inscribe, the otherness of existence is protected and its exteriority and mystery preserved.

Ultimately, the dialogue of otherness that silence has inaugurated is beyond language. Writing and speech are inhospitable to the alterity of what is truly other. Is not the narrator’s encounter with the young woman and the absence of a shared or exchanged speech between them—she talks, and he says nothing—proof that dialogue takes place outside of language, in the silence of a loss that words cannot express? The man and the woman are joined by what was *not* said, by the name that was *not* bestowed, by a dialogue that did *not* continue, by the woman who was soon *not* present, disappearing as suddenly as she had appeared. What was *not* defines what was. Moreover, it is curious that the narrator declares that he will say nothing more in his book about the woman’s face and voice, although one knows that every page will carry the imprint of her trace. This is because the woman’s absence can only be “expressed”

through the presencing of her absence. Since she is beyond the horizon of language, the dialogue with her must continue in non-verbal, silent ways: "as if everything that had not been expressed were finally to be heard, to be read, outside of words" (*LD*, p. 61).

Dialogue, as a human relationship like love and friendship, is, for Jabès, established on silence and distance. The word that the *I* and the *you* exchange or that they fail to speak "owes its power, less to the certitude it designates in articulating itself, than to the lack, to the abyss, to the creative uncertainty of what is spoken" (*LD*, p. 45). In dialogue is found "the desperate confrontation of two feeble words" (*LD*, back cover). Since the fundamental reality of dialogic speech and writing is exile, these forms of human discourse express the desire for a return to a lost homeland or for the rediscovery of a familiar, yet absent face. They yearn for the impossible prenatal oneness that the trauma of birth has interrupted or for the union with God that Creation has disrupted:

Why is the cry of the newborn infant, emerging from the womb, a cry of pain? Undoubtedly, because asserting itself in its own language as a cry of life, it is already a cry of exile.

We are forever, through our words, this cry of the infant searching for a familiar face, for the warmth of a breast, for a love. (*DDD*, p. 84)

Thus one can only write or speak words of absence and exile: "We speak truly only in the distance. There is no word that is not alone. This separation is the unbearable absence that each word comes up against" (*DDD*, pp. 83–84) Yet, the distance between human beings, the separation between lovers, the white spaces between words, which enable them to be read, are in themselves a bridge. Self and other are joined together by what keeps them apart; their only link is the burden of absence and alterity that they share.

In avoiding a certain fascination with unity, Jabès, along with Lévinas and Maurice Blanchot, rejects the notion that the self-other relationship is based on fusion, proximity, and continuity. Rather, it is a relation defined by strangeness and interruption, as Blanchot observes:

What is involved here and requires discussion is everything that separates me from the other, that is to say, the other insofar as I

am infinitely separated from him; separation, gap, distance that leave him infinitely exterior to me, but that also base my relation to him on this very interruption, which is an *interruption of being*—an alterity by means of which he is for me, it must be said again, neither another self, nor another life, nor a mode or moment of universal existence, nor a higher being, god or non-god, but the unknown in its infinite distance.¹⁸

To enter into dialogue, according to Blanchot, is to face the fundamental alterity of the other, to greet “the other as other and the stranger as stranger, the other thus in its irreducible difference, in its infinite strangeness” (p. 115). The word emerging from a dialogue, where silence and distance between self and other are accepted, is not a word that joins but one that interrupts; it is a word of rupture.

4. *The Trace of the Other.*

The disappearance of the young woman from the narrator’s study concludes their meeting, their “face-à-face”; but it also sets in motion their unending dialogue. In her wake, the mysterious woman leaves the trace of her passage. The dialogue begun in presence continues in absence. It has an “after-life” which is that of silence and effacement, like one of Jabès’s books striving to unwrite an earlier book and in its turn being rewritten by the book that follows. In the way she visits the narrator and then disappears, leaving behind only a trace of her now lost presence, the woman in *Le Livre du dialogue* illustrates the enigmatic visitation of the other described by Emmanuel Lévinas in his discussion of “the trace of the other.” Although for Lévinas the other is an abstract entity of possible infinite being, whose appearance is epiphanic and transcendental—“only a being who transcends the world can leave a trace,” he writes—it has certain resemblances to the young woman who, because of the mysterious way she enters and leaves the narrator’s household, possesses a certain aura of epiphany and transcendence.¹⁹ As a trace—that is, as “the presence of what, strictly speaking, has never been there, of what is always past” (p. 622), namely the sign of “the passage of the one who has delivered the sign” (p. 621)—the woman (about whose reality one may have considerable doubts, since she may well be no more than a dream-image) is a somewhat disembodied figure. She exists beyond any image the narrator may have of her. The other, explains Lévinas, is liberated

from the constraints of representative form: "The Other that reveals itself through the face pierces its own formal essence. . . . Its presence consists in its divesting itself of the form by which it is nevertheless revealed" (p. 614). One cannot construct a representation, an image, an idea, or an interpretation of this other. It is the epiphany of a face without discernible form, and yet this face alone speaks:

The manifestation of the face is the initial discourse. Speaking is, above all else, this way of coming from behind one's appearance, from behind one's form, an opening within opening. (p. 614)

The essential starkness and bareness of this face—it is "paralysed in its nakedness" (p. 614), completely exposed and vulnerable—calls out to "me," Lévinas explains. The face is a supplication that demands of "me," first and foremost, that "I" rid "myself" of consciousness, subjectivity, and egoism. The face of the absolutely other calls "me" from "myself," preventing "me" from taking refuge in "myself." It summons "me" to its being and asks that "I" assume responsibility for it. Herein lies the ethical dimension of the visitation: "The face imposes itself on me without my being able to remain deaf to its call or to forget it—without, that is, my being able to give up my obligation to be responsible for its impoverishment" (p. 615). The egocentric foundations of the self are radically questioned by the encounter: "The relation with the Other puts me in question, empties me of myself and does not stop emptying me" (p. 612). An encounter with Lévinas's Other, like the narrator's meeting with the woman in "Le Rêve" is a mystery beyond meaning, an unsettling confrontation with otherness that unravels both the texture of the self and the text of the book. It is the endless dialogue with a trace that, while revealing the absence of the other, also expresses the "indelibility of being" itself (Lévinas, p. 621).

5. *The Unforgettable Other.*

Writing does not end, cannot end. The concluding words of one book are only the beginning lines of the next. *The Book of Dialogue* continues the dialogue of books. Although the last page of *Le Livre du dialogue* announces that the dialogue is soon to end, it also paradoxically promises that it will continue. The penultimate words are:

At these borders of deprivation where deserts adjoin, dialogue comes to an end, but nothingness will continue, in our absence, to speak to nothingness.

Warm breath—that of the resurging word—against cold breath—that of unfulfilled silence. (*LD*, p. 120)

At the edge of the desert and its expanse of silent, empty space the dialogue must end. But since silence does not terminate dialogue, but only prolongs it, speech will be taken up by nothingness, one *néant* addressing the other. It has been the task of *Le Livre du dialogue* to express the truth that there can be no dialogue, no “warm breath,” without silence; and no silence, no “cold breath,” without dialogue. Always, there is some otherness to be addressed, or some exteriority to be perceived, or something beyond the self that calls out for attention, or some migrant, fugitive other that my speech journeys to find. Language, as Barthes reminds us, “is born of absence.”²⁰ Where there is alterity, there is dialogue. As long as there exists some being to whom I can say “you,” some creature that summons me from out of myself, some voice that calls for me to answer, then I will live in dialogue.

The presence of the other is perpetual. Even when absent, it exists as the absence to which I direct my thoughts and address my words. The act of contemplating or remembering the other, even as I acknowledge its absence, establishes a dialogue founded on distance, silence, and lack. It is precisely the inability to forget—to allow absence to create blankness or non-existence—that gives life to the otherness that sustains the dialogic encounter. The writer and the Jew in Edmond Jabès’s work are in dialogue with loss only because they are unable to forget the otherness of this loss insofar as it is evoked by “the desperate confrontation of two feeble words searching for their truth.” As long as alterity is remembered, dialogue—that of books, of words, of writing, of silence—is endless; for as the “final” words of *Le Livre du dialogue* assert:

You cannot be forgotten.

That is the dilemma. (p. 120)²¹

NOTES

1. Cited in Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine: Le Principe dialogique* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 148. N.B. All translations from the French are mine, unless otherwise noted.
2. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 252.
3. "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 293. Hereafter cited in the text as "Toward a Reworking."
4. Bakhtin believed that among literary genres the novel alone could actualize the workings of the dialogic imagination. Poetry, he argued, was incapable of expressing the dialogic realities of human existence. The will to symbolic fusion and totality associated with poetic discourse, its air of self-willed sacralization, and its enclosure within the ivory tower of a singular, single-voiced language—safely removed from the *heteroglossia*, the "multi-voicedness," of the open, provisional, social discourses of historical periods—make poetry an inhospitable place for the communion, exchange, and sense of otherness so essential to dialogue. For a discussion of Bakhtin's "scapegoating" of poetry, see David Carroll, "The Alterity of Discourse: Form, History, and the Question of the Political in M. M. Bakhtin," *Diacritics*, 13 (Summer 1983), 65–83, in particular, 76–79. For an insightful discussion of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and otherness, see Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), in particular chapter 3. In addition, see the excellent essays by Tzvetan Todorov: "Bakhtine et l'altérité," *Poétique*, 40 (November 1979), 502–13; and "L'humain et l'interhumain (Mikhail Bakhtine)," in his *Critique de la critique: Un Roman d'apprentissage* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 32–103.
5. *Speech-Grille and Selected Poems*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), p. 53.
6. "The Meridian," trans. Jerry Glenn, *Chicago Review*, 29, No. 3 (Winter 1978), 37. Hereafter cited in the text.
7. *Le Livre des marges, II: Dans la double dépendance du dit* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1984), p. 70. Hereafter all references to the works of Edmond Jabès will be made in the text according to the following abbreviations: *CSC: Le Livre des marges, I: Ça suit son cours* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975). *DDD: Le Livre des marges, II: Dans la double dépendance du dit* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1984). *LD: Le Livre du dialogue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). *P: Le Parcours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). *RL: Le Livre des questions, III: Le Retour au livre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). *Y: Yaël* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967). I regret not having been able to quote from Rosmarie Waldrop's fine new translation of *Le Livre du dialogue* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), which was published after this article went to press.

8. "Cri et rire—Ah tous mes livres s'estompent dans le mot 'écrire' [Cry and laugh—Ah, all my books fade in the word 'to write']" (*LD*, p. 88).
9. "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 37.
10. *A Lover's Discourse, Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 134.
11. For a discussion of the forms of otherness and the rhetoric of exile in Jabès's work, in particular, the use of the question, the quotation, and the aphorism, see my "Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile," in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), pp. 92–114.
12. For a discussion of *tsimtsum*, see Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), pp. 260–64.
13. Writing itself, according to Jabès, exists in a state of irreparable rupture, for it is the wound caused by the withdrawal of God from the world: "Writing is the suicidal attempt to follow the word through to its final effacement, there where, ceasing to be word, it is but restored trace—wound—of a fatal and common break: that of God with man and of man with Creation" (*P*, p. 87).
14. "Jamais l'avènement n'a lieu. C'est dans ce 'jamais eu lieu' qu'il réside" (*LD*, p. 40).
15. *Le Temps et l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), p. 78.
16. "La relation avec autrui, c'est l'absence de l'autre." (*Le Temps et l'autre*, p. 83).
17. *Ethique et infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p. 68.
18. *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 109. Page numbers hereafter given in the text.
19. "La Trace de l'autre," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 25, No. 3 (September 1963), 622. Page numbers hereafter given in the text.
20. *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 16. "The other," Barthes explains, "is absent as referent, present as allocutory. . . . You have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you)" (p. 15).
21. "Tu ne peux être oublié. / Tel est le dilemme" (p. 120).