

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BOOK:
JABÈS, DERRIDA, LEVINAS

by

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Abstract

The Adventure of the Book: Jabès, Derrida, Levinas is an intellectual history of Jewish writers and philosophers in France during the decades after the Second World War, exploring questions of Jewish identity, writing, and exile. Egyptian-born poet Edmond Jabès, Algerian-born philosopher Jacques Derrida, and Lithuanian-born philosopher Emmanuel Levinas were displaced from their home countries and resettled in Paris, where they fortuitously crossed paths in the early 1960s. For three decades, Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas continued to reflect on questions of Judaism, exile, and writing together in published texts and private correspondences, as interlocutors, critics, and friends. Informed by the dissolution of idealist philosophy as well as the diasporic history of the Jewish people, *The Adventure of the Book* illuminates the stakes of Jewish affiliation in post-war France. Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas treat the question of Jewish identity as a problem of language, and they confront the metaphor of “the book” as a proxy for their experiences of exile and estrangement in relation to nationality, language, and identity. Critically re-appropriating the Jewish tradition endowed by the “Book of Books,” as well as Hegel’s philosophical idealism, Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès frame the book as the site of an *adventure*. This adventure articulates a new relationship between philosophy, religion, and literature in the textual space of the book.

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Introduction

I. Entering the Book

“The philosopher speaks of *phenomena* and *noema*,” notes Gaston Bachelard, “so why wouldn’t he also devote attention to the being of the book, or *bibliomenon* [*bibliomène*]?”¹ At first glance, the question of “the book” might seem like an ancillary concern for philosophy. Philosophy is supposed to take place “out there” in the world of lived experience, whereas the book is the staging area for theoretical arguments. The book, one might think, is merely the formal container for information, a tool or technology for efficiently and durably storing written marks. As a relatively recent invention in the scope of intellectual history, the question of the book must be extrinsic to the substantive concerns of philosophy. This realist conception of the book is subservient to lived experience: even the most lifelike book presents an artificial, mimetic facsimile of the “real world,” and the question of the book is a merely formal affair. Consequently, readers typically bracket the question of the book to plunge into its content and enter the world of the text. François Laruelle describes the “forgetting of the essence of the book in the book,” where the reader suspends the theoretical aspects of reading for the sake of the continuity of reading.² Philosophy’s focus on the structure of experience reinforces the view of the book as a kind of tool used in the service of the “real world,” but this brackets the crucial role of the book in structuring philosophical thought, and

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *L’activité rationaliste* (Paris: PUF, 1965), 6: “Le philosophe parle des phénomènes et de noèmes. Pourquoi ne donnerait-il pas son attention à l’être du livre ou bibliomène?”

² François Laruelle, “Projet d’une philosophie du livre,” *Edmond Jabès: Les Cahiers Obsidiannes no. 5*. (Paris : Obsidiane, 1982), 156.

parsing reality from representation. Emmanuel Levinas remarked in a 1982 interview with Philippe Nemo, “in the great fear of bookishness [*la grande peur du livresque*], one underestimates the ‘ontological’ reference of the human to the book that one takes for a source of information, or for a ‘tool’ of learning, a *textbook*, even though it is a *modality* of our being.”³ The book is not simply a tool, it is a category of human existence. Far from a mere formal question, the conceptual demarcations that give rise to “the book” compose a central nexus of philosophical, literary, and religious reflection.

What makes a book a special kind of object? Edmund Husserl answers this question in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy II*, where he describes the phenomenology of “spiritual objects,” endowed with a special value that discloses the “unity of Body and sense.”⁴ In subjective experience, the presence of another person is perceived not as a mere assemblage of physical parts – a nose, two feet, a chin, etc. – but as a physical-spiritual unity. There is no initial perception of a physical body which is then secondarily viewed with a special value; perception immediately endows the unity of a person with significance. The value of “spiritual objects” stems from subjective modes of apperception which project certain ideals onto these objects. Husserl draws an analogy between the body and the book as spiritual objects: “the book is a body, the pages are sheets of paper, the lines are black marks and physical imprints at certain spots of these papers, etc. Is that what I grasp when I ‘see’ the book, when I ‘read’ the book, when I ‘see’ that what is written is written, what is said is said?” Of course, the book is a physical object with specific physical attributes and qualities, but when I see

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 21-22 [*Ethique et Infini* (Paris : Fayard and Radio-France, 1982), 15-16]. The translation of *livresque* as “bookish” capture the pejorative associations of the term, including its English connotation as a certain character type akin to “nerdy”; Levinas seeks to rehabilitate the term to suggest the novelistic, literary character of existence.

⁴ Edmund Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Scuerer (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 236 [German pagination].

a book, “this is precisely what I am not focused on.” Rather, Husserl continues, “I see what is thingly about it insofar as it appears to me, but I ‘live in the sense, comprehending it.’” The empiricist might object that the physical appearance of the book, which Husserl calls “a first Objectivity,” is the necessary substratum to describe “the sense ‘animating’ the physical,” which he calls a “second Objectivity.”⁵ For Husserl, the spiritual object immediately exceeds the parameters of a mere physical thing. When I perceive the presence of a book, “am I focused on a second Objectivity only externally linked to the first? Is not rather that upon which I am focused a unity that is fused together throughout and not something that just stands there *next to* the physical?” As a spiritual object, the special significance of the book is disclosed immediately: it is infused with intention, it exists precisely *for the sake that* it is read. Husserl writes, “the spiritual sense is, by animating the sensuous appearances, *fused* with them in a certain way instead of just being bound with them side by side.”⁶ The spiritual value of the book brackets its “thingly” character as an object, and expresses its sublime power in human life. “A book can never be reduced to the nudity of the written signs – or others – that it mobilizes,” explains Jocelyn Benoist, “what is distinctive about the book is that its signs are put in play in their being as signs, or in the trickery of what surrounds the sign, its overcoming or effacement.”⁷ Resisting its decomposition into its parts – words, letters, or pages – the constitutive unity of the book as spiritual object renders it the site for a certain kind of human transcendence.

The existential relation to the book stands at the intersection of religious and philosophical thought. In a 1982 interview entitled “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” Levinas describes the book

⁵ Ibid, 237.

⁶ Ibid, 238.

⁷ Jocelyn Benoist in Emmanuel Kant, *Qu'est-ce qu'un livre?* ed. Jocelyn Benoist (Paris: PUF, 1995), 26.

as a modality of human existence, whose importance in philosophy echoes the place of the “Book of Books” in the Abrahamic religions:

But we forget our relation to *books*—that is, to inspired language—which speaks of nothing else. The book of books, and all literature, which is perhaps only a premonition or recollection of the Bible. One is easily led to suspect pure bookishness [*pur livresque*] and the hypocrisy of bookishness in our books, forgetting the depth of our relationship to the book. All humanity has books, be they but books before books: the inspired language of proverbs, fables, and even folklore. The human being is not only in the world, not only an *in-der-Welt-Sein*, but also *Zum-Buch-Sein* [*being-toward-the-book*] in relationship to the inspired Word, an ambiance as important for our existence as streets, houses, and clothing. The book is wrongly interpreted as pure *Zuhandenes*, as what is at hand, a manual. My relation to the book is definitely not pure use; it doesn't have the same meaning as the one I have with the hammer or the telephone.⁸

The book is a central modality of existence and the site of human transcendence: philosophy cannot limit itself to an understanding of what Heidegger calls *In-der-Welt-Sein*, “Being-in-the-world,” but crucially it must also account for *Zum-Buch-Sein*, “Being-towards-the-Book.” Where Heidegger sketches Being-in-the-world as one of the “existentials” that describes Dasein’s ontological situation as “thrown” into the world, Levinas’ quite radical proposition entails the human relationship to the book holds the same fundamental importance. Being-towards-the-book must therefore be analyzed with the same rigor as the phenomenological description of Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others. “My condition - or my un-condition - is my relation to books,” Levinas writes in his 1982 book *Beyond the Verse*, “it is the very movement-towards-God [*l’-à-Dieu même*].”⁹ The transcendence of the book is an expression of the relation to God, the “à-Dieu.” This is expressed both in the Abrahamic religions that place the Bible as the central locus of knowledge, as well as philosophical and literary traditions of writing that attempt to faithfully

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” *Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 109 [“Philosophie, Justice et Amour” in *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris : Grasset, 1991), 127].

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xii [*L’Au-delà du verset* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), 9].

represent the world in the pages of a book. The question of language manifests itself concretely in the book. Levinas elliptically describes, “language and the book, arising and already read in language, is phenomenology [*Le langage et le livre surgissant et déjà lu dans le langage est la phénoménologie*], the ‘mise en scène’ in which the abstract is made concrete.”¹⁰ The book is thus the site for the phenomenological analysis of language, and the prophetic impulse in human beings connected to the idea of infinity. Before the Aristotelean determination of the human being as *animal rationale*, Levinas wonders if the human being isn’t first and foremost “animal capable of inspiration, a prophetic animal.” By the same token, “one may wonder whether the book, as a book, before becoming a document, is not the modality by which what is said [*le dit*] lays itself open to exegesis, calls for it; and where meaning, immobilized in the characters, already tears the texture in which it is held.”¹¹ As an expression of the prophetic character of human beings, the book is the site of language’s transcendence which exceeds the ontological limitations of what Levinas calls the Said, *le Dit*, and discloses the power of inspired language, the Saying, *le Dire*.

What is involved in “starting” a book? When we pick up a book and “enter” the narrative, what shift does it provoke in our perception of the world? Folding back the book’s cover, leafing through its opening pages, and finding entry into the text, one does not know what one will find. Jean-Luc Nancy describes “opening” the book as akin to a negotiation with an unknown interlocutor: “the opening of the book is the raising of the curtains on the stage of these send-offs [*gestes d’envoi*].”¹² The unknowability of what awaits is part of the thrill. Sometimes, we “get into” a book and passionately turn page after page without pause or distraction; sometimes, the book fails to spark interest, its content is off-putting, or distractions intervene, and we put the book

¹⁰ Ibid, xii [9].

¹¹ Ibid, 110 [136-137].

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, “Préface: pour ouvrir le livre,” in Didier Cahen. *À livre ouvert* (Paris: Hermann, 2013), 10.

down. The book seemingly chooses its reader as much as the reader chooses the book. Didier Cahen writes, “Who among us, book in hand, provisionally abandoning the spectator’s pause, the programmed attitude of the simple consumer, has not felt this sort of intoxication which seems to correspond to nothing else? [...] Who has not experienced at least once while reading the certainty of being chosen by the book [*l’élú du livre*]?”¹³ The ecstatic, rapturous feeling of total absorption in a book evokes a sense of election, as if the book were written specifically for that reader. Entering a book requires a leap of faith, it is an encounter with an alterity that cannot be known beforehand, and it demands a certain hospitality.

Franz Kafka’s parable “Before the Law,” a *mise-en-abîme* of Josef K.’s nightmarish story in *The Trial*, presents an arresting metaphor for “entering” the book. “Before the law stands a gatekeeper,” the well-known story begins, repeating its title in its opening words.¹⁴ A “man from the country” approaches the door, but the gatekeeper refuses to admit him. We never learn what law the man stands before, what has led the man from the country to this impasse, or where this scene takes place. No matter what questions the man asks, he cannot convince the gatekeeper to let him to pass: standing before the gate, he does not find the secret words that would permit him access to the law. The gatekeeper warns the man that even if he could pass through this initial gate before the law, further gatekeepers await, each stronger than the last. The man grows old standing before the door, but to no avail as the law remains impenetrable to him. In his dying breathes, the man asks why no one else has ever come through this door, to which the gatekeeper responds, “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.” The man is never able to pass through the door and access the law – even though, apparently, it had been open the whole time. The law remains inaccessible, shrouded in mystery.

¹³ Didier Cahen. *À livre ouvert*, 25.

¹⁴ Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 183-184.

Jacques Derrida presented his reading of Kafka's parable in a text also called "Before the Law" at a colloquium at C erisy-La-Salle in 1982, in which he sketches the metaphoric resonance between the regimes of law and textuality. Both are undergirded by the dynamic between the secret they conceal and the promise they hold. For Derrida, Kafka's story presents nothing less than the parable of literature itself. He writes, "we know neither *who* nor *what* is the law, *das Gesetz*. This, perhaps, is where literature begins."¹⁵ The reader who seeks to enter the book does not know what awaits: the unknowability of the book and its governing law looms over the reader at its precipice. "The text would be the door, the entrance (*Eingang*), what the doorkeeper has just closed," Derrida writes, "as he closes the object, he closes the text. Which, however, closes on nothing. The story *Before the Law* does not tell or describe anything but itself as text."¹⁶ Kafka's parable, then, expresses the situation of the reader standing before the law of the book. Derrida continues, "The text guards itself, maintains itself – like the law, speaking only of itself, that is to say, of its non-identity with itself. It neither arrives nor lets anyone arrive. It is the law, makes the law and leaves the reader before the law."¹⁷ The text is autonomous in the literal sense of giving itself its own law—a law which remains inaccessible or unknowable to the reader. "In its very act," Derrida explains, "the text produces and pronounces the law that protects it and renders it intangible. It does and says, saying what it does by doing what it says." Literature creates its rules by the performativity of its language; by determining its own laws, literature can then subvert them. Derrida writes, "literature can *play the law*, repeating it while diverting or circumventing it."¹⁸ Like the man in Kafka's story, by entering the book, the reader stands before the unknowable law of literature, until the gatekeeper declares, "I am now going to shut it," and the book is closed.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 207.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 210-211.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 211.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 216.

The opening pages of Edmond Jabès' 1963 *The Book of Questions* recount a similar negotiation with a gatekeeper to gain access to the book. The author addresses an unknown interlocutor in dialogue, who stands guard at the entry to a house, which is the book: ““What is going on behind this door?’ / ‘A book is shedding its leaves’ / ‘What is the story of the book?’ / ‘Becoming aware of a scream.’ / ‘I saw rabbis go in.’ [...] ‘Have they read the book?’ / ‘They are reading it’” [“-*Que se passe-t-il derrière cette porte?* / -*Un livre est en train d’être effeuillé.* / -*Quel est l’histoire de ce livre?* / - *La prise de conscience d’un cri.* / - *Mais j’ai vu entrer des rabbins.* [...] *Ont-ils lu le livre?* / - *Il le lisent*”].¹⁹ Behind the door, the rabbis - who are fictional characters in Jabès' book – are reading Jabès' book. In the opening pages of Jabès' *The Book of Questions*, paradoxically, *The Book of Questions* already exists, where it is interpreted by its fictional characters. One of his earliest English-language proponents, novelist Paul Auster observes, “the book for Jabès is a place where the past and the present meet and dissolve into each other,” where there is “nothing strange about the fact that ancient rabbis can converse with a contemporary writer.”²⁰ The law of Jabès' text is determined by a world of books, which are commentaries on other books, and commentaries on those commentaries—a textual *mise-en-abîme*. Unlike Kafka's parable, Jabès' interlocutor in *The Book of Questions* exhorts him to pass through the door to gain entry to the book: ““Where is the book set?’ / ‘In the book.’ / ‘Who are you?’ / ‘I am the keeper of the house.’ / ‘Where do you come from?’ / ‘I have wandered’ / ‘Is Yukel your friend?’ / ‘I am like Yukel’ / ‘What is your lot?’ / ‘To open the book.’ / ‘Are you in the book?’ / ‘My place is at the threshold.’” [-*Où se situe le livre?* / -*Dans le livre.* / -*Qui es-tu?* /

¹⁹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome I, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 16 [*Le Livre des Questions*, Tome I, (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 18].

²⁰ Paul Auster, “Book of the Dead,” *Collected Prose* (New York: Picador, 2003), 370. Auster discovered Jabès' work while living in Paris in the 1970s, and he became one of the poet's first and most important champions in the United States, including his translation of Blanchot's essay “Edmond Jabès' Book of Questions” (*European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1972), 34-37).

-Le gardien de la maison / - D'où viens tu? / - J'ai erré / -Yukel est-il ton ami? / - Je ressemble à Yukel / Quel est ton destin? / - Ouvrir le livre / -Es-tu dans le livre? / -Ma place est au seuil.].²¹

The anonymous gatekeeper standing at the precipice of Jabès' book is, in fact, already in the book; the conflation of the author Jabès and the protagonist Yukel suggests the meta-textual stakes from the opening pages of *The Book of Questions*. As Derrida comments on this passage, "Every exit from the book is made within the book."²² The house is the book, and the gatekeeper stands guard at its entry. Derrida adds, "The writer, builder, and guardian of the book posts himself at the entrance to the house. The writer is a ferryman and his destination always has a liminal signification."²³ Later in *The Book of Questions*, Jabès cites one of the fictional rabbis behind the door, Rabbi Éphraïm, who writes, "A door—a book. / Open. Closed. / You pass. You read. / You pass. It endures [*Une porte comme un livre / Ouverte, fermée. / Tu passes et tu lis. / Tu passes. Elle demeure*]."²⁴ The entryway to the book, like the door before the law, is conditioned by the possibility that its secret will never be revealed, the door will never be unlocked, and it will remain closed off to the reader. Maurice Blanchot describes Jabès' writing as "the empty, desertlike waiting that holds back the writer who works at the threshold of the book, making him the guardian of the threshold, his writing a desert, and from his very being the void and absence of a promise."²⁵ This structural possibility takes place *in* Kafka and Jabès' narratives, but it is the condition *of* them as well. In this sense, Blanchot writes, "*The Book of Questions* is always written twice."²⁶ The opening words of Jabès' text announce this reflexivity: "You are the one who writes and the one

²¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome I, 16-17 [19].

²² Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Routledge, 2001), 92 ["Edmond Jabès et la question du livre," *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 113].

²³ *Ibid*, 93 [113].

²⁴ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, tome 1, 63 [70].

²⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 224.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 223.

who is written [*tu es celui qui écrit et qui est écrit*].”²⁷ The writer and the book are inextricably knotted together, undermining any neat delineation of fact and fiction.

For Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas, the question of the book orients the relationship between lived experience and textuality, the *livresque* or “bookish” character of subjective experience, and the relationship to the book that undergirds biblical, literary, and philosophical traditions. Despite the salient disagreements that arise between these three singular voices of Jewish diaspora, crucially, their reflections on the philosophical notion of writing and the difficult affiliation with Judaism dovetails in the metaphor of “the book.”

These themes echo the well-known depiction of the Jewish people as the “people of the book.” The expression in fact originates with Islamic descriptions of fellow adherents to Abrahamic monotheism as *Ahl Al-Kitab*, but it has come to be associated more specifically with the Jewish people as followers of the Torah, as *Am HaSefer*. Moshe Halbertal explains in *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*, “the Jews became the ‘people of the book’ after a long history that defined the relationship of the community toward the canonized texts and established the diverse functions of texts.”²⁸ The Jews became what Halbertal calls a “text-centered community” during the period of the Second Temple (538 BCE – 70 CE) when “text-centeredness manifested itself more forcefully and affected the nature of authority, the basic institutions of society, and spiritual life as a whole.” In lieu of a national homeland, Jewish life in diaspora has long held together through its canonical books and practices of textual interpretation. Halbertal

²⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, tome 1, 11 [13].

²⁸ Moshe Halbertal. *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9-10.

writes, “the dominant mode of intellectual creativity in a text-centered community is interpretative. This is true of many aspects of Jewish culture.”²⁹ This cultivation of the book imbues a reverence in for writing, reading, and interpretation at the heart of *Judéité*. If Jewish text-centeredness originates in religious practices, it also extends beyond religion in the “Jewish” culture of the book.

Despite their nuanced critiques of essentialism with regards to Jewish identity, the narrative of the “people of the book” reverberates for Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas. Jabès succinctly explains in a 1985 interview, “Judaism and writing entail a single hope.” In the absence of a homeland during two millennia of diaspora, the Jewish people “remains what it immemorially has been: a people of the book, of the book that they possess in lieu of a land. [...] So where has the Jew lived? In his book, of course”³⁰ For these thinkers, the question of the book is intimately connected to the stories of diaspora, exile, and marginalization that, in broad strokes, mark the history of the Jewish people. “The volume of the book as a form of living space!” Levinas writes in *Beyond the Verse*, “it is in this sense, too, that Israel is a people of the Book, and that its relation to the Revelation is unique of its kind. Its actual land is based on the Revelation. Its nostalgia for the land is fed on texts.”³¹ Rather than the idealist philosophical tradition which considers the book as the closed, unified receptacle for absolute knowledge, Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès treat the book as the site of an *adventure*, as a function of its narrative possibilities but also as an expression of the interconnected domains of lived experience and textuality. Writing, interpretation, and commentary are integrally connected to the Jewish history of exile; the book is the proxy for this experience. As Derrida writes in his commentary on Jabès’ *Book of Questions*, “Once more begins the adventure of the text as weed, as outlaw [*Recommence l’aventure du texte comme mauvaise*

²⁹ Ibid, 92.

³⁰ Edmond Jabès, “The Question of Jewishness and The Question of Writing: An Exchange With Edmond Jabès” *The Threepenny Review*, No. 21 (Spring, 1985), 16.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 130 [168].

herbe, hors la Loi] far from ‘the fatherland of the Jews,’ which is a ‘sacred text surrounded by commentaries.’ The necessity of commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of exiled speech.”³² In different ways, this motif of the “people of the Book,” applies to all three writers.

As thinkers attuned to questions of language, but also as products of Jewish diaspora shaped by the experiences of exile, Derrida’s, Jabès’, and Levinas’ reflections on the “adventure of the book” illuminate the stakes of Jewish affiliation in post-war France in terms of a question of writing. By critically reframing the limits of textuality and the world, the “adventure of the book” addresses the heritage endowed by the “Book of Books,” and the idealist philosophical tradition that culminates in Hegel’s absolute book of knowledge.

II. Unlikely Encounters

An unlikely series of events led Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Edmond Jabès to cross paths in Paris in the early 1960s. Levinas was born in 1906 to a practicing if assimilated Jewish family in Kovno, Lithuania; Jabès was born in 1912 in Cairo, Egypt to a Jewish, French-speaking family with Italian nationality; Derrida was born in 1930 in colonial Algiers, an olive-skinned, French-speaking, Jewish *pied noir* with a French passport. These thinkers were born in three far flung countries on different continents, controlled by different colonial empires; they claimed different nationalities, spoke different languages, and adopted quite different relationships to Judaism. Yet their trajectories would ultimately lead them to Paris, where they fortuitously encountered one another in a span of several months in 1963 and 1964 at a crucial moment in their

³² Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 81 [102].

careers. The paths that led these authors to meet in Paris reflect common experiences of war, trauma, and exile that profoundly mark their lives and writing.

Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès were brought together by good timing. On the heels of the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, Levinas published *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* in 1963, his first major volume on Jewish thought.³³ At the time, Levinas was teaching at the Sorbonne, in addition to his role as the director of the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale. Concurrently, the first volume of Jabès' *The Book of Questions* was published in the winter of 1963.³⁴ Jabès had read Levinas' work, and although they had not met, he sent him a copy of *The Book of Questions* soon after its release. Levinas wrote to thank him, and already in his initial response, he expresses apprehension with Jabès' invocation of the Jewish tradition. "At first, I was rather disoriented by the originality of your inspiration, I did not understand its relations with the evocation of the Jewish world," Levinas wrote in a letter to the Egyptian poet in April 1963, "I was ultimately convinced by the authentic poetry of your verb, but for this I had to stop pressing the notion of Judaism, which I am convinced is contingent in your expression."³⁵ His enthusiasm for Jabès' poetry is tempered by confusion with his eccentric writing on the Jewish tradition. The invented proverbs and imaginary rabbis filling the pages of Jabès' prose offered an aesthetic representation of Judaism, detached from its actual commandments and traditions. To appreciate "the authentic poetry of [his] verb" Levinas must treat his evocation of Judaism as "contingent." This thorny appreciation prefigures Levinas and Jabès' interactions for decades to follow.

Derrida happened upon Jabès' *Book of Questions* in a newsstand by chance in the spring of 1963, a "chance or distracted gesture in the direction of a 'gallimard' whose author was

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961); *Difficile Liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963).

³⁴ Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des Questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

³⁵ Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, 5 April, 1963, Fond Jabès, BNF.

unknown to me.”³⁶ Immediately entranced by Jabès’ labyrinthine prose, he drafted and submitted his text, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book” for publication by the fall.³⁷ Derrida had been teaching as an *assistant* at the Sorbonne, and following a productive year of writing, including the publication of his translation of Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry* with his impressive introduction, he was named *maître de conférence* at the École Normale Supérieure in the fall of 1963. Though Derrida was still a young scholar with few publications to his name, when Jabès caught wind of the impending publication – the first contribution to the critical reception of Jabès’ work – he initiated a correspondence. In his essay on *The Book of Questions*, the young Algerian philosopher offered a riveting philosophical interpretation of Jabès’ book, arguing alongside, with, and against the text itself, in an almost Talmudic style of debate; it was immediately clear that Jabès had found a singularly insightful and sympathetic reader of his work. “*C’est de l’excellent*,” Jabès exclaimed in a letter to Derrida dated October 10, 1963, “the pathways that you open are those that I have not visited without knowing in advance where they would take me. Reading you, I discover these pathways traced so well that it seems to me that I have always known your book.”³⁸ Derrida’s essay displayed a probity and insight into *The Book of Questions* that previewed the dialogue between them that would continue in publications, correspondences, and face to face meetings for three decades. “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” published in *Critique* in January 1964, also contains Derrida’s first reference to Levinas. Where Jabès writes, “*I attach great value to what is said, more, perhaps, than to what is written; for in what is written my voice is missing and I believe in it – I mean the creative voice, not the auxiliary voice which is a servant [j’entends la voix créatrice, non la voix complice qui est une servante]*,”³⁹ Derrida comments, “In the work

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès Aujourd’hui,” *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, No. 31, Winter 1972-1973, 56.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès et la question du livre.” *Critique*, no. 201, January 1964.

³⁸ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 10 Oct 1963, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

³⁹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1.

of Emmanuel Levinas can be found the same hesitation, the same anxious movement within the difference between the Socratic and the Hebraic, the poverty and the wealth of the letter, the pneumatic and the grammatical.”⁴⁰ He returns to the same line from Jabès concerning voice and written language in “Violence and Metaphysics,” but it is reversed as a challenge to Levinas concerning the creative power of the spoken word to escape the phenomenality of being.

Derrida met Levinas early in 1964, inaugurating an important relationship for the two philosophers that continued for decades. At the recommendation of Paul Ricoeur, Derrida read *Totality and Infinity* in 1962, and he began crafting his monumental essay on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in the summer of 1963. He started attending Levinas’ Tuesday night seminar at the Sorbonne in the winter of 1964. Though initially hesitant, he would speak to Levinas at the end of the class sessions. Derrida recalled that in one of their first conversations, they discussed Jabès’ recent book. “I have long hesitated – even after they had been published – to send you these ‘dead leaves,’” Derrida wrote to Levinas in the spring of 1964 concerning “Violence and Metaphysics.”⁴¹ But, he continues, “then we talked about Jabès, and then I thought that what I occasionally try to say in these pages is sometimes linked, in another way, with what I ventured in the text you will soon read in the *R[evue] de M[étaphysique]*.” It seems that Jabès’ provocative book allowed Derrida to overcome his reticence and speak with Levinas. “Violence and Metaphysics” was published in two parts in the *Revue de Métaphysique* later in 1964. Derrida reads Levinas’ work against the backdrop of his former teachers Husserl and Heidegger, offering keen insights but also stinging criticism of *Totality and Infinity*, interpreting him back into the very existential philosophy from which he sought to depart.⁴² It was the first publication devoted to

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 89 [110].

⁴¹ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Emmanuel Levinas, 15 June 1964, Fond Levinas, IMEC.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d’Emmanuel Levinas,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1964, nos. 3 and 4.

Levinas' first major work. Despite the severity of his assessment, Sarah Hammerschlag notes, "as he must also have known, Derrida was doing Levinas a great service," since the essay raised the profile of Levinas' book.⁴³ Even in disagreement, they recognized each other's value as a critical interlocutor. Derrida wrote him that he viewed their relationship as both "as close to your thought and as far from it as it is possible to be; which is contradictory only in terms of what you call 'formal logic'"⁴⁴ By the same token, Levinas concludes his fiercely critical essay "Jacques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise" by "emphasizing the primordial importance of the questions raised by Derrida," and acknowledging "the pleasure of a contact at the heart of a chiasmus [*un contact au coeur d'un chiasme*]."⁴⁵ This extreme tension, the paradoxical simultaneity of proximity and distance, marked Derrida and Levinas' interactions for decades.

Derrida makes a point of linking his texts on Jabès and Levinas. "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" and "Violence and Metaphysics" appear consecutively in Derrida's 1967 book *Writing and Difference*, but there is also a noteworthy intertextual melding of these essays. Just as the first reference in Derrida's work to Levinas is found in the essay on Jabès, the very first mention of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics" is framed by the distinctly Jabèsian metaphor of the desert: against the backdrop of the Hellenic influence over philosophy, Derrida writes that Levinas' thought emerges from "the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland."⁴⁶ The thinking of infinity that arises from the vast nothingness of the desert represents Levinas' rebuttal to the

⁴³ Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 13.

⁴⁴ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Emmanuel Levinas, 15 June 1964, Fond Levinas, IMEC. This is a formulation which Derrida later highlights in *Being and Time* regarding Being-towards-death, where Heidegger describes, "the closest closeness [*die nächste Nähe*] that one may have in being toward death as a possibility, is as far as possible [*sofern als möglich*] from anything actual [*seinem Wirklichen*]" (*Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §53, 262). This paradoxical quality of the proximity and distance of death, Derrida observes in *Aporias*, "is the possibility of an impossible, of a nonreal as impossible." *Aporias* trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 70.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Jacques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise," *Proper Names* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 62 ["Tout Autrement," *Noms Propres* (Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1976) 94].

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 101 [122].

Hellenic philosophical tradition. As Jabès writes, “in the desert the sense of the infinite is unconditional,” “in the desert, you are divested of everything—even language, which counts for nothing, makes no more sense, in a world from which man has been erased. There, language balks, comes to an end.”⁴⁷ The nothingness of the desert as the total desolation of language and meaning echoes Levinas’ evaluation of the philosophy of Being in what he calls the “il y a.” Derrida’s description of Levinas’ thought as emerging from the desert therefore calls upon the Jabèsian image *par excellence*. Later in Derrida’s essay, the connection to Jabès is made explicitly, when he asks if Levinas would subscribe to the “infinitely ambiguous sentence” from *The Book of Questions*: “All faces are His; this is why HE has no face [*Tout les visages sont le Sien; c’est pourquoi IL n’a pas de visage*].”⁴⁸ Interlacing these texts, Derrida weaves Levinas’ emphasis on the face and Jabès’ obsession with the book, suggesting an unexplored proximity and salient comparison. Derrida uses Jabès’ words as a foil to challenge the limits of Levinas’ discourse; inversely, he alludes to Levinas in his commentary of Jabès’ text to highlight their shared concerns, pushing back against the distancing that Levinas had expressed in his own letter to Jabès. Linking his argumentative strategy in these respective essays, it is almost as if Derrida were trying to bring about a conversation between Jabès and Levinas, two of his foremost philosophical and literary interlocutors from the period, by playing them off one another.

Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès’ first encounters between 1963 and 1964 inaugurated an uncanny triangular relationship. Each interaction between two of these thinkers was in some sense mediated by the third: Derrida and Levinas discussed Jabès; Derrida refers to Levinas in his essay on Jabès, and vice-versa; Levinas’ reproach to Jabès’ *Book of Questions* prefaces his eventual

⁴⁷ Edmond Jabès and Benjamin Taylor, “The Question of Jewishness and the Question of Writing: An Exchange with Edmond Jabès” *The Threepenny Review*, No. 21 (Spring, 1985), 16.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 135 [160].

criticism of Derrida. The overlaps and contingencies of these writers reveal a fascinating triangulation of shared perspectives and obdurate differences.⁴⁹ During the years that immediately followed, Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas emerged as important voices for a new generation of philosophical and literary exploration, representing different perspectives of Jewish diaspora, and a new understanding of language, exile, and hospitality. This dialogue continued and evolved over the course of three decades, winding through published texts, private correspondences, but also through social interactions at aperitifs, dinner, and even family events. Even in their fiercest disagreements regarding Judaism, language, or ethics, Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas remain linked, returning time and again to engage each other's interrogations. Through an exploration of their published and private exchanges, this project seeks to illustrate the triangle between these thinkers through the perspective of the "adventure of the book," the crucial site for questions of language, nationality, and Judaism.

III. Derrida and Jabès: A Friendship of Letters

The friendship between Derrida and Jabès is perhaps best understood from the perspective of its end. On April 16, 1992, the day that would have marked his eightieth birthday, the Collège International de Philosophie hosted a colloquium in Paris honoring Edmond Jabès, in the presence of his wife Arlette and many of his friends and collaborators. The Egyptian-born writer had died the previous year on January 2, 1991. Organized by director of the Collège International de

⁴⁹ We might hear echoes of similar triangular relationships between earlier thinkers, such as the exchanges between Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and Bertolt Brecht, or Theodor Adorno, which illustrate how the shared reflections of a constellation of asymmetric thinkers can yield productive intellectual endeavors across religious or political disagreements.

Philosophie Michel Deguy, and Jabès' friend and collaborator Didier Cahen, the event featured several lectures and a round-table discussion of Jabès' writing, as well as a reading from his final publication, *The Book of Hospitality*. Over two dozen writers, philosophers, and critics contributed texts to the volume that was subsequently published in his honor, *Saluer Jabès*.⁵⁰ Derrida was unable to attend the event in person due to his concurrent teaching obligations at the University of Irvine in California, but Cahen requested that he nonetheless contribute a short text in the spirit of "sharing, memory, friendship," which would be read as an opening to the colloquium. "We know the connections that unite you with Edmond Jabès" Cahen wrote to Derrida, "and we would therefore be very touched by your participation."⁵¹ Derrida responded to Cahen with a letter entitled, "From the Other Side of the World."⁵² That Derrida was absent from Paris on the day of the colloquium and his contribution therefore came in the form of a letter was, in a certain sense, all too appropriate for his friendship with Jabès: their relationship began with an exchange of letters before they met face to face, and even as they saw each other with some regularity, their correspondence continued for nearly thirty years. Derrida remarks that his dialogue with Jabès had concerned death and mourning from the beginning: "Friendship had thus already come to be reflected in mourning, in the eyes of the poem, even before friendship."⁵³ Their friendship began as a reflection on death and writing. "When friendship begins before friendship, it touches upon death, indeed, it is born in mourning," writes Derrida, but it is also "doubly affirmed, twice sealed." Derrida's friendship with Jabès, "this recognition, this gratitude before all knowledge" was destined to survive even death.⁵⁴ If Jabès and Derrida's friendship was initially forged in letters

⁵⁰ *Saluer Jabès*, Ed. Didier Cahen, (Lessac, Editions Opales, 2000).

⁵¹ Letter from Didier Cahen to Jacques Derrida, 7 February 1992, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁵² This short text was first published in *Saluer Jabès*, and it was subsequently reproduced in *Chaque Fois Unique, La Fin du Monde* (Paris: Galilee, 2003) and in English translation in *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 122 [*Saluer Jabès*, 46].

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 123 [47].

through a discussion of death, in what sense does Jabès' death bring an end to their friendship? By commemorating Jabès' work in a letter addressed to their mutual friend Didier Cahen, Derrida prolonged their epistolary exchange beyond death. Their friendship survives as a written trace.

The event at the Collège International de Philosophie was held on Jabès' actual eightieth birthday, but Derrida recalled that this was not the date officially recorded on his birth certificate. Jabès had alluded to this discrepancy in *Elya*, the fifth volume of *Le Livre des Questions* published in 1969: "Although I was born on April 16 in Cairo, my father inadvertently declared to the consul's office making out my birth certificate that I was born on the 14th of that month [*Né le 16 avril au Caire, mon père par inadvertence, aux autorités consulaires chargées d'établir mon acte de naissance, me déclara né le 14 du même mois*]."⁵⁵ The date recorded on Jabès' birth certificate was two days before he was actually born. While such an administrative mistake was not terribly rare in Egypt at the time, it suggests something more profound about the way that birth is memorialized. Jabès asked, "is it to this error in calculation I unconsciously owe the feeling that I have always been separated from my life by forty-eight hours? The two days added to mine could only be lived in death? [*Dois-je inconsciemment à cette erreur de calcul, le sentiment que quarante-huit heures m'ont toujours séparé de ma vie? Les deux jours ajoutés aux miens ne pouvaient être vécus que dans la mort?*]" His official birthday would always be two days ahead of his life, and only in death could he finally catch up with this deferral. The first declaration of Jabès' existence was an absence. Like the silent *aleph* with which God begins the work of creation, "as with the book, as with God in the world, the first manifestation of my existence was an absence which bore my name. [*comme pour le livre, comme pour Dieu dans le monde, la première manifestation de mon existence fut celle d'une absence qui portait mon nom*]." In a certain sense,

⁵⁵ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 2, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 178 [*Le Livre des Questions*, Tome 2, (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 254-255].

a birthday is the most concrete fact regarding an individual's life; in another sense, it is a completely unimportant marker that signifies nothing beyond an arbitrary date on the calendar. Jabès elaborated in his 1980 interview with Marcel Cohen, "behind the completely banal anecdote, it is the arbitrariness of birth that find itself at issue. When are we really born?"⁵⁶ Conversely, we can wonder when a person really dies, and if the commemoration of the moment of death isn't arbitrary in its own respect. Derrida recalled that Jabès frequently evoked this deferral, "as if the difference of a day or two made his birth just as unlocatable, just as unthinkable, as death itself."⁵⁷ Jabès' mistaken birthday illustrates what Derrida calls "différance": the legal record of his existence was always-already displaced and decentered from its origin.

By the same token, we might wonder at what moment we commemorate the beginning of a friendship—or even its end. Derrida recognized in Jabès' exploration of negativity "a certain experience of apophatic silence, of absence, the desert, paths opened up off all the beaten tracks, deported memory—in short, mourning, every impossible mourning." Soon after discovering *The Book of Questions* in 1963, Derrida wrote "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," which he sent the poet before its publication, inaugurating a friendship between the two francophone, North-African-born writers. This friendship unfolded in published books and essays, in private letters, postcards, and phone calls, as well as during dinners and aperitifs at Edmond and Arlette Jabès' home in Paris on the rue de l'Épée-de-Bois in the Latin Quarter, just minutes from Derrida's office at the Ecole Normale Supérieure on rue d'Ulm, as well as at Marguerite and Jacques Derrida's home in the Parisian suburbs of Ris Orangis. The intimacy of their friendship is revealed in the forms of address animating their correspondence. In their first exchanges, Derrida and Jabès write each other in the formal address, "Cher Monsieur"; soon enough, Derrida would address

⁵⁶ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre: Entretiens avec Marcel Cohen* (Paris: Belfond, 1980), 21.

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Work of Mourning* 123 [46].

“mon cher Eddie,” just as Jabès addressed “mon cher ami Jacques.” The friendship extended to their wives Marguerite Derrida and Arlette Jabès. Derrida sent Jabès postcards from the Swiss Alps, Venice, and Baltimore, and Jabès addressed Derrida postcards from trips in Tunisia, Jerusalem, and Mallorca; Arlette and Marguerite often contributed their own notes. Their letters include condolences after the death of parents, news of growing children, propositions for dinners and lunches in Paris, as well as reflections on unpublished manuscripts, criticisms and interrogations of publications, and, of course, admiration and affection. Jabès wrote in a 1967 letter to Derrida, “Our friendship is – in its entirety – beautiful. It is based on the best of each of us, and I am quite happy about it.”⁵⁸ Though Jabès was almost twenty years Derrida’s senior, their friendship was unhindered by generational divide. Their exchanges reveal two thinkers with uncanny insight into the other’s writing.

Despite the importance that Derrida placed on this friendship, the expansive scholarship on the philosopher has marginalized Jabès’ role to a footnote, as the source for two curious essays in his 1967 *Writing and Difference*, “Jabès et La Question du Livre” and “Ellipse,” which highlight young Derrida’s flirtations with Jewish mysticism and experimental literature.⁵⁹ To offer an example of the elision of Jabès’ place in Derrida’s thought, in his essay “Mosaic Fragment: If Derrida were an Egyptian...” Geoff Bennington writes, “Jewgreek is greekjew: but greekjew is Egyptian.”⁶⁰ He argues that Derrida should be understood neither as Greek, nor as Jewish, nor as a combination or synthesis of the two, but rather that Derrida is, at least symbolically, Egyptian. Yet Bennington sidesteps Derrida’s most important Egyptian interlocutor, Edmond Jabès, whose

⁵⁸ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 4 Feb 1967, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁵⁹ Note, for example, Jabès’ marginal place in Benoit Peeters’ biography *Derrida* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), and his virtual absence from Edward Baring’s *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy—1945-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), despite the fact that it is precisely during this period of the 1960s that Derrida was most directly engaged with Jabès’ writing. Most recently, Peter Salmon’s *An Event, Perhaps: A Biography of Jacques Derrida* (New York: Verso, 2020), only mentions Jabès in passing among the diverse subjects of Derrida’s literary criticism.

⁶⁰ Geoffroy Bennington, *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction* (London: Verso, 1994), 207.

reflections on exile, Egypt, and Judaism are central metaphors for both his life and work. Bennington frequently quotes Derrida's essay on Jabès in *Writing and Difference*, but he avoids engaging the Egyptian writer's place in Derrida's thought or life. I would posit that to understand Derrida as an Egyptian, we need look no further than his relationship with Edmond Jabès, whose complicated relation to the nation of his birth is, in many ways, reminiscent of Derrida's own difficult relationship to Algeria and France. In her 2016 book *Broken Tablets: Levinas, Derrida, and the Literary Afterlife of Religion*, Sarah Hammerschlag emphasizes Derrida's engagement with questions of Judaism and literature at the earliest moments of his philosophical trajectory in "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book."⁶¹ But her book's focus is the relationship between Derrida and Levinas, relegating Jabès to a relatively minor character in this intellectual constellation. The interpretation of Derrida's texts on Jabès in *Writing and Difference* that she proposes highlights their trajectory towards the critical reading of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics." I will argue that Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès' reflections on Judaism and writing are best understood together, by reorienting the perspective to include Jabès as a crucial interlocutor in reflections on the "broken tablets," which Hammerschlag takes as a central motif in the debate between Derrida and Levinas on religion and literature. Most recently, Didier Cahen's 2019 book *Trois Pères: Jabès, Derrida, Du Bouchet*, recounts the author's personal relation with these three thinkers. He recalls, "it was Derrida who introduced me to Jabès, the Jewish-non-Jew, I would say about one and the other."⁶² An important interlocutor for both, Cahen's first-hand accounts of Derrida and Jabès illustrates their proximity over the course of three decades.

⁶¹ Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets: Levinas, Derrida, and the Literary Afterlife of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁶² Didier Cahen, *Trois Pères: Jabès, Derrida, Du Bouchet* (Lormont: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2019), 21.

A careful reexamination of Derrida and Jabès' exchanges reveals a greater affiliation between these thinkers than suggested in existing scholarship, particularly regarding their eccentric reflections on writing and Judaism. Derrida proffered the audacious claim in 1973, "in contemporary literary production, there is nothing that has been written which doesn't have its precedent somewhere in Jabès' texts."⁶³ His texts on Jabès disclose a significant philosophical reckoning. It is impossible to classify Jabès' writing according to the traditional genres of poetry or literature, and he refused to describe himself as a philosopher, even if his writing garnered particular interest amongst philosophers. As if somewhat surprised, Jabès remarked in 1986, "even in the universities here in France, all the doctoral theses that have been done on my books are in philosophy."⁶⁴ If there was a reader who grasped its philosophical import, it was Derrida. "You are constantly at the sources of this book and its interrogations. What lucidity, from beginning to end!" Jabès wrote him in 1964 after reading "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," "from now on, those who have read you, will know how to read me in depth [*en profondeur*]."⁶⁵ *The Book of Questions* was also, in fact, deeply influenced by Derrida's commentaries, and a dialogue between them extends through its seven volumes: Derrida even becomes a character in Jabès' texts. Reciprocally, Derrida was one of Jabès' earliest commentators, whose writing he described as illustrating "the unanticipatable [*l'inanticipable*], that is to say, the most repressed, most familiar, most intolerably close and known, most awaited, henceforth, to have presented itself even before time is able to offer it a monument."⁶⁶ Derrida's uncanny recognition in Jabès' writing is illustrative of their intellectual proximity and friendship.

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès Aujourd'hui," *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, No. 31, Winter 1972-1973, 56. My translation.

⁶⁴ Edmond Jabès, "An Interview with Edmond Jabès," *Conjunctions*, No. 9 (1986), 158.

⁶⁵ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 13 Feb 1964, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès Aujourd'hui," *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, No. 31, Winter 1972-1973, 56.

The published exchanges do not fully account for the personal and intellectual relationship that developed between the Jewish-Franco-Algerian Derrida and the Jewish-Franco-Egyptian Jabès. Their mutual understanding surely relates to their personal histories, as fellow Jewish, North-African, French-speaking émigrés living in some sense “in exile” in Paris, but their intellectual affinity clearly extended beyond their backgrounds. As Derrida expressed in his 1996 *Monolingualism of the Other*, “a Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian genealogy does not clarify everything, far from it. But could I explain anything without it, ever?”⁶⁷ Jabès found in Derrida an ideal reader, whose own project of deconstruction resonated strongly with the reflections on the book and textuality that are the lifeblood of Jabès’ poetry. Here, we may recall what Montaigne says in “De l’Amitié” of his friendship with La Boétie: “parce que c’était lui, parce que c’était moi.”⁶⁸ The basis of their epistolary friendship was, for them, self-evident. Derrida and Jabès regularly sent each other manuscripts of their work before publication, and discussed them in letters and in person. Derrida was notably one of the first to read the manuscript for *Return to the Book*, the third volume of *The Book of Questions*, and Jabès offered extensive commentary on many of Derrida’s texts in their correspondences. Cultivated for nearly three decades in both published and private exchanges, this friendship was formative for both writers.

IV. Levinas and the “Third Party”

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other OR Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 71 [*Monolinguisme de l’autre*, (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 133].

⁶⁸ Michel de Montaigne, “De l’amitié,” *Essais I* (Paris: PUF, 1988).

There is a methodological complexity to articulating the constellation of ideas formed by three thinkers. Whereas the monograph squarely focuses on an aspect of a specific individual, and philosophy's much-loved dialectical approach pits one thinker against another, lassoing three thinkers under the rubric of one conceptual heading imposes a unique difficulty. Such a triadic comparison can identify agreement between the three individuals, or it can align two against the unlucky third to highlight contrast. Both tendencies risk flattening the unique differences of the three individuals to more clearly highlight the pertinence of the comparison. I will guard against this sort of reductive reading in search of neat contrasts, and rather I emphasize the polyphony and multiple perspectives on Judaism, language, and exile that marked the relationship between Levinas, Jabès, and Derrida. The advantage of comparing three thinkers is that it offers a fuller picture of a philosophical issue by presenting multiple views of it which don't necessarily align. Further, this approach acknowledges that philosophy is a dialogue between two interlocutors, but it is always-already in the presence of what Levinas calls the "third party," who interrupts the face-to-face. Following the same logic, this project embraces the irreducible multiplicity of the views presented by these three intellectuals without reducing them to false allegiances or oppositions.

Much has been written about the relationship between Levinas and Derrida. Relevant contributions to this expansive corpus include Simon Critchley's 1992 *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*,⁶⁹ several texts by Robert Bernasconi,⁷⁰ Hent de Vries' 2001 *Religion and Violence*,⁷¹ John Llewelyn's 2002 *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel*

⁶⁹ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999).

⁷⁰ Robert Bernasconi, "Levinas and Derrida: The Question of the Closure of Metaphysics," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), 181-202; "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida," in *Derrida and Difference*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 13-29; "Different Styles of Eschatology: Derrida's Take on Levinas's Political Messianism," *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998), 3-19.

⁷¹ Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Levinas,⁷² as well as Sarah Hammerschlag's *Broken Tablets*. Yet just as there is limited scholarship on the relationship between Derrida and Jabès, only a few scant words have been written about Levinas and Jabès. Gary D. Mole's 1997 *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* is one of the few texts that bring together Jabès and Levinas in relation to the theme of estrangement, where the direct exchanges between the two are often mediated by Blanchot.⁷³ It is my contention that not only do Jabès' exchanges with Levinas and Derrida merit closer analysis, but furthermore, Jabès' poetry sheds new light on the much-studied rapport between the two philosophers. Derrida and Jabès sometimes described each other in their correspondences as almost kindred spirits marked by mutual understanding, while Levinas held himself at a distance from both. This may be related to Levinas' geographical, generational, and cultural differences. Derrida and Jabès were North-African born, French-speaking Sephardic Jews who came to France after the Second World War, whereas Levinas was a Russian-speaking Ashkenazi Jew from Lithuania, who grew up in the shadows of pogroms and the Bolshevik Revolution, emigrated to France and studied with Husserl and Heidegger in the 1920s, and survived the war as a prisoner in a Nazi work camp. Levinas represented a prior generation and different history.⁷⁴ But if Levinas is indeed the more distant point in the triangle he forms with Jabès and Derrida, for this very reason his philosophical perspectives also exerts more pushback against the other two.

In fact, Levinas has a concept that illustrates this status of the third mediating voice, which he calls *le tiers*, the "third party." For Levinas, the singularity of the face to face encounter reveals the infinity of the other. However, ethics cannot be limited to the singularity of the dialogical and

⁷² John Llewelyn, *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁷³ Gary D. Mole, *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Although Jabès (b. 1912) was closer to Levinas' age (b. 1906), his emergence as a literary figure only occurred in his fifties after he moved to France, contemporaneous with Derrida.

already asymmetrical I-Thou encounter; rather, the face to face is *ipso facto* perturbed, deepened, and extended, by the presence of the “third party.” He explained in 1986:

Human multiplicity does not allow the *I*—let us say does not allow *me*—to forget the *third party* who pulls me away from the proximity of the other: away from responsibility prior to all judgment, from the prejudicial responsibility for my fellowman, in his immediacy of uniqueness and incomparability, away from original sociality. The *third party*, different from my fellowman, is also my fellowman. And he is also the fellowman of the fellowman.⁷⁵

The third party interrupts the singular encounter of the face-to-face, it is the intervening voice of justice, or language. In the same manner, Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas’ disagreements variably condense into dialogical relationships that are interrupted by the third party. Levinas may be more distant from Jabès and Derrida, but each at times becomes the third party in the dialogue with the other two. As Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity*, “The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other-language is justice,” the third interrupts the singular exchange of the face-to-face, and bears witness to the ethical encounter. He equates this to the intervention of language or justice in the dialogical face-to-face relation. Levinas continues, “The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding.”⁷⁶ The third party interrupts the face-to-face and enjoins the self and Other to look beyond the ethical to the question of justice. If Levinas is often the third party in the relationship with Jabès and Derrida, it is because of his reckoning with the ethical and religious.

Levinas’ assertion of the positivity of metaphysics and the ethico-religious importance of Judaism serves as a counterpoint to Derrida’s deconstruction of the history of metaphysics, and Jabès’ poetics of negativity. In his 1995 panegyric address *Adieu*, Derrida recounts that Levinas

⁷⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Uniqueness,” *Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other*, 195.

⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 213 [*Totalité et Infini*, 235].

would tell him, "You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy [*le saint, la sainteté du saint*]." ⁷⁷ Indeed, Derrida notes that Levinas' reflections on ethics are inseparable from "an incessant reflection upon the destiny and thought of Israel: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Such reflection consisted of questioning and reaffirming the legacies not only of the biblical and Talmudic tradition but of the terrifying memory of our time." ⁷⁸ As Derrida had observed in "Violence and Metaphysics," Levinas' ethical thought contests the uniquely Greek origin of philosophy, and instead his notion of infinity calls upon an ethical messianic force that draws from the Jewish tradition. In this sense, Levinas' Talmudic perspective offers a counterpoint to the eccentric discussions of Judaism in Jabès' poetry and Derrida's interpretations.

This project is an intellectual history of the dialogue and friendship between Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès, and what they describe as the "adventure" of the book. The backdrop for the exchanges between these three principal figures calls upon a common cast of thinkers who share in their intellectual constellation. The philosophical legacies of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology, and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism are constantly at issue for these thinkers. Furthermore, behind their reflections on French *Judéité* after the Shoah, there are echoes of a prior generation of German-speaking Jewish thinkers including Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, and debates from the Weimar era concerning the possibility of *Deutsch-Judentum*. This legacy, both avowed and unavowed, haunts this dialogue across history. Perhaps most decisively, writer and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot was a crucial interlocutor for Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas, and his reflections

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4 [*Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, (Paris, Galilée, 1996), 15].

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 5 [15-16].

the possibility of literature in the wake of catastrophe foreground essential questions for this project. To be sure, these names all figure in the ideas that are at stake here. However, the specificity of this project highlights the relationship between writing, exile, and Judaism for these three thinkers in France beginning in the 1960s. As we will see, this problematic unfolds through the question of the book.

V. Structure of the Project

“The Adventure of the Book” is composed of five chapters that analyze the constellation of ideas formed by Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas. Its chapters explore the generative roots of these questions in the history of philosophy, leading through the exchanges of these three thinkers across several decades, revealing different aspects of their relation to writing and Judaism.

The first chapter is entitled “The Writing of Exile.” I will introduce the three central figures of the project, offering a brief biographical sketch of the formative events in their early lives, notably their respective experiences of displacement and exile which brought them to France. This chapter explores the connection between writing and exile for Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès, and frames their narratives of displacement in terms of the Greek valorization of homecoming, *nostos*, and the Jewish history of exile, *galut*. I suggest that these thinkers treat “the book” as a proxy for questions of exile and estrangement. Their reflections on the overlapping questions of language, nationality, religion, and birthplace reveal the contingency of identity and affiliation, and the fraught lines of exclusion they impose. I situate these narratives of exile in terms of Jewish diaspora and the specific history of Jews in France.

Chapter two, “The Jew, the Pariah, the Writer,” explores the question of Jewish identification and affiliation, and the stakes of the “Jewish” writer. From 19th century debates over the “Jewish Question” to the search for redefinition for Jews in France following the Shoah, Jewish identity is caught between the double-sided exclusion of Jewish self-definition and the externally imposed projection of the anti-Semite. We will look at the figure of the Jewish pariah, and Bernard Lazare’s re-appropriation of this anti-Semitic trope as the “conscious pariah,” which Hannah Arendt called a “hidden tradition” of modern Jewish history. Through Levinas’ critical reading of Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive*, he reformulates Judaism as an existential orientation, as part of post-war reflections on Judaism and Jewish identity in France. For Levinas, the fact of Jewish “election” inaugurates a form of subjectivity founded on an ethical responsibility to the Other. By contrast, Jabès and Derrida’s reflections on the intractable *aporia* of Jewish identity discloses what the latter calls “hyperbolic Judaism,” which follows the paradoxical logic of the “too much” or “not enough,” as a form of questioning, rather than a substantive identity.

The third chapter, “The Absolute Book and its Demise,” analyzes the “absolute” book in Hegel’s idealism, with a focus on Alexander Kojève’s influential course on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Paris during the 1930s. For Levinas who attended the seminar and Derrida who avidly read it in the 1950s, Kojève’s commentary on Hegel’s absolute book marks the apotheosis of philosophical idealism. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas stakes his opposition to the philosophical tradition of totality, which culminates with Hegel’s philosophy. Derrida’s reading of Hegel in *Of Grammatology* dismantles the absolute book in favor of an understanding of writing as text and trace. The deconstruction of the book liberates writing from the metaphysics of presence, and unleashes the free play of signifiers. I contrast Derrida and Levinas’ notions of the trace to illustrate how their critiques of Hegelian idealism lead in related but opposing directions.

The fourth chapter, “Writing After the Broken Tablets,” explores the motif of Moses’ shattered tablets from the Book of Exodus. I analyze interpretations of this pivotal scene in the Jewish tradition, and how they dovetail with philosophical reflections on the broken tablets from Spinoza, Nietzsche, and others. The shattered tablets become the symbol for human writing, a power symbolically wrested from God in the moment that Moses shattered the tablets inscribed with the original commandments. For Jabès and Derrida, the shattered tablets presents the ambivalence of the book pulled between its biblical heritage and the freedom of poetic expression. Tussling with the legacy of the broken tablets, their reflections on the question of the book are *connected* to the biblical tradition, even as they seek *freedom from* this tradition. In Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* and Jabès’ *The Book of Questions*, the broken tablets become the image for a new understanding of writing that embraces fragmentation and the apophatic language of the unsayable, as an expression of the ambivalent, impossible, yet inescapable affiliation of the writer and Judaism, the poet and the prophet.

The fifth chapter, “The Adventure of the Book,” retraces the theme of adventure in Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas’ reflection on writing and the book. Revisiting philosophical debates over adventure in Kant and Goethe, but also Nietzsche, Simmel, Jankélévitch, Sartre, Beauvoir, and others, adventure stands in opposition to a certain rationalist conception of philosophy and its writing. Analyzing the exchanges between Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas during the 1970s, we will see how their reconceptualization of philosophy is inspired by a certain adventurous spirit that is distinct from that of Odysseus and the Greek tradition. Whereas Derrida describes the history of philosophy as a prolonged metaphysical adventure which is built on certain illusions and fictions, Jabès describes his process of writing in terms of an adventure whose destination remains unknown; rejecting the mystifying allure of literature, finally, Levinas examines subjectivity as an

adventure which either turns towards the self and *nostos* (Odysseus), or towards the infinity of alterity (Abraham). We will see that Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès' reflections on the adventure of the book disclose philosophical thought in movement,

The conclusion of the project explores the connection between writing and hospitality. For Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas, the “adventure of the book” is a reflection on displacement and exile, but the book reciprocally poses the question of hospitality to the stranger: books can be welcoming, they can be offered as gifts, and they can serve as invitations, but books can also be ignored, banned, or burned. These authors draw an analogy between the book and the treatment of the Other through in reflections on the persistence of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism in France, as well as questions posed by the state of Israel. Revisiting Jabès' final book, *The Book of Hospitality*, along with Derrida and Levinas' writing on the possibility of pure hospitality and its conditioned forms in politics, we will explore the ethical and political stakes of the book.

Chapter I: The Writing of Exile

I. Introduction

Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès are products of Jewish diaspora. Despite the vast differences in their respective engagements with religion, and eschewing any pretention of a symptomatic reading of their “Jewishness,” they were each profoundly shaped by exile, dislocation, and exclusion. Levinas left Lithuania for France in 1923 to pursue his studies; Jabès was forced to leave his native Cairo for Paris in 1957 following the Suez Crisis; Derrida was born a French citizen in colonial Algiers, but moved to Paris in 1949. Their stories reflect modern experiences of exile, where nationality is interwoven with questions of language, religion, and culture. In each case, they were born in countries claimed by colonial empires, they mainly spoke the languages of the colonizers and they were educated in their schools, but they represented neither the indigenous populations nor the colonizers. As a Jew, Levinas was not considered Lithuanian or Russian; Derrida did not identify as simply Algerian or French; Jabès was not accepted as Egyptian, he spoke French, and yet he was born an Italian citizen. They were from largely assimilated Jewish families, but it was political turmoil directly or indirectly threatening Jews that provoked them to leave their home countries for France. Their experiences of exile attest to the contingency of nationality, language, and religion, and the precariousness of the claim to a homeland, regardless of the territory one inhabits. “So where has the Jew lived?” Jabès writes, “In his book, of course. It was after all a book that God tendered at Sinai, thus making plain to Israel his choice of them. Before they had a land they

had a book; and once deprived of their land, their book alone was left to them.”⁷⁹ For Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas, the book becomes a proxy for the adventure of departure and the condition of *galut*, exile. This chapter explores the narratives of exile which led these three thinkers from their birthplaces to Paris, and the legacy of *galut* that frames questions of Judaism and “the book.”

II. Nostos and Galut

“Odysseus, the greatest adventurer of all time, is also the greatest nostalgic,” writes Milan Kundera.⁸⁰ Against the formidable obstacles that the hero of Homer’s epic confronts in his quest to return from Troy, Odysseus is tirelessly driven by “the return, the return, the great magic of the return,” so that he might rejoin Penelope and Telemachus in Ithaca, and assume his throne.⁸¹ From *nostos*, return, and *algos*, suffering, nostalgia signifies the pain of exile and the yearning for return. The Greek reverence for nostalgia is expressed in the tradition of epic poetry which places tremendous value in *nostos*, the homecoming. Emily Wilson describes *The Odyssey* as “the story of a man whose grand adventure is simply to go back to his own home, where he tries to turn everything back to the way it was before he went away.”⁸² For Homer and the poetic tradition that follows, *nostos* is a literary genre featuring shipwrecks and sea-monsters encountered during the adventure home. The overarching plot of the *Odyssey* is the emblematic form of the *nostos* tale, and it includes many smaller *nostos* tales. During his journey, Odysseus recounts his own *nostos*

⁷⁹ Edmond Jabès, “The Question of Jewishness and The Question of Writing: An Exchange With Edmond Jabès” *The Threepenny Review*, No. 21 (Spring, 1985), 16.

⁸⁰ Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Perennial, 2002), 7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson, Epub (New York: Norton, 2017), Preface.

to others he encounters, just as other characters including Menelaus and Nestor tell him their own homecoming stories.⁸³ In the *Odyssey*, Anna Bonifazi notes, “the performance of a micro *nostos* tale is embedded in the performance of a macro *nostos* tale.”⁸⁴ The layering of homecoming stories illustrates that the experience of exile is inextricably bound to its modes of memorialization, in storytelling and performance. For the Greek poetic tradition, “the experience of *nostos* is inseparable from performing *nostos*, to the extent that every *nostos* tale retains memory of the successful experience of getting life again; it makes memory survive time and gives the hero afterlife.”⁸⁵ The experience of *nostos* is validated by its performance, which permits its hero to transcend the ephemerality of individual memory, and follow Odysseus’ path. “Homer glorified nostalgia with a laurel wreath,” Kundera writes, “and thereby laid out a moral hierarchy of emotions.”⁸⁶ The Greek tradition lionizes the hero of the successful *nostos* with moral approbation, organizing activities of memory, storytelling, and performance according to its logic.

By contrast, the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible are commanded to shed their attachment to the land of their birth, and go forth into the unknown. Delphine Horvilleur explains the crucial place of departure in Jewish identity:

If there is a strong lesson in Judaism, it is that pure, authentic, and static identity does not exist. All the founding narratives tell the story of people who leave the place they were born because they have a duty to not be identical to who they were. Their veritable identity is to have left their identity. Abraham accedes to his destiny when he leaves the Chaldea of his birth. The Hebrew people is born when it leaves Egypt. The origin of Jewish thought is that one must not be identical to one’s origin.⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid, Books 3-4.

⁸⁴ Anna Bonifazi, “Inquiring into Nostos and Its Cognates,” *The American Journal of Philology*, Winter, 2009, Vol. 130, No. 4 (Winter, 2009), 488.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 507.

⁸⁶ Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, 8.

⁸⁷ Delphine Horvilleur, “L’antisémitisme n’est jamais une haine isolée, mais le premier symptôme d’un effondrement à venir,” *Libération*, Jan 8, 2019, <https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2019/01/08/delphine-horvilleur-l-antisemitisme-n-est-jamais-une-haine-isolee-mais-le-premier-symptome-d-un-effo-1701671>. See also: Delphine Horvilleur, *Réflexions sur la question antisémite* (Paris: Grasset, 2019).

Against Odysseus' will to return home, Judaism is a story of departure. Emmanuel Levinas writes in his 1963 essay "The Trace of the Other," "to the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant even to bring back his son to the point of departure."⁸⁸ In contrast to Greek *nostos*, the Bible highlights departure. In the Book of Genesis, God commands Abram "*lech lecha*," to "go forth" and leave his birthplace in Ur of the Chaldeans and bring his wife Sarai to Canaan, an unknown land, promising him, "I will make you into a great nation."⁸⁹ In Abraham's covenant with God, departure is thereby linked to the promise of redemption. After the birth of Sarah's son Isaac, when Abraham sends away his handmaiden Hagar and their son Ishmael, God tells Abraham, "the son of the handmaid I will make into a nation, because he is your seed."⁹⁰ For Abraham and his progeny, departure is linked to commandment and election, and it extirpates the nostalgia for a return to the mythical (pagan) past.

Exile, *Galut* in Hebrew or *Golus* in Yiddish, has served as the existential condition of the Jewish people. The Bible and the subsequent history of the Jewish people are marked by the repeated narrative of exile and return from the Holy Land. Exile has often been associated with sin, as punishment for the moral failings of the Jewish people, and traditional rabbinic sources have long contrasted *Galut* with *Geula*, redemption. Humanity's exile begins in the Book of Genesis when Adam and Eve are banished from Paradise for eating from the Tree of Knowledge.⁹¹ But in a stricter sense, the cycle of exile and return is inaugurated in the Book of Exodus: Joseph and his family descend from Canaan due to famine and settle in Egypt, where the Jews are

⁸⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed., Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 348.

⁸⁹ Gen. 12:1-2.

⁹⁰ Gen. 21:13.

⁹¹ Gen. 3:23: "therefore the Lord sent him [Adam] forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken." See: Arnold Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

eventually enslaved, until Moses leads the people out of Egypt and to the edge of the Promised Land. The pattern of exile and return becomes the hallmark of subsequent Jewish history.

Four main periods of exile, *arba galuyot*, mark the history of the Jewish people from antiquity to the present day, named after the four civilizations which seized Israel and expelled the Jews: Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. These four exiles were supposedly prophesized in the Book of Daniel, in which Daniel dreams of four beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a fourth beast too “awesome and dreadful and exceedingly strong” to name, which represent the four exiles.⁹² The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar prompted the first exile when he captured Israel, destroyed Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, and exiled the Jews at the end of the 6th century BCE. The Purim *Megillah* recounts that in the middle of the 4th century BCE the Persian king Ahaseurus ordered the execution of all Jews in the Holy Land, following his advisor Haman, only to be undermined by the king’s Jewish wife Esther and her cousin, the leader of the Jews, Mordechai. The Greek Seleucid dynasty reigned in Israel after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. The last of these Greek rulers was King Antiochus IV of the Syrian Hasmonean kingdom, whose persecution of Jews and attempt to outlaw their practices provoked the Maccabee Revolt from 167 to 160 BCE. This is recounted in the Hanukkah story, in which Judah Maccabee and the vastly outnumbered Jews overcome the Seleucids, and rededicate the Second Temple with the miracle of the oil which was said to last eight days. The fourth exile of the Jewish people was precipitated by the Romans conquest of Judea in the first century of the common era. The Romans destroyed the second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and emperor Hadrian expelled the Jews from Jerusalem in 132 CE following the suppression of the Bar Kokhba rebellion. This began two millennia of exile which saw the diaspora of the Jewish people across the world. Just as exile is traditionally

⁹² Dan. 7:7.

associated with sin, the end of the Jewish exile is closely associated with the eschatological hope for the coming of the *Maschiach*. Some view the end to exile as a political imperative for the Jewish people. Indeed, the “negation” of *galut* has long been a key tenet of certain strains of Zionism, which in a certain sense has become a political reality since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the latest twist in the drama of exile and return. This dynamic becomes a structural feature of Jewish history, primed in the Bible, and repeated in world history.

The cycle of exile and return is memorialized in the Jewish liturgical calendar on Tisha B’Av, the holiday that commemorates five tragic events that befell the Jews on this day, including the destruction of both the first and second temples. In Yosef Yerushalmi’s *Zahkor*, a study of Jewish practices of memory and historiography, he references a lament written by an unknown author for Tisha B’Av which weaves together the past and present exiles of the Jewish people, inscribing this structural repetition of exile and return as a kind of Jewish collective memory:

A fire kindles within me as I recall—*when I left Egypt*,
But I raise laments as I remember—*when I left Jerusalem*.

Moses sang a song that would never be forgotten—*when I left Egypt*,
Jeremiah mourned and cried out in grief—*when I left Jerusalem*.

The sea-waves pounded but stood up like a wall—*when I left Egypt*,
The waters overflowed and ran over my head—*when I left Jerusalem*.

Moses led me and Aaron guided me—*when I left Egypt*,
Nebuchadnezzar and the Emperor Hadrian—*when I left Jerusalem*...⁹³

This section of a longer lament weaves the archetypal Exodus narrative in the refrain with the subsequent exiles of the Jews at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and Hadrian, suggesting the continuity of this history pattern in Jewish memory. The personal identification with these historical memories – *when I left Egypt, when I left Jerusalem* – is significant. The catastrophe of

⁹³ Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zahkor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 1996), 43.

exile and the hope of return are not based on discrete historical events which befell particular Jews at particular moments in the past; rather, they illustrate the condition of the Jewish people across history, and the continued reverberations of the past in the present. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses exhorts the Jewish people to keep the rituals of the Passover because “you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt.”⁹⁴ By the same token, an important Talmudic refrain from Rabbi Gamaliel included in the Passover Haggadah notes, “In each and every generation let each person regard himself as though *he* had emerged from Egypt.”⁹⁵ The repetition of exile occurs for Jews of every generation because the Torah insists that *all* Jews, past and future, were present at Sinai when God’s covenant was sealed with the Jewish people. Every individual personally undergoes the experience of exile and return as part of the collective history of Jewish people, with a personal stake in the covenant with God. Yerushalmi writes, “That which is remembered here transcends the recollection of any particular episode in an ancient catastrophe. It is rather the realization of a structural contrast in Jewish historical experience, built around the dramatic polarity of two great historical ‘departures.’”⁹⁶ This pattern of exile and return structures the Jewish liturgical calendar. Halbertal explains that this becomes the “framework narrative” which connecting the “people of the book” across its diaspora through its shared canonical texts:

In text-centered societies the framework shared by a community is intimately connected to a canonical text, which in its turn may be a framework narrative, one that members of a society identify as their own. Framework narratives usually concern the events that constituted the community, and their protagonists are founding fathers, characters larger than life who shaped the society when things were still fluid, like the gods in creation myths who formed the cosmos out of chaos. The American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Exodus from Egypt are but three examples of framework narratives. However, these narratives are not tied to a single canonical text unless the society itself is text-centered. The story of the American Revolution is not connected to any canonical text; it is an event that is taught, told, and commemorated through a variety of texts (though a canonical history of the American Revolution may exist within academic circles). In text-centered

⁹⁴ Deut. 16:12.

⁹⁵ Mishnah *Pesahim* 10:5.

⁹⁶ Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 44.

societies, by contrast, the framework narrative is intimately connected to a specific text. Allegiance and identity with a narrative are mediated through allegiance to a text. Belief in the Exodus and belief in the Book of Exodus are basically indistinguishable.⁹⁷

The framework narrative of exile is constitutive of the Jewish people as a “text-centered” society, and the bond between this framework narrative and its textual corpus is absolute. Practices of textual interpretation articulate and invigorate this connection of the Jewish people to its books.

The Jewish history of exile and text-centeredness reverberates long after the biblical and ancient narratives of departure and return from the Holy Land. Following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple and the expulsion of the Jews from Judea, the Medieval history of Jewish communities living in diaspora across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East is marked by a long series of forced conversions, expulsions, and massacres. Accused of blood libel, poisoning wells, propagating the Black Plague, and other nefarious plots, the Medieval history of European Jews is marked by a rolling series of expulsions. The Jews were expelled from Upper Bavaria for the first time in 1276, from Naples in 1288, and Edouard I banished the Jews from England in 1290. The Jews were repeatedly expelled from France during the 14th century, their property and valuables were taken to enrich the throne, and then they were allowed to return at a cost. There were expulsions of French Jews from Paris ordered by Philip Augustus in 1182, and edicts banning Jews from all of France issued by Louis IX in 1254, Philip IV in 1306, Charles IV in 1322, Charles V in 1359, and ultimately Charles VI’s expulsion in 1394 which remained in effect until the 18th century. But the most significant and catastrophic event in the pre-modern history of Jewish diaspora was the 1492 Alhambra Decree issued by Ferdinand II and Isabella which ordered the expulsion of the Jews from the Kingdom of Spain, capping a century of persecution and forced

⁹⁷ Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 91.

conversions.⁹⁸ After forcing Jews in Spain to convert on penalty of death during the Inquisition, the remaining Jews were exiled from Spain for fear that they might cause the *conversos* who had adopted Catholicism to revert. It is thought that approximately 200,000 Spanish Jews converted – including many who continued to secretly practice Jewish traditions as “crypto-Jews” or *marranos* – and up to 100,000 were exiled from Spain, fleeing north towards the Netherlands, south towards the North African Maghreb, and east towards Italy, as well as areas controlled by the Ottoman Empire in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent.⁹⁹ Both Derrida’s family in Algeria and Jabès’ family in Egypt could trace their arrivals to the expulsion of Jews from Spain.

Diaspora is a historical fact for the Jewish people, whether one embraces diaspora or bemoans life in exile in search of return. Erich S. Gruen explains,

Diaspora lies deeply rooted in Jewish consciousness. It existed in one form or another almost from the start, and it persists as an integral part of the Jews’ experience of history. The status of absence from the center has demanded time and again that Jews confront and, in some fashion, come to terms with a seemingly inescapable concomitant of their being. The images of uprootedness, dispersal, and wandering haunt Jewish identity throughout. Jews have written about it incessantly, lamented it or justified it, dismissed it or grappled with it, embraced it or deplored it.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ In Chapter 3 of *Zahkor*, Yerushalmi argues that the expulsion of the Spanish Jews provoked a fundamental change in the way that Jewish scholars approached historiography. For the generations of Jews following the expulsion from Spain, there was a palpable belief that “something unprecedented had taken place, not just that an abrupt end had come to a great and venerable Jewry, but something beyond that. Precisely because this expulsion was not the first but, in a vital sense, the last, it was felt to have altered the face of Jewry and of history itself.”(59) Whereas previous generations of Jewish scholars had spurned the study of secular history, believing that all the questions pertaining to the Jewish people could be answered by the Bible and sacred texts, the Spanish expulsion introduced a new element into Jewish historiography that acknowledged the place of the Jewish people in the political affairs and the secular history of Christian Europe. It also introduced “a new attitude towards the history of Jewry in exile.” (62) Though Jewish historians continued to describe exile as a consequence of sin, after the Spanish expulsion they turned towards studying this secular history of Jewish life in *Galut*. Yerushalmi explains that Jewish historians of the 16th century “recognize instinctively that these events too had a meaning for the present and the future which cannot be grasped merely by focusing attention on ancient times, and that they are therefore worth recalling. All this marks a significant change in outlook.” This shift in Jewish historiography represents a bridge between the biblical narratives of departure and return and the historical existence of the Jewish people in *Galut*.

⁹⁹ See: Joseph Perez, *History of A Tragedy: The Expulsion of Jews from Spain*, trans. Lysa Hochroth, (Urbana/Chicago: University Of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ Erich S. Gruen, “Diaspora and Homeland” *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity* Ed. Howard Wettstein (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 18.

An interesting relation emerges between the terms exile and diaspora. Exile traditionally holds a negative connotation. “To be in *galut*,” Howard Wettstein explains, “is to be in the wrong place; it is to be dislocated, like a limb out of socket”; by contrast, the related term diaspora, “does not connote anything so hauntingly negative.”¹⁰¹ The opposing valences of exile and diaspora discloses a profound theological-political question for modern Jews: can there be diaspora that isn’t caught in the deleterious sense of exile? Gruen describes Jewish diaspora in terms of two views: the “gloomy approach” holds that “diaspora dissolves into *galut*, exile, a bitter and doleful image, offering a bleak vision that issues either in despair or in a remote reverie of restoration.”¹⁰² According to this view, diaspora is a problem to be overcome, in the form of a return to “a real or mythical homeland.” This dim view of diaspora is connected to the development of Zionism and the political and spiritual need for a Jewish national homeland. The opposing view embraces diaspora as a positive development which has even contributed to Jewish life. According to this perspective, Gruen continues, “Jews require no territorial sanctuary or legitimation. They are ‘the people of the Book.’” Diaspora is not a weakened state of Jewish existence, rather, “their homeland resides in the text,” and in the absence of a state and a temple, “their ‘portable Temple’ serves the purpose,” rendering a national homeland “superfluous, even subversive.” In modernity – because the moral opposition of diaspora and return is a modern creation – Jewish text-centeredness and a positive assessment of diaspora largely go hand in hand, against the correlation of the negative view of diaspora, the desire for return, and Zionism.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Howard Wettstein, “Introduction,” *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, 1-2.

¹⁰² Erich S. Gruen, “Diaspora and Homeland,” 18.

¹⁰³ Gruen argues that the apparent conflict between Jewish homeland and diaspora is a modern invention, rather than a biblical or ancient aspect of Jewish life: “The dichotomy is deceptive. Hellenistic Jews did not have to face the eradication of the Temple. It was there—but they were not. Yet they nowhere developed a theory or philosophy of diaspora. The whole idea of privileging homeland over diaspora, or diaspora over homeland, derives from a modern, rather than an ancient, obsession. The issue is too readily conceived in terms of mutually exclusive alternatives: either the Jews reckoned their identity as unrealizable in exile, and the achievement of their destiny as dependent upon reentry into Judaea; or they clung to their heritage abroad, shifting attention to local and regional loyalties and

The history of exile for the Jewish people instills as a correlative an ethical imperative to show hospitality to the stranger. The commandment to remember the Exodus from Egypt is reciprocally paired with the commandment to care for the Other in one's midst. As Moses reminds the Jewish people in the Book of Deuteronomy, "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."¹⁰⁴ These two commandments to remember the Exodus and respond to the stranger exemplify the central ethical-messianic message of the Hebrew Bible. Alluding to the personal stakes of the Exodus from Egypt, Levinas explains in a short text entitled "Judaism":

One follows the Most High God, above all by drawing near to one's fellow man, and showing concern for 'the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar', an approach that must not be made 'with empty hands'. It is therefore on earth, amongst men, that the spirit's adventure unfolds. The traumatic experience of my slavery in Egypt constitutes my very humanity, a fact that immediately allies me to the workers, the wretched, and the persecuted peoples of the world. My uniqueness lies in the responsibility I display for the Other.¹⁰⁵

Referencing the verse in Deuteronomy commanding that one feed the hungry stranger,¹⁰⁶ Levinas connects the ethical imperative to respond to the Other with the Jewish condition of exile. The lasting lesson of the Exodus narrative is that the commandment to remember the shared experience of exile is reflected in the ethical commandment to welcome the stranger. Exile, then, is connected to the question of hospitality, which is a central topic of concern for Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas.

Between the Hellenic tradition of *nostos* and the Hebraic tradition of *galut*, we confront the classic opposition of Athens and Jerusalem, the two principal taproots of Western thought.

cultivating a permanent attachment to the diaspora" (Ibid, 20). Despite the modern projection of a conflict between Jewish life in exile versus a return to national homeland, Gruen suggests that such a conflict did not exist for Jews living in the period of the Second Temple. There were already Jews living in diaspora across the Mediterranean at the time of the climatic destruction of the Second Temple. Gruen continues: "The self-perception of Second Temple Jews projected a tight solidarity between center and diaspora. The images of exile and separation did not haunt them. They were not compelled to choose between restoration to Eretz Israel and recourse to the Word as their 'portable homeland.' What affected the dwellers in Jerusalem affected Jews everywhere" (Ibid, 32).

¹⁰⁴ Deut. 10:19.

¹⁰⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Judaism," in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 26.

¹⁰⁶ Deut. 26:12: "When you have finished tithing all the tithes of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give [them] to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, so that they can eat to satiety in your cities."

Narratives of exile and return are inextricably related to practices of memory and performance, and they are framed by the value ascribed to them by the Greek and Jewish traditions. The personal experience of exile is irremediably framed by the structuring narratives of exile memorialized in both Jewish and Greek literature, shaping these narratives which echo across historical eras. Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès' respective stories of displacement recall aspects of the Jewish history of *galut*, while highlighting contrasts with the countervailing forces of Greek *nostos*. Here, we may recall the question that Derrida poses in the closing passage of his 1964 essay "Violence and Metaphysics," regarding the ambivalence of the Hellenic and Hebraic elements in Levinas' philosophy: "Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we? Are we (not a chronological, but a pre-logical question) first Jews or first Greeks?"¹⁰⁷ This opposition between Odysseus and Abraham, *nostos* and *galut*, haunts Derrida's, Levinas', and Jabès' reflections on exile and return. Joyce writes in his *Ulysses*, "*Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet.*"¹⁰⁸ This striking formulation suggests the antithetical opposition of Greek and Jewish traditions, as well as the possibility of their synthesis. Derrida concludes his essay by quoting Joyce's words, implying that Levinas' ethical philosophy reveals a similar stricture, even if "Levinas does not care for Ulysses, nor for the ruses of this excessively Hegelian hero, this man of *nostos* and the closed circle, whose adventure is always summarized in its totality."¹⁰⁹ For Odysseus, the adventure ends with the triumphant return home. The *nostos* marks the hero's return to himself, to the familiar, shirking the unknown. Kundera describes Odysseus' nostalgia as a renunciation of adventure, and a return to the finite: "Rather than ardent exploration of the unknown (adventure), he chose the apotheosis of the known (return). Rather than the infinite (for adventure never intends to finish), he chose the

¹⁰⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 192 / *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967), 227.

¹⁰⁸ James Joyce in *Ibid*, 192.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 412 n92.

finite (for the return is a reconciliation with the finitude of life).”¹¹⁰ Odysseus’ decision to embrace the finitude of the return home and renounce the infinite adventure of the unknown represents, for Kundera, a lack of ambition. Indeed, if the *nostos* tale indicates a priority in the Greek tradition of the return, the narrative of departure and *galut* suggests an encounter with the unknown, the Other, and the stranger—and, in some capacity, an engagement with the infinite.

III. Levinas, Exile, and Being

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 in the city of Kovno, Lithuania, part of the Czarist Russian Empire. The city was known both for its yeshivas and history of Talmudic scholars, including the Gaon of Vilna and Chaim of Volon, as well as the city’s embrace of the values of Enlightenment. About a third of Kovno’s eighty thousand inhabitants were Jewish. The Levinas family was from a milieu of largely assimilated bourgeois Jews who represented the tension between Russian and Jewish traditions. They did not live in the Jewish quarter of the city, nor did the children attend Yeshivas; the father owned a Russian book store, the children attended Russian schools, and they spoke Russian in daily life. While Levinas’ parents spoke to their children exclusively in Russian, they would speak in Yiddish between themselves.¹¹¹ The children did not receive a formal religious education, but the family observed Jewish holidays and traditions, they socialized with other Jews, and they learned Hebrew. The family cultivated their children in Russian culture in the hopes of gaining access to the Russian school system, and ultimately to advance to European cultural life.

¹¹⁰ Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, 8.

¹¹¹ Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 34.

When the Germans invaded Lithuania in 1915, the Levinas family fled to Kharkov in the Ukraine; the next year, to the delight of his family, Emmanuel was one of the few Jewish students accepted to the city's Russian secondary school. However, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918 threw the status of Jewish families like Levinas' into doubt, and the family returned to Kovno after Lithuania declared its independence in 1919. The Russian school in the city had closed, and Levinas continued his studies in the Jewish secondary school. He had returned to a changed Kovno, as "a Jew in an age of Christianity, a *litvak* in a world of Jews, a Russian speaker among people who spoke Yiddish, enlightened and observant at the same time, rationalist and sympathetic, panhumanist and an exile."¹¹² The milieu of Russian-speaking assimilated Jews that the Levinas family had once inhabited was no more. Denied the possibility of graduating from the Russian school system, and with his situation in Kovno untenable, Levinas sought other paths to the West.

Levinas ultimately decided to continue his studies in France. He had learned German, but he was dissuaded from moving to Germany due in part to the threat of anti-Semitism. Though he did not yet speak French, he moved to Strasbourg in 1923, "the city in France closest to Lithuania."¹¹³ The decision proved fortuitous. The disputed territory of Alsace was effectively bilingual, and despite its militarized past, its capital city Strasbourg embodied the possibility of a Europe beyond borders. As Ethan Kleinberg describes in *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France*, "neither fully German nor fully French, the Alsatian capital was *unheimlich* in the sense that it called the notions of borders and national identity into question."¹¹⁴ After regaining the territory at the end of the First World War, the French Third Republic had dedicated substantial resources into developing the university in Strasbourg, to fully re-integrate the territory

¹¹² Ibid, 50.

¹¹³ Ibid, 51.

¹¹⁴ Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927–1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 22.

which had been lost since 1871. Levinas studied under Maurice Pradines and Henri Carteron in the Department of Philosophy, as well as Charles Blondel in psychology and Maurice Halbwachs in sociology. Through Pradines, Levinas read the work of Henri Bergson, which for him held the future of philosophy. As Levinas later remarked, “It is Bergson who taught us the spirituality of the new ‘being’ disengaged from the phenomenon in an ‘otherwise than being.’”¹¹⁵ Pradines’ lectures on ethics and politics also brought into focus the continued legacy of the Dreyfus Affair on the French Republic. Howard Caygill explains in *Levinas and the Political*, “French philosophical culture continued to be marked by the reverberations of the Dreyfus Affair. More than an example in Pradines’s lectures on ethics and politics, the Dreyfus Affair was the site of the battle for the soul of French Republicanism and, as such, determined the climate of French thought.”¹¹⁶ For Levinas, the historical repercussions of the Dreyfus Affair highlighted the need to rethink the values of French Republicanism, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and particularly the third principle of fraternity. Rather than understanding fraternity in the Jacobin sense of armed struggle of class and nation, Levinas was inspired by his professors in Strasbourg to think of fraternity in ethical terms, as a question of solidarity and responsibility.

It was also in Strasbourg that Levinas developed an unlikely friendship with a right-wing bourgeois Catholic named Maurice Blanchot. “Straightaway, I had the impression of an extreme intelligence, of an aristocratic cast of mind,” Levinas recalled of meeting Blanchot, “very distanced politically from me during that epoch, he was a monarchist, but we very soon got too understand each other.”¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, Levinas reports they “think alike on many matters,” and he praises

¹¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 28.

¹¹⁶ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.

¹¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” *Is it Righteous to Be?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 29. Levinas viewed Blanchot during their time in Strasbourg as the paragon of a consummate French rhetorical style: “Early on he introduced me to Proust and Valéry ... he stood for the very epitome of French excellence; not so

Blanchot for pursuing “the least expected, most noble and difficult path,” which Levinas describes as a kind of “moral elevation.” For his part, Blanchot wrote, “meeting Emmanuel Levinas when I was a student at the University of Strasbourg was the happy encounter that illuminates what is darkest in a life.”¹¹⁸ He described Levinas in a letter to Salomon Malka published in *L’Arche* as “my oldest friend, the only one with whom I feel authorized to use the familiar address [*le tutoiement*].”¹¹⁹ Levinas’ friendship with Blanchot continued for the following half century, even as the latter became reclusive and ostensibly abandoned public life after 1970. As Derrida would later describe in his eulogy for Levinas, “the *friendship* between Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas was an instance of grace, a gift; it remains a blessing on our time.”¹²⁰ In the 1960s,

much on account of his ideas, but on account of a certain possibility of saying things which is very difficult to imitate, appearing like a force from on high” (30).

¹¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *Exercices de la Patience* 1 (Paris: Obsidiane, 1980), 67.

¹¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, “Do Not Forget,” in *Political Writings: 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 124.

¹²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu—to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 8. A scandal involving accusations of anti-Semitism against Jean Beaufret brought together Derrida, Blanchot, and Levinas. In 1967, François Fédier proposed a *Festschrift* to celebrate Beaufret, poet and critic who was most responsible for Heidegger’s popularization in France after the war. The volume, *L’endurance de la pensée*, was to include contribution from Derrida, Blanchot, and several other prominent philosophers and poets. But, before the volume’s publication, one of the contributors Roger Laporte reported to Derrida that he had heard Beaufret make an anti-Semitic comment regarding the candidates for an open university position in Clermont-Férrand: Laporte reported that Beaufret remarked, “If I had to choose between Clémence Ramnoux, X, Y, and a Jew, naturally I would vote for Clémence Ramnoux.” The Jew in question was Emmanuel Levinas. Derrida wrote to Fédier demanding that his text be pulled from the volume. Beaufret denied the charges, and Fédier and his allies accused Laporte of slander; Laporte maintained his story. Derrida convened a meeting with Laporte and Beaufret in his office at the ENS without resolution; in a further encounter mediated by Michel Deguy, it became clear that the roots of the scandal lay in larger questions concerning Heidegger’s anti-Semitism and political activities, which Beaufret had promoted in France. When Blanchot found out about the scandal involving his closest friend Levinas, he wrote to Fédier stipulating that he would only allow his text to be included if his text included a dedication to Levinas, and all the contributors were made aware of the scandal. Derrida and Blanchot initially agreed *not* to tell Levinas, but he soon found out of the brewing scandal involving his name; they decided to visit Levinas together in his home, and although Blanchot and Derrida voiced their hesitations on behalf of the injurious words supposedly spoken about their friend, Levinas insisted that the publication go forward, scandal should be avoided, and Beaufret should not be tarnished with the black mark of anti-Semitism. In *Maurice Blanchot: A Critical Biography*, Christophe Bident recounts this meeting place in early May 1968, “it is probable that Blanchot had not seen his Strasbourg friend for almost seven years, since the defense of the thesis that became *Totality and Infinity*. After this, he would not see him often, perhaps ever. In any case, their paradoxical proximity was complete.” The volume was published by Plon in October 1968; Blanchot’s text “The Fragment Word” featured his appended dedication to Levinas, but the publisher did not share with the other contributors Blanchot and Derrida’s cosigned letter. Further complicating the affair, it was revealed after Beaufret’s death that he had supported his former student Robert Faurisson, the infamous “négationiste” Holocaust denier. See: Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: A Critical Biography* trans. John McKeane (New York: Fordham University

Blanchot also developed important relationships with Jabès and Derrida both in correspondences and published textual exchanges. Jabès reported in 1980 of their peculiar friendship, “I never met Maurice Blanchot, whose proximity is so important for me. He never showed a desire to meet, despite – our friendship is more than fifteen years old – one or two discrete calls on my part. In his eyes, which he did not leave a mystery, certain friendships have nothing to gain from a *tête-à-tête*.”¹²¹ While Blanchot is not a central character in this project, he is a constant presence at its periphery: Levinas read Jabès in a sense through Blanchot, and Blanchot offered a bridge between Levinas and Derrida’s thinking of writing and the trace.

The crucial juncture in Levinas’ early philosophical development was his discovery of Husserl’s phenomenology. In Strasbourg, Levinas encountered a young pastor named Jean Hering, a member of the Göttingen Circle, who introduced him to Husserl’s work in 1925 before it was translated into French. Levinas enrolled in Hering’s course at the Faculty of Protestant Theology, where he was exposed to some of the developments in phenomenology that had emerged from just over the Rhine in Freiburg. Levinas’ education did not follow the typical cursus for a French philosophy student: his interest in phenomenology and the Bible did not fit squarely into the institutionalized philosophical debates in France. Kleinberg writes, “Levinas had no stake in the French debates over Bergsonianism and neo-Kantianism. For him, the future of philosophy was phenomenology and the home of phenomenology was Freiburg. Levinas decided to go to the source.”¹²² Levinas spent the 1928-1929 academic year at the University of Freiburg, where he studied under Husserl during his final year of teaching at the university. Husserl had announced his retirement, but he taught a final year of courses that year on “the notion of psychology in

Press, 2019), chapter 55; Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger in France*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 126-128, 138n20.

¹²¹ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 63.

¹²² Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 31.

phenomenology” and “the constitution of intersubjectivity.” Particularly the topic of the latter course became a central aspect of Levinas’ work. Husserl frequently invited him for dinner at his home, and Levinas gave his wife French lessons. It was also Husserl who suggested that the Lithuanian-born Jew read the work by his successor at the University of Freiburg, Martin Heidegger. At the time of his retirement, Husserl viewed his former student almost as a son, and Heidegger had dedicated his 1927 *Being and Time* to his esteemed teacher.

Yet Levinas came to see Husserl’s phenomenology as too closely aligned with idealism, and his critique of the objectifying dimension of his notion of intentionality led him to embrace the existential phenomenology in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. He viewed Husserl’s phenomenology as too rigidly constrained by the subjective perspective of the “I,” leaving it incapable of making room for the existence of others. After attending his seminar in Freiburg, Levinas recognized in Heidegger’s philosophy, particularly the concept of *Mitsein* that he presented in *Being and Time*, the possibility of a phenomenological thinking not restricted by the egoistic subjective “I.” Written at twenty-three years old, Levinas’ 1930 book *Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology* was one of the first publications in French to address the developments in phenomenology in Husserl’s early work.

Heidegger was impressed by Levinas during his time in Freiburg, and invited him to attend the highly-anticipated event in Davos, Switzerland in 1929 as a student representative of the University of Strasbourg. The short-lived *Davoser Hochschulkurse* gathered thinkers from around Europe for an annual series of lectures and workshops intended to foster inter-European dialogue and understanding in the aftermath of the First World War. The 1929 session featured a debate between Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, the reputed Jewish Neo-Kantian philosopher from Hamburg, on the topic of Kant’s philosophy. The encounter between Heidegger and Cassirer,

which Rüdiger Safranski described as “a metaphysical clash of arms on the sparkling snowy heights of Davos,” has come to be viewed as one of the defining events in 20th century European philosophy.¹²³ But the stakes of the event at Davos were much greater than technical differences concerning interpretations of Kant’s philosophy. The debate saw a clash between two philosophical approaches, phenomenology and Neo-Kantianism, but also two generations. Where Heidegger stood for a new generation of philosophers, revolting against the orthodoxies of Neo-Kantianism, Cassirer represented traditional European intellectual culture. He had recently been named rector of the University of Hamburg, the first Jew to hold the title in Germany, and he passionately defended the liberal ideals of the Weimar Republic. By contrast, Heidegger’s closely guarded political conservatism and his discontent with Weimar liberalism – in mixed, already at the time, with anti-Semitic tropes – has come into fuller view in his recently published *Schwartze Hefte*. Even physically, there was a stark contrast between Cassirer, a tall, well-dressed man with a thick head of white hair, and the short, mustachioed Heidegger, who wore the sometimes dowdy garb of a rural Swabian. Rumors also exist pertaining to several sleights on Heidegger’s part towards Cassirer that were perceived as anti-Semitic. For the several hundred professors and students who traveled to Davos and many more following the event in newspapers, it seemed the future of philosophy – if not European culture itself – was hanging in the balance. Levinas reported, “a young student could have had the impression that he was witness to the creation and the end of the world.”¹²⁴ With his skills in French and German and his knowledge of Heidegger’s work, he helped the French students in Davos by translating passages of *Being and Time* and explaining its convoluted terminology. For Levinas, Peter Gordon explains in *Continental Divide: Heidegger,*

¹²³ Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 184.

¹²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” *Is it Righteous to Be?* 35.

Cassirer, Davos, “perhaps more than any other eyewitness, the disputation was to represent a true milestone in his career, and his complicated assessment of its significance reveals a great deal about both his own divided consciousness as a philosopher and the greater division of European history he had witnessed firsthand.”¹²⁵ While Levinas admired Cassirer, he believed that it was Heidegger’s thought that represented the future of philosophy.

Levinas sided with his teacher Heidegger over Cassirer. In an inglorious moment at Davos, the attending students performed a play, a *mise-en-abime* of the debate between the eminent philosophers. Levinas wrote the play, and played the role of Cassirer, and Otto Bulnow portrayed Heidegger. The depiction was unflattering: Levinas dipped his hair in white powder to mimic Cassirer’s white hair which stood on his head “like an ice cream cone,” and his character parodied the eminent Hamburg philosopher’s humanism by repeatedly exclaiming, “Humboldt, Culture, Humboldt, Culture!” and “I am a pacifist,” to mock what he viewed as his “non-combative and somewhat desolate attitude,” compared to the pugnacious Heidegger.¹²⁶ Levinas described Cassirer as “too easy to mimic.” Reportedly, Cassirer was quite hurt by the derisive portrayal. After 1933, Levinas came to regret the play, as he regretted siding with Heidegger. He later told François Poirié, “during the Hitler years I reproached myself for having preferred Heidegger at Davos.”¹²⁷ Levinas’ reflections on the Davos disputation were split between his adherence at the time to Heidegger’s thinking, and his radical reassessment of the event in light of subsequent history. “What made the memory so difficult for Levinas,” Gordon explains, “was the *impossibility* of resolving the dispute to his own satisfaction.”¹²⁸ He was “riven in two,” between his respect for

¹²⁵ Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 346.

¹²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Entretien avec Roger-Pol Droit,” *Les imprévus de l’histoire* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994), 203-210.

¹²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” *Is it Righteous to Be?* 36.

¹²⁸ Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 348.

Cassirer's ethical humanism of a certain universalism, and his abiding belief that it was Heidegger who represented philosophy's future. Levinas never resolved this tension between the ethical humanism embodied by Cassirer and the phenomenological method he learned from Husserl and Heidegger; this undercurrent persists in different guises throughout his work.

Following his year in Freiburg, Levinas moved to Paris in 1930. He worked at the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), an organization founded by Adolphe Crémieux to advocate for the rights of Jews. Although he was outside of the French philosophical establishment, he taught classes at the École Normale Israélite Orientale, and audited classes from Léon Brunschvicg at the Sorbonne. Levinas' 1932 article "Martin Heidegger and Ontology" in the *Revue Philosophique* attracted the attention of Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel, which helped bring him into the fold of the philosophical establishment in Paris. He also met fellow Russian émigrés Alexandre Koyré and Alexandre Kojève, who were also influential in bringing German phenomenology to France. Crucially, Levinas was introduced to the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig in 1935 by Jacob Gordin, a student of Hermann Cohen who had fled the Nazis to France and also worked at the AIU.¹²⁹ Rosenzweig's work had a profound effect on Levinas, as he wrote in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, this author was "too often present in this book to be cited."¹³⁰ The outsized if understated influence of Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* is decisive for understanding the relation of philosophy and religion in Levinas' thought.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Joelle Hansel writes: "Jacob Gordin was quite probably the origin of this encounter. A disciple of Hermann Cohen, Gordin was the instigator of the movement for the renewal of Jewish thought in France after the Shoah. Arriving in France in 1933 after fleeing Nazi Germany, he taught a series of courses on Medieval Jewish philosophy at the *Séminaire Rabbiniqque de France*. He was also a librarian at l'Alliance israélite universelle (AIU), where Levinas did administrative and pedagogical work beginning in this period. It was therefore at AIU where Levinas met Gordin, thanks to whom he read *The Star of Redemption*." Joelle Hansel, "Levinas," *Dictionnaire Franz Rosenzweig* (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 2016), 215.

¹³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 28 [14].

¹³¹ In addition to the brief allusion in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas expounded on his debt to Rosenzweig directly in two key texts: "Between Two Worlds' (The Way of Franz Rosenzweig)," which he presented at the Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française in 1959 , and which was included in his 1963 *Difficult Freedom: Essays on*

Levinas was rocked by the political developments in Germany in the early 1930s. He was keenly aware of the mythical forces activated by the Nazi appeal to “blood and soil,” and the dire consequences this would spell for Europe’s Jews. Following Hitler’s rise to power, Levinas was particularly shaken by Heidegger’s embrace of National Socialism. When Heidegger called for the revitalization of the German university according to the spirit of National Socialism in his infamous Rectorship Address in May 1933 at the University of Freiburg, Levinas felt personally betrayed that his former teacher would embrace such barbarism. Levinas was also one of the earliest to write about the threat to the world posed by Nazism in his article “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” which appeared in *Esprit* in 1934. He presciently diagnosed the “primitive powers” at work in Hitler’s philosophy, which “awaken the secret nostalgia within the German soul” and its “elementary feelings.”¹³² The feelings called upon by “Hitlerism” inspire a kind of mythology, they “express a soul’s principal attitude towards the whole of reality and its own destiny,” and “predetermine or prefigure the meaning of the adventure that the soul will face in the world.” What Levinas perhaps over-generously called “Hitlerism” offered an encompassing world view that challenged the liberal notion of freedom which had taken root in Europe since the Enlightenment, and which had allowed for the eventual emancipation of Jews in Western Europe. For Levinas, the Nazi’s biological racism challenged the notion of freedom itself: “the mysterious urgings of the blood, the appeals of heredity and the past for which the body serves as an enigmatic vehicle, lose the character of being problems that are subject to a solution put forward by a sovereignly free Self.”¹³³ Consequently, Hitlerism suggests that “man’s essence no longer lies in

Judaism, and his preface for Stéphane Mosès’ 1982 *System and Revelation*, which offers a paralleled, magisterial exegetical reading of Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*. We will return to Rosenzweig’s influence on Levinas in some detail in chapter three.

¹³² Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” trans. Séan Hand, *Critical Inquiry*, 17.1 (Autumn 1990), 64.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 69.

freedom, but in a kind of bondage [*enchaînement*].” Levinas diagnoses the philosophy of Hitlerism as a rebuke to the notion of human freedom, which the project of Enlightenment had left unrealized or unfinished. By abandoning the ideal of freedom in the service of the total engagement of oneself in the demands of a leader, the Nazi reordering of human freedom to serve a kind of “bondage” had raised the stakes of the threat to the Jews. While it was not possible to imagine the full extent of the horrors that would be unleashed by the Nazis, Levinas’ early reflections proved insightful for the dark path ahead. Already in 1934 Levinas had observed that Hitler’s worldview was not simply an affront to a particular form of liberalism or democratic government, but a challenge to “the very humanity of man.”¹³⁴ In the decades following the war, Levinas would come to see a closer connection between the rise of Nazism and Heidegger’s philosophy of Being. As he would describe in 1990, the philosophy of Nazism stemmed from an “elemental Evil,” a possibility “inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being [*de l’être soucieux d’être*]—a being, to use the Heideggerian expression, ‘*dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht.*’”¹³⁵ Levinas came to see the deep inadequacy of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, turning towards a new thinking of ethics based on the phenomenological method he had learned from Husserl.

The storm brewing in Germany would soon engulf Europe. As France anxiously awaited the inevitable German attack during the “*drôle de guerre*” in 1939, Levinas was called up to the French army as an interpreter and officer, stationed in the city of Rennes. On June 10, 1940, the German *Blitzkrieg* met little resistance as Hitler’s army crossed into the Netherlands, Luxemburg, and Belgium. By June 13, the Germans had broken through the French defenses at Sedan, leaving a path of death and destruction as they advanced through northern French cities. Levinas was taken prisoner by the Nazis during the early days of the fighting. Over one hundred thousand French

¹³⁴ Ibid, 71.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 63.

soldiers were killed, and nearly two million were taken prisoner as the Nazis asserted control over Northern France. In an episode commonly referred to as *l'exode*, eight to ten million civilians took to the road, literally walking south in a desperate attempt to flee the German invasion.¹³⁶ The devastating French defeat was described by general André Beaufre as “une débâcle sans précédent.”¹³⁷ The French government soon crumbled, and on June 22, the hero of the Great War Maréchal Philippe Pétain signed the armistice ceding French sovereignty to the Germans. The chaos and confusion of these days reflected a world that had come apart seemingly overnight.

In his *Carnets de Captivité*, written during his imprisonment in a German Stalag, Levinas reflected on the devastation of the *débâcle* of 1940, as a formative moment for understanding ethics when tested by the utmost desolation and hopelessness. Levinas' *Carnets* include several literary texts, an exception in his oeuvre. The semi-autobiographical novella entitled *Eros ou Triste Opulence* recounts a French soldier taken prisoner by the Germans in Rennes amidst the *débâcle*. Jean-Luc Nancy notes the protagonist's exaggerated nationalism in the novella's opening pages:

It is completely nationalist, that of a Frenchman who loves France viscerally, with all his strength, and who is unhappy about the war. More than a Frenchman, he is an *ultra-Frenchman*. As [his son] Michaël Levinas said to me in a private conversation this summer, it is the little Lithuanian who has arrived and for whom France is everything.¹³⁸

The tone in the novella's opening pages is of someone *plus que français*, as Derrida might say: an immigrant who valorizes France more than even the native French. The narrator reflects, “What is France? An immense stability,” it is a place where “no catastrophe could keep the public service employees from their retirement benefits,” just like “Paris which follows a rhythm of flux and

¹³⁶ See: Éric Alary, *L'exode : un drame oublié* (Paris, Perrin, 2013).

¹³⁷ See: André Beaufre, *1940: The Fall of France*, trans. Desmond Flower (London: Cassell, 1967), and Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York: Norton, 1999). General Beaufre's account of the French military disaster, which he called the most important event of the 20th century and Bloch's historical account of the fallout offer two dueling perspectives on the climactic events of June 1940.

¹³⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Eros, Emmanuel Levinas's Novel?” *Levinas and Literature*, eds. Michael Fagenblat and Arthur Cools (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 24.

reflux.”¹³⁹ In the chaos unleashed in the *débâcle*, this stability disappeared overnight:

France was no more. It left during the night, like an immense circus tent, leaving a clearing scattered with debris. During the bustle of the previous night, where had all the cables, nets, seats, departments, offices, administrations, bailiffs, and compartments gone? They designated a space now disencumbered, empty, homogeneous, without a place to hide. Everything is permitted.¹⁴⁰

The *débâcle* rendered France a non-place, like the outline of a circus tent disappeared during the night, pulling the rug of stability out from under the entire country. Summoning Ivan Karamazov’s famous words to the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, the narrator from Levinas’ story remarks that in the aftermath of the *débâcle*, “everything is permitted.” The collapse of civil order and the sheer terror in the face of the imminent German approach revealed a world bereft of its former sense, where the chaos of the present threatens to cast aside the demands of the ethical obligation. He described the *débâcle* as a situation bereft of any semblance of order: “I do not mean to describe a situation where values are overturned – the change of authority – but rather the human nudity of the absence of authority.”¹⁴¹ The chaos and confusion reflected the senselessness of a world whose meaning had been shattered. Nancy describes, “everything Levinas wanted to narrate [...] takes place here, in this absolute interval. An order is dismantled, another order has not been reconstituted. It is at the same time a kind of loss, an immense privation, and an opening up of possibilities.”¹⁴² Levinas’ exceptional attempt at literature in *Eros ou Triste*

¹³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Oeuvres III. Eros, littérature et philosophie*, eds. Jean-Luc Nancy, Danielle Levinas-Cohen (Paris : Grasset, 2009), 38. Danielle Levinas-Cohen recalls her discovery alongside Nancy of *Eros ou Triste Opulence* in Levinas’ *Inédits* in 2006 at IMEC: “It was the first time that you had discovered the Emmanuel Levinas ‘deposit.’ On the computer screen, we went through the digitalised files of the *Carnets de captivité*, and I remember your reaction when faced with the pages of the novel, the one supposedly called *Eros*. We read its pages aloud, not without joy and astonishment, and the more we read the more it became patently clear to you that this proximity of literature and philosophy, far from cancelling or contradicting the specificity of one or the other, already bore the very movement of a thought and of writing that recognises itself in the sharing of singularities.” “Eros, Once Again: Danielle Cohen-Levinas in Conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy,” 37.

¹⁴⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Oeuvres III*, 43-44.

¹⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres I : Carnets de captivité et autres inédits*, eds. Rodolphe Calin, Catherine Chalier, (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 136.

¹⁴² Jean-Luc Nancy, “Eros, Emmanuel Levinas’s Novel?” 27.

Opulence yields an image of the deprivation of meaning and the crumbling of order which perhaps only literature can imagine. Nancy describes this unpublished novel as an attempt “to touch, in some way, the mystery through literature, rather than to make a sort of literary shutter onto what one would otherwise view through a philosophical shutter, even if this attempt fails.”¹⁴³ Levinas was drawn to literature by “the possibility of touching the mystery through narration and not of illustrating a theory.” Narrative has the unique capability of probing this mystery.

For Levinas, explains Michael Fagenblat, “the advantage of literature consists not so much in *showing* the moral sense of the other—since its truth is strictly ‘invisible,’ falling outside the limits of consciousness, beyond empathy and intuition—but in attesting to the formidable difficulty of discerning this sense.”¹⁴⁴ This is evident in Levinas’ description of the breakdown of sense during the *débâcle* and a specific image he calls his “Alençon scene.” In *Eros ou Triste Opulence*, Levinas describes a scene of German soldiers plundering a French government building in the northern city of Alençon. He highlights “the sound of the drapery falling,” revealing a large hall where “all that remained were bare walls, bare columns, with hard lines. The drapery, that was the country.”¹⁴⁵ The pregnant image of the fallen drapery is symbolic of the collapse of France: the hall is stripped to its brute structure, revealing “things made of cardboard and stucco, bare walls,” which transformed the “resplendent and magnificent” hall into a “vast hovel.”¹⁴⁶ The “Alençon scene” doesn’t depict the carnage of war, it simply illustrates how the world is stripped of its meaning and reduced to its physical nudity. In his *Carnets*, Levinas repeatedly invokes this scene of the fallen drapery to illustrate the disappearance of the world of sense during the *débâcle*:

The falling drapery in my Alençon scene also concerns things. Things are decomposed, they lose their meaning: forests become trees – everything which forest signifies in French

¹⁴³ Ibid, 34.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Fagenblat, “Introduction: Levinas and Literature: A Marvelous Hypocrisy,” *Levinas and Literature*, x.

¹⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres III*, 49.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 52.

literature – disappears. Subsequent decomposition of elements – pieces of wood which remain after the departure of the circus or on the stage – the throne is a piece of wood, jewels are pieces of glass, etc. But I don't mean to simply speak of the end of illusions, but rather the end of meaning. {Meaning itself as an illusion.} The concrete form of this situation: empty houses and the rifling through these houses. Cheese and champagne at five in the morning.¹⁴⁷

The falling drapery leaves behind only a brute structural outline. For Levinas, this image represents the breakdown of sense itself, as illustrated by the utter senselessness of the German soldiers who plundered cheese and champagne at five in the morning amidst the chaos of the *débâcle*.

In *Ethics of the Survivor: Levinas and the Philosophy of the Debacle*, François-David Sebbah argues that the Alençon scene enacts a specifically Levinasian form of the phenomenological reduction. Unlike the Husserlian epoché which hones in on the intentional structures of consciousness by suspending existential questions concerning the objective nature of perceived things, the Levinasian epoché radically “suspends the thesis concerning the existence of the world.”¹⁴⁸ From the perspective of the scene of the fallen drapery, Levinas’ reduction reveals that “Being at its core, revealed for what it ‘is,’ which hardly exists and, in the same movement, ‘is’ senseless.”¹⁴⁹ In the “cold light” of the *débâcle*, people are reduced to mere things bereft of any spiritual value, and the meaning of the world has fallen away, suspended, or set aside. Sebbah explains that the Levinasian epoché reveals that “being is not sufficient, it is not sufficient for sense – for meaning – and not even, from a certain point of view, for being.”¹⁵⁰ The Alençon scene reveals the abyss of a world without ground, which swallows sense and meaning like quicksand. Levinas’ reduction reveals that the situation confronted in the debacle is none other than the nudity

¹⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres I*, 136.

¹⁴⁸ François-David Sebbah, *L'éthique du survivant: Levinas, une philosophie de la débâcle* (Paris : Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2018), 14. See also : Jacob Levi, “Recension de *L'éthique du survivant: Levinas, une philosophie de la débâcle* de François-David Sebbah,” *Implications Philosophiques*, Nov 30 2018.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

of human existence, which is “always-already at the edge of the abyss.”¹⁵¹ This is the thinking of totality, where the world is reducible to its minimal ontological coordinates. As Levinas writes in the preface to his 1961 *Totality and Infinity*, “Harsh reality (this sounds like a pleonasm!), harsh object-lesson, at the very moment of its fulguration when the drapery of illusion burns, war is produced as the pure experience of pure being.”¹⁵² The fallen drapery is a metonym for the reduction of the world to its bare ontological structure. In the face of catastrophe, this reduction strips the world of its meaning, it becomes senseless. The reduction of the world to the “il y a,” the brutish world of impersonal being, is the foil for the ethical calling. Out of the emptiness of undifferentiated being, Levinas discovers the source of ethics in the notion of infinity, which arises from an entirely different order than being. The Alençon scene revealed the world reduced to the “il y a,” laying bare that the origin of responsibility cannot derive from the existence of the world.

Levinas was imprisoned in Nazi work camps through the duration of the war, notably at Stalag 11B at Fallingbommel near Magdeburg in Germany from 1942 until 1945. His French army uniform saved him from deportation to a death camp. Levinas and other Jewish prisoners of war were separated from their compatriots in the camp and forced to wear yellow stars, but following the Geneva Convention, they were not killed. During his imprisonment, Levinas was forced to do manual labor for most of the day, but his status as a prisoner of war afforded him the right to send and receive packages. He was also able to read, as he recounted in 1987:

I was in a Jewish commando. It was not a period of torture. We went to work in the forest; we spent the day in the forest. Materially supported by care packages, morally by letters, like all the French prisoners [...] Books would arrive; one didn't know from where [...] I read Hegel, of course, but also philosophical texts of all types. Plenty of things I had not had the time to read before: more Proust than ever, the authors of the eighteenth century: Diderot, Rousseau, and then random authors. And all of a sudden I would ask myself, “What good is all this?” But in this life of daily physical work in the forest – under surveillance of guards who were without brutality – from the point of view of culture, the

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 17.

¹⁵² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21. Translation altered.

time was not wasted.¹⁵³

While Levinas endured the daily indignities and dehumanization of life in captivity, he survived the war. In an episode that long remained secret, after the imposition of the anti-Semitic Vichy Laws in France, Maurice Blanchot arranged to hide Levinas' wife Raissa and daughter Simone in the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul convent near Orléans, where they survived the occupation. Despite the proximity of Bergen-Belsen to Fallingbommel, Levinas remained unaware of the extent of the Nazi atrocities during his time in captivity. When he was liberated at the war's end, he was reunited with his wife and daughter in Paris. Over the course of the ensuing months, the full extent of the Nazi atrocities was slowly revealed, and images of the death camps began to circulate in newspapers. Levinas soon discovered the fate of family members who were murdered by the Nazis following the German invasion of Lithuania in 1941. The personal toll was compounded by the revelations of the full scope of the Shoah.

Significantly, Levinas described the dehumanization he experienced as a prisoner of war in terms of a kind of exile from humanity, which he situated in terms of the historical exile of the Jews. He writes in "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights":

There were seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. An extraordinary coincidence was the fact that the camp bore the number 1492, the year of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain under the Catholic Ferdinand V. The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile - and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes - stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes.¹⁵⁴

Levinas notes the coincidence of the camp number in the Stalag with the year the Jews were expelled from Spain, connecting the two greatest catastrophes of the past millennium for the

¹⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, "Interview with François Poirié," 41.

¹⁵⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 152-153.

Jewish people through the experience of exile. However, it is not only a geographical exile that Levinas has in mind, his experiences further revealed a kind of exile from the human condition itself. Imprisoned in the Stalag, the stares from civilians which “stripped us of our human skin,” and rendered the prisoners “subhuman, a gang of apes,” represents an exile from humanity in a world come undone. Here, we can see the connection between the Jewish history of exile and the enigmatic notion of impersonal being that Levinas calls the “il y a.” Both entail a disconnection from social order, and the breakdown of a world that fosters a sense of shared humanity. The “il y a” is anathema to the commandment to care for the stranger.

It was clear to Levinas that philosophy must advance beyond the thinking of being, by working through individual being to understand the ethical relation to the Other. In 1947, Levinas published a short book entitled *Existence and Existents*, in which he formalized his critical reflections developed during his imprisonment regarding Heidegger’s fundamental ontology and the inescapable moment of non-sense of the “il y a.” It is a preparatory book, laying the groundwork for the ethical philosophy that Levinas would subsequently develop, most notably, in *Totality and Infinity*. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas argues that “all of modern philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger”¹⁵⁵ has attempted to remove the particularities of the individual from his or her present situation, “to avoid the reification of spirit,” and describe the totality of existence in some sort of neutral or even “objective” manner. Philosophy has long attempted to understand *existence* through a particular *existant*, as if the *existant* were separate from and able to reflect upon existence as a whole. Descartes inaugurates this tradition by separating the *cogito* from the world, subject from object, but Levinas argues that it remains in effect through Heidegger’s “ontological difference” between Being and beings, *Sein* and *Seiendes*, or *être* and *existants*. They

¹⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 97.

are not independent terms. Levinas explains, “‘A being’ has already made a contract with Being; it cannot be isolated from it. It is. It already exercises over Being the domination a subject exercises over its attributes.”¹⁵⁶ Heidegger makes this same argument against the idealist tradition, but Levinas extends the argument to include his former teacher, disputing the primacy of the distinction between existence and existents. He describes the strangeness of the question of Being, which is by essence unanswerable, but which is always a guise for a specific view of Being:

The questioning of Being is an experience of Being in its strangeness. It is then a way of taking up Being. That is why the question about Being — *What is Being?* — has never been answered. There is no answer to Being. It is absolutely impossible to envisage the direction in which that answer would have to be sought. The question is itself a manifestation of the relationship with Being. Being is essentially alien and strikes against us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. There is a pain in Being. If philosophy is the questioning of Being, it is already a taking on of Being.¹⁵⁷

For Levinas, Being is not an attribute of the subject which absolutely determines its conceptual schemas and determinations, as in the case of Heidegger’s *Dasein*. The notion that existence is the ultimate substratum of subjective reality which he calls the “*il y a*” is a critical reinterpretation of Heidegger’s “*es gibt*.” Levinas explains, “for the Being which we become aware of when the world disappears is not a person or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that *there is [il y a]*.”¹⁵⁸ The *il y a* appears in the nudity of the world in the Levinassian *epoché*: this is the world undone that Levinas witnessed in the *débâcle* attesting to “the human nudity of the absence of authority.”¹⁵⁹ Ethan Kleinberg explains the inevitability of the *il y a* in *Existence and Existents* “must be read in the historical context of Levinas's own experience in the POW camp, the persecution of his family in France, and the tragic fate of his family in

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 22-23.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 21

¹⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres I*, 136.

Lithuania and of the Jewish people in Europe. Levinas transfers his own sense of unease, insecurity, and persecution to the philosophical fear that there is no escape from anonymous being.”¹⁶⁰ The pessimistic tone of the *il y a* is understandable: the exile from humanity that Levinas felt during his captivity had not disappeared with his release from the camp, it was woven into the experience of being which he now confronted as a “survivor.”

While the word “ethics” is absent from *Existence and Existents*, it lays the groundwork for his ethics as first philosophy. Levinas explains that he follows the Platonic approach according to which the Good must lie “beyond being,” in an “an *ex-cendence*” of being:

The movement which leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which that existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from Being and from the categories which describes it: an *ex-cendence*. But *ex-cendence* and the Good necessarily have a foothold in being, and that is why Being is better than non-being.¹⁶¹

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas discovers the *ex-cendence*, the *departure* from Being, which sets the stage for his critique of Heideggerian ontology, and paves the way for *Totality and Infinity*. The *il y a* reveals that, like Abraham, it is only in *departure* – departure from Being, departure from one’s home – that the ethical commandment can be fulfilled.

During the 1950s, Levinas principally occupied himself with developing his ethical philosophy laid out in *Totality and Infinity*, and studying the Talmud under the guidance of Monsieur Shoshani. While his real name and origins remain unknown, this mysterious sage appeared in Paris after the war, where he studied the Talmud in sessions whose attendees included Levinas and Eli Wiesel. The renowned gynecologist Henri Nerson (to whom *Difficult Freedom* is dedicated) introduced Levinas to M. Shoshani, a man he described as “an exceptional being, exceptional in all senses.”¹⁶² Levinas told François Poirié, “he was not a hobo, but it happened

¹⁶⁰ Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 254.

¹⁶¹ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 16.

¹⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” 75.

that, according to a common – very common – sense of mortals, he resembled a hobo.” His disheveled appearance did not impede M. Shoshani’s unparalleled knowledge of the Talmud, which he had entirely committed to memory. Levinas recounts that he would lead his sessions without any books in front of him, lasting five or six hours, sometimes late into the night. The mysterious sage subsisted on the little he made from his courses and the generosity of others, trading room and board for his wisdom. For several years after the war, Levinas housed M. Shoshani once or twice a week, until he disappeared without notice, such was his manner. He remained in France until 1962, when he went to Israel, and eventually to South America. Monsieur Shoshani died in 1968 in La Paz, Uruguay, where he is buried. It was only later that Levinas spoke of his study with the Talmudic master during the 1950s, but it was perhaps the most formal Jewish education that Levinas had received in his life. “What remained for me of this contact, made out of restlessness, marvels, and insomnia?” For Levinas, M. Shoshani had given him “new access to a rabbinic wisdom and to its signification for the human. Judaism is not the Bible; it is the bible seen through the Talmud, through the rabbinical wisdom, interrogation, and religious life.”¹⁶³ In 1957, Levinas delivered his first Talmudic reading at the *Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Française*, a tradition that he continued at this formative event for decades.

Levinas’ breakthrough came in the early 1960s with the publication of his *Doctorat d’Etat, Totality and Infinity*, in 1961, followed by *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* in 1963. His second major work, if one can use such terms, was his 1974 *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*.¹⁶⁴ After toiling for many years as a relative outsider in the French university system, Levinas assumed a professorship at the Université de Poitiers in 1961, followed by the Université

¹⁶³ Ibid, 76.

¹⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonos Lingus, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1991) [*Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1978)].

de Nanterre in 1967, and the Sorbonne in 1973. Throughout his career, Levinas maintained two tracks of his work: his philosophical writing and his Jewish writing. For reasons both political and philosophical, Levinas treated them as separate domains of his thought, going as far as to publish his philosophical work with Martinus Nijhoff, J. Vrin, and Fata Morgana, whereas he published his numerous collections of Talmudic readings exclusively with Éditions de Minuit.¹⁶⁵ The relationship between philosophy and Judaism is a key dynamic in Levinas' thought: while he strenuously refuses to conflate religion and philosophy, there is a productive tension between philosophical universalism and Jewish particularity in his work. Levinas would constantly wrestle with this question over the course of his life and work. He remarked to François Poirié, "I have always been Jewish, you know! I took the religious and the historical adventure of Judaism to heart, taking it as the central adventure of the human."¹⁶⁶ This adventure would take many twists and turns in Levinas' thinking of Judaism and philosophical ethics.

IV. Jabès, Egypt, and Exile

The decisive event of Edmond Jabès' life was his exile from Egypt in 1957. Following the Suez Crisis, due to mounting threats to Jews and European nationals, Jabès was forced to flee Cairo for Paris. He never returned to his homeland. In France, Jabès' writing evolved in no small measure due to his dramatic departure from his Egypt, crystalizing around motifs of the Jew, the Book, and exile, which are for him three iterations of the same figure. In a 1987 text entitled "My Itinerary," Jabès

¹⁶⁵ For more on the relationship between Judaism and philosophy in Levinas' writing, see, *inter alia*: Sophie Nordmann, *Levinas et La Philosophie Judeo-Allemande* (Paris: Vrin, 2017); Michael Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Interview with François Poirié," 77.

writes, “if it is true that the condition of exile has never been experienced over so long a period nor been pushed to such extremes, both individually and collectively, then the Jewish condition in its epitome is certainly an exemplary symbol.”¹⁶⁷ For Jabès, the figure of the Jew is synonymous with the condition of exile, which he equates to the practice of questioning: “Questioning means breaking apart, means pitching inside against outside, and dwelling now in one, now in the other.”¹⁶⁸ Questioning is the embodiment of exile, it requires inhabiting a foreign territory, staking claim to something which is claimed by someone else. It is also of the utmost importance to the Jewish tradition, which has always drawn inspiration from the questioning of its own sacred texts. Jabès’ seven-part cycle *The Book of Questions* is ostensibly a response to the Book of Books, it is an interrogation of the Jew, the book, and the condition of exile.

Edmond Jabès was born in Cairo on April 14th in 1912 to a French-speaking, middle-class, Jewish family. His father was a banker and his mother raised the three children; Edmond had an older sister and a younger brother. Though the Jabès family had been settled in Egypt for generations, his grandfather had opted for Italian citizenship as security against rising xenophobia during the 1882 Orabi Pasha Revolt against European and Ottoman control of Egypt. Jabès was consequently born in Egypt with Italian nationality, and a French-speaking family.¹⁶⁹ Educated in French schools in Cairo, Jabès discovered his passion for poetry in his teenage years, when he began reading Musset, Vigny, and Verlaine before advancing to Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud; soon after, he began writing poems and plays. For the Jabès family, Dider Cahen writes, Judaism held “both an important and secondary place.”¹⁷⁰ The family held a place of some stature in the Jewish community of Cairo; they attended services at the local Ben Zimra synagogue, which

¹⁶⁷ Edmond Jabès, “My Itinerary” *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 12.1 (1987), 9.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 42.

¹⁷⁰ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, 306

was also called the Jabès Synagogue, after Edmond's grandfather who had once been at its helm. They would celebrate major holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur at the Grand Synagogue of Cairo. The synagogue composed an important center of social life for the Jabès family, where “*mondainetés* and social life found its coherence and maybe even its cohesion.”¹⁷¹

When Jabès was twelve years old, his older sister Marcelle died of tuberculosis. He was alone at her bedside when she died, as he recalled, “My sister died practically in my arms.” In her waning moments, she told her inconsolable brother Edmond, “Don't think of death. Don't cry. One does not escape destiny.” Jabès recalled these indelible words half a century later in his 1980 dialogue with Marcel Cohen: “It was that day that I understood that there is a language for death, just as there is a language for life.”¹⁷² The family grieved Marcelle's death for some time, and the loss hung over the family for many years to come; his mother never recovered from the loss, and turned inward afterwards. Given his proximity to Marcelle and his impressionable age, Edmond Jabès admitted this trauma “is found buried at the very Heart of my books.”¹⁷³ In important ways, he never ceased searching for the words to represent this trauma of loss, to speak the language of death with the words available to the living. Edmond's brother took his own life in 1964 in Rome.

The most important figure through nearly the totality of Jabès' life was his wife Arlette. Edmond met Arlette Cohen when they were teenagers on a boat returning to Alexandria after a family trip in France; he was seventeen and she was fifteen. Edmond and Arlette were inseparable during the ship's four-day Mediterranean crossing, and they were later married in 1935. Jabès later remarked, “I have constantly, since then, built on this connection.”¹⁷⁴ His unshakable bond with Arlette through his life was vitally important; she was the first reader and critic for all his books.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 307.

¹⁷² Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 23.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 25.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 26.

Edmond described Arlette as the “center of my relation to the world, to beings, to things, to origins.” They had two daughters, Vivienne and Nimet, both born in France. Arlette passed away just over a year after Edmond’s death in January 1991, and their remains lie together in the columbarium of Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

The question of national identity was always fraught for Jabès. Though his family had been established in Cairo for several centuries by the time of Edmond’s birth, they were not immune from the political upheaval that set the world ablaze in the middle of the 20th century. As the political situation across Europe deteriorated during the thirties, its effects began to reverberate across North Africa. Egypt declared its independence in 1922, and it had been formally ruled by King Farouk since 1936, but the British nonetheless maintained a great deal of political and economic influence. Notably, the British retained a large military presence in Egypt due to their vital interest in the Suez Canal, which connected England to its colonial empire in India and East Asia. Edmond and Arlette both took active roles in Jewish anti-fascist groups in Cairo in the mid-thirties, as they continued to receive grim news from their friends in occupied Europe. When Italy entered the war and threatened to invade Egypt via Libya, Jabès was briefly arrested by the British authorities in Egypt on account of his Italian nationality, but he was soon released due to his sympathies with the allies and his anti-fascist activities. Much of the population of Egypt was favorable to the Nazis due to their resentment of the British, and as general Rommel’s *Afrika Korps* advanced from Libya to within reach of Cairo in 1942, Jabès was briefly evacuated by the British to Jerusalem. Arlette worked through the war in a hospital for the British Red Cross. Ultimately, the Nazis were unable to take Egypt, and in this sense Cairo was spared. Jabès was all too aware of what could have occurred had the British wavered, and the battles went differently. News of the war in Europe arrived belatedly in Egypt, and he maintained contact with his friends in occupied

France by mail and telegraph. As details of the Nazi crimes became known in Egypt, Jabès discovered his mentor Max Jacob had been arrested by the Gestapo and died at the camp at Drancy.

With the end of hostilities in Europe declared in 1945, Jabès was able to return to writing and traveling. Dider Cahen notes that Jabès considered the freedom to write and travel as interrelated: “freedom discovered in the book, thanks to the book, freedom rediscovered more practically with the end of the war, which permitted him to move about and travel once more.”¹⁷⁵

Though the war in Europe had ended, the situation for the Jews of Cairo became increasingly precarious in the years that followed, specifically after the 1948 foundation of the state of Israel and the subsequent war against Egypt and its Arab League allies. King Farouk accused Egyptian Jews of siding with their Israeli enemy, and they were increasingly persecuted and subject to attacks. By 1950, the Egyptian-Jewish population of approximately seventy-five thousand had shrunk by two thirds, with most leaving for Israel and the United States.

The ascension of Nasser in 1954 as the president of Egypt initially raised both hopes and worries for Egyptian Jews. Jabès initially cheered the movement that brought Nasser to power because he held out the prospect of a modern, independent Egypt; others worried that he would bring further tension to Cairo’s shrinking community of Jews. Despite Jabès’ early optimism, the situation for Egyptian Jews worsened and soon became untenable. In the autumn of 1956, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, provoking a joint military response from Israel, France and the United Kingdom. Nasser subsequently imposed strict restrictions on the rights of European nationals and Jews in Egypt, and ordered hundreds of expulsions and arrests of those accused of acting as “Zionist agents.” Arlette and their younger daughter Viviane were already in Paris, and Edmond sent his older daughter Nimet to France on the first available flight. Jabès was arrested by the

¹⁷⁵ Didier Cahen, “Écrire sa vie,” *Portrait(s)* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1999), 32.

Egyptian authorities due to his many affiliations with French officials and intellectuals, but he was able to secure his release, ironically, when he proved his Italian nationality. He set about liquidating his family's assets, but he was forced to abandon most of his possessions. With all correspondences stopped between Egypt and France, Jabès was unable to speak with his anxious family in Paris. Meanwhile, his octogenarian father refused to leave Cairo. Ultimately, Jabès was forced to leave Egypt with little more than what he carried with him, though he was able to save his cherished first edition of Balzac's complete works with the help of Swiss friend. At forty-five year old, Jabès left Cairo in June 1957 and joined his family in Paris. They rented a small apartment on the rue Condé in the Odéon quarter of the 6th Arrondissement. He never returned to Egypt.

Jabès did not received a formal Jewish education as a child, and was not particularly observant. But he was forced to leave Egypt because he was Jewish, and he considered his exile the mark or condition of his Jewishness. He recounted, "I left Egypt because I was Jewish. I was thereby led, despite myself, to live a certain Jewish condition, that of the exile."¹⁷⁶ Prior to his departure from Egypt, Jabès had not considered his affiliation with the religion of his ancestors to be a particularly sensitive aspect of his life. "Constrained to leave Egypt on account of my Jewish origins, I was forced for the first time to live my Jewishness," Jabès explained in a 1985 interview, "until then I had managed to remain 'unproblematically' Jewish. I had been virtually untouched by anti-Semitism."¹⁷⁷ It was in his condition of exile in France that he experienced anti-Semitism and it was during this period that he also began his study of Talmud and Kabbalah. There is a certain irony that Jabès, as a Jew, was forced into exile by *leaving* Egypt, which spurred him to study Judaism. Nonetheless, the expulsion of Cairo's Jews was a massive trauma felt across a

¹⁷⁶ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 53-54.

¹⁷⁷ Edmond Jabès, "The Question of Jewishness and The Question of Writing: An Exchange With Edmond Jabès" *The Threepenny Review*, No. 21 (Spring, 1985), 16.

deeply rooted community. It echoed expulsions of the past from the biblical exiles, to the expulsion of Spanish Jews during the Inquisition, to the Jews who fled from the Nazis. His exile in France forced Jabès to experience the Jewish condition which he had not confronted in Egypt.

For Jabès, the condition of exile is intimately linked to both the figure of the Jew, as well as the writing of the book. “We had to abandon all of our belongings in Egypt,” he recalled, “this loss contributed to reinforcing in me the idea that my *déracinement* affected the oldest attachments in my culture.”¹⁷⁸ Indeed, Jabès lived the condition of *Galut* in intensely personal terms. Didier Cahen describes that the reality of exile reinforced Jabès’ attachment to questions of Judaism: “if a man who loses his native land – in an exile that takes, we must insist, the highly symbolic form of an escape from Egypt – seems, in a certain way, to be born to the shared fate of the Jew, the writer who enters the country of his book becomes more of a stranger to himself and his writing.”¹⁷⁹ It was only when he left Egypt for France that Jabès’ writing began to crystalize around the connection between the Jew, the book, and the condition of exile. As he said in a 1985 interview, “Severance from native ground has marked me profoundly, and is perhaps the cause of all I’ve written and become since that time.”¹⁸⁰ Exiled from his home, Jabès sought refuge in the space opened by the book. His writing inhabits the universe of the book as an unmediated experience of textuality, an ontological relationship between the book and human existence. We might recall Levinas’ analogy between Heidegger’s *in-der-Welt-Sein* and what he described as the existential character of *zum-Buch-Sein*. Jabès decided in 1956 to go to France rather than Israel “not because I’m any more at home in Paris than I would be in Jerusalem. My home was Egypt; now it is nowhere.” Rather, he explained, “if I’m Egyptian, the same can’t be said of my books. They are

¹⁷⁸ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 59.

¹⁷⁹ Didier Cahen, *Portrait(s)*, 39.

¹⁸⁰ Edmond Jabès, “The Question of Jewishness and The Question of Writing: An Exchange With Edmond Jabès,” 16.

French, and if I chose France for shelter, it was above all to shelter them, to give them a place to live.” Jabès’ exile fueled his writing in France: “my homelessness has enabled my books to come.”

Jabès’ arrival in Paris in 1957 was certainly not as rude as many who seek refuge in strange lands, speaking foreign tongues: French was his first language, he had extensive connections in Paris, and his wife and daughters were French citizens. But even if his writing found shelter in France, Jabès’ arrival was far from a homecoming. As he writes in *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Book*, “I left a land not mine / for another, not mine either [*J’ai quitté une terre qui n’était pas la mienne, pour une autre qui, non plus, ne l’est pas*].”¹⁸¹ The perception that he was a foreigner, an outsider, followed him from Egypt to France, though it took new forms. Jabès acquired French citizenship in 1967, but, in a sense, this made him no more French than he had previously been Italian—after all, despite his great affinity for the country of his birth, he had never been legally Egyptian. Exile was not strictly a question of geography, but a condition of existence. Jabès repeats the sentiment expressed to him by a fellow Egyptian exile:

In Cairo, it never occurred to me to say that I was Jewish. Living in France, when one asked me about my origins, I responded at first, naturally – since I was born in Cairo – that I was Egyptian. Until an Arab student entered our little group. In front of him, I could not claim to be Egyptian. Referring to my father, who had Greek nationality, I clarified that I was, like him, Greek...until the day that a Greek from Athens, Orthodox Christian and somewhat nationalist, entered our little group of friends. Not speaking a word of the language myself, it became impossible for me to continue to pass for Greek. Can I say without reserve today to my French friends that I am one of them? [*Puis-je dire sans réserve, aujourd’hui, à mes amis français que je suis un des leurs?*]¹⁸²

Leaving Egypt did not end the exclusive boundaries of national identity and cultural affiliation: every claim to identity can be questioned both from within and from without. He concludes, “What to take from all this if not that, for a chauvinist nationalist, wherever he is from, every minority is

¹⁸¹ Edmond Jabès, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of his Arm a Tiny Book*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 79 [*Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 107].

¹⁸² Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 47.

fatally a ‘foreigner.’”¹⁸³ Jabès’ story reveals the perfidy of identity and the ubiquity of exclusion: despite claims to belonging to a nation, a language, a religion, there is always the possibility that these claims to identity will be denied, and turned against them.¹⁸⁴ In France, the tectonic movement of religion, culture, and nationality collided: he was exiled from Egypt because he was European and Jewish, but in France he was an outsider because he was Egyptian and Jewish.

A dozen years had elapsed since the end of the Second World War when Jabès arrived in France in 1957, and while the immediate signs of the Nazi occupation of Paris had long been covered over or rebuilt, the scars left by this period remained intact just below the surface. Jabès was acutely sensitive to the traces of this recent past, and the enduring legacy of anti-Semitism in France. In his interview with Marcel Cohen, he recounted a formative encounter with anti-Semitism in his early days in Paris:

I was returning home one night, the headlamps of an automobile swept across a section of wall which faced me. I had the time to read “Mort aux Juifs,” and, next to it, in English, which still seems inexplicable to me: “Jews go home.” Surely these were old graffiti. What hurt me was that nobody had thought to erase them.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Ibid, 48.

¹⁸⁴ The story that Jabès recounts bears an important resemblance to Hannah Arendt’s account of fleeing Germany for France in her 1943 essay “We Refugees”: “The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles. We were expelled from Germany because we were Jews. But having hardly crossed the French borderline, we were changed into *boches* [German]. We were even told that we had to accept this designation if we really were against Hitler’s racial theories. During seven years we played the ridiculous role of trying to be Frenchmen—at least, prospective citizens; but at the beginning of the war we were interned as *boches* all the same. In the meantime, however, most of us had indeed become such loyal Frenchmen that we could not even criticize a French governmental order; thus we declared it was all right to be interned. We were the first *prisonniers volontaires* history has ever seen. After the Germans invaded the country, the French government had only to change the name of the firm; having been jailed because we were Germans, we were now freed because we were Jews. It is the same story all over the world, repeated again and again. In Europe the Nazis confiscated our property; but in Brazil we have to pay 30 percent of our wealth, like the most loyal member of the *Bund der Auslandsdeutschen*. In Paris we could not leave our homes after eight o’clock because we were Jews; but in Los Angeles we are restricted because we are “enemy aliens.” Our identity is changed so frequently that nobody can find out who we actually are.” (Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 270.

¹⁸⁵ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 67.

The traces of a traumatic past were not gone, and hardly even under erasure, but merely ignored and out of sight. In the early pages of *The Book of Questions*, Jabès alludes to this episode as the direct provocation for writing the book: “A few graffiti on a wall were enough for the dormant memories in my hand to take over my pen, for my fingers to determine what I see [*il a suffi de quelques graffiti sur un mur pour que les souvenirs qui sommeillaient dans mes mains s’emparent de ma plume. Et pour que les droits commande la vue*].”¹⁸⁶ He returns to this painful scene more explicitly when he describes these words engraved in Yukel’s memory: “All he saw any more were those three words on the walls.[...] those twelve letters, transparent, on the glass pane of his memory [*Il ne voyait plus que ces trois mots sur les murs [...] ces douze lettres, en transparence, sur le tableau de verre de sa mémoire*].”¹⁸⁷ These toxic words – “Mort aux juifs” – emblazoned on a street in Paris offered a jarring reminder that, after his exile from Egypt for being a Jew, Jabès confronted a situation in Paris where he was still a Jew, where the latent memories of the Shoah were perhaps not directly visible, but remained just barely papered over. In that moment, Jabès recalled, it was as if “France, where I had invested so much through its culture, seemed to abruptly reject me.”¹⁸⁸ We might compare this formative moment for Jabès with the falling drapery in Levinas’ “Alençon scene”: it reveals the nudity of a world gone awry, stripped of sense. The epiphany of this traumatic scene for Jabès was that one can be treated as foreign anywhere. These poisonous words recall the connection between exile and the standing possibility of the return to violence against Jews.

Jabès had published poetry in Egypt and France when he lived in Cairo, but he worked by day at the Cairo stock exchange – a modest affair, compared to the same lucrative métier today.

¹⁸⁶ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* Tome 1, 26 [30].

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 52 [57].

¹⁸⁸ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 68.

When he arrived in Paris having lost most of his possessions, he had to take whatever job he could find. Jabès worked for several years in an administrative position at an advertising film agency in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly, and he would write in the *métro* during his commute. Amazingly, Jabès sketched early drafts of *The Book of Questions* in crowded Parisian train cars. “I wrote a lot in the metro,” Jabès later recalled; but he preferred to write at home, “for lack of space, I could not isolate myself.”¹⁸⁹ Any resident of Paris can appreciate the irony of leaving one’s own apartment to find the space to write in the purported isolation of the *métro*! Amidst the bustle of his daily commute, Jabès’ writing explores themes of displacement and itinerancy, and the solitude that one can find even in a crowded train. Sometimes writing notes on the back of metro tickets, calendar pages, or scrap paper from the production company, he began sketching several short stories that eventually grew into the first volume of *The Book of Questions*.

Jabès published a volume of poetry entitled *Je bâtis ma demeure, I Build My House*, with Gallimard in 1959, which compiled the poems he wrote in Egypt from 1943 to 1957. In a sense, to turn the page on his life in Egypt, Jabès first had to finish this compilation of his Egyptian poetry. The book included a preface by Gabriel Bounoure, the influential poetry critic at the *N.R.F* (*Nouvelle Revue Française*), whom Jabès had befriended years earlier when he visited Cairo. Jabès later introduced Derrida to Bounoure, who became an important interlocutor for the philosopher.¹⁹⁰ This first publication in France did not come without challenges. After encountering difficulties convincing the editors at Gallimard to publish the work, Jabès sought help from recent Nobel laureate Albert Camus, who was a close friend of the Gallimard family. The Algerian-born novelist and philosopher appreciated Jabès’ poetry, and he was able to push through the publication, writing

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 63.

¹⁹⁰ Didier Cahen writes that one of Derrida’s students was Bricc Bounoure, the grandson of Gabriel Bounoure, who may have served as the intermediary for the first contact between Derrida and Jabès (See: Cahen, 324). We will return to Bounoure’s influence on Jabès and Derrida in chapter four.

to Jabès in July of 1958, “I looked into the matter with [Robert] Mallet. It seems to me that we can lessen these difficulties,” assuring him “I will see with [Michel] Gallimard and I hope you’ll get satisfaction.”¹⁹¹ In February of 1959, the writer and university professor Robert Mallet wrote to Jabès, “A simple note to reassure you of the publication of your volume.”¹⁹² Jabès sent him a copy of *I Build My House* after its publication in May, and Camus wrote Jabès in June 1959 to “heartily thank you for this precious publication, and [I] wish you all the success that your wonderful volume deserves.”¹⁹³ The relationship between these two North-African francophone writers was cut short when Albert Camus and Michel Gallimard were tragically killed in a car crash returning to Paris on New Year’s Day 1960. The volume was received with little fanfare, but positive critical responses. In a review of the volume published in *Critique* in 1960, Robert Bréchon described in Jabès’ poems an “irrepressible word,” and “a response to the world” which challenges speech with silence.¹⁹⁴ After *I Build My House*, Jabès described, “it seemed that I had definitively turned a page of my life.”¹⁹⁵ His life in exile in France had unleashed a force of creativity that allowed him to set out from the shadows of his literary influences, and discover his singular style of writing.

From 1963 until 1973, Jabès embarked on his seven-volume series, *Le Livre des Questions*. “Henceforth, we will better understand *Je bâtis ma demeure*,” Derrida opens his 1964 essay, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book.” He suggests that an element of Jabès’ writing was still germinating in his poetry from his years in Egypt: Jabès had not yet found “its true root,” his poetry still “bent a bit in the wind.” However, he found his singular voice in the first installment of his second major publication, *The Book of Questions*, which was published by Gallimard in

¹⁹¹ Letter from Albert Camus to Edmond Jabès, 22 July 1958, Fond Jabès, BNF.

¹⁹² Letter from Robert Mallet to Edmond Jabès 26 February 1959, Fond Jabès, BNF.

¹⁹³ Letter from Albert Camus to Edmond Jabès, 27 June 1959, Fond Jabès, BNF.

¹⁹⁴ Robert Bréchon, “Edmond Jabès ou la foi poétique,” *Critique* 153 (1960), 123.

¹⁹⁵ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 60.

February of 1963. “The voice has not been altered,” writes Derrida, but “the accent is more serious.”¹⁹⁶ The decisive change provoking the evolution of his writing was his exile from Egypt. As Derrida writes, “what Jabès teaches us is that roots speak, that words want to grow, and that poetic discourse takes root in a wound.” Tellingly, he never mentions Egypt in *I Build My House*: the geography of Egypt is so firmly ingrained in the fabric of Jabès’ words that it is superfluous to name it. Exile from Egypt becomes a central motif in *The Book of Questions*, unleashing the unvarnished creative spark of Jabès’ writing, which attempts to speak the unspeakable, advancing through unceasing self-interrogation. The condition of exile is intimately linked with the practices of commentary and interpretation: the absence or dislocation from one’s homeland is akin to the questioning of the text and its foundations.

V. Derrida, El Biar, and PaRDes

For many years, little was publicly known about Jacques Derrida’s early years beyond the fact that he was born in Algiers and came to Paris to study at the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand. He was particularly reticent to discuss his childhood. Derrida told Didier Cahen in a March 1986 radio interview that a blockage prevented him from publicly revisiting his early life in Algeria:

I wish that a narration were possible. Right now, it’s not. I dream, not of managing, one day, to recount this legacy, this past experience, this history, but at least of giving a narrative account of it among other possible accounts. But, in order to get there, I’d have to undertake a particular kind of work, I’d have to set out on an adventure that up until now I’ve not managed. To invent, to invent a language, to invent modes of anamnesis...¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 77 [99]. Translation modified.

¹⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Le bon plaisir de Jacques Derrida,” broadcast by Didier Cahen, France Culture, March 1986. IMEC.

Derrida describes the difficulty of setting out on the “adventure” of writing the narrative of these years of his life, and the need to “invent a language” and “modes of anamnesis” for him to do so. He was not withholding the details of his early life solely in the interest of his family’s privacy or a desire for secrecy, some further trauma inhibited him from recounting these formative years in Algiers. These difficulties are irremediably connected to the traumas of the Second World War, and then the Algerian War. Nonetheless, the memory of Algeria eventually entered Derrida’s writing more explicitly. His friend and fellow Jewish Algerian-born philosopher Hélène Cixous described “the power of places,” in contrast to “the impotence of human consciousness.” While Derrida may have turned away from Algeria for a time, Cixous suggests that the haunting memory of Algiers persists: “We have forgotten everything, but eucalyptus-scented El Biar remembers. The grounds the winds the trees are haunted.”¹⁹⁸ It would take Derrida until the late 1980s before he set out on this “adventure” to narrate the story of his early years, *à sa façon*, particularly in texts from the 1990s including *Monolingualism of the Other*, *Circumfessions*, and *Points...*¹⁹⁹ While Derrida freely left Algiers to pursue his studies in Paris, his difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences in Algeria echo the story of Jabès’ departure from Egypt: from the difficult separation from the nations of their birth, provoked in large part due to their Jewish family origins, to the permanent sense of foreignness they confronted in France, the paths that led Derrida and Jabès’ to eventually meet in the Latin Quarter in Paris bear salient points of intersection.

“Alger la Blanche” was a city of approximately three hundred thousand people in 1930, the shining hub of France’s colonial holdings in the North African Maghreb. It was constructed

¹⁹⁸ Hélène Cixous, “This Stranjew Body,” *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 52.

¹⁹⁹ Beyond Derrida’s own published reflections on his life in Algeria, Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman’s 2002 film *Derrida*, and Benoit Peeters’ 2010 book *Derrida: A Biography* have shed further light on some of the details of Derrida’s life.

with wide avenues bearing the names of French generals and politicians, complete with its glorified colonial museum and cathedral. The French captured Algiers in 1830, and subsequently extended their colonial rule across the Maghreb. Algeria became one of the world's largest wine producers, which accounted for its main source of revenue, and its territory was integrated as three *départments* of France. In Algiers, European "pieds noirs" slightly outnumbered the local Arab population, which was marked by great inequality and segregation. Exactly one hundred years after Algiers was captured by the French, Jackie Derrida was born at daybreak on July 15, 1930 in a home in the El-Biar district of Algiers, to Haïm Aaron Prosper Charles, *dit* Aimé Derrida and Georgette Safar. They were a petit bourgeois family of assimilated Jews, whose roots traced back to the expulsions of Jews from Spain centuries earlier; Aimé Derrida supported the family working in the wine export business out of the port of Algiers. Without ever stepping foot in the *hexagone*, Derrida was born a French citizen. The 1870 Crémieux Decree, named after the justice minister of France's Third Republic Adolphe Crémieux, granted French nationality to the approximately thirty-five thousand Jews in Algeria. The same privilege was not afforded to the Muslim population. The Crémieux Decree was intended to protect commercial interests with Jewish merchants, solidify the allegiance of Algerian Jews as a bulwark against the Arab population, and one outcome was increased assimilation and gallicization of many Algerian Jews. Derrida's family was in many respects a prime example of the milieu of Jewish *pieds noirs* created by the decree.

Jackie had an older brother named René and a younger sister named Janine; a second brother Paul had died at three months old a year before Jackie's birth, and a third, younger brother Norbert died in 1940 at age two of tubercular meningitis. Derrida was named after actor Jackie Coogan of Chaplin's *The Kid*, and his family continued to call him Jackie long after he had

abandoned the moniker in favor of Jacques when he began to publish in the early 1960s.²⁰⁰ At his *brit milah* on the seventh day of his life, Jackie was given the middle name Élie, after his uncle Eugène Eliahou Derrida, who held him during the circumcision ceremony. Derived from the Hebrew prophet Eliyahu, Élie was inexplicably left off Jackie's birth certificate. Like Jabès' misdated birth certificate, the absence of Derrida's middle name on his birth certificate carries with it an almost messianic symbolic charge. The prophet Eliyahu is reserved a chair at the *brit milah* to witness the sign of the covenant. He is poured an extra glass of wine at the Passover Seder, and the possibility of his coming is a symbol of hope for future redemption. The absence of Élie from his birth certificate made it a kind of secret name, absent from legal documents and formalities, but known to a select few. Derrida used this secret name as a kind of code-word or encrypted signature in several texts. He writes in *Schibboleth* in reference to Paul Celan's poetry,

A word opened to whomever in the figure as well, perhaps, of some prophet Elijah [*Élie*], of his phantom or double. He is unrecognizable, through this monstration of monstrosity, but one must know how to recognize him. Elijah is the one to whom hospitality is due, promised, prescribed. He may come, one must know this, at any moment. He may cause the event of his coming to happen at each instant.²⁰¹

The symbolically charged absence of Derrida's middle name from his birth certificate echoes the mistaken date recorded on Jabès' birth certificate. The official records of their births had omitted or mistaken a crucial detail, leaving a gaping absence in the legal proof of their very existence.

In 1934, the Derrida family moved from their home on the rue Saint-Augustin in Algiers, to a modest villa in the affluent suburb of El Biar, sitting at the hilly edges of the city. El Biar is

²⁰⁰ Derrida explains his name change in an interview with François Ewald in 1991: "I changed my first name when I began to publish, at the moment I entered what is, in sum, the space of literary or philosophical legitimation, whose 'good manners' I was practicing in my own way. In finding that Jackie was not possible as the first name of an author, by choosing what was in some way, to be sure, a semi-pseudonym but also very French, Christian, simple, I must have erased more things than I could say in a few words." Jacques Derrida, "A 'madness' must watch over thinking," *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 343-4.

²⁰¹ Jacques Derrida, "Schibboleth" in *Sovereignities in Question*, trans. Joshua Wilner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 54 [*Schibboleth, pour Paul Celan*, (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 102-103].

Arabic for “the well.” Their home was at the edge of a Christian cemetery and an Arab neighborhood, and it included a garden which Derrida would later call the Orchard, *PaRDes*, the image of paradise from the Kabbalah. In *Circonfessions*, Derrida recalls, “13, rue d'Aurelle-de-Paladines, El-Biar, it's still the orchard, the intact PaRDeS, the seamless present which continues you, the imperturbable phenomenon that you will never see age.”²⁰² Derrida’s timeless memory of his childhood home was frozen in the past; his family was forced to leave Algeria in 1962, and the Algerian state seized and repatriated their home. It is significant that he refers to this home as the Orchard, PaRDes, which is the acronym for the four modes of textual exegesis in the Kabbalah: *Peshat*, the “surface” or literal meaning; *Remez*, “hints,” the allegorical meaning; *Derash*, “seek,” the midrashic or comparative meaning; finally, *Sod*, “mystery,” concerns the mystical or esoteric meaning of a text. Derrida’s childhood memories of the *PaRDes* in El Biar suggest his education in textual interpretation was already underway. The family was not particularly observant of Jewish practices and the children did not receive a formal Jewish education, but Jackie and his siblings would attend synagogue with their maternal grandfather for the High Holidays. He loved the singing and music of the celebrations, and fondly recalled lighting candles and eating pastries during the holidays, though he bristled at the association with any kind of group identity.

There is an uncanny synchronicity to Derrida’s birth falling on the centennial anniversary of the French conquest of Algeria. Cixous observes that critical themes which appeared decades later in Derrida’s writing were already present to him in Algiers: “*Hostipitality*, pardon, perjury, the death sentence, sovereignty, the animal and the slave, all this began its course toward his light from the rue d’Aurelle de Paladine in El Biar then from the lycée Ben Aknoun and thereafter from the lycée Bugeaud, passing by the Place du Gouvernement and before that among the ruins of

²⁰² Jacques Derrida, *Circonfession*, 247.

Algiers bombed in July 1830.”²⁰³ Between the conquest of Algiers in 1830 and Derrida’s birth in 1930, it is as if he was born in a repetition of a historical trauma, whose roots stretched back a century and reverberated into the future. “It has already happened. Already has already happened,” Cixous writes, “he comes to the event that has already happened to him. He comes to the event that is already happening to him. The *déjarrivance* from Al Djezaïr.”²⁰⁴ The coincidence of Derrida’s birth and France’s conquest of Algeria highlight the sense that he had “always-already” experienced this event, a kind of inherited trauma reverberating for a century. His connection to Algiers parallels the arc of the French colonial presence in Algeria: from the centenary of the Algerian conquest at his birth, to the anti-Jewish laws imposed by the Vichy government during his childhood, to his service in Algiers during the Algerian War, to his trip to help his parents move to France in 1962 after Algeria declared its independence.

In his 1996 *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida connects the contingency of nationality and language. As a child he received a French education, and while he learned French and Latin in school, the local languages Berber and Arab were taboo, considered *foreign* languages. He was raised speaking French, he was cultivated by the French education system, and though he had never left Algerian soil – which was legally French soil – he was effectively forbidden from speaking the languages of the people native to Algeria. Linguistically estranged from his home soil, geographically estranged from his “home” language, Derrida’s account reveals the contingency of one’s attachment to a so-called “mother” or “native tongue.” The politics of language are irreparably intertwined with questions of citizenship, national identification, as well as cultural and religious difference. What is Derrida’s native language? The language of his nationality (French), the language of his birth nation (Arab or Berber), or perhaps the language of

²⁰³ Hélène Cixous, “This Stranjew Body” *Judeities* 62.

²⁰⁴ Hélène Cixous, *Judeities*, 63. Al Djezaïr is the Arabic name for Algiers.

his cultural nation (Hebrew)? Derrida describes his monolingualism in the paradoxical formulation, “*Oui, je n'ai qu'une langue, or ce n'est pas la mienne,*” “*Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine.*”²⁰⁵ Derrida’s antinomian claim asserts both possession and dispossession of language, the simultaneous ownership of one’s language as well as the debt it incurs to the Other: one is condemned to live one’s monolingualism, even as that language is contingent, revocable, and beyond ownership. He affirms the performative contradiction of a language that is both mine and never mine. His “ownership” of the French language is as tenuous as his French passport; his alienation from “native” Algerian languages belies his childhood growing up in Algiers; his ignorance of Hebrew speaks to the diaspora of the Jewish people, and his estrangement from religion. Rather, Derrida renounces the concept of “native” or “mother” tongues: “For never was I able to call French, this language I am speaking to you, ‘my mother tongue.’”²⁰⁶ As the language he grew up speaking and in which he is evidently most comfortable, we may be tempted to simplify the matter and say that his native language is, *malgré tout*, French. In a 2004 dialogue with Cixous, Derrida confessed his “strange and stormy passion for the French language,” to which he is irremediably bound: “I remain obstinately monolingual, without any natural access to another language. I read German, I can teach in English, but my attachment to French is absolute. Inflexible.”²⁰⁷ Nonetheless, in *Monolingualism*, Derrida describes French, “the language of the Metropole,” as “the substitute for a mother tongue (is there ever anything else?) as the language of the other.”²⁰⁸ The contingency of one’s ownership and estrangement from a language, one’s monolingualism, is irreducible to a mother tongue, rooted in blood and soil, and

²⁰⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 2 [*Monolingualisme de l'autre: ou la prosthèse d'origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 15].

²⁰⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 34 [61].

²⁰⁷ Jacques Derrida, “From the Word to Life: A Dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous,” *New Literary History*, Winter, 2006, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Winter 2006), 4.

²⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 42 [73-74].

validated by nationality. Derrida's limit case rather starkly reveals the perils of identification with one's "home" language, and its imbrication in questions of national and religious affiliation.

Like the right to speak a language, Derrida's nationality also proved revocable. "Along with others," he writes, "I lost and then gained back French citizenship."²⁰⁹ Following the Nazi invasion of France in January 1940, the country was divided between the German occupied Northern half of the country, and the so-called "Zone Libre," composing the Southern half of the country including the three *départements* of Algeria, which was administered by Pétain's Vichy government. In October 1940, the Crémieux decree and the French nationality of Algerian Jews was revoked. With the ease and anonymity of a proclamation from across the Mediterranean, Algerian Jews became stateless overnight. Further anti-Semitic laws imposed by Vichy restricted the number of Jews who could work or attend schools. Pushing back against the tendency to blame the Germans and obfuscate French collaboration during the war, Derrida reminds this was a decision made by the *French* authorities: "Algeria has never been occupied. I mean that if it has ever been occupied, the German Occupant was never responsible for it. The withdrawal of French citizenship from the Jews of Algeria, with everything that followed, was the deed of the French alone."²¹⁰ The French cannot shirk responsibility for the treatment of the Jews in Algeria because these actions were called for and obeyed by the French authorities on their own volition. He recalls, "we never saw a German uniform in Algeria. None."²¹¹ Though it was legally under the authority of Pétain's Vichy regime, if there was any foreign nation occupying Algeria during the Second World War, it was the French themselves.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 15 [35].

²¹⁰ Ibid, 16 [35].

²¹¹ Ibid, 16 [36].

Derrida was perhaps too young to fully grasp losing his citizenship at ten years old, but he was devastated by his expulsion from school. In his 1980 text *The Postcard*, he alludes to the traumatic event which occurred in October 1942 at the Lycée Ben Aknoun: “Did they not expel me from school when I was 11, no German having set foot in Algeria? The only school official whose name I remember today: he has me come into his office: ‘You are going to go home, my little friend, your parents will get a note.’”²¹² Derrida’s siblings were expelled the previous year, and when the Vichy government installed tighter quotas on Jews in the fall of 1942, Jackie was expelled as well. Particularly because he was a good student, the trauma remained with him for many years. “It is an experience that leaves nothing intact, an atmosphere that one goes on breathing forever,” he told Cathérine David in a 1983 interview: “Jewish children expelled from school.”²¹³ Social exclusion left deep scars. He recalled, “friends who no longer knew you, insults, the Jewish high school with its expelled teachers and never a whisper of protest from their colleagues.”²¹⁴ While Derrida was not observant, he found himself excluded from school and stripped of his French nationality due to his association with this term “Jew.” In a 2000 text “Abraham, the Other,” Derrida recalls that he first encountered the word “Jew” was as an *insult*:

As for the word *Jew*, I do not believe I heard it first in my family [...]. I believe I heard it at school in El Biar, already charged with what, in Latin, one would call an insult [*injure*], *injuria*, in English, *injury*, both an insult, a wound, and an injustice [...] Before understanding any of it, I received this word like a blow, a denunciation, a de-legitimation prior to any legality.²¹⁵

After his expulsion, Derrida enrolled at the Lycée Maïmonide-Émile-Maupas, a provisional school of Jewish students and teachers expelled from public schools. However, Derrida bristled at

²¹² Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Freud to Socrates and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 87.

²¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*, 120.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 121.

²¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Abraham, the Other” in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, eds. Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, Raphale Zagury-Orly (New York: Fordham UP, 2007), 10.

the group identification in this school, remarking that he felt “just as out-of-place in a closed Jewish community as I did on the other side,” and he skipped school for the better part of a year.²¹⁶

American forces arrived in Algiers in November of 1942, liberating the territory from Vichy control. Derrida recalled that on the morning of November 8, “the Americans arrived in force, as always handing out cigarettes, chewing gum, chocolates [...]. This first disembarkation was like a *caesura*, a break in life, a new point of arrival and departure.”²¹⁷ As the war continued in Europe, Algiers was established as the base for the exile government of “Free France,” under the power-sharing agreement of the provisional “two-headed” government headed by Generals Charles de Gaulle and Henri Giraud. However, the Vichy-imposed racial laws discriminating against Jews were nonetheless maintained for six months even under the auspices of “free” France. Giraud was in favor of maintaining the Vichy restrictions, and it was only when de Gaulle ousted him in a putsch that the anti-Jewish restrictions were abolished in March of 1943; the Crémieux Decree was only re-instated in October 1943 by the French Committee on National Liberation, headed by de Gaulle. In the interim, though still legally a stateless person, Derrida was allowed to return to Lycée Ben Aknoun at the end of *cinquième classe*. The school had been transformed by the British into a military hospital and a POW camp for captured Italians, and because most of the male teachers had been called into the army, classes were taught by replacement teachers in makeshift barracks. Derrida returned to school a different student. He described himself as a “voyou,” a rogue, preferring to play soccer than concentrate on his studies; to his embarrassment, he failed the *baccalauréat* in 1947. Upon retaking and passing the exam, Derrida was rededicated, motivated by his discovery of philosophy in the final year of *lycée*, particularly after reading Sartre.

²¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Points*... 121.

²¹⁷ Jacques Derrida quoted by Hélène Cixous, ‘Celle qui ne se ferme pas’, in Mustapha Chérif, ed., *Derrida à Alger: un regard sur le monde. Essais* (Arles: Actes sud, 2008), 48–9.

Derrida passed the qualifying exam to enroll in *classes préparatoires*, and he began his residence at the elite Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris in the fall of 1949. He was subsequently attended the École Normale Supérieure from 1952 to 1956. Derrida later recounted that when he left Algeria for France, he hoped to put the central drama of his adolescence – anti-Semitism – behind him. This, he reflected, pushed him to seek out a non-Jewish milieu in France:

In France, the suffering subsided. At nineteen, I naively thought that anti-Semitism had disappeared, at least there where I was living at the time. But during adolescence, it was *the* tragedy, it was present in everything else [...] Paradoxical effect, perhaps, of this brutalization: a desire for integration in the non-Jewish community, a fascinated but painful and suspicious desire, nervously vigilant, an exhausting aptitude to detect signs of racism, in its most discreet configurations or its noisiest disavowals. Symmetrically, sometimes, an impatient distance with regards to the Jewish communities, whenever I have the impression that they are closing themselves off by posing themselves as such.²¹⁸

Integrating himself in a non-Jewish milieu in France, Derrida sought to escape the principal trauma of his youth. Despite his efforts to put anti-Semitism behind him, questions of marginality and exclusion remained central to his thinking in Algeria just as in France, in Jewish and non-Jewish communities, in philosophy and literature. Derrida did not often refer to his “exile,” and he refused the unambiguous affirmation, “I am Jewish,” but his story evokes key aspects of the legacy of *galut*. In France, he could not avoid the history of anti-Semitism or the question of Algeria.

In November 1954, the FLN, *Front de Libération Nationale*, a violent anti-colonial political faction in Algeria, orchestrated a series of attacks on French police and military targets that killed thirty people. This marked the opening salvo in the bloody eight-year guerilla war for independence waged by the FLN against the French colonial forces, and most notably against the notorious French renegades of the OAS, the *Organisation armée secrete*. After completing his studies at the École Normale Supérieure and spending a year as a visiting student at Harvard University, Derrida and his new bride Marguerite Aucouturier were sent to Koléa, a small town

²¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Points...* 121.

outside of Algiers, for twenty-seven months beginning in 1957 to fulfil his mandatory French military service. He was able to secure a non-combat role as a teacher at a *collège*, a middle school, for the children of French soldiers. Life in Koléa was difficult for the couple, who lived amongst French military service families of quite divergent ideological perspectives. They purchased a Citroën 2CV, allowing them to travel freely through Algiers; they routinely spent Shabbat dinners with Derrida's parents in El Biar, and socialized with friends whose service overlapped, including his friend from Louis Le Grand Pierre Bourdieu, and his friend from the ENS Lucien Bianco. Even if Derrida managed to avoid a combat role and carried out his service in civilian clothes, the intensity of the fighting took its toll. Marguerite told biographer Benoit Peeters,

At night-time, it was a real war. We could regularly hear gunfire. Horrible things happened. One evening, an FLN leader was executed; they then dragged him into the Kasbah, his neck tied to a jeep, before leaving the body outside a mosque. They were probably trying to intimidate the Algerians, but of course this kind of provocation merely stoked their hatred. To crown it all, the dogs in the barracks started barking every time Jackie passed by. 'They take me for an Arab,' he used to say, and he was probably right, as his complexion was very dark, as usual when he came back to Algeria.²¹⁹

The war became increasingly brutal during the time Derrida was in Koléa, as attacks by the FLN and the French OAS reached new heights of violence. Given his personal imbrication in Algiers and his role as a teacher for the children of French soldiers, the conflict deeply rattled Derrida.

In May 1958, tensions rose in Algiers amongst the French military leadership leading to an attempted coup, and provoking a political crisis that brought about the collapse of the French Fourth Republic. During this period of intense uncertainty, Derrida worried that other French soldiers questioned his loyalties. The situation left him literally nauseated. As he remarked privately, "the stupidity around us was particularly aggressive."²²⁰ The other French military

²¹⁹ Benoit Peeters, *Derrida*, 93-94.

²²⁰ Ibid, 95: "Jackie could not help but imagine what the group of soldiers were saying about him: 'he doesn't give a damn about the murdered French soldiers', 'anyway, he's a Communist', 'his wife isn't French', 'he's a Jew', 'he reads *Le Monde* and *L'Express*', 'his wife translates Russian books' . . . And suddenly, at the end of his tether, he

service members accepted the French government's just cause to maintain control over Algeria, despite the growing evidence that French rule was doomed. They looked at the Algerian-born, dark-skinned, Jewish philosopher with suspicion. Derrida wrote to his friend Lucian Bianco, "never had my faith and my fear as a democrat seemed so very 'gross', and the fascist danger so close, so concrete, so invasive. And all this at a time when I am so alone, without friends, without any prospect of getting away, a soldier in a land that's 'sealed off.'"²²¹ Amidst the fighting, his isolation from Algiers on the military base in Koléa was compounded by his isolation from the others living on the base. This double exclusion echoes the traumas of his rescinded nationality, his expulsion from school, and his social exclusion in Algiers during the previous war.

The National Assembly voted on June 1, 1958 to grant Charles de Gaulle full powers for a period of six months to craft a new constitution. Derrida was ambivalent towards the General: he was to the left of de Gaulle in terms of France's domestic affairs, but he also knew that he had ended the anti-Jewish laws in Algeria and reinstated the Crémieux Decree in 1943. The constitution was ratified by a national vote in September 1958, and de Gaulle became the first president of the Fifth Republic on December 21. The war in Algeria reached a major turning point on September 16, 1959 when he spoke of Algerian "autodétermination" for the first time in a televised speech. While it did not spell out the immediate end of the French presence in Algeria, these words were much feared by the proponents of *l'Algérie Française*. De Gaulle announced, "the route has been laid out. The decision has been made."²²² The fighting continued, but Derrida's

started sobbing: 'The idea that this gang of bloody idiots, all cosy in their unassailable, invulnerable clear consciences, their clear consciences as thick as elephants' hides, could condemn me as a "traitor" who approved of murder and terrorism, suddenly got to me.'

²²¹ Ibid, 97-8; Letter from Jacques Derrida to Lucien Bianco, 14–29 May 1958. Derrida wrote later to Bianco that he would have preferred to have fought in the previous war: "I'm at a complete loss, can't settle to anything, a second-class soldier lost in an ocean of malevolent stupidity and I'd like to be in Paris – even if it were occupied by fascists –, as a civilian, with a few friends, and able to play even a modest role in some resistance movement . . . What damn awful luck!"

²²² Charles de Gaulle, Speech on Algerian Self-Determination, 16 September 1959 in Julian Jackson, *De Gaulle*

military service graciously ended, and he and Marguerite returned to France in 1959.²²³

The Évian agreements in March 1962 imposed a cease-fire between the Algerian FLN and the OAS, ending a spate of attacks and assassination attempts both in Algeria and France. On July

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 518.

²²³ Derrida never published any commentary related to the war in Algeria, or the two years that he spent in Algiers during the war. However, a recently published letter that Derrida sent to his friend Pierre Nora concerning his 1961 polemic *Les Français d'Algérie* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 2012) revealed some of his reflections on the conflict. Released at the height of uncertainty concerning Algeria's future, Nora's book did not target the hardline colonists, rather he unleashed a stinging critique of French liberals who he accused of complicity in perpetuating the conflict. For Nora, "the situation of the French of Algeria carries in it the seed of *all* extremisms" (206). Even the French liberals who sought to improve the abysmal economic situation and abhorred the violence committed against the Algerians were, for Nora, still complicit in France's colonial machinations. With some audacity, he criticized the positions taken by liberal national heroes Germaine Tillon as well as Albert Camus. Nora depicts Meursault, Camus' character in *The Stranger*, as an example of the repressed desire to commit violence against the Algerians. Nora claimed that if French of Algeria could simply rid themselves of the "Arabs," they would: "if one offered them genocide with the push of a button, how many of the French of Algeria would refuse it?" (206) Nora demanded nothing short of full independence for Algeria, and a "New Deal pour l'Algérie," a massive investment in social, political, and economic programs to lift the war-torn, impoverished country. He also called for the end of the *pieds noirs* in Algeria: "for the current French of Algeria, *c'est l'adieu*" (266). The book provoked fierce criticism. Raymond Aron told Nora, "18 over 20 for the writer, zero for the citizen!" (18). André Bénichou was reportedly so incensed that he threw the book out the window, striking a passing police officer. Derrida's letter, dated April 27, 1961, begins, "Mon cher Nora...". In the intimacy of a private address to an old friend, Derrida is at times highly complementary, and at others, fiercely critical of Nora's book. He never explicitly speaks in favor of Algerian independence, nor he does he support the French war; he clearly felt targeted by Nora's book and disagreed vehemently with its description of the *pieds noirs*, and yet Derrida agrees with many of the solutions that Nora proposes for Algeria. Derrida enthusiastically agrees with Nora's historical and psychological interpretation of Camus' *The Stranger*. He writes, "I found the intention in the several pages that you consecrate to *The Stranger* to be *excellent*. I always read this book as an Algerian book, and the whole critical-philosophical edifice which Sartre constructed around it always seemed to me, in effect, to diminish or hide its meaning and its 'historical' originality" (292). Nonetheless, he reproaches Nora for his extremely unsympathetic depiction of Camus' efforts on behalf of Algeria. Derrida argued it was grossly unfair to compare Camus to the hardline colonists who dream of the "Algérie-de-papa" and the unrepentant submission of French Algeria. Where Nora accuses Camus of selectively disengaging with the Algerian question for reasons of convenience, Derrida reproached that this argument "is really unworthy of Camus. And of you" (293). He also pushed back against Nora's reductive and unfair depiction of the French of Algeria, which lumped the *pieds noirs* along with the hardcore colonists. Derrida chides Nora, if there is no meaningful difference between the French liberals and the colonists, "what a shame that the Nazis or the Americans weren't racist enough or that their racism didn't have sufficient resources!" (298) For Derrida, Nora paints the *pieds noirs* with too broad a brush, which was manifestly unfair to many liberals, including Camus, who had fought to help improve the conditions of the Algerians. While Nora derided the tepid position of French liberals regarding the future of Algeria, Derrida warned that they would be important allies of Algeria in any future move towards independence. Derrida writes, "Algerian liberalism will be powerless exactly to the extent that totalitarianism takes root in Algeria" (284). Despite significant disagreements concerning the future of Algeria, Derrida welcomes the program that Nora describes as the "New Deal for Algeria." Describing his preferred path for Algeria as one of "real socialism," Derrida anticipates the need for a long period of transition to independence in which liberal *pieds noirs* that remained in Algeria would be crucial. Derrida's own position, if we can say that he takes one, cannot be described as adhering to the liberal French position towards Algeria, nor does he adopt the more radical line of Nora's book. Rather, Derrida emphasized that moderate Algerians who did not support the FLN and liberal *pieds noirs* who did not follow the "ultras," would need to reemerge in a new Algerian society. The liberals should not shoulder the blame for the extremism on both sides of the conflict. See : Pierre Nora, *Les Français d'Algérie*, (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 2012) ; Edward Baring, "Liberalism and the Algerian War: The Case of Jacques Derrida," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter 2010), 239-261.

1, 1962, six million Algerians voted overwhelmingly in favor of a referendum for independence. With the end of the French presence in sight, and with many fearing retribution from a post-colonial Algerian government, *pied noir* families began streaming out of the country. Derrida's siblings Janine and René and their families left Algiers in the spring, amidst a chaotic rush of departures. Derrida had hoped that there might be peaceful coexistence between the Algerians and *pieds noirs* who had lived in Algiers for generations, and he initially advised his parents to stay in El Biar. However, the remaining French in Algeria were soon offered a rather stark choice between leaving with "la valise ou le cercueil," "with the suitcase or in the coffin." At some risk to himself, Derrida returned to El Biar two weeks later to help his parents settle their affairs from the home on rue d'Aurette-de-Paladines. Aimée and Georgette hoped they would be able to return to the house when the situation had calmed; they never dreamed of leaving Algeria, and they had only recently paid off the mortgage on the house. When they left, the house was repatriated by the Algerian state. Derrida's parents re-settled in Nice along with many who fled Algeria.

The year 1962 constituted a turning point in Derrida's life. As he told Évelyne Grossman in 2004, "my adolescence lasted until I was thirty-two."²²⁴ That year, Algeria declared its independence from France, Derrida published his first book, and he assumed his new name, Jacques. These events mark an unmistakable symbolic break from his past in Algeria: the path back to his childhood home had been foreclosed, and he had cut ties with his identity as Jackie and adopted a formal French name, a decision sealed on the cover of his first publication.

²²⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Les voix d'Artaud (la force, la forme, la forge)" *Le Nouveau Magazine Littéraire*, 2004 / 9 (no. 434), 34.

VI. Conclusion

Maurice Blanchot writes in *The Writing of Disaster*, “Whoever writes is exiled from writing, which is the country – his own – where he is not a prophet.”²²⁵ For Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès, the exile of writing is intertwined with the writing of exile. Their experiences of exile were provoked by the legacy of colonialism, world wars, and the unmitigated catastrophes of the 20th century. These narratives are inseparable from the question of Jewish identity, and the historical legacy of Jewish *galut*. For these writers, there was no possibility of *nostos*. The communities they had departed for France were subsequently uprooted or destroyed. If Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès were born diaspora, they would depart their homes bound for a new *galut* in France: they are thinkers of departure and dislocation, rather than nostalgic return. The condition of exile is not only a reflection of their lived experiences, but the situation which they confront in writing in the question of the book. Drawing on their own experiences, Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas characterized exile as a kind of existential condition. For Jabès, exile is a synonym for the Jew, and the activity of writing is an expression of this dislocation. He writes, “for me the two conditions, Judaism and writing, are utterly bound up with each other.”²²⁶ Levinas, as we’ve seen, describes the “il y a” as an experience of exile from the world, a kind of a flight from humanity that he witnessed during the *débâcle* of 1940 and as a prisoner in the Nazi Stalag. Derrida’s reflections on his difficult affiliation to the French language reveal the imminent condition of exile contained in one’s relation to a “homeland” and “mother tongue.” As Derrida insists, “I only have one language, yet it is not mine.” The exile from language, like the exile from the homeland and the world or even being as

²²⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Anne Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 63.

²²⁶ Edmond Jabès, “The Question of Jewishness and The Question of Writing: An Exchange With Edmond Jabès,” 16.

such, represents an affront to the intrinsic value of the *nostos* tale, the fidelity of memory, and the singular attachment to native language. The paths that led Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès to France represent vastly different experiences of exile, but each confronts the condition of exile through the proxy of the question of the book. Jabès writes in *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of his Arm a Tiny Book*, “the place of language is language. Exile from his language is the exile’s fate. [La langue a, pour lieu, la langue. L’exil de la langue est la condition de l’exilé].”²²⁷

²²⁷ Edmond Jabès, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of his Arm a Tiny Book*, 69.

Chapter II: The Jew, the Pariah, and the Writer

I. Introduction

What does it mean to describe someone as a “Jewish” writer? Is this label applied based on the writer’s heritage or familial affiliation, his or her observance of Jewish practices, or is it a quality of writing itself that is distinctively Jewish? Is this identity mutable, or does the writer carry this mark of Jewishness in all activities? Who defines this affiliation to Judaism, and on what terms? Is it a choice? It is hopelessly problematic to identify a characteristic or trait that is symptomatic of “Jewish” writing. The diverse forms of life encompassed by Judaism cannot be reduced to a genetic trace or identifying mark that would define a necessary and sufficient standard by which to qualify a “Jewish” writer. This question composes a subset of the broader difficulty concerning the slippery notion of “Jewish identity.” One point where there is broad agreement, Howard Wettstein writes, is that “any attempt to locate anything like *the* correct account of Jewish identity, or *the* correct Jewish identity, is doomed to failure. There is no—and from the ancient world there never has been— single or uniquely correct Jewish identity. One is reminded of the old joke concerning n Jews and $n+1$ synagogues.”²²⁸ This specific problem of determining the “essence” of Jewish identity highlights the general question of identity claims and affiliation.

The boundaries of identity are imposed both internally and externally: being Jewish is defined both from within, from the perspective of the Jewish community’s own self-identification

²²⁸ Howard Wettstein, “Introduction,” *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, ed. Howard Wettstein (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 9.

and its determination of who counts among its members, and from without, by non-Jews, who have historically projected the figure of the Jew as a target for exclusion and discrimination. The Jew is pulled and pushed between these opposing dynamics. Even if there is no “essence” to being Jewish, this does not prevent the reification of such an identity through its double-edged modes of affiliation. The history of Jewish life in Christian Europe has long entailed a tussle to define the boundaries of Jewish identity. These strictures connect the social and political questions regarding the inclusion or exclusion of Jews in Christian society – the “Jewish Question” – with the ontological question of what it means to be a Jew, that is, the specific character of Jewish existence. Indeed, the character of “Jewish” consciousness is inflected with the same double-edged mode of exclusion: the social alienation of the Jewish people is related to the self-alienation of Jewish consciousness. Franz Kafka wrote in his diary in 1914, “What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself.”²²⁹ The difficulty of assigning Jewish identity, or defining the essential character of the “Jewish” writer, illustrates the divided or fractured consciousness of the Jew, the differential character of *all* identity, and the ineradicable otherness contained in the self. Kafka’s remark discloses the aberration of substantive identity as a signal of wholeness, and it suggests the *aporia* of Jewish identity, among all others.

The question of Jewish identity in France has long focused on its compatibility with Republican ideals. Irwin Wall writes, “the dilemma facing French Jewry since the Revolution of 1789 has been that of a community trying to affirm its specificity in a society whose Jacobin tradition has seemed to demand complete assimilation and uniformity.”²³⁰ Jewish particularism in the context of the universal ideals of the French Republic was always viewed with suspicion,

²²⁹ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914-1923*. ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg with Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1949), 11.

²³⁰ Irwin Wall, “Remaking Jewish Identity in France,” *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, 165.

wavering between uneasy coexistence and hostility. The relative peace and prosperity of the French Third Republic, born out of the wreckage of the 1871 Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, saw assimilated Jews rise to positions of power, even if the nation's deep-seated anti-Semitism remained intact. These dynamics produced certain ironic outcomes. France was the country where a Jewish military official like Alfred Dreyfus could ascend to a high-ranking post in the army, only to be felled by specious claims based in anti-Semitism, and where a Jewish socialist like Léon Blum – himself a *Dreyfussard* – could become prime minister, both before *and* after Pétain's Vichy government.²³¹ Of course, if the Dreyfus affair revealed the stubborn persistence of anti-Semitism in the French Third Republic, it was only a glimpse of the frightful potential unleashed during the Nazi occupation. Wall writes, “that Jews could accede to the highest office of the French government did not lessen the sense of rupture between France and its Jews created by the war and the Vichy regime.”²³² The sense of betrayal led to a painstaking reevaluation of French-Jewish identity after the war. The pragmatic and existential stakes of Jewish identity in post-war France reflected the need to memorialize the Shoah and Dreyfus, and to reconstruct a

²³¹ Léon Blum became the leader of the French Socialists following the assassination of Jean Jaurès in 1914, under the banner of the *Front Populaire*. He served as Prime Minister under President Albert Lebrun in two stints in 1936-1937 and briefly in 1938. Shortly before the elections that led to his nomination as prime minister in 1936, Blum was brutally attacked by a group of anti-Semitic royalists known as the *Camelots du Roi*. This incident did not deter Blum from passing major reforms protecting worker's rights, including the forty-hour work week and paid time off. Further, the Blum-Violette plan included a proposal to extend French citizenship to Algerian nationals, which was struck down by the hard-liner *colons* in the congress and senate. While Blum fatefully decided that France would remain neutral in the Spanish Civil War, he was also a forceful critic of fascism and particularly the crimes being committing against the Jews in Germany, leading to an influx of Jewish refugees into France. Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton write, “Few political leaders denounced the hostility toward immigrants more forcefully than Léon Blum.” (62) During the Nazi Occupation, Blum defiantly remained in France; he was arrested by the Vichy regime and imprisoned in the Pyrenées until 1943, when the Nazis sent him to Buchenwald alongside other high ranking officials. As the war turned against the Nazis, the order for Blum's execution was issued in April 1945, but it was ignored, and he was liberated from the camps in May. After the war, Blum briefly served as the prime minister under President Vincent Auriol for just over a month in 1946-1947 in the provisional government which established the Fourth Republic. See: Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy et les Juifs* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1981); Pierre Birnbaum, *Léon Blum: Prime Minister, Socialist, Zionist*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²³² Irwin Wall, “Remaking Jewish Identity in France,” 168.

cultural identity that had been so nearly destroyed. This chapter explores the modes of exclusion that structure Jewish identity in 20th century France, from the legacy of the “Jewish Question” and the Dreyfus Affair – notably, Bernard Lazare’s “conscious pariah” – to the post-war reckoning with anti-Semitism in France and the traumatic memory of the Shoah. For Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès, the difficulty of Jewish identity illustrates the fragility of affiliation and belonging.

Post-war philosophical reflections on anti-Semitism in France were inaugurated by Sartre’s study *Réflexions sur la question juive*, which reflects on the anti-Semite’s projection of the Jew. But as many critics have noted, his phenomenology of anti-Semitism ignores the existential reality of what Levinas calls “being Jewish.” For Levinas and others involved in the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française*, there was a sense of obligation to reflect on the history of Jewish life and thought in France, which was nearly extinguished in the Shoah. Levinas identifies in the facticity of Jewish existence a “metaphysical sentiment” of election, which implies a unique sensitivity to the threat of violence realized in its most terrible form during the Nazi era, and gives rise to a notion of existence as a form of ethical subjectivity. By contrast, Derrida and Jabès explore the paradox of identity and the *aporia* of affiliation and belonging, and even as they engage questions related to Judaism, they refuse any simple identification as “Jewish” writers. Derrida and Jabès extend Lazare’s figure of the conscious pariah, as critical voices at the limits of tradition, who question orthodoxy and dare to reimagine the Jewish tradition otherwise, through the modality of the *comme si*, the *as if*. Between the ethical subjectivity of Levinas’ “being Jewish” and Jabès’ literary re-imagination of Judaism in the mode of what Derrida calls “hyperbolic Judaism,” the question of Jewish identity yields two avenues for responding to the paradoxical call of belonging.

II. The Jew and the Conscious Pariah

The double-sided modes of exclusion that police the boundaries of Jewish identity are brought to the fore in the historical figure of the Jewish pariah. In his 1920 *Sociology of Religion*, Max Weber described the Jewish people as the quintessential *Paria-Volk*, who are subjected to “negative privileges” – that is, discrimination – due to their perceived differences from Christian society.²³³

The figure of the outcast or pariah has long been used both as a justification to exclude and discriminate against Jews, but it also has a counter-history which Hannah Arendt called the “hidden tradition” of the “conscious pariah.” The “conscious pariah” originates in the writing of Bernard Lazare, a late 19th century French Jewish journalist, outspoken defender of Alfred Dreyfus, anarchist, and Zionist. When Lazare died in 1903 at thirty-eight years old, he left behind an unfinished manuscript on the political destiny of the Jews in Europe entitled *Job’s Dunghill*, which the author’s brother published in 1927. The notion of the “conscious pariah” turns the traditional sense of the Jewish pariah on its head, re-appropriating the pejorative stereotype as a virtue. Lazare’s conscious pariah is a kind of political rebel, who dares to question authority.

After the 19th century political emancipation of many Western European Jews, Lazare noted the stubborn persistence of the figure of the Jewish pariah in the French Third Republic. “I am a Jew and Christian society rejects me,” he writes, “it makes of me a pariah. Even amongst my friends, at certain times I sense that the moral and intellectual communication is interrupted by the survival of prejudice.”²³⁴ Even as the political situation of French Jews had markedly improved over the course of the 19th century, Lazare evokes the stubborn persistence of prejudice even amongst those he considers friends. The Dreyfus Affair had brought to the surface the

²³³ See: Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

²³⁴ Bernard Lazare, *Le Fumier de Job* (Belval: Circé, 1996), 10.

undercurrents of anti-Semitism orienting political allegiances in the French Third Republic, and Lazare was one of Dreyfus' earliest and most vocal defenders. In *Job's Dunghill*, he wonders what is the distinctive character of the Jew that provokes such obdurate resentment. Lazare succinctly illustrates what it means to be a Jew, as the perennial Other of Christian society:

There are two. One, sad and surprised ; he is called Jew; what is that ?
The other : "I will teach you what it means to be a Jew."
Shouts of death in the streets: *Mort aux Juifs!*
The second opens the *Emek Abaka*; he reads and the breath of long ago returns; it comes from the depths of the past, always the same. "Why this against us, and always this?" says the first. "Becomes we are others."²³⁵

For Lazare, the gains made by European Jews in the 19th century by way of political emancipation had not remove age-old stigma. When the first character hears the cries of this timeless anti-Semitic slogan in the street, in a highly symbolic gesture, the second opens the "Emek Abaka," "The Vale of Tears," a history of the persecution of the Jews compiled by Joseph HaCohen in the 15th century. To recall the historical connection between the discrimination of the present day and the past—this is what it means to be a Jew. The Jews have "never found the garden of rest, or its chosen land," Lazare writes, "When we think we've found a haven, the promised land, cities of refuge, persecution returns: we must flee, flee from Spain, flee from Poland, etc."²³⁶ It is the implacability of anti-Semitism, the persistence of the murderous chant "Mort aux juifs," and the permanent possibility that they will be forced to flee that binds Jews across generations.

Lazare reasons that there must be something unique to being Jewish which consistently solicit such hatred. Rather than concealing his Jewishness and running from the label of pariah, he embraces the charge. "What bitter pride to feel this universal hatred," he exclaims, "to be detested by the entire human race, we must carry something great inside of us."²³⁷ He embraces the role of

²³⁵ Ibid, 24.

²³⁶ Ibid, 47.

²³⁷ Ibid, 49.

the conscious pariah who intentionally speaks from his unenviable position as other or outsider, to re-appropriate the stigmatizing figure of the pariah. “The pride of being the pariah” is the distinctiveness of the Jew in Christian society: “What delight to create a nobility from his infamy, a royalty from his debasement.” The conscious pariah does not flee his label, rather he or she transforms the pariah into a political dissident, a kind of rebel. Enzo Traverso writes, “For Lazare, the pariah was not simply someone excluded; he was the proscribed who transforms himself into rebel, who does not accept passively suffering his oppressed condition but makes it the point of departure for a political revolt. In other words, a ‘conscious pariah.’”²³⁸ Lazare embraces the conscious pariah who dares to speak truthfully even at the risk of marginalization.

Hannah Arendt expanded upon the figure of the conscious pariah in several wartime essays written in exile in the United States. In her 1944 essay “We Refugees,” Arendt recalls the figure of the conscious pariah as a counter-tradition in modern Jewish history:

Modern Jewish history, having started with court Jews and continuing with Jewish millionaires and philanthropists, is apt to forget about this other thread of Jewish tradition—the tradition of Heine, Rahel Varnhagen, Sholom Aleichem, of Bernard Lazare, Franz Kafka, or even Charlie Chaplin. It is the tradition of a minority of Jews who have not wanted to become upstarts, who preferred the status of “conscious pariah.” All vaunted Jewish qualities—the “Jewish heart,” humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence—are pariah qualities. All Jewish shortcomings—tactlessness, political stupidity, inferiority complexes, and money-grubbing—are characteristic of upstarts. There have always been Jews who did not think it worthwhile to change their humane attitude and their natural insight into reality for the narrowness of caste spirit or the essential unreality of financial transactions.²³⁹

From Heinrich Heine and Rahel Varnhagen to Franz Kafka and Charlie Chaplin, the conscious pariah stands at the fringes of the tradition, representing the revolutionary spirit of the outcast. In “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” Arendt writes that the pariah has become “a human type — a concept of supreme importance for the evaluation of mankind.”²⁴⁰ The tradition of the

²³⁸ Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 64.

²³⁹ Hannah Arendt “We Refugees,” *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 274.

²⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt, “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” *The Jewish Writings*, 276.

conscious pariah in modern Jewish history is “tacit and latent, and its continuance automatic and unconscious,” populated by rebellious figures who dare to say that the emperor has no clothes. The pariah pledges no allegiance to a group or nation, and he is refused entry by all: the pariah represents the rebellious spirit of all oppressed people. While the figure of the conscious pariah starts with this Jewish “hidden tradition,” Arendt suggests it becomes a universal figure, “a human type,” who exists as a thorn in the side of authority. She identifies a forerunner to the conscious pariah in Heinrich Heine’s character the “schlemiel,” who identifies “the essential kinship of the pariah to the poet – both alike excluded from society and never quite at home in this world.”²⁴¹ However, the schlemiel is defined by his essential innocence before the cruelties of the world. It was Lazare who translated the political significance of the conscious pariah: Arendt explains, “in contrast to his unemancipated brethren who accept their pariah status automatically and unconsciously, the emancipated Jew must awake to an awareness of his position and, conscious of it, become a rebel against it – the champion of an oppressed people.” The conscious pariah is a rebel against the political order as a representative of the oppressed, whose “fight for freedom is part and parcel of that which all the downtrodden of Europe must wage to achieve national and social liberation.” The conscious pariah appeals to humanity beyond the bounds of politics.

Until the 20th century, there was at least a semblance of escape for the Jewish pariah. “So long as the Jews of Western Europe were pariahs only in a social sense,” Arendt wrote in 1944, “they could find salvation, to a large extent, by becoming parvenus.”²⁴² The Jewish *parvenu* found a means of largely escaping discrimination through financial success and by masking the outward signs of his or her Jewishness. However, biological anti-Semitism obviated the distinction between the pariah and parvenu. The Nazis did not distinguish between practicing and secular Jews,

²⁴¹ Ibid, 283.

²⁴² Ibid, 296.

between those who actively identified as Jews and others with distant Jewish ancestry, or between pariahs and parvenus. The Jew belonged to a biological race whose destiny was inalterable and inescapable. “Today the bottom has dropped out of the old ideology,” Arendt writes, “the pariah Jew and the parvenu Jew are in the same boat, rowing desperately in the same angry sea,” “both are branded with the same mark; both alike are outlaws.” The innocence of Heine’s schlemiel no longer has a place in this world, where there is no reprieve for the rebellious pariah, and the Jew cannot escape his or her existential affiliation. Rather, as Arendt identifies in “Guests from No-Mans-Land,” today, the quintessential figure of the pariah is the refugee. Cast into the legal abyss of exile, occupying a liminal zone of non-recognition, the refugee is forced to flee his or her homeland and seek refuge in a foreign and likely unsympathetic land. Unable to escape his or her fate, sealed in Jewish blood, the refugee is tossed into a desperate limbo, with no assurance of survival. Nonetheless, Arendt notes, “those few refugees who insist upon telling the truth, even to the point of ‘indecent,’ get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of gentiles.”²⁴³ Writing these words in New York in 1943 as the Nazi war machine tightened its grip over Europe, Arendt certainly appreciated the irony. Refugees who speak out frankly against the powers that expelled them have the rare opportunity to act as true witnesses to history in the making.

The exile, the pariah, the refugee – these figures are deeply intertwined with the historical legacy of the Jew, without being exhausted by the association. These social outcasts are not exclusively Jews, they do not define what it means to be a Jew, and yet the associations are profoundly entangled. The *aporia* of Jewish identity, its double-sided mode of exclusion from within and from without, defines the stakes of these associations. The history of the Jewish people

²⁴³ Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” 274.

is intertwined with a narrative of exile and social exclusion, which extends from the biblical narrative to modern history; yet, the figures of the pariah and refugee are also the source for anti-Semitic depictions of Ahasuerus, the “wandering Jew,” and the view of the Jewish people as an untrustworthy “state within a state.” Lazare’s effort to re-appropriate the Jewish pariah as a political rebel is emblematic of this tussle between Jewish self-definition and the externally imposed figure of the Jew. A writer in exile is no more “Jewish” than a writer who has not been exiled, and yet it cannot fail to recall the history of the Jewish people. Whether this identity is determined by the Jewish community or by the anti-Semite, the individual is subsumed by group affiliation. This is the double-sided exclusion that complicates claims of identity. It is also the great virtue of Lazare’s conscious pariah, whose unyielding truth-telling questions both the prevailing powers of the Christian state, as well as the orthodoxy of the Jewish community. Excluded by both, the conscious pariah is the marginalized free thinker who questions authority in all its guises.

III. Sartre and the Anti-Semite’s Jew

As France celebrated its liberation from German occupation in the second half of 1944, Jean-Paul Sartre noted that the public spoke little of the fate of France’s Jews. “Now all France rejoices and fraternizes in the streets,” Sartre wrote, “Do we say anything about the Jews? Do we give a thought to those who died in the gas chambers at Lublin? Not a word.”²⁴⁴ Supposedly to assert a semblance of national unity in the aftermath of the liberation from Nazi occupation, few dared to speak of the

²⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1976), 51.

French complicity in the murderous campaign against the Jews, or the fate of seventy-five thousand French Jews deported to Auschwitz. In truth, Sartre believed that many in France did not care what had happened to Europe's Jews; worse, some preferred that they not return. Charles de Gaulle's speech following the liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944 planted the myth of a unified French nation which had been occupied by a foreign invader, and which was eventually liberated by its own hands. "Paris! Paris outraged! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its people with the help of the French armies,"²⁴⁵ he declared. The full history of the German occupation of France was, of course, more complicated. Calls for national unity accompanied silence concerning the crimes committed against the Jews. To heal the fractures of war-torn France, Sartre sarcastically remarked, "we must not irritate the anti-Semites; more than ever, we need unity."²⁴⁶ This allowed certain revisionist histories to take root in the French public imagination following the Liberation: the pernicious "myth of the French resistance" largely indemnified Pétain and the Vichy government for its collaboration with the Nazis in the murder of French Jews. Irvin Wall explains that according to this revisionist myth,

Pétain was to be regarded as the shield, and de Gaulle the sword, of French liberation. If de Gaulle, as leader of the Free French, could lay claim to the title of French liberator by the force of arms, Pétain, although imprisoned as a collaborator, had at least tried to protect the French, and particularly French Jews, from a worse fate than the one they actually endured from 1940 to 1944. Pétain's regime had allowed the deportation of foreign Jews resident in France, but it allegedly had done so without knowledge of their ultimate fate, while French Jews remained protected.²⁴⁷

This sanitized version of the Vichy collaboration in the murder of French Jews remained largely intact for a quarter century, until a series of publications including Robert O. Paxton's 1972 bombshell *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* began unraveling the myth by revealing the

²⁴⁵ Charles de Gaulle, Speech 25 August, 1944, in Julian Jackson, *De Gaulle*, 326.

²⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 51.

²⁴⁷ Irvin Wall, "Remaking Jewish Identity in France," 168-169.

extent of the Vichy collaboration.²⁴⁸ Nonetheless, in the immediate aftermath of the war, fortified by the myth of the French resistance, silence reigned concerning the 75,000 Jewish French citizens deported to Auschwitz, or the cruel round-up of 12,000 Parisian Jews – including over one thousand children – by French police in the Vél' d'Hiver in the 15th Arrondissement of Paris on July 16, 1942 before they were sent to the Drancy camp and deported to Auschwitz. Police chief René Bosquet organized the Vél' d'Hiver roundup, and he was tried for treason after the war, but he was acquitted and his sentence for lighter crimes was commuted.²⁴⁹ For many years, the desire to move on from the dark years of the Occupation superseded the need for a thorough public accounting of France's history of anti-Semitism, including its collaboration in the Shoah.

Sartre published "Portrait de l'antisémite" in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945 and the full text of *Réflexions sur la question juive* in 1946 with a small Parisian publisher, Paul Morihien.²⁵⁰ The first printing of Sartre's book was limited to three thousand copies due to paper shortages. "It had an impact but didn't sell much," Morihien later recalled, "It took a few years for the first printing to sell."²⁵¹ Rather inelegantly translated in English as *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, Sartre's study offers fascinating insights into the historical dynamics that drive

²⁴⁸ See: Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). The myth of the French resistance further unraveled with the highly publicized trials of French war criminals including Jean Leguay, Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier, René Bousquet, and Maurice Papon which continued into the 1990s. France was consumed by "Vichy syndrome," in which the nation attempted to reconcile its self-image with its own history. Revelations about socialist president François Mitterand's past involvement in Vichy provoked further apologies and revelations on the political left, whereas the extreme right unabashedly embraced Vichy apologist Jean-Marie Le Pen, who formed his party the *Front National* in 1972. See also: Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); Bertram M. Gordon, "The 'Vichy Syndrome' Problem in History," *French Historical Studies*, Autumn, 1995, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn, 1995), 495-518.

²⁴⁹ See: Irwin Wall, 172-173. Bosquet was later indicted for crimes against humanity in 1991, but he was murdered by a disturbed person in 1993 before he stood trial. See also: Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz: Le rôle de Vichy dans la Solution Finale de la question Juive en France: 1942*, (Paris: Fayard, 1983); Claude Lévy and Paul Tillard, *La grande rafle du Vel d'Hiv*, (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1992); Richard J. Golsan, ed., *Memory, the Holocaust, and French Justice: The Bousquet and Touvier Affairs* (Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of New England, 1996).

²⁵⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Portrait de l'antisémite," *Les Temps modernes*, No. 3 (December 1945), 442-70; Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paris: Paul Morihien, 1946).

²⁵¹ See: Michel Rybalka, "Publication and Reception of 'Anti-Semite and Jew'" *October* (Winter 1999), Vol. 87, 169.

the anti-Semite's passionate hatred.²⁵² His critique is rooted in his humanism, and his call to genuinely uproot anti-Semitism in France following the war is well-intentioned. With that said, as the French title attests, Sartre's text responds above all to the dynamics of the "Jewish Question," as it was articulated and lived in the French Third Republic, in terms of social and political forms of exclusion and discrimination, largely ignoring the developments in anti-Semitism since the rise of Nazism. The inadequacies of his constructivist approach, and the frequent reliance on anti-Semitic stereotypes that echo right-wing French writers such as Edouard de Drumont, Maurice Barrès, or Charles Maurras – not to mention Heidegger – are quite regrettable. Michael Walzer aptly remarks that Sartre's study demonstrates that "theoretical sophistication and practical ignorance can, sometimes, usefully combine."²⁵³ Sartre's famously contentious thesis is that "it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew."²⁵⁴ The figure of the Jew is a projection of the anti-Semite, rather than a substantive identity defined by certain essential characteristics.

Anti-Semitism, Sartre writes, "is first of all a passion."²⁵⁵ This passion is a way of designating an enemy, the other, such that it can be the target of aggression. Anti-Semitism is a rejection of modernity, and an irrational fear of difference. It is "a form of Manichaeism" which "explains the course of the world by the struggle of the principle of Good with the principle of Evil."²⁵⁶ The Jew allows the anti-Semite to identify a source for his woes. For Sartre, while anti-Semitism is the product of ignorance and ideology, it is also a choice. The anti-Semite "chooses the irremediable out of fear of being free; he chooses mediocrity out of fear of being alone." The

²⁵² I will continue to refer to the French title translated literally as *Reflections on the Jewish Question* to emphasize Sartre's primary engagement with anti-Semitism in terms of the 19th century debate over the "Jewish Question." As we will see, the English translation of the title, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, attempts to mollify the negative associations with the "Jewish Question," but it is misleading insofar as it suggests that Sartre analyzes both the anti-Semite and the Jew, when in fact he is almost exclusively concerned with the former.

²⁵³ Michael Walzer, Introduction, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, xxii.

²⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 49.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 28-29.

inferiority of the Jew satisfies the anti-Semite's own need for validation. Indeed, the anti-Semite "finds the existence of the Jew absolutely necessary. Otherwise to whom would he be superior?"²⁵⁷ Even if the anti-Semite needs the Jew to serve as the object of his passionate hatred, this is not a conscious reflection. For Sartre, anti-Semitism represents a choice that rejects the humanity of the Jew, but it is also a denial of the humanity of the anti-Semite himself. The anti-Semite "is afraid. Not of the Jews, to be sure, but of himself, of his own consciousness, of his liberty, of his instincts, of his responsibilities, of solitariness, of change, of society, and of the world."²⁵⁸ Anti-Semitism is ostensibly a choice in favor of ignorance and fear over humanity, it is the "fear of the human condition." This kind of anti-Semitism was recognizable for those in the French Third Republic, which came crashing down in 1940 with the Nazi invasion.

For Sartre, the figure of the Jew is a response to external conditions, a projection of the irrationalism of the anti-Semite. To satisfy the need for a scapegoat, "if the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him."²⁵⁹ Yet the depiction of the Jew as the mirroring board for the anti-Semite seemingly dispossesses the reality of Jew identity and history. Sartre confirms, "the Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew."²⁶⁰ While there is no denying that the anti-Semite constructs the figure of the Jew as the Other, Sartre shows no interest in the reality proper to the Jew, much less how such a reality is informed by Jewish history and practices. If he deftly analyzes the anti-Semite's projection of the Jew, he ignores the other side of the dynamic: how the Jew constructs him or herself apart from these external pressures. For this reason, at times Sartre risks cozying up

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 19. We might recall Diderot's imagined interlocutor in *Rameau's Nephew*: even those who detest the *anti-philosophe* nephew nonetheless need him as their antagonist, in order to assert their superiority: "Maintenant qu'ils ne m'ont plus, que font-ils ? Ils s'ennuient comme des chiens..." *Le Neveu de Rameau*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 62.

²⁵⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 38.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 8.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 49.

too close to the perspective of the anti-Semite: he often draws on traditional anti-Semitic tropes that depict the Jew as a pariah in a foreign land, whose untrustworthy and selfish habits are the product of a social malignancy. In defense of the Jew, Sartre writes, “the Jew remains the stranger, the intruder, the unassimilated at the very heart of our society.”²⁶¹ Following Hegel’s description of the stateless Jewish people as removed from the movement of world history, Sartre describes the Jewish people as an “abstract historical community” whose rootlessness in the nation has led to their passivity in world history. He writes, “If it is true, [as] Hegel says, that a community is historical to the degree that it remembers its history, then the Jewish community is the least historical of all, for it keeps a memory of nothing but a long martyrdom, that is, of a long passivity.”²⁶² Hegel’s description of the Jewish people as outside of history is not as anodyne as Sartre seems to believe. Even if his intent in using the tropes of the pariah, the wandering Jew, and other stereotypes is to overturn their meanings, it is hard not to view Sartre as passively endorsing these pejorative images. There is no rehabilitating, for example, his description of “typical characteristics of the French Jew—a hooked nose, protruding ears, etc.”²⁶³

Borrowing the terminology of Heidegger’s philosophy, Sartre writes that “to be a Jew is to be thrown into — to be *abandoned* to — the situation of a Jew.”²⁶⁴ Depending on how the Jew responds to this situation of Jewish Being-in-the-world, Sartre introduces the categories of the “authentic” and “inauthentic” Jew. This distinction ostensibly calques Arendt’s delineation of the Jewish pariah and parvenu. Inauthentic Jews “deal with their situation by running away from it,”²⁶⁵ by hiding their Jewishness, or denying their condition. The “inauthentic” Jew is reminiscent of the

²⁶¹ Ibid, 60.

²⁶² Ibid 47.

²⁶³ Ibid, 73.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 64.

²⁶⁵ Ibid 66.

Jewish “parvenu” of the later 19th century who was also able to ascend the social hierarchy by hiding his Jewishness. On the other hand, Sartre describes the “authentic” Jew who embraces his or her situation: “Jewish authenticity consists in choosing oneself *as Jew*— that is, in realizing one's Jewish condition,” the authentic Jew affirms his condition, he “*makes himself a Jew*, in the face of all and against all.”²⁶⁶ It seems that only by embracing the role of pariah can the Jew become what he authentically “is.” While it is unlikely that Sartre had read *Job’s Dunghill*, his notion of the authentic Jew strongly echoes Lazare’s conscious pariah. The authentic Jew, like the conscious pariah, is condemned to revulsion, exclusion, and the threat of violence. For Sartre, between these two unenviable possibilities, the Jew is “destined from the start to either inauthenticity or martyrdom.” The Jew’s tragic fate is either to hide from him or herself, or embrace the role of pariah; either way, “the situation of the Jew is such that everything he does turns against him.”²⁶⁷

The reception of Sartre’s study was mixed.²⁶⁸ Aimé Patri’s review of the book applauded Sartre’s good intentions, but questioned his “chicken-and-egg” approach which “is resolved by Sartre in a direction that is the opposite of the one Bernard Lazare took in *L’Antisemitisme*.”²⁶⁹ By describing the figure of the Jew as created by the anti-Semite, rather than the converse, he denied the possibility that Jewish identity has its own reality apart from the anti-Semite’s projection. Sartre writes, “we must ask, not ‘What is a Jew?’ but ‘*What have you made of the Jews?*’”²⁷⁰ However, he seems to deny the space to respond to the first question. In *Portrait of a Jew* – a book dedicated to Sartre – Jewish French-Tunisian writer Albert Memmi recounted “his book so disturbed me that I immediately picked up my pen. I tried to explain that he was mistaken, that he

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 99.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 102.

²⁶⁸ See: Michel Rybalka, “Publication and Reception of ‘Anti-Semite and Jew.’”

²⁶⁹ Aime Patri, Review, *La Table ronde* 11 (November 1948), 1894-1902.

²⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 49

had not gone far enough. [...] I ended my letter with the words: 'Now, believe me, the Jew does exist, Jewishness survives!'"²⁷¹ In *The Liberation of the Jews*, Memmi further commented, "to affirm my Jewishness without giving it a specific content would have been an empty proposition and in the final analysis contradictory."²⁷² While Sartre's phenomenological analysis of the "situation" of the Jew yields a schematic or formal understanding of the relation between the Jew and the anti-Semite, his description of the Jew as the projection of the anti-Semite strikes of a certain ignorance of Jewish history, as if he had never thought to ask a Jew's perspective on what it means to be a Jew. As Levinas would later exclaim, "of course, we do not owe Judaism to anti-Semitism, no matter what Sartre may say!"²⁷³

Perhaps the most confounding aspect of Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*, as Enzo Traverso notes, is "his almost total silence about Auschwitz."²⁷⁴ Sartre's impetus for writing his book was the silence regarding the French complicity in the Nazi crimes against the Jews, and he acknowledges the existence of the death camps at the outset of the text; however, as the original French title suggests, his analysis of anti-Semitism remains based in the tropes of the 19th century "Jewish Question," which reached their apogee with the Dreyfus Affair. "Applied to the France of the Third Republic, Sartre's analysis is quite apt," Traverso writes, but "such a formulation – anti-Semitism as a *passion* – cannot, however, integrate Auschwitz."²⁷⁵ In his 1947 review of the book in *Critique*, George Bataille criticized Sartre's overly rigid distinctions in light of the Shoah: "there is an epic of reason and the Jews have written some of its most authentic pages; moreover doesn't Jewish authenticity consist precisely in the fact that in Auschwitz it was reason itself that suffered

²⁷¹ Albert Memmi, *Portrait d'un Juif* (Paris: Gallimard 1962).

²⁷² Albert Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jews*, (New York: Orion Press, 1966).

²⁷³ Emmanuel Levinas, "From the Rise of Nihilism to the Carnal Jew," *Difficult Liberty*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 225.

²⁷⁴ Enzo Traverso, "The Blindness of the Intellectuals: Historicizing Sartre's 'Anti-Semite and Jew,'" *October*, Vol. 87, *Jean-Paul Sartre's "Anti-Semite and Jew"* (Winter, 1999), 73.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 79.

through their bodies?”²⁷⁶ Sartre’s distinctions between the Jew and the anti-Semite, rationality and irrationality, or the authentic and inauthentic Jew were ill-fitting in light of the realities ushered in by Nazism. Traverso explains, “the ‘*banality* of evil’ escapes Sartre’s phenomenology of anti-Semitism. Eugenics, racial biology, *völkisch* nationalism, social Darwinism do not constitute for Sartre the ideological premises of a plan to exterminate the Jews.”²⁷⁷ Sartre’s analysis of anti-Semitism focuses on social relations in the Third Republic, but it is totally inadequate to integrate the developments hastened by the Nazi campaign against the Jews.²⁷⁸ Indeed, Sartre’s account of

²⁷⁶ Georges Bataille, Review, *Critique* 12 (May 1947), 471-473.

²⁷⁷ Enzo Traverso, “The Blindness of the Intellectuals,” 79.

²⁷⁸ We might consider Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew* alongside several notable studies of anti-Semitism that were conceived during the war and published soon afterwards. In part one of Hannah Arendt’s 1951 *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973) entitled “Anti-Semitism,” she analyzes the 19th century social-political history of the “Jewish Question” and its ramifications for the emergence of totalitarian movements in the years after the Great War. In contrast to Sartre’s psychological portrait of the anti-Semite, whose passionate hatred of the Jews reflects his rejection of humanism, Arendt is interested in the political and social conditions that have structured the relations between Jews and Christians in modern Europe. Nonetheless, their studies hold certain resemblances. Arendt’s emphasis on the construction of the Jew as a *parvenu* or *pariah* in 19th century France – as we saw in her analysis of Lazare’s “conscious pariah” – is in many ways calqued in Sartre’s distinction of authentic and inauthentic Jews. In the later sections of *Origins*, however, Arendt explains how totalitarian regimes dissolved these distinctions, abandoning all Jews to the same murderous fate as the internal enemy of national *Blut und Boden*. We have questioned whether Sartre accounts for this radicalization of anti-Semitism under fascism. We might also compare Sartre’s study to the penultimate section of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) entitled “Elements of Anti-Semitism.” For Adorno and Horkheimer, anti-Semitism is related to the demand for mimesis at the heart of the dialectical logic of Enlightenment. The religious origin of anti-Semitism – “the adherents of the religion of the Son hated the supporters of the religion of the Father as one hates those who know better” (147) – has ceded to a larger vilification of the Jew, to the point that “nationalist anti-Semitism seeks to disregard religion,” raising anti-Semitism to the conquest for the “purity of race and nation” (144). Fascism seeks to impose a controlled mimetic order for which the Jews are an impediment. Anson Rabinbach explains that the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, the second commandment’s interdiction of images of God, “is at the origin of enlightenment, and at the same time, its redemptive moment,” by posing the existence of a different order that is beyond representation and perception – that is, a refusal of mimesis; by contrast, “fascism is the mirror opposite of the prohibition on mimesis, an archaic world of inauthenticity and terror masquerading as authenticity, heroism, and “being-in-the world” (Rabinbach 57-58). Fascism makes the Jews the Other of nature, whose holdout against Christ is indicative of their resistance to the mimetic order. Akin to Sartre’s diagnosis of the anti-Semite’s need to construct the Jew as Other, Adorno and Horkheimer write, “this mechanism needs the Jews,” so that the anti-Semite can become aware of his difference from the Jew, “the rooted Gentile is overcome by a feeling of something antithetical and alien” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 152). Like Sartre, Adorno and Horkheimer identify the construction of the Jew by the anti-Semite: “Anti-Semitism is based on false projection. It is the reverse of genuine mimesis and has deep affinities to the repressed; in fact, it may itself be the pathetic character trait in which the latter is precipitated. If mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself” (154). The Jews are thereby sacrificed for having exposed the taboo of mimesis on civilization. However, Adorno and Horkheimer refuse the Manichean oppositions that define Sartre’s study: reason and unreason, freedom and fascism, and the Jew and the anti-Semite are not simply antipodes, but interlocked in the dialectic of Enlightenment. See also: Anson Rabinbach “Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?: The Place of Anti-Semitism in Dialectic of Enlightenment,” *New German Critique*, No. 81, (Autumn, 2000), 49-64.

the construction of the Jew by the anti-Semite is of a piece with the book's near omission of the Shoah. He argues that even the casual anti-Semite ultimately seeks the death of the Jew, but the typical forms of anti-Semitism are mere "symbolic murders."²⁷⁹ The fact that anti-Semitism had been responsible for millions of *actual* murders during the preceding years seems beyond the explanatory powers of Sartre's study.

In the final interviews conducted before Sartre's death in 1980 with his assistant Benny Lévy, he returned to the question of a properly Jewish existence.²⁸⁰ Notwithstanding questions pertaining to Sartre's apparent change of heart on certain topics in these interviews, his framing of *Reflections on the Jewish Question* is useful.²⁸¹ Sartre describes his central argument that the Jew is the construction of the anti-Semite as "a superficial description of the Jew as he is in the Christian world," who is "constantly being dragged down on all sides by anti-Semitic ideas, which are trying to devour him, to take over his thinking and capture him at the core of his being."²⁸² In his dialogue with Lévy, Sartre confirms that according to his 1946 study, there is nothing proper to the existence

²⁷⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 35.

²⁸⁰ Benny Lévy (1945-2003) was an Egyptian-born Jew who, like Edmond Jabès, fled for Europe after the Suez Crisis in 1956. He grew up without religion, becoming the editor of a Maoist newspaper *La Cause du Peuple*, and was an active participant in the May 1968 protests in Paris. Along with Sartre, he was influential in founding the newspaper *Libération* in 1972. Lévy went on to serve as Sartre's assistant from 1974-1980. After discovering Levinas' work in 1978, he underwent a stunning turn from "Mao to Moses," studying orthodox Judaism in a yeshiva in Strasbourg and reorienting his work towards Judaism. He went on to found the *Institut d'études lévinassiennes* in Jerusalem along with Bernard-Henri Lévy and Alain Finkelkraut.

²⁸¹ Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews* trans. Adrian van den Hoven (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996). It must be said that these interviews are mired in controversy. Sartre lost his eyesight in the final years of his life, and Benny Lévy had been hired to serve as his writing assistant, reading and transcribing on his behalf. Lévy was a militant thinker, whether in the service of Maoism or the Talmud, and his tendency to dominate the conversation led many to accuse him of editorial malpractice by publishing the final interview with Sartre. Simone de Beauvoir led a chorus of Sartre's inner circle who expressed outrage at the publication of the final interviews, accusing Lévy of manipulating and coaxing a physically compromised Sartre to adopt his own views. Indeed, Sartre makes several surprising reversals in the interview, particularly with regards to Jewish messianism—a change in thinking seemingly provoked by none other than Benny Lévy himself. Others, including Sartre's adopted daughter Arlette Elkaïm, defended the legitimacy of Lévy's interview: while Lévy was relentless, Elkaïm confirmed that he had patiently read and reread the text of the dialogue back to Sartre, to the point of the latter's irritation. For a calibrated framing of the interview, its criticisms and its merits, see Ronald Aronson's introduction, "Sartre's Last Words" (3-40).

²⁸² *Ibid*, 100-103.

of the Jew beyond this externally imposed construction. He describes this as merely a question of focus: "I was hostile primarily to anti-Semitism, and that book is a declaration of war against anti-Semites, nothing more." The purpose of *Reflections on the Jewish Question* was to critique the anti-Semite, rather than to examine the being proper to the Jew. As Sartre admits to Lévy, "I wrote without any documentation, without reading one book about Jews [...] I wrote what I thought. [...] Based on nothing, based on anti-Semitism, which I wanted to combat." This, of course, confirms the criticism that Sartre had ignored any notion of what Levinas calls "being-Jewish." In his interview with Lévy, Sartre apparently reverses course on this point, declaring, "I now think there is a Jewish reality beyond the ravages that anti-Semitism has inflicted on Jews; there is a profound Jewish reality as well as a Christian reality." This Jewish reality involves a particular "destiny," which Sartre appreciates "precisely because it possesses no Marxist element," but rather it is an "ethical end": Sartre tells Lévy, "The Jew thinks that the end of the world, of this world, and the upsurge of the other will result in the appearance of the ethical existence of men who live for one another."²⁸³ Sartre's warming to an idea of Jewish messianism distinct from Marxism may raise eyebrows, but his framing of *Reflections on the Jewish Question* in terms of the anti-Semite's perspective confirm the criticism that Sartre's study had ignored the reality proper to the Jew.

If Sartre emphasizes the construction of the Jew by the anti-Semite in *Reflections on the Jewish Question*, perhaps it is because he recognizes his own perspective as a non-Jew. In its closing passages, he quotes Richard Wright: "there is no Negro problem in the United States, there is a White problem." By the same token, Sartre writes, "anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is *our* problem."²⁸⁴ As a non-Jew, he takes ownership of the problem of anti-Semitism as principally one of gentiles, or perhaps humanists more generally. The target audience for

²⁸³ Ibid, 106.

²⁸⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 109.

Reflections on the Jewish Question was a sector of French society that had long accepted a casual form of anti-Semitism. Sartre demonstrates ignorance – perhaps a willing ignorance – regarding the actual content of Jewish history, and there are elements of latent anti-Semitic thinking in the more unflattering and problematic aspects of the text. Still, he addressed the urgent need to confront the silence regarding anti-Semitism in the aftermath of the Shoah, during the triumphant moment of France liberation, as the histories of the occupation were being written – and re-written – and the crimes against France’s Jews were all too quickly being forgotten, revised, or negated.

IV. Levinas, Election, and “Being Jewish”

Levinas published “Être juif,” “Being Jewish,” in the journal *Confluences* in 1947 in response to Sartre’s *Reflections on the Jewish Question*. In this short but rich text, Levinas criticizes Sartre’s study as an insufficient account of “Being Jewish.” “If Judaism only had to resolve the ‘Jewish Question,’” Levinas writes, “it would have a lot to do, but it wouldn’t be too much.”²⁸⁵ Beyond the social and political stakes of the “Jewish Question” imposed on the Jew by the anti-Semite, Levinas sketches a view of the existential facticity of “being Jewish,” describing the specific character of “Jewish existence.” Against Sartre’s image of the Jew defined by non-Jews, Levinas portrays being Jewish as “not only seeking out a refuge in the world, but feeling that one has a place in the economy of being.” The facticity of being Jewish is not defined by a set of enumerated dogmas or tenets, it “does not take stock, does not enumerate the ideas contained in its heritage. It

²⁸⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Être juif,” *Cahiers d’Études levinassiennes*, No. 1, 2002, 99.

places its spiritual work in its existence more than in its sermon.”²⁸⁶ Levinas’ objective in “Being Jewish” is, contra Sartre, to sketch the situation of Jewish reality from the standpoint of the Jew.²⁸⁷

To unpack the variegated notion of Jewish existence, one must first understand the originality of Judaism, in contrast to the continuities inherited by Christianity. Echoing themes from Franz Rosenzweig’s “neues Denken” addressing the revitalization of Jewish life, Levinas suggests that Judaism must highlight its originality if it is to avoid becoming a reliquary religion starved of life through assimilation.²⁸⁸ To this end, he identifies a fundamental distinction between the temporalities of Jewish and Christian existence. Whereas the disposition of Jewish existence is turned towards the past, Christian existence is theologically anchored in the present moment:

Its originality consists in relegating the Father to whom the Jew is attached to a secondary position, to the past, and only acceding to the Father through the incarnated Son, that is, as a presence, as his presence amongst us. It is not a question of dogma but emotion. Whereas Jewish existence refers to a privileged moment of the past and its absolute position in being is assured by his filiality, Christian existence has this privileged attachment in the present. God is his brother, that is, his contemporary.²⁸⁹

Jewish existence is turned towards the past, in reverence of God’s creation and the revelation of the commandments, whereas the Christian God is the incarnated Son, whose presence is revealed in a moment of human history. The work of Christian salvation is reaffirmed in an eternal present,

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 100

²⁸⁷ Sartre and Levinas were not personally well acquainted, even if their philosophical trajectories share numerous points of contact. They did meet on several occasions, which proved memorable for Levinas, if not for Sartre. In his 1986 interview with François Poirié, Levinas recalls: “In total I met him three times. The year preceding his death I went to him: he wanted me to participate in a special issue of *Les Temps Modernes* relating to the Palestinian problem. I met him also when he received an honorary degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I even have a very beautiful photograph where I’m congratulating him. They were occasional contacts. I also wrote to Sartre when he refused the Nobel Prize. In the letter, which I consider important, I told him that in having refused this prestigious prize, he perhaps was the only man who had the right to speak and maybe this was the moment where he had to speak: to go to Nasser in Egypt to propose peace with Israel. Crazy idea! But I told him, ‘You’re the only man Nasser will listen to.’ I was told that, receiving this letter, he asked, ‘Who is this Levinas anyway?’ Had he forgotten? Had he forgotten *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, which, according to Mme de Beauvoir, had known a glorious moment? In *The Coming of Age*, Simon de Beauvoir recounts how, at the Picard bookstore on the boulevard Saint-Michel, the book was displayed after its publication. Sartre flipped through it and said: ‘All this I wanted to say for myself, but Husserl has already said it.’” Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié” *Is it Righteous to Be?* 43.

²⁸⁸ We will return to Rosenzweig’s influence on Levinas’ thought in detail in chapter three.

²⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “*Être juif*,” 102.

which accompanies “an attenuation of the notion of origin.”²⁹⁰ Just as Pascal and Kierkegaard question the truth of salvation in an eternally renewed moment of doubt, Christian existence implies the refreshing novelty of the constant reaffirmation of faith. Levinas explains that Christian faith in salvation “can never be acquired, but presents a conquest.” The recurring affirmation of faith orients Christian existence, demonstrating “the need to repeat the mystery of Golgotha, to become contemporaneous with God once more.” The need to symbolically relive the crucifixion in the present, to renew the bonds of faith, distinguishes Christian and Jewish reality. For Levinas, this difference in temporal dispositions is essential to the place of Jews in Christian society.

The temporality of Jewish existence is inflected in the “irremissibility” of identity. For Levinas, Nazism had revealed in the starkest terms the inescapability of Jewish affiliation: “the recourse of Hitlerian anti-Semitism to racial myth reminds the Jew of the irremissibility of his being. Unable to flee his condition – for many, this felt like vertigo.” Whereas persecuted Jews were once able to escape this “condition” through conversion or assimilation, the racial science propagated by the Nazis rendered “being Jewish” inescapable. Perhaps, Levinas reflects, the irremissibility of Jewish existence is a symbol for the human condition: “the human situation, surely – and in this sense, perhaps the human soul is naturally Jewish.” But if the human soul contains this purported “Jewish” quality, the facticity of Jewish existence is something more—namely, an indelible anxiety, stemming from the irrepressible possibility that the world will turn once more against the Jews. Levinas describes, “pure anxiety as much as it is foreign to the complacency of the self, the Jewish soul is lived in a halo of affectivity which cannot be translated with exactitude in terms of joy or pain.” This affective quality of the Jewish soul responds to the permanent risk of undue suffering. Benny Lévy highlights the parallel between the irremissibility

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 103.

of being Jewish and the *il y a*:

Jewish facticity is a mode of existing, and we see it is not that of the *il y a*. The same irremissibility on both sides, the same fact of being handed over without the possibility of escape. Levinas always cites Racine's verse: I flee in the night; where to flee? Where to find refuge? But the father holds the fatal urn. I cannot flee, I cannot flee into the *il y a*. I cannot fall asleep in ceaseless insomnia. I cannot not be Jewish. Simply: we exist in it.²⁹¹

The irremissibility of Jewish existence parallels the developments of the *il y a*, without being reducible to it, as a condition that one cannot escape.

Levinas alludes to the "strange resonance" of this affective quality in the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Job. In both texts, righteous characters are faced with the question of theodicy: God allows the innocent to suffer without explanation. Chapter 53 in the Book of Isaiah is the fourth and last "Servant Song," in which God calls on a "servant" to lead the nations, only for the people to turn against him, and the servant bears their suffering and affliction. While the unnamed servant of God is grammatically framed as a singular person, and it might refer to any number of figures from Israel's past, in context it most likely refers to a group, namely the Jewish people.²⁹² The servant "bore our illnesses, and our pains - he carried them, yet we accounted him as plagued, smitten by God and oppressed."²⁹³ The undue suffering inflicted on the servant is often interpreted as a representation of the long history of oppression and anti-Semitism inflicted on the Jewish people. The prophetic book describes the servant meeting his demise "like a lamb to the slaughter," and yet "he would not open his mouth."²⁹⁴ The virtuous servant bears undue punishment with "no deceit in his mouth."²⁹⁵ By the same token, the Book of Job presents the question of divine justice

²⁹¹ Benny Lévy, "Commentaire" *Cahiers d'Études levinassiennes*, No. 1, 2002, 112.

²⁹² There is a popular Christian interpretation of the Book of Isaiah that views the servant in Chapter 53 as a prophetic allusion to the suffering endured by Jesus Christ. There are convincing semantic and historical reasons to doubt the veracity of this interpretation of the Book of Isaiah.

²⁹³ Isa. 53:4.

²⁹⁴ Isa. 53:7: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he would not open his mouth; like a lamb to the slaughter he would be brought, and like a ewe that is mute before her shearers, and he would not open his mouth."

²⁹⁵ Isa. 53:9. If the suffering servant has often been compared to the historical oppression of the Jewish people, the description of victims of the Shoah meeting their death "like a lamb to slaughter" is highly problematic because it

when God tests Job's faith by forcing him to endure undeserved suffering. Job curses his birth, and laments God's wrath: "what do I do to You? O watcher of man, why have You made me as a mark for You?"²⁹⁶ His suffering seems undeserved and arbitrary, and he accuses God of being unforgiving and angry. Turning his plaint to the injustice he observes in the world, Job questions why God has allowed the wicked to rule over the powerless. In both texts, the suffering of the innocent only discloses the inexplicability of God's divine knowledge. This worry of suffering without explanation marks the peculiar affective quality of Jewish existence:

Through this unexpected transformation of malediction into exultation, Jewish existence cannot take part in the play of distinctions according to which Sartre, for example, attempts to understand it. He may be right to contest that the Jew has a proper essence. But if Sartre allows [the Jew] a bare existence [*existence nue*] like all other mortals and the freedom to make his own essence – either by fleeing or assuming the situation that is made for him – we are right to ask if this bare existence permits any differentiation. Isn't Jewish "facticity" other than [*autre que*] the "facticity" of a world understood on the basis of the present?²⁹⁷

Sartre may be right that there is no "essence" to being Jewish, but if "existence precedes essence," perhaps there are different ways of existing—including but not limited to the facticity of Jewish existence. For Levinas, the specificity of Jewish existence is its temporal disposition, turned towards the past and the work of creation.

By contrast, the temporality of Christian existence oriented in the present moment allows it to integrate the developments of the modern nation state and science. "Perhaps the most striking trait of Christianity," Levinas writes, "is its ability to become the State religion, and to remain so

falsely suggests passivity and a lack of resistance, while also implying that their deaths were somehow sanctified by God. Indeed, in *the Prophets*, Abraham Heschel cautioned against this simplistic reading of the verse: "Isaiah does not passively accept Zion's lot. Far from being silent, he challenges the Lord." (*The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962), p. 186.) Indeed, Isaiah later questions God's decision to allow the Jewish people to endure undue suffering, as the prophet rebukes, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent" (Isa. 62:1). Lamenting the useless suffering of the Jewish people, Heschel notes that Isaiah "voices his bewilderment at the silence of the Almighty," (186) and he laments that "Israel's misery seemed out of all proportion to her guilt" (197).

²⁹⁶ Job 7:20.

²⁹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "Être juif," 103.

after the separation of Church and State.”²⁹⁸ Christianity maintains its influence over the state even when divorced from the seat of political power, and even in the face of the secularizing forces of modern science. This speaks to Christianity’s ability to separate a spiritual inner life, “an inner life that is infinitely renewed and innumerably restarted,” against the eternal flux of a profane outer world, which contains “a human nature that is never defined, which is classified according to stable types in the midst of a world with a regular rhythm, preexisting forms, and implacable laws.” Between secular life orientation in the present, and the affirmation of inner faith renewed in the present, the dialectic of Christian reality integrates the secularized state and coexist with developments in modern science. This flexibility is a feature and not a flaw of Christianity.

For Levinas, Sartre’s existentialism “transform[s] supreme engagement into a supreme freedom” by asserting the full range of human freedom in the world, where every action is a choice. This obviates passivity insofar as both action and non-action constitutes a choice. Consequently, “activity and passivity turn from one to the other,” there is no way of avoiding one’s freedom to act.²⁹⁹ For Levinas, this is a natural starting point if one believes that the facticity of the world is “without origin and simply present.” Sartre describes the essence of the human being as absolutely determined by his or her actions and choices, where the facticity of a world without history and without origins allows human beings to exercise the freedom to shape themselves and the world they inhabit. In contrast to an connection to a past to which one can only relate passively, Levinas explains, “to detach the fact of one’s origin, is precisely to dwell in the modern world.” The modern scientific world view coincides with Sartre’s atheistic existential philosophy, but Levinas suggests these developments take place on the substratum of the temporal orientation of Christian existence.

It is here that the originality – in every sense of the word – of Judaism stands out. Levinas

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 101.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 104.

writes, “a fact can be a fact in an absolutely passive way for a creature.” Against the total freedom of the existentialist to shape the world through his choices, a fact can be absolutely passive for a *creature*, that is to say, a being that was *created* by a *creator*. For Levinas, the facticity of the world in a present without origins is incompatible with the existence of a created being:

The imperative of creation, which is prolonged as the imperative of the commandments and the law, inaugurates a total passivity. To do God’s will is, in this sense, the condition of facticity. The fact is only possible if, beyond the power to choose oneself which annuls facticity, one is chosen, that is, elected. The past which creation and election introduce in the economy of being cannot be confused with the fatality of a history without absolute origin. The infinite time behind us, far from excluding the freedom of the present, rather makes it possible, since the instants of the series, instants without privilege which lend themselves to the indifference of the present, to its freedom, its youth, its ignorance of the past. On the contrary, the past which in the economy of being introduces creation and election communicates to the present the gravity of a fact, the weight of an existence and as a foundation.

The fact of Jewish election links God’s creation of the world to the revelation of the commandments, anchoring the facticity of Jewish existence in the past. Even if Sartre’s assessment of “le fait juif” as the construction of the anti-Semite proves correct, Levinas explains, “this fact is, in its very facticity, inconceivable without election.” The fact of Jewish election precedes questions regarding the specific attributes of Jewish identity, and it prefigures the conflict posed between Jewish self-identification and the anti-Semite’s projection. Jewish election is not the product of history, it is the reason that history has unfolded in such a manner. Levinas explains that Jewish existence “*is not the way it is because it has been filled with sacred history; it relates to sacred history because it is a fact of the way it is.*” Yet the facticity of election has an importance that extends beyond the Jew: for Levinas, Jewish election marks, “the very entry of the religious event in the world,” and the continued existence of the Jew symbolizes “the impossibility of world without religion.” The facticity of Jewish existence attests to the impossibility of a world without origins and without history, and the “irremissibility” of religion.

The fact of Jewish election contains an immanent contradiction: the Jew is both “a simple part of reality,” but it is also “equipped with an exceptional privilege of totality,” straddling particularity and universality, such that the self “is equivalent to all being, of which he only represents a part.”³⁰⁰ Levinas argues that the apparent contradiction between the particular and universal is overcome in election. He offers the example of a father’s love for his children to explain the non-exclusivity of Jewish election: the meaning of election “implies the relation of a father to his children, where each child is everything for the father, without excluding the others from the same privilege.”³⁰¹ A father can love all his children greatly, without choosing one over another. In this sense, Jewish chosenness is one covenant between God and a particular group, it does not entail exclusivity. “Jewish election is thus not initially experienced as an arrogance or a particularism,” Levinas writes, “it is the very mystery of personality.” The fact of election is felt as an affect or emotion that bears out this mysterious affiliation, and Levinas suggests that it is the origin of freedom in Jewish existence. Indeed, freedom stems from the pure passivity of a created being: “to be created and to be a son is to be free.” A created being is not dispossessed of agency under the weight of responsibility, rather it means that he or she depends on others. To be a creature is “to refer to the facticity of someone who carries existence for you, who brings sin, who can forgive.” The fact of election evokes Job and the “suffering servant” who bear the suffering of others upon themselves. The responsibility borne of election gives rise to a form of ethical subjectivity born of the revelation of the infinity of the Other. The conflict between Judaism and philosophy in Levinas’ thought, shifting and evolving over the course of his long career, offers a productive tension which gives rise to his notion of ethical subjectivity.³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 104-105.

³⁰¹ Ibid, 105.

³⁰² Benny Lévy argues that this text discloses the fundamentally Jewish character of Levinas’ ethical subjectivity sketched in his philosophical texts: “‘Being Jewish’ functions, we have said, as a (secret) backdrop for the published

In one of the boldest claims in the essay, Levinas writes “Jewish existence is thus the accomplishment of the human condition as fact, personality, and freedom.”³⁰³ Against the rootless existence in the present, the great originality of Judaism “consists in breaking from a world which is without origin and simply present.” The reverence for creation and the commandments which anchors Jewish election to the past allows the Jew to stand as a symbol for the human condition—this, Levinas writes, “Sartre cannot grasp.” There is a “metaphysical sentiment” of attachment, even for the least outwardly “Jewish” Jew:

The rag-dealer who believes he is “freed,” the intellectual who believes he is an atheist but still breathes the mystery of creation and election. The only mystery which remains in a world where everything has become matter, transparent like science. An attachment to Judaism which remains when no particular idea justifies it.

This “metaphysical sentiment” is the symptom of election. Even in the absence of all outward and even inward signs of Jewish affiliation, Levinas insists that this metaphysical sentiment endures, as the minimal trace of Jewish existence. While refusing to describe an “essence” of Jewish identity, this mysterious, indescribable, perhaps ineffable sense of election serves as the

text in plain sight. A backdrop, a seminal reserve for the possibilities to-come [*à-venir*] of ‘philosophical’ thought. A father-text.” (“Commentaire,” 117).

After republishing “Être Juif” in his *Cahiers d'études Levinassiennes*, including his own commentary, Lévy’s final book *Etre juif. Etude Levinassienne* (Paris: Verdier, 2003) presents a reading of Levinas’ essay, where he makes the contentious argument that Levinas operates “une pensée de retour,” from philosophy to Judaism, which he treats as diametrically opposed. According to Lévy, Levinas’ *teshuvah*, his return, to Judaism is laudable but incomplete, he ultimately remains too enraptured by the Greek tradition without completing the return to Judaism. For Lévy, “Being Jewish” is the secret origin of Levinas’ philosophical thought. Other Levinas scholars dispute the notion that Levinas returns to Judaism and instead suggest that the conflict between philosophy and Judaism, Athens and Jerusalem, serves as a productive opposition in his thought. “Levy rightly understood that there is a contradiction in Levinas,” Annabel Herzog contends, “but he was wrong to identify it as being one between Levinas’ ‘Jewish’ and ‘philosophical’ writings. There was no ‘philosophical conversion.’ [...] It is not a contradiction between a Hebrew Levinas and a Greek Levinas but, in fact, between the young Levinas and the old Levinas.” (Annabel Herzog, “Benny Levy versus Emmanuel Levinas on ‘Being Jewish’” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Feb., 2006), 21). Whereas in Levinas’ early writing in “Being Jewish” he expresses a conflict between Judaism and philosophy, in a later period of work including *Otherwise than Being*, he suggests a compatibility of a Jewish universalism and philosophy. Levinas’ late work “finally leads us to understand that they are distinct but that philosophy is needed and called into being by Judaism!” (24) Against Lévy’s insistence that, following Levinas’ philosophical “conversion,” he is led to an incomplete “return” to Judaism, Herzog argues that Levinas’ ethics rather illustrate “the intricate relationship or ‘intrigue’ between Judaism and philosophy, a ‘divine comedy’ that leaves no room for tragic resignation and that, therefore, keeps open all the questions that Benny Levy tries to close” (25).

³⁰³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Etre juif,” 105.

fundamental basis for Levinas' conception of "being Jewish." Conversely, anti-Semitism stems from a distortion of this metaphysical sentiment: "what one calls with hatred Jewish arrogance or Jewish impudence or Jewish pretention is the result of an interpretation which malice or cowardice gives to this metaphysical sentiment."³⁰⁴ From the very source that gives rise to this "metaphysical sentiment" of Jewish affiliation, springs the irrational passion of the anti-Semite.

In "Sans nom, honneur sans drapeau," originally published in 1966 in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, a journal of Jewish thought in France published by the Alliance Israelite Universelle, Levinas further explicates the affective condition of Jewish existence. The extreme forms of violence unleashed during the Second World War had not abated in the subsequent two decades but "violence no longer dares speak its name. What was unique between 1940 and 1945 was the abandonment."³⁰⁵ What Levinas had witnessed during the *débâcle* of 1940 was the utter breakdown in order, in which the objectivity of the world collapsed. "Interregnum or end of the Institutions, or as if being itself had been suspended," Levinas writes, "Nothing was official anymore."³⁰⁶ Against this breakdown of the world and the disappearance of order which he describes as the "il y a," the obligation to maintain the ethical values of peacetime becomes starkly clear. Invoking Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, Levinas describes, "the highest duty, when 'all is permitted,' consists in feeling oneself responsible with regard to these values of peace."³⁰⁷ Yet, the urgency of this obligation recedes during peacetime, when it seems that the institutions and values maintaining the moral universe are operative. "When the temples are standing, the flags flying atop the palaces and the magistrates donning their sashes," he writes, "the tempests raging

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 106.

³⁰⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Nameless" *Proper Names* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 119 ["Sans nom," *Noms Propres*, (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976), 179].

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 119 [180].

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 121 [182].

in individual heads do not pose the threat of shipwreck.”³⁰⁸ The facticity of Jewish existence is a permanent awareness of the possibility that the world once more comes undone, institutions fail to withstand the oncoming storm, and Jews once more find themselves threatened: “Judaism is humanity on the brink of morality without institutions.” Being Jewish involves an ethical obligation challenged by the crumbling of institutions and the recourse to violence. The “strange election” of being Jewish is the standing possibility of finding oneself, “overnight and without forewarning, in the wretchedness of its exile, its desert, ghetto or concentration camp—all the splendors of life swept away like tinsel, the Temple in flames, the prophets without vision, reduced to an inner morality that is belied by the universe.”³⁰⁹ The facticity of Jewish existence suggests a heightened awareness of this risk that institutions crumble and violence resumes in the devastation of the “il y a.”³¹⁰ Stemming from the fact of election, Jewish existence includes the permanent anxiety that the disorder that Levinas encountered in the *débâcle* of 1940 might return.

After the opposition of philosophy and Judaism in his early work, and the middle period in which he suggests that Judaism represents a certain form of universalism, in Levinas’ late work supposes a productive distinction between Judaism and philosophy. In a 1984 interview, Levinas offered this most evocative descriptions of being Jewish:

To be Jewish is not a particularity; it is a modality. Everyone is a little Jewish, and if there are men on Mars, one would find some Jews there. Moreover, Jews are people who doubt themselves, who in a certain sense, belong to a religion of unbelievers. God says to Joshua, “I will not abandon you” [and, in the subsequent phrase]: “nor will I let you escape” (Josh. 1:9)³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 122 [183-184].

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 122-123 [184].

³¹⁰ Levinas draws a parallel to the “scène d’Alençon,” when he describes the *il y a* as “a chilling wind sweeps through the still decent or luxurious rooms, tearing down tapestries and pictures, putting out the lights, cracking the walls, reducing clothing to rags and bringing with it the screaming and howling of ruthless crowds.” Ibid, 123 [185])

³¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality Has Weight,” 164.

The description of being Jewish as a modality rather than a particularity suggests that it is not a substantive form of identity based on a set of genetic traits, observed dogmas, or even belief. Rather, as a “religion of unbelievers,” Judaism is a specific disposition issuing from the irremissible fact of election. Levinas’ remark that that there would be Jews on Mars indicates, *pace* Sartre, that the Jew is a figure of the Other whose enmity does not stem from a particular quality, but as an eternal scapegoat projected by the anti-Semite. Where there are people, they will construct some guise of the Jew as Other. In this sense, it is not that Sartre’s etiology of anti-Semitism is wrong, so much as it is incomplete: for Levinas, it is only beginning from the facticity of Jewish election that we can begin to understand the construction of the Jew as Other.

V. Derrida, Levinas, and the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française*

Despite Sartre’s calls to uproot anti-Semitism in the aftermath of the Nazi occupation, much of the French collaboration with the Nazis was swept under the rug, the myth of the French resistance – Pétain the “shield” and de Gaulle the “sword” – still held sway, and the Shoah was viewed as too taboo for polite conversation. The lack of recognition and accountability for the traumas that French Jews had undergone during the war was shocking. Perrine Simon-Nahum explains, “the *non-dits* and the silence that surrounded the return of those who had been deported demanded Jews recognize the rupture which had intervened, and renegotiate their return to a national community from which they had been violently, and against all expectations, excluded.”³¹² For Jews who had

³¹² Perrine Simon-Nahum, “‘Penser Le Judaïsme’: Retour Sur Les Colloques Des Intellectuels Juifs De Langue Française (1957-2000),” *Les Belles Lettres* “Archives Juives” 2005/1 Vol. 38, 79.

survived the war and remained in France despite its recent treachery, there was a sense of obligation to reconstruct new institutions and a new body of thought dedicated to Jewish cultural life in France. To this end, the *École Gilbert-Bloch d'Orsay* was created by Robert Gamzon and Léon Ashkenazi in 1946, named after the Jewish *résistant* killed by the Nazis during the liberation, and the town near Paris where the organization met. The *École d'Orsay* was dedicated towards the articulation of Jewish identity in the aftermath of the war, and it continued its activities until the organization moved to Israel in 1969.³¹³ A decade after the foundation of the *École d'Orsay*, the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française* was established by Léon Algazi and Edmond Fleg in 1957, as a branch of the Jewish World Congress. The *Colloque* was founded as a semi-annual meeting of francophone intellectuals dedicated to memorializing the Nazi destruction of French Jews, combatting the continued presence of anti-Semitism in France, and building a new forum for Jewish cultural reflection in France.

The *Colloque* sought to bring together intellectuals to reflect on Jewish life in France after the war without regards to religious orthodoxy. At its first meeting on May 24, 1957, André Neher declared, “the organizing idea of these conferences was to try to bring together a meeting of reflection and communion around the Judaism of detached Jews, of dejudaised Jews [*Juifs déjudaisés*].”³¹⁴ Appealing to the need to reconstruct Jewish thought in the aftermath of the war, Levinas affirmed the *Colloque* was “an irreplaceable institution in the Jewish intellectual life of France.”³¹⁵ Indeed, his Talmudic readings were a fixture at the *Colloque* from its first meetings until his death, and he became a central figure in the group in subsequent decades. Many of the

³¹³ See: Lucien-Gilles Benguigui, “L'École Gilbert Bloch: Témoignage sur un lieu de rencontre entre jeunes séfarades et ashkénazes dans la France d'après-guerre,” *Archives Juives* 2009/2 (Vol. 42), 57-66.

³¹⁴ André Neher, in the discussion of Cl. Riveline, “Les ‘Mitzvot’ sujet tabou ?”, *Tentations et actions de la conscience juive*, VIe et VIIIe CIJLF, (Paris: PUF, 1964), p. 354.

³¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Tentations et actions de la conscience juive*, VIe et VIIIe CIJLF, (Paris: PUF, 1964), 12.

thinkers involved in the *École d'Orsay* also participated in the *Colloque*, including André Néher and Léon Ashkenazi, and they emphasized placing the Bible at the center of the group's reflections. Other participants in the *Colloque* represented a more secularized approach to studying Jewish thought in France. Regardless, it always remained attuned to the pressing issues facing French Jews. Simon-Nahum argues, "the first years of the *Colloque* greatly contributed to fashioning the contemporary representations of French Judaism."³¹⁶ The *Colloque* – which remains active today – has played a crucial role in the reconstruction of post-war Jewish intellectual life in France.

The first meetings of the *Colloque* were focused on combatting anti-Semitism and negationism in France, but this proved inseparable from the crucial question of Jewish identity, which Néher called "la question préjudicielle."³¹⁷ The tropes based in the political culture of 19th century France were no longer appropriate to describe French Jewry, and the possibility of defining Jewish identity after the Shoah became the salient question for participants of the *Colloque*. Simon-Nahum writes, "after 1945, the questioning of the framework that defined French Jews, the diversification of the modalities of inscription in Judaism had as its corollary the shattering of identity claims."³¹⁸ In his reflections on the "internal problem" of the Jew, Vladimir Jankélévitch identified the "je-ne-sais-quoi" of being Jewish which "increases the difficulty of being."³¹⁹ A more precise definition of Jewish identity ran up against the same dilemma that historically problematized this affiliation. Edmond Fleg remarked, "We have the joy of having Jews assembled here as Jews, but who don't know quite so well why they are Jewish."³²⁰ While the Shoah further complicated the question of Jewish identity in many respects, in one sense it yielded a rather

³¹⁶ Perrine Simon-Nahum, "Penser Le Judaïsme," 80.

³¹⁷ Ibid, 81.

³¹⁸ Ibid, 81-82.

³¹⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, "Le judaïsme comme problème intérieur," *La Conscience juive, Données et débats*, Premier CIJLF, (Paris: PUF, 1963), 57.

³²⁰ Edmond Fleg, "Le sens de l'histoire juive," in *La Conscience juive*, 5-12.

discrete question: Simon-Nahum explains, “from one speaker to the next, the same question returned: how can one be Jewish after the *Shoah*? What content can one give Jewish identity after the destruction of an entire people? The Jewish condition is characterized precisely by the fact that it escapes all definition.”³²¹ This was the prevailing topic for the *Colloque* until the late 1960s, when questions of French politics and above all conflicts in the Middle East came to the fore.

Jacques Derrida was not a frequent participant in the *Colloque*. He bristled at all suggestions of orthodoxy and group identity, and he rejected every attempt to pigeonhole him as representative or symptomatic of any kind of Jewish thinking or philosophy. Derrida’s refusal to identify as a “Jewish” thinker has a certain Marxian sensibility: in one sense, he takes seriously Groucho Marx’s expression, “I don’t want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members.” In fact, until he spoke publicly about his family in Algiers in the 1980s, little was known about Derrida’s Jewish roots; fairly or unfairly, he had cultivated a reputation as an iconoclast or critic of religion, rather than as a Jewish thinker. In her 1994 biography *Emmanuel Levinas*, Marie-Anne Lescourret asserted that Derrida had excluded himself from this community of French Jewish intellectuals involved in the *Colloque*. “But of the French philosophers of Jewish origin,” Lescourret writes, “we will never see Jacques Derrida there.”³²² Thus, when Derrida began his address at the *Colloque* in 1998, he surely relished the chance to repeat Lescourret’s claim. The topic for the semi-annual colloquium was “Vivre ensemble,” and Derrida titled his contribution, “Avowing—The Impossible: ‘Returns,’ Repentance, and Reconciliation.” To avow his identity as a Jewish intellectual is for Derrida a kind of impossible request, for the topic “living together” already implies a set of problematic conditions for inclusion and exclusion. With whom must Jews live together? Who, after all, is Jewish? The subtitle hearkens the Hebrew term *Teshuva*, which

³²¹ Perrine Simon-Nahum, “Penser Le Judaïsme,” 83.

³²² Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 170.

literally means return (Maimonides described *Teshuva* as the end of exile) but which is also the word for repentance. Derrida is engaged in both. Lescourret's claim that he would never attend the *Colloque* is framed in the future tense, and yet Derrida recalls that even before his participation in 1998, he had in fact taken part in the event decades earlier in the 1960s, at the invitation of Levinas himself. In this sense, his participation in 1998 was a return, and his impossible avowal is a form of repentance. Despite Derrida's hesitance to identify as a Jew, he was not so alienated as to never participate in the annual colloquium of Jewish intellectuals.

Derrida's attendance at the *Colloque* in 1965 invalidates Lescourret's assertion that he would never attend the event. Further, he reads himself into its early history, when he attended as a guest of Levinas himself. The text he presented in 1998 is framed by a joke that Levinas told him during his first appearance at the *Colloque*. Derrida recalls sitting next to Levinas during the address by André Neher, when Levinas leaned in and whispered to him, "You see, he is the Protestant—me, I'm the Catholic."³²³ This short quip stayed with Derrida for many years, demanding of him "an infinite commentary." Perhaps Levinas was referencing the fact that Neher wrote almost exclusively on the Bible and had Zionist beliefs (Neher moved to Israel after the Six Day War), whereas Levinas remained in France and focused on the study of Talmud, the Jewish literature of exile.³²⁴ Perhaps Levinas' joke was a nod to something else. Regardless, Levinas'

³²³ Jacques Derrida, "Avowing—The Impossible: "Returns," Repentance, and Reconciliation" *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities Of Violence And Peace*, Ed. Elisabeth Weber, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 21 / *Le Dernier des Juifs*, (Paris: Galilée, 2014), 22.

³²⁴ Irwin Wall, "Remaking Jewish Identity in France," 186: "Neher and Lévinas remained friends, but after the former's emigration to the Jewish state the issue of *aliyah* became something of a barrier between them. During a coffee break at a colloquium at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem in honor of Franz Rosenzweig, a participant asked Lévinas when he intended to make *aliyah*, since it was in Israel that the Jewish ethics he preached had the greatest resonance. Lévinas replied to the effect that the Jewish state must not be elevated to a totality; Rosenzweig taught, Lévinas said, that the "judgments" of history must not be confused with justice in the abstract. Israel's historic success, however necessary for the Jewish people, does not incarnate the divine plan. Therefore neither the life nor the thought of the Jewish people can or should be completely absorbed in the state of Israel. Jewish thought expressed the reality of Jewish life quite apart from its territorial or institutional configurations, and in case of need must transcend any Jewish organization or state." See also: Raphaël Draï, "Neher et Lévinas," *L'Arche* (February 1996), 78-80.

description of two Jewish intellectuals through a Christian typology suggests that even he, the “Catholic,” could traipse in the lightly profane territory of the joke. The comment further suggests the “Jewish people” is not a transparent expression even for those within its fold, since it can be further parsed according to such sectarian distinctions. If the topic of the 1998 *Colloque* was “living together,” implying Jews coexisting with non-Jews, Levinas’ joke suggests that living together is also a question posed *within* Judaism, of Jewish people living with one another. If Levinas is the “Catholic” and Neher the “Protestant,” Derrida wonders what sort of Jew *he* is:

What must a Jewish thinker be in order to use this language, with the depth of seriousness and the lightness of irony that we hear in it? How can a so-called Catholic Jew (outside of any conversion, any canonization, and outside of any great ecclesial scene of repentance of which we will speak again) “live together” with a supposed Protestant Jew, while remaining a Jew together with himself, and while opening himself to another Jew, probable or improbable, in this case me, who has never felt very Catholic, and above all not Protestant? A Jew who, coming from another shore of Judaism than Neher and Levinas, a Mediterranean shore, immediately remarks in the abyss of these doubles or of this Abrahamic, Judeo-Catholico-Protestant, triangle, the absence of the Islamo-Abrahamic?³²⁵

The crucial question of Derrida’s identification as a Jewish thinker is contained in his first question: what permits a Jewish thinker to speak with such irony about Judaism? To speak of Judaism with the authority to make such a joke requires an identification that also allows him to speak, in a sense, on behalf of Judaism, as its representative. However, if he is neither Catholic nor Protestant, Derrida asks where he fits in Levinas’ typology. He is the third party, neither Levinas’ “Catholic” Jew, nor Neher’s “Protestant” Jew, but something else – perhaps the “Islam Ibrahimique” Jew, the *Marrano*, or perhaps some other amalgam of identifying affiliations. He suggests that “being-Jewish” is subject to further distinctions and differentiations which make it irreducible to a singular existential condition. The question of “vivre ensemble” is as much about how Jews relate to one another as it is about their relation to non-Jews. Levinas’ joke reveals that

³²⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Avowing—The Impossible,” 21 [22].

Jewish identity is irreducible to a single essence, or even to the narrow modes suggested by his “Catholic” and Neher’s “Protestant” Jewishness.

If Derrida balks at the notion of Jewish “identity,” he nonetheless refuses to entirely break off the link to his ancestral religion. Contra Lescourret and those ready to cast him off as an apostate, Derrida judges that it would be “irresponsible to efface, in simple politeness, my signature, that of a Jewish intellectual.” In this rare moment, Derrida affirms his affiliation as a Jewish intellectual, a rupture of the impossible avowal. The question of “vivre ensemble” with the non-Jewish world is no less pertinent or important than the question of how to negotiate the internal divisions of Jewish communities in the world. Indeed, Derrida remarks that for him the question of “vivre ensemble” concerned, ““first of all, for my generation, the Algerian community, the Algerian communities—the Arab, Berber, French of Algeria, French of France, communities—Israeli community, Israeli communities, and beyond.” The contingencies of inclusion and exclusion were never reducible to Jews harmoniously living with non-Jews; the question of Jewish “vivre ensemble” is embedded in the intersectional demands of nationality, politics, and language. For Derrida, the impossible avowal always concerns the rifts and divides policing the limits of inclusion, both from its outside – who counts as a Jew? – as well as distinctions drawn from its inside – what *kind* of Jew is it? A Catholic or a Protestant? Levinas draws a distinction between two kinds of Jews, only to reveal the *aporia* of Jewish identification, and the difficulty for an event like the *Colloque* to discuss such questions without falling prey to a reductive imagination of what constitutes a Jew. Levinas’ joke reveals the chasms and ruptures contained in Jewish affiliation and identification.

VI. Exile, Rupture, and Hyperbolic Jewishness

Jabès did not participate in the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française*: its emphasis on the human sciences was not the right forum for his literary writing, but he also lived his Jewishness as an experience of exclusion and marginalization. In a riveting passage in the first volume of *Le Livre des Questions*, Jabès imagines a scene in which the declaration, “Je suis juif” is challenged from within, by other Jews who contest the narrator’s claim of belonging. The narrator is excluded by other Jews who do not consider him sufficiently Jewish to claim belonging to their religion. Jabès asks, “mes livres ont-ils accentué le malentendu entre mes frères et moi?”³²⁶ The narrator’s interlocutors test the limits of fraternity from within, inverting the anti-Semite’s traditional accusation in their refusal, “Tu n’est pas juif”:

I have been around.
I have circled around myself without finding rest.

My brothers turned to me and said:
"You are not Jewish. You do not go to the synagogue."

I turned to my brothers and answered:
"I carry the synagogue within me."

My brothers turned to me and said:
"You are not Jewish. You do not pray."

I turned to my brothers and answered:
"Prayer is the is my backbone and my blood."

My brothers turned to me and said:
"The rabbis you quote are charlatans. Did they even exist?
And you feed on their ungodly words."

I turned to my brothers and answered:
"The rabbi is a quote are beacons of my memory. One can only remember oneself. And you know that the soul has words as petals."

³²⁶ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, [66]

The oldest of my brothers turned to me and said:

"Our Purim is no longer the feast of your carnival and your joy. Passover no longer the anniversary of your halt in the desert, your passage through the sea. Yom Kippur no longer your day of fasting.

"These dates marked in our calendar: what do they mean to you now?"

"Rejected by your people, robbed of your heritage: who are you?"

"For the others, you are a Jew, but hardly for us."

I turn to the oldest of my brothers and answered:

"I have the wound of the Jew. I was circumcised, as you were, on the eighth day after my birth. I am a Jew, as you are, in each of my wounds.

"But is one man not as good as another?"

The most thoughtful of my brothers turned to me and said:

"If you make no difference between a Jew and a non-Jew, are you, in fact, still a Jew?"

My brothers turned to me and continued:

"brotherhood does not mean putting yourself in your neighbor's place. It means you take into account what he is, but you want him to be as he should be, as the holy texts require he be, even at the risk of hurting him.

"It is the goal that counts. The most imaginative are the most brotherly.

"The believer's intransigence is like a razor blade: it cuts."

And they added:

"Brotherhood means giving, giving, giving. And you can only give what you are."

I beat my breast with my fist and thought:

"I am nothing.

"My head is cut off.

"But is one man not as good as another?"

"Beheaded as good as the believer?"

[J'ai fait le tour.

J'ai tourné sur moi-même sans trouver le repos

S'adressant à moi, mes frères de race ont dit:

"Tu n'es pas Juif. Tu ne fréquentes pas la synagogue."

M'adressant à mes frères de race, j'ai répondu:

"Je porte la synagogue dans mon sein."

S'adressant à moi, mes frères de race ont dit:

"Tu n'es pas Juif. Tu ne pries plus."

M'adressant à mes frères de race, j'ai répondu:

“La prière est ma colonne vertébrale et mon sang.”

S’adressant à moi, mes frères de race ont dit:

“Les rabbins dont tu cites les paroles sont des charlatans. Ont-ils jamais existé? Et tu t’es nourri de leur paroles impies.”

M’adressant à mes frères de race, j’ai répondu:

“Les rabbins dont je cite les paroles sont les phares de ma mémoire. – On ne se souvient que de soi. – Et vous savez que l’âme a, pour pétale, une parole.”

S’adressant à moi, le plus ancien de mes frères de race m’a dit:

“Nos fêtes de Pourim ne sont pas les fêtes de ton carnaval et de tes douceurs. Pâque n’est plus l’anniversaire de ta halte dans le désert et de ton passage dans la mer. Yom Kippour n’est plus la journée de ton jeûne.

Et quelles significations ont, maintenant, pour toi, ces dates cochées dans notre calendrier? Renié des tiens, volé de ton héritage, qui-es tu?

Tu es juif pour les autres et si peu pour nous.”

M’adressant au plus ancien de mes frères de race, j’ai répondu:

“J’ai, du Juif, la blessure. J’ai été, comme toi, circoncis le huitième jour de ma naissance. Je suis Juif, comme toi, par chacune de mes blessures.

Mais un homme ne vaut-il pas un homme?

S’adressant à moi, le plus pondéré de mes frères de race m’a dit:

“Ne faire aucune différence entre un Juif et celui qui ne l’est pas, n’est-ce pas déjà ne plus être Juif?”

S’adressant à moi, mes frères de race ont poursuivi:

“La fraternité ne consiste pas à se mettre dans la peau de son voisin; mais, à partir de ce qu’il est, le vouloir tel qu’il devrait être, tel que les textes saints exigent qu’il soit, même au risque de lui nuire.

Le critère est le but. Les plus imaginatifs sont les plus fraternels.

L’intransigence du croyant est pareille à une lame de rasoir dont le souci est d’être tranchante.”

Et ils ont ajouté:

“La fraternité, c’est donner, donner, donner et tu ne pourras jamais donner que ce que tu es.”

Me frappant la poitrine avec mon poing, j’ai pensé:

“Je ne suis rien.

J’ai la tête tranchée.

Mais un homme ne vaut-il pas un homme?

Et le décapité, le croyant?”³²⁷

³²⁷ Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 60-62 [67-69].

Jabès' dialogue illustrates how the claim "Je suis juif," is also policed from within, when Jews exclude others they deem insufficiently Jewish. Jabès' dialogue essentially stages a *reductio* argument: what is the minimal trace of being Jewish that would satisfy the conditions for the narrator's "frères de race"? What is the essential mark of fraternity? Jabès is never quite Jewish enough for his imaginary interlocutors: he does not attend synagogue often enough, he does not observe enough rituals, he does not pray enough, his books are too heretical. These anonymous gatekeepers of the Jewish community tell Jabès, "For the others, you are a Jew, but hardly for us." His Jewishness is not enough for those for whom stringently differentiating authentic, observant Jews from non-Jews is necessary for their continuation: "If you make no difference between a Jew and a non-Jew, are you, in fact, still a Jew?" For his "frères de race," only inflexible adherence that constitutes belonging. "The believer's intransigence is like a razor blade: it cuts," they tell the narrator. The believer's observance is like the razor's need to be sharp: nothing is ever sharp enough, it can always be sharper. Here we cannot but recall Derrida's explanation in *Circumfession* of the double-cut of circumcision, as both a cut of inclusion and a cut of exclusion: "Circumcision, that's all I've ever talked about, consider the discourse on the limit, margins, marks, marches, etc., the closure, the ring (alliance and gift), the sacrifice, the writing of the body, the *pharmakos* excluded or cut off, the cutting/sewing of *Glas*."³²⁸ Like Derrida, Jabès confronts the question of belonging according to the same hyperbolic logic, where the claim, "je suis Juif" function both to exclude and include, as if on a knife's edge.

The difficulty in the simple identification, "I am Jewish," reveals the double-edged cut of exclusion. Too Jewish for the Gentiles, not Jewish enough for the Jews: this is the paradigm of Derrida and Jabès' hyperbolic Judaism. In his 1964 essay, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the

³²⁸ Derrida, *Circumfession*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 70.

Book,” Derrida interprets the earlier cited longer passage from *Le Livre des Questions* as a dialogue playing out between different characters in Jabès’ fractured consciousness:

Jabès is not a defendant in this dialogue, for he carries both it and the charges within him. In this noncoincidence of the self and the self, he is *more and less Jewish than the Jew*. But the Jew's identification with himself does not exist. The Jew is split, and split first of all between the two dimensions of the letter: allegory and literality. His history would be but one empirical history among others if he established or nationalized himself within difference and literality.³²⁹

The fractured consciousness of the Jew is in constant dialogue with itself, it is an irreconcilable contest of interpretations: the irreducible difference between the voice of the rabbi and the poet. The rift in the Jew originates in two irreducible modes of reading: allegory and literality.

Derrida and Jabès’ experiences of exile are inseparable from questions of Jewish identity, yet both refused to be labeled as “Jewish thinkers.” Born in North-Africa with European passports and Jewish families, Jabès and Derrida represent a fraught intersectional perspective. Although they resisted reductionist identifications with a language, nation, or religion, these identities were thrust upon them like accusations. They endured exclusion and exile from the countries of their birth because of their families’ Jewish heritage, but they also felt the force of exclusion from within the Jewish community, for whom they were not Jewish enough. Neither Jabès nor Derrida had received a formal Jewish education, they only loosely adhered to traditional Jewish practices and traditions, and until they experienced anti-Semitism neither had considered himself particularly “Jewish.” They were the product of Jewish diaspora as much as European colonialism, yet they were often considered too Jewish (or even too African) for the Europeans, too European for the North-Africans, and not Jewish enough for many Jews. This double-edged exclusion attests to the difficulty of identity claims, and the impossibility of escaping them. From “the wound that will not heal [*la blessure non cicatrisable*], that anti-Semitism has left in me,” Derrida describes, “I felt

³²⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 92 [112]. My emphasis.

already, and that I still feel, *at once, at the same time*, as less Jewish *and* more Jewish than the Jew, as scarcely Jewish and as superlatively Jewish as possible, more than Jew [*plus que Juif*], exemplarily Jew, but also hyperbolically Jew.”³³⁰ Identity claims are irreducible to a binary choice between two essentially and substantially distinct identities, rather they reflect a parasitic, differential relation between exclusionary forces that pull on identity claims from within as well as from without. Problematizing any easy identification with Judaism, Derrida’s “hyperbolic Judaism” follows the paradoxical logic of “not enough,” but also “too much.” Jabès and Derrida place themselves at the limits of Judaism, with one foot in the tradition and one foot outside of it, identifying rupture itself as the very center of Jewish identity.

In his 1991 *Circonfessions*, a text written in the mode of stream of consciousness and placed entirely in the margins of Geoff Bennington’s book *Derridabase*, Derrida evokes his sympathy with the figure of the *marrano*, converts who hid their secret Judaism in the centuries following the 15th century expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. He describes himself as “one of those *marranes* who no longer say they are Jews even in the secret of their own hearts,” calling himself the “last [and least] of the Jews,” standing at the fold between the last and no-longer Jewish.³³¹ The *marrano*’s hidden, secret Judaism represents the figure of this fatalistic last Jew, at the closing limit of tradition. Derrida’s family was in fact the product of the 15th century expulsion of the Jews from Spanish, which ultimately led them to Algeria. He told Hélène Cixous in 2004:

I am the inheritor, the depository of a very grave secret to which I do not myself have access. The word or the writing that I send into the world transports a secret that remains inaccessible to me but that leaves its traces in all my texts, in what I do or live. I have often presented myself, barely playing, like a *marrano*, one of those Jews converted by force, in Spain and Portugal, who cultivated their Judaism in secret, at times to the extent of not

³³⁰ Derrida, “Abraham, the Other,” trans. Bettina Bergo and Michael Smith, *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 16 [“Abraham, l’autre,” *Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 24].

³³¹ Derrida, *Circonfessions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 170, 190

knowing what it consisted in.³³²

The irremediable secret at the heart of identity – this quality of the *marrano* – presents the impossibility of an identity entirely known to itself. It highlights the insufficiency of every claim to identity, which cannot be claimed any more than it can be escaped. “More than or less than, not enough or too much, ungraspable, the Judaism of the last of the Jews is impossible,” Gérard Bensussan explains, “there is therefore no possible Jew, for ‘Jew’ designates what is always more, and other, than the set of its conditions of possibility. One might say an event and, of course, a language event, in language, a name.”³³³ Derrida’s hyperbolic Judaism is an identification that is both “too much” and “not enough,” which reveals “the impossibility of being oneself.” Jewish identity is never captured by the parameters of its name, it always exceeds and undermines its idealized register; it is an affiliation that paradoxically can neither be affirmed nor cast off.

The Jewish tradition confronts this impossible of identity through election and the prophetic notion of the “remnant.” In the Book of Isaiah, following the Assyrian invasion of Judea, the prophet declares a *remnant* of Israel will survive to see the restoration of David’s throne: “A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return.”³³⁴ Isaiah’s messianic pronouncement is a promise of future return and redemption, but only for a *remnant*, the part of Israel which *survives*: “from Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors.”³³⁵ Giorgio Agamben explains the “remnant” of Israel is not a numerical figure, rather, “the remnant is closer to being a consistency or figure that Israel assumes in relation to election or to the

³³² Jacques Derrida, “From the Word to Life: A Dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous,” *New Literary History*, Winter, 2006, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Winter 2006), 12.

³³³ Gérard Bensussan, “The Last, the Remnant...” *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, 38

³³⁴ Is. 10:21-22.

³³⁵ Is. 37:31-32.

messianic event. It is therefore neither the all, nor a part of the all, but the impossibility for the part and the all to coincide with themselves or with each other. *At a decisive instant, the elected people, every people, will necessarily situate itself as a remnant, as not-all.*³³⁶ In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig describes the Jewish people as the “people of the remnant”:

Judaism and nothing else in the world preserves itself by subtraction, by a narrowing, by formation of new remnants always. This holds fully true quite externally just in the face of the constant external apostasy. But it also holds true within Judaism itself. It separates from itself that which is non-Jewish again and again in order to put forth new remnants again and again of what is originally Jewish. It continuously assimilates itself outwardly in order again and again to set itself apart inwardly. There is no group, no orientation, indeed scarcely an individual in Judaism who would not regard his way of giving up a secondary matter in order to keep to the remnant as only true one and hence himself as the true “remnant of Israel.” And he is so. The man in Judaism is always somehow remnant.³³⁷

Judaism is the religion of the “remnant”: externally, the Jews are the remainder of those who have not accepted the word of the Christian Gospel, but also internally, from within Judaism, they are the remainder who have not been peeled off by assimilation and integration. The “remnant” becomes the operating logic squeezing Jewish identification on both sides, such that its members are always-already *remaining* members, the remnants of a shrinking whole. Derrida extends a foot forward, beyond Rosenzweig’s remnant, at the threshold of the “last” and the “no longer” Jewish.

In his contribution to the 1972-1973 issue of *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* dedicated to Jabès’ work, Derrida rejected the simple identification of Jabès as a “Jewish” writer: “Jabès, as we all know, isn’t Jewish.”³³⁸ This response may seem puzzling given the substantial investment in

³³⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 55. Saint Paul extends the prophetic notion of the remnant in the Letter to the Romans, where he refers to the Hebrew who had not yet accepted the Gospel: “At the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (Rom. 11:5). Agamben continues, “This is the messianic-prophetic concept of the remnant that Paul resumes and develops [...] the remnant no longer consists in a concept turned toward the future, as with the prophets; it concerns a presence experience that defines the messianic ‘now’” (Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 55). The Pauline conversion of the futural messianic remnant to the remnant of the present signifies the reorientation of temporality in Christian faith, which we highlighted in Levinas’ discussions of Jewish existence.

³³⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 427.

³³⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès Aujourd’hui,” *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, No. 31, Winter 1972-1973, 56.

Jewish themes and the endless stream of rabbinic proverbs populating the pages of *Le Livre des Questions*, but this would misunderstand Jabès' investment in the question of Jewish identity. Derrida explains, "the Jewish identity sufficiently assured of itself to submit a text to questioning, to ask of it to respond and define itself with respect to the 'Jewish condition,' such an identity *does not occur* in Jabès' writing." The condition of Jabès' writing is its unceasing questioning, which proscribes any discrete form of identity – even if it is this very questioning which is its Jewish quality. When asked about Derrida's comments, Jabès explained, "I understood it very well when he wrote it, because I don't really know what it is to be Jewish. Judaism for me is a certain lived experience that I rediscovered through the book."³³⁹ In a 1987 text entitled "My Itinerary," Jabès proffers that the Jewish themes and references in his writing does not make it symptomatic of "Jewish" writing: "the word 'Jew,' the word 'God' are metaphors for me: 'God,' the metaphor for the void, 'Jew,' for the torment of God, of the void."³⁴⁰ To simply affirm one's identification with Judaism, "is already a regression, a stop, a way of falling asleep in this condition," by substantializing some idealized version of Jewish identity. Rather, Jabès explains, "Judaism resides precisely in this challenge. At the bottom of the quest for identity, which Jewish questioning is, there must be doubt and devouring uncertainty."³⁴¹ The notion of Judaism as an unending interrogation of Judaism undermines the presumptive claim, "I am Jewish," but it also places Jabès' writing firmly within the perspective of the literature of Jewish diaspora. As he remarked to Marcel Cohen, "isn't the Talmud above all the book of exile, being only questions?"³⁴²

³³⁹ Edmond Jabès, "An Interview with Edmond Jabès" *Conjunctions*, No. 9 (1986), 152.

³⁴⁰ Edmond Jabès, "My Itinerary" *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 12.1 (1987), 4.

³⁴¹ *Ibid*, 8.

³⁴² Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 105.

Derrida and Jabès express a *hyperbolic* Judaism that resists its reduction to a discrete identity, but rather insists on interrogating the limits of identity, both within and outside the Jewish tradition.³⁴³

The treacherous question of “belonging” discloses the central role of interrogation in the Jewish tradition. There is a strong desire to aggregate and solidify a concrete notion of Jewish identity which would codify the requirements for staking a claim to belonging to the tradition. Jabès writes, “it would have wonderfully simplified things to be Jewish without making it a problem,” but this is not the case.³⁴⁴ “The Jewish tradition has always questioned the texts,” but the question of belonging also “underlies all traditional Jewish questioning without having been tackled openly. As if tackling it could void the questioning.” The interrogation of belonging, the disruption of any static notion of Jewish identity as based on a specific set of beliefs or traits, is central to the Jewish tradition—even when it disrupts long held notions of what it means to be Jewish. The interrogation of Jewish identity is “a perilous path, certainly subversive, but vital to explore.” The Jewish question of belonging is the gateway to an endless interrogation of the self and other that never foreclosed as a static and final determination. “Since he can hardly stop being Jewish,” Jabès writes, “he is forced to ask the question of his identity. Hence, he must immediately face the discourse of the other, and often his own life depends on it. Perhaps this is what is

³⁴³ Some critics have questioned Derrida and Jabès’ literary Judaism. Henri Meschonnic notably argues in *Le signe et le poème* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) that Jabès and Derrida present an aestheticized, irrational Judaism which hypostatizes the figure of the Other: “with more prudence than Jabès, Derrida, in the name of hypothesis, *reduces* Judaism, leaving out all its specificity of language and history for an infra-philosophical empiricism. This reduction identifies it with an amplification of the holy: *the infinitely other*.” (463) Meschonnic sharply criticizes the minimal Judaism which, “echoing Kafka, has lost more and more of its definition which only existed as culture, not as literature, passing through Blanchot and Derrida, delettering from Jabès who habitually formulated his apocryphal status of pure writing. We are seeking here how, why, and for whom. Finding, for historical reasons, certain marks of interest brought to the doubtful Jew. A contemporary irrationalism permutes its letters” (502). One might begin a longer response to Meschonnic’s claims by pointing out that Jabès and Derrida repeatedly *refuse* to label themselves “Jewish” writers *precisely* to head off this criticism: if they are not symptomatic or emblematic of essentially “Jewish” writers, how can they be accused of presenting a reductive Judaism? Meschonnic’s criticism performs the very exclusionary gesture that Derrida and Jabès had highlighted in the double-sided exclusion defining the limits of identity.

³⁴⁴ Edmond Jabès, “My Itinerary,” 8

specifically Jewish.”³⁴⁵ Jabès’ fictional rabbis relentlessly interrogate the tradition, and *The Book of Questions* never cedes to the Book of Books, guarding against the reduction of Judaism to a static identity. Derrida’s denial that Jabès is a “Jewish” writer issues from a poorly formed expression, as if the identifier “Jewish writer” carried some objective character, when in fact it refers to a phantasm. Structuralist philosopher and novelist Lucette Finas, friend and interlocutor to both Jabès and Derrida, develops a similar objection to the characterization of Jabès’ work as “Jewish” in her contribution to *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*. She writes, “every Jew is a false Jew, not false as the opposite of true, but as the *imaginary* underside of a non-existent location.”³⁴⁶ The impossibility of offering a definition for a substantialized identity of a “Jew,” or the “Jewish” character of writing, stems from a certain idealism whose terrible consequences surfaced in the Shoah. Finas continues, “through a surfeit of horror, what Auschwitz maintained in consuming the Jew, was also a *semantic illusion*. Such a deduction can protect us from a certain idealism: this semantic illusion has a *history*.” This semantic illusion is the fantasy there is a substance or identity that exhibits some essentially Jewish quality, whether it is found in a certain style of writing, or in blood. “We all suffer from a lack of identity which we desperately try to fill in,”³⁴⁷ Jabès reflects. The desire to isolate the essence of Jewish identity, like any identity, can hold the promise of reassurance. Finas explains that Jabès reverses the symptomatic notion of Jewish identity: “Jabès’ force is to apply to the Jewish Question the *correction* of the text, to wrest the Jew from the Scriptures to restore him to writing, such that we cannot know if we are dealing with a Jewish writer, rather, on the contrary, he or she is Jewish who writes [*est juif qui écrit*].”³⁴⁸ For Jabès, the notion of a “Jewish writer” is either meaningless, or a redundancy.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 11-12.

³⁴⁶ Lucette Finas, “Edmond Jabès Aujourd’hui,” *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, No. 31, Winter 1972-1973, 57.

³⁴⁷ Edmond Jabès, “My Intinerary” 8.

³⁴⁸ Lucette Finas, “Edmond Jabès Aujourd’hui,” 57.

Jewish affiliation is a dynamic that excludes from within and without, it is an identification which is just as untenable as it is unavoidable. For Derrida and Jabès, Judaism is marked by rupture: rupture in the paradox of identity, rupture in exile, and rupture as ceaseless questioning. In this sense, Derrida and Jabès extend the role of Lazare's conscious pariah, as thinkers who embrace their accused status as a pariah against established beliefs and practices. Too Jewish for some and not Jewish enough for others, their criticism represents a hyperbolic element at the limits of the Jewish tradition, as voices of Jewish questioning rather than Jewish identity.

VII. "Another Abraham," Literature, and the *Comme Si*

The difficulty of Jewish affiliation begins as a problem of language, in language. A colloquium held in December 2000 at the Centre Communautaire de Paris, organized by Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly, proposed the title *Judéités: Questions for Jacques Derrida*. In his address "Abraham, the Other" Derrida expressed his apprehension in light of the topic of the colloquium: "*Longtemps et de bonne heure*, I have trembled, I still tremble, before the title of this conference (questions addressed to me! and concerning judeities!)." ³⁴⁹ Derrida evokes Proust's opening words in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and Kierkegaard's account of the binding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*: the question of *Judéité*, Jewishness, calls upon the Proustian activities of memory, and the angst of Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith. The question of Jewishness is exemplary in its difficulty, and Judaism is itself a question of a certain exemplarity. Derrida refuses to speak on behalf of Judaism, as exemplary of Jewishness, or even to claim "Je suis juif" without addressing

³⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Abraham, the Other," 4 [14].

the injurious connotations of this utterance. Can one speak of *Judéité* without passively assuming the place of exemplarity? Derrida cautions, “to say ‘I am jew,’ as I do, while knowing and meaning what one says, is very difficult and vertiginous.”³⁵⁰ It is a performative utterance that hangs between declaration and accusation, substantive and adjective, and common and proper noun.

The conjugation of Jewish identity takes place in the grammar of affiliation. Derrida identifies three modes of predication of Jewish identity: first, there is the descriptive grammar of affiliation, “I am Jewish,” “you are Jewish,” and so on; second, recalling Sartre’s study on anti-Semitism, there is the dissociation between the “authentic” and “inauthentic” Jew, demanding the authentic Jew to look, speak, and act in certain ways and not others; third, Derrida highlights the distinction between *Judéité*, Jewishness, and Judaism. Where Judaism refers to a religion as a singular bloc, Jewishness refers to the diverse cultural practices of a people. For Derrida, these contingent registers are unsustainable, inevitably slipping between proclamation and accusation, identification and association, inclusion and exclusion. This is particularly evident in the French word *juif*, both noun and adjective, and its accompanying declaration “je suis juif,” which expresses both the substantive “I am a Jew” and the adjectival “I am Jewish.” The language of Jewish affiliation is exemplary, and its declensions magnify the immanent difficulty contained in *all* identity claims. Derrida recalls from his childhood in Algeria the “epiphany of the word *jew*”:

There are two appellations about which I have never managed to know, to know anything at all, and most of all to know how they came to me or whether they constituted names, common nouns or proper names. [...] these two words that are neither common nor proper, are not “Daddy” and “Mommy,” but *God*—and *Jew*.³⁵¹

A common noun names a kind or class of things according to their essential qualities; a proper name demarcates a specific individual with a unique name. The monotheistic “God” names a

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 28 [36].

³⁵¹ Ibid, 9-10 [19].

necessary being that, by its very nature, leaves no room for other beings of its kind. But the word “God” is no more a name for this Being than “Dieu,” “Dios,” or “Gott.” In Jewish texts, God reveals himself in the Bible through a panoply of metaphors and aliases, but his true name is shrouded in mystery. When God reveals himself to Moses as the Burning Bush, he calls himself *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, “I am what I am” — an enigmatic ontological tautology presented as a name.³⁵² In the Kabbalah, the true name of God contains all knowledge of creation. Even the Tetragrammaton – the unpronounceable written name of God as YHVH – reveals just a deeper level of mystery. “God” is neither a common noun nor a proper name.

The word *juif* similarly inhabits the liminal space between common and proper noun, exhibiting elements of both depending on the context of the address. Derrida recalls that the first time he heard the word as a child was not in his home, but at school, as an insult, a performative address meant to injure. “Juif” was addressed as an *injuria*, “both an insult, a wound, and an injustice, a denial of right rather than the right to belong to a legitimate group,” which he received “like a blow, a denunciation, a de-legitimation,” and which beckoned a response.³⁵³ The word *juif* stands at a strange crossroads between memory and anxiety, affiliation and injury. This is what Derrida had described in *Circonfessions* as the double-cut of circumcision: the cut that binds and connects, but also the cut that divides and separates. Similarly, in “Abraham, the Other” Derrida describes the double-sided cut of the word “juif,” which signifies an affiliation that is paradoxically more than *and* less than Jewish. He is “plus que juif”: both “more than” and “no longer” Jewish, that is, *hyperbolically* Jewish. For Derrida, the word is torn between accusation – “Sale juif,” “Mort aux juifs,” “Jews Go Home” – and the expressions of *Judéité* which fill the memories of his

³⁵² Ex. 3:14.

³⁵³ Jacques Derrida, “Abraham the Other,” 10 [19].

childhood. “Je suis juif” contains an affirmation and a disjunction: it is an expression that always exceeds its semantic register, even as it never says quite enough.

The title of the colloquium beckons Derrida to respond to the charge of *Judéité*, and he therefore turns to the origin of the divine call to Abraham, the original interpolation of the Jew as a Jew. In the episode known as the *Akedah* or the Binding of Isaac, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. The patriarch comes to the cusp of killing his only son when an angel intervenes at the last moment. The angel initially calls out twice, “Abraham! Abraham!” to which he responds, “Here I am,” *hineini*, relenting the very instant before sacrificing his son.³⁵⁴ The angel’s call to Abraham is in a sense the original interpolation of the patriarch of the Jewish people *as* Jewish. Abraham is only called Abraham because of the covenant with God, which brought him a son at ninety-nine years old, and an “h” at the center of “Abram.” The angel calls out “Abraham” once more, announcing, “your children shall be blessed all the nations of the world, because you hearkened to My voice.”³⁵⁵ The angel initially calls Abraham’s name twice, and then once more – as if the first interpolation was not sufficient, or Abraham did not recognize the calling, or perhaps he hesitated to respond. In the momentary hiatus between the angel’s repeated calls “Abraham!” lies the difficulty of identification, the ambivalence between Abram and Abraham, the moment before he decides to put down his knife and allow his son Isaac to live, and the moment when God blesses Abraham’s descendants. While the biblical Abraham responds to the call, by returning to the hiatus between the angel’s repeated calls “Abraham!” we can see the potential for something – or someone – else to emerge from this episode.

In “Abraham, the Other,” Derrida revisits this crucial hiatus between the repeated calls to Abraham in the *Akedah* once more, through the perspective of Kafka’s parable, “Abraham.” In

³⁵⁴ Gen. 22:11.

³⁵⁵ Gen. 22:15-18.

fact, his title “Abraham, the Other” is a quote from Kafka’s parable, which is, of course, already *another* version of the biblical Abraham. The paradox of Kafka’s short parable is contained in its first line: “I could conceive of another Abraham” [*Ich könnte mir einen anderen Abraham denken*]:

I could conceive of another Abraham—to be sure, he would never get to be a patriarch or even an old-clothes dealer—, an Abraham who would be prepared to satisfy the demand for a sacrifice immediately, with the promptness of a waiter, but would be unable to bring it off because he cannot get away, being indispensable; the household needs him, there is always something or other to take care of, the house is never ready; but without having his house ready, without having something to fall back on, he cannot leave—this the Bible also realized, for it says: ‘He set his house in order.’³⁵⁶

There is a necessary quality to the narrative of the biblical Abraham: if and only if Abram accepts God’s covenant does he become Abraham; if and only if Abraham welcomes the strangers into his shelter, does God promise his wife Sarah a son, Isaac; if and only if Abraham follows God’s commandment to sacrifice Isaac, does he uphold the covenant, and so on. Precisely because Abraham *could not* have acted otherwise in these critical moments of the biblical narrative without ceasing to be Abraham, it should be *impossible* to conceive of “another Abraham.” Kafka’s Abraham would sacrifice his son without hesitating, and thus without the hiatus in which the angel repeats his call—except that he is busy, “the household needs him,” and he does not have the time to take Isaac to Mount Moriah. Kafka’s Abraham is not the same as the anguished biblical patriarch who answers *hineini* to the angel’s repeated calls, but he nonetheless claims the name Abraham.

In “Franz Kafka on the 10th Anniversary of his Death,” Walter Benjamin identifies the force of Kafka’s parable lies in the “gesture”: his Abraham is ready to sacrifice his son “with the promptness of a waiter.” Benjamin writes, “Kafka could understand things only in the form of a *gestus*, and this *gestus* which he did not understand constitutes the cloudy part of the parables.

³⁵⁶ Franz Kafka, “Abraham,” in Benjamin, “Franz Kafka on the 10th Anniversary of his Death,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 129.

Kafka's writings emanate from it."³⁵⁷ This "cloudy part" of the parable constitutes its essential paradox. Kafka's Abraham is precisely *another* Abraham because he would not hesitate to sacrifice his son: he is not his biblical analogue, and yet he is nonetheless inseparable from him. The essential difference is the biblical Abraham's overwhelming anxiety before the sacrifice of his son, compared to the promptness with which Kafka's Abraham is ready to enact the deed. Benjamin writes of Kafka's Abraham, "No other writer has obeyed the commandment 'Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image' so faithfully." For Benjamin, even as his parable is a kind of blaspheme against the biblical patriarch, Kafka demonstrates a hypervigilance for the Second Commandment in his refusal to make an idol of the biblical patriarch, through the same hyperbolic logic that Derrida describes with the ambivalent expression, "plus que juif," both more than Jewish, and no longer Jewish:

There would be *perhaps* yet another Abraham, not only he who received another name in his old age and, at ninety-nine, at the time of his circumcision, felt, by the blow of a letter, the letter *H* right in the middle of his name; not only he who, later, on Mount Moriah, was called twice by the angel, first "Abraham, Abraham," then, a second time still, from the height of the heavens, as Scripture tells us. There would be perhaps not only Abram, then Abraham, Abraham, twice. That there should be yet another Abraham: here, then, is the most threatened jewish thought [*la pensée juive la plus menacée*], but also the most vertiginously, the most intimately jewish one that I know to this day. For you have understood me well: when I say "the most jewish [*la plus juive*]," I also mean "more than jewish [*plus que juive*]." Others would perhaps say "otherwise jewish [*autrement juive*]," even "other than jewish [*autre que juive*]."³⁵⁸

Kafka's Abraham offers a powerful symbol for the logic of hyperbolic Judaism. The alternative vision of Abraham offered in Kafka's parable is a microcosm of the question of Jewish affiliation: how far can one diverge from Jewish identity and remain a Jew? In the binary terms of identity claims, Kafka's Abraham is neither Jewish, nor non-Jewish; he is, however, both more than and

³⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka on the 10th Anniversary of his Death," *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn New York: Schocken, 1968, 129.

³⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Abraham, the Other," 34-35 [42].

less than Jewish. The other possible Abrahams – after the biblical Abraham, there is Kierkegaard’s Abraham, Kafka’s Abraham, Benjamin’s Abraham, Derrida’s Abraham, and so on – cannot shirk their connection to Jewishness any more than they can fulfil it. Derrida’s hyperbolic Judaism refracts the original Abraham – and, by the same token, the essence of Jewish identity – into the endless possibilities of “another Abraham.”

Beyond the interlocutors with whom Derrida is explicitly in conversation in “Abraham, the Other,” perhaps the most crucial name is largely absent. Sarah Hammerschlag observes, “though [Derrida] says hardly a word about him, Lévinas is nonetheless invoked on almost every page.”³⁵⁹ Levinas treats Abraham as the crucial figure of Jewish monotheism, who stands in contrast to the Greek hero Odysseus. For Levinas, Abraham is the model of human transcendence, and the prototypical figure of ethical subjectivity. By contrast, Kierkegaard’s Abraham *Fear and Trembling* is characterized by the singular episode of the *Akedah*, where Abraham embodies the Knight of Faith. Derrida had explored Kierkegaard’s interpretation in *The Gift of Death*, where he suggests the possibility of ethics lies in a gift without reciprocity and beyond exchange. In his 1963 text “Kierkegaard Existence et Ethique,” he reproaches Kierkegaard’s singular focus on this episode, and he suggests that there is much more to Abraham’s story than the Binding of Isaac:

Kierkegaard has a predilection for the biblical story of the sacrificing of Isaac. Thus, he describes the encounter with God as a subjectivity rising to the religious level: God above the ethical order! His interpretation of this story can doubtless be given a different orientation. Perhaps Abraham's ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order was the highest moment in this drama. And Kierkegaard never speaks of the situation in which Abraham enters into dialogue- with God to intercede in favor of Sodom and Gomorrah, in the name of the just who may be present there? In that passage, Abraham is fully aware of his nothingness and mortality. "I am but dust and ashes" practically opens the dialogue, and the annihilating flame of divine ire burns before Abraham's eyes each time he intervenes.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Sarah Hammerschlag, “Another, Other Abraham: Derrida's Figuring of Levinas's Judaism” *Shofar*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Special Issue: Emmanuel Levinas and Jewish Thought: Translating Hebrew into Greek (Summer 2008), 75.

³⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Kierkegaard: Existence and Ethics,” *Proper Names* (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1996), 74 [“Kierkegaard Existence et Ethique,” *Noms Propres*, 113].

Kierkegaard's focus on the *Akedah* obscures other aspects of Abraham's story, such as his pleading with God to spare the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In his 1966 text "A propos de 'Kierkegaard Vivant,'" Levinas invokes this crucial episode as the root of Abraham's ethical subjectivity:

Here, in Abraham, the precondition of any possible triumph of life over death is formulated. Death is powerless over the finite life that receives a meaning from an infinite responsibility for the other, from a diacony constituting the subjectivity of the subject, which is totally a tension toward the other. It is here, in ethics, that there is an appeal to the uniqueness of the subject, and a bestowal of meaning to life, despite death.³⁶¹

For Levinas, Abraham is the symbol of election and the original figure of ethical subjectivity. Avowing his mortal finitude, Abraham's plea with God to spare the people of Sodom and Gomorrah illustrates the infinite ethical obligation to the Other, borne of his election and mortality. Election constitutes the fact of Jewish existence which gives rise to the infinite ethical obligation to the Other, and Abraham represents the figure of ethical subjectivity. As he describes in *Totality and Infinity*, "the I is a privilege and an election."³⁶²

Responding to Levinas' Abraham via Kafka's parable, Derrida's "Abraham, the Other" questions the fact of election. "By way of Kafka's parable," Hammerschlag explains, "Derrida introduces a glitch into this dynamic by asking, how does Abraham know it was he who was called? Does the claiming of the call not involve an element of presumption?"³⁶³ The hiatus between the angel's first and repeated calls "Abraham!" contains the question of election: how does Abraham know that he is being called? How does a Jew recognize he or she is a Jew? This hiatus injects doubt into the calling, tempering the self-assured calls of zealots and extremists:

Whoever is certain—as was not, precisely, the other, the second other Abraham of Kafka—whoever believes he detains the certainty of having been, he and he alone, he first, called as the best of the class, trans- forms and corrupts the terrible and indecisive experience of

³⁶¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "A propos of 'Kierkegaard Vivant,'" *Proper Names*, 77 ["A propos de *Kierkegaard Vivant*," *Noms Propres* 117-118].

³⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 245.

³⁶³ Sarah Hammerschlag, "Another, Other Abraham," 81.

responsibility and of election into a dogmatic caricature, with the most fearsome consequences that can be imagined in this century, political consequences in particular.³⁶⁴

The paradox is that one must answer the call, but one cannot know how to differentiate the authentic call to Abrahamic election from the dangerous call of the zealot. This is the risk of election contained in the claim of exemplarity, and it provokes the need for the “leap of faith.” In his rereading of Kafka’s parable, Derrida seeds doubt into the fact of Jewish election, uprooting the facticity of Levinas’ conception of “being Jewish.”

In a 1989 interview, Christoph von Wolzogen recalls Levinas’ distinction between Odysseus’s homecoming and Abraham’s departure, and suggests that Kafka’s writing expresses an unfulfilled desire for homecoming. In response, Levinas opposes Odysseus’ nostalgia to the loss of place in Kafka’s writing: “in Kafka there is no returning; there is a search for a place, *un lieu* somewhere. It is a movement to the past. With Kafka, there is, in general, no place.”³⁶⁵ This loss of place renders Kafka’s characters constantly at odds with the world, strangers to themselves, accused of crimes of which they are not aware, where time and place sink into the quicksand of a world without explanation or cause. Levinas draws a parallel between the loss of place in Kafka’s writing and the biblical imperative to honor the stranger in Psalm 119, “I am a stranger on the earth: hide not thy commandment from me.”³⁶⁶ In this verse connecting the imperative to welcome the stranger with the appeal for God’s law, Levinas notes, “The same word that always appears in the Bible: one must attend to the cares of the ‘stranger.’”³⁶⁷ Connecting the loss of place in Kafka’s writing to the commandment to welcome the stranger – that is, the foreigner, the refugee, the *sans-papiers* – Levinas suggests an alliance between Abraham’s going forth and Kafka’s loss of place,

³⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Abraham, the Other,” 31 [38].

³⁶⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Intention, Event, and the Other,” *Is it Righteous to Be?* 141.

³⁶⁶ Psalms 119:19.

³⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Intention, Event, and the Other,” 142.

against Odysseus' nostalgic for return. Unfortunately, he does not close this analogical loop by explicitly invoking Kafka's "Abraham." For Levinas, the loss of place in Kafka's writing does not undercut the facticity of election—rather, for Gregor Samsa or Josef K., it is precisely the fact of being chosen for an ordeal without explanation which provokes the loss of place.

If Levinas views election as the fact of Jewish existence, we might describe Derrida's hyperbolic Judaism as counter-factual: he frequently invokes the expression, *s'il y en a*, prying opening contingency and possibility from the trap of necessity. Hammerschlag notes, "what differentiates Derrida's position from Levinas's is his use of the *comme si*."³⁶⁸ The *as if* introduces the possibility of a different adventure, a different interpretation of the facts of the biblical narrative.³⁶⁹ Derrida's *comme si* enables an infinity of literary counter-interpretations:

I believe that a certain *perhaps* of the *comme si*, *as if*, the poetical or the literary, in sum, lies at the heart of what I want to entrust to you—*as if* the one who disavowed the most, and who appeared to betray the dogmas of belonging, be it a belonging to the community, the religion, even to the people, the nation and the state, and so on—*as if* this individual alone represented the last demand, the hyperbolic request of the very thing he appears to betray by perjuring himself. Hence this law that comes upon me, a law that, appearing antinomian, dictated to me, in a precocious and obscure fashion, in a kind of light whose rays are unbending, the hyper-formalized formula of a destiny devoted to the secret—and that is why I play seriously, more and more, with the figure of the marrano: the less you show yourself as Jewish, the more and better Jew you will be.³⁷⁰

The *comme si* introduces literature by introducing a disjunction between language and meaning which is not bound to the absolutism of the philosophical concept, enabling a Jewishness that "betray by perjuring," which honors the tradition by falsifying it. Hammerschlag explains, "for

³⁶⁸ Sarah Hammerschlag, "Another, Other Abraham," 95.

³⁶⁹ There is a long history of the philosophical motif of the *as if*. For Kant, the regulative idea of God as supreme being is not effective if it is true, rather only if we act *als ob* it is true. Similarly, in the domain of ethics, the categorical imperative demands that one act "as if" the maxim of their actions becomes a universal law for humanity. Hans Vaihinger's 1911 *Philosophy of the As If* (New York: Routledge, 2021) argues that humanity clings to certain useful fictions based on false assumptions but which we treat *as if* they were true. Kwame Anthony Appiah's 2017 *As If* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) extends Vaihinger's claim to study the place of idealization in human thought. By contrast, Derrida's use of the *comme si* follows Kafka in proposing a counterfactual situation, not simply a useful fiction, but as a rethinking and an overturning of historical contingency.

³⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Abraham, the Other" 13 [22].

Derrida this perjury would in fact be the sign of fidelity to the antinomy that is at the heart of ‘being-Jewish.’”³⁷¹ This deceit connects the *comme si* to the *marrano*, whose Jewishness lies precisely in hiding the outward signs of Jewishness. This hyperbolic Judaism is always too much and never enough for a sufficient concept of identity: “The more radically you break with a certain dogmatism of the place or of the bond (communal, national, religious, of the state),” Derrida once told Levinas, “the more you will be faithful to the hyperbolic, excessive [*démesurée*] demand, to the *hubris*, perhaps, of a universal and disproportionate responsibility toward the singularity of every other.”³⁷² Derrida’s hyperbolic Judaism refuses any final interpretation of identity, and embraces the endless possibilities of *Judéité* to question and re-imagine.

Like Kafka’s re-imagination of Abraham, Jabès’ *The Book of Questions* challenges the Book of Books, it questions the tradition as a liminal expression of the tradition. Jabès imagines a legion of rabbis and sages whose invented proverbs and apocryphal Talmudic lessons present a *different* Judaism. Jabès’ relation to “Jewish” writing takes place in the imaginary because “Jewish” identity is already a phantasm. He inverts the question of “Jewish” writing, rendering writing an expression of Jewishness. Consequently, Jabès’ Judaism rewrites tradition as fiction, testing the limits of interpretation. Lucette Finas describes his writing as “*otherwise* Jewish, where Jewish is *other* than Jewish.”³⁷³ Jabès’ rabbis argue over apocryphal scripture and aberrant proverbs, his “Jewish” writing invents and fictionalizes as a condition of its exile. For Derrida, Jabès reveals the impossibility for the Jew to reconcile the literal and the allegorical:

The *imaginary*, this milieu where Jabès allows his rabbis to chat, throws their sentences off course, expropriates their names, such that we also read an uprooting [*déracinement*], a derivation or dispersion of which the *diaspora* [...] is perhaps the initial and most gentle

³⁷¹ Sarah Hammerschlag, “Another, Other Abraham,” 96.

³⁷² Jacques Derrida, “Abraham, the Other,” 13 [22].

³⁷³ Lucette Finas, “Edmond Jabès Aujourd’hui,” 58.

suture. The Jew dresses, bandages, covers, and circumscribes this wound. Jabès re-opens it and makes it bleed.³⁷⁴

The rupture of identity inspires Jabès' use of citations and fictional characters, which both Derrida and Finas connect to diaspora. In lieu of a home, the exiled Jewish writer finds solace in the space of the imagination. Finas explains, "the character of citation, or expropriation, in the text, of Jewish reference. New diaspora, with a lower-case *d* (dispersion, dissipation, [*d'écriture*], displacing, disarticulating the Diaspora)."³⁷⁵ Jabès' expropriation of the Jewish tradition in imaginary citations is a kind of rupture with the canonical texts of Judaism, and its re-articulation in a foreign land. His citations, like Derrida's *comme si*, thus enable a form of literary or virtual Judaism. The split between allegory and literality in Jabès' writing parallels the biblical Abraham and Kafka's Abraham: the *comme si* enables a reading of the tradition against itself, without foreclosing the contingent possibilities of what could have been otherwise.

In their initial exchanges, Levinas maintained a certain restraint and distance with regards to Jabès' poetry and his "contingent" expression of Judaism. His quixotic tales of fictional rabbis and sages stretch the limits of what Levinas can tolerate as an expression of Judaism. Nonetheless, Levinas seemed to warm to Jabès' poetic style by the third volume *Le Retour au Livre* – no doubt due to the influence of Blanchot. "You are a great poet," he wrote Jabès in 1965 after the publication of *Le Retour au Livre*, "however I would be very embarrassed if I had to re-say in non-poetic language what these propositions say – or, unsay. These lucky propositions contain this small earthquake by which one is expelled from the trajectory of language where your thoughts are nonetheless placed."³⁷⁶ Levinas identifies in Jabès' poetry the discontinuity of language and meaning enabled by the imagination:

³⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès Aujourd'hui," 56.

³⁷⁵ Lucette Finas, "Edmond Jabès Aujourd'hui," 58.

³⁷⁶ Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, November 30, 1965, Fond Jabès, BNF.

I see [...] in reading you what Blanchot suggests in *l'Attente l'Oubli* about the essence of poetry: discontinuity to escape with the lessons that the conditions of language make of language, obeying the escapes it carves out, which encroach on speech to say what it wants to say. Is that the problem of the book which obsesses you? The book offers the unique possibility of transcendence. And these names of rabbis, which have shocked me until now, fantastic, but pronounceable names? Is it here that the desire to unveil the meaning of words is satisfied, to discover their freedom as sound?

While he remains sceptical of Jabès' imaginary rabbis, Levinas conceives of the "problem of the book," as a question of the book as the site of transcendence – a theme he shares with the Egyptian poet.³⁷⁷ He develops these reflections in his contribution to the 1972-1973 issue of *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* on Jabès' work, where he describes his poetry's "exposure, without defense, to an attention the hyperbole of which is exigency."³⁷⁸ Within the transcendence of the book, Jabès' poetry is the abyssal place at the opening of language, which "makes the word God suddenly appear," where *Dieu* emerges from *d'yeux*.³⁷⁹ The vigilance to hyperbole is the law of Jabès' writing, and the Jewish condition of his work. Levinas remarks, "is that not what the 'sleepless' attention of the 'guardian of Israel' is?" It is the steadfast commitment to hyperbole that Levinas calls "the Jewish moment of Jabès' work; I mean its human moment." Levinas invokes a dual register in the ambivalence between the Jewish and human aspect of his writing.

The "Jewish" quality of Jabès' writing is not expressed by particular themes of exile or exclusion, rather Levinas explains that these themes "are still turning in the vertigo that comes from what he calls 'the vertiginous place of the book.'"³⁸⁰ It is Jabès' transcendence in the book even as he deconstructs it, which Derrida calls to "betray by perjuring," that illustrates the hyperbolic Jewish character of Jabès' writing. Levinas' sympathetic interpretation of the Jewish

³⁷⁷ Levinas writes: "My condition - or my un-condition - is my relation to books. It is the very movement-towards-God [*l'à-Dieu même*]." *Beyond the Verse*, xii [9].

³⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Edmond Jabès Today," 65 [99].

³⁷⁹ Edmond Jabès *Livre des Questions*, Tome 2, 293. We will return to this allusion in depth in chapter 5.

³⁸⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Edmond Jabès Today" 65 [99].

character of Jabès' commitment to hyperbole suggests a reconciliation with Derrida's *comme si*. Like the two faces sharing Adam's head – perhaps suggesting the split for the Jew between allegory and literality – Jabès' language is “without any possible rupture with this God,” his language is tied to the other, who is the other contained in the self. In his interpretation of Jabès' hyperbolic Judaism, Levinas comes closest to intersecting the logic of Derrida's *comme si*. The triangulation of Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès' responses to the question of “Jewish” writing reveals a chiasmus between the demands of a universal ethical subjectivity, and the singularity of a narrative adventure which can always be imagined otherwise.

VIII. Conclusion

In a 2004 dialogue with Jacqueline Rose and Hélène Cixous for London's Jewish Book Week, Derrida told this variation of a classic Jewish joke:

There are three people on an island: a German citizen, a French citizen, and a Jew [...] They don't know when they will leave the island and it is boring. One of them says, “Well, we should do something. [...] Why don't we write something on the elephants?” There were a number of elephants on the island. “Everyone should write something on the elephants and then we could compare the styles and the national idioms,” and so on and so forth. So the week after, the French one came, with a short, brilliant, witty essay on the sexual drive, or the sexual appetite of the elephants [...] Three months, or three years after that, the German came back with [...] a very positive scientific book on the elephants and the ecology of the elephants on the island. And the two of them asked the Jew, “Well, when will you give us your book?” “Wait, it's a very serious question. I need more time. I need more time.” And they came again every year asking him for his book. Finally, after ten years, he came back with a book called, “The Elephant and the Jewish Question.”³⁸¹

³⁸¹ Jacques Derrida. “The Language of Others.” Jewish Book Week Lecture. Chair: Jacqueline Rose. 1 March 2004. London, England. <https://jewishbookweek.com/event/the-language-of-others-helene-cixous-jacques-derrida/>. Peter Salmon's recent biography *An Event, Perhaps* misattributes Derrida's joke to a different 2004 dialogue with Cixous (See: *An Event, Perhaps* (London: Verso, 2020), chapter 10).

Where Levinas asserts there will be Jews on Mars, Derrida's corollary is that there will be anti-Semitic elephants on the desert island. Sartre describes how the Jew is constructed by the anti-Semite to fulfill the need for a scapegoat and enemy; conversely, Levinas identifies in the fact of Jewish election the origin of the anti-Semite's antipathy. There is nowhere the Jew can go where he or she will not also encounter the anti-Semite. From the "Jewish Question" to the reflections on Jewish identity in the aftermath of the Shoah, the fraught definition of Jewish identity remains, paradoxically, the most uncanny and most exemplary affiliation, which magnifies the *aporia* at the heart of identification and belonging itself. Where Bernard Lazare turns the figure of the Jewish pariah against itself to discover its potential for revolutionary critique, he discovers an essential tactic to respond to the double-edged exclusionary forces that police the limits of Jewish identity and belonging. For Derrida – named for Jackie Coogan, the actor for the silver screen's iconic conscious pariah in Chaplin's *The Kid* – the joke highlights his parallels with Lazare's figure. Trafficking in the terms of national identity, only to satirize or undermine the legitimacy of these distinctions from within, Derrida cannot escape Jewish identity any more than he can embrace it.

"Je suis juif" is a performative utterance which contains an affiliation and an accusation. Derrida and Jabès position themselves at the critical margins of the Jewish tradition, and they refuse the identification as "Jewish" writers, even as they engage the questioning and exploration of *Judéité*. The grammar of Jewish identification is structured by the exclusionary group dynamics that have accompanied the history of anti-Semitism, and yet the recognition exemplified by the biblical call to Abraham is inexorable. By contrast, for Levinas, even if the essential features of Jewish identity are disputed, the "metaphysical sentiment" of election gives rise to the ethical subjectivity. Derrida rather describes himself as irreducible to any discrete form of identity, but faithful to an unrelenting form of questioning. His hyperbolic Judaism follows the logic of "not

enough” and “too much”: there is no necessary and sufficient concept of identity, it is a phantasm captured by the double-sided language of identification. By the same token, Jabès refuses to identify as a “Jewish writer,” and yet in his literary universe, writing is itself the expression of Judaism. This reversal eschews claims to identity that have marked centuries of debates concerning “Jewish” writing, and yet Jabès’ writing imagines an entirely fictional Jewish tradition. Derrida and Jabès explore the possibility of a differential Judaism, which reimagines the tradition through the literary mode of the *comme si*. Like Kafka’s Abraham, this hyperbolic Judaism betrays the Bible by reimagining it. When Levinas describes the Jewish condition of Jabès’ writing as his strict vigilance to hyperbole, where “hyperbole is exigence,” it suggests the possibility for a reconciliation. Levinas’ “irremissible” fact of Jewish election and Derrida’s unavoidable question of Jewish exemplarity cross paths in the frenetic imagination of Jabès’ fictionalized Judaism.

Chapter III: The Absolute Book and its Demise

I. Introduction

This chapter explores the “absolute book” and its demise. I retrace the absolute book in Hegel’s philosophy, specifically the interpretation presented in Kojève’s influential course on the *Phenomenology*, culminating in the figure of the “sage.” Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity* oppose the idealism of the absolute book, but their opposition leads in different directions. Levinas views the Hegelian absolute book as endemic of the philosophical drive for totality, which obscures the idea of infinity. Drawing from Rosenzweig’s critique of totality, *Totality and Infinity* articulates a two-sided critique of totality which “does not envisage the end of history within being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality.”³⁸² Working through the system of being, the individual discovers what Levinas calls the “ex-ceedance” of totality by the infinite, “the overflowing of thought by its content.”³⁸³ By contrast, Derrida announces in *Of Grammatology* the “death” of the absolute book, and the “birth” of an understanding of language based on the “arche-trace,” the irreducible play of linguistic meaning that refuses the metaphysics of presence. Derrida’s critique of the absolute book leads to a new notion of textuality based on the “outre-livre,” which refuses the closed unity of Hegel’s absolute book. The difference hinges on Derrida and Levinas’ notions of the “trace.”

³⁸² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

³⁸³ *Ibid*, 197.

II. The Heritage of the Absolute Book

Philosophers have long dreamed of an absolute book whose pages contained the totality of knowledge. The absolute book would be a sublime, transformative object, a kind of philosopher's bible. The knowledge contained in its pages would transcend human finitude and survive the end of history, and it would offer an understanding of the absolute previously reserved for God. Modern philosophy is ostensibly inaugurated by the quest to discover the "book of nature," to understand its secrets, and inscribe them in a book of human knowledge to rival God's. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes resolves, "to pursue only that knowledge which I might find in myself or in the great book of the world [*le grand livre du monde*]." ³⁸⁴ The book of nature, the book of the world, or the absolute book are variants of the metaphor describing the ensemble of worldly knowledge encompassed in the pages of a book. This ambition morphs into the project of philosophical encyclopedia, where the philosopher attempts to construct the system which can articulate and explain every domain of human experience. ³⁸⁵ The pursuit of the absolute book became an obsession in 19th century Romanticism. Alexandre Kojève explains, "the *summum* of Romantic expression is the novel of the novel, the book of the book." ³⁸⁶ Hegel's systematic

³⁸⁴ René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Part One, 10.

³⁸⁵ The metaphorology of the book is the focus of Hans Blumenberg's work in texts including *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), *Höhlenausgänge*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp Vg, 1989) and *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007). While it is beyond the purview of this project, Blumenberg's reflections on the metaphor of the book draws strong parallels with Derrida's work. See, for example: Anselm Haverkamp, "The Unconceptuability of the Being The Place of Metaphor According to Blumenberg: An Attempted Commentary" *Archives de Philosophie* Volume 67, Issue 2, 2004, 269-278; *Philosophie de la métaphore: penser avec Blumenberg*, eds. Anselm Haverkamp and Jean-Claude Monod (Paris: Hermann, 2017).

³⁸⁶ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 152.

philosophy is the hallmark of this thinking. The culmination of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – the revelation of Spirit to itself at the end of history as absolute knowledge – takes the form of an absolute book of knowledge. By the same token, Novalis declares in his *Romantic Encyclopaedia*, “My book shall be a scientific Bible—a real, and ideal model—and the seed of all books [...] All the sciences amount to one book.”³⁸⁷ The dream of the absolute book as the organon of human knowledge motivated philosophers and poets alike. Mallarmé, whose life was consumed by the project of drafting the absolute book of poetry, declared in the *Revue Blanche* in 1897: “Tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre.”³⁸⁸

The enthusiasm animating the Romantic quest for the absolute book burst in the 20th century. The unprecedented death and destruction of the world wars, capped by the Shoah and the nuclear attacks on Japan, shook faith in humanity’s inevitable progress. Stunning mathematical and scientific discoveries including Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, Einstein’s theory of relativity, and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle undercut the supposed objectivity of the physical world, and enabled extraordinary technological innovations that obviated the dream of an absolute book of philosophy. The monolithic rationalism undergirding the absolute book no longer seemed viable or even desirable. These developments accompanied tectonic shifts in philosophy. Both Wittgenstein’s 1921 *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* as well as Heidegger’s 1927 *Sein und Zeit*

³⁸⁷ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, trans. David Wood (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 99-100, §557-571. For Novalis, the *Romantic Encyclopaedia* is not to be confused with a new biblical organon in the sense of a “new romantic gospel.” The idea of a “Romantic Religion” originates in Lessing’s 1777 *The Education of the Human Race*, where he foresees “this age of a new, eternal gospel, which is itself promised in the elementary books of the new covenant” (§86). While Novalis had elsewhere suggested interest in Lessing’s “gospel of the future,” the *Romantic Encyclopaedia* was intended to serve as a universal book of science. Novalis’ use of “Bible” is a *Gattungsbegriff*, a “generic concept,” which implies the ideal form of the book: rather than a strictly religious notion, “A Bible is the supreme task of writing” (§433). At the same time, Friedrich Schlegel had prolonged Lessing’s suggestion with a Bible project of his own that was intended to “establish a new religion.” By contrast, Novalis wrote to Schlegel in 1798 where he describes “the idea of the Bible—as the ideal of each and every book.” See: David Wood’s Introduction to the *Romantic Encyclopaedia*, xvii-xix.

³⁸⁸ Jacques Scherer. *Le “Livre” de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), Fragment 181a.

stake claims as books espousing new programmatic approaches to understanding the world. However, these patriarchs of 20th century “Continental” and “Analytic” philosophy would come to renounce the systems proposed by their respective books.

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* sets out to ask the question of the meaning of Being, which philosophy had previously taken as “the most universal and the emptiest of questions.”³⁸⁹ He sets out to discover “the basic concept of Being” through a preliminary study of the concrete existence of the special entity called *Dasein*. The first part of *Being and Time* proposes an explanation of *Dasein*, for whom temporality is the “transcendental horizon for the question of Being”; its second part was to sketch the “features of a phenomenological destruction of the history of ontology.” However, after publishing the first two divisions of the first part, Heidegger came to see the futility of completing the project as he had originally intended. After his 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he renounced the word ontology, and the project of destroying the history of ontology which he had proposed for the second part of *Being and Time*. Being, he discovered, can only be revealed in dissimulation. Derrida explains in his 1967 *Of Grammatology* that the language of fundamental ontology is always-already inscribed in the metaphysics that it seeks to escape:

The necessary, originary, and irreducible dissimulation of the meaning of being, its occultation within the very blossoming forth of presence, that retreat without which there would be no history of being which was completely *history* and history of *being*, Heidegger’s insistence on noting that being is produced as history only through the logos, and is nothing outside of it, the difference between being and the entity—all this clearly indicates that fundamentally nothing escapes the movement of the signifier and that, in the last instance, the difference between signified and signifier *is nothing*. This proposition of transgression, not yet integrated into a careful discourse, runs the risk of formulating regression itself. One must therefore *go by way of* the question of being as it is directed by Heidegger and by him alone, at and beyond onto-theology, in order to reach the rigorous thought of that strange nondifference in order to determine it correctly.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §8.

³⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 22-23.

Fundamental ontology cannot outrun the coattails of its own historical discourse: the meaning of Being is bound to the metaphysical language that it seeks to escape. For Derrida, this leads to a regression to the dominance of the signifier, where one must analyze the meaning of Being because it has structured the meaning of Being. The inevitable dissimulation of Being would provoke Heidegger's so-called *Kehre*, away from the programmatic destruction of the history of onto-theology. In the 1946 "Letter on Humanism," he admitted that *Being and Time* had led to a "blind alley," from which he could not progress any further. But if the program of Heidegger's initial project had to be abandoned, this does not imply that it engenders a defunct mode of thought: "to 'philosophize' about being shattered is separated by a chasm from a thinking that is shattered."³⁹¹ Heidegger no longer believed it possible to complete his proposed *Destruktion* of the history of onto-theology, and he abandoned the pretention of a systematic treatise of Being. Rather, "shattered" philosophical thought advances by posing critical questions and following them down their paths, which is incommensurate with the absolute book's assertion of systematic totality. "Wege - nicht Werke," is the motto printed at the beginning of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*.³⁹² He had come to believe that philosophy should be understood as pathways of thought, rather than a compendium of exhaustive treatises. Of course, the critical inheritance of Heidegger's philosophy has an unparalleled importance for Levinas and Derrida. Levinas' concept of infinity emerges in direct reaction to the closed totality demarcated by Heidegger's concept of Being, and his *Destruktion* of metaphysics paves the way for Derrida's critique of "logocentrism."

Wittgenstein's philosophy follows an altogether different trajectory than Heidegger's, but his turn away from the programmatic thinking of the book is similarly initiated by the impossibility

³⁹¹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 246.

³⁹² See: Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, Band I* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1978).

of reigning in language to suit his book's systematic objective. In the preface to the *Tractatus* he summarizes, "the whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."³⁹³ To that end, the *Tractatus* describes the necessary and sufficient rules guiding logical language in its description of the world. But Wittgenstein viewed even his own book as a transitory stage: once it has been properly understood, the reader will have understood its propositions as "nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)."³⁹⁴ Wittgenstein's book functions as a kind of propaedeutic ladder out of our non-sense so that we can "see the world aright," only to kick away the ladder we have ascended. The final proposition of the *Tractatus* asserts, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence," thereby limiting what can be spoken to the bound of sense.³⁹⁵ We may wonder what becomes of the language that is excluded.³⁹⁶ Blumenberg writes of the *Tractatus*'

³⁹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

³⁹⁴ Ibid, Prop. 6.54.

³⁹⁵ Ibid, Prop 7.

³⁹⁶ Wittgenstein describes several notable "books" in thought experiments in his work. In a letter to his editor Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein wrote of the *Tractatus*: "my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one." (See: Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 178). Whereas the written *Tractatus* sketches the limits of truth-verifiable descriptions of the world, its unwritten part is its ethical dimension, without which the book would be incomplete. We may speculate that he is working out the same metaphor in the 1929 "Lecture on Ethics" where he describes two "books" to illustrate his non-representational notion of ethics. The "World Book" would contain all of the propositionally true statements about the world; it would express the totality of facts about the world. This first book would have absolutely no comments about ethics, since ethics concerns prescriptions rather than description of the facts of the world. The second book would be "the Book of Ethics." Insofar as the language of ethics can only be expressed as non-sense, Wittgenstein writes, "if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world" (*Lecture on Ethics* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 46). Eli Friedlander argues in *Signs of Sense* that the *Tractatus* "incorporates both kinds of book. Wittgenstein begins with the fantasy of the exhaustive book and ends with the fantasy of the apocalyptic book; that is, he elaborates the *Tractatus* between two fantasies of doing away with work, in particular with the work of language. This means, not surprisingly perhaps, that the *Tractatus* is an impossible work. Logically speaking, the *Tractatus* does not exist." (*Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 13). The *Tractatus* also describes another book, "The World as I Found It," which he says is a book he *could* write: it would "include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will. And which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather showing that in an important sense there is no subject." (5.631) Friedlander interprets "The World as I Found It," as "overcoming the tension between the impossible book of facts and the impossible book of transcendence," and offers "the possibility of relating to the world

demand to remain silent, “what this mean more specifically is simply that what we cannot speak of in a *certain* way, we must speak of it in *another* way.”³⁹⁷ Despite the *Tractatus*’ concluding imperative, there is no way to avoid speaking. Blanchot writes, “to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible.”³⁹⁸ In “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Derrida similarly suggests that language is always-already underway before we enter the conversation, and there is therefore no way to avoid speaking: “the moment that the question ‘How to avoid speaking?’ arises, it is already too late. It was no longer a question of not speaking. Language has begun without us, in us, before us.”³⁹⁹ In *The Postcard: From Freud to Socrates and Beyond*, he critically reframes the seventh proposition of the *Tractatus* as a question of spoken and written language: “What cannot be said above all must not be silenced, but written. Myself, I am a man of speech, I have never had anything to write. When I have something to say I say it or say it to myself, basta.”⁴⁰⁰ The final proposition in the *Tractatus* circumscribes language to the language of sense, but in light of his critique of “logocentrism,” Derrida suggests that what cannot be said can always be written: the difference inscribed in his coinage “différance,” for example, can be read and written, but not heard. Derrida’s comment is imbued with a degree of irony if not sarcasm, but it illustrates his predilection for liminal discourse, which exposes the non-identity of written and spoken language. Whereas Wittgenstein writes, “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*,”⁴⁰¹ Derrida instead

as *I* found it,” that is, according to a world of sense where things are embedded with meaning (15). While this book may be possible, it is not what Wittgenstein wrote in the *Tractatus*. Friedlander further suggests that we might even consider the *Tractatus* as a literary analogue of Genesis: it is a text divided into seven parts, which begins by positing the boundaries of the world from out of nothing, it then details the modalities for understanding it, before its creator withdraws in silence. In a sense, the *Tractatus* is a self-effacing book: once we have climbed up the ladder and “see the world aright,” we can throw it away.

³⁹⁷ Hans Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp Vg, 1989), 426.

³⁹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, trans Anne Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 11.

³⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Vol II*, trans. Ken Frieden and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 166.

⁴⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 194.

⁴⁰¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.6.

claims, “I try to keep myself at the *limit* of philosophical discourse.”⁴⁰² Constantly seeking out the limits of discourse, tarrying at the margins of language, Derrida attempts to uproot and subvert the closure of linguistic meaning as the “transcendental signifier” or the “unity of the book.”

Wittgenstein later rejected the logical language of the *Tractatus* in favor of the picture theory of language, whose focus on ordinary use is incompatible with the absolute book. He had come to regard the division of sense and non-sense as irreducible, offering the false assurance of a purely logical language which does not obtain. “The ideal, as we conceive of it, is unshakable. You can’t step out-side it,” he writes in *Philosophical Investigations*, “The idea is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.”⁴⁰³ The language of sense functions like a pair of glasses which bring images into a certain focus. Taking off these proverbial glasses, Wittgenstein’s later philosophy disabuses language of its supposed grounding in the logical description of the objective facts of the world. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he turns to the ordinary use of language and context-driven language games which establish linguistic meaning. He writes, “A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.”⁴⁰⁴ The picture of the world determined by logical language filters the world in a manner that passes as objective, but it leaves a lot out of frame: ethics, religion, and the social practices that shape and are shaped by the ordinary, often non-sensical ways we employ language. In the “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein recognizes, “these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence.”⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰² Jacques Derrida, “Implications: Interview with Henri Ronsse,” *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6.

⁴⁰³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §103.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, §115.

⁴⁰⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, 50-51.

This tendency for particularly ethical language “to run against the boundaries of language” discloses the insufficiency of the logical language of the absolute book. The turn away from the *Tractatus* is a rejection of the absolute book in favor of an approach to language understood in the context of the ordinary usages that compose our “forms of life.”

III. Hegel, Kojève, and the Absolute Book

The notion of the absolute book reached its apex and demise in critical readings of Hegel in 20th century France. In the 1960 edition of *Reason and Revolution*, Herbert Marcuse asserted the "only major recent development in the interpretation of Hegel's philosophy" is the "postwar revival of Hegel studies in France," which identifies "the inner connection between the idealistic and materialistic dialectic."⁴⁰⁶ This revival can be attributed in no small measure to Alexandre Kojève's seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, held between 1933 and 1939 at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. Kojève's seminar was a major philosophical “event,” which introduced an entire generation of French philosophers to Hegel's philosophy: its participants included Raymond Aron, Georges Bataille, Raymond Queneau, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Robert Marjolin, and Emmanuel Levinas. The importance of the seminar lies both in his novel interpretation of Hegel, and its tremendous influence on this budding generation of philosophers.⁴⁰⁷ The seminar tempted students to break from the orthodoxy of the French

⁴⁰⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 420.

⁴⁰⁷ Raymond Queneau compiled and edited notes from Kojève's seminar for *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, which was published by Gallimard in 1947; a second edition in 1962 contains an additional note written by Kojève. The abridged English translation by James Nichols, with an introduction by Allan Bloom, was published in 1980. Because my reading focuses on the last year of the seminar which is not included in the English translation, I will cite my translations of the French edition.

philosophical establishment: “I don't know how many times Queneau and I stumbled out of that little room gasping for air-suffocated, beaten,” Bataille recounted, “Kojève's course left me broken, crushed, killed ten times.”⁴⁰⁸ Aron recounted that Kojève’s seminar “captivated an audience of superintellectuals who were inclined toward doubt or criticism,” in no small part due to the magnetism that “stemmed from his subject and his person.”⁴⁰⁹ Ethan Kleinberg describes the formative role of the seminar for “the generation of 1933,” who rose to prominence after the war bearing the influences of phenomenology, Marxism, and existential philosophy which Kojève helped bring across the Rhine.⁴¹⁰ Levinas had previously met fellow Russian émigré Kojève through Alexandre Koyré, and he was one of the only participants in the seminar with direct knowledge of Husserl and Heidegger’s philosophies. Following Levinas’ 1930 *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, Kojève’s seminar was one of the first expositions of Heidegger’s philosophy in France. Derrida was still a child in Algiers during the seminar, but he eagerly read the published seminar in the 1950s. Both Derrida and Levinas found in Kojève a springboard for critical reflection on idealism, history, and philosophy’s relation to the book.

Kojève’s idiosyncratic reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* has pronounced Marxist and Heideggerian perspectives. After reading *Being and Time*, Kojève deploys several of Heidegger’s key existential concepts to respond to shortcomings he identifies in Hegel’s text. Kleinberg remarks, “Kojève uses Hegel to read Heidegger as much as he uses Heidegger to read Hegel,” even if, ultimately, he “firmly believed that Hegel had gotten philosophy right.”⁴¹¹ Further, his interpretation of the *Phenomenology* has a Marxist gloss particularly on crucial questions of

⁴⁰⁸ George Bataille, “Sur Nietzsche” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 6 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 416.

⁴⁰⁹ Raymond Aron, *Memoires: Cinquante ans de reflexion politique* (Paris: Julliard, 1983), 94-100.

⁴¹⁰ Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927–1961*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 4.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid*, 71, 83.

history, the master-slave dialectic, and the role of work. As Kojève's former student Allan Bloom wrote in the introduction to the 1969 English edition, "anyone who wishes to understand the sense of that mixture of Marxism and Existentialism which characterizes contemporary radicalism must turn to Kojève."⁴¹² Kojève's speculative reading of Hegel's text struck a chord. For its participants and readers, the seminar was a thrilling journey through an entire century of German philosophy, which presented a totally new approach to philosophy.

A central thesis of Kojève's seminar concerns the "end of history." Despite the fits and starts of the dialectical movement of history, Hegel believes that history is teleologically guided towards the realization of reason and freedom. Kojève sympathetically describes a two-sided notion of history, which is at once an unyielding story of violence, war, and revolution, as well as the story of humanity's progress towards greater freedom and reason. This picture of humanity's progress against the backdrop of a bloody struggle for recognition, as Kleinberg describes, reflected "qualities that spoke to the generation of 1933."⁴¹³ It bears reminding that until the outbreak of the Second World War, the notion of the "end of history" signified an optimistic hope for a future that would deliver humanity from its various toils.⁴¹⁴ Kojève conceives of history as a struggle for recognition, which ultimately reaches its completion with the satisfaction of Enlightenment; indeed, he believed that the end of history had been reached with Napoleon's victory at Jena in 1806. Nonetheless, as Jeff Love writes in *The Black Circle: A Life of Alexandre Kojève*, "the end of history describes an outstanding *project*, not a *fait accompli* dating back some

⁴¹² Allen Bloom in Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James Nichols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), viii.

⁴¹³ Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 79.

⁴¹⁴ Kojève's belief in the end of history is distinct from the more contemporary iteration of this position, which was famously described by Francis Fukuyama as the end of history that resulted from the fall of the Soviet Union, and the coronation of liberal democracy as the ultimate form of governance and the end of ideological struggles. This was the target of Derrida's 1993 book *Specters of Marx*, where he disputed the closed notion of history by evoking the ghostly presence of Marxist thought even after the supposed demise of Marxism. See: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, (New York: Routledge, 1994).

two hundred years.”⁴¹⁵ Indeed, once the dust has settled on the major battles of world history, there still remain struggles to unfold history’s teleological direction. Stanley Rosen explains that after the end of history, “subsequent history is to be understood not as genuine history or innovation but as the struggle of various sub-Hegelian sects to revolt against historical necessity.”⁴¹⁶ Kojève believed the struggle to determine the future of humanity had been essentially settled, and the remaining conflicts were the aftershocks of this epochal completion.

The absolute book is the focal point of the final year of Kojève’s seminar in 1938-1939, where he interprets the final chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. In this enigmatic chapter, Hegel describes the triumphal moment that marks the end of history, where the dialectic opposition of subject and object is overcome, and absolute knowledge is revealed as "Spirit that knows itself as Spirit."⁴¹⁷ Hegel describes this eschatological moment as “kenosis,” where “the negative is the negative of itself,” and through a process of “inwardizing” Spirit is “starts afresh” on a “higher level.” This culminates in a consciousness that achieves a kind of God-like knowledge of “*the absolute notion*” without mediation. This can only occur for a consciousness that has accrued total knowledge of both self and world. To guide us through the mysterious final chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Kojève introduces the figure of the sage, the consciousness of absolute knowledge. Like many terms in the seminar, one would be hard pressed to find “the sage” in Hegel’s text; this speculative reading interrogates the consequences or unturned stones of the *Phenomenology*, critically examining the text through his interpretation. The sage is “*completely and perfectly self-conscious*,”⁴¹⁸ he can answer any question that could be posed of him, and he has knowledge of the totality of the world. The very purpose of the sage’s existence is “to realize

⁴¹⁵ Jeff Love, *The Black Circle: A Life of Alexandre Kojève*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 164.

⁴¹⁶ Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 93.

⁴¹⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §808.

⁴¹⁸ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 271.

the *Encyclopedia* of all possible knowledge,” “the Sage reveals the totality of Being with *all* of his thought.”⁴¹⁹ The sage achieves the omniscience of a finite deity: bound by the finitude of human existence, the sage acquires total knowledge of the world at the apotheosis of history.⁴²⁰

Hegel describes consciousness as a spiraling movement between subject and object. In the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, he identifies the paradox that one cannot judge the knowledge of the absolute unless one has already presupposed a criterion for what absolute knowledge would be. Breaking from Descartes’ foundationalist account of knowledge based on the rational deductions of the *cogito*, and Kant’s idealist distinction of *a priori* and *a posteriori* forms of knowledge, Hegel’s epistemology identifies the contingency of individual knowledge claims upon the logic of the whole in which they participate, revealing the fundamentally circular character of knowledge. Consciousness in fact has two objects of knowledge, which Hegel describes in terms of the *in-itself* and *for-itself*. There is the direct intuitive apprehension of an object of knowledge, and then there is the reflected notion of that object in terms of its relation to the whole. Unlike the Kantian notion of consciousness where subject and object are separated by a chasm bridged only by sensible intuition, Hegel describes the circular dependence of the subject on the circumstances in which he or she encounters the object: as he writes in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, “‘Notion’ and ‘object,’ ‘being-for-another’ and ‘being-in-itself,’ both fall *within* that knowledge which we are investigating.”⁴²¹ The reciprocity of thought and objectivity, the contingency of the

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 272; 276.

⁴²⁰ Kojève frames the history of philosophy as a tussle between Platonism, where truth is inaccessible as eternal ideas beyond the world, and Hegelianism, where the eternal is connected to the temporal and humanity articulates its place in totality. The sage overcomes this dialectical opposition by assuming the form of the Hegelian philosopher. In fact, Kojève was convinced that the sage is Hegel himself, and his book of absolute knowledge is the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He writes, “we are in the presence of a fact. A man who was clearly not crazy named Hegel purports to have realized Wisdom” (Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction*, 290). Before deciding whether the pursuit of absolute knowledge is impossible, we must see whether Hegel was right to affirm that he is a Sage.” In this respect, Love explains, “Kojève finally discards any claim to philological scruple; he becomes the prophet of the Book” (Jeff Love, *The Black Circle*, 163).

⁴²¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §84.

individual subject upon the logic of the whole, becomes the principle for Hegel's anti-foundationalism. Likewise, Hegel defines experience, *Erfahrung*, as the "dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object,"⁴²² that is, as the circular movement between the subject, its object, and back again. Absolute knowledge would involve the reconciliation of the *for-itself* and the *in-itself* such that "consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien."⁴²³ When consciousness achieves knowledge of itself and the world, when the subject overcomes the otherness of objects, as Hegel concludes the Introduction, "when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself." From subject to object and back again, the movement of knowledge is circular; hence, "the 'circular' *existence* of the Sage":

For the absolute Knowledge of the Sage, every question is its own answer; but this is only because it passes through the *totality* of questions and answers that form the whole of the System. Likewise, in his existence, the Sage remains *identical* with himself, he is closed off in himself; but he remains *identical* with *himself* because he passes through the *totality* of *others*, and he is *closed off* in himself because the *totality* of others is closed off in him.⁴²⁴

The encyclopedic knowledge of the sage signifies the consciousness in which the opposition of the *for-itself* and the *in-itself* is finally reconciled, revealing the essence of the world in its totality. In this sense, the consciousness of the sage is a mimesis of the object of the totality of knowledge.

But the crowning of absolute knowledge is not something that occurs for a person, rather it is an event that takes place in the pages of a book. Kojève writes, "if the Sage is a person of flesh and bones, Science is a *discourse* (Logos) that is effectively spoken or it is a *book* ("Bible")."⁴²⁵ If the sage possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of the world, his book would mimetically contain

⁴²² Ibid, §86.

⁴²³ Ibid, §89.

⁴²⁴ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction*, 288.

⁴²⁵ Ibid, 326.

this same knowledge as an external object: “this Book is *produced* by the Sage,” and reciprocally, “the contents of this object is the Sage himself.” Absolute knowledge becomes science by transcending subjectivity and becoming a book, an object whose existence is assured beyond the finite limits of human subjectivity. Jeff Love remarks, “being a sage is evidently not quite enough” because “there is no sage without the Book.”⁴²⁶ To transcend the finitude of subjectivity, the sage’s knowledge must become the book. Kojève writes, “the *Dasein* of Science is not Man, it is the *Book*. Not man, not the flesh and bones of the Sage, it is the Book which is the appearance (*Erscheinung*) of Science in the world, this appearance being absolute Knowledge.”⁴²⁷ The sage’s book is a kind of philosopher’s stone, its reading is a transformative experience leading through the stages of knowledge to its absolute form. Jeff Love writes, “the Book is the wisdom of the sage, a philosophical bible.”⁴²⁸ Absolute knowledge “detaches itself from Man and passes into the Book,” as the realization of the philosopher’s long sought dream to script the book of nature.⁴²⁹ The absolute book steps beyond the flux of temporality, it “eliminates the exteriority of Time for Man,” and transcends the finitude of human existence.⁴³⁰ As a finite being, the Sage exists in the circular biological time of birth, death, and reproduction, but the sage only exists for a brief period in the linear, teleological movement of historical time. Kojève explains, “The Time in which Man-reader-of-the-Book endures [*dure*] is thus the cyclical (or biological) Time of Aristotle, but not linear, historical, Hegelian Time.” A human participates in circular biological time, but the linear time of history is beyond the purview of a finite being. The Sage’s knowledge is only complete in the pages of a book, where it can escape finitude. For Kojève, the sage’s book supplants the Book

⁴²⁶ Jeff Love, *The Black Circle*, 161.

⁴²⁷ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction*, 384.

⁴²⁸ Jeff Love, *The Black Circle*, 161.

⁴²⁹ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction*, 410.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid*, 385.

of Books: “the *reality* of the eternal Spirit is not a transcendent God living in the heavens, but a book written by a living person in the natural World.”⁴³¹ Hegel’s system reaches its completion in the philosophical facsimile of the Book of Books as the book of absolute knowledge.

The sage’s book is a Faustian bargain: the sage achieves absolute knowledge at the cost of death. Jeff Love explains, “the Book not only has the role of evidencing the sage’s wisdom; it also evidences the finite character of the sage’s wisdom, since the sage is not enough.”⁴³² The finite subjectivity of the sage is insufficient, and only by becoming the Book can he attain the absolute. “Even if Man completely disappears from the surface of the earth,” Kojève writes, “the Book will remain.”⁴³³ The triumph of the book marks humanity’s crowning moment at the end of history, but “the end of History is the *death* of Man.”⁴³⁴ Only when history is done and dusted can the book be completed. If the sage is indeed fated to lead humanity off the precipice for the sake of the book, Kojève offers a bleak outlook for humanity: “Hegel’s dialectical or anthropological philosophy is ultimately *a philosophy of death*.”⁴³⁵ What becomes of humanity at the culmination of a philosophy of death? Jeff Love reflects, “the vaunted irony of Kojève takes on a monstrous quality here when the final end of history, the true point of final emancipation for the toiling, oppressed human being, seems to be indistinguishable from suicide.”⁴³⁶ His notion of freedom involves humanity overcoming and discovering freedom from animal nature, and fully inhabiting the artifice of human society and culture. The sage’s book is the culmination of freedom and humanity meets its mortal end so its ultimate expression can endure. The sublation of humanity as the absolute book completely extirpates its animal nature. Georges Bataille observes the quest for absolute

⁴³¹ Ibid, 395.

⁴³² Jeff Love, *The Black Circle*, 161.

⁴³³ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction*, 417.

⁴³⁴ Ibid, 388-n1.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 539.

⁴³⁶ Jeff Love, *The Black Circle*, 176-177.

knowledge can be achieved “only if the Sage raises himself [...] to the height of death, at whatever anguish to him.”⁴³⁷ The sage is symptomatic of this sacrificial drive in human life:

Concerning sacrifice, I can essentially say that, on the level of Hegel’s philosophy, Man has, in a sense, revealed and founded human truth by sacrificing; in sacrifice he destroyed the animal in himself, allowing himself and the animal to survive only as that noncorporeal truth which Hegel describes and which makes of man-in Heidegger’s words- a being unto death (*Sein zum Tode*), or – in the words of Kojève himself – “death which lives a human life.”⁴³⁸

Confronted with Being-towards-death, the sage’s self-annihilation represents an overcoming of human finitude and animal being. “Kojève’s seemingly outlandish radicality,” Love explains, “is in fact a challenging affront to the conception of man as ‘free, historical individual.’”⁴³⁹ Rather than the idealist vision of humanity’s eternal continuation, Kojève’s utopia is articulated through the lens of human finitude. It is an anti-utopian utopia that marks both the demise of humanity and the ascendance of human freedom beyond its animal nature in the sublime object of the sage’s Book.

Kojève’s seminar on Hegel concluded in 1939 with Europe on the precipice of war. For many of its participants, this meant mobilization in the army, or life under occupation; for others, it would mean exile, imprisonment, or deportation. Kojève spoke of progress and the end of history, but these concepts seemed fantastic or hollow in the new reality hastened by World War II. The war had undercut belief in an unshakable philosophical system that could united ethical, political, and metaphysical questions in absolute knowledge. Kleinberg writes, “by the end of World War II, the concepts of progress and history, shored up by the turn to Hegel after World War I, seemed essentially bankrupt. What do ‘history’ and ‘progress’ mean in a world where the atom bomb has been unleashed and the Shoah has occurred?”⁴⁴⁰ Belief in the inevitable march of

⁴³⁷ George Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” *Yale French Studies*, No. 78, (1990), 13.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

⁴³⁹ Jeff Love, *The Black Circle*, 189.

⁴⁴⁰ Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 109.

history towards truth and justice appeared a sham, and the Hegelian dream of the absolute book no longer seemed a tenable or even desirable goal. Though drained of its idealistic enthusiasm, Kojève's seminar nonetheless offered a fruitful source for critical reflection when it was published in 1947. Hammerschlag notes that Kojève's seminar "inspired a myriad of philosophical/antiphilosophical approaches, which took combating the Hegelian system as their starting point." For Levinas and Derrida, "Hegel's name became synonymous with philosophy and his teleological view of history, the ultimate idol to be deposed."⁴⁴¹

IV. Levinas and the Critique of Totality

Levinas' critique of the philosophy of totality is a rejection of the unifying impulse which reaches its apogee in the Hegelian absolute book. *Totality and Infinity* responds to "the ancient privilege of unity which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel," which has long sought to bring together the disparate elements of existence under the regime of a single system of total understanding.⁴⁴² For Levinas, "metaphysics would endeavor to suppress separation, to unite," and the trajectory of philosophical idealism inexorably leads to Hegel's systematic philosophy, which "absorb[s] the being of the metaphysician" in its drive for unity. Against the synthesis of the self and world as absolute spirit, Levinas insists on the idea of infinity which exceeds any unity that would overcome the separation of self and other in an all-encompassing system of knowledge. He writes, "the idea of Infinity is transcendence itself, the overflowing of an adequate idea. If totality

⁴⁴¹ Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 42.

⁴⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 102.

can be constituted it is because Infinity does not permit itself to be integrated. It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other.”⁴⁴³ Predicated on the separation of self and other, the infinitely Other exceeds every systemic unity, piercing the limits of totality. Levinas casts the history of metaphysics as a quest to overcome separation in unity:

Metaphysics would endeavor to suppress separation, to unite; the metaphysical being should absorb the being of the metaphysician. The de facto separation with which metaphysics begins would result from an illusion or a fault. As a stage the separated being traverses on the way of its return to its metaphysical source, a moment of a history that will be concluded by union, metaphysics would be an Odyssey, and its disquietude nostalgia. But the philosophy of unity has never been able to say whence came this accidental illusion and fall, inconceivable in the Infinite, the Absolute, and the Perfect.⁴⁴⁴

Levinas equates metaphysics’ quest for unity with Odysseus’ *nostos*: the pyrrhic quest to discover unified knowledge is akin to the adventure to return home, a return to the domain of the known, the finite, and *ipseity*. By contrast, his preferred figure of ethical subjectivity Abraham separates himself from his homeland, he goes forth into unknown lands in response to an infinite call.

Levinas describes a double-sided relation to the systematic totality subsumed in the absolute book. The exceedance of totality by infinity does not definitively overcome the systematicity of philosophy—one cannot simply step beyond totality once and for all. “This ‘beyond’ the totality and objective experience,” he writes in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, “is reflected within the totality and history, within experience.”⁴⁴⁵ The idea of infinity can only emerge by working through the system of totality. Just as Levinas rejects the idealist thinking of totality which sacrifices the individual for the sake of unity, he also criticizes the subjectivist critique of totality which he associates with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The eschatological relation to what lies beyond being is not a rejection of totality in the name of a subjectivist

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 80.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 102.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, 23.

transvaluation of values, or belief in values that lies beyond Being. Levinas describes the subjective resistance to totality as futile:

The eschatological vision does not oppose to the experience of totality the protestation of a person in the name of his personal egoism or even of his salvation. Such a proclamation of morality based on the pure subjectivism of the I is refuted by war, the totality it reveals, and the objective necessities. We oppose to the objectivism of war a subjectivity born from the eschatological vision. The idea of infinity delivers the subjectivity from the judgment of history to declare it ready for judgment at every moment and, we shall show, called to participate in this judgment, impossible without it. The harsh law of war breaks up not against an impotent subjectivism cut off from being, but against the infinite, more objective than objectivity.⁴⁴⁶

The thinking of totality which he associates with war cannot be escaped in ontology, or by turning inward to subjective experience. Rather, Levinas' phenomenology works through the imminent content of totality from which springs its exceedance by infinity. This double-sided thinking of totality is therefore "a defense of subjectivity," but one which is "not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity." He refuses the warlike thinking of totality as unified objectivity just as he rejects the subjectivist revolt against totality: it is in Being that one discovers that which exceeds Being,

The idea of infinity can only emerge out of the "separation" of self and other. The encounter with the wholly Other exceeds totality in a presence which cannot be assimilated into the domain of the self. Levinas writes, "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face."⁴⁴⁷ This exceedance of totality is only possible through the separation of self and other, which makes possible the idea of infinity. Levinas writes, "thesis and antithesis, in repelling one another, call for one another. They appear in opposition to a synoptic gaze that encompasses them."⁴⁴⁸ There is no final reconciliation of self and other which accedes

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid, 25-26.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, 50.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, 53.

to absolute identity or sameness; separation undercuts any systematic totality that purports to subsume alterity. The face to face encounter with the wholly Other is only possible because of separation, which enables the ethical exceedance of totality. Levinas writes, “an absolute transcendence has to be produced as non-integrateable.” The refusal to integrate the individual in the mechanics of systematicity is essential for freedom. Separation cordons off an interiority for the individual to exist outside of the grips of history. “Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality,” he explains, “in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being.”⁴⁴⁹ If philosophy is bound to the quest for totality and unity, the infinite arises from the domain of religion. “Totality and the embrace of being, or ontology, do not contain the final secret of being,” Levinas writes, “religion, where relationship subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole – the idea of Infinity – is the ultimate structure.” The idea of infinity reveals the insufficiency of philosophy’s conceptual *nostos* as the Hegelian book.

Levinas’ critique of totality is deeply indebted to Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*. His opposition to the philosophical drive for unity “from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel”⁴⁵⁰ hearkens the opening pages of *The Star*, where Rosenzweig “throws the gauntlet to the whole venerable brotherhood of philosophers from Ionia to Jena,” and the identity of being and thought which was first posited in Parmenides’ poem and culminates in Hegel’s system.⁴⁵¹ Levinas discovered Rosenzweig’s philosophy during the same period in the 1930s when he also attended Kojève’s seminar, but it was the former’s interpretation of Hegel which proved decisive. Myriam Bienenstock observes, “of Hegel and on Hegel, Levinas first knew – he tells us this himself – what

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid, 104.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, 102.

⁴⁵¹ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara Galli, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 18.

Rosenzweig said.”⁴⁵² Levinas wrote two key essays on Rosenzweig’s work: “Between Two Worlds,” which he presented at the *Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Française* in 1959 and which was subsequently included in *Difficult Freedom*, and his introduction to Stéphane Mosès’ 1982 guide to *The Star, Système et Révélation*. In light of these commentaries, we can better appreciate Levinas’ declaration in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* that Rosenzweig is “too often present in this book to be cited.”⁴⁵³ Beyond the importance of *The Star* as a critique of philosophical idealism, Levinas emphasized “this book of general philosophy is a Jewish book, which founds Judaism in a new way.”⁴⁵⁴ Rather than offering a programmatic set of rules or doctrines pertaining to Judaism, *The Star* illustrates that “*Jewish existence* (and I write existence as one word) *itself is an essential event of being; Jewish existence is a category of being.*” The articulation of a properly Jewish reality was instructive for Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*.

Rosenzweig’s doctoral dissertation “Hegel and the State,” completed in 1912 under the direction of Friedrich Meinecke, offered a novel interpretation of Hegel’s political philosophy. Meinecke had posited in *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* that the history of political ideology can be understood through the creative developments of its writers and artists, and Rosenzweig following this approach in his study of Hegel’s political thought. Rosenzweig found in Hegel’s early political writings a struggle to reconcile the demands of radical subjectivity with the objectivity of the world, which was rooted in a rigid concept of the individual at the unyielding mercy of the state. Nahum Glatzer explains, “Hegel’s original conception of the military state [is] rooted in a dim, obscure, rigid, superhuman fate which set itself against the individual.”⁴⁵⁵ For

⁴⁵² Myriam Bienenstock, “Le pharisien est absent: Ethique et vie spirituelle selon Levinas,” *Archives de Philosophie*, Vol. 62, No. 4 Octobre- Décembre 1999, 724.

⁴⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 28.

⁴⁵⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Between Two Worlds,” 183.

⁴⁵⁵ Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 93.

Rosenzweig, Hegel's conception of the state valorizes the sacrifice of the individual in the name of the totality. This was illustrated in the founding of the Bismarckian Reich, and its consequences were revealed in the Great War, in which Rosenzweig served as a member of the Red Cross in Belgium, and later as a soldier on the Balkan Front. He told Rudolf Hallo in 1923, "even when I started writing my Hegel book I considered Hegel's philosophy dangerous," and the Great War had only borne out these suspicions.⁴⁵⁶ The horrors he witnessed in the trenches belied Hegel's belief in progress, which left the suffering individual powerless against the forward march of history. Bienenstock explains that Rosenzweig "assimilates what Hegel names 'power' (*Macht*) and, more specifically, the 'power' of the State to 'violence': he makes of the Hegelian state a State-power (*Machtstaat*) – and he rejects the 'totalitarianism' of Hegelian reason."⁴⁵⁷ He associated the thinking of totality with the statecraft which led to the Great War.

Rosenzweig wrote the first sketches for *The Star of Redemption* on postcards he sent home from the Macedonian front, in war hospitals, and during the German army's retreat. When he returned to Germany, he renounced his university career, and founded the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt. *Hegel and the State* was published in 1920, and Rosenzweig turned the page on this period of his philosophical thought. He told Meinecke, "The man who wrote *the Star of Redemption* [...] is of a very different caliber from the author of *Hegel and the State*."⁴⁵⁸ Rosenzweig wrote *The Star* in six months of what Levinas called "a feverous ecstasy of genius," and it was published in 1921.⁴⁵⁹ Shortly afterwards, he was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, causing him to suffer paralysis and aphasia until his death in 1929. Levinas describes

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 129.

⁴⁵⁷ Myriam Bienenstock, "Le pharisien est absent," 724.

⁴⁵⁸ Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, 96.

⁴⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, in *Système et Révélation*, 7.

The Star as “the work of his life,” which “heralds a new way of thinking.”⁴⁶⁰ Rosenzweig’s life followed a perfectly tragic arc: he “paid off, at the age of thirty-two a lifetime’s debt that Goethe had not managed to pay off before the age of eighty-two, when he finally finished *Faust*.”⁴⁶¹ More than just his most important book, *The Star* also marks “an essential moment in his relations with life,” as “a book that opened up the gates of life.” Whereas Kojève’s sage sacrifices himself for the sake of the absolute book, Rosenzweig’s book is a transitory stage in life which, Levinas explains, “extends beyond the book, but assumes a passage through it.”

The Star begins with a stunning critique of the philosophy of totality. The Great War had disclosed that the obsession with total domination demands the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of history or national glory. Rosenzweig’s opening lines describe the absurdity of the philosophical quest for the absolute for the soldier struggling to stay alive in the trenches:

That man may crawl like a worm into the folds of the naked earth before the whizzing projectiles of blind, pitiless death, or that there he may feel as violently inevitable that which he never feels otherwise [...] upon all this misery, philosophy smiles its empty smile and, with its outstretched index finger, shows the creature, whose limbs are trembling in fear for its life in this world, a world beyond, of which it wants to know nothing at all.⁴⁶²

For Rosenzweig, the war obliterated the systematic basis for Hegel’s philosophy. If *The Star* is a war book, Glatzer writes, “the enemy it attacks is the philosophy of German idealism, the home it defends is the individual, the suffering, erring, loving, doubting, despairing, and hoping human being whom the philosophy of the classical systems has so badly neglected, letting him vanish in the ‘whole.’”⁴⁶³ The same quest for totality drove millions to die fighting in the trenches for the Nation in pursuit of power and domination. Philosophical idealism treats the individual as an abstraction, casting aside his or her individual existence, suffering, and death. “Philosophy refutes

⁴⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Between Two Worlds,” *Difficult Freedom*, 183.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid*, 184

⁴⁶² Franz Rosenzweig, *Star*, 9.

⁴⁶³ Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, xxiii

these earthly fears,” he writes, “that the fear of death knows nothing of such a separation in body and soul, that it yells I, I, I and wants to hear nothing about a deflection of the fear onto a mere ‘body’—matters little to philosophy.”⁴⁶⁴ The war revealed thinking amounted to an inexhaustible teleological justification for sacrificing the individual in the name of a collective end. Glatzer writes, “‘only’ the individual dies, nothing can ever die in the ‘whole,’ says the philosopher.”⁴⁶⁵ The totalizing vision of philosophy subsumes the individual in the name of collective ideals.

The first movement in the *Star* is therefore the shattering of totality, namely the Parmenidean identity of being and the thinking of being, which undergirds philosophical idealism. Stéphane Mosès explains that Rosenzweig “breaks with the central project of Occidental philosophy which is to think Being,” and instead proposes “restarting philosophy from the only possible evidence that cannot be reduced: the personal existence of the person who philosophizes.”⁴⁶⁶ Levinas highlights that for Rosenzweig “*everything is not assimilable*,” and instead “the bursting of the totality affirmed against Hegel [...] puts into question the most spontaneous, most natural movement of philosophy: encompassing, embracing the thinkable.”⁴⁶⁷ The understanding of being as the totality of the thinkable connects Parmenides’ poem to the Hegelian absolute book. By refusing to subsume the individual to the fate of the whole, Rosenzweig begins *the Star* with the existence of the suffering individual, viscerally revealed in the trenches: anxiety of death is the starting point for the individual philosopher. The opening words of the *Star* declare, “from death, it is from the fear of death that all cognition of the All begins.”⁴⁶⁸ Philosophy begins from the fear of death, which fractures the dream of the absolute.

⁴⁶⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *Star*, 9.

⁴⁶⁵ Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig* xxiii.

⁴⁶⁶ Stéphane Mosès, “La Critique de la totalité dans la philosophie de Franz Rosenzweig.” *Les Études philosophiques*, No. 3, (Juillet-Septembre 1976), 351-2.

⁴⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Système et Révélation*, 13.

⁴⁶⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *Star*, 9.

Mosès writes, “death destroys the philosophical illusion that everything can be thought.”⁴⁶⁹ Philosophical idealism has embraced the reduction of the Multiple to the One, so that the entirety of the universe can be grasped by the Concept. For Rosenzweig, this dream of unified totality is a pernicious illusion: “the All, which would be both everything and whole, can neither be known honestly nor experienced clearly; only the dishonest cognition of idealism, only the obscure experience of the mystic can make itself believe it has grasped it.”⁴⁷⁰ Shattering this illusion engendered by totality, and reframing philosophy starting from the suffering individual, “the All of thinking and being [is] unexpectedly shattered before our eyes,” revealing its composite elements: humanity, world, and God.⁴⁷¹ From the fracturing of totality, Rosenzweig brings a close to the philosophical idealism which wills unity at all costs, but as Levinas notes, “the individual *quand même*,’ cannot escape purely and simply from philosophy.”⁴⁷² There is no final overcoming of philosophy and its legacy of war, surely not in the subjectivist revolt against the system. For Rosenzweig, Levinas explains, “the anarchy of the individual protestations of subjective thinkers, as he calls them, such as Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, threatens us with every kind of *Schwarmerei* and every kind of cruelty in the world.” The futility of the individualist revolt against totality presents its own illusion of separation and isolation, which is belied by the reality of war. For the Jewish people, independence from the universal presents a dangerous illusion of security:

The particularity of a people is identical to its finitude. It is Hegelian logic that presides over this announcement of disappearance. The particularity of a thing has significance in fact only in relation to a whole; and from that point on, in the name of Hegelian logic, the necessary disappearance of a people is announced, for everything that is finished must finish. The famous independence of the Jews in the face of history is equally presented as a subjective illusion.⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁹ Stéphane Mosès, “La Critique de la totalité,” 354.

⁴⁷⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, *Star*, 414.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid*, 26.

⁴⁷² Emmanuel Levinas, “Between Two Worlds,” 186.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid*, 199.

Jewish particularity is not assailable to the demands of the universal, but it cannot exist without relation to the universal. This is an important feature of *The Star of Redemption*: in its three parts, Creation, Revelation, and Redemption, Rosenzweig traces the web of entanglements structuring the relation between self, world, and God. *The Star* is a path that begins “From death,” and ultimately concludes “ins Leben.”⁴⁷⁴ Across its winding path, Glatzer remarks, “The distant vision of truth does not lead into the beyond, but ‘into life’ – which are, not accidentally, the concluding words of the book.”⁴⁷⁵ Stepping out of the book and into the world, Rosenzweig offers a new perspective on the transitory relationship of the philosopher to the book. “The meaning of Rosenzweig's contribution,” Levinas writes, is the “fracturing of the totality through which his work began - the substitution of legislation for the totalizing thought of philosophers and industrial society, for attitudes to life that are a series of structures of the absolute.”⁴⁷⁶

Rosenzweig’s 1925 essay “The New Thinking” situates *The Star* as a transitory book which offers a path out of idealist book to the immediacy of lived experience:

Here the book concludes. For what now still comes is already beyond the book, a ‘gate’ from it out into the No-longer-book [*Nicht-mehr-Buch*]. No-longer-book is the enraptured-startled knowledge that in this beholding the ‘world-likeness in the countenance of God’ in this seizing of all being in the immediacy of a moment [*eines Augenblicks*] and blink of an eye [*Augen-blicks*], the limit of humanity is entered. No-longer-book is also becoming aware that this step of the book towards the limit can only be atoned for by—ending the book. An ending which is also a beginning and a midpoint: stepping into the midst of the everyday of life.⁴⁷⁷

The book of philosophy is not a materialization of absolute knowledge or an echo of the Book of Books, but rather it constitutes a passage, a transformation, or a metamorphosis for its reader.

“Everyone should philosophize once,” Rosenzweig reflects in “The New Thinking,” “Everyone

⁴⁷⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *Star* 447.

⁴⁷⁵ Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, xxvi.

⁴⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Between Two Worlds,” 200.

⁴⁷⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking” in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. Paul Franks and Michel Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 136-137.

should look all around once from his own standpoint and life perspective. But this view is not an end in itself. The book is no attained goal, not even a preliminary one.⁴⁷⁸ The book represents a stage in the becoming of the author and reader before the philosopher can enter “the everyday of life.” Levinas focuses on these remarks in his essay “Between Two Worlds.” The conclusion of the *Star* leads “Ins Leben,” but Rosenzweig emphasizes that his book is something that must be “overcome” by means of a passage *through* the book. Levinas remarks, “*real life involves precisely no longer being a book. Nicht-mehr-Buch sein!*” But it is for that very reason a reference to the book.⁴⁷⁹ For Rosenzweig, the book is only valuable to the extent that it leads its reader to take responsibility in ordinary life: “This responsibility occurs in the everyday of life. Except that to know and live it as everyday, the day of the life of the All has to be traversed.”⁴⁸⁰ The *Star* concludes with a leap *beyond* the book of philosophy, and a renewed engagement with lived experience, but it is not a regression to a pre-philosophical natural attitude. If the book of philosophy is something to be overcome, Levinas explains, “*the end of philosophy is not the return to the age in which it has not begun,*” but rather “*the beginning of an age in which everything is philosophy, because philosophy is not revealed through philosophers.*”⁴⁸¹ Rosenzweig’s step beyond the book brings philosophy to reality, exposing philosophy to the concrete reality of lived experience.⁴⁸² Unlike Kojève’s sage who sacrifices himself for the absolute book, Rosenzweig’s

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, 137.

⁴⁷⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Between Two Worlds” 185.

⁴⁸⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” 137.

⁴⁸¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Between Two Worlds” 185.

⁴⁸² We might compare Rosenzweig’s description of *the Star of Redemption* as a transitory book in order to *Nicht-mehr-Buch sein* with Wittgenstein’s ladder metaphor in the *Tractatus*, where he describes the propositions in the book “as steps—to climb up beyond them.” (6.54) Both view their books as curatives to the sicknesses plaguing philosophy. For more on Rosenzweig’s treatment of philosophy’s sickness, see: Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), including Hilary Putnam’s stirring introduction. On further connections between Rosenzweig, Wittgenstein, and Levinas, see: Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, Wittgenstein* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

book is a passage from death to life. We may recall Kierkegaard's words in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it."⁴⁸³ Rosenzweig's book plots a path beyond philosophy, by only by passing through it.

Levinas elaborates Rosenzweig's critique of *Allheit* in his analysis of the philosophical will to subsume alterity within the bounds of totality. In "The Trace of the Other," Levinas diagnoses philosophy's "allergy" to what is foreign, and its need to domesticate the Other into something that is known. Like Odysseus who dreams of returning home, the philosophical tradition inaugurated by Plato responds to the challenge of otherness by returning it to known territory, by domesticating the Other as an expression of ipseity, or sameness:

Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity. From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other – with an insurmountable allergy. It is for this reason that it is essentially a philosophy of being, that the comprehension of being is its last word, and the fundamental structure of man. It is for this reason that it becomes philosophy of immanence and of autonomy, or atheism. The Gods of the philosophers, from Aristotle to Leibniz, by way of the God of the scholastics, is a god adequate to reason, a comprehended god who could not trouble the autonomy of consciousness, which finds itself again in all its adventures, returning home to itself like Ulysses, who through all his peregrinations is only on the way to his native island.⁴⁸⁴

The quest for a unity that overcomes the alterity of the Other is in some sense woven in the genetics of Western philosophy, from Plontius' principle of the One to Heidegger's philosophy of Being. This "horror" and "insurmountable allergy" of alterity is for Levinas an essential feature of Western philosophical thought that transcends oppositions of theism and atheism, or idealism and empiricism. The otherness of the Other represents a challenge to the fundamental disposition of philosophical inquiry to seek unity, from the adequate idea to the rational God of the philosophers.

⁴⁸³ Søren Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 621.

⁴⁸⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other" *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, Ed. Mark C. Taylor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 346

If this tendency is endemic to the philosophical tradition, it reaches its apex in Hegel's systematic philosophy, where the dialectical movement of Spirit towards the integration of difference constitutes the ultimate expression of the philosophical impetus to conquer alterity. Levinas writes, "Hegel's philosophy represents the logical outcome of this underlying allergy of philosophy."⁴⁸⁵ The absolute book is the ultimate objectification of this allergy: Hegel's system would unify the totality of knowledge in one encyclopedic book, for which *nothing* could be external or other.

In his rather polemical 1971 text "Hegel and the Jews," Levinas explicates the implications of Hegel's concept of totality. He describes Hegel's systematic philosophy as the culmination of reason, which must overcome all particulars—including the "separation" of the Jews:

The Hegelian system represents the fulfilment of the West's thought and history, understood as the turning back of a destiny into freedom, Reason penetrating all reality or appearing in it. An unforgettable enterprise! Universal thought must no longer be separated, in the heads of some intellectuals, from the individual whom it renders intelligible. A *separate* universal is no longer universal but has once again become something particular. It must be separated from its separation; the universal, identified from the different, must remain *in* the different from which it had been taken, whether it be, according to the famous formulae, *identity of identity and of non-identity* or *concrete universal* or *Spirit*.⁴⁸⁶

The movement of the Hegelian system towards Absolute Spirit is all-encompassing, it does not tolerate holdouts: the absolute cannot accept the possibility of a "separate universal" that co-exists alongside it. The power of reason integrates all particulars into the systematic construction of the universal, steamrolling opposition and incorporating it into the whole: to raise objection to the logic of Hegel's system is tantamount to contesting the universal movement of reason itself. The drive for unity and mistrust of the particular in Hegel's systematic philosophy is also "the argument that, up to the present day, has nurtured anti-Semitism."⁴⁸⁷ The Jewish people, as a "separate

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, 347.

⁴⁸⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Hegel and the Jews," *Difficult Freedom*, 235.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, 236.

universal” from Christian Europe, has been viewed with suspicion for its particularity, and Hegel’s philosophy elevates this perspective to a systematic philosophy. With more than a hint of sarcasm, Levinas comments, “Anti-Semitism is based within the System, which amounts to saying within the absolute. What a godsend!” Once Hegel’s argument is stripped of its rhetorical flourish, it discloses the basic structure of anti-Semitism: the Jewish people’s separation from the universal is an affront to reason itself. Levinas writes, “the separation of the universal and the particular in which Judaism would be maintained would signify *domination*.” If this is the logic organizing the anti-Semite’s hatred, it risks appearing self-evident in Hegel’s systematic thinking.⁴⁸⁸

The solution is not as simple as calling Hegel’s thinking as fatally anti-Semitic. The brilliance of the Hegelian system is that it undercuts any straightforward criticisms through the logic of the dialectic. Levinas writes, “when faced with the Hegelian saying [*le dire*] one cannot easily raise one’s voice – not only because thought becomes timid, but because language seems lacking.”⁴⁸⁹ If we cannot find words adequate to call into question the workings of the Hegelian system, it is because our language is ill equipped to confront Hegel’s thinking without becoming entwined in its logic. “We speak a poor language! It has no beginning. No word is first,” Levinas writes, “we express ourselves in a language that has not established its grounding.” Just as Hegel’s

⁴⁸⁸ Levinas’ proximate target in “Hegel and the Jews” is Bernard Bourgeois’ *Hegel à Franckfort, ou Judaïsme, Christianisme, Hégélianisme* (Paris: Vrin, 1970) which offers a reading of the young Hegel’s writings on political theology. Bourgeois’ reading hardly sanitizes Hegel’s anti-Semitic conclusions, which are given an air of legitimacy through his sterile academic language. These conclusions, after all, supposedly correspond to the development of reason itself. Levinas cites Bourgeois’ highly injurious claim that Judaism has been at odds with reason since its very founding act: “The act by which Abraham founds the Jewish people is an act of separation, the breaking of all ties with the surroundings” (38). Bourgeois argues Abraham’s election inaugurates a separation that puts the Jewish people at odds with the universal, which pits the Jewish people against reason itself. Levinas highlights a number of passages of highly problematic passages from Bourgeois’ book: “Judaism is in this sense the absolute antithesis of the Hegelian ideal of freedom, the fulfilment of ugliness as Hellenism was the fulfilment of beauty... *Abraham’s existence is therefore that of a being who separates himself from nature as the object of love and fixes it as the object of need...* the Jew is not attached to an idea 'but to an animal existence*. In a word, both Abraham and Judaism at bottom involve a fall back into bestiality.” (39-40) Nonetheless, Bourgeois presents the most deleterious anti-Semitic conclusions in Hegel’s Frankfurt writings as necessary and logical outcomes of his system.

⁴⁸⁹ Levinas, “Hegel and the Jews,” 238

system can integrate any particular objection into its dialectical movement, our ordinary language lacks the grounding to mount a true objection to its logic. Hegel's thinking is the culmination of the rationalist tradition which seeks to overcome alterity in unified totality: "A great philosophy is perhaps only a language that miraculously found in Greece – or somehow gave itself – a justified point of departure," this logic of universality has been programmed into our thinking. The error is believing the Greek origin is the exclusive or privileged origin of philosophy. Levinas cautions, "this is the West's miracle – or mirage." If Hegel's system is culmination of the rationalism inaugurated by the Greeks, and if the logic of anti-Semitism flows from this same thinking, Levinas seeks the Archimedean point from which to oppose the logic of the Hegelian universal.

If there is an alternative destiny for the rationalist tradition, it has its provenance in a different book. Levinas suggests we exit Hegel's system "through the very door by which Hegel thinks we enter it," by turning *towards* self-alienation, by refusing to integrate the particular in the universal, and insisting on the separation of self and other. This reversal of Hegel's dialectics, for Levinas, suggests a turn to the Biblical tradition, whose prophetic language permits another kind of thinking foreclosed by Greek rationalism:

We ask ourselves whether language does not hold another secret to the one brought to it by the Greek tradition, and another source of meaning; whether the apparent and so-called 'non-thought' 'representations' of the Bible do not hold more possibilities than the philosophy that 'rationalizes' them, but cannot let them go free; whether the meaning does not stem from the Scriptures that renew it; whether absolute thought is capable of encompassing Moses and the prophets – that is to say, whether we should not leave the System, even if we do so by moving backwards, through the very door by which Hegel thinks we enter it.

Levinas proposes exiting the Hegelian system through alienation, by turning back the dialectical progress of Spirit, and instead embracing the separation of self and other – both in the otherness contained within the self, and the self's encounter with the infinitely other. As he memorably frames this escape in *Otherwise than Being*, "paradoxically it is qua *alienus* – foreigner and other

– that man is not alienated.”⁴⁹⁰ Backing out of the privilege of the Greek *logos* which has yielded Hegel’s absolute book, and returning to the alienation of the self from itself, Levinas suggests that the Biblical tradition offers a different locus of meaning wherein the ethical is first philosophy. As Hammerschlag writes, “it is the call of the Other that initiates subjectivity in the accusative form, as an act of uprooting that would constitute the subject first and primarily as a stranger”⁴⁹¹ Against Odysseus’ nostalgia for a return home which he equates with the philosophy of totality, Levinas highlights the possibility of another book and its ethical calling.

Levinas evokes a different relation to the book based on prophetic language. In a series of texts from 1982, he reflects more explicitly on the existential relationship between human beings and the book. In his dialogue with Philippe Nemo, Levinas calls the relation to the book as “a *modality* of our being.”⁴⁹² Or, in a 1982 discourse entitled “Philosophy, Justice and Love,” he memorably describes the existential relation to the book as *zum-Buch-Sein*:

The human being is not only in the world, not only an *in-der-Welt-Sein*, but also *zum-Buch-Sein* [being-toward-the-book] in relationship to the inspired Word, an ambiance as important for our existence as streets, houses, and clothing. The book is wrongly interpreted as pure *Zuhandenes*, as what is at hand, a manual. My relation to the book is definitely not pure use; it doesn’t have the same meaning as the one I have with the hammer or the telephone.⁴⁹³

This ontological relation to the book is present in all forms of literature: both the Bible and national literatures reveal the trace of the infinite. Bienenstock writes, “because and to the extent that an ‘other’ voice is heard in the book, the book is ‘holy’; the Bible is a Book, Holy Writing par excellence, to the extent that it is, it is a *radically other* voice which makes itself heard.”⁴⁹⁴ The

⁴⁹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 59.

⁴⁹¹ Sarah Hammerschlag, “Another, Other Abraham,” 79.

⁴⁹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 22.

⁴⁹³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, Love,” *Entre Nous: Essays on Thinking of the Other*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 109

⁴⁹⁴ Myriam Bienenstock, “Le pharisien est absent,” 731.

alterity of the voice that speaks in the book, like the transcendence of the encounter with the Other, reveals a trace of the infinite in its inspired language, as an exemplar of human expression. The ethical calling is discovered through the book, connecting the ethical and textual. For Levinas, Bienenstock writes, “the response to moral interpellation is found in the Book – in Books.”

In *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas describes the trace of the infinite in literature stems from its relation to the inspired language of the Bible, whose meaning exceeds the literal text. The book represents “a contraction of the Infinite in Scripture,” and its language contains the trace of “the prophetic dignity of language, capable of always signifying more than it says.”⁴⁹⁵ This potential is found in literature, but for Levinas its inspired language derives from its biblical source: “Scripture would begin with the line which is outlined in some way, and thickens or emerges as a verse in the flowing of language – no doubt of every language – in order to become text, as proverb, or fable, or poem, or legend, before the stylet or quill imprints it as letters on tablets, parchment or paper. A literature before the letter!” Levinas argues that the “thickening” of the language in the Bible through interpretation and exegesis gives rise to literature, whose potential always-already exists in the reading of the biblical text. The prophetic language of the Bible, which always signifies more than it says, reveals “a religious essence of language, a place where prophecy will conjure up the Holy Scriptures, but which all literature awaits or commemorates, whether celebrating or profaning it.” Both biblical texts and national literatures disclose this trace of the infinite: “signifying beyond their plain meaning, they invite the exegesis – be it straightforward or tortuous, but by no means frivolous – that is spiritual life.” Literature reveal the trace of the inspired language from the Bible, and the privilege of the book as a site for the encounter with the infinitely other. “My condition – or my un-condition – is my relation to books,” Levinas declares, “it is the

⁴⁹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, x-xi.

very movement-towards-God [*l'à-Dieu*]. Is this an abstract expression? Language and the book that arises and is already read in language is phenomenology, the 'staging' in which the abstract is made concrete."⁴⁹⁶ Jean Greisch explains the book is always connected to prophetic language:

Two points are important here: the relation to the book has an ontological significance, and this relation is always more or less a religious relation. [...] this hermeneutics refuses to trace a neat border between the "holy" text and "profane texts." The religious relation to the book is found both in the relation to the Book of Books, in other words the Bible, as well as in certain privileged texts, for example, in national literatures.⁴⁹⁷

This religious relation to the book, which Levinas discovers in biblical and literary texts, reveals the book's transcendence as a modality of human existence. One discovers the ethical imperative in the book, whether it is Abraham's ethical calling or the parable of the Grand Inquisitor. The "thickening" of language through the inexhaustibility of commentary and interpretation is the vitality of the book, both for the Bible and literary texts. Levinas explains in a 1984 dialogue:

Commentary is the life of the text. If a text is alive today, it is because we comment on it. The meanings are not exhausted in interpretation. This is true of the Talmud, but also for Plato or Goethe. When we read Goethe, we also read the commentaries on Faust, wherein the innumerable lives of the text are found. Proust realizes this in regard to his past, and we ourselves realize this in regard to Proust. Further, think of Kafka. He describes culpability without crime, a world in which man never gets to know the accusations charged against him. We see there the genesis of the problem of meaning. Is it not only the question 'is my life righteous?' but rather, 'is it righteous to be?' this is very important for we always measure out the good on the basis of the being that is.⁴⁹⁸

Questioning the meaning of the text through commentary is the vitality of the book, from the practices of interpretation in the Talmud to Kafka's texts which problematize the meaning of being itself. Even the prophetic language of the Bible never accedes to a book whose unity or identity stands beyond interpretation. Relinquishing the quest for unity motivating the Hegelian absolute book, Levinas embraces the book as the site of the "à-Dieu," an encounter with the transcendence

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid, xii-xiii.

⁴⁹⁷ Jean Greisch, "Du vouloir-dire au pouvoir-dire" *Cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, no. 3 : Emmanuel Levinas (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984), 217-218.

⁴⁹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality Has Weight" *Is it Righteous to Be?* 163.

of the Other, where one's very existence is put into question, accused, and threatened without cause—posing “not only the question ‘is my life righteous?’ but rather, ‘is it righteous to be?’”

V. Derrida, Logocentrism, and the Autodidact

The dissolution of the absolute book is a crucial focus of Derrida's writing in the 1960s. While too young to count amongst the “generation of 1933,” he eagerly read Kojève's published seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology* in the 1950s in Paris. Jean Hyppolite, Derrida's teacher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, had attended the seminar and published the first complete French translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1939 and an extensive commentary in 1946.⁴⁹⁹ For Derrida, Hegel's absolute book is the symbol for an entire metaphysics of language, the philosophical tradition he calls “logocentrism.” This question is a central concern in his 1965 text “Writing Before the Letter,” which focused on Saussure and Rousseau. After Michel Deguy praised the essay, and at the insistence of editor Jean Piel who hailed Derrida's “extremely dense, rich, and novel study,”⁵⁰⁰ it was published in two parts in the December 1965 and January 1966 issues of *Critique*.⁵⁰¹ This text formed the germ for his 1967 book *Of Grammatology*.

Of Grammatology is a historical and systematic study of the science of writing, in which Derrida describes a “historico-metaphysical epoch” which has reached its “closure.”⁵⁰² Traditionally, writing has been considered “meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within

⁴⁹⁹GWF Hegel, *La phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. Jean Hyppolite (Paris: Aubier, 1939); Jean Hyppolite, *Genèse Et Structure de la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit de Hegel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946).

⁵⁰⁰ Benoit Peeters, *Derrida*, 159

⁵⁰¹ Jacques Derrida, "De la Grammatologie." *Critique*, 21, No. 233 (December 1965), 1016-1042, and 22, No. 224 (January 1966), 23-53.

⁵⁰² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 4.

a world to which a certain concept of the sign [...] and a certain concept of the relationship between speech and writing, have *already* been assigned.” The “closure” of this historical epoch and even the “death” of the book implies a new conception of “arche-writing” based on the “text” and the “arche-trace.” Since Socrates privileged the spoken word over the written sign, philosophical logocentrism has demands a language grounded in metaphysical presence, with a discrete origin and fixed meaning. Writing is presented as a momentary development in history, “*parousia misleading us [...] in the course of an adventure*” into thinking the priority of the spoken word over the written sign is natural or necessary.⁵⁰³ However, this adventure of logocentrism – “all in all a short enough adventure” – has reached its closure, its point of “essoufflement,” “*exhaustion.*” “Arche-writing” is without origin or living presence, but a “trace” marked by “différance.”

Hegel’s “closure” of the book is apparent in his reflections on the question of the preface. The unity of Hegel’s system in the *Phenomenology* means no preface could meaningfully add to the conceptual elaboration in the body of the text. If the development of the book is a closed system, then a preface can only distract or dissimulate. Hyppolite explained at the 1966 “Structuralist Controversy” event at Johns Hopkins University – with Derrida in attendance – that Hegel struggled to write the preface for the *Phenomenology*:

When Hegel had finished the *Phenomenology*, therefore, he reflected retrospectively on his philosophic enterprise and wrote the “Preface,” different from the original introduction. It is here that he tells what he conceives a philosophic discourse to be. However, it is a strange demonstration, for he says above all, “Don’t take me seriously in a preface. The real philosophical work is what I have just written, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. And if I speak to you outside of what I have written, these marginal comments cannot have the value of what I have written, these marginal comments cannot have the value of the work itself.”⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰³ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁰⁴ Jean Hyppolite, “Hegel’s Philosophic Language,” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 159. Translated slightly modified.

If Hegel's system sketches the self-moving activity of Spirit through the immanent logic of its conceptual determinations, then there is nothing that prefatory remarks can add to the book other than abstract generalities, which contribute nothing to the treatise. Hegel condemns the preface as at best an unnecessary supplement, and at worst a misleading abstraction of the systematic analysis in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The tone of his preface implies, as Hyppolite puts it, "Don't take me seriously in a preface." Where Hegel criticizes the preface as an excess or supplement to the systematic elaboration in the body of the text, by contrast, Levinas suggests the need for a preface reveals the insufficiency or incompleteness of the book or system, and the impossibility of a self-sufficient totality without remainder, without an Other:

The word by way of preface which seeks to break through the screen stretched between the author and the reader by the book itself does not give itself out as a word of honor. But it belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the foreword or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights.⁵⁰⁵

This disagreement concerning the preface illustrates the contrast between Hegel's closed system and Levinas' "exceedance" of totality. There can be no totality without alterity, and no book can sketch the closed unity of a philosophical system without exceeding its own limits.

Hegel's condemnation of the preface discloses the teleology of the philosophical book as a closed system. Gayatri Spivak explains in her translation of *Grammatology* that Hegel's question of the preface reflects "humankind's common desire is for a stable center, and for the assurance of mastery—through knowing or possessing. And a book, with its ponderable shape and its beginning, middle, and end, stands to satisfy that desire. But what sovereign subject is the origin of the book?"⁵⁰⁶ The book can be conceptualized in terms of a closed totality, which originates in

⁵⁰⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 30.

⁵⁰⁶ Gayatri Spivak, Preface, *Of Grammatology*, xi.

the mind of its author, and whose content is contained between its two covers – but what role does that leave for the preface? Despite his own condemnation, Hegel’s preface *is* significant. Written after the body of the *Phenomenology* and before drafting the *Science of Logic*, Hegel’s preface explores how these projects relate. Hyppolite observes, “what interests us more today is to know what Hegel considered the style and structure of a philosophic work to be.”⁵⁰⁷ In fact, Hegel’s exclusion of the preface from the systematic elaboration of the concepts in the body of the text reveals deeper commitments regarding the metaphysics of language and writing.

This is the logic of “logocentrism,” which Derrida calls a kind of ethnocentrism that from Plato to Hegel has organized the place of writing and the book according to the demands of *logos*. Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* that the self-same identity of the book is a kind of fiction or myth, based on a conception of language where the linguistic sign is absolutely linked to its signified meaning. From the “play” of the signifier to the work of interpretation, the book is an unstable determination that is always in flux. “What, then, is the book’s identity?” Spivak writes,

Saussure had remarked that the “same” phoneme pronounced twice or by two different people is not identical with itself. Its only identity is in its difference from all other phonemes. So do the two readings of the ‘same’ book show an identity that can only be defined as a difference. The book is not repeatable in its “identity”: each reading of the book produces a simulacrum of an “original.”⁵⁰⁸

The stable identity of the book – like the stable presence of the linguistic signs that fill its pages – is based on a fiction. Following Saussure’s observation that phonemes are defined not by their identity but through their difference from other signs, Derrida suggests the book is marked by the indelible difference between every reading and every reader: every iteration of the book is, in a sense, new. Spivak writes, “there is, in fact, no ‘book’ other than these ever-different repetitions: the ‘book’ in other words, is always already a ‘text,’ constituted by the play of identity and

⁵⁰⁷ Jean Hyppolite, “Hegel’s Philosophic Language,” 160.

⁵⁰⁸ Gayatri Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, xi-xii.

difference.”⁵⁰⁹ By contrast to Hegel’s systematic enterprise, Derrida’ has no pretention of exhaustiveness or completeness in *Of Grammatology*. He privileges Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* and Rousseau’s *Essay On the Origin of Languages* as emblematic of a certain metaphysical tendency, but Derrida admits that the undertaking is “incomplete,” and has “no ambition to illustrate a new method.”⁵¹⁰ For Derrida, Spivak writes, “the structure preface-text becomes open at both ends. The text has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end. Each act of reading the ‘text’ is a preface to the next.”⁵¹¹ Where Hegel sought to explicate the systematic workings of a closed totality in his book, Derrida’s notion of “arche-writing” cannot be contained to the space bounded by the covers of the book.

In 1967, Derrida published three major books: *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Voice and Phenomenon*. Despite their simultaneity, he strenuously denied that the three books should be considered unified treatises in a traditional philosophical architectonic system. Derrida told Henri Ronse in a 1967 interview in *Les Lettres françaises*, “in what you call my books, what is first of all put in question is the unity of the book and the unity ‘book’ considered as a perfect totality, with all the implications of such a concept.”⁵¹² Describing the relation between these three texts, Derrida sketches a structure reminiscent of Escher’s stairs: “One can take *Of Grammatology* as a long essay articulated in two parts (whose juncture is not empirical, but theoretical, systematic) *into the middle* of which one could staple *Writing and Difference*,” or, “inversely, one could insert *Of Grammatology into the middle* of *Writing and Difference*.”⁵¹³ The “juncture,” “soudure” that Derrida speak of at the center of *Grammatology* suggests, as Ian Machlachlan writes, “the

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, xii.

⁵¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, lxxxix.

⁵¹¹ Gayatri Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, xii.

⁵¹² Jacques Derrida, “Implications,” *Positions*, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3 [Henri Ronse and Jacques Derrida, “Implications” *Les Lettres françaises*, no. 1211, December 1967].

⁵¹³ Ibid, 4.

soldering (etymologically, a strengthening) of a joint, which we might read in relation to the ‘hinge’ (*brisure*) that both separates and joins, given as the title of the third section of Chapter 3 of *Grammatology*.⁵¹⁴ As for *Speech and Phenomenon*, Derrida tells Ronse it “could have bound it as a long note to one or the other of the other two works. [. . .] But in a classical philosophical architecture, *Speech* ... would come first.”⁵¹⁵ The variability of the possible relations between these texts reflects the contingency of their philosophical questions, which always-already exceeds the limits of its enclosure as a system. The junctures form a network that cannot be organized according to the logic of the concept, but according to “metaphoricity itself.”⁵¹⁶ Maclachlan describes this metaphoricity as “the possibility of *carrying over* – from article to book, within or across volumes, or more generally from one place to another, whether that place is literal or metaphorical, by means of joints, hinges or bindings that might be theoretical, empirical, or on the way from one to the other.”⁵¹⁷ These junctures reveal a system that is irreducible to a fixed identity.

The first chapter of *Grammatology*, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing,” begins with Nietzsche’s remark, “Socrates, he who does not write.”⁵¹⁸ The peripatetic philosopher engaged his interlocutors in spoken dialogue, which he refrained from recording as written treatises. Socrates is not a thinker of the book: in the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, he describes writing as a nefarious practice that masquerades as an aid to reason, but which in fact ruins the faculty of memory. Of course, ironically, these arguments against writing have only been memorialized because his disciple Plato wrote the dialogues. Socrates’ privileging of the spoken word over the written sign is perhaps the clearest example of the “phonocentrism” of the

⁵¹⁴ Ian Maclachlan, “The Idea of the Book” in *Reading Derrida’s Of Grammatology*, eds. Sean Gaston and Ian Maclachlan (New York/London: Continuum, 2011), 33.

⁵¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Implications,” 4

⁵¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 15.

⁵¹⁷ Ian Maclachlan, “The Idea Of The Book,” 35.

⁵¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Socrate et la tragédie*, in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 6 [15].

philosophical tradition. A subspecies of logocentrism, phonocentrism describes the hierarchizing the spoken word over the written word, which has been tacitly assumed if not explicitly endorsed through much of the Western philosophical tradition. Derrida writes, “within this logos, the original and essential link to the *phone* has never been broken.”⁵¹⁹ Following Aristotle, for whom “the voice, producer of *the first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind,” the spoken word is treated as the most immediate, original expression of *logos*; writing is thus its subordinate, as if the written *gramme* only exists to support the spoken *phone*:

In every case, the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing. All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself (whether it is done in the Aristotelian manner that we have just indicated or in the manner of medieval theology, determining the *res* as a thing created from its *eidos*, from its sense thought in the logos or in the infinite understanding of God). The written signifier is always technical and representative. It has no constitutive meaning. This derivation is the very origin of the notion of the “signifier.”

The historical contingency of the written sign on the spoken word reveals the preference for the human voice, which is endowed with a vitality and presence that is lacking from the “dead letter” of the written sign. The derivative status of the written sign gives rise to the “signifier” as distinct from the “signified,” which for Saussure are like the two sides of a leaf composing the linguistic sign. Writing is “confined within secondariness,” it is considered a *parousia* to the spoken word, a surplus that is exterior, derivative, and ultimately subordinate to the faculty of voice.⁵²⁰ For Derrida, there is a second meaning of *parousia* as well: the *parousia* is also necessary to maintain the closure of the system against which it is contrasted.

Derrida describes a further distinction between two notions of writing. First, there is a notion of “universal” or “natural” writing, which is a broad notion of language that is expressed in

⁵¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 11.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid*, 14-15.

the signs and patterns in the organization of nature, and which is often expressed in metaphoric terms to describe God's creation; second, there is "artificial" writing, produced by human beings using available technologies, that is, writing in its ordinary sense. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates opposes the metaphorical writing of the truth of the soul with the ordinary sense of writing as the activity of externalizing logos as written signs. Similarly, in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau contrasts the writing of the soul to the artifice of representational writing. Whereas the writing of the soul exhibits "self-presence in the senses, in the sensible cogito, which simultaneously carries in itself the inscription of divine law," representative writing weakens the faculty of speech: "to 'judge genius' from books is like 'painting a man's portrait from his corpse.'"⁵²¹ For the philosophical tradition, the artifice of human writing is "the dead letter, it is the carrier of death," because it reproduces the living voice in the dead letter of written language, which "exhausts [*essouffle*] life." On the other hand, "writing in the metaphoric sense, natural, divine, and living writing, is venerated," it is considered as "equal in dignity to the origin of value, to the voice of conscience as divine law, to the heart, to sentiment, and so forth." Natural writing is "immediately united to the voice and to breath," it is "not grammatological but pneumatological." Natural writing is the presence of the living voice as an inner monologue for the soul, it is "hieratic," akin to the "interior holy voice," expressing the "full and truthful presence of the divine voice to our inner sense." From Plato to Rousseau, the metaphor of natural writing has been privileged over the representational, artificial writing of the human hand.

Despite the privilege it is accorded over representational writing by the philosophical tradition, natural writing can only be understood by recourse to metaphor. Yet paradoxically, the metaphor of natural writing relies on a literal understanding of writing as a referent—it is a circle

⁵²¹ Ibid, 17 [28].

where the basis for the concept of writing is already a metaphor for writing. For Derrida, this bespeaks the intrinsic metaphoricity of writing, long repressed by the logocentric tradition:

The paradox to which attention must be paid is this: natural and universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing, is thus named by metaphor. A writing that is sensible, finite, and so on, is designated as writing in the literal sense; it is thus thought on the side of culture, technique, and artifice; a human procedure, the ruse of a being accidentally incarnated or of a finite creature. Of course, this metaphor remains enigmatic and refers to a “literal” meaning of writing as the first metaphor. This “literal” meaning is yet unthought by the adherents of this discourse. It is not, therefore, a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning but of determining the “literal” meaning of writing as metaphoricity itself.⁵²²

While the logocentric concept of writing originates in the divine scripting of the book of nature, writing can only be articulated by the marginalized category of artificial, human writing. What is at stake in Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism and logocentrism is not the eradication or reversal of the divisions of natural and human writing and their respective metaphors, but an understanding of metaphoricity itself. He insists on the need to retrace the history of the metaphors of writing, which have opposed natural or divine writing with the finitude and artificiality of human writing. In one of the most striking pages in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida quotes a series of passages that describe the world in terms of *liber mundi*, the book of the world:

Rabbi Eliezer said: “If all the seas were of ink, and all ponds planted with reeds, if the sky and the earth were parchments and if all human beings practiced the art of writing—they would not exhaust the Torah I have learned, just as the Torah itself would not be diminished any more than is the sea by the water removed by a paint brush dipped in it.”

Galileo: “It [the book of Nature] is written in a mathematical language.”

Descartes: “. . . to read in the great book of Nature . . . ”

Demea, in the name of natural religion, in the *Dialogues*, . . . of Hume: “And this volume of nature contains a great and inexplicable riddle, more than any intelligible discourse or reasoning.”

⁵²² Ibid, 15 [26].

Bonnet: “It would seem more philosophical to me to presume that our earth is a book that God has given to intelligences far superior to ours to read, and where they study in depth the infinitely multiplied and varied characters of His adorable wisdom.”

G. H. von Schubert: “This language made of images and hieroglyphs, which supreme Wisdom uses in all its revelations to humanity—which is found in the inferior [*nieder*] language of poetry—and which, in the most inferior and imperfect way [*auf der allerniedrigsten und unvollkommensten*], is more like the metaphorical expression of the dream than the prose of wakefulness, . . . we may wonder if this language is not the true and wakeful language of the superior regions. If, when we consider ourselves awakened, we are not plunged in a millennial slumber, or at least in the echo of its dreams, where we only perceive a few isolated and obscure words of God’s language, as a sleeper perceives the conversation of the people around him.”

Jaspers: “The world is the manuscript of an other, inaccessible to a universal reading, which only existence deciphers.”⁵²³

The preference of natural writing over artificial writing is structured into the very foundations of the modern world, from the Cartesian foundations of modern philosophy and the Galilean discovery of a natural world ascertained through observation and reason. The metaphor of the book retraces the line between natural and human writing by privileging the metaphors of *liber mundi* as the site of the philosopher’s quest for absolute knowledge. Derrida’s selection of quotations also offer insight into the far-ranging use of the metaphor of *liber mundi* in the structuring of the modern world. The first quotation from Rabbi Eliezer illustrates the inexhaustibility of the Torah’s knowledge through the analogy of the oceans to ink and the sky for parchment. This passage is found in the Talmud, but Derrida’s footnote indicates its proximal source is Levinas’ “The Pharisee is Absent,” included in *Difficult Freedom*.⁵²⁴ Vividly describing nature in terms of the articles of writing – pen, parchment, ink – Rabbi Eliezer suggests not just the inexhaustibility of the Torah’s

⁵²³ Ibid, 16 [27].

⁵²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 29 [24]. In Levinas’ text, Rabbi Eliezer’s words are met with a more restrained answer from Rabbi Aquiben, who “takes fright at the audacity of his masters: ‘They managed to extract their part from the Torah. For me, I have broached it surely like the man who breathes in the perfume of the cedar tree - his joy takes nothing away from the cedar. Or like the man who draws water from a spring. Or like the man who lights his flame from a flame.’” Rabbi Aquiben’s words are modest compared to Rabbi Eliezer’s, in his suggestion that the inexhaustibility of the Torah’s knowledge is for all, not only the Talmudic masters.

knowledge, but his own limitless knowledge of the Torah. Following this Talmudic passage, Derrida identifies the metaphor of *Liber mundi* in key passages from Descartes, Galileo, and Hume, G.H Schubert that orient the foundations of modern philosophy, mathematics, and the natural sciences. Finally, Karl Jaspers' comparison of the unknowability of the Other to a book extends the metaphor of *liber mundi* to the phenomenological tradition. While we should not ignore the subtle differences marking these different invocations of *liber mundi*, they share "the most decisive separation [which] appears at the moment when, at the same time as the science of nature, the determination of absolute presence is constituted as self-presence, as subjectivity."⁵²⁵ These metaphors mark the very grounding of the modern philosophical-scientific worldview, delineating subjective experience from the working of the objective world, and illustrating the penetration of logocentrism in the arrangement of self and world. Derrida does take human beings out of the book, but rather liberates writing from the book.

The predominance of *liber mundi* produces a distinction between what Derrida terms "good" and "bad" writing. "Good" writing is the divine inscription in nature and the human soul; "bad" writing is the technology of artificial, human writing, from cave paintings and the cuneiform to the modern technologies of writing from the pen to the keyboard. For Derrida, "good" writing finds refuge in the book, where it can be seized as a closed totality:

The good writing has therefore always been comprehended. [...] within a nature or a natural law, created or not, but first thought within an eternal presence. Comprehended, therefore, within a totality, and enveloped in a volume or a book. The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and, as I shall specify later, against difference in general. If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book,

⁵²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 16 [27].

as it is now under way in all domains, denudes the surface of the text. That necessary violence responds to a violence that was no less necessary.⁵²⁶

“Good” writing is amenable to the absolute book. It implies knowledge is a closed totality which culminates with the book of nature. We may recall Kojève sage, willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the absolute book, who ultimately represents the paragon of “good” writing. Shattering the book and its “good” writing in favor of the expansive and open-ended notion of text, Derrida turns towards the metaphoricity that undergirds the logocentric metaphysics of the absolute book.

Against the metaphysics of presence that culminates in the absolute book, Derrida introduces the notion of “différance,” which is “an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring.”⁵²⁷ Philosophers have long sought to understand the world on the basis of a kind of “Urwort,” which orients conceptual thinking: Plato’s thinking is bound to the ideal form, just as Hegel’s philosophy is inseparable from Spirit, and Heidegger’s investigation of Being. For Derrida, “*différance* by itself would be more ‘originary,’ but one would no longer be able to call it ‘origin’ or ‘ground,’ those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference.” Working through concepts while refusing assertions of origins or grounding, Derrida uproots the metaphysics of presence that yields the absolute book by inhabiting its concepts to reveal their own contradictions and inadequacies, and turning these limitations against concepts from within. “The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside,” rather it involves working through concepts from within, “inhabiting them *in a certain way*,” articulating one’s own investment in the very concepts that one deconstructs, “because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it.”⁵²⁸ Derrida’s close reading always carries the risk of falling prey to the discourse he is criticizing:

⁵²⁶ Ibid, 18 [29-30]

⁵²⁷ Ibid, 23 []

⁵²⁸ Ibid, 24 [39].

“Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, [...] the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.” Deconstruction inhabits the book as a means of dissembling it, parasitically turning the text against itself. “It is within structures that it shakes up and deconstructs from inside, a certain inside, which nevertheless opens to some outside,” Peggy Kamuf explains, “deconstruction is a way of inhabiting structures that turns them inside out or upside down, like an uncanny guest who displaces all the host’s property.”⁵²⁹ Derrida frames deconstruction in the domestic terms of habitation: by inhabiting the text and familiarizing oneself with its operating logic, the meaning of the text can be contested, rearranged, and displaced.

If deconstruction involves “inhabiting” the immanent logic of the text to displace or disrupt its dominant interpretation, “Hegel was already caught up in this game.”⁵³⁰ Derrida identifies in Hegel a two-sided relation to writing, as both the culmination of the “logocentrism” which subordinates writing to spoken language, but also as a thinker *of* writing, perhaps *malgré soi*. On the one hand, Hegel “summed up the entire philosophy of the logos. He determined ontology as absolute logic; he assembled all the delimitations of philosophy as presence; he assigned to presence the eschatology of parousia, of the self-proximity of infinite subjectivity. And for the same reason he had to debase or subordinate writing.” If the movement of *Aufhebung* is a conscious process of interiorizing knowledge, *kenosis*, then writing represents a countervailing movement as an externalized form of Spirit, a mere representation of thought. Derrida identifies the same gesture in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Mind*, the third part of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, where he criticizes writing by “denouncing the being-outside-of-itself of the logos in the sensible

⁵²⁹ Peggy Kamuf, “A Certain Way Of Inhabiting,” *Reading Derrida’s Of Grammatology*, eds. Sean Gaston and Ian Maclachlan, (New York/London: Continuum, 2011), 36.

⁵³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24 [].

or the intellectual abstraction. Writing is that forgetting of the self, that exteriorization, the contrary of the interiorizing memory, of the *Erinnerung* that opens the history of the spirit.” The kenotic movement of Spirit runs in the opposite direction of writing, which proceeds by externalization. Hegel’s subordination of writing is ultimately based on the same argument Socrates puts forth in the *Phaedrus*: writing is an external appendage to the mind which enervates the power of memory.

Despite outwardly relegating writing to a secondary position with regards to the spoken word, Derrida argues that the movement of Hegel’s thought can also be understood as a meditation on writing itself. Hegel’s criticism of writing ends at the level of the phonetic alphabet, where written signs are transparent with regards to the sounds they signify. Leibniz had sought to create a universal symbolic language that could employ symbols or even hieroglyphics to rationally describe concepts in science, mathematics, and philosophy. In §459 of his *Philosophy of Mind*, Hegel disputes Leibniz’s linguistic formalism and his praise of hieroglyphic writing: “hieroglyphic script designates representations with spatial figures, whereas alphabetic script designates sounds which are themselves already signs.”⁵³¹ Unlike Leibniz’s symbolic hieroglyphics, which depend on the spatial representation of words and concepts, alphabetic signs are a direct representation of the sounds upon which they are contingent. Hegel writes, “Alphabetical writing thus consists of signs of signs, and in such a way that it analyses the concrete signs of spoken language, words, into their simple elements and designates these elements.” The signs composing the alphabet are the units of writing that come closest to transparently standing in for spoken words; alphabetic signs are “sounds which are themselves signs,” and therefore the “signs of signs.” As the written sign that most closely represents the spoken word, alphabetic writing is the purest possible second order sign for an object. Hegel writes, “alphabetic writing is in and for itself the more intelligent

⁵³¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), §459.

form; in it is the *word*, the worthiest mode, peculiar to the intelligence, of expressing its representations, is brought to consciousness and made an object of reflexion.” If the phonetic alphabet serves as the basic unit for representing thought as written sign, it is indicative of both “good” and “bad” writing. “As phonetic writing, the alphabet is at the same time more servile, more contemptible, more secondary,” Derrida explains, “but it is also the best writing, the mind's writing.”⁵³² Hegel’s ambivalence with regards to phonetic writing marks an inflection point.

Alphabetic signs combine letters into the units of words and sentences through a process of *Aufhebung*. Hegel describes the underappreciated educational value of reading and writing the phonetic alphabet because “it diverts the mind's attention from the sensorily concrete to the more formal aspect, the spoken word and its abstract elements, and makes an essential contribution to laying and clearing the ground for the subject's inwardness.”⁵³³ As the individual phonemes are passed over in the immediate synthetic apprehension of complete words through the “signs of signs,” the subject initially connects the written sign to its spoken referent. Through habituation and repetition, the subject apprehends words synthetically rather than as a composition of individual phonetic units, as if the word were its own symbolic unity. In this case, written words are no longer mediated by their phonetic units, rather “habit makes it a hieroglyphic script for us.” Yet, this is precisely the synthesis of written signs as words and concepts which Hegel had criticized in Leibniz’s universal symbolic language. Derrida writes, “it is the *Aufhebung* of other writings, particularly of hieroglyphic script and of the Leibnizian characteristic that had been criticized previously through one and the same gesture.”⁵³⁴ If the phonetic language of alphabetic signs involve a process of synthetic combinations of phonetic units as complete words and phrases,

⁵³² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24.

⁵³³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §459.

⁵³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 25.

it resorts to the non-phonetic language in the immediate apprehension of abstract linguistic unities.

The capacity for abstraction in written language leads Hegel to offer guarded praise for Leibniz's non-phonetic writing for, amongst others, deaf mutes. Nonetheless, the written sign remains relegated to the inferior category of the dead letter. Non-phonetic writing, Derrida explains, "betrays [...] life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit's relationship with itself. It is their end, their finitude, their paralysis." The non-phonetic moment of language threatens to undermine the written sign as the mimetic representation of the human voice, it undercuts "substantiality, that other metaphysical name of presence and of *ousia*."⁵³⁵ This momentary consideration of non-phonetic writing in Hegel's account of writing reveals the other side of his argument. His relation to language is therefore double: while he is the thinker for whom "the horizon of absolute knowledge is the effacement of writing in the logos, the retrieval of the trace in *parousia*, the reappropriation of difference," Hegel's project can also be "reread as a meditation on writing." Constructing the absolute book while simultaneously seeding its demise, Derrida concludes the first chapter of *Grammatology* by casting Hegel as "the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing."

By deconstructing the philosophical privilege of the spoken word over the written sign, Derrida pushes philosophy into foreign territory. Gérard Granel frames Derrida's question of writing as a kind of exile, a denial of origins, where language is without recourse to its source and must confront the alterity of writing. Derrida's reflections on logocentrism and the repression of writing attempt to "circumscribe the fire that burns at the heart of the Occident," which "has always encompassed and possessed in itself metaphysics."⁵³⁶ The insistence on difference before identity

⁵³⁵ Ibid, 26.

⁵³⁶ Gérard Granel, "Jacques Derrida et la Rature de l'origine," *Critique* n° 246 (novembre 1967).

is always an act of estrangement, both in the confrontation with the Other and in the writing of the book. The question of writing displaces philosophy onto foreign territory. Granel writes:

Another “space,” rather another geo-graphy, in the country of the non-origin [*pays de l’In-origine*] in which we can see that Origin and Presence are only aspects (or versions) (presently on fire), and which for that matter is not the super-country of the origin, the nation of the origin of the origin, but wholly other and wholly otherwise: the country of Writing [*le pays de l’Écriture*].

In this “other geo-graphy” of the “country of writing,” Granel describes Derrida’s “arche-writing,” as the language that precedes the division of speech and writing, and which exists without origin or absolute presence. Arche-writing remains connected to the ordinary concept of writing, but this relation is placed under erasure, it is “that very thing which cannot let itself be reduced to the form of *presence*.”⁵³⁷ Granel describes arche-writing as the “movement of *différance*, irreducible arche-synthesis, opening in one and the same possibility, temporalization as well as relationship with the other and language.”⁵³⁸ Arche-writing critically inhabits the words and concepts of the metaphysical tradition because “the transcendental *arche* must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased.”⁵³⁹ The erasure of the transcendental meaning of language leaves what Derrida calls a “trace,” or the “arche-trace,” a written mark that is neither present nor absence, but the product of arche-writing, opposing the logic of identity by exposing difference:

The concept of arche-trace must comply with both that necessity and that erasure. It is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity. The trace is not only the disappearance of origin-within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an originary nontrace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.

⁵³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 57.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

Derrida's disavowal of the absolute book and its understanding of the written sign as transcendental signifier leads him towards a notion of language as arche-trace, without an origin, and always-already different from itself. The double move in Derrida's "arche-trace" consists of inhabiting the transcendental concepts inherited from the metaphysical tradition, but then placing these concepts under erasure, exposing them to the movement of *différance*.

Derrida further reflects on the "closure" of the book in "Culture and Writing: the Proliferation of Books and the End of the Book," a little-known, untranslated text published in 1968 in the journal *Noroit*.⁵⁴⁰ The essay extends Derrida's critique of "logocentrism" introduced in *Of Grammatology* to the objects of the book, the library, and questions posed by advances in computing technology, which are "haunted by the project of a single universal science, of an encyclopedia."⁵⁴¹ The "closure" of the book does not suggest a book burning, or a regression to a world without books; on the contrary, it disseminates writing beyond the limits of any supposed absolute book, beyond the book as a closed unity, and indeed beyond the page itself. For Derrida, "la mort du livre" indicates the end of the Hegelian absolute book, and a new conception of writing that is "outré-livre," [*beyond-the-book*] where the world itself becomes an experience of textuality.

In "Culture and Writing" Derrida interprets the "Autodidact," the memorable character from Sartre's 1938 novel *Nausea*, as the exaggerated depiction of the encyclopedic spirit, whose quixotic drive for absolute knowledge can only lead to disappointment. *Nausea* presents the journalistic reflections of Antoine Roquentin, who has settled in the fictional town of Bouville to complete a history thesis about fictional 18th century adventurer M. de Rollebon. Roquentin frequents the public library, where he encounters an eccentric man known as the Autodidact, a

⁵⁴⁰ The now defunct journal was produced by the cultural center directed by Léonce Petitot in the northern city of Arras.

⁵⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, "Culture et écriture: la prolifération des livres et la fin du livre," *Noroit*, 130: 1 (August-September 1968), 5-12.

self-described humanist who has tasked himself with reading the library's entire contents. Roquentin observes that the Autodidact follows a simple principle in his monumental task of reading all the volumes in the library: he proceeds in alphabetical order.⁵⁴² For Derrida, this parodic character represents "the phantom that haunts every general library," he is the caricature of the encyclopedic quest for absolute knowledge. His approach to reading the volumes in the library alphabetically reflects a neurotic obsession for completeness or exhaustiveness which is no short of ridiculous. What Derrida calls the "parable of the Autodidact" reveals the extent to which the content of the library had become the Autodidact's world:

He scanned the innumerable books which lined the walls and he must have said, something like Rastignac, "Science! It is up to us." Then he went and took the first book from the first shelf on the far right; he opened to the first page, with a feeling of respect and fear mixed with an unshakable decision. Today he has reached "L"—"K" after "J," "L" after "K." He has passed brutally from the study of coleopterae to the quantum theory, from a work on Tamerlaine to a Catholic pamphlet against Darwinism, he has never been disconcerted for an instant. He has read everything; he has stored up in his head most of what anyone knows about parthenogenesis, and half the arguments against vivisection. There is a universe behind and before him. And the day is approaching when closing the last book on the last shelf on the far left: he will say to himself, "Now what?"⁵⁴³

As the Autodidact carries on from volumes beginning with the letter L to K, as he nears the middle of the alphabet, accumulating a seemingly endless knowledge of the *faits divers* of the universe, Sartre notes, "There is a universe behind and before him." The totality of his universe is contained in the library, Derrida comments "the library as the universe, the universal library is the microcosmic reflection of the universe itself, of the macro-cosmos, of the ordered universe. The universe is the absolute unity of all possible pluralities." The Autodidact's gesturing from left to right suggests "the representation of the path of Absolute Knowledge."⁵⁴⁴ The mere thought of

⁵⁴² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 2007), Epub: "Suddenly the names of the authors he last read come back to my mind: Lambert, Langlois, Larbalétrier, Lastex, Laverigne. It is a revelation; I have understood the Autodidact's method; he teaches himself alphabetically."

⁵⁴³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*.

⁵⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Culture et écriture."

reaching his goal - the apotheosis of knowledge - introduces a terrifying possibility for the Autodidact: "Now what?" With dread, the Autodidact considers the possibility of a world beyond the walls of the library, and confront the world he has so meticulously avoided. At the end of the novel, Roquentin imagines that the Autodidact lives on after completing his task, wandering the streets of Bouville, anonymous, unremarkable, and without purpose.

The Autodidact's self-assigned task represents the exhaustion of the encyclopedic zeal in philosophy that hastened "the closure of the book." The Autodidact renders the quest for absolute knowledge a farce. For Derrida, he is a caricatured image of a more general symptom of "logocentrism." Two inverse dynamics that signal the end of the traditional concept of the book: first, the slow disappearance of the book in national, international, and popular cultures, and second, the acceleration of specialized books particularly in academic and scientific research. Highlighting the proliferation of cottage industries surrounding every well-known philosopher, "such as the Marx library, which collects all the *marxistes*, *marxiennes* or *marxologiques* studies." Derrida notes that the multiplication of texts will soon require that libraries will need texts to be stored as microfilm and other technologies to reduce the massive accumulation of text into a manageable size. A tiny microfilm containing an entire library, Derrida writes, "classified in a niche like a small urn in a columbarium." If technological innovations permit the storage of more and more text in less and less space – a trend that has obviously continued well past Derrida's comments in 1968 – the publication of scientific research has accelerated as never before. The absolute book from Hegel's *Phenomenology* must contain more and more information in a smaller and smaller object, *ad infinitum*, to the point of its explosion. For Derrida, the absolute book has always been foreign to the real activities of science. "There has never been a book of science," he writes, "scientific writing has always been foreign to the book, and it is through it that the book

has always been in some way contested, more or less secretly and today in a new manner which is declared.” A direct affront to Hegel’s absolute book, Derrida diagnoses the “death of the book,” and sketches the possibilities for what follows it.

What defines the ordinary concept of the book? Derrida sketches seven characteristics: a book is (1) “a kind of micro-cosm of a totality containing a beginning and end”; (2) it must have an author; (3) it must express a specific *parole*, a particular voice; (4) it must be linear; (5) in the book, we search for “the living presence of speech and the person who stands behind it”; (6) a book is a kind of expression or exteriorization of reality, it is “the image of a reality which is first perceived or projected: image, that is, imitation”; finally, (7) “the real and absolute Model of the book” is ultimately “God’s book is being as divine writing, as spelling that conforms to thought, to the understanding of divine logos.” The first six characteristics are formal aspects of the book, each of which is accompanied by a body of literary criticism; the seventh characteristic pertains to the ontology of the book. Books are “opuscles modelled off the great divine *opus*,” they are like “small mirrors,” “finite speculations,” in relation to the divine book: the trace of *liber mundi*, as an afterglow of the Book of Books, is ingrained in the ordinary concept of the book:

This is why the ideal form of the human book which most closely resembles God’s book is the book of total science, a book covering the cycle of knowledge but also, since truth is already constituted as a relation of the absolute to the self, as a relation of God to the self, it will be a cyclical book which will only only teach the knowledge of truth. This cyclical book will be pedagogical. It will be a book of the encyclopedic sort. All other books must be summarized, collected, identified, and ordered by it.

Derrida’s description of the ideal book recalls Kojève’s absolute book, which replicates “the ‘circular’ *existence* of the Sage.”⁵⁴⁵ Hegel’s possibility of a circular knowledge, with no beginning or end, would constitute this long vaunted ideal object of knowledge to rival God’s Book of Books. If the philosopher’s book supplants, or at least supplements, the Bible as the beacon of absolute

⁵⁴⁵ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction*, 288.

knowledge in modernity, the theological structure of the book as the source of truth remains intact. Derrida describes Hegel's *Encyclopedia* as the achievement of a certain philosophical totality, which marks the end of a certain kind of philosophy:

That Hegel, whose philosophy is summarized and completed precisely by the concept of absolute knowledge, also wrote an Encyclopedia in which all the parts of knowledge, that is to say of philosophy (logic, physics, anthropology, phenomenology, psychology, etc.) are coordinated, this is quite symptomatic. The end of philosophy, its completion, is also that of the Encyclopedia.⁵⁴⁶

Echoing his diagnosis in *Grammatology* of Hegel as the last thinker of the book and the first thinker of writing, in "Culture and Writing" Derrida describes Hegel's *Encyclopedia* as the last philosophical project that sought to grasp the absolute book. Once the encyclopedic task of absolute knowledge is complete, we may pose the Autodidact's question to Hegel: "Now what?"

The seven characteristics frame "the closure of the book," in terms of a series of oppositions that "demarcate the book from the exterior." These characteristics outline the common notion of the book, but they also leave in relief a negative image of what Derrida calls the "outré-livre," what lies *outside* of the book. He asks, "how is our epoch marked by the opening of this *outré-livre*?" The concept of the book, the "unity analogical for Man and God," is threatened by the proliferation of non-phonetic writing. Derrida presciently foresees the non-phonetic language of mathematics and computing that has evidently played a decisive role in the organization of contemporary society. Referring to MacLuhan's study of mass-media, he suggests our "civilization of the image" cannot be contained to the classic notion of the book and increasingly relates to the world in the non-phonetic language of images. Derrida writes, "non-phonetic writing is programming and computing in all its forms," whether it is computer or genetic code. The predominance of phonetic language that accompanied Hegel's quest for the absolute book has been

⁵⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Culture et écriture."

supplanted by a new order of language unbound by linearity or phonetic writing: it is outside of the book, disseminated into the world as a general practice of arche-writing.

Derrida finds in Mallarmé's poetry the germ for the "outre-livre." The poet's later life was consumed by the pyrrhic quest to write the absolute book of poetry. "Tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre," he writes in the studies for the Book of poetry, "*Un livre ne commence ni ne finit, tout au plus fait-il semblant.*"⁵⁴⁷ Mallarmé dreamed of drafting a book of poetry to rival the Book of Books. In a letter to Verlaine, he expressed his desire to write a book worthy of its name:

Quoi ? C'est difficile à dire : un livre tout bonnement, en maints tomes, un livre qui soit un livre, architectural et prémédité, et non un recueil des inspirations de hasard fussent-elles merveilleuses... j'irai plus loin, je dirai : le Livre, persuadé au fond qu'il n'y en a qu'un, tenté à son insu par quiconque a écrit, même les Génies. L'explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence : car le rythme même du livre, alors impersonnel et vivant jusque dans sa pagination, se juxtapose aux équations de ce rêve, ou Ode.⁵⁴⁸

Mallarmé's dream to write "un livre qui soit un livre" sheds light on a future of writing after the book. For Derrida, while Mallarmé's Book "seems to desperately summarize and bring together the metaphysics or theology of the Book," it also opens to a horizon "towards the future of literature without the book." Mallarmé's physical poetry is irreducible to phonetic reading and insists above all on the visual engagement of the reader; the non-linear language in his physical poetry points towards the "outre-livre." Derrida explains, "Mallarmé tried to restore in some sense the spatiality, the spacing, the theatricality of the letter in his 'total expansion,' that is, to break the linearity of writing." Mallarmé's writing not only breaks from poetry's formal constraints, it disrupts the predominance of voice. Derrida writes, "as soon as there is non-phonetic writing, the entire system of values associated with the predominance of voice are displaced."⁵⁴⁹ The written

⁵⁴⁷ Jacques Scherer, *Le "Livre" de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), fragment 181a.

⁵⁴⁸ Stéphane Mallarmé, "Autobiographie," *Œuvres Complètes*, eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris : Gallimard, 1984), 662-663.

⁵⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Culture et écriture."

gramme that is irreducible to the phonetic language of the voice challenges the preeminence of which Derrida calls “phonocentrism.” Mallarmé relates the book to an immersive theatrical representation, which in modernity has become the site of religious observance in the disenchanted modern world.⁵⁵⁰ In this theater of the book, Derrida relates the “*outré-livre*” to Artaud’s theater of cruelty, which is “a new writing, without the book, of a non-phonetic writing of gestures, of volumes of ‘sacred hieroglyphs,’ whose depth only accords words and phonetic writing a subordinate role.” The theater of cruelty refuses the representational limits imposed by the division of the stage and audience, it engages through shock and excess, refusing to abide by the separation of the theater as a representation of the world. Likewise, non-phonetic writing cannot be contained to the book, it spills onto the stage of a theater without limits. In contrast to the Autodidact, anxious about the day he completes his encyclopedic task, Derrida heralds the “*outré-livre*” as a liberation of writing confined to the long shadow of the absolute book.

“Culture and Writing” is the published version of a text which Derrida had presented on several other occasions, including lectures at Brown University in 1968 and at the Institut Français of Great Britain in 1970. However, Derrida’s notes disclose that at these events he presented the same text under the alternative title, “*La Bibliothèque en jeu*.”⁵⁵¹ This alternative title, which in a sense remains *sous rature* in Derrida’s text, strongly evokes René Char’s 1956 poem “*La Bibliothèque est en feu*,” “The Library is on Fire.” Char’s poem appears as the first of four poems in a collection by the same name published in 1956. He emphasizes the poet’s role as a guiding light for others, and the need – indeed, the moral obligation – for poetry to supplant philosophy.

⁵⁵⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé “Sur le théâtre,” *Œuvres Complètes*, 875-876 : “Je crois que la Littérature, reprise à sa source qui est l’Art et la Science, nous fournira un Théâtre dont les représentations seront le vrai culte moderne ; un Livre, explication de l’homme, suffisante à nos plus beaux rêves. Je crois tout cela écrit dans la nature de façon à ne laisser fermer les yeux qu’aux intéressés à ne rien voir. Cette œuvre existe, tout le monde l’a tentée sans le savoir ; il n’est pas de génie ou de pitre qui n’en ait retrouvé un trait sans le savoir...”

⁵⁵¹ These are based on Derrida’s lecture notes from his 1967 lectures in the Fond Derrida, IMEC.

Virginia A. de la Charité explains, “the poet's work, ‘la bibliothèque,’ is written for and accessible to the public. His work is ‘en feu’ because it is discovered in an intense moment of contact between disparate elements.”⁵⁵² The book, the symbol of the poet’s creative production, is a beacon for humanity, holding the torch of poetic creation for all to see. Fire is the expression of passion and creativity, it is “an image for the terrestrial and celestial sources of energy,” bridging the physical world and the heavens; fire is also destructive, it consumes and destroys everything that it meets, giving way for something new to rise from its ashes. De la Charité remarks, “poetic combustion, not philosophy, enlightens man.” “La Bibliothèque est en feu” expresses the creative and destructive forces of poetic expression. Char writes, “Desire, desire which knows, we draw no advantage from our shadows except from some veritable sovereignties accompanied by invisible flames, invisible chains, which, coming to light, step after step, cause us to shine” [*Désir, désir qui sait, nous ne tirons avantage de nos ténèbres qu’à partir de quelques souverainetés véritables assorties d’invisible flames, d’invisibles chaînes, qui, se révélant, pas après pas, nous font briller*].⁵⁵³ “La Bibliothèque est en feu” evokes the fires of passion and excitement, but also the creative potential of language. Char describes poetry in a symbolic register which connects the earthy with the celestial, it is the fiery moment of creation itself. “Why *poème pulverisé*?” Char asks, “Because at the end of its voyage towards the Country, after the pre-birth darkness and the earthly harshness, the finitude of the poem is light, a bringing of being to life [*Parce qu’au terme de son voyage vers le Pays, après l’obscurité pré-natale et la dureté terrestre, la finitude du poème est lumière, apport de l’être à la vie*].”⁵⁵⁴ Poetry illuminates what philosophy has relegated to the

⁵⁵² Virginia A. de la Charité, *The Poetics and the Poetry of René Char*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 177.

⁵⁵³ René Char, “The Library is on Fire” in *Furor and Mystery & Other Writings*, trans. Mary-Anne Cawes and Nancy Kleine (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2010) 389 [“La Bibliothèque est en feu,” *Les Martinaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 149].

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 384 [147].

shadows: the fiery, destructive, and indeed creative force of language. Char's "*poème pulvérisé*" suggests his predilection for physical descriptions of language, as if the words of a sentence were the bricks of a building. He pulverizes these bricks, leaving behind an archipelagic, fragmented physical language. Paulène Aspel writes, "the nature of Charian poems, which indeed bear traces of this pulverization, somehow become *fragments* scattered over the world, but paradoxically remain solid, resistant entities. These fragments are island-poems, made of small blocks, prose paragraphs, boldly emerging from silence."⁵⁵⁵ Char's pulverization of language shatters the book, and unleashes the creative fire of poetic language. The vestigial title of Derrida's "Culture et écriture: la prolifération des livres et la fin du livre" carries the trace of Char's library on fire, the image of language's power of creation.

VI. Conclusion: The Trace

The philosopher's quest for the absolute book is driven by the will to capture the totality of knowledge in one sublime object. The absolute book has the allure of a philosophical bible, a secular analogue to the Book of Books, and a rival to God's *liber mundi*. Hegel's systematic philosophy represents the culmination of this dream to capture the unity of knowledge in the pages of a book, crystalized in Kojève's influential seminar which emphasized the sage's sacrifice to realize the absolute book of knowledge at the end of history. As we have seen, if Hegel's philosophy represents the ultimate attempt to realize the absolute book, it also sowed the seeds for

⁵⁵⁵ Paulène Aspel, "The Poetry of Rene Char, or Man Reconciled," *World Literature Today*, Vol. 63, No. 2, 250th Issue (Spring, 1989), 206.

its demise. It is the pretension of closure, unity, and totality that sparks Levinas and Derrida's criticisms of the Hegelian absolute book, leading them to reevaluate the relationship between the book, writing, and being, as well as the model of knowledge as a closed totality. Where Hegel's *Phenomenology* charts the incorporation of alterity in the dialectical movement of Spirit, Levinas reverses this movement to reveal the notion of infinity in the encounter of the self with the alterity of the Other. Derrida diagnoses Hegel as the last thinker of the book and the first thinker of writing in his critique of non-phonetic language. For both, what remains after the destruction of Hegel's absolute book is a certain kind of *trace*. What each means by this term, however, is something different, highlighting their respective turns away from the idealism of the absolute book. Whereas Levinas' trace calls upon the transcendence of the encounter with the Other, Derrida's trace highlights the interminable play of "différance" in writing.

In "The Trace of the Other," Levinas describes the trace as a mode of signifying meaning beyond being, which occurs in the encounter with the infinitely Other. The unity of the "I" is constituted by its *ipseity*, its inalienable ontological identification of itself as itself, which discloses its horizon of being, and concomitantly the limits of its knowledge and world. The encounter with the Other interrupts ipseity, it presents someone who is wholly other. Specifically, the *face* of the Other is a remarkable, even halting presence, which breaks the enclosure of the self in the horizon of being. Levinas writes, "the epiphany of the absolutely other is a face in which the other calls to me and signifies an order to me by its nudity, its denuding. Its presence is a summation to respond."⁵⁵⁶ The face of the Other is not a mere object, it is an "epiphany" which demands a response. "A face is abstract," Levinas writes, "it is an incision made in time that does not bleed."⁵⁵⁷ The nudity of the face appears is a *presence* that rattles the order of being disclosed by

⁵⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 353.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid, 354.

ipseity; the face “is not a form of concealing, but thereby indicating, a ground, a phenomenon that hides, but thereby betrays a thing itself.” The presence of the face may be obscured or shrouded by a mask of sorts, nonetheless, “a mask presupposes a face.”⁵⁵⁸ While the face is a presence, the otherness of the Other is an absence for the ontological horizon of the “I.” “The other proceeds from the absolutely absent,” Levinas writes “yet the absent has a meaning in a face.” The trace of the Other discloses a transcendence within the immanence of consciousness, which originates in an immemorial past, beyond the horizon of ipseity, and whose meaning signifies beyond the bounds of the totality of being:

Within being, a transcendence revealed is inverted into immanence, the extra-ordinary is inserted into an order, the other is absorbed into the same. In the presence of the other do we not respond to an “order” in which signifyingness remains an irremissible disturbance, an utterly bygone past? Such is the signifyingness of a trace. The beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace. A face is in the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly passed absent, withdrawn into what Paul Valéry calls “the deep yore, never long ago enough,” [*profond jadis, jadis jamais assez*] which cannot be discovered in the self by an introspection.

The “epiphany” of the face introduces a kind of transcendence, which appears as a phenomenon within the domain of immanence. The trace of the Other extends beyond being, it points to the presence of alterity which predates any specific meeting with another person, and refers to an origin in an immemorial past, the “*profond jadis*.” This original trace of alterity discloses the infinite ethical obligation to the Other, which is actualized in the face.

The meaning of the trace consequently exceeds the modes of signification available to the linguistic sign. Whereas the correlation between an ordinary sign and its signification is determined by the horizon of being which Levinas calls “rightness,” [*rectitude*] for the trace, the relationship of the sign and its signification is one of “*unrightness* [*irrectitude*],” which discloses a “lateral relationship, unconvertible into rightness (something inconceivable in the order of

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, 355.

disclosure and being), answering to an irreversible past.” The *unrightness* of the meaning of the trace “ signifies beyond being,”⁵⁵⁹ and it cannot be righted, so to speak, to fit the ontological horizon of meaning. “*Beyond being is a third person,*” irreducible to ipseity, who defies the “bipolar play of immanence and transcendence” at work in the signification of ordinary objects. The origin of the trace in an absolute past condenses into the form of the third person, a “he,” an *il*, from which Levinas derives his concept of “*illéité*”:

Through a trace the irreversible past takes on the profile of a “He.” The *beyond* from which a face comes is in the third person. The pronoun *He* expresses exactly its inexpressible irreversibility, already escaping every relation as well as every dissimulation, and in this sense absolute unencompassable or absolute, a transcendence in an absolute past. The *illeity* of the third person is the condition for the irreversibility.

The trace of the Other takes the embodied form of a “he,” an “*il*,” which beckons a response. The trace is “not a sign like any other.” ” The “unrightness” of the trace does not follow the correlation of sign and signification that is disclosed by being, it refuses categorization as a phenomenon that occurs *within* the world; the trace, rather, *interrupts* the world. The trace is not a representation or facsimile, it exceeds the register of correlation. “When in transactions one ‘pays by check’ so that there will be a trace of the payment, the trace is inscribed in the very order of the world,” Levinas elaborates, “but a trace in the strict sense disturbs the order of the world. It occurs by overprinting.”⁵⁶⁰ This surplus of meaning in the trace punctures the horizon of being with an alterity whose appearance cannot be understood in the register of signification.

To the extent that the “unrightness” of Levinas’ trace overwhelms the limits of ontology by indicating a transcendence beyond the categories of presence and absence, it dovetails with Derrida’s critique of the logocentrism which has determined language as speech and relegated

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid, 356.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid 357.

writing to a secondary position. He explicitly credits the term “trace” to Levinas in *Of Grammatology*, while making crucial modifications in his use of the term:

I relate this concept of trace to what is at the center of the latest work of Emmanuel Levinas and his critique of ontology: relationship to the illeity as to the alterity of a past that never was and can never be lived in the originary or modified' form of presence. Reconciled here to a Heideggerian intention,- as it is not in Levinas's thought - this notion signifies, sometimes beyond Heideggerian discourse, the undermining of an ontology which, in its innermost course, has determined the meaning of being as presence and the meaning of language as the full continuity of speech.⁵⁶¹

For Derrida and Levinas, the trace troubles this view of knowledge as a closed totality, and suggests linguistic meaning is irreducible to absence or presence, but exceeds these categories. Levinas' trace discloses the *illéité* that is never experienced as presence, which gestures towards the infinite Other; Derrida's trace disturbs the presence of the sign in the play of *différance*.

“Why traces?” Derrida asks in a 1968 interview with Julia Kristeva, “It is a question, rather, of producing a new concept of writing. This concept can be called *gram* or *différance*.”⁵⁶² Against the logocentrism of the philosophical tradition, Derrida's trace implies language is not “present,” either as the spoken word of a living voice, and the meaning of language is not “present,” but rather supposes “the play of differences” in the sign, whose “syntheses and referrals [...] forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present*.” Here, the trace begins from the contingency of the sign: the meaning of a linguistic sign does not stand autonomously from the system in which it operates, rather “no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present.” The text is produced by the “interweaving” of differences, and the meaning of the linguistic sign is never defined by its absolute presence, rather its meaning derives from the web of signs produces the play of difference. “Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent,” Derrida writes,

⁵⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.

⁵⁶² Jacques Derrida, “Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva,” *Positions*, 26.

“there are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.” Writing as trace suggests language is never fully present, but always the result of the play of difference, and the sign is always-already a trace which is woven in a network of signs and texts:

In the extent to which what is called "meaning" (to be "expressed") is already, and thoroughly, constituted by a tissue of differences, in the extent to which there is already a *text*, a network of textual referrals to *other* texts, a textual transformation in which each allegedly "simple term" is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority. It is always already carried outside itself. It already differs (from it-self) before any act of expression. And only on this condition can it constitute a syntagm or text. Only on this condition can it "signify."⁵⁶³

Whereas the Hegelian book promises to bring together the totality of knowledge between its covers, Derrida rejects this closed unity and reveals the play of difference in the arche-trace.

The model of philosophy as a quest for knowledge of the world entails the book as the site of humanity's triumph over nature. The absolute book would be a secular alternative to the Book of Books. This dream, which Levinas and Derrida both retrace from its roots in the Greek rationalist tradition to its apex in Hegel's system, crumbled in the 20th century. The death and destruction brought about by world wars, the brutal struggles against colonialism and imperialism, and the massive acceleration of technological innovation were only some of the developments that brought about the demise of the absolute book. But, as we have seen, the shattering of the Hegelian absolute book leads Derrida and Levinas in difference directions. Whereas Levinas' trace points to the *illéité* of the ethical obligation to the Other, Derrida's trace uncovers the endless play of *différance* that composes the sign.

⁵⁶³ Ibid, 33.

Chapter IV: Writing After the Broken Tablets

I. Introduction

If the dissolution of Hegel's absolute book marks the demise of a certain philosophical idealism, the fragmented book has a memorable biblical antecedent: in the Book of Exodus, Moses shatters the Tablets of the Law at the foot of Mount Sinai when he discovers his people worshipping a golden calf. After punishing the idolaters, God asks Moses to carve a new set of tablets for the commandments, which are transcribed by the prophet and finally revealed to the Hebrew people. The dramatic episode highlights God's retribution against those who break the covenant, but Moses' audacity to shatter the tablets inscribed with God's commandment is also remarkable. Talmudic and philosophical debates highlight the complexity of ascribing a motivation that justifies Moses' act of destruction. The Tablets of the Law are a kind of Ur-book, the precursor to the Torah, and all the books that follow. Moses' shattered tablets become a crucial symbol for the theological-political question of the book's relation to God, and the writer's freedom to follow or rebel against authority, law, and tradition. In the exchanges between Edmond Jabès and Jacques Derrida, the shattered tablets represent the ambivalence between the obedience to law and the freedom from law: the force of tradition binding them to Judaism, as well as the desire to rebel against law to seek out creative freedom. Moses' gesture represents an act of creative destruction – he shatters God's law and rewrites it with a human hand. In Jabès' 1963 *The Book of Questions* and Derrida's 1964 essay "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," the broken tablets emerge as a central motif illustrating the relationship between scripture and poetic freedom. Questioning

is akin to breaking the tablets, undermining the presumptive authority of the law. In other words, *The Book of Questions* is a challenge and a response to the Book of Books, it shatters the original biblical text and rewrites it in fiction with the human hand.

In this chapter, I argue that Derrida and Jabès' reflections on the shattered tablets illustrate what Walter Benjamin calls a "dialectical image" of the tension between the freedom and law of writing. Benjamin describes in the *Arcades Project* an image that exceeds its historical moment: "it's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill."⁵⁶⁴ The dialectical image captures historical dynamics in a single frame, it presents "the constellation of a single moment," whose meaning stretches beyond a given historical moment, in which "the past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory."⁵⁶⁵ Highlighting the ambivalence of adherence to the law, the broken tablets present an image that extends beyond its specific historical moment and sinks its roots into the profound seedbed of humanity. "The dialectical image," Benjamin continues, "can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity." The dialectical image of the shattered tablets of the law dramatizes the rupture from Judaism, history, and tradition, even as Moses' gesture is ultimately folded into the biblical narrative of the revelation of the law with the replacement tablets. Jabès and Derrida express this tension between law and freedom in their reflections on the connection of the Jew and writing. Benjamin writes, "the dialectical image is an image that flashes up," transcending its historical moment and imprinting itself in humanity's

⁵⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Awakening," *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 462. See also: Max Pensky, "Method and time: Benjamin's dialectical images," *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 177-198.

⁵⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'" *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol 4. 1938-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), 403.

memory, it is “the image of what has been [...] flashing up in the now of its recognizability.”⁵⁶⁶

The broken tablets are a potent symbol for the writer’s freedom for creation against the force of tradition, and the ambivalence of the rupture with Jewish tradition, law, and homeland.

II. Max Jacob and the Torn Manuscript

It was an unforgettable encounter in 1935 with his mentor Max Jacob that left Edmond Jabès with an image for the dissolution of the book: challenging the young Egyptian to discover his own poetic voice against his literary influences, Jacob tore up Jabès’ manuscript before his eyes. This jarring experience was formative for Jabès. In *The Book of Questions*, the book becomes the site of the contestation between law and freedom: between the holy words of the Bible and the revolt against them, or equally between the writer’s literary influences and his or her unique poetic voice. The torn manuscript is the template for Jabès’ reflections on the freedom of literary expression.

Max Jacob is a somewhat overshadowed figure of early 20th century French literature whose writing exhibits a unique and iconoclastic style of post-symbolist poetic expression.⁵⁶⁷ Jacob was born in 1876 to a Jewish family in the city of Quimper in Brittany, but converted to Catholicism in 1915 after he claimed to receive a vision of Christ. He was homosexual, though he did not avow it outside the confessional booth. As a child, Jacob was also treated by Jean-Martin Charcot for his chronic migraines. His poetry bridged symbolism and surrealism in volumes such as his 1917 *Le Cornet à dès* and experimental novels including the 1922 *Le Laboratoire central*,

⁵⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Central Park” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol 4. 1938-1940*, 183.

⁵⁶⁷ See: Béatrice Mousli, *Max Jacob* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005); “Max Jacob,” *The Yale Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* ed. Mary Ann Caws (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 47-53.

though he always maintained critical distance from any specific literary school or movement.⁵⁶⁸ Jacob also played a particularly crucial role as a bridge in the network of artists and writers in Paris at the turn of the century. In 1901, he befriended Pablo Picasso, who he introduced to his friend, Guillaume Apollinaire, who in turn connected Picasso with his cubist collaborator, Georges Braque; Jacob was also friends with Jean Cocteau and Amadeo Modigliani, who painted his portrait in 1916. Jacob became friends with Jean Moulin when the latter was named *sous-préfet* in Jacob's native Finistère region; Moulin went on to lead the French Resistance to the Nazi occupation, during which he used the *nom de guerre* "Max," after his old friend. Despite his proximity to many of its major themes and figures, as Jabès notes, "the surrealists were repulsed by Jabès" due to his conversion to Catholicism, and his tepid embrace of iconic forerunners to surrealism, the *poètes maudits* Rimbaud and Lautréamont.⁵⁶⁹ Perhaps Jacob' iconoclasm contributed to his occlusion from literary movements of the early 20th century. Jabès later reflected that many "were quite unjust with his work. They have gone as far as to deny his influence, which is nonetheless undeniable."⁵⁷⁰ Jacob's iconoclasm appealed to Jabès, and his mentorship was formative for the young Egyptian poet. Jabès reported, "he was an excellent advisor for all."

Jabès discovered Max Jacob's poetry around 1930 when he eighteen years old in Cairo, by way of Jean Cocteau's collection *Le rappel à l'ordre*. In 1933, Jabès gave a public lecture on Jacob's poetry in Cairo, but he found that the audience was unreceptive to "the gravity and profundity" of Jacob's writing, which "hides and reveals its anxiety in multiple forms of playing with words."⁵⁷¹ Jabès was captivated by the freedom of Jacob's writing in texts such as *Le Cornet*

⁵⁶⁸ Max Jacob, *Le Cornet à dès* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967); *Le Laboratoire central* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

⁵⁶⁹ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 29.

⁵⁷⁰ Edmond Jabès, "Hommage à Max Jacob," *Saluer Jabès*, 63.

⁵⁷¹ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, (Paris: Belfond, 1991), 309. See also, Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 43.

à dès, and the same year he began a correspondence with Jacob. “You have a lot of thoughts, of interior life,” Jacob wrote Jabès in December 1933, “I am fully persuaded that you will go a long way on the path of art.”⁵⁷² Their correspondence continued for over a decade. Jacob offered crucial advice to his young Egyptian interlocutor, in whom he recognized “the promise of a great future production.”⁵⁷³ In his letters, Jacob urged Jabès to explore the medium of poetry, not to get caught up in questions of representation, but to instead seek out his poetic voice in the immediacy of language. They ultimately met in Paris in the summer of 1935, while Jabès was celebrating his honeymoon with Arlette. Jabès considered Jacob “his first guide, his spiritual father,”⁵⁷⁴ whom he credited for the discovery of his own literary voice, he recalled that it was Jacob who “taught me to be myself, that is, *different*,”⁵⁷⁵ echoing Rimbaud’s 1871 pronouncement to Paul Demeny, “Je est un Autre.” The uncanny co-occurrence of ipseity and alterity, the inmixing of a selfsame authorial voice with the polyphonous if not cacophonous voices of others, and the face of alterity encountered in the pages of the book are important themes in Jabès’ writing. Jabès praised Jacob for challenging him to identify his own literary sensibility, wrested from those inherited from his influences. He later reflected, “with his friend Guillaume Apollinaire who admired and loved his entire life, [Jacob] belongs amongst the first order in the golden book of modern poets.”⁵⁷⁶

The extraordinary episode of the torn manuscript occurred during their 1935 meeting in Paris. When they first met in Jacob’s apartment on the rue Saint-Romain in the 6th Arrondissement, Jabès brought a manuscript of unpublished new material to solicit Jacob’s opinion. When they met again the following day, Jacob reported that he had indeed read the

⁵⁷² Letter from Max Jacob to Edmond Jabès, December 4, 1933, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁵⁷³ Letter from Max Jacob to Edmond Jabès, undated [likely 1934], Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁵⁷⁴ Didier Cahen, “Ecrire sa vie,” *Portrait(s) d’Edmond Jabès* (Paris: Bibliothèques Nationale de France, 1999), 28.

⁵⁷⁵ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 28.

⁵⁷⁶ Edmond Jabès, “Hommage à Max Jacob,” 63.

manuscript, but he added, “and, if you’ll permit me, I am now going to tear it up so we can speak more freely.”⁵⁷⁷ At issue was not the quality of Jabès’ writing, but the autonomy of his poetic voice. “It is excellent,” Jacob told him, “but it isn’t you. You imitate me, but I’ve done my time.” To Jabès’ astonishment, Jacob tore up the manuscript and threw it in the trash. This shocking episode left an indelible mark on Jabès, who systematically retold this story to young writers who came to meet him. “For an hour and a half,” Jabès recounts, “he gave me the most extraordinary lesson in poetry.” Jacob gave Jabès “to courage to be myself,” and to “destroy the idols” of his literary imagination.⁵⁷⁸ This scene of destruction was also a scene of creation: Jacob tore Jabès’ manuscript as an all too literal expression of freeing his writing from the grip of tradition.

In letters that perambulate between prose and verse, often with small drawings animating the margins, Jacob insisted that Jabès explore the creative limits of language in search of his unique poetic voice. He wrote to Jabès in September 1935, “a poem is an experience: passion is not the goal, it is the means! The more it is contained the more animate it is. A dog who scratches the doormat doesn’t make a painting from the dust he lifts! Disorder doesn’t mean to dissolve it.”⁵⁷⁹ Jacob advised Jabès to look at Apollinaire and Éluard to see how they push the creative potential of language by exploiting the sonorous as well as semantic dimensions of poetry; at the same time, he guards against the parasitic urge to imitate or replicate these literary forbearers. “Look at Apollinaire, our only great poet, on the subject of vowels, consonances, diphthongs,” Jacob advises Jabès, “If you shoot at random and approach the target afterwards to see if you’ve hit it, you run the risk that you’ll never hit it.” Jacob called for Jabès to use his poetic voice to push the limits of representational language, but he insists that the poet sow disorder with acute intentionality: “be

⁵⁷⁷ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 29. See also: Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, 310.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁷⁹ Letter from Max Jacob to Edmond Jabès, September 1935, Fond Jabès, BNF.

profound, not strange. Look at Éluard.” Jacob urged Jabès not to get caught up in the anxiety of influence. Ultimately, Jacob wrote to Jabès in October 1935, it is a question of exploiting one’s singular voice and aesthetic: “Advice is useless. I have my aesthetic, you have yours. A question of one’s own skin. No one is wrong if he is profoundly himself, and if he is bold.”⁵⁸⁰ This journey lasted several decades, but Jabès’ mature work is undeniably his own voice.

Max Jacob was arrested in Paris by the Gestapo in January of 1944 due to his Jewish roots, and he died of bronchial pneumonia at the Drancy camp in March before his deportation to Auschwitz. Jabès learned of Jacob’s death in heartbreaking fashion, when a message that he had sent Jacob in France was returned to him in Egypt, marked “Décédé.”⁵⁸¹ In May 1945, Jabès presented his “Hommage à Max Jacob” at a meeting of the *Groupement des Amitiés Françaises* in Egypt. Jabès concludes his text in verse: “The heavens have taken back Max Jacob / The earth retains his work [*Le ciel a repris Max Jacob. / La terre conserve son oeuvre*].”⁵⁸² The details of Jacob’s arrest and death at Drancy would only later become known to Jabès. The memory of Max Jacob would remain with Jabès throughout his life, weaving into his writing. Jabès’ dedicated his collection *I Build My House* to Jacob, and in *The Book of Questions*, a facsimile of Jacob appears as a character: “Reb Jacob, who was my first teacher, believed in the virtue of the lie because, so he said, there is no writing without lie. And writing is the way of God. [*Reb Jacob, qui fut mon premier maître, croyait à la vertu du mensonge parce que – disait-il – il n’y a pas d’écriture sans mensonge et que l’écriture est le chemin de Dieu*].”⁵⁸³ Transformed into one of the fictional rabbis populating the pages of the *Book of Questions*, “Reb Jacob” teaches Jabès “the virtue of the lie”:

⁵⁸⁰ Letter from Max Jacob to Edmond Jabès, 2 October 1935, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁵⁸¹ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Max Jacob, 4 February 1944. Fond Jabès, BNF. See also: Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 29-30.

⁵⁸² Edmond Jabès, “Hommage à Max Jacob,” 64.

⁵⁸³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 85 [96].

that there is “no writing without lie,” even as “writing is the path of God.” Jabès transforms Jacob into a holy lie, as the fictional rabbi “Reb Jacob.” The contingency of reality and fiction, person and character, is the legacy of the virtuous lie in Jabès’ writing.

The indelible memory of the 1935 episode of Max Jacob and the torn manuscript served as a kind of primal scene for Jabès. The episode inevitably hearkens the theatrical scene from the Book of Exodus in which Moses shatters the tablets on the ground. In *The Book of Questions*, writing takes place in the wake of the broken tablets. As Jabès writes in the final volume *El ou le dernier livre*, “by turning their backs to the Tables, the chosen people gave Moses a master-lesson in reading [*Le peuple élu, en se détournant des Tables, donnait à Moïse une magistrale leçon de lecture*].”⁵⁸⁴ Breaking the tablets was necessary so that the commandments could be rewritten by human hand, making possible the creative freedom of writing. Jabès writes in *Le Livre des Ressemblances*, the book “is always the breaking of the imitated, inimitable book [*est toujours brisure du livre imité, inimitable*].”⁵⁸⁵ The book always contains the trace of an inimitable original, in the interim between the shattered tablets and their replacements.

III. The Biblical and Philosophical Legacy of the Broken Tablets

For “the people of the book,” the relationship with God is mediated by a series of books. Indeed, the Jewish people’s bond with God through text is a central thematic in the *Tanakh*. Moshe Halbertal explains the broad meaning of “the book,” *sefer*, in the Hebrew Bible:

⁵⁸⁴ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* Tome 2, 377 [505].

⁵⁸⁵ Edmond Jabès, *Livre des Ressemblances*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1976), 99.

The plurality of the functions of texts is strikingly visible in the biblical use of the term "book" (*sefer*). In the Bible "book" covers a wide range of meanings-in fact, the range covered by our use of the broader term "text." A book in the Bible can be a document. In Deut. 24:1-3, a bill of divorce is called a book of divorce (*sefer kritut*). A book can be a contract; Jeremiah calls a contract of purchase "the book of purchase" (*sefer ha-mikna*, Jer. 32:11-16). A letter is also called a book, such as the one David sent to Yoav-a letter with instructions (2 Sam. 11:14, 2 Kings 5:5, Esther 3:13).⁵⁸⁶

The different books in the Bible illustrate the overarching importance of text in the Jewish tradition, serving a wide array of purposes. The book as a form of nourishment is particularly emphatic in the prophetic books. In the Book of Ezekiel, God calls upon Ezekiel to spread his prophesy of the imminent destruction of the temple to the people of Israel. God tells him, "Son of man, that which you find, eat; eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel."⁵⁸⁷ Literally consuming the book, Ezekiel notes the scroll "was as sweet as honey." By ingesting God's words which are physically inscribed on the scroll, Ezekiel incorporates the divine word into his being, and he is literally able to "speak to them with My [God's] words." Ezekiel is not merely a messenger carrying God's word, he is quite literally the embodiment or incarnation of the message itself, as God's word incorporated into the body of the prophet. A prophetic analogy is perhaps found in the Book of Jeremiah, where God literally places his word in Jeremiah's mouth.⁵⁸⁸

Levinas further elaborates in *Beyond the Verse* on the connection of the Jewish people to the book:

As the 'people of the Book' through its land which extends the volume of in-folios and scrolls, Israel is also the people of the Book in another sense: it has fed itself, almost in the physical sense of the term, on books, like the prophet who swallows a scroll in Ezekiel Chapter 3. The remarkable digestion of celestial food!⁵⁸⁹

The book is the "celestial food" that nourishes the "people of the book," it represents the bonds connecting Jews dispersed around the world, which articulates their history, laws, and precepts.

⁵⁸⁶ Moshe Halbertal. *People of the Book*, 12

⁵⁸⁷ Ez 3:1-4.

⁵⁸⁸ Jer. 1:9; 15:16.

⁵⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 138.

Perhaps the most memorable book in the Jewish tradition is the “book of the covenant,” *sefer ha-brit*, in the Book of Exodus. After leading the Israelites out of Egypt, escaping the Pharaoh’s army by miraculously crossing the Red Sea, God first speaks his commandments to the Jewish people at the foot of Mount Sinai, which Moses subsequently records as a book. Following legal conventions, in chapters 20-24 of Exodus, the covenant is spoken aloud for all to hear, before it is inscribed as written text: “Moses wrote all the words of the Lord ... And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people; and they said: 'All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and obey.’⁵⁹⁰ Hearing and then writing God’s covenant as a text, the Jewish people bind themselves to the contract. Halbertal explains that *sefer ha-brit* is “a legal document, a contract, to remind a party of the obligation he has taken upon himself. Moses gives to the people the laws he heard from God, the people accept them, and he subsequently writes them in a book which is called ‘the book of the covenant.’”⁵⁹¹ The reading, writing, and spilling of sacrificial blood on both parties seals the covenant. In this context, “writing is a sign of commitment; texts are a physical embodiment of will, objects of consent. They also serve to remind people of their promise.” God then commands Moses to ascend Mount Sinai, where he promises to give the prophet “the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”⁵⁹² Few biblical episodes match the drama and intensity of the ensuing series of events. As the people anxiously await his return, Moses finally descends the mountain carrying *lukhot ha-brit*, the Tablets of the Law, but finds his people worshipping the idol of a golden calf. The revelation of the tablets to the people is preempted by the frenzied scene of idolatry, in violation of the newly sealed covenant. The Book of Exodus recounts that Moses’ “anger was kindled” by

⁵⁹⁰ Ex. 24:4-7.

⁵⁹¹ Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 13.

⁵⁹² Ex. 24:12.

his people's transgression, and he "flung the tablets from his hands, shattering them at the foot of the mountain," interrupting the revelation of the commandments.⁵⁹³ In the context of the book of the covenant, Halbertal explains, "writing is a sign of commitment; texts are a physical embodiment of will, objects of consent."⁵⁹⁴ Moses' shattered tablets are literally a broken contract. After the idolaters are punished, Moses returns to Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, where God commands him to carve a new set of replacement tablets, duplicating the words of the originals but written by human hand. When Moses descends with new tablets, "his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord," and he reveals the commandments on new tablets.⁵⁹⁵ The awesome revelation of the commandments, despite this hiatus, ultimately occurs in chapter 35. Strikingly, the revelation of the law on the second set of tablets is unaffected by the previous incident, as if the shattered tablets were a forgotten interlude and the episode resumed as intended.

The scene of Moses breaking the tablets is one of the most over-determined images in the Western cultural imagination, arousing endless reflection by artists and writers inspired by its intense psychological complexity and theological terror. Michelangelo's 1515 statue of the horned *Moses* depicts the prophet sitting as he awkwardly holds the tablets under his arm, perhaps holding back his anger at his people's idolatrous transgressions. The seriousness and tension contained in his face belies his awkward hold on the tablets, which look as if they might slip from his grasp. Rembrandt's 1659 painting *Moses* illustrates the prophet holding the intact tablets above his head, but the image leaves ambiguous whether they are the original tablets or the replacements, turning the focus instead to Moses' inscrutable expression. Chagall's numerous depictions of the Revelation at Sinai insert the scene in the historical arc of the Jewish people in the millennia that

⁵⁹³ Ex 32:19.

⁵⁹⁴ Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 13.

⁵⁹⁵ Ex. 34:29.

follow the Exodus through the catastrophes of the 20th century. These representations of Moses illustrate the unparalleled psychological drama of this episode, at the crucial moment of the revelation of God's commandments to the Jewish people. The interval between the shattering of the original tablets and their replacements is a fascinating scene of anxiety and dread. That God would instruct Moses to carve new tablets is far from obvious; after the betrayal of the golden calf, God could have forsaken the chosen people for their idolatry. Moses' anger bespeaks a human character flaw, but it also reveals his anguish that their treachery might provoke divine wrath.

This iconic passage of the Book of Exodus is laced with textual ambiguities which enable an array of interpretative possibilities. Once the new tablets are carved, there is no further mention of the shattered originals, as if the broken tablets were a detour that no longer bore mentioning, and the new tablets were simply a repetition without a difference. The biblical text contradictory explanations for Moses' shattering the tablets, the authorship of the second set of tablets, and the fate of the shattered originals. These questions have given rise to lively debates concerning Moses' gesture and its consequences for the Jewish people. The broken tablets are a crucial image for the theological and philosophical stakes of commandment and human freedom at stake both in the Bible as well as the secular books that disseminate from it.

While one of the most visually striking scenes in the Bible, a close reading of the episode of the broken tablets reveals important textual lacunae. Chapters 32-34 of Exodus depict the episode of the golden calf and the revelation of the commandments. Moses has climbed Mount Sinai to receive God's commandments, but his people grow impatient as they await his return. They convince Moses' brother Aaron to fashion an idol of a golden calf from their jewelry, and they declare, "These are your gods, O Israel, who have brought you up from the land of Egypt!"⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁶ Ex 32:8.

God is angered by their transgression, and sends Moses down the mountain with the tablets of the law. These tablets were “God's work,” and on them, “the inscription was God's inscription.”⁵⁹⁷ In one of the most dramatic scenes in the Torah, when Moses descends from the mountain to see the people of Israel worshipping the idol of a golden calf, his “anger was kindled,” and he “flung the tablets from his hands, shattering them at the foot of the mountain.”⁵⁹⁸ After Moses pleads with God to pardon the chosen people for their blasphemy, through the form of a pillar of clouds God tells Moses, “Hew for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones. And I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.”⁵⁹⁹ God commands Moses to return to the mountaintop, where he stays for forty days and nights while he receives God's commandment, and returns to the people of Israel bearing the tablets of the law. Moses' actions are described as praiseworthy throughout the narrative in Exodus, even after he had shattered the original tablets out of anger. While the prophet demonstrates his short temper on several occasions in the Bible, it is surprising that he is not reprimanded for destroying God's commandments, or that he is afforded a second set of tablets without complaint. These questions expose ambiguities related to Moses' motivations when shattering the original tablets, which are further explored later in the Torah, and in subsequent Talmudic interpretations of the passage.

The narrative of the broken tablets is retold in chapter 9 of the Book of Deuteronomy with several key differences. Whereas in Exodus, Moses shatters the tablets out of anger at the foot of the mountain, in Deuteronomy, Moses addresses his people directly, and he acts not out of angry, but deliberately: “I saw and behold you had sinned against your God,” and then “I grabbed hold of the two tablets and flung them from my two hands and shattered them before your eyes.”⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁷ Ex 32:16.

⁵⁹⁸ Ex 32:19.

⁵⁹⁹ Ex 34:1.

⁶⁰⁰ Deut. 9:16-17.

Rather than the impulsive gesture described in Exodus, the text of Deuteronomy shies away from Moses' flawed emotional reaction and suggests he intentionally breaks the tablets as a message for all of Israel to see. Yet this re-articulation introduces new questions because it implies that Moses deliberately shatters tablets inscribed with God's word. The biblical text leaves unresolved whether Moses acted out of anger or deliberately, and how his actions are justified, posing serious interpretive questions. What is the logic governing the change in Moses' motivation for dropping the tablets from Exodus to Deuteronomy? How do we explain or resolve the apparent internal contradiction in the multiple biblical retellings of this episode? Further, we might interrogate God's *inaction* in response to Moses' gesture, an act of destruction which seemingly contravenes God's wishes that Moses present the commandments to the people. Does Moses bear any consequences for breaking the tablets? Does God gratuitously offer the second set of tablets, as a repetition without difference, or do they come at some cost ?

A variety of interpretative strategies have been used to explicate Moses' decision to shatter the tablets. According to an interpretation found in the first century text of unknown authorship called Pseudo-Philo, when Moses descends from Sinai to discover the people worshipping the golden calf, the inscribed letters flew off the tablets, and in a moment of panic Moses drops them: "He looked at the tablets and saw that they were not written upon and, agitated, he smashed them."⁶⁰¹ This interpretation rationalizes both Moses' emotional reaction and obviates his intention to destroy God's word. A similar interpretation in Midrash *Tanhuma* suggests the tablets were only light enough to carry when inscribed with God's commandments; once the text flies off the tablets, they became heavy, and Moses dropped them. According to this interpretation, Moses is not even

⁶⁰¹ Howard Jacobson trans., "Pseudo-Philo, Book of Biblical Antiquities," in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture*, eds. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, Lawrence H. Schiffman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 499.

responsible for dropping the tablets, since it is ostensibly God’s decision to lift the words from the stones and making them heavy, though it does not account for Moses’ apparent anger.⁶⁰² Other interpretations accept that Moses acted out of anger. A 9th century midrash in *Deuteronomy Rabbah* offers a sharp rebuke of Moses’ impetuous action.⁶⁰³ The midrash recalls Ecclesiastes 7:9, “Do not be fast to anger for anger resides in the bosom of fools,” to suggest that Moses should have reflected before breaking the tablets, since being fast to anger is foolish, and unbecoming of the prophet.⁶⁰⁴ According to the midrash, God questions Moses, “you are calming your anger by [destroying] the Tablets of the Covenant? Do you want me to calm my anger [by destroying things]? Do you not see that the world would not last even one hour [were I to do so]?” If God were as quick to anger as Moses, he would’ve destroyed the world many times over. When Moses asks how he might atone, returning to the text of Deuteronomy, God tells him to “sculpt two stone tablets.”⁶⁰⁵ Following this interpretation, Moses’ punishment for destroying the tablets is to fashion the second set—in which case, the replacement tablets inscribed with God’s commandments are, in fact, made by Moses’ hand. This midrash presents the prophet as acting hastily and without reflection – that is, he is an all too human prophet who acts imperfectly – and he must take responsibility and atone. Recasting God’s request that Moses to carve the new tablets as a punishment renders the symbolic origin of human writing both a donation and a burden.

The debates in the Talmud offer different perspectives on Moses shattering the tablets. In a homily in *Tractate Shabbat*, it is argued that shattering the tablets is one of Moses’ three actions that God justifies *ex post facto*.⁶⁰⁶ The reasoning is that if God forbids “aliens” or “apostates” from

⁶⁰² Warsaw ed., *Ki Tissa* 30: “As long as the writing was on the tablets Moses could not feel the weight. Once the writing flew off of them, the tablets began to feel heavy in his hands and he flung them and they shattered.”

⁶⁰³ *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 3:14; Lieberman ed.

⁶⁰⁴ Ecc. 7:9.

⁶⁰⁵ Deut. 10:1.

⁶⁰⁶ b. *Shabbat* 87a, b. *Yebamot* 62a.

taking part in the paschal sacrifice, then this interdiction applies to their participation in the revelation of the Decalogue. According to this interpretation, when Moses sees the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, at that moment they became apostates who are no longer permitted to share in the revelation of God's commandment, and therefore Moses is justified in destroying the tablets. Rashi endorses this reasoning, just as Resh Lakish writes of Moses, "More power to you that you shattered them."⁶⁰⁷ But this reasoning by homology is criticized in the medieval *Tractate Tosafot*, which suggests that Moses should have taught the idolaters repentance, rather than simply depriving them of the original tablets.⁶⁰⁸ These opposing interpretations emphasize the worthiness of the people of Israel to receive the commandments, rather than focusing on Moses' impetuous decision to break a sacred object. This suggests the stone tablets themselves are incidental, the question is whether the people deserve to receive their message.

Before he descends Mount Sinai with the original tablets, God instructs Moses to place them in an ark built to precise specifications. While the second set of tablets are explicitly placed in the ark, the text does not elaborate on what becomes of the broken shards of the original tablets. After the original tablets are broken, they disappear from the text as if they no longer exist. By contrast, the narrative in Exodus is quite clear about what happened to the golden calf: it was ground into a powder and mixed with water, which the Israelites were forced to drink to atone.⁶⁰⁹ Despite the text's silence, it seems that the fate of the broken tablets would be of great significance, especially when compared to the handling of the golden calf. According to Jewish oral tradition, damaged sacred books are supposed to be buried in veneration, like dead bodies; if the broken tablets had been buried, it might explain why their fragments subsequently disappear from the

⁶⁰⁷ Tractate *Shabbat* 87a.

⁶⁰⁸ b. *Yevamot* 62a.

⁶⁰⁹ Ex 32:20.

biblical narrative. However, the Talmud suggests a different interpretation.⁶¹⁰ When God instructs Moses to carve a second set of tablets after he shatters the originals, in the Book of Deuteronomy he tells the prophet, “you will place *them* in the Ark,” which Rabbi Yosef interprets to mean that both the new tablets and the shattered original tablets are held in the ark of the covenant.⁶¹¹ The ambiguous pronoun “them” immediately follows the clause, “the first tablets that you broke,” which implies that when God asks Moses to place “them” in the ark, he is referring to both the old and the new tablets. This interpretation relies on an awkward grammatical claim, but it does resolve the fate of the broken tablets, and it is significant that the broken tablets would be preserved in the ark along with the replacements. Rabbi Yosef suggests the broken tablets are preserved with the new in the ark of the covenant because they are holy, which teaches that we should respect the old and sick who have forgotten their former learning, like the still holy shards of the tablets. This lesson implies deference before the broken tablets, as one should respect the elderly.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza takes note of a related textual lacuna in the Bible concerning the fate of the ark housing the tablets. “I find it strange that Scripture tells us nothing of what became of the Ark of the Covenant,” he writes in Chapter 18, “in spite of the fact that the Hebrews regarded nothing as more sacred or more worthy of reverence.”⁶¹² While he believes the ark was destroyed along with Solomon’s Temple, Spinoza considers this absence from the biblical text to be a noteworthy commentary on the sacredness of biblical scripture. He argues that scripture is sacred “as long as it moves men to devotion towards God”; if it ceases to inspire the love of God, “if it is utterly disregarded by them, as it was once by the Jews, it is nothing more than paper and ink, and their neglect renders it completely profane.” Words can be corrupted,

⁶¹⁰ *Bava Batra* 14b; *Menachot* 99a.

⁶¹¹ Deut 10:1-2.

⁶¹² Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 506.

misinterpreted, and twisted to suit particular ends; once the words of scripture fall into disrepute, they are no longer sacred, and the words of sacred texts are reduced to ordinary inscriptions on mere material. Spinoza crucially draws an analogy between the absence of the destruction of the ark and Moses' shattering the original tablets in Exodus. He writes, "when Moses broke the first tablets, he certainly did not in his anger cast from his hands and shatter the Word of God – this would be inconceivable of Moses and of the Word of God – but merely stones." Spinoza argues the original tablets were profaned by the transgression of the golden calf, rendering them mere stones, echoing Rashi's position in the *Tractate Shabbat*. Consequently, the tablets "were now without any sanctity whatever, the Jews having nullified that Covenant by worshipping the calf. And for the same reason the second tablets could not avoid destruction along with the Ark." He suggests there is nothing inherently holy about the material on which scripture is written.

Spinoza further questions whether there is anything particularly holy in the words of scripture. His deflationary account attempts to separate the narrative or storytelling function of scripture from any essentially rational argument underlying the biblical text. Spinoza insists on separating the letter from the spirit of God because nothing essential to God can be recovered from scriptures. "It is therefore not surprising that the original of Moses' writing, too, is no longer extant," he explains, "even the true original of God's Covenant, the most sacred of all things, could have completely perished."⁶¹³ Spinoza notes that the logical extension of this separation between the letter and spirit of God emerges in the Pauline epistles, citing 2. Corinthians, where the apostle describes faith as "written not with ink but with the Spirit of God, not on tablets of stone but on the fleshly tablets of the heart."⁶¹⁴ The absence of the ark's destruction, like the shattered tablets, reveal that the words of scripture are perfidious and inessential, subject to misinterpretation and

⁶¹³ Ibid, 506.

⁶¹⁴ 2. Cor. 3:3.

corruption. The essential belief, “love God above all, and one’s neighbor as oneself,” outlasts the written word, which is subject to profanation and bound to its eventual material destruction.⁶¹⁵ By taking the narrative of the Bible as mere rhetorical flourish, Spinoza’s rationalist interpretation is an affront to the hermeneutic tradition that views the Bible as an insuperably meaningful text. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza describes the Bible as a mere medium – and a highly problematic one at that – for its essential message concerning the love of God.

In the biblical commentary, whether Moses is justified in shattering the tablets depends if the holiness of the engraved commandments can be abrogated. However, to borrow Kafka’s formulation, “*Ich könnte mir einen anderen Mose denken*”: a wholly *different* Moses shatters the tablets as an intentional act of revolt against God’s law. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche emphasizes the rupture with the law, framing the broken tablets as a symbol for humanity’s overcoming of slave morality. As a foil to the traditional image of Moses the Legislator, Zarathustra casts aside the broken tablets of the old, slavish morality, and seeks to write a new set of laws based on higher values. In the third part of the book, Zarathustra returns to his cave upon the mountain after failing to impart to mankind his knowledge of the self-overcoming of man, determining that mankind is not yet ready for his message. The chapter “On Old and New Tablets” begins with Zarathustra’s lament for humanity’s lack of receptivity to his teachings: “Here I sit and wait, old broken tablets around me and also new tablets only partially written upon. When will my hour come? - the hour of my going down, going under [*Die Stunde meines Niederganges, Unterganges*]: for I want to return to mankind once more.”⁶¹⁶ Between freedom and commandment, the broken tablets symbolize the rupture with tradition, law, and the attempt to

⁶¹⁵ Baruch Spinoza, *TTP*, 508.

⁶¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Ed. Adrian del Car and Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 156.

begin anew, but also the freedom inaugurated by the second set of tablets, written by human hands. While Zarathustra is frequently depicted as a foil for Jesus, in this case Nietzsche's anti-hero invokes the symbolism of Moses the Legislator. Nietzsche's character restages Moses' descent from Sinai to deliver a message to the people, and like the biblical prophet, Zarathustra has broken the original tablets and returns to the mountain to hew a new set. In contrast to Moses' transcription of the new tablets, Zarathustra invert the ethical message of the original tablets of the law:

Look here, here is a new tablet, but where are my brothers to help me carry it to the valley and into hearts of flesh?

This is what my great love of the farthest demands: *do not spare your neighbor!* Human being is something that must be overcome.

There are manifold ways and means of overcoming: *you* see to it! But only a jester thinks: "human being can also be *leaped over.*"

Overcome yourself even in your neighbor; and you should not let anyone give you a right that you can rob for yourself!⁶¹⁷

Nietzsche's hero excoriates the old law of humanity as "an old delusion called good and evil," which preached a "sermon of death that pronounced holy what contradicted and contravened all life." In the most explicit sense, Zarathustra's new tablets invert the moral laws of the Decalogue: "This new tablet, my brothers, I place above you: become hard!"⁶¹⁸ "do not spare your neighbor,"⁶¹⁹ "Break, break me the good and the just."⁶²⁰ Nietzsche's trans-valuation of values is perfectly expressed by Moses' gesture of shattering the tablets. Even when new tablets are written, in another turn in the eternal recurrence, Zarathustra preaches, "Break, my brothers, break me this new tablet too!"⁶²¹ The shattered Tablets of the Law illustrate the self-overcoming of man. Certainly, Nietzsche's moral and hermeneutic register for Zarathustra's broken tablets diverge greatly from the interpretive techniques in the Talmud, but he views the tablets' destruction as

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, 159

⁶¹⁸ Ibid, 172.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid, 159.

⁶²⁰ Ibid, 171.

⁶²¹ Ibid, 165.

freeing humanity to write the new laws of the Overman. While Nietzsche has no interest in conserving the divine authority of God's commandments, Zarathustra's destruction of the tablets liberates humanity from the old laws of divine authority, and enables their self-overcoming.

The shattered tablets first appear in Derrida's work in reference to Zarathustra in the final passages of his 1963 essay "Force et Signification." He interprets Zarathustra's new tablets as fundamentally a question of alterity. Sitting alone in his cave on the mountain with partially written tablets, Zarathustra must go down, go under, and find companions with whom he can write new laws. Derrida explains in the closing pages of "Force and Signification":

It will be necessary to descend, to work, to bend in order to engrave and carry the new Tables to the valleys, in order to read them and have them read. Writing is the outlet as the descent of meaning outside itself within itself: metaphor- for-others-aimed-at-others-here-and-now, metaphor as the possibility of others here-and-now, metaphor as metaphysics in which Being must hide itself if the other is to appear. Excavation within the other toward the other in which the same seeks its vein and the true gold of its phenomenon. Submission in which the same can always lose (itself). *Niedergang, Untergang*.⁶²²

Derrida frames Zarathustra's going down into the valley to find companions as the question of writing confronted by the crucible of alterity: "Writing is the moment of this original Valley of the other within Being. The moment of depth as decay. Incidence and insistence of inscription." Writing is the descent from the mountain into the valley, where one steps beyond the self and encounters others. Zarathustra poses the crucial question of the new and broken tablets when he asks, "where are my brothers to help me carry it to the valley and into hearts of flesh?" Derrida cites these words to close his essay. Hammerschlag explains that in Derrida's interpretation, "what is emphasized thus in Zarathustra's legacy is not the overcoming of Christianity, the announcement of the overman, but rather Nietzsche's use of equivocity, his emphasis on it as a means of pointing to the metaphoricity of the discourse."⁶²³ Derrida notes the duplicity in the use of descent in

⁶²² Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, 35 [49].

⁶²³ Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 88.

Zarathustra's *Niederganges, Unterganges* as akin to the duplicity of reading and interpreting. Zarathustra's iconoclasm in his cave is therefore belied by his need to "go down," "go under," and submit himself to "the work and the peril of inter-rogation."⁶²⁴ In a strikingly similar formulation, Jabès writes in the second volume of *Le Livre des Question*, "My questions are the mountain tops of the book. At night, I must climb down to the valley [*Mes interrogations sont les cimes du livre. Il me faut descendre, le soir, dans la vallée*]."⁶²⁵ The encounter with others is like the practices of reading and interpreting: it is not bound by the absolute rules inscribed on the tablets of the law, rather as Derrida explains it remains the moment of "depth as decay." Writing occurs in the interim between the old and the new tablets, between the shattered originals and their re-inscription.

Emmanuel Levinas' *Difficile Liberté* opens with an epigraph from the Talmudic debates over the two sets of tablets. Levinas cites the Talmudic *Tractate of Principles* which proclaims, "Freedom on tablets of stone."⁶²⁶ The citation refers to a Talmudic commentary on Exodus 32.16 which describes the original tablets: "And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables." "Why does it say 'engraved'?" Rabbi Eliezer explains, "had the first tablets, the subject of this verse, not been broken, the Torah would never have been forgotten from the Jewish people, as the Torah would have been engraved upon their hearts." However, as Rav Aha bar Ya'akov argues, "Had the tablets not been broken, no nation or tongue would ever have ruled over them, as it is stated: 'Engraved,' do not read it engraved [*harut*] but rather freedom [*heirut*]."⁶²⁷ Playing off the proximity of *harut* and *heirut*, Levinas hearkens the rabbinic principle that there is freedom to be found in adherence to the law, just as for Levinas the responsibility for the other is binding, but it is also what give rise to my own freedom. The tablets

⁶²⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, 35 [49].

⁶²⁵ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 301 [333].

⁶²⁶ *Tractate of Principles*, 6:2

⁶²⁷ *B'Eruvin* 54a

are a dialectical image of commandment and freedom, whether like Zarathustra we insist on the inherent contradiction between commandment and freedom, or like Rav Aha bar Ya'akov that there is a contingency of commandment and freedom which are mutually enabling. This is the essential question played out by Jabès and Derrida concerning the Jew's relation to writing.

IV. *The Book of Questions* and the Writing of Absence

“You are the one who writes and the one who is written [*Tu es celui qui écrit et qui est écrit*],”⁶²⁸ announces the opening page of *The Book of Questions*. For Jabès, the writer is the subject of the book, and reflexively the book is the subject of the writer, both creator and creation. “To be in the book [*Être dans le livre*]” is to declare “The book is my world, my country, my room, and my riddle. [*Le livre est mon univers, mon pays, mon toit et mon énigme*].”⁶²⁹ For Jabès, literary creation does not stand apart from the world to offer a mere representation of lived experience, rather lived experience is itself part of a textual world: the book is of the world, and reciprocally the world is of the book. Inverting the “realist” book, in which the book offers a representation of the real world, Jabès begins from the premise that the very existence of the world and even God is contingent on the book: “If God is, it is because He is in the book [*Si Dieu est, c'est parce qu'Il est dans le livre*],” and further “the world exists because the book does [*Le monde existe parce que le livre existe*].” Jabès' world is an endless unveiling of books, books inside of books, texts about texts, and the endless proliferation of writing. Jabès writes in the third volume *Return to the Book*, “the book is a labyrinth. You think you are leaving and only get in deeper. You have no chance of

⁶²⁸ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 11 [12].

⁶²⁹ Ibid, 31 [36-37].

running off [*Le livre est le labyrinthe. Tu crois en sortir, tu t'y enfonces*].”⁶³⁰ For Jabès there is no stepping out of the world of books, his literary universe is an infinite series of books within books—the inversion of the metaphor of *liber mundi*. For Jabès, the world exists because it is in a book: “*A book without room for the world would be no book. It would lack the most beautiful pages, those on the left, in which even the smallest pebble is reflected* [Un livre dans lequel l’univers n’aurait pas sa place n’en serait pas un; car il serait un livre auquel il manquerait les plus belles pages, celles de gauche dans lesquelles se mire jusqu’au plus obscure caillou].”⁶³¹ Writing is the process by which the reflexive relationship between the poet and the book is articulated, and the book is the expression of the unfolding tussle between writer and book.

In a rare moment of synopsis early in *The Book of Questions*, Jabès offers this explanation of his puzzling book: “the story of Sarah and Yukel is the account, through various dialogues and meditations attributed to imaginary rabbis, of a love destroyed by men and by words. It has the dimensions of the book and the bitter stubbornness of a wandering question [*Le roman de Sarah et de Yukel, à travers divers dialogues et méditations attribués à des rabbins imaginaires, est le récit d’un amour détruit par les hommes et par les mots. Il a la dimension du livre et l’âpre obstination d’une question errante*].”⁶³² This is perhaps the most cogent declaration of the plot of *The Book of Questions*, whose exposition is fragmented and sometimes indecipherable, and whose narrative often unfolds in the margins of expression, in the words that are left unsaid, in forays into the language of the unspeakable. Jabès recounts a story that cannot be contained to the confines of ordinary language or simple expository narrative. *The Book of Questions* is about its characters Yukel Serafi and Sarah Schwall as much as it is a book about books themselves, their

⁶³⁰ Ibid, 367 [404].

⁶³¹ Ibid, 67 [75].

⁶³² Ibid, 26 [30].

creation, their inspiration, and their destruction. These two dimensions course through Jabès' text as its double metaphorical register. Dider Cahen writes, "with the book, with and against its tradition, with words, with and against the silences they contain, with our culture, with and against the use that we can make of it, Jabès intends to differentiate the reactive attitude which consists in bearing in mind, and the questioning, liberating, and mobilizing conduct which consists in memory."⁶³³ Abandoning traditional narrative form, Jabès' writing is a polyphonic assemblage of stories, written in a singular fragmented style that shift from dialogue between named or unnamed characters, to pages of invented rabbinic proverbs and midrash, as well as prose, letters, as well as free poetic verse. Paul Auster elaborates, "Neither novel nor poem, neither essay nor play, *The Book of Questions* is a combination of all these forms, a mosaic of fragments, aphorisms, dialogues, songs, and commentaries that endlessly move around the central question of the book: how to speak what cannot be spoken."⁶³⁴ The long arc of the seven volumes of Jabès' cycle passes from the tragic love story of Sarah and Yukel amidst the catastrophe of the Shoah, to Yukel's suicide and Sarah's madness, to the eponymous Yaël who is possibly murdered by her husband, to her stillborn child Elya, to Aely, all of whom are different tessellations of God, *El* in Hebrew, who meets a cataclysmic end in the final volume *El, or the Last Book*. But, in a sense, a plot synopsis of *The Book of Questions* is beside the point: the dizzying style of Jabès' writing is itself implicated in the story. "Fragments from Yukel and Sarah's journals, parts of dialogues, snippets of dreams and tales, songs, poems, etc," Cahen writes, "just as words are meaningful through the silences they uncover, it is trained silences that allow the reader to compose the story!"⁶³⁵ The force of Jabès' writing lies both with the words on the page and those left absent, and its plot is

⁶³³ Dider Cahen, *Portrait(s)*, 53.

⁶³⁴ Paul Auster, "Book of the Dead," 367.

⁶³⁵ Didier Cahen, *A livre ouvert*, 111.

constructed not merely from the divagations of its characters, but through the expression of its fractured language itself. *The Book of Questions* is sustained by the negativity of what it does not – or cannot – say. Auster continues, “Because the story of Sarah and Yukel is not fully told, because, as Jabès implies, it *cannot* be told, the commentaries are in some sense an investigation of a text that has not been written. Like the hidden God of classic Jewish theology, the text exists only by virtue of its absence.”⁶³⁶ In Jabès’ writing, the play of absence and presence in the language of the book intersects with the presence and absence of God.

The seven volumes of the cycle of *The Book of Questions* symbolically correspond to the seven days of God’s creation, but Jabès’ books are also a tale of destruction and death. As Jabès writes in the sixth volume entitled *Aely*, “Death is an accomplice of creation. Death is the absent place where the book waits for its fulfillment [*La mort est complice de la création. La mort est le lieu absent où se tient, pour son accomplissement, le livre*].”⁶³⁷ The dual aspects of creation and destruction, life and death, are simultaneously present in Jabès’ tragic characters. “I have erased, in my books, the borderline of life and death [*J’ai aboli, dans mes livres, les frontières de la vie et de la mort*],”⁶³⁸ he writes in the first volume. In a broken dialectic of creation and destruction, Jabès’ characters exist in the indeterminate space between reality and fiction, life and death. Jabès writes in the seventh volume, *El, or the Last Book* on the relation of death and the word, “Deprived of the air of its *r*, *la mort* death, dies asphyxiation in the word, *le mot* [*privé d’R, la mort meurt d’asphyxie dans le mot*].”⁶³⁹ Jabès connects the order of words to that of life—almost like the *golem* of Ashkenazic folklore, a figure of inert matter which is brought to life with the inscription on its forehead of the Hebrew word *emet*, truth, and which is returned to clay by effacing its first

⁶³⁶ Paul Auster, “Book of the Dead,” 369.

⁶³⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* Tome 2, 286 [396].

⁶³⁸ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* Tome 1, 58 [65].

⁶³⁹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* Tome 2, 371 [497].

letter to reveal *met*, death. Further, when God creates the first human being in the Book of Genesis, he brings *Adam* to life from the earth, *adama*. In the Talmud, the first hour of Adam's existence is his shaping out of inert matter, but "in the second [hour], he became a Golem," before he is given a soul, *nefesh*.⁶⁴⁰ Jabès' writing explores this same imbrication of embodiment, life, and text.

Jabès' characters are connected by name, but also in language; they all exist in the indeterminacy between life and death, as much as reality and fiction. His fiction weaves between the fictional characters of *The Book of Questions* and the reflections of his memory and experience. Jabès told Marcel Cohen, perhaps to the surprise of new readers of his vertiginous writing, "there is always a direct relationship between my life and my writing. I can say, today, that all my books are autobiographical."⁶⁴¹ But Jabès' characters are not mere representations or facsimiles of himself and Arlette, they are no more real than the imaginary rabbis whose sage words he "quotes." Didier Cahen recalls that Jabès loved to repeat the slogan, "only the reader is real."⁶⁴² Personal, historical, and biblical narratives are woven together in Jabès' captivating and singular style, and shattered in the fragmented narrative that grasps at the fleeting memory of love and loss in a time of catastrophe. *The Book of Questions* abolishes the line between the presumed reality of the world and the fiction of the book, and its characters are neither real nor fictional. Jabès writes in the fourth volume *Yaël*, "Thus the book is first read outside its limits [*Ainsi le livre se lit d'abord hors de ses limites*]."⁶⁴³ His book "infinitely reflects itself," articulating the limits of the creative possibility of writing, it is "a painful questioning of its own possibility" as a book, but Jabès' book is also a cipher for another question: "the generation of God himself."⁶⁴⁴ *The Book of Questions* is

⁶⁴⁰ *Sanhedrin*, 38b. See: Gershom Scholem, "The Idea of the Golem," *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Schocken, 1965), 161.

⁶⁴¹ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au livre*, 26.

⁶⁴² Didier Cahen, *A livre ouvert*, 113.

⁶⁴³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* Tome 2, 7 [13].

⁶⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," *Writing and Difference*, 79 [101].

the negative image of the Book of Books, it is the fracturing of the Book of Books as broken tablets, as the torn manuscript, or as the shattered trace of the Hegelian absolute book.

The first volume of *The Book of Questions* was published by Gallimard in February 1963. It first received media attention in April when Jabès was featured in an interview in *L'Express* with Madeleine Chapsal.⁶⁴⁵ Derrida recalled first encountering Jabès' book in a suburban newsstand in the spring of 1963; drawn to the book, he purchased it with no knowledge of its author or content. He was immediately enraptured by its scintillating prose, and by the fall he was submitting his essay on *The Book of Questions* for publication. "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," was ultimately published in January 1964 by the journal *Critique*, one of the first contributions to the critical and philosophical reception of Jabès' work. Derrida's article on *The Book of Questions* was followed by Maurice Blanchot's "Interruption," published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in May 1964, and Gabriel Bounoure's essays "Edmond Jabès, the Home and the Book" in the *Mercure de France* in January 1965 and "Edmond Jabès or Healing by the Book" in *Les Lettres nouvelles* in July 1966.⁶⁴⁶ The second and third volumes of Jabès' *Book of Questions*, *The Book of Yukel* and *The Return to the Book*, followed in 1964 and 1965. While Jabès' writing remained firmly ensconced in the avant-garde intelligentsia of the Parisian Left Bank, his work also drew the interest of some popular outlets. In features on Jabès in *Le Figaro* in November 1965 and January 1966 following publication of the first three volumes of *The Book of Questions*, Claude Mauriac hailed the "discovery of an *œuvre*."⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁵ Madeleine Chapsal, "Entretien avec Edmond Jabès," *L'Express*, 18 April 1963. See : Didier Cahen, "Ecrire sa vie" *Portrait(s) d'Edmond Jabès*, 45.

⁶⁴⁶ Gabriel Bounoure, "Edmond Jabès, la demeure et le livre," *Mercure de France* (January, 1965), 114-123; "Edmond Jabès ou la guérison par le livre," *Les Lettres nouvelles*, (July 1966), 98-116; Maurice Blanchot, "L'interruption" (*Nouvelle Revue Française*, n°137, 1964), 869-881. Blanchot's article itself was interrupted, split in half, with the first part republished in his 1969 *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993) and its second part reproduced in *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁴⁷ Claude Mauriac, "Le tourment d'une antique parole," *Le Figaro*, 29 novembre, 1965; "Découverte d'une œuvre," *Le Figaro*, 3 January, 1966. See: Cahen "Ecrire sa vie," 46-48.

Jabès wrote to Derrida on October 4, 1963, after hearing of the young philosopher's impending essay. His letter mentions that he enjoyed Derrida's essay "Force and Signification," and requests to read what he had written on *The Book of Questions*. In response, Derrida expresses the difficulty of writing a commentary he deemed worthy of Jabès' book:

*Any critical commentary can, already, only show itself infinitely unequal to your book. What to say about the ten or so pages in which I had to reintroduce this essay, and where all its limits, which aren't only material, attest even more to this necessary inequality? To seek forgiveness, I can only invoke my admiration, my immense admiration for *The Book of Questions*, and a certain duty I feel to say it. Even poorly and briefly.*⁶⁴⁸

Despite his humility, his essay demonstrates tremendous insight into Jabès' writing. "C'est de l'excellent," Jabès wrote Derrida after reading the essay. Lauding his almost premonitory understanding of *The Book of Questions*, Jabès reported, "you open paths which I have not visited, where I do not know in advance where they might lead me. In reading you, I find these paths traced so well that it is as though I have always known your book."⁶⁴⁹ They met in person several times during the fall of 1963, immediately sparking a dialogue that would continue in friendship for three decades. On only their second meeting, Jabès showed Derrida his letters from Max Jacob. In a December 1963 letter, Derrida wrote he was "touched by what you allowed me to see from your past, with the 'traces of ink' that you showed me."⁶⁵⁰ He describes Jacob's letters as "beautiful and strange," "profound, worrying," while he also reflects on "his itinerary at once cowardly, disordered, undone, and courageous, determined, heroic everywhere." Derrida's appreciation for these "traces of ink" echoes Jabès' own formative encounters with Max Jacob.

"Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" is unlike any other text by Derrida. Rather than reading the central problematic of the text against the grain to displace its presumed meaning,

⁶⁴⁸ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Edmond Jabès, 5 Oct 1963, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁶⁴⁹ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 10 Oct 1963, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁶⁵⁰ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Edmond Jabès, 2 December 1963, Fond Jabès, BNF.

as he had done in his early texts on Rousset, Husserl, and Levi-Strauss, Derrida's essay on *Le Livre des Questions* wrestles with Jabès' words as if they in dialogue. He generously quotes Jabès text as he teases out an interpretation of its imaginary rabbis and fictional authors. Just as the title of Derrida's essay, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," is in a sense the mirror image of *The Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès, it is often difficult to distinguish the line between Jabès' original words and Derrida's interpretation—an ambiguity that Derrida exaggerated by leaving out citations for the many quotes from Jabès' text. Benoit Peeters describes, "quoting Jabès at length, slipping in between his sentences so as to draw them out, the text rests on a form of empathy."⁶⁵¹ Derrida's commentary draws from the book's narrative development, working through its crucial metaphors, but he never strays from the vertiginous logic of Jabès' text. Derrida offers a reading of Jabès' book that resembles a *melitzah*, a medieval form of Jewish poetry in which fragments of biblical and Talmudic quotations are reassembled in a new context as in collage or mosaic to create a new meaning. Of course, he is not citing actual verse nor real rabbinic interpretation, but Jabès' text and his universe of imaginary rabbis. Derrida's text resembles a Talmudic commentary, including dissonant voices and unresolved questions in its construction. He wrestles with Jabès' book, challenging and questioning its logic; at times, his efforts to manipulate the text are rebuffed, overtaken by Jabès' writing. After reading his article in *Critique*, Jabès wrote Derrida to laud his empathetic reading of *The Book of Questions*. "You are constantly at the sources of this book and its interrogations," Jabès wrote Derrida in February 1964, "What lucidity throughout. A great joy for me which I owe to you. From now on, those who have read you will know how to read me in depth."⁶⁵² Derrida's essay demonstrated almost uncanny insight into Jabès' labyrinthine text.

⁶⁵¹ Benoit Peeters, *Derrida*, 135.

⁶⁵² Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 13 Feb 1964, Fond Jabès, IMEC.

V. Writing and the Broken Tablets

“Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book” identifies the crucial connection in *The Book of Questions* between writing and the Jewish people, which Jabès calls the “race born of the book [race issue du livre].”⁶⁵³ For Derrida, Jabès’ book pertains to “a certain Judaism as the birth and passion of writing.”⁶⁵⁴ The metaphors of writing and the figure of the Jew are so thoroughly enmeshed in *Le Livre des Questions* that one cannot discern whether its subject is “the Jew or the Letter itself.” These metaphors take on an outsized role in Jabès’ text, where writing and the Jew are intimately related. Jabès describes the “difficulty of of being Jewish, which is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out [difficulté d’être Juif, qui se confound avec la difficulté d’écrire; car le judaïsme et l’écriture ne sont qu’une même attente, un même espoir, une même usure].”⁶⁵⁵ The parallel between the Jew and the poet becomes the central question in the essay. Born of the book, the Jewish people stands in a peculiar relation to history. The people of the book are attached not only to history, but also to its inscription and memorialization in the book. “The only thing that begins by reflecting itself is history,” Derrida writes, “And this fold, this furrow, is the Jew.”⁶⁵⁶ The Jew is grafted onto history itself according to the logic of supplementarity. The book is external to the movement of history, but the memorialization of history is contingent to the book; born of the book, the Jew is the “fold” of history which is bound to the letter.

⁶⁵³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 25 [30].

⁶⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 77 [99].

⁶⁵⁵ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 122 [136].

⁶⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 78

Blanchot emphasizes the rupture between the Jew and history in his essay on *The Book of Questions*. The book's "very title speaks of its insecurity, its painful force," both in its poetic fragmentation, but also in the rupture of history embodied by the Jew:

A rupture suffered in history, where catastrophe still speaks, and where the infinite violence of pain is always near : the rupture of the violent power that has tried to make and mark an entire era. Then, the other, the original rupture, which is anterior to history, and which is not suffered but required, and which, expressing distance in regard to every power, delimits the interval where Judaism introduces its own affirmation.⁶⁵⁷

The Jew is born from the rupture of history, and *The Book of Questions* is therefore always written twice: both as history and as the writing of history. Blanchot describes, "the book that interrogates the movement of the rupture," as well as "the book in which 'the virile word of the renewed history of a people folded on itself' is designated." In his writing, Jabès sustains this double movement, "supports without unifying it, or even being able to reconcile it."⁶⁵⁸ The rupture at the heart of *The Book of Questions* is embodied by the Jew.

The rupture in Jabès' text poses the question of the relation between the poet and the Jew. *The Book of Questions* advances by means of its endless folds, its repeated prefaces and avant-propos in chapters entitled "Dedication," "At the threshold of the Book," "And You Shall Be in the Book," which are further divided by many numbered sections. The constant folding and unfolding in Jabès' book echoes the fractured subjectivity of the Jew and the poet, whose existence Derrida characterizes as the fold of history. The writer creates the book just as the book creates the writer. Derrida writes, "This movement through which the book, articulated by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history."⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg and Paul Auster, (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1997), 223

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid, 223-224.

⁶⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," 79 [100-101].

The Jew and the poet represent the fractured subject of history, where “the subject is shattered and opened,” folded upon itself, where “writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation.” The dual aspect of writing as both creation and destruction reflects the writer, the Jew or the poet, whose fractured subjectivity is expressed in the fragmentation of the book. Didier Cahen writes “Jew *and* Poet, carrying in his flesh the tear of man [*la déchirure de l’homme*], EJ [Edmond Jabès] is an other – an other *JE*, without being. [*EJ est un autre – un autre JE sans l’être*].”⁶⁶⁰ The alterity contained within this fractured identity, both self and other, is expressed in the book as the site of creation and destruction. The broken tablets are the crucial motif for this ambivalence in *The Book of Questions*.

For Jabès, the broken tablets unmistakably hearken Max Jacob and the torn manuscript. The writer is torn between creation and destruction, but also between adherence to law and freedom. Derrida writes, “The wisdom of the poet thus culminates its freedom in the passion of translating obedience to the law of the word into autonomy [*traduire en autonomie l’obéissance à la loi du mot*].”⁶⁶¹ The irreducible tension for the writer between adherence and revolt is, in a sense, a question of theodicy: can the Jew follow the law, but out of freedom? Reframed in different terms we might ask, can the Book of Books coexist with *The Book of Questions*? The subjectivity of the Jew is split between freedom and the adherence to law. In the chapter entitled “The Book of the Absent,” Jabès sketches an invented debate between fictional rabbis, who debate whether freedom is found in its rootedness, *enracinement*, or its uprootedness, *déracinement* in the law:

(“If freedom has wings,” taught Rab Idrash, “it also has eyes, a forehead, genitals. Each time it takes wing, it transfigures a bit of both the world and man in the excitement of its flowering.”

And Reb Lima: “In the beginning, freedom was ten times engraved on the tables of the law. But we so little deserved it that the prophet broke them in his anger.”

⁶⁶⁰ Didier Cahen, *A livre ouvert* (Paris: Hermann, 2013) 137.

⁶⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 79 [101].

“Any coercion is a ferment of freedom,” Reb Idrash taught further. “How can you hope to be free if you are not bound with all your blood to your God and to man?”
 And Reb Lima: “Freedom awakens gradually as we become conscious of our ties, like the sleeper of his senses. Then, finally, our actions have a name.”
 A teacher which Reb Zalé translated into this image: “you think it is the bird which is free. Wrong: it is the flower.”
 And Reb Elata into this motto: “Love your ties to their last splendor, and you will be free.”)

(« Si la liberté a des ailes, enseignait Reb Idrash, elle a, aussi, des yeux, un front et un sexe. Ainsi, à chaque envol, c’est une parcelle partagée du monde et de l’homme qu’elle transfigure dans l’ivresse de son épanouissement »
 Et Reb Lima : « La liberté fut, à l’origine, gravée dix fois dans les tables de la Loi, mais nous la méritons si peu que le Prophète les brisa dans sa colère »
 « Toute contrainte est un ferment de liberté, enseignait encore Reb Idrash. Comment peux-tu espérer être libre si tu n’es pas *lié* de ton sang à ton Dieu et à l’homme ?
 Et Reb Lima: « La liberté s’éveille petit à petit, à mesure que nous prenons conscience de nos liens comme le dormeur de ses sens ; alors nos actes ont enfin un nom. »
 Enseignement que Reb Zalé traduisit par cette image: « Tu crois que c’est l’oiseau qui est libre. Tu te trompes; c’est la fleur»
 Et Reb Elat par ce blazon: « Aime ton lien jusqu’à son extrême lueur et tu seras libre. »)⁶⁶²

Derrida reconstructs Jabès’ invented debate by identifying two crucial themes for the Jew and the Poet. First, the rabbis debate the *place, lieu*, of freedom, where the Jew and the Poet are alike. The teachings of Reb Lima and Reb Zalé suggest, Derrida writes, “freedom must belong to the earth, or it is merely wind.”⁶⁶³ The rootedness, *enracinement*, of freedom in the world is an essential question for writing. If according to Reb Zalé freedom is rooted like a flower rather than winged like a bird, how can the Jewish people be free in exile without a “place” of their own? For “cette race issue du livre,” the “place” of writing is not in fact a geographical location:

When a Jew or a poet proclaims the Site, he is not declaring war. For this site, this land, calling to us from beyond memory, is always elsewhere. The site is not the empirical and national Here of a territory. It is immemorial, and thus also a future. Better: it is tradition as adventure. [*la tradition comme aventure*].

The place of writing for the Jew is not rooted “here,” “ici,” in the “Blut und Boden” that ties a nation of people to the earth of a sacred homeland. Rather, the Jew is always “there,” “là-bas,” in

⁶⁶² Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 115 [128].

⁶⁶³ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 80 [101].

a condition of exile from its geographical place, but historically rooted by tradition to a world to come. Without a national home, Jewish existence in diaspora finds its roots in “tradition as adventure.” “The Poet and the Jew are not born here but elsewhere. They wander, separated from their true birth,” Derrida writes, “‘Race born of the book’ because sons of the Land to come.”⁶⁶⁴ The Jew, like the poet, does not find a place for writing in the world of “here and now,” except in the flux of time, in exile, in the book. “The Jews fatherland is a sacred text amid the commentaries it has given rise to [*La patrie des Juifs est un texte sacré au milieu des commentaires qu’il a suscités*],” writes Jabès, “Hence, every Jew is in the Law. Hence, every Jew makes the Law. Hence, the Law is Jewish [*Ainsi chaque Juif est dans la Loi. Ainsi chaque Juif fait la Loi. Ainsi la Loi est juive*].”⁶⁶⁵ The fractured tablets represent the rupture with a homeland: the Jew takes refuge in the book, a home in the adventure of history, rather than a geographical location. Blanchot reads Jabès’ line concerning the importance of commentary in terms of “the dignity and importance of exegesis in the rabbinic tradition” where “the written law, the unoriginal text of the origin, must always be taken on by the commenting voice—reaffirmed by the oral commentary, which does not come after it, but is contemporary to it—taken on, but unjoined, in this dis-junction that is the measure of its infinity.”⁶⁶⁶ Referencing the distinction between the Oral Torah, *Torah shebe ’al-peh*, and the Written Torah, *Torah she-bi-khtav*, whose disagreements and disputes nourish textual debate, Blanchot cites Levinas from *Difficult Freedom*: “The oral law is eternally contemporaneous to the written. Between them there exists a relationship whose intellection is the very atmosphere of Judaism. The one neither maintains nor destroys the other—but makes it practical and readable.”⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid, 80 [102]

⁶⁶⁵ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 101 [113].

⁶⁶⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1997), 224.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, 304 n5.

The linkage of exile and commentary makes questioning an expression of dis-placement and dis-propriation. Blanchot explains the rupture of the Jew contests and interrupts the book:

By the arduous and scathing experience that Judaism carries with it—a shattering that continually rises, not only up to the Tables of the Law but on this side of creation (the breaking of the Vessels) and up to loftiness itself; by a tradition of exegesis that does not worship signs but that sets itself up in the gaps they indicate—the man of words, the poet, feels involved, confirmed, but also contested, and in his turn, contesting. We can do nothing concerning his inter-ruption.⁶⁶⁸

Blanchot connects the rupture of the Jew to the shattered tablets and practices of commentary and interpretation. The interruption of language reveals up gaps, ruptures, and breaks in its fabric.

The broken tablets illustrate the poet's freedom to create. In response to Jabès' invented debate, Derrida writes, "Poetic autonomy, comparable to none other, presupposes broken Tables [*L'autonomie poétique, à nulle autre semblable, suppose les Tables brises*]."⁶⁶⁹ He cites Jabès' fictional Reb Lima, who writes, "*Freedom, at first, was engraved ten times in the Tables of the Law, but we deserve it so little that the Prophet broke them in his anger* [*La liberté fut, à l'origine, gravée dix fois dans les tables de la Loi, mais nous la méritons si peu que le Prophète les brisa dans sa colère*]."⁶⁷⁰ The broken tablets represent the irreducibility of commentary and interpretation, which is shared by the poet and the Jew:

Between the fragments of the broken Tables the poem grows and the right to speech takes root. Once more begins the adventure of the text as weed, as outlaw [*Recommence l'aventure du texte comme mauvaise herbe, hors la Loi*] far from "the fatherland of the Jews," which is a "sacred text surrounded by commentaries." The necessity of commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of exiled speech. In the beginning is hermeneutics.⁶⁷¹

For both the Jew and the poet, the need for commentary is the expression of exiled language.

Nonetheless, despite their shared condition of exile, the modes of writing proper to the Jew and

⁶⁶⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, 225.

⁶⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," 81 [102].

⁶⁷⁰ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 115 [128].

⁶⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," 81 [102].

the poet ultimately cannot be assimilated. The limit separating the poet from the Jew stems from the source of their poetic visions: the poet can only aspire to create a facsimile or representation of the Jew's divine source of inspiration. The poet and the Jew are "forever unable to reunite with each other, yet so close to each other," they are ultimately irreconcilable in their relation to the trace of divine authority of the text. "There will always be rabbis and poets," Derrida writes, "And two interpretations of interpretation."⁶⁷² The two interpretations of interpretation for the Jew and the poet are both irreconcilable and irreducible. The broken tablets of the law become the site for the contest of interpretations and commentaries, where the book of humanity transforms into a book of questions. This pregnant image contains both the fragments of God's commandment, but also the violence of its overthrow and destruction. "The breaking of the Tables articulates, first of all, a rupture within God as the origin of history," Derrida writes. The symbolic importance of this episode gives birth to autochthonous human history free from God's interventions: the shattered tablets represent human freedom to question even God. Jabès' Reb Armel writes, "*Do not ever forget that you are the kernel of a severance* [N'oublie pas que tu es le noyau d'une rupture]."⁶⁷³ The broken tablets illustrates the Jew's fractured subjectivity, bound between the fragments of the law and the freedom to rebel against them.

Following these initial meetings in the fall of 1963, Derrida and Jabès and their wives became acquainted as friends. Edmond and Arlette would host Jacques and Marguerite for lunches and dinners at their apartment on the rue de l'Épée-du-bois, and they continued to discuss their latest texts in letters, postcards phone calls, and impromptu meetings in Paris. They exchanged letters of condolence after the death of Jabès' mother in 1965 and Derrida's father in 1970, and their correspondences share details of their families and mutual friends. Derrida later recalled, "we

⁶⁷² Ibid, 81 [102-103].

⁶⁷³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 126 [141].

were neighbors, between the rue de l'Épée-de-bois and the rue d'Ulm,"⁶⁷⁴ and Jabès would host him and other colleagues for aperitifs after work in his Latin Quarter apartment, mere steps from the Ecole Normale Supérieure. It was through these informal meetings in Jabès' apartment that Derrida crossed paths with other intellectuals, "on one occasion with Celan, on another with Gabriel Bounoure (a great friendship for which I have Edmond Jabès to thank)." Indeed, Bounoure was a pivotal figure in 20th century French literary production, even if his behind-the-scenes role is largely forgotten today, and his exchanges with Jabès and Derrida were crucial early in their development as writers. Gabriel Bounoure was born in Brittany in 1886; *normalien* and *résistant*, he was the chief poetry critic for the *Nouvelle Revue Française* [N.R.F.], and he played a decisive role in elevating French writers including Max Jacob, Pierre Jean Jouve, Henri Michaux, and Pierre Reverdy. He taught in universities in Rabat and Cairo, and he was an important voice in dialogues between writers of the Arab and Western worlds. Through his involvement with francophone writers around the Mediterranean, Bounoure played a crucial part in popularizing Lebanese writer and playwright Georges Schehadé as well as Edmond Jabès. He published one book in his lifetime, the experimental novel *Marcelles sur le parvis, Hopscotch on the Square*, though his numerous essays and reviews of contemporary French literature and poetry made him, according to Peeters, "the most influential poetry critic of his time."⁶⁷⁵ Bounoure befriended Jabès in Egypt, and wrote the preface for *Je bâtis ma demeure*, a book which Jabès said was written "under his gaze."

After Jabès sent him Derrida's unpublished essay on the *Book of Questions*, Bounoure wrote Derrida a stunning letter in January 1964, which Derrida read with "grande joie et un grand

⁶⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Letter to Didier Cahen," *The Work of Mourning*, 122-123.

⁶⁷⁵ Benoit Peeters, *Derrida*, 136.

encouragement.”⁶⁷⁶ The letter highlights the importance of the theme of “la rupture juive” in *the Book of Questions*, connecting the image of the broken tablets with the theme of exile:

This penetrating analysis shines a clear light on the confounding richness of the work – a richness conquered by way of destitution [*dénuement*] and silence. Here, there is a perpetual oscillation between All and Nothing which scans the movement of a consciousness that lives, as if for another, the ambiguities of poetry and its language. A quest which demands the most destitute, most excluded, most exiled man. But by his misfortune and his wandering, by the privilege of his disproportionate suffering, the Jew obtains the quality of man *par excellence*, the exemplary man. More than any other, this quality belongs to Edmond Jabès, having taken as far as possible Jewish ruptures = rupture with his community, rupture with the synagogue, rupture with the Hebrew language, rupture with the Law. Without a doubt, Edmond Jabès needed this excess of desert solitude, this extreme condition, for Canaan to appear on the horizon as a freedom which multiplies the passionate, obsidianal interrogations of God. Like the winds of sand which bring the negativity of the secret to the houses of Cairo.⁶⁷⁷

Beyond the “confounding richness” of Jabès’ writing, swinging between existential categories of being and nothingness, life and death, speech and silence, Bounoure identifies the importance of rupture. Beginning with the broken tablets of the law, but also in the rupture or break with a national home, language, community, and even a break in the adherence to the law, it is the quality of rupture that marks the exemplarity of the Jew as a form of consciousness, and as a figure of writing. Jabès confirmed in a letter to Derrida, “what he said about *rupture* through experience is, for me, essential.”⁶⁷⁸ This rupture is symbolized in the broken tablets, but it is repeated in the ruptures of the Jewish people with a national home, language, or with adherence to the law. This is the double consciousness of the Jew, torn between rabbi and poet. Bounoure describes the freedom in Jabès’ writing to relentlessly question and interrogate, “like the sandstorms which bring into the houses of Cairo the negativity of the secret.” Like the sandstorm which exposes the cracks in the wall, Jabès’ writing carries in a kind of negativity that reveals the glimmer of freedom

⁶⁷⁶ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Edmond Jabès, 6 Feb 1964, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁶⁷⁷ Letter from Gabriel Bounoure to Jacques Derrida, 2 Jan 1964, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁶⁷⁸ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 8 Feb 1964, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

through the limits of the book. For Bounoure, Jabès' incessant questioning is split between a call for divine justice and a poetry of negativity, which takes the form of the two faces of the book:

A foreigner everywhere, like in the past the cynic in the cities of handsome aristocrats [...] questions surge from two opposing sides, provoked as much by the universal demand for justice, as by the fate of nothingness and the pain imposed on individual existences. Before the God of the Covenant, the lives of Sarah and Yukel, "these two echoes of flesh" force a cry which accompanies questioning reason, but the cries, the fatal particularities of human existences thrown into suffering and ended by death, are lost in the unfathomable refusal of silence. Where to go? To the past of the old covenant or towards a new promise which would be contained in the Book to come?⁶⁷⁹

In the tragic story of Yukel and Sarah, Jabès confronts the senselessness of human suffering with unending interrogation. For Derrida and Jabès, the fractured subjectivity of the Jew inhabits the interval between the broken and replacement tablets, between what Bounoure describes as the "the past of the old covenant" and "a new promise that would be contained in the Book to come." Like Zarathustra in his cave amidst new and old tablets, in this interregnum, Jabès' book becomes a site for creation itself, revealing the possibility for novelty amidst the divine trace in the broken tablets.

VI. Creation and the Name

Following the destruction of the original Tablets of the Law, Moses inscribes the replacement set with God's commandment, endowing human writing with a trace of the divine power of creation. For Jabès and Derrida, the interval between the broken tablets and their replacements reflects the writer's ambivalence: torn between obedience to the law and the power to write its own laws, as beings who are *auto-nomos*. Between creator and creation, the dialectical image of the shattered

⁶⁷⁹ Letter from Gabriel Bounoure to Jacques Derrida, 2 Jan 1964, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

tablets discloses the writer's power to create with words, even as the writer is also the creation of another Book. Jabès' exploration of the creative potential of writing has its roots in the mystical theories of language he discovered in part through Walter Benjamin's early work on language. In the initial sketches for *The Book of Questions* conserved in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Jabès transcribed on a fragment of paper two memorable quotations from Benjamin's 1916 essay, "On Language as such and on the Language of Man."⁶⁸⁰ Jabès read the essay in the 1959 publication of Benjamin's *Oeuvres Choisies*, translated by Maurice de Gandillac, the first collection of his work in French. The fragment is remarkable if for no other reason because it is a rare instance in the draft materials for *Le Livre des Questions* – a book filled with hundreds of quotations from invented rabbis and fictional characters – where Jabès quotes a real, extant author. Benjamin's essay offers insight into Jabès' reflections on writing, creation, and the name.

The first citation in Jabès' notes is Benjamin's phrase, "the name is that *through* which, and *in* which, language itself communicates itself absolutely."⁶⁸¹ This is a distillation of the essay's central argument that the name is both the expression and the medium of pure language. "All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man," writes Benjamin, "hence, he is the lord of nature and can give names to things." The power to assign names permits human beings, in a sense, to create and order the world; without affirming the literal truth of the biblical account, Benjamin notes the importance of naming in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. He explores the "fallenness" of language, from its prelapsarian creative and magic function to the communicative and instrumental role of human language. The power of nomination is the continuation of the divine work of creation, as Benjamin writes, "God's

⁶⁸⁰ First draft of *Le Livre des Questions*, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁶⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as such and on the Language of Man," *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Vol 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 65.

creation is completed when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks.” The power to name marks the essential overlap of human and divine language.

The second quotation in Jabès’ notes is a well-known expression from Johann Georg Hamann pertaining to the relationship between language and revelation, which is cited in “On Language as such.” Hamann, the 19th century Lutheran minister and counter-Enlightenment philosopher from Königsburg known as the “Wizard from the North,” contests the rationalist claim of the primacy of reason over language. For Leibnitz, “language is the mirror of the intellect,” suggesting a close connection between the activities of thought and language, where language originates in reason, and it is reason that conditions the rules and structure of language. Reversing the primacy of reason and language, Hamann insists that it is language that is the original medium of both reason and revelation, as he wrote in a 1784 letter to philosopher F.H Jacobi, “language is the mother of reason and revelation, its alpha and omega.”⁶⁸² Benjamin quotes Hamann’s words in the context of the relation of “linguistic being” and “mental being.” The equation of these two aspects of human existence come together in the question of revelation. Benjamin writes, “Within all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed.”⁶⁸³ Yet, the highest question of religion cannot account for the inexpressible because “it is addressed in the name and expresses itself as revelation.” Hamann suggests that language is the substratum for reason and revelation, it is constitutive of them, rather than an external description of a phenomenon through linguistic signs. Revelation is born of language, and language begins with the name. Benjamin’s assertion that the name is the medium

⁶⁸² Johann Georg Hamann. *Briefwechsel mit Jacobi*, (Botha: F.A Perthe, 1868), 122.

⁶⁸³ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as such,” 66.

and unit of linguistic meaning draws from his lengthy discussions with Gershom Scholem, who framed a similar point when he wrote to Franz Rosenzweig, “Sprache ist Namen.”⁶⁸⁴

Nomination is constitutive of the act of creation. Benjamin notes that in the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, God’s creation of the world proceeds through a threefold act: “Let there be,” “He made (created),” “He named.”⁶⁸⁵ This threefold act of creation implies an absolute relation between name and knowledge since “God made things knowable in their names.”⁶⁸⁶ However, the creation of human beings does not follow the same process: it is not accompanied by “He named.”⁶⁸⁷ Benjamin suggests a parallel between God’s absolute power of creation and the relative human power of nomination: “in this very parallelism the divergence is all the more striking.”⁶⁸⁸ In contrast to the creative possibilities of divine language, the finite power of human language is expressed in nomination. God pointedly does *not* name the first human beings, instead through an extraordinary donation of creative power, he offers to human the power of naming:

God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served *him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator. God created him in his image; he created the knower in the image of the creator.

Unlike the rest of the named creatures and beings, the power to name affords human beings the possibility of creation with their words. For Benjamin, nomination marks “the frontier between finite and infinite language,” where “the proper name is the communion of man with the *creative*

⁶⁸⁴ Gershom Scholem, “On Our Language: A Confession.” Translated by Ora Wiskind. *History and Memory*, 2.2 (1990), 98. See also: Stéphane Mosès “Langage et sécularisation chez Gershom Scholem,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, No. 60.1 (Jul. - Sep., 1985), 85-96; Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano,” *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 191-227.

⁶⁸⁵ Gen 1:3, 1:11.

⁶⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as such,” 68.

⁶⁸⁷ Gen 1:27 does *not* include “He named.”

⁶⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as such,” 68.

word of God”⁶⁸⁹ This mystical connection between name and knowledge contrasts with the “bourgeois view of language” which insists on the wholly arbitrary connection between signs and their meanings. Rather, Benjamin insists, “language never gives *mere* signs.”

Benjamin illustrates his theory of language through an interpretation of the “falleness” of language in the Book of Genesis.⁶⁹⁰ In the Garden of Eden, God instructs Adam to name the animals according to their essences, demonstrating a transparency between the name and the essence of things. Stéphane Mosès explains that at this stage, “language represents the very essence of reality,” where this language of creation contains “a perfect match between words and things: reality is entirely transparent to language, and language adjoins the very essence of reality with quasi-miraculous accuracy.”⁶⁹¹ Tempted by the nameless snake to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Even are expelled from paradise, precipitating the first “fall” of human language. Fallen human language loses its magical quality, and introduces the imperfect relation between names and things, and the question of correspondence between name and thing, sign and referent. This fall “marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language.”⁶⁹² Henceforth, language takes on an instrumental quality, where “the word must communicate *something* (other than itself).” The fall from Paradise introduces mediation into language, splitting the thing and word, and thereby introducing the question of the sign and its correspondence. After the fall, “linguistic confusion could be only a step away.”⁶⁹³ The episode of the Tower of Babel marks a second moment of language’s fall. When humanity

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid, 69.

⁶⁹⁰ Benjamin’s intention is neither to verify or disprove the biblical narrative of creation. Rather, he seeks “the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language.” The Bible introduces “language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical,” but from this original conception of language the Bible must “evolve the fundamental linguistic fact.” Ibid, 67.

⁶⁹¹ Stéphane Mosès, “Langage et sécularisation chez Gershom Scholem,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 30e Année, No. 60.1 (Jul. - Sep., 1985), 91.

⁶⁹² Walter Benjamin, “On Language as such,” 71.

⁶⁹³ Ibid, 72.

unites speaking “one language and uniform words” to build a tower that would reach the heavens, God halts its construction by “confus[ing] their language,” and “scatter[ing] them from there upon the face of the entire earth.”⁶⁹⁴ With the people of Earth separated into different nations speaking different tongues, God names the tower Babel, in recognition of the site where God confused the language of humanity.⁶⁹⁵ The second fall of language inaugurates different peoples and languages, thereby introducing translation and misunderstanding. Henceforth, the power of the name is scattered and confused, but it is not entirely erased. “In our current language,” Mosès explains, “its instrumental function designates its profane side, whereas its magical (that is, poetic) functions bears witness to the survival of its paradisiacal splendor.”⁶⁹⁶ The creative power of language shines through in the name. Benjamin concludes:

Man communicates himself to God through name, which he gives to nature and (in proper names) to his own kind; and to nature he gives names according to the communication that he receives from her, for the whole of nature, too, is imbued with a nameless, unspoken language, the residue of the creative word of God, which is preserved in man as the cognizing name and above man as the judgment suspended over him. The language of nature is comparable to a secret password that each sentry passes to the next in his own language, but the meaning of the password is the sentry's language itself.⁶⁹⁷

For some Kabbalistic understandings of language, the true name of God's contains the knowledge of the universe, and all language contains a trace of this secret divine name; Benjamin's claim that human language contains “the residue of the creative word of God” comes to him via Scholem, but Hamann, Herder, and Jakob Böhme, who had introduced concepts from the Kabbalah into the

⁶⁹⁴ Gen 11:1-10.

⁶⁹⁵ There is an extremely rich body of literature dedicated to Babel and the confusion of languages in religious, literary, and philosophical contexts, particularly related to the question of translation. See, in particular: George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” *Acts of Religion*, 102-134. Perhaps most notably, Barbara Cassin's monumental project of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) is an invaluable resource and significant philosophical event of recent years.

⁶⁹⁶ Stéphane Mosès, “Langage et sécularisation chez Gershom Scholem,” 91.

⁶⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as such,” 74.

stream of German Romantic thought. Nonetheless, Benjamin's reflections on the pure language of the name resonates with mystical theories of language for biblical interpretation.

Neither of the quotations from Benjamin's essay recorded in Jabès' notes ultimately appear in the published version of *The Book of Questions* – there are precious few citations of existing authors in the series – but these pronouncements deeply inform Jabès' reflections on the relation of the name and creation. Jabès' Reb Stein describes, “*When, as a child, I wrote my name for the first time, I knew I was beginning a book* [Enfant, lorsque j'écrivis, pour la première fois, mon nom, j'eus conscience de commencer un livre].”⁶⁹⁸ Mosès writes that Benjamin's theory of language is based on “the evocation, through a language structured by forms of negativity, of a universe – ours – from which God has withdrawn and which bears witness to nothingness more than Revelation.”⁶⁹⁹ Akin to Benjamin's reflections on the language of naming in Genesis, Jabès and Derrida's discussion of the broken tablets highlight the rupture of divine writing and the birth of human writing which is endowed with the power of creation, and testifies to God's negativity in the book. Derrida suggests it is God's contraction that makes possible the writer's power of creation. “The breaking of the Tables” Derrida writes, is “a rupture within God as the origin of history.”⁷⁰⁰ This rupture carried within God and symbolized by the broken tablets is given to human beings in their language. Derrida calls upon the contraction or withdrawal of God from the world – and from writing – which frees human writing to create. The broken tablets symbolize this rupture in human writing: “God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak, in order to astonish and to interrogate us. He did so not by speaking but by keeping still, by letting silence interrupt his voice and his signs, by letting the Tables be broken.”⁷⁰¹ He identifies two episodes in

⁶⁹⁸ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 23 [27].

⁶⁹⁹ Stéphane Mosès, “Langage et sécularisation chez Gershom Scholem,” 85.

⁷⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 81 [103].

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid*, 82 [103].

the book of Exodus where God repents: the first occurs just before God gives Moses the original Tablets of the Law (Ex 32:14), and the second occurs just before the inscription of their replacements (Ex. 33:17), two moments “between originary speech and writing and, within Scripture, between the origin and repetition.” These moments of divine repentance correspond to the two sets of tablets. Writing always contains this interval between the original, shattered Tablets inscribed by God and the replacement tablets written by Moses’ hand: “This difference, this negativity in God is our freedom, the transcendence and the verb which can relocate the purity of their negative origin only in the possibility of the Question.” The broken tablets disclose God’s negativity, between the trace of God’s divine inscription and the autonomy of human language, and thus they mark the origin of human writing.

Jabès describes God’s absence from the world which makes possible the free expression of human language. The co-existence of human freedom alongside an omnipotent and omniscient God arouses questions of theodicy: how can human beings act freely in a way uncontrolled by an all-knowing and all-powerful God? The solution lies in the negativity of God who retracts from the active workings of the world to permit human freedom, echoing the Kabbalistic notion of *TsimTsum*, which means “contraction.” This theory of creation from the Lurianic Kabbalah describes a process by which God, as *En-Sof* or absolute, contracts into the nothingness of a point to make room for the free existence of the world. *TsimTsum* effectively inverts the logic of *creatio ex nihilo*, it explains God’s retraction from the active workings of the world, which makes possible human freedom. Gershom Scholem explains:

The concept of *Tsimtsum*, the contraction or withdrawal of God, was Luria's attempt to reconcile the existence of God with that of the physical world. If God is infinite, how is it possible for anything to exist which is not God? Given the monotheistic theologies on the immutability of God, Luria's answer to this dilemma was a highly unorthodox one. He taught that an act of creation is possible only through the "entry of God into Himself"; God exiles Himself, as it were, concentrating the infinite essence of His being away from a

single place. The place from which God retreats is merely "a point" in comparison with His infinity, but from man's perspective, it comprises all levels of existence, both spiritual and corporeal. This "point" is the totality of all possible worlds - primordial space. It is no longer God but it is not empty; some residue of divinity remains in primordial space, just as the taste and smell of oil linger in a bottle after the oil is poured out. And it is in these traces of divinity that the potential for the development of the universe is contained.⁷⁰²

The contraction of God, his separation from himself in a point, enables the creation of a world of human freedom which nonetheless retains the trace of its divine source. God's silence dissimulates the divine origin of human writing, and makes room for the poetic freedom made possible by the shattered tablets. Similarly, Jabès' practice of writing involves the articulation of the book from the formless, chaotic matter of language which he calls the "absolute book," and its contraction at the "threshold" of the book. In his interview with Marcel Cohen, he describes the process of undertaking a new book:

I find myself, at the moment of starting a book – and surely I am not alone – literally submerged in its material. It is as if a multitude of possible books are waiting to see the light of day. This material is perhaps the "absolute book," which merges all the books we are capable of writing. It is, in truth, only a vast unintelligible rumor because it can't be formulated, but at least it seems it could be. I try to preserve this material as long as possible in its state of chaos at the threshold of the book, so that the reader can also be present at the birth of the work.⁷⁰³

Jabès describes the process of writing as formulating the matter of language from out of its infinite potentialities contained in the "absolute book." This unformed matter of the "absolute book" echoes what Benjamin calls the "pure language" of the name. From the *tohu va-bohu* of the unformed language of the "absolute book," the writer creates a world in the book, he or she gives form and content to a world of characters and events, and then withdraws from the scene. Like God's absence in the created world, the writer similarly creates the world of the book, and the author's presence in the world he or she creates is felt as a form of negativity. Derrida connects

⁷⁰² Gershom Scholem, "Issac Luria: A Central Figure in Jewish Mysticism," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 29, No. 8 (May, 1976), 10-11.

⁷⁰³ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 69.

the logic of *TsimTsum* to the human freedom to write, enabled by the shattered tablets. “Absence of locality,” he writes, “Absence of the writer too. For to write is to draw back [*Écrire c’est retirer*].”⁷⁰⁴ These absences of place and writer give birth to the poetic autonomy necessary to create—this is the meaning of the broken Tablets. With regards to his or her work, “the writer is at once everything and nothing. Like God.”⁷⁰⁵ Derrida recognizes the echoes of this mystical understanding of language in Jabès’ writing where he writes, “Negativity in God, exile as writing, the life of the letter are all already in the Cabala.”⁷⁰⁶ Between God’s book of creation that speaks the world into existence, and the human book which creates its own world in the power to name, the broken tablets enable the creation of the endless nesting of books within books.

From Moses’ broken tablets to Jabès’ torn manuscript, the destroyed book represents the dialectical image of writing as rupture, a gesture that signifies both creation and destruction, commandment and freedom. For Jabès and Derrida, the broken tablets represents the struggle between the law – divine law, the law of tradition, of influence – and the creative possibilities of writing enabled by the revolt against the law. Where Jabès writes “God is in perpetual revolt against God [*Dieu est en perpétuelle révolte contre Dieu*]” and “God is an interrogation of God [*Dieu est une interrogation de Dieu*],”⁷⁰⁷ Derrida responds by citing Kafka’s remark, “We are nihilistic thoughts that come into God’s head.”⁷⁰⁸ This expression suggests that humans are

⁷⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 84-85 [105-106]

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid, 85 [106].

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid, 91 [111].

⁷⁰⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 138 [156].

⁷⁰⁸ The partial quotation from Kafka which Derrida cites was recounted in Walter Benjamin’s essay, “Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” where he describes a conversation between Kafka and Max Brod. Like Jabès, Derrida had presumably read the essay in the 1959 publication of Benjamin’s *Oeuvres Choisies*: “‘I remember,’ Brod writes, ‘a conversation with Kafka which began with present-day Europe and the decline of the human race.’ ‘We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that come into God’s head,’ Kafka said. This re-minded me at first of the Gnostic view of life: God as the evil demiurge, the world as his Fall. ‘Oh no,’ said Kafka, ‘our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his.’ ‘Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know.’ He smiled. ‘Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope-but not for us.’” (Walter Benjamin, “Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” *Illuminations*, trans Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken, 2007), 116).

emanation of the divine intellect, no more than haphazard modalities of God's thought. "If God opens the question in God, if he is the *very* opening of the Question," Derrida writes, "God proceeds within the duplicity of his own questionability."⁷⁰⁹ The question of God inaugurated by God implies the very articulation of the book is contingent on its questioning: *The Book of Questions* is the negative image of the Book of Books.

VII. Circles, Signatures, and Countersignatures

The practice of quotation call upon prior literary creation, transplanting words from their original setting to a different textual corpus, where they are revived in a new context. Ordinarily, quotations are treated as a kind of supplement to the main textual corpus: marked off from the body of the text, quotation is supposed to add justification or reinforcement for the author's authentic voice, which is the presumptive structural center of the text. But, as Derrida argues in "Structure, Sign, and Play," there is a double logic of supplementarity. The supplement is an addition to the center, but the very existence of the center is also contingent upon the projection of a supplement. He writes, "one cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a 'supplement.'"⁷¹⁰ In other words, quotations supplement the "central" voice of the text, while also maintaining the illusion that such a central voice exists. The supplement "comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified,"⁷¹¹ revealing the

⁷⁰⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," 82 [103]. Translation modified.

⁷¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" *Writing and Difference*, 365.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid*, 365-366.

absence of a center: the center only exists in relation to a margin, to a supplement that defines the supposed objectivity of the center. Following “the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin,” Derrida embraces “the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin.”⁷¹² The logic of supplementarity thereby “determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center.” Quotation supplements but also determines the central “voice” of the text. Jabès’ eccentric use of quotations in *The Book of Questions* disrupts the text’s presumed center and its author’s singular, identical voice, and embraces the polyphony of voices, names, and quotations filling its pages: “*N’oublie pas que tu es le noyau d’une rupture.*”⁷¹³

Walter Benjamin long dreamed of writing a book composed entirely of quotations. The first draft of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* was entirely written in quotations. “It is the craziest mosaic technique one can imagine,” Benjamin wrote to Scholem in 1924 of this method of writing, “so odd for a work of this kind that I will probably touch up the fair copy in places.”⁷¹⁴ Subsequent versions of his *Trauerspiel* book ultimately took a more conventional approach, but he realized this dream in his mammoth *Arcades Project*, which is as much a theory of citation as it is a history of capitalism in 19th century Paris. Benjamin deliberately sets apart his sparse comments in the *Arcades Project* from the majority of the book composed of quotations. Eli Friedlander notes that even after Benjamin had worked on the project for a decade, “a special effort was made *not* to produce larger unities of writing that would rework and absorb the initial material.”⁷¹⁵ By highlighting citation as the very material of his text, its building blocks, Benjamin

⁷¹² Ibid, 369.

⁷¹³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 126 [141].

⁷¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, Ed. Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 256.

⁷¹⁵ Eli Friedlander, “On the Heightened Intuitability of History in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*,” *Dibur Literary Journal*, 3, 2016, 57.

undertakes a method of creation through re-appropriation. Friedlander elaborates, “the text that emerges is not so much an elaboration and interpretation of the quoted material as an ordering of that material as a continuity of citations without quotation marks.”⁷¹⁶ If citation is most fundamentally the repurposing of language in a new context, then Benjamin’s generous use of quotation disrupts the ordinary ways of determining its value or meaning. By cutting off writing from its original context and re-appropriating it in citation elsewhere, the quotation “bears no relation to *why* the words were uttered or written in the first place,” and it suggests, “there is no distinction between major and minor matters insofar as the material of history is concerned.” Benjamin’s use of quotation has a levelling effect on language: it produces a reorganization of historical artifacts, uprooting dominant historical perspectives, and creating a historical work of greater significance. “In being so dissociated,” Friedlander writes, “the citations become material to form a wholly different constructed unity that is essentially distinct from the reconstruction of the past.”⁷¹⁷ The citation migrates from its original historical and textual location to assume a new place in a foreign text, and its words take root in a different context. Benjamin’s “craz[y] mosaic technique” transforms the very fabric of the text. Writing by quotation disrupts the unicity of the book which qualifies authenticity through the “aura” of originality or uniqueness, and assigns value based on the distinction between “real” and “fake,” original and copy.

The Book of Questions is filled with quotations of proverbs and aphorisms from a cacophony of rabbis and sages. Quotations constitute the very fabric of Jabès’ text, rather than externally imposed references. Like Benjamin, Jabès uses quotations to reshuffle the narrative traces of bygone history. His quotations transform language, evoking the names of presumably wise rabbis and sages to call up the material history of the past in order to give its words new life.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid, 58.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid, 61.

However, in contrast to Benjamin's tome of quotations culled from the margins of historiography, Jabès almost exclusively quotes fictitious characters. His imagined rabbis offer salient philosophical perspectives, and the title "Reb," "Rabbi," preceding their names affords their words presumptive authority, but they are ultimately fictional characters:

Why rabbis? Rabbis are, by essence, the privileged interpreters of the book. For them, finding God means finding him in the book, through the word which is hidden behind the word, as if there was always a book within the book, which was ultimately a matter of decrypting beyond the text, the sign itself. White writing, in sum, in writing [...] My rabbis are fake rabbis but, for me, they are closer than any other decoder, because they are themselves writers; that is, they are both creators and commentators of their own works. Isn't every real reader a potential writer, a "rabbi" rooted in the book? You see a contradiction between the terms "memory" and "imagination." This contradiction does not exist in my eyes.⁷¹⁸

The rabbis in Jabès' *Book of Questions* offer commentaries and interpretations of scriptures, which are themselves merely imaginary facsimiles of the "real" Bible and its commentary. The seriousness of Jabès' proverbs, the authenticity of its quasi-Talmudic debates over questions of God and ethics, and the painful story of Yukel and Sarah belie their fictionality. Echoing what Max Jacob called "the virtue of the lie," Jabès' rabbis interpret a fabricated and perhaps even heretical Judaism with the most profound reverence. By abolishing the distinction between memory and imagination, Jabès insists that there is no true reality which can separate itself from fiction. "We are but fiction [*Nous ne sommes que fiction*]. We are only the idea that we make for ourselves," he explains, "only fiction can transcend the unvarnished event, grasping it in the most intimate extensions."⁷¹⁹ In this sense, *The Book of Questions* is the fictional representation for an experience which has no other narrative possibility : the unspeakable, unimaginable horror of the Shoah. Jabès turns to fiction to speak of what cannot be spoken.⁷²⁰

⁷¹⁸ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 74-75.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, 76.

⁷²⁰ Ibid, 93: "To Adorno's affirmation, 'one cannot write poetry after Auschwitz,' which invites to entirely question our culture, I would be tempted to respond: yes, yes we can. And even, we must. We must write beginning from this

The narrative entanglement of truth and fiction discloses the contingency of literature and religion. Jabès asks, “Isn’t the Bible itself first read as a novel?”⁷²¹ *The Book of Questions* constantly slips between the domain of literature and religion, as well as between the space of the book and the world of lived experience. For Jabès, every rabbi is a kind of literary critic, to the extent that the practices of narrative and fiction are deeply woven into biblical interpretation; by the same token, every writer crafts a world in the book by tapping into what Benjamin articulated as the magic language of creation. The writer and the rabbi share a spiritual bond with the book, the common object of their respective practices. Jabès remarks, “everything unfolds as if the writer questions the rabbi, and the rabbi the writer; the two being inhabited by the same obsession with the book.”⁷²² Derrida argues in his essay on *The Book of Questions* that the distinction between the writer and the rabbi is based on a false opposition of religious and literary narrative, the prophet and the poet, even if they ultimately draw their inspiration from irreconcilable sources. The continuity between practices of writing, commentary, and interpretation discloses the divine trace of creation in our fallen language. Jabès explains, “the Jew is fundamentally riveted to the text that his commentary is creation. It is this sort of relationship that the fake – real – rabbis of my books maintain with the text. They would only be fictitious in appearance...”⁷²³ Under the guise of their apparent fictionality, as “virtuous lies,” Jabès’ rabbis speak a certain kind of prophetic truth.

The characters populating *The Book of Questions* overflow the limits of fiction. If indeed writing, as Derrida writes, is “to confuse ontology and grammar,”⁷²⁴ then perhaps the author can

breakage, from this constantly reopened wound.” While Jabès’ comment relies on a misunderstanding of what Adorno meant in this infamous comment, Jabès makes clear that one must confront the unspeakable horror of Auschwitz by writing it as poetry—precisely because it is unspeakable.

⁷²¹ Ibid, 77.

⁷²² Ibid 107.

⁷²³ Ibid, 106.

⁷²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 95 [116]. Derrida’s formulation recalls Wittgenstein’s headline in the *Big Typescript*, “Phenomenology is Grammar.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, Ed. and transl. by C. Grant Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2005), as well

write a fictional character into existence, just as a person can discover that his or her life has slipped into the space of narrative fiction. Derrida's essay concludes by citing "Reb Rida," one of the rabbis who appears in the opening pages of Jabès' book:

Henceforth, so that God may indeed be, as Jabès says, an interrogation of God, would we not have to transform a final affirmation into a question? Literature would then, perhaps, only be the dreamlike displacement of this question [*le déplacement somnambulique de cette question*]:⁷²⁵

"There is the Book of God, through which God questions himself. And there is the book of man. It is on the scale of God's." – Reb Rida
[« *Il y a le Livre de Dieu par lequel Dieu s'interroge et il y a le livre de l'homme qui est à la taille de celui de Dieu.* » Reb Rida]⁷²⁶

Reb Rida is a fictional character invented in Jabès' imagination, but his name is also a near perfect anagram for Derrida—save for the missing "d," which is mirrored as "b." Even this small difference seems fitting insofar as Derrida's essay inverts the title of Jabès' book, as if read backwards – like Hebrew. The use of anagram as a literary device recalls approaches to biblical interpretation from the Jewish tradition. In Talmudic and Midrashic approaches to textual interpretation, the device of anagram, the transposition a word's letters to create another word is called *hipukh* or "inversion." The second century scholar Eleazar of Modi'im introduces the use of inversion in biblical interpretation by transposing a word's letters; inversion gradually comes to include transpositions across words and phrases. Inversion as an interpretative device reaches its apogee with the Kabbalists, for whom inversion reveals the occult or secret meaning of words and names. Kabbalistic texts often describe the rules governing inversions, called *temurah*. Discovering his own name encrypted in Jabès' text, it is as if Derrida has been drafted as a character in *The Book of Questions*. The uncanny resonance of Reb Rida and Derrida is, strictly speaking, a

as Levinas' similar pronouncement in *Beyond the Verse*, "Language and the book, arising and already read in language, is phenomenology." Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, xii.

⁷²⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," 96 [116].

⁷²⁶ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 20 [23].

coincidence: Jabès wrote these passages before he would have ever come across Derrida's name. Yet this coincidence suggests an almost mystical connection, which did not escape Derrida's attention. By concluding his essay with the "countersignature" of Reb Rida, Derrida suggests that Jabès' invented rabbi is the author of his essay. At the same time, the countersignature projects Derrida into the text as a character in *The Book of Questions* – as if Jabès imagined a rabbi, who then wrote an essay entitled "Edmond Jabès et la Question du Livre," who was ultimately Derrida. If a person can write a commentary of a book in which he or she already exists as a character, then perhaps Jabès is right that the world exists because the book exists.

The interlacing of Jabès and Derrida as authors and characters continued as their dialogue progressed during these extremely productive years for both writers. The second volume of Jabès' series, *The Book of Yukel*, was published in April 1964, and the third volume *Return to the Book* in 1965. During this time, Jabès' friendship with Derrida blossomed. In their correspondences, Derrida shared with Jabès his texts on Foucault, Artaud, and other essays that featured in *Writing and Difference*; while Arlette Jabès was always the first reader of her husband's writing, Derrida was the second to read the manuscript for *Le Retour au Livre*.⁷²⁷ In a June 1964 letter to Derrida, Jabès describes his worry that with each successive volume of *The Book of Questions* he confronted the same impossible question of the book. "As for me, I can no longer see the 'difference' between the first and second *Book of Questions*," he wrote Derrida, "I am making progress in the third (and final) volume and I am noticing that I am rewriting the same book for the third time, in search of an impossible response? Maybe these books are only good for the tenacity and the hope [...] of dominating failure; but failure is inevitable."⁷²⁸ Jabès' worry that he

⁷²⁷ Letter from Jabès to Derrida, undated [1966] IMEC : "Your support – you know very well – is quite precious to me. After my wife, you were the first to read this manuscript which I am trying to finish; your remarks were very helpful for me."

⁷²⁸ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, June 24 1964, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

was repeating the same impossible task with each of his books appears in *Le Retour au Livre* in a passage entitled “The Loop,” “La Boucle,” which concludes the first part of the book:

One of my greatest fears, said Reb Aghim, “wants to see my life round itself into a loop without being able to stop it.”

Reb Ardash wrote: “To be in the truth means excepting ugliness on the same grounds as beauty. Religion is the religion of the soul where truth is protected from itself. God plays against God for a reassuring image of His power. There is no divine Truth. There is a desire, a foolishness of God’s which quickens in goodness where the circle is made certain.”

“Blasphemy,” replied Reb Séri. “Gods Truth is the summer of the world, not its venom. It is the gold of the first morning. You only know the rue in truth. You suffer from truth-ache. Ah, may you get well.”

And Reb Ardash said: “It is not always the heart which closes the loop. Sometimes it is the teeth. There are celestial bites which witness God’s despair.”

“L’une de mes grandes angoisses, disait Reb Aghim, fut de voir, sans que je puisse l’arrêter, ma vie s’arrondir pour former une boucle.”

Reb Ardash écrivait: “Être dans la vérité, c’est appeter la laideur au même titre que la beauté. La religion est la région de l’âme où la vérité est protégée d’elle-même. Dieu joue contre Dieu pour une image rassurante de Sa puissance. Il n’y a pas de Vérité divine. Il y a un désir, une déraison de Dieu qui s’avivent dans le Bien, où le cercle est certifié.

—Sacrilège, lui répondit Reb Séri. La vérité de Dieu est l’été du monde et non le venin. Elle est l’or du premier matin. De la vérité, tu ne connais que le ver. Tu souffres du mal de la vérité. Ah! Puisses-tu en guérir.”

Et Reb Ardash dit: “Ce n’est pas toujours le coeur qui clôt la boucle; ce sont quelquefois les dents. Il ya des morsures célestes qui témoignent du désespoir de Dieu.”⁷²⁹

Where Reb Aghim worries that his life has become a loop, Reb Ardash suggests that the truth of God is revealed in contradictions – good and evil, beauty and ugliness – hence “the circle is certified.” Reb Séri protests that God is only good and never evil, but Reb Ardash’s rejoinder that there are also “celestial bites which witness God’s despair,” echoing Kafka’s remark, referenced in Derrida’s essay, “our world is only a bad mood of God.” “The Loop” echoes Jabès’ anxieties about the seemingly impossible task of writing the second and third volumes of *The Book of Questions*, and the Nietzschean trope of the eternal return.

⁷²⁹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1 351 [387]

In a lengthy letter to Jabès dated New Year's Day 1966, Derrida offered his admiration for the recently published *Retour au Livre*, and his reflections focused on "La Boucle":

I have just closed the *Return to the Book*, a book that does not close, a book on the truth of the book opened on the basis of which only God and the hymn have the chance to exist, a book that does not close more than it closes a Loop [...] or which is not *centered*, and which speaks the absence of the center, the center as the absence without ground, the well, the elsewhere, the threshold, mourning [*le puits, l'ailleurs, le seuil, le deuil*]. I want to tell you without qualifications – and also with the absolute sincerity which is yours [...] that I find your poem *admirable*, of a power, mastery, and "disciplined chance" which were a profound joy for me, in this region where beauty – is not satisfied but tears, doesn't tear [*déchire, ne déchire pas*] – because this book is serene (isn't it? A strange serenity) but leaves open the tear [*déchirure*] by which everything acquires meaning. I will say that the parts of the book which touched me the most (especially beginning with "The Loop" where I nonetheless started to enter the text, if this word has meaning), the raw sublime [*brut sublime*], where this word which means more than beauty, was not lacking. By designing a text, terrestrial humility searching for the question on which the book remains open, in its path and its end. The Return, here, is not the closed Loop, but the indefinite reopening of the origin of the book [*Le Retour, ici, n'est pas la Boucle fermée, mais la réouverture indéfinie de l'origine du livre*].⁷³⁰

The question of "La Boucle," the closed loop or buckle, is literally at the center of *Le Retour au Livre*, where Jabès reflects on the futility of completing his task through the cipher of his rabbis. Jabès' difficulty closing the circuit inaugurated in the first volume of *Le Livre des Questions* attests to what Derrida calls "the indefinite reopening of the origin of the book." "The Loop" testifies to "the absence of the center, the center as the absence without ground," repeating Derrida's reflections on the de-centering of structural myth in "Structure, Sign, and Play." The center of the text is both "within the structure and outside it," which is projected as a kind of fiction:

By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. [...] The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center.⁷³¹

⁷³⁰ Letter from Derrida to Jabès 1 Jan 1966, BNF 101-102

⁷³¹ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 352.

Derrida's remarks in "Structure, Sign, and Play" echo his comments on "La Boucle" in Jabès' *Retour au Livre*: the impossibility of closing the loop and "finishing" book is like the impossibility for the center to determine the system without being conditioned by it. He reveals the imbrication of the interrelated circles, centers, and loops in the book, and the impossibility of their completeness or closure. The impossibility of closing the loop, completing the circle, or aligning the center demonstrates the insufficiency of any supposedly closed system, and the ubiquity of the trace, the supplement, or *différance*.

Soon after the 1966 Baltimore colloquium, Derrida wrote to Jabès in December 1966 that he was completing a text on *Return to the Book*, which would appear in his forthcoming *Writing and Difference*. The collection published by Editions du Seuil in 1967 ostensibly tackles each of Derrida's major influences and interlocutors: he devotes an essay to Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, Artaud, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, and so on. Notably, it includes *two* essays on Jabès: "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," and his essay on *Return to the Book*, "Ellipse." Building on the discussion of "The Loop" in their correspondence, "Ellipse" appears as the final essay in the collection, directly after "Structure Sign and Play," as its shortest text and the only one which did not independently published in a journal; therefore, it offers the semblance of a final word in *Writing and Difference* in the guise of a commentary. "Ellipse" is dedicated to Gabriel Bounoure, who had become an important interlocutor for Derrida, and whose acquaintance he owed to Jabès. Alluding to the circularity in "La Boucle," Jabès wrote Derrida in December 1966, "I am proud and happy to be in *the book* twice – with meticulousness through the final line, which is, as we know, always a beginning."⁷³² "Ellipse" focuses on the question of circularity in "The Loop," and the impossible closure of the book. Echoing the critique of "logocentrism" in the first chapter of

⁷³² Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 14 Dec 1966, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

Grammatology, the essay opens by describing what are by now two familiar models of writing:

Here or there we have discerned writing: a nonsymmetrical division designated on the one hand the closure of the book, and on the other the opening of the text. On the one hand the theological encyclopedia and, modeled upon it, the book of man. On the other a fabric of traces marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man. The question of writing could be opened only if the book was closed. The joyous wandering of the *graphein* then became wandering without return. The opening into the text was adventure, expenditure without reserve [*L'ouverture au texte était l'aventure, la dépense sans réserve*].⁷³³

The dissolution of the theological or encyclopedic book inaugurates the text and the question of arche-writing or the arche-trace. Jabès' affirms the "joyous wandering" of the sign, which he calls the "adventure" of the text. Yet the closure of the book is not its end, and it is in the repetition of the book that the writer unleashes the play of the sign. Jabès' Reb Jorna writes, "God follows God and Books follow the Book [*Dieu succède à Dieu et le Livre au Livre*]."⁷³⁴ The circular movement from God to God, from book to book, reiterates of the closure of the book, and the impossible task of completing the final, absolute book. Indeed, alluding to his own struggle to complete his trilogy in *Le Retour au Livre*, Jabès writes, "no book is complete. Is it three times I have rewritten mine? [*aucun livre n'est achevé. Trois fois, ai-je refait le mien?*]"⁷³⁵ For Derrida, the closure of the book is a "moment of errance"⁷³⁶ which replays the interval between these two forms of writing. Despite its apparent futility, it is this effort to begin again, to repeat the symbolic shattering of the tablets, and begin writing the book anew that constitutes its adventure.

"Ellipse" poses the question of the eternal return of the book. In *Return to the Book*, Jabès writes, "The world is exiled in the name. Within it there is the book of the world. Writing means having a passion for origins. It means trying to go down to the roots. The roots are always the

⁷³³ Jacques Derrida, "Ellipse," [429]

⁷³⁴ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 329 [364]

⁷³⁵ Ibid, 342 [378].

⁷³⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Ellipse" [429].

beginning [*Le monde s'exile dans le nom. A l'intérieure, il y a le livre du monde. Ecrire, c'est avoir la passion de l'origine ; c'est essayer d'atteindre le fond. Le fond est toujours le commencement*].⁷³⁷ Echoing Benjamin's essay on the power of the name, Jabès' "passion for the origin" suggests a circularity in the writer's pursuits that must always begin anew. Derrida interprets this passion for the origin as the ceaseless displacement of the text's center :

It is not absence instead of presence, but a trace which replaces a presence which has never been present, an origin by means of which nothing has begun. Now, the book has lived on this lure: to have given us to believe that passion, having originally been impassioned by something, could in the end be appeased by the return of that something. Lure of the origin, the end, the line, the loop, the volume, the center [*Leurre de l'origine, de la fin, de la ligne, de la boucle du volume, du centre*].⁷³⁸

Following the logic of supplementarity articulated in "Structure, Sign, and Play," the passion for the origin in "Ellipse" reveal the absence of an origin, or rather the projection of an origin which is constantly displaced. The rabbis in "The Loop" ask whether it is possible to close the loop. For Derrida, the closure of the book is merely a projection produced by repetition: "the return to the book is of an elliptical essence," where "something invisible is missing in the grammar of this repetition."⁷³⁹ In the elliptical mouvement of the book, the repetition of the origin is always different, the book returns to itself as other. Just before "The Loop," Yukel describes the elliptical closure the book: "the circle is known. Break the curve. The road doubles the road. The book consecrates the book [*Et Yukel dit: 'Le cercle est reconnu. Brisez la courbe. Le chemin double le chemin. Le livre consacre le livre*]."⁷⁴⁰ In the repetition of the elliptical movement of the book, its destruction, its closure, and its renewal, Derrida writes, "The return to the book here announces the form of the eternal return."⁷⁴¹ He suggests that the movement to return to the book is the

⁷³⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 325 [360].

⁷³⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Ellipse," 372 [430]. Translation modified

⁷³⁹ Ibid, 373 [431].

⁷⁴⁰ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1 350 [386].

⁷⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, "Ellipse," 373 [431].

structure of writing itself. If the author is the presumed center or origin of the text, then writing preserves the living voice through its repetition as sign, as *gramme*, and henceforth the disappearance of its origin. Jabès writes in *Le Retour au Livre*:

The center is a well.

The center is a scream, an open wound, a key.

"Do not bet on calming the waves," said Reb Fayah. "The sea holds a grudge."

"Where is the center?" howled Reb Madiés. "The disowned water lets the falcon pursue his prey."

The center is perhaps a shift in the question.

No center where no circle possible.

[...]

The center is threshold.

[...]

"Where is the center?"

"Under the cinders." –Reb Selah

[...]

The center is mourning.

[Le centre est le puits.

Le centre est le cri, la blessure vive, la clé.

"Ne mise pas sur l'accoisemennt des flots, disait Reb Fayah. La mer est rancunière."

"Où est le centre? Hurlait Reb Madiés. L'eau répudiée permet au faucon de poursuivre sa proie."

Le centre est, peut-être le déplacement de la question.

Point de centre où le cercle est impossible.

[...]

Le centre est le seuil

[...]

"Où est le centre?"

– Sous la cendre" Reb Selah

[...]

Le centre est le deuil].⁷⁴²

By multiplying its meanings – the well, the cry, the wound, the margin, mourning, and so on – and by drawing connections between its contradictions – “the center is the margin” – Jabès affirms the

⁷⁴² Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 359-360 [395-397].

play of the sign over the ultimate absence of center. Derrida writes, “just as there is a negative theology, there is a negative atheology,” which work in tandem to project a desire for solid ground in “the phantom of the center.”⁷⁴³ Jabès’ *Return to the Book* highlights this projected phantom in the repetition of the closure of the book, and the displacement of its center. Ultimately, Derrida writes, “the center was the name of a hole.” The phantoms of closure, completeness, and center only work to cover over the abyss at the center, which is the trace of a rupture and an absence.

The third and final part of *Return to the Book* opens with the words of Reb Dérisa: “Tomorrow is the shadow of our hands and capacity to be reflected [*Demain est l’ombre et la réflexibilité de nos mains*].”⁷⁴⁴ Like Reb Rida before him, Reb Dérisa’s name bears an uncanny resemblance to Derrida – this time, the resemblance is a visual and vocal confusion of “s” and “d,” rather than an anagram. He noted in a letter to Jabès, “Ellipse” “closes with the signature of a certain *Reb Dérisa*.”⁷⁴⁵ Once more, Derrida is conscripted as a character in *Return to the Book*. By concluding “Ellipse” and thus *Writing and Difference* with the countersignature of Reb Dérisa, Derrida signs his own work in the rabbi’s name, inserting himself once more into the network of fictitious rabbis and characters in Jabès’ series. Following the publication of *Writing and Difference*, Derrida wrote Jabès in May 1967, “people often speak to me about you, about ‘Ellipse’ and the interlacing, the destruction, or reconstruction of our ‘noms d’auteurs,’ through these texts. Nothing gives me more joy. This play of names allows, as it must, the enigma in which we exist...”⁷⁴⁶ Unlike the uncanny appearance of Reb Rida in the first volume of *The Book of Questions*, Reb Dérisa was an intentional nod to his friend. Jabès conceded in his response to

⁷⁴³ Jacques Derrida, “Ellipse,” 373 [432-433].

⁷⁴⁴ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 381 [417].

⁷⁴⁵ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Edmond Jabès, 9 Dec 1966, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁷⁴⁶ Derrida to Jabès 25 May 1967 BNF #110

Derrida: “Behind Reb Rida and Reb Dérissa, there is without a doubt the same man.”⁷⁴⁷ Derrida’s countersignatures insert him in the world of Jabès’ book, where imagination and memory are undivided. Jabès and Derrida’s connection is expressed as a play of names, sources, and quotations that intertwines their writing in a space undivided between reality and fiction, writing and interpretation, real and fake. The intertextual network tying together Jabès and Derrida as writers, characters, and interpreters in and of each other’s work. Echoing Reb Dérissa, Derrida writes, “The beyond of the closure of the book is neither to be awaited nor to be refound. It is there, but out there, beyond, within repetition, but eluding us there. It is there like the shadow of the book, the third party between the hands holding the book [*Il est là comme l’ombre du livre, le tiers entre les deux mains tenant le livre*].”⁷⁴⁸ The shadow in the space between our hands, between the book and the book, is irreducible to the closed totality of the book: this is the trace of the book, writing that begins from the fragments of the shattered tablets.

VIII. Conclusion

Writing after the broken tablets discloses the fragmentation of language and the contingency of the written sign. The creative potential of human writing, inaugurated by Moses’ shattering of the original tablets, explodes the absolute book containing the totality of revealed truth. Derrida and Jabès’ exchanges in *Le Livre des Questions* and *Writing and Difference*, and their epistolary dialogue on these texts, frame the question of the book – its closure, its completeness, and its

⁷⁴⁷ Jabès to Derrida, 29 May 1967

⁷⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Ellipse,” 378 [436].

destruction – in terms of the trace, and the fragmentation of language after the shattered tablets. We have highlighted the broken tablets as a Benjaminian dialectical image: from its biblical interpretations to its symbolic iterations in Jabès and Derrida’s writing, this motif illustrates the rupture of the opposition in writing between law and freedom, tradition and rebellion.

The legacy of the broken tablets leads Derrida and Jabès to frame their writing in opposition to the unicity and closure of the absolute book. In May 1967, Jabès wrote to Derrida praising the recent publication of *Writing and Difference*: “Your *Book* is *One* in its multiple paths. It is the daybreak that contests a thousand fires [...] One needs night, the shadows which gleam, in its *near* infinity, light.”⁷⁴⁹ The texts in Derrida’s book are assembled chronologically, but they fit together as if by *bricolage*, woven by the binding that joins its pages; nonetheless, he resists framing *Writing and Difference* as the closure of a synthetic totality. The multiplicity contained within its covers illustrates the closure of the book, which was Derrida’s focus in “Ellipse.” Jabès’ letter highlights the play of light and shadows as a metaphor for presence and absence in Derrida’s book, alluding to Reb Dérissa’s words, “*Demain est l’ombre et la réflexibilité de nos mains.*” The interlacing of names and characters in Jabès and Derrida’s writing obliterate the line between philosophy and literature, and the division of reality and fiction. Jabès writes in the closing pages of *Return to the Book*, “In the book reality learns and reveals what it is: a visible your reality which we can front with itself, with its base in the summoned word [*Dans le livre, la réalité apprend et révèle ce qu’elle est; une irréalité visible que nous confrontons avec elle-même, à sa base dans le vocable convoqué.*”⁷⁵⁰ The line separating reality from fiction is an illusion indulged by the book. By the same token, concluding the final essay of *Writing and Difference* with the countersignature of Jabès’ imaginary Reb Dérissa, Derrida inscribes his text in the domain of literature and fiction.

⁷⁴⁹ Jabès to Derrida, 29 May 1967

⁷⁵⁰ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 437

Writing and Difference has no introduction or conclusion. The volume opens with an epigraph from Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dès*, "le tout sans nouveauté qu'un espacement de la lecture," followed by its eleven essays. The final word in Derrida's book is a short note in small type appended just after its bibliography, which pertains to the connection between the volume's texts. Translator Alan Bass observes it is surely the most difficult passage to translate in the book:

By means of the dates of these texts, we would like to indicate [*marquer*] that in order to bind them together, in rereading them, we cannot maintain an equal distance from each of them. What remains here the displacement of a question certainly forms a system. With some interpretive sewing [*couture*] we could have sketched this system afterward. We have only permitted isolated points [*le pointille*] of the system to appear, deploying or abandoning in it those blank spaces without which no text is proposed as such. If text [*texte*] means cloth [*tissu*], all these essays have obstinately defined sewing as basting [*faufilure*].

Par la date de ces textes, nous voudrions marquer qu'à l'instant, pour les relier, de les relire, nous ne pouvons nous tenir à égale distance de chacun d'eux. Ce qui reste ici le *deplacement d'une question* forme certes un *systeme*. Par quelque *couture* interpretative, nous aurions su après-coup le dessiner. Nous n'en avons rien laissé paraître que le pointille, y menageant on y abandonnant ces blancs sans lesquels aucun texte jamais ne se propose comme tel. Si *texte* veut dire *tissu*, tous ces essais en ont obstinément défini la *couture* comme *faufilure*.⁷⁵¹

Derrida highlights the *hipukh* connecting book binding [*relier*] and re-reading [*relire*], and weaves together the language of textuality and textiles. The eleven essays in Derrida's collection are held together "some interpretive sewing," which form a system through the "displacement of a question." He has only allowed isolated points, "le pointille," to appear by setting aside the blank space of the page, the "blank spaces [*ces blancs*] without which no text is proposed as such." Derrida suggests that the connections between the texts does not form a closed totality that aspires to rival the absolute book, but rather a porous, open-ended composition shot through by negativity and the play of difference. The phrase from the preface to Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dès* which he cites in the epigraph, "le tout sans nouveauté qu'un espacement de la lecture," continues, "Les

⁷⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, xiv [437].

'blancs,' en effet, assument l'importance, frappent d'abord."⁷⁵² Gesturing to Mallarmé's words, it is as if Derrida has inscribed his text in the hiatus of the preface to "Un Coup de dès." *Writing and Difference* is held together by the blank space of the page, words that cannot be said, memories and experiences for which there are no words. By the same token, Jabès concludes *Le Retour au Livre*, "man does not exist. God does not exist. The world alone exists through God and man in the open book [*L'homme n'existe pas. Dieu n'existe pas. Seul existe le monde à travers Dieu et l'homme dans le livre ouvert*]."⁷⁵³ The negativity of God and the human being shine in the text.

The final sentence develops the closure of the text in terms of stitching textiles: "If text [*texte*] means cloth (*tissu*)," Derrida writes, "all these essays have obstinately defined sewing [*couture*] as basting [*faufilure*]." Alain Bass' introduction to his English translation of *Writing and Difference* explains the etymological connection between text and textile: "the word *texte*, is derived from the Latin *textus*, meaning cloth (*tissu*), and from *texere*, to weave (*tisser*); in English we have text and textile."⁷⁵⁴ But, the stitching that weaves together the texts of *Writing and Difference* is not a permanent bind, but a loose "basting" stitch. Bass explains Derrida's conspicuous use of *faufilure*: "the *faux*, 'false,' in *fau-filure*, or 'false stringing,' is actually an alteration of the earlier form of the word, *farfiler* or *fourfiler*, from the Latin *fors*, meaning outside. Thus basting is sewing on the outside which does not bind the textile tightly." The texts composing *Writing and Difference* are not bound in a closed totality that separates an inside from an outside, but a written trace connected through the preliminary first stitch. In the aftermath of the shattered tablets, Jabès and Derrida's writing bears these scars of the fragmentation, incompleteness, and impermanence of the trace.

⁷⁵² Stéphane Mallarmé, "Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard," *Oeuvres Complètes*.

⁷⁵³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 402 [438].

⁷⁵⁴ Alan Bass, Introduction, *Writing and Difference*, xiv.

Chapter V: The Adventure of Philosophy

I. Introduction

From the shattered fragments of the absolute book, a new notion of philosophy emerges in postwar France which rejects the teleology of Hegelian idealism and treats philosophy as an *adventure* of thought. An adventure is a break from the ordinary, its course is unpredictable, its conclusion unknown, and it carries danger and risk. Rethinking philosophy as an adventure reorients its objectives and methods, and it fractures its principal object, the monolithic book of absolute knowledge. Adventure undermines the neat separation of fiction and fact, revealing the latent narrative structure and the textuality which cannot be separated from the world of lived experience. For the generation of thinkers who emerged amidst the rebellious fervor of the 1960s, criticism of Hegel's teleological vision of history demanded a reconsideration of philosophy and its relation to reason. This reassessment of philosophy as adventure initiates a turn to literature, and as a reconsideration of the formal and methodological constraints of philosophical inquiry.

The focus on adventure captures a certain air of the times: it marks a rejection of the formal academism and a rethinking of the relation between theory and practice during the tumultuous years of the 1960s. In *the Adventure of French Philosophy*, Alain Badiou describes his generation of French philosophers who emerged in the 1960s as "adventurers of the concept":

But the French philosophical moment was more interested in greatness than in happiness. We wanted something quite unusual, and admittedly problematic: our desire was to be adventurers of the concept. We were not seeking a clear separation between life and concept, nor the subordination of existence to the idea or the norm. Instead, we wanted the concept itself to be a journey whose destination we did not necessarily know. The epoch of adventure is, unfortunately, generally followed by an epoch of order. This may be understandable - there was a piratical side to this philosophy, or a nomadic one, as Deleuze

would say. Yet 'adventurers of the concept' might be a formula that could unite us all; and thus I would argue that what took place in late twentieth-century France was ultimately a moment of philosophical adventure.⁷⁵⁵

Badiou describes his generation as “adventurers of the concept,” a philosophical approach which overwhelms the distinctions between concept and experience, life and work, philosophy and non-philosophy. Against the rigid determinations which divide philosophy according to its traditional conceptual domains – metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, logic – Badiou’s generation sought to reinvent philosophy in such a manner that broke down these traditional categories, extending the place of the philosopher beyond its traditional academic confines of metaphysics and epistemology, to further engage literature, politics, and ordinary experience in a new way. This adventure of philosophy knows no predetermined conceptual limitations, and it is not limited by preordained boundaries imposed by idealistic philosophy. These philosophers who emerged in the 1960s, these “adventurers of the concept,” endorsed a notion of philosophy as a journey that confronts the unknown, unbound by the conventions of philosophy’s past.⁷⁵⁶

Edmond Jabès, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida are three such “adventurers of the concept,” who reflect on the relation of textuality and lived experience in the book as a kind of adventure. For these writers, the book is not the site of absolute knowledge, but rather an articulation of the unpredictable and fractured path of philosophical thought, which is inseparable

⁷⁵⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012), lxii.

⁷⁵⁶ The conception of philosophy as adventure has also inspired substantial criticism. In Gianni Vattimo’s *The Adventures of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), he writes “the new thinking envisaged by Nietzsche with his proclamation of the superman may also be regarded as a kind of 'adventure of difference,’”(2) but he asserts that philosophers including Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida have not furthered the concept of difference, but rather, “this discourse was symptomatic and indicative of the decline of difference.” (138) Vattimo suggests a return to Heideggerian thinking of the “ontological difference” can offer a useful curative to the self-extinguishing adventure of difference as “an authentic future for thinking.” (138) He also employs the rhetoric of adventure to qualify the philosophical reflection associated with this generation of thinkers. Of course, not all the “adventures” of philosophy are from the political left. Bernard-Henri Lévy’s *Adventures on the Freedom Road: French Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (London: Harvill Press, 1995) is a thoroughly ideological account of 20th century French philosophy which pits itself against Marxism, which he paints with a particularly broad brush.

from literature. Even in their divergences, Levinas, Derrida, and Jabès' reflections on the "adventure" of philosophy oppose the teleology of Hegelian idealism, and embrace unpredictability and incalculability. The critique of philosophical idealism rejects the model of knowledge endowed in the absolute book, and they seek out the incalculability of adventure. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas reproaches philosophy's faith in the supremacy of thought: "the transcendence of thought remains closed in itself despite all its adventures."⁷⁵⁷ The philosophy of totality edifies the transcendence of thought, but this cuts off self-consciousness from encountering the thinking of otherness; Levinas suggests that philosophy must open itself up to the encounter with the radical alterity of the other, which he describes as a kind of adventure. Derrida describes in *Voice and Phenomenon* "the adventure of the metaphysics of presence"⁷⁵⁸ in the history of philosophy. If the history of metaphysics is an adventure, rather than the preordained outcome of the teleological movement of history, then philosophy must be understood as a story whose outcome remains uncertain. As he proclaims in "Structure, Sign, and Play," "in absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace."⁷⁵⁹ The movement of the trace is the adventurous foray into the incalculability of writing. Jabès describes the adventure of writing in his 1975 *Ça suit son cours* where he writes, "the gesture of writing is, in the first place, a gesture of the arm, of the hand engaged in an adventure whose sign is thirst."⁷⁶⁰ Between the hand holding the pen, and the blank page it confronts, writing marks the liminal space connecting the text and the world: "on one side the vocable, the work; on the other, the writer." For Jabès, the adventure of writing consists in the immixing of text and world,

⁷⁵⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27.

⁷⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 51 [*La voix et le phénomène*, (Paris: PUF, 1967), 57].

⁷⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 369 [427].

⁷⁶⁰ Edmond Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*, (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), 52.

and the unpredictable course of narrative. This chapter reconstructs Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas' dialogue on the adventure of thought in their major publications in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Adventure reorients philosophy's relation to the book: the book recounts the adventure of thought in movement in its pages, but this reformulation of philosophy is also an adventure *of* the book—it is an adventure that pertains to the phenomenology of reading, as well as a rethinking of the relation between the fiction of the book and the world of lived experience.

II. Reason contra Adventure

To describe a philosophical approach as an “adventure” has often been used to suggest a flight of fancy, a departure from reason, and an invitation for speculation. For others, adventure represents the vitality and daring of philosophy to fearlessly ask questions. Indeed, the opposing use of adventure as a term of praise or derision has a distinguished philosophical history. The value of adventure is the subject of a notable disagreement between Kant and Goethe regarding knowledge of the origins of life. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes the attempt to understand the origin of life through the purposiveness of nature as “a daring adventure of reason,”⁷⁶¹ for which human cognition is not equipped. For Kant, only a divine intellect capable of intuitive understanding could apprehend something in nature from the whole to its parts, “from the *synthetically universal* [...] to the particular” to determine its origins.⁷⁶² Human cognition is not capable of intuitive understanding, and to undertake a study of the origins of life on the basis of

⁷⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 288 [5:419].

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, 276 [5:407].

sensible intuitions would be a misunderstanding of the limits of human cognition, and it would imply a fanciful misuse of reason. On this point, Goethe strongly disagrees with Kant, provoking him to respond in an introduction to a new, though ultimately abandoned *Metamorphosis of Plants: Second Attempt*. Goethe describes his unrelenting “pursuit of the archetypal,” for which “nothing could keep me from courageously plunging myself into the *adventure of reason*, as the sage of Königsberg himself has called it.”⁷⁶³ The value of adventure is at stake in this disagreement. Where for Kant adventure represents an overstretch of the limits of human reason, Goethe embraces adventure as the daring pursuit of the unknown. Is adventure antithetical to the sound use of reason, or is adventure a matter of audacity and daring? The question of adventure cleaves along similar lines for Edmund Husserl, who echoes Kant’s refusal to engage in adventures of reason when he insists in his 1931 *Cartesian Meditations* that “phenomenology’s purely intuitive, concrete, and also apodictic mode of demonstration excludes all ‘metaphysical adventure,’ all speculative excesses.”⁷⁶⁴ The “metaphysical adventure” which Husserl decries as too speculative for phenomenological description suggests an irreconcilable conflict between reason and adventure.

Challenging those who decry adventure as an invitation for speculation, there exists a counter-tradition that embraces philosophy’s adventurous spirit. The emblematic figure of this

⁷⁶³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Schriften zur Naturwissenschaft* Leopoldina Edition (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger 1947) I, 9:95–96, *Goethes Werke* (Hamburger Ausgabe), Ed. Erich Trunz. 14th ed. (München: C. H. Beck, 1989), 13:30–31. See also: Eckhart Förster, *The Twenty Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 166-168.

⁷⁶⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), §60 / 139. See also Derrida’s commentary in “Form and Meaning” in *Margins of Philosophy*, where he argues that Husserl’s desire to eliminate metaphorical language from phenomenological description is ultimately bound to recreate a layer of metaphorical meaning that exceeds pure logical description: “The essence or *telos* of language here are determined as logical; that, as in the *Investigations*, the theory of discourse reduces the considerable mass of whatever is not purely *logical* in language to an *extrinsic value*. A metaphor itself betrays the difficulty of this first reduction; this difficulty is the very one which will call for new formulations and new distinctions at the end of the section. It only will have been deferred and led elsewhere...[...] the *interweaving* (*Verwebung*) of language, the interweaving of that which is purely language in language with the other threads of experience constitutes a cloth.” Derrida, “Form and Meaning,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The Harvester Press, 1982), 170 [“La forme et le vouloir-dire,” *Marges de la philosophie*, 191].

anti-rationalist attitude is Friedrich Nietzsche, who wholeheartedly embraces philosophy as adventure. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche describes the philosopher's need "to experience the most manifold and contradictory states of joy and distress in soul and body, as adventurers and circumnavigators of that inner world called 'man'."⁷⁶⁵ Likewise, as he writes in *Ecce Homo*, "when I call up the image of a perfect reader, what emerges is a monster of courage and curiosity, who is also supple, clever, cautious, a born adventurer and discoverer."⁷⁶⁶ Nietzsche applauds the boldness of the adventurous reader, who has the courage to seek out the unknown and take risks beyond calculated decisions. This adventurous character has been snuffed out of human beings by modern society, which refuses to admit such animal instincts in civilized men. By contrast, the adventurer's spirit is epitomized by his hero Zarathustra, whose own philosophical reflections takes the form of an adventure. In the chapter entitled "On Science" in the final part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's hero decries the loss of humanity's courage for adventure. This animal instinct has been replaced by the herd-like power of fear:

Fear you see – is our exception. But courage and adventure and pleasure in uncertainty, in what is undared – *courage* seems to me humanity's whole prehistory. He envied and robbed the wildest, most courageous animals of all their virtues: only thus did he become – human.⁷⁶⁷

Out of fear, humanity has repressed its courage for adventure to become the docile human beings adapted to modern society; Nietzsche identifies the desire for adventure with the "Dionysian" element of human beings, along with their carnal, erotic, and animal drives, by contrast with the "Apollonian" drives for reason, morality, and ruling structure. Indeed, as David B. Allison describes the philosopher's work in *The New Nietzsche*, "it is an adventure, then, with an urgency

⁷⁶⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), I, 'Preface', 7.

⁷⁶⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, translated by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), §3, 103.

⁷⁶⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrien Del Carno (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 246.

that is, strictly speaking, *unheard of*.”⁷⁶⁸ The adventurous quality that Nietzsche cheers in philosophy stands in contrast to Kant’s broad dismissal of metaphysical adventures. Whether adventure is an expression of speculative folly or the courage to confront the unknown, it embodies values pertaining to the purpose of philosophy itself: is philosophy defined by the cultivation of reason in concepts and systems, or is it rather characterized by the irrepressible curiosity to seek out the unknown? Whereas rationalist philosophy relegates adventure to the domain of literature, Nietzsche declares the philosopher an adventurer who courageously faces the unknown.

The exceptional and unpredictable character of adventure is emblematic of a certain modernism. In Georg Simmel’s 1910 essay “The Philosophy of Adventure,” the German sociologist and philosopher sketches the formal aspects of adventure, whose most general feature is its interruption of ordinary life: an adventure insists on “dropping out of the continuity of life,”⁷⁶⁹ marking an interruption in the continuous thread of the adventurer’s life. Simmel explains, “adventure stands in contrast to that interlocking of life-links, to that feeling that those counter-currents, turnings, and knots still, after all, spin forth a continuous thread.”⁷⁷⁰ An adventure is a part of one’s life, yet it also constitutes a break from everyday experience, it is “the exclave of life, the ‘torn-off,’” “like an island in life which determines its beginning and end according to its own formative powers and not like the part of a continent also according to those of adjacent territories.”⁷⁷¹ The logic of adventure functions apart from ordinary life, it has a coherency which offers its own meaning, yet it is also the adventure that gives meaning to ordinary life. Adventure has no necessary content, it is rather a “*form of experiencing*.”⁷⁷² For Simmel, adventure has two

⁷⁶⁸ David B. Allison, *The New Nietzsche* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985), ix.

⁷⁶⁹ Georg Simmel, “The Adventure,” *Simmel On Culture : Selected Writings Theory, Culture & Society* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 222.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 222.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid*, 228; 223.

⁷⁷² *Ibid*, 229.

formal conditions. First, an adventure must have narrative coherency, with “a specific organization of some significant meaning with a beginning and an end.”⁷⁷³ Second, the adventure must express a kind of necessity for the adventurer. An adventure does not occur simply by chance, rather “transcending, by a mysterious necessity, life's more narrowly rational aspects,” the call to adventure takes the allure of necessity in connection with one’s life, even if the source of the calling is unknown. On both points, the meaning of the adventure depends on the perspective of the adventurer, which comprises “a particular encompassing of the accidentally external by the internally necessary.”⁷⁷⁴ The adventurer confronts a series of events which find coherence and necessity for him or her; for an external observer, the connection between the events may appear haphazard, even illusory. Don Quixote’s battles with windmills dramatize this all too well: adventure is construed subjectively, and the source of its calling, like its outcome, is unknown.

Undertaking an adventure is akin to viewing a work of art: it is an experience that is of this world, yet it is also a gateway to another. Like the work of art, adventure is cut off from ordinary life, but it can illuminate the meaning of one’s entire life. In this sense, Simmel suggests the desire for adventure is illustrative of a certain modernism. The acute awareness of temporal passage, the intensification of the present moment, and the desire to escape the mundane experience of the everyday are illustrative of the modernist attention to subjective experience and temporality. Nonetheless, “so much of life is hostile to adventure.”⁷⁷⁵ Everyday life is organized by mundane decisions and predictable outcomes which lend a semblance of coherence to the logic of one’s life. The urge to escape the banality of the everyday, to unlock the sublime power of the present moment, is at the heart of the interest in adventure. One might go as far as to qualify life itself as

⁷⁷³ Ibid, 224.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid, 225.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid, 230.

a kind of adventure. Simmel writes, “to have such a remarkable attitude toward life, one must sense above its totality a higher unity, a super-life.”⁷⁷⁶ Life can be understood as an adventure only with regards to a higher order of existence, from which the adventure of life would serve as an interruption: it beckons what Simmel calls “a metaphysical order,” of which “earthly, conscious life is only an isolated fragment as compared to the unnamable context of an existence running its course in it.” This belief in existence beyond life takes many forms, but it “merely expresses the running together, in life, of the symptoms of adventure.” Conceived as an adventure, life takes the form of a coherent narrative, whose twists and turns are directed towards the fulfilment of a goal or objective. Simmel writes, “adventure appears admixed with all practical human existence,” and “every single experience contains a modicum of [...] adventure.”⁷⁷⁷ Unlocking the adventure of the everyday is the quintessential modernist experience of escape from the mundane. For Proust, the taste and smell of a madeleine sends his narrator on an adventure through time back to memories of his grandmother; Joyce’s *Ulysses* relives Homer’s epic adventures in one day through the streets of Dublin. The adventure of the everyday illustrates the heightening of time consciousness, the intensification of the present, and the incalculability of the future. Simmel continues, “the philosopher is the adventurer of the spirit,” calling upon fate and freedom to confront uncertain events with “the typical fatalism of the adventurer.”

Vladimir Jankélévich expands on Simmel’s analysis in his 1963 *L’aventure, l’ennui, le sérieux*, emphasizing the temporality of adventure as a relation to the future. Laure Barillas, Pierre-Alban Guinfolleau, and Frédéric Worms explain, “for Jankélévitch, what anguishes the subject is the – often banal – coming [*avènement*] of what will happen to him with certainty, but he ignores what it will really be: he knows that something new will happen, but he doesn’t know what this

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid, 225.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid, 230-23.

novelty is.”⁷⁷⁸ Viewed as a relation to an uncertain future, he operates “a conceptual displacement in his definition of adventure,” which is no longer a “category of action, polarized by its twists and turns [*péripiéties*], but becomes a disposition towards being in time, oriented towards the future.” To this end, Jankélévitch distinguishes the *aventurier*, the adventurer, and the *aventureux*, the adventurous person. The adventurer is a “professional adventurer,” whose interest in adventure is a means to an end, “a bourgeois who cheats at the bourgeois game”; by contrast, the adventurous person typifies “a style of life” with a specific disposition towards the future.⁷⁷⁹ These two forms of adventure are qualitatively different, engendering different existential dispositions.

Jankélévitch describes the minimal unit of adventure, which he calls “the infinitesimal adventure” or “elementary adventure,” as essentially a relation to future possibilities: adventure concerns the future, but what precisely the future has in store is crucially unknown. He notes “the amphibolic, ambiguous, equivocal character of adventure” which is crucial for its articulation. Echoing Goethe’s adoption of the “adventure of reason,” Jankélévitch emphasizes its incalculability. Kant describes amphiboly in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as “a confounding of an object of pure understanding with appearance.”⁷⁸⁰ Because an adventure never divulges its outcome in advance, the (subjective) appearance of adventure is bound to be blurred with the (objective) intelligible form of adventure. The amphiboly is produced by confusing the appearance of an adventure with the ultimate fulfillment of the adventure, which can only be judged retroactively. Adventure depends on this amphiboly: it is precisely the impossibility of knowing

⁷⁷⁸ Laure Barillas, Pierre-Alban Guinfolleau, Frédéric Worms, *L'Aventure, l'Ennui, le Sérieux*. (Paris: Flammarion, 2017). Kindle Edition, Presentation.

⁷⁷⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Aventure, l'Ennui, le Sérieux*, ch 1.

⁷⁸⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A270=B326. Kant explains that amphiboly can occur by mistaking sensible impressions for the object of the understanding, such as Leibniz who treats all representation as the product of conceptual understanding, or amphiboly can result from mistaking the work of the understanding for sensible perception, which Locke commits by viewing all knowledge as the product of the senses: “In a word, Leibniz *intellectualized* appearances, just as Locke ... *sensualised* all concepts of the understanding, *i.e.*, interpreted them as nothing more than empirical or abstracted concepts.” (*KRV*, A271=B327)

in advance whether the hero emerges victorious or if the adventure veers into tragedy which maintains the adventure. Jankélévitch explains, “the future is ambiguous because it is both certain and uncertain. What is certain is that the future will be, that a future will come [*advindra*]; but what it will be, this is what remains enveloped in the fog of uncertainty.” Adventure depends on this tension: once its outcome becomes certain, it is no longer an adventure. The *aventureux* maintains the same double relation to the future as Pascal’s reflection on infinity in his *Pensées*: “We know that the infinite exists without knowing its nature.”⁷⁸¹ Jankélévitch comments, “does not adventure suffer from the infinite? I know *that* [*que*], and I don’t know *what* [*quoi*]. The future is a *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Further: the infinitesimal adventure is connected to the coming of the event [*l’avènement de l’événement*].”⁷⁸² Whereas the adventurer calculates future events, the adventurous person responds to the uncertain-certainty of “coming of the event,” with free improvisation:

The event [*événement*] is only a date on the calendar; but its coming [*l’avènement*] is felt like the “Advent” of a mystery. The event comes too late for adventure: I am face to face and nose to nose with it, and it is no longer the time to courageously face up to this flagrant present. Rather, the coming is the pending instant [*l’avènement est l’instant en instance*]: not actuality in the making, nor is it made progressively, but still on the brink of the making [...] adventure is connected to the extemporaneity of improvisation.

Adventure is not limited to an interruptive and extraordinary form of experience, rather the existential disposition of the adventurous person is oriented to confront the uncertain possibilities of the future with freedom and improvisation at any moment. “Such is the *aventure-minute*,” Jankélévitch writes, “the minuscule adventure of the next minute, which maintains the unpredictable instant of the pending minute, and which makes the heart beat.” The *aventureux* responds to the incalculability of the “coming of the event” with creativity and improvisation.

⁷⁸¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), §418 [Brunschvieg §233].

⁷⁸² Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’Aventure, l’Ennui, le Sérieux*, ch 1.

“The vertiginous passion of adventure” is always divided between opposing motivations: while the adventurous person encounters risks and dangers with “timidity at the precipice of novelty,” he or she is also drawn to adventure by “the crazed desire to profane a secret, to decrypt the mystery of the future.” For the subject of the adventure, “sometimes the heroic desire for peril, war, and catastrophe predominates,” and “sometimes horror blocks the desire.” Between attraction and horror, adventure involves an “oscillation of consciousness between play and seriousness,” without which “adventure ceases to be adventurous.” Without play, adventure descends into tragedy; without seriousness, adventure becomes trite. The tension nourishes the adventure. Similarly, adventure also requires an inside and an outside perspective: inside from the perspective of the subject of the adventure, and outside from the perspective of an audience. “The *aventureux* is inside-outside,” Jankélévitch explains, “Make of that what you can!” [*Comprenne qui pourra!*] Three species of adventure emerge from these relations. First, mortal adventure involves the threat of death. It is more internal than external, more serious than playful, and it is always on the cusp of become tragedy. “Death is the precious spice of adventure,” without some fear of death, there can be no risk or danger, and thus no stakes for adventure. Second, the aesthetic adventure “has for its center not death, but beauty, which is the object of Art.” The aesthetic adventure is more external than internal, it involves the predominance of play over the serious aspect of adventure, and rather than an experience lived in the moment, it is “an adventure contemplated after the fact when it is finished.” The aesthetic adventure takes shape in its retelling. Jankélévitch evokes Kierkegaard’s remark, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”⁷⁸³ The narrative cogency of adventure is formed retroactively in its retelling, which lends aesthetic

⁷⁸³ Jankélévitch quotes a shortened version of the quotation: “it is really true what philosophy tells us, that life must be understood backwards. But with this, one forgets the second proposition, that it must be lived forwards.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Journalen* JJ:167 (1843), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, Copenhagen, 1997, volume 18, page 306.

form to the inchoate flux of present experience. Third, the amorous adventure is a sublime mix of serious and playful, internal and external, it is “extravital, extraterritorial, extraordinary.” Reminiscent of Simmel’s description of adventure as “an island in life,”⁷⁸⁴ Jankélévitch’s amorous adventure is a “joyous island, a parenthesis that is without relation to life as a whole.”⁷⁸⁵ In all its forms, adventure is “always precarious,” constantly at risk of veering off course and “losing its adventurous character.” This precariousness sustains its risk and thrill.

The philosophical interest in adventure is motivated by a desire to understand our perennial sense that we are on the cusp of the coming, *avènement*, of a changed future. The religious overtone of Jankélévitch’s *avènement* is no accident. The temporal disposition towards the “coming of the event” parallels the relation to revelation in the Abrahamic religions, it has the same formal structure as messianism:

It sometimes seems that we are living in a period of advent [*avènement*]: our epoch gives us the impression that we are leaning into the future. “Vers le monde qui vient”... isn’t this the title of a book by Edmond Fleg? We often write that events happen quickly, that the time comes, that the time has come, that the time is close, that we are in the Advent of a mystical celebration where everything will be resolved. It is true that people have always said these things. Since we announced the premises of the coming and the approach of time, how is the time not yet here? The two Writings, The Old and the New, the Prophets and the Gospel, announce the nascent dawn and the imminence of a great event. Ἐρχόμενος ἔξει, *veniens veniet*. Ἰδοὺ ἔρχεται, *ecce venit* : God is almost present, not yet, but almost!

The belief in the *almost* or *nearly* is crucial in religion as in politics as the basic anticipatory structure of messianism, whether it is the coming revelation or revolution. It maintains the belief that the present is nearly the moment of rupture, where a coming event will shatter the *status quo*. That the present is always-already on the cusp of a future event – the coming of a messianic event that is “almost-already” here – discloses the temporality of the religious adventure of a partially hidden God who promises to reveal himself further in a future moment to come. This God,

⁷⁸⁴ Georg Simmel, “The Adventure,” 223.

⁷⁸⁵ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’Aventure, l’Ennui, le Sérieux*, ch 1.

Jankélévitch explains, is “half hidden, *ferè absconditus*.” This adventure of revelation is shared by the Abrahamic traditions, but the reference to Jewish scholar Edmond Fleg is noteworthy. Fleg was a poet, playwright, and scholar, and he was a co-founder of the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française*, where Jankélévitch was a regular participant; his 1960 book *Vers le monde qui vient* offered a message of hope for building a bridge between Jewish and Christian communities – a new adventure of the Abrahamic religions – after the Shoah.⁷⁸⁶ Emphasizing the homologous structure of the religious adventure alongside its literary and philosophical variants, Jankélévitch rejects the Greek tradition’s monopoly on adventure, and suggests that *any* experience has the potential to become adventure. By introducing fantasy and uncertainty into lived experience, adventure forces us to consider the possibility of a changed future:

The evasions of adventure help us discover pathos, drama, and passion in an existence that is over-regulated by economic and social fatalities and the compartmentalization of urban life. Adventure, which introduces pathetic tension and fantasy into existence, reminds us that social barriers are fluid: it equalizes the inferior and superior, brings together the unequal, erases distances, upends hierarchies, softens an overly rigid notion of justice; thanks to adventure, shepherds can marry ambassadors.

Adventure insists on the inexorable possibility of the unexpected, it forces us to expand our expectations of how the world could be otherwise. The *aventureux* confronts the certain-uncertainty of the future with creativity and ingenuity.

The question of adventure enables Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir to explore the possibilities of truth and fiction in the philosophical novel. Certain phenomena are only accessible through literary exploration, as a different modality of the adventure of thought. In Beauvoir’s

⁷⁸⁶ Fleg died in the fall of 1963. Levinas’ *Difficult Freedom* contains a short essay on Fleg’s 1933 *Jesus Narrated by the Wandering Jew*: “His wandering Jew bears the mark of this world which had disappeared and is being reborn. But as he is free of all the conventional characteristics of allegory, he is marvellously alive. His irony, which is that of a man who has returned from everything, for he has walked a great deal, expresses an experience that is outside Evil - profound, maybe, but outside. He speaks like a character out of Shalom Aleichem. This narrator constitutes the work’s great success. The book is important because it speaks of the wandering Jew and his great adventure, his refusal to accept Christianity. But it is important above all because this refusal begins at a very early moment.” Emmanuel Levinas, “A New Version of *Jesus Narrated by the Wandering Jew* by Edmond Fleg,” *Difficult Freedom*, 103-104.

1945 essay “Literature and Metaphysics,” she identifies the ability of the “metaphysical novel” to evoke certain ideas which are inaccessible to traditional philosophy. Whereas philosophical systems construct knowledge based on fixed concepts and axioms, literature can access a thicker mode of description without a preconceived conclusion. Beauvoir writes, “the novel will appear as an authentic adventure of the mind.”⁷⁸⁷ Systematic philosophy is incompatible with the novel because it understands the world through preconceived concepts that telegraph the meaning of phenomena; the appeal of the philosophical novel stems directly from its adventure, whose uncertain outcome is only revealed in the telling. Beauvoir continues, “One renounces the philosophical novel if one defines philosophy as a fully constituted, self-sufficient system. Indeed, the adventure of the mind is lived out in the course of the building of the system.” The unpredictable fate of the adventurer contrasts with the fixed destiny of the Hegelian sage who must sacrifice himself for the absolute book. The philosophical novel calls upon the “adventure of the mind,” freeing it from the fatalism of the concept, following the adventure wherever it may lead.

The possibility of adventure is the central question in Sartre’s *Nausea*. When he initially submitted the novel to Gallimard, his editors considered the title inadequate, and suggested renaming it *The Extraordinary Adventures of Antoine Roquentin*, with a notice below that would state, in contradiction, “There are no adventures.”⁷⁸⁸ While this alternative title was ultimately rejected, it indicates the dual face of adventure in Sartre’s novel. Roquentin has settled in Bouville to write a history thesis about 18th century adventurer M. de Rollebon, only to realize that his life has been devoid of real adventures. For Roquentin, the difference between adventure and mere memories lies in the telling: “you have to choose: live or tell.”⁷⁸⁹ One can perceive the inchoate

⁷⁸⁷ Simone de Beauvoir “Literature and Metaphysics,” *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Veronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 272.

⁷⁸⁸ See: Richard Howard, *Nausea*, (New York: New Directions, 1964), Kindle, Foreword.

⁷⁸⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*.

events of life as part of the continuum of experience, or one can tell a story. The retelling of an ordinary event as if it were a story, indeed a true story, can transform anything into an adventure. “This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales,” Roquentin writes, “he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.” One can choose to remember the drab events of the past, or to construct the edifice of adventure. There is a teleology of storytelling: the framing of the tale determines its conclusion from its beginning, and from there “the story goes on in the reverse.” But to reconstruct the well-ordered coherency of one’s life based on events as they were experienced, “you might as well try and catch time by the tail.” Sartre’s protagonist realizes the thrill of adventure has little to do with events, but stems from an awareness of temporal passage:

This feeling of adventure definitely does not come from events: I have proved it. It’s rather the way in which the moments are linked together. I think this is what happens: you suddenly feel that time is passing, that each instant leads to another, this one to another one, and so on; that each instant is annihilated, and that it isn’t worth while to hold it back, etc., etc. And then you attribute this property to events which appear to you *in* the instants; what belongs to the form you carry over to the content. You talk a lot about this amazing flow of time but you hardly see it. You see a woman, you think that one day she’ll be old, only you don’t see her grow old. But there are moments when you think you *see* her grow old and feel yourself growing old with her: this is the feeling of adventure. If I remember correctly, they call that the irreversibility of time. The feeling of adventure would simply be that of the irreversibility of time.

Roquentin’s nausea overtakes him, awakening him to the absurdity of own existence, and the contingency of the objects in the world around him. This adventure is the experience of temporality: it is not his travels, but his nausea which awakens the sense of adventure that he had desperately sought. In a moment of meta-fictional admission, Roquentin writes, “the word absurdity is coming to life under my pen.” The adventure is his nausea, which allows him to articulate the absurdity of existence that evades the philosopher’s pen. James Wood explains, “Sartre uses the fictionality of his fiction to ask us to reflect on the fictionality — or at least, the

arbitrariness — of reality itself.”⁷⁹⁰ The novel ends when Roquentin abandons his thesis and decides to write a novel, “something that could never happen, an adventure,” which would “beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence.”⁷⁹¹ In this sense, *Nausea* is ultimately a novel about writing a novel – *this* novel. The transformation of the ineffable philosophical notions of absurdity, contingency, and fictionality into the “adventure of the mind” unlocks the philosopher from the yoke of the concept, and unleashes the adventure of the book—this is the adventure Roquentin uncovers sitting on a park bench contemplating a chestnut tree.

Adventure also describes the unpredictable twists and turns of the history of philosophy, in contrast to the teleological movement of Hegelian history. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s 1955 book *Adventures of the Dialectic* stakes a philosophy of experience on the basis of political philosophy, by retracing the historical development of the concept of the dialectic through its developments in the previous century. Merleau-Ponty diagnoses the failure of the dialectic to reap its promised rewards in the concrete facts of history. “Revolutionary politics proclaimed synthesis as its immediate goal,” he writes, “The dialectic was going to appear in concrete facts. Revolution was the *sublime moment* in which reality and values, subject and object, judgment and discipline, individual and totality, present and future, instead of colliding, would little by little enter into complicity.”⁷⁹² That moment has not come, and the hopes that dialectic will reveal itself in the facts of the world seems unlikely. To “bring this liquidation of the revolutionary dialectic to its conclusion,” Merleau-Ponty proposes “the adventures of the dialectic [...] are errors through which it must pass.”⁷⁹³ The teleological movement of the dialectic is ultimately more fiction than

⁷⁹⁰ James Wood, *Nausea*, Introduction.

⁷⁹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*.

⁷⁹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, translated by Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), 7.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid*, 204.

reality, a fever that will eventually pass. Post-Marxist scholars have extended the trajectory traced by Merleau-Ponty's *Adventure of the Dialectic*, including Martin Jay's *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* or Warren Breckman's *Adventures of the Symbolic*.⁷⁹⁴ Similarly, in his analysis of the theological-political stakes of democratic societies and the "adventure of their disintrication" from religion, Claude Lefort cautions against "any new adventure that begins with the formulation of a new idea of the state, the people, the nation or humanity is that it has its roots in the past."⁷⁹⁵ Such an adventure anchored in the past, like Odysseus' *nostos*, can only seek to return to its origin, rather than facing the alterity of the Other.

III. Jabès, Derrida, and "Feux des mots"

Derrida's three major 1967 publications interrogate the adventure of philosophy. "Force and Signification," the first essay in *Writing and Difference*, provocatively begins with an anticipatory *post-mortem* for structuralism. From the perspective of the future anterior in which structuralism *will have already* met its end, he foresees the legacy of the structuralist moment will have been not a discrete set of innovations or concepts, but rather an "adventure in vision":

If it recedes one day, leaving behind its works and signs on the shores of our civilization, the structuralist invasion might become a question for the historian of ideas, or perhaps even an object. But the historian would be deceived if he came to this pass: by the very act of considering the structuralist invasion as an object he would forget its meaning and would forget that what is at stake, first of all, is an adventure of vision, a conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us, to historical objects—his own—in

⁷⁹⁴ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁷⁹⁵ Claude Lefort, "Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 255.

particular. And, unexpectedly among these, the literary object.⁷⁹⁶

It is rather daring to begin one of his first major publications by predicting the demise of structuralism at the height of its popularity. Imagining a future in which structuralism has met its end, Derrida posits that structuralism should not be understood as a historical object which yielded discrete inventions or events as its legacy. This would betray the true legacy of structuralism as an “adventure in vision.” The structuralist adventure consists in a change in perspectives, “a conversion of the way of putting questions,” rather than leaving as its legacy a discrete historical object to be discovered as a kind of material or conceptual relic. This “adventure in vision” reorients language and the limits of semiology. Similarly, in “Structure, Sign, and Play,” he describes the play of presence and absence in the text as “the *seminal* adventure of the trace.”⁷⁹⁷ In this register, adventure suggest a shift in perspective to a new thinking of writing as the trace, embracing the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the linguistic sign and its signification.

Derrida employs adventure in a second register to describe the enduring illusions or fictions in the history of philosophy. In “Cogito and the History of Madness,” published in *Révue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1964 and the second essay in *Writing and Difference*, he describes “the adventure of Western reason” and “the adventure or misadventure of classical reason” that has marginalized the discourse of madness.⁷⁹⁸ In *Voice and Phenomenon*, Derrida identifies the history and meaning of the classical notion of the sign which belongs to “the adventure of the metaphysics of presence.”⁷⁹⁹ Similarly, he writes in *Of Grammatology*, “the history of metaphysics is the history of a determination of being as presence,” and “its adventure merges with that of

⁷⁹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” *Writing and Difference*, 1.

⁷⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” *Writing and Difference*, 369.

⁷⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” *Writing and Difference*, 41, 50.

⁷⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 51 [57].

logocentrism.”⁸⁰⁰ For Derrida, the “logocentric” domination of the spoken over the written word has reached its point of exhaustion and become untenable: it is an adventure that has reached its closure. The belief that human language is only a moment or aspect of natural writing is a fiction which dissimulates by “*willfully misleading us*, only in the course of an adventure: as that adventure itself. All in all a short enough adventure.”⁸⁰¹ Reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s use of adventure as the historical or narrative trajectory of a concept, this historical adventure is a kind of fiction that has outlasted its usefulness. Derrida works through these philosophical adventures by retracing their paths, exposing their missteps, and indicating how they could have gone otherwise. In both registers, his notion of adventure suggests the historical arc of ideas rather than eternal platonic truths, the temporality of concepts under erasure.

The second wave of publications in 1972 further develop Derrida’s adventure of philosophy. His essay “Différance” in *Margins of Philosophy* opens by recounting the adventure of a letter: “I will speak, therefore, of a letter. Of the first letter, if the alphabet, and most of the speculations which have adventured in it [*qui s’y sont aventurées*].”⁸⁰² The adventure of “différance” divulges the incalculability and unpredictability of writing, beginning with the deconstruction of difference itself as *différance*. Jabès writes of Derrida’s essay, “in the word *différance*, a letter, its seventh, is exchanged against the first in the alphabet, in secret, silently. And that is enough for the text to be other.”⁸⁰³ Echoing Jankélévitch’s *aventureux* who is oriented by the “coming of the event,” Derrida writes that “in the delineation of *différance* everything is strategic and adventurous,” where one follows the uncertain and risky future of the trace:

Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple

⁸⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 97 [145].

⁸⁰¹ Ibid, 8 [18].

⁸⁰² Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, 3. Translation modified.

⁸⁰³ Edmond Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*, 58.

strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field. Finally, a strategy without finality, what might be called blind tactics or empirical wandering if the value of empiricism did not itself acquire its entire meaning in its opposition to philosophical responsibility. If there is a certain wandering in the tracing of *différance*, it no more follows the lines of philosophical-legal discourse than that of its symmetrical and integral inverse, empirical-logical discourse. The concept of *play* keeps itself beyond this opposition, announcing, on the eve of philosophy and beyond it, the unity of chance and the necessity in calculation without end.⁸⁰⁴

The trace of *différance* is adventurous because it implies the play of presence and absence without a predetermined ending; the incalculability of the adventure must be approached strategically.

Jabès describes the weaving of his life and writing in terms of an adventure. He explained in a 1986 interview, “for me writing is the adventure to live. And I live it as writing. I myself become a word, a phrase, and what the phrase say, they say it to me too.”⁸⁰⁵ The adventure of writing is the inmixing of fiction and lived experience. In a 1985 interview, Jabès expressed his desire to “disappear from the world of spoken sense and all its presumptions” and “enter into the adventure of writing.”⁸⁰⁶ Didier Cahen explains that Jabès’ adventure responds to the shadow of the Shoah, as an expression of the need to speak the unspeakable:

In the 1960s, *Le Livre des questions* seemed to attract the avant-garde, by privileging a certain air of the times. In truth, the adventure that carries him and the experience that takes over him have little to do with so-called experimental literature. In fact, in the broken narrative between two adolescents, the shadow of the Shoah hovers over all its pages; but with a perfectly measured distance of words which must relearn to speak, *to speak otherwise than by speaking*, since it is also a certain adventure of meaning and the letter, an experience of time and being which almost perished in the death camps. This is the heart of the adventure which requires authentic formal un-discipline; thus its fragmentary, polymorphous, elliptical aspect: a new life of the book beyond the worst transgressions [“*compromissions*”] of meaning and reason.⁸⁰⁷

⁸⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, 7.

⁸⁰⁵ Edmond Jabès and Jason Weiss, “An Interview with Edmond Jabès” 159.

⁸⁰⁶ Edmond Jabès, “The Question of Jewishness and the Question of Writing: An Exchange with Edmond Jabès,” 17.

⁸⁰⁷ Didier Cahen, *A livre ouvert* (Paris: Hermann, 2013), 112.

More than simply following the literary trends of the avant-garde, the fracturing of experience in Jabès' writing responds to the utter breakdown in reason and meaning revealed by the Shoah. The adventure of *The Book of Questions* consists of the writing of the unspeakable, it is the adventure of writing that responds to an experience that threatened to extinguish meaning itself.

The adventurous quality of Jabès' writing is a function of its uncertain narrative course. Where the philosopher traditionally writes a text with the aim of lassoing a predetermined concept, Jabès' writing follows the opposite path, enabling the imagination to follow an uncharted path towards an uncertain destination:

The philosopher, when he writes a philosophical text, tries to circle the object of his thought, in making a concept perhaps, and then to develop it. While for me, this job of development is hidden, it's done inside me, and what is said is the end of all this development inside me. As if each time it was the last phrase, the last thing that remains from a long interrogation. That's how these aphorisms are presented, as in the process of thought, what has been kept, cancelled, kept, cancelled, and at the end one says the thing. Which is why thought itself is a dialogue, and these phrases are what is at the end of the dialogue. The theories one draws from my books are theories based on my practice of the text, and not on a general practice. One can take up the steps after, but not before. Before is the adventure.⁸⁰⁸

Rather than the philosopher whose pursuit of the concept orients the path of writing in advance of its destination, Jabès allows himself to be led by writing, from which the adventure unfolds. The adventure lies in the pre-theoretical moment of writing where the direction of the narrative remains uncertain. François Laruelle explains that Jabès' conception of writing is based on the immediacy of the creative spark: "the writer does not first have access to the book by the mediation of themes, objects, signifiers, figures, or images, he is immediately affected by the force that he experiences without delay, without distance, without postponement, without precaution, and which, by this haste, will add even more postponement and delay in the efficiency of the signified and the

⁸⁰⁸ Edmond Jabès, "An Interview with Edmond Jabès," 159.

signifier.”⁸⁰⁹ Jabès discloses the gripping immediacy of writing an uncertain future, his text is experienced both by the writer and reader as an adventure in the unpredictable.

Jabès positions his writing as the other of philosophy, by questioning its foundations and undercutting its concepts. In his published exchanges with Derrida and Levinas, he challenges the law of the text, by inhabiting the language of his philosophical interlocutor to fracture its conceptuality from within. Cahen describes Jabès’ dialogue with philosophers as “an essentially *non-thematic* relationship. More than the words in a speech, Jabès is attentive to the ways that life manages to be exposed to philosophy.”⁸¹⁰ His writing displaces the conceptual foundations of his philosophical interlocutors, challenging them to occupy a foreign ground. Thus, Cahen continues, “in the texts he consecrates to Derrida or Levinas, he plays the game of the other! As he must, the dialogue is not an exchange of positions, but a change of places.” Jabès’ unrelenting questioning submits philosophy to the quixotic dislocation on display throughout his writing. He addresses Levinas and Derrida in published texts in the 1970s by pushing their own words to the limit, and inhabiting their own positions against their authors: “it is to better ensure an improbable address that he deconstructs the letter he sends to Derrida. It is by citing Levinas *to the word* that he follows the trace of the other!” By positioning his writing as the other to philosophical discourse, Jabès disrupts its conceptual borders, and forces his interlocutors into occupying unfamiliar positions.

Adventure is at the forefront of Derrida’s readings of *Le Livre des Questions*. In “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” he describes the Jew’s existence in exile which forces him to seek refuge in history, by turning towards the possibilities endowed by the future. For the Jew, he writes, “The site is not the empirical and national Here of a territory. It is immemorial, and thus

⁸⁰⁹ François Laruelle, *Edmond Jabès : Les Cahiers Obsidiane no. 5*. (Paris: Obsidiane, 1982), 141.

⁸¹⁰ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, (Paris: Belfond, 1991), 80.

also a future. Better: it is tradition as adventure.”⁸¹¹ The Jew’s exile is transmuted as text, experienced as a as a kind of adventure, turned towards an uncertain future. Where Jabès evokes writing after the broken tablets of the law, Derrida comments, “once more begins the adventure of the text as weed, as outlaw far from ‘the fatherland of the Jews,’ which is ‘a sacred text surrounded by commentaries.’”⁸¹² The adventure of the text illustrates the Jew’s exile, like Jabès’ obsession with commentary, which is “the very form of exiled speech.” The condition of exile frames the history of the “people of the book” as an adventure of writing experienced in textuality. Jabès writes in *Le Retour au Livre*, “adventure is a property of words [*vertu du vocable*].”⁸¹³ The adventure of the book suggests its challenges are unforeseen, and its destination unknown. Against the fatalism of the absolute book whose ultimate object is nothing short of the totality of knowledge, the adventure reflects the text’s unpredictability and uncertainty. As Mallarmé writes, “Un coup de dès jamais n’abolira le hasard.” Adventure is always subject to the irrepressible play of chance, the possibility that the text does not lead down the expected road. “The joyous wandering of the *graphein* then became wandering without return,” Derrida writes in the opening passage of “Ellipse,” “the opening into the text was adventure, expenditure without reserve.”⁸¹⁴ The adventure of the text that develops in Derrida’s essay is played out in the opening of the book, the eternal return of the “boucle,” and the repetition of the book’s closure.

Following Jabès’ naturalization as a French citizen in December 1967, he and Arlette took advantage of their newfound security to travel, and to take a more politically engaged stance amidst the events of May 1968 in Paris. Their apartment on the rue *l’Epée-du-bois*, in heart of the Latin Quarter, was in the geographic center of the student uprisings that upended the city, and despite

⁸¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” 80 [101].

⁸¹² Ibid, 81 [102]; LQ 113

⁸¹³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 1, 329 [364].

⁸¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Ellipse,” 370 [429].

Jabès' seniority with regards to the student protesters, he took part in some of the key protests including the large protest on May 13 around the Sorbonne and Odéon. Cahen reports that Edmond and Arlette found in the protests an "undeniable echo of the aspirations for a change of era, which is translated by *Le Livre des Questions*."⁸¹⁵ Many of Jabès' elliptical and paradoxical expressions might well have been as slogans for the student protesters: we can imagine Jabès' formulations such as "Voici venu le temps de défendre notre parole" or "*Nous sommes liés par l'impossible*" alongside some of the famous protests slogans, "Soyons réalistes, demandons l'impossible" or "Sous les pavés la plage."⁸¹⁶ The students' demands surely resonated with Jabès' own brief and frustrating experience as a student at the Sorbonne, where he was put off by the institution's stuffy academism and formalism. He was impressed by the vitality of the student movement which raised similar complaints. During his frequent travels during the late 1960s, Jabès sent Derrida postcards from trips to Mallorca, Jerusalem, and Tunisia. This period also involved significant travel for Derrida. Following his spate of publications in 1967, he quickly gained notoriety in France and particularly in the United States, where he was invited to lecture and teach across the elite Northeastern university circuit in the late 1960s. He wrote postcards to Jabès from the Swiss Alps, Berlin, Venice, and the United States, including a 1968 postcard of Gilman Hall at Johns Hopkins University, where he touted the idyllic conditions he encountered in Baltimore.⁸¹⁷ By the early

⁸¹⁵ Didier Cahen, "Ecrire sa vie," *Portrait(s) d'Edmond Jabès*, ed. Steven Jaron (Paris: Bibliothèques Nationale de France, 1999), 48.

⁸¹⁶ Edmond Jabès, *Livre des Questions* I, 168, 224 [189, 254]: "Now is the time to defend our word"; "We are bound by the impossible"; "Be realistic, demand the impossible"; "under the pavement, the beach."

⁸¹⁷ On a postcard of Johns Hopkins' famed Gilman Hall dated October 10, 1968, Derrida wrote to Jabès of his first year teaching in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University: "Everything is off to a good start for now. A laborious life which is also calm, slow, silent. The house is big and pleasant. I work there in the morning, and go to the university in the afternoon by foot, since it is close by. Marguerite and the kids are also very happy." However, the rest of his United States tour would prove rather grueling. Derrida continues: "next week, the pace will change—the trips will start: New-York [...] Yale, Chicago, Buffalo, Washington, Providence, etc." At the end of an exhausting lecture tour of American universities, Derrida was left traumatized by a frighteningly turbulent flight from Baltimore to Boston, which left him in fear of flying for several years (Letter from Derrida to Jabès, Oct 10 1968, Fond Jabès, BNF). See also: Benoit Peeters, *Derrida*, 204.

1970s, Derrida's letters address "mon cher Eddie," and Jabès writes to "mon cher Jacques"; Arlette and Marguerite often added notes as well. Their friendship was profoundly connected to the written letter and travel, in a dialogue sustained for years in publications and correspondence.

Jabès prolonged *The Book of Questions* beyond its initial trilogy, and he published the subsequent volumes of the seven-part series in alternating years: *Yaël* in 1967, *Elya* in 1969, *Aely* in 1971, and *El, ou le dernier livre* in 1973. Derrida released "another tripartite Derridean biblioblitz" in 1972 with the publication of *Dissemination*, *Margins of Philosophy*, and *Positions*.⁸¹⁸ While Jabès and Derrida do not explicitly engage each other's work in this round of publications, the traces of their dialogue are widespread. Derrida wrote to Jabès after reading *Yaël*, reporting "c'était magnifique!"⁸¹⁹ He sent Jabès "The Double Session" before it appeared in *Tel Quel* in 1970, and the latter expressed his admiration for a "text which is so perfectly close to me":

What I find admirable in what you write is your thought, by default, seems to want to learn everything on its path. You know everything, but you forget everything while listening to the text, which raises your interrogation; interrogation which is already in any event which you will awaken in passing. We go along with you, behind you, from discovery to discovery. Writing is Eurydice – in this mourning, texts in particles – certain keys are hidden, which you use.⁸²⁰

If "writing is Eurydice," then to gaze directly upon her condemns her back to the underworld, rather it is the uncertainty of her presence that sustains Orpheus' adventure to rescue her. It is by taking risks that writing becomes adventure. In July 1971, Derrida wrote to Jabès, "I have just finished, more or less, the text that will open the collection (*Dissemination*) which will appear, I hope, next winter."⁸²¹ Jabès highlighted the collection's first essay "Hors-Livre," which he called "a great text which I 'meditated' at length (you know how close it is to me)," and he praised

⁸¹⁸ Barbara Johnson, *Dissemination*, vii.

⁸¹⁹ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Edmond Jabès, 10 Feb 1967, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁸²⁰ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 26 Janvier 1971, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁸²¹ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Edmond Jabès 9 July 1971, Fond Jabès, BNF.

Derrida's daring: "Your books trouble us and comfort us. They are now at the heart of your existential contemplations."⁸²² Derrida's audacity is that of the *aventureux*, who is attracted by the thrill and risk of adventure even as it inspires fear and dread.

This adventure was further developed in a series of publications in the 1970s. In his contribution to the winter 1972-1973 issue of *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* dedicated to Jabès' work, Derrida recalls fortuitously coming across *Le Livre des Questions*, "like a vault" which revealed "the unanticipatable"—a kind of Pandora's box, unleashing the adventure of writing which is "the most repressed, the most familiar, unbearably close and known, the most anticipated."⁸²³ This sympathetic view was, of course, mutual. Jabès wrote Derrida in September 1972, "my books owe you so much. You protected them across this difficult mortal path."⁸²⁴ For Derrida, unleashing the "vault" of Jabès' writing denudes an adventure where the question of writing is "gathered, speculated, staked, risked in advance in every atom of the book." Before structuralism was in vogue, before it had developed "its titles, its revues, its parades, its devalued currencies, its frustrated mimes and tics," Jabès had already made the question of writing the beating heart of his work. He describes the "aphoristic ruby" of Jabès' poetry where "the shining aphorism still hides, it only shines in simulacra." In a moment of glowing praise, Derrida proffers that in contemporary literature "nothing has been written that does not have its precedent somewhere in Jabès' text."⁸²⁵

Jabès wrote to express "how much your note touched me," and he responded in the issue of *L'Arc* on Derrida's work later that year.⁸²⁶ His contribution, "Lettre to Derrida on the Question of the Book," explicitly recalls Derrida's "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," placing

⁸²² Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 10 Avril 1972, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁸²³ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès Aujourd'hui," 56.

⁸²⁴ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 27 Sept 1972, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁸²⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès Aujourd'hui," 56.

⁸²⁶ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 14 Janvier 1973, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

the letter in the context of the dialogue inaugurated a decade earlier, and extending their private correspondence into publication.⁸²⁷ Jabès previewed that he had tried “to share the path, to affirm the infinite question and the infinite putting into question, the explosion of the book in the book.”⁸²⁸ The published letter opens with an epigraph from a 1971 interview in which Derrida tells Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta, “I have also regularly tried to put philosophy back on stage, on a stage that it does not govern.”⁸²⁹ That philosophy must relinquish its claim to mastery and embrace the unpredictable hearkens Mallarmé’s declaration, “un coup de dès jamais n’abolira le hasard.” Jabès explains that he has decided to address Derrida in the form of a letter because “we can only speak to the other – or about the other – in the voice of an intimate dialogue.”⁸³⁰ He prefers to speak directly to his interlocutor rather than erecting a false veneer of distance. Didier Cahen explains, “the letter testifies to the most lively attention to the worry and the anxiety of the other as the ferment of questions and the resilience of the exchange.”⁸³¹ They share the audacity to plunge into the adventure of philosophy, a scene that it does not govern: “it is this radicality which unites the two friends so strongly.” Jabès’ letter resembles a prose poem, prolonging his epistolary dialogue with Derrida, which weaves between letters and publications.

The adventure of writing begins with the writer confronting the blank page. Jabès writes, “the blank page is not a grid that one must accommodate. It becomes this surely, but at what cost?”⁸³² The possibility for writing to breach the infinity of the blank page in an act of creation is not bound by any a priori boundaries or strictures—this is the unbounded possibility for adventure:

⁸²⁷ The letter was subsequently included in Jabès’ 1975 book *Ça suit son cours*. There are several modifications to the text from the version published in *L’Arc*. I will cite the version published in *Ça suit son cours*, but I will indicate any relevant differences.

⁸²⁸ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 14 Janvier 1973, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁸²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 50 [69]. Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*, 41.

⁸³⁰ Edmond Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*, 49.

⁸³¹ Didier Cahen, “Ecrire sa vie” 46-47.

⁸³² Edmond Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*, 50.

Everything seems to happen as in a game of chess; but what strategy does one employ when, as in the case of Mallarmé, for example, the chessboard is all white? What game is conceivable when one removes from the players all possibility of playing? It is here that the adventure begins.⁸³³

Jabès' letter highlights the adventure of writing that begins with the gesture of the hand and follows an uncertain course. He describes his process of writing in the material terms of the contact of the ink of the pen on the page, connecting the vitality of his hand to the blank page:

The gesture of writing is, in the first place, a gesture of the arm, of the hand engaged in an adventure whose sign is thirst; but the throat is dry and the body and thought are attentive. It is only later that one perceives that the forearm on the page marks the border between what is written and oneself. On one side, the vocable, the work; on the other, the writer. They will try to correspond but to no avail. The page remains the witness of two interminable monologues, and when voice is silenced, on both sides, it is the abyss.⁸³⁴

The adventure is the spark of creation that emerges from the confrontation of the writer and the page, in the magical space between the blank page and the forearm. Echoing the crucial passage "La Boucle" from *Le Retour au Livre*, Jabès emphasizes the circularity of the book, as a confrontation of opposing forces which is always-already repeating its closure and recommencement: "We always depart from the written text to return to the text to be written, from the sea to the sea, from page to page [*Nous partons toujours du texte écrit pour revenir au texte à écrire, de la mer à la mer, du feuillet au feuillet*]."⁸³⁵ Jabès emphasizes that the end of the book is only the beginning of the next. Notably, he conserves Mallarmé's notion of *Le Livre Absolu*: "In and above all imaginary closure, writing begins and finishes in its perpetual beginning; begins and finishes our passionate interrogation of an absolute – the Book – which is, definitively, outside-of-time [*outré-temps*], only the white background where, in the day, the shadows of our counted vocables dance [*dansent les ombres de nos vocables dénombrés*]."⁸³⁶ The irrevocable fracturing of

⁸³³ Ibid, 56.

⁸³⁴ Ibid, 51-52.

⁸³⁵ Ibid, 51.

⁸³⁶ Ibid, 52.

the absolute book – the symbolic fragments of the broken tablets – disseminates writing beyond the binding of the book and into the far reaches of the world because “it is in fragmentation that the immeasurable totality is given to read.”⁸³⁷ The repetition of the book and its fragmentation is the Sisyphean task of the writer: “Everything is put in movement – in question – by writing.”⁸³⁸

The operative tool for Derrida in this fragmentation of the absolute book is *différance*, which Jabès describes as a “synonym for *mine*,” in its fourfold French meaning as the nib of a pencil, a person’s facial appearance, an underground deposit of minerals, and an explosive device.⁸³⁹ Indeed, the non-concept of *différance* is a technique of writing, as well as a relation to the Other, which in a certain sense extracts its material from deposits hidden deep within the grounds of history and metaphysics. Jabès emphasizes the explosive power of *différance*, a kind of landmine that obliterates the ground beneath our feet. Indeed, as he wrote in a letter to Derrida, *différance* is “the explosion of the book in the book.”⁸⁴⁰

Jabès highlights elemental metaphors of water and fire to illustrate the contradictory if essential question of writing and the book. He compares the role of the writer to the keeper of the lighthouse, who forgets that the lighthouse, “its stone tower and its lantern,” exists to guide ships to safe harbor in the dark ocean night. By the same token, the writer illuminates the path of writing amidst the uncertainty of the blank pages of the book. “The movement of the book is like that of aggressive, amorous waves,” Jabès writes, “the plume, like a beam of fire, illuminates the hope where writing blossoms, and where the lighthouse keeper and the writer record their sighs, their growls, their cries, their grumbles at a distance.”⁸⁴¹ Like the ocean’s waves, writing proceeds along

⁸³⁷ Ibid, 53.

⁸³⁸ Ibid, 55.

⁸³⁹ Ibid, 58.

⁸⁴⁰ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 14 Janvier 1973, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁸⁴¹ Edmond Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*, 50.

a path through crests and troughs, always in alternation. Against the image of the writer as the lighthouse keeper steering the narrative to safe port, Jabès reframes the question of writing through its negative image—as fire: Jabès juxtaposes the images of the lighthouse keeper and the fire-fighter at the top of his ladder: “one tries to put out the fire, the other tries to illuminate the sea. Both show death.” The chiasmus of the lighthouse illuminates the water, and the water that flows from the firehose to extinguish the fire. The dialectical opposition of water and fire leads Jabès to pose Derrida “the burning question,” which forms the vital heartbeat of their extended dialogue:

What is the book ? For the most pertinent, most pressing interrogations, I offer this response proposed by a Kabbalist rabbi – who knows, I assure you, more than we imagined on what we today call writing, or who perhaps knows nothing, preoccupied by symbolism, but so what ? – and which I literally submit for your reflection : the Book is what “is engraved with the black of fire on the white of fire.” Black fire on white fire. Consumption without end of the holy parchment, of the profane page devoted to signs, as if what is consigned – cosigned – written, was only the play perpetrated by flames, “*feux des mots*,” as you said in a recent interview.⁸⁴²

The paradoxical metaphor of writing as fire recalls the hermeneutic tradition of interpreting God’s word. Jabès references the understanding of the Torah as fire in the Book of Deuteronomy, where God gives the Israelites “a fire of Law.”⁸⁴³ Rashi comments on this passage that the Torah is written in “black fire on white fire,”⁸⁴⁴ and this becomes a key expression in the *Zohar*.⁸⁴⁵ In *The Burnt Book*, Marc-Alain Ouaknin brilliantly examines the Talmudic debate concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions for a written trace to qualify as a “book” based on the case of a book damaged in a fire.⁸⁴⁶ We might also hear the echoes of 19th century Hasidic rabbi Nachman of Breslov’s legendary burnt books.⁸⁴⁷ Finally, we might also hear in “*feux des mots*” Kafka’s testamentary

⁸⁴² Ibid, 54.

⁸⁴³ Deut. 33:2.

⁸⁴⁴ *Midrash Tanhouma* I.

⁸⁴⁵ *Zohar* III, 132a.

⁸⁴⁶ Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, trans. Llewellyn Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁸⁴⁷ The legends of Nachman of Breslov’s *Sefer HaNisraf*, “burnt book,” are recounted in Avraham Greenbaum, *Tzaddik: A Portrait of Rabbi Nachman* (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1987). See also: Roger Kamenetz, *Burnt Books: Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka* (New York: Schocken, 2010).

letter to his friend Max Brod ordering him to burn his unpublished writing upon his death.⁸⁴⁸ The paradoxical image of the burned book as a source of creation and destruction ultimately expresses the precariousness of the adventure and the dangers it incurs.

In an interview with Lucette Finas which appeared in *Le Quinzaine littéraire* in November 1972, Derrida portrays his writing as “*feux de mots*,” which “consume signs until they are cinders, but first and most violently, by the irritated flair, to dislocate verbal unity, the integrity of the frayed or frightened voice [...] the calm surface of ‘words’ by submitting their body to a *gymnastic* ceremony.”⁸⁴⁹ He makes words dance, like the licking flames of a fire. Jabès wrote him, “Your ‘deconstruction’ is nothing but the propagation of innumerable fiery hearths”:

Your “Margins” are without reassuring edges; your “Positions,” “Disseminate.” To hope for appeasement from your is to turn away from you. You burn what is positioned at the edge of flames. Rare, very rare are those who live writing with such intensity. “An entire life,” in fact, cannot suffice to calm the fire.⁸⁵⁰

The metaphorical connection between fire and text, a burning question indeed, is a central theme in the eponymous essay in Derrida’s 1972 *Dissemination*. Where Philippe Sollers remarks in *Nombres*, “3.43 / *The path of the black fire where I burned myself on the white fire...*”⁸⁵¹ Derrida comments, “the fire, indeed, is nothing apart from this ‘transference’ from one text to another.”⁸⁵² The flames spread across the page consuming its words as pure energy. “Consumption,” he writes, “is, like dissemination, textual through and through.” The metaphor of language as fire connects the fiery creation of the book to its destruction, linking its energetic and vital force to its

⁸⁴⁸ Kafka’s request to his friend Max Brod that “Everything I leave behind me...in the way of notebooks, manuscripts, letters, my own and other people’s, sketches and so on, is to be burned unread,” implies a paradox that recalls the incompleteness theorem: the request that Brod burn Kafka’s letters unread can only be communicated in a letter: to follow Kafka’s wishes therefore requires that Brod violate them!

⁸⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida in *Écartés* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), 311.

⁸⁵⁰ Edmond Jabès, *Ça Suit son cours*, 58

⁸⁵¹ Philippe Sollers, *Nombres* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 59.

⁸⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* 343 [381-382].

consumption and negation as ashes. Jabès concludes his letter by returning to the sympathy for his addressee and interlocutor, who he confronts face to face, metaphorically, in “feux des mots”:

The gaze divides. On one side, fire; on the other, fire. The “black of fire” is the fire of night, against the white fire of the morning. Between these two fires – the space of a fraction of a second, the time of the nuptials of fire – the irruption of a familiar face. The noise made by words in the book are only noises emitted by the fire, gestures which have become voices mixed with flames.⁸⁵³

Jabès describes his encounter with Derrida’s words as a face to face encounter through the fire of the text. His letter in *L’Arc* challenges Derrida on the territory of philosophy, provoking an inversion between the writer and philosopher. “*Jabès bends to the law of the other*,” Cahen explains, “it is ‘as a philosopher’ that Jabès addresses the writer Derrida! Jabès deconstructs his own reading of Derrida to put into question the responses which could have fraudulently slipped in to offer the counterfeit assurance of the ground, where only adventure reigns without an end in sight.”⁸⁵⁴ By forcing Derrida to occupy the place of the poet against the philosopher’s analytic eye, Jabès’ text operates a kind of chiasmus which challenges Derrida to respond to his own writing as literature in response to Jabès’ philosophical analysis. In this written exchange, “Jabès passes for Derrida, and Derrida for Jabès.” This displacement of the philosopher and the poet plays out the very dislocation and exile that marks the adventure of writing.

Reflecting on their friendship, Jabès wrote Derrida in March 1973, “what remains is our proximity! It is profound, intimate.”⁸⁵⁵ Derrida wrote to thank Jabès for his contribution in *L’Arc*.

Addressing “cher Eddie,” he evokes this proximity:

After rereading your letter in *L’Arc*: it generously carries to the furthest, most risky [...] abyss, to the most profound *mine* in which, despite the night, the invisibility, and the separation, I hear you nearby writing, hollowing out, breathing, engraving, rummaging, stacking, “striking down”—your generosity helps me to live and to continue.⁸⁵⁶

⁸⁵³ Edmond Jabès, *Ça Suit son cours*, 59-60.

⁸⁵⁴ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, 223.

⁸⁵⁵ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 5 mars 1973, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁸⁵⁶ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Edmond Jabès undated March 1973, Fond Jabès, BNF.

This generous praise is telling of his high regard for Jabès. In response, Jabès wrote, “I obviously had so many things to write about you, about your books...but I preferred to speak to you in a low voice, as if all that remained were words for us.”⁸⁵⁷ Derrida and Jabès’ dialogue is an adventure of letters, both as the written sign and as the epistolary *envoi*, in the blurred space between private correspondence and published texts, philosophy and literature, fact and fiction. Their dialogue reflects the rapprochement of philosophy and literature, from Derrida’s adventure of the letter “a” in *différance* to Jabès’ “adventure of the vocable” which leads in unexpected paths. It is this sense of literature that Derrida alludes to in an interview with Richard Kearney when he describes his interest in literature, “not with a capital L,” but rather as “certain movements which have worked around the limits of our logical concepts, certain texts which make the limits of our language tremble, exposing them as divisible and questionable.”⁸⁵⁸ Between *Writing and Difference* and *The Book of Questions*, the signatures and countersignatures that intertwine Derrida and Jabès’ writing are the heart of a shared adventure of writing, literature, and “feux des mots.”

IV. Levinas, Derrida, and the Adventure of the Other

Jankélévitch questions whether Odysseus is truly an adventurer. Whereas the *aventureux* is ready to confront the “coming of the event,” Odysseus constantly shirks the allure of the unknown in favor of his persistent, nostalgic desire to return home. “Surely,” Jankélévitch writes, “Calypso, Circe, the Sirens, and the Lotus-eaters represent for Odysseus as much promise of a

⁸⁵⁷ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida 8 mars 1973, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

⁸⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester, Manchester University Press 1984), 112.

new, unusual life.”⁸⁵⁹ However, he never strays from his desire for return, and the characters he encounters are mere obstacles to overcome in his *nostos* tale. Ultimately, Jankélévitch explains, “Odysseus only desires one thing: to return home, to find his loyal wife, his Penelope, and his house in Ithaca, and the smoke of his village. He does not seek out adventures.” He is not curious about the uncertain possibilities of the future, he is an “*aventurier* by force,” whose “peregrinations [...] are bourgeois adventures.” Odysseus remains closed off from the possibility of true adventure. “The nostalgia of this *nostos*,” Jankélévitch adds, “is the contrary of adventurous curiosity.” Unlike the hero of Homer’s epic, “modern adventure is departure without return.”

This notion of adventure as departure without return echoes Levinas’ Abraham in contrast to Odysseus. For Levinas, adventure is the preeminent metaphor for the experience of subjectivity in its encounters, and the possibility of this departure without return is the crucial question in his dialogue with Derrida. Adventure, then, has two potential valences: like Odysseus, the adventure of the self can remain closed off, dominated by the thinking of *ipseity* and the unending desire for *nostos*; or, the adventure can go forth and engage the uncertain future with no return, by confronting the stranger and the infinity of the face of the Other. Levinas frames the stakes of the adventure of philosophy in his 1963 essay “The Trace of the Other”:

Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity. From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other – with an insurmountable allergy. It is for this reason that it is essentially a philosophy of being, that the comprehension of being is its last word, and the fundamental structure of man. It is for this reason that it becomes philosophy of immanence and of autonomy, or atheism. The Gods of the philosophers, from Aristotle to Leibniz, by way of the God of the scholastics, is a god adequate to reason, a comprehended god who could not trouble the autonomy of consciousness, which finds itself again in all its adventures, returning home to itself like Ulysses, who through all his peregrinations is only on the way to his native island.⁸⁶⁰

⁸⁵⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’aventure, l’ennui, le sérieux*, ch. 1.

⁸⁶⁰ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 346.

The hero of Homer's epic is the standard bearer for the adventure of the self, which for Levinas has become the *modus operandi* of Western philosophy: Odysseus' unwavering desire to return home to Ithaca reflects a thinking of totality defined by the home, the familiar, and sameness. For Levinas, this is the same thinking that from Aristotle to Heidegger has framed philosophy as a search for mastery over totality, and the domestication of otherness. The purported self-sufficiency of consciousness, reason, and knowledge are always structured in terms of a return to sameness. By contrast, the second kind of adventure is embodied by the biblical patriarch Abraham, who is commanded to go forth into unknown lands.⁸⁶¹ The two paths for the adventurer oppose the philosophical thinking of totality with the religious thinking of infinity, Odysseus and Abraham.

Levinas describes the transformations of individual self-consciousness as an adventure that leads in two possible directions: either the adventure of self-consciousness returns to itself, its essence, or its ipseity, or the adventure leads to the encounter with the stranger, and the unknown territory of alterity. The first possibility of adventure is engendered by the philosophical tradition which embraces the thinking of totality, by treating thought as co-extensive with being. The transcendence of thought is ultimately the non-transferable condition of subjectivity, which seals off the self from the world, as the object for its reflection and mastery. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes, "the transcendence of thought remains closed in itself despite all its adventures – which in the last analysis are purely imaginary, or are adventures traversed as by Ulysses: on the way home."⁸⁶² He draws a parallel between the transcendence of thought and the Homeric hero's journey home from Troy. The adventures of self-consciousness also return to its origin, engendering a kind of solipsism where the thinking of totality always returns to the identity of being and thought. Levinas' comparison recalls Rosenzweig's discussion in the *Star of*

⁸⁶¹ Gn. 12-17.

⁸⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27.

Redemption of the hero of antiquity, who is the symbol of the “meta-ethical Self.”⁸⁶³ The defining feature of the ancient hero is muteness, which is an expression of isolation from others:

By being silent, the hero dismantles the bridges that link him to God and the world, and he tears himself away from the landscapes of personality, which, through the spoken word, marks out its limits and individualizes itself in the face of others in order to climb into the icy solitude of the Self. For the Self knows nothing outside itself; it is quite simply solitary.⁸⁶⁴

Levinas’ adventure of the transcendence of thought, closed off from the world and others, extends Rosenzweig’s analysis of the solitary hero of antiquity. Like the philosopher whose attention remains fixed on existence and who is unaffected by the presence of others, Odysseus’ singular focus through is his return, and he is undeterred by the people and places he encounters on the journey. As Rosenzweig writes, the hero embodies “the tragedy of absolute man in his relationship to the absolute object.”⁸⁶⁵ The apotheosis of this closed thinking of totality is disclosed by Heidegger’s philosophy of being which is an adventure turned inward on the domain of ontology, sealed off from the possibility of an intervention that exceeds this order. For Levinas, it is “a process of being, an event of being, an adventure of being. A remarkable adventure!”⁸⁶⁶ This adventure of being marks the culmination of the idealist tradition’s focus on the solipsistic activities of self-consciousness. Levinas writes in his 1947 *Time and the Other*, “solipsism is neither an aberration nor a sophism; it is the very structure of reason.”⁸⁶⁷ In a 1951 essay “Is Ontology Fundamental?” he criticizes the solipsism of the philosophy of existence, comparing the philosophy championed by Heidegger to a solitary adventure: “philosophical research cannot be content with reflection on itself or on existence. Reflections gives us only the narrative of a

⁸⁶³ Franz Rosenzweig, *Star*, 82.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 86.

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 226.

⁸⁶⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, Preface, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, xii.

⁸⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 65.

personal adventure, a private soul, incessantly returning to itself, even when it seems to flee itself.”⁸⁶⁸ The circuitry of the “adventure of being” leaves the individual cut off from alterity.⁸⁶⁹

The second kind of adventure involves the encounter with the Other. Levinas begins *Totality and Infinity* by describing the uncanny fact that subjectivity can have an idea of infinity, a thought overwhelms the totality of thought: “Subjectivity realizes these impossible exigencies – the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain.”⁸⁷⁰ This idea of infinity is able “to shatter at every moment the framework of a content that is thought, to cross the barriers of immanence,” but without a “descent into being,” a return to the thinking of totality. What allows thought to overcome the thinking of totality is the violence of the idea of infinity which exceeds the limits of thought. Following Rosenzweig’s shattering of the All, this thought ruptures the limits of finitude. Levinas explains, “what, in action, breaks forth as essential violence is the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it, the marvel of the idea of infinity.” Whereas the transcendence of thought is an adventure that proves solipsistic or even imaginary because it inevitably leads back to itself, the thinking of infinity leads the adventurer to the unknown domain of otherness. Levinas explains in *Difficult Freedom*, “The solipsistic anxiety of consciousness, seeing itself in all its adventures as captivated by itself, ends here. The privilege of the Other in relation to the I - or moral consciousness - is the very opening to exteriority, which is also an opening to Highness.”⁸⁷¹ The adventure of the other reveals an infinite ethical obligation.

⁸⁶⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 11.

⁸⁶⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Dying for...” *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 207. Levinas often describes Heidegger’s philosophy as an “adventure or advent of *being that is concerned with being*—or being in which being is at stake.” (212) However, he is skeptical that this is truly the only calling for human beings: “Did this meditation on *Sein* – the adventure of being – this questioning of being and its meaning, this meditation on being in the guise of the human being-there, [...] leaves us without ambiguities? Is the adventure of being, as being-there, as *Da-sein*, an inalienable belonging to self, a being *proper – Eigentlichkeit* [...]?” (207).

⁸⁷⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27.

⁸⁷¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 294.

Levinas evokes another adventure in the chapter of *Totality and Infinity* entitled “The Ambiguity of Love,” where he argues “the transcendence of discourse is bound to love.”⁸⁷² There are two possibilities for the adventure of love. In the first case, love is conceived as a purely immanent relation of the self to the beloved Other that reflects a kind of destiny, where “the supreme adventure is also a predestination, a choice of what had not been chosen.” In this case, love reflects the revelation of a preordained sameness. Levinas recalls, “the myth Aristophanes tells in Plato's *Symposium*, in which love reunites the two halves of one sole being, interprets the adventure as a return to self.” This adventure suggests a thinking of identity that is closed off from a true experience of alterity: even where it engages the other, it is under the guise of sameness and identity, and this adventure ultimately returns to the self.

The second possibility of love is the notion of *Eros*, and it initiates an adventure that turns to the infinitely other. “*Eros* does not only extend the thoughts of a subject beyond 'Objects and faces,” Levinas writes, “it goes toward a future which *is not yet* and which I will not merely grasp, but I *will be* – it no longer has the structure of the subject which from every adventure returns to its island, like Ulysses.”⁸⁷³ *Eros* suggests the radical openness of the future, an experience of subjectivity that confronts the radical unpredictability of the future. Levinas’ notion of fecundity offers an adventure that turns away from the self and towards “my future, which is not a future of the same,” but which is “my adventure still, and consequently my future in a very new sense, despite the discontinuity.” Fecundity makes possible a notion of temporality experienced as adventure. The radical openness of the future is an adventure that engages what Levinas calls “true temporality,” where “the definitive is not definitive,” and there is always the possibility of the

⁸⁷²Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 254.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*, 271. Perhaps in recognition of Odysseus’ seafaring voyage, that the metaphor of the island appears in Simmel, Jankélévitch, and Levinas’ analysis of adventure.

unanticipated. For Levinas, fecundity discloses an uncertain future by “escaping the crushing responsibility of existence that veers into fate,” and “resuming the adventure of existence so as to be to the infinite.” This adventure does not conclude with the safe arrival home, but rather insists on the birth of something new. Levinas writes, “without multiplicity and discontinuity – without fecundity – the I would remain a subject in which every adventure would revert into the adventure of a fate.”⁸⁷⁴ Rather, he explains, “without multiplicity and discontinuity – without fecundity – the I would remain a subject in which every adventure would revert into the adventure of a fate. A being capable of another fate than its own is a fecund being.” Ultimately, the transcendence of the I in the encounter with the face of the other is the discovery of “an absolute adventure.”⁸⁷⁵ This second kind of adventure discloses an unwritten future in the encounter with the Other.

If Odysseus’ adventure exemplifies the historical arc of philosophy’s quest for mastery of totality, then the encounter with alterity suggests a departure from philosophy and a turn to religion, or at the very least, recourse to a notion of infinity that exceeds philosophy’s rationalist purview. For Levinas, the idea of infinity is philosophy’s other, which exceeds, disrupts, and challenges the supremacy of thought as a closed totality. The possibility of an adventure of non-philosophy is at stake in Derrida’s monumental essay on Levinas “Violence and Metaphysics,” which questions the viability of the adventure of alterity. “Violence and Metaphysics” was published in the *Revue de métaphysique et morale* in 1964, and it reappears as the fourth essay in *Writing and Difference*. The essay’s title, and the title of the collection, can be understood as a gloss and a response to Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*. The “et,” “and,” that ties *Totality* to *Infinity* presents two disjunctive concepts, where Levinas challenges the supremacy of totality through the idea of infinity. By contrast, Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” plays on the homophones “et”

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid, 282.

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid, 305.

and “est,” “and” and “is,” suggesting these concepts are indissociable: there is no escape from violence in metaphysics because they hold a shared fate. Sarah Hammerschlag explains,

If Levinas paired totality and infinity together to suggest the latter as the break with the former, Derrida paired violence and metaphysics together to suggest that the break from both was impossible. In *Writing and Difference* we have the first steps on an alternative route, one that claims to overcome totality not through the recourse to infinity but merely by exploiting the play of difference already present within the conceptual and linguistic framework of the metaphysical tradition.⁸⁷⁶

In agreement with Levinas, Derrida’s title suggests totality is a kind of violence, and infinity does imply the restitution of a kind of metaphysics; however, against Levinas’ central claim, Derrida argues these concepts are ultimately inseparable, there is no escape from the violence of totality in the metaphysics of infinity. The title’s double meaning illustrates his ambivalent relation to Levinas, marked by extreme proximity and great distance.

Derrida also opens “Violence and Metaphysics” with a post-mortem for philosophy:

That philosophy died yesterday, since Hegel or Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger—and philosophy should still wander toward the meaning of its death—or that it has always lived knowing itself to be dying (as is silently confessed in the shadow of the very discourse which *declared philosophia perennis*); that philosophy died *one day, within* history, or that it has always fed on its own agony, on the violent way it opens history by opposing itself to nonphilosophy, which is its past and its concern, its death and wellspring; that beyond the death, or dying nature, of philosophy, perhaps even because of it, thought still has a future, or even, as is said today, is still entirely to come because of what philosophy has held in store; or, more strangely still, that the future itself has a future— all these are unanswerable questions.⁸⁷⁷

He poses the question of an “outside” of philosophy, whether there can be a non-philosophy which takes philosophy as its object of study. Whether philosophy has reached its terminus is a question that philosophy cannot answer for itself, insofar as questioning “the possibility of philosophy, philosophy’s life and death,” is already caught up in philosophy, the question is “already engaged

⁸⁷⁶ Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 77.

⁸⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 97-98 [117-118].

in, already overtaken by the dialogue of the question about itself and with itself.”⁸⁷⁸ Philosophy’s questioning of itself by itself is a part of its process of shedding its historical skin, overcoming itself, and transformation through criticism; philosophy’s capacity “to speculate, to reflect, and to question about itself within itself” is what allows it to engage in the secondary operations of interpretation and reflection on specific problems posed within the domain of philosophical analysis. There is no outside of philosophy that would not already be engaged in the enterprise from which it seeks distance. The correspondence between the question of philosophy’s demise and the determination of its own content inaugurates “the combat” between the question of philosophy as such and philosophy as a “as a determined finite and mortal-moment or mode of the question.” For Derrida, this represents “the difference between philosophy as a power and adventure *of* the question itself and philosophy as a determined event or turning point *within* this adventure.” These two relations to philosophy can be framed by Jankélévitch’s distinction between the *aventurier*, who treats the question of philosophy as a hurdle to overcome, and the *aventureux*, who takes the question of philosophy as part of its immanent questioning of itself.

“Close to us and since Hegel, in his mighty shadow,”⁸⁷⁹ Derrida argues that, despite their manifold differences, the major philosophical innovations brought about by Husserl’s phenomenology and Heidegger’s ontology insist on several shared principles: first, they identify the fundamentally Greek origin of philosophy; second, they seek “a subordination or transgression, in any event a reduction of metaphysics,” to seek a more immediate form of experience; third, they consider ethics must be *separate* from metaphysics, “coordinated with something other than itself, a previous and more radical function,” otherwise it loses its specificity and is subject to corruption. For Derrida, Husserl and Heidegger both frame philosophy in terms of its Greek origin:

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid, 99 [119].

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid, 100 [120].

At the moment when the fundamental conceptual system produced by the Greco-European adventure is in the process of taking over all of humanity, these three motifs would predetermine the totality of the logos and of the worldwide historico-philosophical situation. No philosophy could possibly dislodge them without first succumbing to them, or without finally destroying itself as a philosophical language.⁸⁸⁰

To excise the Greek heritage from philosophy would leave its conceptual language to crumble like a house of cards. Husserl and Heidegger can only articulate their philosophical languages on the basis of this presumed Greek origin of their thinking, and they cannot conceive of a philosophical language that would originate from a different beginning and remain philosophy.

“It is at this level that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble,” Derrida writes, “at the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession.” To dispossess the adventure of philosophy from this constrained conception of its possibilities, Levinas asks us first of all “to depart from the Greek site and perhaps from every site in general, and to move toward what is no longer a source or a site (too welcoming to the gods), but toward an *exhalation* [*respiration*],” a thinking which is “the other of the Greek.”⁸⁸¹ Uprooting the presumed Greek foundation of philosophy would imply not “a thought for which the entirety of the Greek logos has already erupted, and is now a quiet topsoil deposited not over bedrock, but around a more ancient volcano.” Second, this thinking rehabilitates a notion of metaphysics that Levinas will “raise up from its subordinate position,” and “restore in opposition to the entire tradition derived from Aristotle.” Third, Levinas’ concept of ethics is based on “a non-violent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other” who is uniquely capable of “opening the space of transcendence.” Against the phenomenological tradition which demands ethics be derived from a non-metaphysical origin, lest ethics be infected with the same

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid, 101 [121].

⁸⁸¹ Ibid, 102 [122].

problem of onto-theology that has plagued metaphysics, he reasserts the primacy of the ethical and metaphysics against the adventure of being. That ethics is salvageable from the wreckage of metaphysics is the heart of his rebuttal to Heidegger in *Totality and Infinity*, and his reorientation of philosophy based on the idea of infinity. Stéphane Mosès writes, “this subversion of an idea that is so profoundly anchored in the unconscious logic that structures our thought – that of a reciprocity between the I and the other – still remains difficult for philosophers to admit today.”⁸⁸² Levinas’ concept of infinity is a remarkable affront to the philosophical tradition anchored in Greek logos.

Infinity arises from the finitude of lived experience. Derrida describes that Levinas seeks out “experience itself and that which is most irreducible within experience: the passage and departure toward the other; the other itself as what is most irreducibly other within it: Others.”⁸⁸³ Levinas proposes a kind of empiricism that seeks to overcome empiricism by discovering the immanent transcendence confronted in the otherness of the other. It is a philosophy of immanence that reveals the alterity of the Other which exceeds immanence. In this sense, Derrida identifies in Levinas’ philosophy as a kind of eschatology, “a question of designating a space or a hollow within naked experience where this eschatology can be understood and where it must resonate,” where “the possibility of the impossible system will be on the horizon to protect us from empiricism.”⁸⁸⁴ By describing his philosophy as an empiricism, Mosès explains, “Derrida reveals in Levinas a form of empiricism to which, in effect, Rosenzweig had laid claim.”⁸⁸⁵ In “The New Thinking,”

⁸⁸² Stéphane Mosès, “At the Heart of a Chiasm Derrida and Lévinas, Lévinas and Derrida,” *Naharaim*, vol 3, 2009, 254

⁸⁸³ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 103

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

⁸⁸⁵ Stéphane Mosès, “At the Heart of a Chiasm Derrida and Lévinas, Lévinas and Derrida,” 256. See Derrida’s note in “Violence and Metaphysics,” (190n89) where he acknowledges Levinas’ 1963 text on Rosenzweig “Entre deux mondes,” as well as the line in *Totality and Infinity* where he describes “the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig’s *Stern der Erlosung*, a work too often present in this book to be cited” (T 28).

Rosenzweig describes his project as an “absolute empiricism,”⁸⁸⁶ by which he means to suggest, as Michael Morgan and Paul Franks explain, “a philosophy that bases knowledge on experience but does not limit the objects of experience to the relative or conditioned objects of the senses, leaving room for the possibility of experience of the absolute, unconditioned, supersensible, or divine.”⁸⁸⁷ This is precisely the movement which Derrida identifies as Levinas’ empiricism, which begins with lived experience but is confronted by a kind of transcendence. Where Husserl had sought to root out “metaphysical adventures” from phenomenological description, Levinas proposes that the immanence of lived experience reveals a transcendence that exceeds those bounds. In the *Republic*, Plato characterizes the good as *epekeina tès ousias, beyond being*.⁸⁸⁸ Levinas describes his phenomenology in these terms in *Existence and Existents*, where he articulates a “departure from being and from the categories which describe it: an *ex-cendance*.”⁸⁸⁹ As Derrida explains, “this ethical ex-cendance designates the site – rather the nonsite – of metaphysics as metatheology, metaontology, metaphenomenology.”⁸⁹⁰ For Levinas, the “ex-cendance” of empiricism in the transcendence of the Other is disclosed in the encounter with the face, the most originary encounter with alterity which precedes any encounter with others through the prism of being and ontology. Derrida explains the encounter with the face is more immediate than immediacy, disclosing a phenomenon which cannot be spoken in the language of logos:

Beneath solidarity, beneath companionship, before Mitsein, which would be only a derivative and modified form of the originary relation with the other, Levinas already aims for the face-to-face, the encounter with the face. "Face to face without intermediary" and without "communion." Without intermediary and without communion, neither mediate nor immediate, such is the truth of our relation to the other, the truth to which the traditional logos is forever inhospitable. This unthinkable truth of living experience, to which Levinas

⁸⁸⁶ Franz Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, Ed. Paul Franks and Michael Morgan, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 138: “The catchword [*Schlagwort*] I would soonest tolerate would have been that of absolute empiricism.”

⁸⁸⁷ Michael Morgan and Paul Franks, *Ibid*, 138n48.

⁸⁸⁸ Plato, *Republic* 509b9.

⁸⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 15.

⁸⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 106.

returns ceaselessly, cannot possibly be encompassed by philosophical speech without immediately revealing, by philosophy's own light, that philosophy's surface is severely cracked, and that what was taken for its solidity is its rigidity. It could doubtless be shown that it is in the nature of Levinas's writing, at its decisive moments, to move along these cracks, masterfully progressing by negations, and by negation against negation. Its proper route is not that of an "either this ... or that," but of a "neither this ... nor that." The poetic force of metaphor is often the trace of this rejected alternative, this wounding of language. Through it, in its opening, experience itself is silently revealed.⁸⁹¹

If Levinas takes recourse in metaphor to describe the encounter with the face of Other, it reflects the remnants of a philosophical language gone asunder. The transcendence of the face cannot be bound to the language of the concept. Derrida writes, "truthfully, one does not have to wonder what this encounter is. It is the encounter, the only way out, the only adventuring outside oneself toward the unforeseeably-other. Without hope of return."⁸⁹² The encounter with alterity, like God's directive to Abraham *lech lecha*, is an adventure without return, out of philosophy's stranglehold on thinking, without Odysseus' *nostos* or the sufficiency of the concept. For Levinas, there is no concept of the Other that can respect her otherness; the wholly other is beyond conceptualization. To respect the alterity of the other, Derrida explains, "there is no concept of the Other."⁸⁹³ The transcendence of the face is matched by the absence of language that can encompass it.

"The other proceeds from the absolutely absent," Levinas writes in "The Trace of the Other," "yet the absent has a meaning in a face."⁸⁹⁴ The transcendence of the face is therefore a phenomenon that breaks from the immanence of lived experience, and its meaning is expressed other than as concept or language; rather, Levinas writes, "the beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace." For Levinas, the face of the Other discloses a kind of transcendence, indeed "the Other [...] resembles God".⁸⁹⁵ This marks a chiasmus between their notions of the trace.

⁸⁹¹ Ibid, 112.

⁸⁹² Ibid, 118.

⁸⁹³ Ibid, 130.

⁸⁹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "Trace of the Other," 355.

⁸⁹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 293.

Whereas Derrida's represents the play of absence and presence in the sign, Levinas' trace is a presence beyond presence which stems from lived experience but exceeds it. Derrida writes, "it is a question of knowing whether the trace permits us to think presence in its system, or whether the reverse order is the true one."⁸⁹⁶ Between the trace of God in the face of the Other and the absence of the Other in concepts and language, Derrida writes, "The face of God which commands while hiding itself is at once more and less a face than all faces."⁸⁹⁷ This crucial ambiguity between the face of the Other and the face of God, or equally between the description of lived experience and metaphor, commits Levinas to a form of empiricism while striving for the ethical transcendence of a religious order. At this crucial juncture in his interpretation of Levinas' philosophy concerning the trace of God in the face of the Other, Derrida invokes a verse from Jabès' *Book of Questions*:

Would Levinas subscribe to this infinitely ambiguous sentence from the Book of Questions by Edmond Jabès: "All faces are His; this is why HE has no face" [*Tous les visages sont le Sien; c'est pourquoi IL n'a pas de visage*]? The face is neither the face of God nor the figure of man: it is their resemblance. A resemblance which, however, we must think before, or without, the assistance of the Same.

These elliptical words – "All faces are His; this is why HE has no face" – reflect Derrida's interruption of Levinas' ethical philosophy, while nonetheless remaining closely proximate to it. Jabès illustrate a paradox between the universality of God and the singularity of the individual, between the face of the One and the Many. The solipsism of the adventure of Being meets the transcendence of the Other who cannot be understood as presence.

If Levinas proposes a departure from philosophy without return, an interruption of totality through the infinity of the encounter with the Other, Derrida's deep ambivalence in "Violence and Metaphysics," suggests the impossibility of this dream. Mosès remarks, "Derrida is taken by the thought of Levinas, a little as if he were to say with respect to the priority of ethics over knowledge:

⁸⁹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 135.

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid, 135

it is too good to be true.”⁸⁹⁸ The ambiguity between the empirical and the metaphorical in *Totality and Infinity* reveals an immanent contradiction in Levinas’ critique of philosophy: “by making the origin of language, meaning, and difference the relation to the infinitely other, he is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse. The latter is understood, and instructs, only by first permitting the same and Being to circulate within it.”⁸⁹⁹ Ostensibly, Derrida argues, the adventure of the Other is indissociable from the adventure of being: the transcendence of the Other in Levinas’ philosophy ultimately takes recourse in the being from which it seeks separation:

By radicalizing the theme of the infinite exteriority of the other, Levinas thereby assumes the aim which has more or less secretly animated all the philosophical gestures which have been called empiricisms in the history of philosophy. He does so with an audacity, a profundity, and a resoluteness never before attained. By taking this project to its end, he totally renews empiricism, and inverts it by revealing it to itself as metaphysics.⁹⁰⁰

Levinas’ adventure of the Other ultimately must return to the empiricism from which it takes leave. The transcendence of the Other is a phenomenon of a different order than philosophy, which confronts the individual with something on the order of a religious phenomenon. “If one calls this experience of the infinitely other Judaism,” Derrida writes, “one must reflect upon the necessity in which this experience finds itself, the injunction by which it is ordered to occur as logos, and to reawaken the Greek in the autistic syntax of his own dream.” This assertion finds fertile ground in Levinas’ crucial distinction between Odysseus and Abraham’s respective forms of adventure.

Derrida’s conclusion returns to the possibility for an adventure that departs from philosophy without return, a non-philosophy which diagnoses philosophy’s demise, as its other. Levinas’ interruption of the solipsistic adventure of the self through the encounter with the infinity of the Other makes philosophy tremble to its foundations. Nonetheless, it remains entwined in the

⁸⁹⁸ Stéphane Mosès, “At the Heart of a Chiasm,” 259.

⁸⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 189.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

philosophical tradition it rebukes. Derrida places himself in the space between philosophy and its other: “Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history.”⁹⁰¹ Between these two orders, Derrida provocatively invokes Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the modern iteration of the classic adventurer: “Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet”⁹⁰² This expression, Derrida notes in the accompanying footnote, is a “neutral proposition,” even if he recognizes that “Levinas does not care for Ulysses, nor for the ruses of this excessively Hegelian hero, this man of nostos and the closed circle, whose adventure is always summarized in its totality.”⁹⁰³ Levinas frames Abraham’s adventure in contrast to Odysseus’, but perhaps there is more contamination between these categories than he acknowledges. Derrida asks, “is the theme of the return as unhebraic as all that?” Injecting ambivalence into the distinction between Abraham and Odysseus, between departure and return, Derrida’s conclusion suggests the impossibility of a departure without any semblance return.

V. Levinas and Derrida: Chiasmus and *Sériature*

The subsequent exchanges between Derrida and Levinas heightened the intensity of their disagreements. Levinas’ contribution to the 1973 edition of *l’Arc* entitled “Jacques Derrida, Tout

⁹⁰¹ Ibid, 191.

⁹⁰² Ibid, 192. Derrida notes that this “neutral” expression in *Ulysses* is “attributed to what is called ‘feminine logic’: ‘Woman’s reason. Jewgreek is greekjew’” (*Writing and Difference*, 192 n92). In a parting shot in “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida remarks in the final footnote, “*Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman.” This is not due to some prejudice against women’s philosophical prowess, but rather because Levinas sketches a phenomenology of Eros based on an notion of fecundity and paternity, and therefore an explicitly male heteronormative perspective. Derrida asks, “Is not this principled impossibility for a book to have been written by a woman unique in the history of metaphysical writing?” The other of Levinas’ philosophy, it appears, calls upon the question of sexual difference, and Derrida suggests that this male perspective uniquely situates Levinas’ phenomenology.

⁹⁰³ Ibid, 192 n92.

Autrement” [“Wholly Otherwise”] presents an astonishing rebuttal to the author of “Violence and Metaphysics.” Responding most directly to the reading of Husserl’s notion of the sign in *Voice and Phenomenon*, Levinas describes Derrida’s philosophy in the rhetoric of battle, where “we tread a *no-mans land*, an in-between that is uncertain even of the uncertainties that flicker everywhere. Suspension of truths! Unusual times!”⁹⁰⁴ The deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence that is central to Derrida’s approach displays “philosophy as defeat, desertion of an impossible presence,”⁹⁰⁵ as if deconstruction were a philosophy of retreat. Levinas highlights Derrida’s deconstruction of presence as “an inversion of the limiting concept into precondition, of defect into source, of abyss into condition,” provoking the slipping of the very ground beneath our feet, obliterating the foundations through the deconstruction of the concept, “stripped of their ontic resonance, freed from the alternative of true or false.” Levinas calls this destruction of foundations, “a purely literary effect, a new *frisson*, Derrida’s poetry.” In a damning comparison, he likens Derrida’s philosophy to his experience of the *débâcle* of 1940:

In reading him, I always see the 1940 exodus again. The retreating military unit reaches an area that still doesn't know what *is* happening. The cafes are open, the ladies are at the "Ladies' Latest" stores, barbers are cutting hair, bakers are baking, viscounts meeting and telling one another viscount stories. An hour later, everything is torn down [*deconstruit*] and left desolate: the houses closed up, or abandoned with their doors open, are emptied of their inhabitants, who are caught up in a stream of cars and pedestrians through the streets, which have reverted to their "deep past" [*profond jadis*] of routes, traced out in an immemorial past by the great migrations. In those days of a time between times, there occurred the following symbolic episode. Somewhere between Paris and Alençon, a half-drunk barber invited the soldiers who were passing by on the road (the "boys," [les "*petits gars*"]) as he called them, in a patriotic language gliding above the waters, or keeping afloat in the chaos) to come into his little shop for a free shave. He, along with his two co-workers, shaved them for free and suddenly it was today. The essential procrastination – the future *différence* – was reabsorbed into the present.

⁹⁰⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Jacques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise,” *Proper Names*, 55.

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 57.

In his *Notebooks*, Levinas describes the *débâcle* as “the human nudity of the absence of authority,” where order breaks down and the edifices of human society are stripped to its mere shell.⁹⁰⁶ It testifies to the “il y a,” the faceless, anonymous field of being: it is a feeling of rootlessness, akin to the nightmare of endlessly falling. Levinas recalls an episode he observed in 1940, where “somewhere between Paris and Alençon,” a barber, drunk on the side of the road amidst the debacle, offered to cut the hair of passing soldiers for free. Contrary to the French adage, “demain, on rase gratis” - “tomorrow, we’ll cut hair for free,” equivalent to the English expression “when pigs fly” - this barber “shaved them for free, and suddenly it was today.” Amidst the *débâcle*, even this sort of “essential procrastination – the future *différence* – was reabsorbed in the present.” The barber demonstrates the deformation of time during the debacle: time is warped and temporal passage is annulled. The comparison alone is a stinging rebuke to Derrida.

However, Levinas also indicates a rapprochement in what he calls the “chiasmus.” By “free[ing] time from its subordination to the present,” Derrida extends the Bergsonian criticism of being and the Kantian critique of metaphysics to their logical end, undercutting the presence that grounds the Cartesian *cogito* and its ensuing determinations. His critique of the metaphysics of presence has permitted us, Levinas writes, “to conceive of *the being of the creature* without resorting to the ontic narrative of a divine operation – without treating the ‘being’ [*être*] of the creature as *a being* [*un étant*] from the outset, without bringing to bear negative and empirical concepts, such as contingency or ‘generation and corruption’ – concepts as ontic as the incorruptibility of the Whole.”⁹⁰⁷ By undercutting the presence of being, Derrida emphasizes “the ‘less being,’ which is that of the creature, is shown in its verbliness of verb,” it discloses the *étant*, the creature, in critical relation to the horizon of ontology. If Derrida razes the foundations for

⁹⁰⁶ Levinas, *Œuvres I*, 136.

⁹⁰⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Jacques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise,” 60.

thinking of being as presence, he reveals “the sign, like the Saying, is the extra-ordinary event (running counter to presence) of exposure to others, of subjection to others; i.e. the event of subjectivity. It is the one-for-the-other.”⁹⁰⁸ The undercutting of presence opens the space for the distinction between the *Dire* and the *Dit*. Ultimately, Levinas expresses his sympathy for “the primordial importance of the questions raised by Derrida,” and “the pleasure of a contact at the heart of a chiasmus.”⁹⁰⁹ Despite his injurious reproach to Derrida’s anti-foundationalism, Levinas nonetheless affirms their proximity, connected and separated by an adventure.

In his 1978 *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas develops new perspectives on adventure as a question of language. He depicts the history of philosophy in terms of “the accomplishment of the adventure of essence” which allows the construction of a notion of the self by “persisting in essence and unfolding immanence, in remaining in an ego, in identity.”⁹¹⁰ Significantly altering the approach developed in *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being* sketches the structures of responsibility which emerge from the experience of subjectivity, above and against the limiting conditions of ontology. The resulting notion of ethical responsibility is the “other” of Being, it is the negative image of fundamental ontology. Levinas introduces the distinction between the *Dire* and the *Dit*, the Saying and the Said, to explain the language of the other of ontology. Contra Heidegger’s claim that being resonates in the poetic language of the verb “to be,” the Saying is the pre-original language that issues an ethical injunction before the constitution of the totality of being, it is “below” being, seizing on the adverbial quality of language, its force of action. By contrast to the ethical injunction of the Saying, Levinas writes, “The birthplace of ontology is in

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid, 61.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid, 62.

⁹¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 16 [32].

the said [*le Dit*].”⁹¹¹ The Said is the language of ontology, which discloses the being of the world.⁹¹² Levinas describes the slippage by which the pre-original language of the Saying is reduced to the Said, where the ethical force of language is reduced to the domain of ontological description: “philosophy makes this astonishing adventure - showing and recounting as an essence - intelligible, by loosening this grip of being.”⁹¹³ This is the language of “the Saying,” *le Dire*, which is “is both an affirmation and a retraction of *le Dit*.” The Saying is the language of ethics: “Responsibility for the others or communication is the adventure that bears all the discourse of science and philosophy.”⁹¹⁴ The Saying is an adventure which carries beyond being.

The core argument of *Otherwise than Being* is its fourth chapter, “Substitution.” Levinas opens with a verse from Paul Celan’s “Lob der Ferne”: “Ich bin du, wenn ich ich bin.” The understanding of self and other in terms of their co-constitutive articulation and reversibility is central to the notion of substitution, which occupies the place held by responsibility in Levinas’ earlier work. Substitution describes the choice to give oneself for the sake of the Other, which is the realization of the ethical responsibility that stands above and against the domain of being. He describes the advent of consciousness as an “ontological event” which extends the philosophical tradition’s elaboration in terms of its *arche*, in the Parmenidean identity of being and the thought of being. Levinas questions whether the search for origins is truly an adventure at all:

Subjectivity qua consciousness can thus be interpreted as the articulation of an ontological

⁹¹¹ Ibid, 42 [74].

⁹¹² Stéphane Mosès explains: “The Said could, in a certain way, designate that which linguistics means by the notion of *enunciation* (*énoncé*), that is the semantic content of an assertion. The Saying, in turn, is rather connected with the concept of *enunciating* (*énonciation*), that is the subjective act through which an assertion is formulated. In Levinas, however, the notions of the Saying and the Said have to get along in a philosophical horizon that is completely distinct from this linguistic context. If the Said indeed refers to the themes that discourse develops, the Saying is the subjective instance through which all these possible contents of discourse can be un-said, interrupted, called into question. This calling into question is produced by the encounter with the other. The Saying stems from the absolute exteriority of the other in relation to the I, and this allows it to escape the sclerosis where its dependence with respect to the egoism of the subject would be frozen. In this sense the Saying introduces radical *disorder* into the arrangement of the discourse (of the Said).” (255-256)

⁹¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 44 [75].

⁹¹⁴ Ibid, 160 [249].

event, as one of the mysterious ways in which its "act of being" is deployed. Being a theme, being intelligible or open, possessing oneself, the moment of *having* in *being* - all that is articulated in the movement of essence, losing itself and finding itself out of an ideal principle, an ἀρχή [*arche*], in its thematic exposition, being thus carries on its affair of being. The detour of ideality leads to coinciding with oneself, that is, to certainty, which remains the guide and guarantee of the whole spiritual adventure of being. But this is why this adventure is no adventure. It is never dangerous; it is self-possession, sovereignty, ἀρχή. Anything unknown that can occur to it is in advance disclosed, open, manifest, is cast in the mould of the known, and cannot be a complete surprise.⁹¹⁵

The philosophical tradition's preoccupation with the subjective origins of consciousness is, like Odysseus' nostalgia, an evasion of adventure. Substitution rattles the core of the philosophical tradition guided by *arche*, it is a superior form of adventure, which discloses the responsibility that is "below" being, which culminates in an abnegation of self in its substitution with the Other. Levinas writes in "The Other, Utopia, and Justice," "the possibility of sacrifice as a meaning of the human adventure! Possibility of the meaningful, despite death, though it be without resurrection!"⁹¹⁶ Substitution exceeds the existence of the individual, a cause that goes beyond the I. Levinas explains, "there is a vocation of existing-for-the-other stronger than the threat of death: the fellow human being's existential adventure matters to the *I* more than its own, posing from the start the *I* as responsible for the being of the other."⁹¹⁷ In his later philosophy, the ultimate adventure of human subjectivity is giving oneself for the sake of the other.

After the barbs Levinas unleashed in "Wholly Otherwise," Derrida would take several years before directly responding, almost as if to prevent their relationship from overheating. "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am" is the curious title of Derrida's contribution to the 1980 volume edited by François Laruelle entitled *Texts for Emmanuel Levinas*. The volume features texts from a dozen of Levinas' most prominent interlocutors, beginning with Jabès and

⁹¹⁵ Ibid, 99 [157].

⁹¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Other, Utopia, and Justice," *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 227.

⁹¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, Preface, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, xii.

Derrida—texts written *for* Levinas, *about* his work. Derrida’s text ostensibly responds to Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being*, but it is far from an ordinary interpretation or criticism—even for Derrida. Stéphane Mosès explains, “At This Very Moment” is a text “where the author expresses all the nuances of his subjectivity.”⁹¹⁸ Derrida emphasizes his intimacy – personal and philosophical – with Levinas, even at the moments of their greatest differences. Extending the notion of the chiasmus which Levinas introduced in “Wholly Otherwise,” Hammerschlag writes, “Derrida imposed upon the image of the chiasmus, a further relation, a parasitic subversion that refuses to allow either Levinas or his religion to have the last word.”⁹¹⁹ His enigmatic text is written in the first person, directly addressing Levinas while rarely speaking his name; its title, “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,” stitches together three key expressions in Levinas’ work. Derrida’s text inhabits the Levinasian ethical Saying, testing its viability. The contradiction identified in “Violence and Metaphysics” between metaphysics and infinity is framed in “En ce moment” not as a critique, but rather as the operative logic of Levinas’ philosophy, the very “signature of his thought.”⁹²⁰ Through the implacable binds of the philosophy of identity, the alterity of the Other reveals an irresolvable tension, an *aporia*, which shapes his philosophical approach. Derrida asks, “How does he manage to inscribe or let the wholly other be inscribed within the language of being, of the present, of essence, of the same, of economy, and so forth, within its syntax and lexicon, under its law?”⁹²¹ This tension between alterity and law pervades Levinas’ ethical philosophy, which Derrida explore in his analysis of the distinction between the Saying and the Said. Mosès explains, “The secret of this writing is *interruption (interruption)*,

⁹¹⁸ Stéphane Mosès, “At the Heart of a Chiasm Derrida and Lévinas, Lévinas and Derrida,” *Naharaim*, vol 3, 2009, 267.

⁹¹⁹ Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 28.

⁹²⁰ Stéphane Mosès, “At the Heart of a Chiasm,” 267.

⁹²¹ Jacques Derrida, “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,” *Psyché: Inventions of the Other, Vol. 1*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 150.

disruption (dérangement), through which a language – that of the face to face and of dialogue – comes to disrupt another – that of the philosophical Logos.”⁹²² Derrida operates an inversion, where he disrupts Levinas’ ethical philosophy by inhabiting and working through its shortcomings.

Derrida repeats an expression he attributes to Levinas: “*il aura obligé*,” “he will have obligated.” For Levinas, this construction in the future anterior (or future perfect) tense illustrates a formal ethical Saying, which opens a breach in ontology and interrupts the order of being, the *Dit*, in a futural demand. Derrida favored the future anterior for its ability to project beyond the metaphysics of presence in a speculative future. Simon Critchley explains in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, “The future anterior is the temporality of the trace of *illeity*: it is perhaps the time of ethics.”⁹²³ This ethical performative which Derrida prolongs in the opening words of “At This Very Moment” illustrate the futural orientation of ethics as adventure. The possibility of fulfilling this ethical demand, *il aura obligé*, with respect to the “wholly other” is the challenge issued by Derrida’s text. Critchley provocatively asserts, “what is at stake here is nothing less than the success or failure of Levinasian ethics”:

For Levinas’s work to work, it must be directed towards the wholly other, the trace of *Illeity* signaled in the phrase ‘Il’ aura and must not be allowed to return to the Same. To return to the Same is to return to the name, the proper name of Emmanuel Levinas. Conversely, if Levinas’s work *does not* work, then it will return to, or at least be indistinguishable from, the name of Levinas.⁹²⁴

There is a challenge in the very act of writing a text “for” him, as Derrida and the other contributors were asked to do for the volume *Texts for Emmanuel Levinas*. If Levinas’ ethical philosophy “works” as it is supposed to, as an ethical act towards the Other without return, then Derrida’s text “for” Levinas must not simply return the favor, so to speak, by repeating his concepts to honor or

⁹²² Stéphane Mosès, “At the Heart of a Chiasm,” 267.

⁹²³ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 116.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid*, 116-117.

beatify him; this would be tantamount to Odysseus' *Nostos*—a return to the self and sameness. Indeed, after juxtaposing Odysseus' adventure of sameness to Abraham's departure without return as the mark of the ethical in "The Trace of the Other," Levinas describes the ethical as therefore demanding *ingratitude* from the other: "A work conceived in its ultimate nature requires a radical generosity of the same who in the work goes unto the other. It then requires an *ingratitude* of the other. Gratitude would in fact be the *return* of the movement to its origin."⁹²⁵ Consequently, and perhaps counterintuitively, if a text "for" Levinas is able to take up his ethical demand, it must be one of *ingratitude*: to respect his ethical philosophy, Derrida must respond with criticism. "In order to maintain the ethical moment," Critchley explains, "Derrida must commit an ungrateful violence against Levinas's work: he must show how the work *does not work*."⁹²⁶ The possibility of this ethical performative extends from the text's opening words to its *dehiscence*, "where the work bursts open and goes unto the other without return, allowing it to perform the ethical."⁹²⁷

Derrida's text slips between different authorial registers and addressees. In a text presumptively written "for" Levinas, he addresses his interlocutor through a series of self-effacing interpolations, which he calls "*sériature*," combining *série* and *rature*. The text begins by addressing "il," then "EL," and ultimately the text addresses "elle," the feminine Other of Levinas' philosophy. In the first moment of Derrida's text, a masculine voice undertakes a reiteration of Levinas' ethical philosophy, illustrating *how* the logic of his philosophy work, according to a logic of sameness. The second moment of the text displaces the "il" to a feminine voice, an "elle," which is the Other of Levinas' philosophy. Returning to the complaint expressed in the final footnote of "Violence and Metaphysics," where Derrida describes Levinas' adventure as the first time

⁹²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 349.

⁹²⁶ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 117.

⁹²⁷ *Ibid*, 110.

explicitly gendered metaphysics in history, the second moment of “At This Very Moment” interrupts the logic of Levinas’ thought, as Critchley writes, the feminine voice “shows how his work does not work.”⁹²⁸ This *sériature* confronts Levinas’ philosophy with its feminine other, and threatens to unravel its meaning—as a means of respecting its demand for ingratitude:

The work of EL seems to me to have always made alterity as sexual difference secondary or derivative, to have subordinated the trait of sexual difference to the alterity of a wholly other that is sexually unmarked. It is not woman or the feminine that he has made secondary, derivative, or subordinate, but sexual difference. Now, once sexual difference is subordinated, it always so happens that the wholly other who is *not yet marked* happens to be *already* marked by masculinity (he-before he/she, son-before son/daughter, father-before father/mother, etc.).⁹²⁹

If Levinas’ ethical philosophy cannot respond to its feminine other because it subordinates or ignores the question of sexual difference, it undermines its universality. Derrida asks, “How can one mark as masculine *the very thing* that is said to be anterior or still foreign to sexual difference?” By subordinating sexual difference, Levinas makes masculinity the default mode of his thinking, as if woman were a subsequent category.⁹³⁰ Levinas, the great thinker of the Other and alterity, “remains blind to the priority of feminine alterity by circumscribing the feminine within the economy of the ethical and by inhuming her within the crypt of the Same,” Critchley explains, consequently, “the de-sexualization of the wholly other is a way of making the feminine secondary.”⁹³¹ If the first moment of “At This Very Moment” rehearses the ethical Saying in Levinas’ thought through the performative “*il aura obligé*,” its second moment illustrates the failure of his thought to “work” in the register of “*elle aura obligé*.” By inhabiting Levinas’ text

⁹²⁸ Ibid, 120.

⁹²⁹ Jacques Derrida, “At This Very Moment,” 180.

⁹³⁰ Mosès notes that Derrida strongly objected to the interpretation of the creation of Adam and Eve which Levinas offered in his Talmudic reading, “Et Dieu créa la femme,” in which he suggests the “Chronological and ontological subordination of women with respect to man.” Rather, Mosès observes, “it is completely remarkable that Derrida, who did not possess Levinas’ familiarity with the Biblical text and with its commentaries, nevertheless grasped the internal logic of the account in Genesis better than him” (Mosès, “At the Heart of a Chiasm,” 270).

⁹³¹ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 136.

en sériature, Derrida depicts the failure of Levinas' gendered philosophy to account for sexual difference. It is as if "at the very moment when, with one hand, I weave the delicate fabric of the ethical text," Critchley writes, "another hand, a woman's hand, undoes my work."⁹³²

The *sériature* of voices in Derrida's text comes to a head in a final moment where the male and female perspectives confront, which suggests the impossibility of a final verdict that can overcome the double-reading endowed by sexual difference. The male and female voices meet in a moment of simultaneous proximity and distance:

—I no longer know if you are saying what his work says. Perhaps it comes back and comes down to the same. I no longer know if you are saying the contrary, or if you have already written something wholly other. I no longer hear your voice, I have difficulty distinguishing it from mine, from any other, your fault suddenly becomes illegible to me. Interrupt me.⁹³³

This confusion of self and other most immediately expresses the difference between the masculine and feminine voices in Derrida's text, but it is also an expression of his own differential and deferential relation to Levinas. Following the command, "interrupt me," the ethical order of Levinas' *Saying*, Derrida's text concludes with a monologue written in capitalized letters with scant punctuation which testifies to the impossible synthesis of the voices in *sériature*:

~ HERE AT THIS VERY MOMENT I ROLL UP THE BODY OF OUR INTERLACED VOICES FAULTY CONSONANTS VOWELS ACCENTS IN THIS MANUSCRIPT ~ I MUST PUT IT IN THE EARTH FOR YOU ~ COME BEND DOWN OUR GESTURES WILL HAVE HAD THE INCONSOLABLE SLOWNESS SUITABLE TO THE GIFT AS IF IT WERE NECESSARY TO DELAY THE ENDLESS FALLING DUE OF A REPETITION ~ IT IS OUR MUTE INFANT A GIRL PERHAPS OF AN INCEST STILLBORN TO AN INCEST PROMISED ONE MAY NEVER KNOW ~ BY FAULT OF HER BODY SHE WILL HAVE LET HERSELF HE DESTROYED ONE DAY AND WITHOUT REMAINDER ONE MUST HOPE ONE MUST KEEP HOPE FOR/FROM ONESELF EVEN THAT THUS SHE WILL GUARD HERSELF BETTER FROM ALWAYS MORE AND NO MORE JEALOUSY ~ NO LONGER ENOUGH DIFFERENCE THERE BETWEEN THEM BETWEEN THE FEMININE INHUMED OR THE ASHES OF A BURN-EVERYTHING ~ NOW HERE EVEN THE THING OF THIS LITURGY KEEPS ITSELF LIKE A TRACE O THERWISE SAID LOSES ITSELF BEYOND PLAY AND EXPENDITURE ALL IN ALL AND ALL ACCOUNTING FOR

⁹³² Ibid, 137.

⁹³³ Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment," 188.

OTHERS DONE ALREADY SI I E LE TS HERSELF BE EATEN ~ BY THE OTHER
BY YOU WHO WILL HAVE GIVEN HER TO ME ~ YOU ALWAYS KNEW THAT
SHE IS THE PROPER BODY OF THE FAULT SHE WILL ONLY HAVE BEEN
CALLED BY HER LEGIBLE NAME BY YOU AND IN THAT IN ADVANCE
DISAPPEARED ~ BUT IN THE BOTTOMLESS CRYPT THE INDECIPHERABLE
STILL GIVES ONE TO READ FOR A LAPSE ABOVE HER BODY THAT SLOWLY
DECOMPOSES ON ANALYSIS ~ WE NEED A NEW BODY ANOTHER WITHOUT
ANY MORE JEALOUSY THE MOST ANCIENT STILL TO COME ~ SHE DOES NOT
SPEAK THE UNNAMED ONE YET YOU HEAR HER BETTER THAN ME AHEAD
OF ME AT THIS VERY MOMENT WHERE NONETHELESS ON THE OTHER SIDE
OF THIS MONUMENTAL WORK I WEAVE WITH MY VOICE SO AS TO BE
ERASED THERE THIS TAKE IT HERE I AM EAT ~ COME CLOSER ~ IN ORDER
TO GIVE HIM/HER ~ DRINK.⁹³⁴

~ VOICI EN CE MOMENT MÊME J'ENROULE LE CORPS DE NOS VOIX
ENTRELACÉES CONSONNANCES VOYELLES ACCENTS FAUTIFS DANS CE
MANUSCRIT ~ IL ME FAUT POUR TOI LE METTRE EN TERRE ~ VIENS PENCHE-
TOI NOS GESTES AURONT EU LA LENTEUR INCONSOLABLE QUI CONVIENT
AU DON COMME S'IL FALLAIT RETARDER L'ECHEANCE SANS FIN D'UNE
REPETITION ~ C'EST NOTRE ENFANT MUET UNE FILLE PEUT-ETRE D'UN
INCESTE MORT-NEE A. L'INCESTE SAURA-T-ON JAMAIS PROMISE ~ EN
FAUTE DE SON CORPS ELLE SE SERA LAISSE DETRUIRE UN JOUR ET SANS
RESTE IL FAUT LESPERER IL FAUT SE GARDER DE LESPOIR MEME QU'AINSI
TOUJOURS PLUS DE JALOUSIE ELLE SE GARDERA MIEUX ~ PLUS ASSEZ DE
DIFFERENCE LA ENTRE ELLES ENTRE L'INHUMEE OU LES CENDRES D'UN
BRÛLE-TOUT ~ MAINTENANT ICI MEME LA CHOSE DE CETTE LITURGIE SE
GARDE COMME UNE TRACE AUTREMENT DIT SE PERD AU-DELA DU JEU ET
DE LA DEPENSE TOUT COMPTE POUR D'AUTRES FAIT ELLE SE LAISSE DÉJÀ
MANGER ~ PAR L'AUTRE PAR TOI QUI ME L'AURAS DONNÉE ~ TU SAVAIS
DEPUIS TOUJOURS QU'ELLE EST LE CORPS PROPRE DE LA FAUTE ELLE
N'AURA ÉTÉ APPELÉE DE SON NOM LISIBLE QUE PAR TOI EN CELA
D'AVANCE DISPARUE ~ MAIS DANS LA CRYPTÉ SANS FOND
L'INDECHIFFRABLE DONNE ENCORE A LIRE POUR UN LAPS AU-DESSUS DE
SON CORPS QUI LENTEMENT SE DECOMPOSE A L'ANALYSE ~ IL NOUS FAUT
UN NOUVEAU CORPS UN AUTRE SANS PLUS DE JALOUSIE LE PLUS ANCIEN
ENCORE A VENIR ~ ELLE NE PARLE PAS L'INNOMMÉE OR TU L'ENTENDS
MIEUX QUE MOI AVANT MOI EN CE MOMENT MÊME OU POURTANT SUR
L'AUTRE CÔTÉ DE CET OUVRAGE MONUMENTAL JE TISSE DE MA VOIX POUR
M'Y EFFACER CECI TIENS ME VOICI MANGE ~ APPROCHE-TOI ~ POUR LUI
DONNER ~ BOIS⁹³⁵

⁹³⁴ Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," 188-189.

⁹³⁵ Jacques Derrida, "En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici" 59-60.

The passage concludes, “Bois”: a word that is both the imperative form of the verb “drink” as well as the substantive “wood,” or more precisely in this context, a “wooden” child—a stillborn. This infinitely ambivalent final word divulges what Critchley calls the “clôtural reading” of Derrida’s text. “Drink” echoes the words of hospitality which Rebekah speaks to a stranger, Abraham’s servant, in chapter 24 of Genesis, offering succor to the patriarch’s family and camels.⁹³⁶ It is this hospitality without expectation of reciprocity which convinces Abraham that his son Isaac should marry Rebekah. It is a gesture of radical generosity, an ethical act of substitution in which one gives sustenance to the Other at the expense of the self and the Ego. Derrida concludes his text by invoking the ethical Saying, effacing the speaker in the face of the interlocutor: “I WEAVE WITH MY VOICE SO AS TO BE ERASED THERE THIS TAKE IT HERE I AM EAT ~ COME CLOSER ~ IN ORDER TO GIVE HIM/HER ~ DRINK.”⁹³⁷ Derrida’s final words thereby suggest the ethical act of substitution that Levinas develops in *Otherwise than Being*. By concluding his text with the effacement of the self in the encounter with the other, then, Derrida seemingly inhabits Levinas’ ethical perspective by effacing itself into the very fabric of the text. In this sense, Derrida’s final word is conciliatory to Levinas’ ethical philosophy, it is the ethical *Saying*. Yet this is precisely the gratitude which undermines the ethical Saying by returning to self and its sameness.

The second meaning of “Bois” annuls this apparent gratitude, effacing Rebekah’s hospitality in an act of violence. The female voice in “At This Very Moment” takes a detour in her reading to recall Levinas’ commentary in ‘The Name of God According to Some Talmudic Texts’:

According to the Treatise *Chevouoth* (35a), it is forbidden to erase the names of God, even in the case where a copyist has altered its form. One must in that case bury the whole manuscript. The manuscript, EL says, “has to be put in the earth like a dead body.” But what does it mean to put in the earth [*mettre en terre*]? And what does a “dead body” mean, since it is not erased or destroyed but “put in the earth”? If one wanted simply to annihilate

⁹³⁶ Gn 24:17-18: “And the servant ran to meet her, and said, Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher. And she said, Drink, my lord: and she hastened, and let down her pitcher upon her hand, and gave him drink.”

⁹³⁷ Jacques Derrida, “At This Very Moment,” 189.

it—to keep it no longer— one would burn the whole thing, one would erase everything without remains. One would replace, without remainder, the dysgraphia with orthography. By inhuming it, on the contrary, the fault against the proper name is not destroyed; at bottom one keeps it, as a fault, one keeps it at the bottom. It will slowly decompose, taking its time, in the course of a work of mourning that, either successful as a spiritual interiorization, an idealization that certain psychoanalysts call introjection, or else paralyzed in a melancholic pathology (incorporation), will keep the other as other, wounded, wounding, impossible utterance. The topic of such a faulty text remains highly improbable, like the taking-place of its remains in this theonymic cemetery.⁹³⁸

This female reader highlights Levinas' reflections on the connection between textuality and corporality, and their shared fate in the Talmudic tradition. Just as the body must be buried when a person dies, a text too must be buried if it is damaged beyond use. Consequently, to annul the sympathetic reading of Levinas' text offered by its masculine reader, to put under erasure its closing ethical performative "Bois" as an act of hospitality and gratitude, the feminine reader buries the text as one would a dead body. Displacing Levinas' notion of illéité by substituting its "il" with an "elle," the woman reader effaces the initial reading of Derrida's final word, "Bois." The text, like a dead body, is placed in the ground to decompose. Critchley writes, "in order to annul or destroy this fault, this text *for* Emmanuel Levinas must be placed in the earth and allowed to decompose. Thus, the faulty text is given to Levinas by burying it in the earth, where it is preserved in a process of slow decomposition."⁹³⁹ Where in the final capitalized paragraph of Derrida's text we read, "IT IS OUR MUTE INFANT A GIRL PERHAPS OF AN INCEST STILLBORN TO AN INCEST PROMISED ONE MAY NEVER KNOW," the text is characterized as a stillborn daughter who must be buried. Hammerschlag explains, "Derrida treats the text itself as their offspring, an incestuous offspring, given that Derrida positions himself as the son. Given that reading, Derrida repeats and distorts Levinas's text."⁹⁴⁰ Pursuing the corporeal

⁹³⁸ Ibid, 185-186.

⁹³⁹ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 138.

⁹⁴⁰ Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 29.

metaphor connecting body and text, Derrida continues, “IN THE BOTTOMLESS CRYPT THE INDECIPHERABLE STILL GIVES ONE TO READ FOR A LAPSE ABOVE HER BODY THAT SLOWLY DECOMPOSES ON ANALYSIS.” The second register of Derrida’s final word, “Bois,” is of the stillborn child, who must now be buried to decompose in the ground – all in an act of ingratitude which is requisite for Levinas’ ethical imperative.

“Bois”: an act of generosity and hospitality to the stranger, “Drink!” or the stillborn daughter born of incest, who must be buried. The haunting ambivalence of Derrida’s final word expresses his double reading of Levinas, which is always “at the heart of a chiasmus.”

VI. Jabès, Levinas, and the Declauration of the Trace

The relation between Jabès and Levinas has always been the most tenuous side in the triad, often with Derrida positioned as the mediating third. In fact, Derrida had sought to foist a dialogue between them from the start, insisting on the comparison between Jabès’ question of the book and Levinas’ Other. Their correspondences reveal a distant relationship marked by disagreements, but also a certain sympathy. What interests Levinas in Jabès’ writing are his energetic metaphors and dynamic language – the adventure of his writing – rather than the narrative of *The Book of Questions*. Following the publication of *Yaël* in 1967, Levinas wrote Jabès, “I read your book, but not as a book.”⁹⁴¹ Rather, in its “indelible words,”

Vocables take over, which do not speak but pre-speak [*qui ne disent pas mais pré-disent*]. I am surprised that it must compose a story. I didn’t read it that way, nor did I miss it – these pre-dictions do not become narrative. Perhaps this is poetry as well: we are closer to one another than the name and naming [*nom-nommer*]. One without one.

⁹⁴¹ Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, October 10, 1967, Fond Jabès, BNF.

Levinas suggests the “pre-dictions” in Jabès’ poetry express the ethical language of the Saying, which interrupts the ontological order of the Said, avowing an unexpected proximity. After the publication of *Elya* in 1969, Levinas wrote to applaud Jabès’ latest book, beginning with its title:

Here is *Elya*, anagram or meta-book of *Yaël*, hesitation between gratuity and gravity, between play and destiny. But isn’t this a definition – one more definition – of poetry? I like your poems, but probably not for the same reasons as the important critics and philosophers. I like your incessant words, and how they touch and swoon or faint...⁹⁴²

The description of Jabès’ writing as between gratuitousness and gravity, game and destiny, recalls Jankélévitch’s observation that adventure relies on the tension between play and seriousness. After the publication of Jabès’ *Book of Margins* in 1987, in what proved his final letter to the poet, Levinas wrote, “thank you for having amiably included me in this agreement of disagreement [*cet accord du désaccord*].”⁹⁴³ This contradictory formulation is a fitting description of their exchange.

Prompted in the 1972-1973 issue of *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* to describe Jabès’ “place” in contemporary literature, Levinas suggests his poetry “loses its place, ceases occupation,” it is rather “the very opening of space.”⁹⁴⁴ Through this return to the creation of place, Jabès’ poetry inspires “the de-claustration of all things, the de-nucleation of being – or its transcendence – from which nothing more is missing but one’s fellow man. ‘I am nothing but the spoken word,’ says Jabès. ‘I need a face.’” He recalls an origin that is otherwise than being, it is an exercise in losing its place, dis-placing poetry, and getting lost in words. Jabès “uncorks the words [...] undergoing fission, they may be broken up into their sense and letters and give off the non-place of an absolutely unprotected space, a kind of intra-nuclear space devoid of images.”⁹⁴⁵ Levinas emphasizes the ocular metaphor of sight in Jabès’ writing, which articulates a language “without

⁹⁴² Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, November 26, 1969, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁹⁴³ Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, July 7, 1987, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁹⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Edmond Jabès Today,” *Proper Names*, 63.

⁹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 64.

mirages or prestige or imaginary foyers of extension for a dioptrics, but a field besieged by God.” The displacement has a disorienting effect: “when I have his texts before me I forget that his writing has writing as its theme, [...] I forget that Jabès has his part in the world and trends of modern letters.” This forgetting is for Levinas part of the dissimulating, analgesic quality of Jabès’ poetry. Gary D. Mole explains in *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement*, “Lévinas reads his own transcendence of subjectivity into Jabès,” just as he associates Jabès’ ‘denucleation’ of being with Heidegger and Derrida.⁹⁴⁶ However, his comment is indicative of his mistrust of poetry. Mole explains, “Lévinas can read a philosophical position into Jabès, and can thus forget that Jabès is only a poet.” He “will not see either God or the Jew as metaphors,” whereas Jabès treats these figures as just that. The metaphors of God and the Jew threaten to destabilize the ethical commandment. Therefore, “Lévinas is both admiring and reserved in his reading of Jabès, admiring because there is a break from subjectivity, reserved because the break lacks an ethical content.”⁹⁴⁷ Mirroring his ambivalence towards Derrida, Levinas reads Jabès as a magisterial poet, but nonetheless a poet, whose creative exploration of language never accedes to the ethical transcendence he demands of the philosopher.

Levinas nonetheless indulges this forgetting, setting aside the question of the book, to read Jabès poetry as he would a philosophical position. Levinas interprets the opening lines of *Aely* as projecting an ethical transcendence into Jabès’ metaphors for God:

“Do you know that the final period of the book is an eye,” he said, “and without lid?” *Dieu*, “God,” he spelled *D’yeux*, “of eyes.” “The ‘D’ stands for desire,” he added. “Desire to see. Desire to be seen.”
 [“*Sait-tu, dit-il, que le point final du livre est un oeil et qu’il est sans paupières?*”
Dieu, il écrivait D’yeux. “D pour desir, ajoutait-il. Désir de voir. Desir d’être vu.”]⁹⁴⁸

⁹⁴⁶ Gary D. Mole, *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 13.

⁹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

⁹⁴⁸ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 2, 203 [293].

Jabès “makes the word *Dieu* suddenly appear [...] as ‘*d’yeux*,”⁹⁴⁹ entwining God and the metaphors of sight. Jabès’ writing discloses a vision crafted in language and by language. “With Jabès, the writer is a catalyst only,” explains translator Rosmarie Waldrop:

He lures words onto the page, but they come following their own law. Their own law is partly semantic, but is even more the law of their material being, their body of sound, their letters. Again and again, a pun, a rhyme, an assonance, or an alliteration will draw the words together and determine the course of a phrase. “Verité” will lead to “vertige,” “dialogue” to “diamant.”⁹⁵⁰

By declaustrating words, emptying them of the weight of being, and leaving behind their alliterative husks, Jabès allows writing to follow its own adventurous course. Levinas describes Jabès’ writing as “declaustration as delivery to a lidless Eye,” it is “exposure, without defense, to an attention the hyperbole of which is exigency.” Following the chain of associations whose only law is hyperbole, Jabès depicts God through the ocular metaphors of seeing, prompting the question of God’s face. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas proffers, “the Other [...] resembles God,” prompting the question of whether this face is comprised of words and metaphors, or a kind of vision.⁹⁵¹ Jabès’ commitment to hyperbole reveals the lidless eye of “*d’yeux*,” leading Levinas to ask, alluding to Psalms 121, “is that not what the ‘sleepless’ attention of the ‘guardian of Israel’ is?”⁹⁵² Levinas refuses the prompt concerning the Jewish themes in Jabès’ writing. Mere themes fail to capture the essence of great poetry, and the question of attributing “Jewish” qualities to Jabès’ poetry is a particularly fraught question. Nonetheless, his relentless commitment to the hyperbole of writing is, Levinas writes, “the Jewish moment of Jabès’ work.”⁹⁵³ He references the Talmudic interpretation of Psalm 139, in which Adam is “created with two faces: with one head –

⁹⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Edmond Jabès Today” 64.

⁹⁵⁰ Rosmarie Waldrop, “Signs and Wonderings,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Autumn, 1975), 352.

⁹⁵¹ Emmanuel Levinas *Totality and Infinity*, 293.

⁹⁵² Ps 121:4: “Behold the Guardian of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

⁹⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, 64.

all face – without any background, any shadow for secret thoughts or mental reservations, without any possible break with this God.” According to *Midrash Schocher Tov*, Psalm 139 was written by Adam himself. Where Adam addresses God, “Back and front You fashioned me, and laid Your hand upon me,” he refers to his androgynous creation with two faces on one head, before the splitting of the genders with the creation of Eve.⁹⁵⁴ Adam’s double face – undivided between God and the human being – illustrates the ever-watchful eye of Jabès’ hyperbolic poetry.

Jabès’ text “Il n’y a de trace que dans le desert,” “There is Only a Trace in the Desert,” appeared in the 1980 volume *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*. Just as Levinas’ reading in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* projects ethical transcendence into Jabès’ poetry, Jabès operates a similar inversion on Levinas’ ethical philosophy by subjecting it to the vertiginous question of the book. Mole explains that Jabès “fragments and scatters Lévinas’s discourse [...] redeploying Lévinas’s notions of the trace, the face, the saying, passivity, desire, the Good, God, and responsibility into his own discourse of the desert, errancy, absence, silence, death, and nothingness.”⁹⁵⁵ Jabès describes the presence of this Other as an unrecognizable face, “a forgotten, found face,” and “the Saying [*dire*] of this voice which is perhaps only the unspeakable Saying [*indicible dire*] who says its misfortune, thus who says nothing.”⁹⁵⁶ Whereas Levinas highlights the transcendence in the subjective encounter with the face of the Other, Jabès dissimulates the Other as absence and dissimulation. It is a failure of communication, “from the unspeakable to the unspeakable [*de l’indicible à l’indicible*],” like Levinas’ invocation of *lech lecha*, a movement that goes forth into the unknown: “To leave a place that is known, lived (the landscape, the face) for an unknown place

⁹⁵⁴ Ps. 139:5.

⁹⁵⁵ Gary D. Mole, *Figures of Estrangement*, 19.

⁹⁵⁶ Edmond Jabès, “Il n’y a de trace que dans le desert,” *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas* Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1980, 15.

(the desert, the new face – the mirage?).”⁹⁵⁷ Against Levinas’ transcendence of the face, Jabès describes its dissimulation and its nothingness: “the infinite face of Nothing, with its weight of Nothing, of all the passages reduced to one – mine – lost.” Just as Levinas described how Jabès “declaustrates” or “denucleates” language, exposing the hollowness of being in the metaphor, in “There is Only a Trace,” Jabès deploys this strategy against Levinas’ ethical philosophy.

The trace of the Other is a presence beyond presence disclosed in the transcendence of the face. By contrast, Jabès describes the trace as abyssal: “if I am the trace, I can only be so for the other; but if the other is Other, another other, who will raise the trace? The Other is, perhaps, the abyss of the trace. Thought in the abyss, writing of the abyss. At the edge. [*Pensée en abîme, écriture de l’abîme. En bordure*].” Jabès highlights an ambiguity between the face of the Other, and what Levinas calls the “illéité” of the third person, leaving the trace to tarry in ambiguity. The phenomenon of the face is disclosed in Jabès’ text as an irremediable absence:

From this trace, a face. Which ? Everything is in the face and nothing ; in the effacement of the face which is reborn from its effacement, which emerges from nothingness from its traits forgotten, lost, restituted by death ; as if death knew the face, all faces, in their particularities or their confounding banality, a test of resemblance. With their name: face of the pronounceable or unnamable name.

By replacing the transcendence of the face with its effacement, Jabès reads the Levinas’ adventure against its ethical message, emphasizing the erasure of the Other which interrupts the ethical demand of the face. Mole writes, “Jabès suspend Lévinas’s ethical discourse in order to privilege a questioning of the written and the self-effacement of the writer it entails.”⁹⁵⁸ He interrupts the ethical order of the trace by emptying the phenomenon of the face of its content, leaving dissimulation and absence: “To trample the trace is to trample the face [*Piétiner la trace, c’est*

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁹⁵⁸ Gary D. Mole, *Figures of Estrangement*, 19.

piétiner le visage].”⁹⁵⁹ The ethical order provoked by the face of the Other has, for Jabès, “become nothing once more; but also the mirror of Nothing, the reflection of its broken mirror, its broken oval in a reflected distance.” The face is dissimulated in the broken mirror of nothingness, evacuating the transcendental or infinite character of the Other:

God, like the wholly Other of the other and as if it first had to familiarize us with the face of the Other, shares the responsibility to join, by its vector, the wholly Other without a face; as if all the swallowed faces gleamed, now, with the loss of Yours; as if He had paid with His face, the loss of all of ours. [*comme s’Il avait payé de Son visage, la perte de tous les nôtres*].⁹⁶⁰

He conflates Levinas’ idea of infinity with God but, Mole explains, “Jabès blocks the transcendence,” leaving behind writing as metaphor.⁹⁶¹ What remains is the sonority of writing. “To question is to be without belonging, the time of its formulation; it is to be without belonging in belonging, without connection in the connection,” Jabès writes, “it makes of the inside a perpetual outside.” The oscillation between inside and outside provoked by the question reveals the instability of the written sign, its wandering in exile without return. Jabès emphasizes the play between white and black in literary creation:

Writing is erased in writing. Black whitened in black. White remains.
White is contagious. Black opens to white which fills its opening. Duration is white.
The said does not leave a trace. It is, always, already said, the enjambed (neglected?)
trace.
To go to the discovery of the trace is, perhaps, to continue to write, to turn around the
untraceable trace.
Every trace of the word is in the word.
The word is supercharged with nothing.

*[L’écrit s’efface dans l’écrit. Le noir blanchit dans le noir. Le blanc demeure.
Le blanc est contagieux. Le noir s’ouvre à la blancheur qui comble son ouverture. La
durée est blanche.
Le dit ne laisse pas de trace. Il est, toujours, le déjà dit, la trace enjambée (négligée ?).
Aller à la découverte de la trace c’est, peut-être, continuer à écrire, tourner autour de
l’introuvable trace.*

⁹⁵⁹ Edmond Jabès, “Il n’y a de trace que dans le desert,” 17.

⁹⁶⁰ Ibid 18

⁹⁶¹ Gary D. Mole, *Figures of Estrangement*, 19.

*Tout trace de mot est dans le mot.
Le mot est surcharge de néant.]*

Evoking the play of the blank page and the written sign, Jabès evacuates the transcendence of Levinas' face and its trace, and the Saying and the Said, displacing his ethical philosophy by emptying the transcendence of the face. Levinas and Jabès' readings of each other's work reflect their ambivalence and misgivings. As Mole explains, "Lévinas's mistrust of poetry as a philosopher corresponds to Jabès's inability as a poet to submit the poetic word to anything other than itself as other."⁹⁶² Levinas' skepticism of poetry and Jabès' questioning of transcendence form a chiasmus, where their mutual ambivalence is expressed through their counter-readings that domesticate the other's thinking. Nonetheless, following the publication of "There is Only a Trace," Levinas wrote to thank Jabès for his words of friendship: "Know how much the testimony of your friendship touched my heart, which I felt in each of your words."⁹⁶³ Just as Derrida is connected to Levinas by way of a chiasmus, Levinas and Jabès speak through the blinds of disagreement concerning philosophical and poetic modes of "Being-Jewish." Both confront the adventure of the Other, yet their disagreement on the priority of the word and the face precludes final reconciliation.

In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida challenged Levinas' description of the trace of God in the face of the Other by recalling Jabès' words: "would Levinas subscribe to this infinitely ambiguous sentence from *The Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès: 'All faces are His; this is why HE has no face' [*Tous les visages sont le Sien; c'est pourquoi IL n'a pas de visage*]?"⁹⁶⁴ In "There is Only a Trace," Jabès inserts this same ambivalence into the presence and absence of the face, challenging, displacing, and raising Levinas' ethical Saying in the "denucleation" of being.

⁹⁶² Gary D. Mole, *Figures of Estrangement*, 20.

⁹⁶³ Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, 20 July 1981, Fond Jabès, BNF.

⁹⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 135.

VII. Conclusion

Against the rationalist philosophical tradition that seeks to export the literary experience of adventure from the domain of rational experience, Jabès, Levinas, and Derrida are emblematic “adventurers of the concept,” for whom the adventure is inflected in the question of the book. The character of their respective adventures differs, but Levinas, Jabès, and Derrida are inextricably tied together in dialogue, extending from their personal correspondences to their published commentaries on each other’s work, over the course of many years. They share in the adventure of the book, a rejection of the rationalism that excludes so-called “metaphysical adventures,” and an embrace of the uncertainty and futurity of the text whose outcome remains crucially undecided. They confront one another’s work by displacing its foundations, exiling their interlocutors from their writing, and forcing them to occupy the territory of their critic. The figure of the chiasmus, originally proposed by Levinas to describe his relationship with Derrida, similarly typifies his distancing from Jabès’ poetry; the transcendence of Levinas’ ethical subjectivity is undercut, challenged, but also reaffirmed by Derrida’s *écriture*, just as the “denucleation” of meaning in Jabès’ poetry of metaphor to blur the identity of “being-Jewish” and its ethical commandment. Questioning each other’s writing, parasitically inhabiting one another’s voices and reading their work against its original meaning, Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès engage one another as friends and philosophical interlocutors, for whom writing reveals the call and allure of an adventure: it is an adventure of the book, marked by uncertainty and risk.

Conclusion: Hospitality and the Book

I. Buber and Rosenzweig's *Gastgeschenk*: Hospitality and the Book

The adventure of the book is an expression of exile: entering the book is akin to being swept away from one's homeland, a stranger thrust into unknown and treacherous territory. The book articulates the peregrinations of thought in movement, and the displacement of writing from its mythic or divine origin. Reciprocally, the adventure of the book also poses the question of hospitality: the book can invite or welcome its reader to cross its threshold, to open its cover and enter its world, or, the book can refuse its reader—just as the reader can refuse the book. Books can be given – or even written – as gifts, as acts of gratitude or admiration, they can include dedications or appreciations, but they can also be effaced, desecrated, or destroyed. Hospitality always entails the risk that it is transformed into hostility, that the host's welcoming words prove deceptive or malevolent, and the guest becomes a hostage. The book also carries this risk.

Welcoming the stranger, the foreigner, the Other is through and through an affair of language. Levinas declares in *Totality and Infinity*, “the essence of language is friendship and hospitality.”⁹⁶⁵ Language is not something that is owned or possessed, rather it is something that is shared. “Language is hospitable [*hospitalière*],” Jabès writes in *The Book of Hospitality*, “it does not consider our origins. Being only what we can take from it, it is nothing other than what we expect of us. [*Ne pouvant être que ce que nous arrivons à en tirer, elle n'est autre que ce que nous*

⁹⁶⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 305.

attendons de nous].”⁹⁶⁶ Rejecting the givenness of language undercuts its proprietary belonging: language is hospitable because it invites anyone to use it. “There is no given language,” Derrida asserts in *Monolingualism of the Other*, “like the hospitality of the host even before any invitation, [language] summons when summoned.”⁹⁶⁷ The offer of hospitality is mediated by the “monolingualism” of the host and the guest, which includes but is not limited to a shared tongue, as well as the broad array of perspectives that inform their words and deeds. Derrida elaborates in *Of Hospitality*, “the language in which the foreigner is addressed or in which he is heard, if he is, is the ensemble of culture, it is the values, the norms, the meanings that inhabit the language.”⁹⁶⁸ Welcoming of the other is bound up in language, writing, and documentation. Language is “implicated, in endless ways, in the experience of hospitality. Inviting, receiving, asylum, lodging, go by way of the language or the address to the other.” He evokes the welcoming of immigrants and those who arrive “sans papiers,” whose contingent status as foreigner calls upon the question of writing and its privation in multifarious ways.⁹⁶⁹ For Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas, the question of hospitality is expressed both *in* and *by* language, and the book is its privileged gift.

A specific book can represent a gift of hospitality. In the shadow of Luther’s translation of the Bible, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig collaborated to write a new German translation of the Hebrew Bible during the 1920s. They were not able to complete the project before Rosenzweig’s death in 1929, but Buber published the full translation in 1961. The Buber-Rosenzweig Bible is a word-for-word, “concordant” translation, which heavily leans towards

⁹⁶⁶ Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre de l’hospitalité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 53.

⁹⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 67.

⁹⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 133-135.

⁹⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 2. Derrida analyzes “an experience of writing, a path ventured, a series of ‘political’ gestures,” in which, “at the center of this book, we will hear the echoing, for instance, in more than one register, literal and figurative, of the question of the person with no papers, crushed by so many machines, ‘when we are all, already, undocumented, ‘*sans-papiers*.’”

literality, creating a notably awkward German prose. Some critics have described as “unspeakable,” creating “a barrier between the reader and the meaning of the text,” or described its literality as “unnatural.”⁹⁷⁰ However, the strangeness of the prose in the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible is not an accident but a feature of their approach. Rosenzweig writes that the task of the translator is to “replicate the foreign tone in its foreignness,” that is, a process of *Umfremdung*, which as Dana Hollander explains “leaves the language in a changed state.”⁹⁷¹ All language is a process of translation, of reproducing the foreignness of language in a new tongue, and all translation already contains commentary; the obstacle posed by Luther’s canonical translation must be “leaped over,” *übersprungen*, through the jarring foreignness of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible.⁹⁷² Rosenzweig describes their German translation of the Torah as a “*Gastgeschenk*” to Germany, a gift given from the Jewish “guest” as a token of gratitude to the German “host.” The Buber-Rosenzweig Bible is a book of hospitality, inviting Germans into the Jewish book, in their language. “Rosenzweig noted his unreserved attachment to the German language, the language of his country,” Derrida observes in *Monolingualism of the Other*, their translation of the Bible represents “a respectable and terrified rivalry with Luther, ‘*Gastgeschenk*,’ acknowledgments, and token of the guest who is giving thanks for received hospitality.”⁹⁷³ Rosenzweig belonged to the

⁹⁷⁰ See: Edward L. Greenstein, “Theories of Modern Bible Translation,” *Prooftexts*, January 1983, Vol. 3, No. 1, (January 1983), 9-39; Ralph P. Kingsley, “The Buber-Rosenzweig Translation of the Bible,” *CCAR Journal* 11:4 (January 1964), 22; Marcia L. Falk, *The Song of Songs* (New York, 1977); H. L. Ginsberg, “The New Translation of the Torah, II. In the Path of True Scholarship,” *Midstream* 9:2 (June 1963), 75-86.

⁹⁷¹ Dana Hollander, *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the Nation of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 145.

⁹⁷² Rosenzweig recounted to Rudolf Stahl, “We were wary of neologisms and used them only where they were absolutely necessary. We found a word and then, as evidence, leafed so long in the Grimm [dictionary] or wherever, until we had found the word formations. Thus, we introduced nothing new into the German language, but only included the old.” Rosenzweig stringently following this principle of drawing exclusively from the existing register of German language. In the case of a transitive Hebrew verb in which only an intransitive German equivalent exists, he would justify his use through a single literary citation, so he could justify, “This use of the word is not new. It appears just like this in Tieck’s Oktavian. It follows that it is not grammatically incorrect.” (Ibid).

⁹⁷³ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 82

final generation who believed in the possibility of the elusive synthesis of “*Deutschjudentum*,” and his translation of the Bible is a testament to this eradicated dream.

Rosenzweig and Buber’s translation was completed in a very different world than the one in which it was first conceived: the hospitality of the German “hosts” to their Jewish “guests” would appear quite differently after the Shoah. At a 1961 ceremony in Jerusalem celebrating the translation’s completion, Gershom Scholem confronted Buber, suggesting the “gift” of their translation “is no longer a *Gastgeschenk* of the Jews to the Germans but rather – and it is not easy for me to say this – the tombstone [*Grabmal*] of a relationship that was extinguished in unspeakable horror. The Jews for whom you have undertaken this translation are no more. Their children, who escaped from this horror, will no longer read German.”⁹⁷⁴ Decades earlier, Scholem had fallen out with Rosenzweig after a discussion of “the very *Deutschjudentum* which I rejected.”⁹⁷⁵ For Scholem and those who questioned the viability of the German-Jewish symbiosis even before the rise of Nazism, the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible was a relic of a dead culture, a gift to an undeserving recipient. Its completion was received like an orphaned child. But even if the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible is a tombstone rather than a gift, it represents a unique cenotaph, a memorial to the ill-fated monolingualism of *Deutschjudentum*. Derrida explains:

A translation of the Bible as a tombstone, a tombstone in the place of a gift from the guest or a gift of hospitality (*Gastgeschenk*), a funerary crypt given in thanks for a language, the tomb of a poem in memory of a language given, a tomb which contains several other ones, including all the ones from the Bible, including the one from the Scriptures (and Rosenzweig was never far from becoming a Christian), the gift of a poem as the offering from a tomb which could be, for all one will ever know, a cenotaph, what an opportunity to commemorate a monolingualism of the other! What a sanctuary, and what a seal, for so many languages!⁹⁷⁶

⁹⁷⁴ Gershom Scholem “At the Completion of Buber’s Translation of the Bible,” *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 318.

⁹⁷⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem: Jugenderinnerungen*, 1st ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 178. See also: Stéphane Mosès, “Langage et sécularisation chez Gershom Scholem,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 30e Année, No. 60.1 (Jul. - Sep., 1985), 85-96; Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language,” *Acts of Religion*, 189-227.

⁹⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 83

The book is a written trace that commemorates and memorializes the past beyond the limits of human finitude, it is the receptacle for the memory of the past. A book can be offered as a gift, just as writing or reading a book can be a gift; a book can be inviting or foreboding, it is a gift that may be met with gratitude or hostility. Scholem warned Buber, “As to what the Germans will do with your translation, who could venture to say?”⁹⁷⁷ The book, like the tombstone, is a memorializing trace whose future preservation relies on the hospitality of others. In happy ignorance of the catastrophe that befell Germany’s Jews in the years after his death, Rosenzweig’s *Gastgeschenk* discloses a book of hospitality, inviting the German hosts into the Jewish book, in the language of the German people where Jews have long been guests. The Rosenzweig-Buber Bible is perhaps the highest achievement of the German-Jewish synthesis, a testament and memorial to an annihilated culture, a book which reflects the possibility and risk for the book of hospitality.

If the dialogue between Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas was inaugurated by reflections on writing and the condition of exile, their final exchanges returned to this question from its inverse perspective—that is, the question of writing and hospitality. The adventure of the book carries in exile, and it relies on the hospitality of the Other for its survival. During their ultimate exchanges in the early 1990s, Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas turn to the question of hospitality to reflect on the political challenges of the day. They confront the persistence of anti-Semitism in France, Israel and Palestine, as well as questions of immigration, xenophobia, and racism in Europe, which call for reflection on the hospitality and welcoming of the stranger. The book of hospitality holds both promise and risk: it can be received as a gift, what Rosenzweig describes as his *Gastgeschenk*, but it can also be receive with hostility, which Scholem cast as a *Grabmal*, a tombstone.

⁹⁷⁷ Gershom Scholem “At the Completion of Buber’s Translation of the Bible,” 318.

II. *L’Affaire Carpentras*, Anti-Semitism, and the Future of Europe

On the night of May 8, 1990, the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras was desecrated by anonymous vandals who destroyed thirty-four headstones, and exhumed and grotesquely defiled the body of a recently buried elderly man. Carpentras, a town in the Vaucluse department of the Côte d’Azur which served as a trading post dating back to the Roman Empire, has an outsized role in the religious history of France. The town’s Jewish community traces its roots to the 14th century, and it is home to the oldest active synagogue in France. During the Avignon Papacy, the period from 1309 and 1376 during which seven successive Popes resided not in Rome but in nearby Avignon, Carpentras became the home for the “juifs du pape,” who were banished from France by Philippe le Bel in 1306 and Charles IX in 1394 but offered refuge by the Pope. The historic roots of its Jewish community made the desecration of the cemetery all the more shocking. After the news emerged, Interior Minister Pierre Joxe traveled to Carpentras to survey the destruction, where he strongly denounced “racism, anti-Semitism, and intolerance.”⁹⁷⁸ The following week on May 14, President François Mitterrand led 200,000 people in marches across France “against hate, exclusion, and intolerance.” Across the French political spectrum, leaders denounced the anti-Semitism in Carpentras—with the exception of Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the Front National. The same evening the cemetery was vandalized, Le Pen had spoken on his preferred television program *L’Heure de Vérité*, where he accused the media of organizing a conspiracy against the FN practically in the same breath that he asserted that Jews had too much power in media. As the

⁹⁷⁸ Renaud Dely, “Six ans de récupérations et de manipulations Le FN a abondamment utilisé Carpentras pour se poser en victime d’un complot,” *Liberation*, 2 July 1996, https://www.liberation.fr/evenement/1996/08/02/six-ans-de-recuperations-et-de-manipulations-le-fn-a-abondamment-utilise-carpentras-pour-se-poser-en_180484.

search for the perpetrators began, Pierre Joxe pointed the finger directly at Le Pen who, “like all those who have expressed their anti-Semitism explicitly for decades, [...] is among those responsible, not for the acts in Carpentras, but for everything that has been inspired by racist hatred.” Le Pen speculated that the cemetery was desecrated by agents of the KGB, foreign extremist organizations, and especially by “Pierre Joxe and the socialist State” as part of the conspiracy against the FN. The investigation focused on local FN members, but after following several false leads, the police failed to uncover the perpetrators. Once public attention turned to the next scandal, silence – concerning those responsible for desecrating the cemetery in Carpentras, but more broadly France’s history of anti-Semitism – resumed. The “affaire de Carpentras” was only solved in 1996 when a repentant twenty-six-year-old turned himself in for the crime and denounced his three Neo-Nazi collaborators.⁹⁷⁹

The incident in Carpentras occurred in the context of the growing – and still unresolved – debate in France over immigration, race, and religion. Following an influx of immigrants after the Second World War in response to the massive demand for labor to rebuild France, and another wave of immigration from Western Africa, the North-African Maghreb, and Eastern Asia during the era of decolonialization, France tightened the limits on immigration during the 1970s under conservative President Valéry Giscard D’Estaing.⁹⁸⁰ Following a series of reforms introduced by socialist President François Mitterrand in 1983, and spurred by tectonic shifts in global politics, there was a sharp rise in immigration to France during the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁹⁸¹ The Schengen Agreement was signed in 1985, beginning the consolidation and gradual abolition of

⁹⁷⁹ Anne Cicco, “Carpentras: la piste de l’extrême droite se confirme” *L’Humanité*, 2 August 1996, <https://www.humanite.fr/node/136807>.

⁹⁸⁰ Virginie Guiraudon “Immigration Policy in France” *Brookings*, Sunday, July 1, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/immigration-policy-in-france/>.

⁹⁸¹ Christof Van Mol, Helga de Valk. “Migration and Immigrants in Europe: A Historical and Demographic Perspective.” In: Garcés-Masareñas B., Penninx R. (eds) *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe*. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21674-4_3.

internal borders across Western European member nations, leading to a wave of Northward migration from Southern European countries into France. Concurrently, the splintering of the Soviet Union led to a wave of asylum claims from the Eastern bloc. After spiking in the 1950s at the end of French colonial rule, immigration from the Maghreb to France increased during the 1980s as Europe expanded and its internal borders became more porous.⁹⁸² The influx of new arrivals in France, particularly those from West Africa and the Maghreb, fueled the massive growth of the Parisian *banlieux* and its towering “HLM” (“Habitation à Loyer Modéré”), which are chronically plagued by massive economic disadvantage and racial segregation. The increasing racial and religious diversity of French society was met with the rise of the anti-immigrant FN; Le Pen would call for “*immigration zéro*” by the early 1990s.⁹⁸³ Mitterrand’s government and the French left responded to Carpentras by underlining the need for solidarity in the combat against anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism.

Despite widespread calls for unity and solidarity to fight the common scourge of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, in “Europe, the Jews and the Book,” which appeared in *Libération* a week after the cemetery desecration, Jean-François Lyotard insisted Carpentras must be understood through the specific historical lens of European anti-Semitism. Without minimizing the horrors caused by xenophobia and racism, the etiology of anti-Semitism is unique. Lyotard viewed the incident in light of the long-standing theological conflict between Christianity and Judaism: “The desecration of the graves and the display on a stake of a corpse torn from its coffin in the Jewish cemetery of Carpentras say something specific: it’s that, after the Shoah, the Jews

⁹⁸² Hassène Kassar, Diaa Marzouk, Wagida A. Anwar, Chérifa Lakhoua, Kari Hemminki, Meriem Khyatti, “Emigration flows from North Africa to Europe,” *European Journal of Public Health*, Volume 24, Issue suppl_1, August 2014, Pages 2–5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/cku105>

⁹⁸³ Virginie Guiraudon, “Immigration Policy in France.”

don't have the right to their dead nor to the memory of their dead.”⁹⁸⁴ If European anti-Semitism has long been driven to erase the memory of Jewish people and even the written traces of their graves, it is because “the Jews represent *something that Europe does not want to or cannot know anything about.*” For Lyotard, the public shock in response to Carpentras represents the momentary realization of its unconscious desire for the erasure of the Jewish people from Europe. Whereas the nations of Christian Europe are rooted in the land they inhabit, so the story goes, “the Jews aren't a nation. They don't speak a language, their own. They don't have any roots in a nature, like the European nations. *They appeal to a book.*” Beyond conspiratorial charges, the salient disagreement with Christianity stems from what the Jew's book says.

“It's an old story,” Lyotard writes, but the theological disagreement is rather elementary:

The Book of the Jews says: God is a Voice, one never has access to His visible presence. The veil which separates the two parts of the temple by isolating the Holy of Holies can not be crossed (except once a year by the sacrificant, designated by God). Everything that presents itself as divine is an imposture: idol, charismatic leader, supreme guide, false prophet, Son of God. The law of justice and peace cannot be embodied. It doesn't show us an example to follow. It gave you a book to read, full of history to interpret.⁹⁸⁵

By contrast to the interdiction on the visible traces of the divine in the Jewish book, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ redeems the holiness of the visible, incarnated God:

Yet, Paul says: not at all, the temple's veil was torn apart “once and for all” at the moment when Jesus died on the cross. His sacrifice redeemed your sins, “once and for all,” repeats the apostle. The law has pardoned you, God gave you his Son and the death of His Son as a visible example. Through him the voice was shown. It said clearly: love one another as brothers. That was a revolution. It's the beginning of modernity.

This fundamental disagreement is the origin of the “permanent undertaking” in Christian Europe to “neutralize the Jewish message and banish the community of disbelievers.” Far from a historical accident or misadventure, thwarting the message of the Jewish book is “the anti-Semitism

⁹⁸⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, “Europe, the Jews and the Book,” trans. Thomas Cochran and Elizabeth Constable, *L'Esprit Créateur*, Spring 1991, Vol. 31, No. 1, 158. My emphasis.

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 159.

constitutive of Europe.”⁹⁸⁶ Viewed in this light, there is nothing extraordinary or surprising about the vandalized cemetery. Rather, Lyotard concludes, “What was cause for indignation, in the desecration of the cemetery at Carpentras, is, I fear, that it was from another age. Abject in view of contemporary ‘values.’ But how do the latter stand in view of the book that the dead of Carpentras were reading?” The mistake is to believe that these acts do *not* express contemporary values, as if anti-Semitism were *not* an expression of the present as well. The vandalism in Carpentras stems from the same pathology that has driven European anti-Semitism for centuries: the will to erase the Jewish book, and the written trace of the Jew which preserves her memory, from cemetery desecrations and book burnings to the incineration of millions of people in the Shoah. The survival of the Jewish book shares its fate with that of the Jewish gravestone.

Jabès was moved to write a response to Carpentras entitled “Un Jour de Vie,” “A Day of Life,” which appeared in *Libération* in the summer of 1990. The text forms the centerpiece of his final and posthumously published book, *Le Livre de l’hospitalité*. For Jabès, Carpentras was further evidence that the anti-Semitism on display during the Nazi occupation had never disappeared from France, but merely receded into the shadows. *The Book of Hospitality* intertwines a reflection on hospitality and death with Jabès’ most politically engaged text, where he reflects on anti-Semitism, Zionism, and the refugee question in Europe. Didier Cahen describes Jabès’ final book as an “authentic incursion into the thought of elsewhere, the work retraces in its subtext the double separation of God and man, sky and earth. Thus its double register which combines the most spiritual essay with the most quotidian engagement.”⁹⁸⁷ Jabès’ text divagates between reflections on “the relationships of space and the void, elsewhere and nothingness” in metaphors of the desert and sky, and contemporary political questions from Carpentras to “the most vibrant

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid, 161.

⁹⁸⁷ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, 300.

call for dialogue between the Palestinians and Israelis.” The double register of Jabès’ book folds the political into the poetic, and vice-versa, through the vector of hospitality. Writing in the summer of 1990, Jabès approaches the question of hospitality through the burial of the dead, illustrating the parallel between the respect for cemeteries and welcoming the Other. The memory inscribed on tombstones connects the cemetery to the question of writing and the trace. Jabès opens by remarking that writing outlasts death: “Writing, now, only to make it known that one day I ceased to exist [*Écrire, maintenant, uniquement pour faire savoir qu’un jour j’ai cessé d’exister*].”⁹⁸⁸ Writing survives its authors disappearance, it offers hope for a future where living memory fails. Confronting the inevitability of death with the hope of the written trace, Jabès writes, “the book is useless when the word is without hope [*Inutile est le livre quand le mot est sans espérance*].” This written trace can be inscribed in a book, or the words inscribed on a tombstone memorializing the deceased. Jabès reflects on the fragility of the written trace for the Jew, and the fear that one day this trace will be desecrated:

For my death, said a Jew, I would not like to be buried, but incinerated: because I do not wish to have a tomb, for fear that any passing malevolent might inscribe, one day, in black and red letters, on the flat slab which shelters me, an anti-Semitic slogan of his own. I could not tolerate this.

[*A ma mort – disait un juif – je ne voudrais pas être enterré, mais incinéré: car je ne souhaite pas avoir de tombe, de crainte qu’un quelconque passant malintentionné, n’inscrive, un jour, en lettres noires ou rouges, sur la plate dalle qui m’abriterait, un slogan antisémite de son cru. Je ne le supporterais pas*].⁹⁸⁹

The Jew’s tombstone constitutes a written trace that confronts the permanently at risk of future desecration. The tombstone is a test and a testament to hospitality and the welcoming of the Other.

⁹⁸⁸ Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre de l’hospitalité*, 9.

⁹⁸⁹ Ibid, 17. Jabès was indeed ultimately cremated, and his remains are held in the columbarium in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

That public discussion of anti-Semitism in France had receded to silence during the decades following the revelation of the Shoah was hardly evidence that this history had reached its conclusion. Repeating the words of Pierre Joxe, Jabès writes in *Le Livre de l'hospitalité*:

Racisme.
Antisémitisme.
Exclusion.

Trois sont les blessures.
Trois, les déterminations.⁹⁹⁰

Like Lyotard, Jabès cautions against ignoring the specificity and relevant differences between anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia. These wounds are determinations of violence, and while their common theme is the violent denial of the Other's humanity, their specific pathologies are unique. After the initial shock and the cascade of reporting on the cemetery desecration in Carpentras, silence resumed once the scandal had faded:

Following the protests of outrage brought on by the profanation of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras, silence ensued. How could it have been otherwise? We believe that everything has been said about an ignoble act when we have condemned it with all our soul, and with all our force. But this odious, repugnant act is only the logical and predictable consequence of a discourse, of an expertly, deviously maintained series of discourses; conveyed, amplified, denounced, sometimes by some; most of the time it is tolerated in the name of the freedom of expression that a democratic country affords its citizens.

[Aux manifestations d'indignation soulevées par la profanation du cimetière juif de Carpentras, a succédé le silence. Et comment peut-il en être autrement ? On croit avoir tout dit d'un acte ignoble lorsqu'on a condamné de toute son âme, de toute ses forces. Mais cet acte odieux, répugnant, n'est jamais que la conséquence logique, prévisible d'un discours, d'une série de discours habilement, sournoisement entretenus ; véhiculés, amplifiés, dénoncés, à l'occasion, par quelques-uns ; la plupart du temps tolérés au nom de la liberté d'expression qu'accorde un pays démocratique à ses ressortissants].⁹⁹¹

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid, 29.

⁹⁹¹ Ibid, 34.

The desecration of the cemetery in Carpentras by the young Neo-Nazis is the symptom of a deeper and broader antipathy nourished in silence, festering in the freedom of expression enshrined by democratic states. Evoking a well-known anti-immigrant slogan of the FN, Jabès asks,

France for the French: what does this mean if not France for France? That's normal. Isn't the destiny of France in the hands of the French? But, still, shouldn't we know which France this is about?

*[Que signifie : La France aux Français sinon : La France à la France ? Et c'est normal. Le destin de la France n'est-il pas aux mains des Français ? Mais, encore, faut-il savoir de quelle France il s'agit ?]*⁹⁹²

Implicit in the slogan is the belief that “France” belongs to the “franco-français” – that is, the ethnic group whose lineage traces back to Clovis and Charlemagne, and who hold a mystical connection to the fertile land of the *hexagone* – and no one else. Despite the ethno-nationalistic views espoused by the French far-right, Jabès recalls that in his earlier life in Egypt, “it was the Jewish minorities [...] but also Copts, Christians, of Egyptian nationality or foreign, who maintained the presence of France,” who spoke its shared language of a “universal culture,” and who revered “the image of a country built on three words: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.” Such is Jabès’ admiration for French Republican values, despite the implacability of anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia that stand in their way. Echoing Lyotard’s insistence that Carpentras must be understood as an event of its era, for Jabès the folly is believing that France had ever progressed beyond its anti-Semitic history, as if silence were equivalent to forgiveness and reconciliation:

To think, along with those who repeat it probably to convince themselves, that anti-Semitic discourse is less virulent today than before the war of 1940, for example, is a grave error. Because there was Auschwitz in between. The question is the following: how can such discourse gain acceptance? If the horror of Auschwitz couldn't break it, how can we believe that Carpentras could?

[Penser, avec ceux qui nous le répètent, pour probablement s'en convaincre eux-mêmes, que le discours antisémite est moins virulent, aujourd'hui, qu'avant la guerre de 1940, par exemple, est une grave erreur ; car il y a eu Auschwitz, depuis. Et la question est la

⁹⁹² Ibid, 35.

*suivante : Comment pareil discours peut-il avoir encore droit de cité ? Si l'horreur d'Auschwitz n'a pu le briser, comment croire que Carpentras le pourrait] ?*⁹⁹³

To denounce the Shoah and anti-Semitism of earlier times while ignoring the actuality of anti-Semitism in France is a version of denialism or negationism. Anti-Semitism in France has not been vanquished, it has merely receded into whispers and shadows: if Dreyfus, the Vél d'Hiv, and Auschwitz failed to break France's silence, Jabès asks, how could Carpentras?

Levinas resisted the sensationalism surrounding the desecration in Carpentras. In an interview published in *L'Express* in July 1990, he seemingly downplayed its significance. "I was dismayed like everyone else," Levinas recalls, but "you know, desecrations are practically commonplace."⁹⁹⁴ Rather than emphasizing the deep historical roots of the incident, what astonished him were "the dimensions the deed took, the way it was emphasized," and how it was provoked by Le Pen's appearance on television (Levinas questioned the television presenters' response to Le Pen: "how could they let themselves be led on in such a way by 'jokes' disguised as arguments?") But when asked if the incident in Carpentras was evidence of a climate where "racism and [...] anti-Semitism can flow freely," Levinas offered a rather curious answer:

When Hitler came to power, there were some rival candidates, and opposition which was fighting for a better society and called for a revolution wherever it might take place. Do not be mistaken. I am shedding no tears over the fall of communism. But the result is that this competition no longer exists today. There is nothing more lamentable or which elicits compassion more than this. When the leader of the communist Party of France speaks now there is nothing left to say. [...] it is in this context, the end of a certain era, that the Carpentras incident appears serious to me. There was a positive aspect: sincere reactions that did not stop with merely proper or fitting words. On the Christian's side, the reactions confirmed the efforts towards a better Judeo-Christian understanding, which is, after all, a new phenomenon in postwar Europe. If one seeks consolation, this is it. As to predicting what's in store for us, I have no prophetic gift, even if, sometimes, I read the prophets.⁹⁹⁵

⁹⁹³ Ibid, 36.

⁹⁹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "In the Name of the Other," *Is it Righteous to Be?* 196.

⁹⁹⁵ Ibid, 196-197.

Given the far greater traumas of Levinas' earlier life, it is understandable that he did not overreact to the cemetery desecration, even emphasizing the good that came of it in terms of interfaith understanding. Yet his remarks regarding the end of the Soviet Union bear further analysis. He suggests that the vandalism in Carpentras should be understood in terms of the end of a certain era in which an alternative to the status quo political order seemed possible. For all the problems of the Soviet Union, Levinas implies the existence of a global counterweight to the West afforded a certain stability in the world order. The ascension of liberal democracy as the monopolar order with the fall of the Soviet Union has left no space for ideological competition, leaving vandals like those in Carpentras to rebel against these values by lashing out in such an exaggerated manner. Levinas salutes the encouraging response from Christian leaders following the incident – evidence of progress? – though he refuses to speculate what might follow for the Jews.

Derrida did not directly comment on the cemetery desecration in Carpentras, but days after the incident at a conference on “European Cultural Identity” in Turin, he delivered a version of “The Other Heading,” which elliptically responded to the incident through a reflection on the future of Europe. A full version of the text appeared in October in *Liber*, a unique European newspaper published as an insert in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *L'Indice*, *El Pais*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *Le Monde* in their respective languages. Derrida suggests that the future of Europe is at stake in the response to the growing tensions over immigration, religion, and race:

Hope, fear, and trembling are commensurate with the signs that are coming to us from everywhere in Europe, where, precisely in the name of identity, be it cultural or not, the worst violences, those that we recognize all too well without yet having thought them through, the crimes of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious or nationalist fanaticism, are being unleashed, mixed up, mixed up with each other, but also, and there is nothing fortuitous in this, mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, with the very "spirit" of the promise.⁹⁹⁶

⁹⁹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 6.

The stirrings in Europe inspire contradictory responses, “hope, fear, and trembling,” disclosing both an opportunity and a danger. Derrida notes the multifarious forms of violence on display across Europe have the tendencies of blurring the distinctions between xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and so on. At the heart of these conflicts is the dissimulation of the meaning of Europe. He calls upon “the *duty* to respond to the call of European memory,” and “to re-identify Europe.”⁹⁹⁷ Europe is an *idea*, before it is a given geographical area. Contrary to those who would claim for Europe a specific (white, Christian) identity, whose reactionary and xenophobic beliefs have fueled the growth of right-wing identitarian political parties across the continent, the idea of Europe is in fact constituted by its relation to the Other. Derrida argues that the duty to understand Europe’s identity as a cultural and legal demarcation “also dictates welcoming foreigners in order not only to integrate them but to recognize and accept their alterity: two concepts of hospitality that today divide our European and national consciousness.”⁹⁹⁸ Despite the reactionary forms of xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism that continue to fester, Europe’s identity is one shaped by the responsibility to the Other, and therefore the question of hospitality. Michael Naas explains, “Derrida argues not only that Europe *must* be responsible for the other, but that its own identity is in fact constituted by the other.”⁹⁹⁹ The anti-Semitic desecration in Carpentras – like xenophobic and racist violence committed in the name of defending a privileged and exclusive notion of European identity – is a test of the European idea, and its commitment to hospitality to the stranger.

The questions unearthed by the desecration of the Carpentras cemetery maintain an unfortunate contemporaneity. Delphine Horvilleur remembers the incident as the first indication of the resurgence and banalization of anti-Semitism in France in recent decades:

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid, 76.

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid, 77.

⁹⁹⁹ Michael Naas, “Introduction, For Example,” in Ibid, xlvi.

Anti-Semitism haunts my family history, but I long thought my generation would be safe from it. In May 1990, there was a change with the desecration of the cemetery in Carpentras. I often think back to the national demonstration that it prompted. Nearly thirty years later, when Jewish graves are defaced, as was the case in Strasbourg a month ago [in December 2018], hardly anyone mentions it. Something absolutely abnormal has today become a banality.¹⁰⁰⁰

Carpentras was neither the first or last desecration of a Jewish cemetery in France, but it did mark an inflection point. Most recently, in April 2021, Jews across France have protested the court's shocking decision to dismiss the charges against the murderer of Sarah Halimi, who was beaten and thrown from the window of her Paris apartment in 2017 while her assailant hurled anti-Semitic invectives. This, of course, is only the latest scandalous act of violence perpetrated against Jews in France "parce que juif," including the strikingly similar murder of Mireille Knoll in 2018, the 2015 attack on the Hypercacher supermarket, the 2012 attack on the Ozar Hatorah school in Toulouse, and many more. In this sense, as a symptom and a warning, the vandalism of the Carpentras cemetery recalls Adorno and Horkheimer's words in "Elements of Anti-Semitism": "the despoiling of graveyards is nor an excess of anti-Semitism; it is anti-Semitism itself."¹⁰⁰¹

III. Sinai and the Paradox of Hospitality

The notion of pure hospitality, as the host's unconditional welcoming of the stranger as a guest, is no sooner considered than it is denatured by practical and political considerations which place limitations or conditions on its realization. The paradox of hospitality is that the conditions which

¹⁰⁰⁰ Delphine Horvilleur, "L'antisémitisme n'est jamais une haine isolée, mais le premier symptôme d'un effondrement à venir," *Libération*, Jan 8, 2019, <https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2019/01/08/delphine-horvilleur-l-antisemitisme-n-est-jamais-une-haine-isolee-mais-le-premier-symptome-d-un-effo-1701671>.

¹⁰⁰¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Elements of Anti-Semitism," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 150.

limit and constrain the welcoming of the stranger are also what make it possible. In *The Book of Hospitality*, Jabès recalls the gesture of hospitality shown to him by an anonymous Bedouin man in the Sinai desert, which illustrates the conditioning of hospitality. He recounts driving in the Sinai with an unnamed companion, presumably Arlette, when his car breaks down, leaving them stranded in the desert sun. Appearing as if from nowhere and startling the couple, they encounter a Bedouin man who offers them shelter in the town of El-Shatt. As if to put them at ease, the man adds, “*N’êtes vous pas mes hôtes?*”¹⁰⁰² In French, *hôte* has the peculiar quality of signifying both *host* and *guest*, suggesting the contingency of the welcome and the welcomed. The Bedouin man offers Jabès succor, for which he is grateful, and his car is repaired. Two days later, they see the same Bedouin once more, but when they stop to greet him, the man treated his former *hôtes* as if they were strangers. Initially, Jabès recalls, “this attitude seemed abnormal to us,” but, he adds, “we had not reflected enough, evidentially, on what hospitality is for the Bedouins.”¹⁰⁰³ Rather than a sign of disrespect, the Bedouin man’s feigned ignorance preserves his unconditional hospitality to the stranger, as a singular encounter without precedence or precondition—and which depends on the total anonymity of the *hôte*:

If our *hôte* received us while feigning ignorance of us, it was to mark that we remained, both of us, in his eyes, anonymous voyagers, who he had to honor as such in the name of the ancestral hospitality of his tribe. Because otherwise, our improvised visit would have rapidly looked like an ephemeral reunion.

[*Si notre hôte, nous avait reçu, en feignant de nous ignorer, c’était pour marquer que nous restions, l’un et l’autre, à ses yeux, les anonymes voyageurs qu’il lui fallait, au nom de l’ancestrale hospitalité de sa tribu, honorer en tant que tels car, autrement, notre visite improvisée aurait, rapidement, fait figure d’éphémères retrouvailles.*]

The Bedouin man’s feigned ignorance preserves the novelty and singularity of the encounter with Jabès as a stranger—even, as Derrida would say, *plus qu’une fois*. This is the condition of his

¹⁰⁰² Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre de l’hospitalité*, 84.

¹⁰⁰³ *Ibid*, 85.

welcome. Pure hospitality exceeds mediation through law and language, it demands that the *hôte* – both host and guest – put faith in the good will of the stranger, beyond any delimitation and without condition. Guest and host must put trust in the other, in a leap of faith that the offer of hospitality is sincere. "To bend to the unformulated demands of hospitality [*Se plier aux exigences informulées de l'hospitalité*]," Jabès writes, "is, in a way, to learn our dependence on the Other [*c'est, en quelque sorte, faire l'apprentissage de notre dépendance à autrui*]." ¹⁰⁰⁴ This dependence on the Other is highlighted by the hospitality of the Bedouin man in the Sinai.

Hospitality and the Sinai also form the central question and location for Derrida's "Welcoming Address," which he presented at the conference "Face and Sinai," organized by Danielle Cohen-Levinas as a part of the Collège International de Philosophie in December 1996 – a year after Levinas' passing. The event was held in the Richelieu Amphitheater of the Sorbonne where, Derrida notes, "not only a great professor at the Sorbonne, but a master, once taught." ¹⁰⁰⁵ This prolonged reflection on welcoming, *accueil*, recasts Levinas' philosophy in a new light. "Has anyone ever noticed?" he writes, "although the word is neither frequently used nor emphasized within it, *Totality and Infinity* bequeaths to us an immense treatise of *hospitality*." ¹⁰⁰⁶ Derrida's address explores its pivotal if under-examined role in Levinas' text, beginning with its preface where he writes, "this book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality; in it the idea of infinity is consummated." ¹⁰⁰⁷ The idea of infinity reveals the insufficiency of Being, and it takes the form of a transcendence – an *à-Dieu* – in the encounter with the face, the exemplary moment of hospitality towards the Other. Levinas adds, "metaphysics, or the relation with the

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ibid, 70

¹⁰⁰⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Welcoming Address," *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 17.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Ibid, 21.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27.

other, is accomplished as service and as hospitality.”¹⁰⁰⁸ He notes in the conclusion, “the essence of language is friendship and hospitality.”¹⁰⁰⁹ Derrida’s reading discloses the ethical responsibility to the Other and the question of hospitality as two sides of a coin, two axes that work through Levinas’ entire philosophy. “Far from representing a problem that is narrow and limited in scope,” explains François Raffoul, hospitality “represents the very access to Levinas’ thought of ethics as a whole, and its problematic relation to politics.”¹⁰¹⁰ If absolute hospitality welcomes the Other as the expression of an infinite responsibility, it cannot tolerate limitations or conditions; yet, this is precisely what is imposed by law and politics. Derrida’s question for Levinas therefore concerns “the relationships between an *ethics* of hospitality (an ethics as hospitality) and a *law* or a *politics* of hospitality.”¹⁰¹¹ He asks whether hospitality can be conditioned – or translated – as law, such that it “would be able to found a law and a politics, beyond the familial dwelling, within a society, nation, State, or Nation-State,” without sacrificing its ethical purchase.¹⁰¹²

“Sinai” has two registers which reflect the hiatus between the ethical and political valences of hospitality. First, Sinai irrevocably names “the place where the Torah was given,” where “the tablets of the covenant written by the hand of God” the episode of the golden calf where Moses shatters the tablets and then recasting new ones, and the entire self-interruptive drama of the revelation of the law in the Book of Exodus.¹⁰¹³ But “Sinai” also has a second valence, as “a metonymy for the border or frontier between Israel and the other nations, a front and a frontier between war and peace, a provocation to think the passage between the ethical, the messianic, eschatology, and the political.” As the political borderland at the limit of sovereign states, Sinai

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid, 306.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid, 305.

¹⁰¹⁰ François Raffoul, “On Hospitality, between Ethics and Politics,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 1998, Vol. 28 (1998), 277.

¹⁰¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 19.

¹⁰¹² Ibid, 20.

¹⁰¹³ Ibid, 63-64.

names the marginal space where “all these hostages – the foreigner, the immigrant (with or without papers), the exile, the refugee, those without a country, or a State, the displaced person or population” are subjected to “cruelty without precedent.” Sinai therefore names the place of the interruptive revelation of God’s commandment, and the lawlessness of the political order for the persecuted Other. Derrida recalls Levinas’ reading of Psalm 117 in “The Nations and the Presence of Israel,” where he posits, “a recognition of the Torah before Sinai?”¹⁰¹⁴ The positing of the ethical message of the Torah received before the revelation of the commandments is also a question of hospitality without law. For Derrida, at this moment Levinas appears to admit “election is inseparable from what always seems to contest it: substitution.”¹⁰¹⁵ In other words, the fact of election which discloses the commandment to hospitality must also question the fact of election: the host and guest prove infinitely substitutable. Derrida pairs expressions from Levinas’ two major works that illustrate this logic of substitution in hospitality: “The subject is a host” (*Totality and Infinity*) and “the subject is hostage” (*Otherwise than Being*).¹⁰¹⁶ Between the subject as the receiving host of the Other, and his or her substitution – perhaps his substitution as her, or vice-versa – as the hostage, the stranger, the Other, Derrida describes “a structural or *a priori* messianicity. Not an ahistorical messianicity but one that belongs to a historicity without a particular and empirically determinable incarnation.”¹⁰¹⁷ Sinai is the name for the structural messianicity that maintains the hiatus between the ethical and political, where the substitution of host and hostage, or host and guest, is conditioned by history.

If, as Derrida suggests, no adequate translation is possible between the ethical concept of

¹⁰¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Nations and the Presence of Israel,” *In the Time of Nations*, trans Michael B. Smith (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 97.

¹⁰¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 70.

¹⁰¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 299 and *Otherwise than Being*, 112.

¹⁰¹⁷ *Ibid*, 119.

hospitality and the demands and conditions imposed by law, then Levinas' philosophy introduces a *hiatus* between ethics and law. Hent de Vries explains in *Religion and Violence* that "no unilinear, hierarchical order of foundation, derivation, or causation regulates the relation between these two orders," rather "Levinas's thoughts on hospitality leaves in suspense the question of what comes first. It does so in a paradoxical gesture that bears a remarkable resemblance to the classical procedure of the phenomenological epochē."¹⁰¹⁸ Between the infinity of ethics and the demands of law and politics, hospitality must toggle between these orders via a kind of phenomenological reduction. Through the hiatus of ethics and politics, "the language of hospitality, like that of literature, dislodges phenomenology from its supposed 'certainties.'" The aporia of ethics and law therefore introduces an apparent paradox in Levinas' reflection on hospitality, where the actualization of hospitality as law denatures and renders it inoperative. Absolute hospitality demands that the host accede to the infinite demand of the guest, to the point of giving his or her home to the guest, substituted as host. Derrida elaborates,

The *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers in his own home; he receives it from his own home-which, in the end, does not belong to him. The *hôte* as host is a guest.¹⁰¹⁹

Absolute hospitality implies the endless substitution of guest and host, host and guest, with neither ever acceding to primacy. Raffoul explains, "a logic of *substitution* here takes the place of a logic of subordination or subjection," leaving the host as hostage of the guest in her own home.¹⁰²⁰ If hospitality attempts to overcome the exclusion of the Other, its precondition is the very separation that it will bridge. Beyond the substitution of host and guest, the very possibility of hospitality

¹⁰¹⁸ Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 304-305.

¹⁰¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 41.

¹⁰²⁰ François Raffoul, "On Hospitality, between Ethics and Politics," 279.

presupposes a home, a *chez soi*, a form of interiority and its separation from an Other, a stranger, a foreigner: there must be separation for it to be henceforth overcome. De Vries explains:

To open one's doors unconditionally, one must reign over the house in full authority. Before one can solicit the other to step across a threshold and become a guest, this threshold (of the house, the family, the temple, the nation, a language community, and so on) must be in place and be maintained for the welcome to be what it is. And yet the threshold is also what forever ipso facto puts a limit to the acceptance of the other. What constitutes hospitality in its essence or structure deconstructs it in every instance. Wherever it shows its face, hospitality deconstructs itself.¹⁰²¹

The impasse is that hospitality exhibits a kind of "auto-immunity," where the very realization of hospitality constitutes its unraveling. Derrida writes in *Of Hospitality*, "it is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it."¹⁰²² The possibility of hospitality without conditions, without the corruption by the limitations and exceptions imposed by political demands, is essentially beyond definition. Jabès frames the point in *The Book of Hospitality* in a short, evocative dialogue:

-What definition suits hospitality? Asked the youngest disciple of his master.
-A definition is, itself, a restriction and hospitality does not bear any limitations – responded the master.

[*-Quel définition pourrait convenir à l'hospitalité? – demanda, à son maître, le plus jeunes de ses disciples.*
-Une définition est, en soi, une restriction et l'hospitalité ne souffre aucune limitations – répondit le maître.]¹⁰²³

The *aporia* of hospitality lies in its self-mediation in a definition which limits its purview; hospitality is conditioned by the demands of law which also make it possible.

The apparent impossibility of hospitality is an opening and an opportunity. Raffoul explains, "The hiatus, far from leading to some paralysis of political action, becomes, on the

¹⁰²¹ Hent De Vries, *Religion and Violence*, 315.

¹⁰²² Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 75-77.

¹⁰²³ Edmond Jabès, *Livre de l'hospitalité*, 57.

contrary, the possibility for an ethical *perfectibility* of politics and law.”¹⁰²⁴ Absolute hospitality risks asserting its claim everywhere, and thereby undermining the specificity of its task; in other words, hospitality relies on its limitation by its constitutive opposite. “If hospitality does not let itself be circumscribed or derived,” Derrida explains, “then it would have no contrary: the phenomena of allergy, rejection, xenophobia, even war itself would still exhibit everything that Levinas explicitly attributes to or allies with hospitality.”¹⁰²⁵ It is only through its delimitation by a constitutive opposite that hospitality can have meaning, which implies refusing its absolutism. De Vries comments: “If hospitality, in its very absoluteness, is somehow, in a singular way, *everywhere*—in hospitality *and* in hostility, in friendship *and* enmity, in our relation to other human beings *and* in the openness to any intentional (ideal, material, animal) object whatsoever—then it is also *nowhere* to be found.”¹⁰²⁶ This double-bind links hospitality to law while nonetheless insisting on their separation, preserving its internal oppositional structure.

The demand in the face for absolute hospitality is interrupted by the presence of a third party. “Without waiting,” Derrida writes, “the third comes to affect the experience of the face in the face to face.”¹⁰²⁷ Levinas’ *tiers*, the “third person,” intervenes and interrupts the infinite ethical order of the face-to-face, and comes to stand for justice. Derrida writes, “this ‘thirdness’ [*tertialité*] turns or makes turn toward it, like a witness (*terstis*) made to bear witness to it, the dual [*duel*] of the face to face.” The third party presents both an intervention and a violation of the face to face, de Vries explains, it both “divides and diminishes – but also intensifies and exalts – the absolute relationship between the one ‘me’ and the one ‘other.’”¹⁰²⁸ The third party demonstrates the

¹⁰²⁴ François Raffoul, “On Hospitality, between Ethics and Politics,” 281.

¹⁰²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 50.

¹⁰²⁶ Hent De Vries, *Religion and Violence*, 320-321.

¹⁰²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 29.

¹⁰²⁸ Hent De Vries, *Religion and Violence*, 324.

insufficiency of the dialogical relationship of the host and guest. Translating the insufficiency of the ethical face to face to the hiatus between hospitality and law, the third person interrupts the infinite substitution of absolute hospitality. This interruption by the third, Derrida remarks, “the *illeity* of the third is thus nothing less, for Levinas, than the beginning of justice, at once as law and beyond the law, in law beyond the law.”¹⁰²⁹ The third “protect[s] against the vertigo of ethical violence” by interrupting the absolutism of the face-to-face, parasitically occupying the place of host and guest, exposing the insufficiencies and contingencies of these categories.¹⁰³⁰ In this sense, de Vries writes, “the figures of the immigrant and the seeker of asylum evoke not only the stranger but also the third, the one who not only deepens my responsibility but also gives me a break and thus makes responsibility, if not bearable or masterable, then at least less violent.”¹⁰³¹ Between the singularity of the face and the plurality of the third, Derrida writes, it is “as if the unicity of the face were, in its absolute and irreducible singularity, plural *a priori*.”¹⁰³² This ambivalence forces hospitality to reckon with the conditions imposed by law.

The paradox of hospitality maintains the ethical structure of messianicity even as it is denatured in its codification or conditioning as law. In Derrida’s reading of Levinas – which is prolonged and accentuated by de Vries – the ethical face to face is interrupted and heightened by the presence of a third party, the neglected other Other, who stands for justice. The third bears witness to the scene of hospitality between host and guest, but he or she reveals its inadequacies. In this project, I have suggested that we read Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas according to this same logic of the singular plural, or thirdness, as thinkers whose relationships are based on the

¹⁰²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 29.

¹⁰³⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

¹⁰³¹ Hent De Vries, *Religion and Violence*, 323.

¹⁰³² Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 110.

singularity of the face to face, or the epistolary exchange, but whose dialogues unfold in the presence of the third who interrupts but also testifies to their friendship.

IV. Israel, Palestine, and the Test of Hospitality

When Levinas alludes to “a recognition of the Torah before Sinai,” he poses, Derrida writes, “a test of hospitality.”¹⁰³³ The possibility of ethics before law appeals to a hospitality beyond revelation, “a question of recognizing a universal message for which it has responsibility before or independently of the place and the event of the gift of the law.” This test of hospitality reveals its complexity in the questions posed by the state of Israel, which is called to follow the ethical demands of a messianic history as well as the political demands of the world history of nation-states. Levinas writes in *Beyond the Verse*, “What is promised in Jerusalem is a humanity of the Torah.”¹⁰³⁴ This promise of the Torah is based in the messianic vision of Jerusalem, yet this is at some remove from the actuality of Jerusalem. The hiatus between these two visions of Jerusalem risks muddling the political questions provoked by Israel and its policies, and those related to Jewish people across the world. In his text on Carpentras, Jabès writes, “anti-Israel speech has, little by little, grafted itself onto anti-Semitic speech.”¹⁰³⁵ Different sides share an interest in confusing these discourses. For Jabès, Levinas, and Derrida, as products of *galut* whose strongest attachment is to the French language, the conflict between Israel and Palestine represents the most

¹⁰³³ Ibid, 66.

¹⁰³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 52.

¹⁰³⁵ Edmond Jabès, *Livre de l'hospitalité*, 36.

intractable test of hospitality, at the theological-political crossroads of identity and affiliation, but also the prevailing question of justice.

The creation of the state of Israel had in a certain respect shifted its relation to Jewish books: if they were the “people of the book” in lieu of a national homeland, a text-centered religion in the absence of the Holy of Holies, what to make of this expression now? Whereas the Talmud is considered the Jewish writing of exile, Moshe Halbertal explains, “the Zionists preferred the Bible to the Talmud as the national literature, for the Bible tells a heroic story of the national drama whose focus is the Land of Israel. [...] Unlike the Talmud, they held, the Bible had the potential to become a national epic.”¹⁰³⁶ The Zionist focus on the Bible as the centralized book of the Jewish state alters the “text-centeredness” of the Jewish people as a kind of national literature based on the heroic tales of the Bible. To offer an indication of the importance of this shift: in 1953, in response to writer Avraham Kariv’s claim that the Bible should be understood through the lens of Midrash and Talmud, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion denounced the argument “with all my moral and Jewish force” as bordering on “blasphemy,” and he emphatically affirmed the Bible “existed before there was a Midrash and is not dependent on the Midrash.”¹⁰³⁷ This reorientation of Jewish “text-centeredness” towards the national epic in the Bible illustrates how the question of the book is imbricated in the theological-political constitution of the state of Israel.

Reflections on the place of Israel accompany the prolonged dialogue between Jabès, Derrida, and Levinas on the question of the book. During a 1965 trip to Jerusalem, Jabès sent Derrida a postcard of the Western Wall, with a short note signed by both Edmond and Arlette: “Here, every stone calls us back to ourselves...and friendship is present! [*Ici, chaque pierre nous*

¹⁰³⁶ Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 132.

¹⁰³⁷ Ibid, 133. Poet Avraham Kariv was born in Kovno, Lithuania in 1900—six years before Levinas’ birth in the same city; he eventually emigrated to Mandate Palestine.

rappelle à nous-mêmes...et l'amitié est présente].”¹⁰³⁸ This brief comment is brimming with reverence for this special place in Jewish memory and history. It also evokes the frequent geological metaphors in Jabès’ writing, which express the sedimentation and fragmentation of stone in terms of the desert sand, the tablets of the law and their shattering, but also the tombstone and its desecration. He suggests a connection between Jerusalem, the Egyptian desert of his youth, the shattered fragments of the tablets in the Sinai, but also the broken tombstones in the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras—Jabès evokes the historical narrative of the Jewish people in *galut* as an adventure of sand and stone. As he writes in *Aely*: “Heap of stones. For centuries, God spoke through stone [*Pierres amoncelées. Dieu parla, pour les millénaires, dans la pierre*].”¹⁰³⁹

Amidst the Six Day War in June 1967, Derrida wrote to Levinas that he had been “glued to the radio” since the beginning of the conflict, and for some time he had been “obsessed by what was happening over in Israel.”¹⁰⁴⁰ This, Benoit Peeters speculates, “certainly helped to bring him closer to Levinas.” While he rarely writes directly about political questions, the future of the Jewish state is of crucial importance for Levinas. In his 1967 text “Space is Not One Dimensional,” Levinas examines the mentality of French Jews at this moment of Israel’s latest conflict with its neighbors. He does not mask his attachment to his adopted country. “Adherence to France is a metaphysical act, of course,” Levinas writes, “it had to be France, a country that expresses its political existence with a trinitarian emblem which is moral and philosophical, and is inscribed on the front of its public buildings.”¹⁰⁴¹ *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* represent more than a political slogan, this trinity is the keystone to the political religion of the French Republic. For Levinas,

¹⁰³⁸ Letter from Edmond Jabès to Jacques Derrida, 19 April 1965, Fond Derrida, IMEC.

¹⁰³⁹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Tome 2, 305 [420].

¹⁰⁴⁰ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Emmanuel Levinas, 6 June 1967, Fond Levinas, IMEC. See: Benoit Peeters, *Derrida*, 173-174.

¹⁰⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas “Space is Not One Dimensional,” *Difficult Freedom*, 260-261.

these values are in no way in conflict but rather complement being Jewish. While the Dreyfus affair marked a psychological turning point for French Jews, opening cracks in their faith in Republican ideals, the Shoah and the foundation of Israel were events of another order of magnitude, “human events which tear open their own envelope” which “burn up the concepts that express their substance.”¹⁰⁴² Levinas describes these events as *religious* due to their extraordinary character: “the Nazi persecution and, following the exterminations, the extraordinary fulfilment of the Zionist dream, are religious events outside any revelation, church, clergy, miracle, dogma or belief.”¹⁰⁴³ He evokes the creation of Israel and the Shoah in terms of a “passion” beyond humanity’s capabilities. After two millennia of diaspora, these events precipitated the dramatic entry of the Jewish people into Hegelian history as a newly formed state.

For Levinas, Israel is charged with the special duty of acting both out of the interests of state, but also as a righteous example for humanity. He writes in “Promised Land or Permitted Land,” “there is no other country like it; the resolution to accept a country under such conditions confers a right to that country.”¹⁰⁴⁴ This suggests that Israel can only survive if it lives up to this prophetic duty. The tension between its holy mission and its political realities is the source of great risk: “The resurrection of the State of Israel, its dangerous and pure life, can no longer be separated from its doubly religious origins: a Holy Land resuscitated by the State, in spite of the profane forms it assumes.”¹⁰⁴⁵ He concludes “Space is Not One Dimensional” by expressing the unresolved conflict between universal history and holy history at the moment of the Six Day War:

To be a fully conscious Jew, a fully conscious Christian, a fully conscious communist, is always to find yourself in an awkward position within Being. And you too, my Muslim friend, my unhated enemy of the Six-Day War! But it is from adventures such as these run

¹⁰⁴² Ibid, 262.

¹⁰⁴³ Ibid, 263.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Promised Land or Permitted Land,” *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 69.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas “Space is Not One Dimensional,” 264.

by its citizens that a great modern State — that is to say, one that serves humanity - derives its greatness, the attention it pays to the present and its presence in the World.

The “awkward position within Being” that Levinas describes discloses the hiatus between the ethical and political. The troubling formulation, “My Muslim friend, unhated enemy,” suggests that in the domain of the political, the self-constitution of a state or nation accompanies the designation of an Other, who is prone to become an enemy through the affairs of state. We might recall Montaigne’s paradoxical turn of phrase in “De l’amitié,” “O mes amis, il n’y a nul ami,” which is central for Derrida’s reflections on the contingency of friend and enemy in “The Politics of Friendship.”¹⁰⁴⁶ Levinas’ belief in Israel’s prophetic charge to act as an example for humanity certainly seems incongruous with the political reality of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which is unfortunately animated by far worse than “unhated enemies.” Howard Caygill comments, “it becomes necessary to ask about those who were displaced by the ‘place in the sun’ taken by a ‘great modern state’ and of those others who are sacrificed to its political adventures.”¹⁰⁴⁷ Pertaining to the test of hospitality, Derrida asks, “Who are the *hôtes* and the hostages of Jerusalem?”¹⁰⁴⁸ Levinas’ notion of substitution looms large. If the Jewish people is shaped by its long history of exile in *galut*, its entry into world history as a state accompanies the exile of the Palestinians. In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said remarks on the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba*, “perhaps this is the most extraordinary of exile’s fates: to have been exiled by exiles—to relive the actual process of up-rooting at the hands of exiles.”¹⁰⁴⁹ Here, we might consider Mahmoud Darwish’s poem “A Lover from Palestine” on the experience of exile:

¹⁰⁴⁶ Michel de Montaigne, “De l’amitié,” *Essais I* (Paris: PUF, 1988). This paradoxical expression, which originates with Aristotle, becomes the central question for Derrida in “Politics of Friendship,” *American Imago*, Vol. 50, No. 3, (Fall 1993), 353-391.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 182.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu* 105.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Granta, 2000), chapter 17.

But I am the exile.
 Seal me with your eyes.
 Take me wherever you are -
 Take me whatever you are.
 Restore to me the color of face
 And the warmth of body,
 The light of heart and eye,
 The salt of bread and rhythm,
 The taste of earth... the Motherland.
 Shield me with your eyes.
 Take me as a relic from the mansion of sorrow;
 Take me as a verse from my tragedy;
 Take me as a toy, a brick from the house
 So that our children will remember to return.¹⁰⁵⁰

Darwish expresses the sense of exile through the loss of contact and nourishment from the earth. The hiatus between the ethical and political meanings of hospitality in Levinas' thought reaches its highest tension in the substitution of Jewish and Palestinian exiles. Between "pre-originary hospitality" and "the politics of modern States," Derrida points to "the politics underway in the 'peace process' between Israel and Palestine" as the ultimate test of hospitality.¹⁰⁵¹

The tension between Israel's prophetic duty and its political reality was further heightened when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 to dismantle the infrastructure of the PLO and install a more amenable government in Beirut. Prime Minister Menachem Begin argued, "the alternative to fighting is Treblinka."¹⁰⁵² As Israeli forces arrived in West Beirut, Phalangist Militia entered the Chatila and Sabra camps and slaughtered between one and two thousand Palestinian refugees. Amidst international condemnation for Israel's complicity in the massacre, Begin dismissed the criticism: "*Goyim* kill *goyim*, and they immediately come to hang the Jews."¹⁰⁵³ Days after the

¹⁰⁵⁰ Mahmoud Darwish, "A Lover from Palestine," in *From Splinters of Bone*, trans. B.M. Bennani (New York: The Greenfield Review Press, 1974).

¹⁰⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 91-92.

¹⁰⁵² Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 404.

¹⁰⁵³ David K. Shipler, "Israel Backs 3-Nation Force For Peacekeeping In Beirut," *New York Times*, September 22, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/22/world/israel-backs-3-nation-force-for-peacekeeping-in-beirut-rejects-panel-on-massacre.html> .

massacre, Levinas took part in a radio broadcast with Shlomo Malka and Alain Finkelkraut where they discussed Israel and ethics. Levinas was, it seems, quick to dismiss the Israeli complicity in the massacres, noting “the lack of guilt here [in France] – and probably there [in Israel], too.”¹⁰⁵⁴ Malka asked the crucial question: “Emmanuel Levinas, you are the philosopher of the ‘other.’ Isn’t history, isn’t politics the very site of the encounter with the ‘other,’ and for the Israeli, isn’t the ‘other’ above all the Palestinian?” Levinas’ answer lays bare the hiatus between ethics and politics:

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you’re for the other, you’re for the neighbor. But if your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.¹⁰⁵⁵

Levinas highlights the place of the third party who intervenes or interrupts in a dispute between neighbors; the third exceeds the dialogical ethical relationship between self and other, and introduces the question of politics, and indeed, justice. Where ethics pertains to the singularity of the relation between neighbors, once this situation expands to include the neighbor’s neighbors, other others, the face to face relation becomes inadequate. In some sense, as neither Israeli or Palestinian, Levinas comments on the conflict in the Middle East as a kind of third party; this does not mean he intervenes as a neutral or objective arbiter, rather it suggests that he responds *politically*. Rather than treating these comments as a blind-spot in his ethical philosophy, Caygill argues “a harder thought is that Levinas’s claim is rigorously consistent with his philosophy, which we have argued recognizes the inevitability of war.”¹⁰⁵⁶ If peace is the exception to war rather than its inverse, then any neighbor is susceptible to become an enemy. Several years later, François Poirié asked Levinas what the state of Israel represented for him. “You are touching there on too

¹⁰⁵⁴ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 191.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 294.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 191-192.

many strong feelings!” he told Poirié. But, Levinas added, it is only “as a State,” that “Israel – the people and the culture – can survive.”¹⁰⁵⁷ The quiet realism of this remark finds common cause with certain strains of revisionist Zionism, according to which the survival of the Jewish people is contingent on the state of Israel. Nonetheless, speaking in *galut*, he avoids directly addressing Israel’s policies: “I will say to you that there are many things about which I cannot speak because I am not in Israel. I forbid myself to speak about Israel, not being in Israel, not living its noble adventure and not running this great daily risk.”¹⁰⁵⁸ His refusal to confront Israel’s “noble adventure” on French soil – a fascinating choice of words given the double legacy of adventure in his thought as both Odysseus’ nostalgia and Abraham’s departure – discloses the point where the universal history of statecraft abuts the messianic history of Israel.

Events surrounding the Lebanon War would occasioned a dispute between Jabès and Levinas. On November 30, 1983, Jabès was invited to give a reading at the inauguration of the Centre Rachi, a center for Jewish thought connected to the Sorbonne. Jabès’ English translator and friend Rosemarie Waldrop recalls of the evening, “at the door we are frisked. I know there have been a number of anti-Jewish manifestations recently, a bomb in Goldberg’s restaurant, swastikas in the cemeteries, but I am still a bit taken aback. It turns out the Israeli ambassador is here will speak first.”¹⁰⁵⁹ Jabès entered the auditorium to find himself seated between the director of the Centre and the Israeli ambassador to France, who was to give an unscheduled speech. From there, Didier Cahen describes, “the evening quickly ‘degenerated.’”¹⁰⁶⁰ The ambassador began his address by describing the Palestinians as “those assassins,” provoking members of the audience to leave the auditorium in protest. “A few more hawkish sentences,” Waldrop recalls, “and Arlette

¹⁰⁵⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” 81.

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, 146.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, 335.

Jabès, in the first row, gets up and leaves.” Jabès systematically refused to speak on behalf of any nationalist political agenda, and he was visibly blindsided by the ambassador’s speech as he uncomfortably sat at the dais. Recalling well-worn nationalist tropes, “the ambassador invokes the Masada, Judas Maccabeus, ‘the hammer,’ and again, ‘those assassins, those criminals, those new Nazis.’ He calls for a Holy War.” At this point, Jabès stood up and left the auditorium as well.¹⁰⁶¹ When the ambassador concluded his speech and left the auditorium, Jabès returned to deliver his address, “Judaism and Writing,” which was received by the returning audience with a standing ovation.¹⁰⁶² Jabès was upset for the imposition, and felt he had been manipulated; the directors of the Centre Rashi wrote him to apologize for the awkward situation the event had occasioned.¹⁰⁶³ Nonetheless, Jabès was excoriated by segments of the Israeli press, and he received numerous phone calls and letters questioning his decision to walk out on the ambassador. In particular, Levinas expressed his disagreement with Jabès’ actions, provoking an argument between the two.¹⁰⁶⁴ Waldrop explains Jabès was “deeply concerned with Israel and its fate,” but he “distinguished between the dream of a Jewish land and the actual State of Israel, which he did not consider above criticism.”¹⁰⁶⁵ Following the controversy at the Centre Rachi, in January 1984, Jabès sent Levinas his newly published *Livre du Dialogue*; Levinas thanked him for his “more than friendly dedication” to the book, which was “for me, quite meaningful even before its first pages.”¹⁰⁶⁶ Like many authors, Jabès sent copies of his new books to friends and interlocutors—this was how he first contacted Levinas in 1963. More specifically, Jabès’ sending *this* book to

¹⁰⁶¹ Jabès later told friends: “As I started to get up, the director next to me grabbed hold of my trousers, trying to keep me there. So my great fear was that I would lose my pants up there on the podium.” Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, 147.

¹⁰⁶² Edmond Jabès, “Judaïsme et écriture,” *L’Écrit du temps* (no. 5, hiver 1984), 5-16.

¹⁰⁶³ Letter from Centre Rachi to Edmond Jabès, 1983, also Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, 8 December 1983, Fond Jabès, BNF. The text of these letters is unavailable at the time of writing due to the pandemic.

¹⁰⁶⁴ This is based on Didier Cahen’s account of the incident from a 2019 conversation.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, 147.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Edmond Jabès, 27 January 1984, Fond Jabès, BNF.

Levinas only weeks after their disagreement was a notable gesture of hospitality and welcoming.

In his 1980 interview with Marcel Cohen, Jabès described his ambivalence regarding Israel as both “a lively admiration and an infinite worry.”¹⁰⁶⁷ On the one hand, he remarked, “a Jew today cannot refuse solidarity with Israel, first, because before it was a State, this minuscule part of the globe was already a land of refuge.”¹⁰⁶⁸ Jabès’ exile from Egypt in 1957 was provoked in part by accusations that Egyptian Jews were loyal to Israel during the Suez Crisis, but he had briefly found refuge in Jerusalem during the Second World War, when the British evacuated him from Egypt as Rommel’s army approached Cairo. After the Shoah and the uprooting of Jews across North Africa and the Middle East, a refuge for Jews had become all the more necessary. On the other hand, for Jabès, the very existence of the State of Israel represents the failure of Western liberalism to protect Jews from violence: “this State, modeled by the suffering of so many martyrs, is the reflection of the exemplary failure of Western liberalism. That it was necessary to create it to save the Western Jews is, and remains, the shame of the West.” Israel therefore reflects “less a point of fundamental justice” and more so “the only and predictable response of scarred Judaism [*judaisme meurtri*] to a generalized injustice.” Yet the scars of past trauma are not redeemed in further suffering. Jabès writes in 1990 in *The Book of Hospitality* amidst the first Intifada, “*Never will the wound heal the wound [Jamais la blessure ne guérira la blessure]*.”¹⁰⁶⁹ He urges Israel not to silence the Palestinians, “a nation without hope but who, for its survival, continues to hope [*un pays sans espérance mais qui, pour sa survie, continue d’espérer*].” In a prayer for dialogue, Jabès writes:

That the Palestinians, united behind their chosen representative, make themselves heard, by their authorized voice. That the Palestinians who do not have a representative make themselves heard by their wounds. That the Israelis who know that the only way out, for them, is dialogue, are mobilized.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Edmond Jabès, *Du Désert au Livre*, 50.

¹⁰⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 49.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Edmond Jabès, *Livre de l’Hospitalité*, 37.

[*Que les Palestiniens, unis derrière le porte-parole de leur choix, se fassent entendre, par sa voix autorisée. Que les Palestiniens qui n'ont pas de porte-parole se fassent entendre par leurs blessures. Que les Israéliens qui savent qu'il n'y a, pour eux, d'issue que dans le dialogue, se mobilisent*].¹⁰⁷⁰

Jabès concludes his response to Carpentras with this plea for understanding, tolerance, and hospitality towards the Other, Israeli or Palestinian, because “our responsibility dictates it.” The question of hospitality mobilized by the desecrations of tombstones in Carpentras, but also the possibility of peace between Israel and Palestine, ultimately returns to a question of responsibility.

Speaking in Jerusalem in 1988, Derrida evoked his “concern for justice” and his “friendship for both the Palestinians and the Israelis,” as well as a “respect for a certain image of Israel” and “hope for its future.”¹⁰⁷¹ As a philosopher whose enterprise concerns the deconstruction of binary oppositions, but also as a French citizen from a Jewish family, the Israel-Palestine presents the most intractable theologico-political division. Perhaps Derrida’s most expressive statement on Israel came in a January 2002 letter to his friend Claude Lanzmann, editor of *Les Temps Modernes* and creator of the documentary *Shoah*. Derrida avows a certain partiality in his situation: “The ‘French citizen’ that I am,” he affirms that his critical attention is focused primarily on French politics, but “the ‘Jew,’ even if he is equally critical of the policies of Israel’s enemies, will be more prepared to express his anxieties about an Israeli policy that endangers the safety [*salut*] and the image of those it is supposed to represent.”¹⁰⁷² He leaves just enough ambiguity to avoid directly affirming “le juif que je suis,” but he nonetheless implies he is “le ‘juif’” who feels represented by the image projected by Israel is more likely to expression trepidations about its

¹⁰⁷⁰ Ibid, 38.

¹⁰⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, “Interpretations at war: Kant the Jew, the German,” *Psyche*, vol. 2, 243.

¹⁰⁷² Letter from Jacques Derrida to Claude Lanzmann, 30 January 2002, Fond Derrida, IMEC. See: Peeters, *Derrida*, 509-511. Peeters aptly compares this letter to the one which Derrida sent Pierre Nora in 1961 regarding the Algerian war, which was discussed in chapter one. In the intimacy of a private letter to an old friend, Derrida permits himself to address a controversial political question with honesty and nuance. Like his letter to Nora, Derrida’s letter to Lanzmann attempts to undercut the binary which opposes two extreme positions and stifles any criticism that questions its Manichean oppositions.

policies. Keeping these subjective predispositions at arm's length, there is no politics that is beyond reproach and dissent. Following the 9/11 attacks and the international frenzy to find and capture its culprits, Derrida notes the chilling of criticism of the United States as well as Israel, and the widespread attitude according to which one – particularly a Jew – should feel *guilty* for criticizing Israel or American policies at this difficult time. “Guilty,” Derrida explains, “under at least four headings: anti-Israelism, anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, Judeophobia,” as well as “visceral anti-Americanism.” According to this argument, since the United States was the *victim* on 9/11 to crimes committed by Islamic terrorists, the same forces that have long besieged Israel, to criticize Israel or the United States for its response to the attacks would amount to victim-blaming. To this, Derrida tells Lanzmann, “no, no, no, and no! Four times no. That’s exactly what I wanted to say to you, and that’s why I’ve written to you.” He urges *Les Temps Modernes* to reject this anti-critical stance, which he describes as “totalitarian procedures of intimidation” intended to stifle dissent. This apportioning of guilt for dissent is based on a false dichotomy, as if criticism were contrary to democratic governance, rather than its essence. Derrida refuses to take the bait: “I want to be able to undertake this critical analysis, to make it more complex here, nuance it there, sometimes radicalize it, *without the slightest Judeophobia, without the least anti-Americanism, and, as if I needed to add it, without the least anti-Semitism.*” In his final interview in 2004 with Jean Birnbaum, Derrida offered a starker expression of this belief when he denounced “the disastrous and suicidal politics of Israel and of a certain Zionism,” while insisting, “in spite of all that and so many other problems I have with my ‘Jewishness,’ I will *never* deny it. I will always say, in certain situations, ‘we Jews.’”¹⁰⁷³

¹⁰⁷³ Jacques Derrida and Jean Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 39.

Enduring peace between Israel and Palestine remains the ultimate crucible of hospitality. Derrida, Levinas, and Jabès' reflections on Israel are, in each case, guided by their situations as citizens of the French Republic, as Jewish thinkers for whom this state has particular significance, but also by an abiding concern for justice. These questions prove inseparable from the question of the book. Levinas proclaims "the Torah is justice," and "Jerusalem will be defined by this Torah." In response, Derrida adds, "A complete justice, Torah-of-Jerusalem, but a justice whose extreme vigilance requires that it become effective, that it make itself into law and politics."¹⁰⁷⁴ It is a dispute between neighbors – two sons of Abraham, two editions of the Book – but it is also a conflict between enemy States, dictated by considerations of politics and power; it calls for a prophetic book of hospitality and dialogue that responds to the challenges of law and politics.

V. À-Dieu

"Tout livre s'écrit dans la transparence d'un adieu," Jabès writes in the closing chapter of *The Book of Hospitality*.¹⁰⁷⁵ The book has an unmistakable testamentary character. Cahen writes that it "proclaims with troubling clairvoyance his death, prescribed by-and-in the book."¹⁰⁷⁶ Jabès' text is a meditation on death, beginning with his reflections on the Jew's tombstone and the desecration of the cemetery in Carpentras to his concluding "adieu," which intersects with his reflections on hospitality and the possibility of the unconditional welcome of the Other. In its final chapter "L'Adieu," he rhymes silence with interment: "Se taire. Se terror."¹⁰⁷⁷ The book closes with a

¹⁰⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 109.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Edmond Jabès, *Livre de l'hospitalité*, 101.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, 300.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Edmond Jabès, *Livre de l'hospitalité*, 101.

couplet that rhythms the farewell, “adieu,” and the address “à Dieu”: “To God, the burden of all / To man, a small share [*A Dieu, le fardeau du tout / A l’homme, la part du peu*].”¹⁰⁷⁸ Edmond Jabès died of a heart attack on January 2, 1991; *The Book of Hospitality* was published in April. Just as Jabès’ Egyptian birth certificate incorrectly recorded his birth two days late, by uncanny coincidence, the author biography in *The Book of Hospitality* records Jabès’ death as January fourth – that is, Cahen notes, “once again, *forty-eight hours* after the real date!”¹⁰⁷⁹ This providential error was all too befitting of Jabès’ “adieu”: a deferral of writing beyond death, and even a deferral of death beyond death.

Derrida sent a moving letter to Arlette Jabès on January 4 following the news that “Eddie” had passed. Writing from Nice, where he was visiting his mother who was bedridden and suffering from the advanced effects of Alzheimer’s, Derrida describes turning over his memories of Jabès, rereading his texts in search of the memory of his voice:

In a state of immense sadness, for the past two days, I have lived in my memory, I easily lose focus of almost everything and remember, remember Eddie and the moments that we shared. So long ago, it is true, but these memories remain alive – they have remained alive even across great distances and silences, thanks to texts which I have continued to ponder, certain which I am rereading today (in Nice, where I arrived yesterday to see my mother, who is barely hanging on and who hasn’t recognized me in two years) because I brought them with me. I am trying to hear his voice, and at certain moments I think I can accurately hear it, maybe more accurately than ever [*plus juste que jamais*], and it is very painful to hear in this strange hallucinatory experience. When I started reading Eddie, nearly thirty years ago (in 1962 precisely), I didn’t know his voice. Now it vibrates in every word I read. And I miss it, his voice resonates in me, it calls and whispers, and I also hear your voice, dear Arlette, because I always felt you were so present at the origin of what he wrote: your voice and your hand are truly at work.¹⁰⁸⁰

¹⁰⁷⁸ Ibid, 102.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, 341.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Letter from Jacques Derrida to Arlette Jabès, January 4, 1991, Fond Jabès, BNF. In an all too relatable moment, Derrida misdates the letter 1990; similarly, he surely discovered Jabès’ work in 1963 when *The Book of Questions* was published, not 1962.

Juxtaposed with his ailing mother who no longer recognized her son's face, Derrida expresses the fragility of memory, and the haunting – even hallucinatory – experience of reading Jabès' poetry after his death, hearing his ghostly voice “maybe more accurately than ever.” He hears in Jabès' poetry Arlette's voice as well; as his first reader and critic, Arlette is a permanent feature of Edmond's writing. In his letter for the 1992 event commemorating Jabès at the Collège International de Philosophie, Derrida casts their friendship as born of a reflection on death, and destined to survive them:

When friendship begins before friendship, it touches upon death, indeed, it is born in mourning. But it is also doubly affirmed, twice sealed; this recognition, this gratitude before all knowledge, is, I believe, destined to survive. And already from its birth: in all the books of questions, those that bear and those that keep their name silent, beyond books and their titles, beyond blind words. Edmond Jabès knew that books are here to no avail, no more than questions are, not to mention answers.¹⁰⁸¹

Jabès and Derrida's friendship was born of a reflection on writing and death, and it was therefore bound to survive death: their friendship had encoded the “adieu” from its outset.

“Adieu” is not only a farewell, it is also an invitation to transcendence. Levinas' 1981 essay “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable” describes the *à-Dieu* not as an ending, “adieu,” rather as an opening to what is beyond being, “à-Dieu”:

Infinity would have no meaning for a thought that goes to the limit, and the *à-Dieu* is not a finality. It is perhaps this irreducibility of the *à-Dieu* or of the fear of God to eschatology, an irreducibility that interrupts within the human the consciousness that was on its way toward being in its ontological perseverance or toward death which it takes as the ultimate thought, that is signified, beyond being, by the word 'glory.' The alternative between being and nothingness is not ultimate.¹⁰⁸²

In Levinas' later philosophy, the possibility of ethics lies in the interruption of Being and the order of Sameness: the ethical *Dire* disturbs the ontological *Dit*, and introducing the possibility of a

¹⁰⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* 122 [*Saluer Jabès*, 47].

¹⁰⁸² Emmanuel Levinas, “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, (Albany: SUNY Press: 1986), 39-40.

transcendence beyond ontology, the *à-dieu*. Levinas called this kind of expression a “question-prayer,” which comes before all dialogue. It is also the theme of Derrida’s “Adieu,” which he delivered on December 27, 1995 at Levinas’ funeral in the Pantin cemetery on the outskirts of Paris. The text is an “adieu” to his friend and interlocutor for over three decades, and it is also an “à-Dieu,” a greeting of the Other that is beyond being, and a reflection on ethical transcendence. Levinas’ death marks an uncanny silence in their dialogue. Derrida ponders, “What happens when a great thinker becomes silent, one whom we knew living, whom we read and reread, and also heard, one from whom we were still awaiting a response[?]” The spectral presence of Levinas’ words is an ethical calling that remains in force even after his death; Levinas had described this as “droiture,” “uprightness,” that which is “stronger than death.”¹⁰⁸³ Derrida remarks, “each time I read or reread Emmanuel Levinas, I am overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration.”¹⁰⁸⁴ Framed in the future anterior tense of ethical responsibility, Derrida writes that Levinas “will have taught me to think or pronounce otherwise” the meaning of *Adieu*.¹⁰⁸⁵

Following Jabès’ death in 1991 and Levinas’ in 1995, Derrida would “survive” and write for another decade, carrying on the adventure of the book even as many of his friends and interlocutors passed.¹⁰⁸⁶ In his final interview with Jean Birnbaum in August 2004, with his health failing and intent on reflecting on his imminent death, Derrida disavows any special insight on the subject: “I remain uneducable when it comes to any kind of wisdom about knowing-how-to-die

¹⁰⁸³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Four Talmudic Readings,” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 48. In his commentary on *Tractate Shabbat*, Levinas writes of consciousness: “an innocence without naiveté, an uprightness without stupidity, an absolute uprightness which is also absolute self-criticism, read in the eyes of the one who is the goal of my uprightness and whose look calls me into question. It is a movement toward the other that does not come back to its point of origin the way diversion comes back, incapable as it is of transcendence—a movement beyond anxiety and stronger than death. This uprightness is called *Temimut*, the essence of Jacob.”

¹⁰⁸⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, 9.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Many of Derrida’s eulogies and memorial texts, including those for Jabès and Levinas, were collected in *The Work of Mourning*.

or, if you prefer, knowing-how-to-live.”¹⁰⁸⁷ Rather than surmising anything new about death, Derrida reflects on his situation as one of the last living representatives of his generation of philosophers: “since most of the thinkers with whom I have been associated are now dead, I am referred to more and more often as a *survivor*—the last, the final representative of a ‘generation,’ that is, roughly speaking, the sixties generation.” Though the term “generation” carries certain difficulties – to say nothing of the infinite complexity posed by the notion of the “survivor,” “survival,” and what Derrida calls “*survivance*” – the assemblage of thinkers from this era coalesced around a certain “*ethos* of writing and of thinking,” which we have explored in Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas as the *adventure of the book*.¹⁰⁸⁸ Reflecting on the writing that might outlast him, Derrida describes a certain kind of death with every written trace that leaves his pen:

I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, “proceeds” from me, unable to be reappropriated, *I live my death in writing*. It’s the ultimate test: one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs?¹⁰⁸⁹

Derrida died on October 9, 2004. The adventure of the book, the written trace of the dialogue between Derrida, Jabès, and Levinas, survives.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*, 32–33.

¹⁰⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 27

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 32–33. My emphasis.

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