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## ‘My Mother Tongue Is a Foreign Language’

On Edmond Jabès’s Writing in Exile

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**ABSTRACT:** This chapter examines Edmond Jabès, who chose to write his *oeuvre* in French despite his Jewish-Arabic origins and his being conversant in both Hebrew and Arabic. French was never a true ‘mother tongue’ to him but rather ‘a foreign one’. This poetical choice was also instrumental to his creation of a cosmos that is very clearly defined by *la page blanche*, or the ‘blank page’. His writing develops this idea, both literally and metaphorically. A blank sheet is the only thing a writer has to work with at the start of every writing act, therefore it represents a kind of material opposition that all writers must overcome. It represents in this context an existential nothingness that precedes and simultaneously escapes both human and divine creation. In Jabès’s writings, a blank page has two connotations at once: a condition for writing and nothingness. This ambivalent condition results in the paradoxical assumption that his ‘mother tongue is a foreign language’, because it cannot offer the same spiritual intimacy as another language, say, the Holy Language, and because the writer’s ‘mother tongue’ — and, by extension, human language — is always impure and infiltrated by foreignness.

**KEYWORDS:** Jabès; Talmud; Mother Tongue; Foreign Language; Talmud; Shoah; Tzimitzum

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# ‘My Mother Tongue Is a Foreign Language’

On Edmond Jabès’s Writing in Exile

FEDERICO DAL BO

If it is true that great philosophers only think one single thought throughout their lifetime, this is probably true also for great writers: they only write one single book throughout their lifetime. There is perhaps no better way to describe the long and stratified *oeuvre* of the French-Jewish poet and writer Edmond Jabès. In almost sixty years, he authored many booklets, essays, and poetry collections.<sup>1</sup> And yet, he never stopped spinning around the same question, over and over again: ‘the question of the book?’<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 His main *oeuvre* consists of three main cycles: the first cycle, called *Le Livre des questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963–73), consists of the seven booklets *Le Livre des questions* (1963), *Le Livre de Yukel* (1964), *Le Retour au livre* (1965), *Yaël* (1967), *Elya* (1969), *Aely* (1972), and *El, ou le dernier livre* (1973); the second cycle, called *Le Livre des ressemblances* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976–80), consists of the three booklets *Le Livre des ressemblances* (1976), *Le Soupçon — Le Désert* (1978), and *L’ineffaçable — L’inaperçu* (1980); the third cycle, called *Le Livre des limites* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982–87), consists of the four booklets *Le Petit Livre de la subversion hors de soupçon* (1982), *Le Livre du dialogue* (1984), *Le Parcours* (1985), and *Le Livre du partage* (1985). The book *Le Livre de l’hospitalité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) was published posthumously. This complex and stratified *oeuvre* has been translated into English only in part, as *The Book of Questions*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1976–84) and *The Book of Resemblances*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1990).
  - 2 I am obviously alluding to Jacques Derrida, ‘Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 77–96. This seminal study is the blueprint for my attempt at reading Jabès’s poetics.

Some inadvertent readers could dismiss this as a form of obsession. Yet, the reason that Jabès, in a metalinguistic fashion, never stopped writing his book on the question of the book was metaphysical rather than psychological. Not compulsion but rather a meta-philosophical necessity, emerging from the exhaustion of the traditional notion of the book, compelled him to deal with this question continuously, without interruption, for sixty years. Apparently, for Jabès the art of writing could no longer be accomplished with a great, single book — if this had ever been the case — but could only be disseminated in a labyrinthic series of booklets that desperately seek for unity and yet are always disparaged, scattered, and driven away. What prevented this accomplishment from taking place was — as a sort of metaphysical *a priori* — the Shoah:<sup>3</sup> the almost complete annihilation of European Jewry that had broken apart not only the Jewish people but also the entire Western civilization, its theodicy, and its metaphysics. In other words, Jabès's perplexity can also be phrased in one single question: if God has not saved His people from their almost complete annihilation, how is it possible to still believe in a Holy Writ?

On these premises, Jabès elaborated a strong poetics that suffered from an inescapable paradox: the tenets of traditional Judaism can no longer be upheld yet they cannot be discarded in favour of a blunt secularism. Similarly, the traditional dimension of writing has been exhausted but this does not mean that Western civilization, its theodicy, and its metaphysics have simply come to an end. It rather means that theology and secularism now overlap in a paradoxical way:

the book answers for the book; the writer, for the words that have written him; and the Jew, for what remains always to be read in the Book of God and still to be written in the book of man.<sup>4</sup>

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3 The history of the terminology on the genocide of the Jewish people cannot be treated in detail here. It will be sufficient to say that some early definitions as 'holocaust' and *churban* (destruction) should be avoided due to their reference to Jewish rituals and to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, respectively. The use of the Hebrew term *shoah* (catastrophe) is preferable. Interestingly, Jabès appears not to refer directly to the Shoah but only to allude to it by several metaphors. For a strong criticism of Jabès's use of the Shoah in his *oeuvre*, see Berel Lang, 'Writing-the-Holocaust: Jabès and the Measure of History', in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), pp. 245–60.

4 Edmond Jabès, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of his Arm a Tiny Book*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 58. See also

Jabès seems to argue that humans can no longer believe that Holy Writ is written by God and that ordinary writing can only be written by humans. This chiasmic relationship between the divine and human dimensions of writing suggests that the deconstruction of the Holy Writ consists not in its end but rather in its endless dissemination by means of endless writings on a minor scale: single, erratic, and fragmented booklets. In this respect, Jabès's poetics of the book is haunted by a paradox: the inability to abide by traditional Judaism and the impossibility to simply discard it. Literature, he seems to assume, poses a much more complex question: How does one *deconstruct* the ordinary notion of a book? More specifically, this question is the task of Jewish literature: to deconstruct the Jewish notion of the Holy Writ.

This deconstruction cannot dismiss the notion of the book, which falls within a very definite boundary: *la page blanche*, the 'blank page'. Jabès's work mostly elaborates on this notion — both in an actual and a metaphorical sense. A blank page represents a sort of material resistance every writer must cope with: a blank page is all the writer — every writer, whether a divine or a human one — has at the beginning of each act of writing. In this respect, a blank page symbolizes 'blankness': an ontological void that predates and at the same time escapes the act of creation — both human and divine. In short, there are two simultaneous connotations of a blank page in Jabès's writings: a blank page that is necessary for writing and a void that metaphorically represents what inexorably eludes denomination and therefore remains silent. This all implies that both God and man find themselves as strangers in the act of writing, as if in exile.

#### A STRANGER TO HIMSELF I: ON GOD'S WRITING IN EXILE

The theological notion that God is exiled, while quite common in orthodox Judaism, is not an easy one. At a basic level, this notion means that God follows the Jewish people into exile after the epochal destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE, which took place

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Edmond Jabès, *Un étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 84: 'Le livre répond, pour le livre; l'écrivain, pour le mot qui l'a écrit et le juif, de ce qui reste, toujours, à lire dans le Livre de Dieu et de ce qui reste, encore, à écrire dans le livre de l'homme.'

during the disastrous first Jewish-Roman war. According to biblical premises, God neither interrupts His providence unto His people nor deserts them among the nations but follows them with His perduring benevolence — even at the price of following them into exile.

And yet, this quite caring though perhaps not careful notion of exile could not fully escape some more radical implications. The destruction of the Temple also implied that God's permanent residence on earth had been removed altogether. This circumstance had an unprecedented consequence: God Himself would eventually have no place to dwell on earth and would find Himself in exile. Yet, this almost literal, spatial, or cosmic notion of exile — depicting God as geographically following His people outside of the Land of Israel — would eventually be turned into an uncanny and tenebrous idea: God could only follow His people into exile if He had exiled Himself from Himself first.<sup>5</sup> This radical notion of exile was first introduced during the Renaissance by the famous Rabbi Isaac Luria's astonishing interpretation of the Zohar — the most important and canonical work of the Kabbalah.<sup>6</sup> From the Ottoman city of Safed, Luria propagated the myth of a transcendent God who had not simply followed His people into exile — into the diaspora — but had also imposed a form of exile onto Himself, as a sort of ontological condition of existence for

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5 The notion of 'the Land of Israel' is modelled on the rabbinic expression *'eretz Isra'el* that was coined in post-biblical literature — especially by the Babylonian Talmud — with the purpose of emphasizing the political-theological connection between Jewish communities and the land by suggesting an 'anti-territorial' perspective to future Jewish generations. See Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland* (New York: Verso Books, 2012).

6 Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–1572) is one of the most prominent Jewish theological thinkers. His teachings were mostly transmitted orally and put into writing by his disciples, especially by Hayyim Vital (1542–1620) and Israel Sarug (1590–1610). Scholarship on the Zohar, the thirteenth-century pseudepigraphic mystical commentary on Scripture and Lurianic Kabbalah, is very vast and cannot be summarized here. For brevity's sake I will only mention this interesting introduction: Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a comprehensive review of the study of the Kabbalah, see the bibliographical collection by Don Karr, *Collected Articles on the Kabbalah* (New York: Boleskine House, 1985), which is periodically updated on Karr's personal page on the website Academia: Karr, 'Notes on the Study of Later Kabbalah in English: The Safed Period and Lurianic Kabbalah' <[https://www.academia.edu/38974270/Notes\\_on\\_the\\_Study\\_of\\_Later\\_Kabbalah\\_in\\_English\\_The\\_Safed\\_Period\\_and\\_Lurianic\\_Kabbalah](https://www.academia.edu/38974270/Notes_on_the_Study_of_Later_Kabbalah_in_English_The_Safed_Period_and_Lurianic_Kabbalah)> [accessed 6 April 2022].

everything. Luria famously argued that the world — in essence, the reality of everything that is different from God or the non-divine reality — could exist only if it were given the opportunity or the sufficient ‘space’ for being. The ontological dimension that was at first saturated by the overwhelming Presence of God had to be emptied in order to allow all other entities to exist. Luria called this notion *tzimtzum* or ‘contraction’.

In its simplest formulation, *tzimtzum* consisted in God’s act of withholding God’s creative power and allowing for ontologically inferior entities to take place. This was an act that, as the etymology of the word suggests, could also be compared to God holding His own breath or withholding the biblical ‘Spirit of God’, which ‘hover[s] over the waters’ (Genesis 1. 2). Even in its most basic sense, however, the notion of *tzimtzum* ‘contraction’ also suggested a darker truth, reminiscent of the Pauline notion of *kenosis* or ‘God’s self-effacement’ (Philippians 2. 7). According to the notion of *tzimtzum*, Creation is possible only when it fills an abyssal void that precedes even the existence of God Himself — especially when He was intended as the ‘Creator’ of the world. This also implied the existence of a supernal dimension of the divinity that should be identified not with the Tetragrammaton — God’s ineffable Name — but with a superior realm called *En Sof*, or ‘Infinite’. Under these premises, a self-contracting God would allow not only for the existence of other things beside God but also for the emergence of evil. For some later commentators on the Lurianic corpus, the notion of *tzimtzum* also implied the assumption that God had retracted from the universe by ‘hiding His face’ (*hester panim*) and interrupting His positive influence over the world. In doing so, God had made Himself complicit with evil.<sup>7</sup>

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7 This connection is made explicit, for instance, by the Chabad Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi in his influential *Tanya*, Part 1, *Likkutey Amarim*, Chapter 48 <[https://www.sefaria.org/Tanya%2C\\_Part\\_1%3B\\_Likkutei\\_Amarim.48?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Tanya%2C_Part_1%3B_Likkutei_Amarim.48?lang=bi)> [accessed 12 February 2023]. Nevertheless, they are two distinct concepts. The notion of *hester panim* (hiding of the face) derives from the biblical passage of Deuteronomy 31. 17 and designated a temporary suspension of the divine Providence. This suspension allowed the punishment of sins by the ‘measure of Justice’ (*middat ha-din*) to take place; such punishment would otherwise be stopped by the benevolent ‘measure of Mercy’ (*middat ha-rachamim*). On the other hand, the notion of *tzimtzum* designates a metaphysical event that predates Creation and is the condition for it. See Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirqa De-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha*

This complex and unsettling conception of God represents the theological perimeter of Jabès's poetics of the book. In one of his later texts, Jabès is particularly explicit on the matter and mobilizes the notion of *tzimtzum* in a dialogue between two anonymous rabbis who question God's responsibility towards evil:

'It is time to bring up God's responsibility toward His Creation,' a sage said to his disciples. 'He cannot be the only one to escape His justice.' 'He is the only one not to know it,' they replied. 'Has He not, since He withdrew from the universe, been infinite Oblivion?' And the sage said: 'God is the solitude of Him who is, the only One to be in what once was.' And he added: 'What endures is powerless before what crumbles.'<sup>8</sup>

This frank passage shall be treated carefully. It manifests how Jabès depends on important notions from the Lurianic Kabbalah but it should not be mistaken for a theoretical text. Jabès has never intended to write a book of metaphysics alone, since the Shoah disqualified traditional philosophy and theodicy from being able to say anything meaningful on the nature of God. Jabès never considered it possible to write on metaphysics without writing on the notion of book itself. He argued that there was an uninterrupted connection between God and His Book, as each belongs to the other: 'if God is, it is because He is in the book.'<sup>9</sup>

The ramifications of this assumption were profound for Jabès and his poetics. This mutual association between God and His book did not simply rely on the trite monotheistic assumption that the Holy Writ had a divine origin but rather suggested, quite more radically, that

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(Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 50, and Sanford L. Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mystical Themes in Ancient and Modern Thought* (Jerusalem: J. Aronson, 2000), p. 36.

- 8 Jabès, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of his Arm a Tiny Book*, p. 40; translation modified. See also Jabès, *Un étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*, p. 62: "Il est temps d'évoquer la responsabilité de Dieu envers la Création — disait un sage à ses disciples. Il ne peut être le seul à échapper à Sa justice." "Il est le seul — lui répondirent-ils — à l'ignorer. N'est-Il pas, depuis Son retrait de l'univers, infini Oubli?" Et le sage dit: "Dieu est solitude de Celui qui est, étant seul à être dans ce qui, une fois, fut." Et il ajouta: "Ce qui perdure est impuissant devant ce qui se désagrège."
- 9 For reasons of convenience, I am quoting from the French-Italian (almost) complete collection of Edmond Jabès's complex *oeuvre*: Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des questions*, in *Il libro delle interrogazioni. Testo francese a fronte*, ed. and trans. by Alberto Folini (Milan: Bompiani, 2015), pp. 1–326 (p. 38): 'Si Dieu est, c'est parce qu'Il est dans le Livre'; all English translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

even the divine dimension of writing could not escape the abysmal reality of exile after the divine contraction of God in Himself. What form would this contraction take if God and His Book were mutually related? Jabès's implicit answer is discouraging. It would take the form of a *page blanche*, a 'blank page' that is void of writing, effaced from writing and yet dependent on it.

In this respect, divine writing underwent the same destiny as God, who had exiled Himself into Himself: words are effaced by words, not in the trite sense that words would 'overwrite' words, creating a sort of divine hypertext, but rather in the sense that writing is effaced by itself or, better put, by the perpetual mobility of the writing. In this perpetual effacement, writing also exposes the infinite blankness that structurally allows for it to be written in the first place. It is *la page blanche*, the 'blank page' that simultaneously designates the void carved out from the divine 'contraction' and the structural blankness that can be inscribed by writing. The perpetual overlapping of God and His Book describes this void as a dimension that perpetually escapes the act of Creation, and this is because the void is what poses the possibility of Creation in the first place. In both a metaphysical and literal sense, writing is only possible on a blank page, exactly because God and Book mutually belong to each other.

Yet, the exhaustion of metaphysics after the Shoah poses a serious question concerning the property of being read — or the 'readability' — of the Book. With the emergence of evil, when God has covered His face and has withdrawn Himself into Himself, a radical question arises: how can a book be read by a 'face of the non-face' (*visage du non-visage*) or, conversely, a 'non-face of the face' (*non-visage du visage*)?<sup>10</sup>

#### A STRANGER TO HIMSELF II: ON JABÈS'S WRITING IN EXILE

This radical question cannot be answered by simply relying on the metaphysical presupposition that, because God still enjoys a special relationship to His Book, these two dimensions perfectly overlap. Jabès believes that the historically unprecedented event of the Shoah also reflects a metaphysical one: it is that situation that the Lurianic Kabb-

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10 Jabès, *Un étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*, p. 62; Jabès, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of his Arm a Tiny Book*, p. 40.



lah — and especially his later interpreters — has substantiated with the double connection between the ‘contraction’ (*tzimtzum*) into a divine exile and the ‘hiding of the Face’ (*hester panim*). Jabès believes that an answer to this radical question can only be achieved from the perspective of ‘the Jew’, who has to answer ‘for what remains always to be read in the Book of God and still to be written in the book of man.’<sup>11</sup> Notably, this passage from the divine to the human dimension of writing is especially possible due to their chiasmic relationship: humans can no longer believe that Holy Writ is written by God and ordinary writing can only be written by humans. In other words, the divine and human dimensions of writing entertain a relationship that can never be dialectical as there is no progression from one to the other but rather an unsettling mixture of the two. The Holy Writ can no longer be written — or even be read, in force of God’s ‘hiding of the Face’ — but human writing is all that remains to man. What is this human writing exactly?

Jabès wrote *The Book of Questions* as a tragic love story of a Jewish couple after the Shoah: Yukel and Sarah. Their love story is narrated neither chronologically nor coherently but rather fragmentarily. Jabès abides by his conviction that books — as a solid chronological thread — can no longer be written, as the possibility of history has been shattered by the disruptive event of the Shoah. Therefore, he opts for a *récit éclaté*, a form of narration that is structured as a collection of: fragments from Yukel’s and Sarah’s diaries; imaginary dialogues between fictional rabbis; poetry; and theological ponderings. Overall, Jabès deserts the idea of narrating a love story. He rather opts for a convulsed collection of fragments. This choice entails carrying the additional burden of a theological question about theodicy and metaphysics after the Shoah. *The Book of Questions* fails at telling a love story, but this failure is intentional. It transforms the private relationship of two fictional Shoah survivors into an endless and labyrinthine meditation on Jewish existence and the emergence of evil. Jabès chooses to subvert — or rather deconstruct — every literary genre. An ordinary reader easily sees that *The Book of Questions* can be read as a poem, a fictional work, a meditation, a drama, or even a prophecy on human existence. In its most essential dimension, Jabès’s book tells a tragic love story: Yukel and

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11 Ibid., p. 84; p. 58.

Sarah love each other but are broken by the horrors of Nazi persecution. Sarah survived deportation but has become insane, while her partner Yukel, not accepting the idea of her madness as the only possible way out from their violent past, has committed suicide. In these terms, *The Book of Questions* desperately cries out in response to a metaphysical lack of meaning and exposes language to its fundamental inability to make sense of history.<sup>12</sup>

Jabès's reflection on writing essentially depends on these premises. Indeed, a subtle, non-dialectical economy governs the relation between the literal and metaphorical senses of a blank page. Writing appears to Jabès simultaneously as the actual 'product' of an individual who happens to be a Jewish writer and the horizon within which the writer's activity should be included. This same paradoxical dialectic also characterizes language, i.e. what common sense would simply understand as the means by which a writer 'produces' a piece of writing — as if there were no mystery at all in dragging something out from a dark, unexpressed dimension and delivering it to expression.

In a passage from his second cycle, *Le Livre des limites*, Jabès eloquently asserts the unfamiliar nature of his mother tongue but attributes his assumptions to an unidentified individual — 'he' — who clearly speaks on Jabès's behalf with a nameless, anonymous voice:

'My mother tongue is a foreign language. Thanks to her, I am on an equal footing with my foreignness', he said. And he added: 'I have patiently forged my language with foreign words to make them sister words.'<sup>13</sup>

It would be wrong to interpret this claim in merely biographical terms. Jabès surely had a complex and nomadic life.<sup>14</sup> Yet there is no doubt about his attachment to the French language — his mother's tongue and his mother tongue. As a francophone Jew growing up in Egypt, Jabès makes no mystery about his indissoluble linguistic affiliation

12 I am following Gianni Scalia, *Fuori e dentro la letteratura: stranieri e italiani* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2004), pp. 45–46.

13 Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre du dialogue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 87: "Ma langue maternelle est une langue étrangère. Grâce à elle, je suis de plain-pied avec mon étrangeté", disait-il. Et il ajoutait: "J'ai, patiemment, forgé ma langue avec des mots étrangers pour en faire des mots frères."

14 See Didier Cahen, *Edmond Jabès* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1991), pp. 305–41.

to French, his only literary language, but he also acknowledges that literary intimacy is a construct that was only possible thanks to his constant effort to patiently forge his language by eliminating impurities or its constitutive foreignness. It is then quite striking that he attributes this statement to an unidentified, anonymous, and therefore nameless individual who fully retracts from the biblical custom of naming each character after their own inner qualities. On the contrary, 'one' who speaks about "one's" mother tongue has no name — exactly because one's mother tongue is a foreign language'.

What is then the meaning of Jabès's claim that his mother tongue is foreign to him? This question can be answered neither in biographical nor in psychological but rather in metaphysical terms that recall the chiasmic relationship between divine and human writing. With the exhaustion of the traditional dimension of the book, Jabès acknowledges that Holy Writ can no longer be written. On the other hand, human writing remains 'still to be written in the book of man' by a Jew — like the French-speaking, exiled Egyptian writer Jabès. Yet, his mother tongue cannot offer the same spiritual intimacy as another language, such as the Holy Language. On the contrary, the writer's 'mother tongue' — and, by extension, human language — is always impure and infiltrated by foreignness. Yet, it is the only means of connection with an exiled God. In other words, when he must choose to connect to God by means of a human language, a language that is written in the void of a divine writing that can no longer be written, Jabès elects French.

In this respect, Jabès's affiliation to Judaism is a sort of a *metaphysical* fact rather than a ritual, ethnic, or social one. It is important to note that Jabès hardly received any religious education. Some volumes of the Talmud from his father's bookshelves made him curious but never really fascinated him before adulthood. Jabès addresses Judaism and the dialogical nature of the Talmud only with the years-long redaction of his *The Book of Questions* and he does it in a very personal way. This book, centred around the love story between Yukel and Sarah, is in fact also, and especially, a platform for fabricating imaginary dialogues between fictional rabbis who ponder Jewish existence, the nature of evil, and the yearning for salvation. What is then the reason for quoting fictional rabbis and insisting on Judaism as a category for understanding the act of writing?

While Jabès writes about a number of fictional rabbis, he never reads from the actual Talmud — in which non-legal portions exist but are fundamentally complementary to its main legal core — but Jabès rather ignores and replaces it with a *literary* one. The proportions of legal and non-legal texts — respectively called *halakhah*, or ‘law’, and *aggadah*, or ‘narrative’ — are put into question. Jabès writes his own Talmud and tries to make it resonate with his memories of his father. He appears to write his own ‘private Talmud’ yet he quotes from Jewish writers, thinkers, philosophers, and theologians — whose real names, or ‘proper names’, are buried under fictional ones, or, I would rather say, whose historical names are literally overwritten by literary ones. At a most superficial level, Jabès tells the story of two Jewish lovers, but this apparently simple narrative is buried under many quotes from fictional Jewish Scriptures — a kind of imaginary Bible, Midrash, and Talmud — that manifest a sort of secularization in literary form.

Of course, this means not that Jabès evacuates theology from his horizon, but rather that he treats it by means of a literature that is not necessarily *Jewish*. This is a question not of competence but of what it means to conceive Jewish identity after the Shoah. Jabès never explored the option of establishing a Jewish orthodox identity in face of the exhaustion of traditional Jewish metaphysics. In Jabès’s eyes, the horrendous event of the Shoah suggested that Jewish identity could no longer be determined by the traditional tenets of orthodox Judaism, regardless of their innovation after the question of evil. Therefore, Jewish daily rituals as well as ordinary Jewish theodicy were irrevocably bracketed, if not definitely excluded, from the horizon of Jewish identity; or, better put, these were included only according to an irreversibly deconstructed paradigm. Along with other French Jewish intellectuals, he understood this choice as one that vigorously excluded other alternatives such as the quite challenging effort to explore the possibility of a modern Jewish orthodoxy after the Shoah. When Jabès implicitly opted for its impossibility, his secular Jewish background must have played a considerable role. His basic lack of education in Jewish religious texts played a role when he opted to fabricate a literary Talmud rather than read the actual one. This was a choice not to be taken lightly. It followed the circumstance that the traditional notion of the book had been exhausted and that literature represented the only

option, for literature was a kind of writing that was still to be written in the book of man. Jabès was persuaded that the Holy Writ could neither be written again — not even in the sense of being inscribed in the chain of Jewish tradition — nor be read by a 'Face' that has covered Itself (*hester panim*) after God's metaphysical 'contraction' (*tzimtzum*). All this convinced Jabès that only literature could offer a way out — one that is necessarily desperate — from this cultural catastrophe. In this respect, Jabès opted not for fabricating a literary Talmud but rather for writing an *Écriture du désastre*.

To put it differently: should one still abide by the self-representation of Jewish orthodoxy as the ultimate arbiter of Jewishness or should one rather complicate the question of Jewishness by opting for a theology that has been innovated by literature? I use the verb *surviving* in its most literal sense: surviving the annihilation of European Jewry during the Nazi regime. But in addition, Jabès takes quite seriously the assumption that the Shoah has irremediably shattered traditional Jewish theology. Hence, he also takes the possibility of a new, non-orthodox theology very seriously, and argues for the potential new ground that literature implicitly offers for theological speculation. This is the ultimate reason for writing a *literary* Talmud. Since the Shoah has exhausted the traditional perimeter of theology, literature infiltrates, supplements, and possibly replaces it. In Jabès's eyes, literature can innovate the paradigm of Jewish identity more than Jewish theology itself can. Accordingly, the question of literature is not just a scholarly but a linguistic one: who is Jewish and what language should a Jew speak? These two questions also point to a third, difficult one — is it possible to write in a Jewish fashion about Jewish literature?

Jabès does not really answer these questions. He rather shows — or even displays — his own writings, full of fictional rabbis who endlessly speak and argue with one another. This *entretien infini* is implicitly a long, articulate, and rich examination of Jewish literature and its possibility of existence. Jabès does not simply offer a collection of fictional Jewish literary voices; he also offers, I am tempted to say, the deconstruction of a Jewish *archive* — which refers here, in the most genuine Foucauldian sense of the expression, to the totality of discursive practices governing a culture and its statements.<sup>15</sup> Jabès

15 On Foucault's notion of 'archive', see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon

deconstructs such an archive. He does not really appeal to Jewish tradition but rather invents one. He carves a new literary space out from an historical one: he excavates Jewish tradition and produces a singular literary space that can be experienced aesthetically as a stratified *oeuvre*. At the same time, he also puts this new formation into question and doubts its own ability to register, store, and process a new Jewish tradition.

Yet, the real question at stake here is not the fact of ‘inventing’ new, fictional rabbis and using them for the formation of a new Talmud — perhaps, a literary one that is entirely devoid of legal discussions. Similar collections had been written before. It is well known that the Renaissance scholars Rabbi Jakob ibn Habib and his son Rabbi Levi collected all the narrative portions from the Talmud into a new volume: the famous *‘Ein Ya‘akov* (Jacob’s Well). Their love for ‘narrative’ (*aggadah*) as opposed to ‘Law’ (*halakhah*) reflected the Spanish Jewry’s commitment to philosophy as well as their anti-Christian polemic, since these non-binding texts were used by philosophers as proof texts to confirm the rational integrity of Judaism.<sup>16</sup> So, collecting Talmudic narratives or even forging new ones — this was not really the question at stake. The question, more precisely, was how it is possible that Jabès could establish a new Jewish tradition in which it is assumed that someone’s mother tongue is not familiar but rather ‘always already’ a foreign one.

Jabès was unquestionably marked by the Shoah, which he experienced only indirectly. He moved to France after the so-called ‘Second Exodus’ or the expulsion of Jews from Egypt after the Suez crisis in 1957.<sup>17</sup> Foreignness was to him not simply a cultural symbol but an actual reality. All this shows that it is not only possible but probably also necessary to write in a Jewish way *about* Jewish literature. This requires

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Books, 1972), p. 129. For a deconstruction of this notion, see Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For the use of the Foucauldian notion of ‘archive’ in theology, see David Galston, *Archives and the Event of God: The Impact of Michel Foucault on Philosophical Theology* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011).

16 See Marjorie Lehman, *The En Yaaqov: Jacob ibn Habib’s Search for Faith in the Talmudic Corpus* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

17 See Aimée Israel-Pelletier, ‘Edmond Jabès, Jacques Hassoun, and Melancholy: The Second Exodus in the Shadow of the Holocaust’, *Modern Language Notes*, 123 (2008), pp. 797–818.

installing fictional rabbis within the texture of a fictional Talmud and inscribing Judaism within literature. This necessity is simultaneously moral and cultural. Judaism cannot be an object of scholarship; it must rather be the very dimension where life and literature finally meet and eventually merge in a particular — admittedly not easily accessible — style: an uninterrupted chain of aphorisms, fragmentary dialogues, and scattered voices.

Yet this is neither an effort to talk to a Jewish literary tradition, if there is one, nor to build a new one, if there is none. Jabès rather works *within* these two possibilities. His movement is based on a premise concerning the nature of Jewish literature that he might well have found in Walter Benjamin's *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) with Jewish tradition. What was peculiarly Benjaminian in Jabès? It was perhaps the assumption that there is no single, whole narration of the Jewish past but only an endless, potentially unrelated number of fragments that will have to be recomposed, at least tentatively, in a single work.<sup>18</sup>

This particular form of writing has a noble tradition that begins at the latest with the Medieval *melitzah*: a patchwork of quotations from the Holy Scriptures that are a sort of intellectual divertissement — *melitzah* also means 'joke' — and that, therefore, should not be taken too seriously.<sup>19</sup> In so doing, Jabès takes upon himself the burden of emending the past — its impossibility of being whole as a tradition — and offers a long, intricate, sometimes exhausting recognition of a fictional Jewish literature: quotations, mentions, digressions, quotations from quotations, and so on.

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18 This notion does not emerge spontaneously from Benjamin's *oeuvre*; it rather emerges from the interaction between Benjamin and his close friend, the famous historian of the Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem. See Federico Dal Bo, "Paulinism" in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: On Scholem's Reception of Paul in his Interwar Hebrew Lectures on Sabbatianism, in *Grey Areas — Two Centuries of Wissenschaft des Judentums* (in preparation).

19 See Moshe Pelli, 'On the Role of *Melitzah* in the Literature of Hebrew Enlightenment', in *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile*, ed. by Lewis Glinert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 99–110. See also Dan Pagis, *Chidush u-Masoret be-Shirat ha-Chol ha-Tvrit* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1976). For the notion of *melitzah* as 'joke', see Federico Dal Bo, *The Lexical Field of the Substantives of 'Word' in Ancient Hebrew: From the Bible to the Mishnah*, *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 124 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021), pp. 144–46 and 262–63.

Jabès's style requires a strong control over a magmatic literary material that refrains from unity and therefore never constitutes a Jewish tradition on its own. Despite his frequent indirect mentions of Jewish literature, Jabès could not acknowledge belonging to any of the several kinds of Jewish tradition: neither to the ordinary, slightly unspecified 'transmission' (*qabbalah*) of Jewish scriptures from Mount Sinai; nor to the Rabbinic 'chain of tradition' (*shalshet ha-Qabbalah*), defined as the uninterrupted tradition of the Holy Writ together with all — past, present, and future — commentaries; nor to Gedaliah ibn Yahya ben Joseph's 'chain of tradition' (*shalshet ha-Qabbalah*), defined as the entire history and genealogy of the Jews; nor to the mystical tradition of the *Qabbalah*, defined as an esoteric doctrine that has been emerging since Jewish antiquity.<sup>20</sup>

For this fundamental reason, Jabès resonates with Walter Benjamin and also transforms his vision of the past — a pile of ruins that the angel of history is melancholically contemplating — into a peculiar way of collecting texts. What matters is no longer a book but rather a collection of textual fragments.<sup>21</sup> Jabès makes it quite clear that this melancholic sentiment is often superseded by a more mature one — a longing for a mystical 'reparation of the world' (*tiqqun ha'olam*).<sup>22</sup>

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20 I am alluding here respectively to: the famous passage from the Mishnah stating that 'Moses received (qibel) Torah from the Sinai and transmitted (u-msarah) it to Joshuah' (Mishnah, Tractate Avot 1.1); the Rabbinic notion of 'chain of the tradition' (*shalshet ha-qabbalah*) (cf. Tanna de-bey-Eliahu Zuta, 53); Gedaliah ibn Yahya ben Joseph's chronicles *Shalshet ha-Qabbalah* Venice: Giovanni Di Gara, 1587); and the self-designation of Jewish mysticism as 'tradition' (*qabbalah*). For my own elaboration of these notions, see Federico Dal Bo, *Deconstructing the Talmud: The Absolute Book* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 188–93.

21 On the Pauline implications of this assumption, see Federico Dal Bo, "L'immediata intensità messianica del cuore". Paolinismo nel *Frammento teologico-politico* di Walter Benjamin, in *Felicità e tramonto*, ed. by Gabriele Guerra and Tamara Tagliacozzo (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), pp. 139–52.

22 The concept of *tiqqun ha'olam* derives from the Rabbinic expression *mipnei tiqqun ha'olam* (for the sake of the correction of the world) and designates a secular act of social justice — a specific act, which is not strictly motivated by a Scriptural injunction but which has to be pursued for the sake of social welfare. This virtually secular concept is converted into a religious practice and then introduced as such in daily prayers and Jewish mysticism. Accordingly, the *tiqqun ha'olam* describes the human act of emending the divine world and it is strictly associated with the performance of divine commandments. Among the large bibliography on the subject, see for instance Gilbert S. Rosenthal, 'Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept', *The Journal of Religion*, 85.2 (2004), pp. 214–40.



And yet this does not mean that Jabès rejects an idea of Jewish literary tradition entirely. While he has clearly relinquished the ideal that Jewish identity shall be moulded by the Jewish canon of the Holy Writ, the Talmud, and their commentaries, he cautiously holds onto the assumption that literature can supply Jewish identity. This persuasion is not an ideal that can teleologically orient someone's life but a sort of desperate effort to reconstruct Jewish identity after the Shoah. Jabès accommodates Jewish identity — by restoring and adapting it — to postmodernity. There is no legal identity based on the Rabbinic tradition, but rather something more complex — the backbone of which is literary and not theological (or at least not theological in a traditional sense).

Jewish tradition is rather a tentative and precarious product that mostly relies on the Jewish writer's syncretic power and the reader's endurance. The latter is constantly being challenged. Jabès's intertextual intricacies are eminently Jewish: they fully belong to the millenary Jewish tradition of writing, quoting, commenting, commenting on commentaries, and so on. Jabès's system of citations is recurrent in the entire text and constitutes its very literary body. There is no main 'work' but rather a 'patchwork' that holds fragments together. Despite all appearance, this is radically different from any ordinary medieval system of commentaries, commentaries on commentaries (supercommentaries), and commentaries on commentaries on commentaries (commentaries on supercommentaries). This traditional, uninterrupted 'chain of tradition' pointed to Scripture, which was the foundation of Judaism. By contrast, Jabès's Jewish literature is severed from Scripture and yet not simply secular. Jabès is rather desperate for transcendence. He clearly relaunches literature as an 'update', if not a modernization of theology. While this resonates with many post-structuralist authors, he examines messianism from the same theologically detached perspective: Scripture is no longer able to communicate a persuasive theological content and yet has transmitted this epistemological need to other modes of writing — especially literature. But how can literature substitute for theology?

Jabès refrains from posing, let alone answering this question. And yet he seems to believe that literature is the means to describe the

Jewish habit or rather the *beau risque* (fine risk) of arguing with God.<sup>23</sup> Judaism would then be able to ascribe a specific purpose to literature — substantiating a legal-theological faculty to litigate with God. One could therefore say that the purpose of literature is messianic insofar as messianism consists in reawakening God to His own duties.

*'All Poets Are Жиды'*

On the other hand, Jabès devotes the complex *Book of Questions* to a specific purpose: claiming his own identity by force of being a Jew and a writer. Is claiming to be a *Jewish writer* something peculiar, then?

This is the same question that haunted the Romanian-born Jewish poet and translator Paul Celan, who decided to write exclusively in German after experimenting with Romanian in his early poetry.<sup>24</sup> In an epigraph to one of his poems, Celan seems to want to communicate a secret truth about being a Jewish poet who has decided to write poetry in his own mother tongue — German. The ethical and poetic conundrum obviously is that German is the same language that the perpetrators of the Shoah spoke, a language, hence, that contributed to carrying out this *unspeakable task*, and that was manipulated to hide it from the public. Manipulation was achieved, indeed, by literally altering the nature of the German language.<sup>25</sup> In one epigraph to his poem 'Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa', from his seminal poetical collection

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23 There are many examples for this attitude, in both biblical and Talmudic literature. Probably one of the most famous is Abraham negotiating with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18. 16–33). The notion of *beau risque* is obliquely introduced in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013). See especially Paul Davies, 'A Fine Risk: Reading Blanchot Reading Levinas', in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Athlone, 1991), pp. 201–26.

24 In his youth, Celan also experimented with writing poems in Romanian. See Federico Dal Bo, *Qabbalah e traduzione. Un saggio su Paul Celan traduttore* (Salerno: Orthotes, 2019), pp. 25–28. See also Barbara Wiedemann, *Antschel Paul — Paul Celan. Studien zum Frühwerk* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985) and the recent monograph by Petre Solomon, *Paul Celan: The Romanian Dimension* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019).

25 The most obvious reference is to Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI — Lingua Tertii Imperii; A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. by Martin Brady (London: Continuum, 2007).

*Niemandrose*, Celan quotes (and slightly modifies) a verse from the Russian symbolist poet Marina Tsvetaeva's lyric *Poema Kontza* (Poem of the End). The epigraph is in Russian and written in Cyrillic, and therefore impenetrable to whoever is unfamiliar with Russian: 'все поэты жи́ды.'<sup>26</sup> This typographical choice makes the verse particularly enigmatic, since neither transliteration nor translation are provided. Celan's choice to repeat the Russian poet's verse in Cyrillic alphabet is in no way naive. On the contrary, Celan had a precise reason for doing so: relaunching the enigma of Jewish existence even on a linguistic level. Celan was apparently asking himself what the connection between Judaism and poetry actually was. Does one necessarily follow the other?

The question itself was already challenging, but apparently not challenging enough: Celan elaborated on it and made it even more radical — encrypted in the Cyrillic alphabet, which, like the Russian language, would have been impenetrable to most of Celan's West German readership at the time. Hence, Celan chose to keep the epigraph in Cyrillic for a profound poetic reason: to encode a message that his German readers would never be able to comprehend, unless they had departed from their own Germanness and had questioned their own identity.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Digression: An Ontology of Ethnic Slurs*

Perhaps it is necessary to interpret Celan's choice in yet another direction, such that it is not simply a matter of rendering the verse of the poet Tsvetaeva almost illegible to his German readers. Indeed, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet seems to obey an additional poetic task: it

26 Paul Celan, 'Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa', in Celan, *Werke. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe. I. Abteilung: Lyrik und Prosa*, ed. by Beda Allemann and others, 16 vols (Frankfurt a.M.; Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1990–2017), VI: *Niemandrose*, ed. by Axel Gellhaus, Holger Gehle, Andreas Lohr, and Rolf Bücher (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 89–91 (p. 89). Cf. also *Kommentar zu Paul Celans 'Die Niemandrose'*, ed. by Jürgen Lehmann and Christine Ivanovic (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997), pp. 353–67. Tsvetaeva's verse originally was: 'Поэты — жи́ды!', or 'Poets — Jews!' (Marina Tsvetaeva, *Poema Kantza* (Moscow: Directmedia, 2012), p. 149). For a more accurate translation of this verse, see below.

27 On these topics, see Dal Bo, *Qabbalah e traduzione*, pp. 63–64.

indicates, in a metalinguistic way, the most authentic content of the verse that says something about the connection between Judaism and poetry. After all, the Russian epigraph — ‘все поэты жи́ды’ — can be translated, at first, in quite ordinary terms as: ‘all poets are Jews.’

Tsvetaeva wrote this verse while the Nazi armies were relentlessly pushing into Russia. The verse suggests that she identified with the fate of the Jewish people and with that of her Jewish husband, the Russian poet Sergei Jakowlewitsch Efron, who was a former officer of White Army during the Russian civil war and then agent for the Soviet secret services, and who had been executed by Soviet authorities under the false accusation of being an agent of Trotsky. One should not ignore the fact that this accusation truly was the Soviet ‘translation’ of anti-Semitism and that it mobilized the catastrophic prejudice against the Jews as ‘agents of internationalism.’<sup>28</sup> In this respect, his wife Tsvetaeva was also tapping into this internationalist charge in her verse: she was claiming a universal — and, therefore, transcultural if not ‘international’ — stigmatization of ‘all poets’. As Celan decides to mobilize this assumption in Cyrillic, a quite similar allegiance about a sort of spiritual ‘internationalism’ connecting all poets is at work. Yet, there is a subtle but decisive difference: this claim has been made untransparent and further encrypted within an alphabet that is impenetrable to most Western readers.

This identification, however, was not ethnic, but rather poetic. It was not a matter of circumcision — from which she would anyway be excluded as a woman — but rather a matter of understanding that poetry is necessarily condemned to persecution and rejection. Again, Tsvetaeva was not Jewish but married to a Jew. Consequently, a metaphorical interpretation of her verse, used as an epigraph by Celan, is inevitable: Tsvetaeva was not *literally* Jewish but was a poet, and therefore understood herself as *metaphorically* Jewish. The choice to report the epigraph in Cyrillic then is metalinguistic: Celan apparently used the Cyrillic alphabet to reinstitute a linguistic difference between him-

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28 On this, see Paul Lendevai, *Anti-Semitism Without Jews: Communist Eastern Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), and especially Cathy Gelbin and Sander Gilman, *Cosmopolitanisms and the Jews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), pp. 189–90.

self and his readers. In so doing, he intended to underline a difference he took to be not only cultural but also ethnic.

The choice to rely not only on the Russian language but also on the Cyrillic alphabet seems to follow the desire to highlight a constitutive difference between languages — especially between the persecutors' German language and a language that is spoken by the persecuted. Only to those who can read Russian will the connotation of the epigraph be clear. Only those who know Russian well enough can understand the violence intrinsic to this verse and the derogatory use of the noun *жид* (*žid*), which can only euphemistically be translated as 'Jew' and actually is strongly pejorative in a Russian context, although it was reappropriated and used in a neutral, non-derogatory way by Ukrainian Jews.<sup>29</sup> Hence, Tsvetaeva's verse should rather be translated as follows: 'all poets are kikes.'<sup>30</sup>

Yet, this is not all. Translation can be deceiving. Slurs and profanities are usually excommunicated from poetic language but they have an intrinsic ontology that is only expressed more harshly and unforgivingly. Derogatory terms for Jews often hide a deeper quantum of violence, and this becomes particularly apparent when they are addressed from an etymological point of view. For instance, English derogatory terms for Germans and Italians might point to alimentary habits or fashion that are perceived as odd or ridiculous, as is the case with the offensive terms *kraut* or *greaseball*. As offensive as they might be, these terms imply that the lack of uniformity with 'the majority of people' mostly depends on specific habits that are stigmatized: eating too much sauerkraut or using too much hair wax. Such offensive terms might even be taken to imply that, once these obstacles have been removed, assimilation would then be possible.<sup>31</sup>

29 Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 60–61.

30 This harsh translation is uncommon among commentators, who usually read this verse euphemistically as 'all poets are Jews' or 'all poets are Yids'. I am following here Michael Eskin's suggestion in Eskin, *Poetic Affairs: Celan, Grünbein, Brodsky* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 192n6. See also the German translation *Alle Dichter sind Jidden*, as suggested in Wolfgang Emmerich, *Nahe Fremde: Paul Celan und die Deutschen* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020), p. 21.

31 On these themes, see Federico Dal Bo, *Il linguaggio della violenza. Estremismo e ideologia nella filosofia contemporanea* (Bologna: Biblioteca Clueb, 2021), pp. 21–58.

On the contrary, the derogatory terms for Jews blatantly point to ethnicity itself — the sheer fact of *being Jewish*. This is what clearly appears in many pejorative terms for ‘Jew’ in several European languages. For instance, the English term *kike* has an obscure etymology but was apparently used by educated American Jews to stigmatize illiterate East European Jews and was then generalized as an insult for all Jewish people.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, just like the Russian *жу́д* (*žid*), the deeply offensive French term *youpin* as well as its variants *youp* or *youd* point directly to Jewish ethnicity and are a deformation of an abbreviated form from the Arabic-Algerian derogatory term *يهودي* (*yahūdiyy*).<sup>33</sup> Each and all of these terms only denigrate a Jew for an ontological condition — *being a Jew*.

Again, this scandalous verse stays veiled or even hidden from the general public of Celan’s poem. The typographical difference imposed by the Cyrillic alphabet seems to allude to a difference with respect to other Western languages. However, one should consider the subtle transformation to which Tsvetaeva’s verse is subjected, especially when it is used as an epigraph by a Jewish, German-speaking poet. On the one hand, Tsvetaeva’s verse should have only a metaphorical meaning. On the other hand, Tsvetaeva’s verse is quoted *in Russian* by Celan, who clearly is both Jewish and a poet — who has survived the Shoah. Hence, Tsvetaeva’s verse acquires a new meaning in this context. In this respect, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet also seems to reduce Tsvetaeva’s metaphorical understanding to a potentially literal one: as

32 Karen Stollznow, *On the Offensive: Prejudice in Language Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 128–29. Cf. also Joachim Prinz, ‘Amerika — hast Du es besser? Notizen von einer Reise’, *Der Morgen. Monatsschrift der Juden in Deutschland*, 13.3 (1937/38), pp. 104–11 (p. 110). Another folk etymology suggests that the term might come from the Yiddish קיקעלע (*kikele*), ‘little circle’, possible designating the sign ‘O’, which was used by illiterate Jews who could not properly write their own name but wanted to avoid using the conventional ‘X’ as it would resemble a Cross. Cf. Leo Rosten, *The New Joys of Yiddish: Completely Updated* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010), p. 177.

33 More specifically, the French-Argot term *youpin* consists of two discrete linguistic elements: the abridgement *you* from the Arabic derogatory term *يهودي* (*yahūdiyy*) — also reflecting the neutral Hebrew term יהודי (*yehudi*) or the Aramaic יהודא (*yehudaya*) — and the Argot suffix *-pin*. Cf. Napoléon Hayard, *Dictionnaire Argot-Français* (Paris: Dentu, 1907), p. 40; cf. also Graciela Christ, *Arabismen im Argot: ein Beitrag zur französischen Lexikographie ab der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 551.

a result, there is a passage from culture to ethnicity, from the Gentiles to the Jews — the former being the persecutors and the latter being the persecuted.

Celan made a very complex poetic choice. His use of Tsvetaeva's verse in its original Russian within a German poem raises some epistemological problems. When Tsvetaeva argued that 'all poets are kikes', she was alluding to a particular ethnicity that had typically suffered from epochal persecution. At the same time, she was also generalizing that very condition to every poet by assuming, in metaphorical terms, that every poet would be persecuted as if s/he were Jewish and stigmatized for the same reason. Tsvetaeva's verse, while written in Cyrillic for Russian readers, was as transparent as it was metaphorical. The metaphorical nature of this verse — its metaphoricity — was transparent to every Russian reader. On the other hand, Celan reversed these poetical coordinates in force of his Jewish ethnicity, his personal history of persecution, and his quotation of Tsvetaeva's verse in Cyrillic as an epigraph to a German poem. This verse was now transformed into an epigraph that only few could read. Tsvetaeva's metaphorical truth on poetry was now distilled, encrypted, and turned into an almost literal statement — at least with respect to Paul Celan as a Jewish poet. Yet, this operation — reversing the poetic coordinates of Tsvetaeva's verse — was not intended to be destructive. It rather complicated or, better put, deconstructed Tsvetaeva's metaphor and distilled a new, particular truth from her generalizing verse.

When quoted by Celan with Cyrillic letters at the beginning of his German-language poem, Tsvetaeva's verse is essentially raw and impenetrable. There is a sort of a hardness to the palate that implicitly alludes to the need for maintaining a distance between the language that hosts this verse (Russian) and the language into which it could eventually be translated (German). This complexity creates an enigma: the epigraph can be read only by those who can read Russian and understand the biographical and poetic presuppositions in both Tsvetaeva and Celan. This enigma is offered to the reader and retracted from them: German is the language of the persecutors, but the content of persecution — 'all poets are kikes' — can be revealed and simultaneously hidden only in another language. Yet this other language, coming to the rescue, is also the language of the persecutor, and there-

fore seems, once again, to impair the persecuted: the Jew is not only a 'Jew', but above all a 'kike'. The consequences are dire: literature can only encrypt a destiny of persecution but cannot save from it.

*'All Poets Are Kikes'*

This long digression is instrumental in understanding the proportions of Jabès's poetics of writing and finding an implicit if not covert angle for shedding light on his implicit theology of identity as it emerges from his main character: Yukel. Despite its biblical sound, the name *Yukel* is never to be found in traditional Jewish sources. And yet, the name is not a simple invention but rather a complex wordplay on the question of Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and poetics.

Understanding the deep theological nature of this invention also requires appreciating an intricate wordplay that has escaped the attention of many commentators on Jabès's work. Unlike Tsvetaeva, who claims that 'all poets are kikes', Jabès has never made such a bold statement and never used the equivalent derogatory French *youpin*. Yet, as a commentator suggested, the name *Yukel* would bear a small linguistic secret within it:

this name of a foreigner opens on a rare syllable in French, *Yu*, which makes think of *Youpin* or *Yid*, a syllable that astonishes by its rarity as that which has fallen into disuse, like an old car in the Place de la Concorde.<sup>34</sup>

And yet, the suggestion that the name *Yukel* should be understood against the background of the French derogatory term *youpin* is not enough. This fictional name is much more than that. Indeed, *Yukel* carries a strange, provocative theophoric meaning due to its composite nature. This name joins together two different linguistic segments: the ordinary Hebrew name of 'God' (*El*) and the French derogatory term *youpin*, reduced to the unusual French syllable *yu-*. The name that emerges from this transcultural wordplay would then conflate Jewish

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34 Helena Shillony, *Edmond Jabès: Une rhétorique de la subversion* (Paris: Lettres modernes, 1991), pp. 20–21. The same notion is also repeated in Emmanuel Godo, *La prière de l'écrivain* (Paris: Imago, 2000), p. 23; my translation.



identity, anti-Semitism, and poetics into a single entity — the name *Yukel* — and carry a deep theological meaning with it.

In Jabès's fiction, Yukel is a writer. One should also pay attention to Yukel's similarity to another name: *Yeziel* (God shall live). More precisely, the name *Yukel* sounds like a deformation of *Yeziel*. This old theophoric biblical name is grafted — or inscribed — with the French pejorative *youpin* and finally transformed into *Yukel*. The resulting name calls into question the nature of writing itself. Should the main character have been called after the traditional name *Yeziel*, one could easily have concluded that his profession as a writer — writing on the Book of Life and perpetuating the goodness of Creation — is quite noble. Alas, this writer is not called *Yeziel* but rather *Yukel*. So, he is called after a deformed theophoric name that has removed the original vitality of God from the act of writing. More radically, this deformation carries the stigma, humiliation, and denigration that come from the French derogatory term *youpin*, since this term has been grafted within the old theophoric name *Yeziel*, deforming it into *Yukel*. It is as if Jabès, while inventing this para-biblical name, wanted God to truly acknowledge that His people are nothing more than *youpins* — 'kikes'.

When interpreted against this grim background, the enigmatic character *Yukel* allows one to understand that Jabès too claims that 'all writers are kikes' — or, at least, that 'all writers are Jews'. This claim is maintained several times — especially when Jabès speaks about the difficulty of both being Jewish and writing:

— I told you my words. I have spoken to you about the difficulty of being Jewish, which is confounded with the difficulty of writing; for both Judaism and writing are nothing but the same waiting, the same hope, the same attrition.<sup>35</sup>

The reasons for this identity are neither ethnic nor cultural but metaphysical. In this most Christian of worlds, both writers and Jews share a deserted solitude — a detachment from the world that simultaneously is the condition and the price of writing. Jabès does not thereby claim something particularly new; he rather rephrases a famous *midrash* that

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35 Jabès, *Le Livre des questions*, p. 218: '— Je vous ai rapporté mes paroles. Je vous ai parlé de la difficulté d'être Juif, qui se confond avec la difficulté d'écrire; car le judaïsme et l'écriture ne sont qu'une même attente, un même espoir, une même usure.'

postulates the presence of the ‘word’ (*davar*) of God who ‘speaks’ (*medabber*) in the midst of the ‘desert’ (*midbar*).<sup>36</sup> And yet there is a supplementary similarity between Jewishness and writing, which would also clarify Jabès’s previous assertion that his mother tongue is fundamentally foreign to him. Such a similarity is not explicit but only alluded to in a short, apparently occasional biographical remark:

Born on 16 April in Cairo, my father inadvertently declared to the consular authorities charged with recording the act of my birth that I was born on the 14th of the same month. Do I unconsciously owe to this miscalculation the feeling that forty-eight hours have always separated me from my life? The two days added to mine cannot be experienced except in death.<sup>37</sup>

This curious mistake seems to provide Jabès with a subtle deconstruction of the Jewish notion of fatherhood and opens toward a complex appreciation of writing as a maternal dimension of existence and writing.

*‘The Day of My Circumcision’*

At first glance, the anecdote seems to convey a trivial mistake Jabès’s father made in front of an Egyptian clerk: a simple misunderstanding about his son’s date of birth. And yet this mistake seems, much more profoundly, to be a parody of circumcision and its ritual arrangements.

36 These wordplays rely on the homography between the (unvocalized) Hebrew terms *davar* (word) and *dever* (plague), on the one hand, and between the Hebrew noun *midbar* (desert) and the present participle *medaber* (literally ‘speaking’) from the Hebrew verb *diber* (to speak), on the other hand. For a linguistic treatment of these notions see again Dal Bo, *The Lexical Field of the Substantives of ‘Word’ in Ancient Hebrew* and James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). On the notion of *davar* from a theological-historical point of view, see, for instance, Piero Capelli, ‘La parola creatrice secondo il giudaismo della tarda antichità’, in *La parola creatrice in India e nel Medio Oriente. Atti del Seminario della Facoltà di Lettere dell’Università di Pisa, 29–31 maggio 1991*, ed. by Caterina Conio, 2 vols (Pisa: Giardini, 1994), 1, pp. 155–72. For a theological treatment, see André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publishing Society, 1980).

37 Edmond Jabès, *Elya*, in *Il libro delle interrogazioni*, pp. 1020–1195 (p. 1145): ‘Né le 16 avril, au Caire, mon père par inadvertance, aux autorités consulaires chargées d’établir mon acte de naissance, me déclara né le 14 du même mois. 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.’

What is circumcision if not the process of *inscribing* someone into the people of Israel? It is a sort of ethnic pact signed with flesh and blood. Indeed, when the father brings his son to the *mohel* (the circumciser), he does not simply indulge in an ancient tribal pact; more subtly, he delivers him to a very peculiar kind of writing that eventually inscribes his son's affiliation to Judaism by removing his foreskin — by impressing into his flesh the very same Abrahamic pact that has been marked in this fashion for many generations.

Another digression is necessary to appreciate the metaphysical nature of circumcision in Jabès and its impact on literature. I will in particular consider the figure of Elisha ben Abuyah — a master from the Talmud who was revered as a great scholar and yet apostatized, and who therefore was designated as *Acher*, or 'the other one'.<sup>38</sup> An impressive narrative from the Jerusalem Talmud provides a short piece of biography on Elisha that describes his father dedicating his son to Scripture for the sake of its mighty power:

[my] daddy, Abuyah (abuyah abba), was one of the great people in Jerusalem. On the day he came to have me circumcised (be-yom she-ba le-mohaleyinyi), he called all the great people in Jerusalem and made them sit in one room [with] Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua in another room. After they had eaten and drunk, they [began] stamping [their feet] and dancing. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Yehoshua: while they are keeping us busy in their way, let's keep us busy in our way, let's sit and occupy ourselves with the words of Scripture, from the Torah to the Prophets and from the Prophets to the Writings. And fire fell down from the skies and surrounded them. Abuyah said to them: My rabbis, have you come to burn my house down around me? They said to him: God forbid! Rather, we are sitting and examining the words of Scripture from the Torah to the Prophets, and from the Prophets to the Writings, and [these] words were animated as when they were given to us from Sinai and the fire shone around us as it was shone from Sinai, and principally [Scripture] was not given to us from Sinai

38 On the nature of Elisha ben Abuyah's transgression, see David M. Grossberg, *Heresy and the Formation of the Rabbinic Community* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), pp. 167–92. See also Federico Dal Bo, 'Legal and Transgressive Sex, Heresy, and Hermeneutics in the Talmud: The Cases of Bruriah, Rabbi Meir, Elisha ben Abuyah and the Prostitute', in *Jewish Law and Academic Discipline: Contributions from Europe*, ed. by Elisha Ancselovits and George Wilkes (Liverpool: Deborah Charles, 2016), pp. 128–51.

except in fire and on a mountain with flames [that reached] the skies. My daddy, Abuyah, said to them: My rabbis, if such is the power of Scripture, let's consecrate him (meprisho) [my son] to Scripture.<sup>39</sup>

Again, the historical reliability of this narrative is not as important as its evocative power. The narrative does not only add details to Elisha's biography; it also reports them in the first person: 'On the day he came to have me circumcised...'. An extreme perspective is then assumed here: Elisha reports in the first person the day of his own circumcision, and therefore the day in which he *was born* to the Jewish faith. Yet this event — being circumcised as an infant — cannot properly be narrated in the first-person perspective. If it is performed at the right time, on the eighth day after birth, then no one can remember the day of his own circumcision, just as no one can remember the day of their own birth. In a stringent Jewish perspective, the ritual of circumcision is to be performed shortly after birth and predates any possible experience or rather establishes the very possibility of experience of being Jewish. One's birth and circumcision are as remote and inaccessible as one's own death. There is no actual memory of any of these experiences. No *autobiographical account* — of one's own birth, circumcision, or death — is possible.

And yet the narrative from the Jerusalem Talmud is told in the first person, just as is Jabès's narrative about his father recording his birth certificate. The Talmud assumes here an extreme perspective, which is also a perspective of extremes. Circumcision should be narrated from an objective, external perspective, as a historical fact. For instance, compare what is said about Jesus: 'and when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb'

39 Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Chagigah, 2. 1, fol. 9b, my translation: 'אבויה אבא מגדולי' ירושלם היה ביום שבא למוהליני קרא לכל גדולי ירושלם והושיבן בבית אחד ולרבי אליעזר ולר' יהושע בבית אחד מן דאכלון ושתון שרון מטפחין ומרקדקון א"ר ליעזר לר' יהושע עד דאינון עסיקין בדידהון נעסוק אנן בידן וישבו ונתעסקו בדברי תורה מן התורה לנביאים ומן הנביאים לכתובים וירדה אש מן השמים והקיפה אותם אמר להן אבויה רבותיי מה באתם לשרוף את ביתי עלי אמרו לו חס ושלום אלא יושבין היינו וחזורין בדברי תורה מן התורה לנביאים ומן הנביאים לכתובים והיו הדברים שמיחים כנתינתן מסיני והיתה האש מלחכת אותן כלחיתכן מסיני ועיקר נתינתן מסיני לא ניתנו אלא באש וההר בוער באש עד לב השמים אמר להן אבויה אבא רבותיי אם כך היא כוחה של תורה אם נתקיים לי בן הזה לתורה אני מפרישו'. This passage has parallels also in Ruth Rabbah 6. 6, Qohelet Rabbah 7. 18, and only partially in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chagigah foll. 15a–b.

(Luke 2. 21). The 'documentary effect' is provided by the narration in the third person. The Gospel here implicitly admits that circumcision falls beyond the limits of their own experience for whoever it befalls, even when the person it befalls is Jesus. There can be no personal narration of this event. Therefore, circumcision is an extreme experience and necessarily escapes the possibilities of any autobiography.

In contradistinction, Elisha assumes an extreme perspective on himself and explicitly speaks about the day of his circumcision as if he had witnessed it himself. Yet one should not mistake this personal narrative for ordinary biography. Circumcision does not name an ordinary date in one's life but rather posits the very 'day' (*yom*) from which one's spiritual life begins — the eighth day. Therefore, narrating one's own circumcision in the first person is not simply a rhetorical device; it constitutes a superhuman act, for it means taking for oneself the power over the *entirety* of one's *life*— from one extreme to the other, from birth to death, from spiritual birth to spiritual death, and from circumcision to apostasy. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that Elisha eventually apostatized and left Judaism, possibly following a kind of religious Gnostic conversion. The nature of Elisha's apostasy is a matter of scholarly dispute and is less relevant here than his general behaviour towards his former co-religionists, and especially towards his pupil Rabbi Meir, which is explored in yet another famous narrative from the Babylonian Talmud:

[O]ur Rabbis taught: there was [once] a matter regarding Acher, as he was riding on a horse on Sabbath and Rabbi Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah from his mouth. [Acher] said to him: Meir, go back, because I have already measured by the paces of my horse that thus far extends the Sabbath limit. [Meir] said to him: You, too, go back! [Acher] said to him: And haven't I already said to you that I have already heard from behind the Veil: Return you backsliding children — except for Acher?<sup>40</sup>

40 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chagigah, fol. 15a; my translation: 'ת"ר מעשה באחר שהיה רוכב על הסוס בשבת והיה רבי מאיר מהלך אחריו ללמוד תורה מפיו אמר לו מאיר חזור לאחריך שכבר שיערתי בעקבי סוסי עד כאן תחום שבת א"ל אף אתה חזור כך א"ל ולא כבר אמרתי לך כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד שובו בנים שובבים חוץ מאחר

This is an important text since it shows that the Talmud can be quite tolerant with respect to someone's idiosyncrasies. Rabbi Meir is described as still full of reverence for Elisha and he keeps studying with Elisha, despite Elisha's apostasy and patent transgression of the Shabbat, which involves riding a horse on this holy day and also transgressing the limits of movement prescribed by Jewish law. The details about Elisha's last words are telling. At first, it seems that God Himself has spoken from beyond the Veil — a structure separating the material from the supernal world — and argued that Elisha could not repent. The Jerusalem Talmud too tells a very similar story but argues that this utterance 'from behind the Veil' (*mi-acharey ha-pargod*) actually is a 'divine voice from the Holy of Holies' (*bat qol mi-qodesh qodashim*) that explicitly exempts 'Elisha ben Abuyah' from repenting.<sup>41</sup>

Many commentators overlook this narrative and simply reiterate the idea that Elisha has sinned to such an extent that any repentance is no longer possible. Yet a modern commentator on the Talmud — the late Hungarian-born and Shoah survivor Rabbi Yehuda Amital (1924–2010), who was the founder and director of the Yeshivat Har Etzion (Gush Etzion, Israel), a prominent public figure in Israel, and the recipient of the Israel Prize in 1991 — offers a more intriguing interpretation of the passage. Taking into account the difference between the narratives in the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, he elaborates on Elisha's final words and especially on the assumption that Elisha could not repent, as Elisha tells his pupil. Rabbi Amital elaborates on the Hebrew expression 'except for Acher' (*chutz mi-Acher*) and interprets it literally as 'except everybody else'. Rabbi Amital argues that nobody else but Acher could actually have heard this statement about his inability to repent. Accordingly, Rabbi Amital writes: 'he alone heard this voice; he essentially convinced himself that this was his situation' (*hu mi-'atzmam shachna' et 'atzmo she-zeh matzabo*).<sup>42</sup> The mythological 'divine voice' speaking 'from behind the Veil' would

41 Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Chagigah 2. 1, fol. 9b.

42 Rabbi Yehudah Amital, 'Shabbat conversation', accessible online: <<http://etzion.gush.net/vbm/archive/5-sichot/48hazinu.php>> [accessed 3 April 2022]. This oral interpretation was written down by Rav Matan Gliday (Yeshivat Neve Shmuel, Te'ena, Israel). I came across this commentary in a page from the prominent website *Mi Yodeya* <<https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/104020/elisha-ben-abuya-and-repentance>> [accessed 31 January 2021]. Cf. also Rabbi Yehuda Amital, *Jewish Values*

then be a sort of euphemistic expression for suggesting that Elisha has convinced himself not to be worthy of repentance, and therefore to be beyond forgiveness.

In this respect, the conviction of being beyond forgiveness was Elisha's major sin. While assuming that he had heard a 'divine voice' admonishing him not to repent, Elisha was granting to himself a divine prerogative: forgiveness. One should treat Elisha's conviction carefully. It was not humbleness that had persuaded him that he could never be forgiven for his sins. It was rather a sort of Nietzschean sentiment of loving his own life to the extreme — even more than God Himself. As he assumed that God could never forgive him, Elisha was withdrawing himself from a dimension of repentance and entering a dimension of total ownership — in the legal and theological senses of the expression. He had become the only master of his life. He was claiming his life — from the day of his circumcision to damnation — for himself and for himself alone. There was a sort of grim *amor fati* protruding from his stubborn and superb assumption that God could never forgive him. The question was not a silly one — whether there is a sin greater than God's forgiveness — but rather a radical one: should/could one claim for oneself the entirety of one's life — regardless of its negativity?

In the process of speaking about his own circumcision, Elisha stretched his self beyond his own biographical limits. He claimed the ability to fully comprehend himself as a human being, as a man of faith, and as a first-person narrator. In other words, Elisha's entire self is stretched beyond the limits of 'literature' — to which both biography and autobiography famously belong. Perhaps Derrida was right when he argued, while deconstructing Augustine's influential *Confessions* in his semi-autobiographical 'Circumfession', that biography is no longer a literary genre, although it was once the gem of classical literature.<sup>43</sup> Confessions, stories, biographies, and autobiographies assume that there is an unspoiled origin of life: a source from which it is possible to develop, sort out, and write down a narration about oneself or

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in a *Changing World* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2005), pp. 112, 139, and 223–24.

43 Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession', in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 3–315.

about others. In many respects, the Writ itself is a sort of a gigantic autobiography that God delivered both to Himself and His people. The well-known radical kabbalistic assumption that Scripture would only be a single name of God is only the most conspicuous aspect of this notion, with the more subtle implication that a confession is a perpetual, interminable work.<sup>44</sup>

Yet there is a paradox here: there has never been an unspoiled origin for the Self. Psychoanalysis is quite eloquent about this. It has educated us to believe that Self has never been a primary entity but rather the construct of, if not the negotiation between, two unconscious dimensions: the id and the superego. In this respect, the deep nature of the mind is unconscious and therefore unsusceptible to expression in words. Consequently, there is no primordial source for narration. Therefore, each biography is structurally uncertain. In his 'Circumfession', Derrida has elaborated on the connection between biography and theology:

Saint Augustine, of whom I read that 'having returned to God, he probably never confessed, in the modern sense of the word', never having had, any more than I, beyond even truth, 'the opportunity to confess', which precisely does not prevent him from working at the delivery of literary confessions, i.e. at a form of theology as autobiography.<sup>45</sup>

Derrida has shown that every biography is an art of confession to God, just as autobiography is an art of confession to oneself; he has also shown that this almost chiasmic connection is not harmonious but rather interrupted by a primordial wound that is eloquently described by the homography between the Hebrew words for 'word' (*milah*) and 'circumcision' (*milah*): 'circumcision as retrenchment, mark, determination, exclusion, whence the impossibility of writing, whence the interminable reflection, whence the infinite delay.'<sup>46</sup>

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44 See the excellent contribution Francesco Giusti, 'An Interminable Work? The Openness of Augustine's Confessions', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, Cultural Inquiry, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 23–43 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23\\_02](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_02)>.

45 Derrida, 'Circumfession', pp. 86–87.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 276.



When Elisha takes upon himself the narration of the day of his circumcision, he practices an extreme art of confession. If one joins together two narratives, as it is customary in Talmudic exegesis, one can even conclude that Elisha places himself within an impossible memory of his own circumcision while also heroically accepting his perdition as an apostate: 'haven't I already said to you that I have already heard from behind the Veil: "Return you backsliding children — except for Acher?"' Elisha holds in his hands both extremes of his life — his own spiritual birth as well as his own spiritual death — and in this sense his apostasy is radical: he makes an example of himself; he refuses to conform to what others would call 'truth and tradition'; he rejects his own possibility of redemption.

Keeping in mind the Talmudic narrative of Elisha and the day of his circumcision, I can now return to Jabès and his anecdote about his father making a mistake about the day of his birth. From Elisha's radical perspective, it is ironic if not grotesque to read that Jabès's father made a mistake and recorded his son's birthday in the daily register of newborns as being two days earlier than it actually was. In this sense, *registering* his son's birthday — *writing it down* — predates the actual birth, two days later. And consider this: recording his son's birthday two days before his actual birth is not simply a serious mistake with some serious administrative ramifications; it is also, and foremost, a *deep* mistake due to the complex connection between biography and writing. Besides, registering someone's birthday is a form of an inscription that is inherently connected, in the case of Jewish male existence, once more with circumcision. Derrida eloquently wrote: 'for want of an immediately available surface of inscription, without knowing if they were being inscribed elsewhere, nor what remains once the surface of inscription has been buried, like foreskin or moleskin.'<sup>47</sup> When treated not as an ordinary mistake but rather as a Freudian slip, registering his own son with a false date or falsely 'inscribing' his name in the register suggests an event transcending the episodic and the individual: any kind of writing — like *recording* someone into a list of births — necessarily predates any kind of actual birth. In other terms, writing — like *recording* someone in the Book of Life

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47 Ibid., p. 158.

— *anticipates* life. This constitutes then a curious inversion of two assumptions that traditionally surround the act of circumcision: that it takes place eight days *after* the actual birth and that writing — like the act of circumcision itself — can only follow an actual, biological birth.

*Jabès's Mother Tongue*

It is then not surprising that Jabès interprets his father's trivial mistake in metaphysical terms and possibly uses it to suggest a revolution of the ordinary notion of writing. In one of his last works, *The Book of Dividing*, Jabès briefly mentions the possibility that there is a 'maternal writing' (*écriture maternelle*) just like there is 'mother tongue' (*langue maternelle*):

As everybody knows, there is a mother tongue, the first language we learn that is spoken by us. With this truism in mind, can we declare that there is a 'motherly' writing, a common writing, pages of our early beginnings? A child's first writings are an apprenticeship in writing and not worried about rediscovering the original text: the text that generates texts to be written, although it always escapes us, never ceases to haunt us.<sup>48</sup>

Again, Jabès argues here in metaphysical terms. He argues that there might be a 'maternal writing' (*écriture maternelle*) that can never be fully present to itself, that 'haunts' us while generating 'text to be written', and that is always 'escaping' us. At first, these are considerations that try to explore the dimension of writing in terms analogous to the dimension of language.

Yet, it is not difficult to appreciate here an echo of Julia Kristeva's seminal notion of *chora* and especially the distinction — or even opposition — that she has famously established between writing and

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48 Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre du partage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 46: 'Il y a — chacun le sait — une langue maternelle, la première langue apprise, parlée par nous. Fort de ce truisme, pouvons-nous déclarer qu'il y a une écriture "maternelle", un écrit commun, pages de nos premiers balbutiements? Les premiers écrits d'un enfant sont apprentissage d'écriture et non souci de redécouvrir le texte d'origine: le texte générateur de textes à écrire, bien que nous échappant toujours, ne cesse de nous hanter.'

language. In many respects, Jabès's notion of *la page blanche*, the 'blank page', owes much to Kristeva's claim that an author — a writer! — has to become anonymous, if not an absence or 'a blank space', so that text as such may eventually exist.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Jabès seems to echo her assumption that the dimensions of writing and language do not overlap, since the latter is 'inscribed' in the former.<sup>50</sup> The dimension of writing would precisely be a 'maternal' dimension — just as the dimension of language would be a 'foreign' one. By mistakenly recording his son's date of birth, making it two days late, Jabès's father committed a serious mistake: he confirmed the impossibility of belonging to Judaism solely by means of circumcision — whose Hebrew term *milah* is a homograph that also refers to 'word', as discussed above. In this respect, there is a structural difference between a 'maternal writing' that generates texts that still have to be written and the 'word' (*milah*) by which these texts, perpetually generated by a 'maternal writing', have to be written — a word, furthermore, that can be compared to the act of 'circumcision' (*milah*). This allusion to the *milah* as both 'word' and 'circumcision' probably is the key to the enigmatic epigraph opening *The Book of Questions*: 'mark the first page of the book with a red bookmark, since in the beginning, the wound is invisible.'<sup>51</sup> Hence, Jabès's father made an — unconscious — mistake that proved that one belongs to Judaism specifically by means of writing a 'word' (*milah*), just as every Jewish male also belongs to Judaism by undergoing 'circumcision' (*milah*). Nevertheless, Jabès seems to argue against his father's mistake by claiming that there is a female, maternal writing that predates every spoken word — a writing that is inherently female, cut out from an incision into the flesh, just as circumcision actually is, a word carved as wound or a wound carved out as word.

And yet, the dimension of 'motherhood' should not be imagined as follows:

49 See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 75.

50 I am following here Steven Jaron, 'Le Remaniement', in *Edmond Jabès: l'écllosion des énigmes*, ed. by Daniel Lançon and Catherine Mayaux (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2008), pp. 17–28. Cf. also Tsivia Wygoda Frank, *Edmond Jabès and the Archaeology of the Book: Text, Pre-Texts, Contexts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

51 Jabès, *Le Livre des questions*, p. 7: 'Marque d'un signet rouge la première page du livre, car la blessure est invisible à son commencement.'

Yukel reported the story of that blind woman who, far away from her family, raised the son who she had delivered to the world. And he compared the destiny of this woman to that of the writer and that of the Jew, bound, by a pledge, to the land of his forefathers but separated from it by the eyes and the legs...<sup>52</sup>

Jabès here points to the constitutive blindness of a ‘maternal writing’ (*écriture maternelle*) as the dark, inaccessible source for ‘words’ — even the words for confessing to God Himself.<sup>53</sup> In the unsettling metaphor, writing is a mother whose words cannot be read but only delivered and disseminated, as wounds. The metaphor does not explore the possibility that words could be written with a tactile writing system like Braille, such that the mother’s words — the words of writing — could be accessed physically by touching them.

This fascinating suggestion escapes the poetic economy of Jabès, who rather conceives the dimension of writing within a stringent metaphysics of light, which obviously resonates with Scripture: ‘on the threshold of the seventh day, God closed the envelope of the world, where the stars gleamed, and closed it with His seal, which man calls by the blinding name: sun.’<sup>54</sup> Let us consider once more the metaphor at stake here: ‘maternal writing’ is a blind mother who writes but will never be able to read ‘her’ own ‘words.’ If it is so, the question that arises is whether the metaphysics of light literally is the ‘last word’ on Creation. Apparently, Jabès does not think so. A writer is someone who inscribes words as wounds. These words, which can never be read, come from his inaccessible blind mother, who cannot see the sun as the seal of Creation. In this perspective, light is only another form of

52 Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre de Yukel*, in *Il libro delle interrogazioni*, pp. 327–590 (p. 557): ‘Yukel rapporta l’histoire de la femme aveugle qui éleva, loin de sa famille, les fils qu’elle avait donné au monde. Et il compara le destin de cette femme à celui de l’écrivain et à celui du Juif rivé, par un vœu, à la terre de ses aïeux, mais séparé d’elle par les yeux et les jambes...’

53 I cannot explore here the intriguing suggestion that, due to the complex overlapping between the voice of God and the voice of Augustine’s mother Monica, ‘maternal writing’ may relate to the art of confession. On this, see especially Francesco Giusti, ‘The Hinge of Time: Mothers and Sons in Barthes and Augustine’, *Exemplaria*, 33.3 (2021), pp. 280–95 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10412573.2021.1965731>>.

54 Jabès, *Le Livre des questions*, p. 118: ‘au seuil du septième jour, Dieu ferma l’enveloppe de l’univers où scintillaient les étoiles et y apposa son cachet que l’homme désigna du nom aveuglant de soleil.’

inscribing a word as a wound; it is not ultimate since every word is only begotten by a 'maternal writing'. On the other hand, the constitutive blindness of a 'maternal writing' (*écriture maternelle*) is also the constitutive blindness of 'Writing' (*Écriture*) as a mother who begets her sons — Jewish 'writers' who are all that remains after the exhaustion of the Book. In this respect, 'Writing' (*Écriture*) is inherently secluded from literature, whose words written by 'Jewish writers' cannot be seen by writing, due to a structural blindness that buries writing into a tenebrous solitude:

'blinding a man', Reb Berre, then said, 'does that mean you deprive his soul of the sun? The world inside is a black world. Each avowal, each gesture, is a candle that burns and, while we sleep, wakes deep within us.'<sup>55</sup>

Jabès explicitly compares the act of writing to an unfortunate case of miscarriage: 'therefore, a stillborn child; stillborn, i.e., dead in order to be born; life denied until its birth and frozen in it, whose breath and inertia were our own' (*donc, un enfant mort-né; mort-né, c'est-à-dire mort afin de naître; vie refusée jusqu'à sa naissance et figée en elle dont le souffle et l'inertie furent les nôtres*).<sup>56</sup> In this perspective, the image of a miscarriage is eloquent enough to describe the dramatic act of writing as well as the risks of being misunderstood or, even worse, of delivering a work that is lifeless — stillborn. And yet there is something darker and uncanny at stake.

Let me insist once more on the notion of 'maternal writing'. This notion seems to object to the traditional institution of circumcision, especially because it posits writing before life whereas circumcision posits life before writing. When related to the dimension of maternity, the notion of writing is exposed to the risks of pregnancy and especially to the threat of miscarriage. Jabès's image of writing his own work projects his metaphor of a 'maternal writing' into a darker realm: if motherhood presupposes pregnancy, pregnancy might involve the risk of miscarriage. Here Jabès apparently maintains in much more radical terms that the notion of writing itself necessarily involves the event of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> Jabès, *Elyà*, p. 1172.

miscarriage. The stillborn child carries a poignant name: Elya. Regardless of any lexicological and philological precaution, Jabès assumes the name Elya to be the anagram of his mother's name — Yael. Therefore, the miscarriage figures not simply as an unfortunate event but rather as the tragic destiny to which the act of writing is inexorably delivered. In other words, the final consequence of a fatal *mutation* is reflected in the letter *permutation* of his mother's name — from Yael to Elya. Still, this already dark dimension of motherhood does not exhaust Jabès's notions of language and writing. At first, one should recall that Jabès claims — almost in traditional, naive terms — that a writer is someone who has rediscovered the dimension of his infancy; hence, a writer would apparently be like

[an] eighty-years old [woman] on her deathbed who, a moment before fading away, expressed herself in the language of her childhood that she had forgotten, already in her adolescence.<sup>57</sup>

And yet infantile words — the words of someone who cannot yet speak — are those that a writer would allegedly be required to speak again. Still, they do not appear to be mere, unoriginal repetitions of some soft 'baby talk' but rather sound like the *lamentation* of an unfortunate creature — a stillborn — who has to face a tragic destiny: being out-spoken in words and therefore destined to death. Jabès writes: 'deprived of its *r*, *la mort*, death, dies asphyxiated in the word, *mot*' (*privé d'R, la mort meurt d'asphyxie dans le mot*).<sup>58</sup>

The transparent wordplay in the original French between *mort* ('death') and *mot* ('word') manifests an intrinsic relationship of the individual act of writing with the transindividual, inexorable destiny to die — one is born to die. As a consequence, the very event of motherhood is connected to the event of death not simply as an exterior risk of miscarriage but rather as an interior will of *sacrificing* her own son. What becomes manifest on the sacrificial altar of writing is that every writer's 'word' (*mot*) is destined to 'death' (*mort*). More radically, this

57 Ibid., p. 618: '[une] octogénaire sur son lit d'agonie qui, un moment avant de s'éteindre, s'exprima dans la langue de son enfance qu'elle avait, depuis son jeune âge, oubliée'.

58 Edmond Jabès, *El, ou le dernier livre*, in *Il libro delle interrogazioni*, pp. 1474–1665 (p. 1532).

destiny is imposed as a *sacrifice* by writing itself — that is, by means of ‘the sacrificed and yet always awaited word’ (la parole sacrifiée mais toujours attendue).<sup>59</sup> In these terms, Jabès’s notion of ‘maternal writing’ actually exhausts the patriarchal dimension of fatherhood, which is classically depicted in Scripture by means of two events: circumcision and the sacrifice of the firstborn. Besides, Abraham was the first: the first to become a Jew, the first to be circumcised, the first to offer his son as a sacrifice on an altar of fire (Genesis 22. 1–18).

By inscribing the act of writing into the dimension of sacrifice, Jabès militates for a reinstatement of traditional Jewish messianism. Yet he is well aware that this ‘tradition’ — the ordinary, patriarchal one — is outdated. His discomfort towards the actual Talmud, its hermeneutics, and its faith in a perpetual legal reasoning eventually brought him to write his own private Talmud — not a *legal* but a *literary* one. This fictional and yet somehow not fictitious Talmud met all the requirements for elevating Jabès’s otherwise trivial discomfort for Rabbinic literature to the truly metaphysical assumption that Jewish writing is intrinsically *messianic*. A literary Talmud — populated by fictional rabbis — substantiated a radical expression of this principle: the ‘inoperative nature’ of Jewish Law emerges exactly when messianism is completely secularized and can no longer bear its traditional message.<sup>60</sup> Jabès’s world is the world of revelation — from the radical perspective in which this world is returned to its own nothingness. In this respect, Jabès’s notion of ‘maternal writing’ delivers the act of writing to the sacrificial destiny of death: ‘The book is the place where the writer sacrifices his voice to silence.’<sup>61</sup>

Jabès’s notion of ‘maternal writing’ replaces the traditional notion of fatherhood together with its main institutions — circumcision and the sacrifice of the firstborn. We finally understand that Jabès’s claim that his ‘mother tongue’ is a foreign language only affirms the inability to find a centre *within* the perimeter of writing. Writing cannot provide a stable centre to those who inexorably err when disseminated in

59 Edmond Jabès, *Aely*, in *Il libro delle interrogazioni*, pp. 1196–1473 (p. 1290).

60 I am clearly alluding here to Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Edizione integrale* (Macerata: Quolibet, 2018).

61 Jabès, *Elya*, p. 1060: ‘le livre est le lieu où l’écrivain fait, au silence, le sacrifice de sa voix.’

time and space. Jabès therefore delivers an uncanny diagnosis about speaking a mother tongue: the act of possessing a mother tongue cannot provide stability, and this is because one is inexorably delivered to the act of being written — and hence to die. As a consequence: ‘my mother tongue is a foreign language.’



Federico Dal Bo, "My Mother Tongue Is a Foreign Language": On Edmond Jabès's Writing in Exile, in *Untying the Mother Tongue*, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, Cultural Inquiry, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 45–83 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26\\_3](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26_3)>

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