

*As whirlwinds in the south pass through;  
so it cometh from the desert, from a terrible land.*

*(Isaiah, 21:1)*

## Introduction

The time when justifications were given precedence is over, and, clearly, we find ourselves stripped of justifications. “Our sources precede us,” insists Edmond Jabès, but at any rate we are not heading from them and towards them; rather, they wane underway, gliding by like shadows, only to dissolve as something one can no longer continue persuading to exist. This is also true of the origins of this book. But if I were to believe that persuasion has a power to create – more even, that persuasion is the only wall between us and nothingness – I would have to say that this book sprouted out of multiple questions following one upon another. The final text has gone a long way from the concern of philosophical interpretation of a modern kabbalist’s writings to the question of the status of Jewish philosophy in modernity, to an even broader theme of distinctiveness of modern philosophising as such.

This book’s dark prehistory was nurtured by a simple need: a need to interpret Jabès’ writings so as to glean a singular philosophy from them. Jabès, a 20th-century poet and kabbalist, the author of scattered and hermetic texts that explode any generic boundaries, has already invited ample research and critical attention. He has been commented on by poets and literary scholars, by writers, such as Paul Auster, by philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Blanchot, too. Though undoubtedly valuable – and sometimes invaluable – for their minute and yet brilliant insights, all these interpretations fail to face up to the entirety of Jabès’ textual production. They do not seek to make a comprehensive connection between myriads of particles that make up the body of his writing. Moreover, they all fall into a trap set by the author of *The Book of Questions*. For, when pondering Jabès, one is easily manoeuvred into following one of two well-trodden paths: one either weaves one’s own disjointed and chaotic narrative at the margins of his texts or seeks to come near Jabès writings, interspersing them with a commentary that, as such, ceases to differ from the quoted excerpts. Both approaches bring forth a spectre of Jabès, paler even than it behoves spectres, agonisingly soulless at times and spewing out banalities. By rupturing the writer’s signature and textual continuity in order to pour one’s own, derivative commentary into the fissures, one adds little to his writing while stripping it of much and flouting its right to be given justice to in its entirety.

Such was the path I wanted to avoid at any cost. From the very beginning, which I can only hold in doubt, it was clear to me that the Jabèsian body of text required powerful thinking capable of entering the lists with other philosophers of the 20th century. It required a very special form of thinking, developed only for this particular occasion and dedicated not so much to explicate the text line by line as to illuminate it from the sidelines. My aim was to surmount the diffusion of his writings and make them yield the underlying structure of thinking that seems to inform them. In other words, besides the typical objectives of a monograph – such as acquainting readers comprehensively with a figure as essential to modern literature as Edmond Jabès, surveying the core motifs of his texts and reviewing his critical interpretations – my goal was also to have philosophy materialise out of his writing.

As Heidegger's example emphatically shows, philosophy that ventures to interpret a literary text is usually blighted with severe blindness. Well, the discourse of philosophy as such is blindness in action. And yet, there is a flicker of chance in this darkness. If skilfully capitalised on, a grand blackout, preposterous as it is, passes over entirely obvious questions, takes no notice of its own status and potency, but for all that it ventures further. For what other philosophical discourse would have the grit to try and quarry the structure of thinking from a poet-kabbalist's writings? Planning this book, I have covertly counted on the value added of philosophical arrogance which digs deeper than other discourses in the humanities because it may forget that depth does not exist. If this design succeeded, the Jabèsian work would see another text arise at a distance – a distance greater than literary studies usually venture to tread – one that could legitimately be referred to as Edmond Jabès' philosophy. Such a Nietzschean gesture of strong interpretation, which shuns no justifiable violence, could help set Jabès apart from his contemporary authors and cleave his work off from the continuum of post-war thinking, demanding a more prominent place for the poet than has been assigned to him. One could also advocate for his position in philosophy, a place he certainly deserves though has never actually been granted.

To carry out this design, I needed a solid footing for thinking of Jabès philosophically. One context offered itself more forcefully than others: the context of modern philosophical re-interpretation of Judaism. In the 20th century – from Hermann Cohen, to Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Lévinas, to Harold Bloom (and further) – the movement invigorated philosophy and other fields of the humanities, infusing them with many fresh ideas, as if purposefully gifted to us for the times that saw metaphysics falling apart. In particular, it renewed the Athens-Jerusalem opposition, binding Greek thought with the declining tradition of Western philosophising and attributing to Jerusalem – a

symbol of anti-idolatrous, writing-focused Jewish thought – the role of replenishing philosophical discourse. The contrast of the two metropolises is focalised today in the academic doxa of oppositions – of image vs. word, paganism vs. monotheism, myth vs. faith, immanence vs. Messianism and, finally, the cult of death vs. vitalism.<sup>1</sup> Embracing the strong opposition of Athens and Jerusalem, such a context for reading Jabès would be natural insofar as it would fully espouse the leanings within Judaism that the poet valued highly himself: anti-mythical tendencies, radical a-theological monotheism, the experience of exile, elaborate hermeneutical tradition with its special attitude to writing, intertextuality, primacy of word over image, the idea of creation *ex nihilo* and, finally, the messianic element. It would not pose a serious difficulty to portray Jabès as another Lévinas or another Blanchot (in his apology of Judaism), all the more so that in many senses he indeed was both. But in this framework, the poet's thinking would be reduced to the kind of post-Heideggerian philosophy which vindicates so-far marginalised or excluded discourses. Jabès would become just another proponent of Jerusalem against Athens, and his work would not inventively stray from well-trodden paths.

Such an interpretive approach would entail the risk of taking tautology for a discovery. For Jabès himself contributed to constructing a specific vision of Judaism in the late 20th-century humanities. No wonder, thus, that the vision may be re-traced back in his writings. That is why reading his body of work against academic Judaism would amount to simply explaining *idem per idem*. Therefore, the context of theses typically propounded as a philosophical re-interpretation of Judaism did not seem a fitting conceptual scaffolding for this book. Discarding it, I realised, however, that Jabès' thought bears a distressing paradox that not only prompts one not to read it within Jewish thinking as re-counted by 20th-century philosophy but also compels one to interrogate the legitimacy and relevance of this very re-counting. The said paradox involves the fact that going his own way – reading poets rather than philosophers and consistently kindling the destructive movement of the text he was creating – Jabès arrived where other 20th-century thinkers did even though they had little, or nothing whatsoever, to do with Judaism: Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Lacan. The latter two have even

---

1 In the Polish humanities, a passionate plea for the relevance and permanence of the Athens vs. Jerusalem opposition is to be found in Agata Bielik-Robson's *Erros. Mesjański witalizm i filozofia* [*Erros: Messianic vitalism and philosophy*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), which comprehensively discusses the features of Greek and Jewish thinking. I merely indicate here.

garnered a reputation of paradigmatic, late-time “Greeks.” And Jabès’ texts are saturated with so deceptively Heideggerian a need to listen for and to age-old silences and absences; and his understanding of reality is so Lacanian in emphasising non-Totally, which, to be constituted, needs a minimum remnant, an absent fragment. At the same time, however, Jabès suffuses his work with a profound subtext of Judaism. He untiringly reaches for various motifs from Jewish tradition to make them part of his argument; more than that, he even proclaims that real meanings of certain concepts of Judaism are fully consonant with his intuitions. A puzzle that presents itself to us is, then, why Jabès entered the path of “Greek” thinking if he walked the “Jewish” way.

This puzzle might be framed slightly differently: Why did the thinker who devoted all his mature works to meditating on Judaism, to contemplating the meaning of revelation and covenant after Auschwitz, and, finally, to pondering the death of God in ways clearly nurtured by Jewish monotheism, come essentially so close to Heidegger and Lacan, two heirs to the decaying legacy of “Athens”? Why does he constantly dwell on Nothing, attributing it a Name at the same time? Why is the body of his writing steeped in the death of God – and not only God – instead of in vigorous vitalism? And why is his text subjected to utter simplification, why does it forfeit the richness of content and devastate the narrative down to a tatter, reducing itself to a single, ultimate difference? Briefly: Is Jabès “really” of Jerusalem or of Athens? Is he a post-Greek thinker donning Jewish trappings, or is he a Jewish thinker secretly haunted by the nihilism of fallen Athens?

Such questions would probably be raised by the academic humanities with their adamant investment in the permanence of the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition. Nevertheless, such questions are pulverised when clashing against the hard rock of Jabès’ writings. What an auspicious coincidence it is that Jabès hails from Cairo. The Athens-vs.-Jerusalem dualism is thus sent into such flutter that it is not only hardly applicable to the author of *The Book of Questions* but also forcefully doomed to dismantling. At the slightest attempt, the carefully cultivated distinctions between the truly “Jewish” spirit and the intrinsically “Greek” heritage come to resemble a makeshift footbridge over a precipice. Only when an unsettling, excluded position of a “third metropolis” steals into the academic dualism can one look back upon the assumptions underpinning philosophical Greece and philosophical Judaism, and realise how frequently they converge or overlap. Here is one emphatic example: evoking Judaism, 20th-century philosophy highlighted an apocalyptic dimension in its re-interpretation of Jewish Messianism. Benjamin and Bloch, major upholders of this stance, hoped for the coming of messianic justice, which would give singularity its due. Yet, doesn’t

messianic justice, as pictured by 20th-century philosophy, resemble Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*?<sup>2</sup> Is it not informed by similar forces of simplification, seeking ultimate equality devoid of violence? Does the background of messianic justice not harbour a bane of indebtedness to a dark source, which casts a long shadow over modern philosophy, a shadow this philosophy strives to shake off once and for all? Admittedly, the difference between Athens and Jerusalem seems to obtain still – in particular, as regards the way of attaining the ideal of justice – but it remains so closely linked to the movement of simplification that it forces *to look into how this very opposition is implicated in the processes behind transformations in the two tendencies it is eager to set apart*. For why, in two so different traditions, does a similar desire come to the fore whose object is constituted as a deferral?

When the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition is scrutinised carefully, endeavours to separate lastingly one metropolis from the other come to stir increasing doubt. Threads are revealed which stitched the opposition; and it suffices to compare how various thinkers draw the lines between their respective domains to begin to hesitate profoundly whether the outlines of philosophical Judaism may indeed be demarcated in the first place. While Benjamin repudiates guilt, law and fate, which he associates with the myth and views as a residuum of paganism to be eradicated, Kafka follows the opulent kabbalist and Chasidic tradition to see Judaism as wielding a key to law, guilt and judgment. Given this divergence, does the Law belong with Greek or Jewish thought? If the Law was obliterated, and with relief, too, by the apostles of the Greeks, should it be recovered or rather overthrown in philosophical Judaism? And finally, what is actually guilt that comes into being vis-à-vis the Law? Should it be combated, as a vestige of paganism, or should it rather be considered a treasured ethical value?

The path of suspicion guides us far beyond and above the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition. It makes us inquire whether the tectonic changes that re-interpretations of Judaism are subject to in 20th-century philosophy do not, incidentally, ensue from modern thinking as such rather than from Judaism. Isn't this philosophical and academic Jerusalem, by any chance, haunted by, not even the Greek, but the modern spirit? May it not reflect distinctly modern philosophising? In this age of ours, thinking has taken a unique form: it is produced by and of a galaxy of dispersed minds that still

---

2 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of Gelassenheit*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, with an Introduction by John M. Anderson (New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1966).

look behind in search of a logic of movement which persistently carries them away in one direction. In this fight for survival, oppositions are valuable, if not outright invaluable, for the one that wants to resist the movement of simplification, but, like anchors, they are part of the drifting ship rather than of the bottom beneath it.

By no means do I wish to suggest here that the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem divide has lost its utility in contemporary thinking. On the contrary, the manner in which 20th-century philosophy vindicates Judaism and contrasts it with the Greek legacy emphatically displays all the peculiarities of modern thought. That is why the meandering path that this book followed started with questions about the feasibility of giving a philosophical account of Jabès' writings and wound up in the exploration of meanings of the links between Judaism and 20th-century thinking, which in themselves hold a mirror up to the phenomenon of modernity. Ultimately, the issues of ethics as implicated in modernity's drive to ultimate simplification proved of great pertinence to me. As a result, to salvage the ethical remnant where all ethics seems overthrown is yet another concern central to this study.

Thus, this book spirals around its pivotal point in ever wider circles: Jabès' work pushes towards the issues of 20th-century philosophical Judaism, which in themselves direct towards the phenomenon of modernity. It is not my aim, then, to abolish the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition (as if oppositions could be abolished in the first place); instead, I want to locate this opposition in the context provided by modern thought. To accomplish this feat, I need a firm foothold of *suspicion*. In this book, the central suspicion is: Is 20th-century philosophical Judaism not just an attempt – beyond justification and non-justification – on the part of modernity's immanent drive towards difference to take advantage of Jewish tradition? And, consequently, is Jerusalem, as portrayed in this philosophy, not just a dummy put up by the modern spirit, which has nothing in common either with Greece or with *Eretz Israel*? Further, is all pre-modern history, as we think it, not this kind of dummy? Or, in other words, does the modern turn not sever us off from the past, forever and decisively, reducing it to the stuff to be utilised in its own constructs? Asking such questions and suspecting that the old oppositions cherished for over twenty centuries may be nothing else or more but a mirage veiling the abyss of the modern shift, we could finally re-think the meanings of the Jewish revival the humanities have orchestrated in the recent decades.

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee,” the Scripture says. Love of the philosophical Jerusalem is perhaps the only thing that stands after the Judaism of yore fades away irretrievably in the transparency of

pre-modern history. To defend Jerusalem against its opposition to Athens, this is this book's ultimate goal.

Jabès' writings will serve therein as a paradigmatic example of relations between Judaism and 20th-century thought. His work belongs neither to Jewish philosophy nor to Judaism which tends to tailor philosophy to its own needs. It forms an entirely separate realm of its own, where modern forces of thought deploy the historical matter of Jewish tradition. Suspended between the derivatively and selectively absorbed religion and culture of Judaism on the one hand and the intellectual milieu of the 20th century on the other, the position distinctly espoused by Jabès' writing is shared also by other writers and thinkers, their throng including Kafka, Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, and, to a degree, Derrida. How can these relations be explained? Whence does the revival of Judaism in contemporary thinking originate? And, finally, why do the Jewish insights utilised in the 20th century dovetail so closely with philosophy's own conclusions – as if they shared a kind of common inner structure?

To answer such questions, I propose to use a new notion in this book, one of "Jewish philosophy of modernity" which goes beyond the categories of "Jewish philosophy," "modern philosophy," or "modern Jewish philosophy," as applied so far. "Jewish philosophy of modernity" is a notion that, first and foremost, captures the overdetermination characteristic of Judaism-inspired 20th-century concepts, in which one may distinguish several equally valid frameworks of reference: (1) modern philosophy, i.e. philosophy created in the modern era; (2) philosophy of modernity, i.e. all the schools of thought that make modernity an object of reflection; (3) Jewish philosophy, which, as it were, is in and by itself a product of the age of *modernitas*;<sup>3</sup> (4) philosophy that draws on a variety of insights of earlier Jewish, both rabbinical and kabbalist, tradition; (5) philosophy that inquires

---

3 To an extent, I endorse here the position of Michael L. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon, who insist that the term "philosophy" should be rather selectively applied only to such kinds of thinking which question what is taken for granted, including their own foundations. On this model, pre-modern thought developed within Judaism could be called philosophy only metaphorically, if at all, given its strong rootedness in tradition and subordination to rabbinical control. According to Morgan and Gordon, Jewish philosophy comes into being only when the tradition of Judaism comes to be viewed with detachment and its meanings are interrogated. That is why one of the basic questions pondered by this philosophy is what is actually the criterion of Jewishness. See Michael L. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon, "Introduction: Modern Jewish Philosophy, Modern Philosophy, and Modern Judaism," in M. L. Morgan, and P. E. Gordon (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 1–13, on pp. 1–9.

into the meaning of Judaism in the modern era; and finally (6) philosophy that relies on certain trends of Jewish thought in seeking to explain the modern crisis of philosophy. All these threads are tightly knotted, actually beyond any unravelling. Therefore, instead of laboriously distinguishing Jewish philosophy from modern Jewish philosophy and Jewish philosophy from Judaism, I assumed a priori an inner interconnectedness of Judaism and modernity. Conceived in these terms, “*Jewish philosophy of modernity*” is a complex phenomenon forged in a grid of ongoing reflexive mediations between modern philosophy, thinking about modernity as an epoch, and Jewish tradition.

It is exactly reflexivity – in its new sense heralded by the Kantian critique – that is distinctive to the position of “Jewish philosophy of modernity.” Over centuries, Jewish thought has drawn on innumerable external sources: Greek philosophy, religions of the Near East, Gnosis, Arabic philosophy, Sufism, mediaeval Christian reflection, Protestant tradition, and so forth. Maimonides, the most prominent Jewish rationalist of the Middle Ages, best exemplifies the indebtedness of Jewish thought to Greek, Arabic and Christian philosophies. But “Jewish philosophy of modernity” designates more than just another species of continuing “Jewish philosophy,” which in this age derives inspiration from Western thought, just as it was once inspired by Aristotle or Islamic *kalam*. “*Jewish philosophy of modernity*” contemplates the very problem of whether *there actually is a Jewish philosophy as such*. Hardly anything is more typical of contemporary studies of this philosophy than tentative, non-conclusive speculations about what it is that should “really” be called Jewish philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Yet, rather than in

---

Admittedly, I do not subscribe to Morgan and Gordon’s radical coupling of philosophy with (self)reflexivity, but I do believe that this definitional reduction is informed by apt intuitions. *Modern* philosophy is (self)reflexive. That is why modern Jewish philosophy is bred in and from a remoteness into which questioning pushes the tradition of Judaism. I would not say that Maimonides should be denied the name of a philosopher, yet I certainly agree that he clearly differs from modern Jewish philosophers in that he thinks *within* religious tradition while they seek to re-think what has remained of it.

- 4 See, for example, Adam Lipszyc, *Ślad judaizmu w filozofii XX wieku [The trace of Judaism in 20th-century philosophy]* (Warszawa: Fundacja im. Mojżesza Schorra, 2009), pp. 11–21. As Daniel H. Frank aptly observes, history of philosophy comes into being with the onset of the modern period, and “Jewish philosophy” takes no different course, acquiring visibility only with the advent of a modern perspective, which arranges the thinking of past ages into a sequence and looks for its distinctive features. See Daniel H. Frank, “What is Jewish philosophy?” in Daniel H. Frank, and Olivier Leaman (eds.), *History of Jewish Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–8.

finding a sound answer to this question, the problem lies in *the very imperative of raising this question*. In other words, the fact that many authors seem to be compelled to identify the defining criterion of Jewish philosophy speaks to their own philosophical position rather than to the object of their reflection.

Summing up, “Jewish philosophy of modernity” as conceived of in this book is a notion expected to reveal the problematic nature of modern philosophical references to Judaism in their internally overdetermined structure. I believe that a philosophical account of Jabès’ thought can help grasp an array of their shared recurrent patterns, more explicitly perhaps than analyses of the philosophical work of Rosenzweig, Benjamin and/or Derrida. Why? There are a few reasons. First, Jabès is not a philosopher; he refers to philosophers very rarely, and his thinking, rather than commenting on traditions already in place, evolves out of and by itself. Curiously, however, his thought tackles the same issues that beleaguer modern philosophy. In this light, Jabès can be assumed to succumb to – besides influences of other authors – a logic that pervades all thinking in modernity. Second, his writings, as I shall seek to show in this book, aggregate into an ongoing meditation on one problem that is getting ever more distilled and simplified, that is, on the question of difference and remnant. That is why Jabès is not only a modern thinker but also an embodiment of the utter simplification and crystallisation of structures that shape an essential part of philosophy of modernity. Third, another author that makes so extensive references to Judaism would be hard to find in the 20th century.<sup>5</sup> When analysing Jabès’ writings, there is no evading the question of the status of revision of Jewish tradition. For the trace, the “effect of Jewishness” formed outside the proper discourse of Judaism, as Philippe Boyer writes,<sup>6</sup> is exceptionally pronounced in Jabès. Fourth, Jabès is a thinker who found the reconstruction of Judaism a vital response to the spiritual condition of the contemporary era as well as an effective tool for interpreting it.

Jabès’ work displays, and with extraordinary lucidity too, a fusion of two phenomena, i.e. Jewish tradition and modern thought, permeating his texts in the form of a theory of writing and the writer. At the same time, Jabès constantly

---

5 Cf. Miryam Laifer, *Edmond Jabès. Un judaïsme après Dieu* (New York, Berne and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986), p. ix.

6 Philippe Boyer, “Le point de la question,” *Change* 22 (février 1975), pp. 41–73, on pp. 41–42.

maintains a minimum difference between the two, insisting that he is not a Jewish writer, but “a Jew and a writer.”<sup>7</sup>

That is why I believe that the author of *The Book of Questions* best embodies “a Jewish philosopher of modernity,” with the term’s entire overdetermination. All the influences encapsulated in the term factor in making Jabès’ writings a compelling riddle. Hence, like no one else perhaps, he offers a cornerstone on which to develop the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity.

The argument in this book develops in several interlocking stages. In Chapter One, I begin by formulating the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity. I focus first on a handful of examples of 20th-century conceptual frameworks that drew on Jewish tradition and attempt to identify the underlying patterns they share. They are later confronted with a portrayal of the turn that ushered in the age of modernity. This will help define what Jewish philosophy of modernity actually is in its overdetermined position between Judaism and modern thought.

Relying on this theoretical framework, I will develop an in-depth account of Jabès’ philosophy. To begin with, I will briefly report the author’s biography and describe his writings. In the subsequent Chapters, I will address the most pertinent elements of Jabèsian thinking: the idea of *tzimtzum* (Chapter Three), ontology approximating negative theology (Chapters Four and Five), Messianism (Chapter Six), the concept of the Book (Chapter Seven), affinities between Judaism and writing (Chapter Eight) and, finally, ethical issues, therein Jabès’ reflection on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust (Chapter Nine) as well as on three para-ethical notions of repetition, resemblance and hospitality (Chapter Ten). Each Chapter has its own conclusion in which its central thematic concerns are related to the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity. The last Chapter (Eleven) explores the most advanced field of Jabèsian thought: his speculations on the point. It brings together all the previously discussed themes and seeks to grasp the essence of Jewish philosophy of modernity. Key insights into it are comprised in the conclusion to this Chapter while the book’s Conclusion recapitulates the findings of the Chapters and revisits the idea of Jewish philosophy of modernity charted at the beginning in an attempt to define what contribution the exploration of Jabès’ thought makes to its lore.

In this Introduction, I wish to clarify a few more issues. This book is deeply indebted to such interpreters of Jabès as Jacques Derrida, Gabriel Bounoure, Maurice Blanchot, Rosmarie Waldrop, Beth Hawkins, Warren F. Motte, Didier

---

7 JW, p. 27. Citing Jabès’ works, I will use abbreviations explained and documented in Works Cited.

Cahen, Steven Jaron, Marcel Cohen, Mary Ann Caws, Richard Stamelman, Adolfo Fernandez-Zoila, Llewellyn Brown, François Laruelle, Helena Shillony, William Franke, Stéphane Mosès, Paul Auster and many others. Quotes from and references to their texts speak for themselves, which, however, should not occlude the fact that my project differs considerably from the earlier ways of reading and expounding Jabès and, as such, uses the existing interpretations as props only.

In this book, I had to give up on investigating how the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity is, or could be, applied to the reading of philosophers other than Jabès. Even though I do think that the concept can be highly effective in interpreting the work of Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem, Lévinas, Celan, Derrida and many other authors, I believe that this must be studied separately. This book only seeks to formulate the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity and to develop it in a dialectical application to Jabès' work.

Quotes from Jabès' writings are limited to the absolutely indispensable minimum. His writings are specific insofar that although each piece revolves around a particular underlying idea, all the remaining elements of Jabèsian thinking are invariably braided into it. That is why it is impossible exhaustively to cite all passages that convey a given topos without making this book an imitation of Montaigne's *Essays*. Hence, I quote only the excerpts that are most vividly illustrative or open up large interpretive vistas. I view the body of Jabès' writings through the coordinates of a superimposed grid of a philosophical structure, without however commenting on his particular texts step by step.<sup>8</sup> I believe that the notions I propose here are productively applicable to nearly all works of the poet, but I leave these interpretations to my readers.

At this place, I should settle my intellectual debt to two figures whose ghosts persistently haunt this book though they rarely speak in their own voices. These spectral presences are Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. I briefly address a very complex relation between Jabès and Derrida in Chapter Two. Naturally, they share several assumptions and attitudes to interpretation and writing. However,

---

8 Miryam Laifer observed that "the depth of Jabès's writings compels us to believe that studying every or nearly every word is a prerequisite to understanding his work. After several readings, one always feels that a new reading is necessary because the texts seem to elude us." See Laifer, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 104. Indeed, evoking any quote immediately re-directs the course of thinking, as it forces one to go along new paths opened up by the quotation. This pitfall is well exemplified in the existing interpretations of the poet's work. That is why I limit the number of quotations to an absolute minimum, giving more room to the philosophical structure.

my tenet was that, in a book like this one, Jabès must be freed from the shadow of his follower. Consequently, I left aside inquiries into Jabès' influence on Derrida as an entirely separate question which calls for a comprehensive study of its own. Yet, I tried to show that interpretation of the poet's writings yields a fully original philosophy without a recourse to the categories of deconstruction. More than that, some of Jabès' ideas seem to go further than Derrida's suggestions. Should the handling of the former seem to some readers to be beholden to Derridean deconstruction, I must emphasise that it is not because deconstruction informed my interpretation. Jabès walked his own path, but as it nearly dovetailed with Derrida's, *every interpretation of the poet's work begets a new and unique species of deconstruction*. There is no deconstructive reading of Jabès' writings, or rather there is only a meta-deconstructive reading of them, because the core of these texts is formed by the very same mechanisms that fuelled deconstruction. In interpretations of Jabès, deconstruction encounters itself, that is, no one but a modestly intervening difference.

As to the other spectre – Lacan – the matters look rather different. Nothing is basically known about relations between Jabès and Lacan, and even less about their reciprocal influences. Nonetheless, as I mention in the book's Conclusion, they seem to have shared multiple insights. Undoubtedly, the affinity was affected by their common intellectual milieu, that is, post-war French thought. If the interpretations I propose occasionally seem to rely on categories redolent of Lacan's vocabulary, it is not because I put forward a Lacanian reading of the poet. On the contrary, some of Jabès' original formulas come considerably closely to these categories. This conjunction is far more interesting than any Lacanian reading as *the text itself discloses its affinities with this re-interpretation of psychoanalysis, bidding us to inquire what it actually is that underpins these similarities*. I believe that the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity will help us illuminate this question.

To end with, some technicalities should be explained. Most of Jabès' texts are quoted based on the already canonical translations by Rosmarie Waldrop. Any alterations to them are clearly indicated. Other translations are the joint work of this volume's author and translator. In the footnotes, abbreviations of titles are used, with the full bibliographical data of the editions provided in the Works Cited. Whoever interprets Jabès' writings in a language other than French faces the challenge of striking a balance between a literal translation and a translation that renders the original's poetic depth. In this work, precedence is given to accuracy that conveys the notorious ambiguity of the poet's expressions. Hence, parenthesised original wordings are often provided as otherwise some of the

texts' important qualities, therein punning and homophony, would inevitably be emptied out.

Concluding, I should clearly articulate one more assumption which, though obvious, is too essential to be left for casual conjecture. This volume is a very particular and deliberately selective interpretation. Although it is rooted in a very careful reading of Jabès' texts, no interpretation, especially one of a writer like Jabès, can be considered the ultimately right one. In addition, polyvalence, inconsistency and inner dispersal of his writings preclude any interpretive closure. Jabès himself was often tempted to venture into regions that he had earlier repudiated; that is why to look for any consistent mapping of a straightforward trail in his texts is an exercise in futility. To contrive a single interpretation of any book of his, be it one book only, is a sheer impossibility. In such exigencies, there is only one adequate response. As I have mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, the response involves erecting a philosophical construction *next to* the poet's work so that their mutual correspondences could reveal structural mechanisms un-thought of before. The ramification of such a decision is that responsibility for this chess-playing puppet rests, basically, with me.

