

4 Negative Ontology I: The *Vocable*

Having discussed Jabès' take on *tzimtzum*, we can now examine the philosophy that emerges from his poetry. In this Chapter, I will focus on an underlying grid of recurrent structures. I propose to call this grid negative ontology¹ as it is nothingness that has a central role in it.

To start with, I will discuss the *vocable* – Jabès' basic quasi-concept.² As we shall see, the *vocable* can be interpreted as a modern, negative equivalent of being in classic Aristotelian ontology. I will attempt to derive its model from the poet's scattered observations and remarks. Subsequently, I will use this category to outline Jabès' fundamental philosophical insights. Specifically, I will show why *tzimtzum* makes it impossible to describe reality directly and ushers in two modes of rendering it: representation and repetition, each of them defective in its own way. Afterwards, I will explain why Jabèsian ontology cannot be framed as a set of propositions but must become a sustained practice of writing. I will seek to show that Jabès radically re-invents the way in which philosophy can argue anything. I will also define the function of the text that comes into being in this way. These conclusions will help me outline the basic structure of Jabès' ontology,

1 I realise that the term "ontology" as used here can stir serious doubt, to say the least. Jabès' thought and classic Western ontology, starting from Aristotle and ending with early Heidegger's fundamental ontology, are considerably incommensurate. The recourse to this category invites already classic objections raised by Derrida, especially in his early texts. At the same time, it is difficult to come up with a less awkward term. Consider only the trouble one is in for talking of, say, "metaphysics." I agree with Matthew Del Nevo, who also addresses Jabès' ontology with the reservation that he does not mean fundamental ontology as conceived by Heidegger, but rather "ontology as a matter of writing." Matthew Del Nevo, "Edmond Jabès and Kabbalism after God," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65/2 (1997), pp. 403–42, on p. 421. Also Eric Gould believes that although Jabès indeed rejects transcendence, he retains ontology, which is based on writing from now on. Eric Gould, "Godtalk," in *The Sin of the Book*, p. 170.

To justify the use of the term, I would simply define ontology as an idea of basic relations between forces which come out in the practice of thinking and *cannot have any further attributes*.

2 I will use here the term "quasi-concept," popularised by Derrida, to highlight that Jabèsian categories must not be thought of as stable, logocentric notions. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Positions: Entretiens avec Henri Ronse, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Louis Houdebine, Guy Scarpetta* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), p. 124.

with *tzimtzum* and *vocable* as its components. To end with, I will look into how this ontology is related to modern philosophy and to Kabbalistic thinking.

The *Vocable*: The Concept and its Contexts

Jabès' ontology is tightly intertwined with the writerly imaginary. Hence its key concept – the *vocable* – is a term borrowed from the lexicon of linguistics. As the poet admits, when he started using the word, it had been long out of popular circulation and was employed only by linguists.³

In Jabès' mature thought, the *vocable* replaces *mot* – the word – which emphasises that the word cannot possibly exist as a unity of meaning and script. More than that, the *vocable* takes on such a fundamental function that it can be regarded as an equivalent of “being” in traditional ontology. Therefore, I shall start my account of Jabès' ontology by discussing this very notion. Exploring the poet's writings, we can distinguish four essential contexts in which the *vocable* appears.

First, the *vocable* is contrasted with *parole*, “living speech.” This invites one to play with Romantic clichés of writing as preserving speech while annihilating it at the same time. It is announced in *Yaël* that “The book is always beyond the word [*parole*]. It is the place where the word [*parole*] dies,”⁴ and knowing that the book consists of *vocables*, we can define the *vocable* as the death of speech.⁵ What “death” is that? It is not just the loss of the author's “presence” or “intention.” It is, emphatically, a consequence of *tzimtzum*: in *Aely* Jabès insists that “our words [*vocable*] testify above all to divine obliteration.”⁶ Speech, as expressed above in the passage from an interview with Marcel Cohen, is a utopian model of the equivalence of meaning and written form,⁷ which is ruled out

3 See DEJ, p. 308.

4 BQ II, p. 23.

5 Warren F. Motte stresses that, in Jabès, writing is to speech what the desert is to the world we know – its death. Motte, *Questioning*, p. 8.

6 BQ II, p. 214. In the interview with Benjamin Taylor Jabès adds that the unpronounceability of the Tetragrammaton is an ultimate proof of the difference between speech, which persists in the present, and writing, which lasts beyond the moment of being written down (QJQW, p. 17).

7 Jabès would disown himself if he directly prioritised either of an opposition's elements. Without assessing either “speech” or “writing” (therein the *vocable*), he frames speech as a “live” spirit, a writerly intent which “dies” in writing, whereby he emulates old concepts dating back to German Romanticism. But, as we have already seen, he views speech as closed to the future and owing its freedom to the fact that it only re-tells past events. Writing, in turn, is to be the only proper reality or, more than that, the

in the *tzimtzum*-founded world. Therefore, in the first context, the *vocable* is a *vestige of the imagined "full speech"* – still a vehicle of meaning, yet a mutilated and absence-branded one.

Yet Jabès, with dialectical finesse, proceeds from this to a broader notion of the *vocable* and the second sense in which the term is used.

As a nomad his desert, I have tried to circumscribe the blank territory of the page. I have tried to make it my true place, as the Jew has for centuries tried to make his the desert of his book, desert where the voice [*parole*], profane or sacred, human or divine, encounters silence in order to become word [*vocable*], that is, silent utterance of God and final utterance of man.⁸

The strategic moment of this passage lies in that “the voice encounters silence in order to become *vocable*, that is, silent utterance.” What does it mean? It means that Jabès introduces a middle term – silence – into the simple opposition of “voice/speech” and “*vocable*.” The *vocable* is no longer a vestige of speech, but a unique synthesis of speech and silence. That is why Jabès refers to it as “silent utterance.” This paradoxical coinage implies that the *vocable* not only gestures at speech, whose silencing it constitutes, but *is the utterance of silence itself*. If speech is an illusory making-present, what the *vocable* makes present is absence. As such, the *vocable* is a positive means of expressing the negative.

This is consistent with the writer’s insights at the Cerisy colloquium:

I called this speech [*parole*] of the book, *this speech of silence*, a *vocable*. For fifty years, writers have not used the word *vocable* anymore. Only linguists have employed it. The way I used it, it was nearly a neologism. I created it almost anew. I did so to underline in how far the listening [*écoute*] of the book is not the listening of everyday... To hear the speech of silence [*silence*], we must perhaps make ourselves more silent [*silencieux*] than

very substance of creation. The love of letters alternates in the poet’s writings with the hate of their lethal nature. This characteristic ambivalence has been captured by Derrida, who placed it in the context of 20th-century debates between two sets of representations – “Judaism” and the “Greek spirit.” As Derrida argues, “[i]n the work of Emmanuel Lévinas can be found the same hesitation, the same anxious movement within the difference between the Socratic and the Hebraic, the poverty and the wealth of the letter, the pneumatic and the grammatical”; Derrida, *Writing*, p. 89. According to Derrida, Jabès is torn, in a degree, between the two traditions, just as Lévinas is. On the one hand, he intuitively draws on the resources of Western literature and philosophy to depict how the writer, unable to express himself, dissolves in the word, and on the other, as if wary of the peril of oversimplification, he resorts to Jewish tradition with its more or less strongly emphasised primacy of writing.

8 BR II, p. 45.

silence itself. There is nothing more silent than the word, and yet it speaks. All sounds are in the word [*mot*], and the written word envelops them in silence.⁹

In the second context, thus, the *vocable* is “speech” which *expresses and makes present nothingness*. Jabès effects a truly dialectical reversal here: the sign that refers back to its referent and cannot make it present is equally a means through which this very absence is expressed. The *vocable* turns out to be the symmetry centre of presence and absence: that which it cannot express is at the same time the other side of what it must express.

The third aspect of the *vocable* is associated with its etymology, which links this word to *vox* – voice.¹⁰ Jabès himself adds that the *vocable* is a derivative of *vocare* – to call.¹¹ In this framework, the *vocable* is more than a trace of speech, which it was in the first context; it is a trace of a scream. What scream is meant here? The answer is: the primordial, inarticulate response to the disaster and mutilation of creation. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller offers an illuminating account of this:

Jabès’ work resonates with a scream, a scream of the human being doomed to revolt, a scream of writing that through its rhythm merges with the collective scream of the Shoah survivors, a scream of God, whom his work tries to administer the extreme unction. [...] Only the rebellion that persists in a scream belongs, paradoxically, to the order of speaking [*dire*]; [it is] a scream, however, that cannot be screamed out, it is a whisper that ultimately breaks silence to challenge the muteness of God and expose the lies invented by Theists. [...] In its essence, Jabès’ revolt is not against the absurdity of existence, and it does not express the desire to find man his proper place; the “scream” of remonstrance is directed against God, whom, because of his withdrawal from the world, it blames for the absolute evil exemplified to the utmost in “Auschwitz.”¹²

In Jabès, the scream is an outcry against absolute evil, which is immanent in the structure of the world after God’ withdrawal. Because it is inarticulate, it can be pure expression, for instead of interacting with the world through meanings it *opposes the entire creation as such*.¹³ Therefore, it is not only a protest in the

9 DEJ, p. 308.

10 According to Helena Shillony, the *vocable* “underscores the dimension of audibility. The word is first a sound, a voice that screams or whispers in the desert.” Shillony, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 12.

11 BR II, p. 78.

12 Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, “La ‘Conscience d’un Cri’ dans la poétique d’Edmond Jabès,” *French Forum*, 30/2 (Spring 2005), pp. 97–119, on pp. 97–102.

13 See also Sydney Lévy, “The Question of Absence,” in *The Sin of the Book*, pp. 147–59, on p. 149.

world completely wrecked by a catastrophe,¹⁴ but also the very “spasm ripping the womb of creation.”¹⁵ As such, it is both a response to *tzimtzum* and its projection. Thus if in the third framework, the *vocable* is a trace of a scream, it also betrays scream to “collaborate” with words but anyway remains the scream’s sole available marking.¹⁶ As Motte points out, the idea of the *vocable* serves Jabès also to underscore the powerlessness of a writer when faced with a real scream as an expression of suffering.¹⁷

In this third context, the *vocable* acquires an existential dimension.¹⁸ If the *vocable* is a placeholder of being in Jabès, it is not only a mutilated “being” but

- 14 Thomas J. J. Altizer states that in *The Book of Questions* a scream is that which apocalyptically unites nature, history and God; Thomas J. J. Altizer, “The Apocalyptic Identity of the Jew,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 45/3 (September 1977), p. 361. Gabriel Bounoure, writes that “there is a truth of the scream. It is a truth experienced only within an individual existence and remaining a forever unanswered question. An answer could only come from another sphere of life in which the exception of scream would induce a manifestation of speech.” Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 58.
- 15 Debrauwere-Miller, “Conscience,” p. 108.
- 16 That is why for Jabès writing “unfolds around a scream” (BQ II, p. 260), constantly addresses it and processes it. How does it happen? It happens in the process of inner self-purification and self-simplification, through which the act of writing is “becoming aware of a scream” (BQ I, p. 16).
- 17 Warren F. Motte, Jr., “Jabès’s Words,” *Symposium*, XLI/2 (Summer 1987), pp. 140–56, on p. 143.
- 18 There are close parallels between this notion of the *vocable* – and, in broader terms, the category of scream in Jabès – and Gerschom Scholem’s take on lament in “Uber Klage und Klagelied.” See Gerschom Scholem, “On Lament and Lamentation,” trans. Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel, *Jewish Study Quarterly*, 21 (2014), pp. 4–12. Scholem views lament as the opposite of revelation, which for him is a manifestation of linguisticity as such. Adam Lipszyc explains that “the defining feature [of lament] is its liminal character: it is language on the borderline between the said and the withheld, language on the verge of falling mute. Hence lament has no object and no content. If revelation is devoid of any specific content, being, as it is, an absolute fullness of linguistic positivity, lament is devoid of content as language on the threshold of obliteration, a perishing language.” Adam Lipszyc, *Sprawiedliwość na końcu języka. Czytanie Waltera Benjamina [Justice on the Tip of the Tongue: Reading Walter Benjamin]* (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), p. 172. In Scholem, lament entails accusation, specifically an accusation of language as a whole and pitting the power of its immanence against it to achieve liberation (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 175). Like in Jabès, the scream embodied in the *vocable* is a complaint against ensnarement in language, a protest against collaboration with the closed symbolic system and advocacy for those disenfranchised in the past. The parallel was brought to my attention by Professor Agata Bielik-Robson.

also one that permanently evokes memories of past tragedies.¹⁹ The very incompleteness of the *vocable* serves as a sign of the disaster and, at the same time, preserves the primordial act of protest against it.

The fourth context is provided by those of Jabès' texts which foreground the materiality of the *vocable*,²⁰ showing, in particular, how the act of writing down confers on the word [*mot*] a materiality which it did not have before. "All last words are pre-*vocables*,"²¹ as Jabès concludes, stressing how important the shift from the word to the *vocable* is in which this materiality effect is produced. Motte theorises writing as

a process through which normative denotation is put sharply into question, sidestepped or deliberately neglected. The word assumes materiality in the written text; the objectivity of the thing to which it normally refers becomes secondary to the acquired objectivity by the word itself.²²

The transition from the word to the *vocable* is, of course, tantamount to *tzimt-zum* discussed in the previous Chapter. If the word is a function of the symbolic order in which it is meaningful, the *vocable* with its materiality is involved not only in semantic but also in spatial relations as it has a shape, a colour and a position that situate it relative to other things. Compared with the word, which fully belongs to the imaginary, it carries a surplus beyond the dimension of meanings.

To sum up the four contexts before discussing the philosophical concept of the *vocable*: the *vocable* is: (1) a written record of speech that puts its freedom to an end; (2) a sign not only of speech written-down but also of silence which it has confronted; as such it is a *point* in which speech (absent presence) and silence (present absence) meet; (3) a sign of scream as a trace of the disaster and a protest against it; (4) a specific intersection of meaning and materiality.

19 In his commentary to *The Book of Questions*, Blanchot juxtaposes Jabès's silent scream in the *vocable* with Buber's vision of Hasidism, where prayer and exalted fervour are abandoned for a soundless scream which is "the Jew's reaction to his own great sorrow." Maurice Blanchot, "Edmond Jabès' *Book of Questions*," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 6/2 (Summer 1972), pp. 34–7, on p. 36.

20 As Motte observes that "[e]ven the dictionary [...] insist upon the material quality of the *vocable*, which is defined as a syntactic rather than a semantic artifact, a word considered as a grouping of orthographic or phonetic integers rather than as a unit of meaning." Motte, "Jabès' Words," p. 144.

21 P, p. 56.

22 Motte, "Jabès' Words," p. 146.

The *Vocable* as an Element of Negative Ontology

Now I will attempt to construct a model of the quasi-concept of the *vocable*. My argument will be fundamentally informed by the idea that the *vocable* negatively takes the place that being has occupied in the long tradition of Western ontology. In that sense, the model can be based on the comparison of the *vocable* and Aristotelian being.

Founded on the legacy of Aristotelian thought, which first set out to explore being as such, Western ontology privileges the concept of *ousia*. As already mentioned in Chapter One, *ousia* is a self-contained being whose qualities can be studied, whereby the study and *ousia* are not fundamentally separate, which makes the classic concept of truth possible. Of course, Aristotle himself assumes that there are various orders of studying (which he comprehensively differentiates while analysing under what aspects beings can be studied in particular ways), but they can freely be selected to refer to various aspects of being without affecting being as such. At the same time, the singularity of a given *ousia*, even though its cause is a weighty philosophical problem, is something that *is there – at hand*.

The *vocable* clearly repudiates this ontological paradigm as it is not a “being at hand.” As writing, it is a *particular* combination of meaning (a remnant of the imaginary) and matter (the real). Its singularity does not stem from the originally given independence of *ousia* but from the intersection of a symbolic system with the realm in which it is inscribed. The “meaningful” component of the *vocable* is merely a function of the order that pre-determines things (wherein Jabès is revealed as a post-Kantian thinker) while its “material” component remains inscribed in reality as an outside of the order. That this concept is post-Kantian is revealed in that it does not know “being as such,” studying which would be *secondary*. Hence, rather than in being itself, the principle of singularisation lies in the *place* where a given order of representation and reality are brought together, that is, the place of *tzimtzum*. As such, the *vocable* explodes the opposition of ontology and epistemology.

The second characteristic ensues from the first one: any *vocable* is a place where *the entire* isolated symbolic system confronts its outside, whereby each *vocable* is fraught with the utter tension of the transcendental boundary. As explained in the previous Chapter, it contains two moments of *tzimtzum*: a rupture between a given perspectival order and reality and the former’s repeated breakdown in reality. Brown has observed that the *vocable* is an intersection of universality and absolute singularity.²³ In light of our discussion on the imaginary and the real,

23 Llewellyn Brown, “Le rythme et le chiffre: *Le Livre des questions* d’Edmond Jabès,” *Litterature*, 103/3 (1996), pp. 52–62, on p. 53.

Brown's observation can be specified as follows: the *vocable* is a site where the inner multiplicity of one order and the multitude of singular orders break down; as such the *vocable* is a radical particularity that results from the displacement of relations between singularity and multiplicity. The *vocable* is a crack between the symbolic order and the fact that it is one of many orders; this is what makes the *vocable* utterly singular.

The third characteristic is that the *vocable* cannot be said "to be." What this means is that while being a point where two dimensions dovetail and break, the *vocable* is not subsumed in either of them and, thus, cannot be fully described as "existing," whether as an object or a material thing and, even less, as *ousia*. Just like Derrida's *différance*, it resists thinking and differentiates away the movement that would strive to apprehend it. Thereby, it produces an effect of estrangement as it always generates a gap between "itself and itself."

Consequently, the *vocable* is internally excessive, as compared with *ousia*, in not being a "restful" entity. It embodies both the invasion of the real into the imaginary (which is revealed in the materiality of writing) and a trace of the imaginary in the real (the *vocable*, namely, is this part of matter which sets itself apart through the meaning impressed onto it). As such, the *vocable* has its inner dynamics, and any attempt to capture it from either side produces a shift to the other, which entails a repetition of *tzimtzum*.

More than that, the *vocable* "contains" an emptiness, an ontological displacement which has already been identified as Jabèsian *tzimtzum*. The *vocable* came into being "as a result" of *tzimtzum* and still "lasts" in it (inverted commas seem necessary when using metaphysical notions). This emptiness is a particular way of separating and, at the same time, tying the two dimensions, a paradoxical centre of symmetry that cannot be experienced other than by the internal asymmetry of one of them.²⁴ Unlike *ousia*, it is based on the void.

I called the *vocable* a *place* to highlight that it does not belong to the real-imaginary constellation. We could ask whether this place is only a result of the

24 This is why it is impossible to define how many "internal elements" add up to a *vocable*. Theoretically, it seems that there are three such elements – a "meaningful" part, a "real" part and an emptiness between them. If it were indeed the case, the *vocable* would resemble the Hegelian negation that cuts two corresponding dimensions apart. But, in each of them, the *vocable* appears as both (1) consisting of two elements (as it belongs to one dimension and contains a "particle" of the other at the same time); and (2) consisting of one element in a peculiar way (as it is an element of this dimension and "something more" at the same time).

two orders collapsing or, rather, a site of connection prior to them. One feature of the *vocable* is that this question cannot be conclusively answered. It can be regarded both as a peculiar illusion of an excess place emerging in a confrontation of the two dimensions and as *a place which is part of still another space*. What space would that be? It would be an assemblage of all possible configurations of the imaginary and the real. Jabès calls it the whiteness of the Book on which *vocables* inscribe themselves. I will discuss this in detail in Chapter Seven.

If we assume this space, we should conclude that *vocables* interact with one another in specific ways. Because for Jabès the whiteness of the page and *vocables* together make up the Book, this would serve as a plane of these interactions. It would mean, however, that, besides separating particular configurations of the imaginary and the real, each *vocable* had an additional dimensions that determined its placement in the Book. Hence, the *vocable* could also be said to be a cut-off point of a *particular imaginary-real configuration from the infinite number of such configurations*. In this way, the concept of the *vocable* opens huge theorising vistas as it makes it possible to differentiate between (1) the real as an ensemble of several symbolic orders, yet not as the entire set but as one viewed from the perspective of the order whose singularity is revealed in writing; and (2) the Book as a set of configurations of symbolic orders and their *corresponding* dimensions of reality. The *vocable* is thus the point of rupture between (1) and (2). Consequently, the *vocable* is a concept that urges to go beyond any as-yet thought-of outside of a given order as already marked by its formation. Also, the *vocable* makes possible abstract theorisation of an order as one of many without defining this multiplicity, which would entail it being determined by this order.

Finally, the *vocable*, which always refers to its own impossibility and to the illusion of completion whose loss it seems to be, refers also constantly to the past catastrophes which have left palpable absence behind. The *vocable*, a mutilated “non-being,” is an embodied scream.

Thus, the concept of the *vocable* enables Jabès to construct a specific “a-ontology” in which “existence” – insofar as it is still possible – is based on a fundamental sundering within creation. For the *vocable* is neither an entity nor a nonentity, nor a signifier,²⁵ nor pure matter. It has an inner dynamics of *tzimtzum*

25 According to Francois Laruelle, Jabès' *vocable* is, in a sense, a transformed sign as de Saussure defined it. While de Saussure understood the sign as a pure point of reference in relation to other signs, the *vocable* is a whole, a singularity, which unhinges oppositions. As such, rather than a point where relations with all other signs intersect, it is a particularity that resists reduction to a bundle of its relations. Laruelle grasps here a significant difference between the sign and the *vocable*, without however being able to

inscribed in it, and therefore it seems to form the very movement of the folding in of the order in which it is read, rather than its stable foundation.

Having described the concept of the *vocable*, we can now see how very different ontological thinking can be constructed based on it. We will watch the *vocable* in action.

To start with, I will attempt to show how the *vocable* enables Jabès to focus on the category of the “unsayable,” that is, on the presupposed and ousted other side of the symbolic order. Afterwards, I will discuss the way in which the *vocable* undermines the idea of representation. Finally, I will proceed to demonstrate why Jabès’ thinking is founded on the constant practice of writing.

The *Vocable* as a Trace of the *Indicible*

The *vocable* eludes the order which tries to think by means of it. As such, it holds more than this order could put in it. Hence, an essential difference emerges between the meaning intended to be invested in the *vocable* and the outcomes of writing, which, in Jabès, manifest themselves through reading. Namely, the retrospective reading implies that there is something more in the created *vocable* than in the order that gave rise to it. That “something more” is, in fact, an outside of this order impressed on the *vocable*. Jabès calls it *indicible*:

As soon as it has been formulated, every sentence is confronted by something unsayable [*un indicible*] on which it founders.²⁶

Notably, the act of formulating and giving a definitive closure to “a sentence” is, of course, *tzimtzum*, as a result of which this sentence transforms into a *vocable*. As such, it contains its own “unsayable” [*indicible*]. The *indicible* seems to be a dialectical category as, first, it is what cannot be uttered at a given moment and, second, its limits appear retroactively as that which “the sentence” has not said, even though signalling it negatively. The *indicible* seems both a reason for the failure of the sentence (that which it cannot effectively express) and its consequence as it comes forth only after the closure of the sentence, when it has

theorise it or to explain why, after all, the *vocable* conveys a certain meaning. I believe that only by linking the *vocable*, instead of to a single sign in a symbolic order, to an entire particular symbolic order which breaks in it can we grasp the essence of the singularity of the *vocable*, the discontinuity separating it from other *vocables* and the constitution by it of a liminal unit, not of meaning, but of an entire order in which this meaning is produced. See Laruelle, “Le point sur l’Un” in *Écrire le livre*, pp. 12–32, on p. 127.

26 DB, p. 44.

already morphed into a *vocable*. This is why the *indicible* can be recognised properly only succedently in reading:

[...] When writing, you write to say something. Yet you never say it: something else gets said – something more powerful than what you wanted to say. You never believe that you wrote what you wanted to write. But, in reality, you wrote that, and it is in the book.

[...] We could say that after the break with Egypt, after exile, the reader may say: there is something that happened in his life. But in writing, you do not understand at all what happened.²⁷

The passage suggests that, for Jabès, the surplus of the “unsayable” beyond the meaning one wanted to convey in writing does not result directly from an event external to writing-down but is an inevitable consequence of the *tzimtzum*-based structure of writing itself. Hence, the *vocable* can be interpreted not only as a mutilated sign of what one wanted to write in it, but also as a sign of what, as a result of *tzimtzum*, will *have* to be impressed on it, that is of the *indicible*. Consequently, Jabès often evokes an additional voice that speaks through writing, as a rule associating it with the figure of death:

All dialogue [...] involves three voices: the voice of one that speaks, the voice of one that answers and the voice of death, which makes them both speak [*qui les fait, tous deux, parler*].²⁸

*Night comes ajar for us, vacant reverse of a life.*²⁹

*So it seemed that, once death had blasted him with his own pen, the writer would finally be able to speak, on the far side of the night. But to whom? And for what purpose?*³⁰

*“Death is also a thought – like life, which is an infinite thought of death,” Reb Kambi said. And he added: “Death is in every thought as a thought of thought.”*³¹

What is this voice of death? Death opposes speaking just like reality opposes a given imaginary order. The voice of death is, thus, the effect of the *vocable* which reveals the demarcated order of free utterance as one of many and, consequently, as an internally impossible order. This observation helps us posit that the *indicible* is an *irremovable vestige of the originary severance of the imaginary from the real following the first tzimtzum, which made speaking possible in the*

27 EEJ, pp. 67–8.

28 LH, p. 76.

29 BQ I, p. 289.

30 BQ II, p. 415.

31 LR I, p. 34.

first place.³² “To forget the text that gave birth to the text. We began to write with this forgetting,”³³ insists Jabès. It turns out, however, that – as in the Freudian repressed – this severance, this “forgetting,” continues to mark the speech it made possible, accompanies it like a shadow and imprints itself on the *vocable* as an *indicible*. The concept of the *vocable* enables us to think this primordial negation, which made all utterance possible.

“One cannot write without first silencing the words that stir us. The white page is an imposed silence. It is against this background of silence that the text gets written.”³⁴

“You always speak from a silence on which you will break.

Behind and before us, there has always been *il n’y aura jamais eu... que*] but one and the same silence: the first one,” Reb Yahid had written.³⁵

The first *tzimtzum* – “an imposed silence” – which is a prerequisite of speech is, at the same time, the cause of its failure. Unlike words, however, *vocables* make it possible to grasp this interdependence as they always display their dialectically suppressed other side.³⁶ In this way, they reveal that *each utterance must be inexorably marked with prior silence, which it suppresses to come into being*. For there is no writing without oblivion and oblivion flickers back in writing.

Representation and Repetition

This breeds another consequence of thinking with *vocables*: they are closer to reality than words are as the former render effects of *tzimtzum*. Let us look into the following passage:

They [words] only reflect [*reflètent*] the impossibility of appropriating [*de s'approprier*] things because there is no reality, because reality may be only this absence of reality the *vocables* underline in their powerlessness to take hold [*cerner*] of it – which, for a *vocable*, would be somehow to circumscribe [*circonscrire*] its own reality. But that too is impossible because it also is only the expression of an illusory reality, of an abyss.³⁷

32 This clarifies Jabès’ statement that the *indicible* is an “unimaginable thought back before what is before thought” (*l’avant avant pensée inimaginable*) that persists in thought as its “leaven” and “origin” at the same time (BM, p. 17).

33 BD, p. 51.

34 DB, p. 89.

35 BR II, p. 11.

36 In another formulation, Jabès said that *vocable* is “distance within non-distance, that is, the width of a gap that every letter stresses while bridging it. What is said is always in relation to what will never be expressed” (BM, p. 31).

37 DB, p. 92.

As the passage suggest, “words” misconceive reality and cannot take hold of things. Why not? Because they belong to the order of the imaginary and ignore *tzimtzum*, whose imprint things bear. The originary partition gives words a space of freedom at the price of obliviousness to their own nature, which is unveiled beyond their reach – in the failure of the utterance. The *indicible*, being the other side of their partition, never appears for words such that they could refer to it while *vocables*, as already discussed, are “words that have internalised debacle,” pushed asunder in themselves by *tzimtzum*. As such, *vocables are by nature akin to reality which they seek to apprehend* since they contain an element of absence. This is what makes them better aligned with reality than words are.

According to Jabès, two ways of referring to reality seem to correspond to the words-vs.-*vocables* opposition. One of them is representation, which is clearly connoted by the activity ascribed to words, i.e. *refléter* – “reflecting” and “mirroring.” Representation seeks to take hold of things and order them in its own way (even to “appropriate” them – *s’approprié*). Nevertheless, because representation itself continues to suppress *tzimtzum*, it cannot fully capture things, for things bear the mark of *tzimtzum*. For this reason, *in representation tzimtzum exists between the representing and the represented, determining their ontological incompatibility*.

Vocables take a different course, being more “adequate” vis-à-vis reality insofar as they are internally marred with *tzimtzum*. That is why *their own inner impossibility is of the same kind as the impossibility of reality*. Yet this very fact precludes *vocables* referring to reality as they cannot be effective signifiers. If we think through them, the object of our thinking is, by necessity, not reality as such but the very *vocable*, which draws attention by its own impossibility. Jabès clearly implies that attempting to grasp reality by means of the *vocable* leads only to “circumscrib[ing] [*circonscire*] its own reality.” The language in which the poet describes the *vocable*, instead of “reflecting” or “mirroring,” connotes “encircling,” “defining” and “writing” as such (the *scire*/scribe suffix). Why? The answer is that the *vocable* does not seek to convey the entire reality but itself only, that is, the part of reality which it demarcates itself through writing. Clearly, in return for a better marking than is given to words, the *vocable* is doomed to radical singularity. For this reason, I would like to refer to this way of describing reality as *repetition*.

Clearly, *tzimtzum* cannot be adequately depicted either in representation or in repetition. It stands in the way of description in both cases, the difference lying only in the position in which *tzimtzum* is placed. Representation is coherent but, essentially, illusory as it fundamentally diverges from what it seeks to present because it places *tzimtzum* between itself and the represented. Repetition,

even though conveying *tzimtzum*, does it at the price of being limited only to the fragment of reality encompassed by the *vocable*. To describe the entire reality is impossible, as Jabès assumes, yet *vocables* at least make it possible to gesture at this impossibility. We should notice also that the aporia between *vocables* and words seems to be closely related to the legacy of modern perspectivism. As a result of the fragmentation of reality, representing it as a whole is a perspectival illusion while indicating the fragmentation must be limited to marking the inner fragmentation of the indication itself.

Writing as a Philosophical Practice

As stated in the foregoing, the *vocable* allows a retrospective recognition of the *indicible* – the effect of the primordial severance that produced the symbolic order. It also makes it possible to “circum-scribe” at least this part of reality that it demarcates itself. As a result of the two, it is impossible to settle for one *vocable* only, and, furthermore, time is needed to retroactively recognise what it brings forth. Hence, Jabès’ “ontology” is dynamic, which means that it must sustain itself in and by producing new *vocables*, unable to stop at one, complete and definitive representation of reality. That is why, over a conclusive philosophical proposition, Jabès privileges the continuity of writing that transmutes into a unique meditation.

His notion of writing is one of its kind. Writing, namely, is an alternating cycle of writing the *vocable* that “circum-scribes” subsequent regions of reality and reading it, which gives rise to a new *vocable*:

The first sentence is free. [...] It could be anything. But already the second must follow from the first. And the third from the first two. You must read what you have written. If you read correctly what you have written, the text writes “itself.”³⁸

The first written *vocable* – whose vocation is to encircle, to “close in on,” the real [*cerner le réel*]³⁹ – will “circum-scribe” a fragment of reality irrespective of the representation that accompanied the writing. Since in Jabès’ universe all acts of “creation,” in particular of *vocables*, have the same structure, their content has no meaning at the start. The poet suggests that it is from this encircling that the *indicible* marked in it must be extracted. How does it happen? The category of reading, which has already been introduced, comes in handy. At this point,

38 Edmond Jabès in Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p. 60.

39 BD, p. 55.

we could usefully digress from our main argument and explore two aspects of reading in Jabès.

First of all, reading entails unveiling the layer of *indisible* sedimented in the written-down *vocables*. Correct reading reveals the other side of writing, in which “what had not been expressed were finally heard [*entendre*] and read outside the words.”⁴⁰ We should note the characteristic relevance of the anteriority of the read *vocables*: only the lapse of time between the writing and the reading, redolent of Bloom’s “belatedness,” enables the reader to find the *indisible*. Only in reading can what, by necessity, eluded the writer be discerned. As “a potential writer” and “an unsuspected creator,”⁴¹ the reader is consubstantial with the writer and, consequently, bears considerable responsibility. Jabès compares this⁴² to the responsibility borne by one reading the Torah, who must complement the text containing only consonants and some *matres lectionis* with full-stops, *nikudot* and vowels, without which words cannot be formed. Reading thus compels “more than a profound comprehension of the text, a true intuition of the text.”⁴³ This intuition seems to be related to the Nietzschean “suspicion,” which, as a major philological instrument, helps decipher the unsaid.

In Jabès, reading has also another facet which resembles deconstruction rather than the hermeneutics of suspicion. Namely, if the *indisible* within a *vocable* is found, the *vocable* itself reveals its specific nature – a nature of the line between the directly said and the *indisible* bound up with it. Both these aspects are, in a sense, symmetrical to the inner gap of the *vocable*, and hence, either of them can be shown as a sign read in the language of the other.⁴⁴ The *vocable* turns then into a *place* where the opposition is located and where its elements are separated and

40 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

41 DB, p. 47; BR III, p. 65.

42 DB, pp. 81–2.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

44 Which is what Jabès often does, relying on oppositions – such as death vs. life and voice vs. silence – dialectically and stating, for example, that “life is a voice of death.” In this way, he underscores that each opposition of notions can be read from two directions. One of them is, as a rule, more natural to us, but it is only habit that makes us neglect the other one. Jabès shows that it can always be read from the other side. Ultimately, we cannot settle the order of the opposition’s elements as they reflect each other. What else remains? The very place where the elements are divided. The *vocable* is this place. The *vocable* is a cut that determines the axis around which the opposition is built. While all oppositions are insoluble, there is one certainty in Jabès: the certainty that the *vocable* exists. We cannot resolve the oppositions, but we can show around which place they have crystallised.

articulated at the same time. In other words, the second level of reading would involve saying, while pointing at a given *vocable*: “at this place, the line between the direct utterance and the *indicible* ran so and so.” This locatedness directly on the dividing line is an ultimate effect of the text which reading should reveal. Of course, it is not a limit as Hegel conceived it; rather, it is a place where an enunciation is disturbed by the *indicible* and where, also, the *indicible* is conditioned by the directly said.

Having examined these two aspects of reading, we can resume our analysis of Jabèsian writing. As already mentioned, it is founded on the alternating sequence of circumscribing the *vocable* and reading it, which gives rise to a new *vocable*. Consequently, reading in Jabès serves not so much to deconstruct the existing texts (which is the case in Derrida) as to *make writing turn to itself*, or more precisely: to make it analyse the consequences of the “circumscribing of reality,” which it performed at the previous stage. As this is the quintessence of Jabès’ writerly and philosophical practice, let us examine it in more detail.

The “writing turning to itself” is not simply a progression of writing-down and deconstructing. On the contrary, *each consecutive act of writing down is formed within the compass of deconstruction of the former so as to, by using its enduring effect, try and shape a new line between the said and the indicible*. “I write by the light of what is not revealed in what I express,”⁴⁵ states Jabès. However, because this “unrevealed” side will only show itself when the word is written, Jabès seems rather to be writing in the light of the *indicible* delimited by the previous *vocable*. Still, by reducing the distance between the previous *vocable* and reading, in which a new one will be written, Jabès *comes closer, asymptotically to apprehending the line between enunciation and the indicible in the particular vocable written down*. In this sense, he writes “in the light of what is not revealed in what I express,” shortening the distance between the word and its unsayable. By this token, he nears the gap dividing the imaginary and the real, the plan of creation and its outcome, himself and the work being created. Briefly, in the strain of his writing, he approaches *tzimtzum* as closely as possible.⁴⁶

Clearly, though applying practices akin to deconstruction, Jabès sets a different aim for his writing than Derrida does. Namely, he seeks to turn writing to itself in order to explore *tzimtzum*, whereof writing emerges⁴⁷ and, consequently,

45 BQ II, p. 126.

46 See Richard Stamelman, “Nomadic Writing,” in *The Sin of the Book*, pp. 92–114, on p. 105.

47 That is why Jabès claims that each book fathoms incessantly its own origin, yet not all of them undergo “true reading” which reveals this fact (Cf. BD, p. 37).

to convey, through the mechanism of repetition, *tzintzum* of reality itself. As a result, his texts are chains of *vocables* which, in their tension, embody particular moments of *tzintzum*. The book that is produced in this way is like a *continuous border marked off by particular points of tzintzum*.

In this way, it reduces to a minimum the line between the reading (description) of *tzintzum* and the immediate experience of it. Hence Jabès can identify his writing with a unique *creatio continua*: “Ah, write, write to keep alive the fire of creation,”⁴⁸ and creation itself with an ongoing catastrophe: “There is no reading of the book. We only read its being consumed in the ever-revived fire of creation.”⁴⁹ That is why the text written in the proper tension of self-reading⁵⁰ becomes a *manifestation of tzintzum unfolding in its continuity from the first, random marking of the vocable*.⁵¹

The Role of the Text as a Path of *Tzintzum*

We can glimpse now the finale of the Jabèsian practice of writing. We have already seen what kind of text is produced in it. We could however probe deeper: What ends are served by the text that has unfurled from a random primordial trace and “renders” in and by itself the event of *tzintzum*? What does such a text show? How is it relevant to philosophy?

I have already mentioned that *tzintzum* is a place of differentiation and, in a degree, of dissemination as Derrida thought of it. In the written-down text, *tzintzum* manifests itself through a *deflection* from the trajectory outlined by the imaginary and through a perspectival refraction. As such, *tzintzum* is a structure that conditions the final shape of the text, makes it excessive and overdetermined, whereby it also affects meanings inferable from it. In Jabès’ modern universe, the grid of *tzintzum* points seems to demarcate a peculiar grid of negative forces, whose lines determine the course of all discourse.

48 BS, p. 99.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

50 Hence Jabès believes that “a badly written text is a text badly read by its author” (DB, p.50); cf. BM, p. 11.

51 *Return to the Book* insists: “The work imposes its choices on us. Only much later the writer becomes aware of this” (BQ I, p. 398). In Jabèsian practice, the text clings as closely as possible to the original “cut” of the *vocable* which initiated it. This cut charts the line of texts across subsequent *tzintzums* and in this sense “imposes its choices on us.”

In this context, Jabèsian writing can be viewed as a reversal of dependence between this grid of forces and the planes of discourse it conditions. Namely, instead of regarding the *tzimtzum* grid as a map of undesirable inner disturbances, or even instead of showing its role in shaping the final text (within deconstructive practices), Jabès *seems to use all meaningful content only to focus on the grid of tzimtzum points*. His stories are skeletal, his sentences are elliptical, and the fabric of his text is tattered because the fundamental “object” of this text is the very path of successive *tzimtzums*, imprinted on the inner breakings of writing. Moreover, Jabès deliberately prunes the content of his text to prevent extending the intervals between *tzimtzum* events. In the last *Books* in particular, the content suffices only to highlight the discontinuity of transition. The world is reduced in them to the opposition of Nothing and All, divided and intertwined by the void of *tzimtzum*, imaged in the relocation of letters in the “NUL – L’UN” [NONE – ONE] formula.⁵²

In this way – at the price of an unusually powerful movement of simplification – Jabès seems to expose the negative grid of forces working beneath the surface of modern discourses. Trimming its own content to a bare minimum, his text serves to show how a grid of *tzimtzum* points develops out of a first, haphazard “cut.” At the same time, the concept of the *vocable* does justice to dialectics, acknowledging how the two “sides” (cor)respond to each other and recognise themselves in the other, but also marking a *particular empty place of tzimtzum* that separates and links the two sides. In this way, the *vocable* steps beyond dialectics, whose oppositions get inscribed in a broader whole.

We can now draw conclusions which will answer our opening question about the role of writing practice. Namely, Jabès’ text, in self-simplification down to a line of *tzimtzum* events, *draws a line in a peculiar space of all possible tzimtzums and, thereby, as a whole, is a sign of this space*.

This is, at the same time, one of the nodal metaphors the poet relies on, repeatedly framing writing as arduous path-blazing in the desert, where no roads are to be found. As a path in the desert, the line of text is a *trace* which makes it possible to mark an ungraspable whole. Let us examine the following remarks Jabès makes:

The book is woven into an elsewhere [*un ailleurs*] which leaves us out. It is the word already thought, but which rethinks itself while it is written down.⁵³

52 BQ II, pp. 390–1.

53 BQ II, p. 316.

On one side, writing: what is done, what is written in the book. On the other, facing it, non-writing: what is undone and erased in the book. And as if erasure were writing in order to be erased.⁵⁴

Every book includes a zone of darkness [*d'obscurite*], a shadow-layer [*une epaisseur d'ombre*] which one cannot evaluate and which the reader discovers only gradually. It irritates him, but he does sense that this is there where the real book lies, the site around which the pages he is reading organize themselves. This unwritten book, both enigmatic and revealing [*reveleateur*], always slips away. And yet, only the reader's intuitive grasp pf it enables him to approach the book's true dimension; this intuition enables him to judge if the writer has indeed come close to, or, on the contrary, has wandered from the book he had the ambition to write.⁵⁵

Jabès assumes then that a well-written – that is, well “read” – text is formed in relation to the “real book around which pages organize themselves.” If the book is “well read,” “the other side” cannot possibly be the *indicible*. On the contrary, this “non-writing,” this “unwritten book” and the like are a *space of all the tzimtzum points*, in which the entirety of a particular text imprints a trace. Ultimately, the goal of Jabès' writing is to mark this space. I will describe it in more detail in the following Chapters. At this moment, I would only like to elucidate the philosophical meaning of the text that marks this space.

To do this, I will briefly describe Jabès' writing practice. First, his text systematically discloses its own *indicible*, that is, the effect of the originary severance from reality. Second, it shows dialectically the mutual correspondence of the *indicible* and the direct enunciation, whereby it makes the *vocable* a place of their symmetry. In this way, the *vocable* is not (unlike in Hegel) just a boundary of two dialectically corresponding fragments, but it has its own emplacement that determines a particular way of binding the oppositions. This resembles Derrida's concept of “infrastructures.” Third, as the content is reduced in relation to this constantly reiterated centre of emptiness, the text is revealed as a trail of particular *tzimtzums* impressed on the *vocables*. Fourth, the text as such becomes a sign of the space of all possible *tzimtzums*.

This practice suggests that Jabès, rather than only showing that every utterance is conditioned by its *indicible*, uncovers also the underlying grid of negative forces of *tzimtzum*, which organises the connection between utterances and the *indicible*. In the next instance, however, he shows that this very grid of forces has emerged from the space of possibilities and indicates it through its own

54 BR II, p. 79.

55 DB, p. 82.

incompletion. Therefore, his text ultimately becomes a sign of all the possible formations of the said and the *indicible* which have not been actualised in it.

As such, Jabès' text serves to explore two "phenomena" at the same time. One of them is the emergence of *tzimtzum* from the space of possibilities and the subsequent rise of discourse around this "primal" regulation – this particular disjunction-and-linkage of the imaginary and the possible. The other is that coming close to apprehending an act of *tzimtzum* in its very unfolding, Jabès perceives it also as a *sign* of the space of possibilities of *tzimtzum*, which is indirectly marked in this way. Importantly, the two aspects of the text are inseparable: the "glimmering" of the act of *tzimtzum* in writing "illuminates," in Jabès' metaphor, the space in which it occurs. *Tzimtzum* gives rise to a particular configuration of discourse and, at the same time, signifies because the way in which it happened gestures at all possible ways in which it did not happen. Jabès seems to parse the category of happening (as Heidegger defined it): *happening as such divides "the happened" from the space in which happening occurs, being its sign.*

This is how far the *vocable* pushes philosophical thinking. The *vocable*, which I started discussing from an ostensibly simple "writing-down," turns out to be the fulcrum of comprehensive negative ontology. It is, first of all, an axis relative to which each singular symbolic order discloses its unsaid other side, produced in its very coming-into-being. More than that, the *vocable as a totality of the connection of the symbolic order and its outside* points to the inaccessible space of the Book. For this very reason, the *vocable* makes it possible to render a given order as one of many but also transcends the horizon of the negation it introduces, that is, the division between the order and *its* pluralistic outside. In this way, the *vocable* conveys the inscription of this division into a space whose content is basically unknown to us. If there is, indeed, any Jabèsian "ontology," its object is this space and happening that occurs in it.

In this way, starting from a veritably inconspicuous phenomenon of writing and through the self-focused practising of it, Jabès finds the underlying grid of forces responsible not only for how texts arise but also for how symbolic orders arise that make up a myriad of human worlds. *Tzimtzum* works even where the text is emptied out of any content: this is where the matrix of these dark dependencies that mark every whole with a wound is to be found.

Conclusion: Kabbalistic vs. Modern Meaning of the Ontology of Writing

Concluding, I would like to integrate the implications of this Chapter with the book's organising idea, i.e. recognising Jabès' work as a site where modern

structures of thinking border with Jewish tradition, in particular with Jewish mysticism.

Notably, this broad and heterogeneous tradition contains approaches in which script and writing are used as a blueprint for interpreting Creation. The anonymous *Sefer Yetzirah*, dated by Scholem to the 2nd or 3rd century of our era⁵⁶ and founding Jewish mysticism, describes God's Creation of the world by means of 10 sefirot (still conceived as numbers) and 22 letters of the Hebraic alphabet.⁵⁷ It frames beings as created out of combinations of letters.⁵⁸ The ideas of the *Sefer Yetzirah* were picked up by the Kabbalah, which started to evolve in the 13th century and interpreted the process of Creation as a language movement.⁵⁹ Isaac the Blind, a prominent Provençal kabbalist and commentator of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, frames his doctrine of emanation of *Ein-Sof* as a movement of Divine thought towards "the beginning of speech." The second sefirah – wisdom – is the source of language from which all other sefirot emerge, assembling in various configurations and producing letters of the alphabet.⁶⁰ As Scholem emphasises, linguistic mysticism is a mysticism of writing.⁶¹ The kabbalists were clearly fascinated with writing as a site where meaningful content intersected with the palpably real. Given that already in the Torah Creation is associated with articulation of the creative force of Divine words, writing appears to be a model of all thing *tout court* poised at the border of content and "matter."

According to Scholem, the kabbalists understand writing as a place that harbours mysteries.⁶² The model of all writing – the Torah – bears an imprint of God's creative word. The role of language is highlighted in the repeatedly mentioned and employed ambiguity of דבר, *davar*, which means both word and thing. Isaac the Blind interpreted it as foregrounding the immanent linguistic nature of Creation. Scholem emphasises that in the Kabbalah, which privileges linguistic mysticism, the world of language is the world of the spirit as such.⁶³

The affinity of writing – as depositing the meaning in matter – and Creation lies at the core of the work of Abraham Abulafia, one of the greatest pre-Lurianic

56 Scholem, "Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah," part 1, *Diogenes* 79, 1972, pp. 59–80, on, p. 72.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 72–3.

58 Scholem *Kabbale*, p. 75.

59 Scholem, "Name of God" 2, p. 166.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

kabbalists. He explains that in the act of creation, God brings language within the compass of things, leaving his signatures in them. The process unfolds as follows:

The secret that lies at the basis of the “host” (of all things) is the letter, and every letter is a sign (symbol) and indication of the creation. Just as any writer holds the plume in his hand and with it takes up drops of ink and in his mind traces out the form which he wants to give to is substance, at which moment the hand is like the living sphere, and the inanimate plume, which serves as the hand’s instrument, moves and links itself to the hand in order to spread the drops of ink across the parchment, which represents the body, which is used as the bearer of the substance and the form – in precisely the same way do things occur in the matter of the creation in its upper and lower spheres, as the intelligent person will understand, for it is not permitted to explain it more closely than this. Therefore are the letters set up as signs (symbols) and indications, so that through them the matter of reality, its forms and the forces and overseers which motivate it (that is: the intermediate parties), its minds and its souls can be given some form, and therefore is wisdom (in the sense of true knowledge) contained and gathered up in the letters and the Sefiroth and the names, and all these are composed the one from the other. The letters themselves have substance and form, especially in their written form of being, though far less so or rather in a spiritualized sense in their spoken or conceptual form. What, in the image above, was the ink, which translates this formal element into matter, is, in the organic creation and in the human realm, the seed, which already contains the substance and the forms which shall evolve from it.⁶⁴

Adapting the Aristotelian categories of matter and form, Abulafia is resolved to erect writing into a model of all creation. Importantly, such association enabled many Jewish mystics to put forward theories which can be usefully applied to describing modern perspectivism. As Scholem reminds, one of the major kabbalists of the 13th century, Joseph Gikatilla, distinguished three worlds: the world of the spheres, the world of the angels and the earthly world.⁶⁵ Each of them is governed by different laws, but they are all united by the Torah, which remains the same across the worlds. The Torah is framed here as a universal text which is nevertheless *meaningless in itself* and acquires meanings only within particular worlds, different ones in each. Moreover, each of these worlds consists of millions of worlds, in which interpretations of the Torah differ as well. Each of the interpretations is complete and partial.⁶⁶ The assumption of the identity of writing and creation enables Gikatilla thus to think of reality as one world that

64 Qtd. in *Ibid*, pp. 185–6.

65 *Ibid*, p. 180.

66 Scholem, “Signification,” p. 110.

is internally fragmented as a result of the fundamental divergence between the dimensions of writing (the Torah) and meaning (interpretation).

One more tenet relevant to our argument to be found in Kabbalist tradition is striving to obliterate the difference between ontology and epistemology. As Scholem notes,⁶⁷ the kabbalists often use two different languages to describe Creation, either rendering it as effusion of energy from *Ein-Sof* and emergence of the sefirot as Divine attributes or relying on the metaphors of letters and writing, in which Creation is a process unfolding between the Divine Name and letters. According to Scholem, this duality of language can be seen as an attempt to capture the difference between the order of creation as such (the notions of energy and sefirot) and the order of revelation, in which creation manifests itself (the notions of writing and letters associated with the Torah as revelation in script). Still, *the two orders are parallel*: creation and cognition are based on the same structure. Scholem explains:

The process of creation, progressing from stage to stage and reflected in non-divine worlds, and in nature as such, is for this reason essentially identical with the process expressed in divine words and in documents of creation, which are believed to preserve these words.⁶⁸

Consequently, the kabbalists who assume such parallelisms presuppose that it is possible to apprehend Creation through acts of creation in writing. This highlights the intellectual affinity between such strands in the Kabbalah and Jabès' thought and practice. His category of the *vocable*, which replaces being, refers directly to writing and, besides, makes it possible to theorise reality as immanently perspectival. Also, writing is for him a way of knowing reality as ontology and epistemology are secondary to a common matrix of creation, existence and knowledge.

However, Jabès gives these notions a strictly modern tinge. As already underscored, the difference between the *vocable* and being lies in the processing of post-Kantian philosophical insights. The *vocable* is a "limit" of *the entire given* symbolic order and its outside. Unlike in Abulafia, writing in Jabès does not embody the difference between matter and form but a transcendental difference as each moment of writing bears a radical apophatic tension.

Also, writing in Jabès is not a combination of matter and form, of materiality and meanings readable in it. In this, Jabès parts ways with the kabbalists of old. Here, writing is not a simple whole of two components, be

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

they only ideally differentiable. Instead, it is founded on a rupture between the two dimensions – on the still active *tzimtzum*; hence writing as such is an excessive entity subsumed neither in the imaginary nor in the real but, instead, in the constant transition between the two. At the same time, the transition is an outcome of perspectivism, which Jabès shares with modern philosophy. Essentially, writing as such does not exist for him as it is a *gap* between the two collapsing orders. The gap is theorised by Jabès as a *place*, which results in assuming a specific space of the white and the Book that comes into being in it.

Such an idea of “place” and “space” also goes beyond the traditional Kabbalistic speculations and is explicable only in the context of modern philosophy. For it is not a space in the proper sense of the term, but a space of certain possibilities thought of as places. The places of possibilities as such, rather than beings, are “basic” ontological decisions, that is, *particular acts of tzimtzum*. This type of space is a way of conceptualising perspectivism. That is why, if Jabès resorts to “spatial” or “materialistic” thinking at all, it is not to ponder the relationships of material beings to the area they occupy. On the contrary, like his contemporary theorists (Lacan, for one, and, to some extent, Derrida⁶⁹), Jabès employs “materiality”-related categories to describe the dimension which *transcends the symbolic order and is this order’s condition of possibility*. If the Book is based on “space,” this “space” is just an attempt to apprehend the dimension available to us only partially from the side of symbolic order inscribed in it. It is the dimension that we sense to encompass all fundamental ontological resolutions though we cannot define it in any detail. Jabès’ “materialism” is a philosophical casing of perspectivism, without having much to do either with the kabbalists’ considerations on matter or with ancient materialism.

Joseph Guglielmi certainly seems right to claim that such “spatial” materialism ensues from in-depth re-thinking of atheism as non-existence of a central, meaningful principle of reality.⁷⁰ As a result, places of meanings become primary to meanings themselves, to *entire* orders of meanings, let us add.⁷¹ The whole

69 Cf. Derrida, *Positions*, pp. 87–8.

70 Joseph Guglielmi, “Journal de lecture d’Edmond Jabès,” in *Écrire le livre*, pp. 87–105, on p. 105.

71 Laruelle observes that, building on its Jewish legacy, Jabès’ thought is a radical reversal of Platonism. As the One that integrates reality is overthrown, the space of writing comes into being. Things cease to be metaphors, becoming radically and inconceivably singular. See Laruelle, “Le point,” pp. 123–5.

of the world can thus be theorised only as a space because only space allows thinking about co-existence of orders that defy any meaningful comparison.⁷² Therefore, Jabès' "ontology" is a strictly modern phenomenon even though it draws on borrowings from the kabbalists.

72 For this reason, Joseph G. Kronick can contend that the existence of writing precludes the existence of God. See Joseph G. Kronick, "Edmond Jabès and the Poetry of the Jewish Unhappy Consciousness," *MLN*, 106/5 (December, 1991), pp. 967–96, on pp. 975–6. God had to withdraw not only vis-à-vis language but also vis-a-vis the space that appeared as a result. In his essay on *The Return to the Book*, Derrida aptly talks of Jabèsian "negative atheology." See Derrida, *Writing*, p. 375.

