

## 5 Negative Ontology II: God, Nothing and the Name

The previous Chapter outlined Jabèsian ontology yet passed over one of its central aspects, that is, the poet's radical mono(a)theism. This is where Jabès starkly differs from other philosophers who embrace the oceanic Nothing that engulfs all being. Briefly, there is in his thought a vestige which lingers on relentlessly and is identified by him with God. Given this fact, Jabès cannot be possibly associated with any *vanitas*-riveted metaphysics, where Nothingness is the first and last spawn which brings forth and annihilates creatures that barely keep clinging to being. He resists such classification because his crucial notion is the name which rips both the cohesion of being and the very possibility of insight into Nothing.

Within the simple opposition of Athens and Jerusalem, Jabèsian radical mono(a)theism would exemplify Jewish thought *par excellence*. However, this mono(a)theism is divested of presence and corresponds to the desert landscape, in which the sky and the earth – vaster than the echo of any human word – bear witness to the ruin of creation. For what is created more *today* than the imperious silence, the inner deafness of resting matter? The capacity to hear it is not a thing of Athens – it is a thing of *modernity*. And that a poet like Jabès – “a Jew and a writer” – knows how to listen to it seems seriously to undermine the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem binary.

Thus, in searching for connections among Greek, Jewish and modern thinking, one must look into Jabèsian ontology once again to try and identify relationships of Nothing, God and the name. Though surveying ontology from another angle, this attempt draws on preceding conclusions about *tzimtzum* and the *vocable*. In fact, it again *repeats* the attempt to provide an account of the Jabès' negative thinking. Perhaps the fracture of the two parts of ontology represents the fundamental impossibility of putting a closure on Jabès' philosophy. The fracture is something more than a mere failure here: it is a point of creation and, basically, the only thing to be looked for.

### God – Nothing

Jabès' writings re-engage time and again in efforts to describe Nothing as a foundation of existence. For this reason, Derrida calls *The Book of Questions* “the

interminable song of silence.”<sup>1</sup> Some passages seem to suggest that Jabès sought to develop the concept of nothing, or the void, so as to erect it into an Absolute.

This reverberates in several passages, for example:

The sky is absence.<sup>2</sup>

The Real, which is the sand, and the Nothing, which is the sky, are my two horizons.

[...] “No matter how solidly you build your house,” said Reb Alkem, “it will always rest on sand.”<sup>3</sup>

All I care for: to live the absence of God.<sup>4</sup>

Every creature is allotted an acre of void to settle in.<sup>5</sup>

The void bears the weight of the universe, though light as air.

All truth is airy [*aérienne*].<sup>6</sup>

*The word is a world of emptiness.*<sup>7</sup>

“What strength could rival that of the void?” asked Reb Basri. “It is nothing and, all by itself, sustains All.”

[...] “People of the Book,” were you not the people fascinated for millenia with an extreme sense of Nothing sustained by the letter?

... an extreme sense of the void?<sup>8</sup>

“What holds you up?” Reb Asri asked Reb Debban.

“The void,” replied the latter.

And added: “Does it not hold up the universe?”<sup>9</sup>

In the quotes, Nothing features as the foundation of the existing world, a kind of intrinsic, essentially negative principle that supports all being. In relation to it, the world becomes a whole, one that is internally homogeneous like the desert and sharply demarcated off the void. Nothing finds its particular incarnation in the word.

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1 Derrida, *Writing*, p. 83.

2 LSLS, p. 287.

3 BQ I, pp. 199, 269.

4 BQ II, p. 90.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 102

6 *Ibid.*, p. 287; in *aérien* Jabès plays on the homophony of *a et rien*, “a and nothing.” In this way, he suggests that the air is comparable to the void that supports a certain “a” or to an “a” that bears the weight of emptiness. Of course, he plays also on the function of the letter *א*, which opens the Hebraic alphabet and having no sound equivalent except a glottal stop, encodes the whisper of narrowing breath which, so similar to *tzimtzum*, only supports other sounds and allows pronouncing them.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 417.

8 LR I, pp. 51, 126 (the first line in *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop [Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1991], p. 158).

9 BR III, p. 81.

Therein Jabès seems to build on the legacy of Mallarmé and Blanchot, who view words, disjoined from the things they are supposed to refer to, as embodying an entirely autonomous quality. Due to the very nature of meaning, language, as based on emptiness produced by the dissociation of word from thing, calls into question the idea of presence. This, on Jabès' take, makes the emptiness-underpinned word parallel to any existence that emerges vis-à-vis the negative principle of – capitalised – Nothing.

With the key role invested in Nothing, Jabès can rehearse Kant's, Hegel's, Nietzsche's and Heidegger's earlier gesture of granting the essentially negative a positive function of the "foundation." In other words, the poet relies on the scaffolding of classic metaphysics, which positions being in relation to its variously conceived foundation, but takes Nothing as a new *hypokeimenon*. This means that absence, emptiness and lack do not refer to the withdrawal of something present that should be there, but are autonomous entities in their own right. Being marks itself off from them as it emerges from the originary non-being. Although we are on the side of being and our language is modelled on it, it is still possible to reverse the position of Nothing and make it a positive factor. This is what Jabès seems to have sought:

[...] and yet, maybe I wrote this sentence only to give absence the status of presence.

O perennial presence of an unbelieving absence [*ô pérenne présence d'une absence incrédule*].<sup>10</sup>

This "reversal of Nothing," which can be described as a substitution of *present absence* for *absent presence*,<sup>11</sup> produces a formal paradox. Namely, in the new model, the world can be founded on Nothing. Although this word – nothing – carries a meaning, it is supposed to designate something that eludes meaning. As such, it is a very special word: it functions as all other words in language do, but its content refers to something from beyond language. In Jabès' view, it harbours – just like the words "death" and "infinity" – a chasm faced with which we are swept off our feet.<sup>12</sup>

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10 P, p. 50.

11 Discussing absence framed as presence, Strauss writes: "After Auschwitz, after the disappearance of God in whom Jews put trust or believed to do so – after the vanishing of illusory God into thin air – Jabès attempts to convert [*convertir*] this absence, this silence into a new identity located in the *vocable*, the *vocable* that *names* absence, which dwells in exile, in the desert." Strauss, "*Le Livre*," p. 298.

12 LH, p. 15.

Thinking Nothing as the foundation of reality results, symptomatically, in that *the entire reality is revealed as one whole* – “All” in Jabès’ language. Whatever exists stands sharply against Nothing, and the bare fact of existence unites it with all other things existing. That is why, when confronted with its foundedness on Nothing, reality surrenders its inner heterogeneity and amalgamates into a specific oneness:

All is faced with Nothing which will engulf it.<sup>13</sup>

ALL was engulfed [*sàbima*] in NOTHING.<sup>14</sup>

I give my all, and this *all* is but ashes of countless nothings [*d’innombrables riens*].<sup>15</sup>

*The word will start from Nothing in order to dissolve in the All.*<sup>16</sup>

*Where there is nothing, All is intact: only fragments can be grasped.*<sup>17</sup>

We are at the heart of creation, absent from the All, in the marrow and moire of Absence, with the Void for recourse, for a means to be and to survive. So that, in the creative act, we are and even surpass the Void facing the restoring All.<sup>18</sup>

The passages can be read as implying that Jabès replaces God with Nothing, granting it the same rank and position vis-à-vis Creation. Such reading would make sense insofar that God disappeared replaced by the void as a result of the primal disaster and, consequently, the void should be recognised as a new God. Let us for now put aside the question of how this Nothing of God should be comprehended – as an all-embracing and all-engulfing nihilistic emptiness to which everything returns or, perhaps, as a central point of negativity – and focus on Jabès’ considerations in which God is identified with Nothing.<sup>19</sup>

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13 PHD, p. 121.

14 BUS, p. 49.

15 BM, p. 90. In this passage Jabès uses an interesting property of the French language, in which the word for “nothing” (*rien*) is derived from the Latin *res* (thing). Hence, it is easier to speak of a multiplicity of “nothings.” Also the etymological link between “nothing” and “thing” helps frame nothingness in positive terms as something both present and real. Shillony highlights Jabès’ unique usage of the word *rien*: “Jabès, listening to the hidden memory of words, does not forget that *nothing* [*rien*] means also a ‘thing.’” Shillony, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 31.

16 BQ II, p. 225.

17 *Ibid.*, p.439–40.

18 BQ I, p. 398.

19 Importantly, Jabès has a long line of Kabbalistic predecessors. It is, crucially, as Nothing that *Ein-Sof* in the created world tended to be perceived, which underscored his incommensurability with creation. For this reason, some kabbalists re-interpreted the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* to mean the world emerging from God as nothingness rather than God creating the world out of nothing. This re-casting enabled them to

In a conversation with Marcel Cohen, Jabès suggests that, for him, “God is the metaphor for emptiness.”<sup>20</sup> The name of God<sup>21</sup> – Hebraic  $\text{שׁוּמַה}$  – performs the function of the word “Nothing” as both belonging within language and exploding its structures:

Man is All, God is Nothing. Here is the riddle.

The glide towards Nothing. Perennial slope.

[...] When I call to God, I call to the Sense of the Void.

[...] It is to be asked if God is not the one inadmissible question, the deep avowal of this inadmissibility through which the world is cut off from the world and man from his divine ancestry.<sup>22</sup>

*A man of writing is a man of four letters which form the unpronounceable Name. God is absent through his Name.*

*Writing means taking on God's absence through each of the four.*

reconcile God's separateness with the idea of emanation; see. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbale*, pp. 173–5.

20 DB, p. 57.

21 In Jewish mysticism, the name of God is not only the basis of theological speculation but first and foremost a liminal point in language as it is both one of its words and the only word that must not, or even cannot, be pronounced. This reveals a prohibition of representation within language and highlights that, even though having words to describe everything, language encounters in one of them an impassable limit to its efficacy. As Marc-Alain Ouaknin observes, “the name is a hole in language, a silence from which all other words get the power of meaning” (*Concerto*, p. 30). Jabès adds: “the name of God is the juxtaposition of all the words in the language. Each word is but a detached fragment of that name. ‘Man’ is only a word. All relations between man and God pass through the word [*vocable*]” (DB, p. 102).

In Jewish mysticism, the Name is a limit of language just because the essential mechanism of signification is inscribed in it. Besides, as the Name lacks vowels – which are not written and the tradition of pronouncing them has fallen into oblivion even before the demolition of the Second Temple – it cannot be uttered and, as such, assimilated. In that sense, God cannot be made an object of an utterance. Cf. Ouaknin, *Concerto*, p. 108. Though unpronounceable, the name can yet be commented on. Thus, God does not conceal the knowledge of himself fully. Nevertheless, he appears always *at a distance* from the word meant to grasp him, just like the commented-on name remains a material thing rather than a functioning part of language (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 109). Ouaknin insists that the name is not an instrument but, at most, an experience of the void that emerges based on its own laws (*Ibid.*). Clearly, Jabès' thinking is deeply embedded in the tradition of Jewish mysticism.

22 BQ II, pp. 129, 157, 158.

*Thus any page of writing is fashioned under the sign of four letters which are the masters of its fate, with power to make it disappear through the expedient of the words containing them.*

[...] *God's language – language of absence, language of a language that has weathered fire and marble Frost – is unalterable, as if spelled by death.*

[...] *Thus, because it cannot be heard, the name of God wants to be unpronounceable and sterilize the letter at the height of its meaning.*<sup>23</sup>

[*God*] *is image in the absence of image, language in the absence of language, point in the absence of points.*

[...] like God, emptiness has no name. The eye from the far side of silence turns to stone with the final period of the book.

No word is spoken after.

[...] *God is the high calling to this presumptuous and harrowing departure towards a totality eager to absorb us in its own annihilation.*<sup>24</sup>

“The questioning of God is the questioning of the void. Thus, the pure, objectless questioning of the questioning.”

[...] “Isn't God's unpronounceable name,” he said, “also the erased name of the unthought which all thought meets and founders against?”<sup>25</sup>

In all these passages, Jabès associates God with the void. God is framed as the great “Absent One,” “present where all presence has been abolished.”<sup>26</sup> This means not only that God disappeared and left absence behind, but also that *absence itself has become God*. If it is indeed the case, should Jabès not be charged with nihilism? Does he not believe that only Nothing exists properly, generating and engulfing beings that expire barely leaving a trace? Essentially, such Nothing, rather than a placeholder for the monotheistic God, would be a variety of the Greek *apeiron*; and there would not be a major difference between it and the world, with every being spawned by it vulnerable to absorption by the void. All this basically boils down to asking: Is Jabès a Jewish monotheist or, rather, a conservative nihilist?

### ***Tzimtzum* and the Exigency of Monotheism**

Despite the deceptiveness of some formulations Jabès offers, the answer is rather straightforward as, even though God and Nothing are equivalent in a way, Nothing is by no means the primordial emptiness that consumes beings

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23 *Ibid.*, pp. 250, 300, 301.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 353, 375, 439.

25 LR I, pp. 67, 68.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

entirely and inexorably. On the contrary, it takes the position of the Jewish God, who is radically separated from the world, rather than of the pagan *apeiron*. In his enquiries into the role of Nothing, Jabès relies on his own interpretation of Judaism, in whose Jerusalem Temple the Holy of Holies, as Tacitus famously comments on the Romans' surprising discovery, was untenanted – contained nothing.<sup>27</sup> “Behind there is nothing,”<sup>28</sup> concludes the Jabès, suggesting that a privileged experience of Nothing is part and parcel of Judaism:

Thus we became the people of Nothingness, of the limpid splendour Nothingness, through four letters that attained the silence of inaccessible crests.

. . . people of Nothingness, of the intact void on which was built the world; stone on stone, beehive on beehive, sky on sky, nothing on nothing.

(“What silence everywhere,” said Reb Armel. “And this crushing presence of the void! God is there. I feel it.”)<sup>29</sup>

This suggests that Jabès does not perceive Nothing as an all-encompassing void that engulfs things newly emerging from it but, instead, views it as the foundation of existence, which remains a distant and inaccessible place – “silence of inaccessible crests” – an equivalent of God. Nothing cannot thus be worshipped through pagan wisdom, which sees all things as doomed to inexorable destruction. It is amassed as a mystery in an isolated place, a certain Holy of Holies, storing all the concentration of the void after the withdrawal of God. Therefore, *Nothing and the world are radically distinct even though one is the “foundation” of the other*. So, if Nothing takes the place of God, it is only within a negatively conceived monotheism. That is, Nothing is an outermost point which, though essentially impossible, is the only position from which the world can appear as a whole:

Could the void [...] be just the introduction to a beyond which would give us back not only to ourselves, but to the world which we had only half imagined? To lose, to forget all in order to embrace the world of a glance...?<sup>30</sup>

Given the above, Nothing as conceived by Jabès cannot be regarded either as more primordial or as more substantial than the world. It is dialectically related to the world as a non-existent centre it produces. Therefore, the claim that Nothing is the “foundation” of things should be approached just like the unavoidable, yet false, myth of the beginning.

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27 BR II, p. 30.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

30 BQ II, p. 189.

Such positioning of Nothing is closely associated with a paradox that Jabès persistently revisits. Namely, Nothing – as identified with God – has a Name that inherits the peculiar status of the divine Name in Judaism: it is unpronounceable and inaccessible. In fact, it forms the central, empty point of language and is, at the same time, its condition of possibility and a place where it collapses. Had Jabès understood Nothing as an all-embracing emptiness pre-existing all being, he could have talked about it directly. Yet, as exemplified in the quotations above, Nothing can be addressed only via the paradoxical Name, whose very “use” in itself ushers into language the negative force of Nothing with all its workings. It turns out, thus, that Nothing cannot be talked about in an ordinary fashion, for as soon as we attempt it, it is bound to explode our utterance. In God that is Nothing, all meaningfulness generally breaks down: “Readability is a human invention, and [...] God is an unreadable relation.”<sup>31</sup>

In Jabès, Nothing is a peculiar point in *language* where it strives to gaze at itself ecstatically from outside.<sup>32</sup> God revealed Himself to Moses as the pinnacle of absence in His Name, writes Jabès,<sup>33</sup> and so does Nothing reveal itself in its name today. Definitely, Jabès by no means embraces pagan wisdom since he views God that is Nothing as a language phenomenon, encoded in one peculiar Name, which, additionally, is not inalterable over time but rather *preserves in itself a trace and memory of the catastrophe*. Furthermore, as Nothing is constantly entangled in mechanisms of language, it cannot be made present and revealed. Let us have a look at the following lines:

You show yourself only to hide what you are, O void, O nothing. What is not wants to be free to be. And this freedom becomes the obstacle you run up against.

[...] The obstacle is inside.

[...] Giddy with the space, the wind ends by dropping pitifully.<sup>34</sup>

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31 LR I, p. 96.

32 Of course, Jabès builds here on the vast resources of Jewish mysticism of the Name. In esoteric Judaism, the Name unveils a fundamental fissure that stamps language as the fabric of reality. In other words, the name indicates that not all the spheres of language can be known by man as there is an inner dimension of communication that eludes him. According to Scholem, the name has been central to Jewish esoteric thought ever since the 2nd century, described by an internally contradictory term of שם המפורש – *Shem ha-meforash* – which means the name both “made known,” and “pronounced” as well as “separated” or “hidden.” This duality represents a fundamental insight: the exposure of the essence of language must involve separation from it and falling silent; see Scholem, “Name of God”, p. 66.

33 Cf. BQ II, p. 437.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 287–8.

In a classic double bind, Jabès suggests here that the condition of possibility that gives voice to Nothing is at the same its condition of impossibility. Nothing manifests itself in striving “to be free to be,” in an effort to become a stable, “existing” Nothing, and it is exactly this striving, this effort, that precludes its manifestation, since Nothing harbours the very obstacle in itself. What is this obstacle? The passages above suggest an answer. *Nothing has a Name, and this prevents it from being fully constituted.* The name is its inner obstacle that precludes its autonomous, self-contained existence and makes it only an impossible point in language.

For this reason, Jabèsian Nothing cannot be a pagan, nihilistic pleroma, to which beings that it has newly generated inevitably return. Nothing has a Name, and, consequently, it belongs to the created world and is subject to its laws, without transcending it in any way. This world’s own flesh and blood, Nothing is also this world’s mirage. Hence, any attempt to express it is doomed to failure, for, engaging with it, we plunge into notions and metaphors of “the unthought”:

We do not think death, the void, emptiness, Nothingness, but their innumerable metaphors: one way of getting around [*contourner*] the unthought [*l’impensé*].<sup>35</sup>  
[...] man ha[s] invented God only for the purpose of hoisting up his thought up to the point of the unthought [*l’impensé*].<sup>36</sup>

Unable to stand *the unthought* [*l’impensé*, original emphasis] we take shelter in thought, as if it were a stranger to the former.<sup>37</sup>

“The unthought” seems to be a specific point *in which* dark knowledge about the construction of the world is supposed to be deposited.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps it is only because a Name – e.g. “the void,” “Nothing,” “death” or “God” – is crafted for this point that the point is assumable in the first place. For the name gives a notion a surfeit above its meaning and locates it on a different plane – one of writing. “The unthought” would then be an effect of giving Nothing a Name.

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35 BUS, p. 71.

36 DB, p. 57.

37 BM, p. 92.

38 This point also locates God after Creation. As Edward Kaplan observes, developing his “atheistic theology,” Jabès regards God as a metaphor for the void that serves to elevate thoughts up to the unthinkable. “The questioning of God,” insists Kaplan, “is the questioning of the void. Thus, pure questioning, without object [*objet*]; questioning of the questioning. [...] How to understand God? God does not let Himself be enclosed. God’s closure, is God: a non-closure or an after-closure.” Edward Kaplan, “The Atheistic Theology of Edmond Jabès,” *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 12/1 (1987), pp. 43–63, on pp. 46–7, 50.

Furthermore, it is only due to the Name that an *act of assuming* can work at all, for to think something that, though world-funding, is inaccessible directly, an elementary difference is necessary, a deferral between a notion and its written form. The name gives God that is Nothing a weight which makes us relinquish penetrating the meanings of this specific notion and assume that *they are held by the place created by the Name*. In this way, the Name becomes the empty centre of language – a walled fortress which thinking approaches and recoils from, leaving trails of flawed, circuitous thoughts. A passive participle, *l'impensé* suggests that God and Nothing are always *already unthought*, that is, not so much inaccessible a priori, “not being thought” or “unthinkable” (*l'impensable*), as rather revealed in a failure of an already undertaken attempt to probe them.

They remain on the path already walked, as unapproached points against which thinking has crashed. That is why Jabès so often employs metaphors that associate Nothing with the empty centre and with the always dislocated – past or deferred – present:

“Where is the center?” “Under the cinders” [*Où est le centre? – Sous la cendre*].<sup>39</sup>

The last obstacle, the ultimate border is (who can be sure?) is the center.

[...] “The center is failure. The Creator is rejected from His creation. Splendor of the universe. Man destroys himself as he creates.”<sup>40</sup>

The center is the moment. If God is the center He cannot exist except momentarily.<sup>41</sup>

*Inside and outside* are only the arbitrary part in the dividing of an infinity-time whose promised minute keeps calling the center in question.

Every minute is an apex of nothingness.<sup>42</sup>

Summing up this argument, we could say that even though in his pursuit to grasp Nothing Jabès enters many side paths which, incidentally, might imply absolutising Nothing, the position accorded to Nothing in his thought parallels the position of the Jewish God. Nothing is radically disjoined from the world even though it sustains this world. Ungraspable and incomprehensible, it is represented, in language, in a Name which is a liminal, unpronounceable point of this language.<sup>43</sup> Finally, it is always non-present, assumed and deferred. Ostensibly, it

39 BQ I, p. 360.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 359–60.

41 BQ II, p. 159.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 363.

43 In his interesting comparison of Celan's and Jabès' philosophies, William Franke observes that, unlike Celan, who uses poetry to grasp that which lies beyond language, i.e. the originary event that language cannot reach, Jabès embraces the apophatic approach which always recognises absolute silence as an effect of language. William

occupies the centre, but the centre is a mere mirage, an empty place onto which the vision of the dark origin is projected.

This line of thought could be taken further. As a result of Creation, Nothing acquires a Name which, if written down, is nothing else but a *vocable*. Consequently, a split haunts Nothing/God. Therefore, *it shares in the lot of all things created in that it does not form a stable whole but a non-Whole*, to use Lacan's term. For this reason, in Jabès, neither Nothing nor God himself can be "substances," perfect beings, kinds of *pleroma*. As even Nothing is not a fullness of non-being, Jabès could not possibly endorse the pagan perception of being as "a vice" punished by reversion into the proper condition of non-being. Even Nothing is trapped in the dialectical loop of the *vocable* as a boundary point of a broader structure.

These insights help us understand the radicalism of Jabèsian monotheism, which after all identifies God with Nothing. God that is Nothing is both the apex of absence and the void, a place that makes the negative principle of being thinkable in its entire intensity. But, *at the same time*, God is not himself, remaining absent in his absence and, consequently, internally split. Undoubtedly, in this gesture Jabès overthrows the mode of thinking inherent to classic Western metaphysics. On the one hand, he retains the idea of God as the middlemost point of reality, but on the other, he supplants the fullness of being with the extreme concentration of Nothing. It turns out, however, that *changing the construction principle of God from positive to negative results in God's inner self-differentiation*. In other words, an attempt to conceive of God as "fullness" of Nothing turns him into a non-Whole and precludes stabilising him in one place. Hence, also,

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Franke, "The Singular and the Other at the Limits of Language in the Apophatic Poetics of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan," *New Literary History*, 36/4 (Autumn 2005), pp. 621–37, on pp. 628–35. In other words, also the ultimate experience of Nothing is, for Jabès, a liminal moment of expression rather than an extra-linguistic experience. Hence, Jabès' writing, even if apparently "striving to fall silent" in a tendency identified by Celan as part of contemporary poetry, constantly goes on. According to Franke, a distinct feature of apophatic poetics, which sees negativity as an effect of language, is an assumption that there is a special word, a special place in language, in which it contacts its own beyond and is, at the same time, funded by this place (*Ibid.*, p. 635). The Name of God is usually this word. And indeed, unlike Celan, Jabès very often refers to the idea of the Name with all the connotations it accrued in Jewish thought. Franke states, finally, that, in Jabès, all apophatics starts in the space of perpetuated language – in the Book – and leads back to it (*Ibid.*, s. 633). Wrestling with Nothing does not represent an attempt to go beyond language but involves, ultimately, accompanying its transformations.

he has a Name.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, it is an ontological anti-proof: *God is so perfect a void and does not exist so utterly that, unable to exist as God, he differentiates himself from himself.*

The paradox of Jabès' theology is easily perceived by comparing it with Aristotle's thought. In the Stagirite's metaphysics, God is a thought thinking itself and, as such, the only being that does not depend on other ones.<sup>45</sup> This *noesis noeseos* is *one*, central point of short circuit in Aristotelian ontology and affects all other beings. If in Aristotle God contains himself in his fullness, in Jabès the opposite is the case. His God, an aggregation of absence, is self-referential based on an indelible difference. Though supposed to be a fullness of Nothing, he has an inner crack – grounded in the *vocable* – which always produces an impression that there is a deeper, even more primordial Nothing. By this token, there is a permanent tension between Nothing and Nothing, and between God and God.

Jabès states that God is “so deeply Himself in the incommensurable absence of Self” [*Soi-même dans l'absence incommensurable de Soi*].<sup>46</sup> In the world after *tzimtzum*, where all that is, is founded on God's absence, God is – that is, *is not* – most of all. Since he found himself on his own absence, he can never be stabilised. Moreover, according to Jabès, God is a “murmur [*rumeur*] of absence within absence.”<sup>47</sup> What does it mean? There are no less than two absences here. One of them must be a common absence in the post-*tzimtzum* world, which is this world's structural principle. *Different from this common absence is another absence with one being a murmur against the backdrop of the other.* A particular absence murmurs in the common absence that separates itself off from it. *At the same time, this murmur sets God apart from God and makes him visible by marking him.* Here lies the utter difference between Jabèsian monotheism and the primal pagan Nothing, which, having no Name, is essentially invisible: it cannot be set against any backdrop as it is the ultimate backdrop in and by itself. God,

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44 Importantly, the notion of God as a fullness of being recurring throughout medieval philosophy in fact precluded him having a Name. It is by no means a coincident that in Christianity, which fed on Greek thought, God himself is nameless. Having a Name, the Jewish God, in turn, is a dialectical product *par excellence*. This is also how the Hegelian apology of Christianity as a religion whose triune Godhead fosters developed dialectics can be opposed. The Jewish God is not only paradoxically One but also has an unpronounceable Name that differentiates him internally.

45 See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book XII (Λ), 1072b, trans. William D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press Reprints, 1924).

46 BD, p. 63.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 81. (quotation altered)

in turn, can be differentiated and *is audible*, for his Name makes him internally differential. This vision of God can be formed only when ultimate conclusions are inferred from the way language works based on the elementary difference between the *vocable* and what it refers to. The *vocable* shatters the stable being of God that is Nothing but, at the same time, makes referencing him possible.<sup>48</sup>

Back to our comparison between Aristotle's and Jabès' theologies, if the Stagirite's God is a restful whole that fully overlaps with its own name and an object of contemplation and *seeing*, Jabèsian God that is Nothing is *audible* in the act of ongoing self-differentiation of absence from absence, constantly parted by the Name.

This jettisons him from the immanence of this world and likens to the God of Jewish monotheism.

## Language and Monotheism

This reasoning leads us to where Jabès' writings yield two compelling insights. First, God identified with Nothing is a hub of a continually renewing difference, an oscillation around an inner fissure. Second, this position of God that is Nothing is somehow associated with the fact that, albeit re-worked, it is still the God of Judaism who has a Name. Both these components seem to correspond to Jabès' vision of language, where language is a universal system with even the Creator subject to it. At this point, these links deserve a closer analysis.

Let us start from a remark from Jabès' last work: "A sign [*un signe*] invents the *vocable* – and suddenly the universe finds itself confronted [*se trouve confronté*] with itself."<sup>49</sup> In the light of what we said about the *vocable* in the previous

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48 That the *vocable* enforces a specific concept of God – a differentiated and internally deferred one – is associated by Jabès with the Torah's prohibition on image (see QQLS, pp. 12–16). Because there is the *vocable*, i.e. writing, truth and being cannot be stabilised. Truth defies expression in words, which, as an image, would perpetuate it for ever. Writing must thus only gesture at that which cannot be expressed, fleetingly presenting it for reading (*Ibid.*, p. 14). Consequently, there is no sacred or profane writing as such: sacredness is a momentary tension of writing, which strives to express the voice of silence through itself (*Ibid.*, s. 15).

49 LH, p. 55. The French original emphasises that where there is a *vocable*, the universe is already confronted with itself. The "process" of this confrontation is not accessible to us, for it is a discontinuity. Either there is nothing and unexpressed, pure Nothing exists or there is a *vocable* and Nothing is already constrained but, consequently, also expressed. Writing entails experiencing how Nothing emerges from the dark and is briefly illuminated by a lightning of the *vocable*.

Chapter, the sentence can be interpreted as saying that when the *vocable* – which is no longer an ordinary sign – comes into being, *a rift appears within that which is*. In the void that is emptied out in this way, being is forced to face itself and, thus, differentiates within. While a sign could be viewed as a transparent label of being with a referential function and nothing more, the *vocable* belongs on a different plane, and its split separates it permanently from the thing “named.” In this way, Jabèsian writing explodes being’s quiet existence. Ever since the *vocable* appears, being is “confronted with itself,” inscribed in the void of a dislocation between the imaginary and the real. However, if one sign can refer to one being and only to this being, the *vocable* places that which it refers to in a relation to all existence, which is marked with *tzimtzum* to boot. A thing bears an imprint of belonging to the whole system brought forth by Creation. That is why, as Jabès insists, the *vocable* makes the entire universe confront itself. This confrontation leaves behind a vestige of the irremovable rift, i.e. *tzimtzum*, which defies evacuating as long as the *vocable* exists.

Let us move on and focus on the poet’s following statement:

By virtue of its letters Nothing becomes absence in its written materiality.<sup>50</sup>

By receiving a Name, and thus a *vocable*, Nothing, i.e. God, transubstantiates into absence. Just as any thing is “slain” in the *vocable*, Nothing as well loses its “presence.” In other words, by coming into the world created after *tzimtzum*, even Nothing cannot be present. *For this reason God that is Nothing shares with the created world a common condition: his “being” is based on a gap – on his own absence*. Even though we describe the void itself as “God” or “Nothing,” we cannot wrench it away from a dialectical relation with Creation. In this way, God that is Nothing is subject to the same laws to which any and all being is subject. Nothing is closer to things than the split God that is Nothing. He is the condition of rupture incarnate.

What is that difference between the *vocable* and the thing to which it refers that it carries the fissure on even into God? The answer suggested by Jabès’ thought is far-reaching. First of all, we must notice that *this difference concerns equally language and ontology*. It means that the rift between the thing and the *vocable* divides the signified from the signifier and the “referent” from the “sign” (with, importantly, the *vocable* not being a sign) as well as being from Nothing. In the post-Creation world, Jabès can see no difference between having a *vocable* and being. To have a *vocable* means to be irreversibly severed from Nothing and,

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50 BQ II, p. 248 (quotation altered).

thus, to exist. Yet, at the same time, wherever the *vocable* emerges, Nothing is “encased” by a thing split into two. A fissure that is produced in this way points at the thing. Thus, *the same split brings forth being and produces a fundamental form of language*. As the *vocable* comes into being, we see both language in statu nascendi and the stirrings of emergent ontology. As mentioned in the previous Chapter, in its peculiar way the *vocable* expresses both Nothing and the word that got dissolved in it. Intertwining Nothing and the word seems, for Jabès, to determine the ultimate line where being and language are indistinguishable.

In conclusion, as the *vocable* comes into being, something existing is brought forth and is bound to a unique name confined in materiality. The *vocable* still bears a fissure of *tzimtzum*, which makes the generated being always already internally ruptured. In this rupture, it is confronted with itself and self-differentiated as well as its relation with the entire universe is revealed. Being named and existing coalesce thus in the *vocable* as both are based on the same separation from Nothing. A minimum gap necessary for the *vocable* to refer to a thing jolts it out of its restful existence and breaks it into two, irreversibly stretching it between the imaginary and the real.

Consequently, all things in the Jabèsian universe exist in as far as they have names. Emphatically, it is not that a thing exists *due to* a name or that it has a name due to existing – being and having a name are two facets of the same event. This vision of reality could be said to comprise immanent elements of Jewish thinking: things are radically singular though they are related to the entire world, and the particularity of each of them ensues from its relation to the specific form of name that is the *vocable*. In a sense, each thing has its own unpronounceable name and each is based on self-differentiation. Thus, Jabès can easily make a final step and derive radical, apophatic monotheism from the very way in which reality functions.

Let us also take a final step and try to specify how God is to be thought in a world cleft by *vocables*.

It is a God formed in the semblance of the Judaic God, but an *already* non-existent one. He has a Name which is a paradigmatic *vocable* – material, unpronounceable and permanently disjoined from its “designee.” The Jabèsian God comes out of utter purification; while things that have *vocables* are always deferred and non-present, God has never been there at all and, consequently, his Name, instead of upon some positive content whose mirage it defers, acts upon Nothing itself. Perhaps, there is no “content” whatsoever in this God as he becomes just a chart of relations between a thing and a *vocable*. In this sense, God seems an offshoot of the perception of reality as formed by language, one, let us add, that is radically modern. Once the *vocable* is thought, a thus-conceived

God is brought in. Owing to a cut that separates him from pre-modern thought, Jabès can describe the primal link that entwines language's generative role and monotheism.

Indeed, impenetrable is the irony of history that offered us a solution to the enigma of the connection between One God and his creative language only when we can no longer decide whether the enigma had been there before or whether it surfaced, as we know it, together with modernity.

### **Conclusion: Relentless Theology and the Fate of Jerusalem**

The deep structure of Jabèsian negative "ontology" harbours theology. In this context, there is an odd ring to Heidegger's critiques of ontotheology, which – prevailing in Western thought – was supposed to relegate Being to the background and replace it with being that draws its existence from the supreme and perfect being of God. For Heidegger, ontotheology belongs to an era that is just being rolled back by philosophy. Jabès' thought, however, is born not in the past but in the ongoing movement of simplification and purification. Monotheism features, as a relentless vestige, the last point of difference that precludes oceanic Nothing becoming reality. Unlike Heidegger, Jabès does not dismantle ontotheology but reverses the scaffolding of metaphysical thought still lingering in modernity to unveil its monotheistic vestige. Theology is a term that serves to describe the elementary phenomenon of the vestige which persists when thinking is emptied out of all content.

In this Chapter, I have reiterated the difference between the pagan concept of Nothing as *apeiron* that engulfs all beings and the monotheistic notion of impossible, split and deferred Nothing associable with Jewish monotheism. This difference, of course, is rooted in the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition. The argument above showcases the utility of this opposition to thinking as its central rupture props thought and gives it grounding in the differentiating of material. Without the opposition, we likely could not go that far. Within an after all strictly modern inquiry, it helps form dialectically related, opposed camps: "pagan" and "Jewish," each attributed its particular features. Ultimately, the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem dualism is a definitive difference that remains after a text has been interpreted and thought through; juxtaposing two options at odds with each other, the dualism oscillates around a *pure split*. As the split persists, thus-constructed "Greek" thought and "Jewish" thought find themselves in an unequal relation, *with the latter comprising in itself the effect that is imprinted on it as on an element in an opposition*. For it is through Jabèsian "monotheism," founded on *tzimtzum* and the *vocable*, that the relentlessness of that final vestige, which survives as an

ultimate difference, could be explained. What does it imply for the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition?

I defined Jabès' theology as a re-interpreted Jewish mono(a)theism since it insists that when the Name appears, an irremovable split takes place and persists. But as soon as this theology was to be called, *to be given a name*, its being burst and a gap arose that links it to the other, mute companion, ignorant of its position – to “Greek thought.” Perhaps, the opposition of the two metropolises does not a priori form Jewish philosophy but rather is brought forth by the very movement of naming it? Should this indeed be the case, *philosophical Athens would be only a self-differentiation of Jewish philosophy of modernity*. For, importantly, Jewish philosophy of modernity comes to account for the final vestige, which it associates with Judaic monotheism, and, at the same time, defines itself as recognising this vestige. Because of the latter, *in order to sustain itself, Jewish philosophy of modernity needs a name that, as a vocable, would also differentiate it from itself*. In other words, the movement of difference affects the very construction of Jewish philosophy of modernity, enforcing an inner rupture on it. If it is the case, “Athens” is just another form of “Jerusalem,” which can reach its aim only through self-differentiation. The name of this conceptual Jerusalem – “Jewish philosophy” – is an emptiness that it cannot fathom. If “Jewish philosophy” is indeed interpreted as a *vocable*, it becomes clear why most effort within this current of thought is wasted on fruitless attempts to find a self-definition and sustain a constant difference from what it is not. “Jewish philosophy” is a material name that goes beyond what it “refers” to; at its centre lies a void that continually attracts the movement of thinking towards itself. But it is still impossible to descend into this void. The only possible step is self-differentiation in which “Jewish philosophy” becomes a boundary of two akin territories, one of which must represent permanence and limitation while the other directs the movement of difference, assuming the position of the self-differentiated, alienated and transgressive. Based on Jabèsian thinking, this is how the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition, as well as the necessity constantly to traverse their boundary, can be explained. If it is indeed the case, the vestige that Jabès himself puts in the position of the Judaic God is not so much a re-interpretation of Jewish monotheism as rather *a final projection of Jewish philosophy of modernity on its own content*.

The relentlessness of modern theology is thus a cornerstone of a new philosophical Jerusalem and its own impenetrable enigma.

