

6 Messianism of Writing

In the previous Chapters, I provided a rather static account of Jabès' thought. I sought to grasp the fundamental structures and factors that govern his texts. Now, I will focus on their dynamics. This Chapter will show how the consequences of *tzimtzum* lead, inevitably, to messianism. As already indicated, *tzimtzum* is an excess place productive of a utopian moment. And this is where it essentially ties in with the movement of Jabès' messianism, a signature feature of his thinking.¹ Building on this link, I will attempt to establish in how far this messianism stems from Jewish tradition and to what degree it represents the groundwork of modern philosophy.

I will draw on the conclusions of the previous Chapters to give a theoretical introduction to my theme. First, I will discuss the essence of the utopian moment directly generated by *tzimtzum*, and then I will show how deeply this utopia-induced messianism is rooted in Jabèsian ontology. These theoretical insights will culminate in addressing the relation of messianism to time and truth. Against this backdrop, I will outline the dynamics of Jabès' messianic thought and its existential poignancy. My argument will proceed in a few stages. First, I will explore the utopia of the Unity of things, the ultimate goal of the messianic act, and then I will reveal its inner structure of impossibility. This will help me depict a deferral inscribed in Jabès' messianism. Finally and crucially, I will show that messianism is an effect of a gap between things and language, a gap resulting from *tzimtzum*.

1 "Disenchanted" messianism of Jabès' work has not failed to attract the commentators' attention even though none of them has addressed it comprehensively. For example, Josh Cohen observes: "Rather than seek its redemption, Jabès makes torment's irredeemability the organizing principle of his writing. And yet, [...], this irredeemability is not to be seen in opposition to redemption. The messianic horizon which haunts all of his texts takes the paradoxical form of its non-achievement; the affinity of Judaism and writing lies in their shared thinking of redemption as that which is maintained in its promise rather than in its realization. It is for this reason that perhaps the most privileged term in Jabès' thought is the *question*, for the question is the form which maintains itself only in its irresolution, the originary form of incompleteness." Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 109. I believe that Jabès' messianism and its complex structure deserve a more thorough analysis.

In the last section, I will compare Jabèsian messianism with similar ideas developed in modern philosophy and formulate its implications for thinkers of a messianic proclivity, such as Benajmin and Agamben.

Hope for the Definitive Book

To analyse the messianic structure of Jabès' writing, we must first focus on the utopian moment inscribed in both the imaginary and the real. In an explicit play with Mallarmé, and in fact also with Hegel, Jabès frames this moment as the *hope for the definitive book*. What would this book stand for?

God [...] expected from man the book, which man expected from man. The one, in order to be finally God, the other in order to be finally man. The book of the order of the elements, the unity of the universe, of God and of man.²

It would thus be a book removing all incompleteness immanent to every being and putting the entire world in the definitive order. It would also round off the process of becoming God and man. As they are both authors, we can assume that, in and through this book, the author would definitively execute his design. Consequently, the book would itself evade the rupture between the imaginary and the real. More than that, it *would definitively put this rupture to an end*.

In this sense, if the book came into being, it would be a historic event and an end of history as we know it. As such, it could not be questioned by any other later book, and its text would abolish the very possibility of there being any other texts in the future. The book would mend the fragmented universe by eliminating its haunting *tzimtzum*. Re-uniting the real and the imaginary, it would give the erstwhile real an ultimate self-knowledge and the erstwhile imaginary a full enactment. Like Mallarmé's Book, it would transcend and bridge the gap between meaning and matter as, by being both meaningful and material, it would entwine the two inextricably. By this token, it would also remove the fundamental contradiction between the bare, persisting life and understanding of it:

Isn't writing the attempt to abolish forever the distance between our life and what we write of it between us and the *vocable*? Between us and us, between word and word?³

As this passage suggests, cherished by writing, the hope for the definitive book would also promote comparison and agreement between "beings" which are now inevitably sovereign and isolated – between "us and the *vocable*" (which

2 BQ I, p. 172.

3 DB, p. 105.

would obliterate the chasm of *tzimtzum*), “between word and word” (which would evacuate a fundamental ontological incoherence from the text) and, even, “between us and us.” The latter can be variously construed: as abrogation of the discontinuity of time, which incessantly explodes identity from within and differentiates “us” from later “us,” or as a removal of differentiation intrinsic to every attempt “we” make to self-understand “us.” Finally, as “we,” like everything else that has a name, are burst by *tzimtzum*, the book would abolish it.

A vision of such a definitive book is located at the intersection of Jewish messianism, in particular its Lurianic version, and modern philosophy. Of course, messianism in general gives this vision the idea of restitution of that which was broken at the beginning. Still, Luria’s possible influence lies in that making such a book is, to some extent at least, man’s responsibility – his *tikkun*. The book is a human work which, once accomplished, transforms reality and paves a path to messianic renewal, which transcends man. Importantly, however, unlike in Luria, *tikkun* is here first and foremost an intellectual endeavour: the book is an act of definitive self-knowledge of the real by the real, mediated by man’s work. As such, it is intimately associated with Hegelian absolute knowledge, as are Mallarmé’s ideas about the Book. The Jabèsian book shares with Hegel’s thought a modern assumption that the world is structured by knowledge, internally fragmented and incomplete as this knowledge is.⁴ Like in Hegel, the act of knowing is an event which is more than just a discovery made by a certain person at a particular moment. The externally contingent place in which the book appears becomes a messianic event of universal compass.

In Jabès, the hope for the definitive book motivates every act of writing (as he conceives of it), gives rise to a new book and sets it in motion:

*The first phrases of a work are always full of hope. Doubt creeps in and blossoms on the way. At the end there is double despair: that of the writer and that of the witness.⁵
Hope is bound to writing.⁶*

4 The interdependence of “word” and “world” is explicitly expressed, for example, in: “A word joins other words in order to further first of all the sentence, then the page, and finally the book. In order to survive, it must take an active part in freeing the world of speech, must be a dynamic agent of its transformation and unity” (BQ I, p. 227). In Jabès, the Book gives things their correspondences, doubles and opposites (BQ I, p. 32) and, thereby, is the very basic structure of reality.

5 BQ I, p. 60.

6 BQ II, p. 155.

Hope is a utopian moment that reflexively illuminates the depth of fragmentation. It is accompanied by inexorable doubt, a final disappointment at the end of the work. However, characteristically of Jabès and connecting him to Jewish messianism, which hopes despite and, even more, *because of* historical disappointments, this hope cannot be relinquished.⁷ *It corresponds to tzimtzum, which opens the beginning of a book, just as despair is involved in its collapse.* Hence, the act of writing is informed by its own specific moment of universal hope:

I write because, while trying to get to the end of what I could say, I think, every time, that next time I will succeed.

[...] An unformulated thought means hope to join word to word, means waiting for signs in search of their graven form [...].

We do not know beforehand what regions we will cross because the end is between the tracks of adventure, between the lines, never between standing columns.⁸

To desire something passionately means suppressing the heat of any other desire, means fusing all your desires into one, possessing nothing in order to claim everything at once.

The most deprived have the maddest desires. Emptiness desires to be filled.

[...] *Way off, there is a thought which will soon sweep away all others in order finally to take hold of silence and the dream of words sleeping in rows.*⁹

According to Jabès, writing is fuelled by this specific, maximalist desire – claiming everything at once. “Everything” means understanding which will repair reality. The abysmal failure of *tzimtzum* is paralleled by the hope for the definitive book; the state of fragmentation seems so agonising that writing cannot rest content with moderate claims. It is for this reason that hope is a utopian moment which, resulting from *tzimtzum*, precludes stopping either at a partial imaginary or at a partial real.

Messianism and Jabès’ Ontology

Having seen how the hope for the definitive book imbues writing with dynamics, we can explore Jabès’ messianism in more abstract terms and juxtapose it with the “ontological” structure outlined in the foregoing.

The mechanism of his messianism tallies with the specific position which the act of writing takes vis-à-vis the entire reality. As suggested above, each new “book” – or, more broadly, each symbolic order – is engendered by its

7 See EHW, p. 37. Hope is, as Gould concludes, the irremovable “sin of the book” – “the mad search for divine harmony” (Gould, “Introduction,” pp. xvii, xxii).

8 BQ I, pp. 224–5.

9 BQ II, pp. 310, 316.

own primordial *tzimtzum* as a reduction of this reality. *Tzimtzum* demarcates the boundaries of this order and determines the compass of its own *indicible*. However, this order seems universal in the world that it creates while the *indicible* remains hidden.

Therefore, the messianic structure of each perspectival order can be said to be conditioned by a specific nexus of universalism and partialness embodied in the *vocable*. In this optics, messianism designates simply *a desire to enact universalism immanent to a given order ("book")*. In this sense, messianism would involve surmounting an ostensibly removable barrier that prevents an order from becoming the order as such. "The word which shatters the word in order to break free, for a moment holds the key to the book,"¹⁰ writes Jabès, suggesting that it was the primal severance from the real in *tzimtzum* (and thus "shattering" of and "breaking free" from the burden of the past "word") that produced a feeling that the created order could achieve a messianic consummation.

Consequently, messianism is not a delusion and even less a removable delusion. It is *the other side of that "oblivion,"* to use Jabès' term, into which the symbolic order must slide to be constituted in the first place. Furthermore, in each case, a particular shape of this messianism is likely to be bound up with the limits determined for the order by its *tzimtzum*. In other words, *seeking messianic fulfilment, an order heads, in fact, towards its own, hidden limit*. Pushed forward by the hope for the definitive book, it paradoxically moves towards its own "origins" ("our sources precede us,"¹¹ insists Jabès). It is clear therefore why Lurianic *tzimtzum* and *shevirat ha-kelim* had to be coalesced into one moment of *tzimtzum* sensu largo: messianic hope leads an order back to its moment of primordial reduction. *Tzimtzum* remains a permanent condition of possibility, and the movement between the "originary" curtailment and the "ultimate" consummation entails moving to and from *tzimtzum*.

Similarly, the messianic drive in the act of writing comes from its condition of possibility and causes the originary *tzimtzum* to be rehearsed, as a failure this time. Demanding everything because of its claim to universality, the act exposes the limited grounds of such claims and, thereby, discloses that it is *only one of many*. This in turn, as explained in Chapter Three, means a transition from the imaginary to the real, that is, a failure of *tzimtzum*.

Therefore, the messianic act can be said to reveal a fundamental lack in an order, the same lack, actually, that emerged where the order was cut off from the

10 BQ II, p. 348.

11 DB, p. 85.

real. The concept of the *vocable* renders the pattern, showing the hope-fuelled movement as moving within the imaginary delimited by *tzimtzum*. Exercising its magnetic impact, *tzimtzum* forces the act of writing to make messianic claims. As if by the Hegelian “cunning of reason,” the claims actually represent a given act’s self-analytical impulse since in demands ultimately to comprehend the real, it ironically attains self-comprehension and discovers its own limitedness.

Before concluding this section, let us consider a pertinent question: Does anything remain of this circular movement, to which messianism belongs seemingly *despite* and actually *because of* its hopes? Do repeated messianic cycles generate anything new? A possible answer would be: what a messianic cycle leaves behind is the *vocable* as a *particular* nexus of the imaginary and the real. Only the rise and failure of an order can reveal it and make it known to us. And the *vocable*, as I will show in the next Chapter, is a key to analysing the space of the Book. If Jabès can write that

[...] the book is a universe in motion which our eyes fix.¹²
 ... point [...] visible to the world for a fraction of a second because of my wish to explain.¹³

it is only because of the messianic structure that makes it possible. For it is in the messianic structure that the point of *tzimtzum* is *circumscribed*, which gives rise to a particular order, sustains this order’s “wish to explain” and is a place where it dies. And *the point itself*, rendered by one entire book in its rise and failure, is “a universe in motion which our eyes fix.” Studying this universe through snapshots of particular books is what Jabès commits himself to doing.¹⁴

Therefore, failure does not render the act of writing futile as it produces a *particular point* that preserves both the moment of its own creation and the moment of the radical messianic claim.

12 BQ II, p. 146.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 392.

14 *The Book of Dialogue* insists: “The mind does not think what it knows. It can only think what it does not know. It is ignorance of Knowing which its thinking enriches” (BD, p. 67). This nearly Hegelian thesis encapsulates the relationship between messianic acts and Knowledge that they produce. The acts ensue from ignorance, originary forgetfulness, and keep heading toward knowledge which is concealed from them. It takes an entire messianic cycle to reveal it, and in this way Knowledge, the forgetting of which gave rise to the act, is augmented.

Messianism, Time and Truth

With the preliminaries behind, we can scrutinise the distinct features of Jabèsian messianism in more detail. In this section, I will argue that it is essentially and compellingly related to time and truth, which connects it to the legacy of Kant and Hegel.

As explored in Chapter Three, the “real” time differs from the “illusory time,” and, naturally, the act of writing, which unfolds within a certain order instituted by *tzimtzum*, takes place in the latter. That is why time is measurable in this act, with there being both a past that contains the originary event and a future that holds messianic hope. Still, it is only possible at the cost of the originary limitation of the “real time,” where the *point of this delimiting* becomes a “moment” *inaccessible to this temporal series*. As the act of writing revolves around its *tzimtzum* event, which is both past and future, the “temporal series,” to use Kantian terminology, available in a given order, oscillates constantly around a point that eludes and entirely undermines it. Hence, similarly to Derrida, Jabès’ act of writing is always belated-deferred and refers to that which is behind or ahead of it, for that which is “right before” and “present” refuses to be captured in it and is, emphatically, utterly “absent.” At the same time, it is the point that seeks to accommodate writing.

Such insights seem to inform passages in which Jabès’ reflection on the present comes strikingly close to both Hegel and Nietzsche:

Man carries time. We play against. Time is becoming, a second’s blaze rekindled.
 [...] Man is a merchant of ashes. Out of the world, I save the moment, my portion of eternity.¹⁵
 The center is the moment. If God is the center He cannot exist except momentarily.
 Therefore God passes in whatever, by virtue of renewing itself, does not pass.
 Eternity is constant renewal. So that entering eternity means becoming conscious of all that begins all the time, means becoming yourself a beginning.¹⁶
“A search for harmony,” she had said at the crossroads where we were drawn and quartered by our contradictions. [...]
“at every instant of the book, which is a vibrant mirror of death.”
 [...] Ah, who but ourselves can perform this miracle on us at the hour of our death?
 Creating your truth means exalting the instant. I salute eternity from one second to the next.¹⁷

15 BQ I, p. 135

16 BQ II, p. 159

17 *Ibid.*, p. 248, 280.

“When you write, you do not know whether you are obeying the moment or eternity.”
[...] Moments have a spicy aftertaste of eternity.¹⁸

Following Nietzsche, Jabès sees eternity compressed in the present moment. The act of writing is fraught with constant tension as it turns towards this absent centre. The centre is, at the same time, a site of the concentrating happening/enowning that keeps deferring itself and makes itself visible only in dislocations as past or future, where it is but a trace in the “ashes” into which writing will turn after it passes.

All associations with Heidegger’s late thought, unavoidable though they seem at this point, are ousted by a fundamental difference produced by the relation of Jabèsian messianism to time. In Jabès, namely, there is no language to persist through happening/enowning (as Heidegger’s “Dwelling of Being” does) and allow approaching it. On the contrary, Jabès’ messianism is stirred by the fact that *the centre of happening/enowning can be approached only in a one-off mobilisation of an order in which this order evanesces*. This is the already evoked attempt to achieve the definitive understanding, which is bound to end in failure.

In the passages quoted above, Jabès seems to describe this attempt, relying on the notion of “truth.” In Chapter Three, I distinguished a “perspectival truth” from the inaccessible and fictional “real” truth; here, there is still another truth – one located exactly where the other two intersect. This third truth seems *the outermost point of a perspectival order where this order bumps against the boundary of its reality*. Still within this order, it conveys this order’s *tzimtzum*. Since, as stated above, in a messianic effort to understand the real, an order comes to understand itself or, rather, its own limitedness, this third meaning of truth is a liminal moment of understanding the real in its own perishment.

Let us return to the relation of messianism and time. The central emptiness of the present can be “seen” in such liminal truth as, disclosing the *tzimtzum* of an order, it deciphers this order’s inaccessible, withdrawing centre. At the same time, it propels *tzimtzum*’s reverse movement, in which that central truth of an order turns out to be one of many truths. In other words, the moment of universality of an order lies in the instant of its fall, when its immanent perspectivism is exposed. The concomitant shift in the functioning of time is structured in the same way: *the moment of messianic fall is the point where the “illusory” and the “real” times intersect*. Indeed, it is a Jabèsian “moment of eternity” – an oxymoronic coupling of “eternity” and “moment.” Eternity appears as the illusory time encounters its own boundary and condition of possibility. Since it cannot be accommodated within a temporal series it determines itself, it is “eternal” for the

18 *Ibid.*, p. 407.

entire series. And the “moment” is a moment of the real time in which the *entire* illusory time is inscribed.

The association of truth and time is specifically Jabèsian. Just as truth in Hegel,¹⁹ when truth in the third of the senses defined above *is revealed, it immediately halts time*. In both cases, the time we perceive results from the persistent “alienation,” and knowledge that abolishes alienation simply removes time. In Jabès, however, unlike in Hegel, there are multiple “times” and truths bound up with them. Each of them perishes in its “absolute knowledge,” and the moment of messianic claim and its collapse produce an inextricable nexus of the “moment” and “eternity.” In this sense, Jabès’ thought is a kind of Hegelian disillusioned thought, a Hegelian morning after: *absolute knowledge is not one but forms an end of every symbolic order*.

Concluding, Jabèsian perspectivism is radical in its connection to messianism. Only the uncompromising demand of ultimate truth unveils “the moment of eternity” and, at the same time, inflicts failure on the order that made this demand. In finding truth, the act of writing makes good on its exclusive chance and, as Jabès expresses it, *saves the moment, its “portion of eternity.”* As *Le Parcours* insists, “[it is] as if, at a particular moment, opening eventually gave passage to it alone, opening to itself.”²⁰ This line can be understood to mean that the moment an order falls is actually its opening as it opens to itself, recognising its *tzimtzum*, and offers a passage. Where to? I will address this issue below.

19 Hegel writes: “Time is just the notion definitely existent, and presented to consciousness in the form of empty intuition. Hence spirit necessarily appears in time, and it appears in time so long as it does not *grasp* its pure notion, i.e. do long as it does not annul Time. It is the *pure* self in external form, apprehended in intuition, and not grasped and understood by the self, it is the notion apprehended only by intuition. When this notion grasps itself, it supersedes its time character, (conceptually) comprehends intuition, and is intuition comprehended and comprehending. Time, therefore, appears as spirit’s destiny and necessity, where spirit is not yet complete within itself; it is the necessity compelling spirit to enrich the share self-consciousness has in consciousness, to put into motion *the immediacy of the inherent nature* (which is the form in which the substance is present in consciousness); or, conversely, to realize and make manifest what is inherent, regarded as inward or immanent, to manifest that which is at first within – i.e. to vindicate it for spirit’s certainty of self.” Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pp. 470–1.

20 P, p. 77.

The Risk of Messianism: “The Edge of the Book”

So far, I have outlined the theoretical structure that elucidates Jabèsian messianism: its connections with ontology, the nature of utopia that fuels it and its relation to time and truth. Now, I will explore the very act of writing in more detail, as a messianic event and a real, existential experience.

To begin with, let us explain why, as *an event*, the act of writing is radically dangerous. Let us have a look at two key messianic passages in Jabès:

“You write, but doesn’t what you write hold only for a moment?”

“We don’t own the coming moment at all [*ne...point*].”

“If so, how can we own the present moment?”

“The coming of the Messiah is for tomorrow [*La venue du Messie est pour demain*]. The change will be for tomorrow [*Pour demain sera le changement*].”

“Is the present whiter than the past? Our words cast shadow on the present, but what shadow would challenge the immaculate whiteness of tomorrow?”

“...will tear the night of my ink, of the *vocables* swollen with my black blood, the Messiah amidst them as a shipwreck on the ocean.

All my words bring change.”

[...] “*How will the Messiah come in, o answer!, if the book were a closed world?*” wrote Reb Nachman

“*The Messiah is the condition of change, an incarnation of this condition,*” Reb Akkad said....²¹

Is writing simply to rise up against silence, a twitch of life within death, and finally to die of its passion? Die with its passion whose death catches us unawares with its loss of energy like a setting sun? O night, vast tomb of oblivion

[...] Around what is not expressed, what we could never formulate, we talk like the deaf and write blindly, outside time. But *life is there, on our heels, life come to meet us where we stoically tried to do without it* [emphasis added]. What does it want from us? And first of all, what hold does it have on the book? O weight of the prelude. All steps are under its signs. But life carries death in its womb, and we have eaten of this death.²²

In the first passage, Jabès clearly links the messianic element to deferred time. What we write, he insists, holds only for a moment while the next one is not ours at all [*ne...point*]. This is another reference to the point as a moment of the discontinuity of *tzimtzum*. But, in fact, this point divides us also from the present as between the illusory and the real times there is an irremovable chasm, which prevents us from meaningfully describing and “appropriating” happening. *For this reason, that which will happen is the realm of messianism.*

21 LR I, pp. 121–2.

22 BQ II, p. 285.

The Messiah, as Jabès claims, will come "*pour demain*," which can have two implications. One of them represents messianism's brighter facet, with tomorrow still structurally uncertain and possibly bringing a kind of "salvation." The other implication expresses messianism's extreme ontological threat as we are divided from the next moment by a discontinuity so radical that the depth of the impending change deprives us of understanding. The two implications merge in the word "condition" used at the end of the first passage: the Messiah is both a condition, i.e. a prerequisite of change (a hope for a new world in the closed, fallen book), and its condition, i.e. a state, an incarnation of uncertainty and risk.

The messianic danger is further portrayed in the second passage, which implies that the ultimate mobilisation attempted by the act of writing *arises from its desperate inadequacy vis-à-vis the imminent, radically discontinuous time*. Writing is a "dash of life in death": its own death, for its attempt to understand is self-destructive. One of the rabbis quoted by Jabès is named Nachman, and for a reason, too: Nachman of Breslov believed that writing could grasp the mystical essence of reality only when it was put down and then burned.²³ In Jabès, this thought is even more radical as destruction looms not only for Kabbalistic writing but also for any endeavour to understand life completely. Life, which is "on our heels" and is "come to meet us," forms a surplus that, incomprehensible to us, continues to bring failure upon us.

So, if writing, as Jabès conceives of it, is based on the structure of messianism, it cannot be a quiet meditation on *tzimtzum*; rather, it means experiencing absolute, unbearable mutability:

For me [the idea of the Messiah] represents the idea of a great writer, because, as we face a text, what are we keyed to if not change? And what are we exposed to but the unforeseeable change we owe to its brutality? Messiah is also a *vocable*.

In our task [*à la tâche*], we are like believers buoyed up by immense hope and at the same time shaken by unutterable fear. It happens that a writer commits suicide at the edge of a book. But never will a nonwriter die for a word [*une parole*].²⁴

Tellingly, in Jabès, while a writer is *like* the Messiah, the Messiah is a writer. What do the two have in common? Both survive subsequent failures. For Jabès, the two roles – of the writer and of the Messiah – involve the highest risk embodied in the vision of the "edge of the book" [*bord du livre*].

23 See Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud*, trans. Llewellyn Brown (Princeton: Princeton UP, Lieu Commun, 1995).

24 BR II, p. 47. (quotation altered)

What is this edge? Based on our argument so far, the answer can be: it is a boundary between the messianic representation of the following moment and its coming, that is, between *an attempt to achieve an ultimate understanding and pure duration, which puts it ultimately to an end*. Awaited with “unutterable fear,” “the edge of the book” is a moment when the act of witting is over, and that which has come into being will be faced with abiding reality. This entails also verifying the messianic attempt and showing whether the Messiah was real or false. As such, it is not only a theoretical but also an existential experience of *tzimtzum*. Consequently, the writer is one that dares take this ultimate risk, which other people shun, as he demands truth and pays for his claim with a failure. The Jabèsian writer and the Aristotelian ideal of a calm contemplator of truth are thus worlds apart.

“Do you believe,” he said, “that one can reach the gilded pinnacles of the night and return to the starting point intact?”

[...] “There are no pinnacles of writing,” he said. “Writing itself is a pinnacle.”²⁵

God as the Ultimate Reader: Messianism and Monotheism

Such is the existential risk implicated in Jabèsian messianism. Before describing the very experience of messianic endeavour and failure, I will focus on the relation between such messianism and monotheism as crucial to my further argument.

To start with, the messianic attempt is an act of definitive understanding that seeks to fathom the moment inaccessible to it. As such, it is also an attempt to halt time itself since the Messiah is expected to put closure to history. “The edge of the book” is a moment where all happening/enowning should cease. But what comes to pass when the attempt fails? Time goes on, defying expectations and explanations. It is the reason why the failure of the messianic act *reveals pure, incomprehensible duration after everything has been put on the line and lost*.

It turns out that an attempt to attain ultimate understanding, which seeks to prevent happening/enowning once and for all, is confronted with a dimension that radically transcends it. Thus, the messianic act can be posited to be pure duration what the Messiah is to God. In other words, *the Messiah’s failure gives God space; more than that, it is this failure that reveals him*. Let us have a look at Jabès’ phrasing:

25 PHD, pp. 115–116.

To write as if addressing God. But what to expect from nothingness where any word is disarmed?

[...] *Here I have to stress how strongly the word is attracted to the nothing around it, for which it is the preferred prey. It is the same attraction God has for the universe of the ultimate utterance.*

[...] *Page by page, we answer the end of the world with our own end.*

[...] *God is the accepted challenge of the word. But the word does not lead to God. Only silence could.*²⁶

Writing is followed and heard up to the point where it stops being writing and becomes the deep sense of a passionate deletion.

[...] *The word remains objective where subjectivity afflicts us. Truth is objective. / The law is objective. / Death is objective.*

We must think of God as an objective Totality.

*He said: "Am I the man God did not recognize? If so, I have done searching. For me God is nowhere."*²⁷

What you cannot read

He is reading.

[...] *"God hears what no one hears and sees what no one can see" [...].*²⁸

"The broken tables are an unrivalled model of the book" [...].

*"You will break the book," wrote Reb Shmuel, "not in anger, but in love; because in breaking it opens to divine speech."*²⁹

The vision of God that emerges from these passages is built around three fundamental relations. First, God is presupposed to transcend the messianic attempt. Second, he is a force that attracts "the last word" and generates the tension of "the end," i.e. "the edge of the book." Jabèsian messianism is thus inscribed in the divine and owes to it – to its beyond as it were – its dynamics. Third, *the divine is a plane of reference in relation to which the entire messianic act is a sign*. This is why the act becomes utterly unintelligible after failure as it is read where it cannot reach itself. Bare, meaningless duration is where understanding itself is subjected to an "objective" understanding incomprehensible to us.

Paradoxically, thus, the ultimate "reading" of the real takes place when reading itself is read in a space inaccessible to us. That is why Jabès can claim that *"only what disappears will have called for us."*³⁰ This idea echoes both Nachman of Breslov's "burned book" and Lacan's great Other, who "sees" us, albeit in Jabès such seeing is necessarily discontinued and what remains is a liminal moment

26 BQ II, pp. 153, 161, 169.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 216, 223.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 395, 403.

29 LR I, pp. 99–100.

30 BQ II, p. 154.

in which reading is “read.” God is the ultimate reader as he reveals himself in pure duration after understanding fails. He is also a reader of the failure itself, its recipient and a place where it is written in a peculiar way. God guarantees thus a unique memory of failures, which but for him would vanish without a trace.

Emphatically, even though the failure of writing entails a fall of understanding, it is at the same time an act that brings us closer to the position of God. It is only in the ultimate failure of comprehension that we stand closest to God although always at a distance which separates writing from the reader. All the accrued meaning must be destroyed *for God to manifest himself in the extreme concentration of meaninglessness*. As Jabès claims, the real writer, as well as the Messiah, wrecks his work – “breaks the tables.” He has distilled the ultimate, definitive legibility, making present the entire meaning here and now, in one “table,” only to be able to crush it and make room for God.

Concluding this argument, we can describe the relation between Jabès’ unique versions of messianism and monotheism. Messianism of failure reinforces monotheism and precludes idolatry defined as identifying a certain representation with God. Any particular meaning one could choose to identify with reality is destroyed in the messianic failure and returned *vis-à-vis* the divine that transcends it. Messianism never removes the minimum difference between the Messiah and God.³¹ Furthermore, radicalism of the hope to understand the real leads directly to revealing pure duration and, thus, a surplus that God is in relation to a finite meaning. Therefore, “*the edge of the book*” is a place of God’s revelation through a failed messianic attempt.

Oneness and Equality of Things

With these insights, we can proceed to the central part of this Chapter, in which I will seek to provide a philosophical account of the experience of the messianic act of writing. Because, as already ascertained, in this act writing breaks in transition from the imaginary to the real – and crosses the boundary or *tzimtzum* – this experience helps re-think *tzimtzum* “directly” rather than in abstract terms. My final thesis of this Chapter is that in the moment of messianic failure *the very*

31 The kabbalists always maintained this difference as well. For example, Isaac the Blind believed that speculation could climb to the level of the sefirot, reaching pure “Thought,” a source of human thought. That, however, is not the Divine as such, which is unreachable. Achievable is *devequt*: clinging to God, but not uniting with him. See Fine, *Physician*, p. 224.

gap between the imaginary and the real, between the meaning-producing order and things, is revealed.

To arrive at it, I will first argue that Jabès identifies the messianic act with unveiling a peculiar “One.” To start with, let us observe that Jabès offers many descriptions of getting to the “edge of the book.” In many of them, he suggests that the process is accompanied by a sense of nearing oneness in which everything that enters a new community of things without forfeiting its own singularity:

Before the One comes the dazzling void which we experience as the near advent of One. We came to the end of the night, and suddenly the world turned white. / We stopped at the threshold of the path, overwhelmed by all this whiteness. / Unable to speak or make any gesture, we sat on the last milestone. / We were evenly white.³²
[...] we wander within ourselves (up to the point where we are still ourselves, but different) to find the obscure spot which hides the sun and which, we know, is that privileged place where dark and light touch in order to be two and still only one in revealing the universe.³³

What is this One? Jabès apparently implies that it is an ecstatic experience of the unity of the universe, discovered at the end of the messianic attempt to understand. *The One is a basic plane where differences themselves touch and divide.*

“I no longer see words,” he wrote; “I see only the place of their birth and death, which is blank.”³⁴

The line seems to indicate that it is an area where words, yet or already without meaning, only differentiate, that is, pass from “pure whiteness” to existence and the other way round. As such, it is not a plane of language but a plane of the *very condition of possibility* of language provided by there being differences at all. This is a plane where differences not so much exist as only emerge, still embedded in a specific oneness.

For this reason, if the messianic act reaches it through an utterance, it dissolves in this oneness. This means that the experience of the One entailed by the messianic act absorbs this act as well, obliterating the difference between the act and the event it brings on:

*You try to say all, own all. You think in the end you could disappear.*³⁵

32 BQ II, pp. 321, 353.

33 BQ I, p. 225.

34 BQ II, p. 439.

35 BQ I, p. 333.

Characteristic of the messianic act, an attempt “to say all” makes this “all” engulf and replace also the act itself. Paradoxically, the one, the advent of which Jabès presupposes, is the end, effect and erasure of the act.

The messianic act thus reveals a peculiar unity of the world to which it belongs itself as well. This unity is a site where differences as such emerge and vanish. It is a matrix in which differences come into being but still cluster together. It is both the place of the origin and the place of the end, the beginning of differences and the purpose of the messianic act. *Tzimtzum* again appears as both endpoints of the imaginary.

Having established what is specific to the space of unity, we can now ask where this unity comes from. In answering, we can be guided by an elliptical passage that Jabès placed in his last work’s final section, closest to the “edge of the book,” where the messianic tension is at its highest:

ALL THING(S) EQUAL [TOUTE CHOSE ÉGALE]. This is the [writer’s] point: a thing.³⁶

What does this statement imply? The second sentence states that the writer’s point in all his searching is a “thing.” What “thing”? This is what the first sentence, capitalised throughout, expresses, seeming as much an idea as a trace of a direct discovery made by Jabès at this particular moment of writing. The dual function of the word “tout” makes the French phrase “*toute chose égale*” ambiguous as it can mean both “each thing equal” and “all things equal.” The idea inferable from this is that the “equality” Jabès talks about is comprised *both* of one equal thing and all equal things. Cross-referencing this passage with the portrayal of unity in the messianic act, we can conclude that it is an internally equal unity which is *at the same time* (1) one thing; and (2) a unity of all equal things. Finding it is the aim of writing.

Arguably, it could be a purely mystical unity, about which nothing more can be said, but our previous argument suggests its essential, structural similarity to certain insights of modern philosophy. I believe that this mystical unity can be explained by an issue that Kant and Hegel strove to settle: the basic division between “things in themselves” and knowledge. As we cannot discuss it in detail here, let us only note that Kantian “things in themselves” are both “one thing” and a multiplicity of things. Why? Multiplication of “things” is caused by knowledge to which a “thing” is external. The pluralism of the knowable world in which multiple objects (as Kant conceived of them) exist makes us think about multiplicity

36 LH, p. 89.

also in the case of “things in themselves.” Yet, as external to knowledge, they are “one thing” because phenomenal categories are inapplicable to them.

Based on this reasoning, I will provide a philosophical interpretation of the Jabèsian “One” by drawing on one more idea to be found both in Kant and in Hegel, who investigated a fundamental plane on which “things in themselves” border directly with knowledge. This is the lowest possible level of differentiation, which gives grounding to all differences in knowledge and, at the same time, the level where this differentiation transitions directly into the unity of the “things in themselves.” To avoid recapitulating the conclusions of Chapter One, I will only remind that this is Kant’s concept of “temporal series”: time as a basic form that brings together “things in themselves” and makes them into objects. Hegel, in turn, analyses the same problem relying on the category of “understanding” (*Verstand*), which distills from the chaos of primal undifferentiation a certain rudimentary structure underpinning knowledge and language.³⁷

With these analogies in mind, we can posit that, in Jabès, the messianic attempt to write involves the experience of the One because it reaches the lowest level of differentiation between “the thing in itself” and the multiplicity of the symbolic order that corresponds to it.³⁸ Where the Kantian “thing in itself” is in constant tension with “things in themselves,” the unity of “*toute chose égale*” is experienced in Jabès. This insight is resonant with the premise of Chapter Three, where *tzimtzum* is defined as a moment of discontinuity between the external multiplicity of the imaginary and the real unity of the particular. The moment of the messianic failure is *this very tension between the imaginary and the real, a moment of their ecstatic passing into each other*. In other words, it is an experience of *tzimtzum*.³⁹

37 See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pp. 31–3.

38 The following excerpt from *Return to the Book* aptly shows the symbolic order (metaphorically rendered as “a voice”) causing disintegration of “the thing itself”: “One pebble discovered another and said: ‘I see myself.’ And then: ‘Who has split me off myself?’ The surprised pebble answered back: ‘You are a pebble, like me. Where do you come from?’ Disappointed, the pebble said: ‘So you are not me? We do not have the same voice.’ The pebble answered: ‘As neither of us can move, here I am you; where you are you are I.’ ‘Will we one day be a single pebble?’ [...] And the pebble said: ‘All over the earth we are the same stone.’” (BQ I, p. 347).

39 This concept explains also the “halting” of time in the messianic act. In it, the messianic act reaches the lowest level of differentiation, that is, a plane in relation to which time is perceived, following Kant’s suggestions. It is, so to speak, “the eye of the storm,” where extreme differentiation of the moments of passing time means, at the same time, stopping time. The structure of the messianic act of understanding suggests that it regards

Concluding, the structures recognised by Jabès in writing can be interpreted as references to various layers of mystical, therein Kabbalistic, thinking,⁴⁰ but they are explicable strictly within modern philosophical tenets.

Equality of Things: Possibility and Impossibility

Yet, can the equality and unity of things be really experienced? And what *experience* is it in the first place? The further part of the passage quoted above is illuminating in this respect:

What would the primordial/essential [*de primordial*] thing the writer has to say be other than the thing which is all he seeks to say, but by applying/fitting himself to it [*dans s'y appliquer*], no doubt, in order to leave it to/let it say itself [*pour la laisser... se dire*] indirectly.

As if that saying [*ce dire*] protected it against itself, doubling the access [*en redoublant les accès*] to it; for this thing, in the depths of silence, is the secret of the last word [*du dernier mot*].

Dust [*la poussière*] has its compelling reasons [*raisons fortes*] as well.⁴¹

We must disentangle this cryptic passage step by step. Jabès seems to assume that writing is motivated by saying something that is both essential and primordial – originary – as well as coming. Writing looks for a “thing” which is “all the writer seeks to say.” Because this thing is involved in each moment of writing as its goal, it can be supposed to be also *the primordial condition of writing*, achievable if the writer, so to speak, “applies himself to it.” It means, likely, that the writer not so much enunciates this thing as lets it enunciate itself in his act. In a sense, the writer *leaves it, lets it say itself*. In Jabès’ usage, the verb “*laisser*” resonates with

itself as ultimate, “atemporal” understanding. This, however, results from the fact that, actually, it descends to its *own* lowest level of differentiation, which is a temporal series of *its own order*. The messianic act seems universal because in the order in which it unfolds, no beyond is actually seen anymore. For this reason, the messianic act seems definitive and ultimate *to itself*. Nevertheless, its failure makes it clear that from the very beginning the act was connected with a particular order which has just passed. The difference between the illusory time and the real time is a difference that separates a perspectival order from the unthinkable space in which all such orders are located.

40 For example, *Masoret ha-Berit*, a Kabbalistic work dating back to the 13th century, presents God after Creation as nothing that still has more being than any existence in the world. If all things returned to nothing, they would again become an undifferentiated One; see Scholem, *Kabbale*, pp. 174–5. By the same token, God is presupposed here as a dark centre in which things become one by losing their differences.

41 LH, p. 89.

the same insight as Heidegger's *sein lassen* because the aim of the utterance is to put an end to utterance as uttering-something – *and let this thing be*. Only when the writer withdraws, making room for it, can it articulate itself. Still, without deceiving himself in the least, Jabès means only a mediate utterance.

Impossibility and mediacy of the act are restated in the following sentence. Namely, the utterance “protects the thing against itself, doubling the access to it,” because “this thing in the depths of silence is the secret of the last word.” How should we construe it? First, we should notice that the last word – *this* last word with a definite article: “*le dernier mot*” – seems to be both an inevitable expectation in the messianic act of writing and something impossible because of the very structure of this act. This thing could ultimately be said only if the last word really existed. As another passage implies, only this word really matters to the book:

The totality is not made up of all the vocables, but of one, the last one, which one can still foresee but which one can no longer pronounce and on which all the others have foundered. It is this ultimate word [*parole*] which gives the book its weight. From this word the book gets its charge [*charge*].⁴²

“The last word” aggregates the words that precede it and gives weight to the book by articulating the “thing.” But, in fact, it is still impossible as the hope of the last word is not this thing *yet* while the silence of duration *already* is not this thing. As such, this thing is never present, but rather opens before or closes behind us, in this sense protected by “the double access.” This thing is “a secret of the last word,” which inhabits the messianic act of writing for a fleeting moment only to show that it just *seems* the last word, and it seems so because, essentially, *it cannot be one*. For it is a middle point visible only in dislocation, perceivable only from a place before or behind it. It completes the whole without being seen in it:

Enter the center: *between* seeing and seen.

The hand writes between points. Along with the word, it is forever center.⁴³

As the end of writing, “equality of all things” is thus something that appears as impossible and *because* it is impossible. Each time, the end appears where it is not, and Jabès insists: “there is no goal that, at the very moment it is reached, is not already surpassed.” Writing is trapped in its own impossibility since everything it craves to express and is also founded by continues to be its constantly and obsessively searched goal, defined by its very unreachability. It is *embodied*

42 DB, p. 102.

43 BQ II, p. 359.

in the one, still missing word, a word both originally forgotten and expected in the future:

What if the book were only infinite memory of a word lacking?

Thus absence speaks to absence.⁴⁴

All writing invites to an anterior reading of the world which the word urges and which we pursue to the limits of faded memory.⁴⁵

With this word lacking, writing has the structure of constant deferral:

The victorious eye trumpets its truth. The vanquished eye takes refuge in its defeat. The book escapes both. [...] The end is always in the next word.⁴⁶

Between me and myself there are innumerable words whose ways and will I do not know. They move me away from the book which, sentence by sentence, has moved away from them.⁴⁷

At the finish there is nothing, but this boundary is not yet the fatal end [*la fatale fin*].⁴⁸

The structure of this goal makes it thus essentially unattainable. It appears either as a future event – “finish” or “end” [*fin*], which provides the point that suffuses writing with all tension – or as something that is already transcended, when it turns out to have been nothing in fact. It is not the “*fatale fin*,” claims Jabès and, in the spirit of Blanchot’s musings on the impossibility of death, suggests that it is entirely incommensurable with the “real,” mortal end.

Consequently, even the actual last word before death does not warrant fulfilment. The structure of messianism admittedly tempts us to consider it to be closer to that “which the writer had to say,” indeed, perhaps even to be most authentic. But Jabès believes that while the “last word” may be the most vivid and extreme one, its structure does not differ from that which conditions every messianic act of writing, i.e. from the structure of internal impossibility. That the end is really near does not remove the fundamental disruption between the imaginary and the real and, consequently, cannot make the utterance immediate. Jabès conveys this insight, for example, in the following assertion, which exposes the double bind of the last word’s “truthfulness”:

Our true face is the one we have in the hour of our death, and death contrives to reduce it to dust.⁴⁹

44 BS, p. 27.

45 BQ II, p. 150.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 409.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

48 LH, p. 27.

49 BQ II, p. 265.

To conclude this section, as a result of *tzimtzum*, writing has a specific structure in which the movement forward is fuelled by heading to one particular point, which is the point of consummation and impossibility at the same time. This point demarcates the “edge of the book,” a moment of ultimate messianic tension in relation to which the entire act of writing is positioned. Because, on coming, it turns out to have already been transcended, it is the condition of possibility of writing, which completes and, also, splits writing through its inaccessibility. Therefore, the experience of *tzimtzum* is impossible, which, in the Jabèsian chiasm, means that *tzimtzum is an impossibility and it is experienced as such*.

The Essence of Messianic Utopia

Consequently, the equality and unity of things that transpire in the messianic fulfilment of writing have the structure of internal impossibility inscribed in them. But, in Jabès, this does not mean solely a limitation as it also has a positive facet to it. For although we cannot experience this unity, *we can generally enunciate it, albeit indirectly*, as it is internally fettered by conditions of utterability. And should such experience be given to us immediately, it would require falling entirely silent in mystical, incommunicable stillness. This, however, is not the case since there is no pure experience. Hence, paradoxically, writing can venture into the realm that this unapproachable silence would occupy even though it can articulate it only mediately. *The fact that all utterance bears the messianic structure of inner impossibility implies that there is no portion of the real that it could not describe*.

Building on this observation, we can explain a very important part of Jabès’ writing, in which he seeks to convey *the relations between things as such*. One of such phrasings has already been quoted: “dust has its compelling reasons as well.” Other statements of this kind locate reflection within things themselves, so to speak: in dust, sand, desert, heaven and the sea:

I come from the desert as one comes from beyond memory. I brought the salvation of sand.
[...] “*The desert is homesick for the sea,*” observed Reb Safad. “*This explains why it fascinates us.*”

[...] *Water obeys water and maintains the fish. Air obeys air and maintains the bird.*⁵⁰

“I am, the tree calls to the tree, and the pebble to the simple pebble.”⁵¹

Great is the freedom of light at the hour the sky grows dim.⁵²

[...] it is certain that the pebble sees the star.⁵³

50 BQ I, pp. 197, 270, 194.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

52 BQ II, p. 173.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

The universe is caught in the point like the sea in a drop of water.⁵⁴

The sea rocks the earth and enfolds it. The wind breaks the wind.⁵⁵

A pebble speaks only to pebbles, but with words of the universe.⁵⁶

"I can't know myself otherwise than through you. But who am I?"

"Does fire know fire?"

"Does wood know wood?"

To the wood it devours, fire owes being fire, just like wood owes ceasing to be wood to the fire, which turns it into ash.⁵⁷

In such sentences Jabès, a writer of the impossible, captures with surprising suggestiveness the sense of relatedness which we could feel were we "things as such." He does it relying on his trademark merger in which things can be attributed specifically human relations and human relationships can be suggested to, at a certain level, have a *thingness* to them. "Seeing," "homesickness," "freedom," "knowledge," indeed, the very "being-something" seem not only to pertain to things but also to be based on *elementary relationships among them*. Consequently, the lines above presuppose a liminal level of reality, where two realms meet: (1) things, which "exist" in undifferentiable continuity; and (2) language, which is inhabited only by the already differentiated objects. We got a glimpse of this liminal level when we described the Jabèsian One and concluded that it was the plane of differentiation as such, where differences emerged, vanished and remained in a specific unity. Now we can elaborate on this depiction to state that *this level is describable only because of the knotting of the world of "language" and the world of "things,"* or of the imaginary and the real, to put it in Jabèsian terms.

Consequently, the internal impossibility, which seems to be a bane of writing, in fact affords it an opportunity to evoke the liminal plane, where the basic structuring of the world comes to light. In this way, writing makes it possible to explore the connection between messianism and formation of reality. This relation is as follows:

The plane where relations "still" exist but "no longer" destroy the unity and equality of things is the essence of messianic utopia. Things simply "are" there, side by side, but no relation reduces one to another. At the same time, relations are like lightnings that illuminate this status of universal equality as they appear briefly enough to show the unity that obtains among things. "Briefly" is just our word, for, in fact, there is no time here and whatever happens has already

54 *Ibid.*, p. 393

55 LH, p. 48.

56 BS, p. 17.

57 P, p. 37.

happened. As in the imaginary, all relations constantly morph into each other, but they lack an immanent, perspectival limitation. *The totality of all possible relations is poised in an ecstatic equality and imbues things with unity.* Utter differentiation and complete unification dovetail in this utopian point.

This plane is both the condition of possibility of the perspectival world and the fulfilment that this world pursues, as viewed from its inside. To leave everything the way it is and, at the same time, to shift it slightly to prevent one thing dominating another – to such Benjaminian and Agambenian messianic insights Jabès could subscribe and, more than that, he could explain why salvation dwells in the gap between things and the language-shaped word

Messianism's Bi-directional Movement

It was Benjamin that posited a specific relationship of language and things. He suggested that messianic transformation involved human efforts targeting not so much other people as things.⁵⁸ Jabès seems to have shared this idea to a degree. As Didier Cahen aptly notices, at the core of Jabès' experience, marked by memories of the desert, lies a desire to "become one with things" [*faire corps avec les choses*],⁵⁹ where we join the realm of things through our corporeality. Moreover, by bringing salvation to things, man can be said to bring salvation to himself as a peculiar thing governed by language.

To explain these propositions, I will now attempt to show that messianic utopia entails both: (1) bringing the human being closer to the realm of things; and (2) giving salvation to things in this way. This is a bi-directional movement that *aims to bridge the gap between the two dimensions.*

I will start from the former. Across his texts, Jabès repeatedly presents things as if they were formed by a unique, internal quasi-order which is, generally, *an asymptote of all order.*

If the tree had no intelligence, it would collapse. If the sea had no intelligence, it would devour itself.⁶⁰

The inside of the pebble is written [*est écrit*].

From time immemorial [*de tout temps*] and for ever [*pour toujours*] legible.⁶¹

58 See Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 68.

59 Cahen, "Jalons," p. 264.

60 BQ I, p. 194.

61 LH, p. 13.

In the first passage, “intelligence” is the inner ordering of things, due to which they can continue. But unlike the perspectival order of the imaginary, this ordering does not issue from one system that gives life to particular objects. On the contrary, things survive “in themselves” and “by their intelligence.” Of course, Jabès relies here on Kant’s insights as his “things” are sovereign, not subordinated to the order of knowledge and endowed with an ability to last. Separated from knowledge by a transcendental boundary, their realm seems to be shaped by the “writing of reality itself” as expressed in the second passage. What may this writing be? Let us postulate that it is *the structure of reality before the perspectival reduction*.

Of course, “the inside of the pebble” evoked by Jabès is not the inside of the pebble as an object, but its thingness, which is structurally inaccessible to us. This is where this peculiar writing is located of which *this pebble as a thing is an entity*. Notably, Jabès makes two assumptions in Kant’s spirit: (1) things are inaccessible to knowledge and “resist” the linguistic meaning embodied in their bare materiality; and (2) on this inaccessible plane, there is a writing, full of order which our finite orders cannot reach. The relation among things as entities of this writing would consist in co-existing in one reality, in an ultimate space which holds everything that has ever existed. At the same time, it is a realm of the real time, as Jabès suggests in an ambiguous last verse of the second passage: the inside of the pebble preserves “all time” – that is, unreduced time – and, as such, remains essentially beyond time as we know it.

Thus for Jabès, the realm of things would be a writing that we cannot comprehend – the complete writing in which the particular does not become a unit of an a-priori order but co-exists with other particularities. The movement of messianism would head towards this fullness.

Yet Jabès posits also an opposite movement – one progressing from things to language. Why? Because the fullness of things needs articulation to sustain its elementary differentiation:

Does the sound of the see prove the existence of sound or of the sea?
 And the silence of the sky?
 Dependent on *saying* [*du dire*],
 on the cry.⁶²

It takes the simplest possible enunciation, such as the cry, for things to be brought forth from the unity of the real. In other words, things need language to illuminate the connection between their unity and differentiation. Messianism cannot

62 BM, p. 86.

thus entail siding entirely with their “fullness.” For it is not fullness in as far as it would not be visible as fullness on being accomplished and, consequently, would in fact contain less than the world before the messianic repair.⁶³ This suggests a paradox that triggers messianism’s bi-directional movement. Embracing entirely either side – things or language – is a reduction. *If salvation were to salvage the fullness of the world, it would have to remain poised on the liminal line of the nexus-division of the two realms.*

This helps us proceed to the conclusion of this Chapter, define what Jabès’ messianism consists in and formulate its implications for modern philosophy.

There Is No Salvation Beyond Writing

Jabèsian messianism is an inevitable consequence of *tzimtzum*. It is a movement which seeks to overcome *tzimtzum* and, in the same gesture, only returns to it, discovering its own condition of possibility. Because of *tzimtzum*, in each tangled realm – of the real and the imaginary, or of “language” and “things” – a surplus appears and induces messianism’s bi-directional movement. *At its core, thus, messianic utopia means entering the central gap between the imaginary and the real, a gap that is tzimtzum.*

From the perspective of this gap, things appear as an *already* uttered and, thus, broken fullness while language as a system stamped with a central lack, elimination of which seems to lie in the fullness of things. As such, this gap is a place whence the world reveals itself in its extreme rupture between the two realms. *For it is also a place which negatively fills this rupture.* For this reason, by reaching this point, one experiences the world in the extremity of its internal disruption between “things” and “language,” and one takes at the same time the position of the void that binds this disruption. This relation is explicit in the act of writing, which in its messianic attempt both becomes nothing, veritably vanishing in *tzimtzum*, and seems to sustain the entire structure of reality.

Jabèsian messianism stems directly from conjoining “things” and “language.” Whatever content a particular order of the act of writing invests in its messianic attempt, the possibility and effect of this attempt are based on the structure of movement it undergoes. Notably, the *content* is here entirely secondary to the

63 In this sense, Motte is right to claim that Jabès’ writing as such is fuelled by a permanent split between words and things, which wrestle with each other but never achieve harmony. See Motte, “Jabès’ Words,” pp. 146–7. “Harmony” would indeed be a deprivation rather than a repair of the world.

pattern of *forces* that compel the emergence and failure of this content. Jabès' messianism can thus be said to be structural and circular.

Consequently, it is impossible to abide in the gap sought by writing. The place appears in permanent dislocation – either nearing or bygone – and manifests itself briefly only in one, outermost moment of the “edge of the book.” Therefore, in the Jabèsian act of writing, its end is its sole goal, both expected and postponed – an object of fear and hope. Characteristically, it takes the entire cycle of the “book,” from the originary *tzimtzum* to the final catastrophe, to hit this central, still-sought point. In each act of writing, it is given once only.

Admittedly, Jabès' messianism is based on the structure of circular movement, but *reaching the empty centre of each cycle is a radically singular event*. It is a paradoxical point where particularity and universalism fold into each other because even though it seems to recur in subsequent acts, these repetitions are incommensurable. So the point of *tzimtzum* is an inseverable linkage between the quasi-universal structure and the fulfilment of one, unrepeatable act of writing. Since the two realms intersect, the moment of messianic failure is the only event that eludes any description by virtue of its radical singularity. At the same time, because of this intersecting, Jabès' thought is admittedly circular, but each cycle is a necessary deferral on the way to knowing the *once-given, particular* point, which irreversibly perishes and makes room for another one.⁶⁴

Consequently, Jabès is compelled to “practise” rather than describe *tzimtzum*. All his mature works are devoted to experiencing this specific structure that binds the cycle to the space in which the cycle's central point of *tzimtzum* is inscribed as something absolutely singular. The singularity of the cycle is embodied first and foremost in the book. Purification and simplification of language help Jabès, however, encapsulate this structure even in a single sentence, with his aphorisms forming a “microbook,” a circle that fuses the beginning and the end of its order, singular as a whole.

Still, a question offers itself whether Jabès' messianism is only fulfilled in writing or perhaps entails a “real” change in the world.

64 Gabriel Bounoure aptly grasps the radical novelty ushered in by every new messianic attempt: “As the last word falls silent, nothing more can be known. And even that which is now known is darker than what was known before. Still, a transformation has taken place which will help us kindle other flames of questioning in an entirely new form. [...] The questioning thought pushes relentlessly towards the extreme, the contradictory and the negative, towards impossible truths. The ever more extreme extreme to which it heads tirelessly and without end: this is the unity of the Book.” See Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, pp. 94, 98.

The answer is far from obvious because *tzimtzum* and messianism it produces seem to Jabès to structure the entire world given to us. He views Jewish history as patent evidence that messianic hope and its failure are responsible for real and traumatic events. Consequently, in the Hegelian and Marxian spirit, it could be assumed that by recognising the structure of *tzimtzum* and messianism we will be able at least to influence our own history. Yet Jabès' work seems to suggest that, paradoxically, knowledge of the messianic structure, best available in writing, does not offer any *applicable* knowledge. It offers only an experience of messianism and an unstoppable desire to repeat it. Writing is a privileged site for messianism, but it is also a trap. It may be, like the point of *tzimtzum*, an empty place where intuiting the messianic structure entails self-loss.

I would posit that, in Jabès' universe, messianism is ubiquitous but, once recognised in writing, *it is henceforth possible only in writing*. For the movement of recognition itself has a messianic structure and, through subsequent cycles, impels the writer to the position of the void. Nothing more: salvation brought to oneself and things only means reaching the central void of *tzimtzum* through writing, and, as such, rather than an ideal accomplished in writing and realisable in the "world," it is an experience intrinsic to writing.

Salvation in writing is exemplified in the following passage from *Le Livre de l'Hospitalité*:

Not a farewell [*adieu*] to things, but – o night! – salvation for things, shimmering back farewells [*miroitantes d'adieux*].⁶⁵

Salvation of things does not mean saying farewell to them, but rather dispatching them to God (*à Dieu*), who could support them. Salvation is a coming "night" in which we co-exist and co-reflect ("*miroitantes*" reverberates with "*miroir*" – a mirror) with things in a state of equality. The word ("*adieu*") is replaced by a shimmer – reflection. Things thus shimmer back. In the last verse, "*adieu*" is no longer a farewell but a reflection of non-God, of God's absence (*a-dieux*), in which things dissolve.

*Salvation is, thus, an effect of writing; it is a moment when, as the word fades away, language leaves the thing alone, letting it be.*⁶⁶ And we, watching the dusk fall,

65 LH, p. 19.

66 As Stéphane Mosès rightly observes, such passages in Jabès are similar to Benjamin's "constellations" as words mutate in them from vehicles of meaning to a material arrangement of signs, a thing. See Stéphane Mosès, "Edmond Jabès," p. 47. The messianic effect results from the fact that a text morphs into a thing while language abandons itself, so to speak, and strays from its own formulation, looking at it as at a thing moving away.

feel that we have reached the line between language and thing and, with it, achieved the state of messianic equality.

Conclusion: Jabès' Messianism and Modern Philosophy

Throughout this Chapter, the structure of Jabès' messianism has often been shown to be deeply embedded in modern philosophy. First, it is an effect of perspectivism and, by inducing ever new attempts at definitive understanding, it enhances perspectivism even more. Jabès' writing resembles Benjamin's Angel of History, who tries to collect past ruins, but his drive only adds to them. Second, messianic failure is essentially akin to an entire bundle of issues explored by Kant and Hegel, such as the status of "things in themselves" and transcendental boundary, the relation of a continuous series to singularity and the link between time and knowledge. Third, an attempt at definitive understanding integral to Jabèsian messianism is similar to Hegelian absolute knowledge and, in its failure, also to the fate of Hegelianism, i.e. the confrontation with time it cannot survive. Fourth, the specific combination of circularity and unique course of happening/enowning links Jabès' messianism to Nietzsche's concept of eternal return. Finally, the possibility-impossibility structure inherent to Jabèsian messianism is the same one that Derridean deconstruction tackles later.

Clearly, in its messianic investment, Jabès' thought discovers the same structures that an essential portion of Western philosophy has explored since Kant. At the same time, explicit references to Jewish tradition help the Jabès describe these structures in a language adequate to them. The intertwining of messianism and *tzimtzum* explains the hope that writing finds in movement⁶⁷ while the historical burden of Jewish messianism explains why this hope persists through subsequent failures. Finally, uncompromising monotheism results in maintaining a radical difference between the Messiah and God. To put it philosophically, this difference designates the incommensurability of the messianic attempt and the realm its failure reveals – a realm which not only transcends it, but also in which it has been inscribed since the beginning.

67 Of course, messianism is not necessarily connected to *tzimtzum*. In the Talmud, Yochanan ben Zakkai says that the created world has preserved an immanent tendency to catastrophe, a will of fall, expressed in an unquenchable desire to gain infinite knowledge, which results in another fall. See Raphael Draï, *La pensée juive et l'interrogation divine. Exégèse et épistémologie* (Paris: PUF, 1996), p. 106. Still, *tzimtzum* explains how the messianic attempt is engendered by the primal limitation.

Do these links between Jewish tradition and modern philosophy offer implications for the latter? After all, the structures of secular messianism have lingered in modern philosophy at least since Kant, motivating the internal movement of Hegel's philosophy, making an imprint on Marx's and Nietzsche's thought, essentially affecting, under their own name, 20th-century thinking in, for example, Benjamin, Bloch and Rosenzweig, and being compellingly revived in our times in Derrida's mature thought, Badiou's concept of an event, Žižek's philosophy and Agamben's reflection. That such different philosophers can be listed meaningfully in one sentence is made possible by the power of the messianic structure. What is it that Jabès' messianism can tell us about messianism of modern philosophy?

First, it suggests that messianic hope should be viewed in its proper context, that is, not as a real chance of salvation but as an effect and expansion of the catastrophe. In this perspective, the very idea of going beyond the modern pattern of messianism-as-failure is, in itself, an execution of this pattern. Always appearing a viable and only chance, the endeavour fully to overcome the fragmentation in place is a mechanism that serves this very fragmentation. In other words, the problem is not that there is no way out. On the contrary, there is a way out, and this is exactly a pitfall because the way leads to another failure and expansion of ruins. Claiming everything, we extend the modern desert. For this reason, Jabès can insist that "all we do by writing is [...] to throw ink on the fire."⁶⁸

Jabès seems to reverse the proportions as his messianism, rather than a quasi-Gnostic expectation of intervention entirely heterogeneous with respect to the modern world, is an intrinsic component of this world. Perhaps this insight can help us think a completely different kind of messianism, one Kafka seems to have suggested.⁶⁹ It would be a messianism exhausted in a fleeting thought that

68 BQ II, p. 394.

69 In his Zürau notes, Kafka wrote: "A first sign of the beginning of understanding is a wish to die. This life appears unbearable, another unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wanting to die; one asks to be moved from the old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one will only in time come to hate. In this there is also a residue of belief that during the move the master will chance to come along the corridor, look at the prisoner and say: 'This man is not to be locked up again. He is to come with me.'" Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, trans. Ernst Keiser and Eithne Wilkins, ed. Max Brod (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1991), p. 88. This unexpected liberation can be interpreted as a messianism whose idea is unalloyed with unredeemed reality and, as such, refers to the complete end of the heretofore order, including messianism of failure it contains.

cannot be developed without being entangled in the inevitability of failure. Such messianism would be an idea of a sudden and unanticipated liberation. It can be understood as putting all logic of the modern universe to an end. Still, Jabès does not opt for such messianism and, rather, implies that all attempts to think about transcending this universe are doomed to be sucked back into its movement.

Another implication for modern philosophy would be a protest against pessimism potentially bred by “messianism of failure.” Jabès seems to call for a sober balance of profit and loss that messianism produces. Besides the obvious loss of repeated failure, there is also a profit of successive, unrepeatable acts of understanding. Admittedly, “after its spectacular victory in the very wreck of its unity, the world will be destroyed by the world as man is every night by man,”⁷⁰ yet each new act of understanding leaves something fundamentally new behind. To Jabès, every word is the first one, claims Stéphane Mosès.⁷¹ More than that: *the radical novelty of each subsequent act is possible only because of the utter perishment of the previous one*. At the price of total failure, we are thus given a possibility of obtaining a fleeting and entirely new glimpse of the world:

All is the origin. Nothing is invented. All and nothing are repeated. O miracle of repetition – a regular escape to All, a passionate return to the origin [...].
We could never tell the old language from the new.
Repetition is our subversive way; for it moves by an inborn need to destroy and be destroyed [...].
Repetition is a chance for continual change.
[...] “You are never twice either the same or the other,” he said.⁷²

Messianism thus paves the way to continual change.⁷³ Furthermore, it is only through messianism that we can explore that “All” and “Nothing” in their mutual

70 BQ II, p. 112

71 Mosès, “Edmond Jabès,” p. 45.

72 LR I, p. 88.

73 This passage implies that messianism not only introduces constant change but also precludes stable identities as the breaking between hope and failure is imprinted on everything that exists. For this reason “being” itself fears its own fulfilment and, internally halved, both wants to and cannot arrive. Therefore Jabès writes: “The night hesitates before the forbidden night. This moment’s hesitation clinches the vertigo above the abyss, salutary halt at the fatal edge of time. ‘Even death is afraid of death.’” (BQ II, p. 158).

“Hope: the following page. Do not close the book.”

“I have turned all the pages of the book without finding hope.”

“Perhaps hope is the book.” (BQ I, p. 243).

“The word would have to revive before we could approach its life [...]” (BQ II, p. 150).

relations. And, finally, it is through messianism that we are given an experience of pure duration after failure, which means the experience of God in Jabès.

*Jabès seems to urge to recognise messianism in all its complexity, that is, in the inextricable and arduous nexus of hope and hopelessness.*⁷⁴ For modern philosophy, this would mean an injunction to become aware of its intrinsic messianic component, to realise that the depth and novelty of its acts of recognition come at the price of radical transience and to think on despite being conscious that thinking leaves a vastness of ruins. This implies a third conclusion – the necessity of repetition. Because of Jabès' messianism, *no statement is capable of stopping the movement of understanding*; even understanding the structure of this movement cannot accomplish the feat. Hence the coercion of repetition, which in Jabès is often also a celebration of reiteration:

“You repeat yourself. You say the same all the time. You have grown old,” said Reb Saman to Reb Jaffe.

“Indeed, I say the same all the time; but is the moment a following moment? The other that comes from me says every time what I said long ago; this is my way to survive, through these few words, my truth,” he answered.⁷⁵

Repetition is not a nihilism of disappointed old age but, each time, a new truth that suits the moment when it emerges. Because there is no continuity in time, *formulating subsequent truths is a way to survive, that is to out-last, subsequent moments of one's own dissolution.*

What does it entail for modern philosophy? It means that successive radical acts of understanding, such as Hegel's absolute knowledge, are not *errors* to be avoided in search of a simple, “local” and time-immune reflection. On the contrary, Jabèsian messianism seems to suggest that the scale of the philosophical attempt and the sheer magnitude of its catastrophe lie at the core of philosophising in the modern world. Of course, not all philosophy in modernity is compelled to practise it, but universality of this messianism makes its *movement* reproduce, with more or less precision, the cycle opened by *tzimtzum*. This implies that philosophy resolved to seek a radical act of understanding produces at least one effect: it illumines messianism that conditions it. Through its own failure,

“*The word will start from Nothing in order to dissolve in the All*” (*Ibid.*, p. 225).

“*Developing a thought means first of all the death of this thought for the benefit of another, which chance or its own strict requirements raised to strike it down in turn*” (*Ibid.*, p. 242).

74 The connection is conveyed, for example, in: “Faith buries faith for the promised resurrection” (BQ I, p. 301).

75 PHD, p. 122.

it represents the discontinuity of time and affirms itself as an unrepeatable act of understanding suited to one moment only rather than as *philosophia perennis*. Jabès' thought indicates what sense philosophising makes if determined in advance by a perspectival messianic structure. It does make sense but not because it finds universal, time-defying truths (though this remains philosophy's inalienable utopia). What sense does it make then? Following Jabèsian thinking, we could say that it makes sense in two respects.

First, philosophy's role is to *put an end to the claim of radical understanding*, which is part and parcel of each perspectival order of knowledge. In other words, philosophy is to reveal and appraise the messianic element of this order. What for? To unveil its originary limitation and, thus, to show how the primordial gap of *tzimtzum* opens and closes an entire world form. This intent would not only be deconstructive towards orders which make claims to timeless truth but, first of all, serve to render happening as such since happening, as Jabès conceives of it, means the rise and decline not so much of beings as of *entire orders*.

Second, philosophy could use this practice to examine the very structure of the modern world, which we have described following Jabès. In other words, particular orders of knowledge would serve it as *elements* which, in their movement of emergence and failure, render a grid of forces that eludes any substantive account. Evidently, a similar expectation has been more or less explicitly articulated in modern philosophy since its dawn. As early as in Kant, philosophy explored conditions of possibility of *concrete species of metaphysics*; and in Hegel, the object of philosophy was the movement of *particular forms of knowledge*, therein various forms of philosophy. In other words, the former and, in intent, complete philosophical frameworks were turned into entities whose movement only served to infer conclusions. Compared with Kant and Hegel, Jabès looks nevertheless as an advocate of a general simplification, reducing the content of particular elements to a bare minimum and scrutinising the very principles of their movement. They are reduced to pure differences that help grasp the movement from *tzimtzum* to failure. Entities arising in this movement would serve to support reflection on the space of all instances of *tzimtzum* (Jabès' Book), which could become a new philosophical concept.

This leads to a third, and final, implication concerning the relation between Jabès' messianism and modern philosophy. Namely, philosophy that follows the path of this messianism is a *practice of writing* – an activity that transcends the existing ideas of literature and philosophy. Neither theoretical nor practical, the activity constantly fathoms the rise and messianic fall.

What lies at stake in this practice should not be neglected, and Jabès' mature work is, in fact, devoted to chiselling it. Constituting the *shared* "zero level" of

literature and philosophy, the practice relies on simplification to reveal the structure *it produces in the very movement of its simplification*. That the shared, reduced plane combining literature and philosophy is at all possible is both a reason for and an outcome of writing. This paradoxical loop shows that Jabès' idea that "sources precede us" concerns the foundations of his thinking. The practice of writing is a sovereign movement in the sense that it produces its own conditions of possibility. Ultimately, it resists the question whether it indeed reveals some structural patterns of the modern age or just presupposes them itself. This indeterminacy is perhaps its most modern facet. Finally, the only thing that could be said about modern philosophy turned practice of writing would be: *it is*.

