

## 7 The Concept of the Book

We have discussed Jabèsian messianism. Now let us address the Book, one of his central and, at the same time, most interesting quasi-concepts. In the previous Chapters, I outlined the Book as the space of all possible points of *tzimtzum* and, thus, of all possible constellations of the imaginary and the real. We know also that the singularity of the Book contrasts with the multiplicity of books, just like the singleness of God contrasts with the multitude of messianic acts.<sup>1</sup> In this Chapter, I will elaborate on these preliminary insights and propose a philosophical concept of the Book.<sup>2</sup>

To start with, I will show that this concept contains two basic components which, drawing on Jabès' quasi-Kabbalistic metaphors, I will refer to as *the whiteness of the Book* and *the script of the Book*. With this initial distinction in place, I will discuss each of the components in some detail. Whiteness is related to three categories: (1) continuity and legibility; (2) survival; and (3) succession. The script of the Book, as we will see, is a specifically conceived history. Having described the components of the Book, I will depict the significance of this concept. In particular, I will attempt to show that, because of the Book, philosophical

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1 The capitalised "Book" appears in Jabès relatively late and is more frequently used in *The Book of Resemblances* cycle. Still, in *The Book of Questions*, similar connotations are evoked by *le livre* (the book) as opposed to *un livre* (a book).

In the following, I discuss the idea of the "Book" as defined and interpreted in the light of Jabès' reflection on both *le Livre* and *le livre*. Importantly, not all instances of the former in Jabès' texts designate "the Book" as understood here. As with other quasi-concepts, each passage must be separately interpreted in terms of the meanings it attributes to the even non-capitalised "book."

2 Notably, as Motte observes, Jabès' idea of the Book is indebted both to the sacred and secular traditions, gradually developing the concept inspired equally by the Talmud and Aristotle, the Kabbalah and Mallarmé. He pits these traditions in a heated dialogue, in which each questions the other ones. Motte, "Hospitable Poetry," p. 40. Capitalising the "Book," the poet seems to allude to the Bible as the only proper book and, concomitantly, to a writer's ultimate book – his *opus magnum*. Cf. Matthew Del Nevo, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," *Literature & Theology*, 10/4 (December 1996), pp. 301–36, on p. 307. The Bible is indisputably central in this context, as Del Nevo rightly claims (*Ibid.*). Still, Jabès' ontology should also be factored in as the Book is the Bible in the aftermath of his version of *tzimtzum* and, as such, is founded on God's non-existence. While the Bible was permeated with Divine presence, the Book is there because of God's withdrawal.

knowledge – a definitive, lone act – is replaced by ceaseless writing. This conclusion will come from a comparison of the Jabèsian Book with Hegel's Absolute and Mallarmé's "Book." To conclude, I will ponder the relevance of the thus-conceived Book to Jewish philosophy of modernity.

## Introduction: The Layers of the Book

Let us first establish how the concept of the Book is structured. To do so, we need to revisit our previous insights concerning "the end of the book."

Reading Jabès' texts suggests, crucially, that the end of the book is bound up with a traumatic experience. Jabès himself talked about the fits of asthma which would repeatedly bother him whenever he was finishing a book – as if the rhythm of the book itself emulated breathing in and out.<sup>3</sup> In writing, this torment is envisaged in the recurring visions of the "abyss" and "darkness." The following passage perfectly exemplifies this imagery:

The hour to abandon his book had come.

He took it in his hands not to reread it, but with a long, gentle caress fingered page after page, line after line in order to soothe and close forever the thousand questioning eyes fixed on him, words [*vocables*] of which, at the end of the abyss, only a stare was left.

Immediately, all the stars in the sky went out. He felt paralyzed facing utter night, the absolute negative of the unknowable.

It is not nothingness that roots us to the spot, but the sight of the Void [*la vision du Rien*].<sup>4</sup>

What is it that happens at the end of the book? So pliable before, the words suddenly become *vocables*: something substantial and thing-like – lumps of matter that reflect meaning. They do not explain the world anymore but, through their bare materiality, side with the inexplicable. Additionally, they begin to *stare* at the writer. The book he wrote is becoming not only radically alien to him but also capable of gazing. As the night of absolute negativity falls, Nothing crops up. The unimaginable horror of the unknowable is paralleled by a momentary, *frozen gaze* of the paralysed writer, reflected in the gaze of Nothing itself. This Lacanian conjunction of the gaze and the Real reveals something about the Book; namely, *confronting it is a trauma of being seen by something far more powerful than we are*. The gaze of Nothing itself is an aspect of the Book.

3 IEJ, pp. 15–16. This declaration should undoubtedly be read in the context of Lurianic *tzimtzum*, with its connotations of "exhaling."

4 BS, pp. 86–7.

But this does not describe the Book fully. Further, *The Book of Shares* says:  
 For the first time he felt weightless. Unburdened to an extreme degree. Disintegrated. O  
 ashes of contentious immortality within God's radiant immortality in ashes.  
 Dust. Dust. God turns away from Himself.  
 Could He accept His defeat calmly? Lasting history of dust. History of man and the  
 universe.  
 Have we not paid dearly for our shared dream of eternity?  
 And did God know that immortality was only the other side of death?<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the book, the writer is obliterated together with the order that produced him. He turns into "dust." But his "own" experience is accompanied by a *vision* of past annihilations: of a vast, layered expanse of "dust," of the ruins of the past, with God-the-Creator lying amidst them. The end of the book is the instant when the writer is included in this space. What can it be other than the sequence of "having been read" by the "ultimate reader" – by absent God, for whom the failing messianic act is just one of many?

So, essentially, "the end of the book" is not a uniform moment. It is split into: (1) a solitary confrontation with Nothing; and (2) the vision of joining, as "dust," the rubble of all past failures. This rubble is thus another aspect of the Book, besides its traumatising gaze. The two elements seem to be mutually entangled. For, importantly, the writer cannot contemplate this space of ruins directly. If not, how can he glimpse a vision of it? The answer is that, confronting Nothing as "the ultimate reader," the writer is spotted and destroyed by it. *Without the condition of his radical loneliness in the face of Nothing being lifted*, the writer can however think future confrontations with it. It is from the very position of "dust" to which he has been reduced that he surmises about the space of "dust" accumulated in the former failures of understanding. His thinking about the past wreckage is only possible through the mediation of Nothing. For Nothing, as the place of ultimate scrutiny, is not accessible to the writer, yet *the gaze it reciprocates* enables him to conclude about the space that such gaze alone can see.

Consequently, the gaze of Nothing is the ultimate guarantee of (utterly paradoxical) continuity between particular symbolic orders, i.e. books in Jabès' lexicon.<sup>6</sup> The place whence this gaze looks is inaccessible from any point within the

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5 *Ibid.*

6 Jabès called the period between one book and another "*the book of torment*" (BS, p. 3). See also Waldrop, *Lavish absence*, p. 97. This "Book of Torment" was in fact a *link* between subsequent books and a plane of unbearable discontinuity, whose gaze could be averted only by a new writing design.

Jabèsian universe; indeed, as Jabès suggests, the place holds the eye of God, i.e. the most non-existent one. The burden of Nothing gazing at various orders is one of perennial themes in the Jabès' writings, particularly in *Elya*.<sup>7</sup>

Jabès envisages a plane where all orders are situated side by side. This is the negative of Hegel's Absolute as no point of reconciliation is envisaged where one could say "The Absolute speaks through me." On the contrary, referring to Nothing, one can only say "I am looked at by it." Unlike the Hegelian philosopher, the writer cannot gaze at unity himself and can only see its reflexion in Nothing's gaze fixed on himself. As such, Jabès' thought seems to expose a fundamental distortion in Hegel's philosophy: real unity that it attributes to absolute knowledge is possible, but *only in the place of Nothing*. Absolute knowledge does not recognise unity by itself but only *triggers the gaze that Nothing turns to it*. In this gaze, knowledge sees a reflexion of the actual co-existence of all orders. Consequently, the Jabèsian writer is not faced with the problem that secretly gnawed the Hegelian philosopher, i.e. How can the validity of absolute knowledge be maintained after the book has been written? For the writer, a flash of "absolute knowledge" comes the moment *after* the book is written, in the perishment of the book.

While Hegel espouses the "Greek" notion of seeing as the co-presence and the consequent equality of the seeing and the seen, Jabès deems such seeing to be inaccessible. With seeing always coming out in displacement as an act in which the writer is passive, "seeing" in Jabès is only imaginary while *having been read*, i.e. an act that has always already taken place, is a real category.

In the light of this argument, the Book in Jabès seems to consist of two tightly interconnected and interdependent "layers." One of them is the very *plane* of ultimate continuity between discontinuous orders, that is, the plane of "Nothing," absent God and "the ultimate reader." Employing Jabès' metaphors, let us call it *the whiteness of the Book*. Superimposed "on" this layer, so to speak, there is

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7 To provide just a handful of passages from *Elya*:

"An eye catches and leads me astray. Though seen I cannot see myself.  
 [...] "Do not think walls can keep you apart," he said. "They are pierced by an eye which belongs to no one." Eye of a world without God or of God without the world?  
 [...] Eye is absence opening its lid.  
 [...] God's eye is everywhere. / The void is a voyer.  
 ("An eye for an eye, / the look insists." "How come God refused to take this risk?")  
 [...] From the other side of death, the desert stares at us with our own eyes.  
 [...] *For the word, the invisible is the silence where God defines himself.*  
*To learn to see where there is no more world.*" BQ II, pp. 213, 217, 231, 266, 278.

another one: a layer of particular orders – “books” – that co-exist due to this whiteness. Let us call it the *script of the Book*.

Notably, the traumatic experience of the whiteness of the Book, which appears at the end of the writing act makes it possible to think the script of the Book, i.e. the past of all failures. Therefore, the Book is never given directly but only in its liminal moment between the whiteness and the script, which point is, at the same time, *the liminal moment of a single book – its end*. It is only because of this interrelatedness that we can think of the Book

## Whiteness: Continuity and Legibility

I will now discuss the concept of the Book in more detail and focus first on its former aspect. For Jabès, whiteness is where the definitively finished book is connected to the next book – a site of their shared inscription:

From book to book, the blank space is place and bond.<sup>8</sup>

Since whiteness is a *place*, it can, but does not have to, hold objects (script). It can also be empty, and then it is an irreducible surplus – pure duration, which transcends script. In both cases, whiteness is that which *carries on* and connects over existence and over meaning. For if script is definitively divided by discontinuity, *this very discontinuity* can be said to *bring script together*. To script, whiteness is discontinuity, yet on its own, whiteness is an ultimate plane that stretches across both script and where there is no script. Whiteness is always a substratum though, *for writing*, its pure form is a token of discontinuity. “Continuity can only be assumed in the break...”<sup>9</sup> insists Jabès. Moreover, with this reversal of the regular relation between continuity and discontinuity, *whiteness is presence while script is absence*, for Jabès. Combined, the two make up the Book:

“In the book,” he said, “writing means absence, and the empty page, presence.

Thus God, who is absence, is present in the book.”<sup>10</sup>

Whiteness is present just like the absence of God is present. Writing, however, is absent. Why is it so? Exploring Jabèsian thought, we are led to realise that for this “script” to be script at all, it must presuppose a specific plane. Script (1) constantly refers to it; (2) repudiates it; and (3) includes it as a place from

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8 BQ II, p. 369.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

which it can be read – all at the same time. Jabès believes that script can be both defined and singularised in relation to whiteness only if it persists in referring to the ultimate place from which this definition and singularisation can be seen; otherwise, such a script would be altogether impossible. *Whiteness* must be presupposed to be *the very condition of possibility of there being anything particular*. Paradoxically enough, it turns out that an inaccessible plane of continuity is necessary for discontinuity to be “seen” in Jabèsian language and, consequently, to be distinguishable. To articulate this thought in a self-echoing paradox, *continuity in discontinuity is a precondition of legibility*.

And yet, separate in order to be recognised – for do we not need the blank space [between *vocables*], the fraction of silence between words [*paroles*] to read or hear them? – the words [*vocables*] have no tie to one another except this absence.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, any particularity is possible only when it is assumed to be readable from the plane where it is inscribed together with other similar particularities. In other words, any particularity must presuppose being a passive element in the relation of being read, something that “is seen” but itself does not “see.” This assumption determines its inner construction.

We can now explain why “whiteness is presence while script is absence.” It is not about conferring a permanent ontological status on whiteness or script but about grasping their dynamic relationships. Script, namely, as consisting of units, must assume a constantly present plane which transcends it and from which the finitude of this script can be seen. In other words, script presupposes whiteness as a dimension that continues where script itself has already finished. As such, script bears an imprint of a relation in which *it is already absent and this absence is corroborated by the sustained presence of whiteness*.

Clearly, Jabès does not ascribe any stable ontological presence to whiteness, Nothing, God and the like. They are all *places* which the finite must assume to be able to recognise itself as the finite. This produces a highly interesting consequence as thus-conceived whiteness is an internal assumption of perspectivism. To think the fragmentation of the world into many incommensurable perspectives, it seems necessary to contrive a place of their continuity. Of course, this place is not accessible directly, for it transcends each perspective within which it could be grasped; but *the structure of its presupposed and deferred presence* is imprinted on all perspectives. As such, they refer to one plane which, admittedly, cannot be said to be shared by them (as in each perspective this plane is a trace

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11 BM, p. 84.

only) but which recurs as the place of reference. This breeds Jabèsian repetition, which means, each time, that something so radically singular comes forth that its singularity indicates the imagined repeatability.

Let us conclude our argument so far. In Jabès' universe, all "being" has a dual condition. First, it belongs to a particular symbolic order, which forms it and subsumes it into the continuity of its temporal series. Second, this very order is finite and, in its finitude, presupposes its own inscription in the plane of whiteness. This plane cannot be said to "exist" since it only recurs as a trace in particular orders. Yet, each of these traces is a result of this plane being assumed as, by definition, an inaccessible plane of continuity from which a given order is looked at. In this way – through double external mediation – orders merge by assuming themselves to inhabit one place. This place is the whiteness of the Book.<sup>12</sup>

### Whiteness: The Awe of Excess and Sur-vival

Whiteness is thus that which structurally transcends finitude and comes across as its excess. The end of a book is a privileged place of whiteness. But, in fact, whiteness ensues wherever *something senseless that is the condition of possibility of sense comes forth after sense has collapsed*. Therefore, whiteness is wherever something finite comes to an end against the backdrop of a plane endlessly persevering in its excessiveness.<sup>13</sup> It is not for no reason, as Jasper observes, that

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12 In the "Letter to Jacques Derrida on the Question of the Book," Jabès cites the vision of medieval kabbalist Isaac the Blind and writes that the book is written in black fire on white fire. The metaphor was polysemous to the Kabbalah scholars, such as Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel; nevertheless, it undoubtedly rendered the relation between the written and the oral Torah. According to Idel, the true written Torah is white fire, which forms the substance on which writing is performed while, paradoxically, black fire is the secondary oral Thora. In Scholem, in turn, white fire symbolises the oral Torah from which the written Torah emerges (cf. a discussion of this problem in Del Nevo, "Edmond Jabès and Kabbalism after God," pp. 408–9). Whichever version of the Torah is given precedence in Isaac's original metaphor, what it means in Jabès seems clear in the light of my foregoing argument. Whiteness is the basic raw material of reality as its continuity and present absence whereas that which exists is a particular negation of whiteness just as the black ink vis-à-vis a blank page. Still, to come into being and be read, black needs white. By the same token, existence comes into being against the "background" of continuing reality by setting itself against the present absence. Therefore, his absence – whiteness – founds everything that exists.

13 In another passage Jabès relies on another metaphor: "Sound diminishes sound. 'Between the lines of the book,' you said, 'there are levels of absence.' The bottom of the page is everlasting absence" (BQ II, p. 403). In this vision, "the bottom of the page"

a blank space conjures up a vision of the desert in Jabès.<sup>14</sup> The desert, for one, cannot be destroyed because destruction only expands it; and, additionally, by simply continuing, the desert exposes the finitude of things that enter it.

Jabès suggests that two fundamental modes of experiencing this interrelatedness of duration and excessiveness are life and writing. I will now focus on the two, starting with life. The following passage continues the description of the book quoted above:

“When God wanted to destroy the earth, a great fire burst from the ground sweeping Him into the conflagration.

– But God is not dead.

When God wanted to blot out the sea, a giant wave broke from the others and carried Him off in its fury.

– But God is not dead.

When man opened the book and shattered it – o, grief! – a ravaged landscape lay before his eyes. And he drowned in his tears.

– But man still exists. Here is the miracle,” he said.<sup>15</sup>

Though drawn into a whirlpool of destruction, God and man live on instead of dying. What does this “life” mean? Blanchot would say that it means surviving beyond the disaster – the impossibility of death. Evidently, life in this sense surfaces, according to Jabès, only where it is inexplicable and where its pure duration crosses its demarcated limits:

“Life is at the end [...] Life is at the end, I am sure of it ... And at the end there is nothing.”<sup>16</sup>

Life is in survival.<sup>17</sup>

Characteristically, “the end” – the outermost point that determines the symbolic order – is bound up with the appearance of “nothing,” which is at the same time a form of “life.” Like in the presence-absence dialectics of whiteness and script, life is both an absent thing (in its utter senselessness and indeterminacy) and the only present thing (in its persistent continuation where finitude has passed). As

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is everlasting silence, which however is not absence but, rather, the lowest level of the sound – a silence from which all sound itself from to come into existence. Like whiteness, “everlasting silence” is present absence, an element that makes both writing and sound possible, a fullness from which singularity sets itself apart.

14 Jasper, *Sacred Desert*, p. 85.

15 BS, p. 87.

16 BQ I, p. 126.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

such, life is knowable only in the moments of the end, binding them and determining their legibility. Failure, particularly the failure of the book – that is, of understanding – reactively illumines life. For this reason it is “survival” – *survivre* – both “living-thought” and “living-on.”<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, Jabès views life as a traumatic experience. Its incomprehensible continuity despite subsequent debacles inspires awe – admiration and dread alike. This is also what makes living more difficult than not living:

You have to be mad to accept death, and wise to resign yourself to living.<sup>19</sup>

“To resign yourself to living” is not a fortuitous turn of phrase as life is not a simple choice but rather the more difficult of two options. It is not natural and primordially given; rather, it is a predicament that takes resigning to. To Jabès, life is more of a burden than death is, for life forces one to face up to duration, which is not clothed in sense:

Anguish at the flight of hours, not because I fear death, but because it is impossible to live, impossible to follow.<sup>20</sup>

Still, the sage chooses life, his choice is consonant with the spirit of Jewish messianism, described above, in which the failure of an attempt is, indeed, despair, nonsense and the end of everything, yet also something that is sur-vived traumatically while watching bare duration annihilate meaning. “The Jew expects each day to live,”<sup>21</sup> states Jabès, suggesting that life is never *here* but always *afterwards* and, as such, must be waited for.

To recapitulate, the structure of life vis-à-vis that it which makes it possible mirrors the structure of whiteness vis-à-vis script. Transcending finitude, life is

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18 Of course, Jabès’ idea of life as sur-viving resembles, in many respects, Blanchot’s pre-occupation with the concept of “survival.” For example, Blanchot states in *Le pas au-delà* (opulent punning of the passage is hardly translatable): “Survivre : non pas vivre ou, ne vivant pas, se maintenir, sans vie, dans un état de pur supplément, mouvement de suppléance à la vie, mais plutôt arrêter le mourir, arrêt qui ne l’arrête pas, le faisant au contraire *durer*.” Maurice Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 184. Cf. “Survive: not to live, or, not living, to maintain oneself, without life, in a state of pure supplement, movement of substitution for life, but rather to arrest dying, arrest that does not arrest, making it, on the contrary, *last*.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 135.

19 BQ I, p. 89.

20 BQ II, p. 276.

21 BQ I, p. 143.

an inaccessible dimension of continuity.<sup>22</sup> This is the reason why Jabès' universe cannot simply live: with *living always elsewhere*, only "being lived" is actually possible. We think of "our" life, but this life is, at the same time, utterly strange to us and utterly our own. Just as a blank space amidst script, life appears only as a trace and, thus, as a place of being marked with something in-finite. Hence, to survive means to experience the whiteness of the Book.

The other experience that reveals the structure of whiteness is writing. As Jabès' concept of writing was outlined in Chapter Four, in the following we shall just highlight its aspect of continuity. Writing means persisting in putting down. Writing is not about executing a design to "create works" but about *experiencing continuity above the design*. Jabès envisages the writer as continuing to be after the successive debacles, i.e. the books he has written so far. "His" writing is structurally tied to "his" life. This is a paradoxical and unbearable continuity that shows the catastrophe of books in its sheer horror. For there is a space where they co-exist and wreck each other, which can be seen only in writing.

It is for this reason that writing discloses whiteness as an excess and duration. Persisting in writing, the author can recognise the dimension that binds particular books above their separate worlds. Therefore, rather than on the work at hand, the Jabèsian writer focuses on what follows the work's end and what, through the void of *tzimtzum*, leads to another work. Indeed, he uses subsequent books to explore this paradoxically continuing void. The void ingests the lost book and carves a place for another out of its own excess. Each blank in the Book seems to offer new land, writes Jabès.<sup>23</sup>

Writing is paradoxical insofar that it traverses the place where script is no more:

The route of writing goes through the night. Will other eyes see for us where we can no longer see?<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the continuity of writing mirrors that which is impossible and ungraspable, excessive and enduring, in one word – whiteness. As such, writing is a counterpart of life ("I know that without writing I will die,"<sup>25</sup> claims Jabès). Besides, writing registers for us – or, rather, for the meaning we need in order to understand – that which we cannot see. Writing is "our eyes," which let us appreciate the truly incomprehensible – the continuity of duration ("What is mysterious in

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22 Cf. JW, p. 27.

23 BQ I, p. 72.

24 BQ II, p. 218.

25 LR I, p. 45.

the book is its light [...] not its obscurity,”<sup>26</sup> insists Jabès). As Derrida writes in “Ellipsis,” “within this movement of succession, writing keeps its vigil, between God and God, between the Book and the Book.”<sup>27</sup>

Hence writing consists first in [...] spying continually on a voice whose barren efforts perforate time from the inside.<sup>28</sup>

Notably, the gesture Jabès presupposes is dual as only the decision to persevere in the continuity of writing (structurally analogous to the decision to persevere in life) makes it possible to unveil whiteness and, simultaneously, turns writing itself (and life) into whiteness.

With the last word [*vocable*] of the night, an empty space stretches towards us while we try to cross behind the narrator ...<sup>29</sup>

To keep going beyond the end, beyond the last *vocable*: this is the point *where our own perseverance becomes co-extensive with the dimension it exposes, one that is ostensibly independent of it – whiteness*. “We try to cross an empty space” because it stretches towards us. But doesn’t it stretch just because we made a step to cross it?

## Whiteness: Existence as Incompletion and Succession

We know now how whiteness marks a symbolic order, transcends it and is a place in which it is inscribed. Let us now review what we know about symbolic orders themselves.

Given that they are formed in tension with whiteness as described above, each of such orders – “books” – (1) is incomplete and (2) succeeds another order. Both these consequences mingle in one of Jabès’ key sentences: “The book survives the book.”<sup>30</sup> I will now elucidate this statement, addressing both the aspects.

Let us start from incompletion. “The book survives the book” means that every book carries in itself the possibility of its being surpassed – that it will be survived by another book. However, at stake is not simply this book’s completion and exigency to retreat in order to make room for a future book. We must bear in mind that, in Jabès, sur-viving is a traumatic event. In “being survived,” the

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26 BQ II, p. 425.

27 Derrida, *Writing*, pp. 371–2.

28 BQ II, p. 291.

29 BQ I, p. 181.

30 *Ibid.*, p 191.

book will have to suffer an outright defeat and confront whiteness. In turn, the excess of whiteness will give rise to a new book. Hence, *each book bears a trace of a catastrophic event which only lurks ahead for it*. Furthermore, the book not only assumes its disaster to be witnessed by whiteness but also presupposes *a new book to come into being in this whiteness and bear direct testimony to the prior failure*. Consequently, each book carries the inevitability of its own repetition as it presumes it will perish and be supplanted by a new book.

This idea is a cornerstone of Jabès' perspectivism. It explains the fundamental variance between the imagined future duration of a given order and its actual lot. The order, namely, imagines that it will simply go on existing and, at the same time, that it will inevitably be repeated. What we retrospectively perceive as a lack of continuity in time is, in fact, the symbolic order's "internal" structure, formed in tension with whiteness. Such perspectivism has poignant consequences in Jabès. First, *each whole is incomplete and already disenfranchised*.

*The book is destroyed by the book. We shall never have owned anything.*<sup>31</sup>

Second, once the temporal factor – development, duration, and the like – has come into play, the emerging order is constantly invaded by a recurring break, shift, "wound" in Jabès' lexicon.

*The Book of Questions* is from beginning to end interrupted in its unfolding. Each interruption is a cut. Gaping white wounds.<sup>32</sup>

The first passage implies that an unfolding whole is marked with "wounds" in the way suggesting that whiteness itself uses the texture of this whole to overwrite itself. Thus, for Jabès, internal shifts within each whole – a text in particular – are *traces with which the Book makes its imprint on a book*. Furthermore, the Book overwrites itself with them:

"This absence which claims the book in order to rewrite it, is this God and, therefore, the hope for a divine word which devours us?" he asked.<sup>33</sup>

This is how Jabès' writings should be read. As mentioned in Chapter Two, *The Book of Questions* as a cycle of, ultimately, seven parts was written gradually. Its final structure, as we know it now, was not preconceived. The subsequent books came into being in succession, as "survivals of the book by the book." Instead of a prior design, Jabès was only "conscious of a movement," as he asserts himself,<sup>34</sup>

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31 BQ II, p. 337.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 275.

34 DB, p. 53.

which tossed in successive books. Already *The Book of Yukel* (to become part two of the future series) made Gabriel Bounoure observe that it “takes over *The Book of Questions* and replaces it to see whether this lifeless life can be infused with survival.”<sup>35</sup> The heptalogy was thought of only later as a retrospective attempt to piece together a whole which is nonetheless affected by the structure of survival. At the beginning of *The Book of Resemblances*, Jabès proclaims it to be a book in its own right, albeit possible only in the aftermath of *The Book of Questions*.<sup>36</sup> Both the writerly designs and all efforts to put the past in order are disrupted by whiteness in Jabès. Therefore, the structure of incompletion and impossibility haunts every whole, in particular a book.<sup>37</sup> Whiteness is not only excess revealed *in the aftermath* of a book but also a book’s “inner” wound. For this reason, a book’s incompletion can be read as a trace of the Book itself.

“The book survives the book” implies also that the book at hand follows on the former one, with “succession” based on the structure of survival and, thus, necessarily imprinted by whiteness. In other words, every *already* existing book is a book that has survived and, as such, has the vast and inscrutable past of failed books *behind* it. Whiteness not only follows but also precedes it, concealing the boundless ruins.

“*You dream of writing a book. The book is already written.*”

[...] The past is never foreclosed.

We are soldered to God in the hour and man.

[...] “A madman who wants to destroy the Word by words, and the Book by books.”

[...] “*Death is the past that persists.*”

[...] The present is alone, grubbed. Being on the margin means having reached the place of the present. The place of before-and-after-place.<sup>38</sup>

“*God follows God, and Book follows Book.*”<sup>39</sup>

Everything is before Everything. The word is the day after the word, and the book the day after the book.<sup>40</sup>

“I will write [*aurai écrit*] only one book,” he said. “The first one [*Le premier*].”

But it was already written.”<sup>41</sup>

“In every created thing, there is a space left empty by the thing created before.”<sup>42</sup>

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35 Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 37.

36 LR I, p. 9.

37 Cf. Motte, *Questioning*, p. 122.

38 BQ I, pp. 207, 246, 254, 283, 301.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

40 BQ II, p. 121.

41 LH, p. 57.

42 F, p. 102.

In terms of the continuity of writing, each book is inscribed in the impenetrable past of that which has already come into being. The past persists in the blank space and “is never foreclosed.” Whiteness thus forms a *place* where all past books can be thought.<sup>43</sup> Taking shape, a new book must curb this excess. This, of course, is an act of *tzimtzum*, which produces “a place of before-and-after-place.” The concept of whiteness complements Jabès’ vision of *tzimtzum* insofar that it shows the dimension of continuity, in which a *perspectival order exists only in following other, already bygone orders*. This insight helps us decipher the following passage, central to Jabès’ ontology:

Je suis celui qui suit. [*I am the one that follows*], says the page to the page, the word to the word, the point to the point.<sup>44</sup>

In this sentence, which reverberates with the biblical *אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה* – “I shall be who I shall be” (*Shemot* 3, 14) – Jabès acknowledges that every existing order (rather than being, the subject or God!<sup>45</sup>) is specifically related to another order, and this relation is expressed in “I am the one that follows” [*je suis celui qui suit*]. It exists in existing-after as, generally, to exist means to succeed something. In utter contradiction of the traditionally construed Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum*, the sentence grounds existence not in “being as such” but in relatedness to things past, which relation ousts and conceals the past.

What is more, the homophonic arrangement of *suis* and *suit* seems to underscore that being “oneself” means being “something else.”<sup>46</sup> Being coherent is

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43 Incidentally, Didier Cahen insists that the “Book” refers in a sense to the Bible. Each writer writes after the Bible, in the wake of the book that was or was supposed to be the right and only one. Thus, by writing, one questions, in a way, the sanctity and singularity of the Book as the Bible and alters its meaning since, even though not adding anything to it, one deprives it of the last and proper word and expands the context in which it is interpreted. Nevertheless, Cahen claims that it is the Bible’s fate to perish in writing. The Bible can be correctly interpreted only where it loses its exceptional status. Didier Cahen, “Les réponses du livre,” in *Écrire le livre*, p. 60. In this sense the Bible is a model of the first fallen book which finds itself followed.

44 BQ II, p. 418 (quotation altered).

45 This sentence conveys the relationship of page to page and word to word, which are units of the text rather than of “being as such,” which does not appear in Jabès.

46 Jabès expresses the same idea, which resonates with Rimbaud’s famous “I am another” (“*moi est un autre*”), punning on *Létranger. Létrange-je?*: “The foreigner? The foreign I?” (F, p. 43). Similarly to Lacanian extimacy, that which is most our own is strange to us to the utmost: we are somebody else exactly where we are ourselves. See also Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 24.

impossible as a difference creeps in between “I am” (*suis*) and “I am” (*suis*), with *suis* morphing into *suit*, which is discernible in writing only. In carrying on being, one *already* follows and is already something else. Jabès’ phrasing encapsulates also the parallel co-existence of two orders, represented here by speech and writing. In the former, identity ostensibly persists, but in the latter a disruption within identity is conspicuous.

This duality is inevitable in Jabès’ ontology, and it is this duality that underpins the differentiation of a book from the Book, an act of writing from the continuity of writing, and meaning from life. Emphatically, however, Jabès does not rely on any presupposed dualism. The two aspects do not exist *side by side*. Where there is a book, the whiteness of the Book is unseen, hidden by the reduction of *tzimtzum*. And where whiteness unveils and discloses the ruins of the past, a book is obliterated. So a book and whiteness are intertwined and one makes the other visible. That is why whiteness is not the ultimate instance of presence, but rather a place where the entire past is present *as absent*.

Concluding, the concept of whiteness helps show that every book is based on the structure of sur-vival. It dissociates itself from the past in its own act of *tzimtzum*, which gives it an illusion of being the ultimate one. “Could the obsession of the book be only the obsession of a word able to survive all books?”<sup>47</sup> asks Jabès. “You must believe in the book in order to write it.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, based on this messianic hope, the very existence of a book is sur-vival and, as such, a testament to *failures that precede it*. In other words: the rise of new books, therein Jabèsian messianism, results from this unbearable, excess continuity, which needs acts of delimiting to mark itself off.

Having outlined the concept of whiteness and its implications for the formation of the finite orders of books, we can now focus on the other aspect of the Book, that is, on script.

## The Script of the Book

As mentioned in the foregoing, the script of the Book is the totality of past orders (books) inscribed in the plane of the whiteness.

Essentially, script in this sense is never given directly, but it surfaces as an object of contemplation from the vantage point of whiteness. Whiteness

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47 DB, pp. 102–103.

48 LR I, p. 29 (in Edmond Jabès, “From *The Book of Resemblances*,” trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 12/1, *Special Issue on Edmond Jabès*, 1987, pp. 13–25, on p. 15).

itself appears only at the moment of the book's perishment, as a place that sur-vives and will read it. What is script then? It ensues from the assumption behind the messianic fall of a book. This book, namely, yields itself to its ultimate reader and *allows presupposing other past books similar to it*. In other words: for this book, whiteness is not only the place of being read but also the place that *has read (and will read) past (and future) books*. If whiteness is the ultimate plane of continuity, there must be the corresponding totality of past singular orders which can be seen from it. This totality is referred to as script here.

Having settled this, let us have a closer look at what script involves. First, entire singular orders (books) are units of script. Consequently, each of them is a discrete organisation of the world based on another *tzimtzum*. What is more, as explained in Chapter Three, a unit of writing in this sense is *a given organisation of ("illusory") time and, as such, an entire given history*. Hence, Jabès repeatedly suggests that the Book is "history of all histories" and "eternity of all eternities":

Time [*le temps*] begins with the book.<sup>49</sup>

This time – like a book. All these books will have allowed us to do our time.<sup>50</sup>

The book is the vague consciousness of going beyond yourself, the need for which will show only later.

To wait, in the shade of time, for the time to come, the time which, tomorrow, will be ours [...].<sup>51</sup>

[...] I dreamed of [...] a book [...] which would only surrender by fragments, each of them the beginning of another book.<sup>52</sup>

A highway is also a humble crossroad, and most often we do not know where it leads.<sup>53</sup>

*The time of the infinite is the time of borders crossed.*<sup>54</sup>

"Every century leaves us a white page in bequest. Eternity is just a myriad of pages that fled writing."<sup>55</sup>

"If eternity is the time of God, time of a continuous time where our time miscarries – a past more distant than the past, a future beyond the future – how could we, who can act only in time, reach God?<sup>56</sup>

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49 BQ II, p. 23.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 247.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 346.

55 LR I, p. 19.

56 BR III, p. 64.

Jabès emphatically foregrounds the paradoxical nature of the Book, which is a world of elements that make up mutually exclusive wholes.<sup>57</sup> Each of these wholes has its own time while the Book is an assemblage of all these times, a time *within* which they are all contained, that is, “the time of borders crossed.”<sup>58</sup> *For what is just a unit in the Book is, actually, the entire eternity of time in a given order.*<sup>59</sup> Consequently, there is no single history as each history is finite and perspectival by belonging to a particular symbolic order. The Book accommodates them all.

“To wait, in the shade of time, for the time to come” can thus be interpreted to imply that in the duration of the ultimate time of the Book (“the shade of time”), *its* moment comes which is in and by itself the entire time of a book. Passing from book to book in writing, we pass from one illusory time to another and from one eternity to another, though we still move within a certain ultimate time which aggregates all perspectival times as its moments. In this insight, Jabès is close both to Hegel (with his Absolute as “a time of times”) and to Nietzsche (with his concept of eternal return). Still, he also draws on an important trend within the Kabbalah which revolved around the medieval *Sefer ha-Tmunah* (*The Book of the Figure*) and distinguished two types of the Torah: an absolute one and

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57 The Book is, in a sense, “a set of sets.” Hank Lazer observes that: “The perspective and the written expression that a woman or a man achieves, as she or he learns and makes manifest her or his precise particularity, become part of a larger Book. Such a poetics is akin to set theory – the individual contribution being an element of the all-encompassing set – and to Heidegger’s thinking through of being, the individual existence being an instance of Being.” Hank Lazer, “Is There a Distinctive Jewish Poetics? Several? Many? Is There Any Question?” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 27/3 (Spring 2009), p. 79.

58 It is this “time of borders crossed” that stands for real eternity in Jabès. For the eternity of the book is not independent of and alien to the moment; rather it is the moment’s “infinite extension” (QQLS, p. 15). In this sense, the search for such eternity entails sacralisation. Rather than in the eternal continuance of the sacred moment, sacralisation, the poet adds, consists in the constant tension of the profane, which tilts to its infinite extension (*Ibid.*).

59 In *Intimations The Desert*, Jabès suggests other names for these varieties of time. The time of the Book is named “eternity;” and particular times – just “times.” Their relationship is still the same, however: “Time measures only time, but measures itself against eternity. / The eternity of time is perhaps only time’s eternal return to a time [*du temps au temps*] that repeals it, the repeal becoming an eternity of time [*un temps*] without common measure: frightening infinite. / All writing [...] becoming the writing of its time” (BR II, p. 15). The Book’s counterpart is thus eternity filled with books and their times. One time overthrows another and, thereby, highlights “a dreadful eternity.”

one revealed in a given period (*Shmita*) of the universe. Each of one-thousand-year-long *Shmitas* had its own version of the Torah, based on the reduction of the original absolute Torah and determined by the attributes of its patron *sefirah*. In this vision, history was the passage from one *Shmita* Torah to another, with all of them being in a way accommodated by the absolute Torah.<sup>60</sup> In Jabès, the book is, similarly, the “absolute Torah” of individual books.

In this optics, *script is a totality of possible tzimtzum junctures*, irrespective of how they have actually panned out. “Eternity is a myriad of pages that fled writing,” Jabès asserts and seems to suggest that units of the script of the Book comprise not only the discerned and implemented (e.g. in writing) orders but also their embryonic germs even if they managed to “flee writing.” For Jabès, this makes the writer not so much an author of enunciations as a witness to the rise of entire worlds in which enunciations find their own place. Some of these worlds get to be developed, others only indicated, and still others may pass unrecorded in an utterance. In this sense, “a single letter may contain the entire book, the universe.”<sup>61</sup>

This implies that Jabès develops the concept of the script of the Book to think the past in a specific – and specifically modern – way. The past is not simply a past of “real events,” but a past of orders that have come to pass. How developed they are matters less than the very fact that they came into being. Because of this, the script of the Book contains more than what is popularly conceived as the past, for it preserves also the orders traces of which have but barely remained. *The Book is thus an ultimate witness*. “Events” are registered in this past of the Book secondarily, only as elements of the orders themselves.

This insight leads us to conclude that, though in its basic meaning the script of the Book is the totality of the realised possibilities of *tzimtzum*, it also holds all the “real events” and objects belonging to the orders generated in particular *tzimtzums*. In this sense, the script of the Book hoards everything that has ever existed and become a thing of the past. The idea is intimated time and again:

[...] Thus the chain is never broken. Death verifies the unity.<sup>62</sup>

The book is a solitude of sand where every word leaves an imprint of its voice. You read in silence what once was said by all.<sup>63</sup>

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60 Cf. Scholem, “Signification,” pp. 139–46.

61 BM, p. 47.

62 BQ II, p. 189.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

[...] there are major works [...] which are majestically turned towards ours; critical eyes fixed on all that is – or is to be – written. One day our books will die at their feet; [...] it is our work that opens their eyes.<sup>64</sup>

*Nothing is lost. Even trivial words and gestures are collected and preserved by death.*<sup>65</sup>

“Think also about all the erased words which the words of your books have replaced,” he said. “There are some traces of them left in your notes. Thus you will learn that absence bears witness to all infringed absences because it is written into their gradual dispossession.”<sup>66</sup>

[...] every page of writing is in some way the journal diary of a dead man.<sup>67</sup>

A lack,  
a gap of centuries  
torments me.

[...] Stones, dust, cold slope of emptiness, hell where the murmur seeps down that once shook the Temple.<sup>68</sup>

The script of the Book contains all past “words and gestures” as well as former “works.” “What once was said by all” – by which Jabès likely means commonly endorsed truths – today is but a trace which is read in silence. Thus, the script of the Book holds past verities which failed in their claim to ultimate understanding. Notably, if, in Jabès, the messianic attempt is an utter supersession of former attempts – a striving to institute a book as a universal one – the failure unifies all messianic acts. Lethal to them, the gaze of whiteness forms, at the same time, a plane of continuity against which they appear as units of the same script of the Book.

Moreover, they appear as equal units, for the words “erased” and “replaced” are subsumed in the script of the Book just like “important” and “present” words are. Why is it so? This can be easily explained if we remember the fundamental construction principle underlying the script of the Book. Script is, namely, the totality of possibilities of *tzimtzum*. From the perspective of *tzimtzum*, “erasing a word” does not entail replacing it without leaving a trace. For the erasure to invalidate fully that which has come into being, there would have to be one valid order abiding in time. Then the power of this order’s *tzimtzum* reduction would nullify the past, including the erased things.<sup>69</sup> Yet in the script of the Book, the

64 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 342.

67 *Ibid.*, s. 431.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 432.

69 *The Book of Resemblances* says: “You think you can cross out a word by drawing a line through it. Do you not know that the line is transparent? / The pen doesn’t cross out a word but the eye that is reading it, wrote Reb Taleb” (BR III, p. 12). Jabès clearly

limitation of *tzimtzum* does not work anymore, and the past is manifest in its continuity. For this reason, in script, erasure is not a definitive effacement but only a point of transition from one order to another, with the two orders being equal. Hence, the script of the Book contains the crossed-out word *side by side* with its deletion and the new word.

Clearly, the concept of the script of the Book helps Jabès think much further than the popular notion of the past could enable him to do as the latter is, in fact, always only *a* sense-making history. The script of the Book, instead of making sense, forms a plane where all senses are contained despite their discord (“repulsion” as Hegel would have put it). Moreover, the script of the Book, which basically consists of entire orders rather than of meanings taking shape in them, reveals *the originary grid of tzimtzum reduction*. This, in turn, demonstrates how the mutual negation of particular meanings is powered by the difference of their source orders. In other words, this helps Jabès reduce the contradiction of various meanings at the *content* level to the more primordial forces of limitation and supersession which engender the orders themselves.

To conclude our argument about the script of the Book, let us consider materiality as another aspect exemplified in quotations above. Jabès persistently reiterates the idea that past meanings retain *traces of matter* in the script of the Book: “The word leaves on imprint of its voice in the sand,” “stones preserve the murmur that once shook the Temple,” and • (*El*) tells us:

*The unsayable settles us in those desert regions which are the home of dead languages. Here, every grain of sand stifled by the mute word offers the dreary spectacle of a root of eternity ground to dust before it could sprout. In the old days, the ocean would have cradled it. Does the void torment the universe, and the universe in turn vex the void? Roots buried in sand keep longing for their trees.<sup>70</sup>*

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suggests that the past can be invalidated only by *the current reading* (“the eye that is reading”). It is reading that spots an erasure and takes notice of it, treating the crossed-out word as never existing. But such an erasure would be impossible without the new reading based on its own *tzimtzum*. In the Book, “the line [crossing out a word] is transparent” in being a sign *next to*, but *not instead of*, another sign.

70 BQ II, p. 415. Incidentally, the root metaphor in this passage has its ample antecedents in Jewish mysticism. For one, in Luria, reality consists of several hierarchised worlds, with each upper world being the lower world’s soul, interiority or, as Luria put it, “root.” The root is the principle of life and the anchoring of the lower world in the upper one. See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994), pp. 157–9. On this model, Elohim is a shared place of all worlds and functions in the same way as the Jabèsian Book in this passage.

This passage relies on the metaphor of the desert, where, after its tragic demise, each order (here “language”) is literally *embodied* in a grain of sand. Each grain preserves a separate “eternity” and the hope of the world that arose from it. The desert as conceived in these terms is equivalent to the Book, with expanses of wilderness corresponding to the blank space of the Book and the grains of sand to the script. Where does this materiality-suffused imagery come from? It seems that, for Jabès, only a matter-filled space works as a metaphor that enables us to think the totality of all symbolic orders. The Jabèsian space has no demarcated places and, consequently, all orders are equal in it. At the same time, the orders can be imagined to co-exist, which is impossible within any one of them, where the limiting forces of its *tzimtzum* are at work. Such an intuitive notion of matter as “external” grounds the idea of an external dimension where the orders dwell together.

Let us round up our argument on the script of the Book. As explained, it amasses all the previous *tzimtzum* junctures together with the orders they spawned and the meanings engendered within these orders. Clearly, however, it is possible to think the script of the Book only if mediated by the idea of whiteness. It is so because only from the place taken up by whiteness and inaccessible to us can the script of the Book be gazed at. That is why we can think it only through participating in the fall of the messianic attempt of an order which finds itself confronted by whiteness.

Consequently, the script of the Book is a specifically defined “history” in Jabès. Unlike in the standard notion of common history, there is no comprehensible continuity between the units of this “history.” This, however, does not mean that there is no history as such and that these units are completely unmediated monads. There is still “history” in Jabès, paradoxical though it may be. The plane which gives continuity to its units forms an inaccessible, presupposed place of scrutiny while confronting it amounts to experiencing utter discontinuity. Indeed, there is no communication between the units of such “history,” but each of them, in its own fall, presupposes similar past falls. *So although the continuity of “history” is utterly inaccessible, it leaves a trace in each of its units, and this trace is located exactly where an order perishes.*

The script of the Book thus produces “history” not as a coherent, meaningful narrative of events but as an impossible continuity, inferable from the traces surfacing in debacles of orders. Paradoxically enough, Jabès’ ultimate perspectivism requires presupposing an ultimate and uncrossable plane where all perspectives meet. This is the reason why the desert is the poet’s favourite metaphor. For, in the desert, the utterly dispersed grains of sand make up the ultimate oneness of the desert as such.

## Writing and the Book

At the beginning of this Chapter, I showed that the end of a book reveals a new dimension: the Book. Then, I described two “components” of the Book: whiteness and script. Let us revisit now the key moment of the book’s fall and explore it, drawing on these insights.

Recall that the whiteness of the Book is the totality of possible *tzimtzum* versions, and its script is a set of its *effected* versions. Consequently, each act of writing is dual, depending on which layer of the Book it is juxtaposed with. First, writing is the rise of whiteness, which amounts to forming an order based on a given *tzimtzum*. Following and subsuming the former order, whiteness offers a new place where the originary limitation can produce an entirely new domain. Second, the act of writing ends, nevertheless, in the fall of the book and its inclusion within the script of the Book. Thus *the act of writing is peculiarly suspended between the emergence of whiteness and the incorporation in script*. Between these two extremes – the beginning and the end of a book – writing is forever dislodged vis-à-vis whiteness and script in not being whiteness *anymore* and not having turned into script *yet*.

What is the act of writing in this framework? In the chasm specific to the Jabèsian universe, it can be understood in two ways. First, the act of writing, i.e. one book, can be viewed as an inner movement within the field shielded by the illusion of the originary *tzimtzum*. What is the aim of this movement? Its aim is to bring the book to a close through returning it to *tzimtzum*, that is, through the messianic fall. In this way, *one book is the passage from the beginning to the dissolution which, as a whole, is a unit of the Book*. In other words, on this model, the act of writing means putting down one record in the Book.

In this optics, Jabès seems to assume that the book is a sphere of illusion which, inevitably, turns out to be just a unit of the Book. But this image is incomplete without the other way of viewing the act of writing. For *writing a book down is the only way in which the Book can overtly pass from whiteness to script, that is, happen as such*. In other words: the Book depends on a book as much as a book on the Book.

Consequently, one act of writing takes place, as it were, on two planes simultaneously. First, it produces a book – an order based on a given *tzimtzum*. Second, it is also the Book’s movement from whiteness to script. This double engagement embodies Jabès’ specific concept of writing as a circular movement of rise and dissolution and a unique, individual unfolding of *tzimtzum*, at the same time. This insight helps us draw a crucial conclusion.

*Namely, for Jabès, writing is movement which, in the successive cycles of books, charts an unrepeatable trajectory in the Book’s space*. Out of all the possible

configurations of *tzimtzum*, it enacts some and, thereby, marks the script of the Book against its whiteness. In this way, the book being written down becomes a transition point of the Book's whiteness into script.

Let us revisit now the *vocable* as discussed in Chapter Four. As explained there, the *vocable* is not only a place where the imaginary and the real are separated and joined in a particular way but also an entity inscribed in the whiteness of the Book. The argument of this Chapter helps us eventually explain why the *vocable* is also the breaking point between a *particular* configuration of the imaginary and the real (visible in the perishment of the book) and the space of *all* such configurations. The fall of the book, namely, unveils the whiteness and, through it, the script of the Book. Both dimensions, though accessible by assumption, are not accessible directly. The *vocable* is thus also the liminal point between the fall of one, particular book and the presupposition of the Book it makes possible. In other words, *the vocable constitutes a point dividing the book as a discrete whole from the book as an entity within a larger plane*. Consequently, Jabès conceives of writing not only as of philosophical practice, which I claimed in Chapter Three, for *writing is participation in the formation of the Book itself, that is, in happening/enowning*.<sup>71</sup>

This observation leads us to the last part of this Chapter, in which I will address two issues. First, I will consider the relation between writing and the Book in Jabès, relying on the comparison with Hegel and Mallarmé. Afterwards, I will examine the effects of passing from philosophical thinking to writing which draws conclusions from the nature of the Book.

## Writing as Marking the Book: Jabès vs. Hegel and Mallarmé

As already stated, writing unveils and marks the Book in a way. But what is it that writing actually does? What does this "marking" involve? In this section, I will focus on the quasi-epistemological relationship of writing and the Book. To do this, I will contrast the Jabèsian Book with two apparently similar ideas: Hegel's Absolute and Mallarmé's Book.

Jabès envisions writing as a unique path in the Book. What does it mean? First of all, the journey of writing does not have a predetermined destination, for it unfolds in a space that refuses to have a destination imposed on it. The Jabèsian writer gropes in the dark, unable to anticipate what shape his book's

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71 This makes Richard Stamelman observe that Heidegger's being-in-the-world becomes "being-in-the-book" in Jabès. Stamelman, "Nomadic Writing," p. 95.

new *tzimtzum* will take and, thus, which point of whiteness will be used in writing-down. This is why Jabès' metaphors envisage writing as conscious navigation through a space bristled with units of script like the sea with reefs:<sup>72</sup>

*When adventure has reached its farthest point where the sea listens only to the sea, writing suddenly appears as a broken coastline which no map records.*<sup>73</sup>

Writing brings forth reduced worlds which lend themselves to meaningful, albeit limited, depiction. Yet, they are submerged in the abysmal "sea," without signposts and directions, where adventure reaches "its farthest point." This space is what Jabès dedicates himself to exploring. *For him, writing – instead of in creating works – consists in sustaining the movement of their rise and dissolution, which is movement through the Book.* Consequently, the Jabèsian writer is perennially incommensurable with the Book. It means, first of all, that the Book is a dimension he cannot fully grasp and convey since he is inscribed in it himself. This is seemingly reminiscent of the relationship of the Hegelian philosopher and the Absolute. Yet, this is, in fact, where an essential difference between Jabès' Book and Hegel's Absolute lies.

Hegel presupposed a position in which the Absolute, self-recognising in the philosophical act, speaks through the philosopher. Furthermore, the Absolute's self-recognition is possible because it uses the individual philosopher, abolishing at the same time the difference between itself and him in absolute knowledge. Yet for Jabès, such position is a sheer impossibility because of the specific separation of a book from the Book. All meaningful utterance can take place only in a book, but, there, it is already distorted by its *tzimtzum* limitation. The Book, in turn, is never accessible directly but always as a place of a book's inscription, visible prior to or after it. Unlike the Hegelian philosopher, the Jabèsian writer cannot have the Book self-recognise in him. And it is not for the lack of trying as messianism of the act of writing is nothing other than such an effort. Departing from Hegel, Jabès focuses on what *follows* this effort, instead of on the victory it proclaims. And what follows it is movement from the book that has failed to another book, that is, a displacement in the space of the Book. For this reason, *the Book appears as an ungraspable dimension in which the writer's movement takes place.*

Consequently, unlike Hegel's Absolute, Jabès' Book is recognised only through an incomprehensible shift one experiences. Furthermore, the Book is an assumption inferable from this shift rather than a dimension immediately

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72 Cf. BQ II, p. 227–30.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

given. A similar insight is to be found in Benjamin's Angel of History. Unlike the Hegelian philosopher, the Angel cannot give history a place for self-recognition, capable only of knowing its traces, ruins and relentless, destructive drive forward.

Having established this, we can now return to our initial question of how writing is related to the Book in Jabès. Evidently, not by knowledge as Hegel thought of it. Writing itself is watched from the position of the Book – *it is known by the Book and not the other way round*. Whatever writing knows about itself, this knowledge comes because the Book has been ascribed the position of ultimate scrutiny. So while knowledge pursues its object, *Jabès' writing presupposes itself as an object to reveal the plane from which it will be looked at as such*.

For this reason, I propose to define the relationship of writing and the Book as "marking." I believe that marking can be deemed an "equivalent" of knowing in the perspectival world. How do marking and knowledge differ? Knowing assumes that it cannot only strive towards its object but also exhaust it. Marking, in turn, represents the situation in which the knowing entity is not just finite but also stamped by the assumption that there is a dimension that knows it. What is marking then? Rather than movement towards an object, marking is *autonomous movement* which takes a step back from itself to think a dimension from which it could be seen. Marking brings in not so much knowledge – of writing or of the Book – as this specific distance, which channels the perception of their mutual incommensurability.

Hence, while Hegel's knowledge abolishes the difference between the knower and the Absolute, Jabès' marking highlights this difference because marking, as its very name suggests, is based on the referential role of a mark – a sign. *Writing means self-institution as a sign which can be read only in the Book*. As such, this sign is never "really" read and keeps forever referring only. This reference separates and differentiates the knower from the Book. Writing cannot read itself but, by assuming itself to be a sign, it makes the dimension of the Book visible and, *as a whole, refers to it*. But the Book is not a stable "reading" entity, either, but just an assumption. Consequently, the referential function of the sign is its sole function in Jabès' universe. *This sign does not serve to indicate something present but is the position a symbolic order takes in relation to the Book – the Book, which it presupposes itself by taking this position*.

To conclude the comparison of Hegel's knowledge and Jabès' marking, let us address another difference between them. Knowledge, namely, can be a lone act productive of a permanent outcome: absolute knowledge. This is impossible in Jabès. Writing as marking the Book must be a constantly sustained activity. It is necessary because, unlike the Absolute, the Book is never made present, with

marking merely referring to it and the reference never being accepted. Hence, the Book cannot be shown and described once and for all; what can be done is continue marking, which makes its traces visible.

This distinct vision sets Jabès apart not only from Hegel but also from Mallarmé. Apparently, both poets share the idea of the Book capable of rendering all the relationships of the universe. Both also apparently deem such Book the regulatory idea of the writer's pursuits. It is in the view on making such a Book a reality where they differ. While Mallarmé seemed, at least for a time, to believe that one, definitive writerly act could bring the Book amidst ordinary texts,<sup>74</sup> Jabès knows that the Book cannot be made present and accommodated within one work. Even though, as he admitted himself, his ideas verged on Mallarmé's,<sup>75</sup> Jabèsian thinking surpasses Mallarméan thinking in being acutely aware that the condition of possibility of accomplishing the Book is, at the same time, its very condition of impossibility. Mallarmé wanted to write the ideal and ultimate Book thoughtfully and deliberately<sup>76</sup> while Jabès knows that rendering the real Book in a book would entail *extending* that which has already been written. Otherwise, such a book could not possibly be read.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, a writer's definitive book must be ruined.<sup>78</sup> In his conversation with Benjamin Taylor, Jabès says:

If the sum total of things could be contained in a book, he [Mallarmé] reasoned, such a work would me more than human; it would be the work of eternity, the Book – literally – to end all books.

But as I see it, the complete book of human knowledge would not be eternal but instead the most ephemeral of books. Because knowledge won't stand still more than a moment for the project of certainty. Reach after it and it evades you. What's true one moment turns up false the next. It seems this is the nature of thought. In any case, this is the presumption on which my books are based, and it's in loyalty to such a logic that they function. Each of my characters would speak in order that there may be an end to speaking, in order to fix the truth once and for all where it stands. But no one of them

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74 In a letter to Verlaine, Mallarmé formulated one of the most celebrated articulation of this ephemeral concept. Expressing his belief that ultimately there is just one Book sought, be it even unawares, by anybody that writes, he states that such a Book would be *l'explication orphique de la Terre* (the Orphic explication of the earth). Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 662–663.

75 DB, p. 83.

76 *Ibid.*

77 See IEJ, p. 22.

78 DB, p. 83. Comp. also Handelman, "Torments," p. 62.

can succeed, nor can they succeed in their accumulation. What together they amount to is the refusal of each one's purported truths.<sup>79</sup>

I built my books on the lacks of the book. Every time, the book's lacks create a new book. In a book, gaps/flaws/failings are indispensable. [...] Because of the lacks of the book, no book has ever stopped making itself as a book [*se faire livre*].<sup>80</sup>

Learning a lesson from Mallarmé's failure, Jabès recognises that the space of the Book appears only in relentless continuation, extension and sur-vival:

I have always dreamed of a book that would reproduce [*reproduirait*] the process of life. First, it extends us [*il nous prolonge*], then it replaces us, [...] That's why I thought that my books should make and unmake themselves [*se faire et se défaire*] indefinitely for the benefit of the next book.<sup>81</sup>

Whereas Mallarmé assumed a writer's life to be only a prelude to writing the Book,<sup>82</sup> Jabès believes that "life always comes after the book."<sup>83</sup> In other words, life in all its surfeit, failures and rebirths, in its persistently prolonged going-on, corresponds to the Book.<sup>84</sup> If one work were to show the nature of the Book, none of Mallarmé's project would do, but the Bible alone as it is an internally incoherent layering of books fostered through surviving each other and strung into a never pre-planned sequence.<sup>85</sup>

Bearing this in mind, we can now contrast Jabèsian marking and the notion attributable to Mallarmé, that is, having-written. Having-written is a single, definitive actualisation of the Book. Marking, in turn, means persisting in writing which refers to the Book but makes no claims to incorporating it within any existing work.

Having compared the two poets' respective projects, we can see the central axis of their dispute. In fact, Jabès accuses Mallarmé of omitting the moment of reading in his idea of the accomplished Book. If this moment is presupposed, it is necessary to think the dimension transcending the written-down. This dimension is what Jabès considers the "real" Book. In other words, his critique of Mallarmé concerns the latter's latent desire to stop time by the act

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79 QJQW, p. 17.

80 DEJ, pp. 312, 314.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

82 "The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who surrenders the initiative to words," claims Mallarmé. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 366.

83 BQ II, p. 126.

84 See also Serge Meitinger, "Mallarmé et Jabès devant le livre: Analyse d'une différence culturelle," in *Écrire le livre*, pp. 133–143.

85 DB, p. 83.

of writing which would not be *read* anymore. Still, Mallarmé's formal experiments (e.g. in *A Roll of the Dice...*) suggest that he definitely sought to go beyond the realm where reading is bound up with succession. Instead of being read, his Book would simply reflect the universe beyond the human capacity to ascertain that reflection. Essentially, it would still be inaccessible to people. Paradoxically enough, failure would be part and parcel of accomplishing the book, for it could not be reconciled with the human world and its ineluctable reading founded on succession. Could such an "actualised" Book be anything more than just a trace in this world? Would it not appear as lost in the very moment of being achieved?

This is what Jabès seems to conclude from Mallarmé's venture, and his gesture seems less a polemic and more a thinking-forth of its consequences. Mallarmé's Book omits the dimension in which it could be read and, because this is the dimension of human life, the Book would be brought to pass only after the ultimate end of life. While life still continues, the Book must be inaccessible.<sup>86</sup> This conclusion can be gleaned from Jabès' following words:

A writer tries to imitate the mythical book he will never write. This is what all writing consists in. We will never create this book for once we do, there will be nothing any-more ... it would be death. Talking about Hebraic tradition, this book is also the book of books of people who will try to read it, reading themselves in their [books].<sup>87</sup>

The Book is entangled in the dialectics of life and death as well as of oneness and sur-viving. To Jabès, both Hegel's Absolute and Mallarmé's project would be a structural impossibility spanned between two possibilities. Either they would be carried into effect, but then they could not be followed by anything and, consequently, read, which would amount to the end of the human world; or they would be read, but that would imply being succeeded and becoming inaccessible the very moment they revealed themselves. A response to this aporia is found in Jabès' quasi-concept of the Book which is always displaced as an inevitable assumption and an inaccessible place at the same time. Writing does not aim to know the Book, less even to write it down. Writing only marks the Book.

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86 Warren F. Motte believes that Jabès' working-through of Mallarmé's Book is affected by Blanchot – in particular by his notion of *livre à venir*: a book to come, a book that is only becoming without being a complete whole. Motte, *Questioning*, p. 102.

87 DEJ, p. 308.

## Writing Instead of Knowledge

It is clear now what the Book is and that writing's relation to it consists in marking. It has also been explained why, on this model, marking of the Book is the perspectival world's equivalent of knowledge. Concluding this Chapter, I will ponder a change Jabès deems necessary, i.e. supplanting knowledge with writing. What is writing-based thinking like?

First of all, writing entails the end of a strong, knowing subject. Each subject turns out to be indebted to the Book as both his existence and the domain to which he wants to give shape are places in the Book. The Jabèsian writer realises the sheer size of his indebtedness and does not make any authorship claims to "his own works." On the contrary, he views them as *moments* of marking the Book. Each book is a lightning which irradiates the Book's boundless expanses. What is a writer than? A tool used by the Book to light up its own "existence." Jabès often plays with insights that correspond structurally to Hegel's philosophy but are invested with different meanings. The book can never personify and recognise itself in a writer, who cannot be the Book's prophet, either. Rather, his "works" shed oblique light on its space. Instead of places of encounter between the Book and the writer, they are a point that divides and illuminates them reactively.

Writing means then that the knowing subject is replaced by a new figure: a writer who yields his entire existence to the Book. To mark the Book, he must treat *his successive versions* as parts of books, which light up the Book. Writing equals the continuity of life for him.<sup>88</sup>

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88 As already mentioned, writing is sur-viving. "To believe you still have something to say even when you no longer have anything to express. Words keeps us alive," writes Jabès (BUS, p. 68). A writer's life comes then to depend on the life-sustaining marking of the book. One of Jabès' protagonists – Yukel, a ghetto-survivor – is described by Bounoure as follows: "faced with numerous impossibilities of his life, of any life, Yukel chooses survival (*survivre*) and writing (*écrire*) – one would be tempted to say "sur-writing," for the prefix (*sur*) marks transcending that poor and dismal 'speck of ghetto' he has carried in himself." Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 52. Bounoure focuses on this special aspect of "living-after" which was surviving the Shoah. Writing his own book (*The Book of Yukel*) would mean that the protagonist chose to sur-vive – and sur-write – the Shoah. The book that follows *The Book of Questions* conveys, thus, the mechanism not only of "the book being survived by the book" but also of the survival of a man who has been through a disaster but has not surrendered to it and lives on. Writing is here intertwined inseparably with life and survival, which is wittily expressed in Bounoure's apt coinage *surécrire*.

I am a man of writing. The text is my silence and my scream. My thinking advances with the help of words [*vocable*], moved by a rhythm which is that of the written. Where it runs out of breath I crumble.<sup>89</sup>

“The difficulty of writing,” he said, “is only the difficulty of breathing in rhythm with the book.” [...] Listen to time breathing. Eternity’s breath is imperceptible.<sup>90</sup>

I give to read not what I have read but what has read me unawares.<sup>91</sup>

Jabèsian writing is a practice that abolishes the difference between the knower and the known and transforms the subject so that his entire life boils down to marking the Book. It is no coincidence that Jabès envisages the writer’s condition as exile: in his life, an exile may traverse innumerable places, but he always moves within a *space* that contains these places. The wandering writer is closely correlated with the Book, which Jabès clearly suggests in the following excerpt from *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Book*:

I left a land not mine  
for another, not mine either.  
I took refuge in a word of ink with the Book for space,  
word from nowhere, obscure word of the desert.  
I did not cover myself at night.  
I did not shelter from the sun.  
I walked naked.  
Where I came from no longer had meaning.  
Where I was going worried no one.  
Wind, I tell you, wind.  
A bit of sand in the wind.<sup>92</sup>

Second, writing is an exploration of the way in which particularity rifts and marks the space of continuity. To this purpose, writing produces traces which instantaneously show the difference between them and the field they have been inscribed in – a difference that elucidates their relationship:

A sound – uttered by whom? – and then nothing.  
A word – written by whom? – and then a blank.  
Listen to the nothing. Read the blank.<sup>93</sup>

If knowledge is first of all about the *content* of this sound or this word, what matters in writing is their *position* vis-à-vis whiteness. Jabès is interested in the

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89 BR, p. 45.

90 BQ II, pp. 323, 327.

91 P, p. 36.

92 F, p. 79.

93 P, p. 73. (In Mark C. Taylor, “Foreword,” BM, p. xi).

basic grid of relations between a book and the space in which it is inscribed – the space of the Book. Writing is a continual exploration of this relationship. Marking the Book, writing does not produce either propositions or a permanent body of knowledge. Writing is not even about determining the relation between particularity and the space of continuity; if such determinations are produced, it is only as a side-effect of writing practice. Writing means confronting a book with the Book, a point with space, through making their relationships *visible*. Hence, Jabès' texts revisit time and again the same topoi: boundary, edge, beginning and end, threshold and its beyond,<sup>94</sup> end and sur-viving the end.

What is written flows from a summary of life which the letters restore to its accepted boundaries. But farther off, out of reach, where life clings to its ruin and is nothing but a memory of man's predestined passage, there the universe finally lets us read it from the other side of memory. We alone, now, can do so.

[...] The end is the impassable obstacle. What ruse could we use to be done with it – to be done with what is done? Considering the end as means, is this not also giving the end the means to continue on into an after-the-end between two provisional ends in wait for future prolongations?

[...] To keep within the sensible track, within a balance of life and death – of life in death and death in life – at the heart of the fateful question to God, namely, Where is the end?<sup>95</sup> ...the distance covered between book and book [...] when the blank crossing is achieved within the blank. No shadow to count, no milestone, not the least little pebble near or far. Infinite light! ...except for a point in the distance which is no landmark, but a mystery.<sup>96</sup>

“The book of life,” I said, “opens in death.”

[...] Hence no approach to God and the book could be conceived except in terms of this endorsed point, that is, in terms of a book which we have discovered in the charge of hope this point contains.

[...] Where recourse to the imaginary is exhausted, the book comes forward.<sup>97</sup>

And third, writing is also an experience of happening/enowning which is movement within the Book. How does writing approximate it? In this, Jabès, like Heidegger, must engage with apophatic language. Writing is an experience of happening/enowning for *it performs a movement which it perceives, at the same*

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94 See Mary Ann Caws, “Signe et encadrement: Edmond Jabès ou *Le Livre en Question (I)*.” *Les Cahiers Obsidiane*, no. 5 – *Edmond Jabès* (Paris: Capitales/Obsidiane, 1982), p. 77.

95 BQ II, pp. 265, 310–11.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 392.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 419–20.

*time, as the movement of the Book itself.* This is a specific double bind of activity and passivity, of showing the Book and being read. Writing both opens the Book

A word is tiny in its scope of revelation, immense in the scantiness of the sign. The book is always open.<sup>98</sup>

– and is overwhelmed by the Book –

God taught us that writing is eternal, at the eyes' farthest reach. The book sees for all its words.<sup>99</sup>

This relationship, which makes it possible to make happening/enowning visible, is powerfully rendered, for example, in the following passage:

*And Reb Fehad told this story:*

*"I mingled with a crowd of people and asked:*

*Where is the Book?*

*A man in the crowd replied: I had it in my hands.*

*I went up to him and asked:*

*Show me the Book.*

*The man laughed and said: I threw it into the river so the water could read it. Then I said: Earth furnished the pages. Water and fire the writing. Alas, the man was gone.<sup>100</sup>*

To sum up, writing is an experience of happening/enowning, for in one and the same gesture of having written a book it reveals the Book and is absorbed by it. The act of writing is a change, a coming-into-being of something new, something that is happening/enowning but also has *already* happened/enowned as a fragment of the vast space of the past. Finally, the act of writing is a change of perspective – a turn from seeing the Book as external and separated by *tzimtzum* to recognising oneself in it. But this change of perspective is an irremovable gap in and through which the Book makes itself visible and expands its compass.

This leads us to the conclusion of this Chapter, in which we must reflect on how the concept of the Book ties in with modernity and Jewish tradition.

## **Conclusion: The Book and Jewish Philosophy of Modernity**

The idea of a book that encompasses the entire reality is an old Kabbalistic motif. Without doubt, it could not have arisen had it not been for the position the Torah took in Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. As Moshe Idel argues

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98 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

100 BQ I, p. 313.

in his comprehensive *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction, Judaism had to re-invent itself, relinquishing the holy place as the central point of reference.<sup>101</sup> With its role taken over by the Torah, the ensuing transformations re-cast the fundamental theological tenets: God ceased to intervene in reality directly and hid himself behind the text while his living voice was replaced by the holy book.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, the Torah was accorded such prominence that God was represented not even as its author but as its reader.<sup>103</sup> Idel claims that in post-Biblical Judaism, the Torah was envisaged as pre-existing Creation and, moreover, embodying the paradigm of Creation. It contained all perfect knowledge, and to study it was a religious injunction even for God himself.<sup>104</sup> The Torah was also supposed to serve as the immovable basis for the world both ontologically and sociologically (i.e. for society).<sup>105</sup> This was fertile soil for the Kabbalistic beliefs that the Torah contained everything and was a "world-absorbing text."<sup>106</sup>

Jabès' book obviously draws on these representations. What is more, its inner dualism (of whiteness and script) consciously employs Isaac the Blind's idea of the "white" and "black" fires as components of the Torah, with the former as the mystical source of unity and the latter as the world inscribed in it. Whatever this whiteness could have meant precisely in the old Kabbalah, it was a homogeneous plane that conferred continuity on reality. For example, medieval kabbalist David ibn Abi Zimra insisted that whiteness in the book encompassed things, just like God encompassed all worlds.<sup>107</sup> Jabès' whiteness has an analogous function as it incorporates books, that is, symbolic orders.

Yet, also here, mechanisms of modern thinking are to be found behind the Kabbalistic trappings. One of such mechanisms is the idea of a dimension which is radically external to knowledge. An encounter with this dimension is a trauma of experiencing something that transcends and determines the symbolic order. In Jabès, this dimension is the whiteness of the Book. However, whiteness is underpinned by the same structure as Kant's "thing in itself" and Lacan's "real,"

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101 Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 2002), pp. 1–3.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

106 See *Ibid.*, p. 37 ff.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

that is, by the borderline between the continuous domain of knowledge and the radically particular.

Another modern mechanism involves the idea of a set of all limited symbolic orders. In Jabès, it is embodied in the script of the Book, corresponding to Hegel's Absolute though without a possibility of the Book's direct manifestation in the orders inscribed in it. Admittedly, like in the kabbalists, Jabès' Book comprises the entire reality, yet *reality itself is comprehended in different terms, that is, through the lens of perspectivism*. For the Book contains not beings but "books," i.e. entire symbolic orders.

This implies a third modern facet of Jabès' concept: *the co-dependence of the Book and books*. For the kabbalists, this "world-absorbing text," to borrow Idel's wording, was the ultimate plane of presence. Everything belonged to the Torah, which was the unique ontological foundation of reality. The kabbalist was to rise to its level, where the entire world was anchored. Yet in Jabès, even though the Book is a place where books are inscribed, it depends on books as well. It is through their rise and demise that it can expand; it is only by them that it can be marked. *The Book and books are thus inseparably linked.*<sup>108</sup>

This difference between the kabbalists and Jabès accurately reflects the difference between pre-modern and modern thought. The kabbalists' Book is a transcendent being, the basis and a warrant of the world. In Jabès, the Book is one of the moments of dynamic reality, a moment that must be assumed as a result of perspectivism even though it is revealed only in a dislocation. As I have attempted to show in this Chapter, the Book *is an indispensable presumption of Jabès' thought and gives it coherence*. "Abolishing [the idea of] the place means creating a non-place in proportion to place, [creating] a blank place within the blankness of a yet blanker infinite," states Jabès.<sup>109</sup> He suggests in this way that, unlike in the kabbalists, the Book is not just an existing, transcendent entity but *an outcome of "abolishing the idea of the place."* It is as if thinking something radically particular had to entail the rise of a backdrop that makes it so.

Juxtaposing the concept of the Book in the kabbalists and in Jabès, we can see that it mutated, apparently as a result of a shift in the very notion of being which took place at the threshold of modernity. For Jabès, there is no being as such. Existence stems from "having been read," that is, from being part of a symbolic order. And reading presupposes the ultimate dimension of continuity *against the backdrop of which* a particularity comes to the fore in its distance from the other

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108 Motte, *Questioning*, p. 104.

109 QDLB, p. 229.

ones. Jabès' perspectivism makes the whiteness of the Book – the world's undefeated void<sup>110</sup> – necessary. What is more, because of this very perspectivism, a particular order is seen not only against the background of the continuity of the Book's whiteness but also as *part* of the Book's script. As such, this order is both separate from and inscribed in the Book while the alternation of these aspects is, in fact, the movement of a book's rise and ruin.

In this way, the Jabèsian Book weaves a thread of distinctly modern thought into the texture of the Kabbala's archetypal concept.

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110 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

