

8 Judaism and Writing

Jabès views Judaism and writing, which is (as discussed in the previous Chapter) the marking of the Book, as specifically interrelated. Their interrelation can be briefly described as a structural similarity. This perhaps best exemplifies the essence of Jewish philosophy of modernity. For Jabès, Judaism and writing are fully autonomous: neither of them precedes the other nor is a source or a model for the other. However, when structurally compared, they turn out to have developed in an analogous manner. The conclusion that writing, as conceived of by Jabès, is deeply rooted in the laws of the modern universe indicates that its affinity with Judaism stems from the fact that this very Judaism is, in itself, just a modern re-invention. As such, the analogy of writing and Judaism is due to their respective, inherently modern structures.

In this Chapter, I will examine this relationship. To begin with, I will show how the condition of the Jew parallels the condition of the writer. Subsequently, I will discuss a few aspects representing the identical structure of Judaism and writing. I will show that both – Judaism and writing – are based on the structure of the Book, originate from an event which Jabès calls “wounding” and, finally, are intrinsically historical. This reasoning will help me explain why Jabès regards Judaism as “religion after religion,” which persists after the death of God. Afterwards, I will focus on where Judaism and writing are closest to each other, that is, on life understood as continual interpretation. To conclude, I will seek to locate the interconnection of Judaism and writing posited by Jabès in the context of Jewish philosophy of modernity.

Introduction: A Jew and a Writer

Undoubtedly, Judaism was not among the traditions that had the earliest formative impact on Jabès.² Jewish tradition is hardly ever evoked in his early texts, the least so in his Cairo poetry.¹ *Chansons pour le repas de l'ogre*, the only volume in which such references can indeed be found, is devoted to *dernier enfant juif*, i.e. to the poet's mother-in-law Édith Cohen, and in no way prioritises Jewish tradition. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Jabès considered some of his post-war works to be an indirect response to the Shoah, but they were meant first of all

1 See Jaron, *Edmond Jabès*, pp. 37–40.

to assuage the soul² rather than to ponder what had happened. This may be the reason why these texts barely evoke any recognisably Jewish experience.

This changed only in the wake of Jabès' exile from Egypt, which was provoked by a surge of anti-Semitic sentiments and policies.³ Starting with that moment, when his Jewish origin affected his life so deeply, Jabès came to dwell obsessively on a handful of recurring questions: What is Judaism generally, and in particular today? How is Judaism possible after the death of God? What about Judaism after the Shoah? How do Jewish faith, customs and topoi interlace with and determine Jewish lives? What makes it possible for those who feel attached to Jewish tradition to form a community?

This is not an autonomous set of questions. Unlike Emil Fackenheim and his likes, Jabès does not just try to re-think Judaism after the Shoah.⁴ In Jabès, Judaism and the lot of the Jews are bound up with apparently more general questions – queries about the status of God as such, about the mode of human existence in the world and about the relationship of writing, memory and the Book. It does not mean, however, that “universal” and “Jewish” questions simply alternate. Rather, *a structurally identical questioning is carried out on two different planes of reference*. One of them is writing, where the “subject” is an exiled writer who produces his writings and is constantly inscribed in the space of the Book he traverses. The other is Judaism, where the “subject” is a nomadic Jew who wanders across reality with no place to call his own.

Many Jabès scholars have recognised this double investment of questioning. Stéphane Mosès, for one, writes:

Jabès' books always have a dual point of reference: writing and Judaism.
[...] The Jewish experience and the poetic experience keep referring to each other, in their different ways certainly, but in the same proximity, in the same approximation and distancing, which definitively precludes privileging either of these experiences as a simple allegory of the other.⁵

Yet, although writing and Judaism are interconnected in Jabès' texts, they never lose their own respective autonomy.⁶ This is what Derrida notices when he calls

2 As Jabès wrote in this first poetry volume, “for there may be / a song of childhood / which in the bloodiest hour / stands alone against horror and death” (LSLS, p. 29).

3 See QJQW, p. 16.

4 See Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994).

5 Mosès, “Edmond Jabès,” pp. 45, 47.

6 Despite this autonomy, which can be fully seen only when the entire structure of Jabèsian reality is considered, the poet has not escaped criticism from some commentators who

have accused him of trivialising the Shoah and reducing the Jewish exceptionality. This put Jabès within a broad movement of the post-war humanities that framed Jewish tradition as a victim of Western logocentrism and a stimulus to discard the logocentric structures. Maxim Silverman, who associates the poet with Blanchot and Lyotard, suggests that, like in the latter, where the Jew is turned into an allegory of what has nothing in common with Jewishness as such and serves to oppose Western rationality, Jewishness in Jabès is identified with the process of writing. In this way, Silverman insists, Jewish experience is generalised into a universal truth, which threatens to dilute the Jewish specificity. “Writing is ‘Hebraized,’” writes Silverman, “while, on the other hand, the departicularized ‘Jew’ is thoroughly secularized. In a sense, this amounts to the ultimate form of assimilation of the Jew to a ‘higher’ cause. This is ironic – to say the least – given the professed desire of such theory to refuse to trap ‘the other’ within the oppressive logic of sameness and difference, and to return otherness to the ‘other.’ This universalizing of the Jew in this way moves perilously close [...] to eradicating the Jew all over again.” Maxim Silverman, *Facing Postmodernity: Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 18–28.

This criticism, though useful given the frequent, unexamined instrumentalisation of Jewishness and the Shoah in the post-war humanities, seems oblivious to what Jabès is always acutely aware of. Namely, in modernity, this more or less mythical “Jewishness as such” evoked by Silverman is in itself a play of differences – alternating particularisation and universalisation. Modern anti-Semitism and the Shoah prove powerfully that Jewishness is not just a simple, autarchic way of being, but a condition subject to constant interpretation – interpretation which verges on utter violence – by external agencies. It is also a condition which, as a result of the Jews’ historical experience and of new trends in the humanities, continues to re-interpret itself. To demand respect for the exceptionality of “the other” by prohibiting interpretation of the other’s tradition and by safeguarding it against any change means to remain within the logic of instrumentalisation *à rebours* (the mechanism aptly grasped by Jean Baudrillard).

To Jabès, the Jew indeed seems a universalised allegory of particularity. In this, Jabès is close to the post-war humanities, as referred to by Silverman, but a distinct feature of Jabès’ take on of Jewishness is that even such universalisation is just one of many attempts at self-definition in the history of broadly conceived Jewish tradition. It does not in the least diminish the “Jewish exceptionality,” which Silverman fears. Quite the contrary, it emphasises all the more that the Jewish exceptionality cannot be possibly fully rendered in any explanations. We would be hard pressed, indeed, to find a more unqualified philosophical justification of this exceptionality than is given in Jabès’ notion of the trace which ultimately defies all interpretations and persists where they all pass. The impossibility of erasing the trace, of forgetting, causes, as Jabès sees it, the pain of the Jewish fate. It would be difficult to accuse Jabès of instrumentalising Jewishness, all the more so as, in his thought, Jewishness is interwoven not just with suffering, but with excess of suffering and its unbearable continuance.

Nevertheless, there is a pattern which Silverman’s argumentation actually captures. Namely, modern Judaism is already re-interpreted and, in this sense, instrumentalised. Whatever it might have been before, the Jewish difference has come to rely on the

Jabès' "exchange between the Jew and writing [...] a pure and founding exchange without prerogatives."⁷ Besides, as Josh Cohen suggests, "in insisting that it is writing itself rather than a given thematic or descriptive content that confers 'Jewishness' on a tale, Jabès undoes a key literary-critical distinction between form and content."⁸ Writing dovetails with Judaism not because of its content but because of its *structure*.

This relationship has never been an a-priori assumption for Jabès. It is in the practice of questioning as such that writing and Judaism display their structural likeness. Jabès distinctly emphasises this in his retrospective self-interpretation, insisting that, as the consecutive parts of *The Book of Questions* were written, he grew more and more consciously aware that his texts were coming, unintentionally at the beginning, to resemble the way of questioning characteristic of the Talmud,⁹ that is, questioning as a constant meditation rather than as a search for answers. "If there is anything Jewish in my work," wrote Jabès, "it is endless questioning, commenting, putting in doubt, uncertainty, accepting things which though seemingly true may not be true."¹⁰

This is an explicit expression of the double link between writing and Judaism. According to Jabès, writing is Jewish because it does not provide definitive answers, because it does not know truths that endure in time but constantly wanders across them. Still, in Jabès' account, the same Judaism is simultaneously very peculiar and unorthodox, to say the least. It is a construct with an affinity to the modern universe, which is presupposed in advance in it. Having ascertained this, we can raise an objection: Did Jabès not claim himself that he had discovered analogies between his writings and the questioning mode of the Talmud, which is at any rate a classical rather than a modern corpus of Jewish texts? Consequently, is it not about their affinity to the core of Jewish thinking in the diaspora era instead of to modern thought? The answer must be negative: the

modern mechanism of the remnant and the trace. This is the key factor in universalising Judaism and in stripping it of specificity, which no longer resides in Judaism's own "content" but consists in how it functions in the modern universe. Undoubtedly, modern Judaism is a tradition which has been re-constructed upon the originary loss, the status it shares with other religions and pre-modern knowledge. Thus, Silverman criticises, in fact, not so much Jabès himself as the structural mechanism that makes his thinking possible.

7 Derrida, *Writing*, p. 78. See also Raczymow, "Qui est?" pp. 166–7.

8 Cohen, *Interrupting*, p. 107.

9 EEJ, pp. 69–71.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Talmud is not viewed here from within Jewish tradition, through the commentaries of Rashi, the Tosafot and later exegetes. Jabès does not care either about the *content* of the Mishnah and the Gemara or about halachic argumentation. *The Jewish law is dead to him.* What he finds compelling is only the *logic* of the text made up of strings of inconclusive commentary. His view of the Talmud is external and modern; he finds in it what he himself wants to find. Consequently, there is no way of establishing whether Jabès' texts are "really" Jewish in their fashion of questioning. For "real" Judaism, however it might be defined, no longer exists in the modern universe, and the Judaism which is the framework of comparison for the poet has been "made out," that is, re-invented, in this very mode of questioning.

Therefore, the relationship of writing and Judaism as Jabès posits it goes beyond a simple similarity and is based on Jewish philosophy of modernity. Writing and Judaism are concurrent since each can be read in the context of the other. At the same time, there is an ineradicable difference between them. This is why Jabès is neither a Jewish writer nor a Jewish philosopher but "a Jew and a writer."¹¹ Through his *porte-parole* Yukel, Jabès can claim in *Return to the Book*:

*"First I thought I was a writer. Then I realized I was a Jew. Then I no longer distinguished between the writer in me from the Jew because one and the other are only torments of an ancient word."*¹²

The intertwining of the writerly condition and the Jewish condition is paralleled by the interwovenness of writing and Judaism:

I talked to you about the difficulty of being Jewish, which is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out.¹³

Jabès' book is one text of "waiting, hope and wearing out" which writes itself twice on each of the two planes. Therefore, writing and Judaism can be said to be two particular fields of the modern universe underpinned by the recurring structure. *As the difference between them is irremovable, both writing vis-à-vis Judaism and Judaism vis-à-vis writing are a repetition in Jabèsian sense.* The "and" in "a Jew and a writer" conveys the parallel and, at the same time, the impossibility of identifying the two conditions with each other, being the locus of the ultimate constitutional difference in the modern world.

11 DB, p. 58.

12 BQ I, p. 361.

13 BQ I, p. 122.

These initial insights lead us to the next section, in which I will scrutinise Jabès' texts for the fundamental traits he ascribes to Judaism and writing. Without reducing one to the other, I will show their structural analogy in more detail.

Writing and Judaism: The Structure of the Book

One common trait of writing and Judaism, in Jabès, is their groundedness in the mechanism of the Book. As a result, they share a specific structure. They are not based on any enduring content, and they cannot be reduced to any definite formulation. Instead, they are *movements which pass through their particular finite forms* without being identifiable with them. In Jabèsian language, writing and Judaism are not definitive books durable in time but rather the sustained creation of book after book.¹⁴

Because I discussed writing in this respect in the previous Chapter, I will now focus on Judaism. First of all, Judaism as such has, basically, no permanent and invariably present traits, according to Jabès; instead, Judaism is movement in history which passes through particular forms that are taken to be Judaism at a given moment. More than that, Judaism is a line drawn in the Book as a result of combining mutually contradictory perspectival forms. *Jabès does not negate the internal contradictions within Jewish tradition, but, emphatically, he deems them to be the basic property of Judaism.* For, throughout history, Judaism can repeatedly take new forms which utterly diverge from the previous ones.

Consequently, *Judaism is continuity in discontinuity.* This feature has already been identified in writing: writing also consists in continuing across individual, mutually negating books. Judaism and writing transcend thus their consecutive finite forms. They seem to be, in a way, anchored in the Book, whose existence enables them to survive through the particular forms they take.

Another key consequence is that writing and Judaism are specific spaces of *memory*, in which their previous forms are discernible. In other words, writing and Judaism are not identifiable with their current forms; furthermore, their specific way of functioning *makes visible the forms they once took.* Writing and Judaism seem thus to be "the Book in miniature": as the Book is the ultimate space of continuity and inscription for all past, writing and Judaism make visible *a certain* ensemble of gone-by orders. This trait is well expressed in the metaphor of a line in the Book. If the Book is a continuity of all points, a line connects some

14 This is the reason why, as Jabès insists, the Jews while not having their own land for a long time, have always had their book, which has continued to expand with new parts and commentaries (QJQW, p. 16).

of them. This is exactly the role of Judaism and writing: they institute continuity among some of the past orders. As such, *in their entirety they mark the Book because they unfold in the Book.*

Now, let us look into specific consequences that grounding in the structure of the Book brings to Judaism. Jabès emphasises first of all the incommensurability of the “essence” of Judaism and its particular forms:

[...] we have wept so much over the centuries that to each of our tears there corresponds the brief twinkling of a star.

[...] We have molded our sun in pain, with our own fingers.

[...] Brothers of different covenants and a different abundance, you have built statues for your descendants, granted cathedrals to your cities, surrounded the desert with mosques.

Your treasures have remained with your families.

We mourn for the destroyed Temple.

[...] “*God is leaning against the dismantled wall of the Temple. From now on, no dwelling will be ours.*”¹⁵

The initial sin is a sin of memory. We will never get to the end of time.¹⁶

In what has been said, in what has returned to silence, there is our solitude.

For the Jew, having a place means finishing a book.

The unfinished book was our survival.¹⁷

You must always add five thousand years to the age claimed by a Jew.¹⁸

Judaism is always *not-here*; it is always something more than its current form. It is based on an additional dimension that transcends the here-and-now. Hence, the “essence” of Judaism seems to be negative vis-à-vis any given content. The Jewish God “is leaning against the dismantled Temple,” and, as such, is supported by *sustained nothing*. Hence, he becomes an external point of scrutiny for whatever positively exists. Judaism constantly accompanies that which is Jewish, just as the Book accompanies the book, and adds to its present, finite form a vast expanse of the past.

The “essence” of Jabès’ Judaism consist in that as soon as something comes to be recognised as Jewish, it is instantaneously blasted out of its closure and revealed as finite and inscribed in the space of ages-long, inexplicable continuity. To the Jew, Judaism is what the Book is to the book – it is the space of its inscription, rendering it in a way incomplete and unequal to itself. The Jews are “autochthons of the Book,” says Derrida.¹⁹ For Jabès, to be Jewish means to be illumined in one’s

15 BQ I, pp. 187, 193, 233.

16 BQ II, p. 116.

17 BQ II, p. 309.

18 BR III, p. 21.

19 Derrida, *Writing*, p. 80.

own incompleteness by the legacy of Judaism. This legacy in itself is based on constant self-transcendence: “Judaism is always outside Judaism. It is a religion of leaving the word behind in its own absence and austere novelty [...]”²⁰ Thus, Israel’s wandering across history has no defined meaning of its own and is more like exile, with meanings only occasionally surfacing in it.²¹

Another consequence of grounding Judaism in the structure of the Book is that Judaism endures despite failures of its subsequent forms. Hence also the continuity of Jewish messianism. One of the many disasters visited on the Jewish people in the past could alone be a tragedy capable of putting an end to the nation, but Judaism has not only survived but also helped perceive the subsequent disasters from the outside. Judaism survives outside meaning and is reborn again in a new iteration.²²

This concept brings to mind the biblical notion of שאר ישראל, *she’ar Yisrael* – “the remnant of Israel” – which is often dwelled on in the prophetic books (especially in Isaiah²³). “The remnant” survives the disaster, salvaged from the total destruction visited upon the Jewish nation in its previous form. Yet, rather than re-producing this form in its original shape, it becomes the source of an entirely new form. The remnant of Israel embodies survival and pure duration throughout the discontinuity of the disaster. “The wound of all origin! To the death we survived we keep bearing witness,”²⁴ as asserted by one of Jabès’ invented rabbis. Of course, survival crucially involves suffering. While regular pain has its limits since its excess would cause death, the pain of Judaism is *the memory of subsequent sufferings beyond any limits*:

“Suffering,” a sage said, “is the largest book for it contains all books.”²⁵

This verse depicts suffering as structurally similar to Judaism and writing, that is, as based on the mechanism of the Book. It is a surplus in relation to particular instances of suffering (“books”) – it is the memory of them.²⁶

20 BQ II, p. 291.

21 “To be Jewish means to have left home early and arrived nowhere” (BQ II, p. 439).

22 Cf. Berel Lang, “Evil, Suffering, and the Holocaust,” in *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 277–300, on p. 282.

23 See, for example, Isaiah 10: 22.

24 BR III, p. 60 (quotation altered).

25 LH, p. 11.

26 That is why, Jabès says that “so white was the cry we had reason to think that pain simply meant feeling stages of whiteness” (BM, p. 95). One gap in the text – a blank

Concluding, Judaism and writing are founded on the structure of the Book. While Jabès' concept of writing ensues from the idea of the Book and keeps referring back to it – and its relation to the Book is obvious – Judaism fits this description only when re-interpreted. Admittedly, Jabès uses the concept of the Book to explain the excess continuity of Jewish tradition in time, but this happens at the price of a specific re-invention of Judaism. He casts the Jews as “the people of the Book” in an entirely new sense, which is aptly grasped by William Franke:

Jabès' poetics of the inexpressible pivot not so much, or not so directly, on an extra-linguistic singularity or otherness as on the Book. Like the Neoplatonic One, also an All-Nothing, the Book is infinite and can be manifest only in fragments and finitude, never as a whole and intact. In finite terms the Book is nothing, that is, nothing finite can express it, and every word taken as a word of the Book cannot but be empty. The emptiness of the word, as abstracted and separated from the reality of things and as belonging to the Book, opens into the omnipresent infinity of Nothing, and the Jews, by dwelling in this exile of the word, are veritably the people of the Book (*gens du livre*). This infinity and emptiness of the word, as well as its totalization – the Book – is totally unsayable. But it is open in its emptiness, an open question and an open desert for wandering, a space of errancy. And only in this openness is there any room for human expression.²⁷

This specific re-interpretation of Judaism makes Judaism highly useful in thinking about the Book but, at the same time, severs it definitively from the space in which the Book was not a universal world of exile yet.²⁸

The Wound as the Beginning of Judaism and Writing

Another link between writing and Judaism is conveyed by Jabès in the metaphor of the *wound*. This suggestive expression is underpinned by a powerful philosophical structure. As already mentioned, the relationship of writing and Judaism to their various forms replicates the relationship of the Book to the book. Hence, each of their finite forms is marked by indelible excess. In Jabès, the wound designates this very excess, which shatters finitude and forestalls its

space – is a scream while the chain of the *already experienced* stages of whiteness is suffering. Whiteness – pure duration and bare life – is thus associated with suffering, in itself an effect of communing with the unthinkable.

27 Franke, “Singular,” pp. 630–1.

28 Beth Hawkins explains that “as the space in which the Book is inscribed continually erases itself, grounding is removed, and exile becomes the established condition of both the text and the language employed in the text. The Book becomes the metaphor for wandering and exile. Specifically, the desert becomes the poetic space” (*Reluctant Theologians*, p. 174).

becoming equal with itself. As such, the wound quasi-conceptually renders the fact that the “essence” of writing and Judaism transcends their concrete positive content.

The first part of *The Book of Questions* opens with one of Jabès’ most-quoted lines:

*Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible.*²⁹

Jabès assumes that each book starts from a wound. The concepts and insights developed in the foregoing shed light on this notion. The wound seems to be a new way of describing *tzimtzum* – the originary contraction, which simultaneously (1) makes the book possible; and (2) leaves in it a trace of what underwent contraction. It is this trace that is the wound. Importantly, it is invisible first and is revealed only as the book develops.

The mechanism behind the wound is clarified in Jabès’ remarks about *The Book of Questions*. Namely, Jabès stated that *The Book of Questions* meant, for him, making the primal trace which could be neither forgotten nor erased nor fully elucidated in writing that followed it. Jabès opened an “inexhaustible book” which he could not close anymore and, consequently, had to find himself *in it*.³⁰ It seems, thus, that the wound brings a boundless, negative remnant into the book, which has a number of consequences. First, this remnant rives the finitude of the book apart by indicating a dimension that the book itself cannot capture. Second, this remnant leaves in the book a trace that cannot be comprehended either from within the book itself or in later writing. This leads to the third, and most important, consequence: *this remnant is the axis of the displacement which makes the book as a whole into the book as an entity within another dimension*. Jabès starts writing, but, instead of an autonomous work implementing his design, “an inexhaustible book” appears, in which what was the “work” suddenly becomes a moment.³¹ The wound turns out to be an unexpected opening of a new dimension which engulfs the book and the writer, forced to find himself in this peculiar space.

As such, the wound is an event that compels one to write in the Jabèsian sense, that is, to make oneself at home in the Book and perceive oneself as well as one’s books from a distance:

29 BQ I, p. 13.

30 DB, p. 113.

31 “The book is a moment of the wound, or eternity” (BQ I, p. 196).

Writing forces us to adopt a distance in relation to ourselves. It is in this distance that our books are made.³²

Making a book is by no means a narcissistic enterprise. On the contrary, it requires yielding to the pressure of the written – which can not only give us a faithful image of itself, but also of sustain all through our reading the salutary dialogue the book initiates in taking shape. For its pages are so arranged that, once the first is turned, none of the following can avoid the planned facing page [*face-a-face*].³³

Therefore, the wound can be viewed as both (1) the originary event that initiates writing; and (2) an enduring remnant that shatters the narcissism of the strong writer-work relationship. The wound reveals that no book can ultimately abide in the limitation of its own *tzimtzum* because it will inevitably be confronted with other books. As such, the wound shows that the book does not establish any “truly” new beginning but finds itself *within* the Book:

“The book does not begin,” he replied.

“All beginnings are already in the book.”³⁴

Jabès attributes structurally identical consequences of the wound to Judaism. Predictably, “the wound” in Jewish tradition corresponds to circumcision, and in this respect Jabès does not differ from Celan and Derrida.³⁵ In this perspective, circumcision is a trace imprinted on an individual that marks the continuing, excess memory of Judaism, which transcends this individual.

The effects of the wound as analysed for writing are fully consonant with the Jabèsian interpretation of Judaism. Like the wound at the beginning of the book,

32 DB, p. 104.

33 BD, p. 80.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

35 Waldrop, similarly, concludes that this passage concerns both the writer’s wound and the Jew’s circumcision wound. Cf. Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p. 3. See also, Édith Dacan, “Le corps et l’écriture dans le *Livre des Questions*.” *Les Cahiers Obsidiane*, no. 5 – Edmond Jabès (Paris: Capitales/Obsidiane, 1982), pp. 18–19.

Circumcision is the motif common to Jabès and Derrida (see e.g. “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan” in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen [New York: Fordham UP, 2005], pp. 1–64). In Derrida, like in Jabès, thinking about circumcision as making a mark on the body is bound up with reflection on the trace and writing. Circumcision is a model of the event that traumatises through its incomprehensible singularity; cf. Joseph G. Kronick, “Philosophy as Autobiography: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida,” *MLN*, 115/5 (December 2000), pp. 997–1018, on pp. 1005–1006. In this regard, Jabès and Derrida follow a nearly identical path.

circumcision strips the Jew of a stable and complete identity and makes him refer constantly to the dimension of which he is himself a part. For this reason, the Jew watches himself from a distance. Furthermore, the wound of circumcision becomes an incomprehensible, inexhaustible and irremovable trace. Finally, it points to the inexplicable originary event that set Israel apart from other peoples.

Finally, an important thing is that in his re-interpretation of circumcision Jabès plays on an entrenched motif of Jewish tradition. The Hebraic word מילה (*milah*), which designates circumcision, is also an equivalent of the term “word.” In some Jewish doctrines, circumcision means anchoring the word in reality and establishing a bond between the word and matter.³⁶ In Jabès, similarly, circumcision introduces the Jew into the realm of the Book, i.e. the ultimate instance of “reality.” As such, circumcision is more than just a sign. As stated earlier, in writing, the wound is *the axis of the displacement* between the book and the Book. Circumcision works in a similar manner. Ostensibly just a sign of membership in the Jewish nation, circumcision essentially makes a man on whom this sign has been inscribed a part in relation to Judaism based on the structure of the Book.

To recapitulate, the wound is a notion issued by the very structure of the Book. Based on it, writing and Judaism override their particular forms, leaving a non-removable trace in them. It is the “wound in the beginning of the book” or circumcision. In both cases, it is a sign which reveals a new dimension of historicity that transcends finitude.³⁷ Historicity is what I will now focus on in more detail.

Historicity: Judaism as a Religion after Religion

Writing and Judaism are, according to Jabès, specifically associated with history. Certainly, the relation is not about them sharing the same narrative of the past, but rather about bringing *historicity* into each narrative that develops within them. With their “essence” located in the negative remnant, writing and Judaism

36 Ouaknin, *Concerto*, pp. 69–71.

37 The Jabèsian interdependence of historicity and the letter (and, consequently, circumcision) was also noted by Derrida: “[...] in question is a certain Judaism as the birth and passion of writing. The passion of writing, the love and endurance of the letter itself whose subject is not decidably the Jew or the Letter itself. Perhaps the common root of a people and of writing. In any event, the incommensurable destiny which grafts the history of a ‘race born of the book’ (...) onto the radical origin of meaning as literality, that is, onto historicity itself. For there could be no history without the gravity and labor of literality. The painful folding of itself which permits history to reflect itself as it ciphers itself. This reflection is its beginning. The only thing that begins by reflecting itself is history.” Derrida, *Writing*, pp. 7–8.

explicitly indicate that each of their concrete forms is inevitably historical. This has a very interesting consequence. Namely, these successive forms refuse to be integrated by any continuous narrative. Individual books – and, consequently, individual forms of Jewishness – must therefore be perceived as discrete, mutually negating entities linked only by *their common relation to the remnant* of writing or Judaism that transcends them. As writing was discussed in these terms in the previous Chapter, I will focus in the following on how historicity works in Jabès' Judaism.

According to Jabès, “he [the Jew] carries the weight of his history.”³⁸ This means, first of all, that the Jew cannot forget about the past. Second, he heaps the “weight of history” onto every present moment, which amounts to inscribing this moment in the plane of impossible continuity. In this sense, Judaism works *against* oblivion associated with the limitation of each *tzimtzum* and destroys it by re-connecting to the Book. Third, the legacy of Judaism compels constant reflection on history, which defies erasure. That is why, Judaism, as Jabès puts it, is “but questions asked of History.”³⁹

This statement seems to echo Franz Rosenzweig, who insisted that only the Jewish nation, which is outside history rather than within it, can judge history.⁴⁰ Jabès, however, draws a more complex picture than Rosenzweig's. In Jabès' interpretation, Judaism cannot be conclusively defined as remaining outside History and separated from it by the immutability of the Law and ritual. On the contrary, Jabès' Judaism is a tradition that combines utterly different and changeable forms, which are without a doubt fully entangled in their historical conjunctures. Outside History, there is only the *negative remnant* of Judaism, which, by transcending Judaism's particular forms, makes History visible. Therefore, Judaism is both at the centre of History and outside it.

This distinct situatedness is highly relevant in Jabès' account. In his view, Judaism can restore historicity to contemporary culture, which tends to dwell in oblivion:

What would remain for the Jew if he didn't at least have the hope that his history, his suffering, his anxiety will, after the fact, constitute a ferment, an exemplary experience everybody has to take into account? [...] it exists in order to wake up a consciousness that risks falling... What is at stake is our Western culture. All questioning that avoided Auschwitz, for example, would miss the essential.⁴¹

38 DB, p. 61.

39 DB, p. 29.

40 See Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 355.

41 DB, p. 61.

More than that, it is Judaism, with its boundedness to historicity, that makes genuine questioning possible.⁴² To Judaism, everything that now exists appears in the context of the unforgettable past and is but a moment in the Book that is writing itself down.⁴³

There is one more important consequence. Jabès' Judaism can continue religious questioning where religion as such is no more. Judaism is a *religion after religion*, a surviving witness of its own decline. Judaism after God still permits

to interrogate Judaism without ceasing to be Jewish.

The salvation of the Jewish people lies in the rupture, in the solidarity at the heart of the rupture [...] The rupture is primarily due to God who wanted to be absent, who fell silent. To rediscover the divine word means to pass through this rupture.⁴⁴

Thus, Jabès regards Judaism as unique in that it can continue after the end of Theism, which seems to be intrinsic to the Jewish religion. Judaism persists even though there is no longer God, around whom it organised itself and the notion of whom it purified down to radical monotheism. Judaism is thus a religion after religion because its negative essence makes it a witness of that which has already passed. In this way, Judaism can recognise *within itself* a rupture left behind by the fall of classic Theism; it can find "divine word." In this optics, it is perhaps only Judaism that genuinely understands real atheism, for Judaism itself *is based on its own non-existence, which it has survived and to which it testifies*.

In this view of Judaism, Jabès is similar to Kant and Hegel, two Protestant philosophers of emergent modernity evoked in Chapter One. Their similarity lies in that all three of them consider religion to have been abolished in its erstwhile form by modernity. In the new space ushered in by the modern turn, religion can only be re-constructed in a form that is subject to the laws of modernity.

42 *The Ineffaceable the Unperceived* insists: "By calling himself and his faith into question [*mettant en question*], the Jew has taken the pathetic risk of placing all interrogation on the axis of the crucial question of man and God, of making his own the question of the universe and then bringing it back to the book. The book is his answer" (BR III, p. 69).

43 As *The Ineffaceable the Unperceived* states, the Jew refused to disappear and stubbornly embraced his past:

"Trying to kill the Jew means also tackling his time.

Being born a Jew means entering this time, and dying, leaving it for good. The duration of this time means crossing the desert, indeterminate duration of our endurance" (BR III, p. 61).

44 DB, pp. 58–9.

As such, this religion no longer derives from reality-transcending revelation but, contrariwise, is discernible *in the mode of existence of everything that is real*, including via direct, individual experience. This form of religiosity breeds a specific atheism: ostensibly, God still exists, but he is just a mechanism of the modern world.

Similarly, according to Jabès, “Judaism after God” continues to ask questions about God, but God is now the centre of the void intrinsic to the modern universe. In this sense, the epistemologically privileged status of Judaism should not come as a surprise: Judaism epitomises the modern space so accurately because it is itself based on the structure of this space. *The Ineffaceable the Unperceived* tells the following story:

Reb Issah, the most controversial and, curiously, most feared of the commentators of the Book, taught that Judaism was based on itself alone [...].

Thus, truth, like God, would be an arch-vertigo, an irresistible appeal of the void; [...] God [...] declared: “Whosoever dies in Me shall not die. For I am the life of all death, which unites Me with them.”

Outraged by Reb Issah’s statements which had been eagerly reported, the three most famous rabbis of the region took occasion to summon him and make him explain himself.

“Where did your read that God said: ‘Whosoever dies in Me shall not die. For I am the life of all death, which unites Me with them’? In which holy scripture? asked the first.

Proudly, Reb Issah replied:

“In myself, for I am the source of my sources and the word of my words [*paroles*].”

The second rabbi pounced on him, screaming:

“These are words of your mouth and not God’s.”

“How would God make Himself heard if not through our mouths? How would we come to read Him if not in our books?” replied Reb Issah without flinching.

“You reason like an ungodly man. But who could ever prove that these words are really God’s?” asked him the third.

“I will tell you,” replied Reb Issah. I will tell you: *the words themselves*, because they fly higher than our own words, which die like flies in the attempt to hold them back.⁴⁵

This dialogue marshals the key features of Jabès’ Judaism “after God”: God is the centre of the void, the site of the ultimate community in death. He needs neither Zion as a special place of revelation nor consecrated channels, such as the book, to transmit tradition. He reveals himself in the words of an individual human being.⁴⁶ It is so because God is a *function of thinking as such*, a

45 BR III, pp. 81–2 (quotation altered).

46 In Jewish thought, language is not reductively conceived of as just communicative and horizontal (i.e., limited to human relationships). Rather, it is seen as intrinsically harbouring a transcendent dimension as it refers to Divine Revelation; cf. Gross, *L'aventure*,

point of questioning inevitably presupposed by this questioning. Because of that “Judaism is based only on itself” rather than on a transcendent source.

In conclusion, Jabès’ Judaism is crucially entangled in a double bind. On the one hand, its relation to historicity enables it to persist after “the death of God” and gives it continuity, in which the effects of this event are visible. This is also how Jabès views Judaism, seeing in it a chance to restore “History” to the present. Yet, on the other hand, this re-construction of Judaism itself results from the modern rupture. It is possible to locate its “essence” in the negative remnant only because there is a structure in which this remnant emerges and works.

The Jew and the Writer: A Silent Community

Because writing and Judaism share the same common structure, their “subjects” – the writer and the Jew – take analogous positions. Their particular forms pass in time; nevertheless, the two “are,” in a way, an enduring remnant. In other words, the Jew and the writer are forever torn between their historical forms and surviving based on the Book. To describe this position, I will first analyse the status of the writer:

You are the one who writes and the one who is written.

[...] I hate what is said in places I have left behind.

[...] The word is bound to the word, never to man...

[...] It is not I who answer. It is the sentences.

Words rush in and knock everything over. They want, each, to get their chance to convince. The true human dialogue, that of hands and eyes, is a silent dialogue. There is no such thing (spoken or written) as a dialogue between persons. [...] We are the instrument that takes itself seriously.⁴⁷

At the origin of all, the word questions the universe for man’s benefit. It precedes man in time. Man fashions himself in the word.⁴⁸

“But isn’t it always words that express us?”

No doubt, at the moment my pen draws them, when my voice sets them free... But immediately after, I realize that I have not written, not spoken.

“But in that case, what you read, what other people hear, what is that?”

“A mixture of sounds of words bitterly remote in their alien truth.”

Man is mute I tell you. The only mute creature is man.⁴⁹

pp. 48–49. Here, Jabès connects this aspect to a modern form of this revelation, which instead of from God comes from reality itself.

47 BQ I, pp. 11, 19, 26, 65.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 226.

49 BQ II, p. 373.

In Jabès, the status of the writer is patently affected by a necessary dualism. Namely, on the one hand, the writer is what “the words express”; he is produced as an entity by the text itself. It is, naturally, his “own” voice that other people hear. But, on the other hand, the writer is what has perished in these words. Words are, for him, a strange universe with its own laws, which he has entered but has failed to take hold of. In neither of these forms is the writer more present or truer. He has been produced by words as an entity in the text while, as that which has been lost in them, he is merely a trace, a negative remnant. Thus Jabès’ writer can be said to be a gap between a particular form that words confer on him and a remnant which is left over from this form. Hence the writer embodies the condition of man, “the only mute creature” – the only creature that has a symbolic language, which is exactly what makes him unable to express himself in it.⁵⁰

50 To Jabès, the human being is a thing distinctively possessed of a linguistic being. The human being consists, so to speak, of two parts: a real one and a linguistic one. In Jabès, the former is the body while the latter is theorised usually in terms of the soul (cf. BQ II, p. 276.). On a number of occasions, especially in the *Book of Resemblances* series, Jabès reflects on the body as a substantive component of the human being. Alien to meaning, the body is silent and, inexplicably, manifests affinity with the community of all things. It exists before it comes to be capable of speaking; it exists as an absence only to be illumined by language where language does not reach (cf. BQ II, p. 107). The body is a separated part of the universe, communicating with the rest of the universe via the skin (cf. BQ II, p. 362). The body knows and apprehends the world in a primary way, outside meaning (cf. BR II, p. 81). As the body is matter, traces are imprinted in it (cf. BQ I, p. 139). *We are, essentially, like words written down because “we” means inscribing language in matter that is, in this case, the body.* In other words, subjectification is of the same nature as writing-down.

The body makes meaning and thought possible (BR II, p. 37) though it does not speak itself. It is the foundation of our being across time as a mute and incomprehensible companion. “The body is the road,” and “all roads start from the body and lead back to it” (*Ibid.*, p. 63). “Without body we would be a breath in the wind, a silence within silence. Without body there would be no book. As if absence of books were but suppression of the body. / But could we, without body, even tell presence from absence, waking from sleep, dawn from dusk?” (*Ibid.*, p. 81.). *As such, the human being is similar to the vocable in being stretched between “body” and “mind,” in being a gap between oneself and oneself.*

There is tension between “the body” and “the mind” as they have different ontological statuses and yet mutually condition each other. The body does not march to the beat of thought (cf. LR I, p. 34); it ages in another rhythm than one we can understand. “[W]e are older than our life” (BR II, p. 69), writes Jabès to suggest that the symbolic

Therefore, the writer belongs to the community made up of whatever is structurally positioned as a remnant. In this, Jabès' reasoning approximates Blanchot's *communauté inavouable* (unavowable community).⁵¹ In perishing himself, the writer – “a shadow that carries man”⁵² – *gives voice to that which similarly perishes in its particular, limited form*. At the same time, this voice is a subversive voice⁵³ of protest against the contraction. The scream, an aspect of the *vocable*, resurfaces here again. The perishing writer screams in his own name and on behalf of all creation, bearing witness to unfolding *tzimtzum*. Jabès' portrayal of the writer's condition is thoroughly entangled in the structure of the universe assumed by the poet, a structure I have defined as modern. The writer's position results directly from perspectivism, from the Book's existence forced by perspectivism and from the remnant produced in the Book. The universality of this position, as well as its affinity with the thought of Blanchot, Nancy and Agamben, does not

order always precedes the bodily order and never overlaps with it. Death is strange to us just because it concerns the body (cf. BR II, p. 63).

“The body is on the scale of the body, but what is the measure of the mind? I would not hesitate to say: that of the body. / “Then the limits of the body are arbitrary in life as in death,” said Reb Ledin. / The strength of the body can never equal that of the mind. But the slightest ailment of the body – shortness of breath, a speck of dust in the cogs – can overcome it. / The body wields all the powers of the mind except one: the power to annihilate mind along with itself, at its end. / The body dies its own death; the mind, a death inflicted by the body. / Innocence of the murderer. / Death is first of all a matter of the body. / To think death, he said, is but to think the body” (BR III, p. 74; quotation altered).

Therefore, the body in Jabès can be said to be a site of *inscription* of the human being into reality. As the written word depends on the matter in which it has been preserved, the human being depends on his body but is unable to fathom the order to which it belongs. For this reason, he finds death, as “the body's matter,” so utterly alien. *The mind waits for the death that the body will inflict on it*. The body is entirely innocent since it does not belong to the order of meaning, in which death can be defined as murder. In other words, *within our own bodies, we encounter the limit of language: a beyond that is “our own” and yet belongs to the entire universe*.

In this reasoning, Jabès is, of course, very close to the concept of “extimacy” developed by Lacan.

51 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1998). See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, et al., ed. Peter Connor (University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

52 LR I, p. 21.

53 See Shillony, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 42.

seem coincidental. Rather, it is an effect of the same, basically simple structure whose reiterations inform a multitude of philosophical frameworks.

This insight is substantiated by Jabès' depiction of the condition of the Jew, which includes identical motifs: exclusion, remnant, solitude and silent community. The following passage is a perfect entry point for analysing this issue:

[S]olitude has become the profound destiny of the Jew. [...] If the Jew is the other, it is because, trying at all cost to be himself, he is *also* each time a being from nowhere. [...] I would even say that this *also* – this *plus* which is in fact a *minus* because it is a void that needs to be filled up continuously – is his only difference. This lack is a source of his of questioning.
 [...] To want to be [...] *the other*, isn't that, a priori, an unreasonable provocation? [...] However, if the Jew persists in wanting to be recognized in his difference – that is to say as the *other* – he does so first because he sees it as a fundamental progress [...] as a victory over the self's total intolerance. This [...] is [...] one of the "missions" of Judaism. How could an atheist not subscribe to it?⁵⁴

The first passage clearly identifies the "essence" of Jewishness with the remnant that transcends all positive being (hence, the Jew is "from nowhere"). *Vis-à-vis* being, this remnant is at the same time something more and something less. The difference produced in this way is the source of questioning which cannot be entirely contained in any answer. The distinct character of Jewishness lies in the surplus in relation to meaning, as a result of which the Jew cannot fully dissolve in any given meaning and in his definition.⁵⁵

54 DB, pp. 59, 60, 62–3.

55 That is why, like the writer, the Jew screams "to escape himself from the cruellest punishment: smothering in the word" (BQ II, p. 284) – that is, he marks his perishing in the script with a scream – and, consequently, "the Jewish soul is the fragile casket of a scream" (BQ I, p. 165), which scream finds itself in writing only as a description of persecution and incomprehension. The script entraps and is, in itself, persecution and incomprehension. The scream, which wants to break loose, perishes in the word that lies in waiting for it. The power of naming is destiny and death – the stoning of the scream (*Ibid.*, p. 167). In Jabès, Judaism is closely bound up with the scream, which is an ultimate sign of resistance against incorporation within a violence-based whole. The poet identifies the writer's protest against the arising script with the Jewish rebellion against the violence of "persecution and incomprehension" as based on the same mechanism. In both cases, it is about incorporation into a general meaning, about replacing the true voice of resistance with its meaningful surrogate (stoning of the scream). Along the Lévinasian and Lyotardian lines, Jabès regards meaning as violence, as coerced incorporation in the order governed by its own principles and not respecting the autonomy of things. "The act of writing may be nothing but an act of controlled violence, the time it takes to move to a new stage of violence" (BQ II, p. 348).

The second passage develops this concept. Jabès defines the Jewish condition not only as determined by the position of the remnant but also as *reflectively accepting this fact*. In his view, the Jew wants “to be recognised in his difference.” It is not about a simple recognition of Judaism’s otherness but, rather, about recognising *the universal condition of difference* embodied in Judaism. At this point, Jabès ascribes to Judaism another universal mission which involves combating the homogeneous, self-same, stable identity by disseminating differences. The particularity of the Jewish difference is supposed to be the source of the universal subversion, which would challenge and demolish firm and permanent meanings.⁵⁶ Attractive though this vision is, it is impossible to fail to notice that Judaism’s universal mission again appears due to the common structure it shares with the modern universe. Judaism is not only a reflective acceptance of the position of the vestige imposed by modernity but also a modernity-propelled re-invented construct of earlier Judaism.

Because of the condition of the Jew, the Jewish community – like the community the writer joins – assembles the lonely and the singular, those who belong by not belonging:

[...] it is precisely in this break – in that non-belonging in search of its belonging – that I am without a doubt most Jewish.

[...] Salvation [*salut*] lies in this bet, kept until now, and which has denied any rest to the Jew. Jewish solidarity is a solitude that knows itself [*qui se sait*]. It is made up of all the individual solitudes.⁵⁷

According to Jabès, the Jewish community is not founded on being the same or having the same definition, or on agreement in any shared meaning. On the contrary, this community is a *community of repetition*; that is, every member of this community repeats – through their own condition of solitude – the position of exclusion. Emphatically, this repetition is predicated on reflective processing of Jewish solitude, solitude “*qui se sait*.” On Jabès’ model, it is less Jewish to cherish faithfully the tradition of Judaism and more Jewish to reject, re-formulate and

Writing is an act of “controlled” violence presumably because violence is authorised by the very perpetration of it; its effect – inscription in meaning – obliterates the traces of what has happened. This violence is, thus, self-legitimised. The victim becomes just an excluded “shadow,” doomed to the “stoned” scream. Jabès’ Judaism rebels against this violence: “the Jewish word opposes the hostile exclusion of the voice” (LR I, p. 116).

56 “Chosen by their God, they became a people set apart, bearing a universal message that later required that they give up – make restitution of? – a land they had nevertheless been granted” (BR III, p. 62).

57 DB, pp. 64, 59.

re-invent it. As he explains in the conversation with Marcel Cohen, Judaism “has always favored such excesses”;⁵⁸ even the followers of Sabbatai Zevi considered themselves true to Judaism in the extremity of their heresy.⁵⁹ This shows Jabès’ conceptual affinity with Scholem as both focus on the antinomic tendencies in Judaism and are fascinated with the continuity of Jewish tradition in its multiple and so contradictory forms.⁶⁰

The only constant underpinning of Judaism’s ongoing rebellion is, in Jabès, *the formal difference* rendered in the metaphor of circumcision – the primal wound. The wound is an infinitesimal material trace preserved by all mutually exclusive movements within Judaism.⁶¹ But as Judaism corresponds to the modern world, so the Jewish community seems, to Jabès, to be part of the universal, repetition-based, *community of things*.

*Excluded. Naked. Naked like the destroyed Temple, the witness wall.*⁶²

The persisting of the Jew as the excluded one is on a par with the persisting of a thing, such as the destroyed Temple: while *the ruined wall looks with the ultimate gaze of a witness, the Jew gazes at the meaningful world in the same way*. Like the writer, the Jew lives the life of a “shadow,” bearing witness to that which is excluded. He is the mouthpiece of material memory, which is as indelible as a substantive trace is:

Reb Eloze said: “The synagogue is full of holes for the sky to get in. Thus it has a life of shadow and light until the end of time.”

And Reb Labri: “You cannot destroy a synagogue. You might as well try to bring down the sky.”⁶³

As the sky, which spans above everything that comes to pass and, in its continued duration, is a mute witness of History, cannot be “brought down,” so Judaism cannot be destroyed, for it is essentially survival through destruction, the persisting of the remnant. Therefore, in Jabès, belonging to the Jewish community (and thus, paradoxically, non-belonging) involves being an ultimate witness and bearing witness mutely through sheer survival.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

59 *Ibid.*.

60 See Idel, *Old Worlds*, p. 27 ff.

61 Cf. BQ I, p. 61.

62 BQ II, p. 298.

63 BQ I, p. 369.

The Fusion of Judaism and Writing: Life as Interpretation

It is clear now how and why Judaism and writing have analogous structures in Jabès. Before concluding this Chapter, let us focus on one more recurrent motif – one of life as ongoing interpretation, as “living in the word.” In this specific aspect, Judaism and writing coalesce so thoroughly that, were it not for their different names, it would be difficult to tell the Jew from the writer.

The pivotal passages include the following:

The Jewish world begins with us, with our first steps in the world.

The Jewish world is based on written law, on a logic of word one cannot deny.

Every Jew lives within a personified word which allows him to enter into all written words.

Every Jew lives in a key-word, a word of pain, a password, which the rabbis comment on.

The Jew's fatherland is a sacred text amidst the commentaries it has given rise to.

Hence, every Jew is in the Law.

Hence, every Jew makes the Law.

Hence the Law is Jewish.⁶⁴

[...] being Jewish means exiling yourself in the word and, at the same time, weeping for your exile.⁶⁵

Judaism is always outside Judaism. It is a religion of leaving the word behind [...].

[...] *Dead of wanting to live against life, alive by virtue of being lost in death's labyrinth, he comes into his own survival, as if the beyond were his place. So his words remain prophetic and announce the return of those who left the time of man.*

[...] *Even more than by his speech, the Jew is a Jew by the silence or the vast murmur which encloses his eyes as a sea surrounds an island and makes it inaccessible.*

[...] The desert wrote the Jew, and the Jew reads himself in the desert.

[...] *Jewish solitude lies in the impossible outcome of the book [...].*⁶⁶

I repeat. The sign is Jewish.

The word [*vocable*] is Jewish.

The book is Jewish.

The book is made of Jews.

Because the Jew has for centuries wanted to be a sign, a word [*vocable*], a book. His writing is wandering, suspicion, waiting, confluence, wound, exodus, and exile, exile, exile.⁶⁷

You see, it is perhaps just there, where we are silent while talking, where nobody can read us while we write, that what I have called Judaism resides. The words of the Jews are buried in sand, forever silent, but every syllable, as if mesmerized by this living death, reports their immortal agony.

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

65 BQ II, p. 165.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 291, 299, 300, 302, 319.

67 *Ibid.*, 290.

[...] perhaps the only affirmation of the Jew is, paradoxically, that there is no such person as the Jew. There is only the exile of a word, which he came to take on himself, not to try and save it, or himself, but to guide it from dawn to dusk of the longest day, from the point catching fire to its grandiose conflagration.

[...] “Twenty centuries of wandering can only come to rest in a word both so dense and so light that it is carried off into space and swallowed by the wave.”

“I have lived only within this word,” he added.⁶⁸

Whether talmudist or cabbalist, the Jew’s relation to the book is as fervent as that of the writer to his text. Both have the same thirst to learn, to know, to decipher their fate carved into every letter from which God has withdrawn.⁶⁹

Being a Jew and/or a writer entails continual interpreting: “Our lot is to interpret an unreadable world.”⁷⁰ This thought, which lies at the core of modern Western thinking shaped by the legacy of the Reformation and Protestant hermeneutics, acquires a deeper meaning in Jabès. For it is not only about the Jew or the writer interpreting the incomprehensible world and himself in it. Namely, superimposed on this hermeneutical model is the structure of perspectivism and of the Book. As already shown, the Book is the ultimate reader, a locus of interpretation of all particularity. In relation to the Book, the Jew/writer is that which is interpreted. *For this reason, the state of permanent interpretation involves him striving to interpret the way in which he is himself interpreted by the Book.*

Consequently, if the life of the Jew/writer is a never-ending interpretation, it is so first of all because the “interpreter” himself is thrown into the world subject to interpretation, and he gets a glimpse of the place where he is read himself only fleetingly and in displacement. Hence, the Jew is not only the author of the book but also the book, the sign: “The desert wrote the Jew, and the Jew reads himself in the desert.” The Jew enquires who he is, but he could discern it only from the position inaccessible to him. As this aporia is irremovable and structural, neither the Jew nor the writer exists as a stable, interpreting subject. Their being as such prevents itself from materialising. *For they embody one and the same gap between the perspectival world and the Book.* That is why they actually do not exist but are a *place* which divides and links two sides of the perspectival universe: the limited worlds (books, words, the Law) and the Book. Their spectral being illumines this fundamental ontological crack.

Let us focus now on the quotations above. In the vision they sketch, the Book is the Jews’ world, and each of them has his own personal word, “a word of pain,

68 *Ibid.*, p. 374, 429, 439.

69 BM, p. 173.

70 BQ II, p. 84.

a password.” In these formulations, Jabès alludes to an old Kabbalistic motif, particularly pronounced in the Safed Kabbalah. According to Luria (in the *Sefer Ha-Kavanot*), the Torah was revealed in as many aspects and meanings as there were Jews who received it on the Zion (i.e. six hundred thousand, as tradition would have it). Each of these aspects gave rise to the root⁷¹ (שורש, *shoresh*) of the souls of Israel, obligated to read and know the Torah in accordance with explanations specific to the root from which they arose.⁷² Mosès Cordovero (*Derisha b’Inyanei Malakhim*) believed, however, that each and every soul had its part of the Torah and its own, exclusive individual understanding of it.⁷³

As is always the case in Jabès, the historical motif of Jewish tradition is re-interpreted in the light of his own modern thought. The aspect of the Torah becomes the Jew’s own word – a word of pain, a key-word and a password, at the same time. Given the reasoning recounted above, *the Jew’s own word can be understood as his position in the Book, which he cannot know despite his ongoing enquiries*. If only he could read this word, he would find a key to his existence. But because he has no existence, the word becomes a hidden determinant of his lot. What was a personal revelation to the Safed kabbalists becomes the Jew’s own enigma in Jabès. The enigma arises as a result of perspectivism’s structural principles. Moreover, the Jew/writer embodies the condition of modern man *tout court* as he lives his life in the world “from which God has withdrawn.” The Jew/writer is a paradigmatic interpreter of the world which, in the wake of God’s death, turned into a riddle and, first of all, made man’s existence a riddle.⁷⁴

71 Notably, the “root” is also the name of the conjugated stems of Hebraic verbs, which delineate the semantic field of derivative forms. Therefore, the idea of the “root” comes to connote functions of language, in particular the Hebraic language, in which individual words are based on elementary combinations of letters. Because of this, many kabbalists (starting from the yet “pre-Kabbalistic” *Sefer Yetzirah*) interpreted letters not as simple script-tools but as the basic fabric of reality because permutations of letters were believed to reveal the foundations of meaningful words.

72 Scholem, “Signification,” pp. 126–127.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

74 A similar gesture is to be found in Kafka: in the parable “Before the Law,” “a man from the country” can be construed as a Jew who, cut off from tradition, interprets his own riddle of common Revelation. At the same time, he is a universal example of modern man. “The New Advocate,” another of Kafka’s parables, features Bucephalos. Without the master, the horse becomes free yet loses the peculiar blindness, which before enabled him to rush with Alexander to new lands and defy the fate. What does the modern Bucephalos do? He reads legal books. Instead of spontaneous action, he is overcome by a paralysing hermeneutic drive: the desire to understand what one is and what event founds the new form of existence. This desire seems to hold a hope of

Drawing on these insights, we can now answer the question why, in Jabès, the condition of the Jew and the condition of the writer are so similar in terms of the relationship between life and interpretation. Both modes of being – being a Jew and being a writer – entail *functioning as a sign in the Book, which sign self-reflectively interprets its own place.*

Does writing mean undertaking an ultimate reading, first in our mind, then through our own vocabulary [*vocables*], of a book whose necessity is our reason to be?⁷⁵

The fact that there is the Book seems to doom modern man to be a writer entrapped between writing down his own books and being read by the Book. To Jabès, Judaism, in which interpreting the Torah has merged with life as such over centuries, can offer a wealth of its own experience to this modern condition.⁷⁶ Re-interpreted in this way, Judaism is still universal knowledge about “the exile of the word,” and the difference that constitutes Judaism is based not on any particular content but on the very mechanism of “exile,” typifying reality as such.⁷⁷ The position of the Jew, as Erbertz observes, means here “*conditio humana* in its extreme form.”⁷⁸ In *The Ineffaceable the Unperceived*, Jabès builds on the etymology of the word Hebrew⁷⁹ to conclude that the Jew is a *passeur*,

regaining the lost naturalness even though this hope only exacerbates the paralysis. Thus, both to Kafka and to Jabès, modernity entails incessant, demotivating interpretation. “God’s withdrawal” leaves a trace that calls for constant inquiry. The question about the source of the modern universe dovetails with the question about what one actually is. Both riddles are, indeed, traps resulting from situatedness in the structure of modern perspectivism and of the Book this perspectivism produces.

75 BR II, p. 11.

76 Matthew Del Nevo insists: “Jabès, as a writer and a Jew, is unlike the nomad who stands for the ability to transform silence and absence (as what is most envining) into a life-force. While for the (symbolic) nomad this transformative capacity may be second-nature, for the writer and the Jew, it is what remains to be discovered and is also, after the disaster, of the most pressing historical significance: to transform God’s silence and absence into a life-force” (“Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” p. 303). Consequently, the writer and the Jew can be said to stand at the forefront of modernity’s wrestling with the situation it has found itself in.

77 “To belong to what by nature rejects all belonging – the universal: this is the true Jewish vocation [...]” (BR III, p. 31; translation altered).

78 Erbertz, *Poetik des Buches*, p. 43.

79 It is the traditional, albeit controversial, etymology of עברית, *iwrit* (Hebrew), allegedly deriving from the verb לעבור, *la’avor* (to pass, to cross over, to get past). This

one who crosses, wanders across the desert and guides others, at the same time.⁸⁰

The notion of life as interpretation, which is central to the modern structure, is what ultimately binds Judaism and writing in Jabès. Judaism and writing undergo utter simplification in being reduced to the position of the remnant. The difference between them becomes just a trace, nothing more.

Conclusion: Jabès' Judaism and Jewish Philosophy of Modernity

One of the key motifs in Jabès' texts, the interconnectedness of writing and Judaism, of the writer's condition and the Jew's condition, reflects what I have called Jewish philosophy of modernity. Jabès consistently develops the parallel of writing and Judaism. The two are linked by the common dependence on the structure of the Book, the "essence" based on the negative remnant, the mechanism of survival, the shared transcendence of their respective successive forms, introduction of historicity into them and, finally, constitution of "subjects" – the writer and the Jew, whose life is ongoing interpretation governed by the Book. Such an analogy of writing and Judaism is clearly predicated on the structure of the modern universe and undermines the simple idea of the Jewish legacy as exceptional. If the exiled writer has the same status as the nomadic Jew, what could possibly determine the other's alterity in Jabès? Nevertheless, Jabès consistently maintains that Judaism is unique. Moreover, he regards Judaism as a tradition which provides experience relevant to modernity in that it helps accommodate to exile, survival and continual interpretation.

At this point, we can ask a question that exposes the aporia of Jewish philosophy of modernity: Where does this privileged knowledge of Judaism come from? Does it indeed come from its rich tradition? Or is it perhaps a result of the retrospective re-ordering of this tradition, underpinned by the modernity-specific structure? Should the latter be the case, Jabès' thought would be a peculiar tautology: *Judaism offers modernity a valuable experience only because it is in itself modern*. This would mean that Judaism is a *point* where modern self-reflection reached itself, revealing its disconnectedness from the past and foundedness on itself alone.

interpretation is explicitly associated with the vision of the Israelis' exodus from Egypt as a formative experience of the Jewish identity.

80 BR III, p. 12.

The way Jabès approaches pre-modern Jewish tradition seems to confirm this conclusion, for he finds in it what he actually seeks to find: exile, solitude, uncertainty, permanent questioning and persistent survival. Deconstructive reading, however, shows that the discovery of affinities between Judaism and modernity does not come as a surprise: *the modern structure was hidden in them even before its rediscovery*. In other words, Jabès' reasoning – which proceeds in the following stages: (1) Judaism is... (exile, solitude, constant interpretation, and so forth); (2) *ergo*, it offers modernity a useful experience – obscures that fact that this Judaism is already strictly modern. Perhaps, *obfuscating this premise proves the magnitude of the loss on which modernity itself is based*. The content of old Jewish tradition is still available in modernity, but it depends on the primary severance, which organises it into the structure of the Book, the remnant and survival. With this content defused in this way, it is impossible to establish whether it is “truly” Jewish. Consequently, Judaism with its ages-long tradition of memory, historicity and ritual finds itself thrown into the eye of the modern storm, *where any simple continuity with the past is demolished, and the past itself will always already be a construct*.

This is the lens to be applied to reading Jabès' insights about Judaism. To conclude, let us have a look at some of these insights, bearing in mind that the parallel of writing and Judaism proves that they concern, actually, modernity itself:

Judaism is the only religion in which one breaks even. When a Jew reads a text, he always starts from the oldest commentaries and, later, interprets and questions them, as a result breaking even. He is always the same in his faith, but whenever he reads a text, he breaks even. [...] Hence also [...] this opening, this modernity of Judaism, which only few people see still.⁸¹

Truth is always at the end of the questioning, on the other shore, behind the last horizon. To go towards truth, that is the essential preoccupation of the Jew. But what truth could resist such a questioning? Unless that fragmentary truth, always at a further remove, reveals itself [*se livre*] stroke by stroke [*touches successives*] in the very movement of questioning. Where God abdicates, truth glimmers.⁸²

*The Jew keeps his eyes on the horizon.*⁸³

“Never say you have arrived because, everywhere, you are a traveler in transit.”

Reb Lami.⁸⁴

81 EEJ, p. 72.

82 DB, p. 59.

83 BQ II, p. 298.

84 BR II, p. 62.

