

9 The Shoah and Anti-Semitism

In the previous Chapters, I discussed Jabès as a(n) (a)theologian, philosopher and writer. Now I will focus on a less pronounced, yet equally important, concern of his, involving history, politics, social life and ethics. Undoubtedly, Jabès' position on these issues originates in his reflection on the Shoah and, as a rule, turns back to it. In Jabès, the Shoah is an event in which history intersects with ontology as real experiences transform language and cap the process of God's withdrawal, exposing the entanglements of memory and forgetting. This is the reason why Jabès made (at least declaratively) the Shoah the cornerstone of his thought. But besides this ontological investment, the Shoah formatively affects also Jabès' social and ethical ideas scattered across his writings.

The discourse of Jabès' writings – his *Books* in particular – is governed by the laws of its own, and, unsurprisingly, events which they feature are filtered through a quasi-Lurianic ontology and poetic experience. Nevertheless, Jabès sometimes addresses also events of apparently journalistic resonance. They tend to be associated with certain forms and manifestations of anti-Semitism after the Shoah. Such developments powerfully affected Jabès' explorations of Judaism (as discussed in the foregoing) and, moreover, provoked him to offer spontaneous, topical commentaries. For example, when a Jewish cemetery in Carpentras, Provence – one of France's oldest hubs of Judaism – was defiled in May 1990, Jabès wrote an indignant letter to the press. A passage of the letter was later included in *The Book of Hospitality*, Jabès' last work, in which he strove to reach ultimate silence. The contrast of these discourses suggests that if there is any social reflection to be found in Jabès, it never strays from the central, underlying movement of writing.

I will analyse socio-ethical motifs in Jabès in two stages. In this Chapter, I will examine the role of the Shoah and Jabès' comments on anti-Semitism and on the complicity of discourse in the rise of violence. In the next Chapter, I will discuss the idea of hospitality, in which ethics is, again, inseparable from ontology.

The Shoah as a Disaster

In a text devoted to Blanchot, Jabès writes:

The crematorium ovens were not their [Nazis'] only crime, but surely the most abject, in full daylight, in the abyssal absence [*absence abyssale*] of the Name.¹

1 BM, p. 95.

The first conspicuous thing is that Jabès does not ascribe the enormity of the Shoah to the sheer magnitude of the crime; to compare it with other atrocities in history not infrequently means to insult the memory of all victims. Rather, the Shoah is highlighted – and prevented from being forgotten – by “daylight,” the moment when the crime was perpetrated. In this context, reading “full daylight” as a metaphor for the existing law does not seem far-fetched. If so, Jabès is certainly right to say that the Shoah was not a crime *against the law*, perpetrated surreptitiously, in the dark of the night. It took place “in full daylight,” that is, where the law should be present at its fullest. If so, why did the law not prohibit murder? Did the law fail to work? The key to this tantalising confusion is to be found at the end of the passage, which associates the “daylight” with the “abyssal absence of the Name.” The law did exist and, indeed, set apart day from night, to be consistent with the metaphor, and organised human doings “in full daylight.” Yet, stripped of its ontological embedment in the Name, it lost its ethical power or, rather, *showed that it had no such power at all*. The Shoah was a flagrant crime, arranged by the law and with the full sanction of the law.

Of course, Jabès does not engage in discussions which revived the distinction between positive law and (variously defined) natural law in post-war philosophy of law (e.g. in Radbruch). Emptied of any subtleties, such discourse brings the Shoah down to the level of radical philosophical analysis. In Jabès, law in this sense seems to be identified with the language-based organisation of the world. *The difference between the fact and law becomes in this way less important than the distinction between law and the silent, blank space of the Book, from which law dissociates itself, along with its world.* To a degree, like in Lévinas, the compass of ethical reflection shifts from within language to a relation that arises outside language and cannot be rendered in injunctions. Jabès’ far-reaching premise seems to be that all forms of language bear more or less violence; more than that: that they are *meaningful organisations of violence*.

At this point, it is useful to evoke a sentence which Hannah Arendt brought into public knowledge: “Eichmann feels guilty before God, not before the law,”² as Eichmann’s lawyer stated during the high-profile trial in Jerusalem. “In full daylight, in the abyssal absence of the Name,” writes Jabès. If we put these statements together, we will see that Eichmann feels guilty before God, who is not there, but has nothing to reproach himself for in the light of the law, in full daylight. It implies that God, who – as already mentioned – is a human invention in

2 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Books, 2006), p. 19.

Jabès' view,³ serves to justify the law within the law itself, which waives all responsibility by making guilt the matter of God's judgment. In this way, calling upon God as (in Eichmann's own words) a *Höherer Sinnesträger*, a higher bearer of meaning, reduces all responsibility to compliance with the law, which in itself has no legitimation and lingers in "the abyssal absence of the Name," with God being its own hypostasis.

As a certain configuration of meaning, the law is founded on the void, which it endeavours to veil with its notion of God as a being and a source of meaning in one (which should be distinguished from Jabès' idea of God as the position of a remnant). "They said that they served God and put God into their service," states *The Book of Hospitality*.⁴ Consequently, ignorance of God's death – of "the abyssal absence of the Name" – helps make God part of the meaningful law and, in this way, absolutise this law. This is, I believe, the core of Jabès' ethical conclusions from rethinking the Shoah: the persistence of meaning, "daylight," as dissociated from the absence of the Name, makes for a structural mechanism of ultimate violence, against which there is no protection. The Shoah shows that all forms of the law work in the same way: that which law considers desirable is treated as an order *per se*. Zygmunt Bauman argued that a change of the law-instituted order of injunctions very easily produces a sense of its own naturalness. Very few people are able to find an external grounding, and even if they do, it is not a result of any ethical reflection but rather of a spontaneous, Lévinasian response to the suffering of the Other.⁵ Jabès reasons in a similar fashion:

Auschwitz has radically transformed our vision of things. Not because such a degree of cruelty was unthinkable before. The unthinkable was the near total indifference of both the German and the allied populations which made Auschwitz possible. This indifference continues to defy any previous notion of the human. After Auschwitz, the feeling of solitude that lies at the core of each human being has become considerably amplified. Today, any sense of trust is doubled by an all-consuming distrust. We know that it is not reasonable to expect anything at all from others. And yet we hope – though something gnaws at the core of this hope, reminding us that the thread has been cut. [...] It is therefore the very culture that supports us that we have to question. We must try to grasp *how* it was able to engender the greatest evil, and not only *what* made it incapable of warding off this evil; for is it possible to separate man from his culture?⁶

3 Cf. P, p. 106.

4 LH, p. 42.

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, Polity, 1989).

6 DB, pp. 61–2.

Jabès adds also that it is a gross mistake to regard the Nazis as “brutes from another planet.” The common, widespread support they had from the German population implies that their actions must have seemed completely natural and obvious, which is exactly where the problem lies.⁷

Therefore Jabès’ conclusions denounce culture, the law and, more generally, all linguistic forms of the world. Whether they are criminal or not is entirely a matter of chance. God’s withdrawal – “the abyssal absence of the Name” – divests them all of legitimation, which does not stop them from exercising their authority. On this model, the Shoah is an extreme case that exposes the nature of language most glaringly. As I will show further in this Chapter, in Jabès, it originates in the persisting mechanisms of label-tagging name-giving – in “the power of words over people.” Is there any room left for ethical reflection given that if ethical thinking takes place within language, it is subject to the law while outside language it faces God’s absence? Jabès strives to locate his thought nowhere else than in this paradoxical sphere of absence. This is also what Lévinas did in searching for ethics beyond morality and law, yet still underpinned by active God’s commandment.⁸ In Jabès, God is only a name of this structurally demarcated place of absence, the beyond of all meaning, where the poet seeks to resist language.

Taking this position, Jabès at the same time faces the dilemma which, in the wake of the Shoah, haunted to a greater or lesser degree other authors as well, in particular Paul Celan. Namely, the language which was to depict the Shoah was the same language that had so easily served to perpetrate it. There was no ontological difference between those two applications of that language. So the problem did not lie in the linguistic-vs.-inexpressible opposition, where language stumbled upon a barrier to articulating indescribable crimes. On the

7 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

8 Although Lévinas was one of the key forces in the rapprochement of philosophy and Jewish tradition in the 20th century, he never renounced loyalty to the strictly religious element in Judaism. This is the reason why Jabès had his reservations about Lévinas. In his conversations with Marcel Cohen, Jabès remarks that despite all possible similarities between him and Lévinas – and despite the speculative potential of Lévinas’ thought – Lévinas abandons speculation when it comes, for example, to the Talmudic lectures, and subordinates himself to the already recognised thought for fear of profanation (EE), p. 74). Jabès seems to take issue less with abandoning speculation as such (after all the Talmud itself is based on the *Maloket* method) but with endorsing its religious delimitation, Theism in particular, be it even in its various weakened forms. Jabès’ own speculation gathers momentum where radical atheism steps in.

contrary, the problem concerned two linguistic organisations of worlds which, though mutually untranslatable, were each meaningfully logical. Consequently, a question arose how one could be distinguished from the other, if, “in the abyssal absence of the Name” there was no point of reference provided by an external, law-giving God. Jabès and, even more so, Celan (to whom the language of the murderers was, at the same time, his “mother tongue” and the language of his poetry⁹) strove to re-think the suspicion against their own language because it did not differ ontologically from the language deployed as the murder weapon.¹⁰

Celan and Jabès come to the same conclusions insofar, at least, that they reverse the common opposition of unimaginable crime and comprehensible, ethically informed language (a distinction upheld, for example, by Habermas, who sought ideal claims in language¹¹). Instead of wrestling with language to express what has happened, both poets explore how much language itself has been undermined. Because the enormity was perpetrated with the full sanction of the law, which contrived to give it an axiological grounding, Jabès and Celan do not attempt to put this law in opposition to *any other* law, instead seeking to set the inexpressible *against* language. Rather than in speaking of the ineffable atrocity of the crime, the poet’s responsibility lies in finding a sign for silence that could indicate it. The point is that the crime not only was directly communicable but also had its own, perfectly articulate language.

Thus, both Celan and Jabès grapple with the fact that language has in a way become estranged from them just because it is still theirs.¹² Language does not

9 Cf. Susan Gubar, “The Long and the Short of Holocaust Verse,” *New Literary History*, 35/3 (Summer 2004), pp. 443–68, on p. 456.

10 Susan Gubar explains that “if language was therefore itself an instrument and casualty of the disaster, then literary artists confronted a confounding perplexity about their own medium, as Adorno knew they would. The enormity of the event, coupled with this suspicion about political or aesthetic productions, often propelled poets in two diametrically opposed directions: on the one hand, toward ellipses, fragmentation, in short poems that exhibit their inadequacy by shutting down with a sort of premature closure; on the other, toward verbosity in long poems that register futility by reiterating an exhausted failure to achieve closure.” Gubar, “Long,” p. 443.

11 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas MacCarthy (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1981).

12 Jean Améry described the alienation of language amidst the horror of the Shoah in this way: “We, however, had not lost our country, but had to realize that it had never been ours. [...] The meaning of every German word changed for us, and finally, whether we resisted or not, our mother tongue became just as inimical as the one they spoke around us.” Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and*

side with them as a tool for naming and condemning the crime but speaks against them. Such naming and condemning turns into a fight of word against word, in which no decisive criterion is available as we are faced with “the abyssal absence of the Name.” Outside this conflict, there is nothing, and it is this paradoxical nothing that the poets must cross in search of truth: with language alienated as it is, this is the only place for them to go. In terms of negative theology, they rely on silence for scrutinising the conflict of languages from outside. Consequently, their texts focus not on the meanings conveyable in language but on the means of enhancing their distance from language.

Conceived in this way, Jabès’ work testifies to the Shoah though in a different way than Primo Levi’s, Jean Améry’s and Elie Wiesel’s did. In his conversation with Philipp de Saint-Cheron, Jabès insisted:

You cannot speak of Auschwitz. People imagine that I tried to speak of Auschwitz. But I never tried to speak of Auschwitz because I did not go through Auschwitz. I cannot speak of it, yet Auschwitz is something we all went through, if it can be put in this way. This terrifying, unspeakable thing has made its way into words. Words, for me, have changed completely.

[...] It is not my role to bear witness. Elie Wiesel can bear witness because he was in the camps; I did not know the camps, but it does not take away from me the right – not to talk about the camps, perhaps – but to say what we became in the wake of the camps.¹³

Though Jabès considers himself a Shoah survivor, he has no intention to bear witness the way camp survivors do. His testimony, if it is a testimony in the first place, is different since he describes how reality has transformed after Auschwitz, how language has transformed and how we have ourselves transformed. This choice tends to stir controversy. Berel Lang, for one, criticises Jabès for aestheticising the Shoah, for choosing not to speak of it directly and explicitly, and, as a result, diluting the uniqueness of the Shoah in reflections on a general, indefinite disaster. In this way, the Shoah is made, first, just one among the many events of the tragic Jewish history and, second, a proof of an all-encompassing disintegration.¹⁴ On such reading, Jabès is indeed culpable for what Alain Finkielraut denounced as “narcotization” of the Shoah experience, i.e. its universalisation

Its Realities, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), pp. 50, 53.

13 EEJ, pp. 68–69.

14 In Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians*, p. 160.

and dissemination to the point of collective amnesia, with the Shoah's true historical relevance lost in the ubiquity of its evocations.¹⁵

However, Lang apparently fails to notice the motivation Jabès cites in the interview quoted above. Jabès holds himself unauthorised to provide a direct narration of the Shoah, unlike its direct witnesses. His responsibility lies elsewhere – in the questioning which can prove consequential to the very possibility of bearing witness. In her polemics with Lang, Hawkins contends that, in Jabès, the Shoah results in the very impossibility of writing a continuous history.¹⁶ In this way, Jabès joins a very broad post-war movement of “epistemological” reflection on the Shoah, which attempted to re-think such issues as bearing witness, historical truth and objective criteria of settling disputes. Still, Jabès follows his own radical path in this, problematising the entire linguistic structure of reality. According to Peter Boyle, Auschwitz shatters Jabès' poetry because “it [Auschwitz] is what it is, it is what happened” and, as such, it is entirely divorced from the words which attempt to convey it.¹⁷

The accusation of blurring the uniqueness of the Shoah, or even the very historicity of its events, for the sake of generalised ontological reflection misses out on a fundamental fact. Admittedly, Jabès thinks about the catastrophe as such, about Creation, which is at the same time a collapse, where particular events, therein the Shoah, seem to be only repeated re-enactments of the same general pattern. However, Jabès emphatically states that his *entire* writing is determined by Auschwitz:

I write from two limits.
Outside there is [*il y a*] the void.
Within, the horror of Auschwitz.
Real-limit. Limit-reflection.
Do not read anything but incapacity to ground balance.
Do not read anything but the harrowing and awkward
resolve to survive.
In one scream, life and death
– the despotic sisters –
fade away, intertwined.
Impenetrable is eternity.¹⁸

15 Cf. Bruno Chaouat, “Forty Years of Suffering,” *L'esprit créateur*, 45/3 (Fall 2005), pp. 49–62, on p. 50.

16 Hawkins, *Reluctant Rheologists*, p. 160.

17 Peter Boyle, *Museum of Space* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004), p. 25.

18 P, p. 95.

Even if the *Books* had been written without reflecting on the Shoah, they would anyway be inseparable from the reading framework imposed by Jabès. If, in his texts, references to the Shoah seem to be overridden by the disaster as such, it is the effect of *the utterly radical questioning that the Shoah spurred Jabès to pursue*. Justice, as formerly thought of, would respond to the horror of Auschwitz by trying to write a legible general history in which problems of bearing witness were excluded, the possibility of producing an objective record in language retained and ethical responsibility clearly defined. In Jabès, the experience that stamped itself on language makes such a history impossible, and if it were possible, it would rely on the same mechanisms as ultimate violence. Hence, the other limit evoked in the passage from *Le Parcours* is the void. One does not return from Auschwitz to the old world; the counterpoint to what has happened is found in the void.

Given the above, the Shoah in Jabès is an event which, in a sense, is not “an event,” that is, a fact accommodable within the former framework of knowledge. On the contrary, it becomes a cornerstone of a new reality. The opposite of Auschwitz is not an intelligible, meaningful human world; the opposite of Auschwitz is the void. In this way, Auschwitz is cut off from the past by a radical discontinuity that can be rendered only in a set of concepts and metaphors which re-imagine the idea of the originary disaster in Jabès. If the Shoah loses its uniqueness, it is only because *there is no access anymore to reality not founded upon the Shoah*. The Shoah has become the formative event of our universe, as ubiquitous as God’s withdrawal and permeating all things. As Guy Walter notices,¹⁹ there is no before and after Auschwitz in Jabès since the entire history changes and starts anew with it. Similarly to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Dan Diner, Jabès views the Shoah as a historical turning point, a radical shift in the relationship between the possible and the impossible, an event whose meaning unfolds only in history that follows it.²⁰ Interestingly, Carl Schaffer²¹ summons in this context a well-known Kabbalistic idea of parallel events in higher and lower worlds, exemplified, for example, in the simultaneous exile of Israel and

19 Guy Walter, “La spiritualité du silence après la Shoah dans *Le livre des questions*,” in *Écrire le livre*, p. 75.

20 Cf. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokaście. Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia*, trans. L. Krowicki and J. Szacki (Warszawa: Scholar, 2003), pp. 11–16.

21 See Carl Schaffer, “Chaos and Void: Presencing Absence in Edmond Jabès’ *The Book Of Questions* and Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Paramo*,” *History of European Ideas*, 20/4–6 (1995), pp. 859–864, on p. 862.

Shekinah. Interpreted in the Kabbalistic spirit, the Shoah must be a cosmic event that affects the whole of reality.

Hence, the position of the Shoah in Jabès' thought is, indeed, liminal: the Shoah has been attributed such a fundamental role that, as a historical event, it loses its uniqueness. The dispute over the uniqueness of the Shoah abounds in paradoxes of thinking about discontinuity which were spelt out already by Hegel. By enclosing the Shoah in the category in unintelligibility and unspeakability, we strip it of meaning in the meaningful world while by making it an absolute starting point of the entire post-Shoah reality, we strip it of uniqueness we wish to attribute to it. This is perhaps where the exceptional role of the Shoah in thinking lies: in a mesh of epistemological traps in which it ensnares us and in the inescapable clash of opinions which transfigures the dread of what has happened into the furious criticism of other views.

I believe that Jabès wished not so much to take a position in such polemics as to have his works demonstrate their simultaneous necessity and pointlessness. In Jabès, words never express what should be conveyed in them, and their incompleteness dooms us to perspectivism and the disputes it generates. The above passage from *Le Parcours* suggests that there can be no balance between Auschwitz and the void. No thesis could possibly explain the Shoah or settle the polemics around it. The only thing that remains is writing – an equivalent of “resolve to survive” – which meanders its way between the void and Auschwitz, fully aware that each particular form of writing is only a broken piece and not a full-fledged position.

Bearing Witness to the Shoah

The study of post-Shoah writing, therein Jabès' writing, can be inventively aided by the ideas Giorgio Agamben has been developing for a number of years now. In the third part of his *Homo Sacer* trilogy, titled *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Archive and the Witness*, Agamben focuses the figure of the *Muselmann*, a camp prisoner who, having lost speech and the ability to respond to stimuli, is terrifyingly reduced to his purely biological being.²² As Agamben states, the *Muselmann* reveals the essence of humanity located in speech, which has invaded the biological being and makes man human in the regular sense of the term. The *Muselmann* is a liminal case of anthropology and ethics, a human as

22 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (Homo Sacer III)*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 41–87.

such and no-longer-a-human – a fragile body emptied out of dignity, the will to live and the ability to say “I,” which would constitute him as human in speech. Agamben writes:

The living being who has made himself absolutely present to himself in the act of enunciation, in saying “I,” pushes his own lived experiences back into a limitless past and can no longer coincide with them. The event of language in the pure presence of discourse irreparably divides the self-presence of sensations and experiences in the very moment in which it refers them to a unitary center. Whoever enjoys the particular presence achieved in the intimate consciousness of the enunciating voice forever loses the pristine adhesion to the Open that Rilke discerned in the gaze of the animal; he must now turn his eyes inward toward the non-place of language. This is why subjectification, the production of consciousness in the event of discourse, is often a trauma of which human beings are not easily cured; this is why the fragile text of consciousness incessantly crumbles and erases itself, bringing to light the disjunction on which it is erected: the constitutive desubjectification in every subjectification.²³

Agamben’s idea ties in with Jabès’ thoughts on the status of the writer, language and body (though, of course, while Jabès focuses on writing, Agamben is closer to Lacan, it seems, in attending to speech²⁴). To Jabès, the writer’s role and harsh lot is to give voice to that which is excluded by language, which lingers just before the threshold of enunciation. This verges on Agamben’s vision of the witness who has not experienced himself the events to which he bears witness, for had he experienced them, he would not be capable of bearing witness. Instead, he speaks on behalf of the one who cannot speak, *and the object of his testimony is the sphere that eludes testimony, the sphere that cannot be borne witness to:*

At first it appears that it is the human, the survivor, who bears witness to the inhuman, the *Muselmann*. But if the survivor bears witness *for* the *Muselmann* – in the technical sense of “on behalf of” or “by proxy” [...] – then, according to the legal principle by which the acts of the delegated are imputed to the delegant, it is in some way the *Muselmann* who bears witness. But this means that the one who truly bears witness in the human is the inhuman; it means that the human is nothing other than the agent of the inhuman, the one that lends the inhuman a voice. Or, rather, that there is no one who claims the title of “witness” by right. To speak, to bear witness, is thus to enter into

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 122–3.

24 Jabès probably would not subscribe to Agamben’s simple juxtaposition of speech and “the pure presence.” Jabès views speech as something always already arranged, recounting the past and, as such, non-present. Even putting aside Derrida’s critiques of binding speech to the present (which Jabès could fully endorse), for Jabès the present as such is never there but always displaced. Paradoxically, in his view, it is writing that exposes us most to the impact of time.

a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silent, and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own [...]. Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject, to identify the “imagined substance” of the “I” and, along with it, the true witness.

This can also be expressed by saying that *the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to desubjectification*. But this expression holds only if it is not forgotten that “to bear witness to a desubjectification” can only mean there is no subject of testimony [...]. Here it is possible to gage the insufficiency of the two opposed theses that divide accounts of Auschwitz: the view of humanist discourse, which states that “all human beings are human” and that of anti-humanist discourse, which holds that “only some human beings are human.” What testimony says is something completely different, which can be formulated in the following theses: “human beings are human insofar as they are not human” or, more precisely, “human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman.”²⁵

Jabès is not, strictly speaking, a witness to the Shoah, but he bears witness to what the Shoah revealed – to the discontinuous boundary between speaking and speechlessness, between pointlessness of speech and inexpressible validity of silence. It is not only that Jabès “bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech,” as Agamben’s witness does; in fact, we would be hard pressed to find a writer who has dedicated himself more than Jabès to studying this ultimate limit, *the point* dividing silence from language, itself devoid of content and, thereby, registering the unsayable.²⁶ Agamben’s concept shows why the Shoah can be

25 Agamben, *Remnants*, pp. 120–121.

26 Guy Walter offers a similar insight: “[In Jabès] silence hovers amidst words, within words, in-between the gaps of *vocables*, in-between the parting of the lips. [...] In this way, Auschwitz is always at the threshold, at the threshold between beginning and end, between the impossible opening of the book and its impossible closure. For, in every moment, the *threshold* opens in the book. The book, at every moment, is between the edges of the threshold, at every moment crosses these edges and steps inside the threshold. [...] In this way, Auschwitz is at the threshold of another history, the book of which records the wandering and forbids repetition. From then on, history continues at its threshold and cannot enter itself other than through this threshold. [...] This is how the silence of the scream is perpetuated and gains from infinity the time which it intercepts and leads in-between parts of all [...]” Walter, “Spiritualité,” pp. 81–82.

Interpreting this rather enigmatic passage, I would highlight the two types of threshold it juxtaposes: the threshold that Auschwitz opens for history and the threshold that surfaces in the book time and again. Though rarely portraying details of the Shoah, Jabès’ writing is cut out for thinking about the Shoah because it constantly

identified with the originary catastrophe, with the “wound of the word,” as Jabès puts it, without being divested of its uniqueness while having its essential consequences exposed. Indeed, Jabès’ texts rarely address the realities of the Shoah. As the poet himself states, particulars are redundant because “[w]hen you say: they were deported – that is enough for a Jew to understand the *whole* story.”²⁷ The object on which his writing – like Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* – focuses, is absence as such,²⁸ present in the scattered bricks of the crematoriums in the divine fashion. Because absence needs a footing to show itself, Jabès employs a palette of devices discussed in previous Chapters.

His devices undoubtedly differ from Celan’s: Jabès never deforms words, never degrades the syntax and never belts out chanted sounds, which, in Celan, reminded Primo Levi of “last inarticulate babble” or “the gasps of a dying man.”²⁹ Franke elucidates this difference:

Celan’s language is witness to an event; it is in a state of shock. Jabès seems rather to be witnessing a predicament; the disaster that he expresses is there in language always already. Jabès’ theoretical reflections and the glassy, cool composure, as well as the quietly fiery passion, of his sibylline aphorisms bespeak the disaster of the word as such. Every finite, human word is an annihilation of the infinite, divine Book. This annihilation is

struggles with crossing its own threshold. Similarly, Auschwitz produces for history a certain limit which cannot be crossed by understanding. Even if attempts are made to inscribe the Shoah into meaningful history, it bursts this history apart time after time. In this sense, the threshold – embodied in the point in Jabès – is the limit of incomprehensibility with which the writer constantly wrestles, re-enacting in this way the position of meaning vis-à-vis the Shoah. In Jabès, the impossibility of the book is the same thing as the impossibility of one, continuous history. Hence, Jabès combines reflection on Creation with thinking on the Shoah, as in the following passages of *Return to the Book*:

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

[...] The center is threshold.

[...] “Where is the center?”

“Under the cinders.”

[...] The center is mourning.

[...] Aside from challenging God, the center formed by the many extermination camps left the Jews – chosen people of the center – grappling with the interrogations of the race. Even those who could no longer think” (BQ I, pp. 359–60, 364).

27 Cf. Daniel B. Listoe, “Seeing Nothing: Allegory and the Holocaust’s Absent Dead,” *SubStance*, 35/2 (110) (2006), pp. 51–70, on p. 63.

28 *Ibid.*, s. 54.

29 In Agamben, *Remnants*, p. 37.

necessary to the existence of humanity, of the finite, which is otherwise totally annihilated by the infinite.³⁰

Thus if Jabès persists in writing the point where speechlessness turns into language, the body into mind, and infinity into finitude, he resorts to different means than Celan. Falling-silent does not trickle down into the very tissue of his words; rather, it appears always as *a before* or *an after* of more coherent entities.

Reminiscent of Agamben's survivor, who simply survives in the bare worthlessness of survival (where all values are emptied of meaning),³¹ Jabès evokes the "resolve to survive," on which his writing is based. "In one scream, life and death – the despotic sisters – fade away, intertwined," he writes in *Le Parcours*, intriguingly confirming Agamben's idea that sur-vival, enduring, is a state beyond life and death.³² An equivalent of this state is found in the pure marking, in the point which – in itself ungraspable as a remnant that it is – divides life and death. *Meanings matter to Jabès, ultimately, only insofar as they can be obliterated in being used to mark the point.* In this way, Jabès re-thinks how culture, meaning and language contribute to violence. His answer seems simple in its paucity: meaning is erected on the basis which it cannot grasp and which it subdues. The poet's journey leads to exposing this basis in the nakedness of the point, which embodies the nakedness of continuing life. This is the only way the poet can bear witness to what is annihilated through the very testimony. At the same time, this is also the only way to unhinge the totality of meaning from its enclosure, destabilise it and reveal it *against* "the abyssal absence of the Name."

Thus, in Jabès' writing, a voice is indirectly lent to that which cannot have its own voice.³³ The entire reality is revealed to be a set of things on which language

30 Franke, "Singular," p. 632.

31 Agamben, *Remnants*, pp. 92–4.

32 In this way, as Kronick argues, in Auschwitz – and in the thought that tries to think it – death is no longer an element of "the economy," which it is in Hegel. Death in the Shoah evades the logic of gift and sacrifice in being something totally exterior to meaning, its exteriority forever refusing to be incorporated into dialectics. Kronick, "Edmond Jabès," p. 980.

33 One of the Talmud's classic ethical treatises *Pirke Avot* includes the following maxim: "One who cites an utterance in the name of its original speaker brings redemption to the world"; cf. Adam Zachary Newton, "Versions of Ethics: Or, The SARL of Criticism: Sonority, Arrogation, Letting-Be," *American Literary History*, 13/3 (Fall 2001), pp. 603–37, on p. 603. Jabès obeys this commandment in his special way. Because in the Shoah those who could be quoted did not have a voice, the Jabèsian writer cannot quote their words. Instead, he tries to employ pure marking to invoke that which has fallen silent. The conventional fortunes of the protagonists of *The Book*

works and which, for this very reason, cannot speak themselves. The Shoah unveils the limit to meaning, which turns criminal, and to man turned into a thing enduring in time. His truth is, in Jabès, the truth of Creation, a mute voice of being raised from nothingness. Bearing witness as a Shoah survivor, Jabès bears thus witness to truth which persists as a liminal point of meaning, thought and, also, all value.

However, we could ask whether the desires and hopes associated with finding truth are not dissipated in this truth. This is a truth that does not give anything while taking everything away and delivers us back to speechlessness of Creation, in which everything is equal and mute at the same time. The only alternative is the blindness of meaning, unaware of the nothing in which it is grounded. As Adorno insisted, it was the cold, bourgeois subjectivity that first made Auschwitz possible and now makes life after Auschwitz possible.³⁴ Therefore, Jabès tries to find a way between meaning and silence of Nothing, searching in this manner for *a place which was human once*. But because this is the place where pointless survival is at its most intense, as is the power of destruction pushing the writer – as Jabès himself states – into death, it *only shows how much more was wrecked in the Shoah*.

“Truth is not for sale. We are our own truth: this is the solitude of God and man. It is our common freedom”³⁵ Excluded and violated by language, pure duration is a site where God, man and things meet. As the quotation implies, this place is the centre of solitude but also affords freedom. Comparing Jabès and

of Questions, the voices of rabbis coming out of nothing only to disappear immediately and, finally, the cited utterances of the anonymous *il*, all do what *Pirke Avot* commands in the world in which a space of complete silence has emerged. Those who have passed away can be remembered only in the speech that verges on silence.

In this way, Jabès responds to the urgency of re-conceptualising testimony, quotation and remembrance in the wake of Auschwitz. The Talmudic maxim assumes that both the quoted one and the quoting one can be named; time does not encroach on identity and only consigns the original enunciation to oblivion. In Jabès, however, time destroys all identity and obliterates names. Therefore, quoting must head towards total anonymity. Paradoxically, the salvation evoked in *Pirke Avoti* is made possible only through an anonymous quotation from an anonymous source. Words, so to speak, quote themselves beyond their author and beyond the quoting one. This is the essence of the pure repetition of the point and its testimony.

34 In Brett Ashley Kaplan, “Pleasure, Memory, and Time Suspension in Holocaust Literature: Celan and Delbo,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, 38/4 (2001), pp. 310–29, on pp. 313–4.

35 BQ I, p. 319.

Agamben, we can conclude that Jabès' witness would have a certain power of resistance, which Jabès describes as subversion. Registering the silence of duration is not a surrender to the power of meaning but a struggle with it:

"My vision of God is horrible: blind, deaf, one-armed without legs."

"Lord, I resemble You in my impotence to save You."

[...] "My God, You gave the helpless the strength to act in order to rule the world through Your weakness."

[...] "In silence, we always eavesdrop on death."

[...] I believed we rebel so that the minute of chalk (which records the minute) should survive. I have now learned that revolt is the privilege of death.

[...] You fight in those instants when the reverie of life gives way to the dream of death.³⁶

The first of the passages sketches the idea of "God after Auschwitz" – mute and mutilated, resembling the *Muselmann*. This God shares in the lot of victims in order to save them. Here, Jabès' thinking intersects with Hans Jonas' theology. According to Jonas, Judaism's difficulty with re-thinking the concept of God after the Shoah is greater than Christianity's. The reason is that, unlike Christianity, Judaism does not focus on salvation in the afterlife but sees this world as the "locus of divine creation, justice, and redemption."³⁷ With the Jewish God conceptualised as the Lord of History, theodicy after the Shoah is far more difficult.

Yet Jonas ventures to embrace theodicy despite all odds. He starts from marshalling the common argument that the Shoah proves that if God permitted it to happen, he either is not good or did not have power enough to intervene.³⁸ Then Jonas revisits the idea of *tzimtzum* and argues that creation from nothing inevitably implies a self-limitation of Divine power. God handed his autonomy over to the world, has "given himself whole to the becoming world"³⁹ and suffers with His creation. Expectedly, Jonas' conclusion assigns responsibility for the world as it is to man; because God has completed his action and cannot do anything more now, man is faced with an immense space of ethical obligations.

Jabès' thought differs symptomatically from Jonas' reasoning. While Jabès starts from the same point, i.e. from the idea of *tzimtzum*, he does not restrict it only to the relation of God and Creation. As abundantly pointed out, Jabès' *tzimtzum* frames the relationship of every author to every work, of the speaker to speech and of things to the linguistically formed world. Consequently, unlike

36 BQ I, pp. 241, 272, 273, 275.

37 Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," *The Journal of Religion*, 67/1 (January 1987), pp. 1–13, on p. 3.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–9.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Jonas, Jabès cannot claim that Divine *tzimtzum* has left a space for the human being to act freely in the autonomous Creation. Human activity is human ruin. That is why the human being does not replace God but *repeats* God's position. Indeed, Jabès does not intend to retain the previous ethics after Auschwitz, which Jonas is eager to do. The only ethical position in Jabès is the place of rebellion in the enslavement of all Creation, a protest encapsulated in a simple scream which, devoid of content, mimics the point. An ethical act is to recognise in what way the condition of things – therein of God and the Shoah victims – is repeated in the writerly gesture. An ethical act is to repeat a revolt against the injustice of meaning.⁴⁰ The salvation offered by the blind and mangled God means only stepping into the same position and suffering together, which does not save anything except the remonstrance itself.

This brings us to another major difference between Jonas and Jabès. Namely, for Jonas, God as the almighty lord of Creation undoubtedly does not exist *any-more*, but the sphere of ethical responsibility is still there, ceded to man. In this way, Jonas rehearses, to put it in very broad lines, philosophy's fundamental gesture ever since Descartes, that is, putting man in the place previously occupied by God. The Shoah does not alter this mechanism; more than that, it even inclines Jonas to rely on this mechanism. Jonas assumes thereby that *signs of God's action or inaction are directly correlated with his existence or non-existence*. God did not intervene in Auschwitz, *ergo*, he does not exist (at least not in his previous form). This perfectly illustrates the ontotheological structure of philosophy, to use Heidegger's terminology: God is a being which is the centre of ethical law-giving and of law enactment. God is *ex officio* obligated to act ethically, and if he does not do so, he does not exist. At its core, Jonas' reasoning retains the God of ontotheology and only negatively assesses the existence of this God. Moreover, it presupposes that *God and the place of his potential action are located in the same space; hence, God's non-existence can be inferred from his inaction*. Whether God exists or not, reality is subject to the same laws, and God's existence or non-existence has exactly the same impact on each of its places. This shows that Jonas does not offer any deep re-examination of the idea of *tzimtzum* on which he builds because God's withdrawal is only a cloak hiding reflection on reality still conceived as one whole.

Jabès thinks differently: *in Auschwitz reality is revealed in its truth to which God's existence or non-existence is irrelevant*. This idea is far more devastating

40 This rebellion reverberates with Améry's claim that dignity can be regained only if fear is re-forged into anger. Améry, *Mind's Limits*, p. 100.

than atheism of ontotheology. *God can even exist but this does not change anything.* Auschwitz is a place which, like in Kafka's parables, is too remote for God's power to reach it. If God did not intervene, it might be not because he does not exist but because reality is so fragmented that *at some places God's existence is entirely inconsequential.* It does not entail any expectations of intervention while God's ethical injunctions to man become simply negligible. The Shoah just shows the limit of meaning, and if God expresses himself through meaning and acts meaningfully, the very medium he purportedly uses lets him down. In other words, in Jabès, God is weak not because he has no power to enact an ethical duty, but because the ethical behest itself is erased and becomes undecidable. For this reason, the role of ethics can be assumed only by a powerless, inarticulate scream of protest, which dies out in the opaque world.⁴¹

Drawing on Gadamer, Cezary Wodziński observes that, in Celan's works, the poem is to speak for the Other so as to let the Other speak on his own behalf.⁴² Jabès' writer speaks for all things, including God. Actually, all the things excluded by language speak in the same voice on their own behalf and, at the same time, on behalf of them all. In the passage quoted above, God can save Sarah because he is deaf, mute and mutilated: his powerlessness speaks for her powerlessness. Such speech is an ontological relationship, a relationship of the infinite to the singular. The writer, who has his real voice, is only a special instance of such relationship. In this way, things that have stopped at the threshold of being and all express this fact in and through their position come to form a unique *communio infirmorum*. The writer, in turn, whose position is slightly more privileged because of the possibility to write things down, can use that which causes exclusion – i.e. language – to speak for things. His situation is, thus, liminal: he is still within language but seeks to come as close as possible to the world of equal and mute things.

Thus, Jabès makes himself part of post-war French thought – epitomised by Lyotard, Blanchot and Derrida – which responded to the Shoah by mobilising

41 In a sense, Jabès has more in common with Buber, who thought that though after Auschwitz "one might still believe in a God who permitted the Shoah to happen," one could no longer hear God's words or sustain "an I-Thou relationship with Him." The new God does not resemble the old one anymore, and his change is historical, which means that Auschwitz did not show what God *has always been like* but revealed *what he has become like*. Tamra Wright, "Self, Other, Text, God: Th Dialogical Thought of Martin Buber," in *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 102–21, on pp. 115–6.

42 Cezary Wodziński, *Kairos. Konferencja w Todtnaubergu. Celan – Heidegger* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2010), p. 56.

the motifs of passivity, enduring and indistinction, indebted to Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* (and, by extension, to its source in Meister Eckhart's *Gelazeneheit*).⁴³ The Shoah reveals God's silence so radically that it turns silence itself into a scream, as David Patterson insists.⁴⁴ According to Patterson,⁴⁵ Jabès views the Shoah as an irreparable rupture which founds a new history. In his silence, God speaks henceforth against his will, for the memory of the Shoah creates a new context in which silence, inaudible as it is, becomes obtrusive. In continuing writing, in "resolve to survive," the Jabèsian writer-and-Jew's apparent duty is to *continue marking in order to prevent the silence of God's speechlessness from ever sliding into oblivion*.

Given the above, the idea Gadamer formulated in his meditations on Celan's poetry is applicable also to Jabès: the poem is a cosmic event.⁴⁶ The poetic word does not rely on rhetoric, and it does not use metaphors.⁴⁷ Nor is it an allegory because it does not stand for anything else: it is just "itself,"⁴⁸ as Gadamer claims. In Jabès, the materiality of the word is embodied in the point that divides silence from muteness; in this way, the anchoring which makes silence visible is always sustained. Consequently, Jabès' work boasts ontological relevance as, in its moment, it embodies the forever repeating drama of universal *tzimtzum*. This final point, beyond metaphor and colloquial language, is *the ultimate way of expressing Auschwitz and a testimony to the impossibility of speaking about the Shoah*.

No doubt, it would be precious to know whether this channel of commemorating the Shoah is not, by any chance, just another of the many modern delusions and whether the simplification at which it aims is not, by any chance, one of the enemy's weapons at the same time.

43 Chaouat, "Forty Years," p. 55.

44 David Patterson, "Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 18/2 (Fall 2004), pp. 274–90, on p. 277.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan: "Who Am I and Who Are You" and Other Essays*, trans. and eds. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 121

47 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

48 *Ibid.*

Anti-Semitism as the Rule of the Name

Jabès' reflection on the Shoah is closely intertwined with his scrutiny of anti-Semitism. Like Celan, Jabès keeps an eye on displays of the hatred of Jews after the Shoah a hatred which persists, albeit in less manifest forms.

Jabès was haunted by a fundamental question: Why was it the Jews that fell victim to such a terrifyingly tenacious discourse – an entire system of beliefs, prejudice, associations and labels?

Because I was exiled due my Jewish origin, the Carpentras event and its likes always make me ask anew: What does it mean to be a Jew? What does it mean that the Jew will never escape another's hatred?

[...] It is as the moment came when the Jew is no longer perceived as anything else but a Jew. You may repeat in vain: "I am this and that, I have done this and that, I am a university professor, I am a writer, I am an engineer"; in response you will hear: "No, you are a Jew!" You are perceived only as a Jew and attacked – in the name of what? No idea. This is anti-Semitic discourse.⁴⁹

What is most perplexing to Jabès in anti-Semitic discourse is its absolute reduction of complexity. Differences that add up to a person's individual way of being in the social space are discarded for one simple criterion – being a Jew. All *content* of human features is obscured by this act of naming. The word used in it subsumes all other labels, which Jabès himself experienced in post-war Egypt, when a campaign against "Zionists" mutated into an open witch-hunt against Jews.⁵⁰ Moreover, as Jabès suggests, the most mysterious thing about anti-Semitism is the fact that the content of the "Jew" label (which this discourse associates with various properties after all) is less important than *the very act of designation*. There is no telling in the name of what the Jew is attacked, Jabès observes: essentially, he is attacked in the name of the very name "Jew." While a human being is reduced to this word, inexplicable aggression is unleashed. Anti-Semitic discourse, as Jabès sees it, is the cause of violence, and as long as it continues – and not much changes in this matter – violence can return. Commenting on the calamity in Carpentras, the poet writes in *The Book of Hospitality*:

After the defacement of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras, silence followed; what else could happen? But this disgraceful, repulsive act is always only a logical and predictable consequence of the discourse, of a series of discourses sustained skilfully and cunningly, handed over, bolstered, sometimes condemned by some, but most of the time tolerated

49 EEJ pp. 66–7.

50 Auster, "Interview," p. 11.

by the majority in the name of the freedom of speech, which a democratic country grants to its citizens.

Anti-Semitic discourse – the oldest of them all –.⁵¹

To Jabès, anti-Semitism is a blueprint of all racist speech. As such, it represents a peculiar rule of the word – or word cluster – over human life. It is a way of doing things with words which Austin failed to include in his typology of speech acts. What are ostensibly not all too dangerous acts of elocution disseminate and consolidate latently only to erupt at an unexpected moment and provoke very tangible action. Jabès obsessively dwells on the silence that follows anti-Semitic acts and their more or less nominal condemnation. A newspaper lives one day, he concludes,⁵² and then memory is wiped out. All the while, anti-Semitic discourse goes on underground, in its peculiar memory, in its doggedness to reiterate the same associations and resume the same patterns of action. And, briefly after coming to France, Jabès sees the following words on the wall:

MORT AUX JUIFS

[...] scrawled in white chalk, in caps.

In which street? In several streets on several walls.

[...] at each halt, at each corner...⁵³

Jabès repeatedly reminds that anti-Semitic acts of violence are usually preceded by *writing*: writing which is public but anonymous and unsigned. A more vivid example of the written word that heralds and brings death is difficult to find. Communication in speech is broken, details of the individual's life are obliterated, and only a bare act of naming remains in total silence, which all the more emphasises that writing has taken place. From there, there is only a path to violence, which also takes place in silence, and even if it happens in speech, this speech is empty and purely instrumental, serving the perpetration of the crime. At this moment, Jabès, who devoted much of his work to exploring the writer-language relationship, cannot possibly fail to link this reduction-to-one-name to his other insights.

To discuss this link, we should first describe briefly Jabès' idea of the name:

In the first volume of *The Book of Questions* I say: "The world exists because the book exists." This is so because in order for something to exist it has to be named. Naming precedes us. It is therefore first of all this naming which I wanted to recover; a naming

51 LH, p. 34.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

53 BQ I, p. 52.

which is only the becoming conscious of what is or will be; which has therefore preceded the thing and which will subjugate the universe.⁵⁴

Naming means entering language and, consequently, also the language-shaped world; it means finding in language the word that is most one's "own," the place that is most one's "own," where, however, the contradiction between the named and its language form culminates. Like entering Kant's causal series, naming makes a thing part of the language order, renders it visible and gives its existence in the meaningful world. In this sense, naming determines the form and the fate of the thing turned object. Besides, as Jabès insightfully notices, the name is a place where a thing can "become conscious of what is or will be." This thought can suggest that in the act of naming, a thing, a human being *in particular*, is empowered to recognise the position it has been granted in language, which will also weigh on its future.

The role of naming is analogous here to Schelling's idea of "primordial choice," which predetermines human freedom without, however, being in contradiction with it.⁵⁵ Jabès seeks to grasp this primordial act in which a fundamental ontological decision about the form of a thing in language is made. At this point, we should recall our conclusions about human life being inscribed in the symbolic order, which is represented in Jabès' "premature birth." The poet uses another reference for a similar effect: his name is already in the Bible. The town of Jabès in Gilead ("Jabès" in the French translation) features, for example in the Shoftim (the Book of Judges). Referring to this, Jabès says that "the Jew does not quote the book; he is quoted by the book," which means that the name precedes and determines his existence.⁵⁶

"It is thus simultaneously true," writes Derrida about the Jabèsian idea of naming – "that things come into existence and lose existence by being named."⁵⁷ Standing for a thing, the name replaces and, at the same time, excludes it. Rene Major observes:

Giving itself, the name at the same time holds itself back. The name belongs equally to the one that gives it and to the one that bears it. To the one it entrusts with watching and to the one it watches; but the name itself guards itself against the one that gives it and

54 DB, p. 84.

55 See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1992 [1936]).

56 See Stephane Barsacq, "Dans la double dépendance du nom," *Europe*, 954 (Octobre 2008), pp. 277–9.

57 Derrida, *Writing*, p. 86.

the one that receives it. [...] The name evades the one that gives it and the one that bears it. It preserves the presence of the one and the other in their absence. Beyond death. Beyond erasure.⁵⁸

God's Name is a paradigmatic example of the name. Because he exists in the Creation only as absence, his Name is absence at the extreme of its intensity. Franke argues:

The Jewish God's uncompromising transcendence renders him absent from the world and especially from the *word* in which he is revealed but at the same time concealed. The word remains as a trace of God's withdrawal from the world. The withdrawing of God is the precondition for the existence of anything else. Otherwise God is all in all, and existence is saturated by his being alone. The word makes a beginning, interrupts eternity, and in so doing marks an absence of God by opening up a gap in His eternal presence.⁵⁹

Having established this, we can return to anti-Semitism. Its manifestation *reveals the bare act of naming, which is the precondition of language*. Hence the reduction of complexity in which a human being is stripped down to a bare name. The anti-Semite believes that, in this way, he captures this human being's hidden essence, makes him fully present and reveals the "truth." But he finds nothing except a bare, meaningless name which is directly bound to what this name excludes. The void of naming is revealed in the alleged source of presence, and the one created and, at the same time, excluded by one's name, appears in the absence. That is why Jabès views anti-Semitism as re-enacting the primal gesture of violence that is naming.

What is more, anti-Semitism is a matrix of similar racist discourses because it turns against the Jews as representing the universal message of God's withdrawal and exclusion in the word.

"If [the word] JEW could suddenly be spelled JEWE or JOU, perhaps the persecution would stop" [...] "We would be doubly persecuted" [...]: "in our alliance with the word and in its madness. God expunged the Name so it should never expunge us." [...] "In the permanence of this word lies our permanence, guarded by its letters graven into the infinite absence of the four divine letters."⁶⁰

In Chapter Seven, I discussed the idea of the primal, non-absorbable trace that constitutes the Jewish community. At this point, we can elaborate on Jabès' vision. The trace is not exhausted in the use of a particular word. Because the trace

58 René Major, "Jabès et l'écriture du nom propre," in *Écrire le livre*, p. 15.

59 William Franke, "Edmond Jabès, or the Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God," *Literature & Theology*, 22/1 (March 2008), pp. 102–17, on p. 104.

60 BR II, p. 46.

is founded on an erasure, it functions just inversely to the word that exists at a given moment. While this word can be simply forgotten or driven away and consequently disappear, memory works differently in the space generated by the trace. *Forgetfulness adds another layer to the trace.* As Judaism is memory based on the trace, memory in anti-Semitic discourse resists any simple erasure. On the contrary, each change of the name feeds this discourse and fuels its obsessions. Like a distorting mirror of Jewish memory, anti-Semitism erupts only to descend into the silence of ostensible oblivion, but in fact it accumulates the reserves of its representations and practices beyond meaning. Those return unexpectedly where no meaningful memory seems to have survived. So, if the word JEW were changed into JEWE, the persecutions borne out of anti-Semitic discourse could escalate. “We would be doubly persecuted: in our alliance with the word and in its madness,” concludes Jabès. This can be taken to mean that if the name changed, anti-Semitic discourse would not only hold off the forgetting that the change of name was to effect but also construe *this change itself* as another reason for “tracking down the truth.” Jews would thus be persecuted as Jews (“in our alliance with the name”) and as those who changed their name in an attempt to push into oblivion the cruel past that has grown into it (“in its madness”). If the name is replenished, the obsession of anti-Semitism is projected on its subsequent versions.⁶¹

Therefore, if, as mentioned earlier, naming means making absent, erasing and replacing with a word, we can specify that *each act of erasure bolsters the working of the name.* As Judaism (and writing) bears an immense space of material memory, which includes everything lost in meaning, so the name accumulates absence nourished by each subsequent erasure. In this way, the Jews directly experience the mechanism of naming and, in doing so, join God, who creates a place in his Name where absence is concentrated. The letters of the Name, which is an “infinite absence,” as the passage above puts it, guard the “permanence of the word”: as long as God is wiped out in the name, serving, so to speak, as a paradigm of the name’s operations in reality, the Jews are sustained by their word.

Their experiences, however, enable the Jews to apprehend the violence of naming. Just like the writer-and-witness evoked earlier in this Chapter, the Jabèsian Jew persists and bears testimony despite his name. In other words, where a particular meaning seeks to definitively imprison all things subordinated to it, the Jew recalitrates:

61 This is how, “anti-Israeli discourse incrementally grafted itself on anti-Semitic discourse” (LH, p. 36).

“The number ‘4,’” he said, “is the number of our ruin. Do not think I am mad. The number ‘4’ equals 2 times 2. It is in the name of such obsolete logic that we are persecuted. For we hold that 2 times 2 equals also 5 or 7, or 9. You only need to consult the commentaries of our sages to verify. Not everything is simple in simplicity. We are hated because we do not enter into simple calculations of mathematics.”⁶²

The Jew goes toward the Jew who waits for him, pushed by what he thinks is inescapable fate – which is nothing but people’s fury to destroy him.

[...] Thought respects words in their integrity, whereas society repudiates the Jews. Society often has as much contempt for thought as for the Jews.

[...] At the beginning, the Nazis sent only useless Jews to the gas chambers. Then even this notion of uselessness vanished: all Jews were to be exterminated.

Perhaps there will come a day when words will destroy words [*vocables*] for good. There will be a day when poetry will die.

It will be the age of robots and the jailed word.

The misery of the Jews will be universal.⁶³

In Jabès, the Jew symbolises an opening – a *possibility* – of truth other than the commonly endorsed one: a freedom of thinking, as well as of poetry, which breaks the closedness of “the jailed word” subordinated to pure utility.

Conclusion: Anti-Semitism and the Modern Depletion

In order to conclude this Chapter, let us address one more issue. Jabès’ thought and writing practice, in which the profusion of thought undergoes an utter reduction down to a repeated point, peculiarly parallel the possibility of reducing a human being to the pure name by evacuating all content from it. This affinity helps Jabès understand the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. We could nevertheless argue that instead of trying to understand anti-Semitism by discerning the practice of naming in the process of progressive reduction, it might be better to forgo such thinking and writing at all. By continuing it, we might ask, do we not concede somewhat to the depletion which can turn into the discourse we combat? How does the search for the ultimate, equal, contentless community of things differ from the anti-Semitic reduction? Both mechanisms are, after all, based on the same structure – one I will not hesitate to call modern: the structure of the remnant. Does Jabès’ protest not rely, perhaps, on the same power grid that inflames anti-Semitism?

To answer these questions, we must notice that there is no option of choosing any other structure in Jabès’ work. *Tzimtzum* and exile are the primary

62 BQ I, p. 92.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 228–9.

conditions of the modern reality. After the Shoah, it is impossible to think otherwise. The only thing reflection can salvage, if at all, is *drawing a dividing line between discourses that seek simplification*. While the reduction process as such cannot be eliminated, it is possible to create within it a discourse that will reclaim the possibility to bear witness and to oppose the violence of language. Below, I will formulate three properties of such discourse which show that there still is an ethical choice in a deserted reality (though “choice” is hardly an apt word, for it is all about protest as instinctive as a scream of a tortured human being).

First, if Jabès strives to arrive at the point, at the last threshold of differentiation, he never stops at it as a conclusion. In continuing to write books, he *circles the point, resisting it and discovering ever new possibilities it organises*. What anti-Semitism and its likes do is performing a reduction and stopping there, taking it for the truth, oblivious to the fact that, when consistently re-thought, the point must overthrow this truth. It is the same blinded truth of “full daylight” that was discussed at the beginning of this Chapter.

For Jabès, the point is not the truth but a place which breaks all truth loose from its enclosure. The point as the basis of differentiation does not divide beings into categories because it *makes possible and, at the same, destabilises this very division*. Besides, the point is immanently linked to rebellion: in Jabès, the singularity and contentlessness of the point are paired with the scream as the most elementary and, simultaneously, all-encompassing sign of protest. Therefore, if anti-Semitism regards the bare act of naming as revelation of the truth, Jabès responds by framing it as the pinnacle of violence: revelation of the truth not about the one that gets named but about the functioning of language as such. Admittedly, anti-Semitism reduces the entire abundance of language to the bare name, but it does not judge this fact. Jabès’ response is to reject *the entire language* which has in this way disclosed its essence. That is why Jabès is so resolved to look for a vision of existence liberated from language, a vision of things in their total equality.

Second, the point in Jabès is a *community of all things* while anti-Semitism reduces only a certain group of people to their name. What, across all books, turns out to be a gradual stifling, a levelling, a striving to reach the whiteness of the Book concerns all being. In doing this, Jabès balances on the verge of the highest and most hazardous odds: *his messianism differs from utter nihilism only in the slightest content-difference, which he prevents from fading*. Jabès’ writing takes responsibility for all being. The whiteness of the Book is a locus of the complete and ultimate equality, in which things become at the same time utterly alone. Separation is an extreme condition of equality. For this reason, the community of these things means the termination of all violence as none of the

things can influence any other one. Yet, as Jabès observes himself, the same kind of community seemed to arise as a result of the most horrible violence modernity has produced. *The difference is only a slight one and resides nowhere else than in the content, but it is perhaps only in this difference – rather than in the decisive mechanism of the remnant – that the boundary lies between ruin and salvation in modernity. And this boundary is what ethical thinking must uphold.*

Third, the Jabèsian point reverberates with all the lost contents and properties and, as such, it gives justice to things while anti-Semitic discourse seeks to reduce only a particular group of people to the name and maintain its own content at their cost.

[...] To exclude another means to exclude yourself in a way. The rejection of difference leads to negating your fellow human being. Don't people forget that to say "I" is already to utter difference?

[...] racism is only a renewed expression of negation of the human being, of man as such in his abundance and in his infinite poverty.⁶⁴

Anti-Semitic discourse does not try to apprehend that reduction to the pure distinction is also a source of *its own* destabilisation. On the contrary, it seeks to reduce the other to the name in order to remove the other subsequently. Violence triggered by anti-Semitism is, to paraphrase Hegel, the fury of meaning that refuses to acknowledge its own nothingness. Reducing the other to the pure distinction, anti-Semitism desires in fact to erase its own constitutive difference and establish itself as the universally valid meaning. Racism negates the human being "in his infinite abundance and in his infinite poverty," as Jabès writes, emphasising the inseparable coupling of "abundance" and "poverty," which can be given justice only by the community of equal things that are, as already suggested, one thing and a multitude of things at the same time.

To conclude, reflection on the Shoah compels Jabès to recognise that after Auschwitz no other thinking is possible except thinking which has the desolation of reality as its fundamental precondition. Inconsistency in grasping this fact leads to perpetuating the violence of fragmented language and to the rule of blind nothing. To put it briefly: after God's death, maintaining God as a residuum, "an ethical ideal" or "the higher meaning-maker" is far more dangerous than consistent, conscious atheism. Jabès' ethical response is, thus, radicalism that seeks to *unveil nothing everywhere and in every form. But in this effort, radicalism endeavours to save the most elementary ethical difference – a difference in the aim of simplification.* Jabès' thought may bear the same patterns

64 LH, pp. 35–6.

as the thought of his opponent, Heidegger; but, unlike Heidegger, Jabès knows the consequences of simplification and pursues it with an ethical hope.

In his radicalism, Jabès is very close to Nietzsche, who views “desertification” as irreversible and effort to resist it as breeding nihilism. In the reality they both depict, a real threat is posed not by the lack of meaning but by the persisting meaning unaware of its unfoundedness. This affinity with Nietzsche suggests to what Jabès owes his radicalism. Even though this radicalism seems to be autonomously derived from Jewish thought, modernity demands to be acknowledged also here.

