

## Conclusion: Edmond Jabès and Jewish Philosophy of Modernity

If it still makes any sense draw a disciplinary dividing line between literary studies and philosophy, this line should perhaps be demarcated by their different ways of reading. Literary studies have long struggled to define its object of research. The transgressiveness of literature has seen one definitional attempt after another fail. Hence perhaps the ancillary status of literary studies, where the text is both the point of departure and the endpoint – a space only momentarily illumined by interpretation, which cannot fathom the material bulk of writing. Philosophy has for ages chased the chimera of a transparent text that, arguably, resists interpretation but must eventually surrender if read with the belief that it harbours *thoughts*. Has the erstwhile way of reading philosophical texts (even those that belied the illusion of a purely communicative function) not impressed itself indelibly on philosophy? Does it not still impact the habits of reading in which a conceptual scaffolding is immediately extracted from a text and, also immediately, seen as the world?

If it were indeed the case and if philosophy still focused not so much on reading as on *the questioning* which the text just prompts, such a residuum would offer an immense interpretive opportunity. For philosophy lacks that elementary distance to the text which may curb the interpretive drive but holds interpretation firmly within the bounds of writing. Hence philosophy boldly ventures to interpret in a, so to speak, blinded manner. If Nietzsche chided philosophy for its neglect of philological accuracy and for mistaking a hastily and once only understood text for reality itself, might we say that today, when deconstruction has become part of the academic doxa, philosophy offers us a remedy to reducing the effects of writing to the text as such? Might we say that it is in philosophy that we can find a counterbalance to an all too easy equation of the world with the text and an a-priori acknowledgement that reality is our construct? Perhaps philosophical reading, with its nuisance of seriousness and finding the world in a text rather than the other way round, can lead us back to the abandoned path that deconstruction once walked. Taking the effect of the text for “reality” itself made philosophy a laughing stock once, but today the same gesture can embarrass those who see the effect of the text as merely the effect of the text.

Throughout this book, I have attempted to read Edmond Jabès’ writings philosophically, that is, to look for a reality rather than a text in them, as a result of a trifling, half-inadvertent mistake. The outcome of such reading is Jabès’

philosophy, an effect of radical perspectivism. This philosophy, as an added value, sheds light on the modern construct of Judaism in the humanities. It also helps think the genesis and the role of modern simplification as well as to give it an ethical vector.

Let us now compile the conclusions from the argument in this book. My first intent was to determine whether Jabès' philosophy could be described as Jewish philosophy of modernity and, if so, whether it augmented this philosophy in any way. To settle that, we should best revisit the ideal type of Jewish philosophy of modernity defined in Chapter One and compare it with the aspects of Jabès' thinking discussed across this volume. As listed at the beginning, the distinctive features of Jewish philosophy of modernity include:

*Traces of the modern turn.* This is a vivid feature of Jabès' radicalised and simplified thinking. It surfaces, for example, in (a) the idea of an inaccessible originary disaster associated with Luria's *tzimtzum*; (b) the notion that absence is the foundation of reality marked by the trauma of God's withdrawal;<sup>1</sup> (c) insistence that a thinking based on stability, presence, being, and so forth, *has become* a dangerous illusion which a "nomadic thinking" must ultimately expose; (d) the belief that Judaism is in crisis and calls for an essential re-interpretation; (e) the utter separation between the structure and the content of thinking; Jabès is searching for a pattern of forces that affect the consecutive "books," whereby their content is secondary to the movement in which they are generated; (f) repeated foregrounding of historicity and attempts to understand the modern condition against the former ages. Consequently, Jabès' writings are stamped by the originary catastrophic event that resists being revealed while enforcing repeated attempts to unveil it. The modern shift produces the need for radical simplification which ostensibly aims to show the sources of the crisis though, essentially, it completes this crisis.

*Endorsement of modern (post-)Kantian premises.* As shown in the foregoing, basically every element of Jabès' thinking reflects the structure of the remnant, which I defined as a relationship between finite, limited perspectives and a lack, an empty centre that delimits them and is their inaccessible goal. Philosophically speaking, this structure is the legacy of the Kantian "thing in itself" and the aporia of the continuity of the series. The structure of the remnant appears in the following of Jabès' fundamental concepts: (a) in the idea of *tzimtzum* as an "empty" place of separation and connection between the imaginary and the real; (b) in the concept of the *vocable*, whose "core" is the very distance of *tzimtzum*;

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1 See Guglielmi, *Ressemblance*, pp. 18–19.

(c) in the movement of messianism triggered by the attempt to unite reality fragmented by the void of *tzimtzum*; messianism vainly endeavours to remove this excessive remnant and achieve the Unity of things; (d) in the relationship between the Book and a book: the Book is, in Lacanian parlance, a *pas-tout*, a “not-Whole,” i.e. a Whole with a hole produced each time by a partial book; that is why a book makes it possible to see the Book, but always in displacement; (e) in the position of the Jew/writer, who is always separated from a place from which he could properly interpret himself; (f) in meditations on the point, which are the final and ultimate form of thinking on the structure of the remnant, where this structure is reduced to elementary and material relationships. Besides the structure of the remnant, Jabès’ work amasses also other modern assumptions: (a) perspectivism, described by the poet as a structurally necessary existence of many finite forms of knowledge, which he calls “books”; (b) discarding the notion of transcendent God. Jabès’ God is subject to the laws of the reality he “created”; (c) identification of God with the void, negativity and remnant (d) presupposing an external agency that “gazes at” the fragmented perspectives and confers continuity on them – though this agency cannot be directly known.

*Dependence of thinking on the structure of the remnant.* Admittedly, Jabès does not consider himself a philosopher and does not delve into the crisis of 20th-century philosophy, but his thought seems to enact the same structures that have affected philosophy ever since Kant. Thinking, namely, does not entail taking a neutral account of the object; rather, thinking makes up part of the object. Thinking is particularly subjected to the structure of the remnant and, as such, it depends on a dimension it cannot grasp.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, thinking constantly turns towards its own conditionality and seeks to go beyond its own forms in order to, finally, take hold of the unknown territory. Therefore, even though Jabès does not tackle the self-overcoming of philosophy, his thought is anyway based on the structure of constant transgression and endeavours to go beyond itself. Jabès himself believed that he crossed beyond no-longer adequate literature. Besides relying on this inner structure of self-overcoming, Jabès’ thinking (alongside Heidegger’s *Denken* and Lacan’s *enseignement*) can be treated as an

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2 In his interesting article, Guy-Felix Duportail sets out to show how Jabès’ concepts can be explained in the logic of the remnant which is the stitch (*point de suture*) of the Whole. According to Duportail, the position of God – particularly of God’s Name – in Jabès is such a stitch. For the name is unpronounceable and, as such, does not belong to the symbolic order, yet marks the trace of its constitution. See Guy-Felix Duportail, “Le degré 451 de l’écriture.” *Les Cahiers Obsidiene*, no. 5 – Edmond Jabès (Paris: Capitales/Obsidiene, 1982), pp. 83–9.

outcome of transgression of traditional forms of discourse, specifically of philosophy and literature. As his writings defy generic classifications, they reflect the movement of abolishing the existing forms of reflection.

*Judaism as a "non-philosophy."* Jabès may not get explicitly involved in the 20th-century debate on surmounting philosophy, but he does discern in Judaism a knowledge about the structure of the remnant that underlies thinking. Throughout this volume, Jabès has been quoted time and again as insisting that Judaism means self-awareness of the condition in which ultimate truth can never be known, for it is separated from cognition by a minimal, yet irremovable boundary. I have shown that, according to Jabès, Judaism "knows" that that truth as such is inaccessible and, for this reason, continues to wander through partial and perspectival truths. Judaism's knowledge is not a knowledge of dogmas and theorems, but a knowledge of the intuitive art of reading forged in years upon years of suffering, hope and messianic mobilisations.

*Connection between the "discovery" of Judaism and the transformation in Western thought.* Jabès sees Judaism as a knowledge that the Jews have had for centuries and Western culture acquires only in the 20th century, when submerging in a deep crisis. According to Jabès, Judaism has known for long that the concept of truth is problematic, that interpretation must be continually practised, that time is discontinuous, that language has a creative power, that the author is lost in the message, and that one must hold out messianic hope; Judaism had known it long before Western thought chanced upon these insights. As such, Judaism is, to Jabès, a "hidden truth" of this thought, which is revealed only when the erstwhile certainties have been recognised as illusory. Importantly, Jabès views the Shoah as a key event in this re-appraisal. Produced by the vicious power founded on the illusion of truth and certainty, the Shoah is supposed to bring this illusion to an end and expose it with full clarity.

*"Acquisition" of Judaism as a practical act.* In this book's Chapters, I have shown many times that Jabès' thinking, which seeks to re-invent Judaism in the modern space, is not a purely theoretical enterprise. On the contrary, it entails a profound existential change. The writer's condition is the condition of an exile who turns his life into a space of continual exploration of the Book. Jabès' thinking is neither a distanced contemplation nor even a philosophy that "opens into life," as in Rosenzweig; Jabès' thinking simply crosses the pre-modern boundary between life and theory. Besides, Jabès' messianism – an effect of the structure of the remnant and framed in the notions of Judaism – is based on the vision of acts which can be called *praxis* since understanding of reality goes hand in hand with a sweeping re-making of reality. Finally, Jabès makes a gesture similar to Lévinas', yet far more radical than his. Namely, the Jabèsian concept of "hospitality," as

depicted in *Le Livre de l'Hospitalité*, represents an attempt to project an elementary ethical act that predates language, in the silent community. To Jabès, this is, however, not a new "first philosophy" underpinning further reflection, but rather a goal that thinking is supposed to pursue, heading towards its own expiry. We can say thus that "self-overcoming of thinking" is here brought to the point where thinking is to be replaced by an extralinguistic, silent act of "pure" action.

*Establishment of oppositions that cut through entire history.* Although Jabès does not refer explicitly to the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition, he frequently contrasts Jewish (anti-idolatrous, monotheistic, focused on the central void of reality) thought with thinking that upholds truth, stability and permanent being. Jabès extends this opposition, formative of his reasoning, onto entire history. For example, he references the astonishment of Titus' troops on entering the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, when they found its most sacred place empty. This event, as Jabès sees it, stands for the clash between the Romans and a people that erected Nothing into divinity, making it the centre of the world and the essence of the holy Book.<sup>3</sup> By the same token, Jabès emphatically makes a gesture that recurs throughout Jewish philosophy of modernity, albeit in more disguised forms. Namely, he projects the shift from a thinking he seeks to surmount (i.e. "idolatrous" thinking) to an apophatic and anti-idolatrous thinking (i.e. "Jewish" thinking) onto the same opposition that has purportedly been there throughout the ages. In this way, he attributes to ancient Judaism the identification of God with Nothing and, in this way, blurs the difference between the onetime and the present cult of the Lord. The ease with which Jabès alternates between the "current" argumentation and such historical examples implies how "universal oppositions" of the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem type are constructed.

*Construction of a selective vision of Judaism accommodating modern philosophical tenets.* This has been shown throughout the volume. As I have attempted to demonstrate, Jabès re-interprets Judaism as a radically atheistic tradition which embraced the void and absence as God. In his view, Jewish monotheism essentially does not involve faith in a personal deity but recognises that the entire world depends on the inaccessible remnant of *tzimtzum*. Jabès sieves the extraordinary and internally contradictory plenitude of the Judaic legacy for elements that fit into his modern thinking and can be employed to convey modern paradoxes. Of course, he does not negate that his vision of Judaism is idiosyncratic and unorthodox, but though admitting that his is a radical re-interpretation of Judaism, he anyway projects it onto Judaism's past. Like Scholem, Jabès is attached to the

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3 F, p. 72.

most antinomic movements within Jewish tradition and regards continuity in rupture as Judaism's key feature.

*Construction of a selective vision of Judaism in which the basic tenets are those that conform with modern philosophy.* Such tenets include radical monotheism,<sup>4</sup> anti-idolatry, the primacy of word over image, intertextuality, dismissal of one dogmatic truth for the sake of multiple interpretations, desacralisation of the world, positive appreciation of "life as such," messianism, precedence of a practical act (ethics) over ontology, acceptance of uncertainty intrinsic to happening/enowning and the nomad's condition. Jabès' vision of Judaism seems to utterly radicalise 20th-century re-workings of Jewish tradition. Given its extremity, some commentators contend that it has little to do with "true" Judaism.<sup>5</sup> However, this radicalism sheds light on Jewish philosophy of modernity as such because it shows that the movement which directs philosophy towards Jewish tradition is informed less by Judaism itself and more by the patterns of modern thinking.

*Re-constructed Judaism as underpinning re-interpretation and re-appraisal of previous philosophical insights.* This is perhaps the least visible trait of Jewish philosophy of modernity in Jabès' work, the main reason being that he rarely refers to philosophy's past and, thus, does not feel urged to re-interpret it. It is only in the "Letter to Jacques Derrida" that he suggests philosophy should take into account

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- 4 Why should radical monotheism tie in with modern philosophy if I claimed earlier that this philosophy perceived reality as one, continuous, atheistic space devoid of transcendence? The reason is that, unlike "Greek" idolatrous monotheism, radical monotheism offers a structure that depicts an uncrossable and ubiquitous transcendental boundary between reality and its "thing in itself." It is enough to identify God with the position of the remnant – as Jabès does – for radical monotheism to become an atheistic doctrine, paradoxical though it may sound.
- 5 The Shoah researcher and Jabès' interpreter Berel Lang disagrees with his refashioning of Judaism, stating: "It is difficult for modern consciousness to admit that the idea of the divided self, of a spirit alienated from itself, is itself a recent artifact – that the image of the Jew as congenitally alien is not *itself* congenital, but rather an historical contrivance, nourished conscientiously in the romantic notion of alienation by volunteer poets and philosophers from nineteenth-century Germany, France and England." The careful reading of Judaism's key writings, the Bible in particular, shows that they are not exclusively a description of an alienated consciousness; on the contrary, they are rife with evocations of God's presence and plenitude. That is why Lang concludes that "we learn from *The Book of Questions* more about Jabès than we do about the Jew, more about Jabès' life as a Jew than about the Jew's life as Jew." Lang, "Writing-the-Holocaust," pp. 201, 205.

“the question of the Book” it has so far eschewed.<sup>6</sup> Yet Jabès makes a structurally similar gesture in relation to literature. As discussed in Chapter Eight, he replaces literature with “writing” governed by the same mechanisms as his Judaism. Jewish tradition seems to him an un-literary basis for e-assessing literature. Besides, Jabès frames Judaism time and again as an agency capable of restoring memory to Western thought, which takes pains to avoid memory. By the same token, Judaism becomes a footing that helps Western culture perceive its own suppressed content. Finally, Judaism is to Jabès the experience of exile and because, in his view, this experience has become common in the 20th century, Jewish tradition affords an opportunity to understand the now-universal wandering.

The survey above shows that Jabès’ writings paradigmatically enact characteristic features of Jewish philosophy of modernity, without however relying directly on philosophical discourse (with a few rare exceptions). Yet, as I have tried to show in this volume, this is exactly why Jabès’ work tells us more about Jewish philosophy of modernity than it would were it engaged in strictly philosophical debates. As it stands now, Jabès’ work is a testament to the workings of forces that transcend the limits of philosophical discourse – of forces that determine the specific mechanisms of modern thinking and can be traced in literature, psychoanalysis and historical research as well. In Jabès’ writings, these forces are vividly inscribed in Jewish tradition. Resulting from the inner dynamics of writing, Jabès’ own path to re-constructing Judaism shows the distance between the simplification movement and the positive content it uses.

Before finishing, we should ask how Jabès’ philosophy as described in this book can augment the very concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity. In this respect, I find four elements crucial.

One element concerns the status of historical narrative in Jewish philosophy of modernity. We can ask whether, if historical material serves this philosophy as “the positive content” in which the movement of modern difference unfolds, it *really* refers to the past events in the first place. In other words, is the past accessible to it at all? These questions are particularly pertinent in case of the Shoah, an event that post-war Jewish philosophy of modernity had to re-think thoroughly. As already mentioned, Jabès has been accused of making a pretence of describing the Shoah while in fact subordinating it to *the idea of a discontinuous and traumatic event which anyway results from his thinking*. Put differently, he does not address the Shoah as a real historical fact – with all its ineffaceable

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6 BM, pp. 36–48 (“Letter to Jacques Derrida on the Question of the Book “). See also Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 78.

particularity – but frames it as just one of the many ways in which the universal mechanism of modern difference expresses itself.<sup>7</sup> This accusation could, in fact, be levelled against all kinds of Jewish philosophy of modernity that have referred to the Shoah.

How can the charge be rebutted? First, it is part of a broader, aporetic situation. On the one hand, when depicting the Shoah accurately as a chain of particular events, we acquire historical knowledge, but we risk reducing it to just an objective fact that evacuates radical discontinuity completely. On the other hand, the narrative employed, for example, by Jabès, a sketchy and fractured one as it is, implies admittedly that the very possibility of a historical narrative about the Shoah has become problematic because of the nature of its object yet, at the same time, surrenders detailed knowledge of the past. Particular events – and human actions, which have an ethical aspect to them, after all – are then consigned to the background by an impersonal and non-subjective trauma of discontinuity. Patently, this aporia is an offshoot of the modern disintegration into the content of “historical material” (which is radically separated from the present) and the structure of thinking (which enables us to render the discontinuity of the historical event here and now, yet at the price of reducing it to one, repeated difference stripped of any historical particularity). This aporia seems irremovable, as does the impact of the modern turn.

If it is indeed the case, *Jewish philosophy of modernity is severed from historical events by the very movement of interpretation*. Asking whether they are “really” accessible to it is pointless. Similarly, it is impossible to determine how Judaism re-counted in this philosophy is related to “true” Judaism. The only viable conclusion is that Jewish philosophy of modernity has been shaped in a specific space produced by the modern turn. Consequently, it is organised around the structure of the remnant, a minimal, irreducible difference. Jewish philosophy of modernity brings this remnant into any “positive material” that it processes, particularly into the legacy of Judaism. Tradition, which Jewish philosophy of modernity considers external, is thus in fact informed by its own structures.

As far as the memory of the Shoah is concerned, we should bear in mind that Jabès never put forward his narrative of the Shoah as the only legitimate one, repeatedly insisting that since he had not gone through Auschwitz, his testimony was less potent than testimonies of such survivors as, for example, Primo Levi. The point is that to authorise any of these ways as appropriate and dismiss other ones as groundless makes no sense. The corpus of 20th-century texts about the

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7 Cf. Cahen, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 53.

Shoah must accommodate both Levi's analysis of crystalline precision and Jabès' chaotic, riven writing focused on radical discontinuity. It is a sheer impossibility to grasp the horror of the Shoah with any tolerable exactness without realising that the inhuman power of inexplicable evil merges in it with the utterly mundane pragmatism of mass killing. The fissure between a dispassionate, analytical account of events and the repetition of the trauma which obliterates historical particularity is perhaps an unavoidable aporia of thinking about the Shoah – an aporia that revolves around the central point where the universal trauma takes on a most concrete and most monstrously real shape.

Another aspect of Jabès' thought which sheds light on the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity is the radical simplification movement. Jabès' writings are an example of gradual purification in which the content of thinking is reduced to the point where only the bare structure of thought remains. As shown in Chapter Nine, this movement is characteristic of modern thinking. Yet Jabès not only succumbs to it but also makes it into the object of his writings. He pursues radical simplification himself in order to explore the mechanism that determines his thinking. This is achieved at the price of stripping his texts of content. As we remember, the end of *The Book of Questions* is marked by meditations on the point as such. As a result of this reduction, Jabès' writings are emptied out of content differences and focus on base difference which approximates the Derridean *différance* but is embedded in materiality. In this simplification, Jabès' texts begin to describe the same structures that were dwelled on by other thinkers, not only by Derrida, who was, after all, an assiduous reader of, Jabès, so their affinities are hardly surprising. Jacques Lacan, particularly in his later work, explored the same logic of not-Whole and the remnant resisting reduction. Though it would be very far-fetched to ascribe any directly Lacanian inspirations to Jabès, a bulk of his insights is immensely redolent of Lacan's findings.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Affinities between Jabès and Lacan deserve a separate study. Here I will limit myself only to a handful of examples. First, Jabès and Lacan often insist that whatever is available to cognition or consciousness depends on an ungraspable grounding, on a primary condition which leaves a trace in the symbolic order (*tzimtzum* in Jabès and symbolic castration in Lacan). "For origin [...] knowledge has the no of ignorance it grew out of, a denial, likewise, of all origin" (BS, p. 72), states Jabès. Second, in both, this structure makes it possible and impossible at the same time to apprehend the Whole, for (1) only the trace indicates the Whole, but (2) the Whole cannot be apprehended otherwise than in a displacement which produces the trace. Jabès observes: "Then knowledge would be but a hole within a hole" (E, p. 95). Third, Jabès' vision of the Jew/writer as a silent remnant corresponds to Lacan's notion of the subject as a remnant produced by

What is more, as I have shown throughout this book, many of Jabès' thoughts resemble ideas of other modern philosophers, such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. In all these cases, Jabès is closest to them when he seeks to dismantle his thought down to the pure structure between singularity and multiplicity – the whole and the remnant. This suggests that in his pursuit of ultimate reduction Jabès blurs differences that set him apart from philosophers remote from him, even those he firmly opposes (e.g. Heidegger).

This observation sheds light on the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity. Namely, this philosophy is subject to the negative force of simplification, which eclipses the distinction between Jewish philosophy of modernity and other frameworks within modern thinking. If this conclusion holds, Jewish philosophy of modernity would be based on an inner aporia. Its internal movement would lead it to ultimate depletion, where the very *differentia specifica* of this philosophy evaporated. Of course, Jabès' thought is an extreme example of this process, matched in the depth of reduction perhaps only by the Derridean *différance* even though, instead of being an aim in and by itself, *différance* is just a by-product of deconstruction's work. Therefore, we cannot aver that each and every form of Jewish philosophy of modernity seeks utter simplification where it ceases to differ from other modern forms of thinking. However, such a pitfall seems to be structurally inscribed in its discourse. This helps explain why it is so vital to this philosophy to continue to differ from other frameworks which are so similar to it in many respects. Especially telling is the attitude to Heidegger, who serves as a permanent – and often negative – point of reference for Lévinas and Derrida.

Consequently, we can say that Jewish philosophy of modernity is stretched between the modern structure of simplification and the necessity to preserve distinction from other frameworks of thought it could encounter in the ultimate reduction. This explains the eagerness to keep drawing a dividing line between

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inscription in the symbolic order. This similarity is so strong that Jabès pronounces in a highly Lacanian fashion: "The *I* is not the *Me* [...] What comes newly into the world is perhaps the *I*. What first feels the impact of this event, the *Me*" (E, p. 34). Fourth, Jabès and Lacan share the same materialism brought forth when the Kantian "thing in itself" is linked to materiality. Matter in Jabès (for example stones, sand, eand so forth) and the real in Lacan are based on the same structure. The fact that both thinkers understand the *réel* not as something that "simply" is but as an inaccessible field where the symbolic order and possibility of description break down is not only the legacy of Kant, but also of the Surrealists, who used the notion in this exact way. It should be remembered also that Jabès and Lacan were associated with the Surrealists in their youth.

the “Greek” and the “Jewish,” the “pagan” and the “monotheistic.” This line does not run along the real lines of influence of Athens and Jerusalem. Instead, it is demarcated within the historical material by an a-priori difference which *elevates trifling details into key distinctions between poles of transhistorical oppositions*. Characteristically of modern thinking, its envisioned distribution of relevance among particular diverges from that offered by the historical context. An utterly trivial trait can be exaggerated into the cornerstone of that which is “Greek” or “Jewish.” This attests that a completely different force which seeks self-distinction operates within the positive material turned dead after the modern shift.

This leads us to the third aspect of Jabès’ work that augments the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity. In Chapter Eleven, I sought to show that thinking which undergoes the movement of simplification must halt before the ultimate difference and project it into the “positive content” from which it started. I propose to call the thus-used material *the dimension of inscription*. As shown in this book, this dimension of inscription is an indispensable correlate of modern difference. If Jabès’ thought is viewed as an extreme enhancement of this mechanism, it can be said that *in Jewish philosophy of modernity the movement of negativity takes Judaism for its dimension of inscription*.

Jabèsian Judaism is strictly modern even though it is shrouded in the *content* of Jewish tradition. Entire philosophy of identity may actually be based on this principle. Judaism serves in it to ultimately stabilise the workings of difference. I believe that it is not a coincidence that this philosophy also displays materialist leanings and relies on historical research. Both matter “at-hand” and the “objectively existing historical material” function here as a “non-philosophy,” to apply Derrida’s expression again. They produce a semblance of knowledge free from the movement of difference because they are “external” to philosophy. Paradoxically enough, *the severance of Jewish philosophy of modernity from Judaism of old braces it against its own movement of negativity*. Jewish philosophy of modernity can at will refer to the “obvious,” past Jewish thinking and mask, at the same time, its own interpretation imposed on this thinking. In this strategy, philosophical reflection is suspended and the historical material is called upon directly, without inquiring whether its selection and theorisation are not always-already determined by the structures of this philosophy. Referencing historians rather than philosophers cuts off the movement of difference and guarantees inscription. In this sense, the ready historical account has a material status.

It is, as a matter of fact, no coincidence that Jewish philosophy of modernity (particularly in the first half of the 20th century) has been prominently affected by Gershom Scholem, who considered himself a historian rather than a philosopher. He studied and discussed the source material which is still a starting point

in research on Jewish mysticism. Yet Scholem's study is enormously charged with his own preferences, premises and philosophical theses, which has been amply shown over recent decades by, for example, Idel.<sup>9</sup> And yet, many Jewish philosophers of modernity – from Benjamin to Derrida, to Jabès himself – have drawn on Scholem, heedless of the risk that what they find in Jewish tradition is no longer Jewish tradition “as such,” but rather modern structures. However, the gesture of referring to an external source, that is, an objective historian, guaranteed inscription. The status of Scholem's work in Jewish philosophy of modernity shows how much it is entangled, at its origin, in the modern movement of organising the past content through the modern structure.

There are reasons to believe that Judaism's triumphant march into Western philosophy in the 20th century had less to do with discovering the formerly marginalised tradition and more with using its “positive content” in the play of modern difference. Jewish tradition which appears in these philosophical interpretations is thoroughly re-worked and ordered around the structure of modern philosophy. Pursuing complete simplification, Jabès' thought seems to expose these patterns. For, in heading towards the ultimate difference, it got reduced so much that the border dividing it from other ostensibly remote forms of modern thinking became purely formal. The movement of simplification in Jabès shows, in this way, that the founding difference of Jewish philosophy of modernity can indeed be a projection of the base difference of modernity onto the historical material. If so, Judaism would only be an object of modern philosophical play, providing the dimension of inscription and helping one framework of modern philosophy set itself off from other ones. Yet the content of Judaism would be re-interpreted to the point where the former religious thinking became merely a form for the radically atheistic and apophatic structure of the remnant.<sup>10</sup> The

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9 Cf. Idel, *Old Worlds*, pp. 245–7.

10 This pattern explains the problem raised by Elliot R. Wolfson. In his study *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*, Wolfson uses ideas of 19th- and 20th-century philosophers to interpret the Kabbalah, observing how surprisingly similar they are to Kabbalistic thinking. Wolfson explained it by citing a long chain of the Kabbalah's influence on Western philosophy, stretching from Jacob Böhme to Schelling and Hegel, to Heidegger. Cf. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), p. xv. Of course, such influences should not be overlooked, but they do not really explain the issue away as we can further inquire why these and not any other inspirations proved so resonant. The concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity explains this affinity in more thorough terms than a simple “influence.”

“truly Jewish” concepts would turn into functions of modern thinking in this way. Monotheism would serve as a name for the relationship between continuous reality and its ungraspable limit; messianism would be a function of modern perspectivism; and *tzimtzum* would designate the primary reduction in which the symbolic order arose. Jewish philosophy of modernity would thus differ from other, similar strategies of interpreting past traditions – for example, from Hegel’s, Lacan’s and Žižek’s “Christianity” – *only in selecting the content on which it projected base difference in order to split off from the ultimate simplification.*

To conclude about Jewish philosophy of modernity on the basis of Jabès’ work is a risky venture. His thinking pursues radical simplification, and, consequently, my conclusion must bear its mark. It is unclear whether this reduction indeed reveals the structure inherent to Jewish philosophy of modernity or whether it implants this structure there and only feigns discovery. One thing is obvious: discussing Jewish philosophy of modernity, one is entangled in a double bind one has ascribed to this philosophy.

To finish with, it is important to remember that the way the thus-constructed concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity is applicable to individual thinkers must be studied separately. It would be difficult to formulate any general conclusions here because authors who re-interpret Judaism to use it in philosophy (more broadly, in the humanities) are far too diverse. On the one pole, there are “typical” representatives of Jewish philosophy of modernity, shaped primarily by Western thought and acquainted with Judaism via mediation, such as Benjamin, Bloch, Kafka, Derrida. On the other pole of the continuum, there are thinkers who moved in the opposite direction, using religious engagement in Judaism to bring its ideas into Western philosophy, such as Joseph Soloveitchik, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The difference of the latter’s vision of Judaism from the former’s – in particular the latter’s scepticism about radical messianism – vividly shows how much more “modern” than “Jewish” Jewish philosophy of modernity is. Their concepts seem to be, in themselves, *a trace* of Judaism from before it was irrevocably lured into the desert of modernity – of Judaism which has not gone through utter depletion as it has in Jabès.

The last aspect that Jabès’ writings add to Jewish philosophy of modernity is the ethical dimension of the simplification movement. If modern thinking is indeed threatened to be voided by its pursuit of pure difference, the imperative left over from post-Jerusalem philosophical Jerusalem should be to curb this pursuit with ethical reins. The case of Heidegger shows how easy it is to sacrifice ethics for the movement of purification. Thus, shouldn’t the Jewish tradition, which poses itself as a dimension of inscription, offer – as its ultimate legacy – an ethical assessment of the consequences of simplification? Only a thin line divides

messianic equality and justice from *Gelassenheit*, and Jewish philosophy can and should preserve this line as an expression of its distinction. Persisting where the structural difference has completed its work, this difference helps turn simplification towards ethics: against extreme violence and *for justice*.

It is pointless to seek bounds to the boundless, but it is on us that the position of the boundless depends.