

## EPILOGUE: JABÈS AND POSTMODERNISM

Eric Gould

*University of Denver*

Consider Jabès the writer as the exemplary reader of his own texts. For him there is no apparent split between reading and writing; the one is the commentary on the other; the activities are concurrent. There is little story-telling, for a story is something that has already been read, that wants to stand apart from reality as a special resemblance. Jabès's fiction instead reads itself striving for resemblance; it is writing in process, metafiction, the text that reads its own writing. Jabès would seem to have us believe that we can never separate reading from writing, for his reading eventually wants to write its own progress and his writing cannot avoid reading what that might be.

Is this too much of a strain for fiction to bear? In reading fiction intent on obeying traditional narrative forms—consistent point-of-view, character development, cumulative plot, and a minimal self-consciousness of the writer's task—we are asked to fill in gaps which widen only when we realize the subtlety of a situation or character. We enter and take part in the fictional world as we would play games; we recognize the rules and, in conforming, we lose ourselves in play. That is, we recognize the conventions of narrativity and in the playful act of reading we take them for granted, fusing the text, in intimately evasive ways, with life as we know it or want it to be. Even as we play, we look to break free from restriction, to drop defenses, to cease ratiocinating, to be taken out of ourselves, but all within the rules of the game. This is a novel, or a poem, or a short story, we say.

That is not the experience of reading Edmond Jabès, who writes neither novels, poems, nor short stories (since *The Book of Questions*), and who has never been accused of allowing us to be simply playful. Certainly the term "play" has been applied, in its post-Barthesian sense, to the slipping and sliding of his language, and

therein lies a certain *jouissance*. But Jabès is an intense writer who writes as if every word watches itself at work, and every line reads its antecedent, developing a dialogue with it, a growing relationship of *potential* readings.

Jabès does not create linear plots but, rather, dialectical situations; his narrator and his characters are creatures of shifting consciousness who, even when they speak to us in simulated flesh and blood, or turn the most lyrical of phrases, speak aphoristically, for an aphorism is at best a naming of a moment which cannot end or be fully circumscribed.

The result is that we are always watching Jabès reading himself and we are never really outside the text. He will not let us say that we have comprehended sufficiently. Nor can we play games with the text and let ourselves pretend what it is or forget that it is there. The reveries indulged by story-telling—the loss of self, the transformation of reality, the delight in resemblance—are not easily gained. It's as though the writer keeps expanding on or explaining the rules of the game of writing and reading while the game is in progress.

All this may appear tiresome, yet somehow it is not. Many of the aphorisms can be gnomic and evasive at first, yet they are never unimportant once we realize how subtly they read each other and how they challenge us to read them all together. Above all, the aphorism carries voice, and the voices that speak to us in Jabès work are direct and guileless, demanding of respect. We know where their authority does not lie: it does not lie outside the text, unless we assume, reductively, that Jabès is merely another glosser of the Kabbalah. It lies inside the text in the dialectical process by which the aphorisms read each other. Even-tempered, wise, witty at times, quietly understated about even the most momentous of issues, the voices listen even as they speak.

We find, therefore, not simply a reader, but many readers, *reading aloud* with dramatic intensity. To write at all is unavoidably to adopt a dramatic voice *as character*, to develop a narrative presence that *wants to be read*, that—as Richard Stamelman has said in this collection (and as Jabès elaborates in his interview) wants to set up a dialogue with the reader.

But the writer is never one character or voice, any more than he or she can be one reader. We so often mystify the writing we read by waiting for *the* voice to capture what is said, or what we want to say. We read over and over again to find the single voice. And that is easy enough to do in much conventional fiction where the quotidian is law and each of us as a reader is the quotidian of the low mimetic.

But Jabès's writing gives us voices resisting flesh and blood. They ask questions about the nature of writing, God, exile, and all the other familiar Jabèsian topics; they answer those questions with more questions; they take part in gentle and elusive dialogues which come and go as the pages pass. They belong to no character. We are kept at a distance from the *other*, and deliberately so, for threads of a continuous narrative do not form.

The pleasure of Jabès's texts, therefore, is not voyeuristic. We are not allowed to absorb a scene passively and then anticipate what might happen. We do not read Jabès with any sense of being able to predict the progress of the text, even though the writing scarcely ever strays from its main themes: again, that extended meditation on writing, exile, resemblance, dialogue, God, creativity, and the gap between sign and signified which passes all understanding. So we read on and on and can never leave the page, the same page.

Yet what other author has rewritten the same page so many times with such astonishing variety and provocativeness? It is indeed a page written to bring thinking not to a center, a *logos* or a word made flesh, but to a questioning of its own status, its own possibility, its own lack of logic, for there is no logic, says Jabès, when we confront the unknown. Our reading of the text must match Jabès's understanding of reading: that it is a passage from the logical to the illogical. Our knowledge is suffused with suppressed contradictions implicit in our ideas of being, God, presence, place, the moment, consciousness, the need itself to know "in truth." Jabès will bring those contradictions to the surface to dwell in paradox.

The writer can write the book that writes the writer, can reveal the paradoxes of his craft, not to reverse the hierarchy of God and humans, not to say, "I am God the Writer telling you the definitive tale," but to find God in spite of the writer, the self in the other, the moment in history, the home in exile, perhaps no home at all, home everywhere, God everywhere, even in the taste of corpses. All this can be very therapeutic even as it is very intense, for once we accept the option of the illogical, we have accepted not nihilism but the possibility of the other.

"In the beginning was the word that wanted to resemble," says Jabès. So human creativity is so often endless in its pursuit of similarity but not difference. And in this spirit we reinvent God as ourselves. We reinvent the possibility of God as the writer of *The Book of Life*, as an infinite, thinkable yet unthinkable. For Jabès, God is a metaphor for the unthinkable and the illogical, always the

Trace of reality, which itself is never a resemblance of anything, just an approximation.

So Jabès's writing does not have a hermeneutic interest in discovering meaning or truth. It isn't reading with an end. It celebrates the life of a mind that keeps writing to stay alive because of the energy sustained from discovering so many options in every word, so many signs of life. In reading his own words, Jabès watches meaning dissolve and reconstitute itself, and the very process keeps him going. Meaning becomes its own victim. It's all a marvellous revaluation of writing that is not based on some dusty metaphysics of the value of the word, or on a grab-bag of humanistic and sometimes hollow meanings, or on a self-satisfied assertion of the Great Tradition; for we know now only too well that people have loved Culture and Death at once, and so violently.

But the writing is not in the end merely self-effacing. There is no *insidious* paradox which the reader must erase in the deconstructive turn of Jabès's thought, for his deconstruction is political, moral, the expression of a sharp social consciousness. Jabès surely does deconstruct question after question, but to no nihilist end, indeed to no end in sight. Of course, we say, there must be something *beyond deconstruction* or else we shall simply keep talking endlessly, delighting in paradoxes, forgetting the few values that do bind us together in culture, and presumably losing a sense of identity in the untying of knots which mysteriously retie themselves the moment our back is turned.

But the critics and the practitioners of deconstruction—who are now legion and who claim nihilism as its end—are very wrong if they assume that that is what Jabès espouses. For Jabès, to deconstruct is to think and read at all, to be alive, to write, to be able to talk intelligently about questions that cannot be answered, events that are too horrible for words. He must reveal the *repressed* meaning of the unthinkable: God, the Holocaust, the exile of the Jew. Reading is the pursuit of the unrepressed.

It's precisely because none of his unanswerable questions is ever answered, yet never stays unthinkable, that Jabès's consciousness is, I believe, of strong political interest to us within the context of post-modern writing as persistently mythopoetic, as a search for what has not or maybe cannot be said. His questions do progress; they do turn into aphorisms which challenge other aphorisms, tease further meaning into being. No great pessimistic void awaits his reader, nor do we find in his work a defensive redefinition of what it is to be Jewish

in our times. To write as a Jew, for Jabès, is to stay alive, and so to make the *only* sense possible of extraordinary acts of mass murder in our time, to *not* forget and exclude them from consciousness.

Such warpedly idealistic and efficient acts of terror as the mass murder of the Jews, which we often treat with a morbid curiosity in psychological treatises, will not necessarily be purified by reason or moral outrage, nor eradicated by more culture, more reading of our great books. Our great books were read and our great music played while people walked to the gas chambers. Nor will they be avoided in future by anything less than the sharpest awareness of how subtly paradoxical the Holocaust was, how disturbingly capable almost any of us might be of such an act, and how dangerous our intimacy with the concept has become when we do not deconstruct it, when we claim it is unthinkable, when we deny it, or even when we say, as we so often do: Never Again.

Jabès writes out a consciousness which found its way to us from surrealist beginnings, through humanistic yearnings, as Edward Kaplan has so rightly pointed out, to a social consciousness every bit as acute as Elie Wiesel's or George Steiner's.<sup>1</sup> But Jabès is not simply a Jewish writer the way these are Jewish writers. He is right now, I would suggest, rather more important—not more accessible, perhaps, but certainly more important. He embodies the postmodernist sensibility, which constantly examines the terms of its own thinking. The moralists must remain with us, and their role in the last forty years has been irreplaceable. But in the forty years since the murder of the Jews we have continued to murder in national interests with wanton abandon, and we even persistently and knowingly create conditions for the biggest mass murder possible, the removal of human life from earth by nuclear holocaust.

But Jabès takes no ordinary position of moral righteousness for, in the end, as we have seen in modern Israel and postmodern U.S.A., that can become extraordinarily uneasy when power shifts its way. Nor does he insist simply on survival tactics or on the rhetoric of righteous indignation—both important in their own right, but perhaps not as important as knowing how intimately paradoxical every self is in its instinct death and life.

In a recent review of *The Sin of the Book*, Walter Strauss notes that Jabès's writings "are *essential* to Jewish self-definition in the second half of the twentieth century."<sup>2</sup> "Let me outline," he goes on to say, "three focal problems in the Jewish confrontation with history that must take place in our time: (1) the recognition that the

Jew embodies a fractured history and a fragmented identity; (2) that the Jewish nostalgia for its particular past went up in smoke at Auschwitz and was challenged by a potential new future at the time of the establishment of the State of Israel; (3) that the Jew presently living in the Diaspora must reformulate his identity within the geographical, political—and religious!—options available to him. . . . The questions for the contemporary Jew are multiple—but the problem is that of wandering versus anchorage (the Ark of the Covenant versus the temple); a religious Judaism versus a cultural Judaism; the present ‘Yahweh’; the Jew of-and-in the Book and the Jew who points beyond the Book to History.”

Indeed these are questions that Jabès provokes but, with the contemporary imagination of what it is to be Jewish still so closely attached to Auschwitz and to the survival of the State of Israel, these terms do sometimes deconstruct prematurely to limited, obdurate alternatives. But they do not for Jabès for whom, almost miraculously, the political answer does not lie in the trials of ethnicity or opposition. It does not lie simply in saying Never Again to Auschwitz, over and over again, as Elie Wiesel does. It does not even lie in being religiously Jewish. It comes closer to Ronald Aronson’s moving expression of how a Jew as archetypal postmodern can read the world after the mass murder, and thence of course, of how all of us can do so:

For me, this is the paradoxical meaning of “Never again”: I sense in it a denial that it is already too late. It happened. This is one of the main lessons we can learn about the Holocaust. Another is that we will all be marked by it, forever. In this respect, the Holocaust may only be a culmination of projects of enslavement, dispossession, and murder that have developed during the period of Western hegemony. If one also contemplates the dispossession of American Indians, slavery in the U.S., Western colonialism in Africa, World War II, the Soviet forced collectivization and purges leading to a massive system of work and death camps, World War II, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, the U.S. intervention in Vietnam—then it is clear that optimism is an illusion. It is clear that Jew or gentile, none of us can wake up innocently any more to a pristine world, react childlike to the singing of birds, blue skies, or the promise of happiness. Whatever its source, these centuries, especially the twentieth, have demonstrated a deep-seated human capacity for radical evil whatever the social system, whatever the technological level.

This is the meaning of Adorno's remark that poetry is impossible after Auschwitz. . . . We are, I suspect, permanently *damaged* by the Holocaust. I am not sure we can indicate all the ways it marks us now, or will continue to mark us. But being nearly destroyed as a people, losing so much and so many to extermination, will continue to shape who Jews become, who our children become as the *remnant*.

Another, connected lesson to take away from the Holocaust, is that it can be done to anyone. Over one hundred million have died in this century from human-made causes, mostly in war and in the spiral of famine and disease spreading out from war. . . . I have said that Jews can never be the same after the Holocaust; the point is that the entire world is changed by it to the extent that, once mass murder can take place, we all become its potential victims.<sup>3</sup>

An understanding of the denial of our common humanity in mass murder has been totally absorbed into postmodern consciousness by Jabès. Such understanding does not have to be mentioned constantly by names or lists, for naming the event over and over again will not help exorcise it. The list of names on the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington, D.C. has yet to deconstruct into pure horror of that war or any other, for we are still caught in the guilt of forgetting our dead.

Instead, Jabès reveals the political unconscious at work, because he simply never stops *reading* the crisis of consciousness which has followed the Holocaust, never loses sight of the denial of life we are so capable of. Because he can deconstruct death as life—the life of the book, the life of the lyrical dialogues of his wise men and women and the life of God as somehow implicated in both—he offers us therapeutic reading. He insists on a dialogue with death and life over and over again, and in doing so he manages to avoid not only moralism but also the academic etherealizing of a Derrida and the nihilism of a De Man.

In reading on and on, we increasingly see his writing as an affirmation of life, as both connection and disconnection, not as cloying introversion. And all of the weight of that affirmation falls on the book. That single page of the highly paradoxical postmodern consciousness, written again and again, is rich in implication because it will not stand still and simply resemble. In reading Jabès we find a way of opening a dialogue with the part of ourselves that likes to avoid

large questions about God, truth, exile, and so on, the part that fears our political unconscious, and the part that can easily be found guilty of curiosity and even complicity with the murderer's crime. That is how deconstruction becomes political. It opens up a social consciousness which, in contemplating whether the arts can exist wisely after the Holocaust, undercuts the simplicities of our received logocentric ideology. "God," says Jabès, "is the illogical expectation of all expectation." And that includes the murderer's expectation too.

Furthermore, Jabès is not offering mere "tremulations" on the ether of self-consciousness. Auschwitz, as he has said, has resulted in both "consuming solitude" and consuming distrust. There is no way out of either by building fences around individual or national consciousness. At the heart of rebirth lies the only true kind of social dialogue, that in which question interrogates question. Jabès tellingly describes the Jew as the archetypal stranger who *will* be the other, who *will* be accepted, not through harangue and the inculcation of social guilt, which will only encourage eventual resentment (note, for example, the backlash from unexpected quarters to Elie Wiesel's Nobel Prize), but through the gentlest and most direct of questioning, on and on, until we see the truth of our common humanity based on the need for doubt.

"Life negates itself in literature," says Derrida, "only so that it may survive better." And that deconstructive willfulness is postmodern indeed, a willfulness born of Nietzsche, but rediscovered in the desperation of our times. The postmodern *is* the post-Holocaust, the death of the book as definitive narrative; the time of the meta-narrative, of words watching words at work. And it *is* tiring to read. It *is* an extraordinary profession of strain. It should be taken slowly, meditatively, page by page, for the occasions of reading are different now, though still in themselves very old. As Jabès's writing makes very clear, the occasions for his texts are ancient and interdisciplinary, to say the least: poetry, Midrash, meditation, philosophical narrative, fiction, theology are all part of this connection between reading and writing that I have been describing.

The network of questions, the assertions and failures of resemblances: in the end they present an elusive and often mysterious sense of fact. In part that is due to the quietly authoritative voices allowing only aphorisms, but in part too, it is due to Jabès's shying away from irony. For the postmodernist writer, irony is not enough. Irony implies that something other than what is said *is* true. Metaphor is not enough either, for metaphor implies equivalence and the

discovery of origins. Jabès will chance a metaphor now and then, but only to deconstruct it. He says that God and Jew are metaphors, and readers are right to argue for Jabès's religio-metaphoric intentions. Jabès himself, in "My Itinerary," argues that by inventing God, Jews invented themselves. But he also has written many volumes on the impossibility of closing the gap between the two, on the value of silence and the absence of God. Metonymy, in which events retain their own identity and assert relationship and proximity, not equivalence, is the figure of our time, and Jabès's text is nothing if not a string of metonymies: *God and Jew*, *Jew and writer*. He *can* trust the book which never stops reading the dialogue of the *other*.

### NOTES

1. Edward Kaplan, "The Problematic Humanism of Edmond Jabès" in *The Sin of the Book*, ed. Eric Gould (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), pp. 115–29. The thesis is developed further in Kaplan's essay in this collection.
2. Review by Walter A. Strauss in *Western Humanities Review*, 40, No. 3 (Autumn 1986), 283–87.
3. Ronald Aronson, "Never Again? Zionism and the Holocaust," *Social Text*, No. 3 (1982), pp. 65–66.