

## EDMOND JABÈS: FROM ONE PASSAGE TO ANOTHER

Stéphane Mosès

*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

From *Le Livre des Questions* to *Le Livre du Dialogue* and to *Le Parcours*, the works of Edmond Jabès have always been haunted by a twofold preoccupation: with writing and with Judaism. In *Je bâtis ma demeure*, where already “the poetic vow takes on the proportions of a vital function and a spiritual commitment,”<sup>1</sup> there is still an underlying questioning about Judaism since, as Gabriel Bounoure has so well perceived, “the angels of the Cabala inhabit this dwelling place of poesis which Edmond Jabès wanted to build on the edge of his deserts.”<sup>2</sup> It was after 1945, after the catastrophe, to use the words of Paul Celan, in which an entire world “was obliterated in the abyss of history,”<sup>3</sup> that the words of his youth were blocked off once and for all “by the mysterious deletion that wipes out the world’s entire economy.”<sup>4</sup> Forty years later, looking back on the journey undertaken—not accomplished but undertaken, since, for Jabès, everything is still there to be taken up again, every word is always the first—the poet places the collection of his works under the sign of that original wound:

My dwelling place is destroyed. My book is in  
ashes.

Amidst the ashes, I trace lines.

In these lines, I set down words of exile.<sup>5</sup>

If in *Je bâtis ma demeure* the poet, exiled from the world of appearances, was seeking a homeland in the unreality of language, then language, struck to the depths of its powers, by the totally *unspeakable* character of what had just occurred, will lose, from *Le Livre des Questions* onwards, the evidence it carried. How could the poetic word henceforth shelter the one who inhabits it? How could it

make sense except by relentlessly questioning itself about its own ability—or inability—to produce sense out of non-sense? Doubly exiled, beyond the world and beyond itself, Jabès's poetic language reveals little by little the essential link that joins it to Jewish destiny. A link which is in no way metaphorical: it is from the horizon of the same grief, the same original loss that, from now on, both will go to seek out their path. If, for Jabès, "the words of the tribe" have lost their meaning, it is not only because they have become old, because they have been worn out or corrupted, but because, in a more radical way, to again quote Paul Celan, "there are no words for what happened."<sup>6</sup> No words, indeed, but perhaps (Jabès tells us, echo-like) ashes, "the accumulated remains of a burnt book," ruins, debris, dust in which, however, the poet "traces lines."<sup>7</sup> For the collapse of meaning, which at present renders absurd the classic pretension of the poetic word to interpret the world, does not, however, silence the word. The language of poetry, the very legitimacy of which seems hereafter to be in question, turns back on itself to wonder about the possibility or impossibility of continued speech. Or, to be exact, if the word as an indissociable unity of sound and sense seems to fail us today when it comes to speaking of essentials, then we can at least trace lines in the ash, lines that are less than signs since they refer to nothing except themselves. But at the same time (like the lines on a school notebook or the staves of a musical score), they are the very condition of all possible meaning. Perhaps these lines drawn in the ash already organize themselves in the more complex forms of traced letters, which by themselves signify nothing, but which, placed end to end, form a text. In this way, beyond the impossibility of speech, words would reappear, first as forms, as graphic configurations, as hieroglyphs that would designate only themselves, then once again as words, forever stripped of all claim to embodying a meaning given in advance. These are words that no longer re-present. They are "words of exile," haunted by an absence more original than any origin, by the loss of that which we perhaps never possessed but which, irreparably, we mourn.

In Jabès, the words—those words written "on the undulating surface of a breath"<sup>8</sup>—organize themselves less in a chain of statements than in constellations (to use Walter Benjamin's term), poetic unities simultaneously coherent and crossed by tensions, always verging on a loss of balance. These constellations in turn acknowledge and oppose themselves at the same time, forming as they appear a poetic space in perpetual expansion, a verbal texture

made of fullness and emptiness, affirmations immediately contradicted, unanswerable questions, answers to underlying questions and uttered conjectures soon repudiated. It is the slow unfurling of a tapestry which is always being worked upon, where, through the alternations of affirmation and retraction, through the clever variations of a few obsessive motifs, the thread of an identical questioning continuously unwinds.

The whole of this poetic process seems to refer continuously to the experience of language as it has become crystallized, with the passing centuries, in the texts of the Jewish tradition and in the practice of their interpretation. This has been emphasized by Gabriel Bounoure in his preface to *Je bâtis ma demeure* and in his study of *Le Livre des Questions*.<sup>9</sup> Bounoure states in his work that "in Egypt, where all is preserved in the state of meaningful absence, . . . a poet like Jabès, acquainted with the power of metonymy and metaphor, immediately understands that grammar supports a mystical interpretation."<sup>10</sup> If this is true, one perhaps could ponder the mysterious affinity that unites the poetry of Jabès with the speculations of the Egyptian cabalist Israël Sarung, who at the end of the sixteenth century had based his cosmology on a theory of traces inscribed in "the worlds above" by the letters of divine writing.<sup>11</sup> But the essential idea of this affinity between the poet Jabès and the universe of Jewish tradition lies without doubt in this continuous repetition of the same questioning, in this ever new recurrence of the same inexhaustible question that is, perhaps, in Jewish mysticism, "the most exact metaphor of the Infinite."<sup>12</sup> Thus *Le Livre des Questions*, shows "these imaginary rabbis who come from the most remote ages and regions of rock and sand," and who answer "questions with other, more pointed questions (question-probes), delve into the unknown."<sup>13</sup> From *Le Livre des Questions* to *Le Livre du Dialogue* the Jewish venture and the poetic venture do not cease to refer to each other, certainly in forms forever different, but in close proximity, and through a reciprocal relation that once and for all denies granting to one of these two ventures the privilege of making a simple allegory of the other. Summarizing the direction of his poetic journey, Jabès writes in *Le Parcours*:

"At first I believed that I was a writer. Then I understood that I was a Jew. Then I could no longer make a distinction

between the writer and the Jew in myself because both are only the torment of an ancient spoken word."<sup>14</sup>

However, if until *Le Livre du Dialogue* Judaism and writing appeared as two complementary sides of the same poetic reality, the precise nature of the relationship that unites them becomes the object of an explicit questioning only in Jabès's most recent book, *Le Parcours*. The profound correspondence of the poetic process and Jewish destiny, presumed until then to be an obvious fact and ceaselessly affirmed at the very movement of the work, is now in turn to be questioned, not in order to cast doubt on its reality but instead to seek its origin. The poet asks himself: where does this mysterious accord between the words he finds and the speech of old, forgotten books come from? Or rather, should it be supposed that it is the words that find him, these words that seem as if they have escaped from immemorial texts, and that in some way come to life again under his pen? Such are the questions asked in *Le Parcours*.

To illustrate the novelty of these questions in Jabès's work, I wish to examine two texts, one an excerpt from *Le Livre du Dialogue* (1984), the other from *Le Parcours* (1985), to show how from the one to the other a threshold is crossed, a new step mounted, a different height reached from which the poet can look back to the very foundations of his writing. It is no accident that these two texts both evoke a passage, so that the path of the first toward the second draws equally a course from one passage to the other.

## II

### DIALOGUE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH IN THE WORD

He said, "I am a page of writing for life, just as death, for me, is the page I read.

"This is why writing is simultaneously a measurement and a mismeasurement of death.

"You read what you have been; you make of others the reader of your future.

"In this way, life in the book would be only this passage from illegibility to legibility, attained and, at the same time, lost." And he added, "Life is eligible (*éligible*), death chosen (*élu*).

“The secret dialogue, in its growing, agonizing inaudibility, pursues itself into the most inaccessible depths of our very beings.”

This text, built on a series of oppositions (life/death, I/you, writing/reading, past/future), states in the form of a dialogue (in which, however, only one of the interlocutors does speak) the incessant dialectic that underlies the poetic writing of Jabès and, more generally, all attempts to write today, when language seems struck to the very heart of its power to nominate. There is a tension between sense and non-sense or, as Jabès says, between life and death; there is a search, between these two contrary forces, for a passage through which the poetic speech can insinuate itself, in spite of everything.

We know since *Le Livre des Questions* that this speech no longer has anything to do with the temptation of personal lyricism. When the “I” reappears it is in the form of the quotation (“he said,” “and he added”). These are the words of an anonymous speaker, of whom we know nothing apart from the discourse reported by the poet. It is as if the claim to truth that all utterance implies has been pushed aside straight away, kept at a distance by attributing it to someone else. Similarly, the “you” to whom the anonymous persona addresses himself has no name. This “implicit reader,” this silent partner in a dialogue, the place and time of which we do not know, this “you”: is he not at the same time the imaginary listener of this interior discourse that each of us unwinds throughout his life? Nevertheless, the author of this anonymous speech presents himself as a master who addresses himself to a disciple; in six phrases (of which the first five possess the quality of aphorisms) an instruction is transmitted. But these aphorisms, placed end to end, do not add up to a body of doctrine. These dispersed fragments of a wisdom that no longer knows its name follow each other without connecting, in an apparent discontinuity that does not prevent, however, the progressive emergence of another form of meaning. This meaning is not born of a discursive development, but of an appropriately poetic movement whose necessity is that of language itself. Above all, this necessity is one of sounds that, through all the forms of alliteration and paranomasia, generate themselves to produce significant sequences (i.e. “I read,” “you read,” “illegibility,” “legibility,” “eligible,” “chosen” [“*je lis*,” “*tu lis*,” “*illisibilité*,” “*lisibilité*,” “*éligible*,” “*élu*”]) or, more simply, new semantic unities (“writing,” “mismeasurement” [“*écriture*,”

"*démésure*"]). In the same way, the anagrams so frequent in Jabès give birth to new parallelisms of meanings ("life/future" ["*vie/avenir*"]).<sup>15</sup>

But this poetic logic, which expresses in some way the perpetually renewed creation of meaning from potentialities inscribed in the language, is thwarted (or, rather, disciplined) by the rigorous dialectic or rhetorical figures based on the clash of opposites such as oxymoron ("measurement and mismeasurement of death," "you make of others the reader of your future," "legibility attained and, at the same time, lost"); antithesis ("You read what you have been; you make of others the reader of your future"); or chiasmus ("He said, 'I am a page of writing for life, just as death, for me, is the page I read'"). Between the continuous invention of meaning from the game of verbal forms and the strict economy of rhetorical figures, between the forces of creation and those of stabilization or, in other words, between the principle of life and the principle of death, writing, here too, clears a passage for itself.

This same tension is found again in the contrast between writing and reading. In the first aphorism, writing seems to oppose itself to reading as life opposes itself to death: "He said, 'I am a page of writing for life, just as death, for me, is the page I read.'" It is from the labor of writing that the poet draws the strength to continue living. And this, precisely because when each word springs out from under his pen as if for the first time it extracts a little meaning from the lack of meaning that dwells within it. But these words, once written, are constantly in danger of falling again into a state of lethargy. The finished page that the poet reads is now for him no more than an object, a verbal texture deserted by life. Yet this opposition of reading and writing has no sooner been articulated than it is immediately questioned again. If writing comes to deny death and if it is the "mismeasurement" of death, then it nevertheless carries within itself the germ of its own extinction. The burden of words, the weight of the erosion and banality with which they are charged—this is the "measurement of death" in them—run the risk of pushing them back into the dust at any moment. Conversely, the finished text, which for the poet henceforth only refers to a stage in his development beyond which he has already gone ("You read what you have been"), gives itself to the reader, who explores it like a yet undiscovered continent, like a promise of an infinity of interpretations, so that each new reading opens the text to a different future ("You make of others the reader of your future").

Writing and reading therefore are both turned simultaneously toward life and toward death. Moreover, is not the very movement of

writing always accompanied by a continuous re-reading, just as all reading/deciphering implies in some way a re-writing of the interpreted work? Thus, the literary text, literally “*illegible*” for the one who writes it (and while he writes it), is capable of being perceived only by the one who reads it. But then it is too late since life has already deserted the writing. It is a paradox of poetic language that for the writer it dies as soon as it takes shape, and that for the reader it does not come to life until the moment it dies. It is, however, at the heart of this paradox, in the narrow space separating the principle of life and the principle of death (both of which shape the language), that the poetic word has to invent its path each time anew. Or, more exactly: it is this very path that is the invention of life. The unsteady equilibrium of sense that is forced out of non-sense, the continuous to and fro (both in the case of the poet and of his reader) of a significance which only reveals itself at the moment it slips away, are the very movements by which poetry is created: “the passage from illegibility to legibility attained, and, at the same time, lost.”

To read/to elect (*lire/élire*): if reading is indeed, as Walter Benjamin claims, a “profane illumination” which allows us to find again in the specific organization of words the traces left in the language by an immemorial system of analogies which were familiar to the men of earlier times but which we have forgotten, it should be added, Jabès would say, that for us today, the discovery of a wisdom inscribed in language has become much more uncertain.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, to read is to elect, that is to say, to choose. But among the innumerable potentialities that the text conceals we only actualize those that speak to us. How can we suppose today that language can refer to an obvious truth—even to the poetic truth of cosmic analogies? Should it not rather be said that writing is open to an uncertain multitude of possible readings? Is it not, like life itself, an always new choice among given potentialities? Death, on the contrary, would then be this state-limit where, once chosen, the word would no longer have a future: elected (*élu*) once and for all time just as, at the beginning of Jabès’s text, the page once written is read (*est lue*). The mood of the accomplished (*élué*) is opposed to the mood of the potential (*éligible*) as, yet again, life is opposed to death.

It is in the anguish of this increasingly narrow passage, between life and death, that the poetic word follows its path nevertheless.

What in *Le Livre du Dialogue* was presented as a reflection on writing in general is presented in *Le Parcours* as a meditation upon Jewish writing:

Prose returns writing to itself, poetry multiplies it. The one enfolds it, the other unfolds it. Jewish writing clears a passage between two imprecise and indefinable points. It is the passage, sometimes carried along by the words—which are only the infinite mobility of thought, the adequate expression of this mobility—sometimes, anxious to bear witness, to engage others in the total experience in which it has become involved.

The split is, for Jewish writing, a burst of life, evidence of a renewed bond with the unknown.

From the silence of writing, to the written silence, the Jewish book, in the meticulous copying of God's book, will forever remain incomplete.<sup>17</sup>

This text constitutes a paragraph within an autonomous development which concludes a chapter entitled "The Story." This development is introduced by the following passage:

If God founded the world on the Book (His), the book (Man's) and the Story—which story does it deal with?

God's or Man's? Both?

Contrary to what is usually thought, fiction is not, *a priori*, lies. For the Jew, the truth is in the story; in fact, it is the story.<sup>18</sup>

It should be noted at once that the first of these two texts presents an affinity of rhythm, conception, and structure with the text of *Le Livre du Dialogue*, which we have just analysed. Both are built around a central opposition, that of life and death in *Le Livre du Dialogue*, and that of poetry and prose in *Le Parcours*. However, these two oppositions do not overlap. Poetry is not to be equated with life any more than prose embodies death. Poetry and prose represent two opposite aspects of the same piece of writing, each one equally true to life. Nevertheless, poetry might appear here as the expression of the principle of invention, of outpouring, of creative disorder immanent in the language, while prose would represent the principle of order, structure, lawfulness, and also the function of communication and

dialogue, that the language takes over. "Prose returns writing to itself"; it "enfolds" it; it is "anxious to bear witness, to engage others" in its experience. Poetry on the other hand "multiplies" writing, "unfolds it"; it is "carried along by the words—which are only the infinite mobility of thought." And, just as in *Le Livre du Dialogue*, writing is precisely that which traces a path through the narrow gap that separates life from death, in this text of *Le Parcours*, Jewish writing is defined as that which "clears a passage" between prose and poetry, between the didactic rigor that remains on this side of meaning and poetic invention that draws us always to the other side.

By conjuring up the idea of Jewish writing as a passage between poetry and prose, Jabès alludes in a sense to his own work as a writer, marked by a constant tension between speculative concentration and the free deployment of the potentialities of the language. But does he not, in a much more general way, also aim for a certain manner of speaking characteristic of the texts of the Jewish tradition from the Bible to the works of rabbinic literature? That being the case, we would better understand how this passage on poetry and prose is related to the introductory development where there is a question about the Book of God, the book of Man, and the Story. Certainly, on one level, it could be said that the Book in question is the Bible, a book written by God and read by Man, the text of which is one big story. The tone of that story is sometimes purely narrative, sometimes didactic, so that its significance derives precisely from the permanent intricacy of fable and instruction.

But on another level (that of intertextuality), the first sentence ("If God founded the world on the Book [His], the book [Man's], and the Story—which story does it deal with?") should be understood as a quotation. In fact, in the first paragraph of one of the most ancient works of the mystical Jewish tradition, the *Sefer Yetsira* (*The Book of the Formation*) the following sentence is found: "He created his world from three books: the Book, the book and the story." A much later commentary, written towards the end of the eighteenth century by the famous Rabbi Elie de Vilna, interprets this sentence as the allegorical expression of the cabalist theory of creation, whereby each of the terms of this triad ("the Book, the book and the story") corresponds to a certain stage of the process by which the In-finite, which is utterly unknowable, manifests itself through the finitude of the world. But to explain this process (which is to some extent the signified to which the allegory of the *Sefer Yetsira* refers), Elie de Vilna

analyses first of all the signifier of this allegory, that is to say, the metaphor of the two books and the story. We would say today that this metaphor implies a whole theory of the literary text. According to Elie de Vilna, the text is not something given once and for all. Unlike the word, unlike oral discourse, the text is formed progressively by way of a complex process of interaction between the writer and the reader:

The book is a disclosure of thought, for thought is hidden within Man and only reveals itself through speech or writing. Likewise, the infinite revealed Himself by creating the world, in order to manifest Himself and to make Himself known. . . . Such is the meaning of the sentence in the *Sefer Yetsira*: "He created the world from three books: the Book, the book and the story." The theme of the two books and the story signifies the following: whereas, in the word, thought reveals itself immediately, there are, in the case of the book, two successive stages. The first is that of writing where thought, certainly, already manifests itself in the world, but where the book is still impenetrable. The second stage is when the book is read; it is only then that it truly reveals itself. In the case of the word, on the contrary, the two stages are one.<sup>19</sup>

In the same way, Jabès interprets the metaphor of the two books as an expression of the duality of the Book of God and the Book of Man. In so doing, he takes up again one of his oldest themes, that of the world as a book written by God and given to Man so that he might decipher it.<sup>20</sup> As for the story, Jabès understands it, so it seems, in a manner analogous to that suggested by Elie de Vilna: as the product of the union of the two books, Man's and God's. Just as in the case of the word, where the act of speech merges almost instantaneously with the reception of the message by the listener, so too does the (oral) story immediately offer itself to the comprehension of the auditor. Unlike the written text, the story is not made up of a collection of potentialities that the auditor has to actualize. The truth of the story merges with the very act of narration. "For the Jew," writes Jabès, "the truth is in the story, in fact it is the story."<sup>21</sup> Here, there is no background to decipher: in the story, the book of God merges with the book of Man.

But the duality of the book—the book of God, the book of Man—which covers the duality of writing and of reading, perhaps also refers, by way of a secret connection, to the opposition of poetry and prose. If, as *Le Livre du Dialogue* says, writing is the principle of creation just as reading is the principle of organization, one could be tempted to think that poetry would be more on the side of writing and prose more on the side of reading. And, in a certain sense, reading (which by its very nature exerts a choice among the innumerable potentialities that the written text bears) can do nothing other than reduce the profound instability of poetic writing to a limited number of signified structures. Writing, poetry, and the book of God (as an impenetrable text, that is to say, as absolutely devoid of sense) would, therefore, be opposed term-for-term to reading, prose, and the book of Man, just as the principle of creative disorder is opposed to the principle of limitation and direction. Only the Story, which is its own truth, can glide, always fresh, along the narrow passage that separates these two contrary forces, just as in the Biblical story the Hebrews who had escaped from Egypt clear a passage through the waters of the Red Sea which “on the right and on the left, rose up like two walls.”<sup>22</sup> So, on the evening of the Jewish Passover, this passage is revived through the Story that evokes it.

Translated by Carol Nappholz and Greg Burkman

## NOTES

1. Gabriel Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès, la demeure et le livre* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana 1984), p. 19.
2. Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 24.
3. Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert, III, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 185.
4. Gabriel Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 31.
5. Edmond Jabès, *Le Parcours* (Paris: Gallimard 1985), p. 104.
6. Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, III, 186.
7. Edmond Jabès, *Le Parcours*, p. 65.
8. Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre du Dialogue* (Paris: Gallimard 1984), p. 11.
9. Gabriel Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, pp. 30 and 44.

10. Gabriel Bounoure, p. 45.
11. See Gershom Scholem, "Israël Sarug" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Macmillan/Keter, 1971), XIV, 889–90.
12. Stéphane Mosès, *Système et Révélation, La Philosophie de Franz Rosenzweig* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1982), p. 201.
13. Gabriel Bounoure, *Edmond Jabès*, p. 35.
14. Edmond Jabès, *Le Parcours*, p. 88.
15. On the anagram and the paragram in their connection to the aphorism, see Pierre Missac, "Aphorisme et Paragramme," *Poétique*, 67 (1986), pp. 301–13.
16. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York-London: Harvest/HBJ, 1979), pp. 333–36.
17. Edmond Jabès, *Le Parcours*, p. 30.
18. Edmond Jabès, *Le Parcours*, p. 30.
19. Commentary of the Gaon Elijah de Vilna on the *Sifra de-Zeniota*.
20. See the remarkable study by Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès et la question du livre" (1964) in *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1976).
21. Edmond Jabès, *Le Parcours*, p. 30.
22. Exodus, 14:22.