

THE ATHEISTIC THEOLOGY OF EDMOND JABÈS

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The fact that Edmond Jabès writes constantly about God, when it is clear that for him the word “God” is void of its traditional theological content, has always seemed peculiar to me—and eminently stimulating. Peculiar because his writings live out and convey the atheism of our present age, the post-Auschwitz era in which notions of a just and present God are a scandal to those who had believed, and irrelevant to those who understand, as did Enlightenment rationalists, that God is a projection of desire which possesses no objective reality. Why would the notion of God pervade writings which continually—and paradoxically—point to His absence? I have named this conception of God and Jabès’s negative manner of expressing it an “atheistic theology,” since his writings simultaneously place before us discourse about God and His attributes (albeit negative), while denying any objective reality to the Deity. We are left with an extraordinary amalgam of feelings and attitudes: at one pole, a compelling sense of absence; at the other, an intense yearning for knowledge of the transcendent; between these poles, churning in such a way that abstract distinctions no longer operate, an intense and all pervasive experience of the vital importance of the Holy.

This “atheistic theology” provides access to traditional notions of God and Biblical Revelation that secular thinking might otherwise prevent us from considering. That is why I, involved deeply with writings by religious figures who both practice and think, remain constantly provoked and stimulated—and I would say in a theological manner—by this postmodern writer. I consider myself secularized, and yet the literature of living faith exercises a mysterious attraction. Edmond Jabès bridges the two “fields” of religion and literature. He has created—or renewed—a manner of writing and reading that

conveys, not only problematic aspects of Jewish history, but more so, realities far beyond the French literary tradition inherited from the Romantics through Rimbaud and Mallarmé. His meditative books cumulatively act out—and theorize upon—a paradoxical “theology of nothingness” that brings us into a pre-theological situation in which we might experience what the faithful call God.

Edmond Jabès continues both traditions: he is a prodigal son in the Jewish family of mystics and rabbinic commentators who confront the living God in prayer and in the pages of their foundational books; he is also a child of a poetic faith, ambivalently reenacted throughout the history of Catholic France, a writer, enduring the artificiality of words, seeking nevertheless beyond them an absolute meaning.

His marginal relationship to both literature and faith has unlocked the ambivalence of philosophers and literary scholars willing to face the possibility that their endeavors—from the perspective of possible redemption of mankind—are useless. What practical relevance were the great cultural and scientific accomplishments of Germany when it came to choosing a leader? We discovered that learning or esthetic refinement do not inevitably enhance the spiritual or moral discernment—and certainly not the courage—of most persons. As teachers and critics we are faced with the terrifying possibility that all our efforts to humanize the Humanities—let alone our students—are futile. Somehow the writings of Edmond Jabès, acknowledging the void of culture, give us courage, stimulating a remarkable outpouring of honesty. Much of that honesty appears as the struggle of Jews and non-Jews alike with the guilt of survivors—or with the guilt of intellectual bystanders.

Perhaps, too, as atheistic or agnostic scholars—as most, though not all (e.g. Lévinas) of us are—we finally confess to our surreptitious religious yearnings. It is striking that the work of Edmond Jabès has appealed especially to those (whom we might classify loosely as deconstructionists) for whom literary or philosophical meaning seems impossible. Our scholarship often allows us to disguise personal quests in a method or technique. Yet it is obvious that the fields we choose to explore in depth, for most of our adult years, and often at great sacrifice, are not mere technical games but profound engagements with the subject matter of what we read and reread with the closest attention. Jabès criticism does not normally focus upon value-free stylistic matters, but on the accessibility or impossibility of

meaning, on the viability of literature as an act constituting the person, or a people, and of course the enormous ambiguity of our relationship to the Jewish people, whether we are involved from the inside, as it were, as Jews, or as non-Jews. We face historical facts that demand commitments.

Edmond Jabès's religious discourse opens the skeptical mind. Most modern intellectuals do not choose to represent the religious or ethnic tradition from which we emerged, emancipated, as we view ourselves to be, from the *naïveté* and provincialism of our ancestors. Religious faith, in particular, seems to affront the sophisticated mind. Yet recent conditions in Europe and North America have been such—say, since about 1968—that many secularized thinkers have revived their Jewish heritage (and I am thinking especially of people at Yale, and Jacques Derrida, who has inspired them).¹ It is a consequential, though ironic, fact that deconstructive skepticism—which almost exults in aporia, the undecidability of interpretation—has discovered in the writings of Edmond Jabès support for both their pessimism and for their urgent need to retrieve their ethical responsibility. His atheistic theology, because of its paradoxical dynamics, builds upon the disenchanting realism of contemporary knowledge while preserving the metaphysical and prophetic imperatives of the Biblical and rabbinic traditions with which he engages in fecund dialogue.

His metaphysical radicalism differs from traditional Jewish faith in one absolutely fundamental respect. God, whom the believer assumes is an objective reality, eternal and unknowable in essence, stands behind the Bible, and as a compelling and continuous presence in daily life. Although interpretations of Revelation differ, the traditional Jew believes that the words of the Bible originated in a divine self-disclosure to receptive individuals. The atheist does not accept the existence of such a God, apart from the “God” concocted by mental processes. The special energy and pathos of the Jabès dialogue with Jewish theology can be clarified by comparing his “Book” with the linguistic theory and practice of the most sophisticated interpreter of traditional Judaism, the apologist and activist, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Both writers—observant and atheistic—combine theory and practice so as to open our minds to realities beyond the concepts that frame them. Both were refugees from anti-Semitism, exiled from their homelands—Egypt and Poland respectively—settling in foreign lands finally to write and to exercise a prophetic responsibility.

Wrestling with the Word

Edmond Jabès does not hide behind his multiple literary personas. He is a thinker who reads and interprets his own works, as well as those of Tradition. In conversations with Marcel Cohen, he accepts Cohen's statement that "God" and "Jew" are "only metaphors," and prepares this answer about the state of "Judaism after God." The words "Jew" and "God" are complementary:

It is true that I consider the word "Jew," the word "God," to be metaphors: "God," metaphor of the void; "Jew" agony of God, of the void. In a parallel way, I attempt more closely to delimit the historical meaning of these words: "Jew," "God," linked together in the same process of becoming. Creature and creator, do they not together prepare the advent of a new world order?

However, if God shocks the mind, then the latter, aware of its immense creative power, cannot conceive of a superior, eminently inventive power, to which it would be subordinate. There would be a sort of interversion of roles, man having invented God only for the purpose of hoisting his thought up to the point of the unthinkable and of thrusting further and further the expanse of his powers; the mind, in its essence not being able to accept that which limits its creation. Humility is not the mind's domain but the heart's.

The Jew is the center of that dizzying paradox: by inventing God, he has invented himself, so true it is that "to choose is to choose oneself." God is the Jew's choice and the Jew God's choice. The Jew cannot but be faithful to that choice, if only because of the historical circumstances which have not left him any real chance to evade it, that is to stop being a Jew.

Whether God exists or not is not, in fact, the essential question. It is to himself—and tradition has always insisted upon the importance of free will—that the Jew must first realize the outcome of the values he has committed himself to spreading.²

Jabès, in the first paragraph, assumes that the writer cannot escape from his created reality, words. His use of religious terms recalls the basic Saussurian distinction between sign and signified. Concepts do not designate specific things but are abstractions, with an autonomous—and arbitrary—existence, though they also point to

things in the shared world. It is not surprising that the words "Jew" and "God" are metaphors. Now, for Jabès, the word "God," which ought to designate the source of creation, is a sort of code for "nothingness" (*le vide*). Yet, the dynamism of his works points to the contrary, confirmed by the next sentence which immediately stresses its positive function: "God" and "Jew" energize the same process, that of preparing a "new world order." This prophetic radicalism would not dismay our Biblical ancestors!

The second paragraph returns to the Enlightenment view of mankind as God's inventor. But now a modern metaphysical need drives us to surpass the ordinary limits of knowledge and language: "in order to hoist thought up to the point of the unthinkable." The mind is essentially self-assertive, according to Jabès, proud, almost Promethean, impelled to extend its powers of conception infinitely. Only the "heart"—an emotional intuition of our creatureliness, our subordination to more powerful realities such as history—allows us to feel an appropriate "humility." The Jew—and here Jabès speaks of our historical, social reality—exemplifies the "dizzying paradox" of all mankind: namely that we create ourselves by creating God, a metaphor of our highest aspirations. Historical forces, which we might summarize crudely as anti-Semitism, prevent the Jew from escaping, from losing faith, as it were, from abandoning responsibility for "the values he has committed himself to spreading."

Jabès considers mankind's free will, not God, as ultimate reality: "That God exists or not is not, in fact, the essential question." He subordinates his "theology" to a universal ethics of which the Jew is the free—and constrained—guardian. As significant as Jabès's conversations might be, the literary works, woven of a multiplicity of dialogues, struggle directly with the word "God." Everyone acknowledges his atheistic premise. But in their dialectical function, synonyms of "God" stimulate a yearning secular thinkers might share with the devout.

A passage from his recent book, *Le Parcours (The Trajectory, 1985)*, which focuses upon the writer's relationship to Judaism, further specifies his "atheism." This little volume clarifies basic issues treated in the *Book of Resemblances*, which itself quotes from and reflects upon the preceding seven-book cycle of *The Book of Questions*, the foundation of his written odyssey. The writer overcomes some mysterious reticence as he reveals the contents of a piece of paper, stored in his files, which contains this confession:

I hand over this note I have never dared to use: "I do not believe in God. God believes in me."

... as the air, in order for it to have faith in itself, needs to be breathed; as the star, must know that it sparkles; as the sun hopes to receive a sign of gratitude, from the earth, for the vital light it sheds;

but, perhaps, I wrote that sentence only to bestow upon absence the status of presence; o perennial presence of an unbelieving absence.³

Why, if Jabès has never claimed to represent faith, would he hesitate? Why would the writer not *dare*, as he says, to publish this conventionally atheistic assertion? The dynamics of the entire passage—an introduction, the notation itself in quotation marks, a series of comparisons in a separated paragraph introduced by suspension points, and a concluding self-analysis introduced by *but*—provides insight into a denial of God in language that paradoxically keeps the question of God open. We begin to understand why religious energy permeates the Jabès opus.

Two brief contradictory sentences delimit this "atheistic theology." First, a direct affirmation of non-belief: "I do not believe in God." Then its opposite: "God believes in me." (The French "*Dieu croit en moi*" might also echo the verb *croître*: suggesting, only by homophony, that "God grows within me.") The writer establishes a potentially reciprocal relationship between the person and the sacred word, in which the person receives faith but does not affirm it.

The rest of the passage emphasizes, not mankind's atheism, but nature's initiative as an analogy of God's initiative. The lyricism is surprising, as if an animistic Romantic were describing, in naïvely anthropomorphic terms, the need of non-conscious nature to believe in itself: "as the air, to have faith in itself, needs to be breathed." The contradiction between a spiritual need and the simple, physical exchange of light and air makes us question our refusal to attribute objective existence to spiritual beings or forces. Where does this "consciousness" come from? At the same time, the repeated *as* (*comme*) reminds us that a literary figure, not mystical intuition, is at work.

The third paragraph, broken off typographically after the semicolon, points to a writer's fundamental existential need "to bestow upon absence the status of presence." The term "in order to" (*afin de*) recalls a similar observation in the interview concerning paradoxical concepts: these semantic oddities are all directed toward a positive

goal. Here too, we understand the final enigma at the end, where authors might normally resolve their ambiguities: "o perennial presence of an unbelieving absence." Who or what is absent? God or mankind or meaning? We can identify the attribute but not the attributee: we are left with the phrase "o perennial presence." The conclusion is boldly affirmative; but not its content, only its potential.

The next paragraph straightforwardly restates the problem. This is a semantic, not a truly theological, issue: how to define the word "God." But words are inseparable from a person's commitments within the world outside language. The next sentence, which introduces God's reciprocity, confirms the religious challenge—this time through the dictionary symbol:

Of all the words in the dictionary, the word "God" is the most resistant. We are never certain how we might use it.

One can have confidence only in words one knows—which know us.

For Edmond Jabès, what theologians call "God" is not an objective reality seeking an appropriate symbol, but primarily and exclusively a word. (The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, imbued with the mystic "negative theology" of Meister Eckhart, refers to the "God above God," the divine presence transcending the God concept of anthropomorphic theism.) The writer uses the word "God" to place himself in a critical position with regard to language and to extra-linguistic dimensions of experience.

An important section of *The Book of Resemblances* confronts the word "God" and through the "questioning" leads us to what I consider to be a "religious" commitment. An atheistic theology emerges from this semantic battle with the beyond of language, which is also the beyond of ordinary thought. His existential odyssey, for our purposes identical with his written journey, parallels his life, and addresses the destiny of Western Europeans:

God is a word without end.

Every end insults the question.

The question of the infinite is the feverish question of the closed world, of the shamelessly open world.

Miracles are the beyond of the question.

"The word: *God* interests me," he said, "Because it is a word that challenges the understanding which, because of the fact that it cannot be apprehended as a word, escapes meaning, transcends it in order to efface it; so that it is always a word before or after the word, a word without a word, whose use shocks the mind.

"The questioning of God is the questioning of the void. Thus, pure questioning, without object; questioning of the questioning.

"How to understand God? God does not let Himself be enclosed. God's closure, is God: a non-closure or an after-closure. . . ."

("God is one word too much that deprives us of rest, as a desire would weigh upon a desire; —a desire undesired, but irresistible," wrote Reb Gabri.)⁴

The Jabès "Book" retains its power by constantly, provocatively highlighting the positive thrust of nothingness. The context of this many-layered reflection clarifies the dynamics of questioning and the fundamental idea of openness. The author does not debunk traditional belief; rather he both destroys and builds with traditional words in order to unlock their spiritual power. Exploiting the semantic undecidability of the word "God," he conveys a sense of endless possibility: "The question of the infinite is the feverish question of the closed world." "God" dislocates that aspect of language which sustains the illusion of definite meaning, the equivalence of sign and signified which linguistics has taught us to distrust. The writer challenges the literalization of that Nothingness; *le vide* is a concept, and a momentary experience of meaninglessness, but not a hypostatized reality—since it is a construct of the mind and its language. The internal dynamics of the word "God" are such that only desire—pure desire, without specific object—invigorates the questioner. And that is the point. Jabès places us in a situation appropriate to a post-Holocaust faith. The person, not the Divine, is responsible.

A Poetics of Faith: Abraham Heschel

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a rabbi and philosopher educated in Hasidic Poland and at the University of Berlin, writes in order to help

people experience the Holy. A refugee who lost close family members in the Nazi genocide, Heschel arrived in the United States in 1941 and began a career that combined scholarship, teaching, and social activism. His fundamental conviction is that “the Bible is *holiness in words*. . . . [I]t is as if God took these Hebrew words and breathed into them His power, and the words became a live wire charged with His spirit. To this very day they are hyphens between heaven and earth.”⁵ As a theorist of and witness to spiritual insight, he sets himself one basic task: “to share the certainty of Israel that the Bible contains that which God wants us to know and hearken to; how to attain a collective sense for the presence of God in the biblical words.” Heschel concentrates on the poetic dimension of religious language, such as found in the Bible and in prayerbooks, for his task as expositor and interpreter of Jewish tradition is to transform consciousness: “How does one rise from saying the word ‘God’ to sensing His realness?”⁶

Heschel’s activities were as prominent as his thought. During the American civil rights movement, in the 1960s, he marched side by side with Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Selma-Montgomery demonstration. Heschel said of that occasion: “My feet were praying.” He participated in the anti-Vietnam War movement by attending demonstrations, committee meetings, and supporting people all over the country. He has spoken to large groups on race relations, health care and aging, drugs, Israel, Soviet Jewry, and other issues of immediate concern. His speeches reveal how his scholarly works—particularly *The Prophets* (1962)—provide the theoretical foundation for his ethical stances.⁷ Heschel takes stands deriving from encounters with the sacred, and his words—poetic and vascular like those of the prophets—attempt to convey, by literary means, a transcendent concern incarnate.

Heschel’s poetics of religious language educates our receptivity to the divine presence beyond words and helps penetrate the sacred life within inherited texts. His theory, like that of Jabbès, distinguishes between sign and signified, but for Heschel a metaphysical reality, God, is the “true content” of biblical metaphors. Religious discourse contains an essentially “ineffable” God-side and a polyvalent human-side. He construes descriptions of encounters between the Divine and His people as “understatements”: “*What is literally true to us is a metaphor compared with what is metaphysically real to God.*”⁸ Heschel stresses the beyond of words by displacing the usual emphasis from language’s negativity to its positive transcendent

referent. Experiencing the abyss separating our thought from God, we must conceive categories that surpass imagination: "in moments of insight the ineffable is a metaphor in a forgotten mother tongue."⁹ We can apprehend God only outside of concepts. The notion of the "ineffable"—paradoxical because he evokes it in poetic prose—creates a tension within his use of language which, itself, metaphorically evokes God's presence. Perhaps the "forgotten mother tongue" is our awareness of being created in God's image, the Edenic dialogue with the Creator, viewed from our irremediable exile.

Heschel's apologetics should stimulate our "sense of the ineffable" and open us to the Divine. As did Pascal's highly charged *Pensées*, his exposition combines philosophical argumentation with lyrically evocative passages that evoke his own religious insight. This rhetorical strategy aims to jar our minds and rouse our sense of "radical amazement," awareness of the incongruity of our thoughts with the holy. Awe should lead to a dynamic process of "religious thinking," a complex amalgam that embraces both the human-side and the divine-side of intuition, just as biblical metaphor includes both as a tension between its tenor and vehicle (in I. A. Richards' terminology). Heschel seeks to transform the very way we think about reality by wrenching our minds, often quite violently, from commonly accepted patterns. He prepares us to think religiously (and I stress that this is a dynamic process and not a system) by first overthrowing our habitual, self-centered epistemology, in which we conceive of the self as a subject in search of its ultimate object, God.

Both Heschel and Jabès confront us with the disparity between our minds, our language, and the sacred—ultimate reality, or God. For both, the goal is to surpass language and reach an intuitive commitment. Behind the Jabès process, it appears, is Nothingness, which reveals our projected anthropomorphic wish as fantastical. For Heschel, a divine consciousness stands behind religious metaphors; we should surrender the notion that our self is the origin of consciousness. Described structurally, the basic principle of religious thinking is the *recentering of subjectivity from the person to God*. Ultimately, we might understand ourselves as images of the Divine, responsible objects of His concern. Heschel's method, ironically parallel to that of Jabès, leads us through despair about language to the divine itself.

The most terrifying challenge of Heschel's spiritual itinerary is to risk losing one's very reason in pursuit of divine truth. His foundational study, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955), elaborates detailed critiques of many secular and religious

philosophies, challenging the reader's rational objections to spiritual insight. Then, in the central chapter (13), he evokes the decisive turning point, a moment of despair. The mind painfully relinquishes its preconceptions, to the extreme point of losing language itself:

Only those who have gone through days on which words were of no avail, on which the most brilliant theories jarred the ear like mere slang; only those who have experienced ultimate not-knowing, the voicelessness of a soul struck with wonder, total muteness, are able to enter the meaning of God, a meaning greater than the mind.¹⁰

Heschel bolsters his rigorous conclusion with poetic evocation. The rhythmic harmony of this representation of "not-knowing" forces readers to probe their distance from ultimate meaning—within language, as well as within our lives. We are frail, miserable, and yet, as Heschel almost surreptitiously asserts, we can be inspired with "voiceless wonder." How does he introduce the Presence which might nourish that wonder?

Heschel's impressive certainty challenges despair. His role is to witness, by the integrity of his writing and his life, the confluence of anguish and faith. We must first become utterly helpless, silence our ego-centered thinking, before God can speak to us through the Bible:

We must first peer though the darkness, feel strangled and entombed in the hopelessness of living without God, before we are ready to feel the presence of His living light. "And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud" (Genesis 9:14). When ignorance and confusion blot out all thoughts, the light of God may suddenly burst forth in the mind like a rainbow in the sky. Our understanding of the greatness of God comes about as an act of illumination.

The man of faith brings us to the brink of utter meaninglessness. But he recognizes that it is merely a condition of the mind, of a specific—and avoidable—manner of thinking. Heschel's poetic style churns up almost unbearable feelings which he then translates into a theological insight. The Bible's authority can give the seeker confidence. Individual anxiety, at the threshold of death, meets a still living Tradition. Anguish melts away in the arms of a community.

Two positive results are possible. The first is that we might commit ourselves to study the Bible and the commentaries, yearning for faith as a realistic goal. The seeker believes, at the very least, the holy books to contain true insights into the human condition—but in a language and in a belief structure that require modern interpretation. The second, most radical result of exploding usual categories, is the hope of experiencing God's presence as a mystical illumination. Abraham Heschel, exploiting the full poetic potentials of his style, brings us to that threshold.

Paradoxically, the nothingness of language opens the mind to the origin of thought, the divine. Heschel rehearses the itinerary from utter darkness to illumination in the chapter of *Man is Not Alone* entitled "In the Presence of God." These passages (pp. 77–79) are the pivotal point of his apologetics and dramatize the unity of his entire work: the harmony of inward piety and prophetic activism. With a confidence given only to those who have seen God, Heschel pushes us beyond any humanly inspired hope. Those who have not yet discovered the divine are plunged into apathy: "They have no power to spend on faith any more, no goal to strive for, no strength to seek a goal."

The final paragraph evokes the manner in which God's self-disclosure can lead to the mystic's commitment to a moral and holy life. His poetic prose conveys more than emotional conviction; it is rigorously structured to translate the transcendent event:

A tremor seizes our limbs; our nerves are struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry, wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: GOD. Not an emotion, a stir within us, but a power, a marvel beyond us, tearing the world apart. The word that means more than universe, more than eternity, holy, holy, holy; we cannot comprehend it. We only know it means infinitely more than we are able to echo. Staggered, embarrassed, we stammer and say: He, who is more than all there is, who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our mind can answer; He to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer.¹¹

The word "God" is not abolished; rather it absorbs energy from its divine referent. Heschel takes his place among the most effective mystical writers who convey their speechless, imageless contacts in

dramatic sensorial prose. Readers comprehend that mountain quake in more than a physical sense; we can imagine the pain and power flashing in a moment in which divine awareness might intrude upon our minds. Yet I cannot imagine God; but can anyone?

Heschel is not describing God as He is in Himself but human responses to that Presence. He insists upon the objective reality beyond; the feeling accompanies, not produces intuition of the divine: "Not an emotion, a stir with us, but a power, a marvel beyond us, tearing the world apart." God's presence in the person augments that self by disclosing its foundation; God actualizes the essence of the human being as divine image. We can only sing, praise: "holy, holy, holy; we cannot comprehend it." We worship.

Inward confirmation of God's existence, however, is not the homeland of this spiritual odyssey. Our yearning for knowledge of the divine, when relinquished, opens us to the ultimate—and original—question: God's demand on us. Heschel's mysticism, rather than providing answers to religious perplexity, creates greater problems. The solution is the problem. Faith, fortified by direct contact with God—or rather God's address to us—clarifies the higher challenge. The bare word "GOD" articulates the message: "He . . . who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our mind can answer; He to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer." Heschel's final sentence—incomplete because it contains no verb—is a synonym for God; a pure presence repeats the unending question to Adam, to all humanity: Where are you?

A Prophetic Iconoclasm

Heschel's and Jabès's "answers" to the imperative from Beyond retain a delicate mixture of involvement and aloofness. Abraham Heschel's prophetic activism challenged the cautious Jewish community. He did not shun the public forum, for he felt compelled to express his conscience and provoke social and spiritual self-examination and change. As a rabbi he condemned shortcomings in American society, thus representing biblical judgment—while he also criticized the rabbinic establishment from an uncompromising spiritual perspective. In France, Edmond Jabès has not taken such dramatic stands. The writer remains subtly aloof from Jewish establishments, while his involvement as a Jew remains total. He is not a political figure. And yet readers of his conversations with Marcel Cohen learn that, in Egypt, Jabès began in 1929, at age seventeen,

among the Italian anti-fascists; in 1934 he created the Youth League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism; and these activities continued until 1948. When he arrived in France in 1957 he abstained—"without for that fact ceasing to support the Left."¹² His friends know of his intense concern, which he shares with his wife Arlette, for every event of suffering and injustice that comes to light. To my knowledge, he has participated, without publicity, in demonstrations supporting Soviet Jews and against South African racism.

The Holocaust underlies their relentless insistence upon the dangers of idolatry inherent in writing. When Heschel arrived in the United States, his first articles focused upon matters of faith. He also published an English version of lectures he gave in Yiddish on Eastern European Jewry destroyed, *The Earth is the Lord's*, a prose elegy to its spiritual ideals. He dedicated his foundational work *The Prophets*, an expansion of his 1933 Berlin doctoral dissertation, "To the martyrs of 1940-45."¹³ Behind the scenes he worked to save his brethren. The superficial impression that inward piety predominates over the ethical in his works only emphasizes, by contrast, the delicacy of writing about such an enormous, demonic fact as the Nazi genocide. In reality, an acute sensitivity to the Holocaust's obscene appeal and to the indifference of the nations underlies everything he writes. Heschel considers our normal apathy—the anesthesia of moral outrage—as contemporary civilization's greatest danger. During the years of Vietnam he would exclaim: "Has our conscience become a fossil; is all compassion lost?"

Edmond Jabès also displaces the emphasis of his work in a way that parallels Heschel's putative enthrallment with the spiritual. The Jabès "Book" often appears to be a purely literary exercise. But neither writer excludes the ethical—which is absolutely fundamental. Nor do they collapse the spiritual into the ethical in a way that would trivialize both. Jabès may exemplify a postmodern subversion of literary meaning, but his work cannot possibly support nihilistic conclusions. His skepticism is authentic: conceptual language is a trap. But his constant subversion of the illusion that words represent things or real ideas frees us from linguistic idolatry, the wish that our words were adequate proxies for reality. Jabès has anticipated the worldwide surge of religious fanaticism which, through terror and civil wars, now feeds the vicious, dictatorial potential of religion made official. His theological paradoxes subvert theological fascism.

Jabès does not attempt, like Heschel, to demolish the meta-physical presuppositions of modern thought in order to let the Divine

enter. His multifarious and self-negating voices only demolish the naïve hope that literature might inspire us with faith—be it religious or militantly humanistic. If literature were only a vehicle for a “message,” then Jabès would indeed undermine words of any kind. But the Jabès “Book” is not a lone monument erected in culture’s empty fields of death. This energetic skeptical journey produces limitless dialogues which transcend it.

The “Book” includes a community of voices, outside, as within, its printed confines. Readers enter *The Book of Questions* through quotations and the narrator’s direct interrogations. The outside world cannot be isolated, even in theory, from these colloquies. The solitary who pens enigmas to blank pages includes within them his intimate and social struggles. The act of writing may germinate in such a hot-house, but each page, gathered with others, each book, published, read, responded to by critics and friends, initiates conversations in which our urgent fears and aspirations are on trial. Symmetries organize our reflection on their practical significance.

Each volume of the trilogy which follows *The Book of Questions* ends with a “trial” launched against the writer by a Jewish community seeking to protect its authority from the “writer’s” subversive tactics. The longest and most explicit, at the end of *The Book of Resemblances* (Book I) (as I have written in a previous essay) forces the author into a confession of faith that echoes the prophets’ commitment to a “utopian work” of transforming the world.¹⁴ One of the wiser accusers specifies the function of his “atheism”:

Atheist’s soul, it attracts the agnostic’s opprobrium to itself, for it uses a language which is the negation of that which justifies any language, in that it uses the writer’s discourse to set it against the writer; it uses the Jewish discourse, to set it against the Jew; the atheist’s discourse, to set it against the atheist in his deep conviction and as if one speaks only to destroy oneself.

Every certainty, according to it, diminishes us, every thought subordinates us to the word which consumes it. God alone does not speak where He speaks; that is why God cannot be anything other than the silence where all words are exhausted; but, then, if God is silence, what is that divine word we hear? If God is absence, what is that divine book we comment upon? And what is that human destiny which becomes confused with that of the mute word of our books? No destiny, to that which has not been born. No future, to that which is without existence.¹⁵

These judicial dialogues evaluate the rejection, by atheists, of traditional values preserved by the community of faith, those who find God's living word in the Bible and its commentaries. Words are dangerous because they can petrify dynamic thought. We must smash them. Theological discourse constantly subverted frees us from idolatry; "God" represents that which remains beyond language: "God is nothing but the unthought of every solitude." Negations undermine the word which consumes our thought. This is true from both the religious and the atheistic perspectives: for the Divine transcends all thought; while, from an atheistic perspective, thought itself surpasses the limited referentiality of words. The postmodern writer reminds believers that the essence of their discourse contains that which cannot be captured, the living God—or the Unknowable.

Edmond Jabès's apparently radical skepticism thus preserves its alloy of transcendence. He challenges the complacency shared by intellectuals and the faithful. He demolishes our "good conscience as owners of the book and protectors of its place" in order to liberate us spiritually.

Now the "Beyond" for Jabès is not, as for Heschel and other proponents of Revelation, a divine voice speaking from Sinai. Jabès knows only that the human word is dangerously incomplete. The "trial" which continues in Book II, *Le Soupçon, Le désert* (*The Suspicion, The Desert*, 1978), ends by dissolving itself as trial. The final volume of the trilogy, *L'Ineffaçable, L'inaperçu* (*The Ineffaceable, The Unperceived*, 1980), completes the dialogue with the Jewish community and formulates the basic question:

Where language is lacking, it can contain neither existence nor death.

Then, how to live, act, laugh, suffer or perish? However, rebellious soul that their body's unmouldable memory, their ancient beliefs, their ideas, their desires, their illusions still torment, were they not, without really admitting it, already half settled into the silence?¹⁶

Paradoxically, but consistently, when Jabès undermines these traditional expectations, when he presses them into silence, he also draws our repressed yearnings and beliefs out of oblivion. He thus establishes a dialogue with faith, outside as well as within the "Book," preserving both post-Holocaust skepticism and inherited documents of religious confidence.

The two latest books confirm this humanistic imperative. Their narrator directly speaks for the author, Edmond Jabès, who addresses situations that are not exclusively linguistic. *Le Livre du dialogue* (*The Book of Dialogue*, 1984) confirms the earliest readings of the fragmented Jabès narrative, which, filled with interventions from many sources, had opened huge blank margins into which readers might speak. These silent spaces welcome responses, although they might also, perversely, reinforce our voiceless dismay before repeated subversions of restful formulas. Jabès himself, in the “prière d’insérer” (the backcover blurb) of *Le Parcours* (*The Trajectory*, 1985), presents his reflections on Judaism and writing as *almost* a diary: “These pages might have taken the form of a journal. They are linked with my life.” His first-person statements increasingly specify the meaning of his “pathway,” the entire evolving opus.

The writer is a postmodern iconoclast. His use and abuse of the word “God” should attack the most extreme—and the most pervasive—examples of linguistic idolatry. Jewish history, mixing as it does political, social, and metaphysical aspirations, is a struggle for integrity:

I believe I have perceived that Jewish writing can only be, in its relation to eternity, writing that emerges from the ferocious battle of the book against its image: the image’s word confronting the image of the word. Battle whose writing substantiates the unquestionable end.¹⁷

Eternity is a perspective from which we might reinterpret ordinary constructs. Words must undermine their tendency to absolutize partial views. The very dynamism of the Jabès “Book” distinguishes the “Nothing” (which is the concept of Nothingness hypostatized) from its lethal consequences. The Void, for Jabès, may be objectively real, but his constant undermining of *literary* meaning does not lead inevitably to nihilism. The writer’s battle, waged with destructive (or deconstructive) weapons, is directed toward an essentially positive commitment, as the section’s final sentence dramatically asserts: “. . . but Judaism is life; it is unshakable faith in life and in mankind.”

The “Book’s” paradoxes fight against nihilistic pessimism. Although they aim to threaten our intellectual complacency, there is a danger that the method might become a game, a reflex. His theological

(or atheistic) dimension reminds us of its seriousness. His task is one of practical redemption:

To negate Nothingness. I have attempted to build the book on that sentence; for what does it mean to live, if not to negate Nothingness.

The Nothing, God's obsession; the Nothing, terror of the universe betrayed by its myriad metamorphoses of stars; the Nothing, mankind's adversary; the Nothing, finally, the book's rival. . . .

We have followed the path pierced for us by the Jewish word. Two phrases have accompanied us, in our wandering. For the breathing in: "*God has created man in His image*"; for the breathing out: "*for dust you were, and to dust you shall return.*"

The Jew, wrestling with Tradition and its archaic ways of thinking and with our recent history of despair, reiterates the vital rhythm: inspiration and expiration of God's holy breath. A philosophical anthropology, consistent with the biblical vision and quoting it underlies Jabès's putative nihilism. He clears away abstractions in order to reveal the person; his atheistic theology avers that to be human is to be both fragile and divine.

Our conceptions—as our lives—consist of complementary movements, positive and negative, a biological rhythm: a systole and diastole embracing our total situation. Intimations of mortality must underlie our minds, eternal constructs. Dogmatic theory is idolatry, and the word "God," taken either literally or too abstractly, can mask our surrender to Nothingness. How do we regain, intellectuals that we are with "souls of paper," as Michelet lamented—how do we regain our conscience and our love?¹⁸

The "atheistic theology" of Edmond Jabès is rather an "atheistic anthropology," atheistic in its repudiation of images of mankind that separate our minds from our bodies, our print from the world. Our conceptions must be equal to our responsibilities. The concluding statement, a series of "if clauses," joins opposing views and ends with an unequivocal challenge:

And if God's face were an abuse of faces—abusive face supplanting ours?

And if it were not God who had modeled mankind in His

resemblance but mankind who had taken it upon itself, one day, to imagine God in its image?

Pride and humility of the creature capable, it as well,

And if, in its anxiety, the divine Creation would rest only upon the despair into which all creation plunges us?

And if the book, in its tricks and its boldness, were only the insane resistance to the nothingness of the final page?¹⁹

We must not deify mankind as we have, naïvely, “deified” God, taken images literally. The person, in Jewish theology, is the *only* true image of God. For Abraham Heschel the individual’s divine origin, body and soul, justifies a universal ethics. Edmond Jabès sees a similar reciprocity in his view of mankind as God’s image. For to deny our finitude would lead either to an inauthentic faith, justified by an idolatrous equivalence of sign and transcendent object, or to despair, the collapse of human freedom and integrity.

* * *

The Jabès “Book” nourishes a prophetic impetus beneath its methodical negativism, a vision of justice and world community. It revivifies our conscience by consistently undermining our cherished certainties. His atheistic theology attacks theological complacency, the deification of conventional wisdom. Edmond Jabès, as exile, as writer, speaks for our identity with and responsibility for all humanity. Judaism is more than the political ideology of any state or community, and the Jew cannot be identified solely with any specific territory.²⁰ His post-Auschwitz spirituality does not come from a Voice beyond, but from the still, small voice within: that of relentless devotion to truth. It is true that for Heschel as for other followers of the prophets, the inner voice, after God’s silence, remains our surest guide (perhaps our only guide) if it nurtures the dialogue with Tradition and its interpreters. Edmond Jabès, who includes that community in his “Book,” helps preserve the legacy. His insistent questioning replenishes the lifeblood of our eternally unfinished tasks.

NOTES

1. See Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1973); *Midrash*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman; and the chapter in Susan Handelman, *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).
2. Marcel Cohen, *Du Désert au livre* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1980), pp. 87–88. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
3. Jabès, *Le Parcours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 50.
4. Jabès, *Le Livre des ressemblances* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 67–68; see also pp. 133–34.
5. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 252; the next quotation is from p. 246. My most detailed study of Heschel's theory and use of religious discourse is "Language and Reality in Abraham J. Heschel's Philosophy of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 41, No. 1 (March 1973), 94–113. See the symposium edited by John C. Merkle, *Abraham Joshua Heschel. Exploring His Life and Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1985), and Merkle's book, *The Genesis of Faith: The Depth Theology of Abraham J. Heschel* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1985).
6. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 274.
7. See among Heschel's ethical writings: *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays in Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966); *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience*, with Robert McAfee Brown and Michael Novak (New York: Association Press, Behrman House, Herder and Herder, 1967); *Israel: Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969). These were intense years, marked by the June 1967 war in the Middle East, student rebellions worldwide in 1968, and of course the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States.
8. Heschel's italics. *God in Search of Man*, p. 180. See Merkle, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, pp. 111 ff.
9. Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 75; see also Kaplan "Language and Reality," p. 106.
10. *God In Search of Man*, p. 140. The next quotation is from the same page.
11. Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p. 78; see Kaplan, "Mysticism and Despair," *The Journal of Religion*, 57, No. 1 (January 1977), pp. 38–42 for a fuller analysis of the mystical illumination discussed below.
12. Marcel Cohen, *Du Désert au livre*, p. 45.

13. The dedication of *The Prophets* is followed by this devastating quotation from Psalm 44: "All this has come upon us, / Though we have not forgotten Thee, / Or been false to Thy covenant. / Our heart has not turned back, / Nor have our steps departed from Thy way . . . / . . . for Thy sake we are slain . . . / Why dost Thou hide Thy face?"
14. See my article, "The Problematic Humanism of Edmond Jabès," in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), pp. 115–30.
15. Jabès, *Le Livre des ressemblances*, pp. 140–41.
16. Jabès, *L'Ineffaçable, L'inaperçu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 106.
17. Jabès, *Le Parcours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 103; the next quotation is from the same page.
18. See my translation and analysis of selections from the private diary of the Romantic historian, Jules Michelet: *Mother Death* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
19. Jabès, *Le Parcours*, p. 106. These are the book's final words.
20. A note accompanying an offprint of Jabès's "inaugural lesson" at the Paris Centre Rachi (Center for Jewish Studies) on 30 November 1983 cryptically explains Jabès's refusal to conflate literature and politics. The Israeli ambassador, invited to speak before the writer's presentation, stated his government's hard-line position on settlement in the occupied territories and the necessity for all Jews to emigrate to the Holy Land. Jabès and the majority of listeners walked out. See "Questions du Judaïsme," *Ecrits du temps*, No. 5 (Les Editions de Minuit, no date).