

## The Question of Jewishness and The Question of Writing: An Exchange With Edmond Jabès

Benjamin Taylor

EDMOND JABÈS is among the most original and uncompromising writers now at work in France. A Jew, he was born in Cairo in 1912 and lived there until 1956, when political circumstances forced him to emigrate with his wife and children. It was then that he came to Paris and began publishing the remarkable sequence of books that has won him praise from such critics as Gabriel Bounoure, Roger Caillois, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida.

His output to date includes *Je bâtis ma demeure* (1957)—as yet untranslated—and the multi-volume *Book of Questions*, rendered into English by Rosemarie Waldrop and available from Wesleyan University Press. Since 1976 he has published four volumes of *Le Livre des ressemblances*.

Benjamin Taylor: Since World War II it has often been said that the only historical "answer" to Nazi genocide—the only day commensurate to that night—comes with the founding of an autonomous Eretz Israel. You yourself seem to say so in the last pages of *The Book of Questions*. Zionism is a movement reared on millennial hopes; the will of the "emancipated" Jew to emancipate himself, precisely, from the European dispensation and in the political here and now "to live all of his immense truth," as you've put it. But is not the full force of your work against any such answer to what used to be called the Jewish question? It would seem that the Jewish state has remained unavailable to you both as a theoretical solution to your Jewishness and as a literal refuge from the force of political circumstance. When events compelled you to emigrate from Egypt in 1956, you chose to come to France, the country of your language, rather than Israel, the infant country of your race.

Edmond Jabès: Constrained to leave Egypt on account of my Jewish origins, I was forced for the first time to live my Jewishness. Until then I had managed to remain "unproblematically" Jewish. I had been virtually untouched by anti-Semitism.

Taylor: Even into the thirties and forties?

Jabès: Well, it was in forty-eight, rather than at the time of the Second World War, that so much changed. Not in the minds of the Egyptian people, I hasten to add. They witnessed the establishment of Israel, and the war that ensued, without much real comprehension. If

they vented themselves, it was against Zionists and not against Jews. These two identities—*saihun* and *yahud*—were then still really distinct in the Egyptian mind. In time, of course, the two terms would be blended to a fine consistency, just as the government's propagandists so ardently wished. Yet it remains that the first to embrace this line were not the common people but the intellectual classes: students, professionals and the like. They became militantly nationalistic, without understanding any too well the Western ideologies they seized on to articulate their purposes. What we heard was a hair-raising confusion of Marxist, Fascist, and even Nazi terminologies. In this climate, not surprisingly, the situation of the Jew became more and more precarious.

But not, as I say, on account of the masses. Their hatred would only later be mobilized—by the Muslim clergy, whose voices were to count for so much. In 1948 the chief national need suddenly became a popular unity of purpose against the newly created State of Israel. To this end, a new anti-Jewish consensus was fostered in the schools, in the mosques, in the marketplace. The quality of Jewish existence deteriorated badly after the war of that year. It became difficult—and finally impossible—for Jews to find work. Jews were divested of their property. In 1956 matters reached a crisis, the French and English joining the Israelis in defense of the Suez Canal. In response, the Egyptian government expelled all Frenchmen, all Englishmen and—on account of their alliance by blood to the Israelis—many Egyptian Jews. In the popular mind, you see, the Jew had by that time been thoroughly identified with the cause of Israel.

Like others of my background, I was suddenly "a danger to the state." Neither a practicing nor a believing Jew, my Jewishness nonetheless became the central issue in my life. Of course, I had always known I was Jewish, had never been a passive Jew, but it was only in the fifties that I knew adversity on that account.

Constrained to leave Egypt, I chose to go to France instead of Israel. Why? Well, not because I'm any more at home in Paris than I would be in Jerusalem. My home was Egypt; now it is nowhere. But if I'm Egyptian, the same can't be said of my books. They are French, and if I chose France for shelter, it was above all to shelter them, to give them a place to live. My homelessness has enabled my books to come home.

I must tell you that severance from

native ground has marked me profoundly, and is perhaps the cause of all I've written and become since that time. Egypt was the world I first opened my eyes to, and you will understand if I say that I can never love another place as even now I love that one. Can I begin to explain how deeply the experience of the desert, for instance, schooled and shaped me? Surely there is no more faithful emblem of the infinite. In the mountains the sense of infinitude is disciplined by heights and depths and by the sheer density of what you confront; thus you yourself are limited, defined as an object among other objects. At sea there is always more than just water and sky; there is the boat to define your difference from both, giving you a human place to stand. But in the desert the sense of the infinite is unconditional and therefore truest. In the desert you're left utterly to yourself. And in that unbroken sameness of sky and sand, you're nothing, absolutely nothing. The appalling silence tells you so. It abolishes you. Enter the desert and you broach a new grammar of being. It's the grammar of death. In the desert you are divested of everything—even language, which counts for nothing, makes no more sense, in a world from which man has been erased. There language balks, comes to an end; the grammar of the living is overcome by a more potent grammar of death.

Well, enough. I've digressed and want now to say something about Judaism—the word "Judaism." I do not really mean to offer in my work a definition of the Jew, or of his faith. I speak only for the singular and eccentric Judaism that is my own. It is a Judaism bound up—identified, even—with *écriture* (a word, as you know, of considerably more resonance in French than its equivalent in English). This connection between the Jew and the writer is for me no whimsy or conceit. It is a conspicuous matter of fact. The more thoroughly I live the one condition, the more thoroughly I live the other.

Taylor: I think at once of the lines most often quoted from *The Book of Questions*: "The difficulty of being Jewish is the same as the difficulty of writing, because Judaism and writing are one and the same waiting, one and the same hope, and one and the same wearing down."

Jabès: Judaism and writing entail a single hope. It has sustained the Jew immemorally, but he gets used up by hope. His labor of hoping wears him out. And there, as well, is the essence of writing.

The Jewish people remains what it immemorally has been: a people of the book, of the book that they possess in lieu of a land. (Since 1948 the Jew has of course had a land, however embattled. But a thirty-six-year-old historical fact cannot undo the identity forged by millennia of dispossession. It remains of the Jewish essence to remember and to mourn a lost Jerusalem, whether here in Paris or there at the Western Wall.) So where has the Jew lived? In his book, of course. It was after all a book that God tendered at Sinai, thus making plain to Israel his choice of them. Before they had a land they had a book; and once deprived of their land, their book alone was left them.

It was the visible word of an invisible God that Moses had brought down from the mountain. And by that visible

word alone could the Hebrew hope to come into the presence of his absconded God. So it is Torah, you see—not the sun, moon and stars—that is the visible part of Jehovah. So far from being an object of mere meditation or reverence, it demands instead study, memorization, exegesis.

Studying his book as no other ever has been studied, the Jew confers on the book as such—the text—a first and last significance. In the furor of his need to know God, he enters into the unqualified depths of the book. Thus he discovers what we call textuality. His response to that infinitude is *midrash*, what we call writing. And while, unlike the writer, the Jew as such aspires to make no book of his own, he does so perforce. Not just by study, but by the exegetical labor—by writing—may he come into the presence of his God. Talmud is, then, not just an anthology of explanations. The commentaries of which it is comprised were the rabbi's passion, his life (and his slow martyrdom), for they were the sole possible means by which he could hope to accomplish a direct relation to God. His God had become a book. Accordingly, the text he would make answer by was his only means of saying "thou" to the divine.

As the Jew is riveted to the visible word of his God, so the writer to his possible text. You are probably aware that the Semitic languages—Hebrew among them—were originally written without vowels. Thence it happened in Talmudic times that an identical group of consonants might signify two or more very different things. As vowels were wanting, it was up to the reader to secure meaning. In every reading minute the old book threatened to say something new. Why was the Jew obliged to read, study, interpret? Because the book as given him was always a house waiting, again and again, to be set in order. You see, then, why there was no end to his exegetical labors; they could serve to establish only a provisional order, a provisional putting of the house to rights. Likewise the condition of the writer, whose work is but the ferreting out of order: that of the book he is writing, or will write, or wills to write. His book, like the Jew's, precedes him. Do you not believe it? Even as he writes, already he is written. Already his book contains him.

Suffice it to say that for me the two conditions, Judaism and writing, are utterly bound up with each other. It was in the years immediately following my enforced departure from Egypt that I conceived for myself this "belonging," shall we say, of one identity to the other. In *The Book of Questions* I was able to join them. Now, at the center of that work is a story that is not told, or rather, is told only by way of the imaginary rabbis who "read into" it. I don't mean to be secretive or coy. It's just that this story of two lovers—Sarah and Yukel—doesn't need to be told, inasmuch as it is history itself. You know their story: the Nazis deported them and their families from France; Yukel committed suicide; Sarah's father died in a gas chamber somewhere outside France, as did her mother, in a gas chamber outside France; Sarah survived to return, though deprived of her sanity.

As to those rabbis: they are the exegetes of this historicity, but what they make of it draws the tale freely in and

out of time. They speak to me, as it seems, from somewhere past history, out of mind. Still, I think I recognize their words. I've almost heard them before; but they somehow exceed memory. Like the chants I heard in synagogue as a child—venerable cries from an unknown epoch—the *midrashim* of these rabbis reach me from distances I cannot reckon. It's been said by some critics how "classic" my books are—by which they mean to say, "how French!" They're right, of course, as far as they go. But I believe the rhythm I've imparted to them is finally neither classic nor romantic but semitic—the elemental cadence of my race.

Even in the later volumes of *The Book of Questions*—in *Yael*, *Elya*, *Aely* and *Le dernier livre*—where Jewish references are mostly avoided, the cadence of Judaism cannot be. It subsists in every word, as the difficulty of being Jewish subsists in the difficulty of writing. Surely it was my severance from Egypt that forced me to this recognition, for only then was I compelled to recognize in the book my only and sufficient home. The book, then, is where I aspire to dwell. . . . But what can that mean? Like the desert, the book is a placeless place. In neither is there any abiding; there is only the nomad's digression, his long work of wandering. Insofar as I write, I am that nomad.

*Taylor*: Hearing you speak, I think of another "placelessness," that of speculative *theoria*. In *The Republic* Socrates raised the issue of the *topos noetos*, the "intelligible place" or region of the mind that is the philosopher's only true home. Later, in *The Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger would call it a region of blinding brightness where the lover of wisdom alone can make his way, all others obliged to turn back or be dazzled.

"Where is the philosopher when he thinks?" is a question Plato raised in these dialogues but did not answer. Perhaps you'd be willing to say something more about this placelessness of the book if I were to ask you, by analogy, "Where is the writer when he writes?"

*Jabès*: Yes, it's a wonderful question. I only wonder if I'm up to it. . . . It is fashionably said that the author does not exist, or no longer exists. I myself have written in this vein that he is "nobody." Well, it's not so, of course, but to make a paradoxical point one must sometimes tell a lie. What I was at pains to say is only this: writing entails being written. The words assert a destiny of their own beneath which I, their reputed author, am swept. The more obstinately I apply myself to "my" words, the more I relinquish my privilege as their source and master. They demand for themselves a fortune that does not include me, and willy-nilly I yield to them their sovereign destiny. In so doing, I yield the rank that common sense would have told me was my own: I the writer become the one who is written. Even as I write my sentences I erase Jabès. Ask me who I am and I must tell you, speaking as a writer, that I'm only what I'll be without me, what I'll be in the luck of the book.

To be sure, the "nobody" who is in the book presupposes a somebody at its threshold who is in the first instance bent on transforming himself into language. The original initiative is mine; but writing wrests it from me. (Such is

not the case when we come to speech, wherein I keep my lead. But let me return to this in a minute.) What's most salient, as I see it, is the ineluctable conflict between the writer and his words. But can there be any question of the outcome? What words demand, they get: namely, their right to perform without accompaniment, to silence the writer. His work only appears to consist in subduing words to his own strict purposes. He would make each word "his"; but of course he never does succeed. Asserting himself in the word, he must infallibly dismiss himself from the word.

The writer's work is to set the world in order, and to that end he names the world in its every particular. It is of course the birthright of man to name things and in this way to make an inventory of what is. I must say something more in this matter of man the namer, though what I'll say is difficult and strange. Naming all things high and low man takes dominion over nature. Thus the word makes him lord of what he sees: he names a thing and gives it life. . . .

But in another sense he kills it. Names—the needful accomplices in man's lordship over nature—remain in their essence estranged from his ordering purposes. Words do not in the end suffer to be fastened to things and so to endure the limitation that, having brought about life, brings about death as well. For it is a property of the signifier to win for itself a will of its own. What everyone knows is that the word is an accomplice to distinctively human ends. What the writer alone knows is that it is a stranger to them as well. These names—by means of which we breathe a life into the things of the world—win the will to live beyond themselves by escaping into writing, whose genius it is to explore every confine and compass.

The writer must give himself up to the will of words, to what they may be. We may go so far as to say that his work is to become himself a word. He must disappear from the world of spoken sense and all its presumptions if he is to enter into the adventure of writing. He must, like the God of the Jews, efface himself by becoming a book. Of course he cannot abscond as effectively as God: he does not become the Void, he only becomes the shadow that carries the man he used to be or would have been. So when you ask him what he thinks of this or that, he simply points to his books, as the words I'm at this moment uttering point simply to mine.

I'd like to say something more about the difference between writing and speech—an immemorial discord, never to be healed. For we speak in the simple fullness of time present; but when we write we forswear the present. We divest the word of its attendant voice, riddling it with absence. Thus did the God of Moses bring about the absence of the book—by speaking once and never more. What remains are echoes of the divine utterance, and out of them the Jew makes an eloquence of his own.

One word of that original articulation could never be pronounced again, never returned to the prerogative of speech. It was, of course, the Tetragrammaton or Sacred Name of God. The unpronounceability of that Word of words epitomizes writing in its immitigable difference from speech. It is to enter into the presence of God by way of the absence of His unutterable Name that the

Jew goes on reading and is constrained perforce to make books of his own. Getting to the end of what he had to write, asking the last question, would mean overcoming his severance from God, coming into the pure noontide of the sign. Speech and writing would be reunited. God and man would there and then hold converse. The desert would become a garden. The book would be overcome. But God never does make himself plain; and the Jew is consigned to know Him only in the measure that he does not know Him. Always on the way, the Jew's God never arrives.

Or else: his God is only the Void wherein he, the Jew, makes his passage from question to question, answering each with yet another. He aspires to come into the presence of God, but he comes instead into the absence where God ought to be. Just so, as I see it, the adventure of writing. Only this writer has forsworn all aspiration to presence. If I work under the unpronounceable sign of His Name, it is not out of any wish to restore writing to the condition of speech. I do not wish to overcome absence, the non-place of the book, but to venture still further into it. What I want is to disappear still more thoroughly—into a book whose words have one and all become Names and are accordingly one and all unpronounceable.

*Taylor*: "I'm taking the cure of obscurity," writes your Reb Lohamin. "I nurse my eyesight in order one day to see You." Such pledging of the self to darkness is the speculative Kabbalist's way: he contemplates the secret, untransmitted part of the Revelation conferred at Sinai, and in this way he makes ready for an ecstatic awareness of "the God who is hidden." It is the purpose of Kabbalah, as Gershom Scholem has written, "to broaden the dimension of Torah and to transform it from the Law of . . . Israel into the inner secret law of the universe." From the quotidian labor of reading God's Word unto Israel, the Kabbalist would rise to the unmediated, mystical sight of Him.

In your own work this hermetic tradition appears only as reconstituted by the refining fire of unbelief. The mystery remains, but the mysticism goes. Thus in your work Kabbalah acquires its surprising relation to another hermeticism—that of Mallarmé, whose poetry is the despairing search for an ideal, non-contingent order the secrets of which can only be contained in some quintessential Book.

Does *The Book of Questions* represent a reconciliation of these disparate hermeticisms? Does your work hold out the hope of a Mallarmean "cure" by obscurity? Or does it perhaps hold out a different hope, one in which despair is not implicit?

*Jabès*: I don't know that my work could be said to reconcile two such traditions. Certainly I've labored in both these vineyards, and from each I've brought a harvest—but in order to enrich a work that can be reconciled with neither and in fact depends on presumptions that are extraneous to both.

You speak of obscurity, a word we're obliged to qualify. Because what's dark from the outsider's point of view is purest inevitability from where the initiate stands. Of course Kabbalah is difficult of access! It's a way of reading built to shelter secrets. It's a way of reading by which the initiate alone may hope to

inveigle from written words their mysteries.

Written words, I say, and there's the extraordinary pertinence of the Kabbalist to our modernity: his deep truth is always sunk in writing. For him the truth is in writing or it is nowhere. The indefatigable play of words and letters becomes for him the evidence of and lure to a hidden, mystical reality. "Attend even to the tiniest curiosities, the blandest coincidences of what is written," advises one of my pseudo-rabbis in *Le dernier livre*. "For it may be that truth is concealed in what appears most contemptible or obvious, in places where even the idiot's eye can make its way." It may in fact seem an idiot's labor to recognize in one word the long-lost brother of another because both contain three of the same letters. But such is the discipline of the Kabbalist. He attends to the minute registration of friendship and enmity, likeness and disparity—all among words—and in this way makes ready the approach to an unmediated recognition.

As for Mallarmé: it is indeed from that great poet that I acquired my obsession with the book. But how could any two writers be more different? My obsession with the book is at the furthest possible remove from his. The mainstay of Mallarmé's work is an abiding, if desperate, trust in the rigorous sense that words make, or may someday come to make. He believed in the book as the eventual bearer of an apotheosis—"the Orphic explanation of the Earth." If the sum total of things could be contained in a book, he reasoned, such a work would be more than human; it would be the work of eternity, the Book—literally—to end all books.

But as I see it, the completed book of human knowledge would not be eternal but instead the most ephemeral of books. Because knowledge won't stand still more than a moment for the project of certainty. Reach after it and it evades you. What's true one moment turns up false the next. It seems this is the nature of thought. In any case, it is the presumption on which my books are based, and it's in loyalty to such a logic that they function. Each of my characters would speak in order that there may be an end to speaking, in order to fix the truth once and for all where it stands. But no one of them can succeed, nor can they succeed in their accumulation. What together they amount to is the refusal of each one's purported truth. It's my refusal, of course, but since I can't very well say morning and midnight simultaneously, I've created a clamor of characters to do so for me. Annuling one another, they unmake the one book to make way for another. But if no particular context of their contending truths—no book—is ever final, their clamor itself is. It is their clamor, rather than any last, inclusive context—any Book—that is the real work of eternity. Their clamor will go on routing certainty.

The truth I honor is, like the book I honor, a process without term. Neither is any less than the process of being human. And however late in the day, we always find ourselves stuck at its starting place. As the riot of truth preserves us there, so it preserves the writer where he begins. Preserves him, I mean, from an end to writing. There are only his beginnings—which are all of ours—in the always open book. □