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Politics of the Imaginary in the Work of Edmond Jabès

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

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Abstract

Title: *Politics of the Imaginary in the Work of Edmond Jabès*

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This thesis concerns the relationship between socio-historical context and literary criticism with respect to the work of Edmond Jabès (translated by Rosmarie Waldrop). I argue that literary discourse is a significant site in the history of ideas and that criticism accordingly bears a latent narrative in that it is not merely reflective or reactive but co-constitutive of political discourse. Taking my cue from Edward Said, I read Jabès's text as an event contemporaneous with the Holocaust and the declaration of the State of Israel. The inquiry broadly follows three strands of purpose: (a) to ascertain modes and means through which dominant political ideas are sustained and preserved in a critical culture; (b) as consequence of which, to show how certain nuances, complexities and subtleties in the text are traded for essentialism; and (c) to assess the alternative possibilities created by the primary text. The secondary literature on Jabès is analysed to trace the underlying narrative, both political and historical, in relation to these events. Simultaneously Jabès's text is examined as the site of an alternative imaginary against the hegemonic status quo. The first chapter focuses on exile and exilic consciousness in Jabès. After 1948 and the declaration of the State of Israel, Jewish exile ceases to be a religious abstraction. Most of Jabès's interlocutors direct their attention to the theological while overlooking the socio-political context of exile in relation to statehood. These metaphysical readings, however, while refraining from explicit political pronouncement, tend to affirm and bestow legitimacy on the state's construction of mythology as history. I determine the critical gestures that consolidate this narrative and read Jabès's text as a form of resistance to teleological statehood. In the second chapter I examine the textual

methodology employed in the translation of figural gesture in the Bible into political literalities. I argue that the hermeneutic legacy of constituting statehood from religious scripture is significant for literary studies whose primary object and mode is text and textuality. An analysis of Jabès's conceptual conceits compared with the socio-political trajectory of the Bible (in relation to statehood) yields critical insights both in terms of Jabès's work and the relationship between religious and literary methodology. Jabès resists the authority of religious orthodoxy and affirms poetic injunction that both opposes and transcends the sacred creed. The third chapter focuses on translation in which I consider the ethics of adopting a political subjectivity while translating works that bear witness to moments of historical rupture. Translation or the translatedness of the text is integral to the inquiry – the particularity of the translated condition is not ignored in favour of reading the translated text as if it were identical with the source text. I resist the invitation to draw equivalences between the source text and the translated text and read the latter as witness to the event of the former.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents T. Ambikapathy and Manjula
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[INTRODUCTION]

Myth, History and Criticism

*Yukel, which is this land you call Jewish, which every Jew
claims as his own without ever having lived there?*

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*.¹

Jabès and Context

Edmond Jabès was born in 1912, in Cairo, to an affluent Jewish family. He was raised and educated in the French language and identified as ‘French’, though this had less to do with the country than the language. During the Suez Crisis, when Jews were forced to leave Egypt, he fled to Paris. His staunchly expressed linguistic identity contrasted with his scepticism towards other identity categories based on religions or nationality, such as Jewish, or Egyptian. He told² Rosmarie Waldrop, his translator, that it was almost a relief to be exiled from Egypt as his external was finally reconciled with his internal condition. Not at home in Egypt, or later in life in France, Israel, established as a nation state in 1948, was never an option. Rather he orientated himself through language, and France was the most natural place for his exile.

¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Vol. I, (Wesleyan University Press: first edition 1976, second edition 1991, translated by Rosemarie Waldrop), p. 59. The page numbers refer to the second edition.

² Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), p. 40.

He wrote his most famous cycle *Le livre des questions*³ in the Paris metro while commuting to work. The book carries within it a rhythm of the provisional as if transit were the destination. The thesis will focus on this seven-volume cycle in Waldrop's translation.

In keeping with the requirements of in-depth single author studies, the thesis initiates an original approach to Jabès; it is one that counters the existing scholarship so as to constitute an intervention in the field. However, this is a collateral effect rather than the primary objective. The central concern of this study is the relationship of the literary text (both criticism and the creative text), and the immediate socio-historical condition of the world it inhabits. Contemporary criticism, especially in its engagement with critical theory, is undoubtedly a site where forms, concepts and beliefs are conceived, sustained and opposed. In principle this is emancipatory praxis. However, as Edward Said has argued, academic critical culture in the Anglo-American academy has increasingly severed itself from social, historical and political actualities in pursuit of 'pure textuality'.⁴ The legacy of the most infamous progeny of this practice, New Criticism, is still visible in Anglo-American institutions. Characterised as it is by a kind of indifference to socio-historicity and a concern for deterioration of aesthetic appreciation – at risk of contamination by events, societies, people, systems, etc. – the practice of pure textuality, against its aspirations, perpetuates homogeneity. It affirms the singular pretence of objectivity, though the consequence is often one of complicity with

³ The cycle of seven books is named after the title of the first book: Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), *Le livre de Yukel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), *Le retour au livre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), *Yaël* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), *Elya* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), *Aely* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), *El, ou le dernier livre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). They are published as *The Book of Questions*, Vol. I, op. cit. and Vol. II (Wesleyan University Press, 1991).

⁴ See Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 4.

hegemonic structures and institutions. The politics of the apolitical method are ever the same – erudite compliance and deference to the dominant, elite culture. However, the alliance of the literary text and the world, mediated as it is, is neither simple nor continuous. This complexity has the effect of obscuring the processes through which criticism participates in maintaining the status quo.

Jabès's most famous works were written in Paris. Without detracting from the brilliance and vivacity of *The Book of Questions*, I want to suggest that the location of its production was conducive to its literary prominence. The European metropole that dominated the literary scene in the twentieth century whose milieux had the power to create canons and calibrate transnational literary tastes is a persuasive site from which to write. The consequence of this is that his work is read primarily as a European text which is also a universal text. As is common praxis in the Euro-American academy the particularities of the Western tradition are classified as the universal, so that all other traditions are digressions from its norm. The context is further displaced in translation. In English, particularly in the United States where it was translated by Rosmarie Waldrop and published by Wesleyan University Press, the book appears as a spectre: an artefact from the continent received in elite literary circles with an interest in French poetic traditions. The more traction it gained in Europeanised academic worlds, the more it was abstracted from its own socio-historicity.

The Holocaust, one of the central themes of the book, is the only socio-historical context referred to in the critical literature. The catastrophe is written about in quasi-mystical terms without mention of Fascism in Europe. The failure to engage with the European history of colonialism and the rise of

Fascism produces a narrative of the Jewish people as singular victims in both their position as the oppressed in Europe and colonisers in Palestine. But a cataclysm such as the Holocaust requires a reading that recognizes the significance of context. An erasure of socio-historicity, far from enacting solidarity, can be detrimental to the cause of the victims and the victims of the victims.⁵ In a sense Jabès's book and the Holocaust occupy an equally mystical place in the literary critical imagination: both are phenomena without cause or provenance. Europeanisation of Jabès disregards his trajectory and the complicated place of Judaism, a Jewish homeland, exile, the Holocaust and Egypt in his works. Critical scholarship has simplified his Jewishness so that the identity restricts both the expanse of his ideas and the possibilities for interpretation. The nettlesome question of context, a consideration of which can be both emancipatory and essentialist, does not easily concede to methods such as reading Jabès as a Jewish mystic.

One of the methods to which literary criticism resorts when engaging with minorities is to examine identity as cause or intention. The literary text is read as autobiographical and, in some cases, it serves as a proxy for ethnographic evidence. Insofar as identity is a socio-political construct, it is an essential part of context and should not pass for cause or meaning. For instance, a responsible reading of context, for instance, might include the dialectic relationship of identity both to its positionings as the oppressed and the oppressor. In the case of Jabès, after being exiled for being Jewish, his Jewish identity occupies much of his literary thinking though his attitude to Judaism is hardly one of devotion or submission. His atheism notwithstanding, there are

⁵ Edward W. Said, 'The One-State Solution', *The New York Times Magazine* (10 January 1999), p. 36. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/10/magazine/the-one-state-solution.html>.

several other factors such as his Egyptian background, and French upbringing that should not be neglected in favour of reading him as a European Jew.

As Aimée Israel-Pelletier argues, with the exception of Daniel Lançon, and Steve Jaron, most of Jabès's interlocutors such as Paul Auster, Maurice Blanchot, Susan Handelman, Richard Stamelman, Jacques Derrida, and others write about Jabès as a European Jew; as a Jewish writer in Europe writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust. He is specifically read as a French Jew and the publication of *Le Livres des questions* in 1963 is marked as his entry into the French letters though he had been writing in French for several years before arriving in France. For Auster, the central question of the book is the Jewish Holocaust. For Eric Gould, Jabès raises questions that 'are central to literary practice and theory at the present time. In France, whence comes much of our recent incitement to intellectual riot, these issues have largely been reinvented by Jabès...' In his reading of Jabès, Blanchot makes multiple references to the 'homeland of the Jews' in the aftermath of the Holocaust. From his correspondence with Emmanuel Levinas and other writings concerning the 'homeland', it is clear that Blanchot is referring to both the Biblical homeland and the European Zionist project. He carries this suggestion into his response to Jabès. Jabès's textual homeland partly relates to his exile in France and the crisis of belonging during his years in Egypt. Although he is severely impacted by the Holocaust, he was in Egypt during the war. The Zionist project drew a quite different response from the French Jews of the Middle East – it is hard not to imagine that this context did not impact Jabès's decision not to move to Israel. His ambivalence toward the homeland, and the reformulation of the mythical place into a textual landscape was perhaps a reflection of the wider community's uncertain relationship to the State of Israel. Imagining Jabès as a European Jew writing through the crisis of the

‘Modern Jew’ in the aftermath of the Holocaust is a deliberate misreading. As Pelletier puts it ‘post-1957 writing is the arena in which he wrestled and tried to come to terms with 1) his identity as a Jew and an Egyptian writing in French, 2) his expulsion from Egypt along with more than half a million compatriots in what has been called the Second Exodus, and 3) the ravages of guilt and confusion that ensued in the process of appropriating the Holocaust as object of literature. Jabès was outspoken about his feelings of dejection, alienation, and loneliness as an expatriate in France. Yet, neither he nor his critics have given adequate weight to the psychic toll and the literary consequences that the sublation of his personal history into the greater history of European Jewry had on him.’⁶

My intention, however, is not to advance comprehensive biographical reading as counter methodology to reductive identity-forward modes of reasoning. I read context in Jabès in relation to its socio-historical sphere by extracting the text from its self-referential textuality. The thesis takes seriously the idea of literary discourse as one of the significant sites in the history of ideas: and thus the source text and the secondary literature function as sites where political ideas are constructed and negotiated. This method allows the text to be read in the same continuum as socio-political shifts. The references in the text to the external world are not treated as responses or reflections of the writer to an incidental context. The work of criticism, I would argue, is to take an expansive view of context to articulate the text as a dialectic agent in its history. One of the advantages of this method is that it shifts the focus from authorial-intentionality to the political possibilities enacted in the encounter of the text and context through criticism.

⁶ Aimée Israel-Pelletier, ‘Edmond Jabès, Jacques Hassoun, and Melancholy: The Second Exodus in the Shadow of the Holocaust’, *Modern Language Notes*, Volume 123, Number 4 (2008), 797-818 (p. 800).

The process of undoing the adverse effects of close reading practices has relied on identity as reliable evidence of context. To be clear, my critique of identity-focussed readings does not share the ground of conservative critique of ‘identity politics’. My objective is to deepen the focus and understand identity as embedded in its socio-historicity. My argument is primarily against understanding minority identities as constructed and maintained in Western universality. A reductive fixation on context results in treatment of identity as causality.⁷ But the literary turn towards context has come under fire in the last few decades. Rita Felski in her piece ‘Context Stinks’ argues:

One of the main obstacles lies in the prevailing picture of context as a kind of box or container in which individual texts are encased and held fast. The critic assigns to this box a list of attributes – economic structure, political ideology, cultural mentality – in order to finesse the details of how these attributes are echoed, modified, or undermined by a specific work of art. The macrolevel of sociohistorical context holds the cards, calls the tune, and specifies the rules of the game; the individual text, as a microunit encased within a larger whole, can only react or respond to these preestablished conditions. [...] Understanding a text means clarifying the details of its placement in the box, highlighting the correlations, causalities, or homologies between text-as-object and context-as-container.⁸

⁷ On the subject of neo-historicism Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss argue that Quentin Skinner espouses a ‘performative contextualism in order to shift the emphasis of the discussion of the idea of the text as an autonomous object, and on to the idea of the text as an object linked to its creator, and thus on to the discussion of what its creator might have been doing in creating it’. See Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds, *Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 17.

⁸ Rita Felski, ‘Context stinks!’, *New Literary History*, 42.4 (2011), 573-591 (p.577).

She rehashes the regressive critique of the historicist method, arguing that it has no concern for form or aesthetics. She imposes a false dichotomy of worldliness of a text and its singularity (manifested through/in form). This is a reductive assessment of contextualism. The historicist method is not to view the text as a ventriloquist's puppet where the master (establishment, power, ideology, etc.) and a vast network of 'causalities and correlations' are to be uncovered by the literary spy. However, defending 'contextualism' would be akin to reinventing the wheel as the arguments to counter Felski's claims have preceded her opposition. A thorough reading of Said – one advocate of contextualism relevant to this study – would dispel at least some of Felski's fears about the future of literary criticism. Not to mention the several theoretical paradigms – such as Marxism, feminism, queer theory and so on – that have opposed crude determinism while practising responsible contextualism. However, Felski's position is insightful on two fronts: it would be disingenuous to dismiss how determinism, in particular identity-determinism, is a thriving model of mainstream literary criticism. There are several examples to be recalled of texts written by minority writers traced back to the writer to uncover intentionality or excavate identity as cause or meaning.⁹ It is doubly reductive as it not only

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of identity and experimental writing see Sandeep Parmar, 'Not a British subject: Race and poetry in the UK', *LA Review of Books* 6 (2015).

limits the potential of ideas, but erases the sociality of identity. The focus shifts from social structures to literary behaviour. This does not, however, warrant the dismissal of contextualism so as to seek relativist pastures elsewhere. Her argument, however, highlights a specific application of the method that skews poorly against minority identities. Felski also describes the text as the object and context as the container. She does not rob the text of its agency in using the object-box metaphor, but the text's resistance, transgression and rejection of the status quo is regarded as a misreading. She argues that the texts are not 'lonely rebels' but co-actors and collaborators – while this carries some weight, it is hard to see why the text's entanglement with its environment calls for a rejection of contextualism.

Felski's argument against contextualism (though valid as a critique of determinism), commits the same mistake as her targets by essentialising contextualism; a form of crude textuality as it were. Felski's charge applies to many academic readers of Jabès for their view of his identity as the container and his text as the object. His Jewish identity is inferred as a point of origin and cause. This is a reasonable response after the Holocaust to the extent it centres the persecuted identity and the victim's narrative right to speak. In another sense the method is reductive and does not admit Jabès's conflicted relationship to Judaism. As I shall explain through an analysis of some of his most important interlocutors, his Jewish identity is accorded the status of a minority in absolute terms. The victimisation of Jews is characterised in metaphysical terms regardless of socio-historical factors. This is a failure to

contextualise; instead, Jewishness is represented as a phenomenon in transcendence of context and recorded history. The epiphenomenal characterisation of Jewish identity far exceeds the oppressed-oppressor continuum (as I shall discuss in the section *An Interrupted History*).

The Jewish literary psyche undergoes a significant change after the declaration of the State of Israel. As Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi writes:

[...] the radical shift inscribed in modern Jewish letters between the path and the goal, between journey and destination, is one of the most telling signs of the cultural upheaval that has accompanied the historical upheavals of our time. [...] Repudiating mimetic culture in favour of a reclamation of 'original space' also activates, at the deepest level, a mechanism for renouncing the workings of the imagination.¹⁰

As Ezrahi points out, a socio-historical shift is not exclusive of the work of imagination. Literary pursuit is not confined to a reductive sense of its own identity. Jabès's interlocutors conflate the impact of statehood on diasporic populations, not least the Arab-Jews of the Middle East, with universal European Jewishness. Further, to return to Felski's argument, Jabès's text is examined as a linear response to the Holocaust – a textual object in the context-box of catastrophe. The context of the catastrophe itself is erased.

The rhetoric of eternal antisemitism was highly prevalent in the literary and philosophical discourse of the twentieth century. The idea, that received much favour, was that the Jew is already always an 'other' and therefore persecution is inevitable, constant, and every instance of its manifestation

¹⁰ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 3.

is simply a proof of pre-destined suffering of the Jewish people. This mode of reasoning takes no cognisance of socio-political reality. To the extent the Jewish identity retained a singular mythical permanence in specific corners of twentieth-century discourse, critical readings of Jabès directly reproduce this reasoning. The critical emphasis is firmly on his response to the Jewish condition – not one that corresponds to his situation (of having been exiled from Egypt) but that of a European Jew after the Holocaust.

As against this canonical positioning I read the context to his work as inclusive of the socio-historical setting of the Middle East and Europe in relation to the history of the Jewish people in the twentieth century. This is not to claim Jabès advanced political ideas that have been ignored, or that the intention or meaning of his work is a socio-historical critique of his times. It is merely to say the text holds out multiple possibilities to examine notions of exile, identity, the nation state, a Jewish homeland, and textuality within the context of its turbulent spatio-temporal location. Through the process of contrapuntal reading, to use Saidian terminology, I re-examine Jabès's nuanced and unresolved relationship to Judaism, homeland and exile. The primary objective is not simply to ascertain his complex beliefs but to use his work as a vantage point from which to articulate and form judgements on political ideas. Jabès's Egyptian upbringing presents itself as the most conducive viewpoint from which to think through the European catastrophe and the consequential declaration of a Jewish State in the Middle East. The literary text is not merely responsive or reflective but coconstitutive of the context that governs social and political lives. I argue that criticism's work is not just to excavate the authorial viewpoint, however subversive or resistant, but to employ the text as a site in which to negotiate and forge political ideas, and to imagine alternative possibilities through it.

It is important briefly to explain my context: my political and educational background in India has trained me in certain ways of thinking about third world-ism, colonialism, and provided me with a keen understanding of how the positions of the colonised and the coloniser can be occupied by the same people. Insofar as different contexts sharing similar political conditions can be mutually enlightening it is worth comparing the contemporary Muslim crisis in India with the Jewish crisis in Europe. While the Hindutva movement derives its ideological roots from Nazism, its political character and functioning shares ground with Zionism. Without overstating the case for illuminative potential of analogous contexts, I want to insist that a personal context located outside the Euro-American sphere and supportive of decolonial thinking was instrumental in determining my vantage point.

The question of Palestine, as Aamir Mufti reasons, is of some significance to third world intellectuals. Jabès leaves Egypt at a crucial juncture: as the many third world countries including India were claiming their sovereignty, the already colonised Palestine is ‘given away’ by the British to the Zionists to establish the new settler colonial State of Israel.¹¹ For Mufti the coinciding of colonisation of Palestine and third world decolonisation stands as proof of the failure of European liberalism. He argues that this fault line is the reason the Palestinian experience holds such significance for third world intellectuals:

It is often remarked in the West that there is something arbitrary about the resonance of the Palestinian experience for Third World intellectuals, given

¹¹ The creation of Israel in fact contributes to the rising tensions in Egypt during the Suez crisis as the Jews, who had been living there for centuries, come to be viewed as ‘Zionist brokers’ in the Middle East.

the proliferation of oppressed and disenfranchised peoples around the world. [...] The meaning of the Palestinian experience is indeed inseparable from the fact that the immediate oppressor is the Jewish State, and not a classic imperial power such as France or Britain. But the crisis here is precisely that this is liberalism at its best. In its support for the rights of the Jews of Europe – that is, in its most inclusive and universalist moment – liberalism trips on its own categories and can conceive of nothing but a colonial solution [...] At the very dawn of the era of decolonization, the crisis of Jewishness at the heart of post-Enlightenment European culture and society is finally laid to rest by the "normalization" of the Jews as a colonizing people.¹²

Mufti's reasoning acts as a form of justification for the question of Jewish statehood this thesis introduces into Jabèsian studies. The creation of colonial solutions as forms of liberation is visible across South Asia both in its internal and international politics. My interest in the creation of a colonial Jewish State as a failure of European liberalism and its relationship to religious fundamentalism then partially derives from an experience of the Indian context. Albeit founded on the liberal anticolonial ideology, India's sovereignty is complicit in creating and sustaining the 'minority problem' that is comparable to the Jewish crisis in Europe.¹³ In this sense a history of liberalism must include the colonisation of Palestine as it is a clear consequence of the failure of European liberalism. In the next section I shall discuss the framework of 'secular criticism' and its relevance to reading Jabès.

¹² Aamir R. Mufti, 'Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture', *Critical Inquiry*, 25.1 (1998), 95-125 (p. 123).

¹³ See Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

Secular Criticism

Said, in his introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, titled ‘Secular Criticism’, writes that his practice of literary criticism, which derives from the four broad types – practical criticism, academic literary history, literary appreciation as taught in classrooms, and literary theory – also includes ‘criticism’ or a ‘critical consciousness’ that goes beyond the remit of these defined forms. He explains that it is characterised by an affirmation of the ‘connection between the texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events’.¹⁴ Its antithesis, ‘deep textuality’, is a mode of analysis that views textuality as an exclusive paradigm where the text is understood in relation to and in accordance with itself. Exterior systems and historical events are overlooked in favour of reading the text as an absolute, abstracted entity. To paraphrase Said, this means an understanding of the text without the influence of one’s worldliness and the text sans its worldliness. He critiques the focus on deep textuality in the American academy (though of course the same applies to the Anglo-Euro sphere) for an approach that is removed from context, events and structures that brought the text into being. In an especially incisive description, he says that though textuality is acknowledged as an occurrence, it does not take place ‘anywhere or anytime in particular’.¹⁵ He detects a ‘principle of non-interference’ in the academy exemplified by a rejection of context viewing it as ‘contamination’ by the social and the historical. He is staunchly opposed to esoteric and mystical conceptions of textuality devoid of social consciousness. The historical moment of Said’s indictment is especially interesting as European, specifically

¹⁴ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

French, literary theory was only just making its presence felt in the American academy in the nineteen-eighties. A radical and progressive characterisation of the movement notwithstanding, Said argues that 'European revolutionary textuality' is domesticated and canonised in the event of its transatlantic transfer. According to him, thinkers like Derrida and Foucault, unfortunately, seemed to encourage this evolution. Consequently, for Said, textuality became the 'antithesis and displacement of what might be called history'.¹⁶ While he admits that history cannot be directly apprehended through the literary text, it is yet possible not to overlook the 'events and circumstances entailed by and expressed in the text themselves. Those events and circumstances are textual too [...] and much that goes on in texts alludes to them, affiliates itself directly to them.'¹⁷ He argues that the text is 'worldly', and it is produced and sustained in relation to its context and not as an abstraction conjured ex nihilo. For Said the literary text must be read in conjunction with social realities, the actualities of power and authority, and as part of the historical moment in which it is located and interpreted.

Said's emphasis on the worldliness of the text versus abstract textuality is not a generic framing of the continuity between literature and ideology. He was interested in the specificities of dominant structures and ideologies such as nationalism, religion, ethnocentrism and their effect on the study of texts known as literary criticism. It is worth quoting him at some length on this:

As it is now practiced and as I treat it, criticism is an academic thing, located for the most part far away from the questions that trouble the reader of a daily

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

newspaper. Up to a certain point this is as it should be. But we have reached the stage at which specialization and professionalization, allied with cultural dogma, barely sublimated ethnocentrism and nationalism, as well as a surprisingly insistent quasi-religious quietism, have transported the professional and academic critic of literature – the most focused and intensely trained interpreter of texts produced by the culture – into another world altogether. In that relatively untroubled and secluded world there seems to be no contact with the world of events and societies, which modern history, intellectuals, and critics have in fact built. Instead, contemporary criticism is an institution for publicly affirming the values of our, that is, European, dominant elite culture, and for privately setting loose the unrestrained interpretation of a universe defined in advance as the endless misreading of a misinterpretation.¹⁸

He was one of the few critics in the American academy able accurately to perceive American foreign policy, the rise of Reaganism, increased militarism, and a turn to the right concerning welfare and labour in conjunction with the advancement of the cultural realm towards ‘pure’ textuality guided by an ethic of ‘critical non-interference’.¹⁹

However, Said’s use of the term ‘secular’ triggered a contentious debate. While the differing takes generated some important ideas on the relationship between religion and the nation state, he was accused of elitism and ambiguity.²⁰ Said’s most nuanced readers such as Mufti and Bruce Robbins

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 25. The secluded world of academic criticism is all the more perverse, given its dependence on State infrastructure, private funding, an appropriative publishing industry and distribution systems dominated by multinational corporations.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 4.

²⁰ I shall briefly and somewhat simplistically outline the debate here. The debate is only tangentially related to my argument. The term ‘secular’ is historically associated with

have argued that the term ‘secular’ does not simply imply an anti-religious stance. Robbins writes ‘Indeed, perhaps the most crucial meaning of secular, in his usage, is as an opposing term not to religion but to nationalism’.²¹ Robbins quotes Said from an interview explaining his formulation of the secular:

[...] the dense fabric of secular life [...] can't be herded under the rubric of national identity or can't be made entirely to respond to this phony idea of a paranoid frontier separating 'us' from 'them' – which is a repetition of the old sort of orientalist model. The politics of secular interpretation proposes a way... of avoiding the pitfalls of nationalism.²²

Mufti’s reading of the ‘secular’ in Said is slightly different and exceptionally insightful as he argues that Robbins’s interpretation of the term, while accurate, proposes a formal equality between all types of secularism, which is to say secularism from all standpoints. This equalising gesture, according to Mufti, obliges Robbins to frame his defence of Said’s secularism within the

reason and Enlightenment that undergirded the European project validating both their authority and superiority over the religious and therefore irrational subjects of the colonised world. Consequentially, the term acquired a universal valance: as Bruce Robbins puts it ‘word secular has usually served as a figure for the authority of a putatively universal reason, or (narratively speaking) as the ideal endpoint of progress in the intellectual domain’. Critics of Eurocentrism have challenged and argued against this conception at two levels: the first is an opposition to proclaimed superiority of European rationalism/secularism; and second, they have criticised the adoption of the ‘secular’ framework by nationalist elites of previously colonised countries to control and dominate the domestic population. Peter van der Veer argues ‘at the very distinction between religious and secular is a product of the Enlightenment that was used in orientalism to draw a sharp opposition between irrational, religious behaviour of the Oriental and rational secularism, which enabled the westerner to rule the Oriental’. Equally, within the subaltern studies, the argument stands that the Indian nationalists weaponised the word to rule over the diverse subaltern classes and attempted to neutralise their struggles. See the works of Aamir Mufti, Bruce Robbins, Partha Chatterjee, Ashis Nandy in relation to Indian nationalism and secular thought.

²¹ Bruce Robbins, ‘Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions: On Edward Said’s “Voyage In”’, *Social Text*, 40.40 (1994), 25-37 (p. 26).

²² Interview of Edward Said by Jennifer Wicke and Michael Sprinker, in Michael Sprinker, ed., *Edward Said: a Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 232-33.

apology for its purported elitism. Mufti writes ‘such formalism does not equip us to perceive the distinctness of what I am here identifying as secularist arguments enunciated from *minority* positions’.²³ Mufti admits that the secular for Said is a critique of nationalism, and of ‘assurance’, ‘confidence’, and ‘majority sense.’ Claims on behalf of national culture ‘always imply [...] a critique of the entire matrix of meanings we associate with ‘home’, belonging and community’, but most importantly:

[It] contains the charge that the organicism of national belonging, its mobilization of the filiative metaphors of kinship and regeneration, obscures its exclusionary nature; that it can be achieved only by rendering certain cultural practices, certain institutions, certain ethical positions representative of “the people” as such. Secular criticism seeks continually to make it perceptible that the experience of being at home can only be produced by rendering some other homeless.²⁴

He contends that Said’s use of the word is catachrestic in that it is a ‘meaningful and productive *misuse*’.²⁵ He argues that Said calls for a rethinking of the narrative of progress that has historically underlined the term ‘secular’ from the postcolonial present. For Mufti then, Said’s secularism performs the opposite function of what his critics accuse him of – it questions the western narrative of liberal secularism while articulating a firm anti-national, anti-religious stand from the minority viewpoint. As Mufti concludes, ‘Secular criticism does not imply the rejection of universalism per se. It implies a scrupulous recognition that all claims of a universal nature are particular claims. [...] it means rescuing the marginalized perspective of the minority as one from

²³ Aamir R. Mufti, ‘Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture’, *Critical Inquiry*, 25.1 (1998), 95-125 (p. 107).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

which to rethink and remake universalist claims, thus displacing its assignation as the site of the local'.²⁶

Mufti believes that Said's secularism is not empty cosmopolitanism; it demands a remaking and rethinking of a universalist ethic such as secularism from a minority perspective. It is not statist liberalism that advocates tolerance and transcendence of difference in the name of a national culture, but a secularism reformulated from the perspective of those that would be minoritised and made homeless by the national culture. As Mufti explains 'that nationalism does not represent a mere transcending of religious difference [...] but rather its reorientation and reinscription along national lines'.²⁷ The minority position in Said is a vantage point to critique the various manifestations of liberal secularism, nationalism, categorisation of minority and majority, and the rhetoric of tolerance. To quote Mufti:

The procedures of Saidian secularism are, as I have already noted, dialectical.

In Saidian terms, to adopt the posture of minority – 'to think from the position of a minority group' (Chatterjee's²⁸ words) – is first of all to renounce one's sense of comfort in one's own (national) home, that 'quasi-religious authority of being comfortably at home among one's people'. It is not simply to demand a separate existence for minorities – a demand not so incompatible with the classic liberal paradigm for tolerance as is sometimes assumed – but rather to engage in a permanent and immanent critique of the structures of identity and thought in which the relative positions of majority and minority are produced.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁸ See for instance Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

The declaration of an exclusively Jewish State, as a reparative move, to quote Mufti, is liberalism at its ‘most inclusive and universalist’ moment. He writes that Said believes the ‘crisis over the Jews constitutes an irreducible feature of Western modernity, that minority is a fundamental category of liberal secular society’.²⁹ The term ‘minority’ in Said is an awareness that the ‘minority’ do not just disappear because the category is subject to a critique from the universal standpoint. As rational secularism would have it, transcendence of difference under the aegis of secular principles would lead to some sort of peaceful co-existence. Saidian secularism, on the other hand, calls for a recognition that minority does not simply cease to exist by the application of a universalist logic – but it is precisely the universal that requires the existence of these categories. Said calls for a recalibration of the marginalised position (and the majoritarian), by ‘inhabiting it, that we make it the position from which to enunciate claims of an ethical, cultural, and political nature’.³⁰ Said does not advocate an erasure of difference, but to conceive it as the basis for an articulation of emancipatory politics.

The Jewish minority, a category devised and sustained in Europe, is transferred in the absolute to the newly created Jewish State. This positioning is weaponised and wielded by the State of Israel in such a way that Palestinian resistance is construed as antisemitism. The indisputable status of a minority defined in absolute terms, regardless of socio-political context, lends to a concealment of the shift from victim to perpetrator. The change in context notwithstanding, Zionism positions itself as the politics of the persecuted minority.

²⁹ Mufti, Aamir R., ‘Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture’, *Critical Inquiry*, 25.1 (1998), 95-125 (p. 121).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

The secondary literature on Jabès broadly reproduces the minority rhetoric; a hierarchy constituted in Europe and obscured by metaphysical characterisation. Said's notion of secular thought – both anti-religionism and anti-nationalism – and the category of the minority is a useful framework to bring to analysis of Jabès. It allows for a recalibration of the 'minority' in defiance of liberal categorisation and in opposition to Israel's majoritarian manifestation of the identity. Contrary to existing criticisms, I employ Jabès's minority position to examine the formation of the nation state, the weaponisation of exilic identity, the constitution of hierarchical categories, and explore his work as the site for alternative liberatory ideals. Most of Jabès's interlocutors read his context – exile, the experience of antisemitism in France, and the Holocaust – through a mythical lens. This is to say they draw a direct line from narratives of exile and enslavement in the Bible to the Holocaust. Not to mention the distinct histories of Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardic Jews of the Middle East, and Jabès was from the latter people. The political is effectively absent here and this creates an a-temporal, ahistorical vacuum in which the Jew is located as the eternal victim. This makes for a problematic discourse: sacred methodology is indifferent to socio-political reality, and a historiography of the Jews derived from the Bible replicates the ideology perpetuated by the State of Israel. As I have argued through Said and Mufti, a recognition of hierarchical segregation systems, and the critique of inadequate recourse mechanisms is not easy political praxis. Further to distance the subject from the political by employing the sacred can only benefit maintenance of the hegemonic status quo. Mythological reasoning actively perpetuates an identity that benefits Jewish liberation only to the extent that the Jewish State can function as a colonising entity.

Historicity in Literary Criticism

The principal concern of this thesis is the relationship between literary criticism and the social, historical and political sphere. The relationship, though affirmed as critical to the future of the discipline, is frequently denied or disregarded. The case for the salience of the political in and through literary criticism is not easy to make because of the complex continuity between ideology, dominant structures, hegemonic institutions and a study of texts. The more professional and institutionalised the literary praxis, the harder it is to glean that which it conceals and abides by. A necessary part of the work of critique is a constant and rigorous vigilance towards narratives, histories and versions of the world constructed through the medium of criticism.

The multiple connections between the literary text and the socio-political world, between the text and literary criticism and between criticism and the world are non-linear and co-constitutive. This is to say dominant discourse is not simply reflected in the literary critical method, but also constituted, sustained and reproduced. An application of Saidian ‘critical consciousness’ requires close examination of these networks to understand how majoritarian ideas are introduced and perpetuated through literary criticism. My inquiry is concerned with how ideology operates in critical evaluations of Jabès. If Said’s call for a ‘scrupulous subjectivity’³¹ is what my thesis broadly responds to, I specifically derive from his two central propositions: anti-religionism and anti-nationalism. As I have indicated earlier, Said’s secular stance was keenly disputed, not least because of its anti-religious tendencies. As his interlocutors have argued, his secularism cast a wider net in opposing all forms of institutionalism and majoritarianism. I also want to focus on

³¹ Mufti’s formulation in ‘Auerbach in Istanbul...’, op. cit., p. 98.

Said's particular worry to do with the 'mystical' turn in criticism. As he writes:

In our time there has been a curious transmutation by which the secular world – in particular, the human effort that goes into the production of literary texts – reveals itself as neither fully human nor fully apprehensible in human terms. [...] What one discerns today is religion as the result of exhaustion, consolation, disappointment: its forms in both the theory and practice of criticism are varieties of unthinkability, undecidability, and paradox together with a remarkable consistency of appeals to magic, divine ordinance, or sacred texts.³²

Said is not naïve enough to dismiss the significance of religion to certain communities, and the weaponisation of secularism by the western enlightenment project. However, it is critical not to renounce his reasoning in the name of (misplaced) anticolonialism³³ as religion continues to thrive as a close ally of nationalism in both the western and postcolonial present. I employ his anti-religionism at both levels: to criticise religious critique for its core logic that

³² Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, op. cit., p. 291.

³³ Mufti for instance argues as follows against Ashis Nandy, 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance', in Veena Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence: Communities Riots, and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi, 1992), pp. 69-93. He writes (p. 114): 'Secularism, argues Nandy, is an "import" from nineteenth-century Europe into Indian society and furthermore is the cultural banner of the dominant elite, so that to "accept the ideology of secularism is to accept the ideologies of progress and modernity as the new justifications of domination" ("The Politics of Secularism...", pp. 71, 90). While it may appear at first that such a view is derived from the critique of Orientalism that Said has inaugurated, nothing could in fact be further from the truth, and it is a critical task of the utmost importance that we distinguish carefully between them.' He adds (p. 116) 'Precisely because Nandy's critique of the secular nation-state is based on a gesture of disavowal – secularism as a Western ideology, to be countered by the recuperation of truly indigenous lived traditions – it ends up reproducing the metaphysical gesture at the heart of cultural nationalism itself: the translation of the problem of cultural discontinuity in the modern conjuncture into a narrative of the transmission of a cultural essence. The syncretistic critique of state-secularism inhabits the same conceptual terrain as this secularism itself.'

is external to the man-made world as it actively obscures the social, the political and the historical; and for its implied and concealed nationalism.

My contention is that literary criticism bears and exhibits a latent historical consciousness, a chronology, a sequential narrative for the world it inhabits, and this should be examined as a distinct category. Criticism, even when it disavows of the political (or perhaps especially when it does so), represents a specific version of the world; one seemingly unaffected by socio-political factors. A rationale thus derived regards the text as an autonomous medium that can have any number of hermetic and abstruse interpretations. A world thus enacted in such a reading is nearly non-existent; the events and the situation implied in the creation of the text are absent. These erasures, far from being objective, subsume entire histories though these failures are not easily traced.

The connections between the text, the socio-political domain and criticism are complex and implicated with one another. Standardisation of 'deep textuality' as praxis conceals the influence of dominant ideas in criticism and drawing attention to it can seem like an unnecessary act of uncivility. Corrective measures such as assuming a simplistic correlation between context and text leads to crude conclusions; evident in critical efforts to read according to the author's geographical or sometimes genealogical origin. To at least avoid some of the pitfalls of assuming broad equivalences between context, text, and intention, I attempt to read Jabès's book as an event. A poetics of 'non-arrival'³⁴ dominates the Jabèsian text. The reader is translated into a wanderer following him through the pages to understand that the notion of a destination

³⁴ To borrow a term from Judith Butler, 'Who Owns Kafka?', *London Review of Books*, 33.5 (2011). Available at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n05/judith-butler/who-owns-kafka>.

is remote and absurd. The internal gesture in Jabès that is turned away from a teleological reaching after prompts a reading of the text as if it were an event; this is to say the text exhibits urgency, contingency, and a sense of itself as traversing through a specific time and place. My argument takes the Jabèsian text as an event unfolding in relation to and simultaneously with historical events such as the Holocaust and the declaration of the State of Israel. I examine his work on the same continuum as these events to trace the political changes preserved in the secondary literature and the alternative possibilities created by Jabèsian text. As Said writes of the text's event-like disposition '[...] that a text has a specific situation, placing restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the situation exists at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself'.³⁵ Even if history cannot be directly apprehended through a literary text, it is borne out of and bears the marks of events surrounding it. The Saidian limit on interpretation is a warning against severing the text from its worldliness. Reading the text as contemporaneous with Jewish persecution in the twentieth century and the establishment of the State of Israel, I extract the narrative of events as construed by the secondary literature. The world as conjured and affirmed in the analyses of Jabès is further analysed to demonstrate its religious, nationalist, and ahistorical tendencies. The principles that undergird these readings are compared with the ideology that sustains the State of Israel. The attempt is to demonstrate that literary criticism does not only reflect or take after 'history' but constitutes it in the course of its unfolding.

As Jabès was being forced out of Egypt, the second world war had just ended; Europe, and indeed the world was yet coming to terms with the

³⁵ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, op. cit., p. 39.

catastrophe that was the Holocaust; liberation struggles and anticolonial movements in the Third World were realizing their objectives just as the State of Israel was declared in Palestine. The questions in Jabès's work are as personal as they are deeply implicated in the political. As a Jew in Egypt, he felt the shock of the rise of fascism in Europe, though his own position was not of a victim but of a witness at a remove. The protagonist of the first volume, Yukel, shares this biographical detail – and it is through Yukel that Jabès poses some of the most penetrating questions about the conception of a Jewish homeland, and exile. The case for the personal as produced by the political and vice-versa cannot be overstated. Jabès's internal condition was affected and constituted by the political, and his political imaginary was constructed through the personal. My reading of Jabès is less concerned with the idea of the text as response to context or a confrontation between the two by which the text is made to come to terms with the situation. I regard the text as an event constituted by and constitutive of its socio-political condition. I locate Jabès as the exilic-minority – a minority in metaphorical, internal exile in Egypt, and a minority in physical exile in France – a vantage point to frame critiques of conceptions of Jewish exile, the nation state, and the sacred homeland. The Saidian mode of the exilic-minority is crucial to my study as it is not merely based on Jabès's situation but takes the author-function of the text as the ground upon which critiques of dominant ideologies can be construed.

I develop oppositional readings of Jabès to show that literature can work as a site to imagine and forge alternative political possibilities and produce knowledge that comes to define the conditions of a life. Literature enjoys authority as a discipline where prevalent concepts are constructed and defined (as I will argue in relation to exile in the first chapter) in the popular

imagination.³⁶ My interpretation of Jabès attempts to show that literary criticism can occupy the paradigm of the ‘minority’ to generate subversive and obstructive political forms in defiance of a hegemonic discourse. It can function as the site to influence the public imaginary, against homogeneity, against erasure and obscurity, such that alternative-conceptualisations may come to inform individual and collective political praxis.

³⁶ See Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Duke University Press, 1996).

An Interrupted History

In history, where the centre of the rupture is called Judaism.

Maurice Blanchot, 'Edmond Jabès' Book of Questions'.³⁷

Jabès is regarded as one of the most important French writers of the post-war period. Thinkers such as Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Paul Auster and Robert Duncan, among others, produced original interpretations of his work with lasting effects on literary theory. Paul Auster writes:

The Book of Questions derives from two traditions. One is what can be roughly called the Mallarméan tradition in French poetry, which is above all characterized by a fundamental examination of writing itself. It is a reflexive, self-conscious mode in which questions of language, of the reality of 'the book' and poetic utterance are treated as legitimate subjects and not simply as empty formal concerns. [...] On the other hand, there is the impact of Jewishness, and the Holocaust, on Jabès's work. The Holocaust must be considered beyond the grasp of language, as something that can be answered only with silence. Jabès speaks about the Holocaust, about Jews in concentration camps, but in such a way that he implicitly acknowledges the impossibility of speech [...] how to speak what cannot be spoken. This is the fundamental question of Mallarmé, who insisted that 'whatever is sacred, whatever is to remain sacred, must be clothed in mystery'. But for Jabès it is also the question of Jewish survival.³⁸

³⁷ Maurice Blanchot, 'Edmond Jabès' Book of Questions', *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 6.2 (1972), 34-37 (p. 34).

³⁸ See Paul Auster, 'Story of a Scream', *New York Review of Books* (1977), available at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1977/04/28/story-of-a-scream/>.

To take Auster's categories further, scholarship on Jabès can be broadly divided into two types: firstly textuality, formally referred to as postmodernism,³⁹ and secondly religious analysis (Holocaust related writing is not necessarily religious, but these categories are often conflated, which is part of the current argument). These two approaches are not mutually exclusive: postmodern readings draw from Jewish conceptions of textuality, and similarly religious interpretations frequently refer to postmodernism in a comparative sense. Jabès is either classified with an emerging discipline of 'Jewish postmodernism' or postmodernism itself is postulated as essentially Jewish.⁴⁰ I shall examine these classifications and their interpretive method to demonstrate that they are similarly attuned to what Said terms 'deep textuality' – the text as abstracted from its historical moment and examined within an axiomatic textual medium.

In religious analyses the narrative movements of the Jabèsian text are invariably related to Judaism.⁴¹ The metaphors, gestures, allegories and conceits of the text are interpreted as references to the Bible, or Biblical history of the Jewish people. Mythology acquires an a-temporal spatiality which then becomes the location of the text. A Jewishness thus formulated in relation to Jabès is made to absorb the truth value of empirical history. Said's indictment of modern literary criticism as the breeding site for abstracted textuality that is the anti-thesis of history rings true for most readings of Jabès. His work is regularly read and derived from a religious mode of thinking that both

³⁹ Equating of textuality with postmodernism is not my formulation: Jabès's readers who deal with textuality often use the 'postmodern' framing.

⁴⁰ See Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses, The emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) and Beth B. Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2003).

⁴¹ See the discussion of the work of Hawkins and Handelman later in the introduction, as well as the more developed one regarding Handelman's work in the first chapter.

opposes and precedes history. The text is interpreted as a religious text, and accordingly as sharing its function of transcending the political. The reflexivity in the text is elevated to the metaphysical and perceived as an autonomous phenomenon in the literary consciousness. Jabès's questioning of forms of reality and representation are variously classified as deconstructionist, post-modernist and fundamentally theological. Eric Gould in his introduction to collected essays on Jabès writes: 'For Jabès, the contemporary Jewish writer can only be conscious of the ancient relationship of the Jew to the Word'.⁴² He states:

The fact that God is dead has come to mean, in the Christian tradition at least, that a God with a presence – which is all-presence – somehow no longer exists. But that is not a theological problem for Jabès, not for his rabbinical interpreters, because the Jewish God has always contained His own absence in the divine Word. So the 'death' of God gives birth to the world, which in turn gives divine mandate to the endless interpretation of the word...⁴³

Gould's argument attempts an historicising of the phenomenon, though it takes a sharp theological turn. The mandate for endless interpretation, as I shall show in the second chapter, has a critical political function. It aids propaganda through a rereading of religious texts as complementary to the political status quo. It has less to do with the divine and more to do with a repudiation of history and context. In their readings of Jabès Susan Handelman and Richard Stamelman draw directly from the Lurianic Kabbalah and expand on Maurice Blanchot's comparison⁴⁴ of the interruptions in the text to the

⁴² Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. xviii.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

⁴⁴ See 'The Absence of the Book' in Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Translation and Foreword by Susan Hanson, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 422-434.

breaking of the original tablets. The Jabèsian book, though replete with religious reference, is a literary experiment with signs and systems inherited from Jewish culture. Jabès borrows these tropes and motifs to write through his estrangement from the Jewish faith and identity. The word ‘God’ functions as a wandering sign without the signified – his repeated inscribing of these ‘empty’ words acts as a manifestation of the breach between himself and a god. As he says to Waldrop: ‘It is a word my culture has given me. [...] it is a metaphor for nothingness, the infinite, for silence, for death [...] emptiness.’⁴⁵ That God is a metaphor already invalidates the existence of God, but he makes clear that that which a God might be a metaphor for is nothingness and emptiness.

If language is capable of a vast array of affects, religious language acts as a conjuring mechanism to evoke certain emotions, associations and beliefs. Jabès uses this feature to undermine the conceptual gravitas of sacralised words by displacing them from their conventional meaning. The affectual facility of the word is instantiated and dislocated simultaneously; faith is routinely interrupted and not unconditionally affirmed. Jabès’s interlocutors ignore the ambiguity, play and exploration of his negative or nihilistic inclinations. When his rejection of a classical God is admitted into criticism the rebellion is construed as having been derived from faith. As critics like Beth Hawkins (in *Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès*) and Susan Handelman (in *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*) have asserted of Jabès and other Jewish writers, their defiance or indifference to religion affirms their inherent Jewishness as it illustrates the capacity of Judaism to absorb the act. For

⁴⁵ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), p. 11.

instance, Hawkins constructs a framework within which to read three Jewish⁴⁶ writers – Paul Celan, Franz Kafka and Edmond Jabès – best described as a theology without a God. She concedes these writers a rejection of the classical God and organised belief systems but, in a manoeuvre that is common in Jabèsian scholarship, she constructs a Jewishness from which they derive their universal ethical principle. She reads in their work a despair at the modern world’s moral bankruptcy and asserts that the ethical and moral values they come to forge is inherent in Jewish thinking.⁴⁷ She derives a comparison of the works of these writers and the Noahide Laws. According to her, the Noahide Laws in the Hebrew Bible are a ‘universally binding system of law [...] and a universally applicable covenant’ that precedes the Abrahamic covenant and its association with the people who later come to be identified as the ‘chosen’. She argues that central to the concerns of all three writers is an anxiety concerning their ‘revaluation’ of the covenant. For Hawkins, the message of solidarity preached by these writers’ revaluated covenant stands in stark contrast to the exclusionary praxis of the Abrahamic covenant. The inclusionary model of Jabès, Kafka, and Celan, based on solidarity, is then comparable to the Noahide Laws. This is one illustration of ‘a return to *specifically* Jewish modes of expression’.⁴⁸ This return, she writes, is a response to the anxiety of assimilating into European cultural modernism⁴⁹ and

⁴⁶ The argument is premised on the assumption that the writers are Jewish – factually true in that they descend from a Jewish lineage, but problematic for its assumption of these identities.

⁴⁷ Beth B. Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2003), p. xx.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁴⁹ As intellectual biographers such as Steve Jaron in *Edmond Jabès: The Hazard of Exile* (Routledge, 2017) and Daniel Lançon in *Jabès, l’Égyptien* (Jean-Michel Place, 1998) and Deborah Rosalind Gruber in *Ni Française, Ni Juive Ni Arabe: The Influence of Nineteenth Century French Judaism on the Emergence of Franco Jewish Arab Literature* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015) have shown, Jabès never saw himself as ‘assimilated’ within European modernism. If anything, his politics reflected an influence of French cosmopolitanism such that he resisted religious identification.

therefore each of these writers was committed to preserving and constructing a mode of thinking through their Jewish identity. She writes: ‘Though their situations are in many ways profoundly different, these three authors share a common strategy that underlines a common intention: *each uses a specifically Jewish paradigm as the means for promoting a universal ethics*’.⁵⁰ This mode is what constitutes a postmodern Jewish philosophy for Hawkins. She states that the Jewish mode of expression – an ethics derived from a moral code inherent to Jewishness – provides a language in which to speak about the postmodern condition characterised by ‘exile, wandering, disappearance, absence, etc.’⁵¹ Hawkins deduces a contrived conflation between the postmodern condition and the ‘Jewish condition’ (which is not defined, and all three writers had very different trajectories in relation to their Jewish identity) and as the latter providing means of expression to the former.

As with the comparison to the Noahide laws, Hawkins’s arguments are deeply ahistorical and severed from socio-historical context of these writers. It is not clear from any of their works that they were aware of or writing in consonance with a universally applicable covenant from the Bible. If ‘solidarity’ is a principle that can be simplistically summarised as a common theme, then each of these writers defined their inhabiting of the world in relation to others in completely different ways. If Paul Celan was absorbed in poetry as a mode of address and a site of encounter with others,⁵² Jabès was interested in the figure of the Jew as the exilic other and the estrangement from a normative Jewish identity. And given the centrality of ambivalence in

⁵⁰ Hawkins, Beth B., *Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2003), p. xx.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

⁵² See Geuss’s essay on Celan in Raymond Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Kafka, and his struggles with Jewish identity, claiming any kind of essential Jewish quality in his work is a deliberate misreading.⁵³ While there are many arguments against the forced assembly of three very different writers based on a religious identity, the problem relevant to this argument is this: Hawkins's reading under the rubric of a Jewish postmodernism presents an ahistorical, 'textual' (severed from socio-historical context and simultaneously invested in the Jewish idea of sacred textuality) view that, even though it appears to espouse secular principles, ultimately absorbs the converse of religious thinking (i.e. the secular) in religion as a known and tolerated aberration.

The 'postmodern' is a somewhat unstable category as it is hard to glean a singular definition of the word from its use in reference to Jabès. It seems to invoke certain conditionalities and conceits in the text such as the absence of an author, discontinuities, a non-linear narrative, a preoccupation with the semiotic system and its limits for representation. It acknowledges the rehearsal of certain modernist ideas such as exile, wandering and return albeit within an unstable and isolated medium of the text. The two most consistent elements in postmodern readings of Jabès are ahistoricism and a focus on the text as an isolated medium. Norman Finkelstein in his work on Jewish traditions and contemporary literature argues: 'If the notion of the Jewish literary intellectual invites historicization, then Postmodernism in the arts and human sciences resists such treatment. [...] Postmodernism involves a strong suspicion, if not outright rejection of the frame of historical knowledge; nevertheless, there are occasions when we must impose such a frame, treating Postmodernism with unwonted critical rigor.'⁵⁴ Despite Finkelstein's allegiance

⁵³ See Judith Butler, 'Who Owns Kafka?', *London Review of Books*, 33.5 (2011).

⁵⁴ Norman Finkelstein, *The Ritual of New Creation: Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 12.

to history, his interest in the influence of Jewish traditions in contemporary literary practices tends towards Bloom-ian tenets which he cites as claiming “‘it is text-centeredness” rather than any “religious idea” which distinguishes the modern Jewish identity’.⁵⁵ If religiosity professes a faith in a God, it does so through a rejection of all that is man-made. Text-centeredness is not much different in that it assumes textuality as almost a metaphysical medium without much contact with the outside world. Though the impulse is seemingly secular and opposed to religion, the method often results in an indifference to worldliness. Much like Finkelstein’s slightly contradictory formulation (Bloom’s turn towards the mystical⁵⁶ notwithstanding), postmodernism outwardly assumes a form of secularism, but is unfailingly oblivious to socio-historical context. Most postmodern analyses of Jabès, enamoured of tropes of non-arrival and absence, choose self-reflexivity as their primary object of inquiry. For example, Warren Motte⁵⁷ attempts something of a non-theoretical reading concentrating on formal elements such as metaphors, chronology, narratorial authority and so on, while form itself is not an ahistorical, or apolitical phenomenon, the self-referential interpretive mode proves the ease with which postmodern criticism can disregard the historical in a book so heavy with its own history.

The focus in religious readings such as Handelman’s⁵⁸ or Hawkins’s⁵⁹ is not the text itself: the latter is instrumentalised, as David Stern argues, to a

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵⁶ Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

⁵⁷ Warren F. Motte *Questioning Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

⁵⁸ Susan A. Handelman, “‘Torments of an Ancient Word’: Edmond Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition”, in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès* (University of Nebraska Press, 1985), pp. 55-91.

⁵⁹ Beth B. Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2003).

greater ambition. It is to prove that these modern thinkers and writers have derived their theories, hermeneutic methods and ethical principles from Judaism *against* the secularised Western ideology. However staunch, vehement or subtle the opposition to Judaism or a Jewish identity in these writers, they only reaffirm such an identity by opposing the Western tradition (e.g. Greco-Christian).⁶⁰

A critical drawback of the religious mode of thinking is the problem of conceiving antisemitism as an eternal phenomenon that transcends the historical moment, as opposed to an understanding of antisemitism in the context of European Fascism in the twentieth century. The figure of the Jew in Jabès is frequently perceived as the eternal Other, exclusively and singularly, and anchored only to his suffering that transcends space and time.⁶¹ This characterisation is akin to the minority rhetoric discussed earlier through Said and Mufti: it constructs an identity that is highly significant to the sustenance of the ideology that equates antisemitism with anti-Zionism. The minoritised and persecuted Jew in Europe, by whose trauma Jabès was deeply affected, is perceived as the abiding victim of history. The association of an eternally exiled otherness with Jewishness is understandable in the aftermath of the catastrophe, however, it is a problematic discourse for literary criticism to perpetuate. It does great disservice to the victim: in the absence of a perpetrator and causality their suffering is seemingly endless. This approach

⁶⁰ I discuss Handelman's reading in detail in the first chapter.

⁶¹ For instance, see Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2003), Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, op. cit., Joseph G. Kronick, *Derrida and the Future of Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999, in particular the second chapter on 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Jewish Unhappy Consciousness: Reflections on Deconstruction') and Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book*, op. cit.

misconstrues the Holocaust and ignores the socio-political reality of the declaration of a Jewish State as a settler colonial project in the name of reparation.

In a widely held belief, as much among anti-Semites as many Jewish people and anti-fascist historians and critics, antisemitism is an eternal phenomenon encompassing a period of more than two thousand years – which is to say, the events of twentieth-century Europe are perceived as one event in the very long history of persecution where the Jew is already always the figure of the discriminated other.⁶² As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: ‘Equally widespread is the doctrine of an ‘eternal antisemitism’ in which Jew-hatred is a normal and natural reaction to which history gives only more or less opportunity. Outbursts need no special explanation because they are natural consequences of an eternal problem.’⁶³ The notion of the Jew as the perpetual and a chosen martyr, as opposed to victim of a particular set of circumstances at a given historical moment and place is a doctrine repeated as much in history as in literature. Scholarship on Jabès is no exception: his commentators readily oblige the notion of the Jew as the other, especially an eternal Other, essentially displacing the figure of the Jew from history into the realm of metaphysical abstraction.

For instance, Joseph Kronick writes in the essay ‘Edmond Jabès and the Poetry of the Jewish Unhappy Consciousness’: ‘We might say the “Jew” is the figure of difference, of the Other. Exiled from history, the Jewish people

⁶² Hannah Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism* (Orlando, USA: Harcourt Inc. 1951), p. 7.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 7.

bear witness to the death of God.’⁶⁴ Susan Handelman characterises the Jew in Jabès as an ‘exile, wanderer in history, comforted only by his sacred text and his retreat into the word...’.⁶⁵ In his essay *Être Juif* (1967) often referenced in relation to Jabès, Blanchot declares that being Jewish signifies that ‘the idea of exodus and the idea of exile can exist as legitimate movements; it exists (Judaism), through exile and through the initiative that is exodus, so that the experience of strangeness may affirm itself close at hand as an irreducible relation’.⁶⁶ Blanchot constructs an ahistorical site of Israel within this paradigm of ontological separation:

Israel's solitude – a sacerdotal, a ritual, and also a social solitude – comes not only from the passions of the men who live adjacent to it, but also from this particular relation with itself that placed this extreme, infinite distance, the presence that is other, in its proximity. Thus is born the Jew.⁶⁷

In this letter, written two decades after the establishing of the State of Israel, Blanchot frequently reads the State of Israel as the mythological site from the Bible and vice-versa. To him the Israelites of the Bible are the current-day Israelis. This constitutes a monumental historical error, and not least the mistaking of the figurative for the literal. In this blanket view of the world where the Jew is the absolute other the anti-Semites of Europe are equated with the Palestinians, and resistance to persecution becomes one and the same as anti-semitism. The essentialised figure of the Jew as a framework presents many

⁶⁴ Joseph G. Kronick, ‘Edmond Jabès and the Poetry of the Jewish Unhappy Consciousness’, *Modern Language Notes*, 106.5 (1991), 967-996. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2904595>.

⁶⁵ Susan A. Handelman, “‘Torments of an Ancient Word’: Edmond Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition”, op. cit.

⁶⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, op. cit., p. 125.

⁶⁷ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Être Juif’, article first published in 1962 but reprinted in *L’entretien infini* as part of a larger text, available in English in Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, op. cit.

problems: the effect – the other-ness of the persecuted Jew – is then inverted as the cause – the Jew is persecuted *because* he is the other. The phenomenon is internalised to the site of the victim so that the oppressor and the circumstance of the oppression are virtually obscured.

This leads to another complication: an ahistorical symbol thus produced (seemingly the victim and the cause) overrides the context of his oppression and the context of his role as the oppressor. Blanchot views the estranged subject's transformation of estrangement into an instrument of power as a positive. The archetype of the eternal stranger, which is always the Jew, effectively obscures the settler colonial project that is the State of Israel. It is a politically convenient axiom where any criticism of the State issues accusations of antisemitism as the figure of Jew is the discriminated other, even as the persecutor. The conception of an extended history of antisemitism going back to the Middle Ages primarily derives from the mythology of the Bible. A long narrative line is drawn from the Israelites of ancient mythology to contemporary recorded history of the Jewish genocide. The fictional events of the Bible are conjured within the same paradigm as the catastrophes of the Second World War – the rules that govern the difference between imagination and reality are transgressed to encompass a comprehensive and coherent account of the history of the Jewish people. This constructed account reaching back to the medieval era determines the Holocaust as a culmination of a long history of oppression rather than a singular occurrence. The flagrant speciousness of the argument – given the veracity of events of the Bible is debatable – undermines any success it might have had in initiating an historicised understanding of Jewish persecution. While the intention behind assuming eternal hostility appears to favour the victims and their rightful place in history, I

would argue the abstraction of the event from the realm of history and a quasi-mythological interpretation of their identity only serves to impair their cause.

The cognate notion of eternal antisemitism is a deep and abiding faith in the Bible, not only as a form of historiography, but as an authority that can supersede recorded history. The conception of perennial Jewish hostility primarily stems from the Biblical myth of the exiled people who were deported and wandered for two thousand years before returning to their ‘promised land’. The legal document, *Israeli Declaration of Independence* states: ‘After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom’.⁶⁸ As Nur Masalha explains, the account that is most widely held is that the Israelites were enslaved in Ancient Egypt, and their escape was facilitated by Moses, and who then continued on to Mount Sinai where the Ten Commandments were laid down. However, due to Israelites’ disobedience the march towards ‘the promised land’ takes forty years. After the death of Moses they enter Canaan from the east and conquer ‘the promised land’. He argues that the notion of ‘religious liberation’ derives from this account – when in fact the ‘Exodus and the conquest paradigm is central to the foundational myths of modern secular political Zionism’.⁶⁹ There is an undeniable continuity between the formation and sustenance of the nation state and religious belief as the latter constitutes a substantial part of the former’s imaginary. By embracing religious reasoning,

⁶⁸ The ‘Israeli Declaration of Independence’, formally the ‘Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel’ was proclaimed on 14 May 1948 and is available at https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration_of_establishment_of_state_of_israel.aspx.

⁶⁹ See Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Palestine-Israel* (London: Zed, 2007) and Edward W. Said, ‘Michael Walzer’s “Exodus and Revolution”: A Canaanite Reading’, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 8.3 (1986), 289-303.

literary criticism abdicates its role in the political sphere, and worse, plays a part in legitimising these mythologies and attendant hegemonic discourse.

In an essay on Jabès and Paul Auster, Josh Cohen, through Blanchot, discusses the question of history after the Holocaust, which is to say the writing of disaster. He asserts ‘we can know the Holocaust only in its unknowability, as the negative which refuses to be sublated into the order of positive meaning...’.⁷⁰ He quotes Blanchot ‘the absolute event of history – which is a date in history – that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up...’.⁷¹ Blanchot and Cohen raise critical questions concerning representation and catastrophe and the near impossibility of narrativising through language. Language itself appears to have lost its meaning: a senseless sign system unable to produce an account or a chronology in the face of that which is unthinkable; the paradox as Blanchot explains it: ‘The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time, never will you know’.⁷² The encounter of memory, witness and language provokes several ethical and political problems. Many historians have responsibly theorised the issue of representation of catastrophe, National Socialism and the ‘Final Solution’. One of these, a prominent Holocaust historian, Saul Friedländer, argues that ‘the most extreme case of mass criminality’ should at the very least challenge theoreticians and practitioners who resort to dealing with questions on an abstract level.⁷³ Cohen and Blanchot allude to the problem of representation,

⁷⁰ Josh Cohen, ‘Desertions: Paul Auster, Edmond Jabès, and the Writing of Auschwitz’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 33/34.1 (2000), 94-107.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁷² Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster [L'écriture du désastre]* (Translated by Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

⁷³ Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “final Solution”* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1992). For further discussion see the first chapter.

specifically that of memory, witness, and language; nevertheless, they resort to mystification and mythology. They do not address the traumatic question of representation, but instead metaphorise the impossibility of linguistic representation as the absence of God. Cohen writes: ‘If the primary point of Judaic textual reference in Part One is the Talmud (*The Book of Questions*, volume 1), in Part Two (*The Book of Questions*, volume 2) as I shall elaborate further, it is the Kabbalah – for writing in the Kabbalistic tradition is the anguished tracing of God's withdrawal (tsimtsum) from the world, of His ineluctable absence figured above all in the unpronounceable letters of his Name’.⁷⁴ Entirely absorbed within the being and the non-being of God, the problematic of representation in Jabès fades from view. The main concern here is the notion of Jewish history that draws a line from the Children of Israel wandering the deserts to the Holocaust. In fact the term ‘desert writing’ that Cohen coins as a form of Jewish writing that enunciates the difficulty of writing after Auschwitz derives from the myth of Israelites lost in the desert, ‘what I want to call a deserted writing – a writing of the errancy of the desert, of the desertion of God and of meaning’.⁷⁵ A history thus formulated based on Cohen’s argument regards a real and a mythological catastrophe as within the same paradigm of Jewish trauma, and actively obfuscates the political and ethical consequences of writing the catastrophe.

The problem with identifying religion as the pervasive, infinite context is that it is made to supersede history. It is a conceit so ancient and powerful that it gains in legitimacy over man-made history. Blanchot suggests that ‘the original rupture’ is anterior to history – and so is the Jew:

⁷⁴ Josh Cohen, ‘Desertions...’, op. cit., p. 98.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

One is a Jew before being one, and at the same time this anteriority that precedes being Jewish and, in some way, history, does not root it in a nature (in the certitude of a natural identity), but in an already formed otherness, which, even so, has never yet occurred, and which must be answered, without being able to turn down the responsibility. From this 'the condition of the Jew' is the most reflexive, and at all times sealed by an affirmation more inveterate than nature, more necessary than it, and from which one would not be able to hide, even if one ran from it.

Again, Blanchot not only takes away historical contingency from the victim but imbues her identity with an absolutism such that the Holocaust may seem like the manifestation of an already defined destiny. This Otherness is anterior not just to history but supersedes nature so that the separation is defined before the being. In as much as race has been established as a social construct – given Nazi preoccupation with eugenics – Blanchot, in the name of favouring the Jew, locates an ontological basis for the persecuted identity.

As I have argued earlier, the notion of eternal antisemitism has dangerous ramifications for the victim, and for the victim of the victim.⁷⁶ The political wielding of the absolute minority – both in the case of the Holocaust, and the declaration of the State of Israel – favours the perpetrator. This kind of discourse partly determines and fortifies false notions such as that Palestinians are antisemitic, or that Jews were causally related to the Holocaust. As I suggested at the start of this section, literary criticism, explicitly or implicitly, carries and performs an historical consciousness. The historical narrative thus constructed through criticism, the chronology and the method as

⁷⁶ Said's formulation in 'The One-State Solution', op. cit.

affirmed, yield consequences in the socio-political sphere. Literature, as much as Philosophy or Anthropology, partakes of the life of political ideas. It is important to trace the historical narrative constructed by literary criticism in relation to the socio-historical sphere occupied by Jabès. A distilling of historical consciousness from the secondary literature is a critical aspect of establishing context. The text's participation in its socio-historicity is evidenced through its reception, and through the ideas conceived in relation to it.

The thesis is broadly structured on two central ideas. (a) I first examine means and modes through which ideology is replicated and preserved in a given critical culture. The primary approaches to Jabès, postmodernism and religionism, oppose history, and consider the text to be an exclusive medium. The critical interpretations favour a version of Jewish history borrowed from the Bible and treat Judaism as an axiomatic religious system. I demonstrate how these acts of interpretation, through a rejection of history and a literal analysis of the Bible, reproduce the ideology that undergirds the State of Israel. (b) My counter reading of Jabès then proposes the literary text as a site for imagining alternative political possibilities, and for initiating, defining and construing progressive ideas and ideals. The chapters are organised around critical parts of the seven volumes of *The Book of Questions* in translation. I work through three comprehensive thematic clusters: exile and exilic consciousness, interpretation and representation, and translation.

It is worth noting here that I do not draw a distinction between the terms 'Jewishness' and 'Judaism'. For the purposes of this argument, both these terms imply an observant, religious identity. One might argue that Jabès's work is not anti-Zionist, it is non-Zionist. There are examples of writers who have made their relationship to Zionism clear, e.g. Israeli-Jewish writer

Avot Yeshurun explicitly inverted Zionist principles in his poetry. There are others like David Fogel who refused Zionism and Zionist mythology, even as he wrote in Hebrew, and did not attack Zionism as such. My objective in this thesis is not to explore Jabès's explicit politics or determine his concealed beliefs. It is to ascertain the historical narrative that underlies most critical readings of Jabès and propose an alternative reading methodology: one that views the Jabèsian text as an event in the aftermath of Statehood and reads it as a site for anti-Zionist and anti-colonial politics. Jabès's text is particularly suited to this reading as his work with metaphors and figurative language is against literalism. He restores the myths, metaphors, and allegories to their rightful place within literature, as conceits of fiction. I read this movement against the literalism of the state.

The scope of the thesis is limited to the event of Jabès's work and the secondary literature in relation to the creation of the State of Israel. My readings are restricted to understanding the role of literary discourse as part of the socio-political sphere at a given point in the history of the twentieth century. The following argument does not apply to Judaism as a cultural and intellectual heritage – if the underlying principle here is one of historicism, I would contradict myself if I were to claim the entirety of Jewish intellectual and cultural production under the aegis of my hypothesis. Ultimately, I am concerned with Zionism and Statehood – and the effort here is to gesture towards an alternative Judaic poetics through the works of Edmond Jabès.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 1, *Exile and Exilic Consciousness*, I explore the construction of exile in Jabès. Forced to leave Egypt for France during the Suez crisis, the notion of exile preoccupies much of his textual thinking. A conceit not uncommon in twentieth-century literature, the Jabèsian exile extends beyond the physical to comprise a figural condition. This abstraction, however, is not one of cosmopolitan rootlessness but is derived from personal displacement and the exilic trope in the Hebrew Bible. A consideration of Jewish exile in Jabès after 1948 poses some problems: most of his interlocutors sever the exilic conceit from the creation of the State of Israel and maintain a narrative of contentment in the condition. By contrast, I read Jabès's book as an event contemporaneous with the adoption of statehood. To understand the socio-political valence of Jewish exile as a literary device (employed by a Jewish writer in exile), I employ the anthropological critique of literary exile. The power of literary discourse is such that it informs public opinion, and more crucially, the imagination of the exilic condition. The anthropologists' critique is aimed at the distortion of exile in literary studies as some sort of coveted state as opposed to the reality of deracination, displacement and forced migration. Taking this indictment into consideration, I argue that in the case of literary Jewish exile, the abstracted, stylised figuration functions as a form of resistance to teleological statehood. I examine the political and religious relationship between Biblical exile and the instrumentalising of the myth by the Zionist movement in the creation of the State of Israel. I analyse the secondary texts on Jabès to glean the underlying historical narrative about the exilic condition: while exile is presented as an inherently Jewish condition where recourse ('homecoming') is irrelevant, the socio-historical trajectory of the Biblical notion is mostly neglected. The authority of mythological,

religious hermeneutics, especially in relation to modern literary theory, is repeatedly asserted. As against mystical textuality, through a close reading of the text in conjunction with its socio-historicity, I read the exile in Jabès as an assertion of anti-teleological consciousness. I focus on his rejection of statehood as homecoming to revel in passage (questioning, inquiry) as the destination. Finally, the sacral quality of the Bible (which holds the land) is transferred to the universal book; the book is the sacred object that replaces the land in the consciousness of the exile. The Jabèsian text, in its most abstract, metaphoric element, resists the closure of colonial mechanisms.

In Chapter 2, *Representation and Interpretation*, the focus is on the processes involved in the transformation of a mythological abstraction – Eretz Yisrael, a region referred to in the Hebrew Bible – into a militarised, geopolitical entity. Of particular concern is the textual methodology employed in the translation of figural gestures of the sacred text into literal realities. I argue that the hermeneutic legacy of this event is significant for literary studies whose primary object and mode is text and textuality. As detailed in the first chapter, Jabès's quest for a homeland in the text, the text *as* the land, and exile as ontological are not conceptual movements *ex nihilo*; they are rooted in and resist Biblical themes alongside an exploration of his own identity and exile. A contextual analysis of his conceptual conceits compared with the socio-political application of the tenets of the Bible yields critical insights both in terms of Jabès's work and the relationship between religious and literary methodology. The chapter consists of two sections: representation and interpretation. Insofar as these are broad concepts, they are defined, and their scope is narrowed, within the socio-political remit of their application. If writing is an act of representation, I argue that in the process of statehood, the chronology is reversed; the State of Israel is created as a representation and

confirmation of the Biblical prophecy. I read the Jabèsian text as against this principle – he takes the extreme view that external reality is illegible and poetic inscription is a mere attempt at deciphering the world. His approach to representation subverts the prerogative of Biblical hermeneutics such as access to causality, closure, meaning and return. I further explore the question of representation in relation to Jabès's approach to the writing of the Holocaust. In the latter half of the chapter I consider the socio-political life of the religious exegetic method and its role in the Zionist movement. While rabbinical hermeneutics has been researched extensively, including comparative analysis with literary theory, the socio-historical trajectory of elements of form within the hermeneutic practice – temporality, allegory, meaning-making, etc. – have been largely overlooked. This section then compares the Jewish commentarial form and its political course with Jabès's exploration of the form. Jabès resists the authority of rabbinical orthodoxy to carve out textual space for poetic injunction that both opposes and supersedes the sacred creed.

In Chapter 3, *Translation*, the ethics of adopting a political subjectivity while translating works that bear witness to moments of historical rupture is explored. As I have argued through Said and Mufti, the idea of the particular as constitutive of the universal and the universal, by definition, as an assemblage of particulars is important to the arguments of this thesis. Accordingly, translation or the translated-ness of the text is integral to the inquiry – the particularity of the translated condition is not ignored in favour of reading the translated text as if it were identical with the source text. I desist from drawing equivalences between the source text and the translated text and read the latter as a witness to the event of the former. The literary text is not an exclusive medium, and the socio-historical stakes are not disappeared, sublimated, or transcended in the process of translation. If it is imperative to

consider the socio-historical stakes of any literary text, it is doubly imperative to do so for a translated text. Translation studies suffer from a niche placement where they are considered exclusively to be a paradigm unto itself. The notion of ‘pure textuality’ haunts translation studies, where the focus is on language to the detriment of context. The only cases where questions of power and context arise are when languages occupying unequal discursive positions. While this is not a concern as between French and English, the historical continuity of Europe and the Middle East in the twentieth century is a critical element to examine. Through Derek Attridge’s theory of singularity I establish the literary text as a ‘set of relations’ – rather than a close object – which is to say the source text is already a translation of a set of structural relations. This approach expands the focus to include structural factors such as subjectivity, identity and context. The discourse on translation can be broadly divided into politically inclined and aesthetically inclined. I discuss some of the existing approaches to this binary and examine Rosmarie Waldrop’s translation of Jabès to demonstrate the fallacy of this divide. Translation theory endures similar contextual problems as in literary criticism; the identity of the author is frequently read as cause and the subjectivity of the translator is erased. I argue that Waldrop’s translation of Jabès resists easy conclusions and reads him neither as a Holocaust nor an Egyptian poet, to produce a nuanced translation that is conscious of its historicity without being reductive. Finally, following the argument from previous chapters, I explore Waldrop’s approach to Jabès’s construction of the literal and the figural. I use the recurring motif of the ‘desert’ to explore her translation of his poetic gestures against teleology.

[CHAPTER 1]

Exile and Exilic Writing for Jabès

*Because the Jew has for centuries wanted to be a
sign, a word, a book. His writing is wandering,
suspicion, waiting, confluence, wound, exodus,
and exile, exile, exile.*

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Volume 2.⁷⁷

Edmond Jabès

Edmond Jabès was born into an affluent Cairene family of Sephardic Jews in 1912. They were mainly stockbrokers who had been living in Egypt since the fifteenth century. His ancestors were originally from North Africa and Spain, exiles from the Iberian Peninsula.⁷⁸ He grew up in the cosmopolitan French-speaking milieu of Cairo and received a classical French education. In 1957, during the Suez Canal crisis, ‘harassed and threatened with imprisonment’⁷⁹ he, along with his wife, Arlette Jabès, fled Egypt to settle in France. This marked the official beginning of exile for him and became significant to his encounters with poetry and language. The rupture with Egypt confirmed and concretised an already existing intrinsic sense of exile. A feeling of belonging, however fragile and limited, was taken away in its entirety. He was not ‘Egyptian’ in the context of citizenship, and he thought of himself

⁷⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, II, op. cit., p. 290.

⁷⁸ Steven Jaron, *Edmond Jabès: The Hazards of Exile* (Oxford: Legenda, 2008), p. 27.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

as ‘French’ culturally and linguistically, but after the expulsion he felt exiled from Egypt and foreign in France. He says to Marcel Cohen ‘Strangely enough, in Cairo I felt closer to – I could say more dependent on – French culture than in Paris. I should add that my uprooting was total and happened practically from one day to the next...In Paris, the earth opened under my feet.’⁸⁰ In his intellectual biography of Jabès Steven Jaron observes, ‘he perceived himself to be the native of neither country. It is as if he viewed Egypt with the eyes of a French schoolboy, while he thought of France as a Europeanized Egyptian would.’⁸¹

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and Israel’s invasion of Egypt during the Suez Crisis made the situation of Jews in Egypt precarious. Jaron notes the Jews of Egypt were viewed as ‘Zionist brokers of European Imperialism in the Middle East’.⁸² When asked in an interview with the journalist Maurice Partouche about his decision to move to France, Jabès says ‘Mon attachment a la France date de mon enfance. Je ne pouvais m’imaginer habitant ailleurs. J’aurais choisi de m’installer en Israël si je pensais que je pouvais vivre là-bas en harmonie avec moi-meme.’⁸³ [‘My attachment to France dates from my childhood. I could not imagine living elsewhere. I would have chosen to settle in Israel if I thought I could live there in harmony with myself.’] Berel Lang, who writes about the implication of the Holocaust for Jabès, is critical of his rejection of Israel as the ‘homeland’ after being

⁸⁰ Edmond Jabès, edited by Marcel Cohen, *From the Desert to the Book* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1990), p. 36. Translated by Pierre Joris.

⁸¹ Jaron, Steven, *Edmond Jabès...*, op. cit., p. 27.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

expelled from Egypt. Lang reasons that Israel does not offer a resolution because exile, for Jabès, is ‘ontological’ rather than ‘geographical’.⁸⁴

Waldrop writes ‘Elsewhere, Edmond states that the break with Egypt was a kind of relief because it brought the condition of exile out into the open or, rather, it revealed to him that his destiny was part of the collective Jewish destiny of exile’.⁸⁵ The displacement did not exile him as much as bring to the surface an already existing sense of it. The physical departure was incidental to the ever-prevailing wound of separation. The event merely reinforced an existing condition. Waldrop recalls that Jabès’s grandfather had become an Italian citizen in 1882 and there had not been such a thing as Egyptian nationality until 1929. Jabès was a foreigner in his homeland and his nationality corresponded neither to his language (French) nor his country. ‘Exile began even before he was physically exiled. Is it surprising that his work is an intense questioning of place?’⁸⁶ For Jabès conceptual precedes actual exile, and with the arrival of physical exile, the conceptual becomes central, or even essential to his writing.

The desert, a symbol of his separation from Egypt in *Le livre des questions*, saves him in the many years of his work in finance. ‘I would venture into it [the desert] with completely contradictory desires: to lose myself so that, one day, I may find myself’.⁸⁷ In 1948 stock brokering is closed to ‘foreigners’, but Jabès continues to exercise until 1956. During his years in Egypt, until the age of forty-five, he regarded himself primarily as a French speaking

⁸⁴ Berel Lang, ‘Writing-the-Holocaust: Jabès and the Measure of History’, in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book*, op. cit., p. 194.

⁸⁵ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès*, op. cit., p. 40.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

Egyptian, his Jewish identity surfacing only in the context of antisemitism. While his political engagements in the nineteen thirties were mainly grounded in opposing rising antisemitism in Europe, his poetry and essays were devoid of Jewish themes. In this sense, as Jaron observes, he was not a ‘Jewish writer’.⁸⁸ Jaron notes that at the time there were many Egyptian French Jews who positioned themselves clearly within the Zionist cause – their novels and plays often drew from Jewish mythology with explicit gestures to the dream of Israel. Jabès had little interest in such literature, choosing rather intellectually to position himself alongside his Egyptian contemporaries who thought of the ‘Zionist dream as only that, a dream [...] throughout the Egyptian period he remains Jewish in name only, preferring to assert himself as a connoisseur of French culture [...] his Francophilia and its twin, cosmopolitanism, only increased until 1957’.⁸⁹ This is in contrast to his reputation and reception in France as a ‘Jewish’ writer, almost a theologian.

Deborah Gruber in her study of the influence of French Judaism on Franco-Jewish-Arab literature explains that Jewish communities in the Mashriq were initially receptive to some kind of cultural Zionism when it shared common ground with French universalism, but ultimately they were committed to betterment of their own diaspora communities and showed little interest in leaving for Palestine. Her claim is that Zionism only appealed to a minority of Arab Jews, and specifically in Egypt, its supporters were mainly ‘foreign born Ashkenazi’⁹⁰ communities who were alienated by the middle-class Sephardi elite. The Arab Jews were invested in universalist ideas of

⁸⁸ Steven Jaron, *Edmond Jabès...*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁹⁰ Deborah Gruber, *Ni Française, Ni Juive Ni Arabe: The Influence of Nineteenth Century French Judaism on the Emergence of Franco Jewish Arab Literature* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015). Available at https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/570/.

French Judaism that promoted the emancipation of Jewish communities, which they found had little to do with Zionism. She argues that in consequence of the French influence, and their allegiance to French/Western ideas, the Arab nationalists distrusted the Arab Jews and viewed them as ‘western collaborators who had handsomely benefited from their dealings with colonial powers’.⁹¹ Originating in this political context, Franco-Jewish-Arab literature, Gruber believes, evolved as a complex body of work ‘that bears commonality with yet stubbornly retains distinctness from Jewish, Arab and French literature’.⁹² She contends the genre’s identifying markers are not linguistically or historically limited, but linked to the influence of nineteenth-century French Judaism whose education shaped their ideology. She locates a crucial difference between Franco-Arab literature (such as Etel Adnan, Nadia Tuéni, Miryam Antaki, etc.) and their Franco-Jewish-Arab counterparts (such as Jabès) in that the former ‘retain their belongingness, even in exile’ while for the latter ‘the Jewish writer has no such hope, his/her work is permeated by the nostalgic landscape of memory and is often imbued with universalist images of co-existence [...] and this ideology bears the remnants of French universalism’.⁹³ Jabès’s work clearly exhibits the lack of a sense of belonging; and there is no hope of a return either to Egypt or a mythological landscape. Gruber argues that Jabès’s identification as a Jewish writer did not occur until he left Egypt. When he encounters antisemitism in France, he is slightly horrified. He says to the journalist Madeleine Chapsel ‘j’avais pris conscience de ma condition juive’ [I had become aware of my Jewish identity].⁹⁴ His work is shaped by the permanence of internal and external exile.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 337.

⁹² Ibid., p. 338.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 339.

⁹⁴ Steven Jaron, *Edmond Jabès...* op. cit., p. 2.

As I shall argue later, this positioning allows for a reading of his exilic condition in opposition to Zionist constructions of Jewish exile.

Waldrop narrates an incident in 1983: a centre for Jewish studies is inaugurated in Paris, and Jabès is to give a reading. She recognises on the podium Jabès, and the director of the centre and the Israeli ambassador. The ambassador starts by referring to the Palestinians as ‘those assassins’ and people start walking out. He makes a few other malicious statements and Arlette Jabès, Edmond’s wife, walks out from the front row along with Claude Royet-Journoud. The ambassador calls the Palestinians the ‘New Nazis’ and calls for a Holy War. Jabès collects his papers and leaves the podium. Finally, six bodyguards see the ambassador out the exit. Jabès gives a wonderful reading, to a standing ovation. In the days following he receives calls and letters from Israel: ‘How could you do this, how could you walk out on the ambassador?’. Waldrop says: ‘But, while being deeply concerned with Israel and its fate, Edmond Jabès has always distinguished between the dream of a Jewish land and the actual State of Israel, which he does not consider above criticism.’⁹⁵ Jabès did not make many direct statements in relation to the State of Israel. He rejected the idea of moving to Israel when expelled from Egypt as he thought of language, French in his case, as the real homeland. In his work, however, he questions the right of the Europeans to settle in the East. As I will show, he challenges the mythological basis of this settlement and locates the mystical state in the text.

⁹⁵ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish absence...* op. cit., p. 147.

Exile After 1948

Biblical exile, and Jabès's personal exile range between the literary, aesthetic, abstract and political. Accordingly, it is futile to try to define 'exile' on its own terms a priori to the text or read it merely as a literary conceit. Some of Jabès's best work – written in exile in Paris after the expulsion from Egypt – is an exploration of exilic consciousness arising from the personal and in the broader context of Biblical exile. The immediate challenge to reading the exile in Jabès is determining a critical framework within which to read Jewish exile after 1948. The creation of State of Israel has generated serious philosophical and political predicaments concerning the axiomatic status of Jewish exile. Derived from the Biblical account, exile is a prevalent conceit in the Jewish literary imagination and one that cannot be abstracted from a history of homecoming materialised as statehood.

In this chapter I shall read Jabès's exile as a textual event contemporaneous with the declaration of State of Israel. The Israeli Declaration of Independence⁹⁶ claims that the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) is the birthplace of the Jewish people and having been exiled for centuries from their land, the people kept their faith through the 'Dispersion' and hoped and prayed for their rightful 'Return'. And thus the mythical land is declared and legalised as a nation state. The document, interestingly, asserts both political will and destiny; insofar as they are opposing notions – one relies on agency and the other on submission of agency – the statement calls for a 'fulfilment' of destiny. It implores the Jewish people to gather the political will to manifest their divine destiny. This move is significant as it reveals the political capacity of religious

⁹⁶ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_Declaration_of_Independence.

narrative to mobilise people to believe in its liberatory potential. This is not to say realisation of the Zionist objective has exclusively to do with religious belief, but it is evidently fundamental to Zionist ideology. Indeed, secular Zionism too embraces the Biblical account for its political potential.⁹⁷

If there is a case to be made for literary criticism to be attentive to political and historical shifts, the declaration of statehood begs for an analysis of the event as entailed by a sacred text. Most of the critical scholarship on Jabès is engaged in an examination of textuality; however, the focus is turned away from textuality's encounter with the political so that Jabès's book appears to exist outside a spatio-temporal context. My attempt is to return Jabès's book to its historical circumstance and study the overlapping conceit of exile – in the State's discourse, and in Jabès's work – derived from a common religious tradition. It is an attempt to displace interpretations of Jabès that locate his exile within Jewish theology while remaining indifferent to the political consequences of the theological tropes as employed by the State. The objective is to demonstrate that literary criticism is not innocuous; it can, without vigilance, become complicit in the hegemonic narrative. Given that literary criticism shares a discursive relationship with the political, it is crucial to recognise the political in the literary method, however indirect or concealed. It is important to create counter-narratives and initiate newer sites within critical scholarship to imagine alternative political possibilities.

Jabès is frequently classified as a 'Jewish' writer and I begin by examining this identity category: the two main reasons for this classification are that Jabès is Jewish (though not a believer or an active member of a faith-based community) and *The Book of Questions* draws on themes from Jewish

⁹⁷ See Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism...*, op. cit.

theology. The commentary on his work, as I shall discuss, essentialises this identity, which is to say his book is read within the remit of Judaism as a form of exegetical poetics. A State-led structure of identification, that is the Jewish identity ‘increasingly portrayed as monolithic, static and a-temporal’ is prevalent within and outside the Jewish community. Reading Jabès as an almost-theologian faithful to the very same methods used by the State – e.g. literality, a-historicity, compliance to sacred destiny – is indirectly to affirm the cause of the State. I argue for an interpretive practice that considers Jabès’s book within the limits of empirical history and as opposed to the sacred modes of the State. Jabès’s relationship to Judaism is anything but that of a believer to his religion. His Judaism (surfacing only at the moment of his expulsion from Egypt on the basis of his Jewishness) is affected by uncertainty and estrangement. The events of the Second World War, his own exile from Egypt, and the experience of antisemitism in France forces Jabès, a non-religious cosmopolitan poet thus far, to confront this imposed Jewish identity and his attitude to Judaism. Through the course of the seven volumes of *Le livre des questions* he rehearses this relationship over and over, subjecting it to various degrees of estrangement and familiarity in an attempt to define his ‘Jewishness’ in and as the act of writing.

I outline the critique of ‘literary exile’ that draws a clear distinction between the condition of exile and figuration of exile in writing. The critics of literary exile contend that an aestheticised narrative abstracted from the reality of forced displacement is problematic as it has the discursive power to instruct public and scholarly perception of the condition. They argue that the stylised aspect of literary exile has little to do with deracination or dislocation and creates a conceptual problem in that it is hard to define who is an exile and under what conditions. In order to avoid the pitfalls of abstracting the

conceit from its condition, I historicise Jabèsian exile and read it from within the political and historical context of its time. While the critique of stylised figurations of exile is sound, the very mode of literary abstraction becomes necessary, and urgent, in the case of Jewish exile after 1948 as it indicates a turn away from the paradigm of the nation state. If the contention is that exile is geographical, material and collective, contrary to literary exile which is ontological, abstract and individual, I argue that the latter is essential to resist concretising narratives of the Zionist movement. I analyse critical approaches to Jabès, mainly theological, that fail to address Jewish exile in relation to declaration of statehood. Following the rejection of the nation state as recourse, Jabès renders the text the refuge, the homeland, and the site of return. Here, again, the critical impetus in the secondary literature is to relate Jabès's textuality to sacred textuality and sacred history as superseding recorded history. In light of statehood defended through reification of religious history a reasoning such as this is complicit in sustaining the colonial discourse. As against criticism's barely concealed affinity with mysticism, and its close ally nationalism, I read Jabès's text in conjunction with the land, the text itself as the land, and textuality as a form of homecoming.

Perpetual Exile

*I am in the book. The book is my world, my country, my roof,
and my riddle. The book is my breath and my rest.*

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I.⁹⁸

In Jabès a resistance permeates the literary instinct that rejects both the notion of a territory and a resolution. Waldrop writes of his rhythm ‘of question and answer, question and further question, question and commentary, commentary on commentary and, later, aphorism after aphorism. [...] Not a dialectic aiming for synthesis, but an open-ended spiralling.’⁹⁹ In Jabès, to anticipate a response is to misread the question – the answer can only consist of a deferred return to another question. Totality of the book is broken apart and broken into; it resists closure at all costs. Though questioning is the most pressing, urgent impulse in Jabès’s poetics, he writes in opposition to the fundamental objective of a question. The repetitive, and persistent interrogation is betrayed by an attachment to deferral and non-arrival. Survival of the question is dependent on wandering as a principle – an answer, or its prospect, can eliminate the question.

The gesture that underlies the inconsolable question and the rejection of a resolution constitutes the idea of exile in Jabès. The exilic condition is irreconcilable because a redress is not sought. This is not to say the experience is coveted, but it is not one that can be placated. Jabès undoes the possessive continuity of the self and a place; he disputes the validity of conclusions such

⁹⁸ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 31.

⁹⁹ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 74.

as that being born in a country makes the country one's own, or that citizenship implies belonging.

He reconfigures the idea of exile which is invariably linked to a spatial construction. If a tangible place where one 'comes from' is one's native and to be exiled is to be expelled to an 'elsewhere' with no possibility of return, Jabès's poetics of exile, I shall argue, is not to do with a site or place. When exile is conceptually severed from a location it becomes an absolute condition lacking a concrete site of origin. Jabès's work engages and contends with an abstracted form of exile that makes no claims to a place and locates the book as the site of return and origin. He says in an interview with Philippe Boyer: 'My books are for me both a place of passage and the only place where I might live. Isn't it surprising that the word of God should come from the desert, that one of the names of God in Hebrew should be PLACE, and that the book should have been lived as the place of the word by the Jews for millennia?'¹⁰⁰ A claim of the self to a place, or the claim of a place to the self is made absurd so that belonging is never a given, and unrelated to where one was born or raised. He writes: 'My trees are flamboyant and the date tree. My flower is jasmine; my river is the Blue Nile. My deserts, the sand and flint of Africa. Do I have the right to consider them mine because they entered my pupils and my heart, and because my mouth trumpets them forth?'¹⁰¹ In Jabès, sight and word take precedence over birthright; the tendency to possess is interrupted by the act of seeing and speaking of the cherished object. Being drawn to something is to perceive an image of oneself ('my trees are flamboyant') in it, and instantly the land, the sky, or tree is made familiar – but does recognition equal ownership? Does affinity construe grounds for a

¹⁰⁰ Jerome Rothenberg and David M. Guss, eds, *The Book, Spiritual Instrument* (Granary Books Edition, 1996), p. 129.

¹⁰¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 328.

possessive claim? Here, as before, Jabès seems to be abstracting familiarity from a territorial stake. Landscapes appear in palimpsestic layers of recollection and reality: ‘This morning, between rue Monge and la Mouffe (after the rue des Patriarches and rue de l’Épée-de-Bois, where I live) I let the desert invade the neighbourhood. The Nile was not far.’¹⁰² The sites are unfastened from their locations and laid over other locales as if places too could belong or be exiled from themselves.

There are primarily two categories of country that emerge in Jabès’s work: the real and the imaginary. The tangible one where Yukel or the narrator ‘come from’, and the one they ‘live in’, which is mostly described in the parlance of an outsider. It is the everyday place of one’s inhabitancy; one of concrete earth and palpable air. As one of the imaginary rabbis in the book, Reb Leda, says ‘For any citizen, the fatherland is the everyday reality our eyes and feet encounter. It is the rock where soul and body are thrown and break.’¹⁰³ A faith in the conception of a fatherland (or motherland) is sustained through abstractions such as patriotism, loyalty and kinship – the bed-rock of any nation state. Red Leda challenges the mythical characterisation of a fatherland to claim it as the quotidian country where one is raised or comes to live in. Reb Leda’s country is one of contingency and accident. The traditional categories of a citizen or a fatherland are discriminatory at best. But Reb Leda disrupts the notion to make a citizen of anyone and a fatherland of any place in the encounter between an inhabitant and the place they inhabit. Any attempt to mythologise this familiarity is interrupted as the routine country too is foreign to the ever-exiled. A sense of estrangement haunts the descriptions of places one is most habituated to as if the intimate and mundane

¹⁰² Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 302.

¹⁰³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 68.

are simultaneously made distant and unfamiliar at every encounter. As when Yukel says 'The country I live in is not the one my forebears gave their language',¹⁰⁴ or when Jabès writes of Yukel 'One afternoon he ventured into the desert [...] beyond the frontiers of the Middle-Eastern country where his parents lived'.¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere Reb Oda says, 'In the hands of this man, there is little soil of the country he comes from.'¹⁰⁶ In each of its figurations the native country is made to appear separate from the internal consciousness of the character; belonging is makeshift and held in place only by the barest of relations. The possibility of total alienation is ever present. Little surprise that deracination comes as relief to Jabès – an external reality that finally resembles a tumultuous interior.

The second category is the imaginary country ('elsewhere') without a corresponding geographical location. The Promised Land is conceptually subsumed by the book. After 1948, as a singular hermeneutic act came to dominate the Jewish exilic consciousness – a literal interpretation of a mythical place into a nation state – Jabès resists the manifestation of the figural into the literal. He inverts the process of declaring a territory through the Sacred Book by enacting the sacred land *as* the book. The promised 'country' is relieved of its definition, limits and intransigence. It is used interchangeably with an abstract 'land', which is transfigured into a text. For Jabès textuality is the alternative to a terrestrial solution.

In Jabès, belonging is a near impossibility. In the beginning is displacement. Exile always is, it precedes one's existence; it is the true forbearer and inheritance. Ontological exile is not separate from geographical exile as

¹⁰⁴ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁰⁵ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 54.

¹⁰⁶ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 125.

he does not recognise the latter condition as requiring recourse; it is in and of the being. Exile is inhabited whereas territory signals estrangement. It is almost inconceivable to him that the construct of the nation state could rectify the exilic condition. The incidental in Jabès – the language one happens to speak, the country one happens to live in – serves as antithetical to chauvinism. Claims to rights over a nation state are countered through a diasporic imagination of the accidental; where one lives is not always of one's choosing, but equally there is no 'elsewhere' one might un-belong to more than here. The country one happens to live in is no more exilic than the country that is left behind or the country one aspires to; the notion of a native country becomes irrelevant when exile is perpetual. What takes precedence is happenstance, the reality of having to negotiate exile in whichever country one lives in. His dictum is not universalist in that everywhere is home; it is analogous to Hugh of Saint Victor whom Said quotes: 'The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.'¹⁰⁷ The exilic condition is not a simple romanticism for Said or Jabès – the political valence of the world as a foreign place contains a critique of nationalism. The ontological nature of exile, and the insistence on its permanence, makes obsolete the prospect of the nation state as a solution. However, literary exile is frequently criticised for its depiction of forced displacement and an exaltation of the exilic identity as separate from refugees or immigrants.

¹⁰⁷ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, op. cit., p. 7.

Literary Exile

Exile is distinctive for its rarefied quality and stylised figurations in literature. Andreas Hackl, a social anthropologist, analyses the term by taking on its literary manifestation as central to his inquiry. He makes a useful distinction between exile as a condition and the writing of exile; ‘exile has always been a form of existence but also a form of figuration for those writing about it’.¹⁰⁸ Hackl separates the particularly traumatising plight of dislocation from literary formulations of exile, which is to say the latter does not necessarily negotiate or represent the former.

Conceptually exile has enjoyed a celebrated history in Euro-American literature, especially in high modernism wherein most of its eminent intellectuals and writers have confronted the idea in one form or another. As Caren Kaplan writes: ‘Few of the writers included in critical assessments of Euro-American high modernism are referred to as immigrants or refugees. Their dislocation is expressed in singular rather than collective terms, as purely psychological or aesthetic situations rather than as a result of historical circumstances.’¹⁰⁹ As Kaplan rightly argues, figuration of exile in European high modernism is disconnected from the experience of an immigrant or a refugee and acquires an exalted, even coveted status. A further complication is that not all ‘exilic’ writers are politically exiled or experience physical

¹⁰⁸ Andreas Hackl, ‘Key figure of mobility: the exile’, *Social Anthropology*, 25.1 (2017), 55-68 (p. 55).

¹⁰⁹ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern discourses of Displacement* (Duke University Press, 1996), p. 4.

displacement; exile has come to symbolise an interior condition, an existential separateness from the world. Hackl writes of such exilic figures:

There is thus a widening gap between experiences of exile as a condition of displacement and some of the qualities the figure has come to symbolise, with consequences for questions of who may be considered exiled under what circumstances. As singular figures, exiled writers long played a central role in shaping the public and scholarly perception of this complex entanglement. They have come to symbolise a very particular kind of figuration: exiles as the displacement of high culture and the most pure of literary heroes who live as characters in their own 'transplanted epic'.¹¹⁰

The materiality of displacement, dislocation or expulsion is secondary to conceptions of literary exile. Individual instantiations of the condition take precedence which then feeds into the more generalised perception of exile. The violent and destructive effects of war, colonialism, totalitarianism, ethnic cleansing, etc., and the subsequent ordeal of deracination is absent from these aestheticised narratives of longing and home.

The exilic figure of literature has been influential in shaping both public and academic perception of the condition. The disparity between exile as a conceit and a condition has disrupted the understanding of who comes to constitute an exile under what circumstance. At least some high figures of exile are also often in exile as consequence of wars, colonialism and imperialism except their identity, gender, class, and other attributes afford them privileges unavailable to the many. And yet the imaginative, the autobiographical, the particular and mainly the singular appear to take on the mantle

¹¹⁰ Andreas Hackl, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

of collective experience. Kaplan asks: 'Can the mystified universalism of such representations be countered by strategies of localization or placement or by expanding the subject from singular to plural?'.¹¹¹

For instance, Richard Stamelman in his essay on Jabès, 'Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile' writes: 'By their writing, their wandering, and their history, the Jewish people are continually in transit through a place that is in reality a non-place, a realm of emptiness that the words "outside", "desert" and "book" describe. [...] This non-place of exile is a region of negativity, the other side of existence defined by the dominance of absence, loss, and death. It has no centre, lacking a sense of "hereness" of presence.'¹¹² The ontologising of Jewish exile erases the historical and geographical specificity, particularly the history of antisemitism in Europe. This universalising, mystical move neglects the situation of the Jews outside Europe, including in the Middle East. In another example of mysticising exile, Kronick writes: 'If God is present in the book, he is present not as the blank page, the possible space of writing – God is absence, not presence – nor simply as writing but as the point, the non-signifying mark of punctuation and the effaced vowel, the erasure that exiles the Jew to silence and writing.'¹¹³ The condition of exile as derived from the 'absence of God' is prevalent in most critical readings of Jabès. Berel Lang argues that the clearest formulation of the idea of 'alienation' and the 'spirit of exile' comes from the Kabbalist and Hassidic traditions. His contention is that Jabès borrows from these traditions to devise a nihilistic figure of the Jew whereas the Bible provides other non-diasporic,

¹¹¹ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel...*, op. cit., p. 4.

¹¹² Richard Stamelman, 'Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile', in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book...*, op. cit., p. 97.

¹¹³ Joseph G. Kronick, 'Edmond Jabès and the Poetry of Unhappy Consciousness', *Modern Language Notes*, 106.5 (1991), 967-996 (p. 981).

positive alternatives. In whichever way Jabès's exilic conceit is interpreted – as positive or negative – it is related back to an onto-theological source. Seeing as these aesthetic, psychological metaphors of literary imagination have little to do with the historical or the political, Kaplan calls for contextualisation of the exilic experience, as opposed to reading it in universal terms. She argues for countering abstracted mystification through historicising notions of 'home' and 'away' in the 'production of both critical and literary discourses'.¹¹⁴ Kaplan includes criticism in her analyses of the literary – she believes that critical assessments of Euro-American modernism have failed to historicise exile – and this is crucial as it establishes a continuity between critical methodology and the political and historical context of its practice. This is not merely an ethical argument; to understand the work of literary criticism, it is essential to recognise the discursive potential of literature and its role in the conception and production of knowledge. As thinkers like Hackl and Kaplan, and several postcolonial theorists have shown, literary discourse has played a significant role in constituting the idea of exile, and in conceptualising various other conditions arising directly out of the political.

Critical literary practice bears the responsibility to historicise the narratives it perpetuates. There is, however, no one way to historicise a literary phenomenon; every context and trope demands its own analysis, and this relationship is rarely linear. While Hackl and Kaplan argue against abstraction (in the sense of abstracting away from the lived condition of exile), keeping in mind their imperative to historicise, I want to argue in favour of literary abstraction as a mode of subversion. Jewish exile or the Jewish diaspora refers to the dispersion of Israelites out of their homeland – Land of Israel – and their settling in different parts of the world. The Israeli Declaration of

¹¹⁴ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel...*, op. cit., p. 7.

Independence, declaring the return of the Jews to their promised land claims, ‘In the Land of Israel this people came into existence’ and ‘after being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion’.¹¹⁵ Daniel Boyarin argues that the declaration ‘begins with an imaginary autochthony and ends with the triumphant return of the People to their natural Land, making them “re-autochthonized”’.¹¹⁶ The ‘imaginary’ is significant here as the declaration derives an account of indigeneity, exile and return from the Bible.

Mythology is largely a work of imagination; its creation and sustenance demand the effort of abstraction. In the case of statehood the mythical is reconstructed in the factual and the consequence of mythological events is manifest in a political temporality. Jewish exile corresponds to a mythical history of a people severed from their land but does not necessarily coincide with exile as displacement or deracination.¹¹⁷ Boyarin argues that *Galut* (exile in Hebrew) may be reconceptualised as an ontological category: ‘Because of *Galut Haschechina*, the central notion that *Galut* is not only a political situation of the Jews, but a condition of the world, the condition of the broken world. So, it is the sense of brokenness, and broken heartedness.’ He adds: ‘I’m not saying that most Jews historically thought that way about themselves. But it seems like one of the productive forces in the creation of what we understand as the historical, progressive, leftist tendency among Jews.’¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ See https://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm.

¹¹⁶ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, ‘Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity’, *Critical Inquiry*, 19.4 (1993), 693-725 (p. 718).

¹¹⁷ That Jewish exile is not comparable to dislocation has prompted thinkers like Judith Butler, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin to propose ‘Diaspora’ as an alternative paradigm to exile.

¹¹⁸ David Boyarin (in conversation with Ilan Gur-Ze’Ev), ‘Judaism, Post-colonialism and Diasporic Education in the Era of Globalization’, *Policy Futures in Education*, 8.3/4 (2010), 346-357 (p. 347). Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.3.346>.

Boyarin's formulation obtains the radical interpretation through an act of counter-imagination. It imagines exile as simply a feature that can prevail within and without the nation state and professes political hope.

Jabès conceives of exile as permanent and repudiates the notion of a resolution and its consonant, homecoming; he imagines writing as the return and the text as the homeland. In the terms set by statehood, where imagination has been repurposed as memory (in as much as faith itself is the greatest imaginary feat) Jabès's counter abstraction serves as a 'productive, progressive force'. The grand movements of the Sacred Text based on which the political trajectory of the State of Israel is charted – return, exodus, exile – are altered into literary acts. The high level of abstraction in this translational process functions as a bulwark against literal mechanisms of the State. The imaginary history is reversed through an even greater gesture of imagination. The abstractness of his conjuration preserves the conceit: as Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin have argued,¹¹⁹ there must be a provision for the Jews to profess an attachment to the 'Land' while recognising the rights of Palestinians to their land 'on the basis of real, unmysterious political claims'.¹²⁰ Jabès sustains the abstraction in its absolute abstractness and goes much further than the Boyarin brothers in asserting the sovereignty of imagination by replacing Land with the text. The highly stylised literary conceit in Jabès reverses the literal figuration of the State and liberates the imagination from its strangle-hold. He isolates the symbolism of Jewish exile and subverts the Zionist solution by locating the return in the book. He makes an intervention in the literary and

¹¹⁹ While I agree with their differentiation between mystified and political indigeneity, I do not always agree with some of their arguments regarding Jewish indigenous claims to the land – the details of which are beyond the remit of this argument.

¹²⁰ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, 'Diaspora...', op. cit., p. 715.

the political sphere by reformulating the Land of the book as the land *as* the book.

The response to statehood was not uniformly in favour across the Jewish literary landscape after 1948. The loss of an essential imaginary terrain caused a disruption – as Ezrahi argues,¹²¹ the right to an attachment to this mythical land was wrenched away as it morphed into a settler colonial State infringing on the rights of its native inhabitants. As she explains, the declaration of State of Israel had a huge impact on modern Jewish writing – the Holy Land that was out of reach for over two thousand years was reified into a nation state; an apparition was stolen from and of its imagination and fixed within the reality of borders. An endless journey was recalibrated into a real destination, the mythological Jewish exile had found material ground beneath its lament. She writes:

The deep structure of *provisionality*, of an exile theologically constructed between the ancient memory of domicile and the messianic vision of an endlessly deferred return, once introduced into ‘political, “historical” time and place, generates more than one set of grammars.’ [...] Repudiating mimetic culture in favour of a reclamation of “original space” also activates, at the deepest level, a mechanism for renouncing the workings of imagination, the invention of alternative worlds, to replace them with the recovery of what is perceived as the bed rock of the collective self.¹²²

At issue here is the loss of the imaginary – the multiplicity of modes, manners, selves – in favour of an authoritarian manifestation of the literal. As Ezrahi argues, the State demands that the collective psyche recalibrate its origin as

¹²¹ See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage...*, op. cit.

¹²² Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage...*, op. cit., p. 4.

stemming from a physical place, territorial annexation as the root of its identity. The State claims its legitimacy by insisting on a collective desire to return to the 'origin' at the same time as the collective is forced to imagine a common origin and a contrived kinship. Mourning the loss of the abstract, and the fictional is not comparable to the trauma endured by Palestinians; this is not an argument that locates loss on both sides. The purpose here is to oppose the State's colonial enterprise deriving legitimacy from a mythological site revered for centuries, but also to assert the significance of the figurative over the literal against the homogeneity purported by the Zionist discourse.

To the extent statehood demands imaginative labour and ascertaining a site of origin is an imaginative act, Jabès sets out the possibilities for a counter-imaginative act to subvert the literal. If the critics of modernist literary exile have railed against stylised distortions of real ordeals, it is because the ordeal is an event of recorded history. Jewish exile, on the other hand, is a mythological account employed as propaganda by the State to sustain its colonial enterprise. Writers like Jabès and Ezrahi have argued against literal interpretations of the figural to counter the legitimisation of mythological exile that has resulted in Palestinian dispossession. Every subjective construction of Jewish literary exile imagines an alternative to external, tangible statehood. In the context of Jewish literature after 1948 literary abstraction is necessary praxis to resist the colonial objective.

Mythological Exile

Berel Lang in his essay *Writing-the-Holocaust: Jabès and the Measure of History* writes:

The reader's questions here, in fact, may well usurp the questions of the text: *Is there reason to admit the description of the Jew as alien, as outsider, as continually beset – what the historian Salo Baron titled, with a noticeable edge, the 'lachrymose conception of Jewish history?' Is there evidence (on the second side) for thinking of language itself as a divisive or alien presence, as intrinsically endangered? To be sure, Jabès is not alone in entering these claims. In his view of the Jew as wanderer, in fact, he may speak with the voice of the majority, at least of a recent majority. One important line of such thinking, for example, ironically opposed to Jabès in its conclusions, is evident in Zionist writers who take their starting point the role of the Jew as exile, deracinated, estranged. For these writers, the redemption of Jewish history – a latter-day Messianism – will come only as that historical exile is brought to an end, when the Jew 'finds himself'.¹²³*

Lang's critique of Jabès departs from most other readings as it negates exile as permanent, desirable or ontological. He questions the basis for characterising the Jew as a suffering, estranged figure – the 'lachrymose' characterisation, as it were, mainly derives from theological interpretations of Jewish history. The figure of the Jew, in both Zionist and anti-Zionist rhetoric, had come to be synonymous with an abstracted, ancient and existential condition. As Lang expresses unease at this depiction, his rationale is identical with that of

¹²³ Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 110.

Zionist thought, and therein lies his critique of Jabès. He recognises that both histories – Jabèsian and Zionist – stem from the same figuration of the Jew as an exilic figure; while Zionism is determined to bring exile to an end so that the Jew may find himself, for Jabès Jewishness itself is constituted in the form of estrangement. Lang is quick to characterise ‘wandering’ as persecution which can only be triumphally overcome through homecoming. He bristles against what he conceives as sentimental dwelling. As Steiner explains ‘the “textuality” of the Jewish condition [...] can be seen, has been seen by Zionism, as one of tragic impotence’.¹²⁴ The ontological condition of exile which seeks to reassert itself in its foreignness and dispersion is, to Lang, a state of perpetual incapacity. For Jabès exile comes as relief, it materialises an abiding sense of separateness. Lang’s argument is reflective of a deep split in Jewish and Zionist approaches; the contradiction is especially apparent when Zionism contends with those who identify as Jewish, draw from a common cultural framework, but do not subscribe to its conclusions. It is germane to recall here that ‘exile’, a trope derived from the Bible, was weaponised by the Zionist movement and defined exclusively within the construct of the nation state. Jabès employs the same mythology while not defending its claims to veracity or divine deliverance; he expressly rejects all territorial connotations of exile.

For Jabès exile progresses inward, prevails in the internal self which is also a political act. As Boyarin argues: ‘we are all displaced... being a Jew in a situation where the dominant cultures are not Jewish is a way of constantly reminding ourselves that we are also in *Galut*. And it is too easy to

¹²⁴ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland, the Text’, *Salmagundi*, 66 (1985), 4-25 (p. 5). Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40547708>.

forget that when you have a nation state.’¹²⁵ Jabès is aware that he is in the minority in France – his intention is not to contest the discrimination or erase the marginal status. He is opposed to antisemitism while not viewing exile as an analogous condition. In the same vein as Boyarin, Jabès does not believe that the exilic circumstance can be placated, or that it needs a resolution. Jabès’s conception of a ‘home’ is one that is longed for, always ‘elsewhere’ though arrival is never the objective. He recalls and employs the exilic in Judaism as a mean of understanding his own exile. His primary concern is exile itself and not a resolution; as opposed to Lang, who not only perceives exile strictly within a Zionist framework but can only imagine a solution in terms of a nation state. Lang reads Jabès’s Jew as passive and submissive, a pitiful negative to the decisive and purposeful Jew of the Zionist movement.

Lang’s reading is an exception as he is overtly political and explicitly rejects the exilic conceit. A large part of the scholarship on Jabès affirms his exile and explicates a theological basis for it. Richard Stamelman asserts that ‘the withdrawal of God as the precondition for Creation informs several of Jabès’s images of exile’.¹²⁶ He argues that the absence of God is reiterated through the seven volumes of *The Book of Questions* in such a manner that God comes to constitute a form of presence. What Stamelman means and pursues is an enactment of God in all the absences marked by Jabès. While Stamelman grants Jabès a rejection of God, he does not endorse the rejection of religion that can account for the absence of such a God.¹²⁷ Religious methodology can posit a temporary absence of God as his presence is a given;

¹²⁵ David Boyarin in conversation with Ilan Gur-Ze’Ev, ‘Judaism, Post-colonialism...’, op. cit., p. 347.

¹²⁶ Richard Stamelman, ‘Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile’, in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book...*, op. cit., p. 104.

¹²⁷ Tsimtsum: a Lurianic concept which explains the withdrawal of God, a prerequisite of the process of Creation.

absence is the aberration, presence is the enduring truth. Stamelman applies a similar logic to Jabès's text: the absence of God is temporary abdication, and not a negation of his presence; absence can only be defined within the limits of God's granted presence. For Kronick, the destruction of the Tablets of Law 'serves as the master story, the parable, for most readings of Jabès, including Derrida's¹²⁸ and Blanchot's. It is a parable of writing as the exile from the Word of God and as the secondariness of the commented text.'¹²⁹ A critical feature of Jabès's poetics is his severance of the signifier from the signified. He creates a wandering sign system without a fixed object.¹³⁰ However, these theological readings assign divine referents to the rifts and fissures in the text. The prevailing perspective on Jabès is that his work carves out a place and a method for Jewish writing in opposition to Christian logocentricity. His resistance to literality and weaponised mythology is absorbed within the duel between Jewish and Christian approaches to writing.

Jabès's subversive mechanisms are characterised as a defiance of 'Christian' textual practices. For instance Susan Handelman states 'the "play of difference" advocated by Derrida is the torment of the Christian thinker, the unacceptable exile'.¹³¹ The Jews, on the other hand, 'are so strangely at home in exile, in the play of signs, in the wanderings of figurative language, and in their own constant physical wanderings'.¹³² Kronick, Stamelman,

¹²⁸ Derrida's reading of Jabès is not purely theological, as I argue later in the chapter.

¹²⁹ Joseph G. Kronick, 'Edmond Jabès and the Poetry of the Jewish Unhappy Consciousness', *Modern Language Notes*, 106.5 (1991), 967-996 (p. 988).

¹³⁰ The same gesture that he extends to severing exile from place, or the sacred site from a territorial cognate.

¹³¹ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses, The emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 120.

¹³² Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses, The emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 120.

Handelman, even Blanchot,¹³³ unlike Lang, affirm Jabès's exile, and in principle this position appears to contradict the Zionist discourse of return and homecoming.

However, these readings are predicated on treating mythology as history, and using sacred history as part of critical analysis. Just as statehood derives from literalising the figural, and ascribing historicity to Biblical accounts, these readings conflate real history with mythology and use the Bible as the contextual basis on which to read Jabès. There is methodological similarity between State ideology and secondary literature that legitimises sacred history, reifies the figural, and treats Jewish identity as metaphysical. In addition to employing a theological lens, these readings neglect the socio-political sphere; the conceits and figurations of the texts, the Bible or Jabès's book, do not have a presence outside the isolated world of textuality. While exile can have progressive political implications, confining it to Jewish theology (or as opposition to Christian theology) is highly reductive. The text is limited to an axiomatic totality that is exclusive of the socio-historical encounters between religion and the world. Jabès uses the tenets of Jewish exile as part of his figuration of textual exile; the mythology is a choice of literary device, as any other; the grammar of inherited lamentation complements that of his literary imagination. This is not to undermine his exile from Egypt on the basis of his Jewish identity, but to read him as writing singularly from within or towards a religious tradition is an over-simplification of his subversive tendencies.

¹³³ Several others, including Josh Cohen, Eric Gould, and Edward Kaplan; this is to say that this style of criticism represents a discourse rather than singularity.

The affirmation of exilic Jewish identity, especially in modern literary theory, has been criticised for turning a blind eye to the rise of State of Israel. Contentment in the exilic condition stands in sharp contrast to the creation of Israel which, as Lang has pointed out, is a rejection of the exilic condition. Anna Hartnell argues:

Thus thinkers like Handelman who imply that the Jews are somehow 'happy' with the condition of exile that has been forced upon them shy away from the fact of the state of Israel's rise, the existence of which was secured by the brutal event that defined the Second World War [...] The physical return of the Jews to the 'Promised Land' seriously problematises the current trend in contemporary theory to elevate Jewish identity as exemplary of the fundamentally homeless, exiled identities that inhabit the postmodern world.¹³⁴

Hartnell is right in that proclamations of diasporic or exilic happiness, often repeated in readings of Jabès, should be made to confront the historical shift in circumstance. A failure to do so suggests a reluctance towards challenging the foundational principles of the nation state. A lot of critical scholarship on Jabès has recourse to divine causality and glorifies exile while overlooking the actuality of the State of Israel. A consideration of modern Jewish exile in isolation from the events of 1948 is highly problematic, specifically so in the case of Jabès, a Jew who was exiled to France from the Middle East in 1957, who chose not to move to Israel and whose work is critical to the construction of textual exile in Jewish modernism.

¹³⁴ Anna Hartnell, 'Imagining Exodus for Israel-Palestine: Reading the Secular and the Sacred, Diaspora and Homeland, in Edward Said and David Grossman', *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 2.1 (2005), 1-22.

While I agree with Hartnell's assertion that to express 'contentment' in exile is problematic after 1948, I would argue an assertion of the exilic identity in defiance of the State's account of a 'return' can be construed as a form of resistance. As Ezrahi explains:

[...] [W]riting the exile thus becomes more than a response to displacement (and in its generic form does not depend on physical dislocation at all); it becomes in itself a form of repatriation, of alternative sovereignty. [...] The forms of textual repatriation, of alternative sovereignty, were *conceptually* one remove from the 'thing itself' or the 'place itself'.¹³⁵

It is legitimate to claim exile as fundamental to Jewish identity if it is defined against the State's narrative of homecoming and nationalism. A confirmation of exile derived from the Bible, as most theological readings adopt, is simply to affirm the State's predilection for treating Biblical myth as factual history. When regarded separately, the Zionist position (to bring an end to exile), and the theological position (to affirm exile) seem opposed – but in effect the latter confirms and perpetuates the former's political contrivance. If the Jewish exile that Zionism purports to end is a Biblical account, plainly to affirm the narrative as though it were a real event is to be complicit in the State's discourse. On the other hand, thinkers like Ezrahi, Boyarin and to some extent, Derrida, privilege the abstractness of exile and homeland to counter the advancement of the mythological as factual. Jabès performs a textual movement that reverses the modes of the nation state. He 'returns' the concepts of 'Homeland', 'Exile', 'Dispersion', etc., to the realm of abstraction, reclaims mythology as stories upon which textual conceits are built and not settler colonial States.

¹³⁵ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage...*, op. cit., p. 10.

A Jewish Writer

Will I answer the absurd question: "Who am I?" with: "A writer?"

*A writer and a Jew, I have been led to specify; less to advertise my Judaism than to
take my distance from it and slip the more easily into the resulting rift.*

Was this mad?

*In claiming both, my one desire – my one ambition – was to be considered a writer.
How then can I explain the desire – the ambition to be, at the same time, known as a
Jew?*

Is it really a desire – an ambition? And if it were, what motivates it?

Unless we put the question differently.

What is a writer? What is a Jew?

Neither Jew nor writer has any image of himself to sport. They are the book.

Edmond Jabès (1987), 'My Itinerary'.¹³⁶

Identifying as a Jew comes with a delay for Jabès. It is secondary to his identification as a writer. It is a command from elsewhere ('I have been led to specify'), followed by a qualification that it is not to announce his Judaism but to separate himself from it to move into the resulting rift. His Jewishness is constituted through apprehension, vacillation and a measured inference of persecution. A breach is visible in the continuity of identity and the self – the immediacy of identifying as a writer is interrupted, the gesture is paused, and his Jewishness is claimed gradually at the same time as his desire

¹³⁶ Edmond Jabès, 'My Itinerary', *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 12.1 (1987), 3-12 (p. 3). Translated by Rosemarie Waldrop. Available at <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol12/iss1/2/>.

to claim the nomination is examined. Jabès most strongly identifies with the ‘otherness’ in and of the Jewish condition. His individual separateness from Jewish identity counters and complements this political otherness. He opposes discrimination, at the same time as he does not negate the difference in the name of universalism (though many of his readers misunderstand his equating the writer with the Jew as a universalising move and accuse him of minimising the persecution). What he has most in common with being a Jew is the condition of difference – the split is where the ‘I’ slips into most easily. The ontological ‘I’ primarily identifies as a writer; the Jew and the writer share a similar trajectory: neither has an image of himself except as and in the book. A writer *is* in the act of his writing the book, and the Jew is a Jew through the sacred book¹³⁷ – neither has an image of himself exclusive of this defining relationship. Though Jabès sets up these identities as nearly vying for a claim over the self, he charts a path into Jewishness through his most familiar, intimate version of himself, of that of a writer. His position as a writer is the means by which to acquaint himself with his Jewishness – in finding similarities and resonances in the two conditions he anchors his Jewish identity.

The social construction and affirmation of religious identity require acts of will such as conviction, allegiance, a repeated affirmation that one belongs to, or one *is* of such and such faith. Jabès, an atheist raised in a secular family, never having practised faith in formal or community contexts, had not encountered Judaism or his own Jewishness until the moment of exile. His closest encounter with religion was not one of revelation but of alienation and discrimination. While religious commentary perpetuates faith as a miraculous

¹³⁷ Jabès subverts this idea of the ‘race born of the book’ which I discuss later in the chapter.

mechanism, a religious identity is most strongly upheld, rightly so, under the threat of persecution. It is then conceivable that Jabès's Judaism stems from a combination of atheism and an experience of antisemitism. His approach is stuttered, delayed, and the desire to identify as a Jew comes as a surprise, and it is defined outside the framework of faith. He deciphers his Jewishness through deducing an analogy with the condition of the writer – he writes that it is the 'same waiting, same hope, same wearing out.'¹³⁸ Elsewhere 'the impossibility of writing, which paralyses every writer' is the same as the 'impossibility of being Jewish, which has for two thousand years rocked the people of that name.'¹³⁹ Jabès here expresses both the difficulty *of* being Jewish and *in* being Jewish: the reference here is to both a history of persecution and his personal struggle with faith and identity. He tells Waldrop that the fact of his Jewishness dawns on him quite powerfully only in the moment of his exile. As I have argued earlier, Jabès was not a practising Jew, or a believer, nor was he a 'Jewish' writer, in the same way as his contemporaries. As Gruber and Jaron explain, he was a Franco-phone, cosmopolitan Cairene whose Jewish identity only surfaced during the protests against the rise of antisemitism in Europe – already visible here is a simultaneity of an assertion of his identity and persecution.

A lot of the scholarship on Jabès is disposed to a reading of him primarily as a European Jew, or as Israel-Pelletier puts it 'a Jew in the world'¹⁴⁰ (which for all purposes means Europe) – and therefore much of the analysis has involved reading his work in the direct shadow of the Holocaust and from

¹³⁸ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 122.

¹³⁹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 223.

¹⁴⁰ Aimée Israel-Pelletier. 'Edmond Jabès, Jacques Hassoun, and Melancholy: The Second Exodus in the Shadow of the Holocaust', *Modern Language Notes*, 123.4 (2008), 797-818 (p. 799). Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29734433>.

within the frame of persecution in Europe in the twentieth century. The near absence of Egypt and the socio-literary-political context of the Middle East lends a strange spectrality to these readings as if Jabès comes to be only in the moment of his arrival in Europe. This sense of sudden materialisation is particularly apparent in the acutely theological readings where he is almost a mystical figure bereft of history or context. The inevitable confrontation with his Jewish identity occurs at the moment of his exile; it comes as the clearest confirmation, and this distressing certainty must now contend with a prevailing ambivalence. He draws on the process of writing to traverse the gap between the reification of an identity in response to intolerance, and an internal fluctuation; the book is a way to discern his two-part Jewishness, that under duress and that in doubt. While the symbolism of the book and textuality in Judaism is alluded to, the comparison itself is neither religious nor theological; textuality serves as an instrument of inference in the construction of a self. As the opening line of the *Book of Questions* reads, ‘you are the one who writes and the one who is written’.¹⁴¹

Handelman, one of Jabès’s important interlocutors, is credited with initiating an original approach in modern literary theory in her book *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*. She constructs a theological genealogy for modern literary interpretive practices in the tradition of exegetical literary criticism, such as the works of Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Geoffrey Hartman and Norman Finkelstein. She reads Jabès in light of the theories formulated in her book. The theoretical foundation is religious, and Jabès is implicated as some sort of a religious

¹⁴¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 11.

poet. She argues that Jabès's equating the Jew with the writer is not simply figurative:

[...] the identification of the Jew and writer is not, for Jabès, merely a convenient analogy or apt metaphor; it is the essence of his vision. In a godless century stunned by its glimpse of the void, Jabès uncovers the haunting ghosts of theology long thought to have been laid to rest.¹⁴²

If the comparison of the writer and the Jew is not an analogy, the purpose then, as stated by Handelman, is to excavate a theological basis for the act of writing. Her reasoning derives from her conjecture in *Slayers of Moses* that modern interpretive practice is rooted in rabbinical exegesis. The gesture claims Jabès for Jewish theology and takes the liberty of asserting his Jewish identity while undermining the complex continuity of identification and alienation in his work. She uses the term 'heretic hermeneutic' to characterise Jabès's practice and explains that it is 'a complex of identifying with the text and its displacement. Jabès's book is precisely this identification with the Sacred Book and its displacement. The Book is not opened to include even its own inversions.'¹⁴³ Thinkers as diverse as Derrida, Lacan, Freud and Jabès are read within the conceptual ambit of faith-based heresy. As David Stern writes, 'according to Handelman, no matter how vehemently these thinkers claim to have rejected their Jewish pasts, no matter how ambivalent and hostile toward Judaism their feelings may be, they are still part of Jewish tradition, whether they like it or not'.¹⁴⁴ Although Handelman claims to recognise a specific Jewish methodology at play in modern interpretive practices, she

¹⁴² Susan A. Handelman, "'Torments of an Ancient Word'...", op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁴³ Susan A. Handelman, "'Torments of an Ancient Word'...", op. cit., p. 65.

¹⁴⁴ David Stern, 'Moses-side: Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism', *Prooftexts*, 4.2 (1984), 193-204. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20689091>. This article is a review of Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*..., op. cit.

does so only in the works of ‘Jewish’ thinkers. She gleans a latent ‘repressed’ Jewishness in the critical traditions represented by thinkers such as Derrida or Freud, which is then the basis for reclaiming them as Jewish thinkers. The notion of a Jewishness as inherent, latent and seemingly ontological – as opposed to structural – is to pander to essentialism. For many of Jabès’s interlocutors, including Handelman, religious identity serves as cause rather than context. In subsuming the secular text (of the writer) within the sacred text (of the Jew) Handelman purports to show that Jewish theology is the cause and the source of Jabès’s themes. It is not that the writer is a Jew – as in the case of Jabès, who is forced to negotiate his Jewish identity when exiled on the basis of it – but that the Jew is a writer. Handelman completely disregards the possibility of the writer’s (who is a Jew) secular engagement with the text. The secular text, no matter how disruptive or opposed to religious reasoning, disappears into the Sacred Text which is capable of absorbing even its own inversion.

In *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement*, Gary D. Mole writes:

Moreover, Jabès not only explicitly brings together the *étranger* and the Jew, but he proceeds from a conception of the Jew that goes in step (or one resemblance) further: the Jew is also a writer [...] This extremely problematical bringing together of the Jew and the writer constitutes the fundamental and quite extraordinary leap of Jabès’s new poetic enterprise after his expulsion from Egypt.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Gary D. Mole *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 11.

Mole takes issue with the conflation of the Jew and the writer and claims to share the discomfort with several other commentators. He writes that the critical reception of Jabès's construction of the Jew as the writer and vice-versa met with 'reserved acceptance to outright rejection'.¹⁴⁶ Although Mole affords Jabès's Judaism a wider scope than several other critics, he agrees with Handelman that Jabès seeks the 'faith in heresy, and the heresy in faith'.¹⁴⁷ The heresy, as I have argued earlier, is understood as a form of faith as both (faith and heresy) are identified as rooted in an ontological Jewishness of the subject and the methodology of Jabès's atheism is declared essentially Jewish. Mole contends that Jabès articulates a kind of *atheology*, as opposed to atheism, in which 'the only proper response to the vacancy of God is the vacancy of the self'.¹⁴⁸ The assumption, yet again, is faith. God's absence is an aberration and not a rejection. For Mole, Jabès's Judaism is an aberration, or a breach; one that is nevertheless not given to nihilism or repudiation. Mole argues that Jabès's atheism is a kind of (a)religious creed in itself. The alternating movement of rejecting Jabès's position and reclaiming him for the tradition neglects the socio-political consequence of both religious essentialism and atheism. Mole goes on to characterise Jabès as a 'metaphorical Auschwitz survivor'.¹⁴⁹ He draws out a definitive connection between *Le livre des questions* and the Shoah: 'I wish to look at a number of circumstantial comments by Jabès in which he explicitly indicates the orientation of his writing in relation to Auschwitz.'¹⁵⁰ However, *Le livre des questions* itself does not mention the Shoah; the protagonists are both survivors but the story is never told; the event conjures itself up in the mind of the reader as Jabès lays out a textual

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

landscape that alludes to it. It is impossible to deny the trace of the Shoah in the text, but the coherence is not straightforward or deterministic. Having inscribed Jabès exclusively within the Jewish context, Mole reads his exile as the historical condition of the Jew: 'For Jabès, personal and ontological exile thus become allied with the historical condition of the Jew, the diaspora and the Shoah.'¹⁵¹ Mole not only conflates the Shoah with the diasporic exile of the Jews – the former a recorded catastrophe and the latter a Biblical myth – he examines the Jabèsian text as a witness report rather than literary representation.¹⁵² He criticises Jabès for his problematic use of Jewish history and states that while some critics have found Jabès's account¹⁵³ of the Shoah acceptable, others have accused him of an 'objectionable use of the Shoah'¹⁵⁴ and of distorting Judaism. He quotes Lang who argues that Jabès 'fails' the Jew, language and the Shoah by 'perpetuating a distorted view of Judaism (the negative image of the Jew as a wanderer in exile) and by elaborating innumerable paradoxes in which Shoah is dissolved in generalization'.¹⁵⁵ What seems to be at play here is a reading of Jabès exclusively in relation to normative Judaism; his work as an explication of the Jewish condition only to the extent it obeys the rules for transgression. This church of criticism, when it absolves Jabès of his excesses, only does so by marking his gesture as a Jewish trait. The reasoning is slightly contradictory in that Mole, Lang, and other critics essentialise Jabès's identity as a Jew and criticise him for not being Jewish enough. Either way the spectrum of movement to read Jabès appears limited; it is inscribed within a totality that is his Jewish identity and the subversions and deviations are reabsorbed into the totality.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁵² I discuss Jabès's figural representation of the Holocaust in detail in the second chapter.

¹⁵³ Gary D. Mole, *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès...*, op. cit., p. 145.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

The problematic of criticism that acquiesces in religious totality is that it severs itself from a socially structured, man-made world. Insofar as anti-semitism manifests in the socio-political realm, reversing Judaism or Jewishness into the ontological is inimical. By interpreting identity as causal, innate and as confirmation of religious ideology, these critics abdicate the role of criticism as a site for political interference. The argument does not hold as an effective assertion of Jewish identity in the face of antisemitism, and it advocates a normative Jewishness without room for deviation.

The Text and the Land

Jacques Derrida in his essay *Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book* writes:

[...] in question is a certain Judaism as the birth and passion of writing. The passion of writing, the love and endurance of the letter itself whose subject is not decidedly the Jew or the Letter itself. Perhaps the common root of a people and of writing. In any event, the incommensurable destiny which grafts the history of a *race born of the book*¹⁵⁶ onto the radical origin of meaning as literality, that is, onto historicity itself. For there could be no history without gravity and labour of literality.¹⁵⁷

‘A certain Judaism’ in question here is Jabès’s Judaism; though the characterisation appears reverential (‘birth of writing’), neither Jabès nor Derrida admit a simplistic continuity between Judaism and textuality. Jabès’s relationship with Judaism is exploratory, questioning, and indifferent to redemptory tropes. It is not religion in the same sense as faith or ideology; it is an orientation that marks the text as an instrument to constitute the world, decipher it, inhabit it. It is the site of alternative textuality and alternative exile. Derrida reads Jabès’s ‘race born of the book’ to mean more than a Jewish affinity for the Sacred Text. The formulation hints at both the active and passive roles of the Jew in his relation to the Text, which identifies a ‘chosen

¹⁵⁶ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 25: ‘There is nothing at the threshold of the open page, it seems, but this wound of a race born of the book, whose order and disorder are roads of suffering.’

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, translated by Alan Bass), p. 64 (in Chapter 3 ‘Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book’).

people' at the same time as the Jew identifies himself as part of the chosen identity. George Steiner explains:

But the destiny and history of Judaism are 'bookish' in a far deeper sense; and in one that does virtually set them apart. In the relation to God which defines the Jew, the concepts of contract and of covenant are not metaphoric. A narrative charter, a *magna carta* and document of instauration in narrative form, setting out reciprocal rights and obligations as between God and man, is explicit in Genesis and in Exodus. The foundation of elect identity is textual.¹⁵⁸

If the agreement between God (who defines the Jew) and the Jew (who defines the God as defining the Jew) is not metaphorical, then the 'obligations and rights' demand literal manifestation. Submitting to the destiny as prescribed in the covenant is then a matter of will – the prophecy requires an intentional act towards materialisation. The elect identity of the chosen people must be repeatedly affirmed through actions that actualise the destiny of the chosen people that will confirm their election.

Derrida too uses the word elect, but with an awareness of its duality: 'The Jew who elects writing which elects the Jew, in an exchange responsible for truth's thorough suffusion with historicity and for history's assignment of itself to its empiricity.'¹⁵⁹ There is no external divine mechanism; Derrida is clear that the Jew and the text elect each other, and this exchange achieves two objectives. The first: as such the historicity of the Bible is questionable excepting certain events that may have some historical basis. If Biblical historicity is suffused with the 'truth', which is to say truth-value, and not truth itself, then the Sacred Text's events may be treated as actualities. This is not

¹⁵⁸ George Steiner, 'Our Homeland, the Text', op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit., p. 65.

to say the events are understood as having occurred to every last detail, but it is to believe in the text's literality. It is to affirm that the text is not figural, but as having the significance of literality even if the events are not meant to have transpired in a literal sense. The literal, as a value and a tenet, is of great import to the performance of faith. The second: 'history' here is a reference to the history in the Bible which, in the agreement between the text and the Jew, acquires empiricity. As with literality, the empirical here does not mean the Bible charts empirical history, but it has the value of empiricity. The events of the Bible are regarded with the same reverence as afforded to an empirically recorded event of history. The mechanism of religious ideology is such that the values of truth, empiricity and historicity can be proffered without the events having to be true, empirically verifiable, historically authentic. Religion can transcend the conceptual boundary between truth and mythology by simply suffusing the latter with the values of the former.

Derrida uses 'elect', alongside its theological meaning, in the sense of a choice. The Jewish identity functions as a choice – to be Jewish is to comply within the 'rights and obligations' set out in the text as literalities. As Steiner explains, being Jewish is as much to do with faith in literality of the text as it is to do with the faith in the text. Enduring a common destiny of the Jewish people (as set out in the Book) is a critical part of being Jewish, but it is not passive fatalism. Steiner observes:

The deterministic imperative of the promise of selective or ultimate rescue is binding, as coercive as a blueprint [...] Amos's clairvoyance as to Zionism is as prescriptive as is his foresight of Jewish agony. [...] These texts, moreover,

are felt to be of transcendent authorship and authority, infallible in their *pre-*diction [...].¹⁶⁰

The script, therefore, is a contract with the inevitable. God has, in the dual sense of utterance and of binding affirmation, ‘given His word, His Logos and His bond, to Israel. It cannot be broken or refuted.’¹⁶¹ An obligation to partake in a collective manifestation of the destiny is part of the practice. The empirical value of the text is ratified in the collective Jewish life unfolding per prophecy; and the destiny (as predicted) is intentionally ‘lived through’ so the text remains authentic. The literality of the text has much to do with the textuality; the written word is seen as binding and authoritative in a way that oral oracularity (for instance, prophecy that is classified as ‘pagan’) is not. The ‘enactment’ of the text, ‘privately and historically’, makes the social and personal Jewish life literally textual.

Derrida explains that the ‘incommensurable destiny’ relies on an understanding of ‘meaning as literality’ and a consequent history thus enacted through the understanding of meaning in its singular literality, appears to him as affixed at the birth of literality. Similarly, a history is spliced onto historicity, i.e. history is already always authenticated (by the Book), and historicity precedes history itself; and therefore history could not transpire as foreseen (destiny), if the labour of literal interpretation remains undone by the subject. As I have argued earlier, the history as derived through the Book is attached to the origin of historicity and literality so that these values are affirmed irrespective of the need for evidence.

¹⁶⁰ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland, the Text’, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 12.

Steiner claims neither the Jewish endurance of persecution and ostracism, nor the ‘geopolitically absurd, return of a modern ethnic group [...] to a strip of land in the Middle East long occupied by others’¹⁶² would make sense outside the ‘metaphysics and the psychology’¹⁶³ of living through that which has been prescribed. This means fulfilling a destiny, but also reasserting the faith in the text itself; if the destiny remains unfulfilled, the text will have been proven untrue. ‘The canonical texts had to be shown to be true. The price for this “keeping of the books” (for this “going by the book”) has been, literally, monstrous.’¹⁶⁴ Textuality, then, as enacted in the process of statehood, is not incidental or tangential to the status quo in the region. The text is instrumental in calibrating the present and the continuing reality of borders, and movements of people between a return from exile and fleeing as refugees. Jaqueline Rose writes in the context of the opposition to evacuate settlements in Gaza and the West Bank: ‘A minimal return of land – enacted unilaterally, without negotiation with the Palestinians, and promising nothing even vaguely close to a viable Palestinian statehood – is a violation of the Torah.’¹⁶⁵ She remarks that the ‘cleaving’ to the land is not only because it was promised in the Bible, but the Bible itself was created in the Land of Israel, and this testament to the creative, transformative potential of the land. She says of the biblical enforcing of destiny: ‘The claim of the Jews to the land – tenuous historically, all the more ruthlessly claimed biblically – rests therefore on the unique quality of Jewish self-fashioning, its ability to carve fate into the soil.’¹⁶⁶ And textual allegiance was not unique to religious Zionists. Rose argues that even for the Secular Zionists the Bible remained a

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶⁵ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

foundational text. The Sacred Book acquires oracular infallibility and exceeds the limits of textuality to take on the mantle of law, and a frontier.

Book of Jabès

*I have always held that the right approach to Judaism was above all ingenuous.
We enter a book without being seriously prepared for it. In the course of reading, we
take it on ourselves.
Thus the Jew opens his forgotten book. Oblivion is at the root of
his gesture.
Every word, however, every letter, makes him recall previous readings, just as every
place revisited confronts us with our past.
This familiarity with the text is grounds for suspicion.*
Edmond Jabès (1987), 'My itinerary'.¹⁶⁷

For Jabès, textuality is not external, it is the condition of being for the Jew or a writer. Against the practice of sacred, collective literality, Jabès conceives of textuality as a paradigm for existence, a personal continuum of inference. The right approach to Judaism is creative, playful, but also personal. The book begins without preparation – it is provisional, open to incidence, as it is to interpretation. Jabès's approach is the antithesis of the teleological mode where the book is merely employed in the nomination of cause and meaning. The Jew, he says, opens the 'forgotten' book and finds that oblivion underlies his gesture. He negates the notion of 'remembering' – such as ancient memory, ancient teleology, a refiguring of mythology as memory of the

¹⁶⁷ Edmond Jabès, 'My Itinerary', *Studies in 20th Century Literature...*, op. cit., p. 3.

people – by placing ‘oblivion’ at the source. There is nothing, or nothingness to remember. He is cautious of the familiarity he feels with the objects of the text; he compares it with revisiting places. The lingering question is: if a place or word seems familiar, what is imagination and what is memory? Which is legitimate? And which is which? Ezrahi writes of the collective reification of Biblical mythology: ‘But what is “remembered” is of course also imagined, as mimesis takes on authority and license of memory and memory becomes an article of faith.’¹⁶⁸ The distinction between imagination and memory is obfuscated and the conflation is sanctified into a feature of faith. As I have argued earlier, statehood demands collective mobilisation of imagination – the subjects imagine a concrete origin, kinship, even memory – and Jabès rescues imagination itself from its weaponised use. In the claiming of sacred space as territory, imagination acquires the privilege of memory and demands an obscuring of history with faith. The violent conflation of the real and the imagined is always present in the religious exilic rhetoric and Jabès’s book is a staunch subversion of that logic. For Jabès, imagination is sacred; it generates his sanctuary, a homeland in the book. The imaginary landscape is abstracted from the affliction of having to serve as a real territory:

What counts is our will to read. Our job comes from the idea that we have been chosen to perpetuate the book; our distress, from learning that we can never circumscribe it. Judaism is a clash of readings. All of them wrong. All of them right insofar as they are personal. Some are exemplary, yet cannot be used as examples because they would risk weighing down our own.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage...*, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁶⁹ Edmond Jabès, ‘My Itinerary’, *Studies in 20th Century Literature...*, op. cit., p. 4.

The book will never surrender to meaning or literality; it will not succumb to a fixed relationship with objects in the world. Every reading is a different event, and the words narrate a different story at every instance of commentary. Jabès defines Judaism as an act of reading; one that is personal, and necessarily wrong; so, there can be no right readings to exercise authority. If literality is a performance of faith, Jabès performs his atheism through abstractions. He stands as the non-normative, disobeying Jew who reverses literalities into abstractions. If Jewishness, as Steiner argues, is performed through embodying and enacting the contract with God, it is little surprise most readers of Jabès struggle with his instantiation of Judaism. If he is not enacting Jewishness per the book, is he really even Jewish? He writes:

The oldest of my brothers turned to me and said: "Our Purim is no longer the feast of your carnival and your joy. Passover is no longer the anniversary of your halt in the desert, your passage through the sea. Yom kippur no longer your day of fasting? [...] Rejected by your people, robbed of your heritage: who are you? For others you are a Jew, but hardly for us."¹⁷⁰

In some way, Jabès echoes his future critics here. His subversion of Judaism is nearly always rejected by them or accepted without political valence. He is frequently on trial for his version of Jewishness and when accepted, it is stripped of a socio-political context.

Jabès's construction of the text as refuge and as substitution for the land is partly determined by a rejection of the nation state as homeland; a turn towards the text is also a turn away from nationalism. His relation to the text, the secular text, is partly constituted by factual history; it is a rejection

¹⁷⁰ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 61.

territoriality in favour of textuality as homecoming. Handelman, for instance, circumvents this subversion by absorbing it within theology where the device flails and loses capacity for resistance. She writes:

The writer in the modern era, that is, has come share the Jew's historic condition. But it does not go far enough in explaining Jabès's work. For it is not only history that creates the refuge of the Text – the Sacred Text itself also creates and defines Jew's history [...] Jew's special relation to the word, to language, to truth, a relation that reaches beyond any relative historic condition.¹⁷¹

There is an attempt to excavate a deeper, symbolic causality, and at its core lies the Sacred Text. Just as Jabès's textual references are analysed in relation to the Sacred Text, 'history' is sacralised and substituted for factual history. The interpretive act of converting the Land of Israel into the State of Israel; a history 'created and defined by the Sacred Text', is overlooked in this retelling. Handelman's theological gesture, and much of the criticism on Jabès, sits too closely, uncomfortably so, to the discourse of the nation state. Her legitimising of history as defined by the Sacred Text is a reification of mythology as history; a partaking of forced fatality where the present is calibrated to fit the prophecy. She accords authority to the events of the Sacred Text – they are treated not as conceits, but as actualities. It is as if a long-forgotten history was being remembered and excavated; theological imagination acquires veracity of real events. While Handelman concurs with exilic textuality, she treats Jabès's text-centeredness as originating from the Sacred Text; whereas it is a response to a history meted out through the Text. If for Handelman and religious Zionists the Sacred Text has literal meaning, then for Jabès the book is literal – it is the land, writing is the return.

¹⁷¹ Susan A. Handelman, "'Torments of an Ancient Word'...", op. cit., p. 57.

*The road sucks us in thus disappears...Ink shrinks
space down to the letter. You will print the earth in its split
attention. You will print the sky in its diffuse impossibility.
Rectangles of grass or sand, or blue or clouds. The rays of
the sun are penholders which night gorges with ink —Red Adal*

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*.¹⁷²

For Jabès words do not represent things, which is to say, signifier is not *related* to the signified; the word *is* the thing itself. Jabès approaches the physical world as an alchemist – with a pen and a question; he transforms it into an arrangement of letters. The world as interpreted translates into the word. The resolute materiality of objects is reclaimed as spectral constructions of the book. Waldrop writes: ‘Energy, matter. It exists, but it becomes “world” only in the book, in language, which is created by man and at the same time creates him. “You are the one who writes and is written” stands at the beginning of *The Book of Questions*.’¹⁷³ This reconstructive act is not merely performative – when language replaces object, or event, it does so by absorbing their function and meaning. In a ritual of diligent substitution, the ‘land’, a reference to the Promised Land of the Jews, is relocated in the book: ‘We had a land and a book. Our land is in the book.’¹⁷⁴ The book is a sovereign State. For Jabès the alternative to claiming the sacred land as a nation state is to relocate the land in and as the book. Jabès inverts religious logic on itself: if religion suffuses the Sacred Book with values of historicity, empiricity and veracity, for Jabès the most sacred object is the book itself, more valuable than the land. The book that recalls the land is the sacred object itself – the land is a conjuration and its materiality is irrelevant. The book absorbs the

¹⁷² Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 397.

¹⁷³ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁷⁴ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 87.

literality of the land which exists, elsewhere, as long as the book does. The cultural, political ‘meanings’ of places, events and acts are displaced as they acquire a Jabèsian definition in relation to the text: the return is to the book, writing is the act of exile itself; not writing in exile but writing *as* exile. Wal-drop writes:

[...] he claims to write in a new genre, ‘the book’. Not even books. He writes *the* book that all his books are fragments of. As it in turn is an infinitesimal part of The Book, the totality, the universe that never surrenders: ‘*Jamais le livre, dans son actualité, ne se livre*’ [‘*The book in its actuality never surrenders*’].¹⁷⁵

Exile, then, is perpetual as the book never surrenders; analogously, the land will never concede to a singular interpretation. Ezrahi aptly describes Jabès as one of the ‘modern architects and exemplars of text-centeredness as exilic priority’.¹⁷⁶ She writes that after 1948 the book had yet again to compete with soil ‘as the centre of gravity [...] Those who continue to dwell in the book when an earthly home has become available to the Jews cannot, according to this reading,¹⁷⁷ partake of its materiality; their wandering consists in keeping their distance from the Land, in remaining loyal to the ever-deferred promise.’¹⁷⁸

Derrida notes ‘when a Jew or a poet proclaims the Site, he is not declaring a war. For this site, this land, calling to us from beyond memory, is always elsewhere. The site is not the empirical and national Here of a territory. It is immemorial and thus also a future. Better: it is tradition as

¹⁷⁵ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁷⁶ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*..., op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*..., op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

adventure. [...] when it lets itself be articulated by poetic discourse, the Land always keeps itself beyond any proximity.¹⁷⁹ Sarah Woods comments that Derrida's capitalisation of the S (site) indicates that neither he nor Jabès is here referring to the State of Israel. She writes that for Derrida, the poetic discourse, especially of Jabès's, keeps the Land beyond proximity. He 'distinguishes what Jabès's poetry is doing from prophecy and the Site [...] from any terrestrial location'.¹⁸⁰ Derrida is one of the few commentators who equates the Jew and the writer as exiles and follows Jabès in asserting that the Site (that the exile proclaims) is not the land, territory or place, but that which is always elsewhere. He does not interpret the encounter between the poet and the Jew through essentialised lens: 'The exchange between the Jew and writing as a pure and founding exchange, an exchange without prerogatives in which the original appeal is, in another sense of the word, a convocation – this is most persistent affirmation of *Le livre des questions*'.¹⁸¹ The plurality that Jabès makes available in the Jewish condition prompts him to say *Le livre des questions* is 'one long metonymy, the situation of the Jew becomes exemplary of the situation of the poet, the man of speech and of writing'.¹⁸² For Derrida, *Le livre des questions* is also a 'self-justification to the Jewish community which lives under heteronomy and to which the poet does not truly belong'.¹⁸³ The poet cannot belong because the poetic autonomy 'presupposes the broken Tables', which is perhaps to say poetic autonomy and Judaic heteronomy appear alongside each other in Jabès and the rift remains unresolved; in fact he argues that it cannot be resolved. As Woods points out, the Jewish community, for Derrida, lives under heteronomy (of God), and the poet

¹⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and difference*, op. cit., p. 66.

¹⁸⁰ Sarah Wood, *Derrida's 'Writing and Difference': A Reader's Guide* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), p. 65.

¹⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and difference*, op. cit., p. 65.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

deviates in that he ‘does not simply receive his speech and his law from God’.¹⁸⁴ The poet’s autonomy is reasserted by Derrida as he makes his own law that precedes the tablets. In the case of Jewish heteronomy, as discussed by Derrida, the governance is divine – it is necessarily out of the hands of human control and in the domain of religious authority. Derrida is conscious of the logical discontinuity in a divine sanction manifested by the State which proves the divinity of the injunction. He is less interested in teasing out the contradictions of this duality. His focus is on poetry and its processes of regulation. The poet rejects this religious totality as poetry is its own law. Though Derrida refrains from making explicit the political value of his claims – his arguments remain at the margins of the socio-political realm – he facilitates Jabès’s poetic authority to stand against a divine heteronomy manifested by the State.

Jabès’s work traverses a complex landscape between exile, identity, statehood and writing; it demands a careful consideration of the relationship between textuality, criticism and the political. The role of imagination is crucial to Jewish history as statehood is fundamentally derived from religion and mythology which are but cumulative, collective acts of imagination. Literary criticism, arguably a study of texts and textuality, is then the natural site for critical considerations of the continuum between the text (both secular and religious) and the socio-political world. In the next chapter I shall compare more closely the commentarial form and representation in Jabès with the exegetical method employed in religious commentary.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

[CHAPTER 2]

Representation and Interpretation

The Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael), variously invoked as the Holy Land, the Promised Land, or the Land of Canaan, is a region referred to in the Hebrew Bible as the God-given inheritance of the Jewish people. A mythical landscape defined by means of Biblical spatio-temporality and an abstract territory sanctified through acts of collective imagination was reified into its literal analogue, the State of Israel, in 1948. The reconstruction of Biblical territoriality into a militarised border comprised several rhetorical manoeuvres; of particular concern to this chapter is the interpretive methodology employed by the Zionist movement to instrumentalise figural gestures of the Bible into material actualities. Determining Palestine¹⁸⁵ as the ‘national home for the Jewish people’ by way of an authoritative religious text such as the Bible proved a very persuasive mobilising mechanism. Ascription of sacred or divine significance to a landscape is in itself not objectionable (scholars like Boyarin have argued for what can be thought of as mystical indigeneity).¹⁸⁶ However, the transformation of this abstraction into a juridical, militarised, geo-political colonial State order is another matter.

¹⁸⁵ Palestine was under the British administration in the early part of the twentieth century when it was declared the ‘national home for the Jewish people.’ A public statement dated 2 November 1917 was issued by the then British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, addressed to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community. For more see Edward Said, *Question of Palestine*, op. cit.

¹⁸⁶ For more on indigeneity, sacred vs political/legal claim to the land, see Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, ‘Diaspora: Generation and The Ground of Jewish Identity’, op. cit.

A teleological hermeneutic enabled the creation of an ethno-State that oversaw the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians. Often mistermned a ‘crisis’, the settler colonial enterprise of sustaining a Jewish State in the Middle East has yielded catastrophic consequences for its native population. As Nur Masalha argues:

For Ben-Gurion, the Tanakh, the “Hebrew Bible”, was the master text of Zionism and the foundational text of the State of Israel. Like Ben-Gurion, the founding fathers of the Israeli state also viewed the Tanakh not only as a reliable historical source but also as a guide for Zionist and Israeli state policies towards the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine, the Palestinians.¹⁸⁷

He contends that the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, including passages on land regulation, have been repurposed in the twentieth century to serve as a foundational ‘meta-narrative’ of Zionism and the State of Israel. The land traditions derived from the Bible continue to be at the heart of Palestinian dispossession and displacement.¹⁸⁸

The legacy of a settler colonial State derived from a mytho-literary narrative using literary methodologies such as literalism, determinism, anachronism and contextualism has been largely excluded from literary theory. Ethno-nationalist State projects often enlist religious texts to secure moral legitimacy for conquest and subjugation.¹⁸⁹ The relationship between the socio-political order and textuality is never more obvious than when legality is enacted in the name of ancient scripture. While theology and legal studies have

¹⁸⁷ Nur Masalha, *The Zionist Bible: Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 1.

¹⁸⁸ See also Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit.

¹⁸⁹ For an analogous example, see also resurgence of state sponsored religious fundamentalism in India; particularly, the Babri Masjid demolition incident and consequent judgement.

approached the issue in different ways, institutionalised literary academia remains largely indifferent to this critical event in the history of hermeneutics with consequences for the study of texts and textuality.

Said argues that in the late seventies American literary theory retreats ‘from a bold interventionary movement across lines of specialization’ into the labyrinth of ‘textuality’. He observes a principle of ‘non-interference’ in American and European literary theory, a mode of appropriating the subject matter which is to evidently *not* appropriate anything that is worldly or socially tainted. He defines ‘textuality’ as ‘the somewhat mystical and disinfected subject matter of literary theory’.¹⁹⁰ Said’s indictment is easily verified, for instance, by the Biblical turn in literary theory. He exemplifies the works of Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Northrop Frye¹⁹¹ and many others to signal a trend – a turn away from the socio-political and towards mysticism – initiated in the era of New Criticism. As I have argued in the previous chapter, theoretical studies comparing literary criticism and religious hermeneutic practice largely overlook the interpretive moment of statehood.

The absence of scrutiny of textual processes that reinforce the settler colonial project and its particular relevance to literary studies is the gap this chapter will aim to approach. To do this I shall compare Biblical textuality (its alliance with Zionism) and Jabèsian textuality to read the latter as a subversion of the former. The chapter is broadly divided into two sections where the first part will focus on representation and the second on interpretation. The two conceptual categories – representation and interpretation – will be defined in relation to the Bible and *The Book of Questions*. Under

¹⁹⁰ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., see last section ‘Conclusion: Religious Criticism’ pp. 290-94.

representation the phenomenon of literalism in the process of statehood is compared with the allegorical, metaphorical movements in Jabès. I argue that a paradigm of suffering and redemption underlies this hermeneutic propensity to literality. The translation of a Biblical conceit – a ‘Return’ to the ‘Homeland’ – into a nation state partly derives from the willed production of a political reality to resemble the prophecy. At the intersection of the Bible and the socio-political realm, the relationship between representation and interpretation takes on an extraordinarily complex form. If the narrative form is typically a ‘representation’ of an external reality, the process is reversed in the declaration of statehood. The socio-historical condition operates as an enactment of Biblical augury; so then political reality functions as a representation of mythology.

I shall briefly elaborate on the use of the term ‘representation’: In his introduction to Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, Said writes ‘the representation of reality is taken by Auerbach to mean an active dramatic presentation of how each author actually realizes, brings characters to life, and clarifies his or her own world’.¹⁹² Said writes that this explains why in reading the book we are compelled by a ‘sense of disclosure’ as Auerbach ‘re-realizes and interprets and, in his unassuming way, even seems to be staging that transmutation of coarse reality into language and new life’.¹⁹³ Much as Said is appreciative of Auerbach’s shrewd insights, the use of concepts like ‘reality’ and ‘representation’ and ‘Western’ do not pass without criticism. He thinks it ‘impossibly naïve, if not outrageous’, that these highly contested terms that have brought forth ‘acres of disputatious prose among critics and philosophers’ have been

¹⁹² Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003, 50th anniversary edition, with a new introduction by Edward W. Said), p. xx.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

allowed to stand without qualification.¹⁹⁴ There is, though, one qualification of reality in Auerbach, on Said's own admission, that is as compelling as it is exhilarating: 'With the eclipse of the divine that is presaged in Dante's poem, a new order slowly begins to assert itself, and so the second half of *Mimesis* painstakingly traces the growth of historicism, a multiperspectival, dynamic and holistic way of representing history and reality.'¹⁹⁵ From this point onwards after Dante, Said believes, reality is completely historical for Auerbach, and needs to be read and understood according to its time rather than a divine beyond. He concurs with Auerbach's allegiance to historicism, and an understanding of textuality as deeply implicated in the events of the epoch that cannot be grasped in the abstract but only through major political events, and so too through 'art, economy, material and intellectual culture, in the depths of the workday etc.'¹⁹⁶ My argument about 'reality' and 'representation' in Jabès takes on these terms in the same 'naïve' vein as Auerbach's, which is to say without much discussion in the way of differences between unrealistic art that paints a persuasive picture of the world and vice-versa, or about realism as affect, as relative, or even about its aesthetic value or credibility. The concerns of this argument lie, exactly as Said phrases it, in the way Jabès realises and clarifies his own world; and against the backdrop of major political upheavals, and the relationship between his world of the book and the world of historical events. I consider textuality in the continuum of political shifts, and 'reality' here is the undeniable events of recorded history and the implications as such for the writing and reading of literature.

The idea of representation takes on a drastically different form in Jabès. He contends that external reality cannot be represented in/through the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. xxxii.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. xxvii.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. xxxii.

text as the world is illegible. For him writing is an attempt at deciphering and constituting the world. If poetic inscription is the only possible gesture towards deciphering an incoherent reality, then the limits of the sign system are a central concern. As Jabès says, there is much that escapes the semiotic universe: silence, body, or catastrophe; representation repeatedly fails in its pursuit of meaning. Jabès's representative movement subverts all privileges of Biblical totality such as access to causality, meaning, redemption and origin. However, the Jabèsian poetic prerogative to constitute the world is not a relativist notion. In the section *Representation and Catastrophe* I argue that his 'poetic authority' does not descend into Holocaust relativism. Jabès employs a narrative margin that allows the text to function as a work of representation – the catastrophe itself is not subsumed or minimised in the process.

In the next section, *Interpretation*, I consider the socio-political aspect of the religious hermeneutic method, specifically the interpretative movement behind the declaration of the State of Israel and the problematic of reading the interpretive form after 1948's legacy of literalism. The encounter of religious methodology and political reality is examined to argue that the former is calibrated according to the opportunities that arise in the latter. The commentarial form in Jabès is interpreted against rabbinical orthodoxies to carve out a space for a poetic – not divine – injunction.

Myth of the Nation State

Every nation state has a founding myth that endures to sustain the myth of the nation state. As Benedict Anderson has effectively argued, the nation state is a socially constructed community and one that requires constant refuelling; an habitual reimagining of one's identity as part of the group. The survival of a collective construct requires a narrative that is effectively provided by mythology. The mythology at the foundation of the State of Israel – one that sustains the identity of the State as well as the Occupation – is derived from the Hebrew Bible.¹⁹⁷ The Israeli Declaration of Independence or the formal establishment of the State of Israel was proclaimed on 14 May 1948. A Jewish State was founded in Eretz-Israel – or the Land of Israel, a geographical area located in the Southern Levant¹⁹⁸ determined through the Hebrew Bible – an already existing territory known as Palestine, which at the time was under the colonial rule of the British state. Zionist belief holds that the land was given to the Israelites by God as part of a rehabilitative contract. Israel is the 'home-land' the Jewish people were prophesied to return to, and therefore have a divine deed to the land. Nur Masalha argues: 'The conviction held by Westerners and Zionists (both secular and religious) that God and the Bible have given the "Jews" Palestine (the "promised land") in perpetuity is one of the underpinnings of modern political Zionism and Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine.'¹⁹⁹ The religious ideology, however, was not exclusive to orthodox Zionism and was shared by secular and socialist Zionists alike even as they disavowed messianism. Masalha believes the secularists and the atheists

¹⁹⁷ For more on the principle of the 'Whole Land' see Rose, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., and Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism*..., op cit.

¹⁹⁸ Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism*..., op. cit., p. 32. The author discusses the biblical boundaries of the Land of Israel.

¹⁹⁹ Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism*..., op. cit., p. 15.

readily adopted the divine claim as they were able to grasp the political significance of this narrative. He writes: ‘Although many early Jewish Zionists were secular, socialists, and atheists, they were quick to put the “promised land-chosen people” ideology to use for its political value, both as means of attracting believing Jews to their cause and as a way of justifying their colonial project in European Christian eyes.’²⁰⁰

The opening lines of the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel reads thus:

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.²⁰¹

The declaration adopts the Biblical account of origin and exile as the legal basis for State formation even in the absence of concrete historical and archaeological evidence to substantiate its claims. The document proves an exercise in legislative legitimising of mythology. Assertion of the veracity of the myth in a constitutional declaration becomes one of the first acts of authority committed by the newly formed State. As Israel’s first Prime Minister

²⁰⁰ Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism...*, op. cit., p. 31. Also quoted in Declan Wiffen, *Deconstruction and the Question of Palestine: bearing witness to the undeniable* (University of Kent, Ph.D. thesis, 2014), p. 150. The Ph.D. manuscript is available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/30707922.pdf>.

²⁰¹ Text available at https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration_of_establishment_of_state_of_israel.aspx.

Ben-Gurion, a staunchly secular Zionist, who came to be a 'leading advocate of the historicization of the Bible',²⁰² said in relation to the Jewish rights to the land, 'The Bible is our mandate'.²⁰³ The eternal Book of Books is a reference to the Bible, which is validated by the declaration, which in turn legitimises the document's claim to the land. The Bible and the Declaration corroborate and authorise each other within an axiomatic system of religious and State power. The State narrative, counter to recorded history, maintains a coherent continuity between events of the Bible and contemporary political reality. As Jacqueline Rose writes of Ben-Gurion: 'For Ben-Gurion the essential determining events of Jewish history would remain throughout his life the Exodus, Mount Sinai, the conquest of the land by Joshua, and finally the founding of the State of Israel. Under pressure of the biblical narrative, two thousand years of history fall into the dust.'²⁰⁴

Allan Arkush narrates an incident²⁰⁵ concerning a professor of Archaeology, Ze'ev Herzog, at the Tel Aviv University, who published a paper declaring that the Biblical period never happened. He had argued 'the Israelites were never in Egypt, did not wander in the desert, did not conquer the land in military campaign and did not pass it on to the 12 tribes of Israel'.²⁰⁶ The Israeli public was reluctant to accept these findings and, on Herzog's own admission, it was because 'any attempt to question the reliability of the biblical descriptions is perceived as an attempt to undermine our historic right to the land and as shattering the myth of the nation that is renewing the ancient

²⁰² Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism*..., op. cit., p. 17.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁰⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., p. 47.

²⁰⁵ Allan Arkush, 'Biblical criticism and cultural Zionism prior to the first world war', *Jewish History*, 21.2 (2007), 121-158 (p. 121).

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 121.

Kingdom of Israel'.²⁰⁷ According to Arkush, Herzog attempted to make it impossible for the Israeli public to ignore the 'archaeological revolution'.²⁰⁸ Eventually vigorous efforts to defend the Bible and Israeli identity against his 'subversion' led Herzog to compromise on his position and insist on the indigeneity of ancient Israelites who supposedly did not enter the land as foreigners. He argued that his findings, in fact, strengthened the claim to the land, and a 'liberation from the chains of historical truth will permit a return to the universal human ideas of the stories the Bible and the prophets of Israel'.²⁰⁹ Here truth is an attribute – i.e. no longer valued as fact but simply for being proclaimed as the truth – transferred from scientific inquiry to exegetical interpretation. The purpose and import of historicity and scientific enquiry are absorbed into mythology as value systems. Myth is valued as truth without having to be true. History becomes irrelevant when it contradicts the Biblical myth²¹⁰ that supports a legal claim to the land. It is vital to engage and contend with the mythological underpinnings of the State of Israel as the Biblical, messianic narrative posits a 'return' to the 'homeland' which sets apart the Zionist project from other European colonial missions.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

²¹⁰ Jacqueline Rose, while acknowledging the mythical roots of Zionism, argues that dismissing Zionism as a myth will not work for psychoanalytic reasons: 'Insult an identity and you will drive it deeper (for the same reason you will not have any effect on Zionism by simply accusing it of being based on a set of myths).' While I disagree with the psychoanalytic reading of the political psyche, the argument fails irrespective of the premise; Zionism is an ideology – not an identity – and critiquing a belief system does not constitute an insult. Identity-based insults are typically directed at marginalised peoples and communities (and often reclaimed as part of resistance movements) – however an argument challenging the mythological basis of Zionism is not analogous to insulting a community on the basis of its identity.

Biblical Textuality: Suffering and Redemption

In the essay ‘Our Homeland, the Text’ published in 1985 George Steiner wonders just how Judaism found the ‘resolve, life-tenacity, when an apocalyptic writ had been served on it by its own seers of darkness and when predictions set out in this writ have been realised, to the hideous letter, time and time and time again?’²¹¹ This to him is *the* Jewish question. He explains the answer partly lies in the assurance that ‘catastrophe is never unconditional’,²¹² meaning fate swerves both ways and the promise of rehabilitation closely shadows calamity. Though the paradigm here – suffering and redemption – is typically religious, this essay, written nearly three decades after the declaration of establishment of State of Israel, lays a claim beyond the limits of theology. A collective redemption redeemed in a political temporality far exceeds the allegorical and metaphorical.

While Steiner focuses on the duality of persecution and redemption in the Jewish psyche, he also draws attention to an interpretative propensity to read the Bible as prophetic of political and historical reality. He writes of the promise eloquently made at the end of Book of Amos²¹³

[...] the captive, wind-scattered remnant of Israel shall be brought back to the promised land, ‘and they shall rebuild the waste cities, and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and drink the wine thereof. They shall make gardens and eat of their fruit.’ The entire Zionist dream and purpose, the manner of miracle

²¹¹ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland, the Text’, op. cit., p. 11.

²¹² Ibid., p. 11.

²¹³ The Book of Amos is part of the Old Testament, written by Amos, a prophet who preached circa the first half of the eighth century before the common era.

in which these have been realised, are ‘programmed’ in this fourteenth verse of this ninth chapter of Amos’s script.²¹⁴

He explains that through the course of the Torah and the prophetic books which set out the future of Israel, ‘the note of compensation, of the messianic horizon, is set against that of interminable suffering’.²¹⁵

A faith in absolute literalism renders the Bible a legitimate forecaster of the future and an archive. The events of linear history and the mythical events of the text – the exodus, receiving of the covenant from God, the Holocaust, establishing of the State of Israel – are all ascribed narrative continuity, causality and equal veracity at any given present. Jewish suffering, as outlined by Steiner, is a conflation of the persecution of the Jews in the twentieth century and Biblical accounts of exile and slavery – a merging of memory and imagination, of fact and prophecy. The exegetical method operates in both directions: retroactively, and towards the manifestation of a predicted future. Both events, the unforeseen Holocaust²¹⁶ and the prediction of a ‘Return’ i.e. statehood, are inferred from the Sacred Book. Political and social reality function as a text that is deciphered as an enactment of the Sacred Book and history is persistently *produced* through an inference from the text.

The origin of a specific psychological (and phenomenological) ethos outlined by Steiner is deeply entangled with the hermeneutic method that has determined the political and historical course of the region. A legible, direct access to causality and collective reality is a critical feature of religious literalism. A faith in *knowing* in advance the present as it unfolds and the future

²¹⁴ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland, the Text’, op. cit., p. 11.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹⁶ Unforeseen prophetically, but not politically.

as it will come to be renders the world completely coherent. The crux of divine redemption, as it encounters the socio-political sphere, is that the world is rendered unfailingly legible. Whatever the circumstance – chaos, catastrophe or fortune – it is categorised and comprehended within a religious totality. The sacred text dictates a ‘transcendent totality’, a circular system within which cause, meaning, and action can exist in perfect unity. External reality is then reliable, constant, and inclined towards materialising the words of the religious text in matter, event, and even as borders. Jacqueline Rose explains the relationship between messianic hope and manifest reality: ‘it is central to Jewish messianism [...] that messianic hope is material and carnal as well as spiritual, fully embodied in political time.’²¹⁷ She quotes Gershom Scholem as saying the “Jews pride themselves on the alleged shortcoming,” seeing no spiritual progress in a messianic conception that announced its abdication from the sphere of history.’²¹⁸ If viewed as a hierarchy, the social world is subordinated to messianic hope; equally, spiritual progress is measured through the course of a compliant history. The triumph of the metaphysical depends on the course of material reality which is made to concede to the prophetic mandate to secure its legitimacy; reality (which is the socio-political sphere in this context) then has the power to reify the messianic vision. The significance of a constant and willing socio-political reality as a canvas on which to manifest and complement the messianic universe of the book cannot be emphasised enough in the construction of a political status quo.

As I have suggested earlier, for Steiner the binary is somewhat simplistically resolved between suffering and redemption. It aids his premise that establishing the State of Israel, if not acceptable, is at least understandable.

²¹⁷ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., p. 3.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

Though he argues against the creation of a nation state in the name of Judaism, he frequently relapses into the paradigm of redemption by claiming the return to Zion is ‘understandable’ in the light of Jewish persecution in the twentieth century. He does not question the problematic continuity of Jewish persecution and Palestinian oppression. While recognising Jewish persecution and the need for redemption (which is also rehabilitation), he ignores the plight of the Palestinians, ‘victims of the paradigmatic victims of twentieth-century terror’.²¹⁹ He is quick to interpret Biblical ethic as political reality, much as the Zionists he is seemingly arguing against. Not wanting to appear guilty of undermining Jewish suffering, he endeavours to rationalise the Zionist strategy: ‘They [Jews] would, like all other men and nations, vanquish their enemies rather than be oppressed and scattered by them; if harsh reality dictates, they would rather occupy, censor, even torture than be occupied and censored and tortured as they have been for so long.’²²⁰ The wildly inaccurate and almost jingoistic ring of ‘enemies’ might be the least of Steiner’s problems; that he imagines a direct and unproblematic continuity between recognising Jewish suffering and justifying colonialism and oppression is symptomatic of a wider discourse.

As Rose writes, ‘So often in discussion of Zionism we seem to be faced with a false alternative: acknowledge that suffering *or* castigate the injustice of the Israeli State (the charge that any criticism of Israel is antisemitic merely rides on the back of this false choice).’²²¹ Her own approach to trauma suffered by the Jewish people, particularly in the twentieth century, differs starkly from Steiner’s. She writes, ‘what – a people – make of their own

²¹⁹ Formulation of Aamir R. Mufti, ‘Auerbach in Istanbul...’, op. cit., p. 121, while describing the theoretical exploration of Edward W. Said.

²²⁰ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland...’, op. cit., 23.

²²¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., p. 115.

suffering is of course the key. It is part of my argument [...] that when suffering becomes an identity, it has to turn cruel²²² in order to be able to bear, or live with, itself (the cruel ironies of history take on another sense).²²³ She severs the association of trauma and redemption to focus on the adoption of suffering as an identity and the problematic of victim turned oppressor. While the persecution and ostracism of the Jews in Europe has a specific political history, a predestined narrative of hardship, a sacred writ predicting great ordeals, and a religious account of exile and persecution of a people claimed to be related to modern-day Jews creates a sense in which suffering is inevitable, perpetual and disconnected from the political and historical sphere. External cause is secondary as compared with the destiny of the ‘chosen’ people laid out in the sacred doctrine. The trauma assumes messianic dimensions and is transformed into an existential threat exclusive of the context of Fascism, genocide and colonialism.

Jabès’s own conception of the false dichotomy between recognising Jewish suffering or criticising the State of Israel is closer to Rose’s in that he acknowledges the former while also asking if his ‘brothers from Central Europe’ had the right to be there (Palestine). ‘I also told myself that this must be the same happiness, the same joy, my brothers from Central Europe had felt when, after having fled their ghetto (their fatherland which fitted all inside the ghetto), they found themselves, one morning, in the heart of the East, responsible for a piece of land which two thousand years of oblivion had struck

²²² She details an interview with an IDF (Israel Defense Forces) commander who initially expresses remorse for the killing of Palestinian children, but quickly withdraws into a combative mode: ‘I remember the Holocaust. We have a choice, to fight the terrorists or face being consumed by flames again.’ The conflation of Nazi antisemitism and Palestinian resistance runs deep in the political psyche of the State. As I have argued in the introduction, the adoption of the identity of an absolute persecuted minority, irrespective of context, has played a big role in the sustenance of the colonial State.

²²³ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., p. 115.

off the earth. Did they have the right to be there? One right certainly: the right to open air, to the space they had been deprived of. But at what price?’²²⁴ Jabès registers a caveat in the compensatory model of history by severing the Jewish persecution in Europe from the colonial occupation of Palestine. There is a clear distinction between Central Europe as the Fatherland and ‘one morning, in the heart of the East,’ which has a ring of the foreign, contrary to the Zionist narrative of familiar homecoming. Though a significant part of *The Book of Questions* is about coming into the consciousness of being Jewish just after and during the war, and what it means to be writing after Auschwitz, the paradigm of suffering and redemption, or as Nur Masalha puts it ‘promised land-chosen people’²²⁵ is absent in Jabès. Much as the text is steeped in loss and absence²²⁶ it does not resort to rehabilitative modes to justify a settler colonial State. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the prophecy of the Sacred Book is displaced, and the poet’s book is located as the refuge; writing is the return to the land which is the text.

²²⁴ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, p. 173.

²²⁵ Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism...*, op. cit., p. 3, 10, 27, 31, 86 (the author makes several uses of this expression).

²²⁶ Most succinctly summarised by Richard Stamelman: ‘nothingness appears as the only possession, difference as the only identity, writing as the only trace, wandering as the only activity, and suffering as the only inheritance’. See ‘Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile’ in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book...*, op. cit., p. 97.

Jabèsian Textuality: Illegibility

Religious ideology distorts the relationship between mythology and reality. The external socio-political world is calibrated to meet the Sacred Text's prophesied futurity. The order is: text first, and consequently, a world rendered according to the text. Ideas such as 'eternal antisemitism', and 'chosen-people' (to endure trauma as much as to be redeemed²²⁷) are employed in the construction of a continuous Jewish history (e.g. Exodus, the Holocaust, statehood); the text comes to dictate how external socio-political reality will be comprehended, organised and lived-through. The world is already represented in the Sacred Book; socio-political history merely performs the labour of not deviating from what it is already destined to be.

In Jabès this continuity is disrupted, and the world is declared illegible. He differentiates mythology from political and historical reality. He repatriates allegory to the realm of the myth and employs it as a literary device to sift through a catastrophic reality. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Jabès repurposes the Biblical narrative of exile to comprehend his personal exile from Egypt and the situation of the Jews in twentieth-century Europe. He recalibrates Biblical myths to construct a poetics of wandering and a return to textuality. As and when he has recourse to a mythological past, the messianic view is rejected in favour of a literary paradigm. There is a repeated weaving of trauma and injury that resists teleological causality or consequence. As Waldrop writes, 'If "God" is a word his culture has given him, it is also a word his *language* has given him: *Dieu*. Jabès's writing unlocks unsuspected riches within this word, unfolds its sounds and letters into a

²²⁷ See Chapter 1 of Jacqueline Rose's *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., for a discussion of Israel's destiny.

multitude of other words (without regard to etymology and only secondarily to meaning).'²²⁸ Neither the word of God nor God as a word is sacrosanct – the word attains its highest significance in Jabès for its syllabic richness.

The Bible's role in collective identification with suffering is formative; the text represents narrative constancy and restitution. It precedes empirical history which is in turn interpreted to reflect the prophecy. In a sense Zionism negates the distance between events of the world and textual representation so that one is continually calibrated to confirm the other. In contrast, Jabès dispenses with the notion of a comprehensive text as the precursor to redemptive closure. He negates the conception of history as a constant and mimetic canvas on which to manifest the truths of the sacred text. For Jabès, the book is the only tangible act, and it does not consist of a teleological narrative. As Waldrop writes, for Jabès 'the story is not given. God does not exist. The centre is empty. The real world, the "book" of the universe, is undecipherable.'²²⁹ 'Our lot is to interpret an undecipherable world.'²³⁰ She explains that in the Jabèsian universe, when confronted with the undecipherable world, we endeavour to construct language, 'a place where human discourse can arise, and we can come to exist as human beings'.²³¹ The representative act in Jabès is the gathering of signs and syntax to decipher, understand and write through an illegible world. Accordingly, writing is the means to construction and conception of a narrative reality. Though this hints at a relativist inclination, the liberty to constitute the world is exactly that which imposes an imperative to truth. In the shadow of a catastrophe the representative act bears the responsibility of a witness, but a writer-witness – which is to say the

²²⁸ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 12.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

²³⁰ Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book*..., op. cit., p. 141.

²³¹ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 1.

poetic text cannot serve as a report but must remain aware of the limits imposed by circumstance. It is essential for the text to practise a poetics of truth against the blur of myth.

As Jabès writes in *The Book of Questions*²³²

*(The first phrases of the work are always full of
hope. Doubt creeps in and blossoms on the way.
At the end, there is double despair: that of the
writer and that of the witness.)*

Bearing this burden, Jabès's poetics prevails as a process of forging fragments and makes no attempt at a totalising narrative or a system; continuity is tentative, and deliberately thwarted. Jabès remains allegiant to the truth of the Holocaust²³³ and persecution which is at the core of *The Book of Questions*; and it is the very same fidelity to material truth that underlies his reservations regarding the State of Israel. The catastrophes of external reality are registered meticulously, without distortion; to employ Friedländer's dictum, his work is insightful without detailing the tragedies themselves.

The fragment in Jabès, as against totality, is the unit that allows for meaning to arise; whereas in religious textuality, external 'God-given' meaning is imposed to hold together the fragments, to cohere them into a system. As Derrida writes 'The fragment is not a particular style or failure, it is the

²³² Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 61 (italics in the original).

²³³ As Saul Friedländer warns 'postmodern thought's rejection of the possibility of identifying a stable reality or truth beyond the constant polysemy and self-referentiality of linguistic constructs challenges the need to establish the realities and the truths of the Holocaust', see Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 4-5. Though Jabès is repeatedly characterised as a 'post-modern' writer, his adherence to the historical reality of the Holocaust is indisputable.

very form of the written...First of all, the caesura lets the meaning rise. Not by itself, of course; but without interruption – between the letters, words, sentences, books – no meaning could awaken.’²³⁴ The blank space in Jabès is not merely an element of form; it serves as the site on which discourse may emerge. Within the breach, question, subversion, contradiction appear as a mode of constituting the world; a world that is nevertheless grounded in its socio-historical context. Waldrop, through Robert Alter, reads the fragment in Jabès as analogous to the Biblical form. The technique, though present in both texts, in Jabès is made to enact a resistance to a totalising structure.

Religious reasoning provides a coherent narrative and inherent meaning to events, actions and conditions. In contrast, the Jabèsian universe is ‘radically illegible’ as Waldrop puts it; he writes in pursuit of an ever-deferred legibility. As exemplified by Sarah’s madness, catastrophe is incoherent, and not least due to the unimaginable horrors; thought struggles to contend with this reality. For Jabès, representing the illegible universe in the text and transcribing it into language is contingent and provisional; the process of inferring reality is also the act of constructing it. The temporality of destiny – a predetermined event set to manifest in the present or the future – is interrupted by Jabès’s never-ending interpretative movement. The world as is will never surrender to meaning (prophesied or otherwise), or constancy – it can only be (re)constituted through poetic inference and interference.

²³⁴ Excerpt of Derrida’s essay on Jabès, translated by Rosemarie Waldrop in Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 21.

A World of Signs

A feature that emerges instantly in Jabès is the centrality of the sign system. It is here that the representative gesture comes closest to its constitutive purpose. Jabès's principal approach to writing as a (re)construction of the world in the book is predicated on language. It is within the literal materiality of words, letters and signs that the external world comes into being. Writing is both an act of comprehension and conception. In Jabès, poetry – a primary mode of inquiry – is imbued with the same gravity as any given external reality. The process of writing the book is not merely mimetic; the world itself, including the writer, is constituted within the reality of the book. Derrida pursues the idea of language as constitutive in Jabès:

The non-question I am talking about is the unshaken certainty that being is a Grammar; and the world through and through a cryptogram to constitute and reconstitute by poetic inscription or deciphering; that the book is the origin [*originnaire*]; that everything is *in the book* before being *in the world* and in order to come there; that everything can be born only by *approaching* the book, can die only by failing *in regard to* the book; and that the impassive shore of the book is always *first*.²³⁵

In Biblical teleology language is an instrument, and for the Jabèsian book language is the environment. In the process of poetic inscription language constitutes the world at same time as it is assembled; it is an ongoing event rather than a static transmitter of objects or events. Derrida's use of the lower

²³⁵ Excerpt of Derrida's essay on Jabès translated by Rosemarie Waldrop in Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., pp. 81-82. See also Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit., p. 76 of the first edition (University of Chicago Press, 1978) and p. 94 of the latest annotated edition (Routledge, 2002), for another translation by Alan Bass.

case ‘b’ in ‘being’ is suggestive of a process rather than an entity represented in language after the fact. Waldrop quotes Agamben on this: ‘the meaning of the word ‘being’...coincides with the taking place of language’.²³⁶ Derrida writes that the exegetical need is in fact shared by the poet and the rabbi – but the difference is ‘irreducible’ and they are ‘forever unable to unite with each other’. The poet inscribes and deciphers the world; his temporality is simultaneous; language and the objects of the world exist in a dialectic unity. The rabbi, on the other hand, practises an asynchronous temporality; he assigns and identifies, either after or before the fact. Accordingly, the socio-political consequence of these methods plays out differently in each case. I shall discuss this later in relation to representation of the Holocaust and political significance of the hermeneutic method in the construction of statehood.

Both Jabès and Derrida, while assured of the constitutive prowess of language, are conscious of its inherent instability and consequentially, of its limits. Waldrop suggests that Derrida’s essay, published after only the first two volumes of the *Book of Questions* had appeared, sharpens Jabès’s eye to the implications of his own work, such as the limits of representation in language. She writes, ‘For a while the mirror structures of question and commentary as well as their ground of silence are present from the beginning, it is only in the later volumes that we find explicit statements about exactly this ultimate limit of language: a radical illegibility.’²³⁷ According to her, with every volume he becomes increasingly interested in what escapes language – for instance, silence or the body: ‘(“Your body is a book of thoughts that

²³⁶ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 59.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

cannot be read in its entirety”)²³⁸ Waldrop argues that even the limits of language can only be articulated in language:

[...] it proves how enclosed we are in the mirrors of our sign systems that Derrida and Jabès can posit the radically unavailable only in semiotic terms. It is because Jabès's thinking is bold enough to come to this 'absolute borderline' where the signs become impotent, where we can at best *point* or *scream*, that his writing naturally turns 'back on itself'.²³⁹

She observes that it is through examining its own processes that *The Book of Questions* is able to conclude that 'being is a grammar in *as far* as it is accessible to us'.²⁴⁰

Jabès's conceit of constituting the world through the written word subverts the origin myth of the Bible. He plays on the duality of origin in the Bible and origin as the Bible. As he says to Waldrop, he favours the tenet in traditional Judaism of the Jews as a people of the book – though this refers to a specific book, the Bible, Jabès derives his own mythology from 'people of the book' to declare 'There [the book] lies my true origin'.²⁴¹ When Derrida writes 'the book is the origin', he recognises that in Jabès poetic constitution is almost origin itself, as everything in the world begets a name and a word in the poet's book. As I argued in the previous chapter, Derrida makes a distinction between the Sacred text and the poet's text, sacred creation and poetic constitution. He writes that the 'non-question' he is talking about is not as much a dogma, and 'the act of faith in the book can precede, as we know,

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 47.

belief in the Bible. And can also survive it.’²⁴² He clears a space for the Jabèsian book in which to claim its own mythology while affirming its separation from dogmatic textuality. As Derrida is aware, surviving the Biblical notion of the book is to survive literality as a history and Jabès inscribes an alternative narrative of survival in *The Book of Questions*. Differing radically from the moment of Biblical totality in the creation of a nation state, Jabès reintroduces the book as provisional and open-ended.

Waldrop remarks that the Jabèsian book defies definition ‘[he] does not write novels. Nor poems, for that matter.’²⁴³ She recalls that he claims to be writing in a new genre ‘the book’. ‘He writes *the* book that all his books are fragments of. As it in turn is an infinitesimal part of the The Book, the totality, the universe that never surrenders.’²⁴⁴ Already here The Book is not the sacred book, or even a book at all – it is a metaphor for a universe that refuses to surrender to meaning. This seemingly minor device of metaphor-making is vital in Jabèsian poetics as a stance against literality of the sacred book. To Waldrop the constantly shifting metaphor is puzzling. She writes ‘the metaphor of the book does not seem to have one fixed meaning but unfolds new aspects from one volume to the next’.²⁴⁵ She says that the two frequent references for ‘the book’ are writing and Judaism, and concludes, through Stéphane Mosès, that ‘neither is a key to the other’.²⁴⁶ She observes that neither Judaism nor writing are in themselves ‘fixed or ready-made’ realities for Jabès, but ones requiring constant reinvention.

²⁴² Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit., p. 76.

²⁴³ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, op. cit., p. 16.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

I would argue the metaphor's lack of fixed meaning is the meaning of the act of metaphor-making – it counters religious textuality that is both literal and pre-determined. Though Waldrop and Mosès are right in that there is no logical key (if a is b and c, then the commonalities of b and c must hold the key to defining a) to deciphering the metaphors in Jabès, the gesture should be inferred as against the sacralising totality of religious texts. Reclamation of allegory and metaphor is essential in Jabès against the figural interpreted as literal; against materiality of myths; against the purported historicity of the Bible. A seemingly continuous process of metaphor making, the metaphor behind the metaphor, is the meaning and not that which concludes as an object outside the text.

Jabès writes:

*Childhood is a piece of ground bathed in water, with little paper boats
floating on it. Sometime, the boats turn into scorpions. Then life
dies, poisoned, from one moment to the next.
The poison is in each corolla, as the earth is in the sun. At night,
the earth is left to itself, but, happily, people are asleep. In their sleep,
they are invulnerable.
The poison is the dream.*²⁴⁷

As Waldrop argues, it is difficult to discern a conceptual constant; for if the poison is both in the child's toy (boat) and the flower, one might interpret that as 'beautiful, lovely things contain the possibility of hurt'.²⁴⁸ And yet the poison in the flower is like the earth in the sun which makes the earth a

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 86.

counterpart of poison, though earlier a piece of earth was a metaphor for childhood. Waldrop comments:

Not only do the images range from toy to animal to plant to geology, but their logical relation changes. The metaphors cannot be organised into a system where their elements always correspond to the same concepts. [...] we have a signifier that stands for a signified that in turn stands for, is identified with, another signified. A is B is (talked about in terms of) C.²⁴⁹

Jabès breaks the narrative continuity between signifier and signified, reveals in analogy until that which remains is the gesture alone – a ‘pure analogy’ in which the parallels are infinite, and the act serves to focus on itself. Waldrop explains these ‘pure gestures’ are ‘empty signs that expose the limits of signification’.²⁵⁰ Jabès constructs an alternative sovereignty where the figural gestures take precedence over the object they are gesturing towards. These metaphors and allegories exceed the limits of an object or event to assert process over objective. Jabès performs a resistance to teleology at the level of form such that any attempt at integration or constancy is disrupted. His commitment to uncertainty, resistance to resolution and closure conceives ‘wandering’ as an interpretative method. The reader enacts the wanderer; thinking about the text resembles thinking *as* the text.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

Representation and Catastrophe

'You hardly talked about Sarah and Yukel.'

He replies 'It is the whole truth I wanted to express. And the truth is a scream, a stubborn, ineradicable image which pulls us out of our torpor. An image which overwhelms or nauseates us. The fear of lying is the writer's honor. For he is called to bear witness and to build on his testimony.'

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*.²⁵¹

In Biblical textuality temporality of language construction is not contemporaneous: events and objects are either attributed meaning and cause retrospectively and/or predetermined. Contrary to the poetic method of inscription and deciphering, the religious process ascribes and recognises according to destiny (a predicted timeline). This method of religious interpretation, with the power to regulate and mobilise collective histories, is by no means arbitrary. If 'meaning' is divinely bestowed, it is also controlled by religious authority. By contrast, poetry has the prerogative to constitute the world and does not abide by divine law, but the process is not without constraints and limits. As Jabès writes, a lot escapes the word, silence or the body, likewise catastrophe. Representing a catastrophe in the text is to compose the sign system in the shape of the event – but how can language absorb a calamity? Another limit is truth itself – the stable, empirical, recorded event of history imposes an imperative on the writer (playing witness) against distortion and obscurity.

²⁵¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 122.

The terrifying event that in part defined the twentieth century, the Holocaust, is the unstated context of Jabès's *The Book of Questions*. When narrative is confronted with catastrophe, questions about reality and representation grow to be quite complex. In the introduction to an anthology of essays *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, Saul Friedländer effectively articulates the problem. He writes that during the seventies, as many domains of narrative began to open up between film, literature and history, there began a

[...] shaping and reshaping of the image of the Nazi epoch. [...] In these various domains, new narratives about Nazism came to the fore, new forms of representation appeared. In many cases they seemed to test implicit boundaries and to raise not only aesthetic and intellectual problems, but moral issues too. The question of the limits of representation of Nazism and its crimes has become a recurrent theme in relation to various concrete subjects.²⁵²

The implicit limit to representing Nazi crimes in art as in history – the limit beyond which the representative act becomes offensive – is one of Friedländer's primary concerns; the external limit is set at revisionism, as in the denial of the Holocaust. He characterises the Holocaust as an 'event at the limits' as it tests standard conceptual and representational categories; it is the 'most radical form of genocide encountered in history: wilful, systematic, industrially organised, largely successful attempt totally to exterminate an entire human group within twentieth-century Western society'.²⁵³ He argues that it seems rather obvious that such a monstrosity would not be easily forgotten and considering the Nazi executioners made every effort to conceal the traces and evidence, it is rather critical that all forms of representation – be they art,

²⁵² Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation...*, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 3.

literature or history – bear witness and maintain a record of the past. And consequentially it is essential that this record should not be ‘distorted or banalized by grossly inadequate representations’.²⁵⁴ A claim to the truth is imperative and, as Friedländer insists, ‘there are limits to representation *which should not be but can easily be transgressed*’.²⁵⁵ The principle though is indisputable; it is difficult to discern the breach in a work of representation. What exactly constitutes a transgression is harder to define:

the characteristics of such a transgression are, however, far more intractable than our definitions have so far been able to encompass [...] the intractable criterion seems to be a kind of uneasiness. The problem is neither narrowly scientific nor blatantly ideological: one cannot clearly define exactly what is wrong with a certain representation of events, but, [...] one senses when some interpretation or representation is wrong.²⁵⁶

While a transgression is hard to locate, a sense of adequacy in literary and artistic works is easier to point to – which is to say, a work can offer insights without necessarily defining every element of the tragedy. For Friedländer this is achieved through allusion or ‘distanced realism’ where reality is present, uncoated, but it is implied through a filter – ‘that of memory (a kind of filter), that is spatial displacement, that of some narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid’.²⁵⁷ Friedländer argues that the ‘unsayable’ can be represented adequately by creating a narrative margin which achieves two things: the reader’s ability to comprehend is preserved, as opposed to direct retelling, which can impair perception, and further it prevents the audience from

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 3-4. The two categories where this unease might take form, according to Friedländer, are historical relativism and aesthetic experimentation.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

developing an ‘internal barrier’ to make up for the absence of external distancing. Though there are other narrative practices that can achieve adequacy, the underlying ethical code here is the absolute obligation for form not to transgress the veracity of the situation, and equally, not erase the work of representation by serving as a report. Friedländer makes a convincing case for the complexity involved in identifying a work of representation as having transgressed an ethical limit. An implied breach can elude articulation; at times, a sense of discomfort, or estrangement is the clearest and the only sign. Correspondingly, the work of constructing a narrative comes up against the inadequacy of language: how can a massacre be contained within the sign system? The necessary discipline, skill, and the calculated approach to a written text is in contrast with the incoherence and horror of a catastrophe.

Richard Stamelman identifies the various elements of representation in Jabès’s narrative, starting with memory. He argues that the very structure of narrative, including memory, meaning and sense-making is incompatible with the nature of the event ‘for how one can remember an event whose very monstrosity surpasses recall, whose unthinkability negates thought, whose silence suffocates language, whose absolute senselessness destroys the possibility of human meaning?’²⁵⁸ For Stamelman, as for Maurice Blanchot whom he quotes, the very relationship of reality to language is made precarious and brought into question as language is haunted by the silences, and can no longer convey meaning; thought is scarred by what is imagined, and memory is witness to its own forgetting. Stamelman argues that the scope of

²⁵⁸ Richard Stamelman, ‘The Writing of Catastrophe: Jewish Memory and the Poetics of the Book in Edmond Jabès’ in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture, and “the Jewish Question” in France* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 264-282 (p. 267).

representation, especially within a sign system, will never been ‘wide enough’ to contain a disaster.

The relationship between reality and language is indeed distorted and made precarious in the event of a catastrophe; the unsayable makes coherent prose appear brutal and indifferent. Mourning the absence of a language to speak is to mourn the event itself – however, as Friedländer argues, the representative text does give off a distinct sense of being either insightful or transgressive and, I would argue, this has to do with the text’s relationship to history and context. While Stamelman’s articulation of a linguistic absence following the catastrophe is legitimate and eloquent, he does not consider the potential for language to commit an ethical breach.

Any representative medium, language in this case, has to contend with its own failure in the conditions of a catastrophe – but artistic works do not cease to exist due to this predicament. The culture industry must confront the impossibility of representation, at the same time as practising vigilance towards distortive narratives. The inherent failure of language to capture, present and mediate disaster is significant, however. Artistic works that represent and engage with catastrophes do exist and it is critical to carefully consider the question of ethical transgressions. This is not a moral code as such but a recognition of the discursive power of literature to control and calibrate narrative. For the purposes of this argument, distortion of history and context in the process of literary production (both creative and criticism) will be treated as ethically problematic.

As is typical of literary criticism associated with the Holocaust, the phraseology in Stamelman tends towards quasi-mysticism. The excessive

focus on Biblical antisemitism or Jewish alterity and difference, often framed as ontological rather than political, to use Friedländer's term, produces an unlocatable 'uneasiness'. It is vital not to reason in epiphenomenal or trans-historical terms as it makes socio-political analysis impossible, and, paradoxically, diminishes the perpetrator's role. It is crucial not to lose track of history, context, circumstance, and the actual conditions of the event in the course of literary production around a catastrophe. While Stamelman's reading of Jabès is astute, he is partial to his own framework. The analysis is often linear – for instance, certain features of the text, such as silence or absence, are categorised as obvious manifestations of the impossibility of speech. On the contrary, I would argue, there are no unmediated references in Jabès; no figure or feature can be causally related to a problematic outside the text. An important feature of the Jabèsian form is the interval between the text and the world it inhabits. This is not to claim that the text is severed from its context, but that the text is conscious of its own mediating presence. Even as the poetic references resort to myth, the text exhibits a pronounced sense of its representativeness. As if the text were aware of its representational quality, and this awareness presents as a deference towards historical truth. The metaphors, myths and rhetoric that locate the Jew as the victim are employed at a distance from the event; this gap emphasises and accentuates the text's representative condition. As Jabès writes, 'We do not think death, emptiness, Nothingness, but their innumerable metaphors: one way of getting around the unthought.'²⁵⁹ It is always clear that what is being written is an act of poetic reconstitution. In Jabès the allusions are not real objects in themselves; their figurative purpose is made evident. The book does not attempt to appropriate the gravity of the event to itself.

²⁵⁹ Edmond Jabès, *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion* (Stanford University Press 1996), p. 71. Translation by Rosemarie Waldrop.

In *The Book of Questions* the story is never told; what amounts to a central narrative transpires in fragments and commentary. Waldrop explains in an interview:

The first three volumes of the *Book of Questions*, as he says, have as their pretext a holocaust story. The main characters are Yukel who has come back from the camps but is totally depressed, and later commits suicide. And his lover, Sarah, who has gone mad over the deportation. But as Jabès always said the story is not actually told, it is the pre-text; it is both occasion for the text and comes before it; so, it is not told, it is assumed. We all know about the Holocaust. It is referred to, commented on, but the texture of the book consists partly of dialogues, partly of diary excerpts, partly of poems, partly narratives and wanders all over the place. The later volumes sort of abstract from the story and in the end tend towards being simply aphorisms separated by silence. In the early books, there is a lot of commentary by imaginary rabbis that constantly come in and interpret or have conversations about the story which is not told. But the book also is really wider than the holocaust story if it can be. Jabès makes this really the condition of humanity.²⁶⁰

Tracing the different rhythms at work in Jabès, Waldrop identifies four: the first at the micro-level of the sentence or line, the second is a tension between the sentence and the line in verse, and the third is between speech and formal syntax of prose. All three of these are at the level of structure. She adds, 'Perhaps there is a fourth rhythm on the level of thought. The rhythm in which the book oscillates between the two frontiers of language: Lower limit scream. |

²⁶⁰ Available at https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/XCP/XCP_14_Waldrop_tracks/XCP_14_Waldrop_02_Edmund-Jabes-and-Judaism_1-26-04.mp3.

Upper limit silence.’²⁶¹ Elsewhere she writes: ‘A book about the word. Between scream and silence.’²⁶² The rabbis discuss the book on the first page “‘What is the story of the book?’” “‘Becoming aware of a scream.’”²⁶³ The scream is a central presence in *The Book of Questions*; it is introduced along with Sarah and Yukel, *as* Sarah and Yukel. Sarah writes in her journal at the beginning of the first volume: ‘I scream. I scream. Yukel. We are the innocence of the scream.’²⁶⁴ The writer/narrator says to Yukel, ‘I have given your name and Sarah’s to this stubborn scream, to this scream wedded to its breath and older than any of us, to this everlasting scream.’²⁶⁵ Again Sarah: ‘I do not hear the scream...I am the scream.’²⁶⁶ Sarah struggles with being able to tell herself apart: “‘The owl howling against the wind,” asks Sarah, “is it me, Yukel, is it me? The owl against the wind, the owl for the wind? Is it me, Yukel, is it me? The wind sweeping off my screams, my screams exasperating the wind?’”²⁶⁷

Sarah’s madness embodies the catastrophe; confronted with the abject, and the abyss, Jabès channels the scream of incoherence through her. The characters are borne of the scream; they give it their names and are imbued with its qualities. They appear *as* distressed wails – driven mad by grief, illegible in their presence – and disappear with barely an echo in the final volumes when the story is replaced with commentary. The scream as a device allows Jabès to walk the tightrope of representation: it is evocative without evoking representational unease; and reading through Friedländer’s code, it

²⁶¹ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 74.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 2.

²⁶³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 16.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 166.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 167.

maintains a narrative margin from the event – which is neither narrated nor named – and yet leaves no trace of doubt as to the text's allegiance to the truth.

Jabès chooses the most visceral of affects – the scream – and presents it *as is* in the narrative. The word pierces across the pages like the shock of the sound. There is no attempt to place or placate the scream in the book; it is not explicated or resolved; the context is not specified but understood. The lack of textual aid to reading the 'scream' in Jabès intensifies the sense of incoherent horror. Though the unmediated depiction is not without nuance; it asks the essential question about representation: how to speak of the unsayable except to scream? In Jabès, it is also spoken of *as* the scream. The 'scream' counters the 'word' which signals legibility and comprehension; the scream lies beyond the limits of coherence. The 'scream' is also a word, a signifier encompassed in a sign system. It implies an inability to escape the sign system; it is the agony of a semiotic imperative.

Interpretation

There are several comparative studies of Jewish hermeneutics and modern literary theory – a prolific niche in Euro-American literary studies in the latter part of the twentieth century. The extensive and rigorous body of research²⁶⁸ is not only compelling, but critical to charting a historiography of modern hermeneutics. The comparative analysis offers a better understanding of the influence of religious methodologies on secular reading and writing practices. However, strictly textual implications aside, the Jewish exegetical method played a critical socio-political role in the history of Zionism. A narrowly defined interpretive gesture served to historicise a mythological location established as a nation state. This particular legacy of 1948, I would argue, is then the immediate and obvious context for any analysis of the commentarial form within the hermeneutic tradition. The history of the Bible as a socio-political object should be considered in conjunction with the history the Bible is believed to have prescribed. Likewise, the social and political trajectory of the exegetical method is of as much relevance as the intricacies of the method itself; features of textual criticism such as meaning-making, allegory, or temporality have had an important role to play in the political adaption of Biblical axioms. In so far as Biblical textuality is political, I shall read the commentarial form in Jabès against the interpretative move that precipitated the declaration of statehood.

Interpretation or commentary is a critical feature of Jewish religious practice: the central text, the Hebrew Bible abounds with several explicatory texts written by rabbis over the course of hundreds of years and these

²⁶⁸ See for instance Daniel Boyarin, Susan A. Handelman, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman.

secondary texts are ascribed the same significance as the main text.²⁶⁹ The Hebrew Bible along with the rabbinical commentary and interpretation is universally known as The Torah which represents the entirety of Jewish teachings. As Susan Handelman writes ‘[...] for the Jew, Torah in its most profound sense means not only what is commonly accepted as the “Bible” but also all the rabbinic commentary attached to it’.²⁷⁰ The Torah is divided into oral and written; the oral part, Handelman explains, includes the ‘rabbis’ interpretation and amplification of Biblical laws and stories, their debates, the commentaries on the commentaries and so on.’²⁷¹ Later the oral teachings were written down, which is the *Mishnah*, ‘a codification of the oral rabbinic law that supplemented biblical teaching’.²⁷² And further the interpretations and debates on the *Mishnah* came to constitute the *Gemara*. As Handelman puts it, the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara* constitute the Talmud ‘a word whose root *lamad* means to learn or teach and roughly translates as “the study”, “the learning/teaching of” the Torah’.²⁷³

Much of the critical discourse on the commentarial form in Jabès brings immediate comparisons to the Biblical form and locates his experiments within the Jewish hermeneutic tradition. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, for Handelman, Jabès’s work elicits a direct parallel in the Talmudic mode and the implication is that Jabès performs a similar interpretative gesture. Along with Handelman Waldrop refers to Marc-Alain Ouaknin, who sees the idea of an ‘opening’ (i.e. an opening to commentary) as the essence of commentary ‘in the sense of the expression of Midrash and Zohar:

²⁶⁹ See Susan A Handelman., “‘Torments of an Ancient Word...’, op. cit.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁷² Ibid., p. 59.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 59.

“He opened and said”, “he broke the verse and said””.²⁷⁴ Waldrop writes ‘The “sacred text” or “Jabès’s universe” are not immutable orthodoxy, but are open to interpretation, opened up by commentary. Which means they lastly owe their existence to it. Through it they are alive, changing, are language in motion.’²⁷⁵ While considering the fragment in Jabès Waldrop turns to the Biblical scholar/translator Robert Alter, who argues that the fragment as a Biblical technique is ‘aimed at producing indeterminacy of meaning. [...] Meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a process, requiring continual revision...continual suspension of judgement, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in information...’²⁷⁶ Waldrop wonders if Jabès’s fragment enacts the Jewish tradition of interpretation as the ‘exploding text to safeguard its dynamics of “language in motion” in opposition to a Western ontology of presence.’²⁷⁷ These resemblances are compelling as they are illuminating for attending to the specifics of form such as the fragment or commentary, and they point to an influence of the Jewish exegetical tradition on Jabès’s writing. However, the declaration of establishment of State of Israel, I would argue, is a momentous hermeneutic act that cannot be overlooked in the study of Biblical textuality, or secular textuality analysed in relation to religious methodology. In the aftermath of the interpretive movement that transformed an abstract place into habitable territory with borders, and an appropriation of mythological legends into manifest history (at the cost of recorded history), ‘pure textual’ readings are inadequate. Reading through Ouaknin, Waldrop asserts that the Sacred Text is not an ‘immutable orthodoxy’ – while this is certainly true in a theological sense, a sacrosanct reading of the Sacred Text produced and legalised by the State alters

²⁷⁴ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

the context of claims to multiplicity. Alter's account²⁷⁸ of Biblical exegesis as a process of continuous revision and abdication of judgement comes up against a similar contradiction. Actualisation of literal meaning in the process of statehood puts in question this defence of semiotic indeterminacies in the exegetical method. This is not to say these methods and modes of reading the Bible are infeasible after 1948. It is to bring into focus the widening gap between deep textuality and the socio-political world (which is also reflective of the growing distance between institutionalised academia and the external world) so that the events in the latter contradict the assertions of the former.

The encounter of religious methodology and the political sphere is governed by orthodoxies, intransigencies and opportune interpretations to suit State propaganda. Reading Jabès's secular text as an extension of the rabbinical method seems like a deliberate omission of the socio-political facet of exegesis. The critical elements of the Jabèsian text – his interpretive praxis, poetic propensity to constitute the world in the book, the imaginary rabbis, rehabilitation of metaphor and allegory, etc. – oppose and resist traditional exegesis. Moreover, the text serves as an opportunity to imagine progressive, alternative, and oppositional literary methodology against religious ideology.

The importance of the Sacred Text and the practice of textuality – which is to say faith, tradition, ritual and the constitution of the self as derived from the text – is not singular to Judaism. However, some of elements of textuality integral to Jewish faith have also been employed by the State to serve its own realisation. Steiner provides critical clues in relation to the synergy between the commentarial tradition and religious praxis both in terms of a community organised around the text, and the collective historical lives of

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

the Jews. He draws out a cohesion between the tradition of reading and engaging with the Sacred Text and the constitution of Jewish identity. He explains that the *Talmud*, and the *Midrash* – which refer to parts of Biblical exegesis that use a very specific mode of interpretation prominent in the *Talmud* – ‘express and activate the continuum of Jewish being’.²⁷⁹ He argues that the *Torah* ‘is the pivot of the weave and cross-weave of reference, elucidation, hermeneutic debate which organize, which inform organically the daily and historical life of the [Jewish] community’.²⁸⁰ The pairing of ‘daily and historical’ is particularly interesting as the first half suggests religious domesticity in the context of the individual, family or community; the latter refers to a collective history materialised per the text. This duality of the interpretative ritual – at the levels both of the personal and political – is exemplary of the socio-political history of a religious methodology I am trying to articulate. Steiner continues, ‘successive, often polemic interpretations, citations in a context of sacred doctrine or of political-historical opportunity, construe, around the archaic, cardinal words in the Hebrew canon, a resonant field. An aura of vital paraphrase and definition extends around the word-core; or of dubious definition and misunderstanding, no less dynamic (misunderstanding can yield the more urgent reading, the more compelling attention.)’²⁸¹ While interpretative rituals at the level of the individual, or a community may be regarded as religious or academic praxis, a collective claim predicated on the Sacred Text at the level of International Law ceases to be a niche interest Biblical matter.

Although Steiner admits to the exegetic impulse behind State formation, he writes of it in the spirit of compiling errata. Firstly, he situates the

²⁷⁹ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland...’, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁸⁰ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland...’, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁸¹ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland...’, op. cit., p. 1.

act of ‘homecoming’ in the text and stakes the claim that ‘the dwelling assigned, ascribed to Israel, is the House of the Book [...] “the land of his fathers”, the *patrimoine*, is the script.’²⁸² The creation of a nation state then stands as an aberration to this stated principle – it becomes an act of impiety towards the text. He writes ‘In its doomed immanence, in its attempt to immobilize the text in a substantive, architectural space, the Davidic and Solomonic Temple may have been an erratum, a misreading of the transcendent mobility of the text’.²⁸³ The tragically misconstrued textuality, though Steiner’s central concern here, – underplayed as mere ‘erratum’ – the tendency towards materialisation of abstract religious notions is clearly evidenced here. Steiner ascribes a rehabilitative, in fact survivalist, impulse to the textuality of the Jewish condition; he calls it the ‘the instrument of exilic survival’.²⁸⁴ For Ezrahi on the other hand, the debates, interpretations and polemics on the Hebraic word serve a very different kind of purpose in Zionist ideology. Here she talks about the Dead Sea Scrolls created between the last three centuries BCE and the first century CE and discovered between 1946-47. The scrolls are the second oldest surviving manuscript in the Hebrew Bible Canon.

There is no emblem of the complex connections between texts and territory and disputed claims for hegemony in the Holy Land more dramatic than the Dead Sea Scrolls [...] and the struggle over access to them being waged among different hermeneutic communities. There is no speech more politically loaded in contemporary Israel than the one Elazar ben Yair ‘delivered’ in 73CE [...]

²⁸² George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland...’, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

‘reported’ by Josephus and ‘confirmed’ by Yigal Yadin some nineteen hundred years later.²⁸⁵

She argues that the work of identifying, deciphering and interpreting the scrolls almost becomes a reconstitutive act ‘within a community that never recoiled from anachronism as an organising principle’.²⁸⁶ Ezrahi makes visible the tension between textual practice as a survival mechanism (as it was for centuries before and has remained so for portions of the Jewish diaspora after the creation of the State of Israel) and the Zionist resolve to read the text in light and favour of a putative teleological end. She writes that no matter the early revolutionary zeal of the Zionists and their claim to sever the continuity with an ancient Jewish past, the force of reviving a connection with the ‘*original space*’ seemed to favour a heightened sense of ‘teleology and of closure’.²⁸⁷ She quotes Derrida on this: ‘As always archaeology is also a teleology and an eschatology; the dream of a full and immediate presence closing history...’²⁸⁸ Quite apart from messianism or redemptive conviction, the text, and its promise of an original space – and subsequent origin myth – offers even the non-religious Zionists a closure of history.

The realisation of a redemptive history (which is to say destiny), as Ezrahi rightly recognises, is based on anachronism as a foundational axiom. Handelman writes ‘Commentators from different centuries and continents will enter the discourse, replying to each other as if all were contemporaries. In the world of the Talmud, rigid temporal and spatial distinctions

²⁸⁵ See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage...*, op. cit. For more information about the relevance of Ben Yair’s speech to contemporary Zionist politics, see Josephine Quinn, ‘Enemies on All Sides’, *London Review of Books*, 41.17 (2019). Available at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n17/josephine-quinn/enemies-on-all-sides>.

²⁸⁶ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage...*, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

collapse.’²⁸⁹ It is not immediately obvious to which type of temporality reference is here made: whether it is mythological time in the text, or historical time of the text. The typical suggestion in Handelman is that the historiography of the Sacred Text is transcended by the text’s mythical time frame. This atemporality is presented as a characteristic of the Talmud and the hermeneutic process, and to that extent it is an accurate insight into the constitution of the Torah, but timelessness projected with sacral authority is not without political and social consequence; the atemporal structure works to insure the texts against loss of authority in the public imagination. Steiner explains:

The incessant readings of the primary texts, the exegetic, disputatious, elaborative readings of these readings (the process is formally and pragmatically endless), define temporality. They manifest the presence of the determinant past; they seek to elicit present application; they aim at the futurities always latent in the original act of revelation. Thus neither Israel's physical scattering, nor the passage of millennia, can abrogate the authority (the *auctoritas* of authorship) or the pressure of meaning in the holy books, so long as these are read and surrounded by a constancy of secondary, satellite texts. By virtue of metaphoric, allegoric, esoteric explication and challenge, these secondary texts rescue the canon from the ebbing motion of the past tense, from that which would draw live meaning into inert or merely liturgical monumentality. Via magisterial commentary, the given passage will, in places and times as yet unknown, yield existential applications and illuminations of spirit yet unperceived.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Susan A. Handelman, “‘Torments of an Ancient Word’...”, op. cit., p. 59.

²⁹⁰ George Steiner, ‘Our Homeland...’, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

The repeated exegetic process serves to maintain a continuous present – temporality itself is defined through exegesis. The commentarial form performs an important function in surpassing the potential contradictions brought about by the passage of linear time: it demonstrates how the present is the consequence of a past determined by the book, moulds itself for application to the present context, and supposes a future already presaged in the original revelation. One of the goals of religious commentary is to affirm the relevance of the Sacred Text in a ‘lasting present’. This method fortifies the legitimacy of the text against an erosion in the course of historical, recorded time. The modern, the ancient, the historical and the mythological exist in a conflated indistinguishable paradigm. Repurposing atemporality, as a narrative tool, to maintain the relevance of the sacred decree, is important to the socio-political functioning of religious commentary. For Handelman this distinctive trait of the Torah allows the rabbis to ignore the sequential movement of time and enter the discourse at any given point, becoming contemporaneous with all the voices preceding. However, this atemporality is not an inherent, ontological quality of the text. The repeated inference of the text to match the ongoing present suggests an effort on part of the commentators to manifest the text’s relevance; this gesture declares and defines the atemporality of the text. The internal logic of the Torah is not a mystical phenomenon – an active effort on behalf of its readers serves to maintain the features that prove its divinity.

The religious text’s eternal applicability is neither unique nor exceptional to Judaism – but of interest to this argument is the political realisation of messianic hope at an opportune political moment. As Rose writes ‘Fuelled by the historic needs of the Jewish people, on the verge seizing its own patch of ground, Zionism raises itself to the heavens.’²⁹¹ The transcendent,

²⁹¹ Page 23 in Rose, Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., p. 23.

authoritative, and powerful scope of religious discourse is employed to its maximum potential in State formation. Nationalism and religious ideology have always been bedfellows, but as Rose observes, Zionism's employing of religious discourse when faith itself seemed to have been destroyed by the Holocaust is quite remarkable 'Zionism is unique in laying one by one the terms of messianic destiny, lifted from the Jewish faith, across its geographical landscape even when that faith had been lost.'²⁹² Zionism recalls and employs religious prophecy to mobilise people, and the subsequent manifestation of the destiny – through the agency of the mobilised people – is the proof of the existence of divine destiny.

As I have argued through Steiner earlier, the exegetical method can variously draw on political contingencies, and employ seemingly mystical means to ideological ends. The 'original opening' or the breach leading into interpretation – the breaking of the Tablets containing the Law – as Alter, Ouaknin and Handelman have argued, can accommodate disparate readings. However, the disparity operates within specified limits. Handelman reminds us that all the interpretation found alongside the Bible is foretold and foreseen 'all the later massive rabbinic commentary, debate, questioning and reinterpretation of the Bible are also considered to be divinely given at Sinai'.²⁹³ She quotes from the second tractate of the Talmud 'All that a faithful disciple will expound in the future in front of his master was already given to Moses at Sinai.'²⁹⁴ In some sense this is the limit to the logic of destiny – insofar as the prophecy is calibrated to match the situation at hand, it cannot exceed or bypass the objective. The objective-orientated literal reading of the Bible betrays the exegetical principle behind establishing the State of Israel. The

²⁹² Page 35 in Rose, Jacqueline, *The Question of Zion*, op. cit., p. 35.

²⁹³ Susan A. Handelman, "'Torments of an Ancient Word'...", op. cit., p. 58.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 58 (Talmud Yer. Peah 6:2).

teleology at the root of turning the figural into the literal, theology into history and metaphor into the thing itself only allows for singular, sovereign inferences in support of colonial motives. As Nur Masalha writes, ‘a scrutiny of the language used in the Old Testament in relation to the emergence of political Zionism from the late nineteenth century onwards shows the way in which a secular European conquering ideology and movement mobilised the figurative language of the Jewish religion into a sacrosanct ‘title deed’ to the land of Palestine signed by God.’²⁹⁵ All interpretation as pre-determined favours the Zionist ideology of a God-given mandate – no inference is without divine sanction which paints Zionism as a reclamation movement rather than a colonial project. As Masalha insists, the Bible was not the only, but certainly the most powerful justification.

Declan Wiffen, who works through Derrida’s essays on *Jabès* to explore the relationship between Palestine and deconstruction, argues that religious texts are read within a certain interpretive framework of writing to support and create the foundational myth of Zionism. As I have discussed in the first chapter on exile, the relationship between textuality, writing and origin is ambiguous and several meanings can emerge and appear alongside one another, but in Zionist thought multiplicity of meaning is discarded in favour of absolute literalism. A straightforward conflation of textuality and the text is the first step in the interpretive process leading to the political claim. If textuality demands repeated, rigorous engagement with the text, then the text in Zionism is as an instrument to adopt allegories as literal political truths.

²⁹⁵ Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism...*, op. cit., p. 16.

Derrida writes that in Jabès's first book (*Je bâtis ma demeure*),²⁹⁶ the discourse did not yet love its 'true root', but in *Le Livre des questions* 'a powerful and ancient root is exhumed, and on it is laid bare an ageless wound (for what Jabès teaches us is that roots speak, that words want to grow, and that poetic discourse takes root in a wound)'.²⁹⁷ For Wiffen there are subtle but important differences between 'true root', 'powerful and ancient root' and the ageless wound in which poetry takes root: the ancient root, he argues, is the Torah. The process of exhuming is the Zionist reading of the text as a blueprint of history and destiny. He writes that an 'ancient root to be exhumed' refers to the return (of the Jewish people) based on the Torah where 'an origin can be located, fixed and returned to';²⁹⁸ whereas Derrida's wounded root, or 'root as wound' signals an impossibility of return, and 'ageless' implies the impossibility of determining such a birth in time and space. Wiffen compares Derrida's 'ageless' (unlocatable in history) to Netanyahu's repeated use of words like 'ancient' and 'ancestral' suggesting an historical and therefore rightful claim to the land. The true root, which is to say origin, is writing. Wiffen infers that the difference between these two types of roots/origin is, for Derrida, the difference between religion and poetry. Derrida separates a dogmatic attachment from passion 'The passion *of* writing, the love and endurance of the letter itself, whose subject is not decidably the Jew or the Letter itself.'²⁹⁹ Wiffen draws from Sarah Woods who makes a very astute observation that 'the passion *of* writing is distinct from the passion *for* writing'.³⁰⁰ A passion *for* writing is the reverence for the Torah as the 'word of God', and Derrida reads an opposing affectation in Jabès – a passion of poetic discourse

²⁹⁶ Edmond Jabès, *Je bâtis ma demeure : poèmes 1943-1957* (Éditions Gallimard, 1975).

²⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit., p. 64.

²⁹⁸ Declan Wiffen, *Deconstruction and the Question of Palestine...*, op. cit., pp. 153-154.

²⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit., p. 64.

³⁰⁰ Declan Wiffen, *Deconstruction and the Question of Palestine...*, op. cit., p. 155 (quoting from Sarah Wood, *Derrida's 'Writing and Difference'...*, op. cit., p. 63).

as the true origin which is a destiny to wander in ‘an unfindable and unspecified pathway’.³⁰¹

Derrida distinguishes two types of interpretation at play:

In the beginning is hermeneutics. But this *shared* impossibility of joining the *center* of the sacred text and this *shared* need for exegesis is interpreted differently by the poet and the rabbi...the original opening to interpretation means essentially that henceforward there will always be rabbis and poets. And two interpretations of interpretation. Then Law turns into Question, and the right to speak fuses with the duty to interrogate. The book of man is book of questions.³⁰²

Alan Bass, the translator of *L'écriture et la différence*, offers a gloss: he writes that the rabbinical interpretation of interpretation seeks an ultimate truth that regards interpretation as an obstacle; the poetical one ‘does not seek truth or origin but affirms the play of interpretation’.³⁰³ For Derrida the rabbinical mode is teleological and the poetical mode affirms the process of interpretation and is indifferent to an objective. Jabès’s poetic practice counters the teleology of the rabbis and further dares to subvert the Law into a question; for the poet ‘does not simply receive his speech and his law from God’.³⁰⁴ As Jabès says ‘The Jew has for centuries questioned his truth which has become the truth of questioning.’³⁰⁵ Jabès’s own questioning and inversion goes much farther than what is granted by a sacred doctrine. Accordingly, Handelman

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 156.

³⁰² Excerpt of Derrida’s essay on Jabès in *Writing and Difference* translated by Rosemarie Waldrop in Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 301.

³⁰³ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit., p. 311 (notes by the translator Alan Bass).

³⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit., p. 67.

³⁰⁵ Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book*, op. cit., p. 65.

classifies him as a ‘heretic hermeneutic’. She argues that even within normative Judaism, the opening to interpretation is extraordinary and the rabbinical word ‘remains ever open, unfulfilled, in process’. She adds ‘This internal mechanism puts the text at risk as it precipitates creativity but also its ‘inversions and undoing [...] I have elsewhere called this the “heretic hermeneutic” which is a complex of identification with the Text and its displacement. Jabès’s book is precisely this identification with the Sacred Book and its displacement.’³⁰⁶ Handelman’s stance not only makes clear the authority of the Sacred Text (pronounced by God at Sinai), but so too the authority of a certain view of the Text. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Handelman’s impulse to absorb Jabès’s subversion into the sacral fold appropriates his work and fails to recognise the socio-political consequence of a divinely-controlled discourse.

The many rabbis of Jabès appear between lines and between events to perform a kind of interpretive gesture, and it is a pure gesture in that they do not engage in any form of explication. Waldrop writes, ‘Commentary. This means that. This is that. “The pages of the book are doors...The soul is a moment of light...Distance is light.”’ In so far as these textual movements are anti-teleological, meaning-making is not the objective. The pages are doors and distance is light, but elsewhere distance is us, and God is nothingness and so on – the rabbis implicate the reader in a game of constantly shifting signified. Boyarin argues that in the Midrash ‘The interpretations found in these several works are manifold in nature, but all of them are more or less different from the commentary of the European traditions in that they do not seem to involve the privileged pairing of a signifier with a specific set of

³⁰⁶ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, op. cit., p. 26 (quoting from Susan A. Handelman, “‘Torments of an Ancient Word’...”).

signifieds.³⁰⁷ Founding a nation state based on the Bible stands as an aberration to the principle defined by Boyarin – the Biblical text is consistently paired with a signified in religious Zionism – Jabès’s signifiers are frequently left to wander. The stability of paired signifier-signified sets, which Boyarin calls a privilege, of/within the language system is not a given in Jabès; the ground beneath the signifier is always shifting and deferred to another word, which is yet another sign without a definitive concept. Jabès imperils the system of meaning making at a fundamental level. If the words relate to several concepts, there can be no one way of interpreting the text. This repeating precarity in Jabès is not merely a language game; it is reflective of a deeper existential precarity. For him, the conceptions of ‘home’, ‘exile’, ‘native land’ are experiences of drifting signifieds. In reluctantly relocating himself in the world, he relocates the land in the word. A suffusion of commentary alongside the story imparts a sense of indeterminacy. The text remains provisional – not as if it is always becoming, but as if the becoming is not the objective. The tentative inhabitation of the book is only matched by the conditionality of Jabès’s exile. The high degree of abstraction in Jabès is a subversion of tangibility – the homeland, the nation state, the border.

Jabès uses the commentarial form to perform a kind of anti-literalism that resists rabbinical orthodoxy. ‘The story of Sarah and Yukel is the account, through various dialogues and meditations attributed to imaginary rabbis, of a love destroyed by men and by words’³⁰⁸ write Jabès. Several imaginary rabbis weave in and out of the text with aphorisms, reflections, quips and analogies. As Jabès qualifies, they are ‘imaginary’ – the insistence on imagination as their point of origin subverts religious propensity to claim as real all

³⁰⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. viii.

³⁰⁸ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 26.

that is imagined. The rabbis emerge as central to the commentarial structure in Jabès, similar to the position they occupy in religious exegesis. The rabbinical form is a conceit borrowed from Judaism and repurposed in a literary device – it is not reflective of a belief system. The text, though, is mimetic of religious discourse: part of the textual play in Jabès is his not attributing sacral significance to their presence or truth value to their pronouncements. Jabès gradually undoes the ascriptions of divinity or moral rightness to the rabbis, shifting them between the spectral and the uncanny; their commentary is interrogative and not conclusive.

One of Jabès's several rabbis, Reb Odar says:

*We are treated like impostors. But surely we are the true rabbis. What we say is not on record anywhere. Those who know how to read us, read us in themselves. For within them, our words are ordered as in the works of our sages.*³⁰⁹

In contrast to the external, sanctified voice of the text, Reb Odar appears like an indwelling prankster. The assertion of authenticity ('true rabbis') is followed by an admission that there are no records of their teachings; the suggestion here is that the unrecorded status is exactly what grants them authenticity. This is almost a reversal of the scriptural authority of the Sacred Text – part of their legitimacy derives from being recorded, written into a script. It is not uncommon for oral transmission of histories to be dismissed as hearsay or folklore, and often that which imparts truth-value is the documented quality of the text. In the case of the Sacred Texts the materiality and the recordedness supersede the content; the events chronicled in these books are not supported by archaeological evidence and yet they are believed to be truer than any other recorded or living history of the region. The written text, as an

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

object, embodies sanctity in the public imagination. For instance, Ezrahi observes that the scrolls are the ‘object and the signifier’.³¹⁰ By contrast, Jabès’s signifiers have no object-cognates, and their meaning is internally driven, and given to constant fluctuation.

The rabbis’ word in Jabès is a defiance of ‘God’s word’ as recorded in the scriptures. In religious textuality the notion of a God is most credible and powerful in written form – externally derived and imposed both on the political and the personal psyche. For Reb Odar, on the other hand, presence is not scripturally or ideologically asserted: it is decidedly inward, and personal. There is a provisionality to ‘within them, our words are ordered’; in the interior self of the reader the rabbis’ words arrange themselves towards a poetic truth.

Take Reb Guebra, who preaches the death of God. He says, ‘God died with my childhood’,³¹¹ ‘He died with my youth. Now he is dying with me’. He asks, ‘in the eternal void, three fiery arrows thus recall a man’s passing, perhaps his last questions?’ For him, the man’s questioning outlasts God’s death. If Orthodox belief correlates meaning with God and meaning-making as critical to manifesting the prophecy, for Reb Guebra utter meaninglessness is imminent. Reb Guebra’s God is man-made – he dies ‘with’ the various stages in the life of the Rabbi and not ‘in’ them. At each phase, a different conception of God ceases to be, which is the death of God himself. Yukel wonders

Was Reb Guebra a good or bad rabbi? [...] And did he, like those inspired men who were condemned for their bold ideas, commit the sacrilege of challenging the Law of

³¹⁰ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*, op. cit., p. 6.

³¹¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 313 (‘Forespeech’).

*God? If so, he no doubt deserved that people turn from him. And from me too, for all
the rabbis who have their place in the book Reb Guebra is most like me.*³¹²

Jabès's encounter with his Jewishness at the moment of exile is coloured by doubt and resistance. His cultural, non-hegemonic, unorthodox Judaism is best retold by his unrabbinical rabbis. His Judaism – exilic, non-teleological, atheist, cultural and poetic – is always at stake in the book, opposed as it is to normative Judaism. His rabbis enact and echo this condition for which they draw disapproval both inside and outside the book.

There are several other – even opposing – ways to define the primary conceptual categories of representation and interpretation as presented in this chapter. The objective, however, is not to merely widen the horizons of theoretical concepts exclusive of their trajectories in the socio-political world. Said's warning of complicity with hegemonic narratives is best understood in thinking of the text and its processes as externally orientated rather than inwardly isolated. These concepts have been repurposed and constrained to aid the creation of a settler colonial State – and it is against these narrow limits that literary theory can offer alternative imaginative possibilities. In the next chapter, I shall examine how the political possibilities created by the text can be translated and recreated in the new context.

³¹² Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 313 ('Forespeech').

[CHAPTER 3]

Translation

The primary text used in this study, *The Book of Questions* (translated by Rosmarie Waldrop), is an English translation of Edmond Jabès's *Le Livre des questions*. In translation parlance the former is a target text (TT) and the latter a source text (ST). Translation studies, as part of the postcolonial turn, has been made to recalibrate some of its assumptions concerning power and language systems. The field has had to contend with a history of Eurocentric theory and praxis including colonial administrative practices of language imposition and erasure.³¹³ However, in academia, the tacit convention is to treat translation as an exclusive object of study and not as the constitutive condition of textuality. When the ST is written in a non-European language, and the TT is written in a European language, the particular exchange between European and non-European languages is flagged for translational losses and methodological inadequacies or the translated-ness of the TT is effectively ignored. In most cases translation receives excessive attention or none at all; a failing that adversely affects the ST in the language with limited discursive reach set against the language of the TT with an imperial reach.³¹⁴

³¹³ See for instance Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

³¹⁴ A sub-field in literary studies, 'World Literature' or 'World Literary Systems', has considered the problem of discursive imbalances between languages, between work produced in the metropole versus the periphery, the pitfalls of translation as a homogenising mechanism, and so on. Nevertheless, the new field is fraught with the same problems of Eurocentrism and canonisation. Additionally, the neoliberal compulsion to diversity has meant that more often than not 'world literature' as a category has merely paid lip service to literatures and languages of the global south. Aamir Mufti mounts a serious challenge to the paradigm of World Literature in Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

In the case of Jabès and Waldrop English and French are both imperial languages, and their discursive imbalance is not comparable to exchanges between European and non-European languages. In some sense the French language enjoys the status of an ‘insider’ in Anglo-American academia; the burden of the foreign is only borne by those without access to elite education systems. Thus the theoretical obligation to discuss translation in relation to Jabès and Waldrop is negligible; however, the particular politics at work in Jabès demand a consideration of translation as part of the central inquiry. Though there is discursive parity between French and English, the relevant context is the socio-political continuity between Europe and the Middle East in the twentieth century. Additionally, Jabès’s position in the canon is that of a French and Jewish writer; his Egyptian identity is near-absent from most critical evaluations.³¹⁵ Insofar as this thesis argues for an inclusion of socio-historical context in literary criticism, the case for translational analysis makes itself.

To be clear, this chapter is not an exercise in justifying the employing of the TT and Waldrop’s (translator’s) account as part of the primary material. Waldrop’s translation is an important literary work in its own right and this argument resists assuming hierarchies between the texts. However, overlooking the translated-ness of the TT would be to the detriment of this inquiry. As I have argued in the previous chapters, I take the literary text to be an event: the translated text then bears witness to the event of the ST. The TT acts as a beholder, interlocutor and an observer of the ST.

³¹⁵ For instance, in Eric Gould, Susan Handelman, Maurice Blanchot, Richard Stamelman.

The politics of translation is a rich and productive field in literary studies, though the translational process takes precedence over other factors influencing the practice. The politics of the source text in relation to its socio-political context is regularly ignored in the new context of its translation and publication.³¹⁶ This is particularly true of ‘literary translations’ where the literary quality of the TT is seen as sharing a directly proportional relationship to the weakening of the politics of the ST (as I shall discuss in the section ‘Ethics and Games’). The American version of Jabès suffers a dilution of its context and politics. It appears more mystical, more romantic, and as having lost at least some of its edges. This is not necessarily as a result of Waldrop’s translation. For instance, her sustained attention to Jabès’s atheistic constructions of a linguistic God is evidence of her refusal to read him as a mystic or a spiritualist. The politics of reception within a culture is contingent on factors beyond the efforts of the translator. Jabès’s anodyne place in the English canon is not as a result of Waldrop’s process – as I shall argue, there are critical insights to be gained from her method. In reading through her translation of Jabès I explore the ethics of adopting a political subjectivity while translating works that bear witness to catastrophe. If there is to be a hypothesis here, it is that there can be no lasting ‘thesis’ as such. A conclusive method or doctrine is implausible as it is a practice given to singularity and does not yield to comprehensive theoretical models. This is not to claim translation occurs in a void at a remove from other structural factors. On the contrary, translation is so critically implicated in the socio-historicity of its context that it is erroneous to investigate it as an isolated process or subject it to universalisms.

³¹⁶ Excepting activist translation projects or translation as activism where the focus is on the political. For examples see Maria Tymoczko, ed., *Translation, Resistance, Activism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

In the section *Translator's Subjectivity* I consider Waldrop's conscious and unconscious reasons for translating Jabès. Through Derek Attridge the ST is understood as a 'set of relations' produced through redeploying, exceeding, distending the resources of a given culture. The ST is then already a translation. This view brings into focus the translator and the ST as affected by multiple implicit and explicit structural relations. A consideration of the translator's influences, and their structural network serves to (re)locate them in their context. The translator's subjectivity is thus affirmed in the process. Though the question remains: given the multiple factors affecting the translator's process, what are the ethics of adopting (or not adopting) the political subjectivity of the source text? This is the line of inquiry I pursue in the next section, *Ethics and Games*. The discourse on translation can be broadly divided into two schools: (a) the politically inclined analysis that views translation as embedded in various structural, ideological and materialist concerns and (b) the metaphysical, ontological mode that determines aesthetic literariness as the principal characteristic of a 'good' translation; the method is defined in quasi-mystical terms. The limitations of this division are explored to argue that Waldrop's translation of Jabès does not resort to such easy dichotomies. She recasts Jabès's metaphors, paradoxes and resistances so that her intervention is both distinct and yielding. The next part, *A Holocaust Poet*, deals with the question of identity. In translation studies recognition of identity as structural is not yet on par with the discourse in literary criticism. If there have been multiple particularities (race, gender, class, etc.) that have splintered the façade of the universal in literary criticism, then translation, I would argue, has not adequately absorbed these movements and their critique. The author's identity is either invisible or treated with easy facility so that it appears as cause rather than context. Not least, the subjectivity of the

translator, where considered, does not account for the location of their identity. Jabès's historical position as a Holocaust poet is examined to argue that Waldrop, through her translation, rescues the Jabèsian text from essentialist tropes. The nuances of his relationship with Judaism and the Holocaust are allowed an unconditional surfacing. And when it comes to his Egyptian identity she does not relegate it to an irrelevant past or turn to oriental tropes. The final section, *A Glimpse of the Desert*, follows the argument from previous chapters. Waldrop's approach to Jabès's construction of the figural as an antithesis to the literal is explored. If translation is a process of finding resemblances, it can be argued that the ST, in some sense, functions as a signified to the signifiers of the TT. In Jabès the relationship between the signifier and the signified is consistently obstructed; an awareness of this dynamic is imperative on behalf of the translator so that the fragile gossamer of his textual landscape remains intact in translation. Suggestions of continuity between the signified and the signifier in the TT would constitute a breach. The real challenge for the translator is to draw out a likeness that maintains the levity of the original. I examine the conceit of the 'desert' in Jabès, which serves as a portal to exploration of the play of the thwarted signifier and the signified. Waldrop is attentive to its figuration as a place, a placeholder, a metaphor and a conjuration. The word serves as an illustration of Jabès's gesture against determinism and Waldrop's translational method is analysed through it.

Translator's Subjectivity

Rosmarie Waldrop has translated fourteen volumes of Edmond Jabès's *The Book of Questions*, and this makes for only a fraction of her translated works. She has also translated Jabès's other works, Paul Celan, Emmanuel Hocquard, Jacques Roubaud, Elfriede Czurda, Elke Erb, and Oskar Pastior amongst others. In *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès*,³¹⁷ part memoir, part criticism, she examines her process of translating Jabès through questions, fragments and dialogue. Despite an *oeuvre* so expansive that it seems permanently poised to enact a theory of all theories of translating poetry, she remains focussed on the interstices of language, its absences, severances, the interruptions that allow for possibilities. Waldrop is conscious of herself as part of a continuum, a translator in the late twentieth century; not an ahistorical outlier trying to reinvent translation, or the theory thereof. She refers to Schleiermacher, Novalis, Goethe and Benjamin; and important figures in contemporary translation theory such as Lawrence Venuti, and Antoine Berman to reflect back on her practice. She is insistent on the individuality of her distinctive translational impulses, relationship with Jabès, and personal influences such as their common circle of friends and writers in Paris – Claude Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach, Jo Guglielmi, Marcel Cohen, Emmanuel Hocquard, Didier Cahen – who appear regularly in *Lavish Absence*. They make up the intellectual and social milieu from within which Waldrop interacts with Jabès, reads and translates him.

A question that is repeatedly asked of Waldrop is 'Why Jabès'? The implication is clear: she is/was German, he was Jewish, and these identities

³¹⁷ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit.

must dictate and define the exchange between them. In every instance of its appearance, the question threatens to essentialise and demands simple answers. She recollects:

Raymond Federman asks why I have translated Edmond Jabès. I sense that he wants me to say: to atone. After all, I am German. Was. I was taught the Nazi salute along with the alphabet. But this is not it. *Ce n'est pas ça*, as Edmond would say. It would be presumptuous to think that I, that any individual *could*. Besides, I have not translated Elie Wiesel or any other holocaust literature. It is this particular work that touched me. On the other hand, who knows what motives play into our actions. I do not know what pulls me to the place where I must, and want to, speak. Here. Where I am. 'We always search for meaning of our own life in the text we translate', says Dominique Grandmont. And sometimes we 'find the other inside ourselves'.³¹⁸

Waldrop's recounting of the incident is riddled with sudden stops, brusque punctuations; the abrupt colon after 'to say' draws attention to Federman's sweeping assumption. The contracted sentences mimic his reductive reasoning; the isolated placement of 'to atone' makes explicit the absurdity of inferring a complex process in consonance with a simplistic reparative paradigm. Waldrop rejects straightforward conclusions that seem too obvious to resist. She abstains from an individualistic approach to reparative processes. Such an attempt would mean little for the work and reveal something of a righteous conceit. Not least, neither Jabès nor Waldrop can claim representational authority.

³¹⁸ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 51.

A desire is not easily traced to its point of origin in the psyche. If inclinations were plainly visible, the banality of the creative act would be unbearable. On being asked to explain her choice of texts to translate, Waldrop gestures towards the unseen processes that define our affinities without according them deterministic weight. She speculates the divided allegiance to itself and the other of the self's (the translator's self) in the process of translation. Her emphasis on the translator's subjectivity – as opposed to her invisibility in pursuit of a 'pure' translation – is clearly visible. She is drawn to speaking through a text (not speaking the text) at a given space-time, and the reasons for speaking cannot be reduced to mere biographical details. A reading of the creative act, and I would argue a translation is exactly that, without the excessive influence of biographical determinism (X was born here and therefore prone to making Y choices) is imperative. However, an alternative paradigm wherein the translator is drawn to certain texts for quasi-mystical reasons is untenable. A translator is embedded within and inhabits structures, institutions, milieux, and prone to tendencies, patterns and biases just as any creative writer. That the translator reworks an already existing text does not relieve them of their singular cultural and intellectual context.

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge³¹⁹ investigates the creative process using frameworks located within the sphere of a culture rather than the individual. He disrupts multiple existing mythologies about writing and creativity. Some of his interventions (and consequences thereof) are germane to the translation question at hand. Though his focus is the individual and the singular process of creation, he moves through the structural to understand the personal. As practices of close reading and New Criticism show,

³¹⁹ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, op. cit.

the literary text is frequently subject to analysis exclusive of structures it inhabits; the translated text suffers a similar treatment in that it is read exclusively in relation to the source text, almost as a copy. Attridge's theory initiates multiple possibilities beyond the narrow confines of 'objective' analysis for both the source and the target text. While he admits the creative process retains a degree of mystery for the creator, and inexplicability is a definitive trait, he is concerned with 'structural relations, or better, shifts between different structural relations and the possibilities and constraints they bring into being'.³²⁰ These structures and structural relations are related to the materials available to the creative mind in a given culture: he defines the term 'culture' as inclusive of 'among other things, the artistic, the scientific, moral, religious, economic, and political practices, institutions, norms, and beliefs that characterize a particular time and place'.³²¹ The term is not without its problems, but its usefulness here far exceeds the drawbacks: using 'culture' as a framing concept, Attridge situates the creative process within structures that govern an individual. He desists from esoteric theorising of the creative process and examines the literary object as the product of discrete relations between various sets of norms, beliefs, institutions, language systems, etc. He argues that the culture distils into the individual as a particular 'complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, preferences, prejudices, expectations, [...] that operate physically, emotionally and intellectually'.³²² The literary work is a complex arrangement/disarrangement of these elements to constitute the 'new', that is, the literary text is not created *ex nihilo*. It is affected by and constituted through various structures inhabited by the individual. In turn the new work affects the field it comes into, introduces an alterity and the cultural sphere is therefore transformed. Accordingly, the

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

³²¹ Ibid., p. 21.

³²² Ibid., p. 21.

literary text can be thought of as an event rather than as a static object. Attridge clarifies that the creative process is not a mere reformulation of existing resources. It includes challenging the limits, seeking out exclusions, probing the contradictions and tensions of a culture one inhabits.

Attridge demonstrates that the literary text -- constituted through the redeployment of the resources of a culture, 'understood as sets of relations rather than concrete objects,'³²³ -- is already a translated object. The ST is a translation of the resources of its culture and each new context of its appearance produces a further translation. In translation theory the ST overwhelms the discourse so that all other aspects are neglected in favour of theorising the relationship between the ST and the TT. Attridge's formulation of the 'original' (ST) as an already translated object uncovers many possibilities, one of which is establishing the ST as merely one object or a singular relation within the expanse of cultures a translator inhabits. It expands the focus beyond a narrow speculation of the continuity between the TT and the ST and positions this relationship as part of and affected by other structural relations surrounding the text and the translator.

Taking Attridge's argument further, the translational process can be reimagined as (re)creation in a new context. If the ST is as much a translation as the TT, the translator occupies the same position as the author, as both an active and receptive composer; and the translator's source exceeds the ST to comprise the entirety of their given culture. The translator is responsive, susceptible and translates in relation to various structures and mechanisms as an

³²³ Ibid., p. 73.

individual and as part of a collective. The translator's activity thus defined allows for the certainty of the TT as having undergone a subjective transformation. The TT is reflective of the translator's singularity, subjectivity, conscious and unconscious patterns, preferences, and a negotiation with the characteristics and tendencies of her cultural space-time. The TT, understood as reflective of the translator's subjectivity and embedded in a network of relations, is the conceptual antithesis of the idealised approach to the TT as a pure copy. Waldrop's sense of her translational practice is closer to a recreation than a reproduction 'Readers who read Edmond Jabès in English do not read Edmond Jabès. They do not read Rosmarie Waldrop either, but our dialogue and collaboration.'³²⁴

The creative act, including the choice of a source text, derives from many conscious and unconscious decisions. Waldrop's motives are not exclusively governed by reparational impulses, an assumption that is both reductive and presumptuous. However, this is not to say the complex continuity between Waldrop's German-ness and Jabès's Jewishness did not influence her decision in some way. The *Book of Questions* is a recreation of *Le livre des questions* within Waldrop's space-time as altered and determined by structural factors, preferences, subliminal tendencies, cultural influences and so on. Now then the question is: how should/could the translator calibrate this subjectivity so that the politics of the ST is not distorted, and further, how can the translational act constitute a challenge to the status quo? The translator's subjectivity thus asserted does not free them from having to attend to the political complexities of the ST. The complications of adopting or calibrating the political stance of the ST or mounting a challenge to the ideological

³²⁴ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 63.

parochialism in the field, are many. For the purposes of this argument, I shall focus on the TT's treatment of the political in relation to the ST, i.e. Wal-drop's approach to Jabès and her position and praxis in relation to the ethics of translation. Some of the existing methodological interventions in the field will be briefly discussed, though the focus here is the politics in the ST (in translation) and not the politics of the method.

The notion of a translator as an active agent, and as asserting their subjectivity as a political act is not new to translation theory. In *The Translator's Invisibility* Lawrence Venuti³²⁵ constructs a theoretical framework that considers the field as a whole and prescribes a very specific method to counter what he perceives as provincialism within the Anglo-American, broadly English-speaking sphere. He conducts an impressive review of translated texts and provides a genealogical history of translation in the Anglo-American culture from the seventeenth century to the present day (the latest revised edition was published in 2008). He writes:

A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the 'original'.³²⁶

He calls this transparent effect 'domestication' and presents 'foreignization' as a practice that 'seeks to restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation,

³²⁵ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: a History of Translation* (London: Routledge, first edition 1995, second revised edition 2008).

³²⁶ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility...*, op. cit., p. 1.

[...] a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others'.³²⁷ He argues 'foreignization' is a mode of cultural resistance that allows for the source text to retain its alterity against the ethnocentric demands of the Anglo-American culture. Venuti's text is a call to translators, readers and reviewers to refuse to surrender to fluency, guard the 'foreign', the intransigent, as a show of defiance against homogenisation. He recommends 'locating the alien in a cultural other, pursuing cultural diversity, signalling linguistic and cultural differences and unsettling the hierarchies in the translating language'³²⁸ as some instances of mounting a methodological resistance. His critique of the disregard for a translator's intervention, and a parochial culture of reading and evaluating translations is valid. However, he places undue emphasis on the binary (domestication vs foreignisation) which is ultimately reductive. As Maria Tymoczko has argued, a skew towards the dominant culture cannot be reduced to a single translation method. And as such "foreignization" and "domestication" can both be made to serve "progressive" political and cultural aims, but also the opposite [...] any translation procedure can become a tool of cultural colonization'.³²⁹ Venuti's resolution runs somewhat contrary in that it creates a version of the very problem he sets out to resolve. He overlooks several postcolonial critiques of the relationship between power, colonialism, language-imperialism and translation. A narrow field consisting only of the Anglo-American context (where even European languages such as French or Italian are claimed to have to endure the hegemony of English) recreates an ethnocentric paradigm similar to the one he rejects. His

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 266.

³²⁹ Maria Tymoczko, 'Translation and political engagement: Activism, social change and the role of translation in geopolitical shifts', *The Translator*, 6:1 (2000), 23-47 (p. 35).

injunction to resist Anglo-American dominance lacks in potency for its inability to immigrate beyond the West. However, Venuti's 'call to action', stated rather simply like a manifesto for good and bad practice, raises the question: what really comprises an ethical practice for a translator? In relation to Waldrop and Jabès, the question is: what are the ethics of assuming (or not assuming) the political subjectivity of the source text which bears witness to a catastrophe?

Ethics and Game

Waldrop writes of Venuti's theory, 'For the practice of translation, Venuti's and Schleiermacher's concept of "foreignizing" seems more valuable to me than Benjamin's word-by-word because it directs attention to the whole foreign work and its context, rather than to, or in addition to, the single word.'³³⁰ Benjamin argues that although words can 'intend' the same object, their 'mode of intention' can be vastly different. What this means is that words are used as part of a conceptual universe that is shared between the speaker and the listener. Though the words 'Brot' and 'Pain' mean the same thing in German and French, they evoke vastly different associations in both these languages. The translator's task then is to push this tension between the meaning of the word and the 'mode of intention' to the limit so 'pure language' can reveal itself. He recommends a 'word-for-word' translation that will take apart the 'wall' of the sentence to reveal the original work in its light. Here he is thinking of something like Holderlin's word-for-word translation of the Bible.

For Waldrop, Venuti's argument serves much less as a political or an ethical course and more as methodology. His argument offers more to her in the way of technique than theory provides an insight into her conception of the translational act. In terms of political responsibility of the translator, translation as carrying forth the ST's work of bearing witness arises frequently in relation to Jabès and Waldrop. If the *Le livre des questions* is seen as bearing witness to the Holocaust, then a moral and ethical obligation befalls the translator. As Matthew Cooperman asks her in an interview in the mid-nineties at

³³⁰ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 29.

the Naropa University Writing Festival, ‘As Holocaust literature, and perhaps the Holocaust poetry, Jabès offers a profound moral and ethical witness to both depravity and survival. Your translations extend that ethical paradigm [...] how has translating Jabès concentrated the moral and ethical agency of poetry for you?’³³¹ Cooperman makes assumptions about Waldrop’s translation practice. In some sense the question is meant to provoke a response about poetry as an ethical act, but it also traps the translator into defending the ethics of her practice. She interrupts the implication that moral and ethical agency is, or as construed in the question, should be inherent to the work of poetry:

I have difficulties combining poetry and ‘moral/ethical’. Poetry and ‘agency’ likewise, if we mean the same thing by the word. For me, poetry, all art, takes place in what Winnicott calls a ‘holding environment’, the intermediate zone *between* individual and society, self and world, internal and external experience. It is an area of play, of make-belief, and of negative capability – without any irritable reaching after certainties and solutions – ethical ones included.³³²

Waldrop’s response is not a refusal of poetry’s ethical obligation but a very necessary exploration of the space between the external world and representation. The instinct to continue the ST’s work of bearing witness – or any other kind of political work – through translation seems obviously ethical and ethically obvious, and yet it is far from a simple, or constructive (for the ST) choice to make. A righteous simulation of political subjectivity or the orientation of the ST is presumptuous. Waldrop is reluctant to draw easy connections between biography and form or content. A translation is witness to the event of the ST and not necessarily a direct witness to the catastrophe it marks.

³³¹ See Matthew Cooperman, ‘Between Tongues: an Interview’, *Conjunctions* (2005), published online: <http://www.conjunctions.com/online/article/matthew-cooperman-12-17-2005>.

³³² Matthew Cooperman, ‘Between Tongues: an Interview’, op. cit.

The translator can attempt a recreation of an idiomatic manner, but an unequivocal mimicking of consciousness renders the text without depth or dimension. As I have argued earlier, the creative act is forged in the confluence of discrete elements and structural relations. Identifying cause ('why') based on partial and restricted examination of a writer's context diminishes the text's possibilities including translational. While I might not agree with the conception of poetry as taking place in a sacrosanct space between the individual and the society, Waldrop makes a case for the translator's right to resist simplistic correlations. By refusing to admit presumptuous claims – that she is undertaking reparative duties or bearing witness – she allows for a more complex process to emerge. If there is political conservatism in her thinking of poetry and translation as slightly elevated activities abstracted from society (an in-between 'holding' environment), there are yet insights to be gained. Her indifference to lofty ideas about poetry's agency allows for a more nuanced, sensitive, historically situated approach to Jabès. She is cautious not to misread context for cause or rely on essentialism. Her view of the process allows Jabès to reclaim his own agency as an other-ed figure. She refrains from highhanded righteousness that can potentially trample on the agency it claims to uphold.

In *Making Sense in Translation: Toward an Ethics of the Art*, Peter Cole asks 'But what do we mean when we speak of "the ethics of translation"?'³³³ He argues that in the field of translation theory and praxis are disparate, and therefore ethics cannot account for the art in any way that matters. He asks:

³³³ Peter Cole, 'Making Sense in Translation: Toward an Ethics of the Art', in Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky, eds, *Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means* (Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 3-16 (p. 3).

Do we study the ethics of translation in order to improve our renderings? To affect the way a culture responds to them? Does the theoretical examination of ethics help – as many theorists claim – jar us out of unexamined assumptions about the art of translation and the role of the foreign in our lives, or do the doctrine and abstraction of ethical inquiry render us deaf and numb to the material realities of actual translations and make it harder to recognize excellence? In other words, does the desire for ethical clarity and consistency all too often reflect an inability to accept the elusive essence of the art?³³⁴

Cole's remarks are premised on a tendency in translation theory to recognise translation either as a political act or as an apolitical one in favour of literary aesthetics. He constructs his version of this binary by suggesting that the abstraction of ethical inquiry (from praxis?) could render one 'deaf and numb' to the linguistic realities of the text. He comes to the unfair conclusion that reaching after ethical certainties must reflect a lack of sophistication. Later in the argument he expands the word 'ethical' to mean 'ideology', used as stand-in for any kind of political intervention through translation. He introduces the concept of sympathy (towards the source text) defined as 'a tangential sensation, one that is rooted not in ideology, not even in good will or fellow feeling, but in syntactical, rhythmic, and acoustic experience, as well as the ambient aspects of a given culture'.³³⁵ For Cole, an artless sympathy, 'a lesser-order' one, lies behind the worst kind of distortions in translation and therefore constitutes the greatest ethical breach. He offers two examples in the way of 'flimsy' sympathies: hostile orientalism, and its benign but equally destructive affiliate, a kind of reverse orientalism. Hostile orientalism is the complete absence of sympathy, and acts as a dehumanising mechanism. A 'benign'

³³⁴ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

orientalism is genuine in its sympathies (if only too reliant on reversing the dominant bias and eager to ascribe a simplistic ‘goodness’) and can yet yield disastrous consequences. He uses the example of an outsider who possesses a great degree of sympathy for Palestinian literature portraying the oppression, and yet, cannot grasp the ‘cadences and timbre of a given story or a poem across his skin and in his being will not enter sufficiently into the physical or sensory dimension of the text, and his translation will not do it “justice”’.³³⁶ Cole is right in that an inadequate but well-intentioned translation is indeed an ethical violation as it implies a degree of condescension. It sacrifices artistry, intellect, abstraction, nuance, play, etc. and positions the translator as the unintended saviour. A (translated) subject thus constituted appears naive, simplistic, victimised, incapable of self-intellection and in need of an interlocutor to assert their agency. The oppressed are frequently the most poorly imagined. However, a ‘benign’ and mediocre translation is not a consequence of political solidarity. A different kind of politics is at work here: a benevolent translator limits the persecuted subject to the context of their persecution, but the solution is not to do away with the political altogether. Cole argues that the alternative is to be ideologically unsympathetic to the politics of the source text and yet translate ‘in ethically responsible fashion with the sort of sympathy I have in mind [...] Sympathy of the sort I’m trying to describe, complex sympathy grounded in sense, involves the preparation of the self for the reception and registration of an actual other, and as such its ethic is technical, and its technique is ethical.’³³⁷ Again, it is not clear why ideological affiliation might come in the way of complex preparation and reception of the other. It is conceivable that the translator of a ‘good’ translation is indifferent or antagonistic to the politics of the source text and the author –

³³⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

³³⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

but the merit of the translated text is not directly proportional to the extent of their indifference. There is no inherent mechanism to political solidarity that renders the literary composition bereft of pitch, rhythm, or timbre. Ultimately, the mutually exclusive paradigm – politically conscientious and aesthetically deficient or politically indifferent and aesthetically proficient – is too simplistic and only serves to mystify the process.

At the heart of Cole's argument is an attempt to discredit the political as 'ideology' and elevate 'imagination', 'instinct' and the 'ineffable' to levels of almost-religiosity. The political as prosaic and imagination as transcendent (mainly beyond the political) is a false dichotomy, and in effect, a deeply political position as we must ask: who asserts this? Although Cole is hardly unaware or dismissive of the politics of the other, a depoliticisation of the translational question and a return to the realm of metaphysics (translation as an obscure alchemical process rather than a problem-ridden discourse³³⁸) is reflective of a broader trend among its practitioners.

Cole's conception of aesthetics – unfortunately set against ideology – brings into focus two things: first is the role of language, which is to say, meaning as derived through contingencies of form, metre, and the arrangement of words and spaces on the page. Theoretical frameworks like Venuti's, though both political and seemingly centred on language, are prescriptive and

³³⁸ Cole's rhetoric against 'ideology' also ignores the work of critics like Tejaswini Niranjana, Harish Trivedi, etc., who have argued that translation is discursive, and the practice of subjection/subjectification inherent in the colonial model operates through discourses of philosophy, history, literature, etc., where 'subject' is constructed within multiple discourses on multiple sites, and one such site is translation. A translator indifferent/antagonistic to Palestinian liberation is equally capable of becoming complicit in the processes of the colonial State as they are of essentialising the Palestinian identity.

precede the text. The second thing Cole identifies (by dismissing it) is the role of history, context, identity, political subjectivity, etc. in the constitution of the TT. The process of translation is not like that of literary criticism, but they are both means of deep engagement with the text. A shift in the mode of engagement does not render the political irrelevant. If translation is a recreation, then the structures the ST is embedded within are as consequential as language and form; equally language is never 'pure', or apolitical, and is not merely an instrument for 'content'. However, as it stands, theoreticians and practitioners, especially in relation to poetry, tend to elevate form or instrumentalise it to substantiate a political position.³³⁹ In Waldrop's practice neither form nor historical context gets an unsympathetic treatment. History is the 'semantic field' for language and in turn language plays the semiotic mediator, and not the representative. She recognises the palimpsestic arrangement of history and language where they are exclusive and interrelated; each is affected by the other, but neither determines the other. Waldrop is conscious of history's heavy-handedness; its capacity to overwhelm or essentialise, but just the same she is attentive to language's capricious tendencies. A catastrophe is common knowledge, and yet each time the story is told in a literary text language bears a responsibility for the narrative. If history is constructed through language, in each instance of its retelling, language is freshly obligated to an ethical reconstruction. Language does not occur after the fact; it constructs the event. Waldrop is not naïve enough to fail to recognise the dialectics of this continuum.

³³⁹ For instance, see Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2006) or Clive Scott, *The Work of Literary Translation* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

The Demiurge

Waldrop retraces Jabès's 'steady steps of the nomad, steps sown by desire of words to come together, the rhythm of question and further question, the cadence of commentary'.³⁴⁰ Waldrop likes the analogy Orhan Pamuk's translator, Güneli Gün draws: 'Translating Pamuk is like mirroring his gestures'.³⁴¹ But it also induces a kind of translator's anxiety: she recalls that in Jabès, 'a double mirror separates us from the Lord so that God sees Himself when trying to see us, and we, when trying to see Him, see only our own face'.³⁴² She wonders at which nth refraction the translation catches, and if she is setting up a double mirror between herself and Jabès such that she only sees herself when she is trying to see him. She worries that she might be reading the source text as a version of her translation.³⁴³ Mirroring carries the trace of the body performing the gestures; no resemblance is pure or free of the actor inscribing herself in the act. For Waldrop the question is not whether she is present or absent from the translated text; it is the extent of her presence. She wonders if she has been reading Jabès's as a version of her translation. Far from denying her visibility, she ponders whether she is not after all a Narcissus of the field. This creates a very intriguing dynamic between her, the translator and Jabès, the writer – to which I shall return later in this section.

Having examined the paradox of origin through its constituent elements, including her own part in sustaining the ploy, Waldrop remains remarkably allegiant to axioms of the Jabèsian universe. Her logic is invincible:

³⁴⁰ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 1.

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁴² Ibid., p. 63 (quoted from Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 203).

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 63.

she writes that even when a living person makes a self-referential statement, it is always ambiguous. Yet, in life, we know the context, have additional information; we can check the statement against information from the outside. She continues, ‘against the point of view of others for whom that speaker is only an object, not subject and object at the same time’.³⁴⁴ In the case of a literary work there is no ‘outside’ even though we know we cannot trust what the subject says about itself. She qualifies that ‘itself’ refers to the text rather than the author. Any attempt to see through the object only takes one back to the subject’s statements about the object. She argues ‘the subject that takes itself for its own object blurs the subject-object relation’.³⁴⁵ The blurring of the subject-object continuum in *Le livre des questions* means Waldrop cannot check its pronouncements against an external world. The book clearly states that it writes the writer as much as it is written by him. She writes ‘For me, Edmond Jabès’s origin is in the book. It is where I first encountered him.’³⁴⁶ Waldrop staunchly adheres to the ontological paradox: when Jabès of the external world makes an appearance, it takes her by surprise. Once, when taking a charter flight to the United States from Brussels, she tries to calculate the exact amount of money she will need for the taxi and other assorted expenses. She recalls that Jabès immediately knew the answer: ‘Edmond, without a moment’s hesitation, without consulting the newspaper: “The current rate is *x* Belgian Francs to *y* French Francs, you’ll need about...” My mouth drops open at this sudden surfacing of the stockbroker who *of course knows* such things.’³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Dissonance (if you are interested)* (University Alabama Press, 2005), p. 82.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁴⁶ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 47.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

In one way or another, as Waldrop observes, *Le livre des questions* is almost always about the process of writing a book. In accordance with the declaration at the beginning of the book – ‘Tu es celui qui écrit et qui est écrit’ [You are the one who writes and the one who is written]³⁴⁸ – for Waldrop, the ambiguity whether the writer writes the words, or whether the words use the writer ‘as an instrument to come into being’ persists throughout the books. For Jabès the distinction is clear ‘I am absent because I am the teller. Only the tale is real.’³⁴⁹ Waldrop is drawn to Jabès’s conception of a writer, which she says upsets some; the writer as ‘a catalyst rather than a demiurge’ goes against ‘our wishful image of rational man in control of his world’.³⁵⁰ Perhaps she also means ‘his word’. These multi-layered paradoxes, somewhat unfortunately, earn Jabès the reputation of a mystical writer.³⁵¹ As Waldrop rightly disagrees, Jabès is not a mystical, nor even a religious writer. He is interested in the sign system, its limits and its capacity to behave exclusively of the writer. Waldrop reasons that ‘Language is not necessarily a “tool” we can “use” [...] More than that: words are not even altogether in the service of their meanings (which are supposed to be prior to the sign). For what is the “own law” of words in these books but the law of their “body” of sound and letters?’³⁵² If words are rarely in service of their meaning, and meaning is rarely prior to the event of the word – how does a translator translate? Jabès’s attention to the contrived relation between the signifier and the signified, his sowing of multiple paradoxes to distort these attachments, presents as a puzzle for the translator. Translation as a reproduction of the ST would undo these

³⁴⁸ Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions*, op. cit., p. 1 (and *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 1).

³⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 60 (and *The Book of Questions*, op. cit., p. 58).

³⁵⁰ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 125.

³⁵¹ As Waldrop points out, Giancarlo Carabelli accuses Jabès of ‘escaping from his place in history into mysticism’, see Rosemarie Waldrop, *Dissonance*..., op. cit., p. 84.

³⁵² Rosemarie Waldrop, *Dissonance*..., op. cit., p. 84.

conceits: for instance, if the translator were to repeat these strategies as if her intervention were invisible, the words will have been subject to prior-meaning, the origin paradox would come undone as the translator assumes the position of the creator in the target language. As I shall argue, it is essential that the translator does not mimic but recast the text in her own experience.

To return to the question of continuity between Waldrop and Jabès and Jabès and his protagonist, Waldrop recreates structures and meanings, but she also reconstructs Jabès's conceptual conceits. The paradoxes are recast with a sub- or meta- layer inclusive of the translator. In her analysis of the paradox in Jabès, Waldrop argues that it is a precarious genre as a book's self-referential mode is more paradoxical than a person's. By the time the book reaches the reader, the process in reference has already concluded.³⁵³ I would argue, when the book reaches the translator, specifically Waldrop, she includes herself in the paradoxical equation and the paradox is sustained in the target language. To clarify: the paradox does not endure because it is copied into the target language; it does so as it is conceptually composed anew in relation to the translator. For instance, characterisation of the writer on a spectrum between a demiurge and a catalyst is analogous to Waldrop's image of herself as the demiurge. She consciously mirrors the relationship between Jabès, and the protagonist of *Les livre des questions*, Yukel. She adopts the place of Jabès, and casts Jabès in a position similar to Yukel's – controlled by the demiurge or the catalyst. She includes herself in the continuum becoming immune to the internal, indistinct sphere of the text. The ontological uncertainty of the Jabèsian realm is based on the central paradox of the writer as writing the book and being written into by the book. Waldrop's gestures are

³⁵³ Ibid., p. 82.

embedded in this translational paradoxical space where she writes Jabès into being as he writes Yukel into being. Recreation implies a conclusion to the source text, an endpoint where the translation begins. If the foundation of the book is a paradox, closure equals oblivion. The paradoxical conceit fails in the moment of its translation. Waldrop, by reconstructing the paradox, preserves the conceit without distortion.

Waldrop is a version of Jabès in a different realm, and a different language. Nonetheless she embodies a certain rendition of his being in relation to the book. In the essay ‘The Joy of the Demiurge’ Waldrop casts herself in the role of the demiurge. Asked why she translated the several volumes of *Le livre des questions* she reasons that it has to do with a certain relationship to the original. She quotes Renato Poggioli who compares the translator with Narcissus, ‘who in this case chooses to contemplate his own likeness not in the spring of nature but in the pool of art’.³⁵⁴ Although she finds the comparison amusing for the narcissistic image of the translator it proposes, she takes the indictment further ‘As I read the original work, I admire it. I am overwhelmed. I would like to have written it. Clearly, I’m envious, envious enough to make it mine at all cost, at the cost of destroying it. Worse, I take pleasure in destroying the work exactly because it means making it mine [...] The destruction is serious.’³⁵⁵

The demiurge appears to have at least two interpretations in the western metaphysical canon: a creator in the Platonic sense, and something of an artisan in the Gnostic sense. In the latter account, the materials of the artisan,

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

including the demiurge themselves, are products of another (possibly supreme) being. Waldrop tends towards the allegorical implication of the second category. It is clear why she is drawn to this image: the materials for her transformation already exist as the creation of another figure (ST). She is a mediator and an artisan who breaks down the text to its elements to remake it after her own instincts, a process of which she recounts, 'There is no body ready to receive the bleeding soul. I have to make it, and with less freedom [...] I have to shape it with regard to this soul created by somebody else, by a different though not alien, aesthetic personality.'³⁵⁶ The autonomous words with their own laws are set to music, as it were, and the demiurge, though she can veer very far from the original tune, subscribes to the limits defined by the creator.

Waldrop's comparison of the writer and the translator is not limited to esoteric formulations. She demonstrates that though, outwardly, the two processes seem to work in opposite directions, there are in fact many parallels to found. According to her, the notion that a translation begins from an 'articulated structure' and an original work starts with a 'vague energy' and works 'toward the articulation of surface and structure' ignores the 'destructive aspect of all creation'.³⁵⁷ Here she seems to echo Attridge's theory that all creative work, translation included, is an arrangement/disarrangement of the materials of a culture. She contends the destruction is discernible even at a minute level where 'combinations of words are broken apart to form 'fresh' ones or when the 'traditional combination of elements in a genre is disarranged'.³⁵⁸ This is similar to Attridge, who argues the 'new' comes into the field as a

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

result of taking apart already existing norms, rules and even limits. She explains that in translation the destruction is obvious because the original exists; whereas, ‘for instance, the experience or experiences transformed into a poem cannot be traced by any means’.³⁵⁹

For Waldrop, both in original writing as in translation, destruction foreshadows creation. The dismantled object is not tangible, it is a kind of experiential structure ‘structure of experience is transformed’.³⁶⁰ This is in some sense the crux of her analogical framework. She perceives the creative act through experience – while not suggesting a direct relationship between experience and representation – which is really the separation between writing and that which writing attempts to represent. The same intuition guides her translation: a recreation of the experience of the ST and not a manifestation of mechanical mimetic impulses. She quotes from the *Le livre des questions* in which Jabès (or the creator in any case) tells the protagonist:

Qui étais-tu, Yukel?

“Qui es-tu, Yukel?

Qui seras-tu?

“Tu”, c’est quelquefois “Je”

Je dis “Je” et je ne suis pas “Je”. “Je” c’est toi et tu vas mourir. Tu es vide.

Désormais, je serai seul...

[...]

Et c’est moi qui te force à marcher; moi qui sème tes pas

Et c’est moi qui pense, qui parle pour toi, qui cherche et qui cadence;

car je suis écriture

et toi blessure.

T’ai-je trahi, Yukel?

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 141.

Je t'ai sûrement trahi."³⁶¹

Waldrop translates this as:

Who were you, Yukel?

Who are you, Yukel?

Who will you be?

"You" means, sometimes, "I"

I say "I", and I am not "I." "I" means you, and you are going to die. You are drained.

From now on, I will be alone.

[...]

And it is I who force you to walk. I sow your steps.

And I think, I speak for you. I choose and cadence.

For I am writing

And you are the wound.

Have I betrayed you, Yukel?

I have certainly betrayed you."³⁶²

It is hard not to read the lurking presence of the translator, Waldrop, as addressing these lines to Jabès. Her demiurgic inclination absorbs these lines into her experiential structure. She writes in *Lavish Absence*:

I follow Edmond Jabès through the streets of Paris, through the sentences of *The Book of Questions*. Some I know by heart. I prepare to usurp his name. In another language. My – the translator's – relation to the author seems to double – ape, compound – the author's relation to his character in *The Book of Questions*.³⁶³

For Waldrop, Jabès's admission of betrayal is an instance of writing as always betraying experience. Jabès cannot recount Yukel's experience without altering its structure. When the event is transferred to another entity, the

³⁶¹ Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions*, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

³⁶² Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

³⁶³ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 6.

experience in the target consciousness, no matter how closely mirrored, is constitutionally distinct from the one at source. Waldrop sets up her encounter with Jabès and his book through Jabès's encounter with Yukel. The experience of reading Jabès's transaction with Yukel is written into the translation as a double tracing of her experience of translating Jabès. The TT bears both Jabès's words and his experience replayed through Waldrop. In the same movement Waldrop enacts her subjective interiority and recreates the ST as an alternative to mimetic gesturing. Waldrop is Jabès's medium in English; equally, he is her medium, by which to express her translator's self.

She walks after him sowing rhythm after rhythm in her name: translation as seizure. She chooses his words and cadence in English and sows them on different shores. Even more than between the writer and the protagonist, the 'I' is a compelling device in the dramatisation of the translator's relationship with the writer. The letter's attenuated appearance betrays the many layers of voices ascribed to it: the protagonist is buried under the narrator/writer who is buried under the translator. Reading a translated text while paying close attention to the condition of its translated-ness resembles decoding, except the concern is not making the unintelligible intelligible, but analysing the intelligible to relate back to the unintelligible. A copy-reading, which is to say, reading the TT *as if* it were the ST would erase these layers of identity; it would negate the very process by which the TT finds resemblance to the source. Clive Scott argues that the act of translation does not translate the ST as much as treat it as an interlocutor to process another consciousness 'as one consciousness being processed, answered, by another consciousness, by a text which bears the marks of perceptual exchange'.³⁶⁴ Waldrop's praxis

³⁶⁴ Clive Scott, *The Work of Literary Translation*, op. cit., p. 33.

exemplifies this mode where the ST is an interlocutor to Jabès's consciousness. She not only translates the text, but processes, engages and collaborates with another entity through her own singular context. And precisely because she does not pursue a pure copy, or a mimetic method, Waldrop is able to say 'I have certainly betrayed him. And taken pleasure in it.'³⁶⁵ This is not an admission of guilt as much as testament to the scope and rigour of her translational practice. Processing another consciousness through writing cannot but constitute a form of betrayal as writing itself is 'disloyal' to experience. She recognises and affirms her subjectivity in order to examine the calibration strategies a translator undertakes. A mere assertion of the translator's subjectivity – that it exists – or characterising of that subjectivity as political or apolitical, or sympathetic or unsympathetic to liberation struggles serves to obscure the tangible, nuanced socio-historicity of the ST. These debates occur outside the text and predetermine its course.

³⁶⁵ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 63.

A Holocaust Poet

Jabès writes:

Quelle différence y a-t-il entre l'amour et la mort?

Une voyelle enlevée au premier vocable, une consonne ajoutée au second.

J'ai perdu à jamais ma plus belle voyelle.

*J'ai reçu en échange la cruelle consonne.*³⁶⁶

Waldrop translates this as:

What difference is there between love and loss?

a fricative taken away, two sibilants added.

I've lost it forever, my lovely v.

*I got in exchange the cruellest sound.*³⁶⁷

Waldrop argues that the close relationship between love and death, for Jabès, is not about evolution 'such as the amoeba that literally dies into its offspring', or the 'little death' of an orgasm. She registers an affinity produced by the intimate placement of the words '*l'amour*' and '*la mort*', and the 'surprising number of letters the words have in common'.³⁶⁸ It is obvious to her that Jabès is not probing the difference between love and death; a cliché notwithstanding, such a question would imply a direct relationship between the events outside the sign system; a revival of the proverbial alliance of love and death. The words would then serve no more than their representative purpose. Rather, Jabès marks a linguistic proximity; not an existing resemblance that is simply reflected in language: it is language that orchestrates the correlation.

³⁶⁶ Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions*, op. cit., p. 155.

³⁶⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 141.

³⁶⁸ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 101.

Then again, English does not maintain the same rapport between the words as does French. An attachment forged in language would cede its conceit if it were reversed back to mere signification. She believes it is essential to find words that share at least some of their letters and not simply translate as ‘love’ and ‘death’. She writes ‘I am fortunate to have “loss” available which shares at least half its letters with “love” and is within the semantic field of “death”.’³⁶⁹ However, she admits that the simplicity of an exchange between a vowel and a consonant is lost in English; ‘fricative’ and ‘sibilant’ are technical, a bit unwieldy, and the focus is directed to pronunciation by ignoring the silent ‘e’ of ‘love’ and the different ‘o’s of ‘love’ and ‘loss’. She writes that the sibilant of loss ‘ss’ is the cruellest sound as it shares all the letters with ‘SS’ of *Schutzstaffel*, Hitler’s paramilitary force. As I have argued earlier, Waldrop does not rush to grand conclusions. The substitution relates to the Holocaust, which is one of themes of the book. More specifically, within two pages of these lines, there is a passage about the Nazi SS, and this allows her to set precedence ‘What makes up for this is the text, within two pages, has a passage about the Nazi SS – indeed the cruellest letters, the cruellest sounds in a work that is, on one level, about the holocaust.’³⁷⁰ The transposition follows the linguistic temporality of the book. Waldrop does not take for granted the relationship between the Holocaust and the book unless Jabès brings it in to play at the specific juncture. The words’ capacity to summon the catastrophe in the here and now of the sentence is granted as much by the structuring of words as by context. Waldrop’s explanation cautiously avoids characterising the text on grand terms; she is clear that the book is about the Holocaust at one level as there are other levels. She does not create a relational network of words and references based on Jabès’s Jewish identity and the

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 101.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

Holocaust. She remains close to the world as defined by the text and redefines it in her own fashion.

She sets out possibilities for the translational process to be attuned to the timbre and rhythm of the text with an ear to the political and historical ground of its origin. At first Waldrop's response to Cooperman, and her own theorising of her praxis, seems to suggest a turn away from a consideration of the political and the historical. She rejects an 'irritable reaching after certainty' implied by the moral and ethical agency of poetry claimed by him. Cooperman imposes an extremely specific interpretation of Jabès on her – as Holocaust literature and Holocaust poetry – and expects her to ratify his assumptions. Though her response reads close to Cole's argument, Waldrop does not recoil from ideology; she merely professes a distaste for determinism. Where Cole imagines certainties (the process is doomed at the very mention of the political) Waldrop is interested in uncertainties. She does not immediately equate political solidarity with determinism; if anything, Waldrop's political sympathies ally with Jabès's. Her contention is with flattening the text by means of structures and events that surround the space-time of the writer. She is opposed to perceiving the source text's intricate and complex relationship with these elements as causal. She contemplates Jabès's identity, historical catastrophes of the time and other overlapping public spheres as insights into text rather than as conclusions to its contingencies.

For Waldrop a deterministic translation constitutes a breach in poetry's duty to explore the strangeness, the alterity and the eccentricity of speaking through another voice made one's own. She rejects easy conclusions; tends towards intervals, the pause between certitudes is her space to

speak, to craft and to interject. Her conception of the in-between is not as obscure as it appears and stands to contribute to the broader question about ethics and translation. She borrows the notion of ‘negative capability’ from Keats, whom she quotes ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’.³⁷¹ She adds ‘it is a challenge to closed systems’.³⁷² She is interested in processes of opening; the presence of rifts and interstices as opposing totality or as against sealing the text in pursuit of meaning. Waldrop’s adherence to Keats’s idea derives from her interest in paradoxes, contradictions, doubts, and enigmas in writing as in thought. She is drawn to the countless paradoxes in Jabès’s text. These paradoxes and games sustain the process as they resemble her own relationship to language and writing. Jabès embeds many little paradoxes ‘Are we not the image of the void which has no image?’³⁷³ or ‘My name is in my pain, and my pain has no name’³⁷⁴ within the meta paradox of self-reference. *The Book of Questions* opens with ‘the writer is the one who writes and is written’.³⁷⁵ This is, as Waldrop puts it, a paradoxical state. The writer is the origin and yet he depends on the words he writes for his own origin.

The origin paradox is one of the most compelling conceits in Jabès and Waldrop is entirely persuaded by its charms. She quotes Maurice Beebe: ‘the distinction between the maker and the made, subject and object, becomes blurred’,³⁷⁶ and ‘The distinction becomes blurred in a particularly tantalizing manner: self-references make the reader refer back and forth between subject

³⁷¹ Ibid., p. 125.

³⁷² Ibid., p. 125.

³⁷³ Ibid., p. 78, quoted from Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Resemblances* (Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. 20. The latter is translated by Rosemarie Waldrop.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 125, quoted from Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 286.

³⁷⁵ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 1.

³⁷⁶ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Dissonance...*, op. cit., p. 82.

and object, between thing (person, word) and reflection (reflected person, “word”) in an unresolvable oscillation.³⁷⁷ Language games aside, the question of origin concerns Jabès at another level, and Waldrop is attentive to it. She observes that Jabès extends the paradoxical structure so far that ‘play becomes the most radical quest of self-knowledge’.³⁷⁸ She is conscious of the difficult circumstance that undergirds the literary device. Waldrop understands the absence of the author, though made ‘fashionable’³⁷⁹ as the ‘death of the author’, to be for Jabès the conceit derived from lived experience:

It is no doubt a way of cauterizing his wound, the amputation from his native space. Rejected by the land of his birth he must create himself anew. So he defensively parries ‘no land’ with ‘nobody’. But, in compensation, a godlike nobody, a pure creator absorbed into his act of creation and visible only in it.³⁸⁰

She also considers the influence of Jewish literary culture, commenting that ‘a creator who takes up residence in the word’ is solidly within the remit of the Jewish tradition of the book. As she processes the personal, cultural and historical factors she is careful not to diminish them to present form as objective and unrelated to these structures. Equally, she does not use these details to deterministic ends.

At the very outset literary criticism requires a comprehension of form as related to historical and political context. With translation the preparatory stage requires a different kind of critical reading. The preliminary phase of the translation process for Waldrop involves intense reading and attempts at understanding the work. She looks to Antoine Berman to explain the exercise of understanding a literary work as a translator ‘[Berman] is right that a

³⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁷⁹ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 47.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

translator's understanding is "different from a hermeneutico-critical comprehension". It aims at retracing the author's steps, his creative process, rather than at analysing how the finished product fits within its culture.³⁸¹ Berman, whose work on translation theory significantly influenced Venuti, makes a subtle yet remarkable intervention here. Drawing from Novalis, he separates the hermeneutic from the translational approach. He argues that the translator essentially enters the zone of the work where it is admittedly finished and still being generated; a kind of paradox between continuance and closure that holds some appeal for Waldrop. He writes that the translator enters the intimacy of the writer and his language, and it is on the basis of this penetration that the translator hopes to 'mime' the foreign work. For Berman, criticism, on the other hand, 'rests on approach and not penetration'.³⁸² He argues that criticism is not an experience, and that the translator is closer to an actor or a writer than to the critic. If translation is a form of re-enactment, the first stage relies on the experience of the text – the translator invades the space between the source text and the writer. The second stage, however, relies on approach, and critical interpretation. The socio-historical (and its relationship to the personal) context, though significant at this stage, cannot come to serve as cause. Waldrop recognises the subtext of exile and displacement in Jabès's play, but she does not attribute Jabès's formal experiments to them.

I shall briefly consider a few translational approaches to Paul Celan (regarded as another poet of the Holocaust) as it offers critical insights for the configuration of history and historical context in the process of comprehending a text for the purpose of translation, which, as Berman argues, is different

³⁸¹ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁸² Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (SUNY Press, 1992), p. 213.

from critical or analytical interpretation. In Evelyn Dueck's *L'étranger intime*,³⁸³ an analysis of French translational approaches to Paul Celan's poetry, four translators of his work are discussed. In Marthine Broda's translations, an important translator of Celan's work in French between 1970-1990s, Dueck observes an emphasis on the value of resistance in the face of the Shoah. In her review of the book, Otilie Mulzet writes 'Dueck characterises Broda's translation and approach using Dirk Weissmann's term *la lecture juive* [...] Her emphasis on the immediate historical circumstances of Celan's life possibly blinds her to other interpretative possibilities.'³⁸⁴ What Mulzet draws attention to in Dueck's argument is Broda's reading of Celan strictly as a Jew in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust: a Jewish reading that interferes with every other interpretative possibility and obstructs the potential of the poem to participate in its own alterity. In as much the Jew was the figure of the persecuted other, Broda's reading of Celan as an act of resistance reveals an assumption on part of the translator. A translational approach that takes its cue from a specific feature (the scale and impact of the catastrophe notwithstanding) in the life of the writer and reads the text *through* that suggests a simplistic contiguity between text and experience. As Dueck explains, Celan himself was opposed to poetry 'that hides behind the supposed inoffensiveness of simple "representation"'.³⁸⁵ Mulzet writes 'rather than the more straightforwardly tragic interpretation of Celan's life posited in the work of Marthine Broda, Dueck prefers Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's translations that she characterizes as "philological"'.³⁸⁶ Lefebvre's work on Celan presents a

³⁸³ Evelyn Dueck, *L'étranger intime : Les traductions françaises de l'œuvre de Paul Celan (1971-2010)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

³⁸⁴ See the following review of the latter book by Otilie Mulzet: 'Otilie Mulzet reviews *L'étranger intime* by Evelyn Dueck', *Asymptote* (published online): <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/evelyn-dueck-l-etranger-intime/>.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

nuanced understanding of the entangled sphere of the text and the individual where historical context does not grant certainties to the translator. He describes Celan as ‘*un espace-temps verbal radical et individu alourdi par l’histoire* (“a verbal and radical individual space-time weighed down by history”)].³⁸⁷ Accordingly, Lefebvre undertook extensive research to understand the ‘rhizomatic character of Celan’s oeuvre’.³⁸⁸ Mulzet notes that, for Lefebvre, Celan not only wrote against the German lyrical tradition, but confronted all twentieth-century Western poetry; ‘while its extreme auto-referentiality puts into question its own ontological status as writing. Celan is not only writing “after Auschwitz,” but “according to Auschwitz”’.³⁸⁹ The distinction between reading Celan as a poet after/of an event, and a poet of the space-time of the event, which is to say, the historical, political and personal context of the writer that includes the catastrophe is significant to Lefebvre. Similarly, identity can function either as a singular essentialising lens, or be read in conjunction with other factors.

Much like Celan, a lot of critical work on Jabès interprets and imagines him as a Jewish writer invested exclusively in Jewish themes; and a few of them go as far as to claim him a theological or religious writer. Ammiel Alcalay, in his book *After Jews And Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*,³⁹⁰ criticises the simplistic characterisation by ‘commentators only too willing to appropriate the work of Jabès into an ethnocentric and simplistic ideology of equivalence (that of Jew = Writing = Book), without being attentive enough to the actual linguistic and cultural “collective duration” from which the work

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Evelyn Dueck, *L'étranger intime...*, op. cit., p. 360.

³⁹⁰ Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

emerges'.³⁹¹ For Alcalay the collective duration is a 'series of circles circumscribing a range of sequences, events, activities, and attentions'.³⁹² He explains Jabès's first circle consists of a Biblical palimpsest intimately related to Egypt's landscape, a second circle encompassing the 'semiotic parameters' of Sephardic culture as social, psychological and aesthetic markers, and the 'legal, liturgical, poetic, and mystical texts engendered by Sepharadic/al-Andalus and disseminated all over the Levantine and Arab world';³⁹³ and a third circle etched in relation to the last generation of Jews in Egypt and Jabès's own place in that history. I would argue the fourth circle is a training in the French education system, an exposure to its literary culture, and an abiding influence of (French) universalism. Insofar as it is nearly impossible to ascertain fully any individual's complex cultural matrix, Alcalay traces the cultural, political and linguistic circles intersecting and encompassing the 'radical time-space' of Jabès's life to counter methodological essentialism. This is comparable to Attridge's formulation of the work as originating at the intersection of a broader culture and the individual's distinctive negotiation with its possibilities and limits.

Both Jabès and Waldrop inhabit different, at times intersecting, 'collective durations'. Waldrop is aware of her own space-time and cultural configuration, as she is aware of Jabès's. She compromises on neither subjectivity to arrive at easy conclusions. She does not characterise Jabès as the Holocaust poet or the Jewish poet, choosing instead to read him as a poet with various points of initiation and inspiration. She does not overlook his Egyptian/Middle Eastern background, as seems the norm in Jabèsian studies. She

³⁹¹ Ibid., p. 64.

³⁹² Ibid., p. 64.

³⁹³ Ibid., p. 64.

is cognizant of the politics of identity and how it operates within the canon. She establishes a framework for literary engagement that acknowledges the politics of the work while not essentialising the identity it derives from. For both Waldrop and Jabès identity functions as a location from within which they mediate their relationship to the text. As stated previously, Waldrop corrects herself in the conversation with Federman 'I am German. Was.' On the face of it this has to do with moving countries and switching citizenship, though the implication is more than a bureaucratic technicality. For Waldrop being German (or not being German) has nothing to do with an essential characteristic – the identity is proffered as part of being a citizen of the nation state and it is irrelevant when one is no longer a citizen of that country. She is not German as she is no longer a citizen of Germany. She is indifferent to conceptions of an innate German-ness; her most concrete relationship to such a conception, if at all, is through language. Similarly, she refrains from classifying Jabès as Egyptian or French and allows for the multiple possibilities of being a French speaking Jew from Egypt to coexist in the course of the text. She makes space for Jabès's convoluted relationship with Judaism to emerge; the many versions of Jewishness – the unbelieving Jew, Jew as a metaphor – however conflicting, they are read as equally significant. She recognises Jabès's work as an interrogation of Jewishness, as much as it is about the catastrophe. She does not detain him within contrived dichotomies such as being either truly Jewish, or instrumentalising the Holocaust. As I have shown in the other chapters, Jewishness comes to be the metaphor for various states of otherness, difference and persecution in Jabès. It is also the measure of distance between Jewishness as an identity, a poetic conceit and faith. For Jabès the first significant encounter with Judaism is the moment of exile – it is conceivable that his approach to Jewish identity is one of forced acceptance and doubt. He asks:

Rejected by your people, robbed of your heritage: who are you? ...

If you make no difference between a Jew and a non-Jew, are you in fact, still a Jew? ...

[...]

But is one man not as good as another?

*The beheaded as good as the believer?*³⁹⁴

He does not attempt to resolve the gap between an intimate recognition with the Jewish condition and his lack of faith. Instead he indexes his Jewishness to other states of familiarity, such as being a writer or a persecuted other, or simply as a universal human condition. This is a particularly contentious movement in Jabès as it has been criticised³⁹⁵ for universalising the oppression and downplaying Jewish suffering. However, Waldrop is sympathetic to nuance, doubt and the tendency in Jabès to expand the Jewish condition – a victim of persecution is a Jew regardless of his faith or allegiance.

Waldrop chooses a passage from the first volume:

And Serge Segal shouted at prisoners around him, who would soon be scattered in the various extermination camps prepared for them, shouted as if in the name of the Lord, to His assembled people: You are all Jews, even the anti-Semites, because you're all marked for martyrdom.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., pp. 3-4, quoted from Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 61, and translated from Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions*, op. cit., p. 64.

³⁹⁵ See, for instance, Berel Lang and Gary Mole.

³⁹⁶ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 163.

The quotation carries the caption ‘A metaphorical Judaism:’ – the use of a colon suggests the paragraph is an elaboration or a summary of what a metaphorical Judaism consists in. For Jabès persecution is the paradigmatic condition of being a Jew; the oppressed are already always Jewish. The people at the camps are persecuted for being Jewish, but the persecution also marks them as Jews. Waldrop reads his Judaism as a metaphor for the various states of individuation and defeat. She writes

The Jew has been persecuted for being “other”. But “otherness” is the condition of individuation, the condition of being set apart from the rest of creation in the glorious – and murderous – species of humankind, and in addition, set apart from our fellow humans as individuals, always “other”. Judaism: a paradoxically collective experience of individuation.³⁹⁷

Waldrop focuses on the most differential aspects of Jabès’s Judaism. For her, being othered is the very site of inquiry ‘How could we find ourselves different and not ask questions, not reflect, not speak?’³⁹⁸

There is yet another history, a discursive history that haunts Egypt and that is the spectre of Orientalism. As Ammiel Alcalay points out in his essay on Jabès, ‘there’s nothing “exotic” in the Egypt of Jabès’.³⁹⁹ A view of Jabès as a European writer with possible oriental influences is not uncommon in critical evaluations of his work. His Middle Eastern, Egyptian background is largely ignored, and he is frequently positioned on the European side of the divide between the West and the ‘Orient’. His allusions to the desert or Egypt are neglected – as potentially embarrassing instances of Mediterranean

³⁹⁷ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 3.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁹⁹ Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*..., op. cit, p. 68.

romanticism – or made legitimate through a theological exercise of reading the desert in tandem with Biblical stories about Jewish exodus and the desert. The specific, the particular, the literal desert of Egypt is made to disappear in the profusion of allusions to the sacred. This is a different kind of identity predicament: if Jabès's Jewish identity and relation to the Holocaust is over-emphasised, his history in Egypt is mostly ignored. In *The Book of Questions* (Volume 1), the protagonist Yukel, an Egyptian, experiences something like survivor's guilt at having escaped the Holocaust as he was in the Middle East. When he is recognised as the author of the 'Book of Sarah and Yukel', at the tailor shop, the old lady asks him if he was in France during the war, and he says he was in Egypt. She responds 'Then you're a lucky Jew. No matter what you've suffered, you're a lucky Jew.'⁴⁰⁰ In various interviews, Jabès has called the expulsion after the Suez Crisis 'a little drama',⁴⁰¹ insisting that it was nothing compared with the scale of Jewish suffering in Europe. Jabès's position as an Egyptian Jew (with its own attendant history) is regularly overlooked in favour of viewing him as a European with eastern influences. Even Daniel Lançon, the author of the biography 'Jabès, L'Égyptien', an otherwise perceptive and insightful reader of Jabès, argues

[...] Jabès's Egyptian poems tried desperately to be part of French poetry, whereas, *The Book of Questions* places Edmond Jabès on the margin of the Western poetry tradition that he dreamed of entering. [...] It is in some way a 'return to the Orient' we are watching, as if underneath the European and

⁴⁰⁰ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit, p. 308.

⁴⁰¹ See for instance, Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book...*, op. cit., p. 10 (interview with Paul Auster).

modern interrogation of the book, the sign, the problematic of writing, the personal destiny of a poet after all Oriental... claims its place.⁴⁰²

Jabès tells Waldrop of his 'pilgrimage' to Max Jacob, when he and Arlette were on their honeymoon in Paris, and Jacob, while cordial and friendly, asks Jabès to tear up his manuscript. Jacob tells Jabès that a lot of his work is good but more Éluard, Musset or Jacob than Jabès. Jabès maintains it took Max Jacob to cure him of his 'false romanticism'.⁴⁰³ To return to structures of influence, Jabès's emulation of the French romantics and the surrealists is partly due to his being raised French within the French education system and milieu. He was already a French poet and not someone awaiting admission to the canon. When he was as young as fifteen his poems were circulated in Parisian Salons and recited by actors of the Comédie Française. A colonial mindset informs analysis that assumes Jabès was previously desperate to enter the Western canon, and later returned to his more authentic Eastern roots. It limits Jabès to the politics of canonisation and Eurocentrism; a kind of reverse orientalism where the virtuous East prevails over Western aspirations. This is, yet again, a form of identity essentialism. Entire histories of migration, colonialism and exile reduced to dualisms of East and West in the most simplistic terms. Jabès is critical of the Western imagination of the East; and just eight years after Said's *Orientalism* his critique is more salient than ever. He says in an interview to Jason Weiss in 1982:

I read Arabic, but still it was an effort, and I preferred to read them in translation. So, I had a certain rapport with Arab literature and philosophy, and then I realized in the Moslem tradition, with the Sufis, for example, there were

⁴⁰² Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 150, quoted and translated from Daniel Lançon, *Jabès l'Égyptien*, op. cit.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., p. 43.

completely amazing things, as in the questioning of language. At the same time, I was also beginning to read the great Jewish mystics, who wrote in Hebrew and Arabic. All that is a part of the East, which is a world quite apart. Even the West, which penetrated quite considerably, didn't deeply mark the East, didn't shake things up. For example, in the time of Romanticism, they created an East of fantasies, the men with their harems, the sad women, and so on. It's not that at all. The West has lived on this image of the East which is completely false.⁴⁰⁴

Jabès seems to be tracing an intellectual heritage for himself influenced by Hebrew and Arabic, and Judaism and Islam. To view him as a mono-cultured thinker i.e. a French thinker borrowing from the East contradicts his Cairene ethos steeped in the intersection of these cultures that have influenced each other for centuries. His work is the product of an amalgamation of influences; it is definitely not the work of a diasporic European looking to discover his roots. In fact, Jabès distinguishes himself from the Western gaze, and views himself as part of East; rightly so as he is an Egyptian writing in French, a fact most of his interlocutors tend to ignore.

Waldrop does not conceive of Egypt or the 'East' as foreign paradigms to be read against Jabès's French-ness. She writes that his work is an extraordinary fusion of traditions that 'defies classification as well as direct literary filiation'.⁴⁰⁵ She confesses that had she known more at the time of translating him, she might have consulted Arabic works written in 'divan' form that share similarities with Jabès's textual experiments. Waldrop

⁴⁰⁴ Jason Weiss, *Writing At Risk...*, op. cit., p. 181.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

sidesteps yet another essentialism; having read him as more than a Holocaust poet, she listens just as closely to his figurations of Egypt. The desert in Jabès is an important and complex motif that defies simple transliteration. It is a useful point of entry in the text from which to examine Waldrop's treatment of Jabès's Egypt.

A Glimpse of the Desert

In Jabès the desert plays a starkly different role from that associated with conceptions of the Promised Land. The desert, which is sometimes a metonymy for Egypt, is a landscape outside the bounds of the nation state. Unlike the mythical landscape of the Land of Israel, the desert, once concrete and tangible, acts as word-spectre or a conjuration in his exilic years. The desertic image in Jabès is particularly significant as it resists erasure enacted by the new nation state. It resists the State of Israel's mandate that its citizens renounce their attachments to the Egyptian deserts, or the landscapes of Eastern Europe to imagine a repatriation in Palestine. Jabès's manoeuvring often renders the desert as close as it can get to itself; the image is nearly the thing itself. However, a likeness is not easily granted, as the translator knows only too well. There is fragility in seeking a resemblance; as if the impossibility of the terrain can only be imitated through the futility of attempting a reproduction. If language is unpredictable, and given to its own movement, which is to say, not merely representational, Jabès seems to be asking – what does this mean for the image, and its possible correlative, the object in the world with a historical, political and personal dimension?

I shall briefly return to Dueck's examination of the word 'Ginsterlicht' in one of Celan's poems, which is roughly translated as 'lumière de genet' or 'lumière du genet' by many translators. Mulzet, in her review of Dueck's book, reminds us that Michael Hamburger translates it as 'Gorselight' in English. Dueck feels the French translation ignores two things: history of the region in Germany where the Genista plant is found and the linguistic history of the word. The 'du' and 'de' of the French translation imply a certainty –

light of the plant or light through the plant – that the English translation avoids. ‘Gorselight’ does not suggest a light of/through the plant, but instead evokes the strangeness of pairing light with a plant as if the former could be radiated by the latter. It hints at the whereabouts of the plant and the light; it also puts in question the assumption that ‘light’ refers to illumination. Dueck explores the location of the Genista plant in Saarbrücken on the German-French border where Neue Bremm, a Nazi torture camp was located between 1943-1944. *Bremm* derives from Old High German meaning thorn and in Lorraine, the language of the area, the word refers to the Genista plant. Dueck argues that Celan makes references to the *thorn* twice in his poem and therefore the word ‘Ginsterlicht’ should be read ‘as a transposed invocation of the given historical facts’, which neither the poem nor the poet has the obligation to make clear. These facts act as ‘*interpretive keys*’ and should be introduced into the reading as ‘constituent semantic fields’ which link the image to, say, an instance of trauma or memory.⁴⁰⁶ For Dueck, as for Lefebvre, the historical and political circumstance is a sign or a clue that illuminates the text. Here a historical fact does not provide cause, merely a point of entry into the poem. History is not conclusive to meaning-making; on the contrary, it counters determinism. Dueck reveals another intriguing aspect of landscape in relation to trauma, memory and poetics: if the standard assumption is that the terrain context an event is described in the poem, Dueck shows how Celan arrives from the word to the landscape and not the other way around. He does not choose a different endemic variety, or some other distinctive natural feature of the region – it is the thorn, the Ginster that he arrives at through *Bremm*. In a way the land is conceived through the word and not described after the fact. The light of Ginster filters through the word ‘Bremm’, a name that overwhelms the landscape for its traumatic history. It is not a simple invocation;

⁴⁰⁶ Otilie Mulzet, ‘Otilie Mulzet reviews L’*étranger intime* by Evelyn Dueck’, op. cit.

the association is laid out in the word, in language, sharing only a partial relation to the actual terrain. An associative word-fabric in whose image the land comes to its presence.

There is a similar strain in Jabès where the words carry, create and hold the landscape but not necessarily in relation to the signified or the real place. The land simply exists in the word, a kind of language-scape, and it is laid over, and invoked upon other places. As Waldrop observes

The Parisian streets in Jabès's work are not described the way a novelist might describe how the houses connect, how a woman stands at a window, how the market invades the sidewalk on Saturday morning with melons and figs next to studier beans and potatoes, cheese, and pates [...] If there were to be such images they would have to be of Egypt.⁴⁰⁷

Waldrop reports that Jabès tells filmmaker Michelle Porte that Egypt 'once and for all' will be his 'image of a place'.⁴⁰⁸ Gabriel Bournoure writes that the 'Jewish poet cannot stay with the kind of writing that used to reflect immediate life'.⁴⁰⁹ Waldrop takes it further 'So Jabès's streets appear as words. Magic names. They must speak so we can see them.'⁴¹⁰ She quotes Jabès as often saying 'A thing does not exist [...] unless it has a name.'⁴¹¹

The repeated reference to the 'desert' in Jabès endures as a kind of word-place; a memory that is composed in the book as if it were singularly of

⁴⁰⁷ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 52.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 52.

the book; an image as the place itself. A blurring of distinction between representation and creation; a world not mirrored but cast into being through the word.

As Waldrop sees it, the desert is one of the many points of origin for Jabès. She writes, 'If I were writing a biography, I would have to begin with Edmond Jabès's origins. But where are they? In Egypt, the desert, yes. [...] I am tempted to say, only the desert stayed with him, respecting no borders. But this is of course false.'⁴¹² The desert haunts Jabès's psyche but it would be false to claim it transcends its location, Egypt. The image is critical as it is embedded within a place that subsumes all other places for Jabès. The desert consistently invades his text as it even invades his Parisian neighbourhood 'This morning between rue Monge and la Mouffe [...] I let the desert invade my neighbourhood. The Nile was not far.'⁴¹³ When Irving Petlin draws a series of pastels based on *The Book of Questions*, Waldrop says 'with fine intuition, he translates the desert into a desert of Paris roofs'.⁴¹⁴ The desert is a complex motif not least because of Jabès's rapid literary sleight of hand in which the desert appears and disappears as different embodiments of itself. It acts as a surprisingly fertile conceit in that it is a metaphor and the place itself. The word simultaneously refers to the terrain of Egypt and the place of his origin. It is not easy to characterise the word as an abstraction or recollection. As Dueck reads Celan, the desert in Jabès continues from an invocation towards a biographical fact.

⁴¹² Ibid., p. 46.

⁴¹³ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, I, op. cit., p. 302.

⁴¹⁴ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence...*, op. cit., p. 41.

In an interview with Daniel Weiss he says ‘So I went there [to the desert] to depersonalise myself, to no longer be who I was in appearance of others in Cairo.’⁴¹⁵ In an interview with Marcel Cohen he says the trips into the desert were ‘*une coupure salvatrice*’ (a life-saving break):

In Cairo, I felt a prisoner of the social game... In those days the mainly European quarter where I lived and worked – the commercial and business quarter – was barely the size of the Opera quarter in Paris. In such a confined atmosphere, the texts I published were considered at best a kind of intellectual entertainment [...] Hence, the desert, which started at the very city limits, was a life-saving break for me. It fulfilled an urgent need of both body and mind, and I would venture into it with completely contradictory desires: to lose myself, so that, some day, I may find myself. So the place of the desert in my books is not a simple metaphor.⁴¹⁶

The desert granted him anonymity, solitude, and a break from the self-conscious existence in the world. A sanctuary not given to contingences; the desert was present at the edge of the city, in the periphery of his consciousness, not as an image, but as a tangible place he could journey into. When speaking of his years in Egypt, Jabès claims the word back from its metaphoric capacity as it is not an image, a representation, or an analogous allusion; it is literal. The word runs close to the bone of the text, drawing from his psychic closeness to the landscape. The pages are saturated with a gritty, granular texture as if the letters were particles held together by grammar. However, Jabès loses the desert, and later in Paris it starts to reside in its name and as the name. He envisions a semiotic expanse in place of the sands of the Levant. Daniel

⁴¹⁵ Jason Weiss, *Writing At Risk...*, op. cit., p. 178.

⁴¹⁶ Edmond Jabès, *From the Desert to the Book: Dialogues with Marcel Cohen* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1990), pp. 13-14. Translated Pierre Joris.

Lançon remarks, specifically of the Egyptian years, '[Jabès] has merely traded the real desert for a more fleeting substitute and is "wandering in the desert of signs"'. But at least the latter is a desert that cannot 'kick him out the door,' a 'non-place' from which one cannot, by definition, be expelled.'⁴¹⁷ Waldrop makes a similar observation 'Even when he walks in the streets of Paris Edmond Jabès walks in the non-place that he has chosen'.⁴¹⁸ The real desert evicts him, and he carves the Parisian streets in its image; he inhabits the non-place and conjures its name in the books. When Waldrop notices that Jabès's apartment has no images or photos of the desert, she notes that he does not need it; he carries the desert inside himself. When asked if he would ever revisit the desert, Jabès replies "'Non. Le désert m'a foutu à la porte.'" [No. The desert kicked me out the door].'⁴¹⁹ Waldrop is very intrigued by the phrase 'out the door'; it is not just displacement, but a kind of estrangement. A return is impossible because the desert enacts agency; as it once offered him sanctuary, it banished him just the same. Again, here, an echo of the contingent process of writing; language flows as it withholds. She writes in the way of an inference:

Writing: to find a path in the desert, in uncharted territory.

On the one hand, the desert, image of dispersion, and on the other,

the unreachable center: these are the two foci of Jabès's elliptical thought.

When Yukel drives into the desert he is intoxicated by the grandiose space.

But it brings him face to face with death in a sandstorm:

'At noon, he found himself facing the infinite, the blank page.

⁴¹⁷ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 48.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., p. 40.

*All tracks, footprints, paths were gone. Buried.*⁴²⁰

The trauma of departure lingers but it is an incomplete one as the subject returns to the point of unattainability over and over. Waldrop recognises a kind of parallel with writing; but the desert is not merely a metaphor for writing: writing is also a metaphor for the desert. The harsh terrain of the desert is placed over the blank page as with a palimpsest. She considers the ‘impossible topography of writing’⁴²¹ where the infinite (a desert) becomes both the condition (that which surrounds us) and the aim (that which we try to fill with words, consciousness, things and experience). This leads her to wonder if, by holding the infinite in our consciousness as a possibility, we do not create that which destroys us?

Scott’s definition of the translational process as a text transferred from one consciousness to another is relevant as it seems to hint, if not directly, at structural relations that come to shape the creative consciousness. Waldrop stays close to his literal and semantic landscape while recasting his figures and metaphors as part of her consciousness; she interprets layered possibilities partly permitted through her interpretation. The analogic closeness of the desert and writing is already visible in Jabès, but Waldrop, as having experienced the latter and not perhaps the former, ties them closer. The word is easy to translate (le désert = desert), but the mosaic of memory, trauma, cultural meanings and invocations are read in and through the word to recreate a world and not simply the word. She steps away from causality traps to lean into a subjective recreation of the text. Jabès’s Egyptian origin, the expulsion, a

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴²¹ Ibid., p. 41.

history of the personal in conjunction with the political are all ‘interpretive keys’ that open up fields of connections and meanings in the image of the desert.

Jabès writes ‘*Jamais le livre, dans son actualité, ne se livre*’; in Waldrop’s translation it appears as ‘the book never actually surrenders’.⁴²² Re-reading her translation in the early 2000’s during the writing of *Lavish Absence*, she thinks it inadequate. She worries the adverbial form weakens the statement. She admits to reading the statement very differently in 1973 and delights in her altered opinion nearly three decades later, which can only mean there is no ‘definitive’ translation, even if it is her own. There is no definitive ‘method’ either – each moment of translation is given to contingencies of its circumstance. However, translation is not exempt from the rules of history, catastrophe or structures that govern the production of literature. Said’s dictum to pay heed to the socio-historicity of a text is just as pertinent to translation as it is to literary criticism. A prescribed set of steps cannot politicise the process of transferring a text from one language to another. Every aspect of the ST – identity, form, nuance, socio-political context – demands a rigorous re-enactment in the target language. Waldrop’s translation of Jabès initiates numerous possibilities for translation theory and praxis where history, form and language can enact meaningful encounters in multiple languages.

⁴²² Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 137 (quoted and translated from Edmond Jabès, *Elya*, op. cit., p. 50).

CODA

A passionate questioning. Of himself, of human nature. Of what is considered a given. A passionate crying out against ignorance, wilful blindness, against not understanding, not wanting to understand, against not communicating. A passionate questioning of language. Not just writing well, but staking his whole life on the word, on his call for a little light out of the overwhelming darkness.

Out of great need.

Out of our wounds.

Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*.⁴²³

This coda is complimentary to the introduction in that I shall elaborate further on methodology but with a view to initiating newer lines of inquiry through the questions raised, some resolved and some yet open, in the course of the thesis. While the introduction served to lay out a framework for the argument, here I aim: (a) to think through why these frameworks were necessary; and (b) to acknowledge the challenges and pitfalls encountered in the process.

The above paragraph from the very end of *Lavish Absence* tends towards the more memoiristic aspects of the book. It would seem to ring a sentimental bell unsuited to academic consideration. However, Waldrop's reading of Jabès's poetics as against a world of incomprehensible cruelty, blindness, ignorance; a self-questioning spirit against closure, a mode of precision

⁴²³ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*..., op. cit., p. 155.

against chaos is, for me, the crux of his literary endeavours. Any attempt at rendering resistance into critical methodology runs into multiple obstacles. Foremost, the risk of simplistic characterisations such as Jabès the Jewish poet of the Holocaust, or a Jewish mystic resurrecting Judaism against Nazi erasure. As I have argued, this method essentialises and voids Jabès of all complexity excepting a predetermined response to catastrophe. The more nuanced and attentive readings, the bulk of critical scholarship on Jabès, attribute his exploration to the condition of being Jewish in the twentieth century. This has produced multiple comparative responses between theology and literature, and investigations of overlapping attributes such as textuality, interpretation, meaning, etc. Insightful and rewarding responses notwithstanding, a conspicuous absence of socio-political context in these readings provoked an ahistorical understanding of Jabès's work. The theological texts, especially the Hebrew Bible – from which Jabès's work is seen as deriving its logic and method – is also read without its social, historical context. A continuum between theological textuality and Jabès's literary experimentation is taken for granted; and mostly the reading is reductive in that it resorts to Jabès's Jewishness and the Holocaust as immediate and obvious reasons for employing a religious framework.

The consequences of neglecting socio-political context in favour of reading the text as a self-sufficient medium have been elaborated in the thesis. My argument, in response, derives a connection between the socio-historical trajectory of Biblical conceits and Jabès's *The Book of Questions*. The underlying assertion is the criticality of recognising and analysing ideological processes and their relationship to the study of texts. This methodological intervention in Jabèsian scholarship derives from observing a gap in the secondary literature and from an experience of institutionalised academia. While this

strain of argument, one that heeds the personal, would seem tangential at best and untenable at worst, I hope to argue (convincingly) of its relevance.

The experience of reading, writing and thinking about texts critically within a socio-institutional context can be a dissonant one. The various social structures at work, including but not limited to – sexism, racism, precarity, etc. – are near constant impediments. In effect the institution functions as antithetical to its stated purpose – it obstructs rather than facilitates (a practice though reserved for its socially disadvantaged members). The dissonance then manifests in having to endure and witness the university's structurally unethical practices, and its collusion with nefarious institutions such as the Home Office, oil and arms companies, or the military to name a distinguished few, while being forced to read the text as removed and pure of these concerns. The discontinuity between academic praxis and the social world is so deeply entrenched that it is often extremely hard to relate the experience at hand to the text at hand. A part of the reason for insisting on the relationship between the external world of events and socio-institutional literary criticism is a response to the dissonance experienced as a subject of the university. Thus a framework that could both resolve the gap in the secondary literature and respond to the experience of literary research in an institutional setting was necessary to bring to the study of the Jabès's. And, as I have detailed in the thesis, objective analysis of a text (pure of worldly interference) is hardly ever that. The process of reading texts in relation to their socio-political contexts reveals multiple ways in which the pretence of neutrality and aesthetic responsibility disguises complicity with State narratives, dominant ideology and repressive practices.

Jabès's propensity to question and 'cry out against wilful blindness' as Waldrop puts it, a mode of resistance, invites several interpretive possibilities. In reading Jabès as a Holocaust poet, or a Jewish mystic, given the temporal adjacency of his exile to the catastrophe, one would not necessarily betray his questioning spirit. However, the constant questioning is not merely a way out of 'darkness': it is a mechanism by which to unsettle placative mechanisms and easy conclusions. There were thus two possibilities: to read his work as a response to the Holocaust and antisemitism in Europe or construct an inquiry that simulates and repeats the core gesture in his work and does not merely apply the idea to the text.

Jabès's mode of questioning called for a critical methodology that could exceed the representative paralysis incurred by the catastrophe; that artistic enterprise, following the Holocaust, seemed both perilous and absurd, and riddled with ethical uncertainties, did not elicit a straightforward commentary from Jabès. The inscrutable, incapacitating cruelty and chaos compelled him to oppose incoherence. An interpretative framework constructed from this ethos had to intervene in the binary of good versus bad representation. To the extent I have argued that Jabès's *The Book of Questions* does not commit an ethical representative breach (an instance of 'good representation'), it was equally important not to read him as a 'response' to the event. Regardless of the ethical strength of the work, the notion of 'response' reduces the literary object to a passive observer. A text interpreted as an observer or a responder tends not to play a role in the socio-political context of its presence.

This is not to say there is an obvious classificatory system in which literary criticism admits certain texts in the canon of ideas and believes others

to be mere viewers. The inherent tendency in Anglo-American institutions to guard literary studies from the corrupting influence of history and the tokenistic inclusion of oppression (again, as victims rather than active agents) has spurred on this event-response critical continuum. Jabès's poetics, seen as a way out of incoherence, a stance against 'not-understanding' and 'wilful blindness' can be limited to his opposition to antisemitism, and mourning the Holocaust; however, this would constitute a somewhat simplistic and mystical interpretation of Jabès.

There was yet another risk: if Jabès's book is to be read as a response and a mourning, the concepts in the text had to be limited to the context of one of his identities, that of a Jew, and exclusively to the event of the Holocaust. By mid-twentieth century, and the establishment of the State of Israel, it was clear that contradicting meanings of ideas – such as liberation, exile, and secularism – could be produced by selective contextual positioning. The newly formed State galvanised around anticolonial concepts of freedom and emancipation; however, the context and consequence of founding a Jewish State in Palestine rendered the use of these categories questionable. The conditions of achieved statehood made the notion of anticolonialism unviable; on the contrary, the State of Israel, carrying on the legacy of European colonialism, was established as a settler colonial State. Therefore it was important to examine both Jabès's text and the secondary literature, with a vigilance towards congealed concepts derived through partial contextual analysis.

Jabès's persistent rejection of closure demanded an interpretative frame that could ask questions of the positions inhabited by him and the text. A imitative critical frame, as the one I have employed in the thesis, allowed for a repurposing of his interrogative approach; it admitted his resistance as

not limited to injustice but as antithetical to obvious resolutions. All the complacent anchors – home, nation state, exile, identity, religion and so on – had to be disrupted and challenged. There was a crucial lesson to be learnt here: it is not only the literary object that calls for contextual analysis, but ideas themselves demand regular socio-political grounding. The critical literature on Jabès employs abstracted forms of these ideas to interpret his work. As I have argued, criticism performs a simulation of the State’s ideological mechanism. It was then necessary to examine these ideas in relation to their socio-historic context; and interpret Jabès’s form as an agent in the history of ideas.

The framework is not without its failings, and I hope these lapses can become the basis for future research on some of the questions raised in this thesis. In an article⁴²⁴ published last year, ‘Losing Faith in the Humanities’, Simon During argues that the process of secularisation has happened twice in the West: the first in relation to religion and the second in relation to culture and the humanities. One of the reasons for cultural secularisation, he observes, is ‘globalisation intertwined with feminism and decoloniality’.⁴²⁵ His perspective is interesting as it compares the decline of religion in the West with the death of the canon; the loss of canonicity, and authority, and the impossibility of affirming moral and ethical values in the pursuit of the humanities, for During, enables this identification between religion and the humanities. Many of the previously relevant topics – he offers examples such as free will in analytic philosophy, Dryden’s poetry or differences in humanist thought in Italy in the fifteenth century – have become socially and culturally

⁴²⁴ Simon During, ‘Losing Faith in the Humanities: The Decline of Religion and the Decline of the Study of Culture Are Part of the Same Big Story’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 66.16 (2020). Available at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/losing-faith-in-the-humanities/>.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

marginal as they are not connected to ‘communal acknowledgement of the high humanities’ value. He argues that in the Anglophone centres, ‘it has become all but impossible publicly to defend the use of taxpayer money on them’.⁴²⁶ While I disagree with some of the arguments During makes, the three entanglements he identifies as relevant for the current state of the humanities – decline of religion, emancipatory movements, and the relevance and relationship of the humanities to wider society – constitute potential new lines of inquiry for the methodology articulated in this thesis.

I recognise that these are overly broad, and somewhat hackneyed tropes, but this is part of the problem I want to address in future research, and a part of the current work’s shortcoming. If the relationship between wider society and the humanities is ever-expanding and increasingly complex and the neo-liberal compulsion is to burrow further into a niche, then critical scholarship has to find ways to understand how mainstream ideology is sustained and propagated in literary discourse. In order to tease out this connection this thesis attempts to outline the latent pro-State, pro-religious ideology in literary criticism in the context of the Middle East and Europe in the twentieth century. Not always successful in cogently holding together all the layers, the argument struggles under the weight of its scale. Similarly, the other task of the thesis, to establish criticism as relevant to the life of ideas in a society, lapses due to its narrowly defined scope. The other great challenge was to determine the socio-historical life of the Bible, more expansively researched in terms of colonisation and evangelism, but less so in relation to the founding of Israel. Drafting this partial history of the Bible in relation to Jabès’s text necessitated the exclusion of several other considerations such as the progressive hermeneutic possibilities derived through the Bible by

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

scholars like Daniel Boyarin. The focus, however, was the political life of sacred texts, as they are employed and realised by State mechanism, and to that end, I hope, the omissions are justified. Yet another complication arose from categorisation, specifically the division of representation and interpretation. To the extent that there are errors in defining these concepts, a prospective new inquiry might consider the methods of nomenclature in literary criticism in comparison with their application in political discourse.

During argues that ‘the purposes, qualities, and forms’ through which art and literature are produced have ‘no direct relation to the broader social conditions out of which they are produced’.⁴²⁷ I strongly disagree; though some of these connections might be too simplistically defined (identity essentialism as one example discussed in the thesis), the relation exists and it must be investigated. I view this process of unveiling – teasing out every detail of the convoluted network between society and study of texts – as both possible, relevant and closely related to decolonising and other emancipatory movements.

Though During argues that religion has been marginalised in the West (a hypothesis I am sceptical about for multiple reasons), the age of the secular has dawned otherwise in most parts of the East. The rampant advent of religious fundamentalism in various parts of the world, including the West, calls for a forceful emergence of ‘historicized reasoning, truthfulness, memory, conservation, imagination, and judgment’.⁴²⁸ It demands more than assertions of Enlightenment-stained secularism. A possible direction for a future course of study tends towards discourse analysis: for instance, a study of latent

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

religious/nationalist ideology in the twentieth-century Anglophone critical culture; an analysis of ideas about nation building, protectionism and hegemony in secular works alongside an investigation of xenophobic border laws. Another possibility is to shift the paradigm and expand the scale. Insofar as this thesis pivots on the axis of land, the evolution of the current question could include the aspect of time or temporality. Still tethered to the alliance between literature and history, as asserted in this thesis, an analysis of temporality in the works of prominent Jewish thinkers in Europe, from mid-to-late twentieth century, would yield important insight in terms of the specific Jewish history it enacts in relation to statehood.

There are numerous prospective lines of inquiry that this project initiates (indeed this thesis at the end has felt less conclusive and more like a beginning), but I hope it affirms, in the strongest sense, the significance of institutional criticism and its relationship to the histories within which we are embedded.

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