

Edmond Jabès:
The Hazard of Exile

Steven Jaron



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EDMOND JABÈS
THE HAZARD OF EXILE

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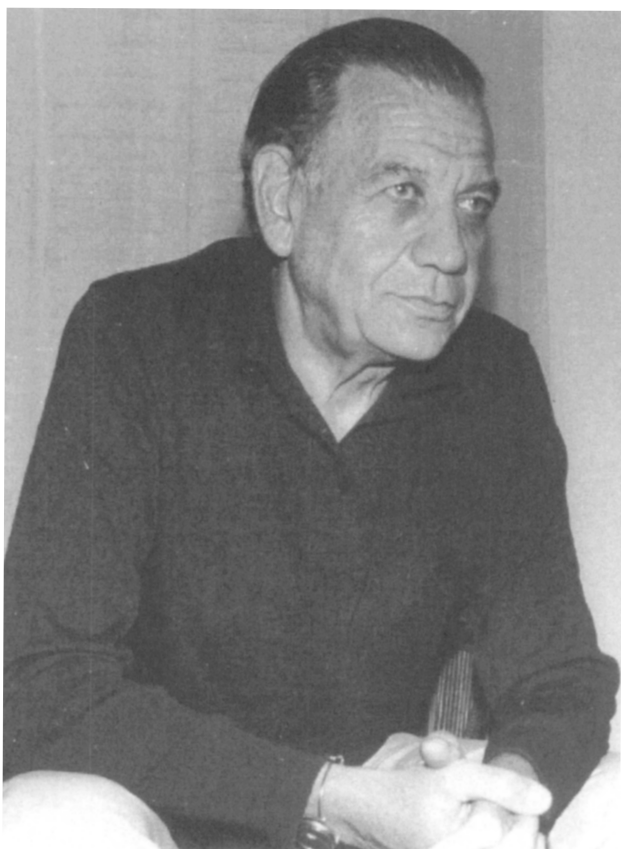
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Edmond Jabès in his Paris apartment, 1973
Photo: Edith Herrenschmidt (Archives Edmond Jabès)

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IN MEMORY OF MY GRANDFATHERS

Marque d'un signet rouge la première page du livre, car la blessure est invisible à son commencement.

Reb Alcé in *Le Livre des Questions* (1963)

La langue a, pour lieu, la langue.

L'exil de la langue est la condition de l'exilé.

Un Etranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format (1989)

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ABBREVIATIONS



Footnotes have been kept to the necessary minimum by the use of abbreviations, followed by page number, for works frequently cited. I have nevertheless allowed myself a handful of digressions in order to clarify or develop a point. In the first instance full citation details are given in footnotes for periodicals and other references, while the short title is subsequently used (e.g. *Marelles sur le parvis* for *Marelles sur le parvis: essais de critique poétique*). Italics in quotations from Jabès's writings are his own, unless otherwise indicated.

- Alo* Edmond Jabès, *Avec l'ombre*
A Maurice Blanchot, *L'Amitié*
Ap Edmond Jabès, *Arrhes poétiques*
Au *L'Alliance universelle*
Bé *La Bourse égyptienne*
Dl Edmond Jabès, *Du désert au livre: entretiens avec Marcel Cohen, suivi de L'Etranger* (2nd edn.)
Ed Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence*
Ei Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*
Et Edmond Jabès, *Un Etranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*
FEJ Fonds Edmond Jabès, Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque nationale de France
I *Israël*
Is Edmond Jabès, *Illusions sentimentales*
Jbmd Edmond Jabès, *Je bâtis ma demeure, poèmes 1943–1957* (2nd edn.)
Jta Edmond Jabès, *Je t'attends!*
LEJ Max Jacob, *Lettres à Edmond Jabès* (2nd edn.)
LH Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre de l'Hospitalité*
LM Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des Marges*
LQ I Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des Questions I (Le Livre des Questions, Le Livre de Yukel, Le Retour au Livre)*
LQ II Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des Questions II (Yaël, Elya, Aely, · (El ou le dernier livre))*

- LR Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des Ressemblances (Le Livre des Ressemblances, Le Soupçon Le Désert, L'Ineffaçable L'Inaperçu)*
- NRF *Nouvelle Revue française*
- 'Op' Edmond Jabès, 'L'Obscurité potable'
- Pa Edmond Jabès, *Les Pieds en l'air*
- Pé *Le Progrès égyptien*
- Sé *La Semaine égyptienne*

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Paris, November 2003

S. J.

INTRODUCTION



The Problem

In 1963 a stirring book entitled *Le Livre des Questions* appeared in France by an author then unknown to the country's reading public. Edmond Jabès, aged 51, was a French-speaking, Egyptian-born writer who had emigrated from Egypt in 1957 after the Suez war and in the wake of extensive economic and cultural reforms instituted by Gamel Abdel Nasser and his corps of Free Officers. Jabès had published a previous book following his arrival in Paris. In 1959, his collected Cairene poetry appeared under the title *Je bâtis ma demeure, poèmes 1943-1957* and with a preface by a close friend from Egypt, the critic Gabriel Bounoure. While that book captured the attention of many of France's prominent writers and critics (it was reviewed no less than ten times, a large number for a poet with such obscure origins) its readership remained limited. The lyrical Surrealism of its poetry seemed outdated or, worse, *manqué*, as Existentialism, the *nouveau roman*, semiology and structuralism gained influence among the post-war French intelligentsia.

The point of departure for the new book was a moral awakening brought about by an existential crisis that effected a shift from lyricism to a fragmentary narrative, or *récit éclaté*. *Le Livre des Questions* was the beginning of a thirty-year-long project to trace the textual relations between the act of writing and Jewish identity, all of which have biographical and historic roots in Egypt.

The early cultural ambiguities Edmond Jabès experienced are at the origin of his complexity as a mature writer. With hindsight Jabès came to attribute the cause of his departure from Egypt to his Jewish origins. Proponents of Egyptian nationalism, fired by the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, viewed the Jews of Egypt as Zionist brokers of European imperialism in the Middle East. But at the time the sense of political threat was perceived as insignificant by many Egyptian Jews. In fact, the fall of the widely acknowledged corrupt monarchy

in 1952 and its replacement by the Free Officers was initially greeted with enthusiasm (*DI*, 44). Soon, however, the European enclaves broke up among the rumbling gunfire of the Suez war of 1956. Nasser did not discriminate; non-Muslim minorities, with the notable exception of the indigenous Copt population (whose residential status nevertheless remains problematical to the present day) and non-Egyptian nationals (Jabès held Italian citizenship), were advised to leave, although many elderly people, Jabès's parents included, remained, his father dying there in 1962 after which his mother came to Paris. English, French, Jews, 'sujets ennemis' all—regardless of their having been born in the country, regardless of their belonging to a family which had lived there for generations—were economically strangled, often publicly humiliated, and finally forced from Egypt.

Exile did not end when Jabès left Egypt in the summer of 1957. Added to the political expulsion was the fact that once in France, he learned first-hand of that country's xenophobic anti-Semitism. One evening shortly after his arrival, he saw this graffiti on a wall in the Odéon quarter of Paris: 'Mort aux Juifs, Jews go home.' It unleashed a psychological fury—perhaps due in part to the curious mix of French and English, probably more because he had undergone a mental shock—and resulted in the birth of his new work. 'Il a suffi de quelques graffiti sur un mur', he wrote in *Le Livre des Questions*, 'pour que les souvenirs qui sommeillaient dans mes mains s'emparent de ma plume. Et pour que les doigts commandent la vue' (*LQ* I, 30).¹ The newly arrived emigrant believed that, as a native French speaker, he would at last belong to the linguistic promised land. He was wrong. His idealized confidence in republican France as the 'patrie de l'humain'² vanished. As he explained to the journalist Madeleine Chapsal shortly after the book's publication, the destabilizing experience of the graffiti led him to see himself in a radically different light: 'J'avais pris conscience de ma condition juive. Il fallait maintenant que je l'assume'³—a distinctly Jewish condition, then; and the daunting, seemingly absurd necessity that he should take responsibility for that condition and that it should become integrated into his consciousness. Thus both the political expulsion from Egypt and the existential rejection from France (where he would nonetheless spend the rest of his life) triggered the composition of the new book. At home neither in Egypt nor in France, Edmond Jabès shared the experience of the dispossessed exile, a position perhaps best summarized by Adorno's terse observation: 'For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live'.⁴

Le Livre des Questions combines dense aphorisms attributed to an enigmatic group of rabbis juxtaposed with the lachrymose love story of two adolescent Jews caught in the war-time maelstrom, which shuttles between Paris, Eastern Europe, Egypt and an unrecognizable 'non-lieu' situated within no identifiable time frame. Critically, it appealed to a relatively wide readership, a French public of Jews and non-Jews still quivering intellectually and emotionally from the trauma of the Vichy catastrophe and pondering further the fate of European Jewry in the post-war world. Thus did the book respond to Adorno's provocative dictum that the writing of poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric (*DI*, 93). And it thus happened that it was representative of the cultural moment of Western Europe, and in particular of France. Representative is the operative word here, for inasmuch as it was the product of a cultural moment, Jabès's fiction portrayed not the savagery of the death camps, but the story of two ardent lovers' intimacy in contrast to death-camp inhumanity. Layered into this depiction was a narrative of the seemingly endless wandering and persecution of the Jews in history, and the principal mechanism by which they coped with their historical vulnerability, commentary:

Le roman de Sarah et de Yukel, à travers divers dialogues et méditations attribués à des rabbins imaginaires, est le récit d'un amour détruit par les hommes et par les mots. Il a la dimension du livre et l'amère obstination d'une question errante. (LQ I, 30; my emphasis)

In short, to recount (by means of a 'récit') and to comment (through the intermediary of the imaginary rabbis, who are not unlike the members of a chorus in Greek tragedy) are the two most functional discursive registers in *Le Livre des Questions*. Commentary in Jabès is explanation; explanation offered not as clarification but as a deepening of the narrative's mystery. Set apart from the main text by typographic markers such as parentheses and italics, commentary reflects the story of Sarah and Yukel while suggesting insights into their disorientation by the events of the war and post-war years:

Qui es-tu, Sarah, dans l'hiver de Yukel?

(Biche traquée dans les dédales d'asphalte et de plomb que j'emprunte, ce soir; biche capturée vivante pour être brûlée — Tu as échappé au feu des hommes mais pas au tien [...]) (LQ I, 40-1)

Jabès's poetic reflections proclaimed that Jewish suffering was no different from any human suffering. This universalism was widely

perceived. One early critic wrote: 'On a dit que c'était un livre sur "le problème juif"'. But from a larger perspective, she added: 'Je crois, pour ma part, que c'est un livre sur les problèmes communs à tous les hommes, vus par un juif.'⁵ The sense of Jabès's universalism remained upon his death in January 1991. The Jewish theologian David Banon reiterated that 'l'œuvre jabésienne est à la fois juive et universelle. [...O]n ne saurait occulter ou privilégier l'une des deux dimensions sans la défigurer'.⁶ It is sadly ironic that, although he had abandoned the dream of Enlightenment universalism following his encounter, in long-cherished France, with the graffiti, Jabès's subsequent work nonetheless incarnated universalist ideals. But more importantly, *Le Livre des Questions*, rendered in the interrogative and composed in a minor key, confirmed in the mind of his French readers their feeling that the possible destruction of European Jewry was unthinkable, but nonetheless real. The social and psychological significance of any serious work of art or literature is never merely academic.

Jabès once said: 'Comme de l'abîme de la nuit ont surgi les astres, l'homme de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle est né des cendres d'Auschwitz.'⁷ Born from the still-warm ashes of Auschwitz, he thus infused his writings with a Jewish consciousness and with collective Jewish memory, especially as they were transformed in the dread period of the death-camp revelations. As such, he could no longer be associated exclusively with that collegium of writers given up to Surrealist reverie and dream life, nor could he be identified, exclusively, as a neo-Mallarméan poet. History had made such associations impossible. Rather, from 1963 onwards, he began to share the company, uneasy though it sometimes was, of writers such as Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, whose positions in the life of contemporary French and Jewish letters remain influential, having helped define the aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations of the day.

The principal aim of this monograph is to place the texts composed in the first half of Jabès's career (roughly between 1929 and 1957) in the cultural milieu (francophone-Egyptian and French-Jewish) in which he grew up, and then to show the radical change in his post-immigration writings once he assumed the consciousness of a Jew in the age of Auschwitz, a historical period which, psychically if not morally, torments this consciousness, but which is assuaged by the very act of writing. A lesser but related concern of this study is to situate Jabès in the nascent literary and philosophical environment of

Paris in the early sixties, in particular the cultural moment that sees a movement away from Existentialist preoccupations towards newer insights into problems of textuality and ontological a-theology.

One often reads in Jabès's mature work of the existence of books that somehow stand before the book in question. Jabès leads the reader across thresholds that open onto other passages, spaces, still other thresholds and, of course, other books. *Elya* (1969), for instance, opens with this very idea: 'Derrière le livre, il y a l'arrière-livre; derrière l'arrière-livre, il y a l'espace immense et, enfoui dans cet espace, il y a le livre que nous allons écrire dans son énigmatique enchaînement' (LQ II, 171). I understand this quotation as a plea to return to the origins of the book (here, *Elya*) and to unearth its past or, in the words of the psychoanalyst Murielle Gagnebin, to engage in a study of what she calls the 'negative presentation' or 'le lieu de l'émergence, dans l'acte même de la négation, de l'infigurabilité'. Gagnebin sees negation as, on the one hand, the artist's 'consciousness of privation' or 'absence' and, on the other, something that goes beyond the 'destruction', 'concealment' or 'elimination' of a model. For her, negative presentation 'postule une réflexion centrée sur le manque conçu en tant que *position*: l'acte est ici visé, et non l'objet de l'acte'.⁸ What has been negated by the artist's or writer's mind remains present—by virtue of the psychical processes of repression or violent rejection—in his or her work. As such, Gagnebin argues cogently for a 'poïétique de la négation'.⁹ I would add, a 'poetics of the stranger', by which I mean the attempt to analyse what Jabès himself called the 'absence originaire' (*Et*, 98) of his creative work dating from his Egyptian years and, more generally, the 'non-lieu' of his writing. In political terms, Jabès's violent rejection by Egypt—which followed the 'soft' repression of the country's Jews—would give him the status of a 'negatively present' subject who embodied this problem in his writings after 1957. Understood in this light, in the quotation from *Elya* Jabès would be referring not only to the books preceding that book (*Yäël*, *Le Retour au Livre*, *Le Livre de Yukel* and *Le Livre des Questions*), but also to the book that preceded his departure from Egypt, his collected poetry from the period, and, further, to his production before the Second World War. But there would be yet another book—a hypothetical, perhaps improbable book 'enfoui dans l'immense espace'. This book, Jabès notes, is 'le livre que nous allons écrire'; in other words, a book that will be collectively written in the time to come. And yet this book is the one that is supposed to be

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behind them all. For this reason, Jabès adds that it is going to be written ‘dans son énigmatique enchaînement’, that is, in a paradoxical continuity. If my analysis of this paradoxical continuity is at all successful, then it will have brought to light Jabès’s earliest known writings and, more importantly, will have tried to interpret them in relation to those which have been studied in greater detail, the later texts dating from his Parisian years.

At first view, the writings dating from the Cairene period differ strikingly from those of the Parisian period. The first were strongly influenced by modernist literary trends emanating from France, whereas the texts composed in Paris stand out by their startling allusions to aspects of ancient and contemporary Jewish history and to the Jewish condition in modern Europe. A more careful reading of the post-war Cairene poetry shows that it was undeniably strong in its diverse and innovative use of Surrealist aesthetics, but was nevertheless estranged from the Surrealist movement. Its stylistic hesitancy was its most salient weakness, although Jabès demonstrated a willingness, indeed an uncomfortable need, to forge an idiom distinct from his Egyptian contemporaries, such as Georges Henein, who was enthusiastic about Surrealism. On the other hand, *Le Livre des Questions* did not dam Jabès’s literary originality and moral vision. It swept broadly, and left few untouched: at its best, the reader is engaged in an empathetic relation with the tragic story of two Parisian lovers, Sarah Schwall and Yukel Serafi. At its worst, Sarah’s and Yukel’s tale of desperate love among the ruinous mental and physical landscapes of post-war Jewry leaves the reader confused, although ‘struck’ by the terrible events recounted therein. It is true that Derrida’s 1964 essay ‘Edmond Jabès et la question du livre’ summarized with lucidity the complex relation of the Cairene texts to the Parisian ones:

On relira mieux désormais *Je bâtis ma demeure*. [...] Dans *Le Livre des Questions*, la voix ne s’altère pas, ni l’intention ne se rompt, mais l’accent s’aggrave. Une puissante et antique racine est exhumée et sur elle une blessure sans âge dénudée (car ce que Jabès nous apprend, c’est que les racines parlent, que les paroles veulent pousser et que le discours poétique est *entamé* dans une blessure). (*Ed*, 99; Derrida’s emphasis)

Here, Derrida was developing key themes in deconstruction; his essay is invaluable as a document in the early history of his thought.¹⁰ It is also important to my argument because it considered the relationship, as few have since, between the poetry of the Egyptian years and that