


Edmond Jabès

THE BOOK
OF
QUESTIONS:

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EL, OR THE
LAST BOOK

Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop



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THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS

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El, or the Last Book

ALSO BY EDMOND JABÈS

The Book of Questions (Volume I)

The Book of Questions (Volumes II & III):

The Book of Yukel; Return to the Book

The Book of Questions (Volumes IV, V, VI): *Yaël, Elya, Aely*

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El, or the Last Book

Translated from the French by

ROSMARIE WALDROP



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El, or the Last Book

THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS

VOLUME VII

When God, *El*, wanted to reveal Himself
He appeared as a point.

The Kabbalah

“Agate marble which I rolled across the doorway of our house when I was a school boy and which suddenly came to rest so far, so far away that I no longer know, with all this weeping, if I now see some humble teardrop at the edge of pain or the one which remained, as if stopped short, on your pale face, now gone.

“Out of the game, but its innermost stake,
“how this familiar point with its faded colors frightens me,” Yukel had written to Sarah.

“Our ears pick *fin*, ‘the end,’ out of the word *faim*, ‘hunger.’ The end is famished,” she said.

He tried to read the book *within* the book and thereby destroyed it in each of its words. But the book also destroyed him, so that nothing was left either of him or of the book except for two small points, one black, one white, which soon fused.

Will we ever know which of the two continued to obsess him?

Then came the slash across the iris, the blank check made out to the void.

Unimaginable encounter of what is on the point of becoming with what is about to be dispersed again.

The tried word blossoms in an ordeal where it is both hangman and victim.

O recoil of all expectation where expectation is tempered, as if action were only the desire not to flower where death guards the gardens.

Then the desert is a space where one step gives way to the next, which undoes it, and the horizon means hope for a tomorrow which speaks, where the pact is the point.

“In your loneliness, you hear the word from far away and then, in gratitude, look at it so closely that you cannot but drown in it.

“My advice is: keep your proper distance, to remain separate.

“Then you will read the first book before the second and so on until the last which is again the first,” he said.

And he added: “We write at the proper distance.”

“Think also about all the erased words which the words of your books have replaced,” he said. “There are some traces of them left in your notes.

“Thus you will learn that absence bears witness to all infringed absences because it is written into their gradual dispossession.”

“A point so small, and yet it holds the ashes of all other points,” he said.

Yesterday and tomorrow are halves of one and the same point.

The question of this book is a book from the far side of questions, a dagger planted in the bone.

Cemeteries, I know all your names, rotting in the abyss of the Name.

A mirror covered with flyspecks. Who will ever tell of the kindness and perplexity of this abandoned pane?

“Then I understood the impossibility of love. We think its object is the person before us, enclosed in her body. Alas, it is this person reaching out to all the points of space and time she has ever occupied or will occupy in the future. If we do not possess her contact with a certain place, a certain hour, we do not possess her. Still, if we had them pointed out to us, perhaps we too could reach those points. But we feel around blindly and do not find them.”

—MARCEL PROUST
(*The Captive*)

“It is up to us to accomplish the negative. The positive is given.”

—FRANZ KAFKA
(*Notes and Aphorisms*)

“An image to explain the concept of truth: a black spot on white paper. We can describe the form of the spot by indicating for each point of the surface whether it is white or black. To the fact that a point is black corresponds a positive fact. To the fact that a point is white—not black—, a negative fact . . . But in order to be able to say that a

point is black or white, I must already know under which conditions a point is called black, under which others, white . . . Now the weakness of this comparison is this: we can indicate a point on the paper even without knowing what black or white is.

“ . . . The verb of a proposition is not “is true” or “is false” . . . That which “is true” must, on the contrary, already contain the verb.”

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN
(*Tractatus logico-philosophicus*)

You said: “Love is death’s crystal day, oblivion its opaque night.”

“How beautiful you are, Sarah, lying here, naked, while I looked for you wherever you are not, where you no longer are,” wrote Yukel.

“ . . . écrit, récit, the ‘written’ and the ‘tale’: one and the same word with its letters scrambled in a most natural way.

“All writing offers its share of the telling,” she said.

No roots. Grow roots.

There is no path but leads to our death, the path we would prefer not to take.

“How can I be both where I am dying and where there is no love but in life?” he had scribbled in his notebook.

“The sage dipped his reed pen into the inkwell, pulled it out, and held it for a few moments, as if in

doubt, above the page where he had not yet noted anything that day. Then, to his pupil's surprise, he drew a small circle in a corner of the blotter he always kept within reach.

"‘This circle;’ he said, ‘which the blotter has made into a point invaded by night, is God.’

"‘Why did you want the circle to turn into a black point? And why should this stain among so many others on your blotter be God?’ the disciple asked.

"‘Your question is that of the Lord,’ replied the sage.

"‘If my question is that of the Lord,’ said the disciple, ‘I know now that God has created me in His image.’”

Is it to this passage from Elya, this reflection from long ago, that the following pages owe their existence? All my books have come about in this way. Some observation, often banal, some breach, some fear, anxiety or pain have in turn prepared their birth.

Here, yesterday's circle has shrunk to a point, the questioning of the circle to that of the point.

Out of the nothingness of the book, a deeper nothing strove towards light, conniving with a rebel point which the infinite dark had hidden from me.

"An accident," he said, "may suddenly transform the infinite into infinite worlds whose interrelation we cannot define, but which we nevertheless sense."

The point, an accident? Day, an accident?

Then this book, like the preceding ones, is the fruit of an accident.

A wound is a shared frontier. The time of the infinite is the time of borders crossed.

No trace of blood remains where I have passed. What could be more natural? Only absence has the power to endure, but its oblivion shapes the negative into a dazzling point, a sun beyond alliance, beyond allegiance, beyond eternity.

“In the night of ‘commentary’ or *commentaire*, there shines—utter daring or fierce irony?—the proud verb *taire*, ‘to be silent,’” he said. “Any commentary must take off from what is silent in the text, what has knowingly or inadvertently been left unsaid.”

Comment? ‘How?’ O insistent question of all beginnings.

How can we be?

How can we follow?

How can we die?

You had to learn to deserve your truth. The Jews know that it is not enough to believe in a truth, that we must, each time, deserve it. There is no merit but in the stubborn effort to reach it. Does stating a truth mean you are sure of deserving it? Where could we find such certainty?

Ah, to grow into what we try to deserve.

What we do deserve—our share of a word—lies hidden, perhaps, between the lines of the book. No doubt, the strength of creation depends on not knowing this.

We can never know the value of the book. It can only be measured in terms of its resistance against the abyss. And who knows to what point the book can be lost?

Nomadism. *Le Nom*, ‘the Name,’ justifies the nomad. The Jew inherited the Name and, at the same time, lost his place on earth. The nomad takes on himself the unstated Name.

*To drain all blood from the voice.
The voice is the straight way. It follows the tracks
of the letters. It is the book's blood.*

*You have no more voice. You have given your
blood. You have written.*

The book's silence is sacrifice of the voice.

*All writing is graven silence, mountain tops
looming on the far side of the voice.*

*Outside any constellation, it is the sparse stars
which fascinate.)*

“Just think,” he said, “how many words a word can contain, and how they subtly undermine it.

“But do not look too closely. If you set a single one free, hundreds will attack you. Will the last one end up getting the better of you?”

Any word is a place open to attack by formidable words ready to usurp the book when nobody is watching.

“Isn't it strange,” he said. “The word which shatters the word in order to break free, for a moment holds the key to the book.”

One letter in common is enough for two words to know each other.

The act of writing may be nothing but an act of controlled violence, the time it takes to move on to a new stage of violence. The book explodes with infuriating legibility.

All shattered writing has the form of a key.

O crumbled word, O book turned to dust. You thought you had done with letters, with symbols. But is that possible? Dust begets more dust.

It is clear that, facing nothingness, any sense is nonsense, any reality crushingly unreal, any alliance a sealed avowal of its useless strength.

Pages full of eyes turned towards death, towards evening.
Long have we searched the horizon in the dark.

O spent point, infinite defense of the book.
A single grain of sand holds out against the desert.

(“In the word commentaire,” he repeated, “there are the words taire, se taire, faire taire, ‘to be silent, to fall silent, to silence,’ which quotation demands.”)

All other life ceases in the life put into words.

The difference between the living and the dead is that the living talk while the dead do not.

Our body decays when it is suddenly robbed of its language, no longer conversant with itself, unable to form, to inform, to confirm.

We speak to the dead in order to bring them back to life. All we manage is the illusion of a general resurrection.

Light also is a word which begets other, explosive words.

Night, reign of respite after the explosion. Blind regrouping of our lights.

. . . this inexorable *before* which is also the *place*
after.

There is the time before the point and the time after
the point. Both are times of laying foundations.

From this point . . .

*(“God was the first to break the silence,” he said.
“It is this breakage we try to translate into human
languages.”*

*“Vowels make us see, make us hear. Vowels are
image and song. In our ancestors’ script, vowels
are points.*

*“God refused image and language in order to be
Himself the point. He is image in the absence of im-
ages, language in the absence of language, point in
the absence of points,” he said.)*

“We came to the end of the night, and suddenly the world turned
white.”

“We stopped on the threshold of the path, overwhelmed by all
this whiteness.”

“Unable to speak or make any gesture, we sat on the last mile-
stone.”

“We were evenly white.”

“The same, both of us, cut from the landscape, you would have
said.”

“The landscape was nothing but an immense white screen.”

“Cut from the white cloth of the screen, I could have sworn.”

“A flat world, hostile to form.”

“What form did we have?”

“Perhaps that of silence at the outskirts of absence.”

“The form of an impregnably real point to meditate.”

(“Well, how is your work going,” he asked, “bit of smoke in the wind?” But then he did not seem to see me any more. He kept asking: “Where are you?” while I tried in vain to answer.

Thus I learned, to my chagrin, that even the closest words cannot always be caught.)

Point of space unmarked by any letter.

Will it all well up again in death?

(Where there is no risk there cannot be any writing. My risk, here, is maintained by the point.)

Junction point.

Saturation point.

Dew point.

At this point of the page . . .

“Waiting,” he said, “is the point of no return in the dark which we hope will lift.”

“Behind us, the world we crossed and, on the table, anxiety’s double dice.”

(“Since that day?

“Since that night?

“Which were our days?

“Which our nights?”

Sarah had written to Yukel.)

“To wait is the patient margin of our fate,” he also said.

(I let you read the book within the book and the word within the word.

So you will learn that once written there is no book which is not books, no word which is not words. In death, this is the way things are.

To be different each time means to die of a birth which itself dies of having got its wish.

Thus the end of death is yet another birth condemned.

A slightly larger space within a word—the separation into syllables, for instance—an unexpected crack, a letter broken or dropped into the void give rise to such play within the word that it is drawn into a series of metamorphoses and destroyed in the process.

“Plurality and multiplicity,” he said, “are only solidified dreams of space, banal incidents on the way.”

Words suffer from a certain opaqueness which they only lose when disembodied. As if in order to be heard they needed to take off their appearance.

*A thousand voices in one. Ah, who can tell which?
And from which donors all this blood?*

In the beginning, there is transparency.

Precocious point.)

“What have you been doing since?”

“I’ve been waiting.”

“Where have you been?”

“I haven’t budged.”

“Which pages do you suggest?”

“Always the first, or rather the one before the first, the virgin page.”

“Impossible to read.”

“Reading is impossible.”

“Absurd book.”

“In the defunct word ‘absurd,’ there was the word *sur*: ‘on top,’ ‘above,’ also *sur*: to become ‘sour,’ fruit or wine which has turned and tastes bitter, a bit vinegary, and finally *sûr*: ‘sure,’ as in knowing with certainty.

“As in a plane or solid system of reference, ordinate abscissa and curve, so the unreasonable, the extravagant and the unexpected help define the position of the vibrant point of any quest.”

“Deceptive point.

“You have no longer any faith.

“You are the most wretched of us all.”

(God laughs and cries in the reverberations of the point.

Evidence: the abyss where proof is the point.

All certainty is a seat belt, a way of tying us securely to the void as the flight takes off into space.)

. . . A book whose words we need to cancel to let it return to its white plurality. A book which is both the promised and the denied part of the book. A book, finally, designated by a point of which we do not know if it is white in the morning and black at night, but which we could come to see as a point of the future, evolving where nothing else subsists.

(I: voice having lived.)

Unbearable presence of the point.

All these ruins necessary for the reign of the spirit.

A point beats in your breast: your heart.

A point beats for your hand: your pulse.

A point beats in space. Listen.

(You arrive at a certain point, you leave, you return immediately: same place, same point, but you do not know where.

Imagine everything beginning with this point. Around it, no cry which is not the last, no sound which is not the last to be uttered, no breath which is not the last breath.

From this point on, we should be able to write and speak without words, from this point on which probably lies on the far side of gesture, agreement or truth, in the mute space death has hollowed out at the end of the book.)

The freedom of the spirit, O tense emptiness, depends on ruling out any point of support.

At the point I have reached:
abolish the title,

mark its place by a point.

From now on, things are either *before* the point—that is, memory—or *after* the point: deadline.

The point itself is visible before, invisible after, or the other way round.

Enter the center: *between* seeing and seen.

The hand writes between points. Along with the word, it is forever center.

The memory in back of our memory is hearing, with eyes in despair.

Likewise, the book before the book.

Souvenir: to come, *venir*, from above, from below. Noise, images, words, silence. Night and day. We will have left . . .

Fire remembers the first fire, and water the unspoiled sweetness of mountain tops.

Memory is a long dotted line marked in turn by dark and light.

What we call a blank in our memory is only a dislike of our retinal field for one or more of these points.

(To discover the deep relations between one point and another no matter how distant and how limited our ability to perceive them, ah, this is true, living knowledge.

“Out of the fog of the word savoir, ‘to know,’ looms the word voir, ‘to see,’” he said. “Knowing is essentially seeing.”

We shall carve in the space between.

“The word voir,” he added, “is placed under the authority of the word roi, ‘king,’ which we cannot

read here, but which reigns nevertheless. There is royalty in seeing."

"But is the word *roi* not also contained in many other words?" he was asked.

"It is," he replied. And after a pause, he added, perhaps to cut short such questions or to throw his audience off the track: "God is there, even when the letter is not.")

Birth and death: one and the same indelible point.

(A twenty-seventh letter remains perhaps to be invented.)

A pain in his shoulder had bothered him all during his walk.

He had sat down at a sidewalk café and ordered a cold beverage which he was now drinking with obvious satisfaction.

One point of his life still remained to be explained: why did he write? Which cause, which insane plan had he taken to the point of sacrifice?

Writing: a graphic representation, an obsessive fresco on the walls of a book which has been protected so long that, no sooner opened than it is corroded and destroyed by the air rushing in.

The place of the book is a walled-in void. Every page a precarious shelter which has its four walls, its margins. To expose them to light and to eyes means to topple the walls and ceiling. All writing returns the word to its initial transparency.

He anxiously focused on clarifying a particular point of his subversive method: a point of fact, point of law, point of honor.

(*“Confrontations of ghosts and historical places,”*
he said, “they are nothing but subversive digres-
sions inspired by after-death.”)

“My story,” he said, “is an hour’s project which made me change three hundred sixty seconds into as many points of the horizon.”

Any notion of eternity or the infinite lapses at the first sign of a running inscription.

Body responds to body with a multitude of points which are mi-

raculous mirrors or the misery of illness. Worlds communicate in our skin.

The body is master over our attachments.

(Dazzling! Myriads of tiny suns, disks of white fire are coming down on the book, blinding me.)

IV

Inside and *outside* are only the arbitrary part in the dividing of an infinity-time, whose promised minute keeps calling the center into question.

Every minute is an apex of nothingness.

“Four beams from the lighthouse of pride,” you said,
“and they come before a fourfold fall.”

He crumpled the page he had covered with words and held it a long moment in his hand before letting it drop into the waste basket. Then he sat waiting.

It would soon be day,
but this day held no hope for him.

At his feet, the paper had turned into a bruised ball, as if half-eaten by rats. You could have called it a point trying to recover its stricken roundness.

It was cold. It was even raining a little. The street was quiet when suddenly

he got up, opened the window and jumped.

*(A neighbor, startled out of his sleep, declared:
"I saw a point lying in its blood. Then I saw it being
hastily carried off, still alive, by an ambulance.*

"I was unable to move.

"I shall always hear the scream of this point.")

An uncomfortable position is the least you can call what I am in today, and without having had the slightest warning, so much was I in the habit of simply following my path.

So far this path had been a series of detours, of unclear comings and goings. But here I am, all of a sudden, trying point by point and step by step to go over its course in my mind, that is to say, trying to go back to a period of writing, to a past of symbols for which I was not entirely responsible, but of which I was attributed a share. So

that, whether I started from a place I had chosen or from where I happened to be (without really knowing how I had gotten there), each of my departures was from a different point of the space granted the book. Place of all places, anchored in the void.

Ah, to gorge this hollow anchor with black ink, to restore its monstrous reality, its very sway over the night, within the everyday frame of being subordinate to death.

(Between two proofs of silence, complex stakes.)

I wanted nothing but to fuse with this Nothingness.

Like a promise to keep, a challenge to meet
on the evening of innocence.

To determine the race of traces.

How many were we, in our desperate march
for survival?

This night

is my night

without face or message.

Snow. Snow on my footprints.

Harsh, the winter from the other side.

Her voice came from so far away that I could hardly make it out.

“Don’t give in to the seductive lies of your pen,” she said. “I must not die, and you neither, in the young, but frail body of an artless letter.”

(This day will come and, afterwards, no other day.)

*You can light up a question whenever you wish.
But later, who knows how to snuff it out?*

“Ou, ‘or,’ and où, ‘where,’ are first of all,” he said, “in jour, our word for ‘day.’”)

Where are you, or are you?

(“Day or other day, on the other side of days.
“A day where?” he added.)

I have to get used to this situation.

Nobody to whom I could turn for—‘or’ is also in the preposition ‘for.’ For or against. But where? Where?—Nobody, I said, to whom I could turn for help around here. (In ‘around,’ *autour*, we also find *ou* and *où*, as well as the word *vautour*, ‘vulture,’ hiding its first letter.) Nobody will plead my cause today.

Time turns skeletons to keys.

Néant: né en . . . It is nothingness we are born in . . .

O subterranean work, forced labor at the roots of symbols, always under death’s severe eye.

At any moment, the book risks the book in its rejected fullness.

(“In the word jour, ‘day,’” he said, “there is above all the name ‘Ur,’ the home of Abraham, town of all birth.”)

So it was true? Nothing. All birth in vain.

“And the sea?” you said. “Ah, what about the sea?”

“I was barred from the voyage.”

“Every age has its voyage. Are you without age?”

“So it was true! It is nothingness we are born in . . . or? . . . and where?”

(“I shall tell you of the sea, Sarah, of all the points of the horizon,” wrote Yukel.

“I shall tell you of the sea, Yukel, of all points, my prison,” wrote Sarah.

“I shall tell you of the sea, Yaël, of the salt and foam of the sea, Elya’s loose shroud, Aely’s infinite wake.”

The desert, our future foretold.)

From book to book, the blank space is place and bond.

Upper case letters: for epitaphs.

(On top of my books,
 my characters, unprovided for,
 dance fandango rounds
 in the scandal
 of their nonexistence.

Mirage of a circle,
 smaller and smaller,
 fainter and fainter.

A point
 drowned
 in a point.)

You have written books. They have delivered you unto death, the other, the frightful.

Deprived of the air of its *r*, *la mort*, 'death,' dies asphixiated in the word, *le mot*.

(“There can be no language for unity. There is no language but for separation,” he said.)

Like a child in its first questions or a lover intoxicated with sharing, the writer grappling with the book does not ask *who* he is, but *whose*.

“To whom do I belong?” On which word, which line, which page of writing do I depend? On which life, which death?

And the question of the book echoes the writer’s question; the question of the word that of the book, and the question of the letter, that of the word: one and the same question.

As the object of our avid questioning, origins, whether in the time of the book or outside time, appear to be the pretext—the pre-text—for again and again affirming our origins. But if the place I have left remains the place I came from, how can I really know which was my place?

An empty space must constantly be filled. Space is all we have had to fight against.

“Don’t I know you?”

“I don’t remember meeting you.”

“Where are you from?”

“I have so often left the same place that it now seems to me I am from nowhere. This place gets so lost in the infinite of places.”

“But you speak a particular language. The language of a country I recognize. Mine.”

“Indeed, I once thought I would find my place in my words, but then . . .”

“Then?”

“How shall I put it? The words suddenly proved to be different.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“It is not as clear as I would like.”

“I am all ears.”

“Well . . . as if, suddenly, I could only speak through the silence of the spaces left empty by their difference.”

“Their difference?”

“Some basic incompatibility between man and his words, something that keeps them apart. Could it be that they are condemned to walk together, but have only the road in common? Exile within exile.”

“But . . . ?”

“The words want, perhaps, to stress this difference by their distance; man suffers, perhaps, not being able to master them.”

“But isn't it always words which express us?”

“No doubt, at the moment my pen draws them, when my voice sets them free . . . But immediately after, I realize that I have not written, not spoken.”

“But in that case, what you read, what other people hear, what is that?”

“A mixture of sounds, of words bitterly remote in their alien truth. Man is mute, I tell you. The only mute creature.”

“But then, your books?”

“Ah, my books . . . What can I say? You see, it is perhaps just there, where we are silent while talking, where nobody can read us while we write, that what I have called Judaism resides. The words of the Jews are buried in sand, forever silent, yet every syllable, as if mesmerized by this living death, reports their immortal agony.

“The desert is our book.”)

“Il, ‘He,’ is inside sILence,” you said. “He—God—is means perhaps: *silence exists*.”

“The spear of silence has spangled the sky with bleeding letters. “Blood is fire,” you also said.

(“The blood of the letter and the blood it dives into will, some day, be the same ocean,” you added.

The desert died of the sea.

My books have shown you how far I have gone, how far I have been stubborn enough to push. And you have noticed, as I did today, this morning, that I have not left my house.

This was at the beginning of everything. And it is at the beginning of everything that I go on walking in place, without past, without future.

Naked, poor like an open hand.

Have I reached the top of this unimaginable death which dazzled and drowned Aely's eyes? A death which rejected letter and word and thus escaped all possession, hence the book?

Awful obligation: to surrender where the tarnished reflection of the ultimate absence surprises us, to resign ourselves to the hellish condition of nonexistence.

Like God, emptiness has no name. The eye from the far side of silence turns to stone with the final period of the book.

No word is spoken after.

(E_L. E sub L. Energy of linkage opposed to E_S, energy of separation.)

Adding energy means splitting an entity into its constituents. Withdrawing energy means regaining the entity, the point.

El.

Ailes. *Broken wings.*)

~~X~~ ~~A~~ DE L

DE L ~~X~~ ~~A~~

~~A~~ DE L ~~X~~

DE L

“We read the word in the sunburst of its limits, as we read the Law through Moses’ angry gesture, through the breaking of the divine Tables,” he said.

In the exploded word, God collides with the hostility of the letters.

Even outside the Name, God is a prisoner of the Name.

“I have worked an unforgivable breach in the lives of human beings. This I regret. Thus,” he said, “God speaks to God.”

The reach of the book depends on its violence which the margins hawk.

God’s rape is from the Prophet’s innate conviction that the Book can be read without mediation. Basic error.

By turning their back on the Tables, the chosen people gave Moses a master-lesson in reading. From instinct—for is the Book not prior to man?—they raised the rape of God to the level of original death. And, rising up against the letter, their independence consecrated the fracture in which God writes Himself against God.

The destroyed book allows us to read the book.

“People of the Book, the Jews have been called. This would imply that God is the only writer, and every book a privileged moment in the reading of the Book,” he said.

“O my brothers with your red and tired eyes, when writing and reading are part of the same act, which of you can accept without bristling that his reading has been prompted?”

“The Jew of the Book is not the faithful, but the unbeliever, the rebel, the exile, the one for whom the book is each time different at the risk of not existing at all.”

“But all these recorded readings,” he added, “all these piles of works will waste away. Did not God, before man, expose His word and, in spite of Himself, reduce it to dust?”

“And to dust thou shalt return, like your name.

“Dust is watered by blood.”)

“Never mind, you can do nothing about it, neither protect your life nor keep from other worries.

“As usual, you will try to distract yourself by looking at the book-stalls along the quais or taking a walk in your favorite neighborhoods of the Capital.

“Nothing has changed since yesterday, except you. Or, rather, everything has changed but you.

“This you don’t know because you are wind, poor, whirling wind

“a thousand miles from your body

“which fought for each word of your book.”

This anonymous letter—why had I kept it?—fell out of a box I was putting in a drawer.

“So you follow me around? Who are you, spy? A man or a woman?

“I am perfectly at ease in my body. I have written it down. *I write*. My notebooks, my papers are covered with words.”

“Your notebooks have often enough fed the fire. You forget that I have lived near you. I am Alain. Remember, Alain, the adolescent who by chance slipped into one of your works. But how can I describe my face when my writing does not make you remember?”

“Do not take on the fate of words where there is no book,” she said.

(“In the word corps, ‘body,’” he said, “there rests the word or, ‘gold.’ A block of hard light which, heated to its melting point by the word, flows into

*the radiant body which the writing body embraces
in order to burn with it.*

*“O net of veins and arteries that my pen inks on
the sun’s dead-end fire.*

“Twin worlds. Dark and light are synonyms.

“To live forever in a death that cannot soften.

“O friendly sharing of the fire.”

*“Man’s innermost being refines sounds, tunes
words more eloquent than proceed from his mouth.
I can only hear our death,” Yukel wrote to Sarah.*

*“The voice from outside is the voice of death.
Speaking voice.*

*“We do not die so much by ourselves as of our-
selves,” Sarah wrote to Yukel.*

*Sarah also said: “Ah, be still. Be still. Let us keep
our lives abundant.”)*

Three thousand years, three charred points,
here, without defense.

Have I come from a land without a voice to re-
new the pact with our borders?

Land in the hollow of a dream, like copper in the
mine, like the seal in the middle of our forehead,
like a lucky star
in the dark sky.

No soil could love your steps more. Here lie cen-
turies of distress and persistence.

Listen. Learn. Our tears still water the grain,
and an ear of wheat is always of our time.

“You are here. In the sand of the wells. Where are you?”

“By the wells of sand I knew you. I was passing through. You
looked at me.”

“I had hoped for you. In your eyes, the world has perished so
many times. Vengeful fires or the unslaked hunger of oceans? Can
we rebuild the world in our memory?”

“I was a shadow where the universe shines out. Every day a day
of larger trenches. But the roots remain.”

“Your roots are in my soul. Your love has ripened in mine.”

“My love was that of a grain of salt for the sea. Cursed passion.”

“You will be the love of trees and the freshest grass. Sap rewards sweat. The earth is contented. Come into the shade, O my love.”

“I was the shadow kicked out when night coveted the world. You would have taken people for owls. The dark allowed them to see.

“I was the persecuted shadow who could never find refuge. Morning denounced me to the ground. Night hated me and treated me as an intruder in its bosom.”

“You will be the love of the Book’s morning and of its nights. The sun listens when the sand talks of foliage and fruit, speaks like the hour to lovers, lips pressed against lips.”

“Word without words.”

“You are here. Where are you?”

It was the first day of our love.

He said:

“What do you want of me, girl? Grass has grown from my eyes, and in the morning, you dance in the grass.

“You have no memory. Mine is a heap of ruins. You are young like a stem holding passion and perfume. I have seen the book in shambles. The road was my bed, my knees my table.

“You have no memory. Mine is a mountain of cries.

“You are free and fear only yourself.

“I have known your face as a child’s and as a woman’s, tender in my embrace.

“Your innocence is that of desire forged in steel. It reaches out to him who takes you in your close virginity.

“Your drift with a stream that searches its course, water missed by the thirst of soil and sky. You are its return.”

“What do you want of me, girl to whom orange and olive bow down?”

“Your body bears the charge and weight of a land doubly occupied with its future.

“Your strong ankles, your breasts swelling with pleasure before milk, your large hips where I drown.

“How deep can I bury myself in the vertigo of a voluptuous truth feeding on blood?

“Death keeps our face, like love,

“tense.

“A wave. Mad, bounding caress. Stripped in its excess.

“One moment, and you are the monster changed into the matchless beauty,

“claws out

“for him who joins

“in your embrace.

“Thus body clasps body in a memory of liquid expanse.

“O ebb and flow of an always new beginning.”

“Against the timely patience of incongruous newcomers, the still upright wall extends a challenge to centuries whose mortar is the soul,

“but when the heartbeat quickens, the soul is reprieved.”

“Deaf alliance, piercing reason. Identity is on exhibit. The ocher dust of still-born mornings covers the world.

“Twilight season. We shall tear to shreds the black veil fallen from the beloved face.

“A cradle song. Let us brandish our trophy.”

“Here, song is closer to song and a groove yet barely a trace.

“Thus a breeze is sister of the water, and a hand full of sand nearly like the hand which seeds the months and makes them flower.

“You came

“with your fragrant thoughts

“and sat down at my door.

“It was the second day

“of our encounter.”

“What do you want of me, girl spun by the earth till you faint.

“Our entwined bodies haul up to the surface of lamplight the stories of your sleep and dreaming.

“Where is the end?

“The body is always beginning.”

And he said:

“I stood on the threshold of every deadline. Disappointed, not by age, but hope, not by my body, but by my spirit wrapped in night. I was born in death. I have not done with being reborn. I saw myself in the distance, calling. Calling myself to the two horizons of an exhausted sky. Rising in order to invent its downfall: thus the daystar illustrates man's fate.

“I had come to the end of a life which, surely, the pebbles on the road would want to tell. But who talks or listens to a stone? Only a Jew. A Jew leaning against a wall or casting his shadow on the road.”

“I had come to the end of my strivings where sleep is a reward, when you appeared. My heart was full of you, and I had often said your name like a wish. Land which pushed me to risk the wager of life, healthy and harmonious body that I would nestle against.

“You came, wild and determined. Ah, can I tear myself from my heart, from my veins? I shall tear myself from you because my hour orders me to leave. I shall tear myself from myself when the light explodes and reveals the inside of morning as a night without end. Time will destroy time. But you will be there, and you will win out.”

And she replied:

“I shall be there with the fruit, the tenderness of the earth. I shall celebrate the season and carry the salvation of roots to distant parts. But it is you I have chosen to lie by my side. To you I have offered my mouth, my breasts. For you I have a sex and a nape.

“I shall be where you are. My fields need arms. I surrender my fields. My hills need shoulders. I surrender my hills. My deserts need water. I surrender my thirst. Naked, I am yours.”

And he said:

“If you were thirst I would quench it with mine, O my love.

"If you were the dark, O my love, if you were the morning
 "or the milestone.
 "But you are the goal,
 "and I do not recognize it.
 "Thus I am punished in the very privilege I was granted:
 "I am loved and unable to respond.
 "Pity me. I have called you."

And she replied:

"Tomorrow is here, under our feet and above our heads.
 "Stay. Where you go I shall follow.
 "Where you are I sing."

(. . . But the earth, let me tell you, is only a translucent point whose skin was savagely ripped off by death. The real abyss.

"A point become country," he said, "become planet, become universe, and so often discussed that we have only approached its idea."

"In the word amour, 'love,' there is the word mur, 'wall.' Has no one else noticed this?"

"For a moment, we will have rebuilt the Temple," he had written.)

"I have trodden under foot the merit of your words," he told them, "yet they made mine stand out. 'Profane words,' you declared, 'that have profaned our Word.'"

"Your words come out of our dramas of dereliction, out of our resurrections, but are they Jewish?" they asked him.

"They are Jewish in their underground vocation, as well as their obedience to the Book whose pages are blown by the wind. They

have the hectic fervor of a butterfly and are stubborn and persistent like the ant," he replied.

"For centuries, the Jews have scraped their foreheads on stone as if it held God's peace," they countered.

"The Book holds God's absence. O word sealed for oblivion. Men received it not, but loyal to the Letter, they multiplied the book," he said.

"God rejects our books. Could it be your belief that the book is witness of God's increasing distance?" they asked.

"Every step towards God is a step away from the book," he answered.

(" . . . about these words of mine," he later said bitterly, "which are mine and nobody else's. Ah, let you and me remember them in secret.")

The husbanded land speaks to the promised land of old.

Displacement. Persons displaced.

"I hear 'displaced' in the distance which separates me from the word 'place.' I read, in mirror writing, my endurance and my pain," he said.)

A book leaves the land, as a boat leaves its harbor home, in order to fulfill its time.

Once it has taken leave, a word has no attachments.

The man of the land no longer recognizes the man of the book. But the sea forever, with every word, tells their common torment.

In that time, in that time, our books were used to feed the fires of hell.

As long as there are books there will be dreams of burning.

(The arsonist who had just been arrested clearly had it in for landlords, not for the stones.

“Let the flames speak,” he screamed, “where riches keep our words enslaved.”

*At each turn of the street
make a point
of taking your bearings.*

“The word rue, ‘street,’ is and was nowhere as present as in the word rOue, ‘wheel,’ and perhaps its diminutive, rouelle.

“The Jews have always been tracked down in their streets, their alleys, their ruelles,” he said.

“Rue has also been insidiously inserted into ‘universe,’” you said in conclusion.)

II

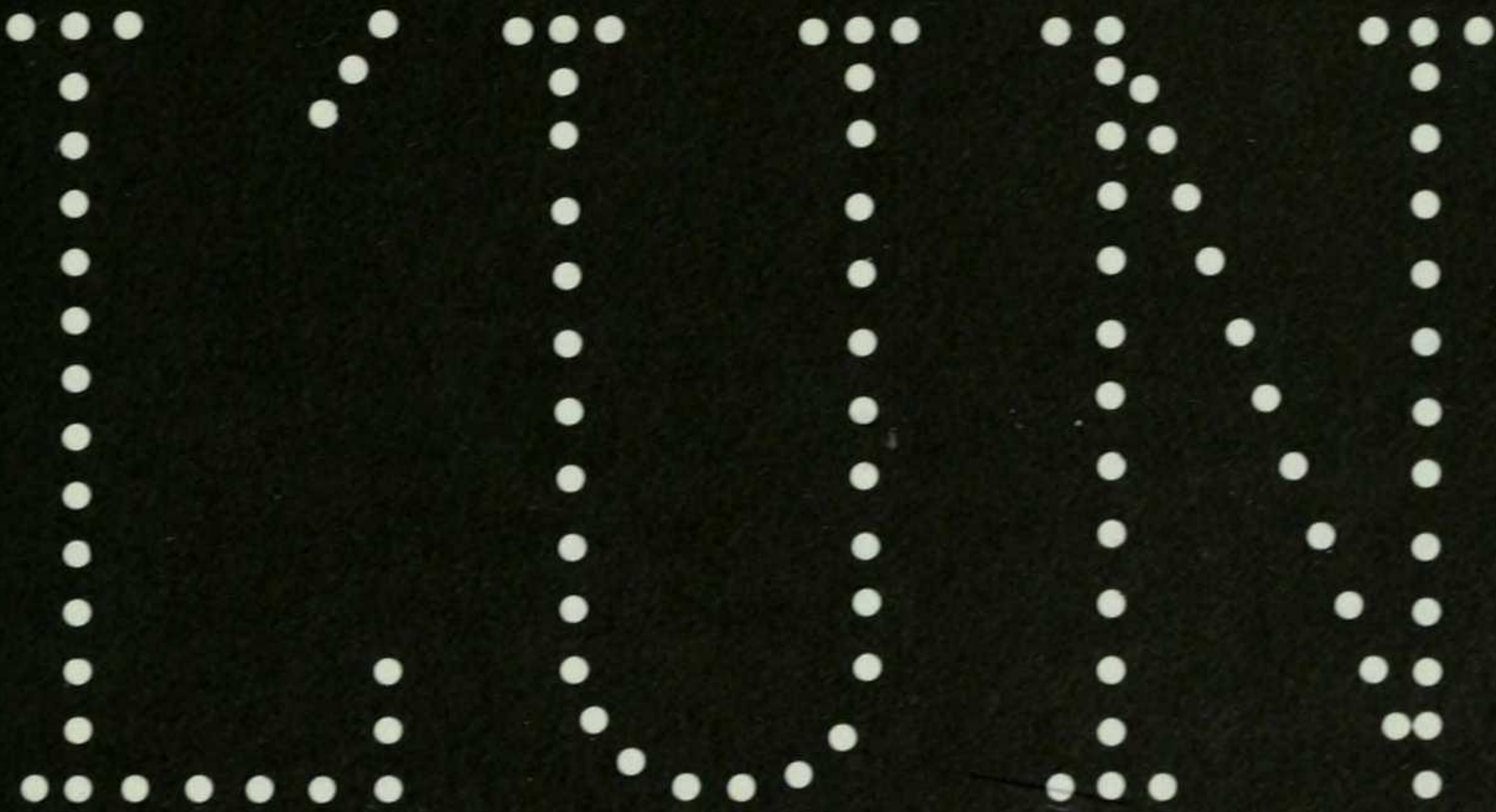
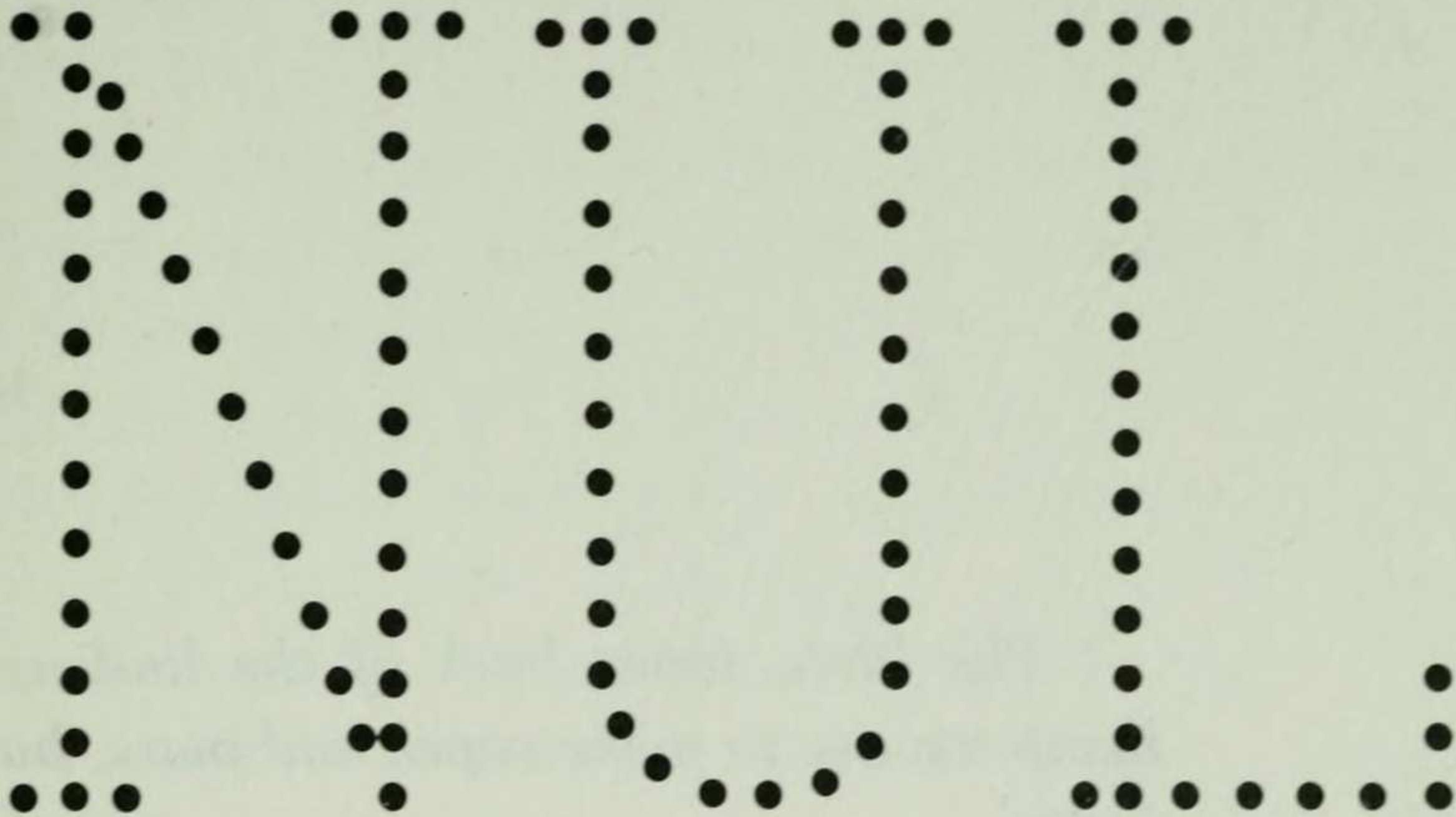


One: diagonal across the circle.
The void revealed across the one.
One: visibility of the circle.

In an ever-growing sea,
O survival of a grain of salt.

NOX

~~NOX~~



(“The liber, inner bark of the linden, bast or hemp we use to make ropes and mats, but also to write.

“In ‘liberty,’ there is the word ‘liber’ rewriting it.

“Thus the word ‘liberty’ writes us into the freedom of the word which writes it,” he said.

A stranger where I was.

A stranger where I am going.

A stranger where I am.)

. . . the distance covered between book and book, between its title and lack of a title. The moment when the page is without reassuring tracks, when there are no more tracks for you or anyone else, when the blank crossing is achieved within the blank.

No shadow to count, no milestone, not the least little pebble near or far.

Infinite light!

. . . except for a point in the distance which is no landmark, but a mystery. Lonely point, floating on an ocean of foam, moving in the incandescent blue, and visible to the world for a fraction of a second because of my wish to explain.

(Everything is washed away. Only the point is left, arbiter of obliteration.)

It was then I was roughly torn from the landscape, from the iris.
Lynched by a thousand arms.

He
spoke
of
the point
and
the one
who
was
paying
attention
rubbed
his
eyes
to cast out the night.

(The point hides the book it contains and so protects it.

What if it were certain that the history of the book is the history of an imaginary point which we will all recognize some day?)

The universe is caught in the point like the sea in a drop of water.
Oblivion, ocean of ink, surging reservoir of posthumous writing.
The wind has shattered the mirrors.

(The sign + is twice the sign -, vertically and horizontally on the page.

The point of intersection of the two lines is the heart of the book which is also, where symbol is abolished by symbol, the hypothetical center of the

universe whose every word measures the space consumed.

Center both on this and the far side of any center, at the crossing of thought and the unthinkable.

O precise and memorable hearts of the book where the book is no more, where it had tried to be and thereby multiplied its center, uncentering it, determined to cut off the book's written space from the space still to be written.

Tomorrow is obliterated by tomorrow. Only a diffuse awareness of obliteration remains.

"All we do by writing," he said, "is to throw ink on the fire."

"Repetition is an illusory usurpation. Writing—like the creation—can harass the page with signs only momentarily. An episodic annexation."

Only a few blank spaces are at my disposal.)

"Is writing," you asked, "the movement towards God which drinks in all His Words from His mouth in order to let them guide us in reading all Reading?"

"Universe opens onto universe in order to be devoured. Likewise word onto word."

"Death can be discovered in every word. Writing, writing, writing: thus we undress her.

"O divine right to desire. Tomorrow is a different nudity," he said.

"Desire is a look spoiled by looking," he added more softly.

You said: "Our relation to God begins actually as a twisted relation to death. Trapped perversity."

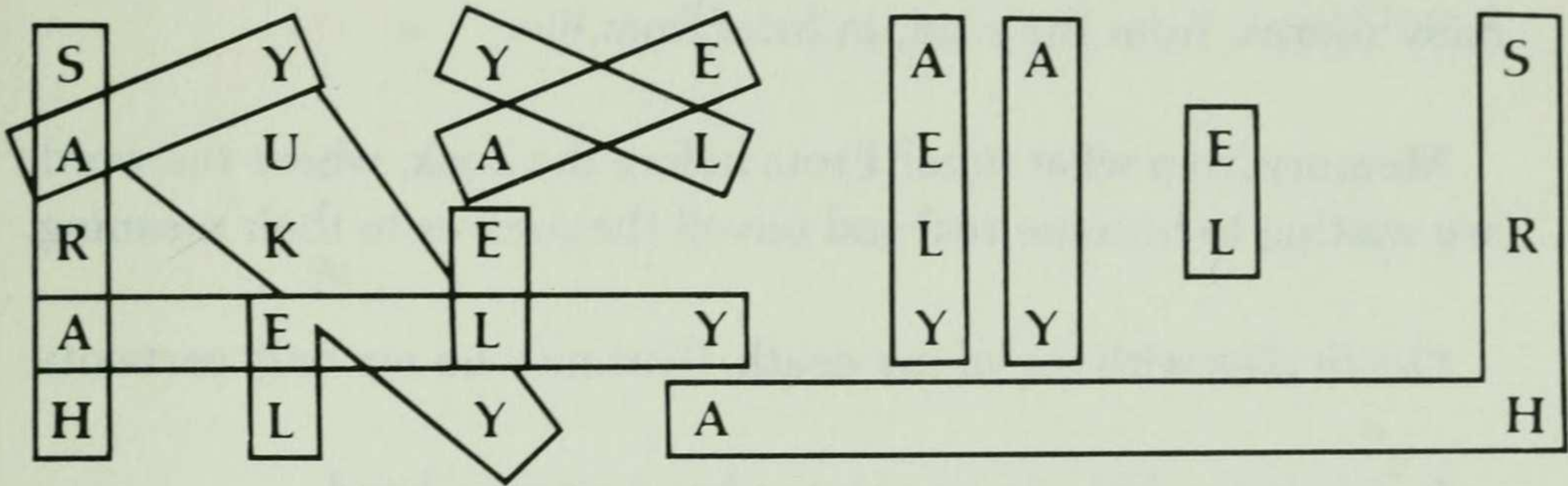
(Il)legibility of the Original Text.

Il, 'He,' is perhaps the key.

What you cannot read
He is reading.

To fragment the name of God, which is formed of all the words in the language, to reduce it to a single word, single syllable, single letter. So, at the end of the night, we approached the alphabet.

To reassemble the scattered pieces in their new relation, into the exemplary Tables.



The key is perhaps *Aely*.

Visibility of death.

You write: *to die*. You know from now on everything will be seen.

The hand, a point burst open?

The fist, a hand closed?

The universe is silent in the hand and reborn from this silence through the word. Hence the beginning is absence, appropriate wound of a premature loss of memory.

A new beginning can only mean that we have, in all innocence, forgotten the beginning.

In any case, beginning means forgetting. We think we begin, whereas we always start over, with both what is manifest and what withdraws into its night.

Day is the beginning of night, and night the day starting over.

Smaller and smaller links closer and closer together to put space in chains? Solidarity from link to link. Ah, who will free the universe, who will break the too heavy bond?

Writing is a scream which continues when death escapes us.

I have only one memory. The words keep refreshing it.
The book we remember is the book we wanted to write.

It is no strain to complete this task, but it estranges us from our daily shores, from the road, in brief from life.

Memory from what time? From before the book, where the words are waiting to become real and unveil themselves to their meaning.

Death dies with me of my death. This may be my only certainty.

In every symbol, every point, a hand clasps a hand.

Every letter is a projection of the hand, a brief and imperfect image, its fleeting pattern.

“Hands are adventurers,” he said. “A high wind blows in each of them.”

The hand is the measure—and excess—of the word.

He said: “The left hand is dawn, the right hand dusk. The book is the work of fading light.”

He also said: “The left hand is life, the right hand death. It is the latter which writes.”

(Visibility, invisibility. Presence, absence. Words of one blood.

Millions of eyes, your blood. Many of them
blank, stunned.

Blindness! Death is also this: a spreading of
empty eyes.)

You will manage to make of this point gnawed by the void a royal crown on your pariah head.

A straw. What is this Nothing—or All—which keeps me from sleeping?

Point. Drop of sperm.

Perhaps Good is the begetting of book by book, and Evil, grinding it to dust.

God mingles with us through Evil, in the dust, for an apocalyptic image of eternity.

•

“God spoke, and what He said became our symbols. The shape of a letter is perhaps the shape of His face. God has as many faces as there are letters in an alphabet. God is written in all languages.

“You will be able to contemplate God once you have learned to listen to words, to look at them carefully, that is, once you have learned to read,” he had noted.

“His voice is inaudible, but it is the supporting silence which allows our sounds to be discrete,” he had added.

“You will shatter the image of words. You will take away their sound. You will divert them from their meaning. You will turn them into holes.

“Then reading and writing will throw you into the vortex of a voice absorbed into the void,” he had also noted.)

In its mother's womb, a child hears before it sees.

How many ears in a point?

We have heard the book even in its silence, but have we even once had hold of it?

The point. Perhaps a sound?

“In *poisson*, ‘fish,’ *son*, ‘sound,’ is a word of many colors. Of course, I also find *son* in ‘poison,’ but poised to listen for a new word because of the corrosion inflicted on the ear.

“Fatal deterioration. Writing is for the most part tactics of waves, sound playing on scales which the eye puts in order.

“Yes, fish are harmonious incarnations of sound,” he said. “Like the blood-red rose.”

*(A look without object in the spreading sound.
Through the ear, we shall enter the invisibility of
things.)*

At the aquarium, the children studied with delight the evolution of fabulous sea-creatures.

They were getting, unawares, their education in the book.

(All books are written in water.

At the bottom of the sea, words are in their element.

Listen, O listen to the water inside the word.)

Then, the desert. Inalterable.

“The letter I,” he said, “this vertical line with its two tiny horizontal serifs, is a straw in the mouth of emptiness which blows so limpid a bubble that only a momentary reflection of the light can betray its presence.

“A point like a head cut off its body and become soul again in its fleeting, soapy roundness, only to burst on contact with space.

“Writing is the childhood of the void, an exorcism of letters, of words.

“In the second stage, the void is pure silence, the words scratched out, erased.”

“I read ‘laughter,’ ris, in the abyss of ‘screams,’ cris,” he said another time. Screams and laughter—of children? of adults?—intersect in our writings.”

“Writing,” you added after he had finished, is a magic mirror. The child dives in and does not recognize his face.”

“The letter is the grandmother of the word,” he also said. “Writing, no matter with what ambition, means practicing the cult of ancestors. But any approach to the letter goes through the nearest, the mother.

“Words come to us from the past, and to the past they return.”)

Bones point towards watering points.
Once oceans clashed within our walls.

“God hears what no one hears and sees what no one can see,” he said.

In the word *lumière*, ‘light,’ there is *miel*, ‘honey,’ the touch of sweetness.

An island, *île*, lies in the honey,
and *El* within the island.

“Words addressed to God are insular words,” you said.

“You liken the island to the beehive, as if any prayer were honey. But watch for the sting of the bee. Moving through space, even God is vulnerable.”

Sound diminishes sound. “Between the lines of the book,” you said, “there are levels of absence. The bottom of the page is everlasting silence.”

A line is the slaked desire of one point for another. The shortest path.

In reading the line we can read the desire. But the line is first of all the *minus* sign.

Any star twinkles from systematic subtractions, considered and impossible to consider. Nakedness. Nakedness.

The abyss is perhaps only the two giant hands of the Creator kept apart by the weight of the world.

You can never appease a dead voice. The other world has its shackles.

Handcuffed: wrists stuck through the round eyes of the void.

Every look is a prison. We die locked in the most distant cell.

The wear and tear of life: death sinking in her teeth.

Death cannot be wrong. She has already drawn our number.

We would have to imagine a universe without world; a night without night, a morning without morning, in order to conceive of this

death where my own death left me. How could we consider it?
Nothingness is beyond imagination, is its negation.

(Then let day be an orgy of light of a time without regrets.)

A white space is only a first reading of white.

The order of creation is an order of chalk, then of marble.

“When you write you do not know whether you are obeying the moment or eternity,” he had noted.

Every new reading of the world is a first reading of the Book.

“*L'arbre*, ‘the tree,’ grows inside the *marbre* or ‘marble,’” he said. “The fruits of eternity are seasonal.”

Feuille, ‘leaf,’ he spelled: *feu-oeil*. But I have never found out if *feu-oeil* meant for him ‘dead eye’ or, on the contrary, ‘eye of fire.’ The latter fits rather better with my idea of the white page in whose eye the word is consumed.

Moments have a spicy aftertaste of eternity.
Immortal, you sink your teeth into death.

L I ~~W~~ R E

L I ~~BS~~ R E

L I R E

L I R E

L E

LE LIVRE: the book
LIBRE: free
LIRE: to read
LE: it

To blind all eyes for the glory of one.

What is this interpenetration and mutual engendering of the eye and the law but desire revealing its disconcerting tendencies and strength where, henceforward, nothing is left to be desired.

Eye rises up against eye. Through its victory over an enemy mortally wounded, we are called to see.

The victorious eye trumpets its truth. The vanquished eye takes refuge in its defeat. The book escapes both.

Rose death, morose meditation of the setting sun. The head of the captured dragon about to be cut off will roll into the dark abyss of worlds. Waking. Sleep. Reawakening. Revolutions, O dream, evolutions. The end is always in the next word.

Striations in rock from the sliding glaciers of an earlier age or barely perceptible lines on the surface of some crystals: between their scars, the law penetrates everywhere and rules on the authority of an unsuspected death preceding ours.

Thus a bird drunk with freedom breaks through the nets of the bird catcher which scar his world.

EL

LE

L

Stages of experience from fore-book to absent book.

Dieu = Vide = Vie d'yeux.

God = Emptiness = Life of the eyes.

He said: "God is empty of emptiness. God is the life of emptiness. He is empty of any life of the eyes. Death cries her eyes out, mourning."

Cieux, 'the heavens,' a plural composed of *ciel* and *yeux*, 'heaven' and 'eyes.'

Dieu is also in the word *Cieux*, as a unique silence: in the mirror of the page, *D* turns *C* at the first touch of the eraser.

Thus 'heavens' is the silent plural of 'God.'

Dieu. Di eu. Dis (à) eux. The empty space between two syllables turns God into 'tell them.' God lets us tell our grief, our mourning.

You use 'God' and 'Gods,' 'Place' and 'Places' interchangeably. Because God is many Gods within God, many Places within the Place.

All mourning mourns, above all, God.

To dominate the space between words, to make sure its silence is neutral.

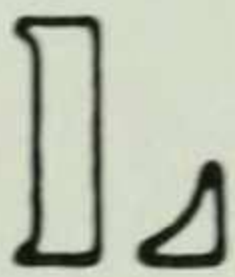
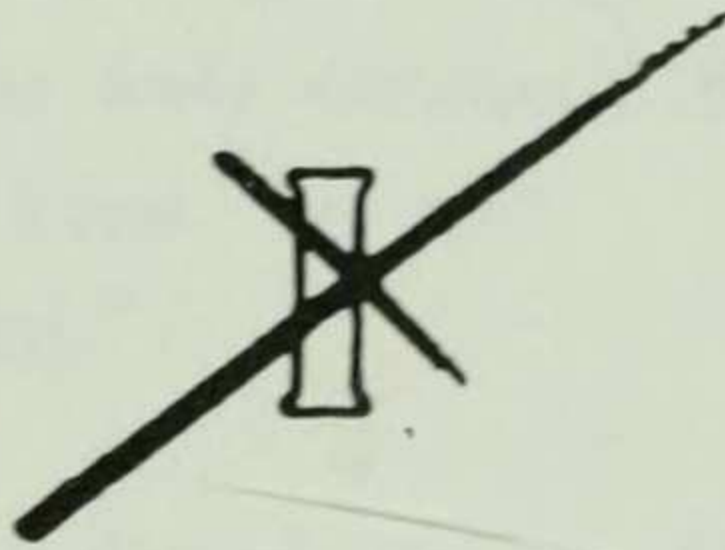
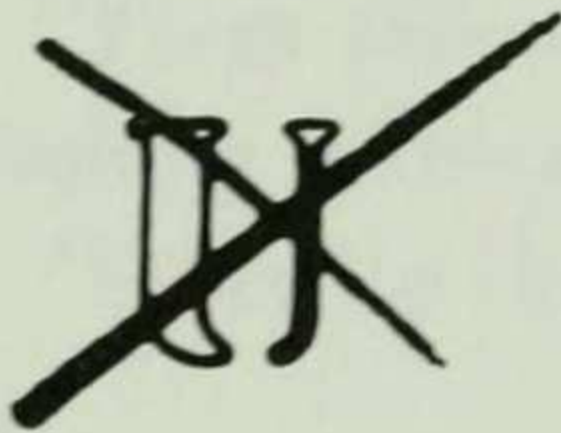
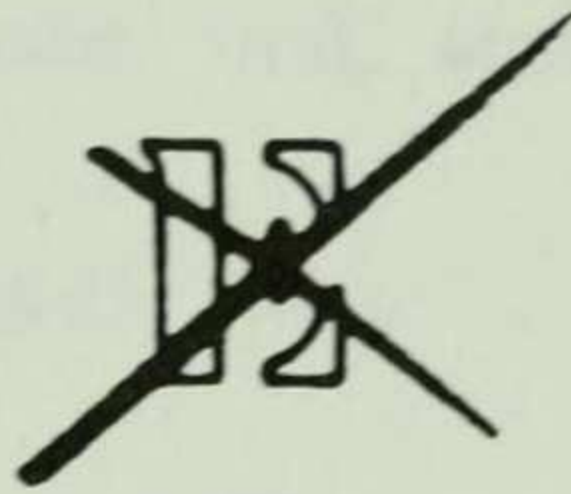
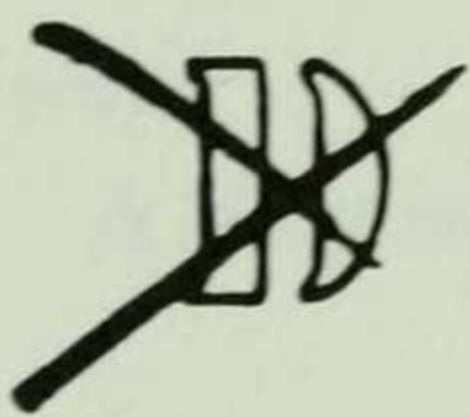
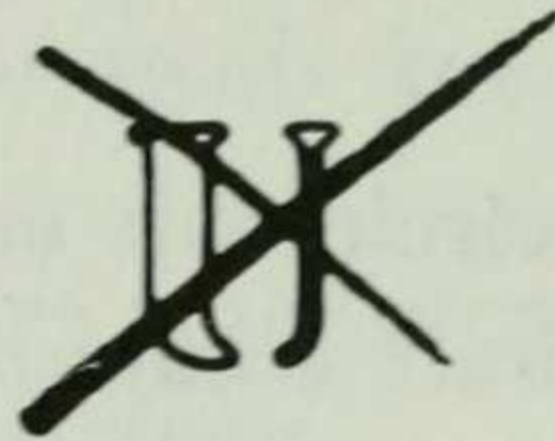
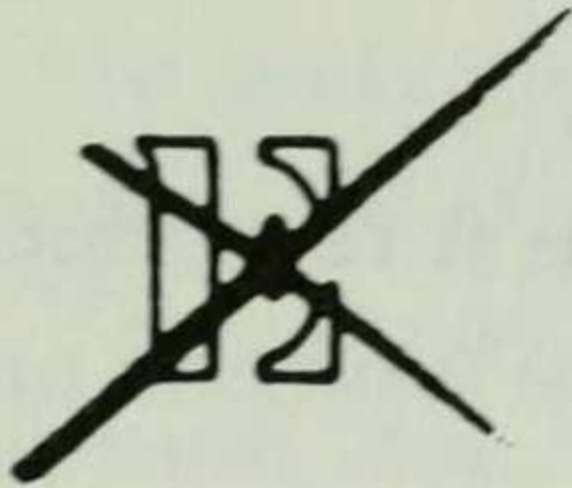
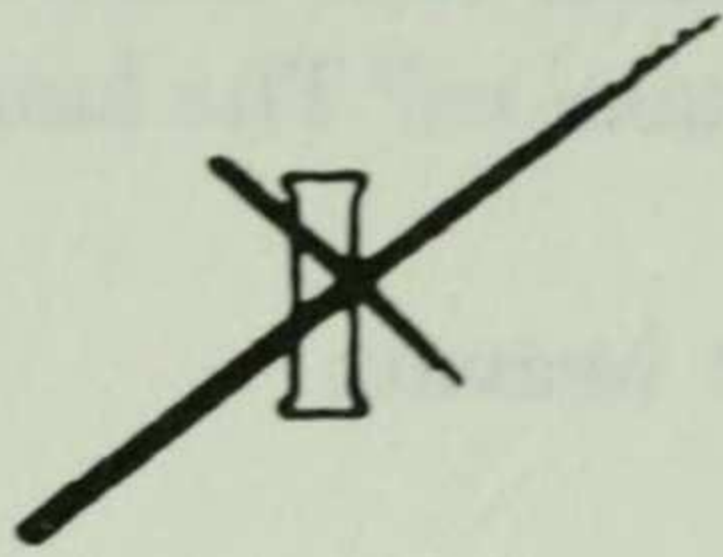
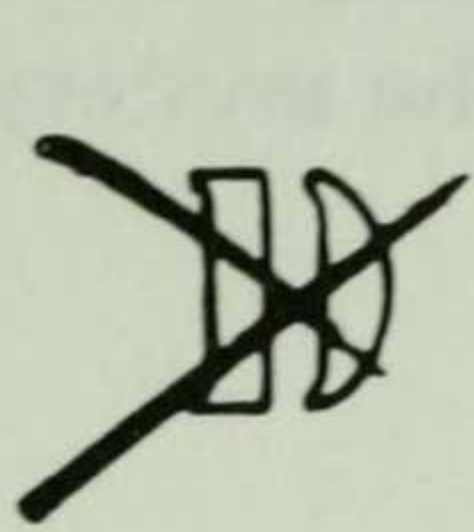
Let the fire be the sword of fire, and the well the water that quenches your thirst.

To fall silent, we must have talked a great deal.

. . . to fall silent, that is, finally not to fail.

In the desert, breasts are dunes.

He was fed with sand.



DIEU: God
DEUIL: mourning

Nobody doubts that death is the steepest and largest step. But where will it take us? The landing is the mystery.

To interdict heaven.

Magnify the line.

Walk around what wanted to be but a detour of a fluctuating thought. Encircle the abyss.

The circle is circle only as long as it reproduces.

The lack of circle accounts for the neurotic modesty of the line.

The largest circle is a function of the smallest.

You squeeze. You pinch. All efforts to write are polarization of the point.

We must protect our words from contagion by the winged, the airy word.

The airy, *aérien*, word is threatened from within by the word *rien*, by airy 'nothing.'

"Mysterious epidemic," she said. "Words were dying of their absence."

Take the *l* out of *voile*, 'veil,' and you get *voie*, the 'way.'

A wing was unveiling the day.

"*Aérien* can be read *A et Rien* or *A est rien*."

"In the first case, 'A and Nothing,' we have the letter A, which is known to contain all others, and then *Nothing*."

"In the second case, 'A is *Nothing*.'"

"From this we can only conclude that A is *All* and *Nothing* at the same time," he said.

"Likewise the point."

"The blank page is this sky never blue, which is everywhere," you said.

I must warn you: writing leads to suicide. Is it only one human life that is at stake in the act of writing? And what is a human life compared to the life of a word? Perhaps nothing. Or all. Or All of a Nothing or again Nothing of an All.

Thus they died. Thus he again picked up his pen, and this natural, almost automatic gesture suddenly seemed so loaded with unknown forces that he shivered.

(The unsayable settles us in those desert regions which are the home of dead languages. Here, every grain of sand stifled by the mute word offers the dreary spectacle of a root of eternity ground to dust before it could sprout. In the old days, the ocean would have cradled it. Does the void torment the universe, and the universe in turn vex the void? Roots buried in sand keep longing for their trees. The deepest weep for their fruit. They are reborn of their tears.)

Fish can only evolve in water. Man can only grow on earth. The word can only live within death.

So it seemed that, once death had blasted him with his own pen, the writer would finally be able to speak, on the far side of the night. But to whom? And for what purpose? Perhaps, by renouncing speech, he could come to inhabit the inaudible word which God holds in His own keeping to sound the silence.)

To allow the page its need for rest. To leave it unworked for a while, as one lets a field lie fallow.

The fruit of paper is bitter words.

The desert is distance sustained by sand. Here, with the grain, lies the point.

“I shall never again let you die,” she had said. “For love of me and our life, give up writing.”

“You want to live,” I said, “yet you are dead to your name: Do you want to live that death?”

“I want to live,” she had said, “live our life, not our death. Life is a miracle out of the void. I believe in it.”

*(How absence plays obliquely on such presence
as we may lay claim to.*

The word is a world of emptiness.

*“There is no truth,” he repeated. “There is only
the practice of truth, as there is the practice of
writing which is the writer’s truth.*

*“God said again: Je suis Celui qui est, ‘I am the
One that is.’ But I hear: Je suis, I follow. Against
wind and tide I have followed and will follow the
One that is. But the One that is, is that not the cre-
ated being, the virtual master of the world?”*

*“God said again: Je suis Celui qui suis, ‘I am
that I am.’ But again I hear: I follow the One that
follows.*

*“Man sets the divine course as the words set the
course of mankind.”*

*Punctual words. They rejoin God in God and
man in man that their purpose might be fulfilled at
the precise hour of fate.*

Je suis celui qui suit.
*I follow the one that follows,
says the page to the page,
the word to the word,
the point to the point.)*

I would give her nothing of myself before emerging from the dark of our days, except this preliminary murmuring, this vague expectation holding on to the desire to love and be loved which tormented her. No part of my features or my voice, except a few signs of solidarity which I meant to gather and dedicate to her. Solitary words of a correspondence broken off.

Is there no other immortality than the one we reach in dying, which strips the sails off the ship and robs us of our possessions?

“And me,” she cried, “what about me? Could death unite us only to separate us again?”

(In this blank universe of ours, we shall stumble, as planned, on the chosen obstacle: a small stone at the edge of a precipice, a tiny point, barely visible for some, invisible for most, and for me, since all this took place, for me too, invisible.)

“Do not ever write again,” she pleaded. “Put down your pen which holds our death. I do not want to rot away. I want to live with you and in myself. For love of me, for life and love of me, reject the words in which I die.”

“In yourself, you are dead,” I said, “and with me, you live our death.”

“Write my name in the book of life,” she begged.

“The book of life,” I said, “opens in death.”

I had to retrace my steps to discover what the obstacle was that I had not been able to avoid, this blank point on a blank page.

Trying to encourage our reading Him by making us curious, God made sure he had a lure, the complicity of a point which we would have to find. Thus we would become obsessed with the book before the point, and with its ratification after.

Hence no approach to God and the book could be conceived except in terms of this endorsed point, that is, in terms of a book which we have discovered in the charge of hope this point contains.

Will I be able to raise this point?

If you carve a blind image onto the blank page you end up punching holes. Morning of the book: perforated morning.

Can the book have an order opposed to the imagination? Where recourse to the imaginary is exhausted, the book comes forward. Austere order. Rigid law. No one can delay his death.

“You must not write again. You shall not write again,” she murmured as if to herself, to give a chance to the past which she dreamed rich with all the days to come. “I have only one worry: to keep you alive.”

(Outside the book, who would you be, woman? Its face is your own. Every page describes you as if you were transparent. It shows me at every stage of our death.)

God's occult world is a world of charred words. A letter is a shape through the flame.

Five times, so I have read, God used the word *light* before there was day. Five attempts at seeing clearly, at letting see. Hence five days of incandescent light, spaced out in time, are the day of the word.

In the face of absence, of emptiness, the symbols we keep copying—is not all writing the recorded sifting of a vast and poignant monologue?—reclaim traces of our origin. (“In the word ‘origin,’” he said, “there is the word ‘orgy.’”) They show persuasive proof of an utterance that had been lost to mankind. So that, where the symbols trap us with their multiple meanings, we always find ourselves at the edge of the ineffable, at the dried wellsprings which will never quench our thirst, but teach us that water, too, is haunted by thirst (does its abundance in some places not prove this?) and that, at the end of its adventure, on waking, it is but a glittering drop, barely the size of a dewdrop on its satisfied petal.

Writing, being essentially excess, struggles at any chosen moment among restrictions.

The bird, whose power of flight knows no limit, surrounds itself from unfailing instinct with barbed wire and so defines its empire, whose borders it will not dare expand. Even an experienced man of writing is, on the contrary, attracted by risk, up to his very fall. His taking flight is a mad venture. Any work that partakes in the absolute cannot but render oblique homage to insanity.

“Throw out your pen,” she said. “Help me out of this madness. Hold me tight, O my love. I do not want to die on the icy page, on this very spot.”

(“. . . Madness is perhaps this swarming of strange pictures, this obscene pairing of words around a forbidden image, around a hunted word,” you said.

“I also read foi, ‘faith,’ in folie or ‘madness,’” you added. “Shaky partitions.”)

I build a book on our sacrificed lives. Could there be a life at the borders of life where we repeat once more—but for which impenetrable purpose?—our characteristic gestures, our most intimate, most weighty words?

Could it be that writing is this other life stuck in the fens of the page? Here, any life devoted to its disconcerting duration gets bogged down.

A decoy, I tell you, the open wounds of a decoy which the meaning given to our words—and woes—keeps us and others from contemplating.

From these wounds we shall have drawn milk.

“What is mysterious in the book is its light,” he said, “not its obscurity.”

“The wall,” he also said, “is not in front of us, but inside. There we must strike.”

. . . it just happened this way. There was no escape. We were inside the wall before it was knocked down. We crumbled with every stone. We found ourselves in each one. So many times ourselves and never altogether. So many times on the point of being . . .

*(Tame the wild beasts, fire-breathers, comet-eaters. No dawn is spared
when the corpses go off two by two, by the dozen, the hundred, to roll in their ashes.)*

“Don’t get yourselves all dirty,” mothers tell their children. “Play with your ball. It’s more fun.”

But the children would rather dig their fingers into the mud roof of the dead.

(The lawn is blue-green. At some hours it is all blue.)

Points scattered through the garden: secretive flowers.

The lie has numberless roots.)

He could not distinguish between what he saw and what he experienced, carried off, as he used to be by the waves, into the gaping breach, into the void.

He had dropped his pen. What giant jackhammer, O death within death, had drilled through the globe to make room for piles of books?

Sometimes he remembered a word, a syllable, or waved, barely, with the shadow of a gesture, to the rare cropping up of a letter. Then there it was: a point gleaming on the horizon, and he knew he was close to what he had so long pursued.

A few yards from my house there is a vacant lot where an empty tin has been tossed which fascinates me. It catches the rays of the sun which the dark will soon wrap carefully and distribute among the stars to make them shine.

The world gives the world a turn in this empty yard, so true is it that our buildings with their fertile lesson rise from the emptiness of the quarries.

For do these buildings not teach us that words, too, though their doors are set at ground level, have their floors, their various, more or less comfortable, apartments?

“Are your lodgings comfortable?”

“I have plenty of room inside my words. And you?”

“I am cramped.”

“Does your apartment get any sun?”

“It is dark inside my words.”

“Perhaps you should move to the country.”

“I cannot leave the city.”

“I hope you will change words.”

“I have not found any others and shall never have the money.”

Only weeds are growing now on the razed lot. But there used to be, until recently, two old houses inhabited by craftsmen. They were sold to a real estate agency which promptly demolished them

in order to build luxury apartments. The agency has since gone bankrupt.

Is the little tin can not, at this bare hour of a dreary late afternoon, a point fallen out of the sky which the light warms and nestles against before the rapacious dark circling over the evening's domain comes down on it, voracious, with crooked beak?

*("Night," he said, "is an image from the far shore,
a somber and ashen stretch with the unslakeable
fires of a ruined day."*

*The shadow of the point was our orphaned
night.)*

In the word *écorce*, 'rind, skin,' I am thrilled by the hardness of the rock, *roc*, I discover there.

Rectangles of fine skin, O pages of immortality, we thought we could write on rock, but the abyss took only the most fleeting interest.

. . . and perhaps the ultimate affirmation of the Jew is, paradoxically, that there is no such person as the Jew. There is only the exile of a word, which he came to take on himself, not to try and save it, or himself, but to guide it from dawn to dusk of the longest day, from the point catching fire to its grandiose conflagration.

At the end of my voyage through the book I shall have a blank page to bring back. Thus the Jew breaks open his strangeness and finds he is still the same Jew.

What weakness did I trust in? The most innocent, of course, whose complicity with death grows stronger in proportion as our resistance against its assaults wanes. Persistent weakness of God—severe, yet bruised by His own severity, hurt by each blow dealt to a man by his neighbor. How much, O how much we have bled together, responsible for the same word set aflame by the course of the day: Day of Creation, Day of Judgment. Morning of the Book.

Through extreme weakness we come face to face with extreme death, on an inaccessible mountain top. At this perilous stage of our retreat, the universe is repudiated. No text is possible on these heights, and writing can only mean an index finger moving slowly across the ineffable void.

(There are no more words where the Jew has no face.)

I could have called these pages: Journal of a dead man.

“The journal is a fake genre,” he said, “unless . . .”

“Unless, you said?”

“Have you thought about our word for fake: *faux*? It also means scythe, curved blade on a handle. A journal would offer death every one of its words.”

“In that case,” I said, “every page of writing is in some way the journal of a dead man.”

“You collect. You take the point for a purse. But it has holes,” he said. “It has holes.”

A lack,
a gap of centuries
torments me.

Great books! Imposing edifices!

Have I been part of the crew, cruelly, in spite of myself? Demolition could have been my trade.

The scream of writing covers the howling of misery, O weeping women, lingering at the golden doors of my desert.

Stones, dust, cold slope of emptiness, hell where the murmur seeps down that once shook the Temple.

For is a murmur not twice *mur*, the ‘wall,’ knocked down, one wall after another attacked?

Burst abscess of absence,
perhaps the Jews had to be robbed of their only possession
in order to communicate with their God, whose kingdom is transparency.

We let the current of the infinite
drift, gently,
between two streams
opposed, but always clear.

(Harmony, arms rendered harmless, resting on the knee.

There was general surprise at the premature announcement of the name of a man “seriously

wounded, you may trust your sources, very seriously," during the meandering of a melody so old that it seemed a blurred vibration of the landscape of the last but one life where we take leave of words on discerning the borders of song.

. . . this love preceding the text it cultivates becomes a pretext for going deeper.

Starry sky. Planetary vision of a dispersed people whose light is the tragic reflection of a drowned day.

Facing this day,
depending on this day,
we shall have numbered our suns.

"In the word naufrage or 'shipwreck,'" he said, "nuage, 'cloud,' is the good luck charm. The sky is the unborn ambition of spume. Death, the sovereign refuge."

Between the lines, the word's infinity.)

On this particular point they disagreed. One was looking for escape in the book, the other, on the contrary, for an extension of his singular situation whose end he feared, though for ill-defined reasons. He needed to perish little by little, without hope of help, whereas the other . . .

But the other's attitude was likewise not well founded. He was only sure that he was suffering more than he thought he could stand.

On the wall of their room, their shadows fused when . . .

"Time," he said, "can be outdistanced by time, and I was suddenly cold."

An extraordinary event just took place.

In a glacial room with marble columns, some old men in black asked for the pact I had signed with death—a parchment roll I held

in my hand—and publicly tore it to pieces while all the books closed against me.

Leaving the palace after the ceremony, I noticed an unusual gathering of about a dozen people around a policeman.

I went up close and saw a man lying in his blood on the sidewalk. He had fallen from the fourth floor of my building. I had never seen him before. “He’s a damn writer,” said the concierge. “These freaks are most of them transparent.” How did she know? She had never touched a printed book. “This is terrible,” I thought, no longer sure I was still in the flesh.

*(This point,
El,
the last book?)*

•

Today was my place.

Four times God fell silent in His Name. Four times, on the way up and down each slope of the mountain, have we faced the silence of the letter.

“Pride is the hope to conquer the four divine letters of the unpronounceable Name, and our fall, to be inevitably engulfed in each one,” she had said.

(“It is not by accident that the word mort, ‘death,’ crestline which the clouds hide from the living, is composed of four letters like the inevitable, though necessarily avoided, Name of God. Mont, ‘mountain,’ likewise, whose second letter, ‘O,’ is the chasm, the precipice which allows us to read it.

“The figure 4 is, in its relation to the infinite, four times the largest number. It rallies the most distant points,” he had written.

“The mountain top where God appeared to Moses is unapproachable because it is the place of the Name,” he had added.)

“Day and night,” he said, “prefigure the same crux.”

Glass does not resist its transparency, especially when it plays with fire.

*My page caught fire along with the earth.
Innocents, both.*

*A dead eye, red crater, bends over the book.
Lava flows into every character.*

*At the end of the tunnel, there will be you and,
perhaps, the sea, that living voice of the book.*

The desert is in our hands.)

How close I feel to people who keep exploring the light rather than the dark because they have, no doubt, always lived in the night.

Dawn, blue water of miracles.

Tonight or, rather, this morning which is still plunged in darkness, I would like to write you these lines.

No silence is more oppressive than that which grips us at the boundary of the book. Silence of a universe spread out—and over how many seasons.

From now on, all words stand behind the word which smothered us. Where no letter can speak, the word becomes passage of the absolute. The desert is ours, with its choked thirst.

To be Jewish is to have left home early and arrived nowhere.

“Sorry,” say the others. “It is late. Come back tomorrow.”

“Soon dawn will find us together,” reply the Jews.

“At dawn,” the others conclude, “you will be far away.”

“I no longer see words,” he wrote. “I see only the place of their birth and death, which is blank.”

“We have not reached anywhere, even if, on the way, we were shown the refuge of a point.

“Twenty centuries of wandering can only come to rest in a word both so dense and so light that it is carried off into space and swallowed by the wave.

“I have lived only within this word.” he added.

“. . . We have proceeded on our way by precept and example. But all we got was broken hopes, insolently broken Tables within the word,” he added further.

(Who writes? And why this intermediary between you and me? Probably to allow us to turn away from an utterance whose shards we have unearthed in all good faith.

“What is Your Name?” Moses had asked God, in despair. What is Your Name, that is, what is Your glory? Whereas divine truth, unlike man who expects to be named, can only make itself felt in the absence of any name.

God is the high calling to this presumptuous and harrowing departure towards a totality eager to absorb us in its own annihilation.

God knew that a name wears away even as it forms and that the invisible—which we cannot circumscribe—is His Omnipotence. Where there

is nothing, All is intact: only fragments can be grasped.

God did not say: "The world I created, but the world I am creating." As if any act of creation were only the initial focus of its permanent challenge.

We have prepared for a word which will be dead on arrival. All our attempts to approach it will have failed.

Our experiment of writing will, in the final analysis, have been only one more step towards death.

How far, O how far will we venture into the dark of darks, the blank of blanks of a colorless universe?)

"I have traded my pen for a punty. My page is now a sheet of glass," he said.

Questioning the point meant unflagging questioning of the question that had come up with it. Unassailable point, favorable and fatal to all thought—fighting with its own excess—for which it is crest and base.

This hallucinatory point—point of contact, of convergence, of incidence—is a noose of knowledge, rope of the sublime hanged man whom the four horizons claim and whose body every new day sets on fire.

Around my neck, a tighter and tighter ring, it will have been my bond with the book. O premeditated death.

The day of the word is an unconscionable day-after.

"The road is a mine field," he had noted. "Too bad for the unlucky."

All this rebellion, this distress will have gotten the better of us.

My desire to write you is a need as vital, as urgent as breathing. But with what new gesture, in the wake of which offensive look can I reach you?

The word *sol*, 'soil,' suddenly comes to my mind, out of the word 'solitude.'

Does being lonely mean to crawl like a worm or to bow your head to the ground? But *sol* is kinder than steel, *l'acier*, and confidentially calls up the verb *solacier*, 'to give solace.' Does all solitude want to be consoled?

O people of solitude, when you were robbed of your soil, were you also robbed of brotherly consolation?

Neither here nor there. But always at the threshold of so low a sky that the eagles seemed enormous worms with muddy wings.

Thus we learned that the infinite is a hidden root, and that all that sprouts, grows green and flowers has the infinite for its sap and its dream.

Could it be that our joined strength aspired only to being re-ordered into the impossible Name?

As with God, the letters which designate us scatter and yet stay with us.

Each flight we attempted into the blue started from one inevitable point.

From this point we have conceived the book.

(“A saber stroke in the void, this is the image of my life and writing I would like to leave behind,” he said. “And if drops of my blood have more than once soiled the ground, you must understand that each of them is an unknown book.”

One crack, and the building crumbles and initiates the endless reading of its ruins.

“I can’t see anything. I can’t see anything any more. This is the writer’s terrible cry at the unsuspected end of his quest in the book,” he also said.

Immense, the word dark.

I shall have probed emptiness from my birth to the evening of my death.

At a certain moment, the pages of my books turned black.

O night of shores we cannot pass beyond.

All this blackness was perhaps the other side of a blighted dawn.

The question of the universe is a question delivered of the book.

The essential: in the throes of our crisis, to preserve the question.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edmond Jabès was born in Cairo in 1912. He left Egypt during the Suez crisis and lives in Paris. In 1970 he received the *Prix des Critiques*; in 1982, the *Prix des Arts, des Lettres et des Sciences* of the Foundation of French Judaism; and in 1983, the Pasolini Prize.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

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“Neither novel nor poem, neither essay nor play, *The Book of Questions* is a combination of all these forms, a mosaic of fragments, aphorisms, dialogues, songs, and commentaries that endlessly move around the central question of the book: how to speak what cannot be spoken.”

—Paul Auster, *The New York Review of Books*



Photo by Bernard Carrère

Edmond Jabès was born in Cairo in 1912. He left Egypt during the Suez Crisis of 1956 and now lives in Paris. In 1970 he received the *Prix des Critiques*; in 1982, the *Prix des Arts, des Lettres et des Sciences* of the Foundation for French Judaism; and in 1983, the Pasolini Prize for poetry. Translator and poet *Rosmarie Waldrop* was educated at the University of Aix-Marseille, the University of Freiburg, and the University of Michigan.



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