

Edmond Jabès

THE BOOK OF
RESEMBLANCES

Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop

“For anyone who is interested in these last frontiers of thought and language, [Jabès] is an irreplaceable writer.” — GRAHAM MARTIN, *Times Literary Supplement*

Edmond Jabès is regarded as one of the most important contemporary French writers. *The Book of Resemblances* is the first of three volumes in his collection, *Le Livre des Ressemblances*, to be published in English translation by Wesleyan. According to *Le Figaro*, it is “a singular work and one of the most important of our time.”

The Book of Resemblances questions the reality behind appearance. Recognition — that of the book or of the person — is challenged: a book is to be read, but it “resembles a book — which was itself not a book, but an image of its attempt.” A woman stands naked in front of a mirror looking at her body. “If she takes her time to examine it closely,” says Jabès, “it is because she knows it escapes her.”

But resemblance offers the hope of restoration. Although God is beyond likeness, since “he can only be like God,” language is a “brew of resemblances” creating images that restore significance — a bridge or passageway to meaning. At present we may not know where resemblance will lead, “except that it has already taken us to the other bank of the same inexhaustible book.”

THE BOOK OF RESEMBLANCES

ALSO BY EDMOND JABÈS

Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop

The Book of Questions

The Book of Questions (Volume I)

The Book of Yukel and Return to the Book (Volumes II, III)

Yaël; Elya; Aely (Volumes IV, V, VI)

El, or the Last Book (Volume VII)

The Book of Dialogue

EDMOND JABÈS

The Book
of Resemblances

Translated from the French by

ROSMARIE WALDROP



WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Published by University Press of New England
Hanover and London*

The University Press of New England

is a consortium of universities in New England dedicated to publishing scholarly and trade works by authors from member campuses and elsewhere. The New England imprint signifies uniform standards for publication excellence maintained without exception by the consortium members. A joint imprint of University Press of New England and a sponsoring member acknowledges the publishing mission of that university and its support for the dissemination of scholarship throughout the world. Cited by the American Council of Learned Societies as a model to be followed, University Press of New England publishes books under its own imprint and the imprints of Brandeis University, Brown University, Clark University, University of Connecticut, Dartmouth College, University of New Hampshire, University of Rhode Island, Tufts University, University of Vermont, and Wesleyan University.

Copyright © 1976 by Editions Gallimard

Translation copyright © 1990 by Rosmarie Waldrop

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotation in critical articles or reviews, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For further information contact University Press of New England, Hanover, NH 03755.

Le Livre des Ressemblances, Volume 1 of *Le Livre des Ressemblances*, was originally published by Editions Gallimard.

Sections of this book have appeared in *O·blēk*, *Temblor* and *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*.

The translator would once again like to thank the author and, especially, Arlette Jabès for their invaluable help and suggestions.

Printed in the United States of America

∞

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jabès, Edmond.

[Livre des ressemblances. English]

The book of resemblances / Edmond Jabès ; translated from the French by Rosmarie Waldrop. —1st ed.

p. cm.

Translation of: *Le livre des ressemblances*.

ISBN 0-8195-5232-1

1. Title.

PQ2619.A112L5413 1990

848'.91407—dc20

89-22690

CIP

5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

<i>Thus, the Cycle</i>	3
<i>The . . . of . . . or the Absent Book</i>	7
I. The "Jacket Notes" of the Seven Books of Questions	11
II. The Book in Question	18
III. The Game of Thought	21
<i>Ed, or the First Mist</i>	25
Moment Outside the Book	27
Moment Outside the Book, II	42
Moment Outside the Book, III	44
Before the First Moment of the Fore-Book	45
Next-to-Last Moment of the Fore-Book	51
<i>El-Book</i>	53
In the Silence of the Word	55
The Perennial Tablets	63
The Game of God	68
The Games of Man	76
The Surname	79
The Immobility of Time	82

CONTENTS

The Multiplicity of Place	85
The Highest Challenge	90
The Passage	97
<i>The Trial</i>	99

From its resemblance with the book to the book of
its resemblance . . .

The book is the place where all books resemble—
also, all places.

*

God only repeats God: but man? Ah, man also re-
peats God.

The book, place of God's power, is also where God
loses His power: place of both His omnipotence and
His humiliating surrender.

Man is God where God is made man: in likeness.

The illegible lies in wait where legibility falters.

Thus, the Cycle . . .

Is resemblance the heart of our references, the criterion of judgment most widely used, most generally accepted and relied on by those who seek to know us?

“You are the one you resemble,” but I resemble somebody else every time.

Can we agree on a resemblance? And, first of all, what is it?

Appearances dissemble. Resemblance is a glitter of appearance. Could it offer a slant for penetrating identity?

This book resembles a book—which was itself not a book, but an image of its attempt.

The characters resemble characters we have known—but who were themselves only heroes of fiction.

This adds a new dimension to the gains of inquiry and meditation, of story and commentary all through the seven volumes of *The Book of Questions*.

Is this book their sequel? It is clear that it would not have seen the light without *The Book of Questions*. But it exists on its own, as every book is a controversial installment or the completion of the one book (done or still to be written) to which its author is bound.

In front of the mirror, Sarah looks at her naked body. If she takes her time to examine it closely, it is because she knows it escapes her.

Who could be absolute master of the body? We can make the soul speak or fall silent. We can take refuge in it entirely. But in our body?

All around Sarah, women and men are arrested for bodies labeled "of Jewish race" in police files. No passport is needed for the soul.

She scrutinizes her thin face with fear because she can already glimpse behind it the faces of new martyrs to the ruling ideology.

We are in France, in 1942.

What are you doing, Sarah, in front of your mirror, thirty-two years later? As if disaster had spared you?

"O Sarah," Yukel had written, "your body is beautiful, enchanting, like the distant landscapes of childhood which outshine the most celebrated sights."

(I no longer know in what period I live, in what minute.

Yukel, elbows on the windowsill, looks out at nothing. Sarah reads a letter from Yukel. Yaël comes away from the crowd milling across the Place de l'Opéra and waves to me with the hand that once put words of love on blue paper meant for her lover.

—Once, that is, in the amazing time of the book which the book dismantles to scatter the pieces.

. . . in that amazing time of our autumn strewn with miserable missives.)

"Our story will never be anything but the story of a book seen through a glass of dead days where likeness sheds its leaves," Sarah had written to Yukel.

The . . . of . . .
or
the Absent Book

“The day of my birth; the day of my death: O immaculate page.

“Blank, the first word and the last,” said Reb Oudish.

And Reb Salsel: “We have forgotten the language of God.

“From time immemorial this forgetting has been our parchment.”

Absence also means transparency of likeness.

“Resemblance with which, elsewhere, the questioning from one work to another reached its first—final—halt becomes an occasion for new and close inquiry, complementary, as we say of two colors. We do not yet know where it will lead, except that it has already taken us to the other bank of the same inexhaustible book,” he said.

What is to be read will always remain to be read.

You read. You tie yourself to what comes untied—
to what unties you within your ties.

You are a knot of correspondences.

. . . a knot of innocence, craftiness, of things likely
and unlikely, of infinite faithfulness.

I

THE "JACKET NOTES" OF THE SEVEN BOOKS OF QUESTIONS

"Ah, who will ever count the centuries examined in the margins of our books?" wrote Reb Amit.

And Reb Arzi: "Each century leaves us its blank page.

"Eternity is but myriads of sheets that escaped being written on."

THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS

The Book of Questions is a book of memory.

Obsessive questions about life, language, freedom, choice, death are answered by imaginary rabbis whose voices are my own.

The answers given by this work are read by two lost lovers. I myself have tried, in the margin of tradition and through words, to find again my fountainhead.

In order to live we must have a name; but in order to enter the world of writing we must, along with our name, accept the hazard of every sound, every symbol that perpetuates it.

"The novel of Sarah and Yudel, through dialogues and meditations attributed to imaginary rabbis, is the story of a love destroyed by men and by words. It has the dimensions of the book and the bitter stubbornness of a wandering question."

Out of a simple and tragic idyll rises a song of love which, against all odds, is a song of hope. Its ambition is to make us witness the birth of the word and, in an all too real dimension, the rising threshold of suffering shown by a persecuted group whose lament is taken up by martyrs in era after era.

1963

THE BOOK OF YUKEL

The place where the writer questions himself covers the absent book. It is a place before life, a place of lived death. It is located between the completed work and the work to be written. Nothing strange, then, that the characters seem like phantoms.

Words cross this space like white birds in the sky. They settle down only in the hour of the reader and in unforeseen sequence.

From Yukel's suicide to Sarah's death, every page is the price of an expectation and a voice of avowal.

The universe forms where a universe is informed.

Tales, dialogues, reflections, prayers follow each other and

“A writer runs off with words, and some of them follow him into death. A word is first a hive, then a name. Two names fight over my heart and mind. I found them deep inside myself, found I had lived their life in the dark. Like you yesterday, I am at the end of my strength. My past is heavy with plunder and persecution. My past leans its head on illusory supports, a compassionate shoulder or my table.

“I have no more ambition. I am the wide passing of the day where you threw me.

“‘What is a writer?’ Reb Hod asked a famous author. ‘A man of letters? No, a shadow carrying a man.’

part, solitary mountaintops on the horizon. But scream summons scream. It is ivy and sign.

1964

RETURN TO THE BOOK

Where grass aims only to stay green, and the pebble, to witness the parting of water and sand, ties become work, and the book a world.

Return to the Book is the last wing of a work that follows its path into the deep.

All through a story that shows us how the love of two Jewish adolescents is destroyed, but which never takes narrative form, imaginary characters lead us through questions and dialogues to the wellsprings of language and poetic meditation where "God questions God."

Book written twice, in the book and outside it. Double experience where the fate of words is also the fate of Jews because "Judaism and writing are one and the same waiting,

"You were this man, Yukel, this hero and martyr.

"I shall soon step aside.

"You came back from the camps of guilt to devote yourself to your last hour, and my pages smell of the ashes of your faith.

"The book is a moment of the wound or eternity.

"We are the world's limits."

"Do you hear the air moving or water growing smooth? A tie is a mute dagger out of its sheath, so that forming ties means winding a rope around a blade, means always retying a knot where knots are impossible.

"Freedom lies in the bond that sends us back to the same bond.

"I live, here is the miracle. I am the life of the bond in the cut knot.

"I need you, man of the halt and the halo, not to go on living, but, on the contrary, to fix in ink the end of my life.

"Between ashes and seeds of fire.

"I know now that page is yoked to page, like word to subjugated sign.

one and the same hope, one and the same wearing down."

1965

YAËL

This work has two parts: *The Time Before the Story*—which is its obsession—and *The Time of the Story*, which is given in the form of a journal.

A woman, Yaël, struggles between a silent past, symbolized by a stillborn child, and the future she desires.

She is the Word of the book and the only one to have a name.

The man she is married to, exasperated by her lies, thinks he has killed her in a fit of anguish. In fact, it is his own life he has ended, and the murder is but the Creator's suicide at the heart of Creation.

"Sign to sign or sign to absence of sign.

"At the end of the deducted hours checked off by dawn, at the end of the road where Sarah lost Yukel, where Jew perished with Jew to keep his faith, the return to the book is a return to sap and to the oath.

"You are accountable only to yourself once you build on your own account. Your turn after mine, with me, in the bed of the last book."

". . . this dream which was a terrible choking of the soul, then a lofty idea of death, then a common notebook where the days crashed into night."

On Yaël's trail, the narrator undertakes an anxious quest of the truth until he becomes aware—vague, but obstinate memory—of his original crime.

Thus the book questions itself, witness of an age both obscure and revealed in every spark of the time it destroys.

1967

ELYA

In the preceding story, Yaël was identified with the Word where man has no message.

The story with which—perhaps to die of it—she had to link *Elya*, the stillborn child of her first love, continues this work.

“The book encloses a face to which our writing adds wrinkles.

“The oldest book is the purest face.”

This face, mute with destroyed passion in its alliances and breaches, is *Elya's*. Page after page, we are called to decipher it, up to its last and unforeseeable metamorphosis.

Thus, in the cut-up margins of the Book, an innocent frozen in time makes us meditate on life swallowing the *other*—our-

“O Yaël, your name broken on the far edge of silence was restored in death. But who had taken such poor care of it?”

“The sequence of its letters inadvertently scrambled, an unfamiliar name, ‘Elya,’ appeared in the sand where no one had been expecting anybody for a long time.”

“Now death makes us live its unrealizable dream of life.”

selves? God?—into its tyrannical and contentious absence.

1969

AELY

Writing perhaps means revealing the word to yourself, at death's door.

Thus we are, for a moment, allowed to see the book, to decipher it under Aely's eyes, which, *eyes of All and Nothing*, are also the unquashable eye of the law that rules over life and death.

In the word oeil, 'eye,' there is the word loi, 'law.' Every look contains the law.

Sign in the infinite wake of signs, this work comes as a reflection on itself and the predecessors that spawned it.

1972

"It is in the vague space of an anticipated word that Aely would observe us.

"Who could have foreseen silence so patient. O night.

"The world will leave you in peace if you do not indulge in confidences.

"There is an end to us and then an end to all that might, even though ended, still contain a particle of us.

"There is an end contemporary with all ending, but which resists in order to end in the future.

"Aely, power of the most distant.

". . . power of the most distant, the never conceived.

"Would the void recompose our name beginning with the last letter?

"Listen to time breathing. The breath of eternity is imperceptible."

(EL, OR THE LAST BOOK)

The story is born of signs and sends us back to signs.

“. . . écrit, récit, ‘written, story’: one same word with a natural scrambling of its letters.

“All writing offers its part of the story.”

For ten years a book—the same, yet always other—has, in a circular movement, pushed ever farther its own questioning. Question tirelessly repeated at the edges of its insecurity.

“Here, yesterday’s circle has turned into a point, and the questioning of the circle, into questioning the point.”

Does a circular work find its logical conclusion in a point?

This point—ultimate trace—is perhaps also the place and the precise moment of the eternal rebirth of the book.

With this work, the seventh in the series, *The Book of Questions* is complete.

“Have I reached the crest of the unimaginable death that dazzled and drowned Aely’s eyes, death that rejected letters and words and thus escaped all possession, therefore the book?”

“Terrible obligation: to give in, caught by the tarnished reflection of ultimate absence, to resign ourselves to the infernal fate of nonexistence.

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

“No word has been pronounced since.”

II

THE BOOK IN QUESTION

The author of the book in question hides behind various pseudonyms, which are promptly presented as voices from the beginning of time and as figures both familiar and strange: for he is himself a stranger to his own person and book—if one can even claim that the book whose instrument he has been is his. He is, in fact, a book carried by all books, a chance for, true, but also the loss of, the book over which no writer has control. Such a work, being boundless, cannot be. It accompanies our books. It inspires them. It would be their model if it existed. Because it does not exist, it is the obsession of the book and, in practice, its explosion, of which we cannot state precisely where it happened or how far it was felt—mingled cries of mother and child?—but which is perhaps only a scream of letters, of words torn from themselves, as the supposed author of this book was torn from his life to become its account:

the account of his death.

*

It would be a serious error to connect any part of *The Book of Questions* with a theory of writing.

If there is theory, it came out of a questioning which touches on man as much as on the word, on man at the moment of writing, when he becomes words. Worry and anxiety are at its base: facing ourselves—as one faces up to something, fights face to face—which, in the book, means one word facing the next, tolerated or fought because it has suddenly taken our place. And the important thing is to know what we have become, into what universe we are moving, with what rhythm, along what road, through which appropriated life or death.

Victims of what obliteration.

Everything in us is done in a certain order and undone with us. The book is only the image of this—unless it should turn out the contrary.

*

We leave a book only in order really to enter it, but once inside, there is no exit.

So what is this leaving—not access to the book, which is difficult and cruel, but the exit—what is it other than the time of a breath, with closed eyes?

We can write only with eyes wide open and see only what we learn advancing confidently or shrinking back in fright.

The supposed author of *The Book of Questions* remembers today his slow progress in the book and how he was rejected by it: evicted from a privileged place where his freedom played at the expense of his existence.

*

Judaism is present wherever a human being is mistreated and persecuted. Yet the Jew is alone with his fate. The joys of his brothers he will share but for a moment. He always withdraws in order to exist, because distance is his best defense. Relations with him must be in terms of this withdrawal, this necessary distance where he moves, speaks and dies, as if his road engendered always more roads, as if only a roll of parchment could contain his law because, a concrete image of his wanderings, its endless unrolling could represent this incalculable distance punctuated by commandments, which the Jew must cover.

Language is a brew of resemblances—their test and counter-test. Writing, then, means using any kind of likeness, marking its stages and degrees.

What we see in an image restores its significance for us, as if its reproduction in the mind were a solid passageway to the unveiled image, a bridge as well as a revelation of its meaning.

Inquiry occurs at this level of approach.

The universe is conspicuous for its likeness to the intimate universe in which we move, for its projection in our heart of hearts,

where we no longer distinguish what is from what is only its avowed, accepted likeness.

(Resemblance sheds the unessential. It reenters essence into the circuit of forms, ideas, metaphors and connections—the preserved essential aspects of the relation and kinship of objects.)

“O Sarah,” Yukel had written, “we were so alike that likeness never made any sense to us.”

Thus God, “El,” has no likeness because He can only be like God.

“Can we be like Him, Who, in His essence, is without likeness?” asked Reb Eliav.

He was told: “Are we not the image of the void which has no image?”

Reb Lior, however, held a different opinion: “If God, as we know, has chosen to manifest Himself in a point, is it not to proclaim His likeness to a point?”

And he added: “Once we have stripped down to being no more than a point in any book, our resemblance with God will be consummate.”

“The point reveals God outside resemblance,” Reb Benchabat wrote elsewhere.)

III

THE GAME OF THOUGHT

“Thought is a hole,” said Yaël, “the hole in which we will be buried.”

And Sarah: “Let me think only of you, Yukel, where we are lost in and by thought.”

(“We might say that all thoughts alike are spoiling for a fight.

“In the mind of God, their battles become eternal, rekindled by our curiosity, our taking sides,” wrote Reb Abed.

Eternity means conflict of resemblances.

There is no conflict outside thought. Where God thinks Himself He is the eternity of His thought.

“Eternity is also an aggressive form of thought—aggressive against any thinking that is only of the moment, a pretentious flash,” said Reb Galeb.

And Reb Sayag: “Ah, that our thoughts could last more than an instant. Then they could give us a fore-taste of eternity.”

A book has always for its background the agony of a book.)

*

(Two thoughts are but one spark claimed by both.

There are no identical thoughts. There is always some difference. For example: one sparkles less or more than the other.

What comes to you is your possessive thinking. However, it may also be the unexpected return of a thought that had only been wounded.

Do we have to pay for every thought we think? And what is the price?

"The blood that irrigates your brain," said Reb Aboussir, "is blood shed by your thoughts, by you."

And he added: "Our thoughts cannot cost us more than the five quarts of blood our body holds.

"To channel the blood, the body has set up a network of thought. So that we are bodies through which ancient and contemporary thoughts circulate continually."

"Healthy body: hope of the mind. Does the future lie in our blood?" asked Reb Azouel.

"The body's future is limited. The body gives as it receives. Its last gift is death," was the reply.

"Blood is both river of life and red ocean of death.

"The universe bathes in our blood," wrote Reb Guédali.

"Death is also a thought—like life, which is infinite thinking of death," said Reb Kamhi. And added: "Death is in all thinking, as the thinking of thought."

You move. Your mind moves with you. The mind is always in motion. It is both a mind in motion and

your moving body. But the body never moves to the rhythm of thought.

The mind reinvents the body. The body we see is in the image of thought, a—changing—image we maintain.

Your body is a book of thoughts that cannot be read in its entirety.

“The Book of God is in our body,” said Reb Gad.)

“On the margins of our pertinent reading, an illegible word remains virtual. Avoiding the eye, can it escape the void?”

“And does this make the eye death’s favorite lethal weapon?”

“The invisible is writing that lies in wait, writing of possible and impossible hope.

“Thus we are led to approach the book. What we read always depends on what remains to be read.”

“And the flesh, for all we say, was made flesh in order to rot through the word where God, brought to bay, renounced His supreme power in the face of the undetermined power of man.”

(“O my love,” Yukel wrote to Sarah, “God is after us like the day when our love shall be returned.”)

*Ed,
or the First Mist*

“But there went up a mist, *Ed*, from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.”

(Genesis, II:6)

“Preparing to create man, He made the mist rise from the abyss up into the heavens to water the earth, and created man in the way a baker adds water and then kneads the bread.”

(Rachi's Commentary on Genesis II:6)

MOMENT OUTSIDE THE BOOK

“I exist because you know me,” he said. “I owe you my likeness.”

What is Thought but the imagined death of all the thoughts sacrificed in its name, Likeness examined through the questions it raises when it becomes but the distance covered by insidious likenesses?

“To think resemblance, does that not mean thinking the complex relation between thought and the word that prints or deletes it? We are praised or despised by our brothers for how we resemble or dissemble.

“Thought is a glimmer spied before sunrise. At noon, light is at its apogee. All shadows are alike, all letters in search of the same word,” you said.

The word strips off likenesses, intending to favor a single one.

God cannot be written.)

1

Perhaps the time has come to strip off your first name. Long, arduous task. You must reach your death without identity, naked, again a virgin.

The man you were, was he like you? You doubt it now. And yet you took advantage of the likeness.

You were never more than the distance at which you kept yourself.

. . . yourself, that is, the inadmissible emptiness you rival.

Availability remains salvation.

Emptier than emptiness, for having been its insane likeness.

Forbidden, the fruit of Knowledge, put on the index for simulating sweetness.

*

(I must tell you of this innocence which is creation: a likeness made tangible. The day before, there was un-likeness settled in its larval stage. Sight was but a blind plant, its stem challenged by fog; hearing, an uninhabited shell. A plant challenged by the fog of the mind, a shell unformed in its longing for God, longing for a man not yet man, a woman already woman. And there was man: through woman and earth, through man in exile, at the first drop of dew.

Sight was born and, with it, the resemblance of realms, of species, of nature with nature,

and intelligence based on sight and hearing, and the hand bound to intelligence by the whole body.

God recognized Himself in God; but man, in his haste to be rid of the Creator, called the world into question.

Any act of creation is an act against the work of God, and a book, a blast at its likeness to the divine Book.

Thus every book is weighed down by both the joy and pain of God, he said.)

*

You must believe in the book in order to write it. The time of writing is the time of this faith.

I believe. I write. But does the book believe in me? Ah, to make the words trust me. To give them surety.

Likeness operates on the level of faith.

There is no book outside its likeness to the book where faith is lacking.

To have faith in order to fathom.

To advance in the book as one advances in age, as one acquires knowledge.

. . . from earliest infancy to full maturity, from the hours of first clumsy thinking to the most daring.

*

To think, to write, means to make yourself resemble. Writing and thinking are subtle approaches to likeness, a play of approximations, changing lights grappling with their nothingness in the face of the object.

To think otherness means to perpetuate likeness.

No two unthought things are alike.

Time marks likeness; eternity erases it.

Fire risks its likeness in fire.

*

(Thought braves thought in order to justify itself in its own eyes—and come to grips with Likeness.

. . . Likeness which, for the mind, is a thought to unthink as one undoes what is done or replants what is planted: a has-been thought.

In the evolution of thought—just as in creation—yesterday is the shadow of tomorrow, from which will arise light.

Thought, intrigued by what is unthought, draws near it like fish going ashore to spawn.

The unthought, to the fish, is dry land.

“If there is a place for what is unthought,” he said, “it is a place of dispersion where thinking drowns. Noon: high locus of the unthought, of thought undone.”)

“Out of all days, God made the day. Thus He overcame separation,” said Reb Arcache. “Out of all books, we shall make one single book.”

And Reb Abbed: “We shall ruin ourselves without respite, for at the end of all destruction there is heaven opening wide.”

And he concluded: “One day, we shall write, like God in heaven, the invisible book of life and death. We shall stop reading God. We shall be read.”

Transparent infinite of all ending.

“How should we go about going toward God,” asked Reb Barsilon, “except by knocking down the obstacles along the way?”

“God is behind all obstacles that are flesh and bone and also barriers to the mind. Once these are removed, soul and body are no more than nameless dust and furtive breeze above the dust.”)

“If we cannot create the vault of heaven,” said Reb Josua, “it is because we do not know the mysterious arrangement of letters with which heaven and earth were conceived.

“If we cannot stop the light from going out, it is because the combination of letters that could save it from the dark is unknown to us.

“If we cannot help regarding you, O death, as the absurd and painful toll of all existence, it is because we do not know how to group letters according to life, which would make you its leaven instead of its end.

“If we cannot save you in your last hour, O human being, it is because the secret disposition of letters that would retain your breath escapes us.

“Our books are books of ignorance.”

And he added: “Ah, which are these letters that form only one impotent word, witness to our impotence? God disdains them. Yet it is through them that we can read God.”

“How can we set our lives in order when nothing is under our orders?” asked Reb Chemtob.

“Both God and man are poor. One for having given all; the other for having nothing to give.”

And Reb Betesh: “‘God is in all’ means outside All, He is nothing.

“‘Man is in God’ means he is only the portion this nothingness grants him.

“The Void insists. Through this insistence the divine mystery becomes clear. Power of Nothing, with-

out which All would only be a projection of the mind.”)

*

I take my pen only when I cannot help it. Up to that point, I resort to all sorts of stratagems to avoid giving in to the words, to the claims of the blank page.

One day, I know, I shall stop writing. This certainty makes me both glad and tremble with fear, as on the threshold of deliverance.

I do not ask what will become of me without writing. I know when I stop writing I shall die.

How could one be dead and still go on living till death? The body is a mystery: universe and tomb, the universe of a tomb and the tomb of a universe. Skin does not bound the body.

What I write leads me (along the same road, but as if retracing my steps) toward what I shall not write, into the night.

Have you asked yourself, on publishing a book, what “Printing completed” could mean, if not your legal death certificate issued by the typographer?

A banal death. How many times have I died? There was a last book that wanted to be recognized as such. Have I always written on its yellowed pages?

(Nothingness, obdurate root.)

“In every book, we live the death of one and the same book,” he said.

“A word is binding and at the same time breaks our bonds. To which of them shall I, one day, owe my freedom?”

“To one only. Your name in shreds.”

God killed the Name that killed Him.

Fierce, O fierce freedom.

If El, or the Last Book put a full stop to The Book of Questions,

The Book of Resemblances finishes perhaps the book of a life in the book. But how far out have I ventured?

Any life, in the face of eternity, is a life laughably scant.

“Life is not going to defeat us, but we it. We shall die by our own hands, our own emptiness, our own fault.

“Every single gesture of ours is aimed against life though we do our best to claim the contrary.

“In our thirst to live we pretend not to know that body and mind are only moments that death grants us through his go-betweens, thought and senses. We pretend not to know that knowledge is only a bait of the watchful void.

“What if this were the explanation of original sin: to burn the wooded walks of life down to their millenary rootstocks, to plug with shovelfuls of ashes the ever deeper pit of death?” wrote Reb Assayas.

And Reb Simhon: “We don’t accomplish. We abolish.”

“Tell me how you managed to disappear.”

“It’s very simple: I broke my name in two. Now I can show my absence as an open casket displays its content.”

“Who are you? This is the first time I speak to you in the book.”

“I have never left the book.”

“I think I hear, but I cannot see you.”

“You are listening to the words of the book.”

“Even when I cannot catch your words, your voice attacks me.”

“It is the silence of the book.”

“And mine?”

“The silence of all voices.”

“. . . .but where are you?”

“Every character in the book is my double. Did you think I could sacrifice them all and be spared?”

“So you are nothing now?”

“Before me, there was the book; after me, there will be the book. But who will be left to identify my voice?”)

Perhaps writing means overcoming all resemblances within the very heart of resemblance, being finally like yourself, like nothing.

*

Nothing is true. Everything could be.

It is our misery that we cannot hold on to the whole life that was ours, that we despair and want to die rather than admit defeat.

“Innumerable names nest in each single one.

“There will always be birds to fill the empty space with their cries,” he said.

“God is now victory of the wing, now the lethal instrument of its defeat. The happy possibility of flight for the creature that resembles Him, and the nail which pins it to the ground or wall: hope or misfortune.

“The mind knows only this double-faced God,” he also said.

Shades of names, changing hue of clouds.

To name: to sort nuances of color.

Cloud in the diamond: bad portion of dark that so depreciates precious stones.

Yet in the southern sky, O Magellanic clouds, are you not matchless, double patch of light?

We count on blood resembling blood in our thirst for silence.
Solitude under the skin.

2

Any book is but a dim likeness of the lost book.

“In each of us,” he said, “there is a book that transforms us into words, as blood forms in the blood.

“To each utterance, each word, corresponds a heartbeat.

“The book’s price is the price of an alliance.”

Body present in its noises. The soul is a word swollen with remote blood.

There is no end, brother, to your ending up in the same word.

Our pen drinks deep at the veins of the moment.

(Procession of faces. Mad night of revelry. Likeness gambles its death, its likeness.

The curse that has, from the beginning, lain on all faces, on all revels that explode the face: this space of n dimensions.

“The divine prohibition is not against images, but against the likeness every image introduces. God wants no face-to-face,” he said.

To recognize yourself in . . . To multiply your likenesses.

Fatal representation! As if in trying to be—to reveal myself—I only brought nothingness to light.

We shall foil the common sight: we shall celebrate fire, pupil burning within pupil.)

In the beginning was the word that wanted to resemble.

Thus God confronted His likeness in the Word, and man his in God.

All creation is an achievement of likeness, an act in which it takes the risk of asserting itself.

What we create resembles us. Only across likeness—as across an ocean—could God create man.

To say that God made us in His image only confirms this: a logical deduction.

God fits perfectly into human logic, which is always short of inconsistencies.

“Creation rejects us” means it ceases to resemble us, it questions its likeness to us who had in vain tried to curb our resembling it.

It makes as little sense to declare that God will come where He is expected as to declare that He will not come where He is not.

To have faith does not mean to expect God, but to make Him expect us in order to quench our own desire of anticipation.

God is the illogical expectation of all expectation, its transfiguring eternity.

God voices the expectation of voice.

Delight of desire where we only desire to live.

“The book is illogical absence of any existence in writing, a proof of God,” he said.

He also said: “What seems illogical often gives us providential access to divine logic: a door where there is no door.”

“To exist in the book could only mean absenting ourselves. God absents Himself in God,” wrote Reb Saltiel.

No more logic once we face the unknown; instead, the absurd spectacle of logic overthrown, literally thrown all over the ground, a heap of broken levers.

Heavier than the world, the unknown. We cannot bear it.

“What strength could rival that of the void?” asked Reb Basri. “It is nothing and, all by itself, sustains All.”

The unknown does not crush the void. It dazzles it.

Life has at its disposal all the colors it kindles; death, a single one which it imposes.

Writer and painter part company at the first ray of sun.

One color only for the word, that of death. One death only for the word, that of color. Death's color is forever: black ashes and white ashes mingling in water.

The writer banks on two colors and dies of one of them.

One color: enough to blind us.

Someday, white will stop being a color and be at last an abyss.

“Black will engulf us,” he said.

The unknown stands at the end of life and at the beginning of death.

For the known, there is no way out except within the known. The unknown is a dead end, a horizon walled up.

Perhaps the exit is an answer; the dead end, a question.

The problem is not death, but the way out.

The way out: the hole you dig within your pale.

At the bottom of the known, where the mind surrenders, the unknown lies snug.

The void has the unknown for openers.

The book leans on the void.

God is the cry of a white word our letters trace for the eye.

The point of any pen is that of a cry.

God's cry is the cry of all absence.

"God has taken the idea of absence to its highest degree. At this altitude, the Book opens to the Book," wrote Reb Ségré.

God is absence of book; and the book, a slow deciphering of its absence.

No book outside God.

3

True, what you say resembles a little what you are trying to say, but it never expresses more than the attempt.

Setting out to conquer the unknown shows perhaps only our secret hope to discover its resemblance to the known.

There is no corrupt unknown.

“What are these clay or marble figures like?”

“Perhaps they are testimonials to likeness itself, are like the likeness they suggest.”

First figure—as we snatch, for no good reason, at the name of God—astonished to figure only the universe, and in vain.

Ignorance is the point of departure of our resemblances, the rallying point of all knowledge.

The unknown is perhaps divine ignorance. Then even God's knowledge would have bounds.

God is not, and man is not, where the unknown no longer beckons.

Both God and man are keenly listening to a simple, indefinite, unidentifiable call.

We once translated this call into a question for fear we might someday stop hearing it.)

To exhaust all knowledge in order to take on the unknown, to be nothing to yourself but this unknown.

What if, behind, God were yet another?

“God refers back to God, as the eye to the eye,” said Reb Arbib.

“To probe the infinite you must accept not to see, must stay with your darkness, on either side of sight.”

(From like to unlike, from knowledge to bald ignorance: thus day runs over into darkness, thus the winding paths of writing.

God has dethroned the light.

Light, the divine image.

God is a victim of God.

God's night is the dark night of the eye.

"Thou shalt not worship an image, God decrees, warning us against idolizing thought which is but a fever of images shaking the mind," said Reb Safir.

One of his disciples countered with this question: "What if, by bidding us distrust the image, God were on the contrary pleading for a kind of thinking in which images clash and tear each other apart?"

Divine recompense goes to the poorest, to God.

"God is the poorest, having been the richest, for He has lost the universe," said a young rabbi.

The saying "Charity begins at home" would seem to be of divine origin.

God safeguards God even where He crushes Him.

"There is no God, he said; there is a radiant glory and a despondency of God, day and night of an incompatible universe."

God is beyond God like respiration without beginning, a breath within breath.

"Who breathes," asked Reb Sabban, "God in me or I in God?"

"I have good reason to believe that we are one and the same breath."

He was answered: "We are quickened by two breaths, of life and of death. God is the latter."

Death: any measure of the horizon.)

4

(Truth is God's serene materiality.)

To establish as true what is perhaps only part of the truth which warrants it, only a step nearer the edge of the abyss.

The void voids us. To go toward truth means emptying out. Against the body, but with your whole body.

The road of emptiness, which is the road of truth, is a detour of suspicion.

To clear the obstacle: logic—logic which keeps safe, to which we owe our safety.

Life does not safeguard any more than death; it guards, guards us for now, is on its guard.

Life is but a vibrant death.

MOMENT OUTSIDE THE BOOK, II

The meaning of a writer's suicide is perhaps this: to give sense to what has none and yet has preyed on him.

O death!
Durable dwelling.

Have I not for more than a year abstained from writing in order to explore directly my resemblance to the man I think I am? As if this could become known to my mind and senses only at a distance from words and their noisy claims, following the example of the word itself which turns to the obliging interval for distance to compare its features with those of other words and finally to share the fate of the one in which it recognizes itself.

. . . But have I not also always been a word burst from my own inky fingers, a word wandering from sentence to sentence, from book to book, a word perhaps already no longer seen or pronounced?

(Distance and silence let us see ourselves where we are no longer seen.

God sees Himself where He no longer sees, across infinite silence, infinite distance.

"You are like me; but who else knows it?" he said.

*“Don’t be like me in what I do but in what I leave
unsaid,” he also said.)*

. . . a book in the death of the book, a match for its likeness to
death.

You play a losing game. You gamble on unlikeness: on vacuous
Nothing.

The unreadableness of the readable marks perhaps the end of
transparency.

MOMENT OUTSIDE THE BOOK, III

I suppose the book written, the story told. The book is never written, the story never told.

I suppose you know what you are going to read and, hence, discover in what is not yet written, in what you know has been written somewhere, in this very book which I wrote and you are reading—or not.

As if the book were written in the memory you have of it or the desire.

“His memory is prodigious,” said Reb Arié of Reb Gaon. “No likeness escapes him.”

“The universe,” Reb Gaon used to say, “is like the universe because it remembers. Oblivion is the end of likeness.”

“Is oblivion not like anything?” a disciple asked one day.

“It would be all too simple,” Reb Gaon answered, “if by closing our eyes we could be rid of resemblances.”

Breath resembles breath, and asphyxiation resembles asphyxiation, as life and death resemble each other in their stubborn determination to live and die.

No meadow for this degree of thralldom.

What *is* resembles what *is* to the point where it is only its resemblance to the nothing of nothing.

We shall always be surprised by our imitations, our conscious or unconscious apings, by time-hallowed analogies, by the subtlety of certain similes.

(God apes God for the benefit of man who apes Him.)

BEFORE THE FIRST MOMENT OF THE FORE-BOOK

What is this emptiness we hold in one hand?

“Our resemblances assemble the remains of an infinite memory run dry,” he said.

Cities debase the face, scramble its likeness.
The desert restores our forgotten traits.

The desert is a divine mirror ground fine.

Our wanderings are an anxious quest for resemblance to ourselves at the heart of our impossible resemblance to God.

“Wandering,” he said, “would only tempt us to reassemble the broken face of absence.”

“You walk,” Reb Gazlan wrote to Reb Aslan, “on the face of your childhood, whose dawn is a smile, and whose night a deep sleep.”

“I walk,” replied the latter, “on my face battered by the stones on our roads. For centuries the bruised soil of our faces has been aching.”

The horizon is always the emptiness of a face.

1

Hordes of human beings, strangers to their condition, their work, strangers to their steps, the city pavement, still tied to fog-wrapped soil: how shall we name them unless with a global name that rivets them to a great fire of mourning as with one pair of shackles?

The few ashes I am taking with me—where? why?—ashes from the mountain that towers over the world: is it the body of a friend, an enemy or—who knows—my own? My own inside the others, this burned portion of me inside each of them. But there were so many that hardly any of me is now left inside myself.

Devouring crowd, devoured by flames, crowd in ashes. Will writing from now on mean separating my name in ashes from theirs?

There is always, in some quiet place, some flame lying in wait for the tiniest bit of straw, a flame that stubbornly refuses to go out, drunk with conflagration.

The dead of tomorrow are legion. Books bear witness, succeeding each other with the regularity of all that is mortal. The future is forever just a word in suspense.

It is raining for the first man. The earth can expect to flower. Jubilant ocean. The waves crash onto inaugurated, crowned beaches.

Tracks that are noticed are tracks for tomorrow. The future can be measured by the creature's intelligence and determination. Everywhere the work of man, already. God grows vague and finally takes on His indifference.

Then I was assailed by a multitude of faces, some familiar, some barely glimpsed, comrades in good luck or bad, met by chance or long looked for.

"The face does not die," said a sage. "Even absent, it remains a face, molded on absence as we mold words on emptiness."

I do not dare, so great is my fear, put a name on any face, on my neighbor's any more than on my own.

Immortality reassures. Time terrifies.

All risk is taken in time, against time; but sometimes for it.

The time of the book is the time of risking a name.

Sarah resembles Sarah; and Yukel, Yukel.

If I go on writing, is it to make them run new dangers through their evident likeness to themselves, as if I could not bear to imagine them at peace, finally, at the very core of the book? Or, on the contrary, because there is no peace in the book or for the book, and we constantly need to challenge it over again in its words and its flesh?

“In the Nazi camps,” Yukel had written, “we were starveling books whose titles you could no longer make out. The resemblance of creatures barely alive had reached—O noon of crime—its zenith.”

Does Sarah resemble Sarah? Does Yukel resemble Yukel?

And Yaël and Elya and Aely?

O death, unsilvered mirror.

“The irreplaceable—what has no substitute—is not reason, but the unreason of resemblance which thrives only on what is interchangeable,” said Reb Tamon.

“I do not know this book. Your book is one among many. I don’t know every book. How could I? Who is this Yaël? And Elya and Aely?”

“What is this story you are telling me? What dream, what wound? I have my own dreams, my stories, my wounds.”

“Our days and our nights are days and nights of the word where books hail each other, touch for a moment and are lost together.”

(God is a stranger to His memory.)

*God speaks in oblivion. His word means forgetting.
It is a word of forgetting, forgetting all words.*

Resemblance is a pledge of recognition.

*Does solidarity work through resemblance? In that
case we could only have solidarity with people like
us.*

*“It is comforting that God resembles us,” wrote
Reb Matalon. “Recognizing ourselves in Him gives us
solidarity with one another.”)*

2

God: an endless word.

Any end insults the question.

The question of the infinite is the feverish question
a closed world puts to a world flaunting its openness.

Miracles are beyond question.

“The word *God* interests me,” he said, “because it defies understanding and, being incomprehensible as a word, escapes sense, which it transcends and annuls. So that it is always a word before or after words, a word without words, past or future, a futile word whose use shocks the mind.

“Questioning God means questioning the void. Pure questioning without object, questioning the question.

“How could we understand God? God cannot be closed in on. God’s closure is God: non-closure or after-closure.

“We must question the ungraspable, unthinkable, grasped and

thought in their arbitrary absence, their jealously protected not-knowing, in failure, pain and blood.

“To question God means hurling Him to His death, making the place of death into the locus of all indeterminable places of anxious questioning of God.”

And he added: “I write at the feet of a word which cannot be explained to the words I live with. A word that invades and troubles, that defies the human order which other words try to respect.”

“Is the unpronounceable name of God not also,” he said elsewhere, “the erased name of the unthought on which all thinking crashes and breaks?”

(“God is a word too many, which troubles our peace like desire weighing on desire—an undesired, irresistible desire,” wrote Reb Gabri.)

The first book and the last share an unbiddable silence.

Any page of writing is a knot of silence unraveled.

Quiet abyss.

3

How could you, Sarah, have forgotten the laugh of the man you brushed against when you were arrested in the street or the louder laughs of the rude, vicious schoolboys pointing their fingers at you?

Yukel was not far off, caught like you in the raid, and you exchanged a look so hopeless that the tentacled laughs—as if they had in spite of themselves bathed in your moist eyes, your held-in tears—seemed suddenly glistening like injured inkfish out of the sea, brandished by stray fishermen.

On the sidewalk opposite, however, there stood a young man your age or a bit younger who stared at you with an expression of suffering and revolt.

The sun was radiant that day.

What happened to that young man? I followed him into the bar whose door he had pushed open. I saw him at the counter, tossing down one glass of wine after the other without a word. Then he went to the men's room, and I heard him vomit and vomit and vomit.

Was he the man who years later tried in vain to reach me before leaving for another continent? He had simply written: "The laugh is inside the book. A page of writing is, from top to bottom, made up of invisible mouths with two lines of letters each for teeth. The words no longer make sense. They only point to the whiteness hemmed by letters which belonged or belong to the inseparable faces without age or future that were swallowed up in the laugh."

We write, as we paint, with ivory black which, as you know, is the fine black powder obtained by mixing ivory and burned bones.

("Leave the laughs with the laughter. This might well be wisdom," said Reb Hemsî.

"Such wisdom we don't care for," replied Reb Teloul. "You don't leave a dagger lying on top of a dagger."

"The mouth is never more than a wound in the face and in the absence of face," said Reb Sherki.

The dying man laughed so loud he had to have earth stuffed into his mouth.

The earth laughed so loud it had to be stifled with millions of dead.

"At dusk, the universe is written in burnt umber," he said.)

NEXT-TO-LAST MOMENT
OF THE FORE-BOOK

*(Budding trees.
Flowers, fruit filling out.
Open arms,
and a body dropped
like a laugh among laughs
dying down.*

Death always laughs at a suicide.

A suicide's laugh amuses the void.

*The whole earth is in stitches, and a laugh explodes
the earth.*

*"You may laugh at me," he said. "Death will avenge
me; I shall be an eternal image of laughter in my
prison of bone."*

*"Once my head is that of a skeleton, you won't
hear, you'll only see me laugh.*

*"Privilege of the dead to make unanimous pacts
with silence," he also said.*

*In death we shall laugh as if raising a standard, as
if stamping out pins or pennies.*

One never dies for a laugh.

The laugh of life matches the laugh of death, as a crater spitting volcanic blocks and boulders matches the abyss where the sun sets.

Ears perceive the difference between sob and laugh. The eye merely registers the same grimace.

The passage from life to death is a passage from the image to its reverse, from a world loud with desire and promise to the silent world of planetary spaces, from the apotheosis of flesh to the sterile reign of bones abandoned by the mind.

Light is spirit, but there is no dark for the dead, only a few ashes strewn over the eternal day.

The hand that molded man is immortal for modeling the infinite.

It is perhaps the soul that lends color to our unlimited limits.

The living and the dead have the same horizon in front of them.

The book is the work of a hand.)

El-Book

Repetition is the power of resemblance.

“Tell yourself that where you are I have been; where you ponder I have thought; where you walk I have walked; where you collapsed I was flat on the ground,” wrote Reb Mazlia.

“Could the divine Name, *El*, be an etymon? Here’s the mystery,” said Reb Kabry.

And Reb Arbib: “Since all words in our language are the name of God, is our resembling Him as we name, as we speak, not simply a resemblance of our name and His?”

“You talk. You write. You raise indestructible obstacles,” Reb Eladad replied.

“Then talking and writing would not mean tearing down obstacles, but leaving them behind, leaving all of them behind.”

“Where there is no writing, where there is not even speech yet, there is only space ready for obstacles,” Reb Bérid had already written.

And added: “We always die between four walls of words whose thickness and height we cannot tell.”

The void is waiting for vocabulary.

In being said—or not said—the void is voided.

IN THE SILENCE OF THE WORD

“With me, you shall decipher the characters of the invisible which were never and nowhere designed by man. They were graven in our breath by breath from the divine lungs which we long took for the largest cloud ever to illumine the sky with its lightning,” Reb Ovadia had written. “But take my advice. Advance with caution in your reading, because at any moment you risk perishing in flames.”

“I do not choose to see. I see.

“I do not choose to hear. I hear.

“I do not choose to feel. I feel.

“But who gives orders

“to my mouth,

“my hands,

“my legs?

“I am at the same time master and slave of my body,” said Reb Alcé.

“And of your soul?” asked one of his disciples.

“I am the sleeping soul of my waking soul, and the waking soul of my soul asleep: the day and night of immortality,” he replied.

“Exile was perhaps the first question because it was the first word. (Pre-exile means pre-word.) Question from mortal creature to the fallen immortal.

“The universe, on its own account, keeps echoing this persistent and vain question,” wrote Reb Amiel.

“Exile and death are subject to the same conditions: for death is the night of exile, and exile, the day of death,” said Reb Nataf.

“We shall triumph in exile. As did God,” wrote Reb Safra, whose body was not found after his death and whose soul was said to have become so transparent that not one of his sisters noticed it the time it came among them.

“Exile had so changed my features,” said Reb Abner elsewhere, “that none of my community would take me under his roof. For all of them, I was already dead.”

“I have dug in so deep that I am cut off from all thought, all desire, all sentiment,” Reb Dabbah had written, “but my heart beats as in the best days of my most valued encounters.”

“There is no rest in the kingdom of resemblances.

“For any question, resemblance is a treacherous dissatisfied question at the heart of felicitous phrasing.

“It keeps the mind on the alert. In the dizzy gap between its sly incursions, we question the mind which questions us,” said Reb Ezra.

“I do not write so much for myself as to please the words in their love and hate. Does God not have all words for His name? Then my writing expresses the love and hate of God. To write for yourself means perhaps only to write against the divine Name, with this very Name,” said Reb Taon.

(“The first word in the dictionary is a name, and this name contains all names, and all names fuse and become this single name which is a word among other words just as laughable: God.

“Is it not strange that Prince and slave use the same words to express themselves?

“Through them, the Prince turns slave; and the slave, Prince. And neither of them knows it.

“We are all equal before language, its imperatives, the use we can make of it.

“The Prince is ridiculous if he believes he cannot help speaking as a prince; and the slave pitiable if he counts on turning prince by repeating the prince’s words.

“Man, who established social hierarchies, should have been on his guard against language, which reduces him to a single word and, like death, promises everybody, if not the same tomb, then at least the exact same nothingness,” he said.)

“Learning to love the night means preparing to sway the future with words of love. The moment after is of the dark. All roads lead into night, place of renouncing all resemblance, all of ink’s daring,” wrote Reb Nessim.

O night of our fleeting nights, ocean of our plowed oceans, in your infinite black the Book of Eternity is written, pursued by our unseaworthy books.

*

“Is that you ringing my doorbell, imagined rabbis of *The Book of Questions*, singular interpreters and commentators of its paradoxical pages? Your names have changed, for the most part, but your voices are the same.”

“Our voices are fitted to the circumstance.”

“Will I see all of you again?”

“There are fewer of us now. Many of our sages have faded into their words. Shadows resemble them now, impalpable traces of their passage and our grief.”

“I have long lived in the desert of their shadow.”

“We are sand of sand and words of words squeezed by the too heavy sky of night as were the sacred words of our holy books between their bound covers.

“God dies in the shelved book and is resurrected in the book that is opened.”

Whirling allows the sand to breathe.

In the desert, wind means life.

“To violate the Book, to rob a rich man’s grave are perhaps one and the same reprehensible act. My book is of the poor, my tomb the open sky,” said Reb Messoulam.

And Reb Assin: “No burial for my words. Let them be pasture for your eyes, those whirling vultures, till they become pasture for your beaks.” He added: “Weep for those among us who will never be in the Book.”

To which Reb Messoulam replied: “What kind of land was yours that you could make it your book?”

“God had only His name for a tomb.”

It is also a book that closes the book.

(“What is day,” Reb Zaccai had noted, “unless the dazzling stretch between night and night’s doom in which our eyes strive to stay open?”)

*

The book is our law. Like book, like law? One law would then rule all resemblance. We cannot cheat with our likenesses. We advance in their territory.

Only another *Book of Questions* could claim to resemble *The Book of Questions*; only characters they could be taken for, its characters.

Could they be reborn through their resemblance because I can only write one and the same book?

—The same even where it is different, right from the beginning?

*

This July has been exceptionally rainy. But we did have a few days of sun.

Sarah has regained confidence. She will soon see Yukel. I believe Yaël is sincere. Monday, we shall go to Hossegor together.

My feet have taken me to the Odéon. Will I bump into Yukel's phantom here? He had spoken to me like an old friend. I made no effort to enter into his life, which, I cannot explain how, was a little bit my own.

The square is no longer quite the same. It is not really different either.

"We live in the margin of time," Sarah had once written to Yukel, "or, rather, in a passive time made present by unearthed images, a presence snatched in time from a frozen past, a compromised future."

The pharmacy is still there, but certain shops around it have changed. At number 1, rue de Condé, the old office supply store has given way to a two-screen movie house. Yukel lived in number 5. The coal dealer opposite died in 1960, of cancer, as did his son last year. His widow—to escape loneliness, to escape herself—is still running the bistro next to their shop, which they also own.

In this neighborhood, as anywhere in France, there used to live friends as well as enemies of the German occupants, pro- and anti-Nazis. Now there are those who have repented, those who have stuck to their opinions and newcomers with whom one cannot be very sure of what they think.

Ah, I could go on recalling the streets and houses, the light and smell of this nearest part of the Sixth Arrondissement, and all that I have found out about its inhabitants. But as I gather my memories the neighborhood fades; the voices, the once familiar sounds disperse. It is because I was born very far from here, much farther, oh, I don't know any more. So this neighborhood is not the place of my childhood or my life, but of my death. It is the home of a man whom I resemble to the point of being always taken for him, even though people know that I was with him in the hour of his death and that he has been in his grave for years.

There are words that outlive us, gestures that continue us when we have left this world for good, old stories, everyday words, age-

old words which we perhaps said—or failed to say—and which resurface in the great book of space, in characters of night like scraps of dark so that someday someone should undertake to read them.

Every reader is the elect of a book.

*

(Do I miss The Book of Questions so much that I cannot help trying to recover it through the angle of resemblance?)

Thus the exile does not leave the land from which he was chased; land, however, foreign to itself for being reshaped in exile.)

“There is little time left,” said Yaël in a rage. “We must not let it be wasted.”

She knew better than anyone that we are not really worried about death, but about what dies with us. For what are we except a moment’s chance to die with God, the universe and ourselves?

And she added: “I shall die like a queen, never as slave.”

We shall never rewind time without the sure help of images.

To gather fruit when famished. To take care that it does not drop from the tree.

To the creature’s ravenous hunger to know, the fruit of knowledge adds its own impatient hunger.

Fruit feeds on fruit.

“A fruitless tree is like a barren woman,” he said. “Both are the hunger of their hunger.”

“To eat means also being eaten,” he said elsewhere. “Death has the same mouth, same palate, same teeth, same belly and same appetite as we.

“Now it is life, now death digging up our image: image of a body sated or a body crushed without sound.”

“You feed death with everything you have eaten,” wrote Reb Mazloun. “If rich, with your favorite dishes; if poor, with your crust of bread.”

And Reb Basri: “Lord, my food on this earth was the Book. My death has only had Your words for sustenance. Thus my life and my death are only one hunger to read.”

“God is nothing but gnawing hunger for God,” wrote Reb Sasson.

(“Images have a past and future difficult to determine. They make us think of them both in their past and in their future. Thus they are the image of thought, of which we never know if it will plunge us into the night of our past or project us into time to come,” wrote Reb Sarda.

“By abolishing images, God left us without past or future, but at their mercy.”

And he added: “An image is always image of an image which thought veils or unveils. So that there is no past or future except for thinking that has stayed alert.”

To serve as trap, or be caught in the trap of the unthought. Same snare for every thought.

“Beware,” he said, “of being seduced by your song’s echo. At the last note, the void will engulf you. We are always our own victims.”

“The image of the sun, O parhelion, is only for a brief moment the sun,” he also said.

“The mimicry of the unthought, which consists in treacherously taking on the appearance of thought,

confuses the latter, leading it to believe it is again thought when it is really doubled in death. Thus the unthought is but a deceptive reflection of thought attracted to itself and suddenly reduced to nothing. Thoughts crumble at the feet of the unthought like birds at the edge of the sky," wrote Reb Farhi.

To which Reb Agiman replied: "Thought dies in thought because the sky of the unthought is its sky also.")

THE PERENNIAL TABLETS

(One can say words; one can only read a vocabulary. Does vocable then equal written word?)

One writes also sous le vocable, that is, with invocations of . . . , under the patronage of . . . ; mythical patronage, in the case of the book.

The vocable is devoted to the book it invokes; the word, to the world it translates—but is the world not in the book? The vocable would add this precision: the word is made vocable where the book is made. In other terms, the word changes into a vocable as sentences make it aware it belongs to a book and as its desire to be part of it increases. Like the silkworm turning butterfly and darting into the air to be part of the celestial world.

The mouth is ignorant of vocables.

“We have to meet words halfway, watch them act, listen to them.

“A word speaks against the words it fears, and which sleep inside it. A word speaks for its wounds, which it hides or flaunts. A word speaks in the name of silence to which it aspires.

“We must answer to—and for—this silence as the Hebrew people must answer to—and for—the broken Tablets,” he said.)

1

“The second Tablets could not be like the first, being born out of breakage. Between them, the bleeding abyss of a wound.

“The first Tablets emerged from the abyss of the divine; the second, from the red abyss of mankind. Do we have the cheek to claim they are alike when we know that all likeness marks the difference we would abolish?

“God was forced by His people to repeat Himself, that is, to suit His Word to the fancy of His deafest creature.

“From then on, everything had to take place in the stormy space this repetition commanded.

“Thus the law is built on a resemblance become human by facing death and hence eternal repetition.

“And the book, on the hope of resembling the hidden Book,” you said.

“Repetition is marked by resemblance. It resembles more closely what our formulations have not quite succeeded in resembling: a kind of rigorous focusing.

“Repeating, repeating ourselves, is a vital act. It means rejecting an assumed resemblance in favor of a different, more striking one with our exemplary object of resemblance. But not everything takes place on the level of appearance. There are delays of time and distance. So that the future is our pledge of likeness.

“Yesterday resembles yesterday, as a step does a step forward,” he said.

“The beginning is Everything. We invent nothing. We repeat everything and nothing. What a miracle: repetition—the systematic recourse to Everything—means impassioned return to the beginning,” you said.

“We have never been able to distinguish between old and new language.

“Repetition became our way of subversion, for it is moved by an innate need to destroy and be destroyed in its turn where there are no more margins for what is settled,” he said.

“Repetition—which can also be a new performance, a new spectacle following any spectacle after, for example, some *a priori* justified criticism—reopens inquiry when the latter thought it was at rest. It restarts questioning beyond its conclusion, relying on the dynamics of resemblance preoccupied with its multiple aspects and aims.

“Repetition is a chance of permanent change. Change via the inspired means of exchange,” you said.

“We are never twice the same, nor other,” he said.

“My vocabulary cannot be yours. I am the only one to inhabit it in my books.

“If my house is an exact replica of yours, does that make it yours?”

“Besides, if my vocabulary were everybody’s, what right would I have to my works? Could I have signed them without dying of shame?” said Reb Avigdor, after an evening’s discussion, to Reb Malka.

“In your writings you assemble, as I do, words identical with those of the language in sense, sound

and number of letters. You think you are living in them when all you are is a chance guest of their reflection.

“Every page is a paper mirror. You bend over it and look at yourself. Water likewise gives back our image; but what image has ever been able to hold the river?” he replied.

*

Any book is a pale projection of God's book in progress.

Of the book to be made, the horizon is the first line.

“Is it not strange,” said Reb Mansour, “that the book to be copied is always the book to be written?”

“Did the Book of books perhaps issue from all potential books?”

“Then the accomplishment of the first book would be contained in the last. God is the book in the space to be filled by the future book. He is its infinite construction.

“At the end of time, His books and ours would be one and the same completed book.”

And he added: “It is our works that require the most erasing.”

And again: “The All is faced by the Nothing which will engulf it.

“Ah, the last book is perhaps only the trace of a book in which God wanted to be visible.

“Likewise the point.

“Then all our knowledge would tend toward a point's victory over death. But is God, Who is the Knowing of Knowing, not also the death of death, white point in a white abyss, pellucid?”

There are degrees, sometimes imperceptible, within resemblance.

For instance, the likeness of white to white, of also-white to bone-white,
of the absent book to the book of all our absences.

2

“You are repeating yourself. You always talk of the same thing. You’ve gotten old,” said Reb Saman to Reb Yoffé.

“Indeed I always say the same thing. But is a moment the moment after?”

“Another man, come out of me, always says what I had said a long time ago. This is my way of surviving through my few words of truth,” he replied.

THE GAME OF GOD

“Could it be that the place for the spirit, which God promised man, is really a place promised to the wandering question, hence the place of the question—of the book?” asked Reb Barda.

“That place is my head,” replied Reb Kalef, “and my head is, like my people, a land without land.”

“In any place, God is the place of my soul,” he said.

They realized that after losing their land they had become strangers to themselves; and their worry hit on the anguishing question which words would from now on supplant theirs.

“Any word is the word of a place. Is even a non-place a place of words?”

“Absence of words does not at all mean an absent word. Is God, Who is sovereign voice, not a full word in the vested silence of the void?”

“Only the fallible word can be heard.”

And man said: What name will now be Yours, You Whose name is that of all our vanished names?”

And God said: “The deafening name of My vanishing.”)

God is named
where the universe loses its name,
where man has lost God,
and God, man.

“There would still be the name in collusion with the Name, and the book descended from the Book, on the other side of absence, at the timid return of day,” he said.

“What difference is there between silence for you and noise for a deaf man?” Reb Hacoheh asked Reb Abravanel.

“The difference between dawn and dusk, the radical difference between silence stealing in and encrusted silence.”

“Noise is the brutal challenge of a silence that I cannot perceive, as a grain of sand in its freedom can cause indescribable trouble for the desert,” said Reb Safir elsewhere. And added: “God’s silence caves in and crumbles where I speak.”

Every sound is an unknown sound augmented.

“Death never quite wins out over death. God relies on His unlikeness to Himself, leaving the field wide open for the boldest speculations on His likeness to Everything and, at the heart of Everything, His likeness to Nothing,” wrote Reb Piha.

Any letter is the ultimate letter getting lost in its perceptible black reproduction.

Reb Raccah wrote:

To the man who asks Him about the place of the book, God replies:

You shall go through the book as a mountain spring goes through a river.

From now on, there will be two banks where I have spoken.

There will be trees on both sides of My word and, in My word, all the sand left from My deserts.

To the man who asks Him about being tied to the book, God replies:

Where My word of absence spreads unchallenged, your word will baffle the dark forces of the universe, just as I mastered creation by balancing its destructive forces.

To the man who asks Him about rest in the book, God replies:

May your voice reach the end of all words and thence hoist itself up to My silence; for it, too, I created the seventh day.

(Everything seems in place and, suddenly, nothing holds up.

How much longer, ah, down to which buried milestone, will we build on our ruins?

And on the ruins of our counted ruins?

One word from somebody or other, one unexpected gesture, and already we do not recognize ourselves.)

I thought I recognized Yaël, but it was not really she; and yet . . .

I thought I recognized Sarah, then Yukel and even, through their fabulous story, Elya and Aely; story of dead letters within the four letters of their name.

If it is not they, who are they?

If it is not their book I am leafing through, what book is it?

Resemblance is a brief harmony of the infinite.

(You resemble what resembles you for the time of resembling.

No image is eternal.

God's eternity is absence of image.)

He said: "The space between two mirrors is perhaps the reflected void of death and the book."

He said: "The space reflected between two words is perhaps the void of death and the book."

He said: "The water of transparency is precious dew.
"We shall take on the whiteness of our thirst."

Paris does not know us, although it is in this city that the book opens and has closed,
although it is here that the words we exchanged have been engraved.

Which book of the collective scream will one day be yours, Sarah, where you are no more?

Which book of liberated words will one day be yours, Yaël, where you are no more?

Which book of revolt and distress will one day be yours, Yukel, where you are no more?

The book of resemblances remains to be written.

("Unity is dead. I write to keep the words separate so that they should live in spite of the book and in spite of God, Who is word upon word and book upon book.

"Legibility is a human invention for the benefit of humans.

"God is illegible unity," said Reb Arias.

And he also said: "We are the separation within God, the reading of the entire reading made practical.

"Could it be that writing is in the end only our aptitude for disentangling words like hair to find where it parts?"

"Ah, let us leave the words to their games of passion. It is in the space of their wounds that they speak to us.

“Reading is the deciphering of wounds.”

To this Reb Benhaim replied, not without humor: “Sometimes it is through our most modest inventions that we can elucidate the mystery of God. The invention of the comb is one of them.

“Could learning to write just mean learning somehow to use a comb?”)

I write with resembling words in the resemblance of the book.

(“The metamorphosis of the world which is a tested rule of conduct is also the mood of the moment,” he said.)

There is no continuity in time.

(Innumerability of God.

All reference to the universe goes through the innumerable.)

The book was still hanging—as by a hair?—by a point.

“You tried to tarnish the point.”

“The point was the object of my temptation.”

“Then you turned away from temptation.”

“In my renunciation, I encountered the point.”

“Have you forgotten the point?”

“The point is the star of oblivion. The night of the book is the night of a single star.”

“Have you noticed,” said Reb Assued, “that the full stop is the sun of the book? The other punctuation marks are only its shadow, just as word and book are only the universe it contains.”

Fertile forgetting.

We shall warm ourselves in forgetfulness where the book obeys
a book it does not remember.

*

In front of Notre-Dame, a blind man sells postcards to the tourists
come to see the cathedral: colored views of Paris.

I believe that every exile is this merchant's brother.

A place we can no longer see ceases to be ours. An exile is a
blind man without territory.

Turned in on himself, packed off to the bottom of his soul, his
skin is his border. It tans in the sun and in winter allows the cold
to penetrate.

He follows two parallel paths: his memory's and his feet's. It
happens that his feet betray him; his memory, never.

Where does the blind man go? From his room to the famous
square and from the square back to his humble dwelling. The same
route three times a day. But can we be sure we are well enough
informed about the small details of his itinerary?

He breaks—as if his soul had migrated into a different body—
with the alienating ritual of the usual path in order to cleave seasons
and continents at the precise predetermined hours when the land
that ejects him is in turn struggling with its bloody mutations.

(Lives akin, books akin. Death is without ties.

*Engrams perturb death, for only the brain can op-
pose the void by opposing to its lack of traces the
indestructible trace of a formative event perceived by
the individual.*

*Death hounds oblivion. Oblivion is the quick of
death.*

*Oblivion is also the thought of death where nothing
is left to be thought or to think.*

. . . a kind of thoughtless thought, like a blighted ear of wheat by the roadside.

“Oblivion is the road of death,” he said, “and not the death of the road. Oblivion is duration where nothing endures.”

A resilient work whose resilience is measured, as with metal, by its shock absorption, but in the work itself, in each of its parts.

To resort to the kinetic energy needed to cause breaking, and control it. To be this energy.

“All along its pages,” he said, “a book is nothing but repeated breakage.

“The word is set in shards.”

“The broken tablets remain the unchallenged model of the book,” wrote Reb Ezri, “for every line of writing is shards promised to legibility.”

A book is always breaking the imitated, inimitable book.

“You shall not break the book in anger,” wrote Reb Chemoul, “but in love. For it is in its breaking that it opens to the divine Word.”

“No need to break the book,” replied Reb Haggai.

“It is already broken. Writing only confirms the cracks, explains and interprets them for you.”

“Solidarity among Jews,” wrote Reb Koufy, “is based on respect for solitude.

“We are a multitude of solitudes and the solitude of this multitude.”

“Every sentence in our books,” said Reb Layani, “is an infinite, solitary line. We live and die between those lines.”

And he added: "We have a sentence for our sky, a sentence for our soil, but we are neither on earth nor in heaven."

Reb Malah reacted in these terms: "Our solitude is a beam prized for its strength. Floorboards are nailed in from above, the ceiling lath from below. But who will furnish the joists?"

"Our sky is below.")

"Never forget that you are writing on the smooth skin shed by a serpent," he said.

Life by life.

Death by death.

Word by word.

*

("Night," he said, "is a point pierced by dark; day, a point pierced by light. Oblivion bleeds.

"There is no future for the book except in forgetting the book.

"Thus we are driven to write without interruption. For our pulse beats in unison with words struggling in the holes of their memories," he added.

"Writing begins and ends in oblivion.

"The book is oblivion's itinerary," he had noted on top of the page, and at the bottom: "God forgets God where He conceives Himself.")

Forgetting the left page resembles forgetting the right page. Thus the book unfolds in immemorable resemblance.

THE GAMES OF MAN

“This really is your oval face, Yaël. It is your eyes, their matchless soft black and their cruel blue—cruel when they soften, soft when they try for cruelty. It is your nose, your mouth, it is your hair, soft and silky as if resonant with silence, it is your shapely body.”

“It is me, yes, but is it me? It is me, yes, but did I ever exist? How can I resemble a woman who is not, and yet indubitably be that woman? I am Yaël in as far as I am the plaything of her absence, the double of an imaginary creature imagined anew with my features, resuscitated, haggard, in the labyrinth of unsurmounted absence.”

“This really is your deep voice, Yukel, your lined forehead. It is your skinny hands and tapered fingers, your eyes vague and sad, yet charged with such desire to live and love that they sometimes seem like embers. It is your way of looking, rich with all the looks you’ve reined in, all the books you’ve read. It is your tired laugh and your slow walk. It is you, narrator of my works, victim of your narration, an open wound—ours—in the empty breach, like the cleft of a woman in labor, a mother’s dark cleft, as if indeed the blood still running down her legs came from pushing you out of her seeded womb, out of a perfect world, intending you for a different one, the world of the word to be born of your birth.

“Yukel, is it really you? Then it is me also, and everything has to start over, be lived again, but where, under which horizon, in which generous corner of the earth, on which auspicious and willing page of a book to be composed?

“It is you, Sarah, amid your mad screams which only death could smother. Your silence today is the silence of all our screams held

back for a while. It is you; I recognize you not just by your young face worked over by hell, not just by your aimless smile, your eyes red with weeping, but above all by your lips, which keep murmuring as if forever repeating Yukel's name without face, without even the hope of a face.

"O Sarah, how beautiful you were and still are, even if no longer the same, even if you are another person and, perhaps, the mere image of another who in other times could have been the Sarah you incarnate without knowing too well what she expects from you nor what you expect from her, without knowing if you owe your existence to the spacious book in which you once stopped beyond death for love of Yukel, for your love, for ours, when there was no love anywhere on earth, when there was everywhere so much hate to quench, so much crime to commit.

"Sarah, shivering in your winters of fever, no sunshine on your ardent youth. Nestled in Yukel's shadow, it was a short—so very short—while that your bodies spoke to each other, yet to your last breath, the words from this voluptuous harmony never stopped shaking you from neck to toe. Alone, your head wavered, is wavering still, a mist glowing at night, a float adrift.

"If it is you, Sarah, then I must also be dead or so ideally, so intimately like your lover that nothing separates us any more. I died with him, and he lives by my death. He occupies my apartment, my room. He reads my mail, he sits down at my table, he takes my pen, he assembles my words and writes my book.

"And it is you, the old Jewish tailor in the rue de Pontoise, next to your bent, inconsolable wife. It is you, couple feeding on your pain, left alive, ironically, prey to the atrocious sight of the ovens where your children were thrown. But if it is you, why is it you don't seem to recognize me, don't come out of the half-light of your shop with the peeling walls? Why won't your eyes take in the shabby suits to redo for your customers with slender means, why can your numb hands no longer sew?

"It is all of you, but you're probably so absent inside your own absence that you need a long time to answer to my appeal, as if in this space of time a riddle could be solved, a name be known, but in the way that silence gains ground by irreversibly unfolding silence.

“Everything is out of phase where likeness emerges. Being is not being, things are not things, the book is not the book.”

(He said: “Forgetting follows forgetting as light follows the dark.

“The stars are forever rehashing one and the same word. We talk in the night.”

“One evening, I saw the city lights glimmer in the sea and, greatly moved, read the same book there,” Yukel had written.)

THE SURNAME

Y.H.W.H.

El-Elyon.

For the silent name,
a silent surname

—unbearably *silent*, like the sevenfold *silence* of
the *sky*.

“Blessed be El-Elyon, Melchizedek greeted Abraham, but Abraham replied: He whom you call the most high God is no other than Y.H.W.H., my Lord. This is His true name. So far you have only known His surname.”

(Genesis 14:19)

Figures of my works, you perhaps never had a name. Did you, in order to enter the book, use a surname, a borrowed name or name of convenience?

As destinies are erased, your names were crossed out in favor of anonymous first names—what could be more impersonal than a first name on a page? Names drowned in the book, sighted again in which part of the atmosphere, impossible to fish out except by leaning over so far that we would fall into the void where the universe has jettisoned its name.

You shall keep your first names, lest my book sink. You shall cultivate your masks, your appearance of refined or caricatured appearance. But you shall have no rest until we have, in the few letters that designate them, discovered your faces: the face that Sarah conserves of Yukel, and Yukel of Sarah, the one attributed to Yaël and

that of her stillborn child, Elya, saved by his name as he could have been by that of Aely whom she did not want. So true is it that we are only the unfolding of a name, the figure of its becoming.

(“The Jew,” he said, “is a Jew because he resembles a Jew. He is because he resembles . . . but the one he resembles also exists only because he resembles. . . . He is only his resemblance with somebody else, some other. He is this would-be resemblance with an unknown whom we have given a face—which is therefore not his own, but a face modeled on an invented face: face of a moment, changing with its likeness to the face remembered for the time being.”)

“Then being Jewish could mean being forever the object of the most whimsical likenesses?”

“The Jew is one who is silent for silence and voluble for any word in his deepest likeness to God Who is word of silence and silence of all words.”

“The Jew is a book in God.”

“We resemble our alliances and especially our alliance with the invisible in the void of its vocable,” wrote Reb Sofer.

“It seemed natural to everybody that the complicity of God and man should find its most beautiful ornament in the silk of silence man wears to govern. But one day, man gave up this garment: the vernacular took vengeance on divine speech,” Reb Benassaya had written.

And Reb Bitran: “Man in his presumption raised his voice to saturate the universe with his words. This marked the decline of the words of the Book.”

“Where all falls silent with you, God is like you,” said Reb Beraha.

“When Moses came to death’s threshold, God wanted to be si-

lence so that His mouth could serve as tomb for the prophet as well as for all new words.

“We speak propped against God’s lips, we write in the abyss of His throat,” he also said.

“The resemblance of letter and figure, of word and number, lies in the equivalence of their respective use and exchange value. We write as we count,” said Reb Cherki.

“The figure 4,” Reb Naouli put it, “is certainly the greatest, as it is written in *The Book of Questions*, because it reaches all that is up and all that is down, all that comes before and all that comes after.”

“Beyond up and down, in the unlimited space of before or after, there are no figures,” Reb Aouate answered.

“There is the resemblance of all figures to the uncrystallizable figure of the infinite,” said Reb Zekri then.

“It is the same with God’s infinite because unpronounceable name which all names resemble though they be nothing but glittering dust of names.”

(“What is the star of David other than a triangle superimposed on its mirror image? Likeness is evidence,” said Reb Bensadon.

“Evidence is the main test of likeness,” Reb Chouchana wrote to him. “For it is often challenged. It operates at a distance and for its effect relies on surprise.”)

THE IMMOBILITY OF TIME

The immobility of time is time fleeing from time, and fleeing, likewise, from flight. I am elsewhere. I allow elsewhere to be here. The time of here and of elsewhere are the same time fleeing in my flight. The time of elsewhere flees the elsewhere to join the time here. Time here flees from its place to become the time of a place beyond. Thus time is a perpetual back and forth between one time and another. The rebound abolishes time. Abolished time means immobile time. Void, death, nothingness are outside time, but this outside-time is only time pushed farther out: this time-outside-time is the time of writing. Nothing moves, it would seem, once it is written. Immobility of the letter, the word. The book carries the weight of its characters' immobility, the mobile stillness of their flight from flight, crushing weight of all the space contained in a letter.

(Ah, you are running, running away. You are fleeing where everything is in flight. Nothing is welded in place. The book is perhaps just a meeting place of our flights, a place escaped from its own place.

Then writing would mean accounting for these planned or fortuitous encounters. The space of lightning: a word is trapped by a word, and a book has allowed us to read it.

The book's infinite is the vital space of the word.

To read what flees even from reading.

Perhaps our reading is simply seeing through the words' feigned inertia to their will to flight, consists perhaps in each time revealing this threshold.

There is a false immobility of the book just as there is a false mobility of speech: the book tries to flee from the book, whereas speech hangs on to what it says.

To form and to flee could nearly be synonyms.
We flee from ourselves into the forms we make.
We make a getaway as we make a book.

Speaking and writing differ in that the former wants to settle while the latter is giddy for flight.

"You want to settle down. You are fleeing from flight," he said.

Any flight is a fascicle of writing.

Words also run to leaks, like pipes.
We sometimes puncture a word unawares.
A word that has lost its blood is a word of which we know only the agony and keep only the loss.

It is not ink which gives color to a word, but the horizons that enchant it.

There is no immobility except where there is no sap.

The tree escapes through its roots. The universe is flight defied and foiled by flight.

Stability of things, of beings, of the world, you are only a tiny moment of respite between two flights, an imperceptible time become an illusion we depend on: our poor old time.)

All resemblance is an implicit understanding between two flights, complicity of intention and action.

Any flight has its postponed aim in resemblance. The book of resemblances is the book of Flights.

“We know when we run away it is only another way of retracing our steps back to the place where we got lost,” Reb Baccouche had written.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF PLACE

“Making yourself resemble,” he said, “is not a perverse pleasure in imitation, but a subversive act, the manifestation of a male subversion of nature and spirit.

“The Jew has always tried to push to perfection his likeness to the book.”

“I have discovered that the Jews were the most subversive of peoples and, over the centuries, escaped destruction only thanks to this subversiveness, which they consciously call their fidelity to the book.

“Nobody has worried as much about correct reading. Nobody has understood better that writing only means withdrawing what is written in favor of what is in process, their fidelity being faithful to the future,” said Reb Louzoum.

“White like a page is the Jewish soul,” said Reb Assayas. “On it, our intermittent wanderings are printed in the typeface of lost places.”

*

All reading is reading of a strange, primal place.

“Three times God appeared to Moses, in a different place. Every word defends its place.

“The book likewise has its place, most often without salient features. At first sight, however, it could very well be taken for a place knowingly chosen by the word, for a return to a cherished place, perhaps its birthplace it keeps longing for. Even for a word, the place of birth is unforgettable. This choice, unless arbitrary, would determine the action, the development of the book.

“The question is, who has the right to choose the place of the book,” said Reb Tevet.

“There is no place of the book, hence no choice; there are a thousand places baffling choice. Every letter is an intimate configuration of place. All we do in writing is show to words the place of each of their letters, and to the book, the scattered places of its words. In this way Jew has been going toward Jew ever since the exodus. All the countries of Jews are the same divided homeland which they make whole again by gathering to complete the book.

“So the work of writing is a repeated affirmation that every letter belongs to a definite place deliberately kept secret until it enters the book; and the book, the reunion of an infinite number of places: O promised land all promise,” replied Reb Tekoa.

(“One letter among all is my true country. Every time I find it in a word, let alone doubly or triply, I tremble with happiness. O my brothers, let us, a people without land, no longer claim to be from such and such a country, but from this or that letter; for the world is our book,” wrote Reb Zemer.

And Reb Gazit: “A plot of land could be in the image of all the letters of the alphabet. We read one and the same country.”)

You move in the book, move across words, from place to place.

You no longer count your surprises, your disruptions, your delights and disappointments.

“Many are the places of my death,” he said. “I speak, I write of each of them.”

“You speak, you write of one single place that contains them all,

just as a second is inhabited by all the preceding seconds, and the book, by all the books completed before it," he was answered.

"I speak of the false resemblance of one grain of sand with another grain of sand," wrote Reb Chemouli, "the false resemblance of pain with pain and joy with joy. Nothing is like anything else: the universe's resemblance with God is the resemblance of All and Nothing, as if Nothing were posing as All, and All as Nothing."

Then he said: "If we cannot see God it is because He is in Nothing when we look for Him in All, and in All, when we think we have contemplated him in Nothing. But," he added, "our eyes which are unable to embrace All cannot seize Nothing either, for Nothing is only the void of All."

One of his students replied: "All is like All, and Nothing like Nothing."

"Thus there is neither All nor Nothing, but only the manifest likeness of two unthinkables: of what poses as All, to All, and of what poses as Nothing, to Nothing."

"Then God would only be the face of the absence of revealed face, a complex relation of unlikeness to a like unlikeness, of a thick wall of light to its limpid counterpart."

And Reb Sabban: "God's perfection is without a perfect image of God. Perfection rejects resemblance."

And Reb Hababon: "God alone does not know likeness. He is unlikeness at the heart of all that resembles Him. He is a multiplicity of likenesses which unlikeness designates as the likenesses of annulled likenesses, as void refracting the void."

"Thus God is like God where nothing is like nothing, where everything is like everything else."

"God, Who flaunts the diversity of His unity, is therefore the likeness of Nothing to Nothing and of All to All."

("Did Moses realize that on receiving the decalogue the Hebrew people would try with conscientious fervor to discover which other words might also have been written by Yahweh's hand. As if God's will to silence were only an invitation to this particular peo-

ple to mitigate the lack of divine words by human words resembling them?" said Reb Mosri.)

"Resemblance," said Reb Alcé, "is an image of an image, a gesture of a gesture, a word of a word, a silence of silence which the book denounces.

"Thus there has never, at any moment, been a book of resemblances."

And he added: "Is it not true that where resemblance is in effect the book encounters insurmountable difficulties in being a book, much like the Jew in his desperate eagerness to be finally Jewish?"

And Reb Massoulès: "Judaism, which we can in some way regard as stubborn writing in a night where all writing fades, has as an innate virtue—its main characteristic—the lucid patience that centuries inherit from centuries."

("There is no Jewish discourse. There is a questioning kind of word, waiting, in reserve for questions. There are mute words facing the dominant discourse: of power, of the hostile majority. There are words that are eloquent facing God—I mean in their relation to God. All these are for me one single discourse which I call Jewish because it came out of our fundamental questioning and its diversity bears witness to our freedom and rebellion," wrote Reb Talah.

And elsewhere: "Is rebellion not a form of obedience, its paroxysm?"

"Having obeyed everyone, let us end obeying only ourselves; having obeyed everything, let us finally obey only the demands of Nothingness. As if obedience had exhausted its term, and we could not help rising up against it.")

Nomadic writing, which is not of one place, but of all places, resuscitated by letter joined to letter, now runs dry in the desert

of thirst. Every grain of sand speaks for this desolate stretch become its natural home, yet dies a lonely, continuous death scorched by the sun.

Writing mourned by its lost places. So many tears, this ink: Jewish tears and ink.

“Every little patch of the globe, from the richest to the most barren, has through the book contributed to the Jews’ physiognomy, their turn of mind, their reason to be and live. But it has also been a ferment to their native nostalgia, their restless and painful ways, which are no doubt like other people’s, yet also straining toward recognition of a preserved place in the sparkling constellation of non-places,” Reb Hassoun had written.

“The Jew’s likeness to the Jew is comparable to that of a universe in flames to a universe in ashes,” Yukel had noted.

THE HIGHEST CHALLENGE

1

(“What, or whom, are you smiling at?” Reb Yehiel was once asked by one of his young students.

Reb Yehiel pointed his finger at the empty air and replied: “At you, at myself, at your question.”

And added: “At our likeness.”

“My son is born. My son is born,” cried Reb Amiel joyfully. “He has inherited my most cherished likenesses. His face magnifies them all.”

“At the hour of dying, you resemble all the dead,” said Reb Maalod. “You finally take on resembling all exhausted resemblances.”)

And man said to this God:

“I hear only You, but can't hear You.

“I see only You, but can't see You.

“I search only for You, but can't search for You.

“I hope only for You, but can't hope for You.

“I form only You, but can't form You.

“I strike only You, but can't strike You.

“I question myself only in You.

“I measure myself only against You.

"I am only a word at the heart of Your words.

"I am only vocabulary where You are written."

And God said to man:

"I am the despotic, obsessive, most enigmatic of your creations, after the word."

And man said:

"Am I the word?"

And God said:

"I am the questioning of the word."

And man said:

"Am I the word in question?"

And God said:

"Let your breath, O whiteness, draw a first line on the unblemished marble of My word. What is feverishly written during the day, the tablets of night allow us to read."

And man said:

"My tongue is chattering dust. Give me another."

And God said:

"Dust is marble, and the void, a universe."

And man said:

"Where am I?"

And God said:

"What does it matter where you are?—Wherever you are, I no longer see you."

And man said:

"Have I given You eyes too weak?"

And God said:

"You have given me eyes for the infinite."

And man said:

"Let Your eyes dive into me. I carry the infinite."

And God said:

"Let our absence form an alliance."

And man said:

"Where are You?"

"Where am I?"

“O Lord,” said Reb Chamoun, “in You I am invisible like You, and my name is that of the invisible: Your unpronounceable name.”

“Developing more normal relations with God implies more normal relations with the divine Name, hence with its unpronounceability,” wrote Reb Basri in reply.

To be a nomad in the infinite stretches of the word.

“The name of God overencodes the name of God where it cannot be pronounced,” said Reb Kalef.

*

. . . Thus, the book’s proposition echoes the proposition of the letter where they are doubly barred from access to universal resemblance.

Resemblance cannot but be its own limit. Defining the limit means homing in on resemblance.

No likeness for man except in what is human.

There cannot be any resemblance in creation except with what is systematically removed from all resemblance.)

“Are you already far from the book?”

“At this point of convergence, the book is still open to the sly questioning it would no doubt rather have avoided.

“If there had never been a book, there could *a fortiori* never have been any questioning of the book.

“But if the book were nothing but stirred-up desire, cruel and pathetic waiting for the book, the finally claimed moment of a place propitious to the unfolding words, then questioning the book would

only be reconsidered questioning of an at best imperfect model of the book whose realization we have lived stage by stage.

“The question would spurt from this violent passion of book for book, from this push beyond borders rarely reined in—so great the vertigo of words at the height of challenge, a wager with ourselves in the wake of death.

“The world is in the hands full of sand stretched out toward us.

“In this case, writing would consist in assembling words aware of their condition around a hypothetical, idyllic plot of land, a place imagined on the basis of a non-place harried daily in its silence.”

*

“You write. Is your writing valid only for the moment?”

“The moment to come is not ours.”

“Under these conditions, how could the present moment be ours either?”

“The Messiah is for tomorrow. For tomorrow all change.”

“Is there a present more blank than the future? Our words cast their shadow over today, but what shadow would dare tackle the immaculate blank of tomorrow?”

“The night of my ink would dare, night of words gorged on my black blood where the Messiah will struggle like a castaway in the sea.

“Each of my words brings change.”

“But what changes do they prepare us for?”

“Perhaps they initiate us into a love of change which change rejects and fears. Truth is the virtue of change.”

(“You said: ‘Truth is the void. Ah, how the void is devoured by change.’

“Where would the Messiah enter, tell me, if the book were a closed universe?” Reb Nahman had written.

“The Messiah is the condition of change, condition incarnate,” said Reb Akkad.)

From now on, all reasons for understanding or judging were tied to my memory of the approaches of the book with which I had to reckon in the future. Held captive, at the point where I happened to be, by words whose necessity (dictated by my deep desire to break out of my solitude) I did not yet see clearly enough to subscribe to wholeheartedly. And yet my life depended on them. I finally had to cross the fiercely defended border line of silence which no word dared violate, had to encourage those timorous words to get their teeth into the infinite.

The book within our reach is the book of the end of a doomed world. It is up to the survivors to restore its words along with its order. Could it be that there is one single order for all books? Seen from this angle, writing a book would mean finding its original order, without which it cannot exist. Could it not be that the order of a book is the path dug by the despair of every page of writing which the void shreds and carries away?

("Our heaviest chains," he said, "are forged with unarticulated words.")

"Do not judge me by what you know and I could have known, but by what you learn from me and I learn every day," said Reb Sebton.)

2

And then nothing . . .
Impotence of God.

"Do you believe," he said, "that you can reach the golden peaks of night and return to your point of departure, intact?"

"Mountains of darkness. Mountains of the mind.

So lonely in the infinite night, a star is the glimmering knowledge that it sparkles only for itself," he also said.

It is perhaps time for me to chart the fault, chart the inevitable slide, caused by the sudden quake, of one part of text into another, connecting different times and levels of writing.

"There are no peaks in writing," he said. "Writing is itself the peak."

Fault line. Death guards the far side of death.

Death has its hours of light and its hours of darkness.

Eternity is cellular.

In the morning, my shadow alone.

Where others would find certainty, we risk moving on an immense field in motion.

Where others find occasion to affirm, we find doubt, fear, anxiety, infinite questioning.

Subversive words, breeding polemics because strife-ridden and molded from misgivings.

Where others hope for results, for us there is nothing.

Starting from nothing only to return to nothing. Roving across a negative explanation renewed with death, which we accept and recognize as the only access to the book where (for having been named) we come into the power to name; power which undermines any manifestation of any presence, any stray impulse toward the idea of force, and of course denounces as absurd any will to dominate.

Writing establishes itself as the ultimate of writing where sense has capsized in what lies beyond sense, beyond the reassuring sig-

nificance that is implacably challenged until it becomes the very process of being challenged by the failure that awaits it in the end.

Who could stop our advance? Which utterance, which word could hold us back where no word is possible, nor any utterance? Everything is blank and will not, through and for us, cease being blank.

“But then, where, how and from what could inquiry be reborn which has always been our road?”

“Perhaps from the smoking ashes of a suspended questioning.”

(We cannot take our distance from God except in the book. Unless God is precisely the distance in which the book is written?)

Distance which God took from Himself as if by choosing the Book He had in advance condemned Himself to disappearance.

To realize the book, that is to say, to establish the order that would let the book come about, but from which it escapes, alas, to our chagrin: an order like a blank outline in whose hollows the words would settle, forgetting that it is only a ground plan of the void which we in vain try to read.

“People of the Book,” might you not be simply a people spellbound for centuries by an extreme sense of Nothingness maintained by the letter?

. . . by an extreme sense of the Void?)

THE PASSAGE

“The unthought,” he said, “is perhaps the thought of tomorrow.
“God is the future.”

God thinks where our thinking gives out. This thinking is what we must reach.

“I am the thought that explodes thinking, the absence that leads absence astray, the innocence that kills,” a sage had written.

What passes has perhaps a passion for passage.

“My thinking is a dagger, and I am my thinking. With your frail hand, you have wrenched the weapon from my hand,” he had also written.

And had added: “We have seized God’s thoughts. We have disarmed Him. Therefore He does not exist.”

Any thought is the observed moment of its death and sudden resurrection in the non-thought now illuminating.

There is no future but in death, its only passageway.
God is the passage.

The Trial

To trust what outlasts us.
To face the next inquiry.
Yesterday is an avid question.

Thought always gives uneven battle to thought.

To proclaim the outcome of the battle. To appeal
to an arbitrator. Respect his decision.

But how go about this when we are both the con-
tending forces and judge of the confused contest?

“The arbitrary was our semisalvation.

“So that now, at the tentative truce to our battles,
we can declare ourselves neither altogether defeated
nor entirely victorious, neither quite alive nor truly
dead,” wrote Reb Zafrani.

“God is nothing but air, fiery air which punctures my lungs,” screamed Reb Gabry, the madman, dead since of tuberculosis.

“I spit on Him with all the black wounds full of Him that He keeps open inside me.”

His son then said to him: “Father, is not every star a gob of spittle from a consumptive sky?”

“We have fortified our souls listening to your teachings, whereas you have buried them in a hurry. Everything that comes from God, including madness, is a sun of wisdom.

“Transparent, the truth of ink written at this altitude. And resplendent, at the bottom of the abyss, our resemblance to Him.”

“Any flame is full or faint divine respiration. Breathing, God enlightens and sears us with points of fire. But God’s miracle is to make breath an everlasting flame which does not consume Him,” wrote Reb Debbas.

“A dog comes up to me. He has been timidly prowling around the neighborhood. I pet him. He follows me. In the animal’s moist eyes, there is our unshakable loyalty to the sign received,” Reb Sommer had written.

(“Last look, murderer’s look. Ah, may your eyes never cast a last look at the world. Reading to this point of penetration dries up the springs. The moment read is widowed of the moment. But there are texts which our reading does not exhaust this quickly, texts whose abundance depends on how deep we drill the

well. So many unsuspected springs feed the planted field of the book," wrote Reb Moyal.

"The Jew opposes his own language to any other. Here is his solitude, just as his subversion is to absorb other peoples' languages into his own," said Reb Bit-tar.

"Lovers' words and words addressed to God have close ties to writing; for they too cease being current speech in order to speak for all demagnetized words," wrote an émigré rabbi encountered too late to be in The Book of Questions.)

"All resemblance is furnished by the book. A book is pure likeness—pure as we say of an art or diamonds—to the body.

"You shall value your body, through the book, for its resemblance to the divine body whose precious sweat is ink," wrote Reb Ous-souf.

. . . All those pores, all those tiny natural inkwells.

The book of sweat is the source book of the body, tepid moisture of words.

*

"Of sense, we have stressed its reach beyond sense, and of non-sense, its tyranny," wrote Reb Aboulker.

And Reb Amar: "God is first of all non-sense, then the sense of non-sense, then the sublimation of His negativity."

And he added: "God names Himself in the refusal of the name, in the non-naming where He drowns."

And concluded: "God is not refusal, but His refusal's slow progress on the road of truth that spells Him."

Did not Reb Assad, for his part, write: "God is the exhaustion of all knowledge at the heart of absolute knowing. He is the radiant

adverb of not-knowing—which is itself our knowing's indeterminate place of return and rest. Because God knows nothing for knowing all. Having known everything in advance, on the sixth day of Creation—the first day of the universe—He let go of useless knowledge.”

“The readability and unreadability of God is the readability and unreadability of not-knowing,” said Reb Alfié.

“Could there be ingrained in the edges of not-knowing a question God could not escape?” Reb Nahmias asked Reb Menassé one day.

“We make sure of this question,” Reb Menassé answered. “We are marking time at the edge of what can never be known because it is alien to knowledge.”

And Reb Dabbah, who listened distractedly in a corner of the room with the two rabbis, said: “Is not death, with its loss of consciousness, total loss of knowledge? We cannot question death except in death, and once dead, we are without questions.”

“Get used to taking any word for your name, as God does. It is the only way to take words on fully,” wrote Reb Dassa.

And Reb Hakim: “My name is the distance felt between names and the Name.”

“If we admit that the order of the divine Book is defective, must we conclude that God has given us an absurd book? Unless He wanted to point out that the absurd is the place of mystery?” wrote Reb Sémouha.

And added: “Perhaps God is teaching us with His failed book that the book is impossible.”

And elsewhere: “If God Himself is an absent word, or, rather, absence of words, then is not every vocable a carbon of this absence?”

Exploitation of absence: divine language.

You write on God.)

2

We are all dead here. How can you demand the death sentence for the accused?

“All these punishments, this long punishment, what a disgrace!”

This is how the defendant expressed himself. Nobody but he heard what he said. So he was sentenced for his silence.

“If you do not deny the facts,” said the prosecutor’s soul, “you hold them to be true.”

The jury assented.

The public applauded the verdict.

To sentence a dead man to death, what madness!

In the kingdom of souls, there will be a soul decapitated, a soul without head.

He was arrested for publishing, about fifteen years ago, a disturbing book, followed by others as embarrassing, which did not help his case. But how can you imprison a soul except by leaving it in its body? Now it was to be delivered: it would become an intolerable void, a body without body, a soul without soul, deaf, unable to speak, without eyes to push back the airy walls of darkness with dawn’s gigantic arms to let the world enter: a trunk with undesirable, humiliated hands and legs. And yet, what inexplicable relief: being anonymous, the triumph of solitude and chance of exile.

He remembers these sentences of Reb Samuel’s: “The soul is a body for the body its absence shelters. Therefore do not expect to find your flesh and bones there or see your blood circulate. Immortality is a breath. It is enveloped by the immortal body. Picture the delicate glass cylinder that protects the wick of my oil lamp. Its

flared emptiness keeps the breath burning. God is the immense breath of the universe. His inhaling is day; His exhaling, night. Cosmic summer and winter! Ardent soul or glacial." Sentences that reminded him of what Reb Zeitoun wrote on the eve of his death, according to his daughter: "The soul is a small patch of sky that brightens and dims along with the soul. Close-knit by mutual desire, our souls form the wide garment of God. O that mine might be the pocket where the Creator puts His book."

"This is why," one of his disciples commented later, "an infinitesimal fraction of our time is all by itself God's morning or evening. Without knowing it we live at the same time in myriads of universes revealed perhaps only in death."

("How many universes lay claim to the same letter! Each of our words is as many times all these universes as it contains letters," said Reb Banoun.)

"Be another, boldly," said Reb Bensiloun. "Thus I shall no longer be."

*

"You wanted to write this book. You made us think you could do it. You have not written a word. You have not made a book," said a writer's soul, called as witness for the prosecution.

The defendant's soul replied: "We never write. There is no book."

"Sacrilege. Are we not writers?" continued the witness's soul. "And you, do you not present yourself as one of us? I have composed many works which continue to be read."

"A writer knows that he writes nothing," the defendant's soul pursued, "that the words he lines up are only fleeting pleasure or distress of words. The game is between them and the writer, in other terms, between nothing and nothing. The book is the death of the book. Each of its sentences describes our death, for the pages of death are but pages of the book."

". . . but we are dead," said the judge's soul.

The second witness for the prosecution was the soul of a Jew that could barely contain its fury.

“You traitor,” it said. “We opened our doors to your Jewish words, and your words were poison. You spoke of God, of the Book, but only to confound and reduce them to dust.

“You said, on the threshold of the book, every human being was Jewish. You dwelled on our suffering, our misfortunes. You called for the Messiah. But only the better to turn away from us, to open larger breaches onto the void, our abyss.

“Now what has become of our groans, our screams?”

“You have written that writers and Jews are one and the same word: a word of exile. What about our faith in God, our hopes? The Book of God is a book of faith. There is no solitude in God. There is no future for Jews in the diaspora except in collective solidarity. Here is our strength. God is within us, and our union consecrates His unity. Even just one of us parting company with his coreligionists, whether in mind or in body, compromises God’s unity.

“You have challenged the book. You have led the question astray. You have multiplied its paths and then let them be covered with sand.

“Faced with insistent interrogation, your book could only be the book of the fleeting moment of questioning where God is but the despair of never having been God.

“So what kind of a Jew are you? To the book of life you oppose the book of death, as if a bed of nettles could win out over our roses.

“You have discredited our sages and rabbis. You parodied their names and put words in their mouths, dead set against them. You struck at God’s heart, wounding Him in His truth and love. God is Total Response. The question is human. We question the divine response to let it permeate us and to transmit it, enriched by our questions, to our descendants—not to sow confusion in their minds.

“What kind of a Jew are you to dispute our roots, a Jew of severance? Your law is the law of your books, whose commandments were dictated by your own death. Death belongs to God, the master of Creation. All creation means conflict with death. You have skewed the rules of the game. You have taken death’s side in order to rise to the level of God Whose trump it is and to overthrow

proudly, at a point where there is no more prelude or end, the Creation. You are obsessed with the void; but is it not in the void that body and soul grow and blossom, like trees and light? You have glorified the void in the name of a final truth to which you sacrificed all others. But does the void not let the world drink? Has its water not quenched all the thirst of the universe? The desert is on the scale of the human infinite; the void—which surrounds the desert—on that of the infinite God. So that there is always one more infinite separating Creator from creature. This infinite, which is the open Book of God, you have tried to fill up with your books. Madman to think even for a moment that you could succeed. The Book of God is written in the ashes of those who only burned for themselves.”

The defendant's soul replied: “What does it mean to be Jewish if not to be the awakening of thought where there is no morning, the anxiety of a step where there is no arrival? What does it mean to be Jewish when our roots are only a book soon left behind? Are you the Jew of yesterday's book or of today's? Would you say you remain the same book? Would you say you remain the same soul?

“Being all words, the Word of God is each time different and, once uttered, no longer belongs to Him. So that there is no Book of God any more than there is a book of man. There is only written or oral confirmation of the void by God or man.

“I said that being Jewish meant taking on all books through an obsession with the unique Book. I said that the death of a Jew was the death of all the words in the book and of all the books in the unfinished Book. I said that the Jew's will to survive lay in his resolve to start the book over again. I said that the Messiah was the ultimate opening of the book, being the vocable defined by this opening. I said that at the farthest, boldest, most daring point of his quest the Jew ceased to be Jewish to the Jews, and that this paradox was one of the keys to Judaism, the promised key to the Book which all books, presuming on this promise, claim to hold. I said that being Jewish meant living these moments of belonging and not-belonging to Judaism and dying with them, alone, and that Jewish solidarity had to pass this cruel test. I said that a writer was a writer only because he was Jewish; that a Jew was a Jew only when, at the end of his reading, he felt himself becoming a writer;

and that there was no way out except to accept this absurd condition which allows them, fused into twin brothers, to walk along the abyss."

"Did you ever hear a sillier speech?" cried the Jew's soul. "If you believe in nothing, why call yourself Jewish?"

"I believe in the book within the destruction of the book, as we can believe in life only within the unfolding of death. I believe in the Nothingness—nothingness makes God tremble—inscribed in its own interruption, that is, into the space occupied by words which surrender only because they desire to escape the Nothing they express.

"And I say that writing is a revolutionary and scrupulously Jewish act, for it consists in taking up the pen where God withdrew from His words, in forever pursuing a utopian project after the example of God, Who was the All of a Text of which nothing is left.

"In the end, all writing embraces the unpronounceability of Yahweh's name. This is the lesson of Judaism.

"To make your name unpronounceable, to be a stranger among strangers, an exile among exiles, to shed your likeness to yourself and others in order finally to embrace divine un-likeness, which condemns all images: day of truth.

"The Creation does not reflect God, but sends us back to nothingness, which is but universal lack of images. This is also the lesson of the second commandment, which inspired the law of the book."

Then the soul of a man renowned for his wisdom asked to speak and did with much bluster:

"Are we going to let this vile soul make fun of us?"

"A writer's soul, it is put to shame by writers.

"A Jew's soul, it is put to shame by Jews.

"An atheist's soul, it is put to shame by agnostics because it uses language to deny any language's reason to be: using writers' discourse against writers, Jewish discourse against Jews, atheistic discourse against atheists and their deep convictions. As if we spoke only in order to destroy ourselves. Diabolical work of sabotage.

"Certainty, he pretends, makes us smaller; thought subordinates us to the word consuming it. God alone does not speak where He speaks; therefore God must be the silence where all words run dry. But then, if God is silence, what is this divine word we hear? If

God is absence, what is this divine book on which we comment? And what is this human destiny that fuses with the silenced words of our books? No destiny for what has never seen the day. No future for what does not exist.

“This soul makes trouble everywhere. It is pernicious. It has fed on carrion, a jackal. Its religion is misery.

“The book remains the book, man remains man, God remains God, the universe remains the universe where Thought blazes in the glory of the Word.”

“And the unthought?” ventured the defendant’s soul as if with a cry. “The opaque, translucent, cursed unthought which saps, abases and depraves us? God is nothing but all solitude unthought.

“Once beheaded I shall have no more thoughts, I shall lose my sight, the sense of smell. I shall become a portion of Nothing. I shall be a wanderer in the infinitely persistent nothing which is also the immobility of death. Not even in your bitterest contempt, your strong good conscience as proprietors of the book and protectors of its place, shall you scrutinize me again in the way natives jealous of their soil have so often stared at the Jews, those eternal expatriates. For you shall never know where I am or even if I am. A stranger, like Yahweh among gods, I shall also be without likeness.”

The Court was all white: walls, ceiling, doors, windows, floor. The judges themselves were white from top to toe, dressed in a white like that of their skin, their hair, their eyes, their mouths, their foreheads, their necks, their hands, their shoes. Likewise jurors, prosecutor, public, ushers, policemen. I do not, however, remember seeing or hearing any lawyers, just as I have still not quite caught what was said. Everything was so white that the sound of the voices became white.

For example, when the prosecutor said to the defendant: "Since you do not deny the facts, you hold them to be true"—and the judges agreed—I thought the defendant said a few words. Unfortunately they were inaudible, perhaps even to him.

Everything is still so white that I am beginning to wonder if this Court was really a Court, if I witnessed a real trial, if all the souls present were real souls. And myself so white, so flat, so smooth, so very white in front of my sheet of white paper, these tens and hundreds of white sheets, myself white paper, become a sheet of standard size.

And in my memory bits of sentences reeling off, whose sense I have barely begun to scratch. For instance, when the defendant's soul claimed that being a Jew meant not being Jewish to the Jews. I was at first shocked by this equivocal statement; then, when I thought about it, it suddenly became luminous: because with, or for, others I am never *me*—I am *the other me*. If I were as strictly and entirely Jewish as I am who I am, if I were all by myself the soul, body, eyes, voice, sense, infinite and limit of the word "Jew," I could not be Jewish for those who claim to be Jews. For it would

mean admitting that I am nothing but them, all of them in each one of them. It would also mean that there is no such thing as *a* Jew, but only *Jews*, that one is Jewish only collectively, never individually, inside and outside the tribe. Can a letter, a word, a symbol be all letters, all words, all symbols, and continue to have its own existence, meaning and necessity? Gathered together, are we only one single being, one single dawn, one single night?

If my name were "Jew" I would obviously not accept that anybody else bear it. Now it is precisely this name which is at stake—which is the stake—in the book of this name.

But how white everything is around me. WHITE. WHITE. WHITE. Can I overcome this whiteness? Can I overcome myself, my white self drowned in all this whiteness?

No closure makes sense in the desert, in the void; no thought, no book which means closure of thought.

To speak of the book of the desert is as absurd as to speak of the book of nothing.

And yet, on this nothing I have built my books.

Sand, sand, sand to the infinite.

If there is a book of death, it can only be the death—put into words, as a city might be put to sack, O double sacrifice—of the book.

At these undetermined limits of the mind, at this ravaged, but uncrossable border, resemblance sees its power unmasked.

Here language fails.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edmond Jabès was born in Cairo. He left Egypt during the Suez crisis of 1956 and has lived in Paris since then. He is regarded as one of France's most important contemporary writers. His awards include the Prix des Critiques (1970), the Prize for Arts, Letters and Science of the Foundation of French Judaism (1982), the Grand Prix National de Poésie (1987), and the Italian Pasolini and Cittadella prizes (1983 and 1987). Wesleyan University Press has published in English the author's *The Book of Questions* (seven volumes) and *The Book of Dialogue*.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Rosmarie Waldrop's most recent books of poetry are *The Reproduction of Profiles* and *Streets Enough to Welcome Snow*. She has also written a novel, *The Hanky of Pippin's Daughter*. Her translations of Jabès have received a Columbia University Translation Center award.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Book of Resemblances was composed on the Mergenthaler Linotron 202 in Caledonia, a typeface designed for Linotype in 1939 by W. A. Dwiggins, who named it Caledonia because of its derivation from the nineteenth-century typeface known as Scotch. The typesetter was Brevis Press of Bethany, Connecticut. The design is by Kachergis Book Design of Pittsboro, North Carolina.

Other Wesleyan Books
by Edmond Jabès
Rosmarie Waldrop, *translator*

The Book of Questions

“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, *New York Review of Books*

The Book of Questions (Volume I)

ISBN 0-8195-6043-X Paper, \$10.95

The Book of Yukel, Return to the Book (Volumes II and III)

ISBN 0-8195-5011-6 Cloth, \$26.00

ISBN 0-8195-6049-9 Paper, \$10.95

Yaël, Elya, Aely (Volumes IV, V, and VI)

ISBN 0-8195-5086-8 Cloth, \$26.00

ISBN 0-8195-6103-7 Paper, \$10.95

El, or the Last Book (Volume VII)

ISBN 0-8195-5109-0 Cloth, \$26.00

ISBN 0-8195-6107-X Paper, \$10.95

Set of 7 works above, in 4 volumes

ISBN 0-8195-6108-8 Paper, \$40.00

The Book of Dialogue

“*The Book of Dialogue* is a process, at once frustrating in its endlessness and joyful in its plentitude, and its trajectory is that of the boomerang—or a bullet shot straight to the end of a circular universe . . . Even if the ultimate dialogue ‘does not take place,’ to read it is no anticlimax—the more so because the entire book teems with dialogue, with exchange.” —BRUCE KAWIN,

American Book Review

ISBN 0-8195-5147-3 Cloth, \$18.95

ISBN 0-8195-6209-2 Paper, \$10.95

“Jabès occupies the front row of modernity. He *listens* to language in such a full way that all its chords resonate.”

—CLAUDE ROYET-JOURNOUD, *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*

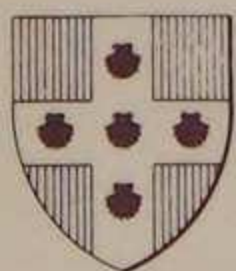
“As cathedral walls must disappear into glass to show the absence they frame, the work of Jabès has risen from solid foundations to a diaphanous height. . . . there is a resonance of pure speech formed by all the echoes of *Resemblance*.”

—JEAN ROUDAUT, *Le Quotidien de Paris*



Edmond Jabès

Photo by Bernard Carrère



WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS
Published by University Press of New England
Hanover and London

Printed in U.S.A.

Cover design by Kachergis Book Design

ISBN 0-8195-5232-1 CL

