

MY ITINERARY

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Paris

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

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

Was this mad?

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

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

Unless we put the question differently.

What is a writer? What is a Jew?

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

I have always held that the right approach to Judaism was above all ingenuous.

We enter a book without being seriously prepared for it. In the course of reading, we take it on ourselves.

Thus the Jew opens his forgotten book. Oblivion is at the root of his gesture.

Every word, however, every letter, makes him recall previous readings, just as every place revisited confronts us with our past.

This familiarity with the text is grounds for suspicion.

A place is never the same. Things we had not noticed on the first visit emerge from our oversight and shake what confidence we had in our eyes.

A word does not repeat itself; it does not repeat what it said before. It says something more every time because it is alive. The book is alive. Only death can interrupt the reading.

Here begins the questioning. Here, intelligence recovers its basic rights. We must first know where we are and what we are doing there; then we can show proof of our passage.

Any commentary on the book is a commentary on the desert where we are stranded.

Truth is the stake of all invention. A text is a wing spread in the wind. We follow its rhythm with our eyes and decipher its shadow on the sand.

What counts is our will to read. Our job comes from the idea that we have been chosen to perpetuate the book; our distress, from learning that we can never circumscribe it.

Judaism is a clash of readings. All of them wrong. All of them right insofar as they are personal. Some are exemplary, yet cannot be used as examples because they would risk weighing down our own. They challenge us to match their ambition.

Interpretation of the Book for a book of interpretations. The work does not impede movement. It is the very movement of its flow.

An infinite which ends in an infinite being born.

And God? Ah, for man, God is perhaps the vertigo of the fatal breach between them, which the book imperfectly fills.

It is true, the word "Jew," the word "God," are metaphors for me: "God," the metaphor for the void, "Jew," for the torment of God, of the void. In parallel, I also try to close in as much as possible on the historical sense of these words; "Jew" and "God," joined in one and the same becoming. Do creature and creator not prepare, together, the coming of a new world order?

Yet, if God shocks our mind, it is because the mind, conscious of its immense creative power, cannot conceive of a superior, highly inventive power on which it would be dependent. It would seem an inversion of roles, since man has invented God only in order to hoist his thought to the unthinkable and to push ever farther the scope of his power. The mind, by definition, cannot accept what would limit its creation. Humility is not in the domain of the mind, but of the heart.

The Jew stands at the center of this dizzying paradox: by inventing God he invented himself, so true it is that "to choose is to be chosen." God is the choice of the Jew, and the Jew that of God. The

Jew cannot help being faithful to this choice, if only because the

historical circumstances have not allowed him to dodge it, that is to say, to stop being Jewish.

Whether God exists or not is, in fact, not the essential question. It is first of all to himself—and our tradition has always insisted on the importance of free will—that the Jew must answer for the fate of the values he has pledged to spread.

Approaching it on this level, we find what I would call “Judaism after God.”

I am aware how arbitrary, how insupportable, the use of the word “Judaism” in the expression “Judaism after God” may seem to some—though a number of rabbis, and true ones, have not taken the least offense. I am obviously thinking of conformist Jews. I have never intended either to shock or to join them. For my part, however, I think I must understand our tradition, if possible, in its most original and daring aspects. Inasmuch as I have never been satisfied with any positive answer I have perhaps joined our tradition without really trying. Is it not itself in constant flux? All schisms have survived in the Jewish world, and since the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus there has not been any supreme religious authority. The Law remains, but all reference to the Talmud and its great commentators is a personal affair.

For all that, I have never considered myself a Jewish writer. I am—I have often insisted—a Jew and a writer, which is not at all the same thing.

To come back to “Judaism after God,” to the values the Jew has chosen to vouch for: I can specify that, for me, these are mainly the freedom to question Judaism without ceasing to be Jewish. To my knowledge, this freedom of the Jew is exceptional. It has become my obsession.

Jewish stubbornness, too, fascinates me: in defining his identity, in trying indefatigably to circumscribe his behavior, to respect an order of things through questioning, to understand before judging, to safeguard openness.

But openness is, above all, a breach.

A breach which is God’s doing, as He chose to be absent and mute. To rediscover the divine utterance means passing through this breach. And the implacable questioning to which we submit this utterance can only take place within the breach through which it acquires its true freedom and deep meaning.

Truth always beckons at the end of questioning, on the other bank, beyond the last horizon. To go towards truth: this is the Jew's essential preoccupation.

But what truth could resist such questioning? Unless it is to the very movement of the question that this fragmentary, always more remote truth gradually surrenders. Glimmers of truth where God abdicates.

This wager, so far accepted, which has taken all rest from the Jew, is his salvation. Jewish solidarity is conscious solitude. It is formed of all the individual solitudes together.

Fracture lies at the heart of my books "as the stone in the fruit." I shall push the metaphor farther by saying that from this stone will grow other fruit and other trees. . . .

Likewise with questioning, which can only develop out of a breach. A question has its virginity, as does the fruit cut from the tree. This is also why any one question is independent of the others—every fruit has its chance—while nevertheless sharing their common destiny.

The Jew is always "the other," "other" even to himself. If he is "the other," it is because, while trying at all costs to be himself, he is always *in addition* a being from nowhere. Herein lies his difference and the distance he keeps.

I would even say that this *addition*—which is, in fact, *subtraction*: a void to be filled—is his only difference. This lack is the source of his questioning.

It is also the reason why he cannot stop with simple appearances. In his eyes, those are never more than a stage. He seems to have a second kind of sight which over-dilates his visual field and supports the idea that behind our reality there is another reality still more tangible. By this ever unsatisfied look, one Jew recognizes another.

Dissatisfaction is one of the roots of the Jew's questions. For him, all suffering is lived suffering. He carries the weight of his history whether he knows it or not. I would even say: he carries the weight of History. We can only ask ourselves if questioning would have any sense without anxiety. There is something horrible about observing suffering and also about saying that it has its positive side. But what would the Jew have left if he could not at least hope that his history, his suffering, his anxiety would turn out to have been a ferment, an exemplary experience which each must turn to account? To remain a

moment with this experience, it is there to rouse a consciousness in danger of falling asleep. Our whole Western culture is at stake. Any questioning which avoids Auschwitz, for example, passes by the essential.

Auschwitz has radically changed our way of seeing. What had been unthinkable before is not so much the degree of cruelty, but rather the almost total indifference of the German as well as the Allied populations, which made Auschwitz possible. This indifference continues to defy any previous notion of what is human. Auschwitz has considerably aggravated the feeling of solitude which all beings have. Today all trust is lined with a consuming distrust. We know it is unreasonable to expect anything from another. We still have hope even so, but it has a buried quality which keeps reminding us that the thread is broken.

To want—even at the cost of his life—to be *other*: is this not, *a priori*, a foolish provocation? All the more because it would be difficult immediately to integrate and accept this “other” as such.

Yet if the Jew is bent on being acknowledged in his difference—hence as the *other*—it is above all because he sees it as a fundamental progress, and not only for himself, as a victory over the innate intolerance of the ego.

This indispensable stage is, I believe, one of the “missions” of Judaism. How could even an atheist help accepting it?

I do not, for my part, refuse assimilation. On the contrary. I only believe that any assimilation which does not take the difference into account is an imposture. There are commonplaces we must not be afraid to repeat: we can grow richer only through the effort to join the “other.”

But perhaps it is more complicated. The problem is always total. We think we have convinced “the other” on a precise point of our relation to an individual or group, and we notice with resentment that his general attitude has not budged. Our relation to “the other” has remained unshaken as a whole. Therefore I think that the effort to convince is utopian. Instead, we must get “the other” accepted in his strangeness, in his sovereign difference.

I am not taking the word “assimilation” in its philosophical sense. I want to propose an assimilation analogous to a conglomerate of minerals: a mass of stones set in the same cement.

In any case, assimilation is unavoidable. Could we be Jews in the Diaspora today and scorn the Western heritage? Is assimilation not also a means for rethinking our identity in comparison with the surrounding culture?

It is my inability to be "a peaceable Jew," appeased and anchored in his certainties, that has made me the Jew I think I am. It may seem paradoxical, but it is no doubt precisely in my being cut off—in this not-belonging which seeks to belong—that I am most Jewish.

It would have wonderfully simplified things to be Jewish without making it a problem. But you would rightly tell me that this is another utopia. The Jewish tradition has always questioned the texts. It has never cast doubt on belonging. Perhaps I have started out from the question: "what is this belonging?"

Thus I am investigating, at the same time, the question, the why of the question—and why I myself came to question this question.

I think this question underlies all traditional Jewish questioning without having been tackled openly. As if tackling it could void the questioning. But it has seemed to me, for several reasons, that we need to integrate it into the age-long Jewish interrogation, that here is a perilous path, certainly subversive, but vital to explore.

I have never tried to rethink the problem of Judaism—I am far from such pretension—nor to draw from it any philosophical lesson. Only, not to face this question, at the point I had reached in my life and thinking, would have meant giving up.

Having, on the other hand, made the Jew into the archetypal stranger—on the same grounds as the writer and any other creator—the word "Jew" that I had appropriated turned me into the stranger of strangers; and it is here that I acknowledge a certain Jewish vocation, but grown in an unusable direction as it could not be adopted by a community.

It seems to me that Judaism, because of its search through the most daring speculations, has always encouraged such excesses as long as they were recorded. Is there not, for instance, in the seventeenth century, the spectacular case on the border of charlatanry, the case of Sabbatai Zevi, who converted to Islam? Following him, many Jews embraced this religion, convinced they were in no way betraying their own.

With this extreme example, I only want to underline the unwavering will of a people avid to know how far it could go and still be itself.

Utopian messianism contains the names of many an inspired man, followed to some degree by distressed believers reading in his message an end to their misery.

Distress, faith, untiring search for truth: these are the century-old characteristics of a persecuted community true to the image that fixed its fate.

I think that true hope, hope that moves us deeply, is always tied to an answer in parenthesis. It is asking much of our neighbor to hope that he will learn to find his dignity in the imbalance of the question rather than in an answer which freezes him and us in rigid positions.

The affirmation "I am Jewish" is already a regression, a stop, a way of falling asleep in this condition.

This may seem excessive, even a challenge. For me, Judaism resides precisely in this challenge. At the bottom of the quest for identity, which Jewish questioning is, there must be doubt and devouring uncertainty. Without them, there would be no questioning because identity follows from choice. It is, roughly, what we choose to be. It is the idea we gradually form of ourselves. Even so, we must distinguish between an identity which is, at best, acceptance of its origins, and one which, in the course of experience, reflection and contact with others, ends up sticking to our skin. We all suffer from a lack of identity which we desperately try to fill in. But it really resides in this despair.

Perhaps exodus and exile were needed so that the word cut off from all words—hence face to face with silence—could acquire its true dimension. Word where nothing speaks any more and which, in order to be totally free, becomes deeply ours; just as we are truly ourselves only in our most arid solitude.

We have not thought deeply enough about sand, the essential metaphor in Genesis. It is only in the desert, in the dust of our words, that the divine word could be revealed. Naked, transparent word which we have to find again, each time, to hope to speak. Displacement creates deserts.

If it is true that the condition of exile has never been experienced over so long a period nor been pushed to such extremes, both individually and collectively, then the Jewish condition in its epitome is certainly an exemplary symbol. Many an uprooted person could on some ground or other claim to be "Jewish," even though this name remains tied to a specific, uncommon past which has marked a whole people in their flesh and thought.

Questioning means breaking apart, means pitching *inside* against *outside*, and dwelling now in one, now in the other. In an *outside* which, in relation to the inside, is the recoil, the space to back up, the pre-prelude, the first threshold necessary for the question; neutral space where neutrality has no value.

For is the Talmud not, above all, the book of exile, being only interrogation? No doubt there would be much to add here. Since Moses, the Jew has claimed the privilege of facing God directly, without intermediary, not even Moses, between him and his Lord.

We have become so familiar with God that we do not hesitate to solicit His answer to our most ordinary problems. This is why commentary is mainly personal. God has spoken. We cannot establish relations with God except through His word which we examine and explain only to push the questioning farther, only to convince ourselves that we have understood it before we even consider ways of replying.

Does our commentary not force God to speak even in his silence or, rather, to let His word resonate in such a way that the dialogue is never interrupted? Thus we see how deeply the Jew is bound to the text and that his commentary is creation.

It is this kind of relation to the text that the fake—true—rabbis of my books have. Hence it is only in appearance that they are fictions.

In this context, it is interesting that the Jews continue to claim Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as their ancestors rather than Moses, the only one who really spoke with God. What does Moses announce on coming down from Sinai? That God is invisible and that His word is our only possible connection with Him. The covenant with God goes therefore necessarily through this Word. Answering to—and for—this Word is henceforward the mark of Jewish identity. True, Moses is the mediator, but only that. The Jew remains alone with the divine text. He always faces this text.

Here, it seems to me, is an enormous distance from what will become Christianity. Hence free will, hence the daring which entitles the Jew to call on God directly in every word, hence the appeal to understanding, hence also tolerance which follows from it and accepts error as long as it comes out of a sincere and authentic approach to the book. Everything happens as if tradition had confidence in man and

the error were only momentary, a tolerated step towards true comprehension. Perhaps even a step planned in. The Jew's seeming irreverence toward the divine text is the very sign of his attachment to the Word of God.

In what for others is perhaps simple religious exegesis, I am charmed by the double lesson we might draw from it:

Whether it is the Bible or secular works, man is alone with the text.

We have no other reality beside that which the books give us.

This also is one of the ways of Judaism.

And it is mine with the works I love and which attract me only when they are disturbing. I can show my attachment to their authors only through the texts which evidently have disturbed them also. This is, for me, the ideal closeness: to find one's respondent at the other end of the same questioning.

Any question is bound to becoming. Yesterday questions tomorrow, as tomorrow questions yesterday in the name of the always open future.

Our famous "who am I?" is justified only in a universal questioning of which we are but the persistent echo.

Questioning is violent by definition because it provokes the violence of the reply and in turn violates it.

I have written somewhere: "Truth must needs be violent"—because it always rises up against a truth as believable and likely to dethrone it.

Truth is not the opposite of lie, but of another truth.

To be cured of answers means perhaps no longer to expect anything from them except that they step down in favor of questions.

Questioning means, in fact, refusing the end.

Can balance be found in the question, in series of questions?

The question causes a void around it. In this void I try to stand. Can we still speak of balance? Balance would mean accepting the fall.

The Jew has always been at the root of a double questioning: his own and that of *the other*. True, he can in no way avoid them. Since he can hardly stop being Jewish, he is forced to ask the question of his identity. Hence he must immediately face the discourse of *the other*, and often his own life depends on it.

Perhaps this is what is specifically Jewish. Hence the openness of Jewish questioning, the universal relevance it often has.

It is in this context that I have written: the Jew has “himself become question.”

Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop