

BLACK AND WHITE

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In *De Migrationi Abrahami*, Filone explains how Jew signifies migrant. Abraham is *the* Jew inasmuch as his is the perfect prototype of every migration. God said to Abraham: go out from your land, go out from your people, go out from the house of your father. He promised Abraham a happy land and a blessed descent, but to Abraham it was not given in any way to foresee which ways he might reach them. The commandment that is given to him is this, purely and remarkably: go out. If the weakest of roots still held him back, if there were also a puff of nostalgia in leaving Ur of the Chaldees, he could not go *ahead of* the Omnipotent (Gen. 17:1), as though pushed by His voice. He has his sight perfectly directed in front of himself, turned to the Open, to the Free like that of Rilke's animal. To the Voice he can reply only "behold me!" like the animal at the Order of creation. But, in overwhelming difference from the animal (and from the Angel, "bird of the soul"), that Voice, that Order calls him not to stay, not to take up abode or home, but to *go out* from everything: from the land of his fathers, from the "smile" of his son, from himself. He belongs to absence.

In Jabès as well the premise has the name of "migration." Every gesture, every sign, all that of which signs are a continuous reevaluation, presupposes distance, a radical distance from *identity*: identity of the self with one's earth-mother, with one's own language, with oneself. To migrate from the land of the Chaldees is to take leave forever from every possible deification of the world; to migrate from the mother tongue means to render the mind a stranger from every idea of the omnipotence of the word, from every illusion that the word can know perfectly, that the word can un-veil (and not just re-veal, that is, to veil *again*) from every *Babelic* conjecture; to migrate from oneself, after all, apex of the migration, a means to *despair* of one's very self,

to remember one's own *oudenía* (as Filone calls it), to make emptiness in oneself so that that call can resound and be corresponded with only "behold me!" The migrant must have no "property"; he who "possesses" is not *free* to migrate. A radical dispossession of himself (so must Filone's *oudenía* be understood), an irrevocable aperture to the *free* (free the grace of the calling; free, that is, awaiting nothing, requiring nothing, the "reply" of Abraham) constitutes the paradoxical word of the migrant. Called by absence, he *cuts himself off* from the idols of the fatherland, from the language, from Self: the highest idols, essence of every idolatry.

But Jabès is *not* a Jewish writer: "I have never considered myself a Jewish writer. I am Jewish and a writer, which is not at all the same thing." Not only is it not "the same thing"—a great deal more; on the contrary here it is a break, here the authentic, extreme migration is taking place—that of the written, of the writing itself from the being-Jewish.

Filone's writing was not migrating; it interpreted the migration, but in this very interpreting it also inhabited it. The migration constituted the sojourn of the writing. Here instead the writing migrates together with the migration of the being-Jewish: in this condition or form of being it accompanies, over a road of its own, the migration of the writing. But that has a decisive consequence: that the writing can not further pretend to be interpretation. Since it *was* in migration (coincidence of writing and being-Jewish), the writing was able to interpret it. Thus it is with Filone. But if the writing migrates from the being-Jewish, no writing will be able any more to affirm the essence of it. It was exactly the identity of the writing and the being-Jewish that permitted Filone (just as with the whole tradition that remains faithful to it) to speak of him who is *heir* to divine things. *Quis heres?* He who will go out from you, he will be your heir; he whom no land, no language, no son will be able to hold. Heir is he who transcends himself. But the writing here *says* that the errant and wandering soul will be able to inherit. And the term heir (*kléro-nomos*) refers to *Nomos*, not to *Charis*. In the writing (exactly here, in this system of signs), the migrant positively affirms that which will save it making it heir. In the writing one recomposes an identification that the migration seemed to have completely dissolved: the identification, exactly, between this writing and the being-Jewish. And such identification permits us to reply to "*quis heres?*"

Certainly the heir also migrates. Being an heir does not save one from the migration—and therefore from the desert. But the desert, for

the heir, is *symbol*: symbol of that absence that yet calls positively and which *in the writing* it is possible to interpret, and once interpreted we discover that it (the absence) has there elected its heirs. Another thing entirely is the desert of one who has made the writing migrate from the being-Jewish, of one who has carried the migration so *deeply* as not to be able to conceive any more his own writing in the sign of any identification whatsoever with its being there, and, consequently, so as not to be able to see in it an interpretation of such a being.

Jabès's "book" is not that of the interpreting sign. His desert is not that of exegesis, that covered by exegesis. Nevertheless, exactly in that respect he still "pertains" to the descent of Abraham, to the descent of migrating. The last gesture, in fact, of such a descent is not otherwise conceivable except from the certainty of the tradition which would renew itself in writing. The writing which declared us heirs permitted us to undertake the same migration. In perennial migration writing defined the sacred dimension of tradition (it defined it precisely by unwearyingly renewing its interpretation). Jabès's writing instead completes the "history" of the interpretation; its completion is the *dis-location* of the writing with respect to that being there that it had always tried to say, with which it had always tried to squeeze out an extreme, desperate identification.

That happens of necessity; Jabès's "completion" is not comprehensible without reflecting more radically on the figure of Abraham. In order to detach himself from everything, in order to concentrate on his being-migrant, Abraham must not have memory. But he establishes the itinerary of a people that will have to repeat with hammering insistence precisely that "remember!"—as if the Voice which pulls away from everything established the necessity of memory. That "go out!" which resounds to the origin expresses itself and multiplies across the infinite echoes of memory. The tradition (the memory) represents itself, in fact, if one looks closely, precisely as perennial memory—exegesis of the *decisive* moments of the People—of those moments, in other words, in which it has been called to take to the road again, to renew the very name of migrant, to "return" to one's own exodus. But it signifies that that perfect abandonment, that perfect farewell which does not leave a trace—Abraham's farewell to Ur of the Chaldees—that parting so established as to confound itself with the most perfect forgetting has value only at the origin, is pure origin, unattainable by names, by signs, by words. Origin is forgetting. The tradition—unthinkable without that origin—is, instead, memory. If something of this memory is in fact akin to its origin, it is not the Words

and the interpretations in whose net it is woven, but its emptinesses, the long periods of silence, the pauses of its discourse.

To this paradox it seems to me that Jabès's writing returns inexhaustibly. The perfect migration would be the Forgetting, which is conceded to no sign of man, since it is not permitted to reach the Origin again, that Open which nothing delimits or holds back and which seems—for an instant—to resound in the "behold me!" of Abraham. Our translation can be but a betraying. But if we believe that this "work" constitutes the authentic interpretation of the Origin, if we remember that our signs can fully signify it, that we are its true *heirs* through these signs, then we do not abandon every land and language and identity, but we abandon the migration itself, since we make a new house or roots out of it. Thus our writing is constrained to remember—and thus, in having to remember, it knows how to dislocate the Origin (its own Origin), it knows not to intend it otherwise than in the form of its dis-location. The Origin: the being-Jewish; the writing: its dis-locating itself, its expressing itself in the forms of memory, its necessary mutual intention through the signs of man.

In the desert through which he travels, his saying and understanding cannot be but a *mutual* (mis)-understanding. The intention itself "goes away" from the original sense, and only through this also remembers it (since the Origin is perfect migration, that *rising* so calm in itself and open-turned-again to the Free which stands in front of it, so as not to remember anything, so as not to have premise). The sign which occurs in the desert of the migration cannot therefore possess the Origin, cannot be symbolically bound there. Writing must not make itself an image of Origin. Jabès affirms this by saying that the book must not be written in the image of the Book ("You will not write a book in the image of the Book because I am only the Book"). The book which defines itself as perfect exegesis of being-migrant, the book which pretends itself identical to the being there, the book, in other words, which *stays* in the migration, "in symbol" with it, does it not appear, to be exact, as the quintessence of that idolatrous temptation that consists of making out of the book an image of the Book? Here the distance of Jabès's writing from that tradition that has in Filone's exegesis its unattainable archetype. The writing of Jabès renounces not only every symbolic value, but likewise every allegory. The desert does not stand for something else, has no value by virtue of signifying something other than itself. It is precisely *this* sign, pure and naked, never simple metaphor. It gives itself, has happened; it is exactly *this* place where every migration is set forth, where every

identity breaks up. It is its own greatest *evidence*, where nothing can in a stable manner “pitch camp,” and words lose the idolatrous faith in their own power, since here there is no “thing” on which to be able to act. The desert teaches one to be oneself, that is, *different* (as Jabès says *à propos* of his rapport with Max Jacob).

Jabès’s writing is utterly distant from the “mystical” to which we are accustomed, which is a writing that proceeds through sighs, desires, returns, by means of the profound emotionalism of allusion. Jabès sets word to word, proposition to proposition; his sonority is mono-tone: “watch the word live” detached from the phrase; he makes a desert around each; he distends an interminable, blinding white between note and note. Thus footsteps must sound in the desert when the exodus would not be the exegesis that fulfills the heir. Every word is a brief pause, an imperceptible interval, a brief strip of earth. It “binds” us, certainly, but it itself is “bound” to the vast silence that embraces it. More than expressing and saying, it listens to this silence. Is a word-that-is-listening conceivable? Is a speaking which comes about through listening conceivable? Or, in order to be able to listen truly, does not the impotence of the not-speaking always remain with us? In order to reach the force of the listening must we renounce the life of the word?

Far from the form of the exegesis as from the sigh, and far from the allusive which makes of the word a simple pretext or an obstacle to be removed in a dimension which is finally apophatic (opposite and complementary to the Babelic), the writing of Jabès is sign of these questions; it continually remembers and develops them. It does not know the power of the response. Indeed, it flees from it. Memory does not reassure us with the “history” of responses, but “saves” in us the interrogation itself. Tradition is the tradition of the interrogation. Every word is interrogation and therefore none can respond to another; every word is alone; every phrase, every sheet is alone. And this is exactly what renders them reciprocally participants, what gathers them in a “book.” The “book” is interminable, since no response can write the end of it. And exactly this aspect (that its signs cannot explain, interpret the migration—if they could, the book would end up by making itself an image of the Book) renders it a participant in the exodus.

The book cannot have the light of the perfect exegesis, nor must it resolve itself into a sign of and through the silence. The writing which—without returns, without deluding itself about responses—sets with patience and *pietas* interrogation to interrogation, word to

word (those words which, across astronomical distances, "constellate the night of the thought"), *subverts* with the "black sun" of the word the white of the page, and with the "glacial white" of the page the word which believes that it can "camp" there. The "margins" which embrace every "black" of the writing narrate, with their silence, of the restless, unappeasable heart. But, at the same time, that word, that "black" instant that interrupts and pierces the white of the page (that point which the desert crosses), obstructs every fascination: fascination would be to conceive of the desert as a new dwelling, or as perfect quiet, or as a symbol full of the Origin, which is Oblivion. Thus black and white relate to each other, reciprocally "subverting each other" in the enquiry: neither is the last horizon of the other. They reciprocally imply each other and send each other to the end. The premise of both remains unattainable: the migration which coincides with the Origin as aperture-spring, as pure form of happening.

Jabès's game of black-white is similar to the Rosenzweigian logic of the "and." Jabès's book lives in a dimension absolutely foreign to the "terrible little word" "is" (Rosenzweig). It is entirely other-than-to-be (Lévinas). Thus the black of the writing does not say what thing the white *is*, nor does the white express the true essence of the black. An "and" merely joins them. But the "and" joins, only demonstrating the distance. The "and," the creature misery and *measure* of the "and," divides-unites one word to the other, one footstep to the other. We have not been given One, but neither has it been given to appease us in the inhospitable self-affirmation that every word and every footstep always attempts to fulfill. The "and" unites their separation. *The* word of Jabès's writing seems to me to be this: the soul which does not pretend to say what it *is* which is being dwelled upon, nor to connect it in effect with anything else, much less to identify it by means of something else.

The "and" *begs* a noun to address itself to another, begs a face to reflect another.

Tradition is not throughout Jabès a golden chain that binds interpretation to interpretation and response to response, but the uninterrupted risk of the innumerable "ands" which have happened during the migration, in the time which is completely decision-instant of the migration. The "is" dominates tradition as memory of responses; the "and" looks at tradition as memory of questions. The "is" conceives the question as an enemy to be overcome, the "and" as a continuous catastrophe to be "saved."

In the "and" between two things, two nouns, two faces, occurs

the most remote of proximities. Thus a great writer *and* Jew of the twentieth century called her God: Else Lasker-Schüler. The most remote of the proximities is also for Jabès the silence of the Word of God. This Silence does not love silence (it does not love the fact that we make images out of it), it loves the inexhaustible game of black and white, the language of the “and.” Such language holds *to its heart* its infinite distance.

Translated by Roberta Payne