Saying Celan In Silence

Frank Garrett

After the death of Paul Celan, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commissioned Edmond Jabès to write a memorial work for him. What resulted was a brief essay of sorts entitled, "The Memory of Words: How I Read Paul Celan." Immediately, within the very first sentence, we confront the conundrum of the written word passing as a kind of speech: "I have never spoken of Paul Celan."[1] Yet this printed sentence serves as a forward, a pre-word, to the speaking (and writing) that is to follow: Jabès' text presents itself both as a saying and as a writing. In and through the subsequent *written words*, Jabès *will speak* of Paul Celan—at least that is the assumption and perhaps even his intention—and propose that his own inability to read German, to read Celan in German, to read him "*dans sa langue*," might be one of the reasons he has never spoken (publicly) of his friend. Perhaps language itself—specifically, the language of his friend—has prevented Jabès from speaking about him, even in Jabès' own language. As the question marks make clear, not even Jabès is certain as to the reasons for his erstwhile reticence and reserve.

An absence of written words multiplies and amplifies the absence of prior spoken words on Celan: Jabès continues, "I have never written anything on Paul Celan."[2] The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* has tempted Jabès both to speak (as writing) and to write of, about, and upon Celan. However, it is not merely the request of the German newspaper that tempts Jabès but the fact that he would be speaking and writing on Celan *for German readers*, those readers who presumably already read Celan in Celan's own language, yet, for the first time, would be reading Jabès' own hesitant first words, translated into German, on Celan.

What is the nature of Jabès' relationship to Celan? What is it that gives Jabès authority to speak and to write of Celan in the first place? Why would anyone, especially the editors of a German newspaper, tempt a French-language poet to write words *in memoriam* of a German-language poet for German readers? Jabès attempts his own cursory explanation: "I love the man who was my friend."[3] Yet to what do the two times, the two verb tenses employed within this seemingly straightforward statement, speak? The friend who is no more already and yet still disrupts chronology: Jabès (still) loves the friend who is at present not there. But there is more than love and friendship that links them: both a difference and a sameness join together the two poets and their work. Their books, in their differences, bind Jabès to Celan;[4] also, "the same questioning," "the same wounded word," unite them.[5] *Une parole blessée* ruptures the questioning and speaking that has taken place between the poets

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[1] "*Je n'ai jamais parlé de Paul Celan*." Edmond Jabès, *La memoire des mots: Comment je lis Paul Celan* (Paris: Fourbis, 1990), 9. All translations from the French are mine, though I remain indebted to both the German and (prior) English translations: Edmond Jabès, *Worterinnerung: Wie ich Paul Celan lese*, trans. Elias Torra, in *La memoire des mots: Comment je lis Paul Celan* (Paris: Fourbis, 1990), 23-39; and Edmond Jabès, "The Memory of Words," trans. Pierre Joris, in *Paul Celan: Selections*, ed. Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 217-223.

[2] "*Je n'ai jamais rien écrit sur Paul Celan.*" Ibid., 10.

[3] "*J'aime l'homme qui fut mon ami.*" Ibid., 9.

[4] "*Et, dans leurs différences, nos livres se rejoignent.*" Ibid.

[5] "*Une même interrogation nous lie, une même parole blessée.*" Ibid.

and continues to disrupt the time(s) of that questioning and speaking. Likewise, differences interrupt the sameness of the speech, and yet their differences are what sustain and uphold their friendship. Such amity, Jabès seems to be saying, cannot be founded upon a pure hegemonic sameness, within a unitary totality. Instead, friendship, like language, requires a heterological foundation. The poets, like their books, meet in that space open to difference.

In taking the risk to speak and to write, for the first time, on Paul Celan, Jabès directs his own language toward the place opened by Celan's German.[6] The chance, the opportunity to write, then, on Celan for German readers has convinced Jabès to agree to write in the first place. The circularity of this logic is never fully unraveled or resolved in Jabès' text. There are other disruptions—of logic, of time, of identity—as well. His assent, for example, to write for the publicly available *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is achieved *as if* in private, *as if* he had somehow been able to choose to assent on his own, of his own volition, "as one says 'yes' to oneself in silence or solitude." Such resolve, however, does not seem to be the case. Celan's absence calls for Jabès' words, not to merely represent Celan textually, literarily, or biographically, but rather to attempt to speak the silence of Celan's own (silenced) voice, to reveal the absence of the speaker through the voice of the poet's own words.

The space Celan's language opens for Jabès (and toward which Jabès destines his writing) is not simply empty as such; instead, emptiness fills,[7] as it were, this space at "the very heart of language."[8] There are, of course, several ways to understand Jabès' employment of *emptiness* here. A void, a lacuna of language, exists between the two poets in that Celan's German was never the medium through which Jabès spoke to Celan, never the medium through which Jabès read and understood Celan's poetry. The emptiness perhaps recalls the empty chair (or the emptiness itself) left after Celan's death, about which Jabès eloquently writes in "*Souvenir de Paul Celan*" in *The Book of Margins*:

> *Ce jour-là. Le dernier. Paul Celan chez moi. Assis à cette place que mes yeux, en cet instant, fixent longuement.*
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> *Paroles, dans la proximité, échangées. Sa voix? Douce, la plupart du temps. Et, cependant, ce n'est pas elle, aujourd'hui, que j'entends mais le silence. Ce n'est pas lui que je vois mais le vide, peut-être parce que, ce jour-là, nous avions l'un et l'autre, sans le savoir, fait le tour cruel de nous-mêmes.*[9]
>
> That day. The last. Paul Celan at my house. Sitting in this chair at which my eyes, in this moment, stare.
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> Words, with closeness, shared. His voice? Mild, most of the time. And yet it is not him I hear today but the silence. It is not him I see but the emptiness, perhaps because that day, we both unwittingly had played a cruel, selfish trick on ourselves.

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[6] "*Ecrire, pour la première fois, sur Paul Celan et donner, pour lieu de destination, à mon texte, le lieu ouvert par sa langue, par sa propre parole, m'a poussé à dire «oui» — mais comme on dit «oui» à soi-même, dans le silence ou dans la solitude. En pensant, cependant, à l'ami disparu.*" Ibid., 10.

[7] "*La place est vide quand le vide occupe toute la place.*" Ibid., 11.

[8] "*Et comme si, pour la première fois, en toute sérénité, je l'accompagnais là où nous n'avions jamais pénétré ensemble, au cœur même de la langue avec laquelle il s'est tant débattu et qui n'est pas celle avec laquelle nous nous parlions.*" Ibid., 10.

[9] Edmond Jabès, "*Souvenir de Paul Celan*," in *Le Livre des marges* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1984), 157.

The emptiness, made even more concrete, more palpable, with the mention of the chair, the place, the spot made vacant by Celan's absence, functions as that which remains—the keepsake, the *souvenir* itself—of Paul Celan. This brief recollection achieves its own memorial function as it also prepares the space for the revenant, the return, the *to-come* (qua *venir*) of Celan, as he who (or whose absence) haunts Jabès' text.

The abyss left where Celan once existed cannot replace the poet; Jabès cannot simply utilize that fissure in space and time as a present reality that takes the place of his absent friend. Jabès continues to account for Celan's absence, asking, "To whom to speak when the other is no more?"[10] As if by way of a possible response to this unanswerable question, Jabès offers a meditation upon translation. Only the subsequent few lines reveal any "substantial" biographical information about either Celan or Jabès: Celan, Jabès testifies, was "an admirable translator,"[11] after Jabès confesses that he can read Celan only in translation.[12] The remainder of this section of the text, however, consists mainly in Jabès recalling Celan's "unforgettable" voice while reading his (Celan's) own poems in translation.

Betrayal and treason temper and arbitrate translation. Citing Philippe Soupault's preface to *Prince Igor*, Jabès concurs that translation betrays only when it pretends to represent or reproduce actual reality.[13] Celan's satisfaction with his poems in translation puzzles Jabès, who only reads Celan's work in translation, and, although he knows no German, somehow gauges that the translations of Celan are inferior to the originals. Jabès also understands Celan as an *untranslatable* author, reading him (despite his untranslatability) both *in* translation and *as* translation as if he were writing at the edge, the border, of two languages of the same magnitude, as if the written words of one language preserve and carry over the echo of an inextinguishable language that remains ever present despite its obscurity and seeming remoteness. These two languages contaminate as well as distill, move as well as affirm one another. Jabès offers a variety of names for Celan's two languages: *renouncement* and *expectancy* [*du renoncement* and *de l'espérance*], *poverty* and *wealth* [*de pauvreté* and *de richesse*], *clarity* and *obscurity* [*la clarté* and *l'obscurité*], *glorious morning* or *mournful evening* [*glorieux matin ou triste soir*], and finally *dust* and *dust* [*poussière* and *poussière*].[14] Both languages remain indistinguishable from one another, and each contributes to the meaning of the other. The language of renouncement, for example, only bears meaning and significance when Celan speaks or writes it through the lexicon and grammar of hope: "Neither the one nor the other, but—unspeakable pain—the vast and desolate field enveloped in fog, of what cannot express itself alone, outside and in time."[15] Celan's "bilingualism," according to Jabès, interrupts itself in its attempt to express something of itself or of its other, of its twin or "opposite," much like the *unspeakable pain* or *indescribable grief* [*inexprimable douleur*] that literally disrupts Jabès' sentence, interjecting itself and breaking up the flow of the statement, "as if the speaking [of one language] could raise itself only on the ruins of the other, with and

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[10] "*A qui parler quand l'autre n'est plus?*" Jabès, *Memoire*, 11.

[11] "*Paul Celan était, lui-même, un admirable traducteur.*" Ibid.

[12] *"[J]e ne peux lire Paul Celan qu'en traduction. . . .*" Ibid.

[13] "*«La traduction — comme l'écrit le poète Philippe Soupault, dans sa préface au Prince Igor — n'est une trahison que lorsqu'elle prétend, comme la photographie, reproduire la réalité.»*" Ibid., 12.

[14] Ibid., 13.

[15] "*Ni l'un ni l'autre mais — inexprimable douleur — le vaste champ désolé, enveloppé de brumes, de ce qui ne peut seul s'exprimer, hors et dans le temps.*" Ibid.

without it."[16] Such an interruption brings forward with it an echo of the other, of both the other person and the other time, when Celan himself was present.

Language—in its evocation—remains tethered to an inextinguishable silence that prepares and dissipates, makes room for and bespeaks an originary, anarchical silence. Jabès affirms that silence allows us to hear the word, allows for the hearing of the word.[17] But how are we to understand silence and its ineffable relation to language, to the word? Does the word not break the silence, expelling it into the realm of the audible? Or does silence, like the emptiness we considered earlier, somehow fill the space opened up by its "opposite," that is by language itself? If emptiness can fill the space of the room, the chair, the conversation once occupied by Celan, then it seems likely that silence, too, can fill the aporetic gap at the heart of language, that silence can enfold into and within language as a way of speaking-off and speaking-against a purely empty, silent language that says nothing. But this is not a pure apophatic event in which Jabès, in avoiding mentioning Celan, mentions Celan. Instead, nothing begins to speak itself through language. Without origin and without name, silence bespeaks its secret: the poet can hear and understand silence only through his or her literary, languaged work. But what is it that the poet hears? Is the inaudible essence of silence but an incessant murmur to which the poet cannot close his or her ears? Does Jabès offer us a preliminary answer when he writes, "Uninterrupted passage from silence to silence and from word to silence"?[18] How are we to understand such an oblique, cryptic passage? Is this how we are to understand translation? The relationship between Jabès and Celan? The recovery and revelatory work of language? Or something else altogether?

Before ever attempting to offer us an explanation, Jabès follows this statement by asking his own question: "is the language of silence that of the surmounting refusal of language or, to the contrary, that of the memory of the first word?"[19] At the risk of relying too heavily on a metaphysical scaffolding of language, we nonetheless still want to ask, "What is the first word?" Following other indications back toward the Hebrew creation myth, is it the first word of the Torah or the first word spoken by G-d? Is it the first word of human being or the necessary name spoken as a supplement to creation? Perhaps this *premier mot* indirectly references the first word of ethics: the *hallowedness* of the *hello*—that is, the recognition of the divine height and distance of the infinite, aporetic other when we encounter him/her/it face to face. Conversely, perhaps the first word implies, in actuality, the last: the *God be with you* of the *goodbye*, the *a-Dieu* of the *adieu*. Is it Paul Celan's first word, the petite *fleur*, that blossomed on his lips despite his Germanic mother tongue? And why the *memory* of it; why not the word itself? Or is it a word—like *shibboleth*—that remains forever on the *limen*, at the border of the between, medial space-time of being's milieu? Despite the flood of questions that arise from such a statement, Jabès maintains and avows that even though a memory of the first word remains, there is no *history* of the word. There is,

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[16] "*Et comme si cette parole ne pouvait s'ériger que sur les ruines de l'autre, avec et sans elle.*" Ibid.

[17] "*Le silence … permet l'écoute du mot.*" Ibid.

[18] "*Passage ininterrompu du silence au silence et du mot au silence.*" Ibid., 14.

[19] "*[L]a langue du silence serait-elle celle du refus de la langue ou, au contraire, celle de la mémoire du premier mot?*" Ibid.

however, a history of each word's silence.[20] In this way, history shows itself as the absence of story, of narrative content, of representative function.

It is here in Jabès' contention that such a history of silence enciphers itself within the materiality of the word—"formed by letters and sounds"[21]—where we can begin to glimpse Jabès' own poetological project. For the poet, the word *matters*. The word encodes memory and history within its very materiality, within its inability to speak within its silence, which is, after all, what prompts, provokes, tempts, and necessitates Jabès to write and to speak on Celan. Much like Celan's use of the vocative "Ladies and Gentlemen" throughout his Meridian speech, Jabès, in his brief memorial work, effects his own distantiation by means of the repetition and evocation of "Paul Celan" seventeen times, surrounded throughout by puns and other wordplay—most notably *silence* and *sa langue*. Jabès' "The Memory of Words: How I Read Paul Celan," then, is more than a mere memorialization of Celan the man; it too becomes a reading of the word/name "Paul Celan," as well as an expression of the memory encoded within that word/name. And yet the words taken from Celan's poem that ends Jabès' work further translates—again, not what is communicable[22]—that which is *impossible* to pass on: Celan the man, his absence, and Jabès' own personal memories of his friend, of his reading of Celan's poems. We cannot approach Celan's life, the being of the man who bore that name. Yet Celan's life, through writing, allows us access to the German poet himself through his own words that bear the wound and scar of his absence, of his double absence: undoubtedly, Celan's life "is written in the language of his writing."[23] The betrayal of translation becomes a necessary modality of Celan's life. We today know him solely through his written words and through the words written by others, even obliquely. However, these marks upon thousands of pages cannot bring Celan himself forward to us or even toward us. Instead, readers can approach these written texts only in a passivity which does not continually bear the violence of language, of interpretation, by a mere reinscription or representation of what the text seeks to transmit. Only silence, the "silent dialog through words" ["*silencieux dialogue à travers les mots*"][24]—what cannot be passed on or carried over—breaks through impassable languages and historical gaps to offer us a chance, an opportunity, a risk for an opening toward Celan, toward his poetry, as well as toward the essential silence at language's core. Jabès' relationship to Celan vexes the poetological project of the French-language poet when it confronts the silence that interrupts and dislocates that which language, through writing, would attempt to speak. With Jabès' memorial work—his work of memory—we seem to have passed entirely over from the communicative, informational slope of language to the literary slope. It is difficult, if not outright impossible,

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[20] "*Il n'y a pas, j'en suis maintenant persuadé, une histoire de la parole; mais il y a une histoire du silence que chaque mot relate.*" Ibid., 15.

[21] "*Le mot qui est formé de lettres et de sons garde la mémoire … de toutes les voix qui l'ont, au cours des années – et même des siècles – prononcé et répandu.*" Ibid., 14.

[22] Walter Benjamin's best hope for translation is that it does not attempt to communicate the inessential nature of the text; bad translations communicate only that which is inessential (i.e., the communicable itself). See Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Edmund Jephcott in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 253-263.

[23] "*Sa vie est écrite, dans la langue de son écriture, avec les mots de sa vie même et de la mort, qui est encore un mot.*" Jabès, *Memoire*, 17.

[24] Ibid., 20.

to read in Jabès anything that resembles biographical facts, anecdotes, or particular historical details—the typical content of memorial pieces. Instead, Jabès writes as if to continually disrupt writing itself, ever deferring the act of recognition, of understanding, all the while putting writing—and the role of the writer—into question.