

DESERT LITERATURE, DESERT LANGUAGE

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I want to talk about some desert literature, and I want to talk about desert language, particularly about theology. We tend not to think of theology as a desert language, as a language of wild and open places, as a wild and open language. Theology as it comes to us, and has done now for so long, tends to be the language of the library and the academic study.

In talking about desert literature I want to talk about two writers: Edmond Jabès, who died in 1991 in Paris, a French-Jewish writer; and James Cowan, who lives in Sydney.

Let me start by talking about Jabès. Edmond Jabès was born in the desert city of Cairo in 1912. In mid-life he and his family were expelled from Egypt as part of the persecution of Jews following the Suez crisis of 1956. They relocated in Paris and Jabès was never to return to his native land. In Paris, Jabès began to write what he called the book of his non-belonging.¹ Ten volumes, which as the jacket-notes to the last volume attest, constitute "a single work". I am talking about Jabès's monumental *Livre des Questions* ('Book of Questions') in seven volumes and *Livre des Ressemblances* ('Book of Resemblances') in three volumes.

"As a nomad his desert, I have tried to circumscribe the blank territory of the page", Jabès writes, "I have tried to make it my true place, as the Jew has for centuries tried to make his the desert of his book, desert where the voice, sacred, human or divine, encounters silence in order to become word".²

In *Le Livre des Ressemblances*, Jabès says:

The experience of the desert has been crucial for me.
Between sky and sand, between All and Nothing, burns the
question. It burns without being consumed. It burns for itself
in a void.³

Jabès describes how when he was in Cairo he used to go out into the

desert for forty-eight hour stretches, taking only a blanket, and experiencing for himself a silence and solitude "so deeply that it becomes difficult to bear any more of it".⁴ In a fragment of the first volume of *Le Livre des Questions* Jabès relives an experience of being lost in the desert. In this passage Jabès is speaking of himself:

At noon, he found himself facing the infinite, the blank page. All tracks, footprints, paths were gone. Buried.⁵

He was probably only a few miles from his point of departure. But he did not know. And how could one, here, speak of arrival or departure? Everywhere: oblivion, the unmade bed of absence, the wandering kingdom of dust.⁶

This experience of the desert is for Jabès what may broadly be called a religious experience; he writes:

Man's salvation is whatever has, as he has, a beginning and an end, whatever can start over. Salvation is the water that quenches our thirst only to be needed again. It is the bread which satisfies and maintains our hunger. It is what sprouts, develops, ripens for man and with him. Eternity, the infinite, are the enemies of pulp and rind. When there is nothing left, there will be sand. There will be desert to conjugate the nothing.⁷

It is ironic that in Paris Jabès felt closer to the desert than he did in Cairo. In Cairo, while the desert was a surrounding presence, Jabès' attention was on literary culture in Paris. However, once permanently displaced from Egypt and living in Paris Jabès writes that the desert "came between" him and French literary culture. It "cut me off suddenly because it could not be shared", he said.⁸

Jabès begins to write a "book outside of time", - which was how Egypt suddenly appeared to him,⁹ - a bleak, fragmentary, and beautiful work with "the dimensions of the book and the bitter stubbornness of the wandering question".¹⁰ This "bitter stubbornness of the wandering question" is like the nomad, and the book in which the question wanders like the desert.

The desert is an archetypal place: the desert is not merely a place which we inhabit, but a place which inhabits us. Jabès inhabited the desert in Cairo, but in Paris, the desert inhabited him, it invaded and

pervaded his memory and imagination. He associated the blank page with the desert's empty spaces and the endlessness of the writer's task of writing. For, he says, "the book imperceptibly takes shape within the book we will never finish, *there is my desert*".¹¹ In European culture the desert has come to us and lain hold of us through *story*. Not the forgettable stories of fiction so much as the authoritative and dangerous stories of Scripture.

The great stories of the desert are no less archetypal than the place itself! It is to the desert that the ancient Israelites escape from bondage; it is through the desert the Chosen People need to pass if they are to reach the Promised Land. God gives His prophet His Law in the desert and reveals Himself in enigmatic but no uncertain terms there. Jesus retreats from the world to commune with his Father there. Really it is an arid hard place, spiritually it is a fertile place. Like Heaven, the desert is a place one has to make oneself fit to inhabit, unlike Heaven, there are no guarantees of survival.

Australian writers (and artists) are haunted by the desert in their own way. I am referring to those, like Jabès, whom the desert inhabits, whose eyes are no longer on Europe, or America, as the places of inspiration and 'culture', but who look instead *to the centre of their own land*. I would like to give some attention to one such writer, not to compare him in an artificial and arbitrary manner to Jabès, but to amplify the desert silence.

James Cowan has been an itinerant traveller in the remotest of our deserts, and the desert enters his texts, not in such a way as to disorient and lose the reader, as sometimes we as readers might feel disoriented and lost by Jabès. I would describe Cowan's books as *travelogues*. He sets out for the symbolic and sacred centre of his own land in each case, but somehow it evades him, he never quite gets there; and if he were to get there, we understand, it would be only to get *lost* there.

In a chapter from *Letters From A Wild State*, entitled 'On Myths', the fictional writer of the letters visits "a vast water-hole known as Cullymurra".¹² He writes, "by the time I had reached Cullymurra water-hole I felt I had indeed crossed over Homer's blood-filled trench".¹³ The reference refers *us* back, to Homer, to the beginning of literature, and in our mind, as we cross the blood-filled trench, we are initiated back into that illiterate and wild mythological world upon which all the mental reference points of our modernity may be traced back. Once across that blood-filled trench *we are out of time*.

From the tribesmen who live at the water-hole the writer hears that this whole desert had once been "a luxuriant region supporting all kinds of exotic wildlife".¹⁴ The men preserved the memory of a group of monsters called the Kadimakara who descended from the sky. The traveller is told that "once these creatures had tasted of the fruits of the earth their appetites became insatiable. In time they had eaten all the shrubs, trampled the earth hard, and finally had resorted to eating the giant trees down which they had come. In an ironic twist of fate they had destroyed their one escape route to the heavens!"¹⁵

In one chapter of his poetic work, *The Prince Of Silence*, James Cowan meditates on the grave of an old Australian explorer who was brought to his knees and who eventually died in search of an inland ocean. The old explorer wore his life out in search of a mirage. He had sought a virgin body of water and rode out into virgin territory in search of it. The virgin territory he crossed turned out to be himself. The expedition to find the hidden inland ocean, at least in Cowan's recital of it, became an expedition across the dreamscape of one's being and one's death.

Of desert experience Cowan writes: "An exchange takes place between the principle of water and its ability to quench a thirst. As a result every slender waterfall in our being yearns to realize itself as a *cascade*. I find myself awash in a torrent of purely imaginable solutions, each one so saturated that it yields little more than the intangible".¹⁶

Silent though the desert is - as Edmond Jabès writes - "we become aware of it only through words, and words, alas, drive us ever farther from our goal".¹⁷ As I said before, arid and hard though the desert is, spiritually it is fertile; it fructifys, says James Cowan.

Inspired by the desert we can hardly resist theology. I do not mean theology in a formal, traditional, that is to say *European* way. I mean theology in a desert way, a way which is uncertain and easily lost. A way however which leads somewhere special, sacred.

And so let us consider desert speech about God. In the texts of Edmond Jabès God is one of the objects of the obsessive questioning; yet God is an object for Jabès in the same way that for him a desert or a book is an object: it is inextricable from himself and his experience. In the case of God, as in the case of the desert, this is an experience of God's silence and absence; as the experience of God was an experience of silence and absence for those to whom Jabès's books are a testimony: those who died in the Holocaust. Auschwitz was a desert of death, the place where God's people were deserted.

God is like the desert too, Jabès reminds us, in literally being a place: one of the Hebrew names of God is *Hammakom*, which means *place*.¹⁸ As a place-name in the desert, God, in the experience of His silence and His absence, is, when we get there, a deserted place, an inhospitable place, what our spoken language calls 'a godforsaken place'. But a godforsaken place is a very *real* one. Real, that is to say, *authentic*, the difference between a water-hole and a mirage. And no place is godforsaken where faith exists and in the desert faith is primordial.

Desert has nothing to do with culture where *man* is made but everything to do with faith, where worship is as natural as it is timeless. Jabès writes of desert faith and desert worship:

That faith is a lighter, larger breath, an indefinable blue in the motionless blue of the sky ... the desert assigns its own slow rhythm - a rhythm from beyond silence, from beyond life - to the smallest gesture, the most insignificant word.¹⁹

Prayer is a language of faith; Evagrius the Solitary who lived in the Egyptian desert in the fourth century of our era defined the theologian as one who "prays truly".²⁰ Faced by the limitless silence and absence of the desert, prayer seeks a language for those evaporations, disappearances, mirages, and obscurations which are inner as much as outer. It is a simple language but hard to learn. Its learning-process is called asceticism; *God*, its first and last word, is really unpronounceable. The name 'God' we utter is really a mistake.

For, out in the desert God is not a thing, a *theos*. Desert theology is atheistic; desert faith *beyond* the idolisation of forms of language. Faith of this kind is better understood by the Jews than by the Christians: for among Jews 'God' names that which is unknown or unpronounceable. God is the name of that which is *not* a name. Jabès writes: "He [God] is the image in the absence of images, language in the absence of language, point in the absence of points".²¹ In desert theology the word *God* signifies *absence* despite what our imaginations or our sentiments want the word to invoke. "God is absent through his name", writes Jabès.²² Praying truly, as desert Fathers like Evagrius attest, has little to do with invocations and vain imaginings. This absence which 'God' names and which does not invoke him, is not a 'pure' absence, a conceptual kind of absence, a logical absence; it is the desert's absence: a pure *presence* in other words.

The desert writer is faced with this absence which is also a

presence, in the blank page. Jabès writes: "God, the Absent, but beyond the power of absence, hence bound to be present where all presence is revoked".²³ Theology, it follows, is the discourse *in the name* of that which is not a name.

And yet, that God, which we do not name by naming, has manifested or *revealed* Himself such that names are not inapplicable; but neither are they, strictly speaking, applicable. Let us not forget that revelation, at the *origin* of theology, is *other* than He Who reveals. For example, the Law is not the Law-maker; the Son is not the Father; the Law-maker is understood *in* the Law, and the Father is come to *through* the Son; but they are not one *and* the same. Revelation is a stand-in, in the absence of He Who reveals. Revelation presents the One Who reveals, but *is* not the One Who reveals. Revelation is representational. Revelation, by standing-*in* for the the One Who reveals, hides His absence. Don't alibis always do this?

Revelation is an alibi, for it claims 'God is here', and thus it locates God for us. Theology wants to *place* us in that location: it wants to locate us with respect to what is revealed. As an alibi, however, revelation is a silent witness to untold stories; to an elsewhere. Theology vouchsafes that witness, and affirms the alibi as nothing but the truth. But between a revelation which says 'God was here' and a revelation which bespeaks an 'untold elsewhere', we have an ambiguous truth open to question and uncertain of meaning.

In one way, theology is discourse in the name of that which is not a name, but which is revealed. In another way, theology is discourse *instead* of the name which is not a name, and which hides it. These two ways are indistinct.

Who understands theology in this indistinct way? The desert dweller does. That is, one like Jabès. One like James Cowan. One who is not necessarily a 'theologian' in any academic sense, but one for whom the desert obtrudes between being and thinking, where the 'theological' postulations of 'great minds' [sic] are lost in silence and listening. To know this silence and listening is to understand the desert as the original place of theology. To abide in this silence and listening is to "pray truly".

When we utter the name which is not a name *knowing* it is not a name, we do not thereby declare that God does not exist. For we are talking about the God we seek in the desert not the logician's God. The God which we do not name in naming exists no less than the desert exists to the one in it. Having no name for God, no pronunciation, we listen instead to the way God silently stalks the

heart of every word and gesture, abiding nowhere. For as Jabès, a man of the desert knows, "Between the sky and sand, between All and Nothing ... The experience of the desert is one of listening, extreme listening".²⁴

Let me finish with this reflection from the desert. That perhaps the tradition of the Shekinah, the divine presence, which was with the Israelites in the wilderness, means that the promised land, or the ideal city, is never *literally* beyond, but projects what is already *present*: God with us. The Shekhinah is the *absence* of any place of true abode beyond itself. Do not those whose main aim is to possess land become possessed by it? And do not those who would aim to possess God in these forms of language, or those forms of language, end up possessed by thought structures? Then the Shekinah departs. The language of God's presence is essentially a desert language, it is dispossessive. Dispossessive language is the language ascetical life teaches, a language that learns to let-go of itself and listen. I think that the desert is the only environment in which this language can be understood.

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