

A Bonfire in the Starry Night

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For many years now, Irving Petlin has been working in the series form. Each of these series extends, echoes or elaborates, in particular ways, the thematic core of the others, while forming within itself an elaborate cluster of metaphorical and metamorphic pictorial "sites." By working in series, Petlin emphasizes the open and endlessly exfoliating character of signification, and the play of identity and difference at work in the act of representation. In a time, historically, of fragmentation and loss, no single signifier can pretend to be stable, no one *point de repère* to be definitive. Hence, the multiple, or displaced, perspectives he often incorporates into the work. The gaze is not singular, not fixed; instead it probes the recurring figures, objects and images before it for the facets of meaning they may release. A kind of visual hermeneutics is at play, where what signifies is not just the wall but the number and texture of the stones, not just the stair but the number of its steps, not just the expression on a face, but what lies, not quite visible, behind that expression (a given face will also resonate with ancestral likenesses or traces, a plural singularity). So a river, in Petlin's "Seine Series," tells as much by what it hides as by what it discloses, and a Paris street resonates with what is absent, what has disappeared.

Petlin's 22 pastels in response to Edmond Jabès's *The Book of Questions* complete a circle. They are the last in a trilogy of series begun with Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* and continued with a group exploring the work and world of Bruno Schulz. Intimately related to these are the "Seine Series," consisting of five pastels and five oils, with the river as the governing "text," and the sequence of *natures mortes*, "The Four Seasons."

Schulz, Levi and Jabès encompass the before, during and after of Petlin's exploration into the period, the cauldron, of World War II, and the horrors and residues and survivals of Shoah. Each series represents an attempt to grasp the nature of this moment and its aftermath, its aftermath of wounds and absences and revenants. Each as well speaks by indirection to Petlin's own experience, his life, and to the "possible lives" of this painter of Polish-Jewish descent: Schulz, whose city, Drohobycz, and fate "could have been" Petlin's; Levi, whose experience in the camps "could have been" Petlin's; Jabès, whose city of exile, Paris, Petlin has shared during two significant periods of his life as a painter. In the renditions of Schulz's world, Petlin immediately recognized physical and cultural cognates to the tenement landscape of Chicago immigrants in which he

was raised. For Petlin, Primo Levi's questioning of the chemical elements for the meanings of a life would suggest parallels to what occurs in the painter's "laboratory," where the elemental means of representation are interrogated, the cobalt blue, the zinc white and titanium white, the cadmium white of absence.

The appeal to Petlin of these writers, the call which results in dialogue, can be understood in several ways. Petlin has said that with each he experienced a "jolt of recognition." All are profoundly innovative writers for whom conventional forms of narrative realism are unacceptable. In each there is an embeddedness of figures, an ancient character to persons and things paradoxically combined with an expressive immediacy. For Petlin, this resonance of the new with the old is the mark of profound innovation, the search for what is old to understand the new in things.

Looking at it another way, the question becomes, how do you arrive at an art that is not simply one of surfaces, an art that participates in the palimpsestic nature of what is before the eye, discovering the withheld beneath the disclosed. I must emphasize that we are not speaking of hermetic meanings here, but of buried history by which the present itself is buried in turn. It is in this regard that Paul Celan, to whom Petlin dedicates two of the "Seine Series," objected so strenuously and justifiably to being characterized as a hermetic poet. Yet, the unsayable cannot be narratized without betrayal of the meanings at its core. Confrontation must come, paradoxically, by indirection. The truth must be told but, as Emily Dickinson (a favorite poet of Celan) notes, we must "tell it slant." For each of these writers, and for Petlin, the narrative is within, is inside the way of working: materials, shape, form, touch and trace. As a result, the work of these writers has acquired a universal character, for it is finally questions of identity, of being and non-being, good and evil, and the limits of language that are at issue, questions, that is, of the nature and limits of the telling. How, possibly, can the aesthetic illuminate the social and historical dimensions of experience when the aesthetic itself has been so problematized and deformed by the events of history?

It is the questions behind *The Book of Questions* that first drew Petlin to Jabès's work. How do you respond to Theodor Adorno's earnest cry that it would be "barbaric" to make poetry after Auschwitz? By this often misunderstood statement, he means in part that questions of pleasure, consolation, *divertissement*, must be entirely rethought; the activity and signification of art must be rethought. It was after all the Nazis who appropriated the aesthetic dimension into the political, and the Nazis who listened to Schubert quartets within sight of the ovens. How do you think the unthinkable? What happens to human feeling and to the aesthetic intelligence "after"? For Petlin, such questions involve a "conversation with the soul," and Jabès offered a syntax for such a conversation. The circling and errancy of *The Book of Questions*, the multiplication of voices, provoked a new thinking about exploratory means. Petlin was drawn as well to what he calls Jabès's "alphabet of attachments" in language, which seemed parallel to Petlin's non-linguistic or silent alphabet. This alphabet forms the trail of Jabès's words and things, a path of constant invention, of iteration and reiteration, and the testing of meaning. Midrash, perhaps. But it is finally this:

how do we ask a question and allow it to resonate in all directions, without the illusion of a possible answer?

These were the issues that began to swirl through Petlin's head when he sat with Jabès in the writer's apartment on the Rue de l'Épée-de-Bois for a first portrait session. It was a month before Jabès's death. The attendant conversation lasted four hours, at the end of which time Petlin's drawing paper was blank. He would never see Jabès again but would complete the portrait the day after his death.

Petlin chose to work with the first three volumes of *The Book of Questions* (*The Book of Questions*, *The Book of Yukel*, *Return to the Book*), using the exemplary Rosmarie Waldrop translation which had been supervised by Jabès and his wife, Arlette. Rather than foregrounding one narrative voice, *The Book of Questions* presents a kind of *theatrum mundi*, a multiplicity of voices within a variety of forms. Imaginary rabbis ("rabbi-poets") converse. The doomed lover Yukel speaks from his diary. Absences converse. Events are narrated, witnessed, recalled, prefigured in a first-person voice impossible to identify or stabilize. "I" as we, or you, or they. "I" as everyone or no one. The exilic "I" may stand in utter isolation or in turn become the voice of all exiled "persons of the Book," persons exiled into the book. In fact, it is all of these things at once.

The site? Paris and the desert. Paris as the desert. The desert as the book. The book as the body. The Seine and the Nile. The buildings and the wells. The alleyways, the streets and the skies. The skies and stars, skies and smoke. The cemetery of Bagneaux, the cemetery of sand in Cairo, of marble in Milan, the cemetery in Rome.

And within this labyrinth, the fragments of the tale: the first encounter of the young lovers, Sarah and Yukel, at the Carrefour de l'Odéon, her death in the camps, his suicide. Fragments of a tale enfolded, buried, with countless others.

After the Suez crisis, the Jewish community of Cairo was forced to emigrate. Paris became the home of Edmond Jabès, his new landscape. The whiteness of the city echoed, not without multiple ironies, the whiteness of the sands of Egypt. Out for a walk on his first day of residence, he came upon a graffito in French and English: MORT AUX JUÏFS/JEWS GO HOME, a literally graphic reminder of France's enduring antisemitism and its all-too-recent, dark chapter. So Paris was double, at once welcoming and rejecting. For Petlin too, upon his return, Paris was a multi-layered site of rich personal experience, stored history, beauty and complicity. Like Jabès, he would look at the city with an eye that was at once familiar, accustomed, and foreign. The apartment he and his wife Sarah eventually found, coincidentally, was a few minutes walk from that of Edmond and Arlette Jabès. They would share the same streets and markets, would walk the same trajectories.

From *The Book of Questions*, Petlin would extract a series of recurring images, figures and viewpoints that spoke both to his plastic imagination and to his lived experience. As in *The Book of Questions*, he would continually return to these sites from different angles, in the attempt to fathom the full range of their meanings.

Thus the wells, the alleyways, the trees, the door, the brothers, the streets or roads, the boats, the Book, the scream, the sail, all of which have their own history in Petlin's earlier work. He would look as well at the way these images continually metamorphose into one another ("the door - a book," "the tongue of dry wells," "the word - a fir tree"). The site, then, is always multiple, consisting of the scene before the eyes and the site within the text. The site, therefore, is at once a present and a presence and an absence and an elsewhere. The latter, a shadow, informs the present with memory, with unforgetting. It is an act of anamnesis. Before the eye/I is also what is gone, silenced. The site is always a place of confluences, its temporality multi-dimensional. Hence the "ancient character" of these depicted places, events, gatherings, figures, cloaked in time but of no identifiable moment.

There is not space here to examine the entire series, but I would like to take a brief look at a number of the pastels in relation to the generative textual passages, to give some idea of the process involved. Many of the pastels, of course, are linked to multiple passages, where the same image recurs in the text. Only a reading of the book would offer a full sense of the unfolding of a given image.

In Vézelay on January 6, 1994, as Petlin is contemplating figures from the Old Testament, his conceptual work on the series begins to come into focus. Here he takes the photographs from which a composite will be constructed. He will work from this composite to create the somberly elegiac, "The tallest tree, feet buried in the snow, hears our screams," and its companion piece. It is from the cry of Reb Kamoun in *The Book of Yukel*, and it can be seen as the iconic, mournful intimation of the series. The tree itself strongly suggests a torso, arms upraised, with a bright slash or wound of red against the winter sky. It is a picture of silence, a silent scream that will sound through the entire series.

"A neighborhood lives through its streets, as a tree through the strength of its branches." So begins a passage in *The Book of Questions* that will be the source (along with many parallel passages) of several images in Petlin's series. The street as a site of passage, of encounter and reencounter, chance events, violence and play, apparition. "A street is never the same," states Jabès:

*(The street stirs with the passer-by.
My street stirs in her sleep and speaks, now
softly, now loudly. My alley-way is an adolescent
in the middle of a noisy neighborhood, where her
sisters have lost the habit of rest. (pp.139-40)*

Petlin wandered the streets spreading out from the Place de la Contrescarpe, the Rue Mouffetard and the Rue Monge, in Jabès's neighborhood. He was struck by the ancient scale and singular curve of the narrow Rue Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, how its atmosphere seemed to contain another time within its present. He decided to posit this as the street/alley-way of encounters suggested by the text. (Jabès himself never remembered the specific street, if any, he was referring to.) It will appear and reappear, "never the same," throughout the series in

works such as "The Street" (I & II), "My alley-way" (I & II) and, finally (though it is in fact the earliest pastel rendition of it), "Paris is white." In the first of these, "The Street" (I), the street is empty, but stained with slashes of red, the same red which scars and cross-hatches the sky and highlights details of the buildings. "The Street" (II), on the other hand, is inhabited by five spectral figures. At the extreme left edge, a screaming figure; behind him a man "who might be Yukel." Behind Yukel, a figure "from an Egyptian past," carrying an infant. To that figure's left, parallel with Yukel, the ghost-double of Yukel, the lover and suicide. Farther back on the street there is a fifth figure, half-naked, drawn from Petlin's "The Street of Jews." Now, windows are lit and stars are visible ("a bonfire in the starry night," p.38). In "Paris is white," we have the first, tentative attempt to represent the drama of absence that is the story of Sarah and Yukel. It is what, like "The tallest tree..." Petlin refers to as a "white pastel." The "false," non-optical perspective gives the feeling of being expelled from a tunnel-like space, rather than entering it. The title is drawn from the section in *Return to the Book* immediately before Sarah speaks of first meeting Yukel ("We were two breaths, two echoes."). "Paris is white. Paris rejoins the old Paris in its whiteness." (p.399) Petlin, of course, will return to this section for one of the panoramic pastels of the "Seine Series" dedicated to Jabès, and once again for "Winter" of "The Four Seasons." "My alley-way" (I & II) follow "Paris is White" with more developed and articulated views of the street. The identities of the figures are fugitive and shifting, unstable. They seem to metamorphose into one another. No one can be identified as Sarah or Yukel. The clouds in the blue sky of #I have become vertical smoke-plumes, as if from factories or other chimneys. The power and menace of the images evoke the horror of conflagration, engulfment, flight. Nowhere is the expressive potential of pastel more evident.

Several in the series depict the Egyptian landscape. These derive from numerous references throughout *The Book of Questions* to Jabès's homeland and to the formation of his poetics under the influence of its culture and its landscape, in particular the desert and its silences, the river and its commerce, the wells and their gatherings. The pastels, however, also refer to a range of Petlin's own personal experiences, stemming in part from a trip to Egypt and the Sinai with his wife, Sarah, some years ago. The new works echo those produced directly after the trip, a trip in which for the first time Petlin witnessed a landscape of sand and rock strikingly close to that which much of his earlier work had, half-unknowingly, evoked. "Watching the Nile flow with its cargoes," from a passage in *Return to the Book*, is a virtuoso, panoramic evocation of the river that derives in part from a semi-hallucinated dream Petlin experienced in Egypt in a state of extreme dehydration. It is a work in which nothing happens. A state of slowness and spatial extension creates, in the painter's words, a "historic haze." The boats seem almost unmoving, and the river-as-canvas/river-as-text, as well as the elevated perspective, remind us immediately of the renderings in the "Seine Series." On the right bank are overturned boats, hints of activity but no figures. On the left bank, we find a combination of new and ancient architecture. There is a sense of distance, of endless vista dotted with minor events in their soundlessness and voicelessness. Here we see the influence of Renaissance martyr landscapes which has touched a number of Petlin's earlier works. Things

occur at the edge of the frame, at the edge of history, obscured by the inexorable flow of ordinary life.

“The wells of my brothers” and “Wells of the desert, buds of fire” refer to the not always comfortable memories of difficult discussions at the wells in *The Book of Questions*, the experience of leaving the city to walk and talk along the Nile. For Petlin, they are reminders of walking and talking in the streets of Chicago with his brothers. Meeting-place as a site of disputation. In striking contrast to “Watching the Nile...,” the scale here is dramatically reduced. In each, a night sky is represented, rich and turbulent. In “The wells of my brothers,” there is an almost Bacon-like distortion and merging of the figures, a sense of lamentation. The sky is a site of unsettled activity, with the suggestion of patterns and figures emerging and merging. A yellow tear rends the sky’s fabric, hinting at another dimension behind. In “Wells of the desert...,” the sense of contention seems somewhat diminished, as a male figure somewhat stiffly and tentatively reaches to enfold the naked, orange-tinted female, while an ancient child-witness watches. The events of the sky appear less troubled, if still unsettled.

“The desert, Paris” is a large pastel on linen, accompanied by a small study with the same title. The desert, like the city in such a view, represents an accumulation of infinite detail, and therefore a kind of emptiness. It is a space at once full and empty, sounding and silent. There is a brooding, darker character to the large work, a sea of flickering, rooftop details creating at once a multiplicity of signs and a void. Rising over the horizon is the spectral outline of one of the university buildings from the Jussieu campus as a kind of sentinel or witness. The sky is leaden, composed of grey and white pastel shades and the texture of the linen itself - a source of weight rather than of light. It is a work that, like many of Petlin’s, brings into question the boundary between the abstract and the representational through its sense of field and pattern. The primary reference in Jabès is to the “Letter to Gabriel” in *The Book of Yukel*, which begins with an evocation of Cairo in contrast to the pyramids and sphinx of the desert and ends with an eruption of the desert in the city:

This morning, between rue Monge and la Mouffe (after
the rue des Patriarches and the rue de l’Épée-de-Bois where I live) I let
the desert invade my neighborhood. The Nile was not far....

This autobiographical moment must have immediately struck Petlin, whose son is named Gabriel, by its dual proximity.

Closer still to abstraction are the two pastels on paper, “The soil shifted (for a long time)” (I & II). The title is drawn from *The Book of Yukel*:

And Yukel said:

“In a village in Central Europe, the Nazis one
day buried some of our brothers alive. The soil
shifted with them for a long time. That night, one

and the same rhythm bound Israelites to the world.”

Petlin has stated that both works “almost made themselves,” and that “certain things can’t be drawn, instead they are materialized.” It is the paper itself, the defining shapes in it, which Petlin allows to model his patterns. In each, what is described is a surface; the unspeakable, beneath, is both implied and screened. Additional commentary seems unnecessary. The eloquence is evident - and tacit.

“The door, the rabbis go in” refers to an early sequence in *The Book of Questions* which for Petlin carries an almost mystical weight:

“What is going on behind this door?”

“A book is shedding its leaves.”

“What is the story of the book?”

“Becoming aware of a scream.”

“I saw rabbis go in.”

The two rabbis here hearken back to the “white negroes” who populated some of Petlin’s work in the sixties. Figures of multiple and inscrutable identity, their bodies are wound with philacteries. They climb a stair toward a door, a door of the book. Inside the door is a third figure, angelic, youthful, wrapped in a ruffled cloth, the air around her animated. The rabbis are entering a mystery, a space of youth and living spirit. A line, perhaps a thought-line or a sight-line, or both, passes through the central figure.

“Day breaks, the night has conceived” (I) follows immediately from “The door...” In a passage directly preceding the one quoted in the title, Jabès writes:

We know the word which makes us see, hear, dream, and judge does not exist except in terms of the reality it creates and yet eludes.

Thus opens the book. What is traced there is the shadow of the gold which gleams by inner necessity.

Through the opening of the door, of the book, once again the angelic figure, but here enveloped in a red night filled with stars, reminding us of Jabès’s description of the Egyptian night and its “buds of fire.”

In the second “Day breaks...,” all that is left of the young woman is the ruffle, a trace of innocence. An orange-yellow *tâche* effaces the figure and seems to bear it toward the upper air, following the vertical lines in the paper itself. Behind her, before what has become a deep blue, night sky, the “tallest tree” reappears, now more than ever suggesting a male torso, its pectorals clearly visible. The door has become a window. Outside its frame stands a figure naked except for a cap, a mason or some other kind of workman. He is one of those displaced figures from no identifiable time who populate Petlin’s work. He is at once depicted (within

the frame of the pastel) and off-scene (outside the frame of the window and its events). Thus the laborer, the silent witness, semi-invisible, off-stage, without whom the event, or the events of history, cannot take place, and without whom the monuments, the temples and pyramids, cannot be built.

The final image in the series is drawn from one of the last and most poignant images in *Return to the Book*:

I am haunted by the memory I mentioned of a buffalo
tied to her wheel to spread the bountiful water.
Have I given drink, I who know only thirst,
I, absent from myself,
I, Yukel Serafi, whose life and story are summed up
in a few sentences?
I share the fate of the worn-out beast in its self-
willed night.

As artists, in Petlin's words, "We trade on freedom but live in slavery." The tension between these poles is central to the dynamic of artistic production. The versions of "The waterbuffalo, tied to her wheel" (I & II) form a coda to the series and explore this image of resignation of the artist at his or her task. In the first we view the animal, passive, beaten and scrawny, from behind. A yellow curtain, perhaps a shroud, hangs over the beast. In the second, the white, ghostly face comes toward us, again attached to the pipe-turnstile, in Petlin's words "the plumbing of our lives." The shroud has been replaced by a light, the animal is healthier, less mortified. Two views of the (Sisyphean?) artistic vocation or task. To paraphrase Jabès, "a task to be completed without question," since *we* have tied *ourselves* to the wheel. Petlin expressly intends an echo of Van Gogh's portrayal of inmates at the asylum of Saint-Rémy, and he may also have in mind Van Gogh's "Prisoners' Round (after Doré)."

"The Four Seasons" follows from the vast panoramas of the "Seine Series" as a kind of mirror turned inward. Now it is the seasons of the studio, and of the artist's life and psyche, which are to be portrayed. Details of autobiographical memory are scattered throughout, as the painter contemplates the experience of passage, of transiency, and of the still life, the *nature morte* itself. Personal history and the interior life displace the focus on historical event and public space that dominate the "Seine Series."

"Spring" represents an astonishing confluence of the quotidien with the oneiric. It is as if the imagery of the dream were voyaging into the everyday or, conversely, the things of dailiness had been transported into, and been illuminated by, the slant light of dream. Out the window of the artist's Paris studio one sees the grey roofs of a gently subdued Paris under a grey sky lit by a patch of orange. Within the studio, to the right, a boat is arriving. The boat is a recurrent image in Petlin's work and can take on various shades of meaning. Here the image is clearly a hopeful, liberating one, as the boat sails toward the

“harbor” of the artist’s palette mounded with paints directly beneath the window. In his notebooks, Petlin makes clear that this is “Gabriel’s boat,” the boat his son Gabriel used to sail during the summer. The boat is sailing across a pacific “mare bianco,” its passengers garbed in cheerful colors. Above the heads of the passengers are brightly detailed brushes, and to the right of the brushes hover two indistinct hands holding sticks. To the lower left, the pastel is anchored by a folded, glowing pink cloth. Beyond we see the paraphernalia of the studio, including a jug of brushes glowing with light. The interplay of the material and the imagined, the studio and the harbor, proposes that in any fully realized work, the two will blend seamlessly into one plastic vision.

The mood of “Summer” is strikingly different. There is a sense of intense nocturnal heat, fierce reflected light, airlessness. To Petlin, this work summons memories of the suffocating heat of Chicago during his childhood. The half-loaf of bread at the center suggests the oven of summer but also the young artist’s head baking with ideas in that same heat, trying to imagine art in the airless environment and sensual deprivation of the Chicago tenements. To the viewer’s right, there is a blue head on a stick, and beside it a white skull. Next to the skull, the pair of blurred hands reappears, holding now intensely red sticks (a recollection of Petlin’s early, quasi-allegorical *Rowers*). Beneath the sticks, two glittering, yellow forms send off showers of sparks. To the left, once again the painter’s materials, his brushes and mounds of paint, modeled with an iconic character. Through the window, we see Paris at night, sweltering.

“Fall,” like “Winter,” is close to a *grisaille*. It is the time of last light, before the descent of winter. Only a scrim of muted green to the right of the window and one last brush still aglow provide relief. The tubes and mounds of paint are partially dessicated. The tubes and brushes to the right have been set in rough alignment, while the tubes, the tubular bodies, to the left lie in a contorted embrace. Everything is grounded, fallen.

“Winter” offers a divided canvas with an exaggerated recessional perspective. The “lake” of the painter’s table has frozen and whiteness mantles the air. Here is a third reading of Jabès’s “Paris is white,” one to be juxtaposed with the versions in the “Seine Series” and “The Book of Questions.” Certainly the whiteness of winter implies another white page, another silence and another kind of desert, where life has come to a stop. To the lower left are tubes, glasses, the things of the studio strewn about and abandoned. At the center the now thoroughly aged and shriveled tubes and paint mounds meet. Through the window, the city and sky in winter. To the right, from bottom to top, whiteness has invaded the studio.

(Postscript)

I have written at some length elsewhere about Petlin's "Seine Series." I would like simply to quote from that piece concerning the three works directly related to this exhibition:

"The Disappeared, I," is the first of two dedicated to the great post-Holocaust poet, Paul Celan, who lived in Paris after the war and committed suicide in 1971 by leaping into the river from the Pont Mirabeau. The painting evokes the Paris of World War II, a shrouded, blacked-out city, its bridges spectral, its sky filled with puffs recalling anti-aircraft fire. One window is illuminated for Celan, who is not there. A remnant of the recently destroyed city of Grozny appears as an echo within this echo.

"Paris is White" is dedicated to the poet and author of *The Book of Questions*, Edmond Jabès...The title derives from a key moment in Jabès *Return to the Book*, when the doomed lovers, Sarah and Yukel, first meet. The whiteness of the page, the city, the canvas, the desert. The white of the third picture in this series has been transmuted into a ground of light. The spiritualized verticality of the painting contrasts with the horizontality of the others in the series. The city's architecture has dematerialized, and everything is in flux. Lines and masses waver, refusing fixity, completion.

"The Disappeared, II," a pastel on raw linen, is the second of two for Paul Celan. It asks, "What is it when someone disappears or takes his life?" The atmosphere or weather mantles everything here. Color and event have been suppressed (the usual bright character of pastel itself has been suppressed, as an empathic gesture toward what is depicted). Things are seen through a scrim. Forms that in many of the other canvases are solid have become hollowed out. The disappeared, and the suicide, are also the unrealized, the incomplete, the mute. Browns and greys dominate, along with the linen itself.

