

Writing as Commitment: In Memory of the Philologist and Editor Maurice Olender (1946–2022)

Markus Messling

Department of Romance Studies, Saarland University,
Saarbrücken, Germany
markus.messling@uni-saarland.de

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For anyone who wanted to understand the enormous importance of Maurice Olender for intellectual life in France, March 11, 2023 was a meaningful day. It was chosen to commemorate the great classical philologist, cultural archaeologist, and intellectual historian in the metropolis on the Seine. His widow, Lydia Flem, the Belgian writer and psychoanalyst, together with the publishing house *Le Seuil*, had invited friends, colleagues and a wider public to the elegant Maison de l'Amérique latine on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. *Le tout Paris* had come to say farewell.

A particularly Parisian milieu met here, straddling politics, art, the *intellectuals*, and the universities in which Olender had acted as an intellectual pivot: Monique Lévi-Strauss and the executors of Georges Perec's estate, thinkers such as Charles Malamoud, Jacques Rancière, and Antoine Campagnon, friends and companions, including the film director Luc Dardenne and Christine Marcandier, the co-founder of the cultural journal *Diacritik*, the historian Ivan Jablonka, the philosopher Sylviane Agacinski and her husband, former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. This illustrious and distinguished community came to pay their respects and to recount, in anecdotes and reflections, their manifold ways of relating to the deceased.

Born into a family of Polish refugees in Antwerp (Belgium) on April 21, 1946, and trained in diamond grinding as a young man, Maurice Olender is best known in France for his series published by Le Seuil—first as “La Librairie du xx^e siècle,” and from 2001 on as “La Librairie du xxi^e siècle”—which he

founded in 1989 and which has included such renowned authors as Monique and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Henri Atlan, Jacques Le Goff, Antonio Tabucchi, Italo Calvino, Yves Bonnefoy, Jean Starobinski, Donatella di Cesare, and again and again Lydia Flem and Georges Perec.¹ Without a doubt, this series set a style and tone—arguably one of the most important in France, if not in Europe, for an entire generation.

Maurice Olender was a brilliant editor who only included in his series what already appeared to belong to it, in quite an idiosyncratic way. Anyone who was lucky enough to be admitted to his “pied à terre” in the 6th arrondissement not far from Saint-Sulpice, which served Olender, commuting from Brussels, as a manufactory for his publishing ventures, couldn’t help but be amazed at the chaotic mass of manuscripts, the towers of books, and piles of notes. His apartment resembled a silent, performative protest against the disappearance of material libraries in our helplessly digitised times.

He loved books not simply as a bibliophile, but he loved them *existentially*. They were his desperate albeit magnificent means to deal with the irreparable deaths of so many people and the narratives that surrounded him since the great silence he experienced as a child after the Shoah. For him, making books meant crafting encounters with people. That is why you would not usually meet him in his archival “cave,” but in Casa Bini, a decent Italian restaurant on rue Grégoire de Tours, where he would already be waiting for you at his familiar table. Here, he knew how to stage himself while remaining authentic. For a young postdoc meeting him there, this situation had an air of the Café de Flore-era and the urban flair of intellectual restlessness. Maurice Olender was a master of conversation, who gave generously, and at the same time was always looking for novel ideas and texts. Conversations with him revolved decidedly and always around philology, its sources, traditions, and its political implications. Everything counted, nothing was simply said. There was something suspended about it, as if the dialogue never ceased, as if we just continued where we had left off every time we met, but there was also a great weight to the conversations, carried by Maurice. Unforgettable for me, therefore, was his reaction to a question asked after his lecture at the Marc Bloch Center in Berlin in November 2015, as to whether philology, the love of the word, the interpretation of texts, was not rather an individual business of the search for meaning. The political power of philological accuracy, Olender answered, could only be underestimated by those who did not know about the importance of every column, every comma in the subtle selective techniques of the minions of death.

¹ <https://librairiexxisiecle.com>.

Of course, Olender was thinking here of National Socialism, but also of the systematic torture by the French army in Algeria, which one of his teachers, the Greek philologist Pierre Vidal-Naquet, had snatched from obscurity and oblivion in a Dreyfusian manner with his books *La torture dans la République* (1972) and *Les crimes de l'armée française* (1975).²

As a student of Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Jean-Pierre Vernant, who had founded, together with Marcel Detienne, the renowned “École de Paris” of historical anthropology at the École pratiques des hautes études, which would later find its home at Écoles des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), and, of course, above all of Léon Poliakov, the pioneer of Shoah research, who had already collected countless documents at the Commissariat général aux questions juives during the war and later testified as an expert at the Nuremberg trials, philology for Maurice Olender constituted a concern for the archives of humanity—for its division and its destruction. In the debate about the return to philology in the 1990s and 2000s, he was one of those who neither cultivated a naive faith in philological education and its humanistic power, nor wanted to consign its traditions and techniques, its potential for resistance, to oblivion.³ Olender's activity as an editor of the critical journal *Le Genre humain* (Le Seuil) was also borne by this ethical impulse, in which he sought to deal with the ensuing cultural and methodological consequences and with such diverse and important topics as “Le Masculin” (with contributions by Roland Barthes, Nancy Houston, Lydia Flem et al.), “L'Art et la mémoire des camps” (with contributions by Fethi Benslama, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière et al.) or “Vérité, réconciliation, réparation” (with contributions by Barbara Cassin, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur and others).⁴

With his major book *Les Langues du Paradis. Aryens et Sémites: un couple providentiel*,⁵ honoured by the Académie française and translated into more than a dozen languages since its publication in 1989, Olender uncovered the

2 Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La Torture dans la République: essai d'histoire et de politique contemporaine 1954–1962* (Paris: Minuit, 1972); idem, *Les Crimes de l'armée française: Algérie 1954–1962*, with a new preface (Paris: La Découverte, 2001 [1975]).

3 See Markus Messling, Vorwort, in Maurice Olender, *Die Sprachen des Paradieses. Religion, Rassentheorie und Textkultur*, ed. Markus Messling, trans. Peter D. Krumme, foreword Jean-Pierre Vernant, with an essay by Jean Starobinski, rev. ed. (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2013 [1995]), 7–16.

4 *Le Genre humain* 10 (1984); *Le Genre humain* 36 (2001); *Le Genre humain* 43 (2004).

5 Maurice Olender, *Les Langues du Paradis. Aryens et sémites: un couple providentiel* (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1989); Engl. *The Languages of Paradise. Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009).

political force that a far-reaching shift in philological epistemological interest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from “Semitic” (especially Hebrew, Old Testament) cultural archives to “Indo-European” archives unleashed in Europe. Although Olender never argued teleologically or deterministically, his book is nevertheless a milestone in the analysis of anti-Semitic discourse in the field of modern philology (and beyond) with its scientific apparatus and claim to knowledge. It was to have a great impact upon my generation.⁶

Strongly influenced by Raymond Schwab's epochal book *La Renaissance orientale* on the consequences of the discovery of the “Indo-European” language family for the reflection of languages, religions, history and biology in the nineteenth century,⁷ an eminent, yet still understudied *œuvre* that could, in a way, be seen as a precursor of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, *The Languages of Paradise* is an elegant essay rather than a bulky study. This does not mean that it is not the expression of great erudition. Olender manages to gather the chapters around a leading question: How did the great philologists who dealt with the Semitic languages and cultures in the long nineteenth century and whose studies contributed to the shape the philological disciplines have today, deal with the concurrence of a new narrative on human origins and European descentance that developed with the discovery of the Indo-European language family? Reading through the works of Johann Gottfried Herder and Ernest Renan, Friedrich Max Müller and Adolphe Pictet, Rudolf Friedrich Grau and Ignaz Goldziher (and in fact many others), Olender shows how deeply European language thought is inscribed into a Biblical understanding of human origins and how the possibility of a European origin in “India” puts into question monogenetic thought. Languages, genealogy of peoples and their cultural archives, religions, and world history fusion into ideas of where “Europe” comes from and what presumably makes its “modernity.” In this power to shape identity lies the importance of modern philology for European self-affirmation and nation building in the long nineteenth century, which made philological

6 In 2013, Islam Dayeh, Ya'ar Hever, Elizabeth Eva Johnston, and I organised a conference in Berlin entitled *Formations of the Semitic: Race, Religion and Language in Modern European Scholarship*, with a keynote lecture by Maurice Olender on *The Fabrication of Origins: European Philologies Between Science and Religion*, that would gather some of these positions and was later published as a special issue in *Philological Encounters* 2, no. 3–4 (2017). My research project “Philology and Racism. Discourse and Counter-Discourse in 19th Century France, Germany, Spain, and Italy,” funded from 2009 to 2014 by an Emmy Noether Excellence Grant of the German Research Foundation, owed a lot to Maurice Olender's book and the exchange with him at EHESS and elsewhere.

7 Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale*. Préface de Louis Renou (Paris: Payot, 1950).

comparatism for long a paradigmatic discipline (*Leitwissenschaft*) that was not at all understood as “soft science.” One understands the political dilemma that meant the rise of a non-biblical Indo-European self-understanding based on scientific methods within a Christian culture that had for long regarded itself as belonging to a history of the Hebrew Bible. How is the idea of destiny transferred to new understandings of world history? What role do Jewish history and Hebraic tradition play in the changing scenario? How are the “Indo-European” and the “Semitic” related? Olender calls the ‘protagonists’ in this search for origins and historical truth “providential twins” (“un couple providentiel”). Making the formation of the “Aryan” discourse more and more visible, Olender does not judge on simple moral grounds. He addresses each work with subtlety and attention to the wording and the inner tension which drove it. But even though he does not extend the discourse to the political world of the twentieth century, one understands the deep divide of humanity that is produced within a European modernity that claims to be secular, but grounds its “higher Indo-European spirit,” allegedly predestined to achieve the apogee of human thought, in a salvific history and the dream of a realized Paradise. “In these two linked but asymmetrical mirror-images, these projections in which nineteenth-century scholars attempted to discern their own image, we cannot today fail to see looming in the background the dark silhouette of the death camps and the rising smoke of the ovens,” writes Jean-Pierre Vernant in his preface.⁸

Combining the history of language thought with a broader cultural history, philological readings with the social power of interpretation, the religious heritage with its *fortleben* within a secular modernity, *The Languages of Paradise* has inspired scholars from various backgrounds to revise the history of their disciplines and to question ideological formations that permeate the present. Aside many works on the history of philology and philological disciplines, one might think of Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin's *Exil et souveraineté. Judaïsme, sionisme et pensée binationale* (2007),⁹ which deconstructs the Zionist invention of a non-diasporic, new Jewish identity, and develops the idea of binationality against the claim of a messianic, monocultural State; or of Jean-Paul Demoule's *Mais où sont passés les Indo-Européens? Le mythe de l'origine de*

8 Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, xi.

9 Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *Exil et souveraineté. Judaïsme, sionisme et pensée binationale*, trans. from Hebrew Catherine Neuve-Église, preface by Carlo Ginzburg (Paris: La fabrique, 2007).

l'Occident (published in Olender's "Librairie" in 2014),¹⁰ which puts into question the evolutionary theses based on the "Aryan invasion theory," especially the idea of the peregrination of a homogeneous Indo-European tribe from Asia to Europe.

If *The Languages of Paradise* is characterised by the insights into the political power of the comparative approach, it is also a commitment to the practice of deep reading, to which Olender ascribes a vital possibility for understanding and revising the philological tradition. He would later take the inner contradiction of modern philology between its historical political implications (as discursive formation and disciplines) and its potential for truth and resistance as the starting point for an unconventional account that is both a history of personal education and a history of scholarship in the period after the Second World War: *Un fantôme dans la bibliothèque* from 2017 is neither an autobiography in the usual sense nor a treatise, but rather a kind of Benjaminian essay in which Maurice Olender gives an account of his life as a philologist to himself and the readers.¹¹ The basic question that drives Olender is this: Where does his almost obsessive desire for the materiality of the text come from?

Maurice Olender grew up in the aftermath of the Holocaust in an environment surrounded by death. The first section of his book is thus titled *Cendres* ("Ashes"). "In such a context, the strangest thing could seem to be the joy of the little boy born of survival: I danced above the flames of those pyres invisible to the child" (15). In this environment, clinging to a Jewish scriptural and interpretive culture that was only orally transmitted gave support to his parents, who were not very well educated. They knew everything about that Jewish culture which they could not read. Thus, Olender developed an obsession with writing in an everyday family life of absolute orality. The material, the text, stands for the survival and recovery of lost lives and their stories. A deep engagement with the materiality of writing emerges, which creates clarity in a double sense: on the one hand, nothing can be hidden in it, the written lays down its own armour ("sa propre armature," 16), language reveals everything; on the other hand, however, there is no "spirit" (*Geist*) behind the letter, not the Christian dualism that had been held against Judaism for centuries as an accusation of a religion of rites, law, and spiritlessness: "A spiritual materialism

10 Jean-Paul Demoule, *Mais où sont passés les Indo-Européens? Le mythe de l'origine de l'Occident*. La Librairie du XXI^e siècle (Paris: Le Seuil, 2014).

11 Maurice Olender, *Un fantôme dans la bibliothèque*. La Librairie du XXI^e siècle (Paris: Le Seuil, 2017, my translation).

of this kind, in the technical sense of the term, assumes that no ‘spirit’ can separate itself from the ‘letter’ any more than the soul can separate itself from the living body” (17).

A student of archaeology, classical philology, and religious studies, Maurice Olender never forgot this core of his thinking throughout his brilliant career, from being a student at the École normale supérieure (Ulm) to several guest professorships in Zurich, Princeton, Jerusalem, and elsewhere. The philologist’s task was to make an afterlife possible by working on textual remains and by producing archives in the first place. *Matériaux du rêve* (“Dream Materials”) is in this sense the first, most important chapter of *Un fantôme dans la bibliothèque*. As a “minimum level of social contact” (60), work on the archives thus stood against the extinction of civilisation (40f.). In this spirit, Maurice Olender bequeathed his own estate to the Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine (IMEC) already during his lifetime.¹² At the same time, he was aware of the fact that his existential project collided with an enormous silence, which he sought to understand through an analysis of the positions of Martin Heidegger, Reinhart Koselleck, and Günter Grass, and with which he even confronted the influential founder of the so-called School of Constance and the former ss-officer Hans-Robert Jauss during his lifetime.¹³

In this sense, for Olender the philologist’s task did not consist solely of editing, sorting, and archiving. The scholar lost the confidence of the child in the written word insofar as he increasingly recognised the political function of cultural archives. Had the turn to “Indo-Aryan” ideology in the nineteenth century not been one of the essential reasons for the splitting off of Jewish culture—and, thinking for instance of Renan, of “Semitic” cultures more broadly—in European thought and self-understanding? And had philological arguments based on the analysis of language structures, the character of texts, and the understanding of historicity not been used to ascribe aptitude for higher spirituality to the “Indo-European” cultural world, while a non-dynamic materialism and an inability to tell the ‘truth’ were ascribed to the Jewish tradition? This is what the ghost in the library receives its semantic depth from: starting from the spirits of the lost inhabiting the imagination of the survivors, passing by the spiritual meaning of writing, up to the ghosts summoned by a monumental philology.

12 https://www.imec-archives.com/archives/collection/AU/FR_145875401_P284OLN.

13 See the chapter “Le silence d’une génération” in Maurice Olender, *Race sans histoire*, revised edition (Paris: Le Seuil, 2009 [2005]), esp. 251–91. Engl. *Race and Erudition*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Maurice Olender remained *maître de conférence* (lecturer) at École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris throughout his life. Despite his international success, he was never promoted to full professor, “directeur d’études,” which at the EHESS has to be sealed by a majority vote in the general assembly. Olender himself seemingly avoided entering the race again after an initial painful rejection (which for today’s generation at EHESS is quite often the usual way of getting there). Against this bitterness, he positioned his own “academy,” his school of transversal questioning combining art and knowledge, a devotion to curiosity that took shape in his book series. It must have been a satisfaction to Maurice Olender that at some point everyone wanted to be published in it. It became clear that his “Library” towered over everyone. It had become his own way of researching, a kind of individual expression through others: “Above all, how can we fail to see in this seizure of the self through an otherness the way in which Maurice Olender expresses himself in his research?” writes Christine Marcandier in her preface to the volume *Singulier Pluriel. Conversations*.¹⁴ This shows Maurice Olender for whom he was above all else: someone who had transformed his woundedness, his melancholy into a quiet, enduring, creative power.¹⁵ His dynamic would open the way for others to grow with him. On October 27, 2022, Maurice Olender, one of the great European philologists, intellectuals, and editors, esteemed member of the advisory board of *Philological Encounters*, passed away in Brussels. We will miss his curiosity, wisdom, and friendship.

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14 Maurice Olender, *Singulier Pluriel. Conversations*, ed. and intr. Christine Marcandier (Paris: Le Seuil, 2020), 10 (my translation).

15 While he wrote in his introduction to Jean Starobinski’s book *L’Encre de la mélancolie*, which he published in his “Librairie,” that this was Starobinski’s life-time topic, it was without misunderstanding when Maurice talked about it that it was also central to his own existence (Jean Starobinski, *L’Encre de la mélancolie*, preface Fernando Vidal, La Librairie du XXI^e siècle [Paris: Le Seuil, 2012]).



Maurice Olender in the famous restaurant “Renger-Patzsch,”
Berlin-Schöneberg 2013

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