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Une rose des vents politique: The southern winds of Jean Genet's poetic compass

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Abstract

Iconoclastic French dissident, Jean Genet, notoriously channelled his hatred of the West as a way to discover the South. This article reads Genet's admiration for the Palestinians as more than just a foil to the imperialist hegemony of a French homeland he reviled; but as a relation of equality that debunks the oppression of North-South dialectics. Tackling Éric Marty and Ivan Jablonka's accusations of anti-Semitism, as well as criticisms of Orientalism, I use Genet's 1982 essay 'Quatre heures à Chatila' to argue that his Palestinian texts radically re-orient the political compass where the North constructs and reifies a one-dimensional South.

Résumé

Poète iconoclaste, Jean Genet aurait puisé dans sa haine de l'Occident pour découvrir le Sud. Cet article vise à montrer que Genet, en s'affirmant pour les Palestiniens, fait plus que dénoncer l'hégémonie impérialiste de l'hexagone ; il se place dans une éthique d'égalité brisant la dialectique oppressive du Nord-Sud. En abordant les accusations d'antisémitisme et d'orientalisme chez Genet, portées par Ivan Jablonka et Éric Marty, cet article fait l'analyse de son essai 'Quatre heures à Chatila' pour prétendre que ses textes palestiniens réorientent la boussole politique dans laquelle le Nord construit et réifie un Sud unidimensionnel.

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S'il me fallait figurer le Palestinien [...] je ne pourrais pas le faire sauf à inventer une sorte de figure toujours mobile [...] passant entre les gouttes comme l'aiguille de la boussole indiquant toujours le Nord, afin qu'elle-même – l'aiguille – ou que lui-même – le Palestinien – ne soit jamais le Nord.
- Jean Genet¹

Troubling a North-South Axis

“Tant que la France ne fera pas cette politique qu'on appelle Nord-Sud, tant qu'elle ne se préoccupera pas davantage des travailleurs immigrés ou des anciennes colonies, la politique française ne m'intéressera pas du tout”,² vehemently declares Jean Genet in one of his final interviews with Bertrand Poirot-Delpech in 1982. The remark follows Genet's disavowal of French domestic politics and his indifference towards the abolition of the death penalty in his homeland; decisions which bear little consequence to a writer whose restless nomadism has always carried him Southwards. Throughout the 1930s until his death in 1986, Genet spent his life fugitively criss-crossing through the Mediterranean, Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, exchanging the politics of his native soil for the revolutionary struggles of those without a homeland. In this late interview, Genet uses his torpor towards the political interests of France as a mimetic reflection of France's own apathy towards the North-South relations in which it is not only involved, but from which it gains its political hegemony. Genet's contempt for the monolithic, white-centric notions of justice exerted by those in the metropole, who myopically boast of an egalitarianism that is nonetheless based on “une démocratie contre les pays noirs, arabes ou autres...”,³ cuts to the core of his global political consciousness. His 'North-South' axis is inflected by a Marxist, postcolonial rhetoric of lateral equality

that excoriates France's vertical imperialism and ignorance towards the racial injustices posed by migration, social mobility, and national autonomy. As Genet strives to break the umbilical cord that binds him to his motherland, he will seek new ways of engaging in North-South relations by creating a subversively utopian poetics that collapses the hegemony of one side over another.

However, Genet's North-South politics are by no means evangelical. In this rare, off-hand use of the term, his language is remarkably detached: ‘cette politique’ gesturing to an organised structure of relations from which Genet will always stand apart; the passivity of ‘qu'on appelle Nord-Sud’ couched in an off-hand appropriation of a Manichean duality to which his writing has always notoriously been opposed. We need only to turn to two philosophical powerhouses who have theorised at length on Genet's resistance to dialectical thinking, to recognise that his use of such a binary is highly charged. Consider Jean-Paul Sartre's exploration of how Genet destabilises the hierarchical position of “deux termes d'une contradiction” by making them “renvo[yer] l'un à l'autre dans une ronde infernale” in what he calls “des tourniquets”;⁴ or Jacques Derrida's counter-argument that Genet's writing collapses oppositions not because his language is endlessly circular, but because his oscillations between two poles of an antithesis work to bring into relief the remainders that fall outside of those terms.⁵ It is precisely what is left over from Genet's troubling of the binary relations between North and South that interests me in this article, his writing not seeking to reinforce a Hegelian logic in which a dominant master subordinates a victimised slave, but to unsettle the very foundations that make such dominance possible.

This article studies Genet's displacement of the North-South binary in two distinct ways. Firstly, I

¹ Notes written in 1970 by Jean Genet, collated in Elisabeth Boyer and Jean-Pierre Boyer, *Genet* (Paris: Éditions Farrago, 2006), 300.

² Jean Genet, “Entretien avec Bertrand Poirot-Delpech”, in *L'Ennemi déclaré* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 227. ‘As long as France does not engage in what has been called North-South politics, as long as it is not more concerned with Immigrant workers or the former colonies, French politics doesn't interest me at all’, *The Declared Enemy, The Declared Enemy*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 194.

³ *Ibid.* ‘[A] democracy that works against black countries, Arab countries, and others...’, *Ibid.*

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet : comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 267. Translated as ‘whirligigs’.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Denoel, 1981). Derrida claims that Genet's writing is “imprenable” precisely because his language refuses to be totalised into any stable oppositional discourse: “Enfin presque (ah ! tu es imprenable (eh bien) reste” (45). ‘(Ah) you're (an) ungraspable (very well) remain(s)’, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 65. Derrida's own approximate language and resistance to any definite affirmations (presque, eh bien, ah), reproduces the indeterminacy he attributes to Genet's writing. We are unable to decipher firm differences here: the ‘reste’ functions as both a verb and noun, creating an area of uncertainty, a remainder from the binary, that becomes the very site of doubt that all of Genet texts seek to explore.

examine Genet's vehement anti-West, anti-colonial sentiments as the impetus that drives him South and that underpins his dogged defence of the Palestinian revolution. I evaluate the risk of romanticism in Genet's pro-Palestinian sentiments, while discussing the possibility of an objective political outlook when entangled in the geographic, legal, and expressive freedoms granted by French nationality. Confronting Éric Marty and Ivan Jablonka's accusations of Genet's anti-Semitism,⁶ I then turn to Genet's homage to the Palestinians ravaged in the massacres at Sabra and Chatila in his 1982 text 'Quatre heures à Chatila'. In this quixotic idealization of the Fedayeen rebels, Genet plays with an Orientalist mythology in which the North reifies the South and immobilises it in a one-sided image. Genet accentuates the artifice of his representation of Palestine by indulging in a highly aestheticized folkloric imaginary, drawing attention to the absurdity of Orientalism as a way of attesting to a reality that exceeds the totalising vision of the 'North'. In so doing, Genet spins round the cardinal points of a North-South political compass to produce a non-hierarchical *rose des vents*: a medieval dial that once pointed East, towards Jerusalem, is transformed in Genet's Palestinian poetics as an emblem of the mercurial and tempestuous nature of all territorial dominance.

Going South

Even as early as July 1937, prior to the publication of any literary text, Genet expresses an irresistible desire to migrate Southwards. He writes to Ann Bloch in Prague that "je vais partir dans quelques jours. Pour quel Sud sableux, pour quel Tombouctou vide de mystère ? Savez-vous que le grand mystère, c'est précisément qu'il n'y a pas de mystère ?"⁷ Mired in the stasis of a "un monde occidental [qui l]'a piétiné",⁸ down-trodden by a nation that prevents him from progressing, his own

steps take him South. Yet, despite Genet's desire to leave, his South is never reified into one fixed geographical locus. This 'Sud sableux' is an elsewhere, a 'Tombouctou' that demands no demystification from an authoritative exegesis, but which like its sandy composition, resists any firm ground from which to be overruled. There can be no homogenisation of a singular South here; the very question 'pour quel Sud ?' disintegrates the uniformity of such a label. Instead, Genet exploits the sandy cliché of the South to draw attention to its granular, atomised multiplicity; a diversity that refuses to play into Orientalist narratives of appropriation in which a faceless South lurks as a mysterious shadow to be unveiled by the North.

Such heterogeneity can be found in the sheer breadth of Genet's textual relations to what we might broadly call the South. His homoerotic portrayal of Barcelona and Mediterranean virility in *Journal du voleur* (1949); his inflammatory parody of race relations in *Les Nègres* (1958); the provocative, oblique gesture to the Algerian War in *Les Paravents* (1961); his copious political writings on the Black Panthers, the Iranian revolution, the conditions of work for African immigrants in France that proliferated in the 1960s until his death in 1986;⁹ his personal and political memoir on the years spent with the Palestinian fedayeen in *Un captif amoureux* (1986); not to mention the poetic tropes etched into his burial in Larache, a harbour town in Northern Morocco where his liminal tomb is housed in a Christian cemetery that sits contiguous to a Muslim one, facing the North Atlantic sea, poised half-way between Europe and Africa, and abjectly adjacent to a prison and a landfill site. Genet's posture as a writer is orientated towards the outcast, peripheral remainders that fall from any system; a position of exclusion in which he himself is forever included. Drawing on the arc of his own personal narrative, he rationalises his journey Southwards as a series of exiles:

⁶ See Ivan Jablonka, *Les Vérités inavouables de Jean Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 2004); Éric Marty "Jean Genet à Chatila" in *Brefséjour à Jérusalem* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) and *Post-Scriptum* (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 2006).

⁷ Jean Genet, *Chère Madame*, ed. Friedrich Fleming (Hamburg: Merlin, Verlag, 1989), 15. 'I'm off in a few days, bound for which sandy south, which Tombouctou devoid of

mystery? Did you know that the great mystery is that there is no mystery?', my translation.

⁸ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 240. 'The Western world stepped all over me', 206.

⁹ Largely anthologised in *L'Ennemi déclaré*.

j'ai passé une partie de ma jeunesse en maison de correction, en prison, à l'armée, quatre ans en Grèce, dans les pays arabes, le hasard seul m'a-t-il conduit aux endroits où je serais heureux [...] ou bien une poussée venant de moi me guidait là ?¹⁰

Arguably, what drives Genet South is just such a force, *une poussée*, that operates in both a horizontal and vertical direction. Etymologically, *une poussée* means both a "pression horizontale qui s'exerce sur les éléments qui supportent une voûte" and a "force verticale de bas en haut à laquelle sont soumis les corps plongés dans un liquide".¹¹ We can map Genet's political attraction to the South along both such axes. On the one hand, there is undoubtedly a vertical rejection of a North that has debased him. Brought up in care from seven months old in 1910,¹² he becomes the pariah who embraces his exclusion when asserting that "haïr la France, c'est rien, il faudrait plus que haïr, plus que vomir la France".¹³ His rejection of France is as intimate as it is emetic; this is not the hostility of an outsider, *not* the voice of "les exclus encerclés"¹⁴ as Derrida later describes the Palestinians in *Glas*, but an internal critique of a system that Genet must try to swallow in order to jettison. Consider his metaphor: he is unable to digest France and assimilate it as a national identity, but neither can he fully expel it as a foreign body. In his poetics, France lingers as an abject remainder of undegradable waste.

On the other hand, what eclipses the verticality of Genet's personal crusade against France is a horizontal ethics of equality that lies at the heart of his writing about the South. When writing *Un captif amoureux*, Genet is keenly aware that he is perceived as "celui qui vient du nord [pour] les Palestiniens",¹⁵ hindered with the ironic responsibility of being a spokesperson for "les

Français [qui] ne s'intéressent pas aux Arabes".¹⁶ Yet, his writing seeks to kindle an entirely new set of relations that removes him from any *de facto* position of authority. In recognising that "la révolution palestinienne [...] n'avait pas seulement changé les Palestiniens, mais moi aussi avec eux",¹⁷ his language emphasises contiguity over confrontation. This is a revolution that Genet inscribes on a profoundly existential level, rather than on an identitarian one. He describes how

en Europe, par une paresse innée, j'avais l'habitude de considérer la fonction plutôt que l'homme [...] chaque homme était interchangeable à l'intérieur de la structure où se définissait sa fonction [...] Sur les bases palestiniennes, ce fut le contraire qui arriva : je changeai en ce sens que mes relations changèrent, parce que chaque relation était différente. Aucun homme n'était interchangeable en tant qu'homme ; on ne remarquait que l'homme, indépendamment de sa fonction et cette fonction ne servait pas à maintenir en place un système, mais à lutter pour en détruire un.¹⁸

In a logic that recalls Sartre's way of seeing the *garçon de café* in *L'Être et le néant*, who lacks any real self-awareness because he seems too preoccupied with performing a role,¹⁹ so Genet is desensitised to the European individual caught up in a capitalist onslaught of social functions, rather than human interaction. The Palestinian revolution awakens him to the presence of a newly embodied subjectivity, prompting him to engage in relations with a renewed individualism that recognises the other *as such*. Genet attributes the real revolution as taking place not in any geopolitical sense, but within the transformation of his own ethical landscape. It is only through harnessing his own difference, of using his position from the North to bear witness to the South, that he acknowledges the

¹⁰ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 400. 'I spent part of my youth in a reformatory, in prison, in the army, four years in Greece, in Arab countries. Was it only chance that drove me to the places where I would be happy because of the absence of women, or was I guided there by a pressure coming from me?', 363.

¹¹ Entry 'poussée' in the Centre National de ressources textuelles et lexicales, produced by the CNRS and 'la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme de Nancy'. <http://www.cnrtl.fr>.

¹² Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 149.

¹³ Ibid. '[T]o hate France is nothing, you have to do more than hate, more than loathe France', 125.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Denoël, 1981), 45. '[E]ncircled outcasts', 36.

¹⁵ Jean Genet, *Un captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) 208. '[W]ith the Palestinians someone from the north', *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), 174.

¹⁶ Ibid., 209. '[T]he French aren't interested in the Arabs', Ibid.

¹⁷ Jean Genet, "Un texte retrouvé de Jean Genet" in *Genet à Chatila* (Paris: Solin, 1992), 98. 'The Palestinian revolution didn't just change the Palestinians, but me along with them', my translation.

¹⁸ Ibid. '[I]n Europe, because of an intrinsic sense of inertia, I used to consider the role rather than the person ... everyone was interchangeable within the structure that defined their function [...] In the Palestinian camps, it was quite the opposite: I changed insofar as my relations changed, because each relationship was different. No one was interchangeable; you noticed only the person, regardless of their function and this function was not used to maintain a system, but to fight to destroy it', my translation.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 95.

singularity of individual difference more generally. The transposable nature of humans in a vertical system of utility, function, and dominance, becomes the horizontal equality of those serving to break apart such power relations. It is in these terms that Genet experiences the Palestinian revolution as a personal metamorphosis: “[l]a révolution palestinienne a instauré de nouveaux types de relations qui m’ont changé et, en ce sens, la révolution palestinienne est ma révolution”.²⁰ Writing about the South becomes a means of writing about the self; not from a politically narcissistic position of self-affirmation through the objectification of the other, but as a utopian form of universalism. To cite Juan Goytisolo, a close friend of Genet’s buried next to him in Larache:

Il perdra le nord et le sud, il s’orientera et se désorientera *ex professo* pour tourner enfin ses pas, son regard, sa curiosité, son amour et son désir de connaissance vers une universalité sans frontières : celle non pas de nos anciens points cardinaux imposés, fixes et iniques, mais des trente-deux mille directions possibles d’une enivrante et féconde rose des vents.²¹

The heady winds that guide Genet’s political compass undoubtedly make for a mercurial political position: the metaphor of a *rose des vents* emphasises Genet’s resistance to territory, to rootedness itself. He may claim to Tahar Ben Jelloun in 1979 that “je suis du côté de ceux qui cherchent un territoire bien que je refuse d’en avoir un”,²² but he also makes clear that “le jour où les Palestiniens seront institutionnalisés, je ne serai plus de leur côté. Le jour où les Palestiniens deviendront une nation comme une autre nation, je ne serai plus là”.²³ The anaphora of *le jour où* announces not only Genet’s inevitable betrayal of any professed allegiance, but renders it an entirely necessary treachery if we follow Leo Bersani’s logic that “he is

uninterested in any redeployment or resignification of dominant terms that would address the dominant culture”.²⁴ Genet celebrates sedition rather than restoration. Thus, like the wind, his support of the Palestinians must be transient in order to uproot the mimesis of revolutions that are predisposed to repeat the same hierarchical values of domination ‘comme une autre nation’. Albeit paradoxical, Genet’s horizontal allegiance to individualism is dramatised by this anticipated betrayal of the Palestinians. In stating that “je suis français, mais entièrement, sans jugement, je défends les Palestiniens [...] Mais les aimerais-je si l’injustice n’en faisant pas un peuple vagabond?”,²⁵ Genet professes a contingent solidarity only to those who exist outside of the circuits of institutional recognition and validation (to borrow from Gayatri Spivak’s terms).²⁶ As long as the Palestinians remain subaltern wanderers, able to exist in absolute freedom from any nation-state that seeks to subordinate or reify them, then Genet can pledge his support.

Despite his ostensibly totalising language, what is so radical about his ethical position is that he can never defend any community, nor any individual in a social context, *entièrement*. Any alliance can be forged only with the “nomades, gitans, vagabonds” who are abjectly leftover from a society that locates them at its borders; this anti-identitarian abjection becoming the only mode in which Genet is able to find himself reflected as he insists in *L’Ennemi déclaré* that his own “situation est celle d’un vagabond et non d’un révolutionnaire”.²⁷ In his militant anti-essentialist mode of understanding identity, Genet will forever be politically wedded to the remainders of a social system precisely because therein lies their revolutionary power: only by being outcast from a political order, only by falling

²⁰ Genet, “Un texte retrouvé”, 98. “[T]he Palestinian revolution forged new types of relationships that changed me, and in that sense, it was my revolution”, my translation.

²¹ Juan Goytisolo, “Le Nord vu du Sud”, *Lettre Internationale*, No. 13 (Summer 1987), 4. “He will lose North and South, he will orient and disorient himself as a profession itself, turning his steps, his eyes, his curiosity, his love and his thirst for knowledge towards a universality without borders: one that does not adhere to fixed, unjust cardinal points, but one that welcomes the thirty-two thousand possible directions of an intoxicating and fertile compass card”, my translation.

²² *The Guardian*, 1980, no.15, “Genet on Immigrants”, 13. “I am on the side of those who seek a territory, but I refuse to have one”, my translation.

²³ Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré*, 282. “[T]he day the Palestinians become an institution, I will no longer be on their side. The day the Palestinians become a nation like other nations, I won’t be there anymore”, 244.

²⁴ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 152.

²⁵ Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré*, 254. “I am French, but I defend the Palestinians entirely, without judgment. They are in the right because I love them. But would I love them if injustice had not made them a wandering people?”, 218.

²⁶ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56. “I live[d] like a vagabond, not a revolutionary”, 34. See Brueton, “Drifting with Direction: Going astray in Jean Genet”, *Performance Research*, 2018, Vol 23.7, 81-88, for a discussion of Genet’s relationship to nomadism.

outside of its structural modes of acknowledgement, is there the possibility to resist the dominant modes of its epistemology.

For Éric Marty, in a much-contested reading of Genet as an anti-Semite,²⁸ such “lectures progressistes de Genet” are simply moralising misinterpretations, which seek to “conférer une visée émancipatrice”²⁹ onto his writings about Palestine. Marty reads Genet’s representation of the Palestinians in his later texts as a reincarnation of his depiction of the Nazi occupation of France in his early ones, in which France is figured as impotent and prostrate before the eroticised virility of the Nazi soldiers. For him, Genet’s glorification of Palestine is simply a foil for the gratification brought by the subjugation of the North more broadly. In a line of argument that not only silences the voices of the South that Genet’s writing strives to make heard, but which obliterates the specificity of their cause, Marty’s Eurocentrism conflates two wildly different manifestations of political rebellion. He contends that

Genet est contre le Pouvoir et pour la Puissance, contre Israël et pour la Puissance, telle la Puissance solaire des bataillons de « guerriers beaux et blonds » de l’armée nazie que, dans le *captif amoureux* [sic], il continue de chanter, fasciné par ces provocateurs d’Exode, où les Français sont vus par Genet « de dos » couchés devant des « guerriers beaux et blonds » : « Un peuple de dos, des dos qui courent, pris entre tant de soleils : celui de juin, du Sud, l’astre allemand » Il n’y a, on s’en rend compte peu à peu, de Palestine qu’une Palestine allemande, qu’une Palestine nazie.³⁰

Marty’s distinction between *pouvoir* and *puissance* offers a subtle, faithful reading of Genet’s politics. Genet does stand anathema to any political or cultural sovereignty that is protected by the

impersonal authority of ‘power’; just as much as he fetishizes the vigour and force of rebellion. But, Marty’s series of equations quickly derail: attributing Power to France and physical might to the tyranny of the Nazis, he then constructs a parallel relation in which Israel is the Power terrorised by a Palestinian aggressor; a potent vitality that, he believes, titillates Genet because of a homosexual fascination with the process of absolute domination itself. Marty distorts Genet’s hatred of Power to place him “du côté de la domination monstrueuse”,³¹ in a sadomasochistic construction of power relations that locks Genet into the conventional oppositional logic of victim/oppressor in which the political supremacy of the North must be *overpowered*, made to run to the South, to the Sun, humiliated and debased. In suggesting that Palestine is purely an extension of the erotic power that Genet ascribes to Aryan Nazi soldiers that force his homeland into surrender, not only does Marty whitewash any cultural difference between Palestine and the Third Reich, but he fabricates an ersatz South that can only be an image of the North, extant in the wake of its oppression or conditioned by its models of revolution.

Genet’s figuration of the French ‘de dos’ undoubtedly eroticises their subjugation: “la France se coucha”,³² evoking both a political and sexual submission; personifying a nation without the upper hand, unable to consider itself upstanding. However, by imagining France fleeing to the South, Genet does not reverse or reinstate the hierarchy he has just collapsed. Rather, he crafts a radical image of equality between the French during the German Occupation and the Palestinians.

²⁸ Such a label responds to Jean-Paul Sartre’s exploration of Genet as role-playing the anti-Semite. Sartre suggests that Genet recognizes the Jewish plight of being a nomadic victim and suggests that this uncomfortable familiarity forces him into a rivalry: “Ce qui répugne à Genet chez l’Israélite, c’est qu’il retrouve en lui sa propre situation” *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 230. While Ivan Jablonka and Éric Marty use Sartre to justify their reading of Genet’s anti-Semitism, it has been vigorously disputed by: Rene de Ceccatè, ‘Jean Genet antisémite ? sur une tenace rumeur’, *Critique*, November 2006, no. 714 (Paris: Minuit, 2006) 895-91; Carl Lavery *The politics of Jean Genet’s late theatre: Spaces of revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Hadrien Laroche, *Le Dernier Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 1997); Mairéad Hanrahan, ‘Jean Genet: Une écriture retorse: la réponse de Jean Genet à ses juges’, *French Studies*, Vol 68.4, October 2014, 510-525.

²⁹ Éric Marty, *Jean Genet, post-scriptum* (Paris: Verdier, 2006), 11. ‘Lend an emancipatory objective’, my translation.

³⁰ Éric Marty, ‘Jean Genet à Chatila’, *Les Temps Modernes* 2003/1, no. 622, 2-72, 37. (Marty cites *Un captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 454). ‘Genet is against Power, thus against Israel. But he is in favor of force, such as the force of the sun embodied by the battalions of “handsome blond warriors” of the Nazi army. In *Prisoner of Love*, the fascination hasn’t ceased; Genet continues to sing the praises of those who made the French take to their heels in the so-called exodus of 1940, when refugees fled west and south in advance of the German armies: “I saw a whole nation from behind, saw their backs running away, caught between the sun of June, of the south, of the German star”. We come to realize that the sole Palestine for Genet is a German Palestine, a Nazi Palestine’, *Radical French Thought and the Return of the “Jewish Question”*, trans. Alan Astro (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36. ‘[O]n the side of a monstrous form of domination’, *Ibid.*

³² Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, 454. ‘France cringed before them’, 387.

Fiers de leurs colonies, les fiers Français étant devenus leurs propres travailleurs immigrés. Ils en avaient la grisaille, et même lors de courts moments, la grâce. Mousse, lichen, herbe, quelques églantines capables de soulever des dalles de granit rouge étaient l'image du peuple palestinien qui sortait un peu partout des fissures... Car s'il me faudra dire pourquoi j'allai avec les feddayin, que j'en arrive à cette ultime raison : par jeu.³³

Genet's terms perfectly recall the quotation with which this article began. The French are cast as the very immigrant workers they ignore; the fricative sounds of Genet's contempt rasping through the sentence as he concocts their hubristic fall from grace. Despite his antipathy, there is no suggestion of a role-reversal in this logic, but, rather, the insistence on a new-found humility and grace forged from the recognition of a profound humanity found only in acute debasement. He describes "une dame, bijoux aux doigts, aux poignets, aux oreilles, au cou, prenait soin de deux enfants pauvres et méchants" and "dans le même wagon de deuxième classe, un monsieur décoré de divers ordres, coiffé d'un chapeau Eden, soignant avec égards un vieillard pauvre, fourbu blessé et sale".³⁴ Adorned with the trappings of material affluence, Genet's divests his invented French characters of any self-aggrandizement in order to forge a series of new relations that intersect across age, status, health, wealth, and virtue. In their new-found abject exile, Genet glorifies the French, figuring them as stitching together a new ethics of equality "nœud après nœud".³⁵ Alongside this, Genet depicts the image of the Palestinians becoming visible in the undergrowth. Reminiscent of the insurgent rhetoric of the infamous slogan from the student revolution of May 1968, 'sous les pavés, la plage', Genet's vegetal symbolism lends the Palestinians the space to emerge from their downtrodden state to a natural burgeoning through the paving stones

of oppression. The moss, lichen, grass, and wild roses are age-old organisms that belong to the environment in which they grow; the metaphor testifying to Genet's recognition that there is an intrinsically organic, unforced and unstoppable impetus behind the Palestinian desire to be seen spread across the surface of the very land from which they have always stemmed.

It is only in the juxtaposition of his transformation of both France and Palestine, of North and South, that Genet's poetic imaginary recasts a political stage on which both are fixed in a dialectical logic underpinned by vertical oppression. If Genet is drawn to Palestine 'par jeu', then I find the polemic games that Eric Marty and Ivan Jablonka have denounced as anti-Semitic and anti-Western, to be motivated by experimentations with more egalitarian forms of relation beyond a straight North-South hierarchy. Genet is no moraliser who stands outside of his text from a dictatorial or transcendental position of absolute knowledge. The homophone 'jeu' calls out to Genet's own 'je', such that writing about the alterity of the Palestinians is as much about writing about himself. It is about finding new ways to make manifest the universal parity he encounters within the homeland he rejects, when his gaze falls upon an abject other on a train passing through different villages across Southern France, and he realises that "tout homme est tout homme et moi comme tous les autres".³⁶

Overtuning Orientalism?

Naturally, we must be critical of the stance of a writer whose voice is self-avowedly inflected by "l'aisance d'un Occidental qui dispose de temps, d'espace, de mobilité".³⁷ To strive for such an "identité universelle à tous les hommes",³⁸ runs the

³³ Ibid., 455. "The French, so proud of their colonies, became their own immigrant workers. They had the same greyness, and sometimes, briefly, the same grace. Moss, lichen, grass, a few dog roses capable of pushing up through red granite were an image of the Palestinian people breaking out everywhere through the cracks. If I have to say why I went with the fedayeen, I find the ultimate explanation is that I went for fun", 388.

³⁴ Ibid. "A lady with jewels on her fingers, wrists, neck and ears, was looking after two poor and naughty children. In the same second-class carriage, a gentleman wearing an Anthony Eden hat and a number of decorations was carefully tending a poor old man who was injured, exhausted and dirty", 387.

³⁵ Ibid. 'stitch after stitch', my translation.

³⁶ Jean Genet, *Œuvres Complètes IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 30-31. "[E]ach man is every other man and myself like all the others", *Fragments of the artwork* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 101. For an analysis of how this resonates with Genet's Palestinian politics, see Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity* (London: Verso, 1999).

³⁷ Genet, "Un texte retrouvé", 126. "The ease of a Westerner with access to time, space and mobility", my translation.

³⁸ Genet, *OC IV*, 22. "A universal identity with all men", 92.

risk of naïve idealism, or what Edward Said queries as a possible inversion of Orientalism. He asks

[d]oes his love for the Palestinians nevertheless amount to a kind of overturned or exploded Orientalism? Or is it a sort of reformulated colonialist love of handsomely dark young men? Genet did allow his love for Arabs to be his approach to them, but there is no indication that he aspired to a special position, like some benevolent White Father, when he was with them or wrote about them [...] In the context of a dominant Orientalism that commanded, codified, articulated virtually all Western knowledge and experience of the Arab/Islamic world, there is something quietly but heroically subversive about Genet's extraordinary relationship with the Arabs.³⁹

Genet's chronicles about Palestine are, however, exonerated by Said on two accounts. Firstly, as we have briefly explored, his writing is not crippled by the proselytising didacticism of Orientalist narratives. On the contrary, in bearing witness to the Palestinian revolution, Genet experiences his own personal and ethical awakening. He is the disciple and son, not teacher or father. Secondly, because Genet's depiction of the Palestinians is 'heroically subversive': his voice toys with the hackneyed, exoticized tropes of what he calls "un monde arabe conventionnel: *Les Mille et Une nuits !*",⁴⁰ in order to invoke the reality of an experience that is all the more authentic because it is mapped onto what Genet calls a "féerie à contenu révolutionnaire".⁴¹ His voice is legitimate *only* because it is fictional: he evokes, rather than unveils; tells a story, rather than imposes a truth. On the final page of *Un captif amoureux*, Genet acknowledges that his role as a *témoin* of the Palestinian revolution is to depict the shade omitted from formerly lurid colonial representations. In his aestheticized portrayal of the fedayeen, he defies the Western reader from immobilising the Palestinians in the flat planes of a one-sided image. He claims that "le témoin est seul.

Il parle [...] il ne répond pas seulement à l'implicite question *comment*, mais afin de faire voir *pourquoi ce comment*, il éclaire le *comment*, il l'éclaire d'une lumière qu'on dit quelquefois artistique".⁴² It is only by drawing attention to the artifice of his voice, to its folkloric make-believe, that he evacuates Orientalist myths of their power. Let us turn to his 1982 essay, 'Quatre heures à Chatila' to explore these ideas further.

On 12 September 1982, Genet arrives in Beirut at the height of the Lebanese war being fought between Israel and Palestine. Despite the promised departure of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation from an Israeli-seized Beirut, there nonetheless ensued two days and three nights of a bellicose massacre of between 1500 and 5000 people in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Chatila, at the hands of Christian militia sponsored by the Israeli army. Seven days after his arrival in Beirut, Genet is the only European to bear witness to the devastation. His poetic homage in 'Quatre heures à Chatila' remains a textual memorial to what was denied commemoration by any physical edifice, his words the "seule sépulture" to use Jacques Derrida's terms to the "quarante cadavres [...] qui restaient dans [sa] mémoire".⁴³ Yet to be buried by language also means to become immortalised by it: the text lives on through its retelling; the "cadavres pourrissants" not put to rest, but captured in the present tense of that decomposition so that they not only "restaient des feddayins"⁴⁴ for Genet who knew them, but via the more political paranomasia of that term for us, the 'feddayin restaient' – rehoused on the territory of Genet's page. This testimony plays with both connotations of the word 'rester' – both as detritus, in that his is a text of the human "ruines de Chatila", which leaves an indelible trace "où il n'y a plus rien"⁴⁵; and a remainder, in the sense that Derrida lends to the 'reste' in his *Glas*, in which he argues that Genet's texts refuse to be synthesised into a

³⁹ See Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 55 – 56.

⁴⁰ Genet, "Un texte retrouvé", 121. '[A] conventional Arabic world [found in] *One Thousand and One Nights*', my translation.

⁴¹ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 264. '[F]airy tale with revolutionary content', 228.

⁴² Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, 503. 'The witness is on his own. He speaks [...] doesn't merely answer the implicit question "how?" – in order to show the "why" he throws light on the "how", a light sometimes called artistic', 429.

⁴³ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 263. '[F]orty corpses remained in my memory', 227.

⁴⁴ Ibid. '[T]hey remained fedayeen', 226.

⁴⁵ Ibid. '[T]here is nothing left', 218.

neat dialectical system that allows us to mourn, to sound the death knell, of something finished or complete. As Genet's writing on Palestine makes visible the marks concealed by the "silence total" of the "Israéliens, soldats et officiers [qui] prétendent n'avoir rien entendu",⁴⁶ as he speaks into the wreckage brought by the "Croix-Rouge internationale [qui] entraine avec ces bulldozers",⁴⁷ he does not seek to fill the void of those silenced, but to bring the outline of that silence into even greater relief.

If Genet's writing on the Palestinians in Shatila is their only burial ground, it offers no ordinary resting place. Something unresolved *tombe* from the tomb he creates that leads to the renaissance of the voices of the fedayeen rather than their mausoleum. Unlike Sartre's canonizing approach in his imperious 692-page *Saint Genet* (a character analysis so totalising that it entombs Genet and paralyzes him in the silence of being "presque incapable de continuer d'écrire"),⁴⁸ Genet's eulogy to the Palestinians stages his own return to writing.⁴⁹ It not only brings back his voice in order to do justice to theirs, but, in a double rebirth, his fiction brings alive the contours of "une réalité politique et une réalité humaine"⁵⁰ of those Palestinians painted only by "l'enquête menée par Israël [...] qui voulait sauver une image".⁵¹

Genet's asyndeton at the end of 'Quatre heures à Chatila' encapsulates the three movements that inspire his representation of the Palestinians:

Officier libanais : Vous venez de là-bas ? (Son doigt montrait Chatila)

JG : Oui.

Officier libanais : Et vous avez vu ?

JG : Oui.

Officier libanais : Vous allez l'écrire ?

JG : Oui.⁵²

⁴⁶ Ibid. 245. 'the Israelis, both soldiers and officers, claim to have heard nothing', 210.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 259. '[T]he International Red Cross came in with its bulldozers', 223.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 22. '[W]as almost unable to continue writing', 12.

⁴⁹ Although Genet wrote several political articles throughout the 1970s, 'Quatre heures à Chatila' is reputed to be his first literary work since the publication of *Les Paravents* in 1966.

⁵⁰ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 271. '[A] political and human reality', 234.

⁵¹ Ibid. 'Israel's goals in its investigation [...] the massacre that] tarnished an image'.

⁵² Ibid., 263. "You're coming from there?" [...] "Yes." / "And you saw?" / "Yes." / "You're going to write about it?" / "Yes.", 227.

In seeking to recast the unilateral image disseminated by Israel, Genet also wields the political strength of coming from 'là-bas', from the North, to see and show a more vivid portrayal of events beyond the clichés of the Western press.⁵³ Despite his excoriation of the West, his initial description of Palestine is nonetheless constructed in a series of oppositions that are in danger of playing into the very Orientalist logic in which one world is eclipsed and then enlightened by the other. He explains how

[d]epuis longtemps, le monde arabe était présent comme l'ombre portée du monde chrétien : et, dès mon arrivée en Jordanie, je me suis aperçu que les Palestiniens ne ressemblaient pas à l'image qu'on en donnait en France. Je me suis tout d'un coup trouvé dans la situation d'un aveugle à qui on vient de rendre la vue. Le monde arabe m'était familier, dès mon arrivée, me parut beaucoup plus proche qu'on ne l'écrivait.⁵⁴

The dichotomised language of sight – *l'ombre/aperçu; aveugle/vue; parut/était* – does not depict the object of its gaze. Rather, Genet simply undoes those one-dimensional representations of Jordan, the Palestinians, and the Arab world by emphasising the act of looking, of visualisation itself. Genet figures the Palestinians not as alien caricatures of absolute alterity, but as proximal, familiar humans that bear a sameness to their foreign onlooker. His gaze does not seek to homogenise the Palestinian by making them into a likeness of himself. Instead, in a gesture that recalls Lévinasian ethics, he incites his reader to recognise the relation between spectator and observed, between European and Arab, as founded on an intimacy that can only be forged from our being "infiniment étranger".⁵⁵ This does not negate a sense of kinship; on the contrary, it helps to build it by affirming subjects as such. For Lévinas, there can

⁵³ Ibid., 370.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 'For a long time the Arab world was presented as the shadow cast by the Christian world; but from the moment I arrived in Jordan I saw that the Palestinians did not resemble the image that had been presented in France. I suddenly found myself in the position of a blind man who has just regained his sight. The Arab world that became familiar to me when I arrived appeared much closer than what was written', 331.

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infinité* (Paris: Kluwer Academic, 1971), 211. '[I]nfiniment étranger', *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 194.

be no objectification in this mode of looking in which “l’identité du moi enveloppe l’altérité de l’objet qui devient précisément contenu”.⁵⁶ Rather, it is by honing in on the face of the other’s radical difference that their selfhood is fully “présent dans son refus d’être contenu [...] Il ne saurait être compris, c’est à dire englobé”,⁵⁷ and consequently an intimate relation can be forged.

What Genet sees in the images of Palestinian soldiers published in 1971 by the French photography magazine *Zoom* is precisely an objectified lack of singularity. Their static depiction allows them to be ‘compris’ – both encompassed and (mis)understood – by a gaze that quite literally effaces them.

Les images, on le sait, ont une double fonction : montrer et dissimuler. Celles-ci s’ouvrent sur un tireur et son fusil, mais pourquoi ? Ensuite pourquoi tant d’armes ? pourquoi tant de photographies qui montrent une Palestine en armes et décharnée ?⁵⁸

Silenced by such images, the Palestinians are also effaced by the objects they carry: their weaponry becomes the symbol of their collective threat; this faceless ‘Palestine décharnée’ turned into a fallible body that is wasting away, skin and bone, detritus. Genet’s revulsion towards the American photographer ‘Madame S’ in ‘Quatre heures à Chatila’ who asks him to arrange the bound, decomposed feet of one of the bodies so that she can “photographier avec précision”, testifies to the false curation of a Western scene in “deux dimensions, l’écran du téléviseur aussi, ni l’un ni l’autre ne peuvent être parcourus”.⁵⁹ Where the image is flat and impenetrable, rendering the spectator passive, Genet engages in a physical relation with a reality that resists being captured by “la photographie [qui] ne saisit pas les mouches ni l’odeur blanche et épaisse de la mort”.⁶⁰ He constructs a depth of field only possible when

traversing the actual presence of that abjection, and thus in seeking to engage in a relation with the absolute abjection of the other, he also recognises them as subjects because they will not yield to our gaze. As Genet reminds us in *Un captif amoureux*, “sous tant de fantaisie, tout de même qu’il faut regarder avec défiance les photos des camps au soleil sur le papier glacé des magazines de luxe. Un coup de vent fit tout voler, voiles, toiles, zinc, tôle [...]”.⁶¹ His language of materiality renders the images of Palestine we consume nothing more than false garments, cloaking our eyes from a reality that we are unable to witness. Recalling the metaphor of the *rose des vents*, perhaps Genet’s texts offer the gust of wind that blow apart these veils, troubling the neat axes of an enforced opposition between the North-South and unsettling the grounds on which those relations have been cast.

Genet’s answer to the question, ‘vous avez vu ? / oui’, thus symbolises more than merely a visual testimony of events in Chatila. It represents an affirmation of the Palestinians as subjects via the intimate foreignness of faces that have been forgotten; faces which, as Genet shows, are ‘présent[s] dans le[ur] refus d’être contenu[s]’ by their Western caricatures. He catalogues the dismembered bodies: the fixed stare of “un boxeur noir” for whom “personne n’avait eu le courage de lui fermer les paupières ses yeux exorbités, de faïence très blanche”;⁶² the “visage rose – un rose d’enfant, à peu près uniforme, très doux, tendre – [qui...] n’était pas l’épiderme mais le derme bordé par un peu de peau grise. Tout le visage était brûlé”.⁶³ Even in death, Genet brings to life a portraiture whose colours lend an idiosyncratic contour to the flat fiction of photographed images. And yet, his description is already coded by the colonial semiotics of Empire in which the pink of the face appeals to what Salman Rushdie, Tahar Ben

⁵⁶ Ibid., 210. ‘[T]he identity of the I envelops the alterity of the objet’, Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid. ‘[P]resent in its refusal to be contained [...] it cannot be comprehended, that is to say, encompassed’, Ibid.

⁵⁸ Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré*, 89. ‘Images, as we know, have a double function: to show and to conceal. These images begin with a gunman and his rifle, but why? And then after that, why so many guns? Why so many photographs showing a Palestine armed and fierce?’, 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 244. ‘Photography is unable to capture the flies, or the thick white smell of death’, 210.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 245.

⁶¹ Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, 23. ‘We had to be careful not to let the ornamentation and elegance persuade us that the tents were happy places, just as we mustn’t trust the photographs of the sunny camps printed on the glossy paper of deluxe magazines. A gust of wind blew everything away – the canvas, the zinc, the corrugated iron – and I saw the misery plain as day’, 12.

⁶² Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré*, 259. ‘No one had had the heart to close his eyelids; his bulging eyes, as though made of very white porcelain’, 223.

⁶³ Ibid., 260. ‘[H]er face was pink – a baby’s pink, more or less uniform, very soft, tender – but there were no eyelashes or eyebrows, and what I thought was pink wasn’t the top layer of skin but a deeper layer edged in gray skin. Her whole face was burnt’, 224.

Jelloun and Genet himself have all spoken of as the “rose [...] qui coloriait la mappemonde et indiquait l’Empire colonial français”.⁶⁴ As such, Genet’s vision is imbued with its own *double fonction*: to recognise the individual alterity of the Palestinians, while exposing the horrors of a whole legacy of their erasure.

However, there is no victimisation within Genet’s vision. Rather, his testimony in ‘Quatre heures à Chatila’ rouses a more radical mode of sight, which shows the beauty of resisting the shackles of any repressive image. In parallel to the Palestinian revolution, he explores how

[a]vant la guerre d’Algérie, en France, les Arabes n’étaient pas beaux, leur dégaine était lourde, traînassant, leur gueule de travers, et presque soudainement la victoire les embellit mais déjà un peu avant qu’elle soit aveuglante, quand plus d’un demi-million de soldats français s’éreintaient et crevaient dans les Aurès et dans toute l’Algérie un curieux phénomène était perceptible, à l’œuvre sur le visage et dans le corps des ouvriers arabes: quelque chose comme l’approche, le pressentiment d’une beauté encore fragile mais qui allait nous éblouir quand les écailles seraient enfin tombées de leur peau et de nos yeux. Il fallait accepter l’évidence : ils s’étaient libérés politiquement pour apparaître tels qu’il fallait les voir, très beaux.⁶⁵

Those who break their chains, and who rupture the conditions in which they were humiliated, those who embrace a sense of self not subordinated by the other, but made resplendent in front of it, experience the transcendence of a freedom that troubles the terms on which a North-South dialectic is empowered. Beauty is not erotic here, it is transformative, forged from the political freedom of “une insolence riieuse qui s’aperçoit que l’éclatement, hors de la honte, était facile”.⁶⁶ It is this ‘insolence’, this means of constructing one’s own conditions of being, of knowing ‘le sens de

l’action’, or of having a ‘sens propre’, that bursts open that system of repression. Genet’s figuration of beauty is as revolutionary as it is evolutionary: only revolt can bring about the desquamation of a nation under oppression; this shedding of skin not signalling the birth of a new order, but the nascent process of coming into being, of the very taking form of individuality. Perhaps that is why the beauty of Genet’s resistance cannot be not reified into a transcendental image that can ever be attained or comprehended. At the core of this revolutionary spirit is an essentially human exuberance that Genet makes manifest in the image of the child, who “vivant dans des milieux anciens et sévères” channels a “liberté [qui] se fraye à travers les peaux mortes”.⁶⁷ Resistance becomes the image of life itself, vital to our evolution as we brush away the dead particles of political bodies that contained our existence to make room for the fragile and inchoate form of existential emancipation.

Harnessing this “beauté propre aux révolutionnaires”,⁶⁸ Genet thus troubles the very North-South binary in which the Palestinian fedayeen’s status as revolutionaries are forged. This is a beauty that cannot be located: neither as an image to be compartmentalised and attained; nor as an identity that can be subdued and then rejected. Rather, it emits the energy of an endless becoming free, “une beauté [...] pose pas mal de difficultés”⁶⁹ for any artistic representation since it pertains to the ineffable core that drives all children, all people, forwards. Thus stripped of any geographical or political locus, Genet attributes this revolutionary spirit to an ontological reality that can be found in the “impalpable – innommable – joie des corps, des visages, des cris, des paroles qui cessent d’être mortes, je veux dire une joie sensuelle et si forte qu’elle veut chasser tout érotisme”.⁷⁰ To return to

⁶⁴ Ibid., 267. ‘[P]ink [...] the one that used to color the map of the globe, indicating the French Colonial Empire’, 231.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 261. ‘In France, before the Algerian War, the Arabs were not beautiful, they seemed odd and heavy, slow-moving, with skewed, oblique faces, and then almost all at once victory made them beautiful; but already, just before it became blindingly clear, when more than half a million French soldiers were straining out their last breaths in the Aurès Mountains and throughout Algeria, a curious phenomenon became perceptible, working its way into the faces and bodies of the Arab workers: something like the approach, the presentiment of a still fragile beauty that would dazzle us when the scales finally fell from their skin and our eyes. We had to admit

the obvious: they had liberated themselves politically in order to appear as they had to be seen: very beautiful’, 225.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 261. ‘laughing insolence which realizes that, when shame has been left behind, the bursting forth of new life is easy’, Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 251. ‘breaking with the ancient order of things, a new freedom emerges through the layers of dead skin’, 216.

⁶⁸ Ibid. ‘a beauty peculiar to revolutionaries’, Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid. ‘a beauty [that...] raises a number of problems’, Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 262. ‘[T]he impalpable-unnamable-joy of bodies, faces, shouts, words that are no longer dead, I mean a sensual joy so strong that it tends to drive away all eroticism’, 225.

Derrida's reading of Genet's texts as 'imprenable', it seems that his writing about the North-South is itself inscribed in the very 'impalpable – innommable' energy that drives his universal vision of resistance. His writing testifies to the fact that no representation can fetter this ineffable spirit of self-realisation to any single image, which could be used as political fodder to create and maintain a position of power.

To conclude, I turn to Genet's own conclusion to his essay. In a defiant gesture of anti-Orientalism, he demands the reader imagine the real landscape of Palestine. He muses that "si quelque lecteur a vu une carte géographique de la Palestine et de la Jordanie, il sait que le terrain n'est pas une feuille de papier. Le terrain, au bord du Jourdain, est très en relief".⁷¹ His texts implore us to see beyond the fictionalised image of the South as a textual invention that "belonged to the Orient of Chateaubriand and Nerval [...] a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences".⁷² Instead, Genet depicts his South like the Jordanian landscape, *en relief*: not a superficial, flat imaginary; but a shaded, animate portrayal that demands we recognize the presence of a reality outside of a literature that can never capture it. Perhaps that is why, in a double bluff, Genet saturates 'Quatre heures à Chatila' with a self-conscious nod to a folkloric genre: juxtaposing the heroism of the Fedayeen to Achilles in the *Iliad*; referring to the mythologizing of "des Européens et des Arabes d'Afrique du Nord [qui lui] ont parlé du sortilege"; having "vécu la période jordanienne comme une féerie"; and suggesting he should rename the text as "Songe d'une nuit d'été".⁷³ By daring his reader to see his text through the artifice of fairy-tale, not only does Genet gesture to the epic timelessness of the revolutionary struggle he describes, but he authenticates the realness of the Palestinians who will never be diminished to pure characters in a text. Such an idea would be mere fantasy.

⁷¹ Ibid., 264. 'Any reader who has seen a map of Palestine and Jordan knows that the terrain is not a sheet of paper. The terrain along the Jordan River is in high relief', 228.

⁷² Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 3.

⁷³ Ibid., 263 – 264. 'Europeans and North African Arabs have spoken to me of the spell that kept them there'; 'I] experienced the Jordanian period as if it were a charmed adventure'; 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 228.