

Genet in Palestine

Inspired by the plight of the Palestinian people and shocked by the massacres carried out at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, Jean Genet began work on his final book *Un Captif Amoureux*. It was the coming together of his art, politics and humanity, writes Ahdaf Soueif

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When *Prisoner of Love* was first published in France in 1986, *Le Matin* declared that "Genet was assuredly one of the greatest French prose poets of this century, reaching the same heights as Proust and Céline. *Un Captif Amoureux* has all the sacred fire and poetry of his earlier works." Yet today several bibliographies do not list the book and even readers familiar with Genet are sometimes unaware of its existence. I was amused to see that when Compagnie Lara, a French theatre group, adapted *Captif* into a play and performed it in April 2002 as part of the Prague Writers' Festival (dedicated to Genet), the performance was mentioned in the British press as "a new production of Genet's last play."

In fact Genet's last play, *Les Paravents* (The Screens), about the Algerian revolution, was written on the eve of Algerian independence from France in 1961. Three years later, after the death of his companion of nine years, the high-wire artist Abdallah Bentaga, Genet left France (having, it is said, destroyed his manuscripts).

His relationship with his homeland had never been simple. Born in 1910 and abandoned as an infant to the *assistance publique* he had, by the age of 16, been jailed for petty theft. At 18 he was sent to Syria as a volunteer for the Foreign Legion, which he deserted eight years later, setting off on a "vagabondage" across Europe towards France and jail once more. Genet's extraordinary 1940s saw him in and out of prison while producing the great narratives that won him the admiration and solidarity of Cocteau, Sartre and André Breton: *Journal du Voleur*, *Miracle de la Rose*, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, *Pompes Funèbres* and *Querelle de Brest*. In the 1950s he created the plays that are his great bequest to European post-war theatre: *Le Balcon*, *Les Bonnes* and *Les Nègres*, followed in 1961 by *Les Paravents*.

"Obviously," Genet said in an interview in the early 1980s, "I am drawn to peoples in revolt ... because I myself have the need to call the whole of society into question." But if all Genet's preceding work subverted the values and

arrangements of society, *Les Paravents* was the first to engage with a specific revolt. Perhaps it was this that then drew other "transgressors" to appeal to him. Genet, as he said in the same interview, responded. He wrote an *hommage* for the French young revolutionary Daniel Cohn-Bendit in 1968, smuggled himself across the Canadian border into the US to speak on behalf of the Panthers at Stony Brook in March 1970 and, in the autumn of that year, fetched up in the Palestinian bases in Jordan. He was to stay till the end of May 1971 and then -- intermittently -- till the end of 1972. His involvement with the Palestinians is the story of *Prisoner of Love*.

But Genet did not, as it were, go home and start writing. Another 10 years were to pass before he started work on the new book. During this time he was to say in an interview for Australian radio: "I no longer have the need to write ... I have nothing further to say." Then, in September 1982, Genet (at the request of his Palestinian friend, Leila Shahid) visited Beirut and found himself in the middle of the Israeli invasion of the city. He was, it seems, one of the first foreigners to enter the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila after the Christian Lebanese Phalange, with the compliance of the Israeli command, tortured and murdered hundreds of its inhabitants. There, pushing open doors wedged shut by dead bodies, Genet memorised the features, the position, the clothing, the wounds of each corpse till three soldiers from the Lebanese army drove him at gun point to their officer: "'Have you just been there?' [the officer] pointed to Shatila. 'Yes.' - 'And did you see?' -- 'Yes.' -- 'Are you going to write about it?' -- 'Yes.'"

The essay "Four Hours in Shatila" was published in 1983 and in October of that year Genet began writing *Prisoner of Love*. It is as if, through the long years of virtual silence, everything was being saved up for this last book, which he finished just before his death from throat cancer in 1986. Serious and playful, romantic and unflinching, literary and factual, *Prisoner of Love* is a coming-together of everything that was Genet: his art, his politics and his humanity.

But Genet is at pains to point out that "I'm not an archivist or historian or anything like that." *Prisoner of Love* accumulates its power through a staggering display of leaps between times, places, styles and modes of consciousness. Taking in events from the beginning of the 20th century to the time of writing, shifting from polemic to lyrical, from exposition to prophecy, fusing disparate bits of the world into living images, it refuses to be confined by definitions or summaries. "This," said Genet, "is my Palestinian revolution, told in my chosen order."

His revolution is -- at the beginning, amidst the hills of Ajloun -- "a party that lasted nine months. To get an idea of what it was like, anyone who tasted the freedom that reigned in Paris in May 1968 has only to add physical elegance and universal courtesy." And at the heart of the party were the young guerrillas, the *fedayeen*.

The party, however, was being held in grim circumstances. Expelled from their

lands in 1948 and again in 1967, these Palestinians were refugees in King Hussein's Jordan. Radicalised by the Arab states' defeats in both wars, they had started to take matters into their own hands by forming guerrilla organisations. In 1970 there were at least five such organisations operating in Jordan and the king had started to fear them. Their raids on Israel brought Israeli attacks on Jordanian villages and there were several skirmishes between the *fedayeen* and Hussein's Bedouin troops.

Although Arab governments tried to contain the conflict, it escalated until, on 6 September, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), led by George Habash, hijacked three airplanes. They demanded the release of 100 Palestinians from Jordanian jails and blew up one of the planes -- after releasing the passengers and crew. On 16 September, the king launched a full-scale attack on the Palestinians. In the civil war that raged for 10 days, about 3,000 Jordanian and 2,000 Palestinian fighters were killed. It was at the end of this "Black September" that Genet arrived at Ajloun: "War was all around us. Israel was on the watch, also in arms. The Jordanian army threatened. But every *fedayee* was just doing what he was fated to do."

What they did was train, discuss revolution -- and make music. One of Genet's recurring images is his memory of two young fighters "drumming on wood, inventing more and more cheerful rhythms" on a pair of deal coffins; coffins that were clearly destined to be either their comrades' or their own, for "... nearly all of them were killed. Or taken prisoner and tortured."

The root "fda" in Arabic signifies something relinquished in the certainty of gaining something more precious: a ransom, perhaps, or a sacrifice. "What made the *fedayeen* supermen," Genet wrote, "was that they put the predicament of all before their own individual wishes. They would set out for victory or death, even though each still remained a man alone with his own sensibilities and desires." In them he rediscovered one of the central themes that had occupied his earlier work. In *The Miracle of the Rose*, Genet had written: "Only children who want to be bandits in order to resemble the bandit they love ... dare have the audacity to play that character to the very end." In the Palestinian *fedayeen* in 1970 he finds young men -- boys almost -- with the audacity to play the revolutionary to the very end. And with them, this "pink and white" 60-year-old French eminence, although he never thought of himself as Palestinian, felt "at home".

One of the unique qualities of this book is that Genet never exhibits any of the characteristics we have learned to expect from white men or women writing about Arabs. He has no inclination to "go native" but he never goes in for generalisations on "Arab customs" or the "Arab mind" in either his descriptions of the Palestinians or his reflections on them and on his feelings for them. More than that, his opening scene, where he finds himself sipping tea among the women in the camp at Baqa -- women who laugh and joke when he asks if their husbands would mind his presence among them -- is set up as a swipe at

"orientalist" references and as a joke at his own expense: "Something told me my situation was not what I'd have expected from my previous knowledge of the east: here was I, a man, alone with a group of Arab women. And everything seemed to reinforce this topsy-turvy vision of the orient."

From then on, in image after image, he fuses together his own French, Catholic world and this new one he is experiencing: the Bedouins dance, "twelve or fourteen soldiers holding arms like Breton bridegrooms", an annexe of the Fatah office makes him think of "the 1913 Russian Ballet: with five Parisian stagehands standing by, several Nijinskys in striped costumes flecked with moss and dead leaves waiting to leap on-stage in *Le Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune*", a Circassian village on the Golan Heights, after six years of Israeli occupation, like a village "in Normandy after the landing at Avranches. Looted by the Yanks." And then, in what becomes a motif of the revolution throughout the book, the image of the young *fedayee*, Hamza, and his mother "linked to that of the Pietà and Christ".

But if Genet was *bouleversé* by the *fedayeen* -- as Leila Shahid put it -- he retained a clear eye for the circumstances surrounding them: "[the *fedayee*'s] brightness protected him, but worried the Arab regimes ... What was it the Arab world so urgently needed, that the Palestinian resistance should come into being?" In training, not just his eye, but his heart and his genius on the Palestinian revolution, Genet also sees the world surrounding it: the Palestinian leaders who "serve two masters", the Arab rulers "faithful to America", America: "Does she support Israel ... or just make use of her?" And Israel: "If you're against Israel you're not an enemy or an opponent -- you're a terrorist. Terrorism is supposed to deal death indiscriminately, and must be destroyed wherever it appears. Very smart of Israel to carry the war right into the heart of vocabulary..."

And the revolution itself? "There's a small shop in Chatellerault where I once saw a knife as small as a penknife with blades that opened slowly one after the other and then gently shut again, after having threatened the town in all directions ... open, this small provincial masterpiece swelled up until its forty-seven blades resembled a porcupine at bay or the Palestinian revolution. That too was a miniature threatening in all directions: Israel, America and the Arab kingdoms. Like the penknife in the window it turned on its own axis and no-one wanted to buy it."

Time and time again as I read *Prisoner* I found myself wishing that Genet were alive today. As Edward Said wrote in 1990, he "fully intuited the scope and drama" of what the Palestinians were living through, recording "a seismographic reading, drawing and exposing the fault lines that a largely normal surface had hidden". And in doing this he was also reading the future.

It could be said that for Genet the enemy was always the rigid form: a movement that became a government, a revolution that turned into an authority. The

Palestinians were the antithesis of rigidity; he was captivated by the flexibility of their identity. It could embrace, it seemed, anyone who wanted to be part of it: German and Cuban doctors, a French priest, a nun, two young Frenchmen called Guy, a young Israeli who had renounced Zionism: everyone was welcome at the party. And -- as is testified to by Genet's failure to realise that the *fedayee* leader he knew as "Abu Omar" was in fact a Christian -- "Palestinian" always came before "Christian" or "Muslim".

Yet this openness itself, Genet saw, could in the prolonged absence of victory prove a weakness. In a passage just after the middle of the book he examines the French expression "entre chien et loup" -- literally "dusk": a time when one creature might metamorphose into another. For a moment Genet pulls back from his image: "In order to record the next phase of the story," he suggests, "perhaps I ought to draw back at first and take a run at it." What he is taking a run at is his fear of the *fedayeen* metamorphosing into Islamic militants; the "logical conclusion" of his feeling that "the expression *entre chien et loup*, instead of connoting twilight, describes any, perhaps all, of the moments of a *fedayee's* life".

The proposition brings "howls of protest ... from the PLO officials". But Genet's premonition is so strong that -- uncharacteristically -- he records the exact date of its occurrence: "But as one of their leaders told me today, September 8 1984, that such a thing was impossible, let's pretend this digression was never either written or read."

This remarkable passage is very much Genet at work. Like a miraculous street artist he beckons us over to watch as he paints prophetic lines and shadows on the pavement. The image complete, he walks away with a shrug.

But what he has to say is of tremendous importance and he knows it. There is no doubting that once again he has nailed his colours to the mast of the oppressed, to the "metaphysical revolution of the native". In this instance the Palestinian, as before it had been that of the Black Panthers and before that the Algerian revolution. Said reports that in Beirut in the autumn of 1972, speaking of Sartre's strong pro-Israeli stance, Genet had said: "He's a bit of a coward for fear that his friends in Paris might accuse him of anti-semitism if he ever said anything in support of Palestinian rights." Genet would probably not have been surprised to see otherwise admiring critics, like Edmund White, fearful that such an accusation might be levelled against him, seeking to separate the genius of the book, somehow, from its politics. Similarly Clifford Geertz (*New York Review of Books*, 19 November 1992) has written that "Genet is, for all his sympathy for the Palestinians' predicament not so much a partisan ... as a connoisseur of pure rebellion." Genet himself would have rejected such expedient distinctions. "It's not the justice of their [the Palestinians'] cause that moves me," he writes, "it's the rightness."

And yet, if the Palestinians found in Genet a passionate friend and a thoughtful

interpreter, Genet, writing in the early 80s, found in them the subject that would draw from him a powerful and layered articulation of the themes that had informed his work of the 40s and 50s: the heroism of the outlaw, the beauty of the constant, wilful overturning of the established order, the transfiguration of eroticism into chastity, the power of a non-religious spiritual life, the weightlessness of death, the continuation of a feeling beyond the life of the individual who felt it, and the tensile and creative relationship between the image and its reality.

This is a book about the Palestinian revolution (with some pages about the Black Panther movement) but it is also about art and about representation. In *Le Balcon*, *Les Bonnes* and *Les Nègres*, the central theme is the relationship of appearance to reality. For Genet the image is central both to art and to life. It can make reality more bearable and keep memory alive: "Every district in the camp tried to reproduce a village left behind in Palestine ... Nazareth was in one district, and a few narrow streets away Nablus and Haifa. Then the brass tap, and to the right Hebron, to the left a quarter of old Jerusalem. Especially around the tap, waiting for their buckets to fill, the women exchanged greetings in their own dialects and accents, like so many banners proclaiming where each patois came from." But its mask can also be used to manipulate reality to sinister ends. Genet cites the murder of three Palestinian leaders in Beirut by three pairs of Israeli commandos camping it up as ringleaded queens who "kissed one another on the lips to shock the bodyguards into thinking they were just shameless, giggling Arab pansies ... Newspapers all over the world described the assassination, but none of them called it terrorism on another country's sovereign territory. No, it was considered as one of the Fine Arts, deserving the relevant Order and receiving it."

Then, and most importantly, there is the image that needs to be created in order to convey reality, to make it, so to speak, real. "It's not enough just to write down a few anecdotes. What one has to do is create and develop an image or a profusion of images." And this is the task that Genet has set himself in *Prisoner of Love*. For an image, he suggests "is the only message from the past that's managed to get itself projected into the present". It is a measure of Genet's pinpoint accuracy, the hard-headed realism that accompanies his poetics of the image, that today -- two decades on -- the Palestinians are more than ever embroiled in an "image" battle, while Genet's friend, the one-time Black Panther leader, David Hilliard, is embarking on a fight to rescue the image of his group from a new and different group calling itself by the same name. "This is about more than the ownership of a trademark," Hilliard is quoted as saying, "it's about who controls and defines history" (*The Guardian*, London, 12 October, 2002).

In his 1982 interview for Australian radio, Genet insisted that the work he had done of his own accord -- the novels written in prison -- had been done in the certainty -- because of the certainty -- that it would never be read. His plays he dismissed as having been written to commission, except for *Les Paravents*,

which, because of its cast of 107 characters, he had thought would never be performed. In *Prisoner* the possible absence of a reader is at once reassuring and troubling: "This book will never be translated into Arabic, nor will it ever be read by the French or any other Europeans. But since I'm writing it anyway... who is it for?"

Sartre had written -- in praise of Genet's work -- that "he reduces the episode to being merely the manifest illustration of a higher truth ... He reconstructs the real on every page ... in such a way as to produce for himself proof of the existence of God, that is, of his own existence." It is not surprising that, in 1982, Genet brushes this aside with "[Sartre's] book called *Saint Genet* was really about himself". For in the work that he was about to embark upon, unconstrained and uncommissioned, Genet was engaged upon a project at once more artful and more truthful. The Palestinians, he saw, were no good at making images: "The ... journalists, describing the Palestinians as they were not, made use of slogans instead. I lived with the Palestinians, and my amused astonishment arose from the clash between the two visions. They were so opposite to what they were said to be that their radiance, their very existence, derived from that negation. Every negative detail in the newspaper, from the slightest to the boldest, had a positive counterpart in reality."

It is this reality that Genet devoted his final years to recording. He feared the revolution's defeat and "the evidence, rarely accurate but always stirring, vouchsafed to the future by the victors". Age and illness were against him. Pain was there too. In the last months he refused painkilling drugs to retain the lucidity he needed to create, for the future, his image of the reality of the Palestinian revolution: "Would Homer have written or recited the *Iliad* without Achilles's wrath? But what would we know about Achilles's wrath without Homer?" Genet, the great subversive image maker, knew that he had found his subject and his subject had found him.

(This is an edited version of Ahdaf Soueif's introduction to Prisoner of Love, by Jean Genet, translated by Barbara Bray, published by Granta, London.)