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Before the Ascendance of Mediocrity: Jean Genet's Politics of Writing

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In my study of Jean Genet's late work *Prisoner of Love*, I begin by analyzing and responding to the historically dominant interpretation, put forth by Jean-Paul Sartre and furthered by Georges Bataille, of Genet's writing. Both thinkers establish two ways of reading Genet across his *oeuvre*. First, they show a tendency to conflate the writer's actual life and the figure of the narrator, thus denying the ironic distance that for Genet is essential to his practice of cultivating his own fluctuating mythology and demonstrating the essential quality of social identity. Second, they assert that Genet fails to fulfill the criteria of committed political literature. This leaves, for me, a question, whether there is a possibility of an alternative to the logic of partisanship that grounds Sartre's and Bataille's evaluation. Paralleling the thinking of Jean-François Lyotard and Edward Said most specifically, Genet devaluates the authority of the spoken word (and its analogue in the history of philosophy, writing as the extension of that

presence) through the art of writing and its singular truth. This aesthetic product is opposed to the truth of a history that would bring the practice of the Fedayeen and refugees into the grand narratives of political superpowers. Through strategic use of the Sartrean myth that Genet helps to develop in his autofiction and interviews, the author is able to put forth his “emblem of the Palestinian Revolution” (*PL 204*), an image of Hamza, a Fedayee, and his mother, that disrupts the filial logic of historical discourse and has the potential, as Genet establishes, to survive the death of the revolution through its affective appeal.

In the following chapter, I focus on Genet’s concern, throughout *Prisoner of Love*, that the revolution seems inevitably to move toward the pursuit of nationhood and social order, thus for him relinquishing the inclusiveness and fluidity of its identity that for him gives it its value. The author maintains a critical distance and recounts the means by which the Palestinian community organizes itself through imagined relations to a past, present, and future. In doing so, he continually establishes the hierarchical boundaries that separate the Fedayeen from their leaders in the PLO, who interact on the plane of international diplomacy. Positioning themselves against America, Israel, the Arab kingdoms in which they are exiled, and, as Genet suggests, potentially their own political party, the Fedayeen have a limited relation through which to assert their identity in opposition to these others. Genet leaves open the possibilities for any number of betrayals to the liberatory conditions of revolution that would occur in the recourse to such identifying practices.

Finally, in my last chapter, after demonstrating both Genet’s specific use of his past writing to assist in his evocation of the Palestinians and his simultaneous critical distance in

observing their potential to betray their own revolution, I account for the hybridity of Genet's text, which blends Genet's idiosyncratic use of the autobiographical genre with, seemingly, the genre of political literature. However, I argue that the connection between these elements can be explained by Genet's awareness of the conventions of each genre. He reflects on the projection of the image that is shared by autobiographical art and the productions and representations of political groups, but does not attempt to follow the generic conventions of either. In response to Genet's evasion of the demands of autobiography and political representation, I pursue ways of accounting for his affiliation with the Palestinians through investigating a series of prepositions, suggesting that he may be writing *for* or *of* the group. This distinction is related to the fundamental argument of postcolonialism, that of speaking for the other, and also brings to mind the impossible identification with the other that has its transgression in "going native." I conclude that Genet ultimately maintains his distance from the revolutionary group, not as a betrayal, or only if betrayal is conceived as a necessary element of writing.

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Chapter One

Tracing Sartre's Saint: Writing as an Alternative to Commitment in Genet's Late Works

In the introduction to his biography of Jean Genet, Edmund White argues against a biographer's inclination to reduce the contents of Genet's novels to the brief outburst they represent chronologically. Instead, he expands upon each work, examining in what ways archival information contradicts Genet's cultivation of his own myth and, conversely, how his writings can assist in offering a biographical account. As he notes, "such a strategy would fail to make use of the information in Genet's books, and would ignore the complex, distinctive way that he 'fictionalized' his own early life" (xviii). White asserts that parallels can and should be made between Genet's autofictional writings and his biographical existence and that his texts contain valuable *information* for the biographer that helps to clarify what cannot be uncovered through the archive. However, White establishes that the biographical subject "Jean Genet" and the "Jean" of the texts must never be conflated: "[O]ne must never forget that Genet was writing fiction, not autobiography, and his account must be corroborated by outside sources". As Loren Ringer has noted in his work *Saint Genet Decanonized: The Ludic Body in Querelle*, Jean-Paul Sartre's massive tome *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, while acting as a biographical source on Genet as well as the entry point into his collected works in French, can be criticized for making the very reduction that White warns against. Ringer writes, "What is most striking in Sartre's theory is that he never differentiates between Jean Genet the narrator and Jean Genet the author" (44). Given that, as Ringer makes clear throughout his analysis of the critical work on Genet indebted to Sartre's interpretation, the latter philosopher's work has established a

canonical way of reading Genet and, moreover, an identity to ascribe to the authorial/narrative figure, Sartre's articulation deserves attention, if only as a formidable image to which Genet will respond in his later texts.

I. Sartre's (and Bataille's) Myth of Genet

As a way of locating the image of Genet that Sartre propagates, the philosopher's introduction to Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* demonstrates the construction of key elements of the Genet legend that the latter author will take up much later, in his *Prisoner of Love* and in interviews and essays. Sartre sets the scene with Genet in prison, writing (and rewriting, after the manuscript is destroyed again and again) his novel, in an extreme opposition to the society that has exiled him: "The world has isolated him as if he were pestiferous, it has cooped him in. Very well, he will intensify the quarantine. He will sink to the depths where no one will be able to reach him or understand him [...] we are confronted with a regression toward infantilism, toward the childish narcissism of the onanist" ("Introduction" 2). In the passage, Sartre reiterates several parts of the Genet myth that he explores in full in *Saint Genet*. By situating the conflict of society's condemnation of Genet the thief and the latter's perverse appropriation of this identity within the prison, Sartre suggests a sort of double origin to Genet's *conversion* into Evil. If one takes the philosopher at his word, the moment of Genet's confrontation with the judgment of Society (represented by the Morvan peasants) takes place at the moment of his first socially recognized theft: "The peasants oblige him to *internalize* their sentence: he is an *evil* nature" (SG 53). In the context of Sartre's existential philosophy, this is the fundamental moment for the young Genet, who makes the paradoxical choice of limiting

his range of possibilities to this essence of evil: “the *being* which Genet thinks he has received from grownups is *already made* [...] This complex reality has at least one simple characteristic: its being *is not in question*, it is stable and fixed, like that of objects. In short, it is a being *in itself* and *for others*, but it is not a being-for-itself (60).” Framing Genet in this childhood myth has the effect of, as Loren Ringer puts it, turning Genet into “society’s ‘absolute other’ [...] someone in society who is not attached [to it] in any way or has a relationship of reciprocity” (SGD 29). Sartre argues that the young Genet is forced into taking this relation toward society, as at every moment being its imagined unassimilable other. Furthermore, it seems that the infantilism that Sartre claims takes place in the prison cell occurs much sooner, during the first interdiction. Writing of the stand the imagined Genet takes in being society’s other, Sartre notes, “Some may regard this attitude as the defiance of the sulking child who boasts of the misdeeds of which he is accused. And what if it were? Does anyone think that this ten-year-old was going to react like a man of forty? Certainly, if Genet chose this defense he did so because it was within his scope” (SG 51). Despite Sartre’s claim later in the passage that Genet’s prison writings must be considered as the work of a man acting freedom, as shown in the quote from his introduction to *Our Lady*, for the philosopher, Genet’s writing will always be contaminated by this infantilism, a reduction of one’s possibilities to their essence that negates the potential for social and political engagement.

In his analysis of *Saint Genet*, Loren Ringer argues convincingly that Sartre’s myth of Genet, included as the first volume of Genet’s collected works in French while the philosopher was at the height of his renown, exercised a singular power over interpretations of Genet’s work for years to come. Ringer makes the further claim that George Bataille’s chapter on Genet

that closes his work *Literature and Evil* can be read in this light. Indeed, Bataille's writing is as much a response to Sartre's philosophy and the latter's use of Genet to illustrate those ideas as an evaluation of Genet. More importantly, Bataille accepts and uses Sartre's biographical use of Genet's writings, taking Sartre's evocation of an original crisis and Genet's subsequent pursuit of an evil ethic as his starting point. In fact, Bataille's claim that Genet fails to establish the sovereignty of communication (for Bataille, the conditions for political writing) is indebted to Sartre's work. As Bataille writes, Genet "requires a general negation of the taboo, a search for Evil relentlessly pursued till the moment when every barrier has been broken and we reach a state of complete collapse" (LE 159). Bataille's argument, that Genet's pursuit of an inverse ethic stays within the confines of the morality of Good, of social order, references Sartre's establishment of the paradoxical ethics of *untouchables*, who, like Genet, are outside society: "They admire nothing so much as the values, culture and mores of the privileged castes. They continue to view themselves with the concepts and according to the pattern furnished by their persecutors" (SG 54). This concept of the exception, separated from the relations of society but completely codified by it, has its exemplar for Sartre in Genet, who tries paradoxically to live out "this shaky concept [of Evil] [...] that the Society of decent folk has manufactured [...] for the express purpose of projecting it on others. Evil is what my enemy does; it is *never* what I do myself" (151). Evil is an uninhabitable, negative designation that refers only to what Good, moralizing citizens do not do; thus, Sartre and Bataille follow their Genet in his inability to transcend this order. Bataille argues, as Sartre will in his introduction to *Our Lady*, that "[i]n the horror of no longer being tricked he moves toward his last resort – he tries to trick someone else in order to trick himself for an instant" (LE 160). This claim leads Bataille into his argument

that Genet does not attempt and is unable to communicate with his readers, which parallels the claims of Sartre. At several times throughout his writing on Genet, Bataille identifies his concept of sovereignty, which is linked to an overturning of the values of contemporary society: “Indeed, the quest for sovereignty by the man alienated by civilization is a fundamental cause of historical agitation (whether it be religious or political, undertaken, according to Marx, because of man’s ‘alienation’)” (165). Here, Bataille identifies a legitimate, political value for pursuing sovereignty, the goal of a different social order. Betraying Bataille’s political intimations, Genet, the former claims, ultimately only has a superficial connection to sovereignty: “Genet’s attitude, eager for royal dignity, nobility and sovereignty in the traditional sense of the word, is the sign of a calculation doomed to failure” (166). Just as Sartre has formulated, Genet cannot escape his desire for the power of the all-too-human sovereign, and his pursuit of evil is merely a tricking of the reader and a failure of literature’s political significance.

After establishing Genet’s fatal instant in childhood, Sartre’s image of the author will continually be affected by his radical placement outside society. This opposition is especially significant in terms of how Sartre describes Genet’s relation to language and writing; as the philosopher notes in *Saint Genet*, “If we want to understand what he is today and what he writes, we must go back to this original choice and try to give a phenomenological description of it (51)”. In his introduction to *Our Lady of the Flowers*, a passage taken from *Saint Genet*, Sartre offers a complementary *description* of Genet’s writing process within his prison cell, a narrative that portrays Genet’s movement from solitary masturbation of the activity of writing. For Sartre, Genet has initiated the same relation to society in prison that he affirms in the

original crisis; just as he affirms the absolute otherness that society hoists upon him as a child, as an adult, he reduces reality to his prison cell and his fantasies: “If the world of human beings, in its terrible absence, is still in some way present, it is solely because this solitude is a defiance of that world” (“Introduction” 2). Thus, just as for Sartre and Bataille, Genet’s adoption of the negative identity of the Evil other is doomed to failure in its implicit relation to the Good, Sartre identifies in Genet’s choice to “narrate” his solitary life in prison a total rejection of the other, in this case, the entirety of society. His introduction to *Our Lady*, a microcosm of his canonical legitimization of Genet’s fictional *oeuvre*, begins with the assertion that, in the work, “[w]e do not even find in it – or at least not at first – the attempt at communication”(2), and he continues by following Genet to the limits of his pursuit of this rejection of what, for Sartre, is the purpose of writing.

In his logic of total opposition, then, the figure of Genet stands as the antithesis of the hypothetical writer of engaged literature in Sartre’s *What is Literature?* In this work, Sartre outlines the relation between writer and reader that allows for a relationship of political responsibility to emerge, as, for the philosopher, “although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative” (62-63). In response to the title question of the chapter, “Why Write?,” Sartre briefly outlines the writer’s desire to impart their singular phenomenological relation to the world, of putting order into the disparity of being an impetus toward writing. However, this “need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world” (39) needs a second term; writing is a dialectical relation which needs its recognition in the reader. In a description of the writer as yet without a reader that seems tailored for a description of Genet’s texts, Sartre writes, “if we ourselves

produce the rules of production, the measures, the criteria and if our creative drive comes from the very depths of our heart, then we never find anything but ourselves in our work” (40). As, for Sartre, the writer can never rediscover their essential relation to the world they describe through reading their work, they require another free subjectivity. The philosopher emphasizes that this relation between reader and writer must be one which each recognizes the other’s freedom, and describes reading as such: “the characteristic of aesthetic consciousness is to be a belief by means of an engagement, by oath, a belief sustained by fidelity to one’s self and to the author, a perpetually renewed choice to believe. I can *awaken* at every moment, and I know it; but I do not want to; reading is a free dream”(50, my italics). This ability to wake, metaphorically speaking, that Sartre describes is a result of the contractual relation respecting the other’s freedom. As a result, the written work offers a means for both reader and writer to map political inequities from the real world onto a malleable world, which can then be used to enact change in reality. As Sartre writes, “the objects represented by art appear against the background of the universe,” and the result of this connection is the possibility of eventual action: “this is quite the final goal of art: to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom”(57). Sartre concludes his development of the ethical relationship that binds writer and reader by emphasizing the purpose of the parallel between the fictive and real: “[H]ow could the writer, who wants himself to be essential to this universe, want to be essential to the injustice which this universe comprehends? Yet, he must be; but if he accepts being the creator of injustices, it is in a movement which goes beyond them toward their abolition. As for me who read, if I create and keep alive an unjust world, I can not help making myself responsible for it” (61). With his rhetorical question, Sartre establishes a moral

imperative for the writer, and thus for the rewriting reader, to observe human injustice and map it onto the fictional world, the better to mutually recognize it. Sartre's injunction is to move from this fictional relation toward a more just, even utopian society: "[B]ecause the author, with [the reader] as medium, has attempted to integrate [the writing] into the human, it must appear [...] as being shot through with a freedom which has taken human freedom as its end, and if it is not really *the city of ends* that it ought to be, it must at least be a stage along the way"(62, my italics). In illustrating the relation between writer and reader, Sartre establishes a practical definition of communication that is political and which moves from the page to the surrounding social world of which it is a condensation, as a means toward utopia.

Returning to his evaluation of Genet, one can compare Sartre's illustration of the writer-reader engagement to the description the philosopher offers of the novelist's movement toward writing in order to show the means by which Genet fails to fulfill his role. At the beginning of his introduction to *Our Lady*, after calling the book "the epic of masturbation," he writes, "The words which compose this book are those that a prisoner said to himself while panting with excitement, those with which he loaded himself, as with stones, in order to sink to the bottom of his reveries, those which were born of the dream itself and which are dream-words, dreams of words" (2-3). Thus, from the start, Genet doesn't resemble the engaged writer Sartre describes; for Genet, words are objects that are utilized to enhance his erotic pleasure. Sartre's depiction of this process is paralleled by his distinction, in *What is Literature?*, between the poet and the prose-writer and their relation to language. Whereas, for Sartre, "the prose-writer [is] a man who *makes use of words*" (WL 19) in order to establish himself and his phenomenological perspective to a reader, the relation for a poet is bodily and apolitical:

“[Words] are prolongations of his meanings, his pincers, his antennae, his eyeglasses. He maneuvers them from within; he feels them as if they were his body” (13). Yet for all this corporeal relation to language, Sartre claims, “The poet is outside language. He sees words inside out as if he did not share the human condition, and as if he were first meeting the word as a barrier as he comes toward men” (14). Sartre’s mythological Genet will take up this poet’s relation to language, their inability to utilize it for the purposes of signification and communication with others, because he has been banished from the social contract that language represents: “[T]he moment the child Genet realizes that the word is a ‘shared thing,’ that it is ‘socialized,’ he becomes aware that this socialization is effected against him [...] all his words are snatched from him! He will remain fixated in this childish amazement” (SG 277). As I argued, Sartre’s binary logic establishes the *infantilism* he later accuses Genet of in his cell at the moment of his *original crisis*. This moment of absolute choice, which represents the logic of a child and which Sartre suggests is later maintained by adult freedom, thus governs Genet’s activity and his relation to language.

The reader of Sartre truly gets a sense that he is performing an analysis on Genet through his texts, and furthermore, suggesting the impossibility of transference. Thus, he illustrates Genet’s writing process in prison, showing how his development of characters and scenes is part of his poetic relation toward language, both literally and ethically masturbatory: “Their truth, their density, are measured solely by the effect they produce upon him [...] Divine is Genet himself, is ‘a thousand shapes, charming in their grace, [that] emerge from my eyes, mouth, elbows, knees, from all parts of me’” (“Intro” 5). Instead of creating a work which has as a backdrop the real world and which can be measured against it, the characters and events are

subject to Genet's whim and his erotic relation to language. Sartre continues to find symptomatic images of incorporation that demonstrate, in Genet's literary creation, an inability to utilize language for the purposes of communication. Sartre again quotes Genet describing in his text his creation of a character: "For the past two days, in my daydreams, I have again been mingling his (made-up) life with mine... For two successive days I have fed with his image a dream which is usually sated after four or five hours" (6). Unlike the hypothetical writer of Sartre's *What is Literature?*, who realizes that he needs the reader as he cannot make objective the subjective process of ordering the world, Genet only resorts to language as a means to continue tricking himself, as Bataille would say. As Sartre writes, in a formulation that recalls his description of the poet, "The onanist wants to take hold of the word *as an object*. When it is repeated aloud or in a whisper, it immediately acquires an objectivity and presence that are lacking in [...] [t]he image" (14). In Sartre's depiction, Genet first speaks the words that he wants to stand in for his fantasy image, in order to imagine that these words come from another narrating his erotic act; when this isn't enough to trick himself, he writes in order to read the fantasy later and imagine it was written by another. Finally, he appeals to a reader, in the way in which, Sartre writes, "toilet-poets engrave their dreams upon walls; others will read them [...] Whereupon the words become huge, they scream out, swollen with the other's indignation" (17). In this relation to the other and transfer of affect, Genet seems close to entering the communicative contract with the reader, yet for Sartre, he stays within himself and his own desires, using the reader's voyeuristic gaze to heighten his pleasure. In the act of writing, Sartre claims, Genet comes close to waking from this dream of an erotic solipsism, and the philosopher finds proof of this in the reflexive comments Genet makes on the writing

process. This metaphor of waking, in addition to being a possibility of the reader in the normative relationship Sartre describes in *What is Literature?*, also describes Genet's experience of interiorizing his identity as thief as a child: "Then, at times, he would writhe in his bonds, he wanted to *awaken*: 'I wanted to back up. Stop! No go! ... I wanted to turn back the clock, to undo what I'd done, to live my life over until before the crime' [...] And then, one day, he found himself converted [...] Impossible to turn back" (SG 50). Just as, for Sartre, Genet is psychically unable to turn back from his "choice" of evil (As the philosopher writes, "He decided to be what he was, or, to put it otherwise, the matter was decided within him"), he is unable to wake from the self-serving dream he has created and materialized as text. Following his metaphor, Sartre classifies Genet as a lucid dreamer and his work as a "controlled waking dream" ("Introduction" 22) that uses the presence of the reader toward its own ends and thus cannot be conceived of as a text that pursues ethical engagement.

In studying the foundations of Sartre and Bataille's critiques of the early writings of Genet, one can get a better sense of the suppositions of their reading that, as such a formidable assessment, Genet will respond to in his later work, including his interviews and his *Prisoner of Love*. As I have shown, both Sartre and Bataille make no distinction between the figure of Jean Genet the author and the narrator/protagonist that appears in his works. At the beginning of his chapter on Genet, Bataille even claims that he will go farther than Sartre, arguing that the philosopher is too generous in considering Genet a literary genius: "[I]t is Genet the man who is worthy of interest, rather than Genet the writer" (LE 149). Furthermore, as Loren Ringer notes in a reading of Sartre's *What is Literature?*, the philosopher's theory of literary communication is based on the privileging of speech, of writing as a transcription of spoken thought: "[W]ithin

Sartre's non-apologetically logocentric view of literary creation, writing is man's means of naming objects and consequently, conquering the world" (*SGD* 34). This can be seen in the way Sartre traces Genet's phenomenological rise to writing, from the thinking of fantasy, to spoken language, and finally, writing as the means of finding the spoken word later in time and as if addressing him from another. Both Sartre's and Bataille's objections to Genet's literary practice (for Sartre, his use of the ostensible gaze of the reader of his writings to heighten his pleasure; for Bataille, his lack of honesty in laughing at the reader) imply that for both, writing and reading are corollary activities that require a space of equality to be communicable, and thus political. Thus, their theories of writing are part of the dominant tradition within the history of Western philosophy that Jacques Derrida outlines in his essay "Signature, Event, Context." As he writes, "If we take the notion of writing in its currently accepted sense [...] [we are] compelled to regard it as an especially potent means of communication, extending enormously, if not infinitely, the domain of oral or gestural communication" ("Signature" 3). He establishes that for this understanding of writing to be valid, one has to presuppose that it is the natural extension of thought and of speech as representing the presence of thought. He makes much of this supposition of extension, writing, "To say that writing extends the field [...] of [...] communication presupposes, does it not, a sort of homogeneous space of communication?". For him, such a conception of writing assumes that it allows for an ever-further extension in time and space of the written message, itself a representation of spoken thought, without danger of losing meaning. Finally, these presuppositions extend to the relationship of the reader and writer; writing implies the absence of the writer at the time of reading and the reader at the time of writing, but here, absence "[...] is determined in the most classic manner

as a continuous modification and progressive extenuation of presence” (5). Thus, Sartre’s and Bataille’s general theories of literature and their thinking on Genet’s work are informed by a tradition of thought that expects the writer to establish a travelling presence within their work, the better to address the reader in their physical absence.

As a result of their theoretical grounding, for Sartre and Bataille, Genet cannot be considered a political writer, for in their thinking on literature they develop an ethical notion of communication. Instead, for Sartre, Genet is a dreamer who comes close to but cannot awaken to the possibilities of his vocation, due to his unflagging efforts to will an identity of evil. Instead of using words to communicate his subjective ordering of the world to a reader, Genet reduces the world to the confines of prison and produces characters through a process of incorporating images, using language only as a means to prolong his pleasure. Bataille’s account of Genet’s misguided pursuit of sovereignty ends with Genet misreading sovereignty in its basest historical sense, dreaming of genealogical nobility, power, and riches. In his later works and interviews, Genet both utilizes and displaces this mythology of his pursuit of Evil, the image Sartre and Bataille have established of Genet as a dreamer unable to wake from his essentialism, a solipsistic onanist incorporating fantasy images for his own pleasure. Furthermore, in his concern over the Palestinians’ own dreams of base sovereignty, Genet demonstrates his aversion from such desires like the filial maintenance of power, wherein the refugees would take on the very titles of power that had previously oppressed them. In using the very identity that Sartre and Bataille ascribe to him in his late interviews and writings, Genet problematizes the mapping of presumed presence onto writing and demonstrates his own concern with the political possibilities of literature.

II. Genet's *Rôle* as Saint

If, as Loren Ringer has argued in his critique of the legacy of Sartre's Saint Genet, the philosopher's biographical exegesis of Genet's work has stood as a barrier to other means of interpreting the author's fictionalization of his own past, it is in part because of Genet's alacrity to utilize and build upon the mythology. As Gisèle Child-Olmstead notes, "Recent biographers have uncovered evidence that contradicts the myth of the abused and illiterate child that Genet propagated to cultivate his image" (44). However, if this new archival work has allowed for commentators to make new connections between Genet's writing and his actual existence, Edmund White suggests another point of inquiry, the writer's purpose in continuing to articulate this image of himself in interviews and texts. As he writes, "Genet borrows the prestige of the confessional autobiography. Within a book he may deny its truthfulness, even insist on its mendacity, but the whole project invites, and is sustained by, the credulity of the reader" (xviii). As White continues, he claims that Genet is aware of the conventions of autobiographical writing and the means by which identity is established and taken as credible by the reader. One can abstract from individual identity to collective identity, a major concern of Genet's throughout *Prisoner*, in understanding how for Genet, the discursive means of establishing identity is both a methodological and a philosophical question. Throughout his interviews and, as I show later, his late *Prisoner of Love*, Genet both utilizes the Sartrean myth and ironically disassociates from it as a means to challenge the mapping of speech and identity onto the art of writing.

In a late interview with Austrian journalist Rüdiger Wischenbart at which Layla Shahid, a member of the PLO, was present, the image of Genet that Sartre establishes makes an appearance in Genet's own language. Significantly, the interview takes place just over a year after the massacres at Sabra and Shatila, two Palestinian camps outside Beirut, in September 1982; as Albert Dichy notes in his contributions to *The Declared Enemy*, Genet agreed to the interview on the condition that it stay on the topic of the Palestinians. Thus, Genet's appropriation of Sartre's description and language is significant in terms of understanding the former's political relationship to such groups as the Black Panthers and the Fedayeen. Throughout the interview, Genet tests the limits of opposing his early writings and life to his late political engagements, as he says, "[t]o the extent that you can oppose the real world to the world of daydreaming" (DE 240). Indeed, when asked why he became involved with the PLO in addition to the Black Panthers and the Red Army Faction, Genet performs the same conflation of his life and work that Sartre sets in motion in the 1950's: "What led me to it was first of all my personal history, which I don't want to recount. It's of no interest to anyone. If someone wants to know more about it, they can read my books; it's not very important [...] my earlier books – I stopped writing about thirty years ago – were part of a dream or daydream" (235). Genet thus, within the confines of the interview, subscribes to Sartre's interpretation of his work and draws a contrast between it and what could be called his "political turn" in affiliating himself with the Panthers and Palestinians.

Later in the interview, however, Genet makes a statement that throws any notion of commitment into question. When asked about the necessity of the individual to submit to the revolutionary order of a collective movement, Genet responds (Layla Shahid beside him),

“Listen: the 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). When asked whether the Palestinians know this, Genet says, “I think that’s where I’m going to betray them. They don’t know it.” This disavowal on Genet’s part, his unwillingness to fully subsume himself to the mission of Palestinian nationhood, raises questions as to the type of political relationship he maintains with the group. Finally, Wischenbart is led to cite a previous interview of Genet’s, where the latter is paraphrased as saying, in the interviewer’s words, “[...] that you always lie a little when you talk.” When asked whether he was simply being ironic, Genet’s responds:

It was partly a joke, but deep down, that’s what I experience. I am true only with myself. As soon as I speak, I am betrayed by the situation. I’m betrayed by the person listening to me, quite simply by the fact of communication [...] When I speak to myself, [...] I don’t have time – and anyway it’s pointless – to tell myself a lot of nonsense, and I’m also too old to lie to myself. And it’s in solitude that I accept being with the Palestinians. It’s not when I say yes to Layla, yes, I’ll go with you...it’s not at moments like that. (244-245)

In this commentary that retrospectively hovers over the interview, Genet infects the speaking situation and his statements with the indeterminacy of irony. Building from a critique of the phenomenological situation of communication as spoken dialogue, Genet differentiates between his internal monologue and any spoken affiliation, suggesting that articulation of his relationship to the Palestinians must come from continued reflective work. His image is indebted to Sartre’s characterization of the imprisoned Genet building characters within himself and bringing them to the writing surface through speaking words of desire; however, as

a challenge to the transparency of his speech within the interview, his irony retrospectively problematizes his adoption of the Sartrean image to describe himself.

In his interview with Wischenbart and Shahid, Genet's responses lead to unavoidable questions in the light of his adoption of Sartre's myth, his claim of affiliation with the Palestinians, and his radical questioning of the possibility of communication in speech. In order to illustrate a distinction between his early works and his late movement toward political commitment, Genet's makes use of Sartre's myth, but this forces him to make a further divide between his earlier fiction writing and his later advocacy. However, readers have noted that "Four Hours in Shatila," the essay he published soon after the massacres, bears the characteristics of his literary style; this work, as well as his other essays and *Prisoner*, as Scott Durham has noted, "[...] is hardly a journalistic or political document in any conventional sense of the term (171)." Sartre's account of Genet's writing, with its claims that the latter wrote primarily for his own pleasure and not in order to engage an audience – a description of apolitical writing – is taken on by Genet himself in an account of his relation with the Palestinians and therefore lingers uncomfortably around the writing Genet produces on the group. If it is demonstrable that Genet often returns to the themes and images of his past writings in order to describe the Fedayeen and refugees, is this work thus apolitical? Can the reader take Genet's use of Sartre in the interview as ironic, in keeping with his distrust of dialogue itself? Can the line between Genet the onanist and "the political turn" be severed? Such a critical move would require a reconception of the term "political," in order to think through how Genet's professed affiliation with the Palestinians, perilously hanging on the movement towards recognition as a nation, can be thought of as political.

Throughout the interview, Genet makes use of the Sartrean myth to illustrate his development, from his time in prison and early writings to his late entrance into reality and affiliation with political groups. Amidst their discussion of Genet's essay on Shatila and, more significantly, Genet's conception of beauty in revolution, linked to a creation of new values after colonial oppression, Wischenbart asks, "In today's world – where politics is something that takes place between two superpowers – isn't that a vain hopefulness, with no chance, no real hope?" (236). In his question, the interview formulates a recognizable definition of political activity, as a specific discourse tied to relations between nation-states and internal to each state as the institution of political parties to which citizens subscribe to in shows of partisanship. Genet's response suggests a conception of politics that is more pervasive, connected to social relations and which thus avoids the despair of a globalized world: "You spoke of superpowers. It's true. But these superpowers leave a margin for certain groups of people to liberate themselves from sub-superpowers." Wischenbart's question and Genet's response indicate a way of conceiving political action as partisan, practiced by nation-states, and essentially static, and an opening towards another concept of the political. Genet's thinking parallels that of Roland Barthes in the latter's *Mythologies*, who in articulating the social practice of myth-making characterizes myth as "*depoliticized speech*." In order to clarify himself, Barthes continues, "One must naturally understand *political* in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in *their power of making the world*" (143, my italics). Considering the political in its widest sense, that is, in the range of human possibilities, and furthermore, in terms of the potential for subjects to change the range of those possibilities, draws politics as a much wider range of discourses than those of foreign

relations or partisan commitment. Further down, Barthes continues, “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (143). In considering dominant conceptions of the political, then, one can think of the way in which political events are framed, as discussions between heads of state or party leaders. Such articulations lend credence to the disillusion with politics that Wischenbart expresses, where what is lacking is the optimism of Barthes’ definition and its possibilities of betterment.

Wischenbart’s evocation of politics as a game between two *superpowers* and Genet’s search for activity on the margins is paralleled in the unattributed dialogue in Jean-François Lyotard’s “Lessons in Paganism.” The conversation opens with the first speaker attempting to gain a grasp of the other’s (presumably Lyotard’s) view of contemporary politics within an unnamed France. For the first speaker, the situation is seemingly thus, that for Lyotard, “[...] the narratives of the left and the right are [...] interchangeable, and so are the narratives of big parties in countries with a two-party system” (122). Furthermore, any of these political narratives is constrained by the mechanics of capital and of the historical failure of communism in Soviet Russia. For Lyotard, conceiving of the political as a closed system in this fashion is symptomatic of a lament for the promises of Enlightenment reason; as he puts it to his interlocutor, “you persist in believing in the Passion of truth in history” (125). His lesson begins with this allusion to Christianity; he argues that it is necessary “to be godless in things political (130);” and elsewhere, that “we still want justice [...] justice in a godless society”. Returning to the subject of a national political race, Lyotard notes that the contemporary moment seems to

be one of a simultaneous desire for a transcendental judge and a doubt that this exist; recounting statistics that suggest modern doubt in politicians to promote change, he says, “When public opinion is in this state, it seems to me that we are seeing the Western equivalent to the erosion of the great narrative in the Communist empires [...] If you forced me to say in my turn something about this state of opinion, or *state of narration*, I would say that the increase [...] of uncomfortable little narratives isn’t such a bad omen” (my italics, 131). Lyotard speaks to the seeming disillusionment with narratives of social progress that have their culmination in gulag narratives emerging from Russia, but which can be mapped across national political bodies and cultures, as evidenced by his interlocutor’s political despair at the conversation’s beginning. His correction within the passage to *states of narration* reflects his claim that politics consists of the circulation of narratives and their pragmatics, or as he defines it, “all the complicated relations that exist between a speaker and what he is talking about, between the story-teller and his listener, and between the listener and the story told by the story-teller” (125). For Lyotard, political activity consists in this exchange of narratives, in their articulation of their *references* (or real world events) that are reciprocally shaped by this discursive exchange.

Lyotard’s lesson in paganism in political thought parallels Genet’s practice of writing his political affiliations when the former philosopher considers how the power dynamics of this narrative exchange can be changed, from a focus on the transcendental reason of the state toward its margins. He reaches this through evocation of the same image that Sartre develops in relation to Genet, that of the prisoner. Lyotard observes that, despite the jailing of dissidents in *Party-states*, their narratives emerge to tell of totalitarian atrocities; this demonstrates that

politics in the Barthesian sense of social contingencies continues to operate across political bodies despite repressive efforts. As he writes, “the reason we hear them is that another pragmatics does exist and function; the ghost of a civil society made up of distended circuits and improvised modes of circulation. And what it talks about in the stories it helps to circulate is simply *the ability to tell stories*” (132, my italics). Lyotard’s description of a marginal narrative work that reflects upon the very possibility of circulating its contents in an exchange, “outside the tutelage of the narratives programmed by political institutions”, parallels Genet’s project; the latter author continually foregrounds his questions regarding his role or narrative position in relation to his affiliated communities and his filial connection to the West.

Continuing to develop his notion of the pagan in relation to dominant political narratives, Lyotard continues to utilize a metaphor that parallels Genet’s criminal vocabulary; in etymologically analyzing the term, he develops an opposition between *pagus* and *heim*, or between the disreputable border area of town and one’s home. He writes, “You don’t feel at home [in the *pagus*]. You do not expect to discover the truth there; but you do meet lots of entities who are liable to undergo metamorphoses, to tell lies, and to become jealous or angry: passible gods” (136). In describing this pagan scene, Lyotard gives an alternate image the reader can use in challenging Sartre’s dominant myth. Genet’s use of irony in the interview with Wischenbart throws his very adoption of the Sartrean apolitical myth and subsequent commitment into question. As Patrice Bougon argues in his essay “The Politics of Enmity,” Genet’s writing about the Palestinians in *Prisoner of Love* is marked as well by irony in a manner that deviates from the generic expectations of the *roman à these*, which establishes a coherent political worldview or truth and seeks the reader’s subscription. In both speech and writing,

Genet's ironic stance places him in what Lyotard calls "the ghost of a civil society", in the *pagus*, where inhabitants communicate "by using words that were openly intended to deceive, openly duplicitous [...] in order to produce certain effects, not in order to profess the truth" ("Lessons" 136). Yet, in the context of Genet's tenuous relationship with the Palestinians that he threatens to suffer should they become an institution, Lyotard's warning should be kept in mind: "There is absolutely no question of a heroic uprising against the state in some battle to the death, as though [the civil society's] relationship with the state was [...] one of symbolic reversion [...]. The only way that networks of uncertain and ephemeral stories can gnaw away at the great institutionalized narrative apparatuses is by increasing the number of skirmishes that take place on the sidelines" (132). In uncovering, beneath and concurrent with the disappointment with master political narratives and their unfulfilled promises, a political social order paralleling that of Barthes, Lyotard theorizes the political possibilities that Genet takes up in representing his relation to the Palestinians; in addition, he and Genet share the concern that such revolutionary communities will covet the positions of their oppressors.

Lyotard's observation of an imagined *symbolic reversion*, the desire on the part of marginalized groups to attain the power held over them by political institutions, is at the heart of Edward's Said's cultural critique in his essay, "Secular Criticism." Significantly, Said and Lyotard both use the metaphor of religious dogma as a means of illustrating generational maintenance of institutional power and the means by which such narratives can be disrupted. The tension between Genet's activity with and seeming support for the Palestinian refugees and his avowal of future betrayal can perhaps be better understood by considering his stance toward and writings on the group as an example of secular criticism. In his essay, Said gives a

historical account of how filial structures in society, most clearly the family unit within the larger community of the nation, have been replaced by what he calls affiliation, “a kind of compensatory order [...] a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or a world vision” (234). However, in his example of the U.S. humanities discipline, Said demonstrates how a community that replicates the familial structure of generational transmission also proceeds to exclude ideas and peoples that do not conform to its values. Defining the Palestinian community as affiliative, one could argue that the ambitions of Fedayeen and PLO leaders toward statehood contain the desire to exclude that has placed them in the position of exile. In his position as secular critic, then, Genet must “recognize the difference between instinctual filiation and social affiliation, and [...] show how affiliation sometimes reproduces filiation, sometimes makes its own forms” (239).¹ In engaging in this work, Genet refuses participation in “the transfer of legitimacy (239)” that a perpetual commitment to a cause moving between two valences of the political, from the community to the institution, would require.

Nearly all of the commentaries on Genet’s late writings on the Palestinians and his other affiliations address the theme of betrayal, a continual idea in his earlier novels and plays. While demonstrating his duplicitous (or, in Lyotard’s language, pagan) irony in describing his commitment to the refugees and Fedayeen during the Wischenbart interview, Genet suggests that he will betray the Palestinians. Yet, as Bougon notes, “Betrayal changes in meaning, however, according to whether it is a question of a private act directed toward a friend, or a public act related to political responsibility [...] in the second, more strictly political sense,

¹ In her work on Etel Adnan’s novel, I am indebted to Olivia Harrison, who utilizes Said’s notion of affiliation to consider a writer/narrator’s relation to political communities. Significantly, she considers how, through a narrative figure in the position of secular critic, “[...] the political can emerge other than in the warring binaries of friendship and enmity (2-3),” seeking the political beyond these institutionalized narratives.

betrayal appears as a more or less hidden, but originary link between enemy groups” (151). In this wider consideration of the term, Bougon suggests that at the future moment when Genet betrays the cause of the Palestinians, the group, in pursuing the power they were subjected by, has preemptively betrayed “[...] the idea of revolution” (152). One should also recall, in the context of the interview, that Genet holds opens the ironic negation of his claim to support the Palestinians, that for him, “[...] it’s not when I say yes to Layla, yes, I’ll go with you [...]” (DE 245). As Genet takes on the role of the secular critic, monitoring the ways in which the Palestinians as a group and as a revolutionary order moves between filial and affiliative ambitions, he must maintain the possibility of betrayal as an ethical imperative. As he states in another interview, “Writing is perhaps what remains to you when you’ve been driven from the realm of the given word” (193). Involved with a group that is itself between political institution and the pagan margins, between filial legitimacy and the potential of affiliation, Genet claims recourse to the ironic practice of writing and the very techniques that Sartre establishes as apolitical and self-serving, thus forcing a reconsideration of his *oeuvre*.

III. The Art of Writing and the Practice of Paganism

The interview that Wischenbart cites, one Genet had done in the mid-seventies with Hubert Fichte, sheds light on the distinction the writer makes between solitude and dialogue and allows one to consider the ironic indeterminacy surrounding Genet’s use of the Sartrean myth. At a point in this earlier interview, Fichte asks Genet whether he asking the writer good questions. The latter responds, “They’re good questions, but I can never say the whole truth. I can say the truth only in art” (DE 139). When pressed for his definition of the truth, he states,

“Before all else, it’s a word. It’s a word that’s used first of all to make someone else believe in your own sincerity. You say: I’m telling you the truth”. Here, Genet doesn’t offer a description of how the truth might appear in the work of art, only a negative definition of truth as an ironic distance in dialogue. Finally, Genet responds to Fichte’s insistence in understanding whether, for the writer, there is a specific difference between sincerity in art and in dialogue: “There is an essential difference. In art, one is solitary, one is alone before oneself. In a conversation, one speaks with someone” (140). When Fichte suggests that in writing, one appeals to a reader, as in the Sartrean formula, Genet assures him that he never intended to do this. At this moment, he seems to be adopting the very critique that Bataille and Sartre ultimately level against him, that he is incapable of the communication with a reader that engaged literature, art with the possibility to enact real political change is defined by.

At the very end of his *Prisoner of Love*, in his description of the role of the witness, Genet gives an account of how his art of writing may be connected to the political productivity that his critics expect. He blends his illustration of the witness in the courtroom with his own oath: “Before I started to write it I’d sworn to myself to tell the truth in this book, not in any ceremony but every time a Palestinian asked me to read the beginning or other passages from it or wanted me to publish parts of it in a magazine” (PL 429). His emphasis on truth brings one back to the possibility of truth or sincerity in art discussed in the Fichte interview. Here, Genet’s oath is made before himself, not to the Palestinians, but seemingly in solidarity with them, in that by writing, he is fulfilling their desire to publish his account of living with them. In describing the hypothetical witness, he continues, “He takes an oath to the public – to the court and the spectators. The witness is on his own. He speaks [...] The witness 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 [...] some light and shade which only he perceived”. Here, Genet gives an image of a witness who, despite giving an oath, is alone, and who speaks, despite his testimony being seemingly surrounded in the solitude necessary (as Genet has stated) for artistic truth. Addressing the seemingly paradoxical oath that both binds the witness to the public and places him apart from it, Genet writes, “Perhaps it’s to surround the witness with a solitude that confers on him a lightness from which he can speak the truth. For there may be three or four people present who are capable of hearing a witness” (430). Here, while paradoxically giving a description of speech, Genet illustrates his distinction stated in interviews between speaking and writing. In the courtroom image, Genet makes clear that the judges do not respond to the witness’ testimony; furthermore, the witness does not directly address the audience. In the process of the artistic act, Genet only establishes the possibility of a minority being able to hear the testimony, suggesting the fulfillment of the oath, a relation that closely parallels the expectation Sartre places on the writer and reader of engaged literature. Thus, in the last passage of the book, Genet gives a description of his role in writing on the Palestinians through the paradoxical description of the witness’ spoken address. This ironic displacement parallels Genet’s use of the Sartrean mythology of daydreaming, the world of prisons, and solipsism in seeming to erase the line between speaking and writing while actually clarifying the relation between writer, the Palestinians, and the possible community of readers that must occur in political literature.

Additionally, in the interview with Fichte, Genet draws a parallel between his discussion on truth or sincerity in art and in conversation and the importance of death. Abstracting from a

question on revolutionary slogans, Genet states, “[...] any person takes on his true dimensions once he is dead” (130). He explains this statement by connecting his thoughts on death to the question of representation and the image: “[A]s long as a man is alive, as long as he can inflect his thought, as long as, while he lives, he can throw you off track and can try to conceal his true personality by negations or affirmations, you don’t really know who you’re dealing with. Once he’s dead, everything is deflated. The man is fixed, and we see his image differently” (131).

Genet thus appeals to the potential for irony to assist in maintaining an image during one’s life, and describes the subsequent practice by which historical discourse incorporates and establishes new images to represent the dead. In relating these two passages, the reader again sees that for Genet, truth is a modality of discourse. Speaking of the interview the two are having in connection with this mediation on life, death and truth, Genet says, “[W]hile I’m talking to you like this I can present an image of myself that’s more acceptable, more presentable, according to my desire of the moment” (130). Thus, within the confines of an interview, Genet again throws any stable notion of identity into question; however, this is not to relativize his commitment to groups like the Palestinians, only to make clear, like in Genet’s interview with Wischenbart, that political solidarity cannot be grounded in a declared oath, but must be continually interrogated in the work of art.

In a similar rumination on the production of images and death that he includes in *Prisoner of Love*, Genet reflects on what may be an almost universal desire among men, “to produce an image of himself and propagate it beyond death so that it may wield a power, or rather an unforceful radiance at once sweet and strong” (PL 301). For him, the danger of such desire is that individuals seek to live their life in accordance with this image (or identity), rather

than simply allowing it to work its discursive effects: “This widespread function [...] desires fulfillment while the person concerned is still alive; he gets hung up on the image of himself. But this can’t be: the desire prevents its own fulfillment”. Genet gives an example of a man “[adopting] a pose” for a photograph, trying to live out the static image of his identity. Edmund White, in quoting from this passage to discuss Genet’s use of autobiographical conventions to better establish his mythic identity, suggests that the writer is here referencing his own autofictive technique. Whereas the man taking up a preconceived pose would correlate to the image Sartre draws up of Genet, a subject who attempts to live out his social identity to the fullest, in this section of *Prisoner*, Genet suggests that this would indeed be a failure. He then abstracts from individual to collective identity, noting that, “[f]rom Greece to the Panthers, history has been made out of man’s need to detach and project fabulous images, to send them as delegates into the future, to act in the very long term, after death” (301). Significantly, Genet draws up a chronology that ends at the Black Panthers, another group whose affiliation he recounts in *Prisoner*. As opposed to the Palestinians, whose revolution was at least marginally recognizable to Genet at his time of writing, the Black Panther party had been violently suppressed by the U.S. government; furthermore, Genet makes clear that one of the failures of the Party was that they were overcome by their own rhetoric, their own image politics. So, for Genet, the desire to be immortalized in historical discourse through the propagation of an image or identity is neither exempt from criticism nor even tenable. First, the temptation to try and live in accordance with the image leads to failure and stasis. Secondly, such groups try to enter a domain guarded by a class of experts, historians, who authorize which images continue to represent the past. However, as Genet notes, “[Historians will] only be able to replace [images

from the past] if they provide facts and explanations that we can sympathize with and assimilate, if they create new images that give us something we can talk about”(302). Here, he nearly quotes Lyotard’s theory of grand narratives and little stories as the discursive logic of history; while for the philosopher, “It’s difficult to see how we can go on with the story”(“Lessons” 127) of, for instance, the teleology of Marxism after the emergence of gulag narratives in the 1970s, little stories told by pagan narrators continue to solicit our response. Given his theorizing on the circulation of images as crucial in determining history, it is important to study the kind of image that Genet produces in response to the Palestinian revolution.

In an earlier passage, Genet makes another connection between death and the propagation of images, centering his reflection around the image of a fedayee walking away from the camp, ostensibly toward battle and death. In considering the disappearance in relation to the role the author plays in writing about him, Genet writes, “The disappearance seems to be not only a vanishing but also a need to fill the gap with something different, perhaps the opposite of what is gone. As if there were a hole where the fedayee disappeared, a drawing, a photograph, any sort of portrait, seems *to call him back* in every sense of the term. It *calls him back* from afar – again, in every sense of the word. Did he vanish deliberately in order that the portrait might appear?” (PL 23, my italics). In the original French, the verb *rappeler* offers the multiplicity of its meaning for Genet’s injunction to read the word in all of its senses. One possible meaning would be, as Barbara Bray translates, to “call [someone] back”, to recall someone, which has the connotation of bringing someone back in space, suggesting the desire of bringing someone back from dead in all their presence. Furthermore, *rappeler* could be extended to the phrase «*rappeler quelqu’un à la vie*», literally to bring someone back to life.

Such are the desired functions of the image, which leads Genet to wonder whether the fedayeen's deaths are simply a means to solidify their identity in history. He then connects this reflection to a distinction he will continue to illustrate throughout his book between the leadership of the revolution and its fighters and refugees: "I first met the Palestinians in 1970. Some of the leaders got excited and almost insisted I finish this book. But I was afraid the end of the book might coincide with the end of the resistance [...] Some inexpressible feeling warned me that the rebellion was fading, flagging, was about to turn into the path and disappear. It would be made into epics" (24). In recalling the desire on the art of leadership that he finish his work, Genet brings up the distinction between what Patrice Bougon identifies as the genre of "*roman à thèse*" ("Politics" 143) and the political function of literature. Noting that the *roman à thèse* is characterized by the rhetorical technique of establishing an ideological perspective through the narrator, "[using] its authority over the reader [...] [to narrate] an exemplary way of life, relying on or generating a hierarchical system of values," Bougon argues that Genet's writing "contradicts the principles that found political *commitment* in literature" (my italics). Yet, Bougon does not deny that *Prisoner* "takes a *manifest* stance in favor of the Palestinians [...] the text is [...] a literary work made up of a set of signs that are not organized according to binary logic: there is no clear, hierarchical opposition of two different political views" (144). In his analysis, Bougon makes clear that *Prisoner* does not fulfill the kind of commitment the Palestinian leaders desire when he seek Genet's partisanship; such a work would not only solidify the images of the dead Fedayeen as a means to counter the articulated enemy (Israel, the United States, the other Arab states) but would also require an assumption of identity on Genet's part. In his discomfort over this interest on the part of the leaders, Genet creates a

metonymy, comparing the *rebellion* to the figure of the fedayee who disappears from the path and dies in battle, and suggests that epic songs would be established from it, the ultimate form of collective self-mythology.

In place of «des chansons h r iques» (CA 33) that the leaders would have Genet write, the author constructs a text that, at one point, seems to him to be potentially more an account of himself than of the movement. He writes, “What if this book were only a mirror-memoir *for me alone*, in which I conjured up my own shape among a few others in a time not of their choosing but of mine? Perhaps I needed this story in the past in order to understand the time and place they’d taken on in my memory; so that via the writing I could see a little more clearly the struggle as a whole, its advances and retreats, resolutions and whims, altruism and greed” (PL 381, my italics). Here, Genet calls up the very criticisms leveled against him by Sartre and Bataille, who maintained his unwillingness to engage with an audience, writing only to please himself. In place of that objection, Genet offers another interpretation, that by utilizing this literary mythology of his past, he will be better able to carry out the task of expressing the truth of the Palestinian revolution through writing, given that this truth is conceived of in the terms he gives in his description of the witness at the end of the book. In another moment of reflection, then, one can see the very terms of Sartre’s critique emerge in Genet’s language as he considers his connection to the revolution and his writing of it:

[T]he disparateness of my own existence had merged into the continuity of Palestinian life, though still leaving me with traces, glimpses of, sometimes severances from, my former life. Sometimes events from this former life became so vivid I had *to wake myself up*. I was in a *dream, which I am able to control now* by reconstructing and assembling its various images. Sometimes I wonder

whether I didn't live that life especially so that I might arrange its episodes in the same seeming disorder as the images in a dream. (*PL* 354, my italics)

Here, Genet adopts the language and logic of Sartre's critiques in *Saint Genet*, describing his process of writing the book as a movement between dreaming and waking, between taking on his mythic identity of the early novels and waking to his awareness of writing. Specifically, Sartre's conclusion that *Our Lady* is a lucid or waking dream, that Genet is capable but unwilling to engage his audience, is taken up in the passage. However, the author's suggestion that the work only *seems* to be the product of a fantasy is corroborated earlier in the book, when Genet plants a mocking warning: "[L]ike all the other voices [that I quote] my own is faked, and while the reader may guess as much, he can never know what tricks it employs" (33). He makes another allusion to *voice*, to speaking, which he has established in his interviews is always the realm of dissimulation, and again brings this possibility of irony into his texts. Thus, Genet's allusion to his "former life," his myth, serves a productive purpose in helping to describe the contradictions of revolution using a structure that eludes cooptation by Palestinian leadership or, as Lyotard would call them, *grand narratives* of political conflict.

As Genet reflects throughout *Prisoner* that his past life is instrumental for his understanding of the revolution as a whole, it is important to consider the points in the text where his self-mythologizing merges with a description of the Palestinians. In another passage where he reflects on his relationship to the group, he writes, "By agreeing to go first with the Panthers and then with the Palestinians, playing my rôle as a dreamer within a dream, wasn't I [...] a European saying to a dream, 'You are a dream – don't wake the sleeper!'" (*PL* 173). Genet suggests that the Palestinians aren't simply dreaming, but that they are the products of

another's fantasy, that of the Israeli and American people, to name two players. [The passage brings to mind another from Genet's earlier novel *The Miracle of the Rose*, wherein the narrator "Jean" makes the sort of world-reducing oath that Sartre criticizes: "I am therefore dead. I am a dead man who sees his skeleton in a mirror, or a dream character who knows that he lives only in the darkest region of a being whose face he will not know when the dreamer is awake. I now act and think only in terms of prison. My activity is limited by its framework. I am only a punished man" (32). In this earlier work, Genet links the two metaphorical states of death and of being in a dream in a way that parallels his descriptions of the Palestinian fighters. He notes throughout *Prisoner* that "the lightness of the fedayeen's way of life was due to the fact that death was always hovering over them" (427), that such a continual proximity to death allows them a certain freedom that affiliates them with the heroes of Genet's earlier fiction. He also uses the metaphor of the dream in describing the Israeli imaginary, in that for Jews of the diaspora in the early part of the twentieth century, Palestine "was a place of dream, where everything still had to be built, and the Jews of 1910 dreamed of it as empty, or at worst peopled by insubstantial shadows who didn't really exist as individuals" (148). In describing Jewish desire for homeland in this way, Genet uses a trope of literature concerning colonialism, describing the colonized as being perceived of as shadows, to connect to the earlier passage, in another's dream. However, he is aware that the Palestinians are characters in another group's dream, with potentially annihilating effects: "[I]n 1970 an old word that had disappeared from political vocabularies was heard again: the word Palestinian. Neither masculine nor feminine, singular nor plural, it didn't denote men or women. It was armed; all the *super-powers* knew was that it represented a revolution; they didn't know yet whether they ought to keep an eye

on it or destroy it" (149, my italics). To return to Lyotard's consideration of the narrative pragmatics of global politics, as a result of the revolution, Genet observes, the Palestinians became a discursive object within a grand narrative. Within this logic, Lyotard gives a Genetian definition of death: "Death is a matter of archives. You are dead when stories are told about you, and when only stories are told about you" ("Lessons" 126). Remembering Lyotard's prisoner of the totalitarian state before their narrative escapes as a little story, one can see the precarious state the Palestinians are in, facing death in the material sense of being bordered by enemy defense but also in the sense of being consumed by (and living up to) the dominant narrative. Thus, in his role of writing, Genet is aware of the dream status placed upon the refugees and wary of the dangers of valorizing or legitimating their response in the language of grand narratives, seeking to convey through a pagan image (to use Lyotard's term) an affective response in his potential readers.

Against the epic desires of the Palestinian leaders, Genet finds his image and charts its development inside him throughout the course of *Prisoner of Love*. His reflection begins upon recounting a scene in Lebanon where a church processional is interrupted by another parade, enthusiastically touting a banner illustrated with what Genet at first thinks is the Virgin Mary, but which he later understood symbolized "the Pole Star": "the lady in the picture was neither virginal nor Christian but belonged to the pre-Islamic 'Peoples of the Sea.' Her origins were *pagan*, and she'd been worshipped by sailors for thousands of years" (11, my italics). This observation sets up a series of reflections for Genet, leading him to make a parallel between the image of the *pietà* and that of another child/mother couple, that of Hamza, a fedayee, and his mother, who Genet stays with for one night during his time in Jordan. The alternate

procession Genet describes leads him to consider, throughout his work, many of the origin myths and genealogies Palestinians tell themselves and others as a means to legitimate their community. He quotes a former fighter as saying, “The Palestinians wanted to be an entity – wanted to leave an image of themselves as a single whole, historically, geographically and politically [...] Historically they saw themselves as descendants of the Palestinians, ‘The People from the Sea’ – in other words from nowhere” (240). In this quotation, Genet finds a connection to his discussion on the desire for groups to project an image of themselves; as he makes clear in that section, images of the past, though disseminated by historians, must have an affective appeal for their audience. Thus, Genet seeks to utilize the pagan potency of the Pole Star image as something other than the symbol of some mythic origin. As Lyotard notes in his analysis of the disruptive theatrics of the sansculottes in the French Revolution, it would be erroneous to ascribe a genealogical connection to the use of revolutionary image, as the Palestinians seem to do in their origin myth: “It is [...] vain to try and locate a past in these movements without future. They do not possess the temporality of ‘politics’ (understood as an accounting of interests and strengths of opposing parties or as a determination by one party of the means of triumphing over the others)” (“Futility” 99). Lyotard asserts that these events be instead be read as disruptive “intensities” (90) that trouble the grand narrative logic of opposing powers and the teleology of history. Similarly, Genet values the scene of the interrupting parade for its ability to parody the pomp of the Catholic tradition. He is led to recount another moment of disruption that occurs on a Japanese flight, where the word “Sayonara” spoken by the flight attendant “made me feel my body being stripped bit by bit of a thick black layer of Judaeo-Christian morality” (52). He thus transforms a celebration of the

Pentecost at a Catholic church into a magical, pagan ceremony, leading him to the following consideration: “The word paganism sounds a challenge to any society [...] paganism puts the unbeliever back amid the so-called ‘mists of time,’ when God didn’t yet exist. A sort of intoxication and magnanimity allows a pagan to approach everything, himself included, with equal respect and without undue humility” (41). Genet’s staging of the surprise removal of his society’s moral code allows him this position of the pagan critic. Lyotard puts forth a definition of paganism by quoting Pierre Klossowski, as “a lofty indifference to the question of exclusivity in the performative speech-act (‘All the gods [of antiquity] died laughing uncontrollably when they heard one of their number proclaim himself the one and only god’)” (“Futility” 92). Thus, for Lyotard and Genet, paganism involves stripping all attempts at asserting “the Passion of truth in history” (“Lessons” 125) of their performative grounding. Genet will instead consider an image that is able, through his art of writing, to disrupt social values and attain affective support from his readership.

In his study of the French Revolution, Lyotard stipulates that his use of the word paganism also implies “the seemingly incoherent activity of playing out scenes [...] the derisive honor of parody [...] established rituals [...] that openly belie the exclusive and edifying function that state religion tends to assign it” (“Futility” 92). Similarly, Genet develops the image of Hamza and his mother as “the pole star that guided me” (*PL* 392), one that comes to symbolize the revolution for him in opposition both to the filial value of traditional religious images and to the desires for legitimacy on the part of Palestinian leaders. He reflects at length on the potency of this image for him, at first relating it to the tradition of the *pietà*, but in a manner that disrupts the austerity of that iconic image. He is led to this thinking by remembering the

events of his stay at Hamza's home; as the fighter is out defending the Irbid camp against Bedouin soldiers, Genet takes the son's bedroom for the night. He makes much of the fact that the mother performs the same evening ritual for him as she would for her son: "For one night and for the duration of one simple but oft-repeated act, a man older than she was herself became the mother's son. For 'before she was made, I was'" (193). Genet's paraphrasing of the Bible connects his reflection and his consideration of the *pietà* and Biblical genealogy, as such religious images often depict Jesus as much larger than Mary, or reveal a Mary who paradoxically lessens in age through the years due to the wear caused by adoring kisses. He writes, "The fact that the Virgin Mary is called the Mother of God makes you wonder, since the chronological order is the same for *parenthood human and divine*, by what prodigy of mathematics the mother came after her Son but preceded her own Father. The order becomes less mysterious when you think of Hamza" (192, my italics). Recalling Edward Said's distinction between filial structures like the family and their significance for the transmission of values across history, Genet performs a large leap of affiliation by questioning the genealogy of Christianity, only to subsume it to the logic of Hamza and his mother. Genet performs similar ties of affiliation throughout *Prisoner*, commenting that "for two months I was to be David's son," (300) referring to David Hilliard, the Black Panther thirty years Genet's junior. These affiliations adhere to Said's description of them as "a kind of compensatory order [...] a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world vision," ("Secular" 234) as long as one leans heavily on the *order* implied here, always remembering Genet's avowal to betray the institutional desire of the Palestinians.

In his consideration of the Hamza/mother image, what remains significant for Genet is the disruption of generational transmission of power that affiliation offers. However, as Scott Durham notes, “On a first level, no doubt, this ‘symbole de la résistance palestinienne’ may be ascribed an immediately political function, as the bearer of a readily decipherable ideological message” (“Genet’s Shadow Theatre” 57). In other words, Hamza and his mother could easily serve the Palestinian leaders, eager for coverage from Western journalists, as an icon symbolizing such meanings as the shared responsibility of taking up arms in the community or the unanimous support within the identity group for continuing the revolution, mothers and sons alike; the resemblance to Christ and Mary might act as a ground of legitimation for Western viewers. Opposing this ideological impulse, Genet takes the image for himself and within himself: “[T]he seal, the emblem of the Palestinian revolution was never a Palestinian hero or a victory like Karamah, but [...] Hamza and his mother. That was the couple I needed, for in a way I’d cut it out to suit myself, cut it out from a continuum that included time, space, and all connections with country, family and kin” (204). Durham is apt to suggest that such images and Genet’s use of them “resemble nothing so much as the images of dead toughs cut out from newspapers by the imprisoned narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*” (“Genet’s” 55). Such an opposition brings the reader back to Sartre’s criticism of Genet’s solipsism and incommunicable writing in his introduction to *Our Lady*, where, from these cut-out images, Genet, through a process of incorporation, develops their fantasy attributes within himself for his own pleasure. Indeed, in describing his relation to the Hamza/mother image, Genet uses the language of incorporation, erotics and taboo, playing off the strange oscillation of filial roles. He writes, “By now the couple, carried and nurtured inside me for so long, contained an almost

incestuous element,” (*PL* 304) a quality “unknown to the Father” (203). In this transgression of the filial order, one can relate Genet’s language to the operation of cutting out the image of the couple from the context of the revolution. In separating this affective tie he has to the revolution from the legitimate narrative of heroism and military victory that the Palestinian leaders seek to propagate, Genet removes the image from its possibility of being incorporated by the discourse of identity politics.

Sartre would claim that Genet’s separation of the Hamza/mother image from the dominant Palestinian revolutionary narrative comes at the price of entering into the solipsism of personal whim. However, Genet develops his relation to the image in the context of a broader discussion on emotion and its inextricable connection to writing. Recalling the image of eating with Hamza in his mother’s house in great phenomenological detail, he writes, “From the twinge of melancholy I feel if it ever leaves me, I know this emotion will never cease to exist. Even if I myself am shot dead it will still go on, felt by someone there, and after him by another, and so on” (*PL* 189). The passage is connected to Genet’s statement, in an interview with Antoine Bourseiller, where he links the experience of strong emotional ties to the necessity of writing: “If writing means experiencing such strong emotions or feelings that your entire life is marked out by them, if they are so strong that only their description, their evocation, or analysis can really allow you to deal with them, then yes, it was at Mettray, and at fifteen years old, that I began to write” (*DE* 193). Here, Genet reveals with astonishing sincerity his affective connections to his past that lead him to write. Furthermore, this statement sheds light on his earlier claim, in the interview with Wischenbart and Shahid, that his commitment to the Palestinians is not founded upon accepting the invitation from PLO leaders; rather, his

affiliation with them can only be articulated in solitude, which, Genet asserts, is the condition of artistic creation. Directly after his relation of emotion and writing in the Bourseiller interview, he makes the statement I've quoted above, that writing serves as a means of affiliation "when you've been driven from the given word" (DE 193). Thus, Genet cannot express his relation to the Palestinians through images that are part of the legitimating narrative of the PLO. However, his connection to the image of Hamza and his mother shouldn't be taken as a retreat from politics. This is shown in an abrupt change in tone that directly follows Genet's reflection on the dining scene in Hamza's house, where he notes that the emotion he felt and must express in writing will succeed his life. He writes, "Unless, of course, they flood the whole place. Then the eye will rest only on a lake or a dam and Israeli fishermen" (PL 189). In this startling counter-image, Genet identifies the stark political reality facing Hamza, his mother, and the refugees living in the camp at Irbid and affirms the necessity of writing as a political recourse to the subsuming of the Palestinians beneath the narratives of Israeli nationhood and the discourse of political super-powers.

As Scott Durham notes in his analysis of Genet's development of the Hamza/mother image, the latter author identifies and troubles resemblances between this figure and that of the Catholic *pietà*, for instance, in a manner that does not allow for it to be taken up by the Palestinian leadership in their ambition toward recognized nationhood. Durham writes, "Whether they are drawn from European renderings of the Pietà, from pre-Islamic and Asian rituals, or from contemporary Phalangist rituals, all these images appear [...] as so many alternative realizations of a single figure that is differently combined and renarrated by the inhabitants of the parallel worlds through which it circulates" ("Genet's" 58). Durham evokes a

geographical area, crossed by competing discourses, that cannot be articulated well by the logic of binary politics. Instead, as he argues, Genet is able to demonstrate the closeness of these value-laden images, even among peoples (the Palestinians and the Phalangists, for example) who are violent enemies. As Lyotard argues, “History writes itself only as the narrative of a body,” and, in parallel, “[p]olitics announces itself only as the desire for this body” (“Futility” 89), speaking of the unified social and political body that lends itself to the orderliness of historical discourse and lends an explanation and teleology to that narrative. Despite the Palestinian leadership’s desire for Genet to assist them in articulating their version of this historical discourse, the writer is unable to agree to this relation, which for him mimics the filial order that legitimates the organization of nation-states from the West, stretching its order across the world. Recalling Sartre’s (and Bataille’s) critique of his apolitical solipsism, in his late writings, Genet clearly cultivates the mythic identity that for both critics is inseparable from his forced dissociation from political reality. However, the writer also reflects throughout his writings and interviews on the connection between his own practice of dissimulation through this mythology and the situation of the Palestinians, who must either resort to such anti-identitarian practices or the weak position that the leadership offers them, as marginal contenders for recognition who face assimilation or annihilation by political super-powers. Throughout *Prisoner of Love* and his other late writings and interviews, Genet interrogates his own role as the writer that might help to disseminate these “little stories,” as Lyotard calls them, that alone have the power to dismantle the legitimacy of politics conceived of as binary and between globalized super-powers. While considering his role as writer, Genet continues to

both resist and analyze the desire to pursue the legitimacy of nation- or statehood as it appears among disparate Palestinian voices.

Chapter Two

Posing the Image: Genet and Palestinian Identity

In a passage in *Prisoner of Love* where he reflects on the practice, by both individuals and groups, of projecting their image beyond death, Genet gives a description of the figure that fails at producing their mythic image because they want too badly to identify with that representation while they live. As he writes, “A young man having his photograph taken adjusts his appearance a little, making it more studied or more relaxed – in any case, different. He adopts a pose” (PL 301). With his example for the figure who cannot resist taking on the identity of his own creation, Genet seems to allude back to an earlier passage of the book, where he recounts the visit of photojournalists from Europe and the Far East to the Palestinian camp at Baqa. He illustrates a scene wherein the photographers, “[t]hose who’d never been asked to pose themselves but who would be stars if they got a picture of a star – which here meant every Palestinian wearing combat dress and carrying a Kalashnikov” (32), attempt to force stereotypical gestures out of the fighters by making them hold poses for extended periods. As Genet notes, the journalists, situated within an economic and discursive system that rewards such images, try to maintain control over the Fedayeen, to make them the referents of revolution, and he simultaneously suggests a different reading, which he follows throughout *Prisoner*. He writes, “Some artists think they see a halo of solitary grandeur around a man in a photograph, but it’s only the weariness and depression caused by the antics of the photographer” (32). He continues this thought in a subsequent aphorism: “What is still called order, but is really physical and spiritual exhaustion, comes into existence of its own accord

when what is rightly called mediocrity is in the ascendant". While the photographers see the image they have been able to capture of the Fedayeen as potentially fitting into the "new images that give us something we can talk about" (302), as part of the continually developing and affecting historical discourse, Genet warily observes the possible reactions of the Palestinians. The pressure to assent to Western representative desire that is apparent in this scene is connected, as Genet demonstrates, to the hierarchy that separates the fedayeen and refugees from their political leaders and the "leading families" (108) and to the potential for the revolution to slide into social order and the realization of a nation-state.

Genet locates the pressure placed upon the Fedayeen to live up to the typical image of the freedom fighter/terrorist not only in the gaze of the Western journalists, but also in the words of the Palestinian leaders themselves. He quotes Yasser Arafat as saying, "Europe and the rest of the world talk about us, photograph us, *and so enable us to exist*. But if the photographers stop coming, and radio and television and the newspapers stop talking about us, Europe and the rest of the world will think, "The Palestinian Revolution is over. America and Israel have settled the matter between them"" (PL 261-2, my italics). Arafat's statement suggests that the leader, committed to the claim of territory and statehood, or as Genet describes these participations in an international code, "a law that would have Europe as its heaven" (428), sees the possibility of continued revolution only through the forging of a static, mediatized identity. However, as Edward Said notes in the final chapter of his work *Orientalism*, the representation that serves the Palestinian Arab in Western discourse is hardly one that could fuel a push toward the Western-mandated legitimacy of a nation-state. As Said writes, "if the Arab occupies space enough for attention, it is as a negative value. He is seen as the

disrupter of Israel's and the West's existence, or in another view of the same thing, as a surmountable obstacle to Israel's creation in 1948" (286). Said goes on to argue that the propagation of this *negative value*, or the representation of the chosen other that helps to define the mission of America and its affiliate in the Near East, is a continual practice, one that easily transferred the antagonism traditionally placed upon Jewish Semites to their ethnically related neighbors. Furthermore, he suggests that this popular image of the Arab as, among other things, the illegitimate holder of resources deemed essential to the developed world, can be added to the overall representation by the West of their "Muslim Arab" essentialized other as being without history, "inconsequential nomads possessing no real claim on the land and therefore no cultural or national reality" (286). In short, the photo that adds to the production of the Palestinian as a *negative value* has as its relative the representation of Palestinian as *shadow* upon the future state of Israel.

Arafat's warning, that a failure to maintain the *pose* of revolution could lead to both a discursive and material death, places the Palestinian leadership, and by proxy, the Fedayeen, in a paradox. While assenting to their role within Western discourse, they continue to maintain these very powers as their enemies. As Genet writes, "The slogans of the Palestinian revolt named three enemies: Israel, America and the Arab police states" (*PL* 262). Yet despite this assertion of antagonism, Genet continually points to the fact that for the leaders, their oft-longed for "ultimate victory of the revolution" may establish itself along the same ideological lines (and international agreements) as that of their alleged foes. As Genet writes, "Families of historic or perhaps legendary origin, dating anywhere from mythical times to the days of Lawrence [...] surrounded Arafat with a kind of dateless history" (263). Here, Genet recognizes

what Benedict Anderson pinpoints as the creative narration of nationalism, wherein “nations [...] always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny. With Debray we might say, ‘Yes, it is quite accidental that I am born French; but after all, France is eternal’” (JC 11-12). For Anderson, it is not important that the Palestinian families that trace their lineage to the mythic pasts of prophets do so accurately; rather, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the *style* in which they are imagined” (6). For Anderson, the effect of these mythologized lineages and ties to territory help to cultivate “something to which one is naturally tied [...] precisely because such ties are not chosen, they have about them a halo of disinterestedness” (143). Thus, the nation can ask its members to sacrifice themselves for the preservation of the community, as all are bound together by this “deep, horizontal comradeship” (7).

Of course, as Genet makes clear, the horizontal logic of nationalism is belied by the fact, as Anderson notes, “of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each [community]” (6). In *Prisoner of Love*, he takes up the metaphor of the horizon in order to show the palpable disconnect between the PLO leadership and their fighters on the ground. He writes, “Arafat and the rest of the PLO, with *their agreements and their disagreements*, functioned at quite a different altitude altogether: they flew from one capital to another. Perhaps Palestine was no longer a country to them, but something to be expressed in fractions, a tiny element *in a grand operation being waged between East and West*” (PL 123-24, my italics). In using the metaphor of a higher plane to describe the PLO’s investment in partisanship and diplomacy, Genet parallels his earlier interview with Rüdiger Wischenbart, where the latter

expresses his disillusionment with the possibilities for political change given the stalemate of superpowers. Genet responds by assenting, with the exception that “these superpowers leave a margin for certain groups of people to liberate themselves from sub-superpowers”(DE 236). Here, in his reflection on the PLO, Genet offers the element of the Palestinian revolution that, for him, stands as both a danger and a necessity. In organizing the “pragmatics of [its narrative]” (“Lessons” 125)”, to cite Lyotard’s theory of the conditions grounding discourses, toward the *grand narrative* of national sovereignty and international diplomacy, the party offers the Fedayeen an example of the social order they could adopt. However, Genet cannot deny that “the peace we felt, the peace we enjoyed, was due to the PLO” (124). For, as Genet is aware, for political powers like the United States and Israel, the emergence of the Palestinians as a group was due to guerilla warfare that was tempered by the presence of the party: “the word Palestinian [...] Neither masculine or feminine, singular nor plural, it didn’t denote men or women. It was armed; all the super-powers knew was that it represented a revolution; they didn’t know yet whether they ought to keep an eye on it or destroy it” (149). In this unequal relation of power, wherein the governments of the developed world can choose to silence the word that represents Said’s *negative value*, a nuisance to the sovereign beings, Genet recognizes the mediating significance of the PLO in order for the revolution to continue. He even seems to agree with Arafat’s ultimatum on Western media, that the Fedayeen must be represented or be effaced, when he writes that previous to the discursive rise of the Palestinians, “the ‘refugees’ were [...] seen merely in terms of aid allocated annually and distributed by [the UN] [...] in some camps somewhere to an undifferentiated mass in which no

one had a name" (148). They are saved from simply being a statistic, but Genet makes clear that they still may become one.

In *Prisoner of Love*, Genet, through recollection of the statements of the Fedayeen and reflections on what he had observed during his stays in the Near East, gives what Edward Said characterized as "something like the effect of a seismographic reading, drawing and exposing the fault lines that a largely normal surface had hidden" ("On Genet's" 30). Said's suggested image of the surface evokes the despair of the discursive relation the Palestinians find themselves in, faced with the options of being represented by the West, entering into the pragmatics of that narrative through the PLO, or living in the nonexistence of charitable aid. He implies that Genet's reading is able to account for the inconsistencies between the PLO ideology and what Strathis Gourgouris calls a collective "revolutionary imaginary" (*DL* 288). Genet suggests a metaphor of his writing when he notes in an aside, "Revolution seen as a sort of speleology" (*PL* 313), or a study of the depths of caves as opposed to a reading of the supposed horizontal relation that bind the Fedayeen and their leaders. As opposed to the PLO leaders in the skies, Genet writes, "Each fedayee's horizon was taught him by his eyes and his feet. He had only to look in front of him to see where he was going, and behind him to see where he'd come from. Neither a radio nor a newspaper linked him to the rest of the revolution; just occasionally an order for a mission" (122-23). Here, Genet again notes the vertical and phenomenological discrepancy between the soldiers and the leaders. He asserts that in their attention to diplomatic talks, the PLO often left the Fedayeen in material danger with obsolete orders, leading him to suggest that, amid gossip of expensive hotel rooms used by the leaders for meetings, the fighters could be getting tired of their party's misuse of

resources: “The Fedayeen were beginning to get angry with leaders who were ‘servants of two masters’” (333), presumably, God and gold. In addition, Genet’s description of the fedayee’s everyday experience at the bases demonstrates that, in contrast to the cosmopolitan practices of the leadership, the fighters have no connection to the circulation of discourses that concern them. As the author recounts in a quote indirectly attributed to the Palestinians as a whole or an unnamed fighter, after visits from foreign journalists who asserted their affiliation with the revolution, the Fedayeen never saw the product of their interaction with the media, leading them to wonder, not about their own existence, but whether “‘the far-off places exist[ed]’” (13). Genet also portrays the Fedayeen as being aware that the identity of their cause’s professed enemies made for the risk of disappearance, of discursive non-being that could lead to the derailment of revolution: “‘We were admired so long as our struggle stayed within the limits set by the West. But nowadays there’s no question of going to Munich, Amsterdam, Bangkok and Oslo [...] In our own sands, on our own hills, we were a fable’”. The (quoted) voices of the Fedayeen thus reinforce Arafat’s prediction, while unable to witness the effects of their actions from the “higher vantage point” (122) of the leader.

In his reading of the revolution that takes into account the hierarchical layers of the Palestinian community, Genet seeks to convey the ways in which the PLO’s discourse attempts to orient the practice of the Fedayeen as a means toward that “juster social order existing as yet only in official declarations” (313). In his allusions to the corruption of Palestinian officials, Genet would have the reader regard this ever-deferred justice dubiously, just as, in his essay on the French Revolution entitled “Futility in Revolution,” Jean-François Lyotard suggests, “If we are to learn anything from history, it involves both unlearning any faith in the agency of

meanings and increasing our suspicions” (87). The philosopher’s alternative is to view the Jacobins as desiring a unity of the social and political body, where their use of language contains a performative truth; Robespierre’s terror is then an effort to make that body cohere in “the struggle for another, more organic society” (90), even if it means destroying the community attempting to develop that society. In this same sense, Genet recognizes that below the call of Palestine as a justification for their warfare “were orders received which never appeared in their books. Such imperatives included a love of fighting and physical confrontation, together with an underlying desire for self-slaughter, for glorious death if victory was impossible [...] behind all this was the phrase with which Arafat ended every letter, personal or official: victory or death” (PL 313). Genet posits Arafat as the inheritor of the role of Robespierre in the cause of revolutionary terror, articulating the truth that “a fedayee has to win, die, or betray” (65). Just as Robespierre asserts that “[d]eath is not an eternal sleep [...] [it] is the beginning of immortality” (TP 107), Genet notes that within the Palestinian communities, “[a] great fuss was made of the sons of ‘famous martyrs’” (PL 262), lending continual credence to Arafat’s dogmatic ultimatum.

In his study of the French Revolution, Lyotard suggests that by analyzing the role of women within the event, one might better understand the heterogeneity between the dynamics of activity by numerous groups and the univocal discourse of the Terror and of history. He writes that “their intervention into public affairs is a revolution within the Revolution that cannot fail to provoke scandal and [...] to quell the Revolution as well as make it more provocative” (TP 93). Following his suggestion, one can consider the image of the palace and the shanty town that Genet draws up as a model of the revolution within the Revolution.

The passage in *Prisoner of Love* begins and ends with an image of identification with the other; as Genet begins, “A shanty town within a kingdom. In a piece of broken mirror they see their faces and bodies piecemeal, and the majesty they see there takes shape before them in a half-sleep; and always this sleep leads up to death” (PL 68). The space evoked, both here and throughout the passage, suggests all of the discursive forces with whom the Fedayeen interact: the United States; Israel, with its territories expanding and including communities of Palestinians; the Arab states, within which the Palestinians have set up their camps; and the PLO, whose corruption has placed them on a different plane. In relation to all these powers, Genet suggests that the boys from the shanty town begin to discover themselves through a process of oblique reflection: “When they’re still children a mother or a whore gives them a piece of broken mirror in which they trap a ray of the sun and reflect it into one of the Palace windows. And by that open window, in the mirror, they discover bit by bit their faces and bodies” (72). Thus, if read as an allegory of the position of the Fedayeen, Genet establishes an image for the kinds of misidentification that occurs in the *piecemeal* reflection of themselves that is their occasional and fragmented glimpse into the discourse of which they are a part. In a passage where Genet recollects these brief discursive exchanges and the reactions of the Fedayeen, he demonstrates the lack of material that has gone into the imaginative effort necessary for revolution: “One day a Fedayeen showed me a photograph of a part of the royal palace and said: ‘All that for just one man.’ Implying: ‘All I’ve got is an eighth of a shack’” (334). Ultimately, the Fedayeen’s desire for these luxury objects leads Genet to pessimistically echo Anderson and answer his question: “What day-dreams make a man go to the sacrifice? Stereotypes”. He wonders whether the limited view of the kinds of lifestyles that they are

officially fighting against will sway the soldiers, in the end, to the Jacobin ultimatum of Arafat: “Amid all these bourgeois dreams, did the fedayee see himself as a *hero*? When *fatigue*, dust and *boredom* acted on him *as hashish and opium sometimes do*, did he see himself looting some emirate and climbing higher and higher until he had a state funeral and a statue erected in his memory?” (334, my italics). In the repetition of the factors of *boredom* and *fatigue*, the reader is returned to the earlier passage of the Western photojournalists, where the fighters’ consent to pose is mingled with Genet’s reflection on the seeming inevitability of revolutionary decline. Also, the reference to opiates here established a connection with the fatal *half-sleep* that Genet associates with the identification process between shanty town and palace; the author here explores, like Anderson, the conditions that allow for the Fedayeen’s affect of dying gloriously for their cause, fulfilling the command of their leaders.

Ultimately, the pressure on the part of the PLO has the effect of reducing what for Genet is the most important part of the revolutionary community, its inclusiveness. As Ahdaf Soueif writes in her introduction to *Prisoner of Love*, “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 a 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” (xiv). Genet’s excitement with the affilial separation from the nation-state that these affirmed Palestinians represent is tempered, however, by what he sees as the *Party’s* move toward an ever-greater strictness of criteria that define inclusion within the Palestinians. He recounts a scene where Dr. Alfredo, one of these expatriates who considers himself part of the movement, displays with one word the bourgeois tendencies of the PLO:

“When the chairman of the PLO had asked him his nationality he’d answered in one word: ‘Palestinian.’ This was not well received. From the sudden silence that fell in Arafat’s reception room I could tell he didn’t like hearing others claim that distinction” (313). The effect of this adherence of the part of the leadership to the essential imaginative claims of their lineage and tie to territory is expressed in the unattributed quote, “‘No man who’s not a Palestinian himself ever does much for Palestine. He can leave her behind and go to some nice quiet spot like the Côte d’Or, or Dijon” (65). The irony of this sentiment, as Genet bitterly notes, is that this luxury of distance is lived by the very Leading Families that offer the Palestinian community their mythic extension into the past, as well as by former officials who divert funds from the cause. This factionalism also finds its way into relations between the Fedayeen, who for Genet resembled, at least to start, the ideal of horizontal relations. He describes an exchange where one slightly higher-ranking official refuses to allow his comrade leave to attend to his pregnant wife: “The more the one pleaded, the more the other, as if by a normal and necessary mutation, spoke like a petty tyrant. It wasn’t a mere matter of discipline and security – it was the routine antagonism between officers and ordinary ranks [...] Is hatred there from the start, needing two friends to make its way?” (138). In considering this scene, Genet suggests that the revolution might be betrayed in the banal gesture of maintaining power through the arbitrary distinction of rank.

Finally, another possibility of betraying the revolution that Genet explores is one that, in its suggestion, “brought howls, almost shrieks of protest from the PLO officials who heard me”(254): the potential for the Fedayeen to separate themselves from their leaders’ bourgeois desire for nationhood and the Western image of luxury and embrace the murky identity of

religious fundamentalism. As he writes, “What I feared most were logical conclusions: for example, an invisible transformation of the fedayeen into Shiites or members of the Muslim Brotherhood” (254). For Genet, this possibility would have the effect of placing the fedayeen into the even more inaccessible depths within contemporary political discourse. He recalls a conversation he has with a Moroccan lawyer in contact with a Muslim brother and reflects on the similarities between “[t]he limits of convention in conversation [and] [...] geographical frontiers [...] When they do move, it’s to make way for new frontiers which are also traps. So I still know next to nothing about the Moslem Brotherhood” (89). Posited as the *absolute other*, the *negative value* that must be eliminated by the major players of political discourse, the fedayeen’s potential move into fundamentalism would be an affirmation of the affective fears that Said notes characterize the American view of the “Middle East”: “Lurking behind all these images is the menace of *jihad*. Consequence: a fear that all Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world”(O 287). As Patrice Bougon notes, Genet was very prescient in observing this possibility: “Genet seems to have perceived an ideological terrain that, ten years after the publication of his book, has led to the suicide attacks of *certain* Palestinians linked to the HAMAS” (“Politics” 156). In light of these separate identifications that the fedayeen seem to gravitate toward, from the PLO’s desire for a homogeneous nation moving toward the the Western dream of territory and nationhood, to the Western image of luxury, to the very image of otherness that would legitimate their destruction by Western military structures, Genet is unable to fully invest himself in the asserted goals, or even the liberatory atmosphere of the revolution. “[N]ever my total belief, never the whole of myself” (PL 105), he writes, and his final

work can be seen as a continual mediation on his relation to this group that seems, despite their utopian promise, to be slipping ever into conformity or discursive and actual death.

Chapter Three

Genet, Writing, the Palestinians: Searching for Prepositions

In the introduction to his biography on Jean Genet, Edmund White notes that a characteristic of the writer's work from his early novels through his posthumously published memoirs is an awareness of and utilization of the conventions of autobiographical writing. As he notes, "Genet borrows the prestige of the confessional autobiography [...] [He] recognizes that if the transmission of an invented self is seamless, successful, then it is accepted as the truth" (xviii). As I argued in Chapter One, Genet makes clear through his interviews and late writings that, first and foremost, truth is a relation of sincerity, one that is necessarily subverted in speaking and, as shown here, in writing. As Genet continues in *Prisoner of Love* to rhetorically utilize the conventions of autobiography but ultimately does not fulfill the contract between author and reader, one must ask his grounds and purpose for such a betrayal. In the context of Genet's ironic use of autobiographic techniques, White quotes from a section of *Prisoner of Love* I have analyzed at length, wherein the former author considers the almost universal desire, on the part of individuals and groups, to project images of themselves beyond their death. As Genet leaps from the individual to the continuum of groups from Western history, "[f]rom Greece to the [Black] Panthers" (PL 301), the reader can observe a link between Genet's autofictional production and his focus in writing about social groups like the Panthers and the Palestinians. However, as Patrice Bougon argues, even if "*Prisoner of Love*, which claims at the end of the book, to be a 'report,' takes a *manifest* stance in favor of the Palestinians" ("Politics" 144), the very literary, polysemic quality of the language of Genet's texts makes a position of

commitment impossible. Thus, Genet's text is neither simply a sincere autobiographical account nor a *roman à thèse*, and yet, elements of the autobiography and the memoir, in the sense of recounting the actions of the Palestinians, exist within the same hybrid text. In light of the closeness and often comingling quality between self-reflection and observations regarding the Palestinians, I will explore the ways in which Genet's position in relation to the exiled group *could* be characterized. I will proceed by analyzing the implications of the possible prepositions between the sentence, "Genet is writing [...] the Palestinians," because, in changing the modifier from "for" to "on" or to "of," many suppositions, within the fields of modern politics and postcolonial studies, to give two examples, are activated. Additionally, I will take up different arguments that attempt to account for Genet's connection to the Palestinians, in an effort to clarify the interconnectedness of the texts that make up *Prisoner of Love*.

Before directly considering Genet's writing position in relation to the Palestinians, it is important to study the way in which his writings both observe and circumvent the conventions of autobiography, in that his approach to self-representation is tied to his eluding of the traditions of political commitment in writing. His understanding and manipulation of "the *autobiographical pact*" (OA 13), to use the phrase of Philippe Lejeune, is best observed in comparison to the latter's project of detailing the conventions of the genre. First, Genet fulfills, for Lejeune, the fundamental requirement that distinguishes autobiography from the *autobiographical novel* and other works that base their relation to reality on resemblance rather than identity, that of the proper name: "Autobiography [...] supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about" (OA 12). In suggesting an

identity between the space of the text and that of the figure who authorizes the text, Lejeune sets the stage for his description of the figure of the author: "An author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two" (11). Thus, for Lejeune, the figure of the author is a referent that can and should be connected, in the genre of autobiography, in order to bring meaning to the *oeuvre* and the next text in the chain. For him, autobiography, in that it "claim[s] to provide information about a 'reality' exterior to the text," makes an implicit pact with the reader, swearing to tell the truth as in a courtroom (which, as I argued in Chapter One, Genet identifies as a model to describe his text's relation to its readers). However, as Lejeune writes, "[The oath] is a supplemental proof of honesty to restrict [writing] to the *possible* (the truth such as it appears to me, inasmuch as I can know it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.)" (OA 22). Thus, Lejeune notes that in the explicit contract drawn up by the identity of the proper name, the reader allows for a margin of error in the author's recollection and representation of the past, and even searches for these distortions.

In his *Prisoner of Love*, Genet both reinforces and openly questions the referential truth that his seemingly autobiographical text is supposed to establish between world and text, thus throwing the possibility of representation of himself and the Palestinians into ironic indeterminacy. Despite the "use of *titles*" that suggests the identity of author-narrator-protagonist (Genet divides the French text into *Souvenirs I* and *II*, implying that he is recounting his memories of the truth of the past), Genet does not fulfill another element that would establish the identity of autobiography. As Lejeune argues, one of the ways in which the author establishes this ground is through the "*initial section* of the text where the narrator enters into

a contract vis-à-vis the reader by acting as if he were the author” (OA 14). Paradoxically, Genet circumvents this convention by fulfilling it, rhetorically speaking, and giving a description of his act of writing: “The page that was blank to begin with is now crossed from top to bottom with tiny black characters – letters, words, commas, exclamation marks – and it’s because of them the page is said to be legible. But a kind of uneasiness, a feeling close to nausea, an irresolution that stays my hand – these make me wonder: do these black marks add up to reality?” (PL 5). The reader is at the opposite point of the reader at the end of *À la recherche du temps perdu*; instead of phenomenologically moving with the narrator toward the moment of writing that thus circles back to the beginning, Genet’s reader is put of the alert from the start that the text before them, finished before it begins, is in a perilous relation to referential truth. While affirming his identity as author, Genet writes of the radical impossibility of writing to re-present the truth of the past. He wonders if “the Palestinian revolution [was] really written on the void, an artifice superimposed on nothingness,” and continues, “If the reality of time spent among – not with – the Palestinians resided anywhere, it would survive between all the words that claim to give an account of it [...] it buries itself, slots itself exactly into the spaces, recorded there rather than in the words that serve only to blot it out” (PL 5). Here, Genet uses the example of his writing in relation to the Palestinians in order to question the referential pact instituted in autobiographical texts. He wavers between asserting that the reality of the Palestinian experience as he saw it and tries to write about it is effaced by the *void* and that it somehow *survives* as an irretrievable presence, a distinction that will be important as I explore the different meanings evoked by the preposition describing Genet’s writing. Furthermore, at the beginning of the work, Genet takes care to place himself outside, not *with* the Palestinians, as if

to suggest his ultimate inability to know or represent them. He brings up his notion of the void or absence that the art of writing tries to cover with representations in the later passage on the near-universal need to project an image beyond death: “The essence of theater is the need to create not merely signs but complete and compact images masking a reality that may consist in absence of being. The void” (PL 302). I will have to return to Genet’s comparing the functions of the *theater* and this image production later, but at this point, I will recall Edmund White’s use of this reflection in *Prisoner* to describe Genet’s own practice of cultivating his self-mythology. For both the author and for the Palestinians, whose image production Genet critiques through his work, “[i]t doesn’t matter whether or not the image corresponds to what they were really like”; rather, the criteria is whether or not the individual or group can “[manage] to wrest a powerful image from that reality” (PL 302). Here, Genet both identifies the acceptable margin of error in autobiographical representation and the rhetorical ends of such a writing practice, to convince the reader and thus propagate the truth. Here, Genet’s vision of the real parallels Lyotard’s thinking on narrative pragmatics, where the rhetorical appeal of certain narratives establishes the “truth” of history and suggests practices for the future.

Of course, by simultaneously establishing the autobiographical connection of author-narrator-protagonist and radically questioning the potential for writing to represent reality, Genet places his autobiographical relation to the reader on uncertain grounds. At other points in *Prisoner of Love*, Genet is more forthcoming in his rhetorical manipulation of the conventions of autobiographical writing. In a passage where he reflects on whether or not writing is a lie that hides reality, he notes that in many scenes, his writing is univocalic, unable to represent the different characters’ emotions adequately; he concludes, “And like all the other voices my

own is faked, and while the reader may guess as much, he can never know what tricks it employs” (33). Genet here boldly and ironically laughs at his past concern, establishing a continuing theme throughout *Prisoner*, that to quote another is inevitably to imitate, to betray that other. In trying to represent his own concerns about the verisimilitude of the text and representing the identities of the Palestinians, Genet always ultimately returns to the absence that writing cannot efface, ensuring the *flat* quality of representations of the past. Interestingly, in Lejeune’s description of autobiographical conventions, quotation serves as a stumbling block for the reader’s experience of the referential pact: “But here, our head starts to swim because the idea crosses the minds of even the most naïve of us that it is not the individual who defines the ‘I,’ but perhaps the ‘I,’ the individual [...] exists only in discourse” (OA 9). Although Lejeune urges his reader to “avoid chaos for the moment,” Genet seems to revel in forcing the reader to face the truth of the constructed nature of both “Genet” and all the figures whose words he claims to recall. In Patrice Bougon’s analysis of *Prisoner of Love* as political text, he notes that the work is “a patchwork of quotes, and the figure of the author is transformed or haunted by its more or less anonymous polyphony” (“Politics” 148). Within his argument, Genet’s structure of (sometimes unattributed) quotes and the author’s admission that his reproduction of these quotes force a betrayal of translation means that the author has no textual identity on which to ground his commitment. For Lejeune, such a confusion of voices and the narrator’s own disavowal of their fidelity throws the veracity of the text into question: “It is impossible for the autobiographical vocation and the passion for anonymity to coexist in the same person” (OA 20). Under the criteria established by Lejeune, I can return to the critiques of Sartre and Bataille that I analyzed in Chapter One and ask: does Genet’s betrayal of the conventions, between

writer and reader, of autobiography simply signify a self-serving refusal to communicate, a trickery, or rather a sign that for Genet, such concepts as identity are merely conventions and cannot be “communicated,” that is, transmitted through the literary work? Given Genet’s extended reflections on absence and the paradoxical task for writing (or any representative art) to create lasting significations over the *void*, I argue that Genet’s approach is a simultaneous recognition of the rhetorical effectiveness of generic conventions and a disbelief of their suppositions (the static presence of identity, most importantly).

In another passage of *Prisoner of Love*, Genet draws a relation between the betrayal of the autobiographical pact that he continually performs in his writing and the image production of the Palestinians, thus giving one suggestion for his attraction to the group. In a section of “The Autobiographical Pact” where he compares the reception of the proper name to Lacan’s mirror stage, Lejeune writes, “This acquisition escapes memory and autobiography, which can recount only these second and inverse baptisms that are for a child the accusations that freeze him in a role through a qualifier: ‘thief’ for Genet” (21). Just as Lejeune is unable to see a correspondence between a desire to write autobiographically and the desire to be anonymous, he wholly takes up the Sartrean reading of Genet that establishes him, as Loren Ringer writes, as the “absolute other,” always attempting to will an impossible identity of alterity. However, in a passage of *Prisoner*, Genet decisively breaks with even the rhetorical gesture of willing Evil through pursuing the identity of the thief; after giving an image of a paper toy that can be disassembled into a blank page, he writes, “For a long time I’d been vaguely uneasy, but I was amazed when I realized that my life – I mean the events of my life, spread out flat in front of me – was nothing but a blank sheet of paper which I’d managed to fold into something different.

Perhaps I was the only one who could see it in three dimensions, as a mountain, a precipice, a murder or a fatal accident" (*PL* 171). Here, Genet suggests the autobiographical quality of the later passage I have quoted at length, where the author reflects on the social desire to project one's image beyond image. He goes on to detail the elements of his life that he *fictionalized*, to use Edmund White's language, including his childhood as an orphan raised in the French countryside and his life as a vagabond and a prisoner and disassociates these experiences from the singular vision he gave them in his novels, concluding, "My visible life was nothing but carefully masked pretenses" (172). But if Genet exposes himself as a *natural sham*, it is at this point in the text that he makes a tenuous and reflective connection with the exiled group he lives with: "And when the Palestinians invited me to go and stay in Palestine, in other words in a fiction, weren't they too more or less openly recognizing me as a natural sham?" In this moment of affiliation, Genet problematizes any simple attribution of relation one could make about him and the Palestinians, for example, that as an individual exiled from society as a child through a public interdiction (Sartre's interpretation), Genet feels a kinship toward the exiled group. As Carl Lavery argues in his study of Genet's theatre, for many critics, "Genet's sympathetic response to Blacks, immigrant workers and the Palestinians is seen as a natural consequence of his outsider status [...] No matter how commonsensical or seductive such an approach might be, it is ultimately too mechanistic" (*PJG* 69-70). To simply argue that Genet identified, or more strongly, projected his assumed identity onto a group would suggest that Genet uncritically supports the cause of the Palestinians, a supposition that is refuted by the critiques of hierarchy, religious dogma, and nationalistic desire that fill the pages of his work. In the passage of *Prisoner* quoted above, Genet suggests that, contrary to what Lejeune argues in

his figuration of the author, he cannot be reduced to the imaginative contents of his *oeuvre*, and likewise, the Palestinian collective identity is a product of a considerable projection of fantasy.

Despite the apparent simplification of equating Genet's outsider status and his later affiliation with displaced groups, it is important to consider the relations between Genet's background and his investment in the Palestinians, if only as a starting point in considering his relation. In discussing the partisanship that Genet expresses with decolonizing movements in Algeria and the Palestinian resistance in *The Screens* and *Prisoner of Love*, Edward Said, offers a parallel between this support and Genet's own relation to the *métropole*: "His anger and enmity against France had autobiographical roots; on one level, therefore, to attack France in *The Screens* was to transgress against the government that had judged him and imprisoned him in places like La Mettray. But on another level, France represents the authority into which all social movements normally harden once they have achieved success" ("On Genet's" 34). Said offers two ways to interpret Genet's autobiographical relation to colonized groups, as a personal vendetta for past mistreatment and as a general reaction against filial power. In his essay entitled "Genet and Europe," Edmund White goes further in connecting Genet's experiences as a child prisoner of Mettray and his later affiliations, noting that, "[a]t Mettray [...] the inmates were called *colons*, or colonists, just as French settlers in Algeria were also called *colons*" (5), recalling that in an unpublished filmscript on Mettray, Genet develops a theory that French prisoners were developed as colonial mercenaries for the exploitation of the colonized South. For White, Genet's prison experiences and his youthful military engagements in Syria form his view of Arab-French relations and include him in the experience of colonialism,

even to the point of identifying as colonized. Returning to Said's observation, his suggestion that Genet's antagonistic relation to France is because of the nation-state in general as a model of social order is taken up by Carl Lavery, who demonstrates that Genet takes a wide view of colonialism, dividing it into three practices: *imperialism*, or the historical practice of European countries racing for Africa and Asia; *neo-imperialism*, or the contemporary economic practices whereby colonial inequity is maintained between the *metropole* and its "postcolonial" peoples; and *the colonization of everyday life*, where past imperial practices are a model grafted upon the European "home market" (PJJG 35-37). For Lavery, the result of Genet's expansive view is "a rejection of the form of government that brought it into being: the European nation-State" (38); subsequently, he is wary of the nationalism and desire toward a Western mandated social order that appear within the Palestinian revolution.

It would be difficult to deny that, on some level, Genet identifies with the cause of the Palestinian revolution; indeed, *Prisoner of Love* can be described as an effort on the part of the author to understand this personal connection, one so strong that he stayed for "nearly two years" instead of simply honoring "the invitation to spend a few days" (PL 12) in the camps. However, to suggest, as White does, that Genet feels his own past was a parallel experience of colonization may be to promote an over-identification, as the latter author observes, "Meagre though it seemed at the time, I'd had the privilege of being born in the capital of an empire that circled the globe, while at the same time the Palestinians were being stripped of their lands". Genet is careful to establish in his writing the difference that inevitably prevails between his and the Palestinians' experience. The critical argument that Genet's affiliation with the Palestinians is grounded on his feeling of being similarly oppressed or his own thinking on the

wide effects of colonialism suggests that Genet is writing “for” the Palestinians, to suggest one meaningful preposition. To write “for” is to represent for another who is incapable of representing itself, to organize oneself as a privileged interlocutor. This position as it is taken by Western academics and artists has been the subject of debate in postcolonial studies, perhaps best exemplified in Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, taken from her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. In her work, Spivak outlines the contemporaneous scholarly practices that attempt to account for an oppressed colonized subjectivity, “[i]n the face of the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the self’s shadow”(2197). Her argument is that these scholarly practices perform the same kind of violence as colonialism in attempting to establish an essential subject position from which the colonized subaltern can represent themselves, whereas, she claims, “one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogenous” (2200). She extends her critique to scholars within the colonized population who, authorized by Western academic practice, attempt to renarrate colonial history “from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation,” citing a group of Indian scholars. Here, her argument parallels Lyotard’s in his essay “Futility in Revolution,” wherein he discourages inserting the pagan theatrics of the sansculottes into a historical narrative of the French Revolution, as this would only establish the group as the heroes of a redemptive future and, of course, an explainable past. Instead, Lyotard urges his reader to consider the revolutionaries as operating within an intermittent and heterogenous time that cannot be adequately narrated by bourgeois aspirations for history.

In her essay on the subaltern, Spivak radically questions the possibility for the subaltern or the colonized to represent themselves politically, thus lamenting the potential that, given an impossibility of writing “by” the colonized, there will continue to proliferate representations “for” that other produced by privileged subjects. However, in her revision to an earlier edition of the essay, she notes that her earlier pessimism and despair might be remedied. In the case of an Indian woman tied to a revolutionary group who commits suicide while menstruating, thus, for Spivak, powerfully challenging social interdictions upon the female body in Hindu culture, Spivak at first laments the fact that her death is not recognized as a revolutionary gesture by her family or by Indian women. For her, this seems the ultimate expression of the subaltern’s inability to speak. Yet, in the later revision, she assents to the criticism of another scholar that, as Spivak writes, “I am able to read Bhubaneswari’s [the killed revolutionary] case, and therefore she *has* spoken in some way [...] All speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception” (2207). Yet, given her recognition that she is herself a product of Western scholarship and unable to access the heterogeneity of the colonized population, she remains skeptical. Her pessimism results from the fact that the “new mainstream” (2206), Bhubaneswari’s female relatives fifty years after her death, do not articulate their predecessor’s gesture, and indeed, become the subjects of a new imperialism, economic globalization.

Similarly, in the one passage of *Prisoner of Love* where Genet reflects on the title of his work, the author reflects on his own feelings of doubt as the revolution seems destined to forget its impetus: “When I arrived, to an enthusiastic welcome from the Fedayeen, I probably wasn’t clear-headed enough to evaluate the opposing forces or make out the divisions within

the Arab world [...] Gradually my feelings changed [...] I was still charmed, but I wasn't convinced; I was attracted but not blinded. I behaved like a prisoner of love" (PL 216-217). In this recounting of his investment and subsequent critical distancing from the revolution, Genet suggests that what at first was the spark of a full-fledged identification with the Fedayeen and refugees, with their establishment in the camps of a space and time of weightless liberation becomes tempered by his judgment of the heterogeneity, not only between himself and the Palestinians, but the Palestinians themselves in their political hierarchy and factionalism. As Strathis Gourgouris notes in his study of Genet's late works, "The English translation of the title [*Un captif amoureux*] as *Prisoner of Love* misses the multiple nuances of the French. The author is not only a prisoner of love but also a prisoner *in* love, a prisoner captured by love but also captivated by love" (LT 263). Despite these many valences radiating from the original French, in the passage in *Prisoner*, Genet makes clear both the bond that ties him to the Palestinians and his cultivated critical distance from them, if only because of his awareness of the group's tendencies toward forgetting the revolution and adopting social order. In comparison, Jean-François Lyotard's reflections on his affiliation with and writings on the Algerian revolutionary movement offer a parallel to Genet's approach. As Lyotard reflects on his revolutionary era writing, "It is the correspondence of a lover. *From a distance*, the lover confesses his *jealousy* of everything that deceives or will deceive the loved one. He admires the loved one, he encourages the loved one. He complains, knowing the loved one will not meet the fate that courage and beauty deserve" (PW 170, my italics). In this description of the relation of love between a Westerner and their chosen revolutionary group, Lyotard describes the inevitable separation that must characterize their affiliation, while simultaneously expressing an

impossible desire to only speak to them, a *jealousy* toward other competing discourses that might (and Lyotard argues, will) sway them from revolutionary beauty. Thus, Lyotard helps to describe the paradoxical relation Genet finds himself in with the Palestinians. Both writers identified in their group the values that are expressive of a politics able to disorient the dominance of master narrative, yet this very identification is a projection fraught with danger, as, by writing about them in such a manner, a Western voice threatens to make the other speak in his voice. Rather, as Lyotard continues, “The differend showed itself with such a sharpness that the consolations then common among my peers (vague reformism, pious Stalinism, futile leftism) were denied to me” (*PW* 170), referring to his idea of the difference between two heterogeneous discourses that cannot be mediated. Lyotard is aware that the actions of the Algerians, just like those of the sansculottes in the French Revolution that he discusses in “Futility in Revolution,” are misread in the traditional desire to narrate history in an arc toward a redemptive future, the possibilities of which he puts into parentheses due to their total lack of relation to the Algerians’ practice.

As Bill Readings notes in his introduction to Lyotard’s *Political Writings*, in which “The Name of Algeria” is included, the philosopher relinquishes the Western tendency to speak in a position of authority for the other, recognizing instead the heterogeneity that Spivak observes between Western accounts of power relations and the colonized’s reaction. Readings writes, “[Lyotard] writes not of ‘the Algerian War’ but of ‘the Algerian’s War’ – a war that is not his, cannot be his, but that nonetheless call out to him, demands a testimony that can never be adequate, a response that can never redeem his debt or obligation” (*PW* xiv). Lyotard offers an example of a Western figure who recognizes in a revolutionary group the same challenge that

he makes to the structure of domination that the imperial project established. Through this relation, the group makes an appeal that the Western other take responsibility for this inequity, but Lyotard is aware that this *debt* can never be repaid, as the very heterogeneity of perspective that separates them also results in the elimination of the revolutionary project. As Lyotard writes, “Almost all the companions of that time are dead today, and dead *because of this differend*” (PW 170). In short, Lyotard recognizes his continuing responsibility to memorialize the individual dead whom he felt this strong affiliation, while remaining unwilling to commemorate that past through the essential figure of the revolutionary subject in history. In this, Genet parallels the writing and political practice of Lyotard, in that, to begin with, at the time of writing *Prisoner of Love*, many of the Fedayeen he knew had been killed. Through evoking the image of a marionette and his puppets, Genet reflects at length on his role, writing about, and often quoting, the revolutionaries after their deaths. He writes, “All this to show that I know what a distance there is – but how can one measure a distance that’s really a feeling? – between what Abu Omar [one of the fallen Fedayeen] was and what I say about him now that he’s dead, drowned”, directly after writing, “So what will it be like when I’m at my last gasp?” (PL 351). In this abrupt shift in focus from Genet’s own inclement death (he had already been diagnosed with throat cancer at the time of writing) to that of the dead Fedayeen and the paradox of writing in their place, one can consider another relation that binds the author to the group. Near the end of his book, he writes on his emotional reaction to the massacres of Palestinian refugees at Chatila, but notes that “the act of writing came later, after a period of *incubation*, nevertheless in a moment like that or those when a single cell departs from its usual metabolism and the original link is created of a future, unsuspected cancer, or of a piece of

lace, so I decided to write this book” (PL 429, my italics). In alluding to the illness that is about to rob him of life, Genet shows himself to be in the same relation to death that he describes of the Fedayeen, thus giving their camps that feeling of lightness that intoxicates him. He notes that the distance of writing (literally) separates him from the affective immediacy of an event like Chatila. He, like Lyotard, writes from a sense of responsibility, one which establishes that he will never be able to adequately account for the Palestinians’ past, and a distance that allows him to decipher what could never be seen in the closeness of love *among* the group.

In the act of writing, then, which brings Genet’s relation to death into parallel with the Fedayeen, could one say that he writes “of” the Palestinians? One meaning that is evoked from this preposition is the sense of memorialization, of writing “of” those who have passed. To write “of” someone also suggests the distance that both Lyotard and Genet value; it is not to authoritatively “know” the other and write of them in that discursive register, but to only “know of” them, obliquely, through their own difference. Maybe most importantly, to write “of” the Palestinians for Genet is to stage what cannot be actualized in reality, to write as one of the group. Through the quotation of evocation of the Fedayeen, Genet performs an inevitable distortion with their language and actions that places his stake within the memory. As he writes, “They remain dead, the people I try to *resuscitate* by straining to hear what they say. But the illusion is not pointless, or not quite [...] one thing that a book tries to do is show, beneath the disguise of words and causes and clothes and even grief, the skeleton and the skeleton dust to come. The author too, like those he speaks of, is dead” (PL 353, my italics). The passage first evokes, through Genet’s choice of the word *resuscitate*, the desire that he evokes much earlier in the book and that I analyzed in Chapter One. The passage revolves around the

meanings that Genet uses the reader to explore evoked by the French verb *rappeler*. In the moment when the fedayee disappears, representative images emerge in his place, leading Genet to question, “Did he vanish deliberately in order that the portrait might appear?” (PL 23). For Genet, this self-effacement suggests that the fighters sacrifice themselves in the name of a revolutionary slogan perpetuated by party leaders, “Victory or death.” This for him is the equivalent of the individual who wants to live the image they attempt to project beyond death; it is a failure attributable to the hegemony of Palestinian leadership. However, in the text, before addressing the desire on the part of leadership that Genet finish his book and thus add to their move toward national legitimacy, Genet seemingly digresses: “Giacometti used to paint best around midnight. He spent the day gazing intently, steadily. I don’t mean he was absorbing the features of the model – that’s something different. Every day Alberto looked for the last time, recording the last image of the world”. In order to understand how this aside might be a response to the image production that Genet feels is effacing the revolution, one must look to Genet’s broader investigation of Giacometti’s aesthetics in “The Studio of Alberto Giacometti.” In this essay, the author claims that Giacometti’s art “is not destined for unborn generations. It is offered to the innumerable populace of the dead. Who recognize it. Or refuse it. But these dead of whom I spoke have never been alive. Or I am forgetting. They were alive enough to be forgotten, enough so that their life’s function was to make them cross to that calm shore where they wait for a sign – one that comes from here – that they recognize” (FA 43). In this passage, Genet offers a means to understand what he means by, in writing, *straining to hear* what the dead have to say. He imagines the dead not quite as the final and unknowable realm beyond

life, but, potentially, that which must be addressed by memorial writing, though at best it cannot reestablish the relationships and peoples of the past.

Ultimately, the preposition that might best articulate Genet's relation to the Fedayeen as he recounts their shared past might be one without an equivalent in the English language, the French *contre*. As François Noudelmann notes in an address to Jacques Derrida on the latter's work *The Politics of Friendship*, "[I]n French, 'counter' (*contre*), means also 'aside': a displacement, not the line that follows from the origin to the (faithful or unfaithful) descendants, but that which takes a step aside" ("A Non-Genealogical" 44). As opposed to a writing that would be "for" the Palestinians, thus reinscribing the Fedayeen within the redemptive narrative history and justifying their martyrdom as a means toward a brighter future, a writing "of" the Palestinians would seem to allow for the affective ties that Genet shares with the refugees to be expressed. However, despite his use of the first-person plural at times throughout *Prisoner*, Genet is aware that he is separated from the Palestinians through the tendency for the community to imagine itself as integrally connected to a shared past and territory. Furthermore, for Genet, writing is always characterized by a distance, in opposition to speaking or the given word; it is a necessary betrayal when loyalty would mean helping, as Patrice Bougon writes, "[...] not so much to change an unjust social hierarchy as to occupy the positions of [the Palestinians'] oppressors" ("Politics" 152). After refusing to fulfill the conventions of autobiography and submitting the concept of identity to the Lyotardian logic of narrative pragmatics, Genet resists the position of historian and does not give a collective or essential identity to the Palestinians in revolt. His approach is not simply to spurn the desire on the part of the Palestinians to have their narrative and representation enter Western political

discourse; rather, he is aware that such a practice would efface the very heterogeneity to surrounding social orders that attracts Genet so much to this necessarily temporary community.

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