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Introduction: Narrow Straits

In 1968, Jean Genet crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, reached Paris, and strode into the courtyard of the Sorbonne. There he saw, next to the red booth of the Maoists, the Palestinians' set-up. What color was it? He signed the first of a series of interventions, tracts, prefaces, stories, and political writings. Seventeen years later, in 1986, *Prisoner of Love*, his last book, was published posthumously. The writer is buried in Larache, in Morocco.

Between these two crossings of the Strait, Genet "hopped everywhere things were hopping in the world."[1] He was seen in Chicago and Jordan, he traveled to Strasbourg and Chartres, in France. He met parties and movements and the men who made them: the Black Panthers in the United States, the Red Army Faction in Germany, the Palestinians in the Middle East. Everywhere he went, he saw the disinherited. It was in Vienna, in 1983, where he expressed his understanding of the past and the future translation of an experience whose rules he would set down. He spent fifteen years on the side of men from everywhere, and began writing his last book. "When I finished with writing, I was thirty-four, thirty-five years old. But that was a dream. It was in any case a daydream, a reverie. I wrote in prison. Once I became free, I was lost. And I didn't find myself again in reality, in the real world, until I was with two revolutionary movements, the Black Panthers and

the Palestinians. So then I submitted myself to the real world. I was acting in relation to the real world and no longer to the grammatical world […].”[2] The first act—submission to a real world—led to another. It wasn’t by looking at the Palestinians or the Black Panthers, but by remembering the change of attitude of the Algerians in Paris after the independence of their country that he could say, “to explode forth out of shame is easy.”[3] In reality, it is a single gesture, with both hands, moving from one world to the next, a movement out of unhappy captivity: getting out, as you might get out of prison, or yourself, or leave some port. To speak of that gesture is to open yourself to the possibility of a story wanting, in itself, to be liberated.

This book is not a monograph about Genet. The limits I’ve imposed on myself—the period from 1968 to 1986—are not definitive. The period involves a series of actions: those of the writer’s, those of the movements’. Before that, there was Genet’s unwillingness to sign the “Manifeste des 121” demanding the right to refuse a draft notice for the war in Algeria in 1960; that is another beginning to this story. His judgment of the occupation of Lebanon, which he witnessed in 1982, must be understood in relation to two others he experienced: the German occupation of Paris (1940) and the French occupation of Syria (1930). We’ll go further: if he decided to choose as his father a member of the Black Panthers whom he met in the United States, and his mother a Palestinian woman of Ajloun in whose house he spent the night, in Jordan, if this choice has political consequences, then we have to return to his experience at a public school in 1920, the day Genet, an abandoned child, could not describe the house in which he lived. Later on, this story will echo in what remains as the writer’s legacy.

In 1977, at the turning point of this period, Michel Foucault undertook a project: he wanted to speak of the “Lives of Infamous Men.”[4] This historical project was concerned with the seventeenth century in France, most particularly the prison archives of the years between

1660 and 1760 in that country, though he added that it could be applied to other times and other places. Foucault wanted to describe the political life of these monstrous abominations—the madman, the sodomite, the atheist; men filled with violence—from the tiny traces they left behind, "the discourses that in misfortune and rage they carried out with power." Whereas Foucault gave up the project, Genet took it at face value. Or, rather, the infamy that haunted the writer found, in those years, a way of speaking its name and living its experience. Yet Foucault said some time later, in 1984, that "the misfortune of men must never remain a mute vestige of politics."[5] Genet, who at that time had just met Foucault the philosopher, would be faithful to that thought.

In this perspective, the last incarnation of Genet means *the one at the end*, the echo of the writer's last period, when the man attempted political action by the means the poet uses: language. But the *last* also signifies the *lowest*, the way we speak of the lowest of the low, if the black and Palestinian experiences of Genet do not exclude war, the incitement to murder, and the hatred of the enemy.

Men of infamy, the last Genet among them, are not men lacking in dignity, but rather those who struggle against the shame of being silenced.

"When a traveler comes from abroad, from Morocco, for example, he may read an article in *L'Humanité* on Cohn-Bendit [...]."[6] This sentence begins Genet's first political article. "When I hear the word 'man,' I run to him at once..."[7] Thus spake Erasmus in a text written in 1517 entitled *Querela Pacis.* To a nearly perfect degree, Genet's political writing expresses the same concern as Erasmus does. Both may exclaim, "The man of whom I speak is struggling against himself." My hypothesis is that Genet's political project embraces the movement of this hurried impulse; it makes Genet come running in the name of man, concerned. An explanation of the name of man—that's the political will of the last Genet's incarnation, the direction of his intent.

Meetings with movements, dialogues with youth and an old man, friendships, and politics all involve a certain relationship with ancestors, with tradition and history. These exchanges help us understand Genet's metamorphosis, and this is the objective of Part One of the book. Investigations into brutality, terrorism, and war—the issues of the concept of violence—aim to preserve the possibility of revolt without giving in to terror. This way of looking at fascism is also a way of checking the state of poetry in the world: Part Two of the book is concerned with these issues. Genet's research into the fables, often religious in nature, used by movements and his reflection on fictions, at the origin of his adventure, will constitute the final part of our study, for they will move Genet to attack evangelism in politics.

Chronologically, but not only and not really, these are three *circles of matter*—the critique of friendship, of violence, and of history—that each time recreate a genealogical line. These chapters seek to establish a path that is not the only, nor the final, one. I wanted to find the means of seeing the grain of sand, yes, but also the sea in which the writer drowns.

Endnotes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (1974) (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1981), 50.
2. "Une rencontre avec Jean Genet," *Revue d'études palestiniennes*, Fall 1986; republished in *The Declared Enemy* (*DE*), translated by Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 239–40.
3. "Four Hours in Shatila," *Revue d'études palestiniennes* 6 (January 1, 1983); *DE*, 225.
4. Michel Foucault, "The Lives of Infamous Men," in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 3:157–175.
5. *Libération*, June 30, 1984.
6. "Les Maîtresses de Lénine," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, May 30, 1968; *DE*, 18.
7. Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings* (*ER*), (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 5:296.