

**IN MEMORIAM: MONUMENTS, MEMORIALS, AND THE REVOLUTIONARY  
DEAD IN THE WORK OF JEAN GENET**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the memorial and monumental aspects of Jean Genet's final memoir, *Un captif amoureux*. My introduction discusses biographical reading as a predominant trend in the critical literature and argues that this way of reading Genet empties out the political force of a deeply committed literary text, severing *Un captif* from the historical genealogies that led to its production. In response to this history, my work addresses the text's memorial and monumental character in order to argue, first, for the sincerity of Genet's articulations of political affinity to the Palestinians and the Black Panthers and, secondly, to argue that mourning, and the memorial impulse, are coextensive, in this text, with the (retrospective and prospective) production of community. I suggest that Genet considers memorial art as a means of assembling this community, whose point of connection (mourning) enables the transcendence (without the negation) of what might be considered to be irreconcilable differences, specifically national, ethno-religious, social, sexual and racial categories of identity.

Chapter one considers the figure of cemetery as a spatial metaphor for the memory work being undertaken by the memoir. I argue that Genet conceives the power of the text's commemorative capacity to be in its creation of a flexible and indeterminate discursive space, a figurative territory, for the literally dispossessed (living and dead) to inhabit. For Genet, the limitations of this project circulate around the identity and disposition of the prospective reader who, despite sometimes being characterized as sympathetic, appears to inhabit the text's discursive space as an outsider. Chapter two turns from the architectural towards the sculptural. Unlike the spatial metaphor of the cemetery, which suggests habitation, dwelling, and the confluence of perspectives, the recurring image of the *pietà* suggests the devotional and

ceremonial qualities of the memoir as a commemorative object and the text's uneasy position within, and relationship to, the broader history and economy of Western representation. Comparing Genet to the vandalizer of Michelangelo's pieta Lászlo Toth, I argue that his "vandalism" of the pieta produces both a new image to be circulated but, in creating a new image, a new referent also emerges.

## Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Madeleine Reddon. The germ of this project began in the first semester of my Master's degree in a term paper I wrote for Dr. Dina Al-Kassim titled: "Fostering/Festering Wounds: An Analysis of Wounds, Identity and Theatre in Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love*." I presented different iterations of that paper at a Graduate Conference at the University of Toronto in May 2013 and at UBC's English Graduate Conference, also in May of 2013. In the last term of my MA, I wrote again on Genet for a class on monuments and memorials. The term paper from that course, " 'Que suis-je venu faire ici?' A Discussion of Autobiography and Memorial in Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love*," laid the groundwork for the introduction to this thesis.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Jean Genet and his Reader: The Long Seduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Preliminaries: Returning to the Desert.....	1
1.2 Critical Silence and the Terrible Pleasures of Reading Genet .....	7
1.3 The Funeral Procession: Outlining an Approach for Reading.....	18
<b>Chapter 2: Textual Remains: Monumental and Memorial Space .....</b>	<b>25</b>
2.1 Ventriloquizing Dead Revolutionaries .....	25
2.2 Le petit cimetière de Genet .....	31
2.3 A Tombstone of Silence and Absence .....	41
<b>Chapter 3: Iconoclasms: Breaking and Making the Sacred Image .....</b>	<b>46</b>
3.1 Sculptural Obsessions: Vandal Artists.....	46
3.2 Divine and Damaged Icons.....	51
3.3 The Sham .....	54
3.4 New Referents: Materializing the Revolutionary .....	58
3.5 Conclusion: Addressing the Living .....	61
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>67</b>

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To my father, Rejean, and my sister, Robin.

I dedicate this to you for your unshakeable  
faith in me and my work. I love you both.

## Chapter 1: Jean Genet and his Reader: The Long Seduction

“I read *Prisoner of Love* because I was one.” Maria Damon

### 1.1 Preliminaries: Returning to the Desert

In May of 1986, a mere five weeks after Jean Genet passed away (weak from cancer, he suffered an accidental fall in his hotel room), Gallimard published his final opus, a memoir titled *Un captif amoureux* (trans. *Prisoner of Love*). Fully aware that he was dying, Genet worked tirelessly on this last text, refusing medical treatment, because it wasted the time he needed to write, and painkillers, because the drugs dulled his mind. This memoir recollects the time Genet spent among the Palestinian Liberation Organization Fatah revolutionaries, in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, during the early-1970s and the mid-1980s periods of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, during the same period, his intermittent visits to the Black Panthers in the United States. The final proofs of the text, left “neatly stacked” in his hotel room (Soueif n.pag.), contained a final, brief note at the top of the manuscript. The note—which later became the epigraph to the memoir—gently advises his readers: “mettre à l’abri toutes les images du langage et se servir d’elles, car elles sont dans le désert, où il faut aller les chercher.”<sup>1</sup> Read as a final comment on death itself—death as both the dangerous desert and the radical limit that one must try to encounter to create art—this note crystallizes the project of Genet’s memoir, which is an exploration of art and its capacity to engage with, render, and remember the dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Bray translation of *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “Put all the images in a place of safety and make use of them, for they are in the desert, and it’s in the desert we must go and look for them.”



Death occurs. Someone disappears. Yet for Genet, this disappearance always marks a reciprocal appearance. Genet describes his text as an image that has emerged to fill the void left by a fedayee<sup>2</sup> who has died:

Cette image du feddai est de plus en plus ineffaçable. Il se tourne dans le sentier; je ne verrai plus son visage, seulement son dos et son ombre. C'est alors que je ne pourrai plus lui parler ni l'entendre que j'aurai le besoin d'en parler.

Il semble que l'effacement ne soit pas seulement la disparition mais aussi la nécessité de la combler par quelque chose de différent, par peut-être le contraire de ce qu'il efface. Comme s'il y avait eu un trou dans cet endroit où le feddai disparaît c'est qu'un dessin, un photographie, un portrait veulent le rappeler dans tous les sens de ce mot. Ils rappellent le feddai d'assez loin—dans tous les sens de cette expression—. Voulut-il disparaître afin qu'apparût le portrait? (*Un captif amoureux* 32)<sup>3</sup>

In using the verb *rappeler* in “tous les sens” (in all its meanings and from every direction), Genet figures the image as an object with many capacities. The image calls after the dead (as if they had just left the room and we were calling them back...), recalls them (makes them return), and remembers the dead.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the dead's radical absence provides art with a complex imperative:

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<sup>2</sup> One who sacrifices themselves. The singular noun used to describe Arabic revolutionaries, specifically fighting Israel. In this text, the fedayeen refer to the Fatah revolutionaries fighting in the PLO.

<sup>3</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003):

The image of the fedayee grows more and more indelible: he turns into the path, and I'll no longer be able to see his face, only his back and his shadow. It's when I can neither talk to him anymore, nor he to me, that I'll need to talk about him.

The disappearance seems not to be 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? (23)

<sup>4</sup> The French definitions of *rappeler*: Appeller pour faire revenir, faire revenir, faire revenir à la conscience, à la mémoire (Grand Robert).

to hail the dead and, through that hailing, return them in some way, and yet also to remember those who have turned down the path, those who have been subsumed into the “void.” In his work *Paralyses: Literature, Travel, and Ethnography in French Modernity*, John Culbert notes a curious problem in Michel Leiris’s autobiography *Scraps*, which I suggest is also at play in *Un captif*. For Leiris, death is conceived as “a trespass, as [a] figure of limit and border” whose figuration can only be conceptualized as “an absolute boundary, a barrier to thought and figuration” (Culbert 62-3). Yet, in spite of the inability to figure death, death nevertheless can still appear indirectly. Death, and dying, can still be performed or staged. Actors, after all, die all the time. This paradoxical issue also appears in Genet’s work. However, in *Un captif* the act of dying precedes the appearance of the art work. Death transmutes the dead into art and, in doing so, “countersigns” the production of art (Culbert 66).

Despite the vitality of this text—the richness inherent in its dense and complexly rendered images, its effusive and elegiac tone, its peculiar plain style—*Un captif* is often neglected in the critical literature on Genet. Instead, reviews of *Un captif* tend to consider Genet’s presence as the narrator to be the text’s most salient feature. For instance, William Thompson reads the novel as Genet’s final (and failed) pronouncement on his personal politics and identity: “However politicized his activities in the Middle East may have appeared, the ultimate result is still an attempt, a desperate attempt, at self-explanation... There seems to be resignation on the part of Genet to the hopelessness of his own efforts to understand himself and to make himself understood” (149). In a similar mood, Colin Davis reads the text as a final note from Genet on his inability to reconcile with society at large: “At the end of his life he cannot curtail his lifelong journey into the imaginary and reaffirm the supremacy of the real... he is still unable to overcome his own detachment from the spectacle of reality” (17). And, for some, the

work reads as a complete failure: “Les souvenirs Palestiniens de Jean Genet surprennent. Récit révolutionnaire? Soutien à l'OLP? Pas même. Plutôt un auteur absent qui a choisi une platitude et la monotonie” (Claude Meunier qtd. *Jean Genet et son lecteur* 145). Subsequent discussions of the text have not progressed much further than these initial comments, which consider the majority of Genet’s 500-page text to be merely a testament to his lifelong narcissism.<sup>5</sup> I locate these reviews in a long tradition of reading Genet’s fiction as autobiography.

Frequently, these readings fall into one of two categories: either they attempt to read reported events about Genet’s life into his fiction, using biographical details to unlock the ‘secret’ of the text (Dorothy J. Altman, Hadrien Laroche, Carl Lavery). Or they consider his fiction as an appendage to his public persona, the similarities between Genet’s life and his novels read as moments of “truth” with the capacity to fully explain his public comportment (beginning with Jean Paul Sartre, Georges Bataille, and continuing with Harry E. Stewart, Rob Roy McGregor, Edmund White).<sup>6</sup> Other scholars, such as Claire Boyle, Elizabeth Stephens, Scott Durham, Grace Russo Bullaro, have begun to address the problem of reading Genet through

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<sup>5</sup> Not all of the initial reviews of this text read this way; in fact, the French reception of *Un captif amoureux*, some of which is detailed in *Jean Genet et son lecteur*, is much more interesting, in terms of its *thematic investigations*, and far more forgiving of Genet’s “narcissism” than the English reception of the work. That being said, this history of positive reviews does not seem to have as much influence on subsequent discussions of *Un captif amoureux*.

<sup>6</sup> My paper will detail some of these conflation. Several critics have already begun to point out the pervasiveness of this problem in the criticism, but the issue remains shallowly mined; Loren Ringer’s *Saint Genet Decanonized: The Ludic Body is Querelle* (2001) conducts a thorough critique of Sartre’s work on Genet and its subsequent influence on the criticism from the 1950s to the 1990s; Richard McLaughlin, in his Master’s thesis *Before the Ascendance of Mediocrity: Jean Genet’s Politics of Writing* (2012), draws from Ringer to show how Sartre’s reading of Genet persists in Bataille; however, the finest critiques have come from Elizabeth Stephens’ *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet’s Fiction* (2007)—iterations of which have been published as a paper of the same name and “Je suis un mensonge qui dit toujours la vérité”: Genet’s Queer Subjectivities (2005)—and Claire Boyle’s “Friend or Foe? Misidentification, Abject Selfhood and Genet’s Queer Reception” (2005).

autobiography. Bullaro notes rightly: “if [Genet’s] novels have been 'semantically underdetermined', his life has been, if anything, semantically over determined" (73).

Even a brief overview of these scholarly critiques suggests that this way of reading Genet radically reduces the complexity of his novels in order to establish a stable account of the author. Biographical reading is a predominant trend in the critical literature in Genet; in this thesis, I argue that this way of reading Genet empties out the political force of a deeply committed literary text, severing *Un captif amoureux* from the historical genealogies that led to its production. I ask, how does reading *Un captif* as an expression of Genet’s narcissism diminish or erase the text’s political project, which professes an affinity to and an unparalleled support of the Palestinian revolution and the Black Panther movement? To begin, engaging the political dimensions of *Un captif* involves recognizing that Genet’s late work cannot simply be “apolitical” as Plunka suggests (510) and, moreover, that the narrator’s declarations of affinity with the Palestinians and the Panthers are legitimate demonstrations of solidarity and not just expressions of a hollow persona. I position my work in opposition to the scholarly accounts that read Genet disparagingly as an “apostle of the wretched of the earth” (White *Genet* xvi). Ahdaf Soueif writes, "Genet himself would have rejected such expedient distinctions," regarding his presumed apolitical stance, in saying “ ‘It's not the justice of their [the Palestinians'] cause that moves me...it's the rightness’ ” (Genet qtd. n.pag.).

Although he argues against reading Genet’s work through biography in other articles, in “The Deaths of Jean Genet,” Scott Durham rehearses a scene that often prefixes critical investigations of *Un captif amoureux* grounded in biographical reading:

It was only after many years, that Genet-contemplating the imminence of his own death, as well as the passing of the revolutionary movements that had absorbed so much of his

energy since his abandonment of writing would return... After a long silence, the writer recovers his voice long enough to record these last images of the Palestinians for the memory of the West; but he does so only when his own situation, like that of the Palestinians themselves, appears past all hope. (171)

Commonly, *Un captif* is framed as Genet's return from a self-imposed exile from writing.

Genet's long-standing "silence" has some real basis; after the death of his lover Abdallah Bentaga, Genet tore up "all his manuscripts and [threw] the bits down the toilet, including his book on Rembrandt and the two plays that followed *The Screens* (*The Penal Colony* and *The Fairy*)...He took a vow never to write again" (White *Genet* 472-3). Later, Genet would state simply that he had stopped writing because he had nothing else to say. In an interview in 1982 with Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, Genet responded to a question on his "Rimbaud-like" silence: "I don't know why Rimbaud chose silence. I said that he understood that he had to be silent. For me, it seems to me that, since all my books were written in prison, I wrote them to get out of prison. Once I was out of prison, there was no longer any reason to write. My books helped me get out of jail, but what was there to say after that?" (*The Declared Enemy* 197). Though Genet confirms his silence here, his playfulness suggest that he may simply be playing up to the interviewer's expectations of him as a *poète maudite*; in his reply to Genet, Poirot-Delpech remarked, "There are a lot of us who regret this silence of yours," to which Genet rejoined, "Oh! You'll get over it" (*DE* 197).

Taking Genet's proclamations of his silence, perversely, at face value, begs the question: why are critics suddenly taking this notorious liar seriously? Even though Genet corroborates with critics on his silence, the fact remains that he had been continuously writing since his plays and the death of Abdallah. True, Genet was writing essays and not fiction, but continuing to frame this as a "silence" within scholarly accounts is a suspicious act of collusion. To counter the

story of the silent Genet, I will offer my own reading in this section of my introduction wherein I suggest that the majority of Genet's critics, already comfortable and resigned to considering him as (merely) a French, White, Queer writer, were and continue to be disquieted by Genet's political affiliation with the Black Panthers and the Palestinian Liberation Front. His extremist politics, though present in all his previous fictional and non-fictional work, became too visible in *Un captif amoureux*. Approaching the work through biography offers a means of tempering this disjunction between previous, sanitized accounts of Genet and his work. Following this discussion, I discuss in the last section of my introduction how Genet's memoir invites us to approach his work through social frameworks from which we might ascertain other, neglected, elements present in his unique history of the Palestinian revolution such as practices of mourning and memorial.

## 1.2 Critical Silence and the Terrible Pleasures of Reading Genet

The ambivalence critics have had towards *Un captif amoureux* in terms of genre (is it another fictional autobiography? Is it a political tract?<sup>7</sup> Is it a "semidocumentary"?)<sup>8</sup> and their struggle to categorize Genet's late career points to a discomfort and rift in the critical literature on his work. The transparency of Genet's political affiliations has caused critics to treat *Un captif*, historically and contemporaneously, with noted apprehension. Even acknowledging *Un*

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund White is inconsistent with classifying the novel, something I discuss more fully later in this paper, but Loren Ringer is another good example of a critic who deliberately misconstrues the text. On White's heels, Ringer states that "*Un captif amoureux*, published just months after Genet's death in 1986, while written in prose and definitely contained some fiction, belongs more to the domain of political essay" (12), even though White overtly states that "to regard Prisoner of Love as a political tract would be a mistake." (*PoL* x). Comparatively, Annie Cohen-Solal, in an early review of the book, does not have as much difficulty acknowledging the text's promiscuous use of genre: "Reportage? Journal? Poème en prose ou conte épique? *Un captif amoureux*, son ladvire, attire, mêle tous les genres" (qtd. *Jean Genet et son lecteur* 113).

<sup>8</sup> A classification used by Gene A. Plunka in *Jean Genet's Anti-Semitism: Fact or Fiction?*

*captif* as part of Genet's collected works has become difficult for some, a problem which I feel has been aided by readings of Genet's work as essentially autobiographical.<sup>9</sup> Ahdaf Soueif describes a tangible silence developing around the book:

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

This decidedly peculiar forgetfulness regarding *Un captif* must be, in part, due to a shared sense within academia that Genet's work had already been "completed." Certainly, in 1951, Gallimard had already begun publishing Genet's *Oeuvres Completes*, but, in addition to this, his work already seems to lend to comfortable categorizations—take Albert Dichy's groupings of Genet's work, for example: "frontal attack or the period of the novels... the oblique manoeuvre or the period of the theatre... the last festival or the phase of political fiction" (*Flowers and Revolution* 21-22)—into which the significance and centrality of *Un captif* dissolves. Hence, the surprise with which *Un captif* was received: "when Jean Genet died in 1986, many people, especially outside France, were surprised to discover he hadn't died years before" (*White Prisoner of Love* vii). More importantly, however, was the way in which the contents of *Un captif*, "unlike

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<sup>9</sup> This might also be related, in a small way, to the proclivity to see Genet also as *either* a playwright or novelist. In any case, there seems to be a multitude of issues with classifying Genet, leading to oddities in his general reception by academia.

anything [Genet] had written before" (White *Genet* vii), were considered to be "at odds" with what was understood to be the substance of his early work.

Aside from the significant changes in narrative style and tone, perhaps the only truly uncomfortable difference for critics was Genet's newfound and unwavering allegiance to Palestinian rights.<sup>10</sup> Soueif describes the academic treatment of *Un captif* as unavoidably caught up in the outlying debates about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

[Genet] speaking of Sartre's pro-Israeli stance...had said "He's a bit of a coward for fear that his friends in Paris might accuse him of anti-Semitism if he ever said anything in support of Palestinian rights." Genet would probably not have been surprised to see otherwise admiring critics, like Edmund White, fearful that such an accusation might be leveled against him, seeking to separate the genius of the book, somehow, from its politics. Similarly Clifford Geertz...has written that "Genet is, for all his sympathy for the Palestinians' predicament not so much a partisan ... as a connoisseur of pure rebellion." (n.pag.)

Obviously, then, contemporary discomfort regarding *Un captif* in the criticism relates directly to the stigma surrounding the critique of Zionism and Israeli policy. As Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, silence facilitates social exclusion: "the public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown... in this instance, the identification of speech

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<sup>10</sup> Newfound in the sense that his previous fiction and plays did not take up the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; if critics had been following his political essay writing, where he was most outspoken and polemical about these issues, they would not have been surprised. Again, I reiterate that this surprise is part of the fiction of Genet's twenty-five year silence, a fiction enabling critical accounts of Genet as a non-political writer: "Aucun droit de réponse à redouter: Genet, qui n'avait rien publié depuis vingt ans, a donné ce livre, presque certain qu'il n'en verrait pas la sortie et que le texte devrait être son propre témoin et son unique avocat. (Hervé Cronel qtd. *Jean Genet et son lecteur* 173); "C'est aussi le premier livre de Genet après un silence éditorial de vingt-cinq ans" (Cohen-Solal qtd. *Jean Genet et son lecteur* 114). Most of Genet's political essays were written in prominent French Journals and they would have been difficult to ignore, which only serves to underscore my point. His writing on the political efforts of the Black Panthers and other groups was featured in: *La Nouvelle observateur*, *L'Humanité*, *Le Démocrate véronais*. And his essays on the Palestinians appeared in *Zoom* (a French journal on photography) and *Le Monde diplomatique*.



that is critical of Israel with anti-Semitism seeks to render it unsayable. It does this through the allocation of stigma, and seeks to preclude [criticism of Israel] from viable discourse criticism" (xvii).<sup>11</sup>

Media coverage surrounding the Israeli military action against Palestine in July and August of 2014 attests to the persistence of this stigma. Major media outlets avoided any portrayal of Israel as aggressor and elided describing Palestinians as victims. As Nadia Barhoum states, this rhetoric primarily sought to obscure the "disproportionality of violence" against Palestinians by the Israeli state, to nullify reports of the death toll in Gaza, and to ensure any stated support for Palestinians remained "political suicide" (n.pag.). Analogously, the rhetorical measures of devaluing *Un captif amoureux* elides any dialogue with the Israeli Palestinian conflict. The critical treatment of *Un captif* is significant, not just as an instance of a discreet policing of the canon, but as evidence of broader and more troubling regulations of language, whose acknowledgement will allow us to engage responsibly not just with Genet's politics<sup>12</sup> but

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<sup>11</sup> There has been some debate on whether or not Genet himself was anti-Semitic, critiques leveled largely by Harry E. Stewart and Rob Roy McGregor in *Jean Genet; From Fascism to Nihilism*, and Martin Seth Kramer in *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East*. (But also Maria Damon who I quoted at the beginning of this introduction.) I think there is very little evidence of Genet's being anti-Semitic, save Sartre's conjectural remarks: Genet had once told him "that he could not sleep with a Jew" (qtd. Birchall 181). White notes that there was never any overtly anti-Semitic remarks in Genet's work and, even when potentially anti-Semitic material appeared in the first drafts of *Un captif amoureux*, Genet removed the passages before publication (559). Gene A. Plunka's *Jean Genet's Anti-Semitism: Fact or Fiction?* explores the question of Genet's rumored anti-Semitism in more detail and concludes that there is limited evidence, save knowledge of Genet's exposure to several known anti-Semites, to demonstrate the case.

<sup>12</sup> And to which Genet do I refer, the narrator, the author, the public persona? To me, it is clear that the author's personal politics are different than those articulated by the narrator Genet in *Un captif*. As Edmund White notes, the author Genet was much more practical about his politics than was evidenced in his writing, he "may have espoused extremist causes, but once committed he favoured strategies that might actually succeed" (*Genet* 561). I explain this difference as the author's fostering a productive and ironic distance between himself and the Genet articulated within his novels. Especially, since I consider the political stances Genet articulates within his literature to have a different valence than real revolution (see his interview with Michèle Mancheaux in *The Declared Enemy*).

also with discourses seeking to invalidate Palestinian political claims. The author's politics are directly concerned with the interruption of the regulatory and constitutive functions of the language of "the dominant class," whom he considered to be his "torturers" (*DE* 197).

Within the scholarship on Genet, Edmund White's biography is exemplary insofar as his spectacular struggle to categorize *Un captif* effaces its importance within Genet's oeuvre.<sup>13</sup> In his introduction to the first English edition of *Un captif amoureux* (*Prisoner of Love* 1989), Edmund White makes a bold claim that Genet's final work most closely resembles the Bible in terms of structure and style:

Like the bible, *Prisoner of Love* is about chosen people (Panthers, Palestinians) without a homeland. Like the bible, [it is] polyvalent, inconsistent, an invitation to exegesis. Like the Bible it is a book of memory, of names. It alternates serenity and bellicose hate, history and poetry, epic and lyricism. Like the Bible it is the Only Book, one meant to be read again and again and that is constructed canonically, as though the first-time reader had already read it. Indeed Genet has invented a new sort of book altogether- a new kind of prose and a new genre. (*PoL* xviii)

White's lofty but unsustainable analogy—stating *Un captif* is just like the Bible yet utterly new—and his high praise of the formal structure of the book become strange when we consider his other writing on Genet. Although White, like many others, describes *Prisoner of Love* here as Genet's "first major work to be published in nearly twenty-five years" (*PoL* vii), and also as a

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Nevertheless, I take seriously Genet's notion of a 'literary revolution' and do not want to dismiss its relationship to the Palestinians as incidental or convenient.

<sup>13</sup> I single out White in particular because his influence on the recent critical literature on Genet has been considerable and much of the criticism simply lauds White's contributions without much dissension.

fictional text (*PoL* xviii),<sup>14</sup> both of these characterizations fall away in his biography on Genet, published only four years later in 1993.

In *Genet: A Biography*, White erases the significance of *Un captif amoureux* when he explains to the reader, "Since Genet wrote all his fiction in a single concentrated period, the biographer could begin and end the discussion of the novels in a single chapter" (xviii).<sup>15</sup> This is not a throwaway remark and White reiterates this point throughout. Indeed, it is the organizing principle of the entire biography, demonstrated in the degree to which White privileges the early years of Genet's life and writing career, relative to Genet's so-called "political" period, which consists of the years he spent abroad with various revolutionary groups (the Black Panthers, Fatah, and the Palestinian Liberation Front) and the time he spent writing *Un captif amoureux*.<sup>16</sup> White's impulse to separate and differentiate this text from the rest of Genet's novels, in an act of demotion, as well as through a marked reticence concerning the latter half of his life, exemplifies how *Un captif* continues to be one of the least studied works in Genet's oeuvre. Even though White mentions content from *Un captif* (recurring motifs, themes, important passages), nowhere does he, as definitively as he did in the introduction to *Prisoner of Love*,

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<sup>14</sup> White does this in the paragraph immediately following the aforementioned quotation likening *Prisoner* to the Bible.

<sup>15</sup> White refers to the English title of the text but for simplicity's sake, and because I am reading the text in the French, I will refer to it in the French.

<sup>16</sup> White only begins discussing Genet's political involvement—here seen as Genet's first meeting with the Panthers—at about the 500 page mark, which is telling when we consider the text is 635 pages long. I am reluctant to describe Genet's later years as his political period because, in some sense, I think this implies or presumes that Genet was somehow without politics prior to his involvement with the Panthers and Palestinians, which is patently untrue.

explain or clarify the genre of the work. Undeniably, it appears that White has become uncomfortable qualifying the work at all.

The general discomfort with Genet's radical politics in the critical field is reflected in White's apprehensive treatment of the text. In both instances, the generic identity or instability of the work is only discussed in order to disregard what it says. As I mentioned in my introduction, I locate the origin of this repression in a critical trend, long held in studies on Genet, of conflating the author with the narrators of his novels. Genet's overt self-fashioning and public persona, predating even his first publication, begs for this kind of academic riposte: the author, "hailed by Jean Cocteau as 'the greatest living writer of the modern era' before he had published a single book" (qtd. Stephens *FLS* 130), was an early literary legend. Moreover, Genet's "status as a 'case history'" impels a biographical reading of his work insofar as the critic (who appears as the bureaucrat in disguise) seeks to "ground their ultimate truth" (Durham *Preface* 3) in the "petty criminal" from the "series of court records, government documents and newspaper reports...[where he has been] known variously as Genest, Gejetti, Jenet, Genêt, Ganetti or Gallien" (Stephens *FLS* 130-1). Reading Genet's fiction then, primarily through biography but also as autobiography, becomes a process of stabilizing the contradictory aspects of the narrative voice through the critic's unveiling and uncovering of the "real" Genet.

Yet pinning down a definitive Genet is a futile endeavor as "on peut toujours trouver chez Genet une phrase qui contredirra celle qu'on cite...il faut toujours être conscient [que] l'on ne peut dessiner qu'un Genet possible" (Didier Eribon qtd. Stephens 131). As Stephens writes, the tendency of critics who "persistently return to Genet's self, suggests an enduring belief that Genet's self-writing may be seen through, that it may add to the information we have about the

man behind the scandal, that readers can get closer to the real-life Genet as a result of their readings” (Stephens *GQS* 26).

This is certainly true of White who, despite cautioning other critics to “never forget that Genet was writing fiction, not autobiography” (*Genet* xviii), tends to reduce the narrator’s voice in Genet’s texts to an example of the author’s personal perfidiousness and vice versa.<sup>17</sup> We should therefore question White’s assumption that “Genet is the narrator and principal character of all his novels except *Querelle*” (White, *Genet*, 171) as it reinstates regulatory accounts of what is inferred to be *the author’s* subjectivity by way of his psychological profiles, the details of his court documents, etc. over the rhetorical and discursive content of his fictions, effacing their political and ethical implications. Our difficulty in reconciling Genet’s wily public persona, the unwieldy capriciousness of his narrators, and the theoretical underpinnings of his work, which take the self to be an entity primarily of contradiction and antagonism, explains why this is such a common critical reaction to reading these texts. Boyle points to this as the continued “critical investment in breaking through to the core of a writer renowned for works which highlight the ubiquity of artifice and performance, and the absence of essence” (Boyle 26). Like Boyle, I contend not only that we cannot resolve the contradictory elements in Genet’s writing (nor,

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<sup>17</sup> For example, immediately after he makes that remark, White forgets that Genet is not writing autobiography, when he tells the reader:

It should be pointed out that Genet consistently blurred the personal facts in his novels, plays and film scripts, though not out of simple discretion (for instance, he sometimes magnifies his crimes). This slight (or not so slight...) reworking of the truth is a way of making it tender, for a smoother ingestion into the body of the text. (*Genet* xviii).

White cannot escape reading the author Genet’s well known proclivity for lying (in letters, interviews, to friends, to biographers, etc) into the narrators who share his name and, later in the biography, even into the formal content of the novels’ settings, the other characters, and the plotting of the narratives.

perhaps, should we), but that his rhetorical style is a deliberate muddling of any possible information we might glean about the author, and that the purpose of this muddling is to trap the reader into performing a particular reading. By Boyle's account, this is a form of seduction; Genet seduces the unsuspecting reader by goading them into a search for the "true Genet" and, as a result, the reader abandons other readings: "To be seduced into recognizing a self-called Genet ... is to abandon an investigative approach... and instead to produce a mode of reading likely to scramble, rather than produce, knowledge about Genet's person" (Boyle 31-2).

This scrambling of self is characteristic of all Genet's prose writing and gestures to the ways in which Genet's work avoids articulating representative depictions of marginal subjectivities. Durham writes that this is the distinctive feature of his work, which is "less a matter of creating a literature of theft than of perpetuating a theft of literature; less a matter of representing a marginal subjectivity in the language of official culture than of making a subaltern or perverse use of that language itself" (*Preface 2*). Genet's work is less about reasserting the significance of marginal subjectivities, or with rendering marginal figures visible, than it is about trying to corrupt, and render impotent, the language of "the masters." This goal seems to be Genet's primary impulse for writing, and it implies that the scrambling of the self will extend beyond Genet's self-representation to affect his readers. When discussing the publication of his first work *Notre Dame des Fleurs*, Genet discloses:

My dream would have been to give it to an editor... who would bring it out with a completely bland cover in a very small printing, say three or four hundred copies. The book would have made its way into unsuspecting minds. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible. We ended up having to sell it to a publisher who sold it to homosexuals or to writers, which amounts to the same thing: they were people who knew what they were getting. I would have liked for my book to have fallen into the hands of Catholic bankers

or into the homes of ordinary people, policemen or concierges, people like that... (DE 8-9).

The efficacy of Genet's seduction relies precisely on his narrators' use of, and blatant play with, the conventions of the genre of autobiography, snaring critics into reiterating now timeworn analyses as his "readers' attention[s are] drawn to the elusiveness of Genet's self" (Boyle 32).

But we are also convinced of the possibility, despite the constant reminders of his infidelity to the reader, that there exists something concrete about Genet somewhere in the text.<sup>18</sup> This impulse, I think, springs from Genet's highly particular deployment of autobiography, a genre broadly understood as being inextricably linked to the confessional and the confession (Gilmore 2), whose "disruption of generic code functions as an authorial disclaimer" (Boyle 32).

Suddenly, "the address to the reader is not the 'I cannot write myself' that is common in post-war French autobiography, but rather 'you cannot read myself'" (Boyle 32) and it is this address that incites the reader to react in opposition to the narrator's forewarnings. This interplay between the "seduction" of the reader and the critic's subsequent judgments of Genet's "truth" recall Michel Foucault's assertion that "sex [is] not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood" (Foucault 71). Recalling Foucault's constellation, in which the subject's articulation of sexuality demands a hermeneutic response of verification (66), this

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<sup>18</sup> This might be, in part, because of a superficial agreement between the names of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist within Genet's fiction, which, as Philippe Lejeune's "pacte autobiographique" dictates, distinguishes autobiography as distinct from fiction: "quand on cherche donc, pour distinguer la fiction de l'autobiographie, à fonder ce à quoi renvoie le «je» des récits personnels, nul besoin de rejoindre un impossible hors-texte: le texte lui-même offre à son extrême lisière ce terme dernier, le nom propre de l'auteur, à la fois textuel et indubitablement référentiel" (35). Paul Eakin explains the significance of this revised elaboration of the autobiographical contract in his introduction to *On Autobiography*, the English translation of a selection of Lejeune's writings: "while authorial intention remained essential to the pact, it could now be identified textually rather than through putative access to the consciousness of the author. Attention thus shifted from the question of sincerity in the writing 'to the sign of that intention present in the text' that is, to the kind of autobiographical contract elaborated" (ix).

power dynamic requires that sex be constructed “as a problem of truth” (56), figured as a “sign... to be interpreted” (67), by another subject in the hermeneutic position. Accordingly, this desire to prove “Genet” to be either “true or false” is a manifestation of the critic’s bid to re-enact the “spirals of power and pleasure” associated with the familiar genre of “capture and seduction” (Foucault 45). For example, the confessional, but also, the autobiography, a genre whose greatest supporting fiction is that it permits the transmission of a “truthful” self-representation.

The reader’s pleasure in re-enacting the confessional mode—a pleasure Genet solicits us to take— explains, at least in part, the frequency with which critics have read biography into his work, though I hesitate to say definitively that this a fundamental misreading of Genet or that these readings have no critical value. That being said, the limitations of these readings as redemptive projects is clear. When White maintains that Genet “borrows the prestige of the confessional autobiography” (*Genet* xviii), this way of accounting remains tied to the reproduction, through the “pleasure of analysis” (Foucault 71), of certain truths about the author that rely on repressing the more inflammatory and destabilizing aspects of Genet’s writing. Durham speculates that the redemptive reading is both the most common way of reading Genet and that it necessarily depends on renouncing both Genet’s criminality and that of his characters as incidental to his work. Genet's criminality becomes merely an “emblem of the authenticity of his work and the marginal experience that it represents” and, in turn, his literary work is framed as “what redeems the criminal himself, transforming him into a productive citizen of the republic of letters” (Durham *Preface* 1).

Historically, the rhetorical “redeeming” of Genet arose for very practical reasons. In their judicial appeals, Sartre and Cocteau framed Genet as a rehabilitated figure in order to establish his "legitimacy as a literary figure" in the eyes of the courts and the president (Durham *Preface*



1) and to assure his release from prison. Yet subsequent iterations of this particular “Genet” have acted as vehicles of erasure. White intends to use his biography to make Genet into an example for others: “few people may think a sexual and social deviant—a man of accused of killing his intimates and of advocating betrayal, of creating scandal and perpetrating pornography—can provide an example to others, but this biography shows how such a transformation can be wrought” (*Genet* xvii). But as Durham suggests, making Genet into “an example” for others requires repudiating and sanitizing some of the foundational aspects of his writing, such as his relationship to criminality or his radical political affiliations.

### **1.3 The Funeral Procession: Outlining an Approach for Reading**

Over the course of this introduction, I have discussed several issues surrounding the uptake of Genet’s work. Obviously, there are a myriad of ways in which Genet’s fiction openly tests the limits of autobiography but a pressing question remains: is autobiography the limit to Genet’s fiction? More imperative is a renewed concentration on “the relation of Genet’s singular voice and sensibility to the collective experiences of the various publics to which (but also against which) his writings are addressed” as understanding Genet’s work as merely reflective of his personal archive radically diminishes the ways in which it is also “written in explicit response to a series of political events” such as WWII, “fascism, and the French Resistance,” the Algerian War, the Black Panther movement, and the Israeli-Palestinian war (Durham *Preface* 4). Moving away from autobiography requires a different instantiation of the historical and contextual genealogies that led to the production of Genet’s text and, thus, the reanimation of his political affinities.

Though he is constantly questioning the aims, shape, and substance of his project, “Que suis-je venu faire ici?” (CA 278),<sup>19</sup> Genet never attempts to clarify his intentions behind his “souvenirs” (49). Genet’s intermittent discomfort with the over-determination of his presence in the recollection and articulation of his memory points to the latent obsession of the novel, which is not the articulation of self or subjectivity, relative to a witnessing, but rather the issues surrounding the death and the dead, of mourning and memorial. Specifically, how can one mourn, appropriately, for those deeply distanced from yourself by culture, history, geography, and language?

The subject of death usually follows the narrator’s ruminations on the novel’s purpose and project. Genet muses on the triviality of his text as his death garb, stating that the text will only really serve his corpse: “Les souvenirs que je rapporte sont peut-être les ornements dont on pare encore mon cadavre, ce que j’écris ne pouvant server personne mais ce cadavre de moi-même certainement tué par l’Église catholique, très doucement le paganisme lui rendra hommage” (CA 260). However, it is the text that enables Genet to become entwined with the Palestinians through its memorial character. Immediately following this, Genet asks rhetorically, “Pourquoi parler de cette révolution?” and answers, “Elle aussi ressemble à un long enterrement don’t j’ai suivi le cortège de loin en loin” (CA 260).<sup>20</sup> Implicit in Genet’s answer is an analogy about his

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<sup>19</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “What am I doing here?” (235).

<sup>20</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “Perhaps the memories I record are mere draperies with which my corpses is still being decked. Perhaps what I write is no use to anyone. But the cadaver of myself, most certainly killed by the Catholic Church, will receive quiet homage from paganism. “What the point of talking about this revolution?” it is too like a long-drawn-out funeral, with me occasionally joining in the procession” (219).

writing: if the funeral procession is a metaphor for the revolution, then Genet joins in with the Palestinians through his text by way of its commemorative, funerary character.

The memorial cortege figures early and late in Genet's work. In his first novel *Notre Dames Des Fleurs*, the memorial for Divine—Genet's famous abject transvestite prostitute—begins with a procession of Queer and transvestite prostitutes to Divine's gravesite. Later in his career, in his essay "That Strange Word," another funeral procession appears headed by the Funeral Mime, whose role is to speak the words to make the dead speak again, to return them from the dead. In these instances, the funeral procession marks a recurrent theme in Genet's work of memorial. In considering *Un captif* as a memorial project, my thesis draws from Jacques Derrida's discussions of mourning in *The Work of Mourning*, paying specific attention to the ways in which Genet figures community as coextensive with the memorial impulse, a relation I see arising, in *Un captif*, through motifs of lightness and luminosity.<sup>21</sup>

I read the luminous fedayeen—radiant because of their proximity to death and for their revolutionary joy<sup>22</sup>—as inheritors of an infectious light from the funeral procession in "This Strange Word..." In this essay, Genet suggests moving the theatre to the graveyard as a solution

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<sup>21</sup> Genet repeatedly describes the appearance and gestures of the fedayeen as having a radiant light and his impression of the overall revolution is also one of light. Genet describes the revolution as a luminous series of images engaged in an (almost) terrible chase: "Quand l'expression Révolution palestinienne est prononcée, elle m'impose encore une très rapide mais épaisse obscurité où les images lumineuses et très colorées se déplacent, l'une chassant l'autre presque méchamment" (CA 407-408). The darkness surrounding the revolution here certainly requires more reading but obviously Genet is positioning the liveliness and the beauty of the revolutionary Fedayeen against the torpid and hostile world enclosing them. Bray's translation of this same passage, strangely, is missing the "terribly, viciously, or nastily" connotations of the word "méchamment" describing the chase: "I've only to hear the phrase "Palestinian revolution" even now and I'm plunged into a great darkness in which luminous, highly colored images succeed and seem to pursue one another" (348).

<sup>22</sup> Dina Al-Kassim has already begun investigating the anti-colonial contours of revolutionary joy in Genet. From her talk on Genet, Bataille and joy, Al-Kassim asks, "if anti-colonial work is or must be written as elegy, what then might postcolonial studies have to say of joy?" This has been a guiding question for my work.

to the diminishing social relevance and function of drama and begins to develop a new form of performance, which he calls Monumental Theatre.<sup>23</sup> This form of theatre aims to “set ablaze in each spectator” something so powerful and contagious that it “would be enough to illuminate those who weren’t able to be present and stir trouble in them” (*Fragments* 109). Like the spectators “lit” by the theatre, the fedayeens’ light marks the “monumental” character of their revolutionary spirit as well as the depth and intensity of their interconnection.

Working from Derrida’s articulation of mourning as necessarily self-referential, my thesis questions whether or not Genet’s “overwhelming” presence in the novel—what has been understood (by Davis, Thompson and others) as preventing the text from demonstrating a sincere or serious political stance—is actually what precludes the text from becoming a vehicle for the erasure and elision of these representations of community. In my view, Genet calls attention to his own singular and partial view of the revolution to prevent his work from becoming what Annie E. Coombes describes as the fate of many a national and official monument—“a monolithic representation of the struggle” compared to so many other “monuments” to this same period (*History After Apartheid* 10).

Annie E. Coombes and Lucia Volk both define memorials and monuments as practices and objects that hold the potential to resignify national and/or community narratives concerning, broadly, history and cultural identities. Though state monuments are often put forward as objects offering a “seductive resolution” to problems created by controversies over national belonging (Volk 28), I argue that Genet deliberately constructs his text as a figure of irresolution, produced

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<sup>23</sup> Notably, this particular essay is perhaps the one piece of writing in which Genet consistently and repeatedly gestures to a collective group to which he apparently belongs, using “us” and “we” more frequently than in any other work.

in opposition to the more common desire for realistic testimony. Instead, Genet offers a fantastical monument to the revolution: "Mais tant de mots afin de dire: *ceci est ma révolution palestinienne* recite dans l'ordre que j'ai choisi. À côté de la mienne il y a l'autre, probablement autres" (416).<sup>24</sup> I argue that the text reproduces the interpellative intention behind every official monument as a monument is a representational object that glorifies a particular event/person/community, and addresses the viewer through its positing of an "ideal community" to which they may or may not belong. Thinking about the interpellative function of the memoir, I argue that though Genet appears to be soliciting the future reader to "occupy" the text alongside the fedayeen, he is also refusing them entry and claim to the ideal community he is articulating, which is figured both as a living and a "phantom community" as Durham suggests (*Deaths of Jean Genet* 184).

I have organized my chapters around two competing metaphors in *Un captif amoureux*, one architectural and one sculptural, which Genet uses to describe the memoir and its memory work. Chapter one focuses on Genet's frequent comparisons of his text to architectural projects as spatial metaphors for the memory work being undertaken by the memoir. Part of my discussion of the metaphors will involve reading *Un captif* alongside one of Genet's essays, featuring earlier iterations of his thinking regarding the role of architecture in producing community and nation, *Chartres Cathedral* (1977). For me, the spatial metaphors in *Un captif* query the text's capacities and limitations as a commemorative object. Genet conceives the power of the text's commemorative capacity to be in its creation of a flexible and indeterminate

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<sup>24</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "All these words to say, This is my Palestinian revolution, told in my own chosen order. As well as mine there is the other, probably many others" (355).

discursive space, a figurative territory, for the literally dispossessed (both living and dead) to inhabit. However, for Genet, the limitations of this project circulate around the identity and disposition of the prospective reader who, despite sometimes being characterized as sympathetic, appears to inhabit the text's discursive space as an outsider.

Chapter two turns away from the architectural towards the sculptural. The recurring image of the pièta in *Un captif* is a metaphor in competition with *la bourgeois maison* to describe and articulate the project of the memoir. Unlike the spatial metaphors which suggest habitation, dwelling, and the confluence of perspectives, the image of the pièta suggests not only the devotional and ceremonial qualities of the memoir as a commemorative object but also the text's uneasy position within, and relationship to, the broader history and economy of Western representation. Genet's version of the pièta is a Palestinian, Muslim couple and, for him, they form the emblematic image of the revolution (CA 243). He writes: "La mère et le fils ; non tels que les artistes chrétiens les ont représentés – peints ou sculptés dans le marbre ou le bois, le fils morts, allongé sur les genoux de la mère plus jeune que le cadaver décrucifié – mais toujours l'un ou l'une veillant sur l'autre...chacun étant la cuirasse de l'autre" (CA 242).<sup>25</sup> Here, Genet de-crucifies Christ, restoring him to life, and rewrites the mother and son relationship as one between living and equal partners. Their defensive (but dynamic) position and the son's anticipated, but not yet actualized, martyr status significantly revises, almost beyond recognition, the traditional Mary and Jesus coupling from Western iconography. Genet's creative intervention into the tradition of representations of the pièta is an aesthetic disruption of Western art through

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<sup>25</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "The mother and the son, but not as Christian artists have depicted them, painted or sculptured in marble or wood, with the dead son lying across the knees of a mother younger than the son de-crucified, but one of them always protecting the other... each was the armor of the other" (203).

its creation of a new and antithetical image. Comparing Genet to the vandalizer of Michelangelo's pièta Lászlo Toth, I argue that his "vandalism" of the pièta produces both a new image to be circulated but, in creating a new image, a new referent also emerges.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to the pièta as a metaphor for the memoir, Genet's "new" emblem is an attempt to produce a representation of the revolution completely different from those already circulating, as well as an image that successfully contains and perpetuates the revolutionary spirit of the fedayeen. I argue that Genet considers the memorial character of his work to be what enables his image to remain distinct and separate from these other representations. The dead's estranged and yet proximal connection to the image is what, for Genet, forms the revolutionary, corrosive power of language but is also what prevents art from being directly useful for concrete political or revolutionary purposes.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> My thinking on this comes from Tobin Seibers' article "Broken Beauty: Disability and Art Vandalism" in which he discusses in depth the vandalism of Michelangelo's pièta, and other art vandalisms, as creating, through the destruction of representational forms, "disabled" subjectivities. Seibers' notes, "Art vandals breach aesthetic form, violating the analogy between art object and subjectivity, and yet they do not render this analogy ineffective. They transform it, replacing the original reference with a different idea of subjectivity—the subject with a disability" (n.pag.).

<sup>27</sup> Genet's thoughts on the question of art's relationship and usefulness to social revolution appears most saliently in his interviews; replying to Hubert Fichte's query concerning a perceived "gap between poetic and artistic revolutions and social revolution," Genet responds, "What are referred to as poetic or artistic revolutions are not exactly revolutions. I don't believe they change the order of the world. Nor do they change the vision we have of the world. They refine vision, they complete it, they make it more complex, but they don't entirely transform it, the way a social or political revolution does... political revolutions rarely, I might say never, correspond to artistic revolutions" (*DE* 128). And, in an interview with Madeline Gobeil, Genet notes that "I wanted to write plays for the theater, to crystallize a theatrical and dramatic emotion. If my plays are useful to blacks, it's not my concern. I don't think they are, in any case. I think that action, the direct struggle against colonialism, does more for blacks than a play does" (*DE* 13).

## Chapter 2: Textual Remains: Monumental and Memorial Space

### 2.1 Ventriloquizing Dead Revolutionaries

When thinking about the relationship of *Un captif amoureux* to memorials, there is an innocuous moment that I return to that grounds my thoughts. This scene, a repeating scene in the text, features three fedayeen singing to one another during a patrol. The first fedayee sings:

« Verdun<sup>28</sup> est un dispositif bien ordonné. (Je n'ai pas dit mélange de croix et de croissants composant un immense cimetière.) Une tuerie eut lieu là, sans autre auteur que Dieu lui-même, Sénégalais, Malagaches, Tunisiens, Marocains, Mauriciens, Calédoniens, Corses, Picards, Tonkinois, Réunionnais s'opposaient en chocs également mortels aux uhlands poméraniens, prusiens, westphaliens, Bulgares, Turcs, Serbes, Croates, Togolais; des milliers de paysans se sont dévorés dans la boue, de tous les points cardinaux venus mourir là. Donnant la mort autant qu'ils la recevaient. À tel point, et si nombreux que plusieurs poètes, seulement à des poètes se pose la question, pensèrent à ce lieu comme à un bloc magnétique appelant les hommes, les soldats internationaux, nationaux, provinciaux, les obligeant à venir mourir là, un bloc magnétique indiquant une autre Étoile polaire, symbolisée par une autre femme, par une autre vierge.

« Nos tombes palestiniennes sont tombées d'avion sur le monde entier, et mourant n'importe où nul cimetière monumental ne les paraphe. Nos morts sont partis d'un seul

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<sup>28</sup> Several sources suggest that one of Genet's final requests was for Gallimard to publish *Un captif amoureux* without proofing or altering the text. By some accounts, he didn't even want his publisher to read it before printing: "Genet est arrivé un jour chez Gallimard avec son manuscrit sous le bras... et a demandé que personne ne lise son texte avant qu'il soit imprimé" (Mathieu Lindon qtd. *Jean Genet et son lecteur* 118). Apparently honoring Genet's request, Gallimard's first edition of *Un captif* does not appear to have been completely copy-edited (for example, the alternating capitalizations of the ethnicities and cultures, in the quotation I provided above, remain) but it is not entirely clear to me whether subsequent French editions of the novel have kept with this; certainly, the typographical irregularities have been dealt with in both of the English editions of the novel that I am working with. The translator, Barbara Bray, discusses the difficulty of consolidating an English version of *Un captif* in light of missing original manuscript. She suggests that there are many typographic errors littering the French version of the text that became stylistic features, which Genet may or may not have intended (*PoL* xix). I have chosen to reprint faithfully the first edition of the French text.



point du peuple arabe pour former un continent idéal. De l'Empire céleste si la Palestine ne descendait jamais sur la terre, serions-nous moins réels? » chante en arabe un feddai. (132)<sup>29</sup>

In the French edition, a little asterix hangs next to *Verdun*, hastily signalling that a Palestinian is speaking and not Genet. It would, undoubtedly, be only too easy to mistake this voice for Genet's. The song, which critiques a French national cemetery and memorial for exploiting the labor and deaths of minority cultures and colonized peoples for the production of Nation, seems to be a strange thematic choice, perhaps too situated in French history, for a fedayee to sing. Moreover, it appears too close to other versions of "Genet" in style and thought. For instance, in his essay on Chartres Cathedral, Genet offers a similar critical account of nation. Asking the reader, "Is Chartres cathedral French, Beauce, or Turkish?" ("Chartes Cathedral" 166), Genet gestures to the dependence of French culture and nation on the work of domestic "foreigners" and the dispossessed. But, even if we disregard these resemblances, the song remains too

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<sup>29</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003):

Verdun is very well laid out—a mixture of crosses and crescents forming one huge graveyard. There was slaughter there, carried out by God himself. Senegalese, Madagascans, Tunisians, Moroccans, Mauritians, New Caledonians, Corsicans, men from Picardy, Tonkin, and Réunion all clashed fatally with Uhlans, Pomeranians, Prussians, Westphalians, Bulgarians, Turks, Serbs, Croats and men from Togoland. Thousands of peasants from all corners of the globe came here to die, to kill and be killed, to be swallowed up in the mud. So many that certain poets—only poets think such thoughts—have seen the place as a kind of magnet attracting soldiers from everywhere, a magnet pointing to some other Pole Star, symbolized by another virgin.

Our Palestinian graves have fallen from plans all over the world, with no cemeteries to mark them. Our dead have fallen from one point in the Arab nation to form an imaginary continent. And if Palestine never came down from the Empire of Heaven to dwell upon earth, would we be any less real?" So sang one of the fedayeen in Arabic. (110.)

There are a couple differences I'd like to point out here between my sense of the French and Bray's translation. Bray has taken out the parentheses at the beginning of this scene and combined the first two sentences. To me this effaces the two different registers that the fedayeen speaks in: the first, a mockingly officious voice describing the "well organized" national cemetery, and the second voice, a cheeky aside, remarking on the confused combination of Muslim and Christian graves in the space.

entangled with themes that appear later on and more insistently in *Un captif* to mitigate this ventriloquist's effect. Specifically, the allusion to “another virgin” at the end of the verse recalls Genet’s discovery of an alternative Mary figure (Hamza’s mother) in his memories of the revolution.

As Christopher Lane has discussed in “The Voided Role,” Genet has never been able to “convincingly” render character for many critics and, indeed, the reader feels his presence in this scene—a scene where he is only supposed to be a nominally present—acutely. Throughout the narrative, moments like these make the reader more inclined to agree with Genet when he self-effacingly describes his writing as inadequate puppetry: “En parlant de Ali, en lui faisant dire des mots français qu’il ignorait peut-être, ou moi-même incapable d’en restituer le ton, j’avais laissé qu’il se transformât en marionnette” (CA 415)<sup>30</sup> and this awkward rendering probably accounts for some of the harsher reviews of this work, which cast these moments as contrived: “Le texte est lourde, répétitive, pas soigné à une série d’impasses littéraires désespérantes (Claude Meunier qtd. *Jean Genet et son lecteur* 145). And yet, despite what appears to be an accidental carelessness or awkwardness<sup>31</sup> on the writer’s part, there remains something present in this scene, and in this song, which is irreducible to the figure of Genet. The longing for land and the imploring, interrogative question, “De l’Empire céleste si la Palestine ne descendait jamais sur la terre, serions-nous moins réels?” are instances where the reader is reminded of desires and

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<sup>30</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “I’d changed Ali into a marionette by talking of him and making him use French words he may not have known, or perhaps because I myself couldn’t recapture his tone...” (354).

<sup>31</sup> I’ll discuss this “awkwardness” in more depth shortly.

struggles that are distinctly not Genet's,<sup>32</sup> emerging out of the text because and (perhaps) in spite of the author.

Untangling these voices would be impossible and fruitless, a return to the mode of reading Genet critiqued in my introduction: the search to discover who (or what) is (or is not) "Genet." I rehearse such a reading here in order to draw our attention to the complexity of readerly attention that Genet's text demands. Moving forward, differentiating between the "true" and "false" Genet will not be one of my goals. Instead, I introduce this scene as an instance where the overarching project of *Un captif amoureux* becomes evident. The cemetery is, at once, a fantastic space of possibility—where dreams of a utopian community are realized as an ideal continent of the dead—and a material absence symbolizing the myriad of problems faced by the dispossessed, neatly encompassed in the fedayee's question of whether their humanity depends on the physical presence of land. The fedayee ask both, Are we any less real if the divinity of Palestine, our land, never reappears? and inversely, What proof do they (Israel, the international community, the reader) need in order to see us as human? In the narrative, the cemetery appears repeatedly as one of the many material "proofs of existence"<sup>33</sup> that the Palestinians lack to prove

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<sup>32</sup> What desires and struggles? Specifically, the struggle against systemic Israeli oppression and violence; the desire to return to Palestine. Despite Genet's personal distance from these issues, a distance he acknowledges and stresses repeatedly—the memoir is, after all, about "[le] temps passé auprès – et non avec eux" (11), the time he spent *with* but not *among* the Palestinians—the fight against colonialism, and other problems facing the dispossessed, were longstanding concerns in his writing, as evidenced his attention to these issues in his essay writing in the later period of his career. I stress this point because Genet's political writing has been largely ignored in the critical literature.

<sup>33</sup> Genet lists the proofs of existence, "Je rapporte cela parce que la cause des Palestiniens, joueurs de cartes sans cartes, était défendue par des hordes qui paraissaient à l'Europe des rassemblements de marginaux, sans véritable identité, sans lien juridique bien établi avec un État reconnu, mais surtout sans territoire bien sûr leur appartenant, mais auquel eux-mêmes appartenaient, territoire où se trouvent habituellement les preuves: cimetières, monuments aux morts, racine des noms de famille, légendes et même, ce que je saurai plus tard: stratèges et idéologues." (CA 278). His listing of these physical markers (cemeteries, monuments, genealogies, and, later, gardens) appears several times in different forms throughout the text. Here is the Bray translation: "I mention all this because many of those

themselves to the international community and, as objects, they loom large in the dreams of the revolutionaries. Evinced by the singing fedayeen I discussed earlier but also shown in other, more innocuous moments such as when Lieutenant Mubarak complains to Genet about the pettiness (the smallness) of the revolution: “Tu ne peux pas savoir à quel points ils me font chier avec une révolution qui leur rendra la petite maison, le petit jardin, les petits pot de fleurs, le petit cimetière...” (CA 267).<sup>34</sup>

For Genet and the revolutionaries, the cemetery is a space of desire and fantasy that renews and solidifies community ties. I read the cemetery as a recurring spatial metaphor, one of many, delineating the memory work being undertaken by the memoir. For me, these spatial metaphors query the text’s capacities and limitations as a commemorative object. Like the cemetery, memoirs are read as “proofs” of existence insofar as their appearance seems to confirm some form of material reality for the reader (*ex nihilo nihil fit* after all). Genet constantly questions the text’s ability to serve as evidence for a reader while, at the same time, he remains interested in thinking about how art’s physical presence as intrinsically connected to the dead and dying. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, art emerges as others recede.<sup>35</sup> That

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who fought in the cause of the Palestinians—those card players without cards—were regarded in Europe as outcasts without any legitimate link with a recognized country, and above all without a territory belonging to them and to which they belonged, with the usual proofs of existence: cemeteries, war memorials, family trees, legends and, as I was to find out later, strategists and ideologues.” (*Prisoner of Love* 235).

<sup>34</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “You can’t imagine how sick they make me, with their revolution that’s supposed to give them back their little houses and gardens, their little pots of flowers and cemeteries” (*Prisoner of Love* 225).

<sup>35</sup> I am reminded of a comment Genet makes about John the Baptist when he is describing the Black Panther party and the growth of their ethos. Genet says, “C’est vrai — « il faut que lui grandisse et que moi je décroisse » (Évangile de Jean rapportant la parole de Jean-Baptiste). Je me répète cette form : « Il faut qu’il grandisse *afin* que je décroisse. » (CA 292 his emphasis). This movement between increasing and decreasing—he must increase so that I may decrease—marks an ebb and flow between people that is usually reserved in this text for the transmutation of the dead into art.

being said, Genet primarily conceives the power of the text's commemorative capacity to be in its creation of a flexible and indeterminate discursive space, a figurative territory, for the literally dispossessed (both living and dead) to inhabit. And this is what I aim to discuss by pointing out the spatial metaphors. However, for Genet, the limitations of this project circulate around the identity and disposition of the prospective reader who, despite sometimes being characterized as sympathetic, appears to inhabit the text's discursive space as an outsider whose search for *the* truth restricts them from accessing the world Genet is describing.

Like a cemetery, many of the dead, whose real bodies might not have been recovered or ever properly buried, are interred here: Mubarak, Ali, Abu Omar, Genet, etc. In speaking through them, Genet mourns. But the mourner's speech is stilted, full of foreign elements and strange tensions. For Jacques Derrida, mourning manifests commonly as this difficulty in speech, which has "to fail in order to succeed" (*Work of Mourning* 144). This failure marks the mourner's attempts at interiorizing the beloved. Since mourning is never "successful," we can never fully interiorize the other; mourning manifests in language by way of aporia (*Work of Mourning* 144). Part of the failure of mourning also materializes as a form of linguistic cannibalism, like Genet's ventriloquism with the singing fedayee:

Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization, since the other, outside us, is now nothing. And with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory...Memory and interiorization: since Freud, this is how the "normal" "work of mourning" is often described. It entails a movement in which an interiorizing idealization takes in itself or upon itself the voice of the other, the other's visage and person, ideally *and* quasi-literally devouring them.  
(Derrida 34)

Derrida discusses an internal psychic process of "devouring," which subsequently marks the speech of the mourner. In the conjoined figure of the Palestinian fedayee and Genet, we see the

literalization of Derrida's description of the mourner's grappling with memory and the dead. To me, this figure, this body with two voices, shows the text's visceral encounter with death and its impasses. In light of Derrida, I approach *Un captif amoureux* as a text saturated with death and bound up in a process of mourning. If the aporetic speech of the mourner suffuses this work, how is Genet mobilizing the language of mourning? To what end? Returning to the figure of the cemetery, in what remains of this chapter, I argue that the memory work of the memoir seeks to produce a memorial space for the dead over and against other monumental representations of the revolution, a monumental (but ephemeral) cemetery to rival *les nécropoles nationale* of other battles like Verdun, effected through the staging of Genet's memories.

## **2.2 Le petit cimetière de Genet**

Of Genet's prose works, *Un captif amoureux* is, perhaps, the most self-reflexive about its formal elements. For instance, the narrator Genet often draws the reader's attention to his narrative's relationship to other forms of memoir writing and other genres of witnessing. In other moments, he speaks directly to the reader about how he is re-organizing the story of the Palestinian revolution to suit his own desires. Or Genet muses on the identity of his reader and on his own position within the text as a privileged witness to these historical events. Frequently, he calls our attention to formal features of the text that will appear (painfully) self-evident. For example, when Genet tells us that the conversations he is remembering are not meticulous recreations and that they have been, in effect, reconstituted, we are not terribly surprised:

Dès ici je dois prévenir le lecteur que mes souvenirs sont exacts, dans les faits, les événements, les dates, mais les conversations sont recomposées. Il y a moins d'un siècle il était encore d'usage de « décrire » les répliques échangées, j'avoue avoir cédé à l'époque. Les dialogues que vous lirez sont une reconstitution en effet, je les espère fidèles mais je

sais qu'ils n'auront jamais l'ingénuité d'un véritable échange de répliques, un Viollet-le-Duc habile ou non étant passé par là. (CA 45)<sup>36</sup>

Besides being strangely solicitous of the reader here (Genet's narrators are usually more hostile, disparaging, and antagonistic) there seems to be nothing to give pause except, perhaps, in the surprising (but apt) comparison Genet makes between his writing and the work of architect Viollet-le-Duc. Viollet-le-Duc, an architect notorious for his controversial restoration projects, preferred subtly redesigning historic buildings, rather than restoring them to earlier versions of themselves. For le-Duc, these alterations returned the building to "a complete condition that may never have existed at any moment" as renovation recovered a lost and crucial essence (qtd. *Architectural Theory of Viollet-le-Duc* 6).

Like le-Duc's restorations, Genet's recasting of the revolution, his decision to modify memory rather than reinstate "facts, dates, and events," is a form of restitution in keeping with what he considered to be the essence of the revolution. The essence of the revolution for Genet was the Palestinian's loss of their homeland, a loss that is repeatedly figured in the text as a game or a performance played by the fedayeen, which takes place without the requisite props or pieces. Genet's own sense of loss—the loss of his Palestinian friends and others—takes shape in the memoir as a form of written mime, acquired through observing the revolutionaries' reenactments of loss. Like the card game Genet witnesses, played between two revolutionaries without real

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<sup>36</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "At this point I must warn the reader that my memory is accurate as far as facts and dates and events are concerned, but that the conversations here are reconstructed. Less than a century ago it was still quite normal to "describe" conversations, and I admit I've followed that method. The dialogue you read in this book is in fact reconstituted, I hope faithfully. But it can never be as complex as real exchanges, since it's only the work of a more or less talented restorer, like Viollet-le-Duc" (35). I note that this translation diminishes Genet's self-deprecating dig: "a clever Viollet-le-Duc *or not* passed by here."

playing cards, the narrative constantly and self-consciously signals the presence of an absence:<sup>37</sup> “Mahjoub et moi eûmes bien ce dialogue, aussi véridique que le jeu de cartes sans aucune carte en main, alors que le jeu était présent par la précision des mains, des doigts, des phalanges” (CA 45).<sup>38</sup> In this mimetic model of memorialization, the dead appear in the residual silence produced by the narrative as it unfolds, just as the cards appear in the empty space between the hands, fingers, and joints of the fedayeen. As a result, the content of Genet’s memories is somewhat incidental. What is significant is, instead, the utterance that produces, peripherally, space for the specters conditioning and originating the text. In this way, the narrative makes space for the absent dead.

The residual silence produced by the narrative, the space where the dead appear and haunt, exists for Genet on a literal as well as figurative level. The white space between words on the page is also a silence, containing more substance than the information relayed by the writing itself. In the opening page of the memoir, Genet reflects on the excess produced by writing:

La page qui fut d’abord blanche, est maintenant parcourue de haut en bas de minuscules signes noirs, les lettres, les mots, les virgules, les points d’exclamation, et c’est grâce à eux qu’on dit que cette page est lisible... La révolution palestinienne fut elle écrite sur le néant, un artifice sur du néant, et la page blanche, et chaque minuscule écart de papier blanc apparaissant entre deux mots sont-ils plus réels que les signes noirs? Lire entre les

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<sup>37</sup> The creative recasting of Genet’s memories reproduces the playacting of the fedayeen and, for Genet, this imitation is most legible in the moments of “awkwardness” of the narrative. The narrator’s comments on the gracelessness of his memoir—is Genet *habile ou non*? Is he a skilled restorer? Is this memoir only “stiff puppetry”?—underscore the tension Genet is (simultaneously) producing in, and reading into, his work between memory, invention, and the recollection of the dead.

<sup>38</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “Mahjoub and I really did have that conversation; it’s just as authentic as the game of cards without cards, where the game existed only through the accurate mimicry of hand and finger and joint” (35). I don’t discuss this image very much here but this is a recurring and very important structuring motif, which requires more attention.



lignes est un art étale, entre les mots aussi, un art à pic. Si elle demeurait en un lieu la réalité du temps passé auprès — et non avec eux — des Palestiniens se conserverait, et je le dis mal, entre chaque mot prétendant rendre compte de cette réalité alors qu'elle se blottit, jusqu'à s'épouser elle-même, mortaisée ou plutôt si exactement prise entre les mots, sur cet espace blanc de la feuille de papier, mais non dans les mots eux-mêmes qui furent écrits afin que disparaisse cette réalité. Ou bien je le dis autrement : l'espace mesuré entre les mots est plus rempli de réel que ne le sera le temps nécessaire pour les lire. (CA 11-12)<sup>39</sup>

The black marks allow the page to be read. To the reader, these marks *suggest* that it is the page that has become readable though Genet insists that only the marks themselves can be read. Their legibility, in fact, depends on the impassiveness of the page. They can speak because the page remains silent. In some sense, this section rehearses a common critique of the communicative capacities of language: writing obscures the page just as language fails to capture *réalité*, so that the attempt to represent the real only produces its effacement. What is more interesting here is the sense that “reality” for Genet nevertheless remains, captured and contained, in the space between the marks. The reality of the revolution persists in “la translucidité du parchemin,” the “translucent” space produced through the writing on the page (CA 11).

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<sup>39</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003):

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... Was the Palestinian revolution really written on the void, an artifice superimposed on nothingness, and is the white page, and every little blank space between the words, more real than the black characters themselves? Reading between the lines is a level art; reading between the words a precipitous one. If the reality of the time spent among—not with—the Palestinians resided anywhere, it would survive between all the words that claim to give an account of it. They claim to give an account of it, but in fact it buries itself, slots itself exactly into the spaces, recorded there rather than in the words that serve only to blot it out. Another way of putting it: the space between the words contains more reality than does the time it takes to read them. (5-6)

But what exactly does this encrusted reality consist of? For Genet, it closely resembles an affect: “Leur réalité était l’imbrication fertile en haine et en amour, dans les vies quotidiens, semblable à la translucidité, silence haché par des mots et des phrases (12).<sup>40</sup> Like an affect, reality is intersubjective. It is found (in abundance) in hate and love nested within people’s daily lives. Comparing it to translucency and to a silence “cut” by words, Genet describes reality as unmediated and immediate. This marks the first instance where we see Genet resisting the prescriptions of memoir writing as he asserts the primacy of the banal, the everyday, over discrete, unique historical events.<sup>41</sup> But it also suggests that what is “real” about the revolution to Genet is unrepresentable and even, perhaps, unintelligible. Its unintelligibility as such explains why, immediately before this comparison, Genet admits that he had completely misunderstood the Palestinian revolution, “La révolution palestinienne m’aurait donc échappé? Tout à fait” (12).<sup>42</sup> In some sense, Genet remains firmly embedded within this “silent reality” even as he continues to speak, by alluding to what remains non-articulated and unspeakable about the revolution. Genet’s misunderstanding, his affirmation of his non-knowledge, positions him as

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<sup>40</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “The reality lay in involvement, fertile in hate and love; in people’s daily lives; in silence, like translucency, punctured by words and phrases” (5-6).

<sup>41</sup> Here is another instance of Genet’s attention to the “failed” character of his writing: “Je le dis mal.” I translate this as “I am saying this wrong” or “I am saying this badly.” This comment is left out of the Bray translation.

<sup>42</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “So did I fail to understand the Palestinian revolution? Yes, completely” (6). This becomes slightly more complex when Genet adds, “Mais peut-etre l’est il de ce temps compact et réel, serré entre chaque lettre de la langue hébraïque” (11-12), making the violence enacted by speech on silence take on a slightly different valence. I suggest that Genet is not making an easy correlation here between Israel/Palestine and the words/page—he makes several other analogies that make this an uneasy supposition, such as when he describes the Black Panthers as black letters on the white page of America—but I do think that he is gesturing to the violence performed by language, when mediating reality, as necessarily related to State. The violence of language, like that of the State, lies in its diminishment of embodied time. I suggest that Genet “misunderstands” the revolution in order to put some distance between the mediating work of his writing and that of State and other violent forms of mediation. His emphasis on being “among but not with” the revolutionaries further underscores this for me.

still embedded within the revolution, over and against the reader who remains unable to access to this unmediated realm. Literally, the reader is separated by time and space from this reality and, figuratively, the reader's engagement with the text, the act of reading, precludes them from participating in its silence. The reader remains bound up in the trap of mediation, folded into the violence that the words enact on the unspoken.

Before discussing more about how the reader is implicated in this text, I would like to restate that representation for Genet cannot disclose reality and yet its constitutive failure is essential in preserving what remains. Like the blank page beneath the words, reality is continuously present within discourse as its impassive and impenetrable backdrop. To complicate this already very complex image, recall that in this same moment Genet also compares writing to the Palestinian revolution—the revolution is “an artifice superimposed on nothingness.” Here, the revolution becomes another form, like writing, whose emergence obscures something greater than itself. Genet nominates “the void” as what is obscured by the revolution, what it is “written” onto. What the void consists of (other than death, non-being, nothingness) is purposefully unclear. But if it is true that some aspect of what is obscured becomes visible, then something emerges here at the periphery. Despite whatever the revolution is “obscuring,” what becomes visible to Genet is the ethereal beauty of the fedayeen, which appears in their luminous gestures and their radiant bodies. The lightness of the revolutionaries makes them elegant. Their beauty is a beauty without vulgarity: “Chacun, qu’il fut d’origine plebienne ou noble, semblait rivaliser de distinction dans ces futaies où personne n’était vulgaire. Voisinage de la mort? L’expression des Grecs : « Que la terre te soit légère », avant qu’il ne

meure le feddai on peut dire qu'a la terre il fut leger" (CA 286).<sup>43</sup> Reminiscent of the whiteness of the page, the fedayeen's light appears only in relief, as a consequence of their proximity to death.

Returning to the question of writing and its relationship to "the page"—the page that appears to stand interchangeably for death as well as for the reality of "daily life"—we must now be wondering what this constellation entails in terms of reading Genet's memoir. If writing effaces everything except for what remains inscrutable in the margins of the page then Genet demands an impossible hermeneutic from the reader: reading *Un captif* requires listening to the silences embedded in the narrative. In some sense, this paradoxical reading imperative is strikingly reminiscent of monuments and memorials. As I noted in the introduction to my thesis, memorials and monuments are objects representing historically significant events or persons, produced (often but not always) by the State to incite reflection and meditation on collective memories and national narratives. Public (green) spaces are often created alongside these objects. This space is produced for the purpose of public and private commemorative practices, which appear and disappear along with the waxing and waning of the public's relationship to the history represented in the monuments and memorials. For Coombes, monuments become alive relative to political and historical conjectures. They are "animated and reanimated on through performance" (12) and thus this space allows room for the public to establish and reinvent their relationship according to how the object is seen to be "addressing" them.

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<sup>43</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "Everyone whether of noble or plebian origin seemed to vie with the rest in distinction, in those forests where no one was vulgar. Was it the nearness of death? The Greeks had an expression: "May the earth be light on you." You could say that before he died a fedayee was light on earth" (242).

Comparatively, Genet asks us to engage with the blank spaces within the narrative, to reflect or dwell within the page, as a means of situating ourselves relative to the events of the revolution. I suspect that this demand to dwell in the blank space of the text is intended to be quite literal. Laurent Boyer, Genet's editor, notes that Genet was very attentive to the literal presentation of this particular narrative: "[Genet] had at one point proceeded to compose the work by juxtaposing, on each page, several texts arranged in columns or in the form of squares on a chessboard, to make use of the interplay between red and black typography. He decided instead on a more readable presentation of a continuous text that he wrote, integrating earlier fragments, during the last two years of his life" (*PoL* xxi). Despite forgoing the checkerboard layout, the arrangement of the text in *Un captif* still shows an attention to the reader's aesthetic apprehension of the words on the page. Frequent and (sometimes) counterintuitive line breaks that separate sections of text show Genet playing with and accentuating the whiteness of the page. If the text is a monument to the revolution then the whiteness of the page gestures to the "public space" available to the reader for reflection and contemplation. Within it, Genet directs us to reflect on our relationship to this history.

As Coombes notes, in times of political and historical conjuncture, monuments become newly visible (11). Suddenly, monuments that had been silent seem to address the public around them. The public answers this address by occupying, either literally or figuratively, the space surrounding the monument. Using this territory, the public rearticulates their relationship to the historical narratives represented by the object, either through commemorative practices or other forms of interaction (defacement, demolition, restoration, replacement, etc). To take the analogy between text and monument further, if the text acts as a "monument" relative to the white space

of the page, what history is being described by this monument? What “history” addresses Genet’s readers?

As I have noted, Genet repeatedly disavows his ability to tell the history of the revolution yet he continues to speak. For Basma El Omari, the form of Genet’s writing precludes the reader from accessing a history; its form doesn’t metaphorize in “the proper sense” but instead marks its own lack (130).<sup>44</sup> That is to say, in producing a historical account, the text doesn’t compare itself to something, it compares itself to nothing. Omari expands, explaining that Genet is, of course, not writing a descriptive chronicle. History is only nominally present in the memoir in the form of a search, a search that uses the faces and bodies of the revolutionaries as an index for a historical truth that it cannot and will never be able to witness (Omari 129).<sup>45</sup> The reader’s ability to orient themselves to this history becomes problematic in *Un captif* since a solid history, or even the fiction of a consolidated account, never materializes. Instead, what is present as a history in the text continually underscores its own emptiness. Instead of the full, mythological account of history present in state monuments, what addresses the reader here is the hollowness of accounting and the privation felt by the witness of having to speak after the fact of death. History only appears in the narrative as a trace in the faces and bodies of the revolutionaries, many of whom, as Genet consistently reminds us, are now dead. Genet remarks that he is deliberately effacing anything that might be present in the narrative that is not in his own “personal” sense revolution, obscuring any “true” or single version of the Palestinian revolution

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<sup>44</sup> Omari: "Genet trace une écriture qui ne métaphorise pas le sens propre mais inscrit son absence" (130).

<sup>45</sup> Omari: Genet's history “se morcelle en une multitude d’histoires qui se reflètent dans des visages, des corps, des mots et des regards. [L’histoire] est écrite sans être décrite, elle est même cette écriture de l’absence, qui cherche dans ces visages, ces corps et ces regards ce qu’elle ne pourra jamais voir” (*Prisoner of Love* 129).

through what he calls a “darkening” of events: "Tout aura lieu sur fond de nuit : sur le point de mourir, malgré le peu de poids de ces mots, leur peu de substance, le peu d’importance de l’événement, le condamné voudrait encore décider seul du sens de ce que fut sa vie – écoulée sur fond de nuit qu’il voulait ce non illuminer” (CA 67-8).<sup>46</sup> Genet’s darkening of history recalls, for me, Daniel Tiffany’s discussion of a trope of lyric obscurity that he terms “darkness visible”: “the corporealization of obscurity in poetry frequently coincides, in its particulars, with the depiction of invisible substance” (50). Poetry encounters its own linguistic obscurity through tropes that render “darkness visible” as the “poem sees its own body in a rainbow, a cloud of dust, a shadow, a storm” (50). Similarly, *Un captif*’s materialization of absence and loss appears as a growing darkness for Genet, who continues to insist on the inscrutability of his writing, even as it is received by the reader in a plain rhetorical style.

Tiffany describes lyrics obscurity as a form of writing that is intentionally incomprehensible as it uses specialized language, like slang or jargon, to speak only to certain initiate readers/listeners: “the principle of lyric obscurity... always refer[s] obliquely to the impression made on the uninitiated listener by the siren song of the vernacular” (19). This form of speaking produces a spectacle within language of the reader’s non-knowing as it emphasizes the author’s inclusion in a group to which the reader, likely, does not belong. Though the argot from Genet’s early work fits more closely with Tiffany’s discussion of the ways that lyric obscurity works to bind communities by excluding the non-initiate, *Un captif* produces a similar

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<sup>46</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “Everything happens in the dark. At the point of death, however insubstantial those words and however unimportant the event itself, the condemned man still wants to determine for himself the meaning of his life, lived in a darkness he tried not to lighten but to make more black” (54).

form of obscurity, not through a use of specialized languages/diction, but through a materialization of its own inscrutability.

For Tiffany, “the problematic of lyric obscurity” focuses “on its *reception* by the reader, on poetic readership, and on the social configuration of poetry” as it emphasizes a frustrated or denied “moment of exchange or enactment” between reader and writer (7). Lyric obscurity—by keeping something from its audience, or producing the illusion that it entertains secret knowledge—creates forms of sociability similar to those of the fetish: it possesses an inscrutable substance at its core, kept and understood only by an initiate (Tiffany 9). Like the fetish, this “secret keeping” instantiates social rules, practices, and social hierarchies. In emphasizing the obscurity of his text, Genet positions himself and the fedayeen against the reader as an initiate group with access to the murky substance of the revolution. Genet articulates community by enforcing and emphasizing the reader’s non-knowledge. What the reader does not know, and cannot know, is precisely the silent substance of *réalité*. Shared between Genet and the fedayeen, the intersubjective, embodied, and affectual experience of the revolution becomes the secret core posthumously uniting them. Unlike the public monument, which becomes a means of enacting, initiating, or reaffirming community ties, Genet’s monument to the revolution is exclusionary, stressing an insoluble and unbridgeable division between the reader and narrator.

### **2.3 A Tombstone of Silence and Absence**

In concluding this chapter, I would like to return to what I read as the spatial dimensions of Genet’s writing. Genet uses nested spatial metaphors throughout the text to describe the memoir’s ability to signal the absence of the dead. The cemetery is one example, an example I would like to use to sum up my discussion of the monumental effects of *Un captif*. As we know, cemeteries are spaces containing the physical remnants and remains of human bodies but missing



a crucial presence. Like the cemetery, the memoir gestures to life but cannot contain it. The allusion to Viollet-le-Duc calls attention to the ways in which Genet is consciously thinking about the spatial register of his writing, about what makes the text closer to a memorial or monument than a simple literary text. The memoir produces a textual space wherein certain figures *remain* spectrally but do not (cannot, can never again) materially subsist. In thinking about the memoir as *housing* these figures, we see how and why Genet considers himself more architect than a strict memoirist.

Though the reader can visit and look into this cemetery-like space, Genet denies them entry to the community he is positing. There is a sense that this exclusion is, in part, because of the reader's non-involvement with these events and these people—the reader's great distance from the revolution—and because the reader remains alive while Genet and the revolutionaries Genet is remembering remain dead. Certainly, Genet seems to speak out from his own grave. Commenting on why he went to see the Palestinians, Genet suggests that he went for fun and that he went, perhaps, because he was already dead to the world: “Car s’il me faudra dire pourquoi j’allai avec les feddayin, que j’en arrive à cette ultime raison : par jeu. Le hasard m’a aidé beaucoup. Je crois que j’étais déjà mort au monde. Et très lentement, comme de consommation, je mourus définitivement afin de faire chic” (CA 455).<sup>47</sup>

Prophesizing his own death, Genet writes into the void and against the reader whom he can't even conceptualize. Musing on the afterlife of *Un captif*, Genet asks, “Puisque ce livre ne sera jamais traduit en arabe, jamais lu par les Français, ni aucun Européen, puisque cependant

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<sup>47</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “If I have to say why I went with the fedayeen, I find the ultimate explanation is that I went for fun. Chance helped a lot. I think I was already dead to the world. And very slowly, as if of consumption, I finally died altogether, just to do the decent thing” (388).

sachant cela je l'écris, à qui s'adresse-t-il?" (339).<sup>48</sup> The answers to this rhetorical question "Who is Genet writing this work for?" seems apparent: the dead. Genet offers his text as burial site and memorial for the fedayeen, those who Genet saw singing for a cemetery. Of course this offering is freighted and, as Genet detractors have noted, it is hard not to read this memoir as anything but a testament to self. I gesture here to Derrida who describes the terrible position of the mourner: "speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness" (*Work of Mourning* 72). Speaking for the dead becomes fraught as one can never fully speak of them without being self-serving; it is difficult to resist "draw[ing] from the dead a supplementary force to be turned against the living" (*Work of Mourning* 51). To avoid this, for Genet, the production of a monument of exclusion is the most ethical way of honoring the revolutionaries:

Qu'on veuille bien comprendre que j'essaie de redire celui qui fut un homme de vinq-cinq ans, mort déjà depuis longtemps : douze ans, je crois. Les lecteurs diront que j'emploie un mâchoire d'âne, plus ou moins vielle, rouillée, mal articulée ; chaque souvenir est vrai. Une bouffée de définitivement. Chaque souvenir, moins qu'une goutte de parfum peut-être, fait revivre l'instant défunt non selon sa fraîcheur vivant de cette époque, mais autrement, je veux dire revivant d'une autre vie. Mais un livre de souvenirs est aussi peu vrai qu'un roman. Je ne ferai pas revivre Moubarak. Ce jour-là et les autres ce qu'il me dit ne sera jamais restitué. Il est bien évident que la description de Carolina du Brésil, je l'ai écrite, mais comment répondre à un mort autrement que par rhétorique ou silence?

Il en est peut-être ainsi de tous les mots mais certainement pour ceux de sacrifice et surtout sacrifice de soi, abnégation, don de soi. Les écrire en hommage à celui qui osa les

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<sup>48</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "This book will never be translated into Arabic, nor will it ever be read by the French or any other Europeans. But since I'm writing it anyway... who is it for?" (289)

vivre pour en mourrir reste un action indélicate et les monuments aux morts de guerre aussi pleins de ces offrandes sans douleurs.

Les parachutists dit-on voient le globe terrestre venir sur eux avec une vitesse augmentant dans la mesure de l'accélération provoquée par leur chute, sur le point d'écrire ces mot dont j'ai parlé je dois être attentif, ne dissimulant ni la naïveté ni l'hypocrisie de celui de prière, pire que tous les hommages. Écrire le mot sacrifice c'est très différent, d'abord d'en faire le sacrifice, encore plus le sacrifice de sa vie c'est-à-dire voir le monde s'anéantir à la vitesse du globe arrivant sur le parachutiste qu'il anéantira. Celui qui, vivant, sacrifie son unique vie devrait avoir droit à une sorte de pierre tombale de silence et d'absence à la fois le dissimulant en frappant d'irréalité quiconque pronouce le nom ou évoque l'acte héroïque cause du mutisme définitif. (CA 405-6)<sup>49</sup>

I quote this passage in full to sum up for my reader the many different tracts my essay has been investigating within Genet's work concerning commemoration and mourning. Here we see

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<sup>49</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003):

Remember I'm trying to describe what a man of twenty-five was like who's been dead a long time. Twelve years, I think. Readers may say I use a mouldy, dislocated old ass's jawbone to do it. But every memory is true. A whiff of cool air fleetingly revives a moment that's past and gone forever. Though perhaps not as powerfully as a drop of perfume, every memory nevertheless brings back the dead moment; not in the living freshness of then, but throbbing with another kind of life.

But a book of reminiscences doesn't present the truth any more than a novel does. I can't bring Mubarak back to life. What he said to me that day and other days will never be reconstructed as it really was. I could write a description of Carolina Del Norde. But how can you answer a dead man, except with rhetoric or silence?

This may apply to all words, but it's certainly true of words like sacrifice, self-sacrificing, abnegation, altruism. To write them down as a tribute to someone who dared to live them, and live them to the point of dying for them, is indecent. Like the war memorials covered with similar easy tributes.

Parachutists are said to see the earth approaching with a speed that accelerates with the approach of their fall. And when I'm about to use the sort of words I've just mentioned, I must be careful. Careful not to hide the naïvety or hypocrisy of the word "prayer" in particular—it's worse than any tribute. To write the word sacrifice is very different from actually making a sacrifice, above all the sacrifice of your own life: seeing the world annihilated as the earth approaches to annihilate the parachutist. A man who sacrifices the one life he'll ever have deserves a tombstone of quiet and absence. One that will swallow up both him and anyone capable of naming him or the heroic act that brought about the ultimate silence. (345-6).

Genet's ambivalence to the form of the work, novel or memoir. Neither form has the capacity to bring someone back to life nor can Genet ever bring Mubarak back to life. Nevertheless, Genet continues to feel Mubarak's pull, what is felt as an unstated question that requires Genet's answer. And so a form with which to do so must be sought. The memoir, in its complex arrangement of "rhetoric and silence," is Genet's attempt at answering and answering to "this dead man."

As I have discussed throughout this paper, Genet repeatedly tries to materialize absence, the absence of "reality" and the dead, while obscuring what remains present. Though he speaks, Genet retains silences in order to provide the fedayeen with a text like "un pierre tombale de silence et d'absence." Unlike "les monuments aux morts de guerre" that are created without any painful offerings—without sacrifice—Genet crafts a memorial wherein he attempts to seal himself. Genet wishes that he will also be "concealed" or sealed within this tomb alongside the fedayeen. In producing this memorial space, the text as tomb swallows Genet up, leaving behind the reader to look on after them.

## Chapter 3: Iconoclasms: Breaking and Making the Sacred Image

### 3.1 Sculptural Obsessions: Vandal Artists

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May in 1972, Lázló Toth took a sculptor's hammer to Michelangelo's *Pietà* shouting, "I am Jesus Christ, Christ is risen from the dead" (qtd. Gamboni 202). Toth succeeded in shattering the Madonna's nose, her eye, and broke off one of her arms but was stopped, by a fireman from the crowd, before he could do any more damage. After the incident, the Church honored the fireman with the Knight's Cross of the Gregorian order because, as the Pope proclaimed, he "had preserved more than a work of art, [he had saved] 'the very symbol of the mother of God'" (qtd. Gamboni 202). At the same time that the Pope was bringing roses and praying before the newly disfigured Madonna, Genet was making his third trip to Jordan. Edmund White writes that, on this tour, Genet was "hoping to go back to Irbid to see Hamza and his mother, who had become obsessions for him" (*Genet* 573). In *Un captif*, it is during this visit that Genet begins to write about seeing this couple as a version of the *pietà*. The image of Hamza and his mother forces itself on Genet, haunting him long after he leaves Jordan:

Dés que nous fûmes sortis de Jordanie, l'image de Hamza avec sa mère ne quitta guère ma pensée. Cette image s'imposait d'une façon curieuse : je voyais Hamza seul, le fusil à la main, souriant et ébouriffé, tel qui'il m'apparut avec Khaled Abou Khaled, et sa silhouette ne se dessinait ni sur le ciel ni sur les façades des maisons, mais sur une grande ombre, une ombre que je peux dire épaisse, aussi étouffante qu'un nuage de suie dont les contours ou, comme dissent les peintres, les valeurs, sculpteraient la forme lourde et immense de sa mère. (CA 241)<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003):

As soon as we were out of Jordan the image of Hamza and his mother started to haunt me. It was strange: I saw Hamza alone, gun in hand, tousled and smiling, just as he'd looked when Khaled Abu Khaled

As I noted in the introduction to my thesis, Genet re-imagines the *pietà* to be a living Palestinian couple in which Christ is a Fatah revolutionary and Mary is his Muslim mother. For Genet, there is always one human figure and one “fabuleuse” form (CA 241) in this couple but, between the mother and the son, these states aren’t stable and the divine and human tend to switch places. This image of the “couple-monstre” (monster, or monstrous, couple) (CA 241) plays on the tensions between terms in a series of binaries: the divine and the demonic, the saint and the criminal, the hero and the terrorist.<sup>51</sup>

Hamza’s death always appears imminent—it looms over him just like the spectre of his mother—but Hamza himself, unlike many of his comrades, doesn’t die in the revolution, or in the narrative, and so his “martyr” status is potential rather than actual. In this way, Hamza is, perhaps, only liminally a Christ figure. But, like Toth, Genet’s attention is predominantly on the figure of the Madonna. Dario Gamboni remarks that “after his arrest, Toth repeated that he was Christ and stood ready for crucifixion, but also pretended to be Michelangelo. God had commanded him to destroy the statue of the Madonna, because, being eternal, He could have no mother” (202). Analogously, Genet also describes himself as the holy Son. Sleeping in Hamza’s bed, Genet solves the riddle of “l’ordre chronologique des parentés humaines correspondant au divin” (CA 229), or how the Son of Mary could also be her divine Father, as Genet takes the son’s place in this holy configuration:

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introduced us. But instead of standing out against the sky or the front of house, he seemed to be framed by a huge dark shadow lowering like a storm cloud, the contours—or as painters would say the values—of which suggested the vast and ponderous shape of his mother. (202).

<sup>51</sup> The Saint and the Criminal are not so very different: in an interview with Madeline Gobeil, Genet responds to the question, What relation do you see between the saint and the criminal?, by saying: “Solitude. And you, don’t you think that the greatest saints are a lot like criminals, if you look at them closely? Saintliness is frightening. There is no visible agreement between society and the saint” (DE 10).

Puisqu[e Hamza] était cette nuit au combat, dans sa chambre et sur son lit je tenais la place et peut-être le rôle du fils. Pour une nuit et le temps d'un acte simple cependant nombreux, un veillard plus âgé qu'elle devenait le fils de la mère car « j'étais avant qu'elle ne fût ». Plus jeune que moi, durant cette action familière – familiale? – elle fut, demeurant celle de Hamza, ma mère. C'est dans cette nuit, qui était ma nuit personnelle et portative, que la porte de ma chambre s'était ouverte et refermée. Je m'endormis. (CA 231)<sup>52</sup>

Though there is no reference to Toth in *Un captif*, and no clear sign that Genet was aware of this incident at the Vatican, it is difficult not to read these two moments as joined.<sup>53</sup> Assuming both the position of Christ and the *artist maudite*, Genet and Toth mirror one another's iconoclastic interventions. While Toth literally vandalizes the sculpture of the *pietà*, Genet figuratively embellishes and recasts these iconic religious figures, breaking the image through metaphoric additions rather than through physical damage. (Both echo, in some sense, Michelangelo's own frustrated acts of creation; frequently, his assistants had to prevent the sculptor from destroying his own work.)<sup>54</sup>

In this chapter, I tease out the iconoclastic aspects of Genet's work, suggesting that his imaging of the *pietà* enacts a similar form of violence as Toth's vandalism on Michelangelo's

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<sup>52</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003):

Because he was fighting that night, I'd taken the son's place and perhaps played his part in his room and his bed. For one night and for the duration of one simply but oft-repeated act, a man older than she was herself because the mother's son. For "before she was made, I was." Though younger than I, during that familiar act she was my mother as well as Hamza's. It was in my own personal and portable darkness that the door of my room opened and closed. I fell asleep. (193)

<sup>53</sup> That being said, this event was international news. I have seen no mention of the incident in his writing, nor any connection to Genet in the criticism on this incident. Dr. Dina Al-Kassim alerted me to the similarity between these two moments and her encouragement led me to investigate this matter further.

<sup>54</sup> Michelangelo did succeed in smashing his Florentine's version *pieta*, which was saved and reassembled by one of his contemporaries.

work. This rupturing is not merely an “anti-idolater deliberately smashing an icon” (CITE 18) but an act of creation that is, perhaps, more disturbing than the physical smashing of an idol.<sup>55</sup> The word iconoclasm, deriving from *eikon* (images) and *klastes* (breaker), means “image breaking” (Boldrick *Striking Images 2*) and usually refers to assaults against religious artifacts. Simon Baker observes the term “is frequently misused to describe situations where nothing is broken but, instead, something is added” (*The Cruel Practice of Art 173*) and, as many contemporary critics in studies of iconoclasm have ascertained, the act of iconoclasm is less dependent on physical breakage than on the discursive transformation of the sign “preced[ing], accompany[ing] and proceed[ing] from moments of physical break[age]” (Richard Clay qtd. Boldrick *Striking Images 2*). Particularly relevant, in the case of Genet, is the notion that iconoclasm may even occur when the intentions of the “iconoclast” are not to destroy, but to improve or restore the image in question. My usage of iconoclasm understands it broadly as a socially troubling action directed towards an object or image known to produce “collective meaning making” (Boldrick *Iconoclasm 6*), an action whose iconoclastic effects depends on how the action is read.<sup>56</sup> Iconoclasm intervenes in a preceding set of social arrangements, invested with shared, symbolic value. These arrangements may or may not be normative configurations.

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<sup>55</sup> It is curious that many recent acts of art vandalism have specifically targeted images of the Virgin Mary, perhaps suggesting the sensitivity of some to this archetype: Lorenzo Costa’s *The Holy Family*, cut by unknown object in 1969; Leonardo Da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and John the Baptist*, vandalized by shotgun blast in 1987; Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary*, covered with latex paint in 1999.

<sup>56</sup> In discussing the ways in which we cannot read iconoclasms based on intentionality, Boldrick notes: “however, intention-based views of iconoclasm’ also mean that, for example, the major alterations that Wyatt made to Salisbury Cathedral could not be classified as ‘iconoclasm’ because his stated intention was to ‘improve’ and not destroy. Yet, as Alex Buchanan shows, Wyatt’s opponents called him ‘the destroyer’ and discussed his work in ways that drew parallels with Reformation ‘iconoclasts.’ (10) Genet, like Wyatt, is read as someone whose “improvements” are essentially destructive, as evidenced by Genet’s detractors, mentioned in my introduction.



The “success” of iconoclasm lies in its ability to expose these arrangements, revealing their potential to be resignified. Recalling Genet’s discussion of the black marks on the page, we might say that the iconoclast’s actions adds a diacritical mark to the socially inscribed object. This marker of difference can serve to profane a sacred object, through alteration, or lifts an “ordinary” object into the realm of the sacred.

Thinking about the etymological origins of the word vandalism, Richard Clay points out that “calling someone a vandal labels them a ‘barbarian’, setting them apart from civilization as epitomized by Rome and its self-proclaimed heirs” (qtd. *Iconoclasm* 7). The pejorative aspects of the term “vandal,” originating from the Vandals sacking of Rome, explains why some critics have begun describing these assailants in other ways. That being said, the term “vandal” suggests to me other more pressing considerations. For instance, we might read this form of violence inversely; vandalism may be an assertion, or demonstration, by some subjects of their preceding marginalization or exclusion from the social. That is to say, we might read the vandal’s actions as an articulation of their subject position as already “outside” the normative framework, violently exposing their liminality to the community through a very public means. As I discussed in my previous chapter, one of the main concerns of *Un captif* is Genet’s concern with producing a community between himself and the revolutionaries by excluding the reader from a particular kind of affective access to his memories of the Revolution. In this chapter, I take the idea of Genet producing community further, suggesting that his reimaging of the *pietà* is meant to be an iconoclastic act that reinstates and emphasizes his marginalization in order to further embed himself in the Palestinian revolutionary community. At the same time, this iconoclastic re-inscription of the *pietà* produces a new referential object through the alteration of the sign.

### 3.2 Divine and Damaged Icons

Sans que je sois un spécialiste de l'art médiéval ni renaissant, je sais que les premières *pietà* furent sculptées dans un bois nouveau et dur, supposé imputrescible ; quand le group était terminé, l'artiste le peignait comme actuellement on peint encore dans les prisons françaises les petits soldats de plomb. Les imagiers taillèrent dans les blocs de marbre, toujours ces mêmes figures : le corps très maigre et nu d'un cadavre aux pieds et aux mains percés, le torse et la tête posés sur les genoux d'une femme dont on ne voyait que l'ovale du visage et les mains, tout le reste du corps était recouvert d'étoffes plus ou moins habilement – selon l'époque et selon l'artiste –, habilement ou esthétiquement disposées. Ces groups, on peut presque dire qu'ils envahirent le monde chrétien, depuis peut-être les Carolingiens jusqu'à Michel-Ange, aussi bien sculptés que peints... Il semble que la femme – la Vierge Marie – soit plus vieille que le cadavre de l'homme posé presque entièrement sur ses genoux, ce qui serait dans l'ordre, mais quelques groupes montrent une vierge-mère plus jeune que le fils mort. Il des baisers trop appuyés, trop longs, et tendres, que des générations de fidèles ont donnés à la Vierge, effaçant les rides, lissant le visage de bronze, de cuivre, d'argent, de marbre ou deivoire, réussissant il y a quatre cents ans le miracle de rajeunissement que donne aujourd'hui la chirurgie esthétique. (240)<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003):

I'm not expert on medieval or Renaissance art, but I do know that the earlier *pietà* were carved out of hard, knotty wood, which was supposed not to rot. When the group was finished the artist would paint it, just as prisoners in French jails still paint lead soldiers. Similar figures were later hewn out of blocks of marble: a gaunt naked corpse with pierced hands and feet and its head and chest resting on the knees of a woman. All you could see of her was her hands and the oval of her face; all the rest was covered with draperies, more or less skillfully and pleasingly disposed according to the artist and the period. Such groups, painted or carved, may be said to have invaded Christendom between, say, the Carolingians and Michelangelo. While the face of the corpse in these compositions is usually quite calm—though sometimes it may seem shadowed by the memory of the suffering on the cross—the face of the woman shows great sorrow, with eyes bent down over the dead man and deep furrows on either side of the drooping mouth. The woman, the Virgin Mary, usually looks older than the man whose body rests almost entirely on her knees, but some groups show her as a virgin mother younger than her dead son. Occasionally this youthfulness is the result of the long and ardent kisses bestowed on it by generations of believers. The kisses have smoothed away

Discussing past representations of the *pietà*, Genet, once again, layers the history of mass cultural production with that of state exploitation, conflating the figure of the painter with French prisoners to suggest the reliance of the majority on the cultural labor of foreigners and criminals. In outlining the different versions of the *pietà*, Genet suggests the striking divide between the lifelessness of Christ and the life of Mary; the peacefulness of the skeletal son as compared to the portrait of Mary's grief, which looks as if it were incised in the mother's face. As viewers, we have a fragmented sense of Mary's body (which hides from us in the excessive folds of her robes) relative to the body of Christ who appears all too visible in his abjection. Despite ostensibly charting a history of the different versions of the *pietà*, Genet seems to be pulling this imagery largely from Michelangelo's sculpture, which was known for its (controversial) portrayal of Mary as younger than Christ and for the prominence of her drapery, embellished to compensate for the disparity in size between the male and female forms (Hibbard 46). Significantly, the sculpture was "considered perfect" by Michelangelo's contemporaries and has been praised since for its technical virtuosity (Hibbard 46).

Genet's iconoclastic rendering of the *pietà* is a response to the technical mastery achieved in this sculpture and to the ideals embodied in these figures. Once again, positioning himself as inexpert—"Sans que je sois un spécialiste..."—Genet offers his image of the *pietà* to the reader as an unfinished and unclear rendering whose Christ and Mary figures are, literally, alive, which makes them far more dynamic characters than the congealed bodies from the realm of Christendom. Hamza and his mother move and emote and Genet reads in them a strength and

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the wrinkles from the face of the bronze, copper, silver, marble or ivory, thus producing four hundred years ago a miracle of rejuvenation now performed by plastic surgery. (201-2)

vitality that is totally absent in the opposing sculpture. To discuss the iconoclastic aspect of this rendering, I turn to Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders who discuss a continuum of malevolent and benevolent forms of iconoclasm (*Iconoclasm* 23). In both cases, the gamut of iconoclastic action runs from irreversible physical damage (obliteration or sacrifice of the icon) to reversible actions (negative or positive cultural redefinition of the sign). In this chart, the malevolent “disfiguring” of the idol has a benevolent counterpart, “re-modeling [or] restoration” (*Iconoclasm* 23). Disfiguring is “a particularly complex and potent form of harm to sacred object...because the disfigured object functions as a sign of both its power, and its powerlessness” (*Iconoclasm* 20) and “tends to concentrate on the face and eyes” (*Iconoclasm* 21), as evidenced by iconoclasts like Toth. Genet’s rendering of the *pietà* is iconoclastic as it obviously and overtly refashions the group of the *pietà* while retaining and recalling earlier iterations of the *pietà*. The ability to be recast the *pietà* so dramatically strikes the reader as evidence of the form’s essential impotence, of the sacred sign’s ability to be profaned, to be remodeled (or disfigured).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> I suggest that Genet’s iconoclasm is related to the French surrealist interest in, what Louis Aragon described as, Parisian “statuomania” (qtd. Baker 190). The surrealists responded to the “dramatically rising tide of statuary in the city” as “six times as many statues had been erected in Paris between 1870 and 1911 as had been raised between 1800 and 1870; a leap from around 25 in the first seventy years of the nineteenth century to nearly 150 during the Third republic” (Baker 191). In *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, “a list of 31 monuments was compiled and surrealist respondents gave suggestions for how to improve them” (195). As Simon Baker notes, “these proposals ranged from minor alterations to wholesale destruction, but most settled for the addition of a provocatively placed ‘woman’...or resorted to blunt scatological humor” (195). Baker describes these hypothetical interventions—interventions such as placing a “gilded bronze turd” on the head of Joan of Arc (Eluard qtd. Baker 195)—through Gamboni’s term “metaphorical iconoclasm” (qtd. Baker 205). Metaphorical iconoclasm arrests a physical monument’s ability to signify properly as it introduces satiric or nonsensical representational elements to render the sign impotent. Since the “ability of the statue to adequately represent its intended subject relies upon respect for the monumental terms in which this representation takes place,” the surrealists’ metaphorical attacks, “*could* be said to prevent it from completing its most basic task...[rendering] the monument completely void” while “leaving it there

In some sense, this profanation of the sacred image, what I have described as an iconoclastic representation, is part of Genet's demystification of its referent, the sacred object, i.e. the sculpture of Michelangelo's *pietà*. Though this action can also be read as a sacralisation of the profaned object insofar as Genet newly sanctifies the image that has been rendered inert and ordinary. Aura Satz writes that "throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we find numerous account of inanimate objects such as relics, paintings, and sculptures miraculously coming to life, bleeding, speaking, moving" (*Iconoclasm* 36) in the Western world. Exposing religious frauds was also another common practice of iconoclasm: "statues or crucifixes that would *not* bleed, would not perform 'animation,' were confirmed by early iconoclasts...as dead and insentient" (*Iconoclasm* 39). Returning to the description of Michelangelo's *pietà*, Genet, comparatively, emphasizes the inertness and prosaicness of the sculpture relative to Hamza and his mother by noting that the face of the Madonna didn't become youthful through a miracle. It was (merely) the pious kisses of the devout that changed her stony face overtime. Stacy Boldrick remarks that "the power of certain images or objects to incite a physical response, and the dynamic between the image's attributed power and control over it are the core issues of iconoclasm" (*Striking Images* 4). Genet, as iconoclast, thus responds to the affective power of the fetishized object by stripping it of its magic and revealing the religious sculpture to be empty.

### **3.3 The Sham**

Genet shows us the "original" *pietà* to be a sham (i.e. "profane" in Agamben's sense) and, I would argue that, his substitutive image, of Hamza and his mother, appears equally

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as a reminder of its pathetic failure to hold onto its own meaning" (Baker 206-7). In some sense, Genet's introduction of "foreign" elements into the traditional shape of the *pietà* also conditions its helplessness.

hollow. Continuing with Satz's work, the revelation of the "sham" refers to a constellation of interesting ideas relating to theatrical iconoclasm during the English Reformation, ideas which I feel resonate with *Un captif amoureux*. During this period of the middle ages, the introduction of the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Roman Catholic Church coincided with a return to theatre, which had previously been banned. Satz suggests that the appearance of an incarnate Christ, the miraculous manifestation of his flesh and blood through bread and wine, provoked a desire to "re-actualize" miracles through theatrical re-enactment (*Iconoclasm* 36). However, the ambiguity between miracles and their re-enactments, in turn, incited iconoclastic action as people sought to test the veracity of icons said to be miraculous. Satz remarks that "images, evidence of the Church's idolatry, were frequently burnt after an initial destruction for in a tautological triumph, dead images had no blood, felt no pain. One Lollard incident describes the chopping off of a head of a statue of St. Catherine to see whether she would bleed. As she didn't, she was burnt as a sham" (*Iconoclasm* 39). In a similar mood, Genet reveals Michelangelo's *pietà*, the "very symbol of the Mother of god," to be a sham, nothing more than inert stone.

However, the substitutive image Genet offers of Hamza and his mother is also equally hollow, another sham. In this case, Genet emphasizes hollowness as a precondition for the appearance of his image, which is antithetical to the religious icon. Drawing a productive analogy between the figure of the puppet (or animated object, the automaton) and that of the sacred icon, Satz notes that the marvelous aspect of both objects relies on seeing a "hand" inside of them, which produces the miracle: "both the miraculous icon and the automaton imply [a] projection of presence through the object. In the sacred image, the projection of presence and its animating 'hand' is displaced elsewhere to the spiritual realm" (*Iconoclasm* 38). Iconoclasm, in the context of the Reformation, was directed towards revealing the artifice of the miracle, the

deception offered by the theatrical icon as “the iconoclastic act reveal[ed] a rawness of the object, expos[ing] its reducible substance, break[ing] its mechanism, cut[ing] its strings” (*Iconoclasm* 39). Destroying the object aimed “to detach the object from what it represent[ed] and whatever empower[ed], manipul[at]ed or animat[ed] it” (*Iconoclasm* 42); showing that a cross couldn’t bleed, or that a statue that couldn’t cry, rendered the objects void. The presence inside the object vanished.

As readers of Genet, we are only too aware of the ways in which presence, in this text, signifies a fundamental absence, or absences. Repeatedly Genet uses theatre, mime, and puppetry to describe the fedayeen, as he saw them during the revolution (recall the card players without cards), and in reference to his own post-mortem animation of them. To continue with the analogy of puppetry, we see Genet’s “hand” in the text all too clearly and all too often. Genet juxtaposes his puppetry of the fedayeen to the emptiness of the sculpture. For Satz, the iconoclast’s destruction of the object aimed to “rematerialize” the “animating hand [which was] exposed to be anything but spiritual” (*Iconoclasm* 36). Here, the emptiness of the sculpture and Genet’s puppetry become equivalent forms of illusion. Exposing the sculpture to be hollow demonstrates its deception—there is no divine hand inside of it occasioning its miraculous youth. The authenticity of the *pietà* depends on its ability to mask its status as a man-made object. In unmasking the *pietà*, Genet demonstrates that the object is not a shameful deception but rather an absolute sham. Exposing the artifice of the sculpture enables its redemption. In *Un captif*, life itself is a deception (an artifice made and maintained by the self), masking the void of non-being, and art, through its creation of illusion, enacts a new life for those who can no longer appear. Genet suggests that his own life was as empty as the sculpture or puppet, an emptiness he felt was recognized implicitly by the Palestinians:

Ma vie était ainsi composée de gestes sans conséquence subtilement boursoufflés en actes d'audace. Or quand je compris cela, que ma vie s'inscrivait en creux, ce creux devint aussi terrible q'un gouffre... ma jeunesse de voleur et de prostitué ressemblait aux autres jeunesses qui volent, se prostituent en acte ou en rêve ; ma vie visible ne fut que feintes bien masquées... si toute ma vie fut en creux alors q'on la vit en relief... que les Palestiniens me demandassent d'accepter un séjour en Palestine, c'est-à-dire à l'interérieur d'une fiction, avaient-ils plus ou moins clairement reconnu le *spontané simulateur*? 205-6.<sup>59</sup>

The hand inside of the puppet, or the hollowness of the sculpture, reveals the sham of life, which is itself a form of empty inscription written on the “gouffre” (gulf or abyss). Thus, for Genet, the hand is equally as empty as the puppet.

Significantly, Genet implies that only *some* lives are shams in this way: the prostitute, the thief, the revolutionary, etc. He notes that the presence of these marginal figures is itself always a form of conjuring, an illusion that resembles the miraculousness of the sacred object insofar as the drama of the thief's life (or other outcast) obscures the emptiness of their person. Implicitly, the emptiness of the social outcast lies in tension with those considered “full,” ie. the broader normative community. The spectrality of the sacred object and that of the social outlier are commensurate illusions. I read Genet's iconoclastic action—the nullification of the magic of the *pietà* through a revelation of its “sham” character—as a means of affirming his relationship to figures who are considered equally “void” by society at large. Since iconoclastic actions are

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<sup>59</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “When I saw that my life was a sort of intaglio or relief in reverse its hollows became as terrible as abysses... My youth as a thief and prostitute was like that of all who steal or prostitute themselves, either in fact or in dream. My visible life was nothing but carefully masked pretences... My whole life was made up of unimportant trifles cleverly blown up into acts of daring. If my life was really hollow... when the Palestinians invited me to go and stay in Palestine, in other words in a fiction, weren't they too more or less opening recognizing me as a natural sham?” (172). I have kept with the Bray's translation as I find the resonances of the word “sham” here particularly evocative and completely in line with Genet's work.



usually read by the public as either evidence of psychosis or as a criminal act, we might see Genet as purposefully enacting a form of representational violence that demands that we read him as deviant. In doing so, readers affirm his position as “outside” and “with them,” further instantiating Genet within the community he is producing between himself, the fedayeen, the Black Panthers, and any other “vandals” that may be present. In this way, the text occasions and even solicits negative reading practices and explaining, in part, Genet’s political detractors in the critical literature.

### 3.4 New Referents: Materializing the Revolutionary

Before moving on, I would like to briefly reiterate what I have said so far about how I am reading iconoclasm into *Un captif amoureux*. In this last section I have argued that Genet produces a rival image of the *pietà*, an image of Hamza and his mother, whose rendering effects an iconoclastic action as Genet, at once, “disfigures” the original image of the *pietà* (through a disjunctive juxtaposition of his and Michelangelo’s sculpture) and exposes the miraculous youth of said sculpture to be a banal deception. In some sense, I am suggesting that Genet vandalizes one image in order to produce another. This new image is an essential part of the memorial project of the memoir as its appearance, as the representative “face” of the commemorative object (the monument in all its sham glory), allows this text to resist an erasure: “Mais, tirée par les premières, cette pensée levait suivre : ce que nous savons des hommes, illustres ou non, fut peut-être imaginé afin de dissimuler les gouffres composant la vie... Le *spontané simulateur*, son abjection le hisse peut-être à un niveau où son échine dépasse, se laisse voir” (207).<sup>60</sup> I would

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<sup>60</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): “But from these thoughts there emerged another: all that we know of men, whether famous or not, may only have been invented to hide the abysses of which life is made up... Perhaps the abjectness of the natural sham lifts him high enough to be seen permanently sticking out of the lava” (174-5).

like to complicate my discussion of Genet's demystification of the sacred object a little further. Satz suggests that this form of demystification (the debunking of the illusion) is a violent act that reveals the base materiality of the object, proving the absence of an interior life through an affirmation of its essential physical inertness (39). In turn, I suggest that the demystified physicality of the sacred object inversely reifies the materiality of the fedayeen, an action I read as an ethical aesthetic response to media representations of the Palestinian Revolution.

In "Broken Beauty: Disability and Art Vandalism," Tobin Siebers examines the vandalism of art objects, focusing on images representing the human figure. Siebers suggests that "vandalized images fail to represent what they represented before their injury... The act of vandalism changes the referential function of the art work, creating a new image in its own right" (n.pag.). Vandalism must necessarily be considered an "act of creation" because, in changing the image, "a new image comes to life" (n.pag.). Writing in the context of disability studies, Siebers' work thinks about how art is read mimetically, and the ways in which this hermeneutic entails seeing a vandalized image of the human form as coextensive with a disabled figure. This occurs because the viewer of art reads the human form caught in the canvas mimetically. The subject experiences aesthetics as a self-reflexive process, whereby one contemplates one's own subjectivity "by projecting it to another site" (n.pag.), through a relatable form. Siebers suggests that this is, usually, a positive affective experience for the beholder of art as "the essence of the human, constrained by aesthetic form, is made quiet, more beautiful, and rendered momentarily comprehensible" (n.pag.). Vandals violate this sedate experience as they "breach aesthetic form, violating the analogy between art object and subjectivity" though "they do not render the analogy ineffective" (n.pag.). Instead, this analogy is transformed, "replacing the original referent with a

different idea of subjectivity—the subject with a disability” (n.pag.).<sup>61</sup> Though in this case, Genet’s rendering of the *pietà* does not instigate a new form of subjectivity, that of the disabled subject, I do think that his creation of a new sign, over and against, the old representation of the *pietà* plays on the referential function of aesthetics. The creation of an icon through the iconic figures of Hamza and his mother intends to assert the materiality, and thus humanity, of the fedayeen.

This, I feel, is a response to other forms of mediation whose representation of historical events and peoples tends to impoverish what is being represented (the referent) through the production of spectacle. In regards to Genet’s essay “Quatre heures à Chatila,” Zahra A. Hussein Ali notes that Genet’s aesthetics are “enmeshed with a resolute response to the anticipated prejudices of the media’s coverage of the massacres, prejudices that, he believes, are historically rooted and are the result of an incapacity to transcend political complacencies” (602).<sup>62</sup> Ali continues, stating that, in that essay Genet’s critical aesthetics responds to what he considered the “dangers of two-dimensionality, for, as [Genet] declares, neither television nor photography can

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<sup>61</sup> Siebers says that there is an “expectation that [the] art object and world will correspond in some degree of mimetic exactitude because they compel audiences to reject or correct wayward representations” (n.pag). These correctives appears as art criticism, discursive public reactions, and other benevolent responses but sometimes these correctives are violent physical displays. I find that Siebers’ model of aesthetic experience relies too heavily on emphasizing the pedagogical function of art. That being said, I still find Siebers’ discussion valuable for its assertion of the, perhaps, counterintuitive notion that the vandalized sign acts and changes, in turn, the referent.

<sup>62</sup> Genet’s essay “Quatre heures à Chatila” was written after he witnessed the massacre perpetrated by the Phalangists at Sabra and Shatila in 1982, which he later testified to in an international court. Sections of this essay were re-used within *Un captif*, cut-up and inserted, non-linearly, into various incongruent sections of the narrative. The sections of the essay that remain in *Un captif* still reflect the cruelty of the Phalangist torturers but the dispersion of the sections seems to dissolve the spectacle of the torture and Genet’s connection to the corpses as their preeminent ‘witness.’ Instead of presenting this event as central to the history of the Revolution, Genet presents his witnessing of Sabra and Shatila as one instance of being with the Palestinians in a continuum of other moments of the revolution. It is obvious to me that this choice is a reaction to the specularization of violence in the media and reflects Genet’s desire to avoid the sensational representation of the conflict.

generate an actual physical or effective virtual encounter between viewer and filmed or photographed dead bodies and demolished houses of the victims because ‘neither can be walked through’ and neither ‘show how you must jump over bodies as you walk along from one corpse to the next.’” (604). As a result, Ali suggests that the aesthetic of “Quatre heures à Chatila” is an attempt by Genet to invest his text with a “three-dimensionality” that cannot occur through popular media. Ali writes, “only by charging his text with a sculptural dimension can Genet project a rendering of the carnage onto the page, which is metaliterary (i.e., beyond mere literature), as well as asymptotic (i.e., incorporating actual history of the genocide but not in a totalizing way)” (605). Though *Un capif* does not render the “sculptural” or three-dimensional aspects of the Revolution in this way, we might say that the aesthetics of this text are still responding to this same issue, namely the impoverishment of the referent by way of spectacular forms of mediation. Like the essay “Quatre heures à Chatila,” this memoir responds to “the media’s non-recognition of the full humanity and rights of the Palestinians [as well as] the inevitable flattening effects of its mediation of the genocide” through its production of a dynamic image that appears as a “vandalized” form of an earlier icon. Genet’s new image occasions, through its alteration, the production of a new referent, which is, no longer the Christian Mary and Christ, but a human (yet hallowed) Palestinian couple. Here, the gesture that shows the inertness of the sculpture outside of the text, also affirms the humanity of Hamza and his mother who, like Genet, were real people.

### **3.5 Conclusion: Addressing the Living**

When describing his memoir through spatial metaphors, Genet appears comfortable styling himself as a creative restorer, engaged in reconstructing memory for the purpose of creating *remains*. Conversely, the unbidden image of the pieta reminds Genet of his compulsive

and often unclear motivations for writing, which, when untangled, appear to him merely as the uncanny return of childhood trauma: Genet's orphaning and subsequent feelings of alienation and abjection. Genet suspects that the entirety of the revolution simply occurred just so that Hamza and his mother would haunt him:

Ce n'était pas tout. Ce groupe, tant de fois répété, profondément chrétien, symbole de la douleur inconsolable d'une mère dont le fils était Dieu, comment pouvait-il m'apparaître, et si vite, avec la vitesse d'un coup de foudre, le symbole de la résistance palestinienne, ce qui serait assez explicable, mais au contraire « *que cette révolte eut lieu afin que me hantât ce couple?* » (CA 243)<sup>63</sup>

Omari states, at the event of death, the image is what appears when we no longer have the words that would allow us to speak about it: "L'image est déjà le substitut du mot. Elle est quand le mot ne peut plus être, ne peut plus dire ou nommer. L'image est déjà dans l'imaginaire, lequel agit quand le réel manque" (130).

She reads the appearance of the image of Hamza and his mother through a mythological register. For Omari, Hamza's mother, and the other older Palestinian women peopling the narrative, recall the land of Palestine, an unknown territory that Genet encounters through these figures:

D'aucuns ont vu cette image de la mère et de son fils comme un fantasme qui attache l'auteur à l'histoire dont il témoigne, fantasme qui le ramène à sa propre enfance et à sa mère perdue ou inconnue. Or, il semblerait que cette rencontre n'est pas une retrouvaille de la mère perdue mais plutôt une découverte de la terre inconnue. La mère de Hamza n'est qu'une vieille comme les autres vieilles accroupies autour des pierres noircies. Elle

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<sup>63</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "But why had this oft-repeated, profoundly Christian couple, symbolizing the inconsolable grief of a mother whose son was God, appeared to me like a bolt from the blue as a symbol of the Palestinian resistance? And not only that. That was understandable enough. But why did it also strike me that the Revolution took place in order that this couple should haunt me?" (204).

restitue les ruines d'une vie par la lumière du ciel étoilé, comme les vieilles restituaient les ruines en pierres noircies par un index et un rire. Elle ne dit rien et, sans pointer ni montrer, son index, comme le point fixe faisant reculer le désordre destructeur, appelle une image d'une autre femme. Avant l'image de la dernière femme suivons le trajet de l'index: «À l'instant je compris tout: le fer, l'acier explosant au loin, à côté articulation d'un index» (139)

In part, I agree with Omari's reading; the mother figure in this text does seem to signify lost territory and this sense of loss seem inversely tied to Genet's persistent celebration of his and the Palestinians' nomadism. I, nevertheless, want to resist allegory and retain the "fantasy" attached to the author's loss of his mother. Retaining this fantasy is not a return to biography. Rather, retaining this fantasy preserves the sense that this text remains a memorial project, one that is concerned, almost prosaically, with remembering the dead.

In the preceding chapter, I suggested that this text was an answer to an ambiguous demand from the dead. At this point, I would also like to affirm that this text was written as an address to the living, intentionally left behind as both an icon and monument for future generations. In an interview, Layla Shahid, Genet's companion during many of his trips abroad, said that she believed Genet wrote these final works (*Un captif amoureux*, "Quatre heures à Chatila") only because he had been personally solicited:

“En 1983, j'étais à Vienne avec lui quand on lui a demandé pourquoi il avait écrit *Quatre heures à Chatila*. Il a répondu: « Parce que Layla me l'a demandé. » Et je me suis rendue compte que ça n'était pas un pirouette. Quand il dit qu'il a écrit *Un captif amoureux* parce qu'Arafat le lui a demandé, ça doit être vrai aussi. Jean se considérait fondamentalement plus comme un voyou que comme un écrivain ou un intellectuel. Il avait toujours besoin d'une raison pour se justifier par rapport à lui-même, pour pouvoir dire « j'ai écrit ça parce qu'on me l'a demandé, pas parce que je suis écrivain » Mais écrire *Un captif amoureux*, c'était aussi réfléchir sur lui-même, sur la place que les

Palestiniens ont pris dans sa vie. En 1970, venir, c'était un acte politique. Mais rester, c'était au-delà ça, c'était déjà comme un acte d'amour." (qtd. *Jean Genet et son lecteur* 123)

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, it is striking that the representative image of the Revolution for Genet is not, the dead figure of Christ and his sorrowful mother, but a living Palestinian couple. If this text is meant to be a monument to the Revolution, its representative image suggests that it was not merely written in order to provide textual space for those who were lost in the Revolution but also meant to remain as evidence of the continuation of this moment, which he and others inhabited, into the present.

The potential of the image to be hollowed out and reframed is what strikes Genet as its power, which, doubtless, is why he chose the iconic image of the pieta to refashion. As Durham remarks, "Genet insists throughout *Un captif amoureux* on its aspect as an act of self-fabulation at once ethical and aesthetic...the attempt of the dying writer to detach from the actuality of his life a 'fabulous image' that will act long after his death, neither as a faithful portrait of its original nor as a model for future imitators, but as a point of departure for new inventions and new actions" (173). The image that Genet leaves behind is intended to be a corrosive artifact. Explaining why he initially chose to write in a high French style, Genet says in an interview,

...what I had to say to the enemy had to be said in his language, not in a foreign language, which slang would have been. Only someone like Céline could do that...I was a prisoner, I couldn't do that. It was necessary for me to address the torturer precisely in his own language. The fact that this language was more or less embellished with slang takes nothing away, or almost nothing from its syntax. If I was seduced by language—and I was—it wasn't in school; it was around the age of fifteen, at Mettray, when someone, probably by chance, gave me Ronsard's sonnets. And I was utterly dazzled. I had to make myself heard by Ronsard. Ronsard would never have tolerated slang... What

I had to say was so... it bore witness to so much suffering, that I had to use that language and no other. (196)

Genet's corruption of language, his "perverse use" of the enemy's idiom (Durham 2), becomes the corrupting image of the *pieta*. An image implanted within the discourse that is meant to remain and resist. In discussing the revolutionary power of the Black Panthers, Genet states that having no land from which to organize their revolt, "C'est ailleurs et autrement qu'ils vont entreprendre des opérations subversives dans les consciences" (119).<sup>64</sup> What Genet admired about the Panthers was that the image they enacted, of a Black subjectivity, staged a tragedy (a tragedy of their real oppression) in order to extinguish it: "Ils voulerent cette image, si l'on veut théatrale et dramatique. Théâtre pour exposer le drame et l'éteindre" (116).<sup>65</sup> Comparatively, Genet stages a romance (between mother and son) meant to live on past his death, growing larger and more indelible as time passes.

Lastly, I will end by cautioning future readers from reading *Un captif amoureux* mimetically. That is to say, though I agree with Durham when he says that this text is meant to offer a platform for "new actions and inventions," I do not believe that Genet offers us any concrete "answers" or pedagogical models. In *Dissensus*, Jacques Rancière argues that "the logic of mimesis consists in conferring on the artwork the power of the effects that it is supposed to elicit on the behavior of spectators" (137). In direct opposition to readers of art like Siebers, Rancière notes "the efficacy of art resides not in the model (or counter-model) of behavior that it provides, but first and foremost in partitions of space and time that it produces to define ways of

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<sup>64</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "the Panthers' subversion would take place elsewhere and by other means: in people's consciences" (99).

<sup>65</sup> *Prisoner of Love* (2003): "...was a theatre both for enacting a tragedy and for stamping it out" (98).



being together or separate, being in front or in the middle of, being inside or outside, etc.” (137). Art does not occasion certain behaviors but rather affects the viewer through its organization of the visible, sayable, and actionable, which may or may not make the viewer respond (Rancière 152). Consistently, Genet also affirms that art’s relationship and usefulness to social revolution is not one of pedagogical value. Replying to Hubert Fichte’s query concerning a perceived “gap between poetic and artistic revolutions and social revolution,” Genet responds, “What are referred to as poetic or artistic revolutions are not exactly revolutions. I don’t believe they change the order of the world. Nor do they change the vision we have of the world. They refine vision, they complete it, they make it more complex, but they don’t entirely transform it, the way a social or political revolution does... political revolutions rarely, I might say never, correspond to artistic revolutions” (DE 128). And, in an interview with Madeline Gobeil, Genet notes that “I wanted to write plays for the theater, to crystallize a theatrical and dramatic emotion. If my plays are useful to blacks, it’s not my concern. I don’t think they are, in any case. I think that action, the direct struggle against colonialism, does more for blacks than a play does” (DE 13). Similarly, *Un captif* is not a pedagogical guide for revolutionary involvement or thinking. Intended, instead, to be a ruminative object, the text’s political investment is in affirming mourning, in celebrating the Palestinians and their revolution, and in articulating a shared symbolic space between disparate revolutionary contexts.

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