# Genet's dying words

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What remains of a Palestine torn into small, very even pieces and flushed down the toilet?[1]

In the early morning of Sunday, 19 September 1982, Jean Genet entered the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in southern Beirut, Lebanon. It was the end of a week in which the French writer had been an eyewitness to the making of modern Palestinian history. After arriving in Beirut on the previous Monday, he learnt of the assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel on the Tuesday afternoon, saw the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) occupy West Beirut on the Wednesday morning, and watched the IDF fire flares to light up the sky over Sabra and Shatila on the Thursday evening, before hearing reports of a massacre taking place in the camps late on the Friday night. To find out what was happening, Genet took the first safe opportunity to go into Sabra and Shatila and see for himself on the Sunday morning. If we can believe the account of his friend Leila Shahid, at whose family home he was staying, Genet was so traumatized by what he found during the four hours he spent in the camps that morning that he shut himself away in his room for the next two days and left Beirut completely for Paris within the week: "I have to go to my room," he told Shahid upon returning, "I need to be alone." [2] In fact, Shahid was so shocked by Genet's state when he came back from the camps that she was certain the writer (who was 71 years old and already seriously ill from throat cancer) would himself die on the Sunday evening: "I was sure he was going to die that night," she recalls, "more than anything I was persuaded that what he had seen was so terrible [*affreux*] he couldn't survive."[3]

To be sure, Genet did not actually die in Beirut on 19 September 1982 and, if anything, appears to have been physically and creatively revitalized by his visit to the refugee camps. It seems he devoted much of the time he spent sequestered in his room to working on what would become the classic essay "Quatre heures à Chatila [Four Hours in Shatila]" (1983). As Shahid recalled her own first impression of the manuscript when he presented it to her in Paris one month later, Genet's account of what he saw that day represented nothing less than her friend's literary and physical resurrection: "I had a feeling of extraordinary vitality," she says, "almost a victory over death, a victory over the horror of what we had seen, particularly since I found this text of very great literary quality. I felt that it was his return to life, to creation."[4] In response to his experience in Sabra and Shatila, Genet also began working on his first major piece of prose since

*Journal du voleur* [*A Thief's Journal*] (1949) more than thirty years earlier: *Un Capitif amoureux* [*Prisoner of Love*] (1986), his 500-page memoir of more than a decade of encounters with the Palestinian fedayeen from Jordan in 1970 to Beirut in 1982, was published five weeks after his death in Paris on 15 April 1986.

If his four hours in Shatila is thus often narrated as a remarkable late-career renaissance after a long silence – "the pale and lame old man decides to write again," Jérôme Hankins confirms, "that is, to survive"[5] – Genet himself was perversely insistent that, in a certain sense, he *did* die in Beirut. It is possible to detect a strange symmetry in the late work between writing about death – and in particular bearing witness to the mass killings in Sabra and Shatila – and the death of the writer themselves, as if it were really true that "what he had seen was so terrible he couldn't survive." For the late Genet – and here both senses of the term "late" seem to apply -- it often appears that only the dead can really bear witness to the dead: "The author," he writes at one point in *Un Capitif amoureux*, "like those he speaks of, is dead."[6] Perhaps most strikingly, Genet – himself now dying of cancer – goes on, as Simon Critchley observes in an excellent essay, to compare the book he is writing to a set of cancerous metastases that had grown out of what he witnessed in Sabra and Shatila that Sunday morning, and that will eventually kill him.[7] "In September 1982," he reflects, "the Shatila massacres were perhaps not decisive, but if the act of writing came later, it was in the incubation time, the instant or instants that a cell, a single one, branching off [*bifurquant*] from its usual metabolism, beginning the first stitch of a lace or cancer where no one suspects what it will be, or even that it will be, that I decided to write this book."[8]

In what follows, I re-read Jean Genet's dying words – which is to say the words he wrote *as* dying, the words he wrote *on* dying, as well as the dying *of* words, of language itself – in "Quatre heures à Chatila," *Un Capitif amoureux* together with other writings and interviews on Palestine.[9] To outline my argument, I propose that Genet's late work on the Sabra and Shatila massacres does not simply bear witness to the death of the other, but to the death of the one who bears witness to that death and, finally, perhaps even to the death of the very world that attempts to bear witness to that witness. If Genet's singular speech acts undoubtedly defy interpretation in any other terms than their own -- "so many words to say: *this is my Palestinian revolution*," he declares at one point in *Un Capitif amoureux*, "told in the order I've chosen"[10] -- I hope to show that what passes under the proper name of "Sabra and Shatila" in his work is part of a larger virtual ~~philosophical~~ archive or dossier – whose other contributors arguably include his contemporaries Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida -- upon the (im-) possible relationship between the one death and the many deaths, between death in the singular and mass, massified or metastasized death, between the solitary act of killing or murder and the massacre, the act of genocide or even the world-destroying apocalypse.[11] For Genet -- with Derrida and against Lévinas – what Maurice Blanchot famously calls "the instant of my death [*L'Instant de ma mort*]" (or your death, or their death) is also the instant of the death of the world.[12] In response to the question of what, if anything, may

remain of the world after Sabra and Shatila, however, I conclude that Genet's answer is, appropriately enough, a flower.

*40 hours in Shatila*

In the early evening of Thursday, 16 September 1982, a Lebanese Forces Christian militia group led by Elie Hobeika entered the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut.[13] To take revenge for the assassination of Kataeb or Phalange Party leader and President-elect of Lebanon Bashir Gemayel two days earlier, an act that they wrongly assumed had been carried out by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or its proxies, Hobeika's militiamen then proceeded to murder somewhere between 800 and 3,500 civilians (the exact figures are unknown), including many elderly, women, children and even babies, before leaving the camps on the morning of Saturday, 18 September. In a cold-blooded killing spree that continued uninterrupted for no less than 40 hours, the Phalangists also tortured many of their victims before killing them – raping women and girls, dismembering limbs with axes, flaying some victims alive, tying others to cars and dragging them through the streets – before finally bringing in bulldozers to bury the bodies and hide what they had done.

To many local and international observers, Israel bore a significant responsibility for the Sabra and Shatila massacres whether through willful negligence or direct complicity with the Phalangists. It had invaded Lebanon in June 1982 to destroy the PLO and had forced the latter's withdrawal from Beirut in September of the same year. At the same time, the Israeli government entered into a political alliance with the Kataeb/Phalange party to install a new pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian Lebanese government led by Gemayel.[14] If Gemayel's election as President on 23 August represented the apogee of this plan, Israel's attempt to transform Lebanon into a protectorate presided over by a Christian puppet government was thrown into chaos just three weeks later when the President-elect was assassinated by Syrian intelligence services in a bombing of Kataeb Party Headquarters on Tuesday, September 14. In the aftermath of Gemayel's assassination, Israeli defense minister Ariel Sharon claimed some 2,000 fedayeen remained in the Palestinian camps despite the general evacuation of the PLO, and authorized Hobeika's militia (who has a notorious reputation for brutality against Palestinians) to enter Sabra and Shatila on Thursday 16 September to search for them.

If Israeli troops apparently did not go into the Palestinian refugee camps themselves, or directly participate in what ensued, the massacres nonetheless took place when Sabra and Shatila were under total Israeli control. To focus only on the undisputed facts: the IDF had already occupied West Beirut in violation of a US-brokered ceasefire and cordoned off the refugee camps following Gemayel's murder; they allowed the Phalangists to enter despite knowing the strong likelihood they would exact revenge for the killing of their leader; they had a direct line of sight from nearby rooftop

observation posts; they fired flares at night to illuminate the night sky whilst the Phalangists were inside; they allowed more militiamen to go in on Friday, 17 September, and they supplied at least some of the bulldozers that were used to demolish houses and hide the bodies. Finally, IDF soldiers on the ground were -- at the very least -- suspicious that something disturbing was happening during the 40 hours of the massacres, and reported details to their superior officers, but were instructed to do nothing: "We don't like it," one officer replied, "but I forbid any of you to intervene in what is happening in the camps."[15] Indeed, Israeli war reporter Ron Ben-Yishai personally telephoned Ariel Sharon on Friday, September 17 to tell him what was taking place but again nothing was done.[16]

In the aftermath of the massacres, Israel faced the largest domestic street protests it had ever seen, together with general outrage from the international community, but prime minister Menachem Begin's defiant first response was to put the blame for the atrocities solely on the Lebanese Phalangists: "Goyim are killing goyim," he declared, "and the world is trying to hang the Jews for the crime."[17] To investigate the events under mounting internal and external pressure, the Begin government proceeded to appoint the Kahan Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut, whose 1983 report duly found that what took place in the camps was the "direct responsibility of Phalangists." If the Kahan Commission laid most of the blame for the massacres on Hobeika's militia, however, it also concluded that Israeli military personnel bore what it called "indirect responsibility" for not preventing the massacres in the first place and then failing to stop them once they knew they were in progress. In the case of the Israeli defense minister himself, the Commission adjudged Ariel Sharon to bear "personal responsibility" for "ignoring the danger of bloodshed and revenge [and] not taking appropriate measures to prevent bloodshed"[18] and recommended that he resign or be dismissed from his post – but instead Sharon was moved to another ministerial position in Begin's government and, of course, went on to serve as Israel's foreign minister and then prime minister between 2001 and 2006. Finally, we should also note that Lebanon has never held an official government investigation into the events of Sabra and Shatila: Elie Hobeika was the beneficiary of a general amnesty for militia leaders at the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 and went on to become a member of parliament and government minister before his own assassination in 2002.

*Eyeless in Beirut*

In "Quatre heures à Chatila," Genet seeks to describe what he saw in the Sabra and Shatila camps only 24 hours after the massacre ended.[19] It is an essay that contains more than 40 references to sight, seeing, being seen or being unable to see in only 20 pages. To gain access to the camps that Sunday morning, Genet apparently pretended to be a foreign journalist but his attempt to put into words what he found inside foreswears any pretensions to a war reporter or photographer's alleged neutrality or

impartiality. Yet, this lack of journalistic objectivity is not simply due to his barely concealed contempt for what he perceives to be the compliantly pro-Israeli international press, because there is a more radical and inescapable subjectivity at work in his text. For Genet, what he saw, felt and heard in Sabra and Shatila was something that could be captured neither by narrative technique, two-dimensional photograph nor television screen because it depended so completely on a live, embodied encounter with another (dead) body: "A photograph doesn't show the flies nor the thick white smell of death." [20] If "Quatre heures à Chatila," remains a remarkable first draft of history – which confirms via eyewitness testimony the full extent of Israeli responsibility for the massacres[21] – this is also a text that (as Catherine Brun has testified) is shot through with gaps, blind spots, unanswered questions and unrepresentable or inexpressible scenes.[22] In Genet's disturbingly graphic descriptions of the countless dead and mutilated bodies he saw in the camps, we encounter a kind of negative political phenomenology where every victim's body simultaneously calls or demands to be seen and yet retreats or recedes into the vanishing horizon of unseeability.

To begin with, what shocks Genet about the corpses he sees in the camps is the obscene *visibility* of that which should remain private or unseen: the dead lie with eyes wide open and mouths gaping in the frozen terror or agony of their last moments; they carry appalling open wounds with skin flayed, brains exposed and limbs dismembered; they are stripped of all dignity with trousers pulled down or dresses up; they are piled on top of each other like lovers in "an erotic rut";[23] and they are strewn unburied in the streets, defenseless against the swarms of flies that feast on them in the hot sun. For Genet, the corpse is a body that "has nothing more to hide: positions, contortions, gestures, signs, even silences belong to one world and to the other."[24] Yet, it is perversely this total visibility of the corpse – which is to say the absence of anything secret, hidden or unexposed within it – that itself becomes the barrier to seeing it: what the dead body fatally lacks is that excess or horizon of invisibility against which, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously argues, the visible appears *qua* visible. "If we look closely at a corpse, a curious phenomenon occurs," Genet observes, "the absence of life in this body is equivalent to a total absence of the body or rather to its uninterrupted retreat [*son recul ininterrompu*]. You feel that even by coming closer you can never touch it."[25] In its very openness to being gazed upon, the corpse withdraws infinitely from that gaze.

If Genet was one of the first independent observers to enter the Sabra and Shatila camps after the massacres – mere hours after the killers themselves had left – he always remains painfully aware that he has, nonetheless, arrived fatally late upon the scene of the crime. To gaze upon the mutilated Palestinian corpses in the camps, what Genet both sees and does not see is thus also the spectral figure of the departed Phalangist who tortured and killed them in the first place:

> In the middle of them, next to all the tortured victims, my mind cannot shake off this "*invisible vision* [vision invisible]": what was the torturer like? Who was he? I see him and I don't see him. He is blinding me and he'll never have any other form than that drawn by the poses, postures and grotesque gestures of the dead worked in the sun by swarms of flies.[26]

For Genet, what remains of the perpetrators who have fled the scene is a kind of outline – a photographic negative – that has been indelibly imprinted upon the flesh of the victim they leave behind: "The dead generally become very familiar, even friendly to me," he writes elsewhere, "but when I saw those in the camps I perceived only the hatred and joy of those who had killed them."[27] In the apparently singular figure of the corpse, what we see and do not see at the same time is thus not one but two bodies fused together in time and space: Phalangist and Palestinian, perpetrator and victim, killer and killed.

In Genet's own phenomenology of the inapparent, [28] however, we can perhaps also find one more spectral body upon the scene besides victim and perpetrator, namely, that of the phenomenologist himself. To look more closely at the endlessly vanishing or receding figure of the corpse, as he constantly invites us to do in this essay, Genet eventually finds himself staring into a kind of black mirror that reflects back nothing more than his own impossible act of bearing witness to their death. It is particularly striking that, upon gazing into the sightless eyes of the Phalangists' tortured and murdered victims, he both sees and does not see *himself* as another one of those victims. As he revealingly declares in the scene discussed above, he, too, feels as if tortured: "He [i.e. the Phalangist] is blinding me [*Il me crève les yeux,* literally "he is gouging out my eyes" -- AB]." For Genet, as he finishes his own grim four-hour procession through the camps, what he finally recognizes is that he, too, has become just one more corpse amongst the rest: "The cadaverous smell [*l'odeur cadavérique*] was coming neither from a house nor a victim," he recognizes at the end of the essay, "my body, my being, seemed to emit it."[29] If it may be tempting to explain away Genet's total identification with the victims of the massacres as the unconscious symptom of some kind of vicarious or secondary trauma, what I think "Quatre heures à Chatila" is really beginning to describe here is a much stronger formal symmetry or equivalence between writing about death and the death of the writer themselves: only the dead, once again, can bear witness to the dead. In Genet's last work on Palestine, moreover, what we prematurely call the unique or singular death of the individual sets in motion a process that progressively destroys not simply the victim, the perpetrator and the witness or bystander but the whole world.

*Death destroys the world*

In his posthumously published memoir *Un Captif amoureux*, Genet poses a -- seemingly exorbitant -- question about the Sabra and Shatila massacres which remained implicit in "Quatre heures à Chatila": what if the death of the Palestinian refugees in the camps marks the destruction of the entire world? To put Genet's question into historical relief, I want to situate it against another set of traumatized phenomenological reflections emerging out of a camp, namely, the early Emmanuel Lévinas descriptions of the "horror" of the *Il y a* [There is]" in *De L'existence à l'existant* [*Existence and Existents*] (1947). It is worth underlining here that the French philosopher wrote his famous fragment on the *Il y a* when interned in a German prisoner-of-war camp during the Second World War – and so his apparently abstract account of being held "captive" or "hostage" by Being also has a precise historical dimension. As many scholars have documented, the early Lévinas's account of the *Il y a* belongs to his larger critique of Heidegger's fundamental ontology and particularly of the latter's claim that death is what "makes possible all other possibilities" for Dasein because it is our "ownmost potentiality of being [*das eigenste Seinkönnen*]."[30] Yet, pace Heidegger, Lévinas argues that the subject does not experience death as their own innermost possibility to be resolutely seized, but as a fundamental *impossibility* that represents the limit of any willing subjectivity: "death is ungraspable," he writes in *Time and the Other* (1947), "it marks the end of the subject's virility and heroism."[31] For Lévinas, this impossibility of assuming our own death thus leaves us radically powerless: "What is important about the approach of death is that at a certain moment we are no longer *able to be able* [*nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir*]," he writes, "It is exactly thus that the subject loses its very mastery as a subject."[32] In *Existence and Existents*, what Lévinas calls this essential incapacity to take on death as the ground of our individual freedom leaves the subject trapped in that bare, impersonal existence preceding all subjectivity called the *Il y a.*

To flesh out his argument about the impossibility of my death, Lévinas proceeds to give a reading of Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth.* Its protagonist's tragic fate is to learn that his killing of Duncan, Banquo et al in order to secure the Scottish throne accomplishes nothing at all because, according to the philosopher, everything he seeks to kill simply will not die. As Macbeth himself reflects when the ghost of Banquo returns to preside over his triumphal feast: "The times have been/ That when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end. But now they rise again."[33] For Lévinas, what Macbeth's tragedy reveals for us is that the subject is constitutively unable to obtain freedom by assuming or mastering death as their Heideggerian own-most possibility: "To kill, like to die, is to seek an escape from being, to go where freedom and negation operate. Horror is the event of being which returns in the heart of this negation as if nothing had happened."[34] If Macbeth ultimately ends up wishing for his *own* death, it turns out that suicide is no more possible than murder because Being again returns in the form of a "last chance" to be victorious over his enemies that always intervenes before death: "Prior to death there is always a last chance; this is what heroes seize, not death,"

Lévinas writes, "The hero is the one who always glimpses a last chance, the one who obstinately finds chances. Death is thus never assumed, it comes. Suicide is a contradictory concept.[35] In Lévinas's account, Macbeth's final despairing wish that his own death will also bring about the end of the world – "I 'gin to be aweary of the sun, / And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone"[36] – thus does not constitute a masterly assumption of death but, on the contrary, the ultimate expression of a self-defeating slavishness that, despite everything, clings to life: "In its effort to escape the Other in dying, it recognizes the other," he claims, "The suicide to which it resolves itself in order to escape servitude is inseparable from the pain of 'losing,' whereas this death should have shown the absurdity of every game. Macbeth wishes for the destruction of the world in his defeat and his death." [37]

If Lévinas is preparing the ground here for his famous thesis that ethics is first philosophy – which is to say that I cannot die "my" own death because death is always the death of the other – we can also detect a strange kind of *Auseinandersetzung* with Lévinasian ethics in Genet's late work on Palestine. To reconstruct this invisible dialogue, I first want to recall that Genet has his own complex theory of the face-to-face ethical relation to the other, which we do not have the time and space to discuss here, but which he powerfully articulates in his essay "Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt... [What remains of a Rembrandt]" (1967) via a meditation on a chance encounter with an ugly man in a third-class railway carriage: "His gaze was not that of another: it was my own that I encountered in a mirror, inadvertently and in solitude and self-forgetfulness," he writes, "I flowed out of my body [*Je m'ecoulais de mon corps*] through my eyes, into the passenger at the same time that the passenger flowed into mine."[38] Yet, as Carl Lavery observes, an ethical encounter with the other that was originally experienced as a horrifying negation or dissolution of the self in "Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt" will be transformed into a kind of collective ecstasy or epiphany almost twenty years later in *Un Captif amoureux.*[39] For the later Genet, what began as a traumatic moment of subjective destitution or annihilation in a French railway carriage will become the ecstatic revelation of a subjectless affect that exceeds the finitude of subject and object in the Palestinian camp in Jordan. In his ethical encounter with the Palestinian fedayeen, Genet re-valorizes Lévinas's *Il y a* – which is to say the terrifyingly bare impersonal or general Being that precedes all beings – into an equally impersonal "living on" called "happiness [*bonheur*]":

> For having written above "if I die nothing will die," I give myself the obligation to be clear. The astonishment in front of a cornflower, a rock, the caress of a calloused hand, the millions of emotions of which I am composed, I will disappear but not them: other men will record them, they will still be, thanks to them." More and more, I believe that I exist in order to be, among other men, the support and the proof that life is only the uninterrupted emotions running through all of creation. The happiness of my hand in a boy's hair, another hand will know it, already knows it, and if I die this happiness will live on [*se*

*perpétuera*]. "I" can die, but what allowed this "I," what made possible the happiness of being, will make that happiness of being live on without me. [40]

In the conclusion to *Un Captif amoureux*, however, which returns once more to the scene of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, the late Genet also stages one more ethical encounter with the other that, consciously or unconsciously, seems to challenge the early Lévinas's assertion of the impossibility of death by positing a hyperbolic counterclaim*:* my death – your death, their death -- is indeed the death of the entire world*.*[41] It is obvious, for example, that Genet's murdered Palestinians are absolutely dead in a way that Shakespeare's murdered Banquo never is : "a corpse is horrible," Lévinas observes, "it already bears in itself its own phantom, it presages its return."[42] As Genet describes them, though, the Palestinian corpses he encounters in the camps are more akin to the corpse of Macbeth himself whose irredeemably dead body signifies, in his own imaginary at least, the undoing of the estate of the world itself. To answer Lévinas's claim that Macbeth's final despairing wish that his own death will bring about the end of the world is nothing but an "absurdity," Genet goes on to argue in a remarkable meditation that, on the contrary, what is really absurd is the idea that any world could simply carry on after Sabra and Shatila:

> Dying with their eyes wide open, they knew the terror of seeing every created thing—man, chairs, stars, suns, Phalangists—tremble, convulse and blur, knowing they were going to vanish because those who would be their victims were driving them to nothingness. The dying saw and felt and knew their death was the death of the world. *Après moi le déluge* is a ridiculous claim [*absurdité*], because the only *after me* is the death of all creation.
>
> Understood in this sense, death is a phenomenon that destroys the world. To eyelids reluctant to close the world gradually loses its brightness, blurs, dissolves and finally disappears, dies in a pupil obstinately fixed on a vanishing world. So? The wide eye can still see the glint of the knife or the bayonet. The brightness that slowly approaches, pales, blurs, disappears. Then the knife, the hand, the sleeve, the uniform, the eyes, the laughter of the Phalangist have ceased to be.[43]

For Genet, the Palestinian victim here performs a kind of phenomenological *détournement* or expropriation of the gaze of the Phalangist perpetrator: what begins as the perpetrator voyeuristically beholding the death of their helpless victim is transformed into the victim "seeing" the death of the perpetrator who has put them to death in the first place. They do not simply die their own deaths but bear witness to the death of the other, indeed the death of the world in which victim, perpetrator and witness all live, which itself contracts to the size of their own dying eye. If Genet seems to strategically ally himself with a certain Heidegger over and against the early Lévinas here – which is to say he restores death to its privileged position as the possibility of all

possibilities for the subject -- he also uncannily anticipates the later work of arguably his own greatest philosophical reader, namely Jacques Derrida: Derrida's late work *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* [*Each time uniquely, the end of the world*] (2003) reiterates, albeit without ever citing, Genet's claim that every single death is a phenomenon that destroys the world because there is no common utilitarian metric or measure by which we can adjudicate between the value of the one and the many, the individual and the mass, deaths.[44] Finally -- and obviously this can be nothing more than an open question here -- we might also ask whether Genet's *Captif amoureux* can be read as a cryptic response to Lévinas's own controversial comments about Israeli responsibility (or lack of it) for Sabra and Shatila in a French radio interview recorded little more than a week after the massacres on September 28, 1982. In response to a question from Shlomo Malka about whether the Israeli's "other" is, first and foremost, the Palestinian – which is to say about whether the former owes a direct ethical responsibility to the latter – Lévinas's famous or notorious answer is at once both perfectly right and horribly wrong, philosophically precise and at least arguably politically (self-) exculpatory: "My definition of the other is completely different," he explains, "The other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbor. But if your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do?"[45] Perhaps, we might argue that Genet's "other" short-circuits Lévinas's implicit ethical hierarchy of others, neighbors, and neighbors of neighbors: the Palestinian is an other whose death is at once the death of the entire world, recall, including not only the Phalangist but the Israeli as well. They are a "third party" (which is to say another other, in Lévinas's schema, the other of the other, to whom I have no face-to-face ethical relation but only a political relation to be triangulated) who is not willing to patiently wait their turn in the stately procession of Lévinasian phenomenology from ethics to politics, but who (as Derrida argues in a later essay), is really *first*, who is there at the origin of ethics, and who must already be inside a face-to-face relation that, without them, would be entirely purist, violent and exclusionary. [46] What if, Genet thus seems to reply to Lévinas, your ethical purism ("what can you do when your neighbor attacks another neighbor?") risks curdling into nothing more than the shoulder-shrugging philosophical equivalent of "Goyim are killing goyim and the world is trying to hang the Jews" when you decide to defer the undeferrable political demand of the Palestinian dead?

*Flowers of Shatila*

In his work on the Sabra and Shatila massacres, the late Genet thus successively bears witness not only to the death of the other (the Palestinian), nor to the death of the one who bears witness to that death (Genet himself), but, finally, to the death of the very world – of ethics, of politics, of any possible common metric, language or reference between same and other – that attempts to bear witness to that witness: "Understood in this sense, death is a phenomenon that destroys the world." To return to our opening

question of "What remains of a Palestine?", I am thus tempted to reply "nothing": Genet's Sabra and Shatila tolls the funereal bell, once again, for Hegel's *Savoir absolu.*[47] If Clare Finburgh Delijani's excellent essay on "Quatre heures à Chatila" discovers a certain spectral afterlife or remainder for the dead, which bears witness to an undetermined justice or restitution to come,[48] I personally prefer to see Genet's dead as – spiritlessly, undialectically, unsublatably – dead. For Madame B., a *cossetted* haute-bourgeois Christian Lebanese woman interviewed sympathetically by Genet, there can be no question of metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls from the mass grave that is the Sabra and Shatila camps for fear that the Palestinian dead may be reincarnated as Israelis – and this strategic atheism is, more or less, endorsed by the author himself.[49] In drawing this discussion to a close, though, I want to propose that Genet may negotiate one possible poetic path between the "nothing ever dies" of Lévinas and the "everything always dies" of Derrida, crudely speaking, by seeking to imagine a kind of soulless or material metempsychosis at work within the corpse itself. What, if anything, may *flower* – grow, germinate, pollinate -- out of the killing fields of Shatila?

To speak of a politics of the plant or flower in "Quatre heures à Chatila," we inevitably recall not only the early Genet's extraordinarily fertile botanical metaphors – which are of course anatomized in detail by Derrida in his classic *Glas* (1974) -- but his much later and rather more obscure debates with the Palestinians fedayeen in Paris, Jordan and Lebanon around the politics of territory (*terre*, land, but also ground or soil -- AB). It is something of an inconvenient truth for readers who seek to recruit Genet too readily to radical or progressive causes that his frequently declared "love" for Palestinians never extended into a support for their defining project of a Palestinian state.[50] As early as his essay "Les Palestiniens" (1972) – which records an interview with young fedayeen in Paris --- Genet disputes the governing mythology of the Palestinian revolution as a story of violent uprooting from, and return to, the homeland: "Can you get [your land] back," he pointedly asks one fedayee, "if you don't want anything else with it?".[51] For Genet, the Palestinians are no longer the exiled, deracinated *paysans-citoyens* of "a *territory* [territoire]" that they can return to and cultivate, because the Palestinian state is really only the name of a "*dream*" that would consist of nothing less than a revolution in Arab subjectivity – and arguably subjectivity itself.[52] In one of his last interviews with Rudiger Wischenbart and Leila Shahid Barrada, Genet even goes so far as to argue that the accomplishment of a really-existing Palestinian state would only be a betrayal of this Palestinian dream: "The day the Palestinians are institutionalized, I will no longer be on their side," he declares, "The day the Palestinians become another nation, I will no longer be there."[53]

If Palestine is not a *terre* from whence we came and to which we will return, Genet's "Quatre heures à Chatila" nonetheless re-imagines the Palestinian dead as strange fruit, plants or flowers who collectively perform a kind of revolt or resistance at the level of matter itself. It is striking just how often the flower trope appears in this apparently

fruitless text, whether it be in the verdant woods of Ajloun or the arid streets of Beirut where "death is still on the surface of the earth [*fleur de terre,* a flower of the earth -- AB].[54] As Genet describes them here, the flowers of Shatila are often small, poignant signifiers of lives – birthdays, weddings, funerals -- that will never now be lived: no-one throws "rice and flowers" for the IDF soldiers who occupy West Beirut; "pink and gray flowers" are embroidered on the dress of an old woman whose hands were bound and fingers cut off before she was killed, whilst "brightly-colored flowers" decorate the cushions of a sofa in a salon where three men lie dead.[55] To look more closely at Genet's corpses one last time, though, we find that they are not simply ironically garlanded with the flowers of a life unlived but are themselves quite literally flowers who are blooming, violently -- monstrously – otherwise. They turn "black, purple and blue" under the hot sun as they begin to decay; they give off an overpowering "thick white" scent; their heads swell up grotesquely until they are larger than "a watermelon – a black watermelon," and their bodies likewise becomes bloated "through the chemistry of decomposition" causing them to burst out of their clothes to the point where they begin to perform a plant-like reproduction without parthenogenesis.[56] For Genet, however, the beautiful and terrible flowers of Shatila blossom most tenderly in the "baby pink" face of a young woman he sees weeping for her dead brother, which turns out, on closer inspection, not to be pink at all: "It wasn't the epidermis [that was pink – AB] but the dermis bordered by a bit of gray skin," he notes, "The whole face was burned."[57] Perhaps most revealingly, though, Genet goes on to reclaim the exact same graphic and disturbing trope of dead and new skin to describe, not the brutality of the occupying force, but the regenerative violence of revolution itself: "Is a revolution really a revolution when it hasn't made faces and bodies shed the dead skin [*le peau morte*] that weighed them down?"[58] In Genet's poetic revolution, the Palestinian corpses busily propagate, germinate and cross-pollinate themselves in posthumous pursuit of their life's work of returning to the *terre.*

In the early morning of Tuesday 18 March 2025, I was writing the conclusion to this text when I learnt that Israel has resumed bombing Gaza in violation of the agreed ceasefire: 400 people (including 183 children and 94 women) were on that day added to the estimated toll of 59,029 Palestinians killed in the conflict thus far, according to the Gaza Health ministry. To re-read ~~Genet's~~ "Quatre heures à Chatila" forty years after it was first written – which is to say in the aftermath of yet another Israeli military operation to destroy yet another Palestinian militant group; yet another mass killing of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians whose deaths are again blamed solely on the militants themselves, whilst yet another international community does nothing –- we perhaps begin to repeat history neither as tragedy nor as farce but as a Genet-style theater of cruelty.[59] It is hardly surprising that many commentators have begun to see Israel's recent War on Gaza (2023-) through the dark historical lens of the Lebanon War of 1982.[60] After all, the Lebanon War was the Likud Party's original attempt to remake the map of the Middle East; it was also found by international rapporteurs to involve the "deliberate or indiscriminate or reckless bombardment of territories of a civilian

character,"[61] and, of course, this supposedly short and strategically limited campaign quickly morphed into Israel's first "forever war": the IDF was compelled to occupy southern Lebanon for the next 18 years before unilaterally withdrawing in 2000. For the late Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," takes place in the same future anterior tense as Omar El Akkad's haunting recent work on the Gaza War, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (2025): "Israel had decided to allow itself to be judged coldly," Genet coldly judges, "it is now what it has been preparing to be for a long time: an execrable, temporal power, colonialist in a way which we hardly dare to be anymore, having become the judge of the final instance [*l'Instance Définitive*]."[62] Perhaps we can best witness this historical constellation between the Palestine of 1982 and 2025 – a constellation which is entirely bereft of any redemptive Benjaminian flash (*blitz*) of awakening – in Genet's final exorbitant claim that Israel's plan for the future of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps will be to turn them into (and here I can do no better than borrow a phrase from President Donald Trump) the "Riviera of the Middle East":[63] "it's worth five million old francs per square yard when it's still in ruins," the French writer ventriloquizes a property speculator sizing up this piece of prime real estate, "But how much when it's 'cleaned up [*propre*]'...?"[64] If it is still remotely possible to speak of a "right," dignified or appropriate answer to the question of what remains of a Palestine for us today, then, I think it is finally perhaps neither quite tragedy nor farce, tears nor laughter, but the response given by one of the saddest corpses Genet encountered in his four hours in Sabra and Shatila – the old woman in the pink and gray flowery dress, whose hands were tied apart as if she had been crucified, and whose ten fingers had been cut off and left next to her body. In Genet's dying words: "Her black and swollen face, turned towards the sky, revealed an open mouth, black with flies, and teeth that seemed very white to me, a face that seemed, without moving a muscle, either to grimace or smile or else to cry out in a silent and uninterrupted scream."[65]

19 July 2025

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[1] Jean Genet, "Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes," in *Œuvres complètes, IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 19-31. Translations mine.

[2] Jérôme Hankins, "Entretien avec Leila Shahid," in *Genet à Chatila*, ed. Jérôme Hankins (Paris: Solin, 1992), 17-68, 31-4. Translations mine.

[3] Hankins, "Entretien avec Leila Shahid," 35-6.

[4] Hankins, "Entretien avec Leila Shahid," 39.

[5] Jérôme Hankins, "Et mourir de lumière," in *Genet à Chatila*, ed. Jérôme Hankins (Paris: Solin, 1992), 9-16, 10. Translation mine.

[6] Jean Genet, *Un Captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 414. Translations mine.
[7] Simon Critchley, "Writing the Revolution – The Politics of Truth in Genet's *Prisoner of Love*," *Radical Philosophy* 56 (1990): 25-34, 26.
[8] Genet, *Captif amoureux*, 502.
[9] See also here Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[10] Genet, *Captif amoureux*, 416.
[11] See also, amongst many other texts, Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death" trans. Charlotte Mandell in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 300-344; Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1950); Raymond Queneau, *Le dimanche de la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952) and Jean Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes, or Terror in Literature* trans. Michael Syrotinski (Urbana-Champaign, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 2006) for an archive of classic post-war philosophical works that explore the relationship between literature and death.
[12] Maurice Blanchot, *L'Instant de ma mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).
[13] Amnon Kapeliouk, *Enquête sur un massacre*: *Sabra et Chatila* (Paris: Seuil, 1982). In this section, I am basing my account of the massacres on Kapeliouk's work.
[14] See Alain Ménargues, *Les Secrets de la guerre du Liban: Du coup d'état de Béchir Gémayel aux massacres des camps Palestiniens* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004) for an account of the collaborations between the Israeli Mossad and the Lebanese Forces before and during the 1982 Lebanon War.
[15] Kapeliouk, *Enquête sur un massacre*, 60.
[16] Ze'ev Schiff and Yehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 275.
[17] Kapeliouk, *Enquête sur un massacre*, 103.
[18] Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut (1983)http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign%20Relations/Israels%20Foreign%20Relations%20since%201947/19821984/104%20Report%20of%20the%20Commission%20of%20Inquiry%20into%20the%20e.
[19] Jean Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," in *Œuvres complètes, VI: L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 243–64. Translations mine.
[20] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 245.
[21] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 254–59.
[22] Catherine Brun, "Tu n'as rien vu à Chatila…," in *Jean Genet: Du roman au théâtre*, ed. Marie-Claude Hubert and Michel Bertrand (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2011), 183–93.
[23] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 249.
[24] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 245.
[25] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 245.
[26] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 247.
[27] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 260.

[28] Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars* , trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 80.
[29] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 259.
[30] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 70. In this section, I am partially reproducing a discussion from my essay "Terrors of Theory: Critical Theory of Terror from Kojève to Žižek," *Telos* 190 (2020): 157–176.
[31] Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 74.
[32] Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 74.
[33] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* ed. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), Act 3, Scene 4, ll. 81-4.
[34] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 56.
[35] Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 73.
[36] Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* Act 5, Scene 5, ll. 48-9.
[37] Emmanuel Lévinas *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 235. See also here my discussion of Lévinas's reading of Shakespeare's play in Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 81-3.
[38] Genet, "Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt," 22-3.
[39] Carl Lavery, "Ethics of the Wound: A New Interpretation of Jean Genet's Politics," *Journal of European Studies* 33: 2 (2003): 161-76, 167.
[40] Genet, *Captif amoureux*, 423-4.
[41] Compare here Steven Miller's discussion of the same passage in his excellent *War after Death: On Violence and its Limits* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 65-6.
[42] Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, 56.
[43] Genet, *Captif amoureux*, 423-4.
[44] See Jacques Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde,* ed. Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 9. In the Avant-propos to this book, which is the French edition of the collection of eulogies and obituaries published in English as *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida writes: "Each time, death declares *the end of the world in its totality*, the end of all possible worlds [la fin du monde en totalité, la fin de tout monde possible]; *each time the end of the world as a unique totality, therefore irreplaceable and therefore infinite* [la fin du monde comme totalité unique, donc irremplaçable et donc infinite]" (emphases in the original). Translation mine.
[45] Emmanuel Lévinas, Alain Finkielkraut, and Shlomo Malka, "Ethics and Politics," trans. Jonathan Romney, in Seán Hand, ed. *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 289–97, 294. In the more than 40 years since the interview, Lévinas's remarks have been read as everything from a legitimate defence of the alterity of the other from any positive identity claims to the inadvertent admission of a covert ethnicism at the heart of his ethics. See Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University

Press, 2003), 172n4, Robert Bernasconi, "Strangers and Slaves in the Land of Egypt: Levinas and the Politics of Otherness," in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006) 246-61 and Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) for a range of responses to Lévinas's claim.

[46] Jacques Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 15-126.

[47] Jacques Derrida, *Glas* trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

[48] Clare Finburgh Delijani, "The Anti-Monumental Cemetery: Ghosts in Jean Genet's "Quatre heures à Chatila," *French Studies*, Vol. LXXIV, No. 4, 587–604.

[49] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 258.

[50] Compare, for example, Critchley, "Writing the Revolution," 32.

[51] Jean Genet, "Les Palestiniens," in *Genet à Chatila*, ed. Jérôme Hankins (Paris: Solin, 1992), 87-151, 116. Translations mine.

[52] Genet, "Les Palestiniens," 99.

[53] See Jean Genet, "Entretien avec Rudiger Wischenbart et Leila Shahid Barrada," in *Œuvres complètes, VI: L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 269-96, 282. Translation mine.

[54] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 257.

[55] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 248, 249, 251.

[56] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 245-46, 249.

[57] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 260.

[58] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 261, see also 251.

[59] Compare here also Arthur Bradley, *Staging Sovereignty: Theory, Theater, Thaumaturgy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 219-24.

[60] See Jason Burke, "Veterans warn of echoes from 1982 Lebanon war as new conflict looms on Israel's northern borders," *The Guardian*, 14 July 2024 https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/13/veterans-warn-of-echoes-from-1982-lebanon-war-as-new-conflict-looms-on-israels-northern-borders , amongst many other examples.

[61] See Sean MacBride et al, *Israel in Lebanon: The Report of the International Commission to Enquire into Reported Violations of International Law by Israel during its Invasion of the Lebanon* (London: Ithaca Press, 1982). In its report, the MacBride Commission found that the Government of Israel had no valid reasons under international law for its invasion of Lebanon, for the way in which it conducted hostilities, or for its actions as an occupying force.

[62] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 257. See Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2025).

[63] In a 4 February 2025 press conference with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington, Trump announced his plan to turn the Gaza Strip into the "Riviera of the Middle East," complete with luxury beachfront resorts, whilst its

Palestinian population of 2 million would be voluntarily or involuntarily relocated to unspecified "various domains." See https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/full-text-trump-and-netanyahus-explosive-news-conference.

[64] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 257.

[65] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," 248.