

Jean Genet: Flanerie, Mimesis, and Journalism

SHAKEEL ANJUM

The terrible years of his life are not history but nature, a river condemned to meander through a landscape of hell.

— WALTER BENJAMIN, Karl Kraus

Writing is perhaps what remains to you when you've been driven from the realm of the given word.

— JEAN GENET, *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*

How can another see into me, into my most secret self, without there being able to see in there myself.

— JACQUES DERRIDA, *The Gift of Death*

In *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin writes, 'traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel' (92). In this lamenting essay on the question of a vanished art form, Benjamin's profound thinking on the communicative gesture of art connects at once the sensuous faculty of touch with history of nature and nature of history. However, there is in this passage, a deeper insight, a philosophical one, of nature's role in subjectivization, informed by a mimetic connection that the nature of 'culture industry,' to steal a phrase from Adorno, today has made it to disappear in the 'phantasmagoria' of the object driven world of modern metropolises, traces of which can still be found in the gait of modern day vagabonds, criminals, and *flaneurs* who roam around the vortex of the city in search of their lost subjectivity. Benjamin himself was a *flaneur* roaming on the streets of Paris recording the history of modern capitalism. His most promising, unfinished book to come, *The Arcades Project* which eventually came, traces the development of the modern city, Paris from its 'refuse' of gutters to suburbs. When Benjamin conceived and began to work on *The Arcades*, sitting in Bibliotheque Nationale, Jean Genet, his contemporary, another nomadic figure perhaps would be serving prison sentences in Paris on accounts of various thefts and criminal activities. What connects Benjamin and Genet is their trajectories of

depredations, incommunicable sufferings, and fate as refugees and migrants both buried far away from their places where they were born; Benjamin was buried in Port Bou, Spain and Genet in Larache, Morocco. Modern cities forced both of them to exile and death. Also what connects their writings is the sheer melancholia, grief, wound of the modern subject in search of their own selves in the world of objects and crowd lost to them where their words remain to haunt the postmodern reader. The subject of this essay is not Benjamin, but Jean Genet, his life and his works, majorly journalistic which throws light on the questions of linkages between journalism, literature and *flanerie*. Along with Marcel Proust, Paul Valery, Cezanne, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Genet is perhaps the last writer whose words are erotically charged and his flesh cannot be separated from militancy, history and nature. Remove nature from history, Jean Genet is smashed to pieces like a leaf.

In Benjamin's writings, the figure of the *Flaneur* as he observed it throughout in the process of his unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*, is an ambivalent one as it is represented in the writings of Charles Baudelaire. With the development of mass culture, the representation of crowds by the Parisian newspapers in late Nineteenth Century and the early Twentieth Century was based on the idea of production and reproduction of spectacle of the Parisian streets. The anxiety of the mass representing the crisis of the modern life heralded by modernity was commoditized. Gregory Shaya writes, 'The mass press would go where the crowds longed to go' (54). If the appearance of the *Flaneur* represented the 'alienation of the city and of capitalism,' (47) then its prototype, the *badaud* was a figure representing empathy, seeking 'a story that would touch her' (49-50). Benjamin's collection of quotations under the title 'Flaneur' is seeking to locate the position of the *Flaneur* in the class struggle as opposed to the general representation in mass media which homogenizes the Parisian crowd as Susan Buck-Morss's reading of *The Arcades* in her text, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* suggests.

The cherished figure behind the idea of *Flanerie*, Charles Baudelaire's poetry represents the anxiety of modernity and commodity fetish where the changing landscape of Paris through massive constructions and the introduction of commodities in the form of 'new' are represented allegorically in same manner as Benjamin saw the baroque world's (*Trauerspiel*) representation of pagan figures in his text, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Buck-Morss writes, "Benjamin makes the claim that if in Baroque allegory the debasement of nature had its source in Christianity's confrontation with pagan antiquity, in the nineteenth century the debasement of the "new" nature has its source in the production process itself (Buck-Morss 179). Benjamin sought to understand capitalism by juxtaposing Baudelaire's representation of prostitution and Marx's writing on commodity and value production. It is where Baudelaire's ambivalent position as a writer equivalent of a prostitute at the marketplace in the tormenting conflict of the old and the new surfaces when Benjamin comments, 'Baudelaire knew how things really stood for the literary man: as *flaneur* he goes to the marketplace, supposedly to take a look at it, but already in reality to find a buyer' (quoted in Buck-Morss 185). Benjamin found in Baudelaire a poet representing the allegory of modernity in ruins. What is important in the *flaneur* is not where he goes, but his exilic nature, as 'he is as much out of place in an atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city' (On Some Motifs in Baudelaire 172-173). It is the becoming, the fate of the *flaneur*, his final destination that interests Benjamin, 'what had to become of the *flaneur* once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged' (On Some Motifs in Baudelaire 172). The *flaneur* would also meet the same fate as slaves freed from the farm, both would become an alienated worker in the industry in the process of what Marx calls 'primitive accumulation of capital.' As Benjamin notes on the section *Baudelaire in The Arcades Project*, 'in the *Flaneur*, one might say, is reborn the sort of idler that Socrates picked out from the Athenian marketplace to be his interlocutor. Only, there is no longer a Socrates. And the slave labor that guaranteed him his leisure has likewise ceased to exist (334). The very conception of *flanerie* according to Benjamin is built on the leisure acquired on the basis of the exploitation of labour time from the body of the worker in factories and the sexual pleasure derived from the sexuality that has mimetically acquired a commodity form through prostitution. The colonial expansion of the French Empire overseas, especially Africa, brought the combination of leisure; of wine and women. Roland Barthes examines in *Mythologies* how myth reinvents itself in the form of commodity and given a national aura and an 'ornament in the slightest ceremonials of French daily life,' (67) by

erasing every trace of colonial exploitative history of the commodity. As 'wine is felt by the French nation to be possession which is its very own ... The mythology of wine can in fact help us to understand the usual ambiguity of our daily life... Its production is deeply involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even the bread' (65-68). The other side of the pleasure derived from prostitution, another capitalistic exploitation of sexual labour is dependent on colonial desire. Benjamin notes this aspect of colonial history of desire through Baudelaire. Benjamin writes, 'When he went to meet the consumptive negress who lived in the city, Baudelaire saw a much truer aspect of the French colonial empire than did Dumas when he took a boat to Tunis on commission from Salvandy' (The Arcades Project 327). *Flanerie* didn't last long, as the empire. As Benjamin suggests, 'the social base of *flanerie* is journalism' (Arcades 446),' and this figure of the *flaneur* is exploited by the newspaper *Le Flaneur* in its appeal to the masses to be responsible and 'not to forget our rights and our obligations as citizens... let us be *flaneurs*, but patriotic *flaneurs*' (The Arcades Project 448). It is through its conformity with the state apparatus that journalistic *flanerie* achieve its character as a class. As Benjamin further writes that the last incarnation of the *flaneur* is the 'sandwich-man' advertising commodities in the Parisian market (The Arcades Project 448). The capitalistic-colonial aspect of France will be examined in detail further in the writings of Jean Genet, another nomadic figure, a production of empire itself. Walter Benjamin's insight on commodity fetish in the works of Baudelaire leads him to go into the precise details of the body, that of the prostitute of which Baudelaire's major writings represent. Benjamin comments

The whore is the most precious booty in the triumph of allegory- the life which signifies death. This quality is the only thing about her that cannot be bought, and for Baudelaire it is the only thing that matters (Arcades 336).

For Benjamin as he is examining things from the point of view of the allegorical representation of ruins, this phrase constitutes his idea of looking at modernity's mimetic refashioning of the old into the 'new' as in the Baudelaire poem, *The Swan*. Susan Buck-Morss explores in detail Benjamin's drawing of parallels between Baudelaire's representation of Paris in allegorical fashion by recalling Andromache, wife of Hector in the ruins of Paris (Andromache, I think of you.../ The old Paris is gone.../ old suburbs, everything for me becomes allegory/ while my dear memories are heavier than rocks) and

Seventeenth century Baroque theatre's appeal to pagan antiquity (Buck-Morss 179).

What is so called new as postmodernism would suggest is a complete break from the old is perhaps not the case. The old is metamorphosed into new in a mimetic fashion and its traces are scattered in the geographies as far as Algeria and Palestine whose representations recur in Jean Genet's works like *The Screens* and *Prisoner of Love*, in various forms, allegorically. The Paris Commune of 1848 saw the clear division of the city in two poles, the workers and the bourgeoisie. The city which was represented by the Parisian newspapers as one whole mass divided into two dialectical poles paving the way for class politics. Baudelaire was seen at the barricades in solidarity with the workers. Haussmann's plan of rebuilding the city in 1850s onwards which pushed working class to the suburbs and periphery revolted again in 1871. The city would be haunted further still in the next century in 1968 in the form of agitating students and workers. As a *flâneur*, Baudelaire did not belong to Paris, he was out of place. Benjamin writes, 'to the *flâneur*, his city is- even if, like Baudelaire, he happened to be born there- no longer native ground. It represents for him a theatrical display, an arena (The Arcades Project 347). Baudelaire recorded the evils of commodity fetish of modernity in his works and Benjamin suggests that 'there is, in Baudelaire a latent tension between the destructive and the idyllic aspects of death- between its bloody and its palliative nature (The Arcades Project 345). The mimetic impulse of the 'author as producer,' to use Benjamin's own words can be seen in Baudelaire's poetry representing the tension between subjectivity and commodity. Baudelaire paints objects with his subjectivity and his gaze takes away even what is living in the commodity towards grave. Death, ruins, destruction, emptiness and melancholy is represented allegorically in commodity itself. Here Benjamin cites Baudelaire,

Baudelaire regards art's workshop in itself as a site of confusion] as the "apparatus of destruction" which the allegories so often represent. In the notes he left for a preface to a projected third edition of *le Fleurs du mal*, he writes: "do we show the public... the mechanism behind our effects?... Do we display all the rags, the paint, the pulleys, the chains, the alterations, the scribbled-over proof sheets- in short all the horrors that make up the sanctuary of arts?" (The Arcades Project 329-330).

In fact, Baudelaire shows the whole of modernity's destructive character in his poems. More than Baudelaire himself, perhaps inspired by Baudelarian spirit, Jean Genet is the last artist who creates a portrait of destruction and devastation both of commodity and nature in its broken, devastated form, and, along with it he represents Empire as it lay in ruins in his late works. As Benjamin suggests,

'allegory holds fast to ruins,' (The Arcades Project 329). Jean Genet's works represent everything from furniture of the empire, its uniforms, plantations, colonies through the abjectness of the bodies of the colonized in revolt mimetically, representing the revolt of nature. Body and nature is intertwined. Genet's narrative prose is more Baudelarian, less Proustian. 'The literary influence at work,' writes Edmund White, Genet's biographer, is the 'reminiscences of Baudelaire and Rimbaud' (White 107). Baudelaire is the *flâneur* of Paris recording its changing landscape in a melancholic way then Genet's *flânerie* is turned upside down, magnified whose subject is not Paris, but the dark geographies of the colonized world. If Baudelaire was at the barricades, Genet was among the Palestinians, Black Panthers, Baaders and Algerians. Edmund White writes, 'like Genet Baudelaire identified himself with the marginal members of the society and felt his artistic method required that he merge with the crowds of big cities' (White 136). The dialectics of solitude and mass and physical objects is characteristics of their bodies and their bodies of literary work. As Benjamin observes that the "multitude in Hugo" arises as the "depths of the shadow" and "the prophet seeks out solitude... He goes into the Desert to think. Of What? Of what multitudes.?" (The Arcades Project 292). This seeking out of solitude as venturing out into unknown territories only to see that the territory that which one seeks is inside oneself. Genet's epigraph in the *Prisoner of Love*, reads as: 'Put all the images in Language 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.' Here is the passage moving in dialectics of the language and territory, and the territory is the desert. The search for image takes the subject into the depths of the desert. In reality, deserts are deserts, but, the imaginative power of the writer fills the desert with language. The city as it remains crowded with all sorts of events and signs suggest the hollowness of language, the language of hollowness, hollowness of the city and the hollowness of its language in contrast to the emptiness of the desert full of language. This passage adds another dialectics now, that of the nature and language. It's in nature in its true form that language grows like cactuses. It's in the deserted geographies that solitude meets its mass. Baudelaire was a solitary figure as ever and 'every intimacy with things', writes Benjamin of Baudelaire, 'is alien to the allegorical intention' (The Arcades Project 336). Benjamin contrasts the solitude of Hugo to that of Baudelaire: Words like images present themselves to Hugo as a surging, relentless mass. With Baudelaire, in contrast, they take the side of the solitary, who to be sure fades into the multitude' (The Arcades Project 333). Genet's solitude is mimetic. He cannot talk of his solitude without the other. He is crowded with solitude or rather

his solitude is crowded with nature. Both Baudelaire and Genet were

possessed by inanimate nature. Baudelaire believed that objects thought *through* him, for in the grandeur of reverie the ego is quickly lost. In Genet's case the absorption is based on fear: 'Trees were astonished to see me. My fear bore the name of panic... Around me the world was shivering sweetly. I could even chat with the rain' (White 136-137 Passage quoted from *The Thief's Journal*).

In his play *The Screens*, the character, Mother is in conversation with the trees, rages in angst asking for a passage id represented in at two instances here.

THE MOTHER: (*furiously. The invisible tree to which she is speaking must be made "visible" by her gestures*): Step aside so I can pass, damn it, or I'll tear off your skin, you leafy tree, I'll tear off the skin of your belly strip by strip. (*She makes the gesture of pushing aside the invisible tree*) (*The Screens* 118).

And, Mother again,

THE MOTHER: ... It's the night full of nettles. (A pause.) Nettles! (*Suddenly lyrical.*) Through the lords of the old, go back to the Fairy, back to the virgin, I, I've known since childhood that I belong- perhaps through the females, and Said through me- to the nettle family. Near ruins, tangled with shards, their bushes were my cruelty, my hypocritical meanness that I kept, with one hand behind my back, in order to hurt the world! I tamed them and they held in their venom, drew in their needles. In their leaves I stepped my delicate hands: hemlock would not have frozen my veins. Everything in the vegetable kingdom was won over to me (*The Screens* 112-13).

This angst of the Mother in *The Screens* is 'projection,' to use Sartre's phrase, of his own unconscious, of his subjectivity into the realm of nature. This projection as we would see further is at play in *Prisoner of Love* as well. This projection is inverted, turned into allegorical mode of representation of nature in revolt. It's in the revolt that subjectivity is taken to its extreme, stretched beyond limit, to infinity where subjectivity dissolves into nature attaining a mimetic character, thus posing a challenge to the state apparatus. The vegetal subjects escape state control through its flight into nature: 'They come up behind us, veiled. When the job's done, they're metamorphosed on the spot. The guy becomes a tree, an eggplant, who knows! What do you do? Pick up and crush it? You're just picking and crushing an eggplant. The rebel has got away' (*The Screens* 115). To use Deleuze's phrase, it's a nomadic 'becoming', 'becoming' tree of the Mother. 'In their leaves I stepped my delicate hands,' is the harshest critique coming from a sentiment which is anti-modern to its core. In Genet, allegorization of nature achieves a form beyond allegory. Allegory is incomplete without signature in Derridean sense, a funereal signature. There is a personal story which Genet's provides in *Miracle of the*

Rose when the security guard at Fontevault prison asks his name

"Name?"

"Genet."

"Plantagenet?"

... The guards gave me a dirty look. Perhaps he despised me for not knowing that Plantagenets were buried in Fontevault (*Miracle of the Rose* 10).

Derrida's bafflement at the missing of the question of flower what he calls the 'theological question' (13) in Sartre's *Saint Genet* is a genuine bafflement. Ontology is unthinkable without nature. In his text, *Glas*, Derrida writes that Genet leaves his signature everywhere, in every object, texts as a 'contract with writing as a funeral rite' (42) which is represented in *The Screens* again.

THE MOTHER: And that your funeral is also part of your life as a living man! (*The Screens* 57).

Genet inverts the whole logic of the anthropology of the name, it's not life that lives, signs or represents its death. In Genet's representation of the allegory, his self is mimetically allegorized in the process of writing. There is a death-image in every sentence. He too is a part of nature that resists in death, through death, of what is living in being. 'I is another,' Rimbaud's sentence can be seen crawling like a green creeper all over his being. 'This *dereglement de sens* ('disorganization of the senses') was essential to Rimbaud's poetic programme as well. In a letter to a friend in 1871 Rimbaud declared, ' *Je est un autre*' ('I is another') and wrote, 'The poet makes himself a *visionary* by a long, immense and methodical disorganization of the senses.' The agents for such an untuning of the mind were 'all the forms of love, of suffering, of madness' (White 137). The language that Genet invokes in *The Screens* through characters like Leila, Said, and The Mother is about breaking the image. The state lives off through images. The perpetual breaking of images perpetuated by empire through its machinery of control is a necessary element in Genet's *The Screens* and *Prisoner of Love*. *The Screens* represents the violent shaking of images, not allowing it to freeze, escaping it by betrayal. The idea of betrayal in Genet's writing is not betrayal of love, or army, or country as such, but betrayal of languages, images, stereotypes.

THE LIEUTENANT (*Taken aback for a moment*): It's not a matter of intelligence, but of perpetuating an image that's more than ten centuries old, that grows stronger as that which it represents crumbles, that leads us all, as you know, to death (*The Screens* 119).

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari state, 'the state is what makes the distinction between the governors and the governed possible. We do not see how the state can be explained by what it presupposes, even with recourse to dialectics. The state seems to rise up in single stroke, in an imperial form, and does not depend on progressive factors. Its on-the-spot emergence is like a stroke of genius, the birth of Athena... The state clearly dates back to the most remote ages of humanity... from clans to empires, from bands to kingdoms' (418-419). Deleuze and Guattari call this phenomenon, 'mutation' (419). The empire is nothing but the mimetic production of the image and its circulation, or in Adorno and Horkheimer's words, 'civilization has replaced the organic adaptation to the others and mimetic behavior proper, by organized control of mimesis, in the magical phase; and finally, by rational practice, by work in the historical phase. Uncontrolled mimesis is outlawed' (Adorno and Horkheimer 180). In *The Screens*, it is 'uncontrolled mimesis' at work, where the subject and nature are so intertwined that it opposes all the plastic forms. In the ninth scene, Leila takes out several stolen objects from under her skirt, speaks to them violently. Leila and mother are in conversation, Gendarme enters, enquires about the stolen clock, and, the mother responds.

THE MOTHER: Years ago. The clock's been there for ages. Just imagine, one day, when he was very little, Said took it completely apart. Completely piece by piece, to see what was inside, and he put all the springs on a plate. He was still a tot, and just then I entered the house. That was long ago, as you can imagine. I was returning from the grocer's, and what did I see on the floor?... (*She mimes the scene*). But really, like some kind of vermin ready to scamper away: little wheels, little stars, little screws, little worms, little nails, gobs and gobs of thingumbobs. Little springs, sparrow's wings, cigarettes, bayonets, castanets... (The Screens 64)

What we see here is the allegorical representation of empire in the form of plastic machine, the clock. The assemblage of the components form 'little wheels' to 'castanets' is the image formation of empire. Breaking the clock allegorically represents smashing the image of empire. Historically, empire stands in defense of God, good and goods against what is evil both in nature and society. Genet's characters in *The Screens*, represent the ugly, the evil, the abject, filth, rottenness and he makes the evil an ultimate gesture through which subjectivity is redeemed. Genet represents evil allegorically in terms of nature. The coming together of nature, history, evil and love is represented in the words of Leila.

LEILA: I'll obey you. (*with sudden severity*.) But I want- it's my ugliness, earned hour by hour, that speaks, or what speaks? - I want you to lead me without flinching to the land of shadow

and of the monster. I want you to plunge into irrevocable grief. I want you- it's my ugliness, earned minute by minute, that speaks- to be without hope. I want you to choose evil and always evil. I want you to know only hatred and never love. I want you- it's my ugliness, earned second by second, that speaks- to refuse that brilliance of darkness, the softness of flint, and honey of thistles. I know where we are going, Said, and why we are going there.

SAID: ... I am telling you, I'm on my way to becoming someone. Are you coming? (The Screens 109).

Dipping of the subject in the world of melancholy, choosing evil, becoming someone other than itself is a recovery of the tranquilized self, a self in wound. 'Evil as such,' writes Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 'which is cherished as enduring profundity exists only in allegory... by its allegorical form evil as such reveals itself to a subjective phenomenon... In evil as such subjectivity grasps what is real in it, and sees it simply as its own reflection in God' (233). At the end of the play, Said will go on to betray the resistance itself, defying the formation of postcolonial image, 'I'd take hold of myself... as far as that goes' (The Screens 190). It's a complete destruction of image, of his own image by his own self at the very moment when it was on the way to become sign of revolt and resistance. Towards the end of the play, Said would lose his way 'in the stones and in the woods,' sinking into 'another region... how one must lose oneself' (The Screens 189). David Fieni reads *The Screens* as 'an allegory for the role of mass media communication in an era of mass consumption' where 'history as catastrophe meets the commodity fetish' (57). In Fieni's reading of the play is literal, it depicts the triumph of mass media over subjectivity. Genet's play is 'profoundly discontinuous' (The Infinite Conversation 361) and Bataille's argument that Genet's writing has 'neither the power to communicate with his readers nor the intention of doing so' (Bataille 161) is a little harsh judgment. It is not the writing that communicates, but the act, in order for the act to communicate writing must transform itself dramatically. In Genet's performances and writings there is no communication as such but a will to communicate in a realm where modern forms of communication has lost that true mimetic form. The will to communicate is vegetative and not given but the idea of communication is in search of the same in Genet's works. 'The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue' (Beckett 293). Talking to rains, plants, animal world, objects, stones and so on is based on the idea of reaching out mimetically back to nature in its most natural of forms where subjectivity grasps its truth in the organic and vegetative, almost a historic-theologico-philosophical commitment

to language that is primitive. The possibility of communication lies in its impossibility. Jacques Ranciere argues that the 'unrepresentable is lodged precisely here, in the impossibility of an experience being told in its own appropriate language' (Ranciere 126).

Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love* is his last text dwelling on the length of time he spent *among* the Palestinians. Genet lived with the Palestinian revolutionaries, fedayeen from late 1970 to late 1972. The memoir begins with a void, nothingness, a struggle to locate one's own self in writing that shall never again be written.

The page that was blank to begin with is now crossed from top to bottom with tiny black characters- letters, words, commas, exclamation marks- and it's because of them the page is said to be legible. But a kind of uneasiness, close to nausea, an irresolution that stays my hand- these make me wonder: do those black marks add upto reality? The white of the paper is an artifice that's replaced the translucency of parchment and ochre surface of clay tablets; but the ochre and the translucency and the whiteness may possess more reality than the signs that mar them.

Was the Palestinian revolution really written on a void, an artifice superimposed on nothingness, and is the white page, and every 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 time spent among-not with-the Palestinians reside anywhere, it would survive between all 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 spaces, recorded there rather than in the words that serve 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. Perhaps it's the same as the time, dense and real, enclosed between the characters in Hebrew (*Prisoner of Love* 5).

'How can I say it,' says Beckett at the end of the story, *The Unnamable* (406). This aporia of speech cannot be trespassed alone. There are two stories, two names, and a silence reigns over both. 'The attempt must be made,' says Beckett, 'in the old stories incomprehensively mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine before being his' (406). How can one write one's own story without the other, without being there of the other, deep inside in one's own self? Also how can one write one's own story when word itself will have betrayed the word? 'Words fail, voice fails, so be it' (406). Genet is no more, and most of his Palestinian friends too have departed and with the shrinking of the geography called Palestine what words will save it? Words have the tendency to wither away against the tide of the world. Truth is skin rubbing against each other in silence. Hence the feeling, 'close to nausea' at the displacement or the effacing of the signs. In the beginning was nothingness. Perhaps Genet's method of writing here is to bring out the

image of the everyday silences contained in the voids, the shrills, cries, the violence erupting out of the void called Palestine. Beckett again, 'all I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well built phrase and the long sonata of the dead' (27). These beginning words are an exit from the literary into literature, into solitude of one's being with the skin of the other. Beckett sums it up all. However there is another feeling, of the reader, 'close to nausea' almost 'reduced to the region of death (*Mourning Diary* 77),' to use Roland Barthes phrase with the knowledge that the text which one is reading, its author is no more. There is the death of the reader too. Genet died while finishing this text. Corpus follows corpse and vice versa. The last text is not the text anymore; it is silence reigning all over, it becomes a *souvenir*, 'the gift of death,' to use Derrida's phrase. This text is not a memoir; it's a novel, representing death as Barthes would say in *Writing Degree Zero*. Let us return to the word, *Souvenir*; Genet affirms that this book is a *souvenir* (*Prisoner of Love* 38), from whom to whom? To the Palestinians? Yes. It's a *souvenir*, a gift, from the one when it will have been finished, the author would remain no more to present it to the friends concerned. Or is it written for the ones, in memory of those who have already departed before him? Or is it writing that is in itself a *souvenir* containing singularities that will flow as rainwater touching all those, the dead who are sleeping in their graves and the living who are gazing the skies. Hence, the silence of mourning. Blanchot writes for George Bataille, '... Vainly do we try to maintain, with our words, with our writings, what is absent; vainly do we offer it the appeal of our memories and a sort of figure, the joy of remaining with the day, life prolonged by a truthful appearance. We are only looking to fill a void, we cannot bear the pain: the affirmation of his void... Everything we say tends to veil the one affirmation: that everything must fade and that we can remain loyal only so long as we watch over this fading movement, to which something in us rejects all memory already belongs (*Friendship* 289). Writing is perhaps an ethical way of living together mimetically. For Kafka to write is to be near, to write to someone, for someone is to find a place in the heart of the other. Writing is a landscape as he writes, 'I am writing only because it is so necessary for me today to be near you for a moment, even though it be only by a means of this card' (*Kafka* 50). Returning to the beginning lines of Genet's *Prisoner of Love* again, these words represent faces facing each other gazing on nothingness. Benjamin writes, 'everything is face. Each thing has the degree of bodily presence that allows it to be searched - as one searches a face- for such traits as appear. Under these conditions even a sentence (to say nothing of

the single word) puts on a face, and this face resembles that of the sentence standing opposed to it. In this way every truth points manifestly to its opposite, and this state of affairs explains the existence of the doubt. Truth becomes something living: it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think each other' (The Arcades Project 418). Faces appear distinct and visible because of the distance, the void that separates them. Looking this way the text appears as a graveyard where corpses lie next to each other facing void. In other words, text appears as *engraved* like bodies in graveyard, a mimetic space where history, nature and faciality merge. Words are faces in nature; the disappearance of nature is also the history of disappearance of beings as such. There is interplay of opposites: light and shadow. Death and the living, not life is the 'label of his singularity, the guarantee of his total lucidity in the face of death' (Guattari 224).

How to read Genet's works that borders on the border of nothingness? Not to read him would be a denial of history, to read him is to affirm a place in nature that no longer exists. Since capitalism denies both history and nature, by reading Genet one can affirm one's place in both. 'In the violence and incomprehensible beauty,' writes Edward Said in his text, *Late Style* on Jean Genet, 'of the deeply shattering and disruptive events that have reconfigured an already absurdist landscape into an entirely new topography, it was Genet's quite figure moving through the Levant that seemed to me, and doubtless to others, to have informed the dense fluidity of what would take place' (Said 76). In what would follow in the text and beyond, Genet would be witness to destruction of lives and nature on a catastrophic scale. The text is an allegorical painting of catastrophe. 'Everyday Alberto looked for the last time, recording the last image of the world' (Prisoner of Love 23). Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as Adorno writes, 'is an artwork and a metaphysics of art, the experience of hawthorn hedge figures as a fundamental phenomenon of aesthetic comportment' (Aesthetics Theory 88). In a similar vein but exactly the opposite is achieved by Genet in *Prisoner of Love*. In Proust, memory seeks its own interior, in Genet memory seeks the exterior in history. In Proust (Swann's Way), looking through hawthorns he could see the face of a beautiful woman with gleaming black eyes in whose image he would be lost in daydreams, while Genet writes of the Palestinian camps, 'A gust of wind blew the canvas, the zinc and the corrugated iron all way, and I saw the misery plain' (Prisoner of Love 15). 'Landscape ethics' in Proust is Landscape politics in Genet. Genet's aesthetics has an ugly, sad, ruinous side to it. Adorno provides a linkage between a work of art and historical side of nature as 'engraved as their expression is history,

and engraved as their form is historical continuity' dating back to 'romanticism, probably initially to the cult of ruin' and 'perhaps the most profound force of resistance stand in the cultural landscape is the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically because it is etched by the real suffering of the past' (Aesthetics Theory 88-89). Genet presents a descending dialectic: 'When we went down the steeps of Jordan at nights to lay mines... were we ascending from hell or descending from heaven?' (Prisoner of Love 13). Everything in the story is melancholic, sinks, perishes, and turns into ruin.

What was to become of you after the storms of fire and steel?
What were you to do?

Burn, shriek, turn into a brand, blacken, turn into ashes, let yourself be slowly covered first with dust and then with earth, seeds, moss, leaving behind nothing but your own jawbone and teeth, and finally becoming a little funeral mound with flowers growing on it and nothing inside (Prisoner of Love 102).

Singularities of suffering can be expressed in terms of nature because in suffering, a part of nature suffers too. What connects Genet to Palestine is a singular geography and history of pain expressed mimetically is the nomadic existence of an individual on one hand and the whole community on the other. Both are to use Genet's own words, 'discarded refuse of "settled" nations' (Prisoner of Love 15). Genet was in Palestine at a time when everything was being reduced to ashes. He witnessed Palestinians rage at a point when its people were vanishing, and geography reduced to stomach ache. Grief runs like stream of water pouring over the whole text. *Prisoner of Love* is a book of mimesis in which silence and suffering is the only language connecting Genet to Palestinians. Roland Barthes writing on Proust writes, 'Sade, yes, Sade used to say that the novel consists in painting those on loves' (Rustle of Language 288). This text is a landscape painting. Genet draws a parallel of Cezanne's painting, Sainte-victoire mountain with the weightiness of Palestinian peoples' gestures. He says, 'They are imposing!... It's real, it's there' (Interview with Wischenbart and Barrada 241). For Genet, mountains possess 'personality to which everyone relates in a special way' (Prisoner of Love 268). These connections in terms of images that Genet makes goes back to his childhood for example when he sees hills in Ajloun, Jordan, he sees a similarity with the hills of Morvan, the place in France where he spent his childhood among Morvan peasants (Prisoner of Love 81). In another instance, Genet contrasts the 'sobriety and elegance in Palestine' to the lakes in Norway (Prisoner of Love 417) 'Language is the highest application of mimetic faculty,' writes Benjamin, in which 'similarities flash up fleetingly out of the steam of things only to sink down once more' (Doctrine of the Similar 697-

98). Genet writes, 'I had greeted the revolt as a musical ear recognizes a right note. I often left my tent and slept under the trees, looking up at a Milky Way that seemed quite close through the branches. At night the armed sentries moving around over grass and leaves made no sound. They tried to merge into the tree trunks. They listened... A little way off, through the darkness, I could hear the Jordan flowing. I was freezing cold' (Prisoner of love 9-12). Here two planes of enunciation dissect and meet to form a freezing point: 'existential plane,' to use Guattari's term and geomusical plane and the intersection of these planes is the point of revolutionary becoming. For Genet, Palestinians as a race are 'naturally musical' (Prisoner of Love 47) and they are the composers of song that has 'always been shut up, silently; within himself (Prisoner of Love 47). Hearing the right note of music can create seismic sensations in the body. Death, image, eclipse, shadows, beauty, memory and effacement are the haunting themes of the text and these hauntings are not imaginary, they are real. For Genet, Palestinians were the people 'nearest to the earth, to the clay, and of the same colour' and at the same time they seemed to him 'as the most vaguest and most non-existent' (Prisoner of Love 218). Black Panthers were for him a 'profusion of ferns' (Prisoner of Love 247). Historical subjectivities and enunciations come wrapped in nature, bursts forth like flower buds, blooming, and finally tilting vertically downwards embraced by earth. Walking on any fragment on this part of this earth remains no longer the same. History bites our toes like thorns. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin's understanding of nature and history through Baroque allegory, expressed in melancholic faciality what Benjamin also refers to as the 'biographical historicity of the individual' is expressed in terms of an attachment to primordial landscape intertwined by death (166). Epic poetics of Homer represents for Benjamin, the history of nature in a pure state (167). Genet represents Palestinian struggle against the Zionist colonization in Homeric *acedia*, poetry that negates images of permanent myth, that of Israel as a people of the book and their notion of geography as timeless. Palestinians think of their place and life in terms of finitude. Towards the end of his essay, *Four Hours in Shatila*, Genet comments, 'the struggle for a country can fill a very rich life, but a short one. This we recall, is Achilles' choice in the *Iliad* (228). Palestinian resistance is represented in the language of nature. 'Moss, lichen, grass, a few dog roses capable of pushing up through red granite were an image of the Palestinian people breaking out everywhere through the cracks' (Prisoner of Love 388). The whole of Palestinian landscape is weaved in a funereal language and the mimesis at its purest level is achieved in his narrative when self is

effaced to show itself in a multitude of revolutionary wills. In Benjamin's terminology, it's the expression of 'revolutionary discharge' achieved in a natural language where 'body sphere and image sphere interpenetrate so deeply that revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervations' (Surrealism 160).

Writing this book, I see my own image far, far away, dwarf size, and more difficult to recognize with age. This isn't a complaint. I am just trying to convey the idea of age and of the form poetry takes when one is old. I grow smaller and smaller in my own eyes and see the horizon speeding towards me, the lines into which I shall merge (Prisoner of Love 134).

For anyone who is least interested in the philosophy of history and is only concerned with the aesthetic fashion code, this book might pass as another beautiful text. The force of this text is historical not because it cites events as it was witnessed but because of words coming from someone carrying bruises of history on his skin. Genet does not venture closer to words. He makes the use of the words from a slightly mocking distance' (Prisoner of Love 107). Genet's writings are neither journalistic nor literary, they are real, like words 'deterritorializing,' to evoke Deleuze and Guattari here, both literary and the journalistic. To the extent that journalism is a profession of the so called ethical reportage and literature, a genre in a general sense, to think of connecting the two or finding a common ground between the two would be asking the dead Socrates to wake up and walk on the streets of Athens. I might sound Barthesian here. There is a difference between *Madame Bovary* and *Four Hours in Shatila* as Genet himself suggests (Interview with Wischenbart and Barrada 240). To evoke Barthes, Journalism is 'sticky' while literature is imaginary, but a piece of writing is real as it divides the person writing, spatially into his past and present. Words belong to anyone, reality not. Writing has an erotic, sexual connection to the event as Genet's writings suggest. Journalism is a part of bourgeois culture industry and hence a part of the state apparatus and television is a 'magic screen with its zooms and its cranes' enchanting the audience 'with the death of the Palestinians' (Prisoner of Love 175). This is what Genet perceived of images flashing on screens. Writing disenchant. It doesn't stick; it is a force of catastrophe. 'Every morning brings us the news of the globe,' writes Benjamin in *The Storyteller*, 'and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories' (89). News is a modern ritual, mimetically reproduced. For Hegel, newspaper was just a matter of change of habits, morning prayers were replaced by newspapers in bourgeois culture. The insight into this observation of Hegel is this: devotion to metaphysical metamorphosed into a blind devotion to mass culture. Benjamin's remark runs in

the same current as Hegel. In his essay on Karl Kraus, The Viennese journalist, Benjamin draws a close relation between journalism, nature, theatricality, writing, ethics and the skin that writes. A story, 'must summon the dead from their graves,' (435 Karl Kraus) writes Benjamin of Karl Kraus' writings. Modern mass media instead sends people to graves, mobilizing national, international passions to wage war against the people on an everyday scale. Kraus was among the minority, perhaps lone voice writing against the First World War.

Genet begins his essay, *Near Ajloun* with these lines: 'Bodies and faces are given to those who can read' (152). Those who can't read are either mythological figures, prophets or the poor. Images are denied to those who can't read. In other words readability is a poetic gesture. Genet's line if taken out of context here can be turned into a critique of the image-world of television and journalism. In the materiality of the world where image after image is produced in newspapers, television screens, films and other forms of representation, a sense of blindness prevails because they come as coded in the form of bureaucratic ration supply of judgment. The sensuous connection is a mimetic condition of bodily discharge, invisible yet communicable that connects subjectivities is erased by modernity that's why the poverty of stories amidst 'news' that Benjamin talks about is a postmodern condition. '... Justice and the entire defense of this community take place because of attraction that is sentimental, or perhaps sensitive or sensual. I am French, but I defend the Palestinians without judgment. They are in the right because I love them,' wrote Genet in *Four Hours in Shatila* (218). Here defending a people is not a question of measurement or weighing, that blind woman who holds the balance in her hand, on the contrary it is about standing in defense of history against the irrational rationality of barbarism. Benjamin warns of catastrophe that was coming and the catastrophe to come in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious' (255). Genet has the enemy of history in his mind 'whose face is unacceptable' (The Declared Enemy 1). Jacqueline Rose assesses Adorno's reading of Beckett's *Endgame* 'as the exemplary text after Auschwitz' (Rose 151) which takes all the way to Genet's *Four Hours In Shatila* linking Europe to Palestine through a singularity of suffering. 'Beckett and Genet she writes, 'face each other at either end of the taut wire' (Rose 151) historically. Genet could see only a quarter of barbarianism at display at Sabra and Chatila. He could go no further. What he writes in the following lines, no journalist or historian can display the wound that will remain etched in being

The stench of death was coming not from a house or a tortured victim: my body, my being seemed to emit it. In a narrow street, underneath a jutting wall, I thought I saw a black boxer sitting on the ground, stunned from a knockout, a look of laughter on his face. No one had had the heart to close his eyelids; his bulging eyes, as though made of very white porcelain, stared at me. He looked downcast, defeated with his arms raised, pressed against this angle of the wall (*Four Hours in Shatila* 223).

In the theatre of cruelty how can language remain serene? These lines are the vulnerability of language at the risk of evanescence. Genet shows us that words carry within itself the finiteness of lives. 'Farewell to half of me. I die to myself,' He writes (*Prisoner of Love* 62). The style of the essay is achieved in a language of skin weaved by sensuousness. 'If style is the power to move freely in the length and breadth of linguistic thinking without falling into banality,' writes Benjamin, 'it is attained chiefly by the cardiac strength of great thoughts, which drives the blood of language through the capillaries of syntax into remotest limbs' (Karl Kraus 441). The language of *Four Hours in Shatila* falls on *Prisoner of Love* like the gaze of a prophet falling into abyss. Genet's texts are philosophical meditations on word and the world. Philosophy never came closer to death as in his writings. It almost died. 'Words still live on in our language instead of sunk like a wreck,' Genet writes (*Prisoner of Love* 16). Genet's style in *Four Hours in Shatila* is a work of citation, not the recognition of the academic and the intellectual enterprises but a living one, citation as assemblages of memory, as a life lived among people, as a necessary condition of understanding our present, our location in history and geography, our relationship with the past which nanotechnologies of present power erodes, and, understanding the crisis which lurks in our waking life and chases us in our dreams as nightmares. In the struggle of existence over barbarism which threatens to turn us into *Homo Sacers*, every citation is a spade of excavation, of remembrance, a matter of concern, a memorializing exercise, self criticism, and reflections of our own location in histories and the cacophonies of beings. To cite is to [in]cite, to seek oneself in citation, a mimetic exercise, [In] citationment. Citations are mirrors, reflecting our image, not the present image, but the images of the pasts, deaths, cadavers, catastrophes, and leftovers of history. What is citation for, if it doesn't haunt us and bring the memories of the dead piled before our imagination which we deny in our present? On the contrary, Journalism is a function of reporting numbers. Journalism is pollution, it makes the air heavier. Genet is narrating here about journalists' presence in Baqa camp. 'The Japanese, Italians, French, Germans and Norwegians were the first film cameramen, photographers and sound engineers on the scene. The air,

which had been light, became heavy' (Prisoner of Love 31). For Karl Kraus, the Viennese Journalist, journalism represents 'violation, the martyrdom of words,' Benjamin cites him in his essay, *Karl Kraus*

Is the press a messenger? No: it is the event. Is it speech? No: Life. The press not only claims that the true events are its news of events, but it also brings about a sinister identification that constantly creates the illusion that deeds are reported before they are carried out... Once again the instrument has run away with us. We have placed the person who is supposed to report the outbreaks of fire, and who ought doubtless to play the most subordinate role in the state, in power over the world, over fire and over the house, over fact and over our fantasy' (Cited in Karl Kraus 440).

The way Genet mentions about journalism's complicity with power and the representation of the Palestinians and making of the so called international public opinion which works in favour of Israeli state machinery wipes out every trace of reality of Palestinian lives, including their history. Genet's essay, *Violence and Brutality* which reflects some of the key concerns on violence can be read parallel to Benjamin's essay, *On the Critique of Violence*, and in the Postcolonial context, Genet's essay reflects that of Frantz Fanon's writings on colonial condition. In the same essay beginning on the representation of trial of the Red Army Faction in West Germany, Genet writes, 'journalists like to throw around words that grab our attention but they have little concern for the slow germination of these words in the minds and conscience of the individuals... The trial against RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion), the trials of its violence is very real, but the West Germany, and with it all of Europe and America, want to fool themselves. More or less obscurely, everyone knows that these two words, trial and violence hides a third: brutality. The brutality of the system... The brutal gesture is the one that halts and suppresses a free act' (Violence and Brutality 171). Here Genet sees violence in mimesis itself, representation of violence in nature. Life and Violence are 'virtually synonymous' and 'the violence of a bud bursting forth-against all expectation and against every impediment-always moves us' (171-72). The contrast drawn by Genet between violence and brutality in terms of nature, calling violence beautiful has to do with his own life lived throughout in penal colonies and prisons where the mark of brutality lives on his skin. Every word has a history and that history is traced back to nature. Journalism portrayed Palestinians what they were not. Genet writes, 'the papers, that is the journalists, describing the Palestinians as they were not, made use of the slogans instead. I lived with the Palestinians, and my amused astonishment arose from the clash between two visions. They were so opposite to what they were said to be that their radiance, their very existence, derived from that negation' Every

negative detail in the newspapers from the slightest to the boldest had a positive counterpart in reality' (Prisoner of Love 243). Genet at once tears the curtain of the politics of representation. Mass representation derealizes. In Genet's work the whole grammar of relation between journalism and literature if there is any, is inverted. 'There is no doubt that the Palestinians caused a collapse in my vocabulary' (Prisoner of love 312-313). Imaginary confronts the real in Palestine. Genet did not want to talk about his earlier works after his interaction with the Palestinians. In an interview with Wischenbart and Layla Shahid, Genet admits that he was 'obliged to submit' to the real after what he witnessed in Sabra and Shatila and in Palestine with words that were his (The Declared Enemy 241). Literature sheds its imaginary in Palestine while journalism becomes state fiction or we can call it mass fiction. A certain alterity of the self, words and the landscape then becomes a necessity in order to represent reality. Adorno maintains that Kraus sought to rescue of 'linguistic objects as a part of his vindication of what capitalism has oppressed: animal, landscape, woman. The reorientation of aesthetic theory toward natural beauty is allied with Kraus's effort' (Aesthetic Theory 86). Benjamin already in the *Karl Kraus* essay brings the elements of sexuality, nature and words back in conformity with the nature when journalism attempted to destroy this mimetic faculty by bringing life and technology together which represents for Benjamin the 'fetish of creative existence' (Karl Kraus 456). Genet's writings represent the coming together of the primitive, flesh, sexuality and nature in Benjaminian sense, to borrow a phrase, in which 'the fit state of man appears not as the destiny and fulfillment of nature liberated through revolutionary change, but as an element of nature per se' (Karl Kraus 447). Any attempt at capturing the ambivalency of journalism and literature will be a betrayal of the philosophy of history, of nature and words as Benjamin himself comments, 'Journalism is the betrayal of the literary life, of mind, of the demon' (Karl Kraus 446).

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