Jean Genet: Prisoner of Love

In 2002, the Festival was dedicated to Jean Genet whose stories of the dispossessed appear in Prisoner of Love.

The page that was blank to begin with is now crossed from top to bottom with tiny black characters - letters, words, commas, exclamations marks - and it’s because of them the page is said to be legible. But a kind of uneasiness, a feeling close to nausea, an irresolution that stays my hand - these make me wonder: do these black marks add up to reality?

If the reality of time spent among, not with, the Palestinians resided anywhere, it would survive between all the words that claim to give an account of it.

When I said the Blacks were the characters on the white page of America, that was too easy an image: the truth really lies where I can never quite know it, in a love between two Americans of different colour.

So did I fail to understand the Palestinian revolution? Yes, completely.

It was for fun as much as anything that I'd accepted the invitation to spend a few days with the Palestinians. But I was to stay nearly two years. Every night as I waited half dead for the capsule of Nembutal to send me to sleep, I lay with my eyes open and my mind clear, neither afraid nor surprised, but amused to be there. On either side of the river men and women had been on the alert for ages. Why should I be any different?

Even before I got there I knew my visit to the banks of the Jordan, to the Palestinian bases, could never be clearly expressed. 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 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.

The Milky Way rose out of the lights of Galilee and arched over me and the Jordan Valley before breaking up over the desert of Saudi Arabia. Lying there in my blanket I may have entered into the sight more than the Palestinians themselves, for whom the sky was a commonplace. Imagining their dreams, for they had dreams, as best I could, I realized I was separated from them by the life I’d lived, a life that was blasé compared with theirs. Cradle and innocence were words so chastely linked, for them, that to avoid corrupting either they avoided looking up. They mustn’t see that the beauty of the sky was born and had its cradle in the moving lights of Israel.

In one of Shakespeare’s tragedies the archers loose their arrows against the sky, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if some of the fedayeen, feet firmly on the ground, but angered at so much beauty arching out of the land of Israel, had taken aim and fired their bullets at the Milky Way - China and the socialist countries supplied them with enough ammunition to bring down half the firmament. But could they fire at
stars rising out of their own cradle, Palestine?

We were only exchanging courtesies; neither of us was bound by promises forgotten before they were uttered. My certainty that there was nothing at all serious either in Arafat’s question or in my answer was probably the real reason why I forgot to bring pen and paper with me. I didn’t believe in the idea of that or any other book; I meant to concentrate on what I saw and heard; and I was as interested in my own curiosity as in its objects. But without my quite realizing it, everything that happened and every word that was spoken set itself down in my memory.

There was nothing for me to do but look and listen. Not a very laudable occupation. Curious and undecided, I stayed where I was, at Ajloun. And gradually, as with some elderly couples who started off indifferent to one another, my love and the Palestinians’ affection made me stay on.

The policy of the superpowers, and the PLO’s relations with them, spread over the Palestinian revolt, and us with it, a kind of transcendental influence. A tremor starting in Moscow, Geneva or Tel Aviv would rumble on via Amman to reach out under trees and over the mountains to Jerash and Ajloun.

If they looked at them from far enough away and on a misty day, people thought the camps must be happy places because of the way the colours of the patches seemed to match: those who lived beneath such harmony must be happy, or they wouldn’t have taken the trouble to make their camps such a joy to the eye.

We oughtn’t to have let their ornamental appearance persuade us the tents were happy places. We shouldn’t be taken in by sunny photographs. A gust of wind blew the canvas, the zinc and the corrugated iron all away, and I saw the misery plain.

When I arrived, to an enthusiastic welcome from the fedayeen, I probably wasn’t clear-headed enough to evaluate the opposing forces or make out the divisions within the Arab world. I ought to have seen sooner that aid to the Palestinians was an illusion. Whether it came from the Gulf or from North Africa it was ostentatious and declamatory, but flimsy.

Gradually my feelings changed, especially after the 1973 war. I was still charmed, but I wasn’t convinced; I was attracted but not blinded. I behaved like a prisoner of love.

But what if it were true that writing is a lie? What if it merely enabled us to conceal what was, and any account is, only eyewash? Without actually saying the opposite of what was, writing presents only its visible, acceptable and, so to speak, silent face, because it is incapable of really showing the other one.

The same is true for every page in this book where there is only one voice. And like all the other voices my own is faked, and while the reader may guess as much, he can never know what tricks it employs.

The only fairly true causes of my writing this book were the nuts I picked from the hedges at Ajloun.
A chicken, boat, bird, dart or aeroplane such as schoolboys make out of bits of paper - if you unfold them carefully they become a page from a newspaper or a blank sheet of paper again. For a long time I´d been vaguely uneasy, but I was amazed when I realized that my life - I mean the events of my life, spread out flat in front of me - was nothing but a blank sheet of paper which I´d managed to fold into something different. Perhaps I was the only one who could see it in three dimensions, as a mountain, a precipice, a murder or a fatal accident.

What might have seemed a heroic deed was only a pretence, a good or bad imitation that unobservant eyes took for the thing itself.

My whole life was made up of unimportant trifles clearly blown up into acts of daring.

When I saw that my life was a sort of intaglio or relief in reverse, its hollows became as terrible as abysses. In the process known as damascening the patterns are engraved on a steel plate and inlaid with gold. In me there is no gold.

Being abandoned and left to be brought up as an orphan was a birth that was different from but not any worse than most. Childhood among the peasants whose cows I tended was much the same as any other childhood. My youth as a thief and prostitute was like that of all who steal or prostitute themselves, either in fact or in dream. My visible life was nothing but carefully masked pretences. Prisons I found rather motherly - more so than the dangerous streets of Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin and Barcelona. In jail I ran no risk of getting killed or dying of hunger; and the corridors were at once the most erotic and the most restful places I´ve ever known.

The few months I spent in the United States with the Black Panthers are another example of how my life and my books have been misinterpreted. The Panthers saw me as a rebel - unless there was a parallel between us that none of us suspected. For their movement was a shifting dream about the doings of Whites, a poetical revolt, an 'act', rather than a real attempt at radical change.

And when the Palestinians invited me to go and stay in Palestine, in other words in a fiction, weren´t they too more or less openly recognizing me as a natural sham? Even if I risked annihilation by being present at actions of theirs which were only shams, wasn´t I already non - existent because of my own hollow non-life?

I thought about this, sure that America and Israel were in no danger from a sham, from defeats presented as victories, withdrawals as advances - in short, from a shifting dream floating over the Arab world, capable only of such unsubtle acts as killing a plane-load of passengers. By agreeing to go first with the Panthers and then with the Palestinians, playing my role as a dreamer inside a dream, wasn´t I just one more factor of unreality inside both movements? Wasn´t I a Europen saying to a dream, 'You are a dream - don´t wake the sleeper!'

In Palestine, even more than anywhere else, the woman struck me as having a quality the men lacked. Every man, though just as decent, brave and considerate, was limited by his own virtues. The women - they weren´t allowed on the bases but they did all the work in the camps - added to all their virtues a
dimension that seemed to subtend a great peal of laughter. If the act they put on one day to protect a
priest had been performed by men it would never have carried conviction. Perhaps it was women, not
men, who invented the segregation of women.

When I read in the papers about a virgin of sixteen blowing herself up in the middle of a group of Israeli
soldiers, it doesn´t surprise me very much. It´s the lugubrious yet joyful preparations that intrigue me.
What string did the old woman or the girl have to pull to detonate the grenades? How was the bodice
arranged to make the girl´s body look womanly and enticing enough to rouse suspicion in soldiers with a
reputation for intelligence?

Instead of having me baptized, the orphanage, even though it didn´t know whether my mother was
Jewish, might have had my body marked with the 'shallow slandered stream'. If I´d been brought up in
Talmudic faith I´d be an elderly rabbi now, all prayers and tears, slipping damp notes between the stones
of the Wailing Wall. My son would be a major spy in Mossad, working in the Israeli Embassy in Paris, and
my grandson would be a Mirage pilot, smiling as he dropped his bombs on West Beirut.

A stupid thought, for in that case I wouldn't be writing this book or even this page. I'd be someone else,
with different thoughts and a different religion, and I'd look for my ancestors among the furriers. I'd have
curls down to my chest. I'm sorry to have missed that.

They brushed against death every day, every night, hence the airy elegance beside which dancing is
heaviness itself. And with them animals and somehow things also were tamed.

Among groups ranging in size from ten to ten thousand, death didn´t mean anything any more: you
couldn´t feel a quadruple grief when four friends died instead of one, a sorrow a hundred times deeper
when a hundred died. Paradoxically, the death of a favourite fedayee made him all the more alive, made
us see details about him we´d never noticed before, made him speak to us, answer us with new conviction
in his voice. For a short time the life, the one life of the now dead fedayee took on a density it had never
had before. If while he was still alive the twenty-year-old fedayee had made a few undemanding plans for
the next day - washing his clothes, posting a letter - it seemed to me those unfulfilled intentions were
accompanied now by the smell of decomposition. A dead man´s plans stink as they rot.

But what did they mean to do with this grey head, with its grey skin, grey hair, grey unshaven beard - this
grey, pink, round head for ever in their midst? Use it as a witness? My body didn´t count. It served only to
carry my round grey head.

It seemed to me that all that interested the fedayeen was how the party was going to end. For it was a
party, the Palestinian revolt on the banks of the Jordan.

But why had the voice of stream grown so loud that night, so loud that it got on my nerves? Had the choirs
and the hills come close to the water without anyone realizing? More likely the singers´ voices were tired,
or they just started to listen to the voice of teh stream, either because they liked the sound of it or
because they disliked it.
The stream, in a voice that was low at first, has told how all the Arab countries mistrusted the Palestinians. Not one of them bothered to give any real help to that tortured people tormented by its enemy, Israel, by its own political and revolutionary factions, and by the inner conflicts of each of its citizens. Every country felt threatened by a people without a country.

So, here’s how I first met Hamza.

Irbid near the Syrian frontier put up better resistance than places like Amman, and the Palestinian camp on its outskirts fought better and longer than any other in Jordan.

Some of the leaders, especially Khaled Abu Khaled, thought I wasn’t safe at the Abu Bakr Hotel. So they sent for a young man, who came towards us smiling.

Can anyone who’s been to see The Battleship Potemkin fifteen or twenty times say it wasn’t ever just in hopes of spotting that friendly peaceful face by the gun turret? - the face of the Russian sailor handsome enough to make the soldiers swarming down the steps halt in their tracks?

This soldier was carrying a Kalashnikov, of course, but that was so common I didn’t notice. All I saw of him - or of anything, almost - was his pleasant face and black hair.

It was more than pleasant, illuminated by the certainty that the resistance at Irbid was his life’s whole purpose. He was twenty, with black hair, a keffiyeh, and a just nascent moustache. He was pale - sallow, rather - despite his tan and the dust.

We couldn’t hear the sound of heavy artillery, but it was still some distance away.

There were plenty of signs that the Bedouins were on their way. But even when you know all resistance will finally be in vain, you have to resist.

One of the signs was the stream of people, dishevelled, dusty and dehydrated, fleeing along the roads from the camps at Amman, Baqa and Gaza on mules, in lorries or on foot.

Men and women, whatever their age, were going about certain in the knowledge of where they were and what they were doing. Every act had its own value and importance, neither increased nor diminished by the proximity of the heavy artillery or of the Syrian frontier - that escape route, or trap, for fleeing Palestinians. No one knew if the frontier was open or closed. You might think it was open when it had been closed five minutes before. And vice versa.

It was October 1971, and I can vouch for the fact that the man in the street in Irbid, as well as the shopkeepers and hotel managers, were already quite obviously hostile towards the Palestinians.
It took us about an hour to walk to Hamza’s place.

The camp was below, and the road sloped downward. When we came to a little white wall with a white-painted door in it, Hamza took a key out of this pocket and let us into a small country yard, locking the door again afterwards.

Outside the room which I later found out was her bedroom stood a Palestinian woman dressed in the sort of gown she’d have worn back in Haifa. She was smiling, and she had a gun. She must have been about forty. The gun slung over her shoulder was the same as Hamza’s. He greeted his mother in Arabic. She went on smiling, and wearing her gun.

The family had fled from Haifa after it was bombed, and eventually found refuge in Irbid. In 1949 the camp still consisted of patched-up tents. Then it became a shanty town, with walls and roofs made of sheets of aluminium, corrugated iron and bits of cardboard, just as wretched as the camp at Baqa.

Hamza showed me his bed, where I was to sleep that night.

‘I’ll be on duty. I’m a junior officer.’ (I seem to remember he was in charge of about ten or twelve fedayeen.)

After lunch, Hamza took me into the school yard. The class-rooms were empty. All the children were in the playground, groups of Palestinian kids talking about the approach of the Jordanian artillery without either boasting or fear. They all had one or two pairs of grenades slung over their shoulders or tied to their belts, and an Algerian teacher who spoke French told me that none of the boys would sleep that night. They’d be waiting for the moment to take the pins out of their grenades and toss them at the Bedouin soldiers.

My hands were attracted by their roundness. The boys, already bold fighters, talked of nothing but war, in accents much more grandiose than those of the fedayeen.

Did the fedayeen think of something else, something precise? Of a woman’s things, for instance? Or of other places chosen regardless of reason? - hair, eyes, breasts, private parts, buttocks. Or were they lost in a mist of diffused desire, and each pure as an angel?

The sound of guns and mortars had got nearer, answered by bursts of machine-gun fire and odd rifle-shots from the fedayeen in Irbid.

I lay fully dressed on Hamza’s bed, listening to the noise of battle. It grew less regular but remained just as deafening and apparently close.
Then in the midst of this aural chaos two little reports from nearby seemed to hurl the din of destruction back. I suddenly realized they were two peaceful taps at the door of my room. While iron and steel exploded in the distance, a knuckle was banging on wood a few feet away. I didn’t answer, partly because I didn’t know how to say ‘Come in’ in Arabic yet. But mainly because, as I said, I’d only just realized what had happened.

The door opened, light from the starry sky came into the room, and behind it I could see a tall shadow. I half-closed my eyes, pretending I was asleep, but through my lashes I could see everything. The mother had just come in. Was she taken in by my pretence? Had she come out of the now ear-splitting darkness, or out of the icy night I carry about with me everywhere? She was carrying a tray, which she put down on the little blue table with yellow and black flowers, already mentioned. She moved the table near the head of the bed, where I could reach it. Her movements were as precise as a blind man’s in daylight. Without making a sound she went out and shut the door. The starry sky was gone, I could open my eyes. On the tray were a cup of Turkish coffee and a glass of water. I drank them, shut my eyes and waited, hoping I hadn’t made any noise.

Another two little taps at the door, just like the first two. In the light of the stars and the waning moon the same long shadow appeared, as familiar now as if it had come into my room at the same time every night of my life before I went to sleep. Or rather so familiar that it was inside rather than outside me, coming into me with a cup of Turkish coffee every night since I was born. Through my lashes I saw her move the little table silently back to its place and, still with the assurance of someone born blind, pick up the tray and go out, closing the door.

My one fear was that my politeness might not be up to hers - that some movement of my hands or legs might have betrayed my pretence. It all happened so smoothly that I realized the mother came every night with a cup of coffee and a glass of water for Hamza. Without a sound, except for four little taps at the door, and in the distance, as in a picture by Detaille, gunfire against a background of stars.

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

The various hazards that have allowed me to survive in the world don’t allow me to change it, so all I shall do is observe, decipher and describe it. And every phase of my life will just consist in the undemanding labor of writing down each episode - choosing the words, crossing them out reading them the wrong way round. They won’t be set down truthfully, as some transcendental eye might see them, but as I myself select, interpret and classify them. As I’m not an archivist or a historian or anything like it, I’ll only have spoken of my life in order to tell the story, a story of the Palestinians.

What I saw at once was that every ‘nation’, the better to justify its rebellion in the present, sought proof of its own singularity in the distant past. Every uprising revealed some deep genealogy whose strength was not in its almost non-existent branches but in its roots, so that the rebels springing forth everywhere seemed to be celebrating some sort of cult of the dead. Words, phrases, whole languages were disinterred.

Hamza returned at dawn, covered in dust, weary eyed, smiling happily. He stowed his gun away in the
shelter by the bed.

'Congratulations, kid,' he said, addressing a military salute to the entrance to the cellar. 'You shot well tonight. I appoint you gun of the first class.'

He laughed. Two friends who were with him remained serious. He lay down and probably fell straight asleep.

I went into the mother’s room, intending just to drop in and say goodbye. She smiled. She was crouching on the floor, kneading the dough, for that evenings’ s bread, but rose and made me some tea. Water hadn’t been rationed that night. The town had put up a good defence. The people were obviously proud of themselves. Unlike Paris in 1940, Irbid had held out.

'The Syrian frontier's open.'

Everyone in Irbid knew at once. I decided to leave as soon as the first collective taxi was ready.

As soon as were out of Jordan the image of Hamza and his mother started to haunt me. It was strange: I saw Hamza alone, gun in hand, tousled and smiling, just as he’d looked when Khaled Abu Khaled introduced us. But instead of standing out against the sky or the fronts of houses, he seemed to be framed by a huge dark shadow lowering like a storm cloud, the contours - or as painters would say the values - of which suggested the vast and ponderous shape of his mother.

But if I thought of the mother herself, for example, when she opened the door of my room, her son was always there too, enormous, watching over her with his gun in his hand. In the end I never imagined just one image on its own: there was always a couple, one of them seen in ordinary attitudes and realistic dimensions while the other was a gigantic presence of mythological substance and proportions. It might be summed up as an apparition of a colossal couple, one human and the other fabulous.

Of course what I’ve just said is an inadequate account of what happened: the images were always changing. Hamza appeared alone at first, and his hair stirred not because of the wind or because he moved his head, but so that his mother, or rather a sort of mountain resembling his mother, might suddenly appear behind him, coming neither from left nor right, above nor below.

Amid that world, that language, that people, those faces, those animals, plants and lands all exuding the spirit of Islam, what preoccupied me was a group embodying the image of the mater dolorosa. The mother and son, but not as Christian artists have depicted them, painted or sculptured in marble or wood, with the dead son lying across the knees of a mother younger than the son de-crucified, but one of them always protecting the other.

Perhaps it’s not very important, but it is very strange, that for me the seal, the emblem of the Palestinian revolution, was never a Palestinian hero or a victory like Karameh, but that almost incongruous apparition:
Hamza and his mother. That was the couple I needed, for in a way I´d cut it out to suit myself, cut it out from a continuum that included time, space, and all connections with country, family, and kin.

I´d made a good job of detaching it from the universe to which it naturally belonged, selecting just the two elements I could assimilate - the mother and one of the sons - and imperiously discarding the two other sons, the daughter, the son-in law, and probably also a family, a tribe, perhaps a whole people. I´m not sure I feel as strongly now about the nights of the revolution as I did in 1970. But perhaps even then I was looking for the revolution´s emblem and seal, as in the seal of the prophets in the Koran.

But why had this oft-repeated, profoundly Christian couple, symbolizing the inconsolable grief of a mother whose son was God, appeared to me like a bolt from the blue as a symbol of the Palestinian resistance? And not only that. That was unerstandable enough. But why did it also strike me that the revolution took place in order that this couple should haunt me?

At the age of sixty my hands and feet grew light again, my fingers capable of clutching a tuft of grass at the top of a slope and balancing my would-be weightless body on the precarious stone on which I stood. I could hoist myself up just because the tuft of grass itself was so weak! I could climb as fast as the fedayeen, and I declined their hands outstretched to help me as I reached the now treeless plateau from which you could see Jericho.

Neither Hamza alone, nor his sister and her husband alone, nor the mother alone, could have become symbols of the revolution. I see quite clearly that there had to be Hamza, his mother, the night of battle and the firework display of the nearby guns.

And now it´s all disappeared.

Yet like them I´ll have looked on at the Palestinians´ revolt as if from a window or a box in a theatre, and as if through a pearl-handled lorgnette.

How far away I was from the Palestinians. For example when I was writing this book, out there among the fedayeen, I was always on the other side of a boundary. I knew I was safe, not because of a Celtic physique or a layer of goose fat, but because of even shinier and stronger armour: I didn´t belong to, never really identified with, their nation or their movement. My heart was in it; my body was in it; my spirit was in it. Everything was in it at one time or another; but never my total belief, never the whole of myself.

I first met the Palestinians in 1970. Some of the leaders got excited and almost insisted I finish this book. But I was afraid the end of the book might coincide with the end of the resistance. Not that my book would show it as it actually was. But what if my decision to make my years with the resistance public were a sign that it was soon to disappear? Some inexpressible feeling warned me that the rebellion was fading, flagging, was about to turn into the path and disappear. It would be made into epics. I looked at the resistance as if were going to vanish at any moment.

How does a journey really start?
The fixed mark, the pole star that guided me was still Hamza, his mother, his disappearance, torture and almost certain death. But if he was dead, how would I know his grave? Was his mother still alive? Wouldn´t she be terribly old? My fixed mark might be called love, but what sort of love was it that had germinated, grown and spread in me for fourteen years for a boy and an old woman I´d only ever seen for twenty-four hours?

Is love anything else but what wakes you up and sends you to sleep? Does it make you anxious too? What has become of him? Of her? Of them both? The question always presents itself as if it had chosen its moment. When one´s very tired, too tired to think, and starts to day-dream. Or in a moment of pleasure. But what may they be suffering?

What had preoccupied me so deeply so long was going to seek out its goal: marks on a thin, suspicious face, a few grey hairs, and some smears of henna on a withered skin.

When I went back to Irbid in July 1984 the revelation of the town, the camp, the house and the mother, all Hamza´s glorious past, were things of the past. No pride or happiness was left in the mother´s voice or eyes.

The more I looked at the wrinkles round her mouth and on her forehead the less I recognized the strong, cheerful woman I´d known before. So much so that the more proofs she gave me that I really had been here, that we really had met, before, the more I doubted whether all that had actually happened fourteen years ago.

Before, my memory had been firmly imprinted with the image of a woman strong enough to carry a gun, and to load, aim and fire it. I hadn´t been present at the débacle; I could measure its effects all the better. Hamza´s mother had become as thin and flat as all the other two-dimensional shapes you saw in Jordan. Hamza´s mother was as the empty uniform on the coffin of a dead soldier, as a poster, as a barley loaf, as a plate.

Where could all the mother´s coldness, dryness and mistrust have come from? From what dried-up stream? But the metaphor didn´t help.

What had happened in those fourteen years to turn such a free and handsome woman into the one who treated us with nothing but guile and mistrust? For it seemed to me she gave me the piece of paper with Hamza´s phone number on it merely out of weariness under so many pressures. The plural is significant.

She'd been gay before, defending her cause with her gun and proud of her son. Now she was dried up.

That was what I thought, or rather something like it, yet I knew I´d never be cured. The fedayeen who´d become my friends, but with a friendship that was never laboured, were dead, imprisoned or on the run, or had regrouped to fight other battles in other countries. The trees - beeches, hornbeams, a few poplars - hadn´t been harassed. They said nothing. But not a single tropism had yielded.
I crept away almost on tiptoe, like someone leaving a room in which even the bed is asleep.

It’s time for me to take stock. From 1950 to 1955, I found Greece pleasant. In 1967 Jordan was delightful. At the beginning of 1970 I was fond of the Black Panthers. From late 1970 to late 1972, more than anything or anyone else I loved the fedayeen. What happened? Greeks, Japanese, Panthers, Palestinians - had they been under a lucky star? Was it that I was easily impressed? Are they still as I remember them? It was so beautiful I wonder whether all those periods of my life weren’t just dreams.

Anything not to do with the book came to seem so far away as to be invisible. There was the Palestinian people, my search for Hamza and his mother, my trips to the East, especially to Jordan, and my book. But France, Europe, all the West, no longer existed. A trip I made to various parts of Africa and my stay in Ajloun detached me still further from the Europe and the Europeans who already meant so little. By the middle of 1983 I was free enough to start to write my souvenirs, which were meant to be read as reporting.

After giving his name and age, a witness is supposed to say something like, 'I swear to tell the whole truth.' Before I started to write it I’d sworn to myself to tell the truth in this book, not in any ceremony but every time a Palestinian asked me to read the beginning or other passages from it or wanted me to publish parts of it in some magazine. Legally speaking, a witness neither opposes nor serves the judges. Under French law he has sworn to tell the truth, not to tell it to the judges. He takes an oath to the public - to the court and the spectators. The witness is on his own. He speaks. The judges listen and say nothing. The witness doesn’t merely answer the implicit question 'how?' - in order to show the 'why' he throws light on the 'how', a light sometimes called artistic. The judges have never been to the places where the acts they have to judge were performed, so the witness is indispensable. But he knows a realistic description won't mean anything to anyone, including the judges, unless he adds some light and shade which only he perceived. The judges may well describe a witness as valuable. He is.

What’s the point of that medieval - almost Carolongian - sounding oath in the courtroom? Perhaps it’s to surround the witness with a solitude that confers on him a lightness from which he can speak the truth. For there may be three or four people present who are capable of hearing a witness.

Any reality is bound to be outside me, existing in and for itself.

I remember like an owl. Memories come back in ‘bursts of images’.

Writing this book, I see my own image far, far away, dwarf size, and more and more difficult to recognize with age. This isn’t a complaint. I’m 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 line into which I shall merge behind which I shall vanish, from which I shall never return.

All I’ve said and written happened. But why is it that this couple is the only really profound memory I have of the Palestinian revolution?
I did the best I could to understand how different this revolution was from others, and in a way I did understand it. But what will remain with me is the little house in Irbid where I slept for one night, and fourteen years during which I tried to find out if that night ever happened.

This last page of my book is transparent.

Un captif amoureux © Éditions Gallimard, 1986

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