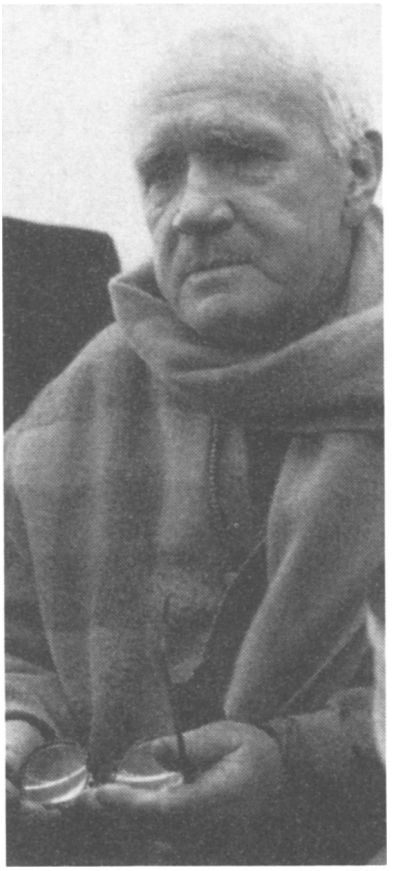
interview



JEAN GENET

The Intellectual As Guerrilla

In September 1982 Genet travelled to Beirut. One day after the massacre by the Christian Falangist militia, he managed to spend a few hours in the camp of Chattila. He published his first report under the title "4 Hours in Chattila." Thirteen years earlier, between October 1970 and April 1971, Genet had been invited by the PLO at which time he visited Palestinian camps and military bases on the Syrian-Jordanian border.

What was it that compelled you to commit yourself so strongly to the cause of the Palestinians and the PLO? Up to now it's been rather rare that you spoke out with such determination on behalf of a political movement or group. You have done so for the Black Panthers in the US and for the Red Army Faction in the Federal Republic of Germany.

What led me to it has first of all to do with my personal history which I don't want to tell you. That's not interesting. Anyone who wants to know more about that can read my books. That's not important. What I do want to tell you, however, is that my previous books—I stopped writing about thirty years ago—belong to a period of dreaming, of day-dreaming. Once I had passed through this dream, this day-dream, it was time to take action in order to reach something like fulfillment in my life. You mentioned the Black Panthers and the Red Army Faction as well as the Palestinians. To make it short, let me tell you, that I supported those who asked me to get involved. The Black Panthers came to Paris and asked me to come to the United States, which I did immediately. Klaus Croissant came and asked me to help the cause of Baader. Ten years ago it was the Palestinians who said I should come to Jordan. Madame Chahid asked me a year ago to come to Beirut. Of course I was on the side of the people who rebelled. Because of course I myself also questioned all of society.

So we have Genet as a man in revolt, a fighter? After all, it's not that easy a decision to go to Lebanon, as a fighter or as an eye-witness, someone who reports about it, as you did.

In 1967 . . . I don't know who had caused that war . . . was it Nasser, was it Israel . . . I don't want to determine that . . . I was in England. I took a train to France, no special reason. It so happened that there were only Englishmen in my compartment. I asked them where they were going. They said: "To Israel. To help." They all were Jews. I assume you'd find it quite understandable that Englishmen would come to the aid of Israel, because Israel was in danger. Now why do you ask me what reasons I had to help a people in danger? There are connections between the Palestinians, the Panthers, the Red Army Faction and myself. So it's normal that I'd help them. I can't help them much, because a seventy-three-year-old man can't do much for a young people that revolts. But as much as I can help them, I do.

In your book "4 Hours in Chattila" as well as in previous books you talk about the beauty you found there. A beauty, for which there was a place, macabre and tragic, to be sure, even in Lebanon. That is also why I wanted to know what made you go to Lebanon.

I've also been in banks. And I never saw a beautiful bank. I ask myself, if this beauty you're talking about—and it's a problem for me, too, I ask myself this question—if this beauty of which I wrote in my books doesn't come from the fact that the rebels regained a freedom they had lost. Is it difficult

to follow me?

Yes, somewhat. What does this beauty and this freedom consist of?

The beauty of the revolutionaries manifests itself in a kind of matter-of-factness, an insolence even, towards the people who had humiliated them. Don't forget that you're talking to someone who has lived for seventy-three years in France, a country which owned a huge colonial empire. Therefore I myself had been wrecked for reasons I'd rather not explain to you. I was crushed by this notion of France. So it was totally natural for me to be on the side of those rebel people who asked for my support. This beauty I am talking about and which shouldn't be referred to so much—I'm afraid, it might be an illusion—this beauty lies in the fact that former slaves broke free from their enslavement, their submission, their humiliation to achieve freedom from France (in the Algerian War) or, in the case of the blacks, from the United States or, in the case of the Palestinians, from the entire Arabic world.

In our world where two superpowers determine all politics, isn't that a futile hope which has no chance of fulfillment?

You're asking difficult questions; it would take some time to answer them properly, but you don't give me any time to think. I'd need at least four or five days to think about them. Anyway, you talk about superpowers. That is correct. However, these superpowers leave some room for some peoples to free themselves from the respective subordinate powers. Now, when you say all hope is futile, a quick, almost malicious answer comes to my mind: What isn't futile in this world? I am asking you this: What isn't futile in the end? You'll die. I'll die. They'll all die . . . well . . .

When you were in Israel last year, didn't you feel like a spectator sometimes, even though you were traveling on assignment from a Palestinian magazine? I'm asking you this question because, to be totally truthful, it wasn't your own struggle which you observed as an eye-witness. After all, you're not Palestinian.

Yes, exactly. I want to elaborate on that. When the Palestinian representative in Paris invited me to come to Jordan—I'm jumping back now thirteen years—the Palestinian people were somewhat alien to me. I only knew them from French papers and magazines. I asked myself where I was going. I'm going to tell you one experience I had. I was in Deraa. Deraa is a little town on the Syrian-Jordanian border. Every day there were fights there between the Syrian and Palestinian forces. The PLO had rented a little house in Deraa and transformed it into a hospital. They received visitors there, people like myself who came to offer their support to the Palestinians. You're absolutely right to say that in the beginning I was a spectator. I arrived as a spectator. Now, when I came to this house, I was asked after a while

whether I'd like some coffee. So coffee was made. When it was brought to me I noticed two Palestinians in their battle uniforms, with their caps on their heads. They smiled, they laughed, they spoke a guttural Arabic. They were leaning against two crates. They laughed, and I still remember how they tapped the crates with their fingers. Their fingers were sharp and dry and they beat the crates with a kind of certainty. When I left I took another look at the crates: those two who were talking to each other were actually leaning against two coffins. In fact, they were waiting for two dead Palestinians who were brought in eventually in sacks and put into those crates. I'm telling you this because this was my first impression of the Palestinians. Almost immediately I was captivated by the weight, the truth of the gestures of these men.

When I left Paris I still was under the influence of a very literary Middle East. Even the newspapers reported about it in a very literary manner. The only thing missing were quotes from *1001 Nights*. Up to then I only knew the traditional Arab world. Already as an eighteen-year-old I'd been to a bazaar in Damascus. Now, among those Palestinians I saw people whose gestures were filled with heavy, real weight. It was the weight of reality. In Arab countries people give packages of cigarettes as gifts. But not one cigarette was lit and smoked carelessly. A cigarette meant something. A bucket of water, carried by a woman, meant something. You saw the bucket, you saw the water, you saw the woman. In short, what I feel, what I sensed almost from the first day, was that these people were the first in the Arab world who found a way, a modern way, to connect to themselves. And their revolt is modern.

What really amazes me again and again is the unreal aspect we hear in Europe about the fighting in Lebanon, between the Palestinians and the Israelis. We've gotten so used to hearing the number of casualties; only when it's really extreme massacres, as in Sabra and Chattila, do we become conscious again that these are real people dying. What do you think about this sense of it being unreal which we as distant observers have.

Well, as to your sense of it being unreal, it's not the Palestinians who come to my mind, but you yourself. You transform everything into something unreal so it's easier for you to take. It's easier to accept an unreal dead person or an unreal massacre than a woman who carries real letters into real camps. You see, it's primarily you who accepts the massacres and turns them into something unreal. Yesterday, when you saw Madame Chahid's photos of Chattila, it may have been the first time that you saw documents which weren't made in a studio. Because the documents which are being circulated by newspapers and magazines, just like the reports of journalists, are perceived as if they were made in a studio.

There is this notion of Jean Genet, the writer, as the loner. As with the Pan-

thers or the Palestinians, you do, however, seek contact with a collective, with very strong groups. Are you attracted to such groups?

Yes, yes. Now I do want to talk, very briefly, about my personal history. You see, it was in prison that I started to write five books. Five, not six. Writing always means to talk about one's childhood. It's always looking back . . . writing, at any rate, and modernist writing in general. As you know, the first sentence in Proust's work begins: "For a long time I used to go to bed early." And he tells his entire childhood which fills fifteen hundred or two thousand pages. I was thirty when I started to write. I was thirty-four or thirty-five when I stopped writing. It was a dream, a day-dream at least. I wrote in prison. When I came out, I was lost. I really found myself—my way around the real world—only in those two revolutionary movements: the Black Panthers and the Palestinians. That's when I submitted to the real world. That means doing something today which I didn't do yesterday. In short, I acted under the conditions of the real world and not in the world of syntax. At least, in as much as it is possible to juxtapose the real world with a dream world. Dreams are real. But we also know that while we can have an unlimited effect on our dreams we do not have an unlimited effect on the real world. Another discipline is needed which is no longer determined by syntax.

I told you before we started this interview that I read "4 Hours in Chattila" not only as an eyewitness report but also as a novel. What I meant was that this text contains the nucleus of what could well be, say, a contemporary novel about the Near East. You replied immediately: "No, no, that's not a novel. I was really there."

It wasn't a novel because to me that term points immediately to a world of dreams, to the unreal. *Madame Bovary* is a novel. In that sense this text is not a novel. If you use the term "novel" to define a literary genre, this is not a novel.

But this text also contains a very special way of writing. One senses immediately Genet, the story teller, the literary figure.

OK. I only have one more thing to say to that. Degas, the painter, wrote a sonnet. He showed it to Mallarmé and Mallarmé thought it was bad. So Degas said to Mallarmé: "Nonetheless, I've put many thoughts into it." And Mallarmé replied: "A poem isn't made of thoughts but of words." The kind of story I wrote wasn't made of my thoughts. But I did write it in my words. In order to talk about a reality which wasn't my reality.

Still, I ask myself what exactly is the big difference between the literary eyewitness and the reporter. It was you who insisted so adamantly that you stopped writing thirty years ago.

I won't ask you to read my books which I wrote thirty years ago. But if you tried, you'd see that it's not the same way of writing. By the same token, you'll also notice that it's the same person talking.

In your piece about Chattila one gets a sense of the world of the Palestinians. One can almost see each individual person. At the beginning of our talk you said that the beauty which you described lies in this people's feeling of freedom.

Wait . . . that's not all. In the beginning, I think I also emphasized the weight, the strength, the power of the gestures. All that adds up to beauty. Now I will ask you. Wouldn't you say that this kind of beauty is found in the real world? What is it that painters are looking for? Rembrandt or Cézanne? Don't they look precisely for this weight of reality? Isn't that what it's all about? And they did find it, at least those I mentioned. But don't you feel that in the Arab world this weight doesn't generally exist? Those countries rely on military and police regimes. The Palestinians, on the other hand, found exactly that weight—I'm afraid I'm getting very literary now—they have reached the weight of Cézanne's paintings. They're pushing themselves on us. Every Palestinian is real. Like Cézanne's "Montagne Saint-Victoire." She's real. She's right there.

Why did you say you were afraid you were getting too literary?

Because I'm afraid this conversation is pushing me back thirty years.

Madame Chahid, who accompanies you, also asked you this question: Where do you see the difference between your books of thirty years ago and today?

Actually I've said it already. Alright, then, I repeat. In my books and while I was in jail I could do what I wanted in the realm of my imagination. I was master over the things I was working on because all I was dealing with was the world of my dreams. But now I'm no longer above the things which I've seen. I am obligated to say that I've seen people who were tied, chained, a woman whose fingers had been cut off. I have to submit to reality. But I'm doing so in the same words which are my words.

Especially in your plays I get the impression that all people have lost their dignity, also their pride. What's so noticeable in the text about Chattila is undoubtedly the desire for dignity in the people you describe. Isn't that also a crucial difference?

When you mention my plays, can you tell me which ones you're talking about?

The Balcony *for example.*

Yes. In *The Balcony* . . . well, in *The Balcony* we're also dealing with entertainment. Besides, I had to fulfill a contract. You know I was commissioned to write that play. I was paid of lot of money so I had to write it. But, I didn't just sketch a portrait of any old world, it was a portrait of the Western world. Do you remember the themes of *The Balcony*? It's about a bordello and every dignitary, every client of *The Balcony* comes to look for his dignity, a visible dignity.

But the dignity was in the disguise.

Of course.

But isn't the kind of dignity you described and experienced in the Palestinians completely different?

Completely different. I would never think of writing about Yassir Arafat's bandanna. I noticed a few things about his bandanna. You know that Arafat has no hair. But his bandanna has a fringe of hanging threads. I remember how he constantly played with that fringe of his bandanna. Bishops, or our present pope, are completely contained in their costume. But Arafat isn't stuck in his bandanna. He's still in other places too. But just imagine the pope dressed like you or I!

One could assume Genet reveals himself as moralist.

What you're saying about me doesn't bother me at all. Just don't confuse a moralist with someone who is moralizing.

Do you feel that your literary work is a past that burdens you when you work, travel or write today?

Are you asking me whether today I reject any work of art or writing? Of course not. I could only write the books I wrote thirty years ago because of inclinations which I developed, towards which life had led me. If I hadn't done all that work myself . . . that's what you thought, and you're probably right . . . I'd probably have started as an observer. You asked me whether that's not what I am: an observer. When I was still very young I understood quickly that everything in life was closed to me. I went to public school up to the age of thirteen. At best I could've become an accountant or a small clerk. Therefore, I didn't prepare myself to become an accountant, or a writer, for that matter—I didn't know that then—rather, I prepared myself to observe the world. Because I was useless to the world and also because I couldn't change the world, I observed the world. Already at the age of twelve or fifteen I created the observer in me, the person I needed to be and, consequently, the writer I was to become. That work on myself which I did then continues to exist.

*I've asked you whether a revolution, even a revolt, makes sense in a divided world. I want to expand that question. Is this revolt which is so important to you related to the "*acte gratuit,*" the existential revolt? I'm thinking more of Camus, rather than Sartre.*

I don't know Camus well, because that man annoys me. I've met him—a man who moralizes a lot. No, I think, even in a world that is divided between two superpowers—you were alluding to the United States and the Soviet Union—even there the revolt of every individual remains necessary. What did you do yourself? Madame Chahid ordered coffee; you turned off the tape recorder when the waiter came. That is how you performed a small act of revolt. And I moved an object away. Every day we perform small revolts. As soon as one creates a small disorder, which is to say, as soon as one creates one's own, individual order, one performs a revolt.

The revolts you are talking about are highly individual gestures. However, revolutionary groups like the Panthers or the Palestinians demand the submission of the individual to a strict order. The order of a revolution also demands obedience. Doesn't this apparently necessary gesture of submission bother you?

Leila Chahid had asked me to write for the *Revue d'Etudes Palestiniennes* and first I said no. I said no because everything I knew about the Palestinians dated back thirteen, at least twelve years, and was transmitted to me via *Le Monde*—a racist newspaper, which is hard to believe, it's masking itself—or via other newspapers and TV. In short, I knew nothing about the reality of the Palestinians. When Leila insisted and I began to make myself available—a little bit at least, but not too much—to the Palestinian cause, I said, the simplest thing for me to do would be to go to Beirut. So I went to Beirut with Leila. That is, I put myself at her disposal. When Leila asked me to come to Vienna, to talk to you among other things, well, I came. Really, it doesn't bother me. On the contrary, I'd say that I feel a kind of larger freedom. Because in the meantime I've learned that to a certain extent—not too much, because I am very old—that I can help a movement like the Palestinians, I feel all the freer.

The revolt of European intellectuals in this century was mostly a revolt of individuals. That is why they were so frequently criticized by organized revolutionary movements. I am thinking of the feuds between surrealists and communists, the conflicts among French intellectuals around 1968. A whole history, a tradition grew out of this.

Now listen. The day the Palestinians establish themselves, I'll no longer be at their side. The day the Palestinians become a nation like any other nation, I'll no longer be part of it.

The intellectual as guerrilla?

Exactly.

And your Palestinian friends know that and accept that?

I think that'll be the moment when I am going to betray them. They don't know it.

In another interview you said at the end of the conversation that you always lie a bit the moment you start talking. I don't know if that wasn't just an ironic gesture.

It was a little bit of a joke, too, but deep down it is what I feel. I am honest only with myself. As soon as I start talking I am already betrayed by the situation. I am betrayed by the person who listens to me. Simply on account of the information, the communication. My choice of words betrays me. When I talk to myself, alone, I don't lie. I don't have the time for it. I don't need to kid myself. I'm too old to lie to myself. I commit myself to the Palestinians when I am alone, not when I say yes to Leila, yes, I'll come with you. It happens . . . when I am alone, when I make my decision in solitude.

Interview with Jean Genet by Ruediger Wischenbart from Die Zeit, *March 30, 1984. Translated by Gitta Honegger.*