§ 33 Four Hours in Shatila

In Shatila, in Sabra, gayim massacred gayim—what does that have to do with us?
—Menachem Begin (in the Knesset)

No one, nothing, no narrative technique can ever say what they were like, the six months, and especially the first weeks, that the fedayeen spent in the mountains of Jerash and Ajloun, in Jordan. Others before me have given an account of the events, laid out the chronology, described the successes and mistakes of the PLO. The feeling in the air, the color of the sky, the earth, and the trees, these can be told; but never the faint intoxication, the sense of gliding over the ground, the sparkle in everyone’s eyes, the openness of relations not only between the fedayeen themselves, but also between them and their leaders.

There under the trees, everything and everyone was quivering, light-hearted, filled with wonder at a life so new to everyone, and in these vibrations there was something strangely still, alert, reserved, and protected, like someone praying without saying anything. Everything belonged to everyone. Everyone was alone in himself. And yet perhaps not. In short, both smiling and strained. The area of Jordan to which they had withdrawn, out of a political choice, was a zone stretching in length from the Syrian border to Salt. and bounded by the Jordan River and the road from Jerash to Irbid. About sixty kilometers long and twenty kilometers wide, it was a mountainous region covered with holm oaks, little Jordanian villages, and sparse crops. There under the trees and the camouflaged tents, the fedayeen had set up camps for combat units equipped with light and semielectric weapons. Once the artillery was in place—it was meant to be used mainly against possible Jordanian operations—the young soldiers looked after their weapons, taking them apart to clean and oil them, and putting them back together with the greatest speed. There were even some who accomplished the feat of taking them apart and putting them back together blindfolded, so that they could do it at night. Each soldier developed an amorous and magical relationship to his weapon. Since the fedayeen had only jur: left adolescence behind, the rifle as a weapon was a sign of triumphal virility, and it brought with it the certainty of being. Aggression disappeared: they showed their teeth in a smile.

The rest of the time, the Palestinians drank tea, criticized their leaders and the rich—Palestinians or otherwise—and insulted Israel, but they talked especially about the revolution, the one they were engaged in and the one they were about to undertake.

For me, if the word “Palestinian” occurs in a title, in the text of an article or a tract, it immediately evokes the fedayeen of a specific place—Jordan—at a time that can be easily dated: October, November, December 1970, January, February, March, and April 1971. It was then, and there, that I saw the Palestinian Revolution. The extraordinary evidence of what was taking place, the intensity of this happiness at being alive, is also called beauty.

Ten years passed and I heard nothing from them, except that the fedayeen were in Lebanon. The European press spoke offhandedly, even disdainfully, of the Palestinian people. Then suddenly there was West Beirut.

A photograph has two dimensions, so does a television screen; it is impossible to walk through either. From one wall of the street to the other, arched or curved, their feet pushing on one wall and their heads leaning against the other, the blackened and swollen corpses I had to step over were all Palestinian and Lebanese. For me, as for the remaining inhabitants, moving through Shatila and Sabra was like a game of leapfrog. Sometimes a dead child blocked the streets, which were so narrow, almost paper-thin, and the dead were so numerous. Their odor is no doubt familiar to old people: it didn’t bother me. But there were flies everywhere. If I lifted up the handkerchief or the Arab newspaper placed over a head, I disturbed them. Infuriated by my gesture, they swarmed over the back of my hand and tried to feed off of it. The first corpse I saw was that of a fifty- or sixty-year-old man. He would have had a ring of white hair if a wound (an ax blow, it seemed to me) had not split open...
his skull. Part of the blackened brain was on the ground next to the head. The entire body lay in a sea of black, clotted blood. His belt was unbuckled, only one button of his pants was fastened. The feet and legs of the dead man were naked, black, purple, and blue; perhaps he had been taken by surprise at night or at dawn? Was he running away? He was lying in a small alley immediately to the right of the camp entrance across from the Kuwaiti embassy. Was the Shatila massacre carried out in hushed tones, or in complete silence? After all, the Israelis, both soldiers and officers, claim to have heard nothing, to have suspected nothing, even though they had been occupying this building since Wednesday afternoon.

Photography is unable to capture the flies, or the thick white smell of death. Nor can it tell about the little hopes you have to make when walking from one corpse to the next.

If you look closely at a dead body, a strange phenomenon occurs: the absence of life in the body amounts to a total absence of the body, or to its constantly receding as you look at it. Even if you move closer, so you think, you will never touch it. This happens if you contemplate it. But if you make a gesture in its direction, stoop down to it, move an arm or a finger, suddenly it is very present and almost friendly.

Love (l’amour) and death (la mort): these two words are quickly associated when one of them is written down. I had to go to Shatila to see the obscenity of love and the obscenity of death. In both cases, the body has nothing left to hide: positions, contortions, gestures, signs, even silences belong to both worlds. The body of a thirty- or thirty-five-year-old man was lying on its belly. As if the entire body were nothing but a bladder in the shape of a man, it had swollen from the sun and from the chemistry of decomposition to the point of stretching the fabric on the pants which were about to burst open at the buttocks and the thighs. The only part of the face I could see was purple and black. Just above the knee, the bent thigh revealed an open wound beneath the ripped fabric. What was the origin of the wound? a bayonet, a knife, a dagger? Flies all over the wound and around it. The head larger than a watermelon—a black watermelon.

I asked what his name was; he was a Muslim.

"Who is this?"

"A Palestinian," a man in his forties answered me in French. "Look at what they did."

He pulled back the blanket covering the feet and part of the legs. The calves were naked, black, and swollen. On the feet were black unlaced boots, and the ankles were tied very tightly by a strong rope—its strength was obvious—about three meters long. Which I arranged so that Mrs. S. (an American) could photograph them clearly. I asked the forty-year-old man if I could see the face.

"If you want, but look at it yourself."

"Will you help me turn his head?"

"No."

"Was he dragged through the streets with this rope?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Was it Haddad's people?"

"I don't know, sir."

"The Israeli?"

"I don't know."

"The Katayeb?"

"I don't know."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him die?"

"Yes."

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know."

He quickly walked away from the dead man and from me. He turned back to look at me and disappeared into a small side street.

Which alley do I take now? I was drawn by fifty-year-old men, by young twenty-year-olds, by two old Arab women, and I felt like I was at the center of a compass whose every radius pointed to hundreds of dead.

I will add this here, without really knowing why I'm placing it at this point in my story: "The French have the habit of using the tired expression 'dirty work'; well, since the Israeli army ordered the Katayeb or the Haddadists to do the 'dirty work,' the Labor Party had its 'dirty work' done by the Likud, Begin, Sharon, Shamir." This is a quote from R., a Palestinian journalist who was still in Beirut on Sunday, September 19.

Among them or alongside them—all the tortured victims—I cannot get this "invisible vision" out of my mind: the torture, what he looked like? Who was he? I see him and I do not see him. He is everywhere I look and the only form he will ever have is the one outlined by the grotesque poses, positions, and gestures of the dead, attended by clouds of flies in the sun.

Since the American marines, the French paratroopers, and the Italian
bersaglieri who made up the intervention force in Lebanon left so quickly (the Italians arrived on a ship two days late but flew in Hercules airplanes), since they left a day or thirty-six hours before their official departure date, as if they were escaping, and on the eve of Bashir Gemayel's assassination—are the Palestinians really wrong to wonder whether the Americans, the French, the Italians had not been warned to get the hell out and fast, if they didn't want to appear to be mixed up in the bombing of the Kataeb headquarters? The fact is, they left very quickly and very early. Israel brags about itself and its effectiveness in combat, its preparedness for battle, its ability to take advantage of circumstances and to create circumstances to take advantage of. Let's see: the PLO leaves Beirut in triumph, on a Greek ship, with a naval escort. Bashir, hiding it as well as he can, visits Begin in Israel. The intervention of the three forces (American, French, Italian) ends on Monday. Bashir is assassinated on Tuesday. Taabat enters West Beirut on Wednesday morning. The Israeli soldiers were advancing on Beirut on the morning of Bashir's funeral, as if they were coming from the port. With binoculars, I saw them from the eighth floor of my building as they arrived in single file: a single column. I was surprised that nothing more was happening, since a good rifle with a sight could have picked them off, every one of them. Their ferocity preceded them.

And the tanks followed. Then the jeeps. Tired out from such a long early-morning march, they stopped near the French embassy, letting the tanks go on ahead, heading straight into Hamra. I saw the sidewalks, one every ten meters, their rifles pointed straight ahead, their backs against the wall of the embassy. With their long torsos, they looked to me like boas with two legs stretched out in front of them.

"Israel had promised the American representative, Habib, not to set foot in West Beirut and above all to respect the civilian populations of the Palestinian camps. Arafat still has the letter in which Reagan promised him the same thing. Habib is supposed to have promised Arafat that nine thousand prisoners in Israel would be released. On Thursday the massacres in Shatila and Sabra began. The 'bloodbath' that Israel claimed it was avoiding by bringing order into the camps! ... That's what a Lebanese writer said to me.

"It will be very easy for the Israelis to deflect all the accusations. Journalists in all the European newspapers are already hard at work prov-

ing their innocence; none of them will say that on the night of Thursday to Friday, and then from Friday to Saturday, Hebrew was spoken in Shatila." That's what another Lebanese said to me.

The Palestinian woman—for I couldn't leave Shatila without going from one corpse to another, and this game of snakes and ladders led inevitably to this mark—Shatila and Sabra leveled, with real-estate battles raging to rebuild on this very flat cemetery—the Palestinian woman was probably old since she had gray hair. She was stretched out on her back, laid or left there on top of the rubble, the bricks, the twisted iron rods, no comfort. First, I was surprised to see a strange twist of rope and cloth that went from one wrist to the other, holding the two arms apart horizontally, as if crucified. The black and swollen face was turned toward the sky, black with flies, with teeth that looked very white to me, a face that seemed, without the slightest movement, to be grimacing or smiling or screaming a silent and uninterrupted scream. Her stockings were black wool, her dress with pink and gray flowers was slightly hitched up or too short. I don't know which, showing the upper part of the calves, black and swollen, again with delicate shades of mauve matched by a similar purple and mauve in the cheeks. Were these bruises, or were they the natural result of rotting in the sun?

"Was she beaten with a rifle butt?"

"Look, sir, look at her hands."

I hadn't noticed. The fingers on both hands were spread out like a fan and the ten fingers had been cut as if by a gardener's shears. Soldiers, laughing like children and happily singing, had probably enjoyed finding these shears, and using them.

"Look, sir."

The ends of her fingers, the top joints, with the nail, were lying in the dust. The young man who, very calmly, with no emphasis, was showing me the torture undergone by the dead, quietly placed a cloth over the face and the hands of the Palestinian woman, and a piece of cardboard over her legs. I could no longer see anything but a heap of pink and gray cloth encircled by flies. I knew young men pulled me into an alley.

"Go in, sir, we'll wait for you outside."

The first room was what remained of a two-story house. The room was quite peaceful, even welcoming; an effort at happiness, perhaps even a successful effort, had been made using various leftovers, with foam rub-
ber stuffed into a destroyed piece of wall, with what I thought at first to be three armchairs but which were in fact three car seats (maybe from a junked Mercedes), a couch with cushions covered with loud flowery material and stylized designs, a small silent radio, two unlit candelabras. Quite a peaceful room, even with the carpet of spent shells covering the floor... A door slammed as though from a draft. I walked on the spent shells and pushed on the door that led into the next room, but I had to force it; the heel of a boot was preventing it from letting me through, the heel of a corpse on its back, next to two other corpses of men lying on their bellies, all of them stretched out on another carpet of empty copper shells. I nearly fell several times because of these shells.

At the other end of this room another door stood open, with no lock or latch. I stepped over the dead bodies as one crosses a stream. In this room were the corpses of four men piled on a single bed, one on top of the other, as if each had made an effort to protect the one underneath him or as if they were gripped by some erotic lust now in a state of decomposition. This pile of shields smelled strongly, but it didn’t smell bad. The smell and the flies, it seemed to me, had gotten used to me. I no longer disturbed anything in these ruins and in this quiet.

"During the night from Thursday to Friday, and then from Friday to Saturday and Saturday to Sunday, no one had kept vigil with them," I thought.

And yet it seemed to me that someone had come to see these dead men before me, and after their death. The three young men were waiting for me at some distance from the house, a handkerchief over their noses.

It was then, as I was leaving the house, that I was struck by a kind of faint attack of madness that almost made me smile. I said to myself that they would never have enough boards or carpenters to make the coffins. But then, why would they need coffins? The dead men and women were all Muslims, who are sewn into a shroud. How many meters would it take to engulf so many dead? And how many prayers. What was missing here, I realized, was the cadence of prayers.

"Come, sir, come quickly."

This is the moment to write that this sudden and very momentary madness that had me counting meters of white cloth gave my steps an almost energetic liveliness, and that it may have been caused by something a Palestinian woman, a friend of mine, had said to me the day before.

"I was waiting for someone to bring me my keys (which keys: to her car, to her house, I only remember the word keys), when an old man went running by. "Where are you going?"—"To get help. I’m the gravedigger. They’ve bombed the cemetery. All the bones of the dead are out in the open. I need help gathering up the bones.""

This friend, I believe, is Christian. She also said to me: "When the vacuum bomb—it’s also called an implosion bomb—killed two hundred and fifty people, all we had was one box. The men dug a mass grave in the cemetery of the Orthodox church. We filled up the box and then went to empty it. We went back and forth under the bombs, digging out bodies and limbs as best we could."

For three months people have used their hands for two different functions: during the day for grasping and touching, at night for seeing. The electricity outages made this blind man’s education necessary, as it did the climb, two or three times a day, up that white marble cliff, the eight-floor stairway. All the containers in the house had to be filled with water. The telephone was cut off when the Israeli soldiers, along with their Hebrew inscriptions, entered West Beirut. The roads around Beirut were also cut off. The constantly moving Merkava tanks showed us that they were watching over the entire city, though at the same time we figured that their occupants were afraid the tanks would become a fixed target. They must also have feared the activity of the Murabitoun and the fedayeen who had been able to remain in parts of West Beirut."

The day after the Israeli army entered the city, we were prisoners, but it seemed to me that the invaders were less feared than despised; they inspired disgust more than fright. None of the soldiers laughed or smiled. It was certainly not a time for throwing rice or flowers.

After the roads were cut off and the telephone silenced, unable to communicate with the rest of the world, for the first time in my life I felt myself becoming Palestinian and hating Israel.

At the sports stadium near the highway from Beirut to Damascus, a stadium already almost destroyed by aerial bombardment, the Lebanese deliver piles of weapons, all apparently deliberately damaged, to Israeli officers.

In the apartment where I’m staying, each one of us has a radio. We listen to Radio Katsyeb, Radio Murabitoun, Radio Amman, Radio Jerusalem (in French), Radio Lebanon. Everyone is probably doing the same in the other apartments.

"We are linked to Israel by many currents that bring us bombs, tanks,
soldiers, fruit, vegetables; they take our soldiers, our children to Palestine... in a constant and ceaseless coming and going, just as we are linked to them, so they say, since Abraham—in his lineage, in his language, in our common origins...” (a Palestinian fedayee). “In short,” he added, “they’re invading us, stealing us, choking us, and they would like to embrace us with both arms. They say they are our cousins. They’re very sad to see us turning away from them. They must be furious with us and with themselves.”

To claim that there is a beauty peculiar to revolutionaries raises a number of problems. Everyone knows—or suspects—that young children and adolescents living in traditional and strict environments have a beauty of face, body, movement, and gaze quite similar to the beauty of the fedayeen. The explanation is perhaps this: breaking with the ancient order of things, a new freedom emerges through the layers of dead skin, and the fathers and grandfathers have a hard time extinguishing the spark in their eyes, the energy pulsing in their temples, the surge of blood through their veins.

On the Palestinian bases in the spring of 1971, this beauty subtly pervaded a forest enlivened by the freedom of the fedayeen. In the camps there was yet another kind of beauty, slightly more muted, that took hold through the reign of women and children. The camps received a sort of light that came from the combat bases, and as for the women, the explanation of their radiance would require a long and complex discussion. Even more than the men, more than the fedayeen in combat, the Palestinian women appeared strong enough to maintain resistance and to accept the changes brought by a revolution. They had already disobeyed the customs: by looking men straight in the eye, by refusing to wear the veil, by leaving their hair visible and sometimes completely uncovered, by speaking with a firm voice. Even the briefest and most prosaic of their acts were the fragments of a confident movement toward a new order, unknown to them, but in which they sensed a freedom that would be, for them, like a cleansing bath, and for the men a glowing pride. They were ready to become both the wives and the mothers of heroes, as they already were for their men.

In the woods of Ajloun, the fedayeen dreamed of girls, perhaps, and it seemed that each one outlined next to him—or modeled with his gestures—a girl pressed against himself; hence this grace and strength—with an amused laughter—of the fedayeen in arms. We were not only in a pre-revolutionary dawn but in a gray zone of sensuality. A crystallizing frost gave to each gesture its own gentleness.

Constantly, and every day for a month, always in Ajloun, I saw a strong and wary woman crouching in the cold—but crouched like the Indians of the Andes, certain black Africans, the Untouchables of Tokyo, the gypsies in a market, in a position ready for sudden departure, in case of danger—beneath the trees, in front of the guardhouse, which was a small durable structure hastily bricked together. She would wait barefoot, in her black dress trimmed with braids along the hem and along the sleeves. Her face was severe but not mean, tired but not weary. The commando leader prepared an almost empty room, then signaled to her. She entered the room. Closed the door, but did not lock it. Then she came out without saying a word and without smiling, and returned on bare feet, and very upright, to Jerash or to the camp at Baqa. I learned that in the room reserved for her in the guardhouse she would take off her two black skirts, remove all the envelopes and letters that had been sewn into them, put them in a bundle, and knock once on the door. She would give the letter to the leader, go back out, and leave without saying a word. She would return the next day.

Another older women would laugh over having nothing more for a hearth than three blackened stones, which in Jibel Hussein (Amman) they laughingly called “our house.” They showed me the three stones, sometimes lit with glowing coals, laughing and saying with such childlike voices, “Darna.” These old women belonged neither to the revolution nor to the Palestinian resistance: theirs was a cheerfulness that has ceased to hope. Above them, the sun curved onward. A pointing finger or outstretched arm formed an ever thinner shadow. But on what soil? Jordanian, by virtue of an administrative and political fiction decided by France, England, Turkey, America... “The cheerfulness that has ceased to hope”—the most joyful because the most hopeless. They could still see a Palestine that had ceased to exist when they were sixteen years old, but finally they had a soil to stand on. They were neither above it nor below it, but in a disquieting space where the least movement would be a wrong one. Under the bare feet of these supremely elegant octogenarians, these tragediennes, was the earth solid? This was less and less true. When they had fled Hebron and the Israeli threats, the earth seemed solid here, there...
was a feeling of lightness and everyone moved sensuously in the Arabic language. As time passed the earth seemed to experience this; the Palestinians were less and less bearable even as these Palestinians, these peasants, were discovering mobility, quick steps, running, the play of ideas reshuffled almost every day like cards, as well as weapons put together and taken apart, and used. Each of the women takes turns speaking. They laugh. One of them is reported to have said:

"Heroes! No joke. I gave birth to and spanked five or six of the ones in the jebel. I wiped their behinds. I know what they're made of and I can make more."

In the still blue sky the sun has curved onward, but it's still hot. These tragediennes remember and imagine at the same time. To be more expressive, they point their finger at the end of a sentence and stress the emphatic consonants. If a Jordanian soldier happened to pass by, he'd be delighted: in the rhythm of their words he would hear the rhythm of the Bedouin dances. Without any words at all, an Israeli soldier, if he saw these goddesses, would unload his automatic rifle into their skulls.

Here, in the ruins of Shatila, there is nothing left. A few silent old women hastily hiding behind a door with a white cloth nailed on it. As for the very young fedayeen, I will meet a few of them in Damascus.

If someone chooses a particular community outside of his birth—whereas to belong to this people one must be born into it—this choice is based on an irrational affinity; not that Jews have no part in it, but this justice and the entire defense of this community take place because of an attraction that is sentimental, or perhaps sensitive or sensual. I am French, but I defend the Palestinians entirely, without judgment. They are in the right because I love them. But would I love them if injustice had not made them a wandering people?

In Beirut, in what is still called West Beirut, almost all the buildings have been hit. They have different ways of collapsing: like a many-layered pastry crushed by the fingers of some giant King Kong, indifferent and voracious; or at other times the three or four top floors lean deliciously in an elegant plea, giving the building a sort of Lebanese drape. If a facade is intact, take a walk around the building and the other walls are pocked with bullet holes. If all four sides are unscathed, it's because the bomb fell from the airplane into the center and made a pit where there was once a stairwell or an elevator.

In West Beirut, after the Israelis arrived, S. told me this: "Night had fallen, it must have been around seven o'clock. Suddenly a loud metallic noise, clank, clank, clank. My sister, my brother-in-law, and me, we all ran to the balcony. It was a very dark night. And every now and then there was a flash, like lightning, less than a hundred meters away. You know that almost right across from us there's a sort of Israeli headquarters: four tanks, a house occupied by soldiers and officers, some guards. Darkness. And the clanking sound is coming closer. Flash; a few light torches. And then forty or fifty kids, about twelve or thirteen years old, beating in time on little metal jerrycans with rocks or hammer or something else. They were screaming, chanting loudly in time: 'La ilaha illa Allah, la Katayeb wa-la Yahoud' (There is no God but Allah; no to the Katayeb; no to the Jews)."

H. said to me: "When you came to Beirut and Damascus in 1928, Damascus was destroyed. General Gouraud and his troops, the Moroccan and Tunisian infantrymen, had fired on Damascus and cleansed it out. Who did the Syrian population blame?"

Me: "The Syrians blamed the French for the massacres and the destruction in Damascus."

Him: "We blame Israel for the massacres at Shatila and Sabra. These crimes shouldn't be placed only on the shoulders of the Katayeb who took over the job for them. Israel is guilty of allowing two companies of Katayeb into the camps, of giving them orders, of encouraging them for three days and three nights, of bringing them food and drink, of lighting up the camps at night."

H. again, professor of history. He said to me: "In 1917, Abraham's coup was rewritten, or, if you like, God was already the prefiguration of Lord Balfour. God—as the Jews used to say and still say—had promised a land of milk and honey to Abraham and his descendants, but this region, which did not belong to the God of the Jews (these lands were full of gods), this region was populated by the Canaanites, who also had their gods, and who fought against the troops of Joshua until they stole the famous Ark of the Covenant, without which the Jews could never have won. In 1917, England did not yet possess Palestine (that land of milk and honey), since the treaty giving it a mandate had not yet been signed."

"Begin claims that he came to the country..."

"That's the name of a film: Une Si Longue Absence [sic: So long an absence]. Do you see that Pole as the heir of Solomon?"

In the camps, after twenty years of exile, the Palestinians were dream-
ing of their Palestine, no one dared to think or say that Israel had thoroughly ravaged it, that there had been a barley field now there was a bank, that the power plant had taken the place of the creeping vine.

"Let's replace the fence around the field?"

"We'll have to redo part of the wall next to the fig tree."

"All the pans must be rusted—we need to buy an emery cloth."

"Why don't we run an electrical line out to the barn?"

"Oh no, no more hand-embroidered dresses; you can get me a sewing machine and another one for embroidering."

The old people in the camps were miserable; perhaps they were also miserable in Palestine, but nostalgia produced magical effects there. They were in danger of remaining prisoners of the unhappy spell of the camps. It's not certain that this segment of the Palestinians would leave the camps without regret. This is the sense in which an extreme destitution becomes fixed on the past. Whoever has known such destitution also knows, along with its bitterness, an intimate, solitary, unappealable joy. The camps in Jordan perched on rocky slopes are bare, but around their edges there is an even more desolate barrenness: shanties and tents full of holes inhabited by families glowing with pride. Only a complete lack of understanding of the human heart could make one deny that men can become fond and proud of their visible wretchedness; this pride is possible because visible wretchedness is counterbalanced by a hidden glory.

The solitude of the dead in the Shatila camp was even more palpable since they were frozen in gestures and poses over which they had no control. Dead just any old way. Dead and abandoned where they lay. But around us, in the camp, all the affection, tenderness, and love lingered in search of the Palestinians who would never again answer.

What can we say to their parents who left with Arafat, trusting in the promises of Reagan, Mitterand, and Pertini, who had assured them that no one would touch the civilian population of the camps? How to explain that the massacre of children, old people, and women had been allowed and that their bodies had been abandoned without a prayer? How can we tell them that we don't know where they're buried?

The massacres did not take place in silence and darkness. Lit by Israeli flares, Israeli ears listened closely to Shatila from the beginning, on Thursday evening. What festivity, what reveling happened there where death seemed to take part in the pranks of soldiers drunk on wine, drunk on hate, and drunk no doubt on the joy of pleasing the Israeli army as it listened and watched, as it encouraged and incited them. I didn't see this Israeli army listening and watching. I saw what it left behind.

To the argument: "What did Israel gain by assassinating Bashir; entering Beirut, reestablishing order, and averting the bloodbath?"

What did Israel have to gain by massacring Shatila? Answer: "What did it gain by entering Lebanon? What did it gain by bombing the civilian population for two months; chasing out and destroying the Palestinians. What did it want to gain in Shatila: the destruction of the Palestinians." It kills men, it kills the dead. It razes Shatila. It won't miss out on the real-estate speculation on the newly improved land: it's worth five million old francs per square meter in ruins. But "cleaned up," it'll go for . . . ?

I'm writing this in Beirut where, perhaps because of the close proximity of death, still covering the ground, everything is more true than in France; everything seems to happen as if, wearied and overwhelmed with being an example, being untouchable, exploiting what it thinks it has become—the inquisitorial and vengeful saint—Israel had decided to let itself be judged coldly.

In short, thanks to a skillful yet predictable metamorphosis, it is now what it has long been in the process of becoming: a loathsome temporal power, a colonizer in a way that no one can any longer dare to be, the Definitive Authority that it owes both to its long malediction and to its status as chosen.

Many questions remain:

If the Israelis did nothing but light up the camps, listen to it, hear the shots fired from so many shells—I stepped on tens of thousands of them—who was actually shooting? Who was risking their skin by killing? The Phalangists! The Haddadists! Who? And how many?

What happened to the weapons that left all these dead bodies behind? And where are the weapons of those who defended themselves? In the part of the camp I visited, I only saw two unused antitank weapons.

How did the murderers get into the camps? Were the Israelis at all the exits controlling Shatila? In any case, on Thursday they were already at the Alkka hospital, across from one entrance to the camp.

The newspapers reported that the Israelis entered the camp of Shatila as soon as they knew about the massacres and that they stopped them right then, that is, on Saturday. But what did they do with the killers? And when the latter left, where did they go?

After the assassination of Bashir Gemayel and twenty of his associates,
after the massacres when she learned that I was back from Shatila, Madame B., a woman of the upper class in Beirut, came to see me. She walked up the eight floors of the building (no electricity); I thought of her as old, elegant but old.

I said to her: "Before the death of Bashir, before the massacres, you were right to tell me that the worst was on its way. I saw it."

"Please don't tell me what you saw in Shatila. My nerves are too sensitive. I have to stay calm so that I can bear the worst that's still to come."

She lived alone with her husband (seventy years old) and her maid in a large apartment in Ras Beirut. She is very elegant, very careful about her appearance. She had period furniture, Louis XVI, I think.

"We knew that Bashir went to Israel. He was wrong. An elected head of state ought not associate with those people. I was sure something bad was going to happen to him. But I don't want to hear about it. I have to be careful to steady my nerves for the terrible blows that are still to come. Bashir should have returned that letter in which Begin calls him his 'dear friend.'"

The upper class, with its silent servants, has its own way of resisting. Madame B. and her husband "do not entirely believe in reincarnation." What will happen if they are reborn as Israelis?

The day of Bashir's burial is also the day the Israeli army enters West Beirut. The explosions draw closer to our building. Finally everyone goes down to the shelter in the basement. Ambassadors, doctors, their wives, daughters, a UN representative to Lebanon, their domestics.

"Carlos, bring me a pillow."

"Carlos, my glasses."

"Carlos, a little water."

The domestics also speak French and so are allowed into the shelter. It may be necessary to look after them, their wounds, their transportation to the hospital or the cemetery, what a mess!

It is important to know that the Palestinian camps of Shatila and Sabra consist of miles and miles of very narrow alleys—for here even the alleys are so thin, so skeletal, that sometimes two people cannot walk together unless one of them turns sideways—alleys cluttered with rubble and debris, stone blocks, bricks, dirty multicolored rags, and at night under the light of the Israeli flares that illuminated the camps, fifteen or twenty gunmen, even if well armed, could never have succeeded in carrying out this butchery. There had been gunmen, but a lot of them, and probably squads

of torturers who split open skulls, slashed thighs, cut off arms, hands, and fingers, dragged the dying on a rope after binding them hand and foot, men and women who were still alive, since the blood flowed from the body for a long time, to the point that I couldn't tell who had left this stream of dried blood in the hallway of a house, from the pool at one end of the hall to the doorway where it disappeared in the dust. Was it a Palestinian? A woman? A Phalangist whose body had been cleared away?

From Paris, it is indeed possible to doubt everything, especially if you don't know anything about the layout of the camps. It is possible to let Israel claim that the journalists from Jerusalem were the first to bring news of the massacre. How did they communicate it to the Arab countries in the Arabic language? And how in English and French? And when exactly? And to think of the measures taken in the West when a suspicious death is discovered, the fingerprints, the ballistics reports, the autopsies, and the experts' second opinions! In Beirut, hardly had the massacre become known when the Lebanese army officially took charge of the camps and immediately swept away the ruins of the houses along with the remains of the bodies. Who ordered this hasty action? Yet this was after the statement had spread throughout the world that Christians and Muslims had killed each other, and after the cameras had recorded the ferocity of the carnage.

Akka hospital, which was occupied by the Israelis, is not two hundred meters from the camp, but forty. They saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing!

For that's exactly what Begin declared in the Knesset: 'Goyim massacred goyim, what does that have to do with us?'

My description of Shatila was interrupted for a moment, but I must finish it. There were the dead bodies I saw at the end, on Sunday, around two o'clock in the afternoon, when the International Red Cross came in with its bulldozers. 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 arm raised, pressed against this angle of the wall. He was a Palestinian, dead for two or three days. If at first I saw him as a black boxer it was because his head was enormous, swollen, and black, like all
the heads and all the bodies, whether in the sun or in the shadows of the
houses. I walked near his feet. I picked up an upper dental plate from the
dust and set it on what remained of a window sill. The hollow of his hand
held out toward the sky, his open mouth, the opening of his beltless
pants: so many hives where the flies were feeding.

I stepped over another corpse, then another. In this dust-ridden space,
between the two bodies, there was at last a very living object, intact amid
the carnage, a transparent pink object that might still be of some use: an
artificial leg, apparently made of plastic, wearing a black shoe over a gray
sock. When I looked closer it became clear that it had been brutally
wrenched from the amputated leg, since the straps that usually held it to
the thigh were all broken.

Artificial leg belonged to the second body. The one on which I had
seen only one leg and one foot with a black shoe and a gray sock.

In the street perpendicular to the one where I saw the three bodies,
there was another dead body. It didn’t completely block the way, but it
was lying at the entrance to the street so that I had to walk past it and
turn around to see this sight: sitting on a chair surrounded by silent and
relatively young men and women, a woman was sobbing—a woman in
Arab dress who as far as I could tell was sixteen or sixty. She was weeping
over her brother whose body almost blocked the street. I moved closer
to her. I looked more carefully. She had a scarf knotted around her
neck. She was weeping, mourning the death of her brother there next to
her. Her face was pink—a baby’s pink, more or less uniform, very soft,
tender—but there were no eyelashes or eyebrows, and what I thought
was pink wasn’t the top layer of skin but a deeper layer edged in gray
skin. Her whole face was burnt. Impossible now to say how, but I
understood by whom.

With the first bodies, I made it a point to count them. Once I got to
twelve or fifteen, surrounded by the smell, the sun, tripping over every
piece of rubble, I couldn’t do it anymore, everything was blurring
together.

I have seen a lot of collapsed apartment buildings, gutted houses with
eiderdown floating out, and was indifferent, but when I saw the ones in
West Beirut and Shatila, I saw the horror. The dead generally become
familiar to me, even friendly, but when I saw the ones in the camps I
could discern nothing but the hatred and joy of those who had killed
them. A barbaric celebration had unfolded there: rage, drunkenness,
dances, songs, curses, laments, moans, in honor of the voyeurs laughing
on the top floor of the Alka hospital.

In France, before the Algerian War, the Arabs were not beautiful, they
seemed odd and heavy, slow-moving, with skewed, oblde faces, and
then almost all at once victory made them beautiful; but already, just
before it became blindingly clear, when more than half a million French
soldiers were streaming out their last breaths in the Aurès Mountains and
throughout Algeria, a curious phenomenon became perceptible, working
its way into the faces and bodies of the Arab workers: something like the
approach, the presentiment of a still fragile beauty that would dazzle us
when the scales finally fell from their skin and our eyes. We had to admit
the obvious: they had liberated themselves politically in order to appear
as they had to be seen: very beautiful. In the same way, having escaped
from the refugee camps, from the morality and the order of the camps,
from a morality imposed by the necessities of survival, having escaped at
the same time from shame, the fedayeen were very beautiful; and since
this beauty was new, or we could say novel, or naive, it was fresh, so alive
that it immediately revealed its atonement with all the beauties of the
world that have been freed from shame.

A lot of Algerian pimps passing through the night at Pigalle used all
they had for the Algerian revolution. Virtue was to be found there too. I
believe it was Hannah Arendt who distinguished between revolutions
that aspire to freedom and those that aspire to virtue—and therefore to
work. Perhaps we ought to recognize that the end pursued—obscurely—
by revolutions or liberations is the discovery or rediscovery of beauty,
that is, something that is impalpable and unnamable except by this
word. Or rather, no: by beauty we should understand a laughing insouciance spurred by past misery, by the systems and men responsible for mis-
ery and shame, but a laughing insouciance which realizes that, when shame
has been left behind, the bursting forth of new life is easy.

But on this page the question should also, and above all, be the fol-
lowing: is a revolution a revolution if it has not removed from faces and
bodies the dead skin that distrusted them? I’m not talking about an acad-
emic beauty, but rather the impalpable—unnamable—joy of bodies,
faces, shouts, words that are no longer dead, I mean a sensual joy so
strong that it tends to drive away all eroticism.
Here I am again in Jordan, in Ajloun then in Irbid. I pull from my sweater what appears to be one of my white hairs and I place it on Hamza's knee as he sits next to me. He takes it between his thumb and middle finger, looks at it, smiles, puts it in the pocket of his black jacket, puts it with his hand, and says:

"A hair from the beard of the Prophet is worth less than this."
He takes a slightly deeper breath and starts again:

"A hair from the beard of the Prophet is not worth more than this."
He was only twenty-two years old, his thoughts leapt with ease far above the forty-year-old Palestinians, but there were already visible signs—visible on himself, on his body, on his gestures—that linked him to his elders.

In the old days, the farmers used to blow their noses into their fingers. A flick of the wrist sent the snot into the thorn bushes. They would wipe their noses on their corduroy sleeves which, after a month, were covered with a pearly sheen. So did the fedayeen. They blew their noses the way a nobleman and prelates took snuff, slightly bent over. I did the same thing, which they taught me without realizing it.

And the women! Night and day they embroidered the seven dresses (one for each day of the week) of the engagement trousseau offered by a groom, generally older and chosen by the family, a rude awakening. The young Palestinian women became very beautiful when they rebelled against their fathers and broke their needles and embroidery scissors. Into the mountains of Ajloun, Salt, or Irbid, into the forests themselves, there settled all the sensuality liberated by rebellion and by rifles, let's not forget the rifles: that was enough, everyone was more than happy. Without being aware of it—but is that true?—the fedayeen were perfecting a novel beauty: the vivacity of their gestures and their visible weariness, the quickness and brilliance of the eye, the clearer tone of voice all became allied with a swift response and with its brevity. Its precision too. They had eliminated the long sentences, the gib and learned rhetoric.

Many people died in Shatila, and my friendship for them, my affection for their rotting corpses was great also because I had known them. Blackened, swollen, rotted by the sun and by death, they remained fedayeen.

At around two o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday, three soldiers of the Lebanese army, rifles ready, led me to a jeep where an officer was dozing. I asked him:

"You speak French?"
"English."
His voice was dry, perhaps because I had just awakened him with a start.
He looked at my passport. He said, in French:
"You're coming from there?" (He pointed toward Shatila.)
"Yes."
"And you saw?"
"Yes."
"You're going to write about it?"
"Yes."
He handed back my passport. He signaled me to leave. The three rifles were lowered. I had spent four hours in Shatila. About forty corpses remained in my memory. All of them—and I mean all of them—had been tortured, probably amidst drunkenness, songs, rites, the smell of gunpowder and, already, rotting flesh.

No doubt I was alone, I mean the only European—with a few old Palestinian women still clutching a torn white cloth; with a few young, unarmed fedayeen—but if these five or six human beings hadn't been there and I had discovered this slaughtered city, the Palestinians lying there black and swollen, I would have gone mad. Or did I! This city that I saw crumbled and scattered on the ground, or thought I saw, that I walked through, lifted and carried by the powerful stench of death—all that taken place?
I had only explored, and very poorly, one twentieth of Shatila and Sabra; I saw no part of Bui Hassan or Bourj al-Barajneh.  

It is not because of my inclinations that I experienced the Jordanian period as if it were a charmed adventure. Europeans and North African Arabs have spoken to me of the spell that kept them there. As I lived through this long stretch of six months, barely tinged with night for twelve or thirteen hours, I came to know the lightness of the event, the exceptional quality of the fedayeen, but I sensed how fragile the edifice was. Wherever the Palestinian army had assembled in Jordan—near the Jordan River—there were checkpoints where the fedayeen were so sure of
their rights and their power that, day or night, the arrival of a visitor at one of the checkpoints was an occasion for making tea, talking amid bursts of laughter and brotherly kisses (the one they embraced was leaving at night, crossing the Jordan River to plant bombs in Palestine, and often would not be coming back). The only islands of silence were the Jordanian villages: they kept their mouths shut. All the fedayeen seemed to be slightly raised off the ground by a very light glass of wine or a little puff of hashish. What was it? Youth, unconcerned with death and in possession of Czech or Chinese arms to fire into the air. Protected by weapons that shot so high and talked so big, the fedayeen weren't afraid of anything.

Any reader who has seen a map of Palestine and Jordan knows that the terrain is not a sheet of paper. The terrain along the Jordan River is in high relief. The whole venture should have had the subtitle "A Midsummer Night's Dream," despite the hot-tempered words between the forty-year-old leaders. All that was possible because of youth, the pleasure of being there under the trees, playing with weapons, being away from women, that is, of conjuring away a difficult problem, of being the most luminous because the sharpest point of the revolution, of having the approval of the population in the camps, of being photogenic no matter what they did, and perhaps of sensing that this fairy tale with revolutionary content would soon be wrecked: the fedayeen didn't want power, they had freedom.

At the Damascus airport on the way back from Beirut I met some young fedayeen who had escaped from the Israeli hell. They were sixteen or seventeen years old: they were laughing; they were a lot like the ones in Ajlun. They will die like them. The struggle for a country can fill a very rich life, but a short one. This, we recall, is Achilles' choice in the Iliad.24

§ 34  Registration No. 1155

Beginning with Lyautey's entry into Morocco, or with the establishment in 1912 of the local bureaux, there were only two ways to describe Morocco: in terms of strategy, and then in terms of exploitation. We know this from all the reports on local affairs and from the studies of the anthropologists.

There was also a way of describing the Moroccan who had been born as a soldier or a worker: they were Moroccan soldiers, Moroccan workers.

Some papers found in an old cabinet at the flea market tell us what it sufficed to know about them.

The word "skeleton" comes immediately to mind. They are indeed skeletal, these forms with their ten or twelve categories, making it impossible for us to understand that an entire world of events, both individual and collective—rebellion, mourning, revolutions, loves, killings, diseases—had taken place in these bodies now circumscribed by a Christian corporal attentive to his cold calligraphy.

Who we have been, we French, who we still probably are—these archives, all too well maintained and preserved, spit it ill back in our faces.

Recto

You have before you a first document (1155) entitled "Carte d'identité de protégés français" (Identity card for residents of the French protectorate). Indeed, Morocco was a protectorate.