

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

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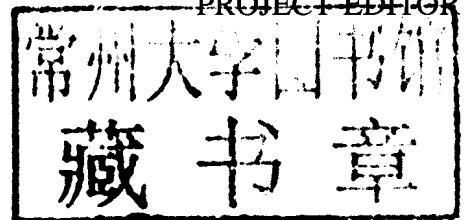


Volume 311

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Jeffrey W. Hunter**  
PROJECT EDITOR



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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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# Tahar Ben Jelloun

## 1944-

Moroccan-born French novelist, poet, essayist, short story writer, playwright, and travel writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Ben Jelloun's career through 2011. For additional information on Ben Jelloun's life and writings, see *CLC*, Volume 180.

### INTRODUCTION

One of France's most celebrated writers, Ben Jelloun was awarded the country's highest literary honor, the Prix Goncourt, for his novel *La nuit sacrée* (1987; *The Sacred Night*). The sequel to *L'enfant de sable* (1985; *The Sand Child*), Ben Jelloun's first work of international stature, *The Sacred Night* continued the tragic life story of a Moroccan girl who was raised from birth as a boy. The two novels bring together many of the themes and issues that have concerned Ben Jelloun throughout his many and diverse publications—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. The problem of fractured identity, in these two novels portrayed within the context of women's subjugated condition in the Muslim-Arab countries of the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia), is elsewhere in Ben Jelloun's works viewed from the perspective of the North African immigrant in Europe, a position from which Ben Jelloun speaks from experience. Born in Fez, Morocco, Ben Jelloun emigrated to Paris in 1971 for political reasons and has remained there ever since.

*The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night*, labeled "narrative- and gender-bending novels" by the critic Cynthia Running-Johnson, also display many of the artistic innovations Ben Jelloun has devised in his fiction to create a specifically Arab-African cultural space while writing almost exclusively in the French language. Ben Jelloun is admired as much for his intellectual commitment to a variety of social and political causes as he is for his narrative experimentation and richly evocative style, which in its lyricism and creation of dream states and fantasy betrays not only his poetic sensibility and studies in psychotherapy but also the influence of the magical realists.

Through all of his works, including the many articles he has produced during his long tenure as a contribu-

tor to the Paris newspaper *Le Monde*, Ben Jelloun has emerged as a respected and philosophically minded advocate in defense of human rights and a spokesperson for a cosmopolitan outlook on political issues of global import. Ben Jelloun is a sought-after speaker at universities and other venues throughout the world. But he remains best known for his novels, which have continued to command international attention since the success of *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night*. These books now appear in over forty different languages. Additional literary awards have followed: in 1994, the Prix Méditerranée for *L'homme rompu* (*Corruption*), and the Gran prix littéraire for the body of his work; in 2004, the International IMPAC Dublin Award for *Cette aveuglante absence de lumière* (2001; *This Blinding Absence of Light*); in 2005, the Prix Ulysse for the entirety of his work; and in 2008, the French Legion of Honor.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ben Jelloun was raised in a small apartment in Fez with his two brothers and sister. His father sold spices in an open-air market and later worked as a tailor. As a child, Ben Jelloun was sent first to a Koranic school and then to a school where French was spoken in the morning and Arabic in the afternoon. In 1955, the year before Moroccan independence from France, the family moved to Tangier; the contrast between the two cities—Fez and Tangier—is addressed throughout Ben Jelloun's fiction and was the starting point for his first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Harrouda* (1973). In 1963, Ben Jelloun enrolled at the University of Rabat to study philosophy. In 1966, he was among a group of students arrested for leftist political agitation against the monarch. His punishment was a compulsory stint in the military for eighteen months. Ben Jelloun recalled the humiliating conditions of his detention in a long poem that was smuggled out of the barracks and eventually published in *Soufflés*, a radical political review.

The army experience was also the inspiration for *This Blinding Absence of Light*, which is based on the actual case of a Moroccan political prisoner in one of King Hassan II's desert camps who was condemned for twenty years to a tiny underground cell measuring less

than 10 feet by 6 feet by 6 feet. After his release from the army, Ben Jelloun continued his studies and began to teach philosophy. Abdellatif Laabi, the founder of *Soufflés*, published his first collection of poetry, *Hommes sous linceul de silence* in 1970. The next year, amidst rumors of a coup d'état and other political unrest, Ben Jelloun entered the Sorbonne in Paris. He received his doctorate in psychiatric social work in 1975, having already practiced as a psychotherapist for three years. In the meantime, he had begun his association with *Le Monde*, whose editor had invited him to write articles about immigration and Arab culture. A focus of Ben Jelloun's early psychiatric work was dysfunctionality among North African immigrants in France, the subject of both *La réclusion solitaire* (1976) and *La plus haute des solitudes: Misère sexuelle d'émigrés nord-africains* (1977).

In an interview with Shusha Guppy for the *Paris Review* in 1999, Ben Jelloun described how winning the Priz Goncourt in 1987 changed the course of his career: "There had been an African writer in 1934 who had won the Goncourt, but no one mentioned him in 1987 when my novel won it, so it was assumed that I had been the very first. The prize gave me access to a much larger public. But already my previous novel, *The Sand Child*, published two years earlier, had been a bestseller and sold a hundred and fifty thousand copies. When *The Sacred Night* won the Goncourt, it carried all my other books with it." The prize has created more interest in Ben Jelloun's journalistic writings as well, helping to publicize his commitment to persons marginalized by all types of economic and class inequality. Ben Jelloun currently lives in a Paris suburb with his wife and children; he vacations regularly at a seaside home in Tangier.

## MAJOR WORKS

Despite their range of genres and diversity of subject matter, the themes of Ben Jelloun's writings have remained strikingly consistent throughout his career. In broad terms, Ben Jelloun has sought to expose imbalances in power relations, be they related to gender, economic class, or politics. Many of his novels focus on abuses of power that marginalize individuals by compromising their identities. Ben Jelloun creates psychologically complex characters struggling to survive in the challenging sociopolitical climate of the postcolonial Arab world where conflicting influences vie for dominance: North African and European, male and female, modern and traditional, Muslim and Christian. Some critics have organized Ben Jelloun's fiction into two groups: stories that indict the patriar-

chal culture of the Maghreb for silencing women, and stories that document the fractured identities of North African immigrants in Europe. *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night* belong to the first category. Their main character is Ahmed, the eighth daughter of a Moroccan man determined to raise her as a boy in order to outsmart Islamic law, which stipulates that female children can only inherit one-third of their father's property. Ahmed's father and mother persist in the charade, dressing him as a boy, binding his breasts, even enacting a bogus circumcision. By the time Ahmed realizes he is really a girl, he has learned to enjoy his position of male dominance and decides to remain a man, becoming increasingly tyrannical with his sisters.

*The Sacred Night* continues Ahmed's story into adulthood. When Ahmed's father dies, he finally tries to accept his female nature. He moves away from the family, adopts the woman's name Zahra, and marries a blind man. But his sisters exact vengeance when they learn of the deception and subject him to a brutal female circumcision. Scholars have argued that Ben Jelloun deconstructs and then reconstructs the character of Ahmed/Zahra to illustrate the female's lack of genuine identity in traditional Muslim society.

Some critics have considered *La nuit de l'erreur* (1997) a companion piece to *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night*. In this novel, a Moroccan woman, Zina, rebels against the oppression of her sex and becomes a type of "Aisha Kindisha," a femme fatale of Arab legend who uses her alluring charms to seduce men into submission.

The problem of fractured identity is everywhere apparent in Ben Jelloun's fiction about Arab migrants as well. In *Les yeux baissés* (1991; *With Downcast Eyes*)—the title refers to the humility expected of Muslim women—a young Muslim girl is caught between dual identities after her family moves from a small Berber village in the south of Morocco to France, where she takes advantage of the greater educational opportunities for women and becomes a writer. Twenty years later, she returns to her home village only to be cast out as a traitor. One of Ben Jelloun's most widely discussed novels about the tribulations of migrants is *Partir* (2005; *Leaving Tangier*), which describes the predicament of a brother and sister, Azel and Kezia, who are intent on leaving Tangier for a better life. Both college educated, neither can find a job in the dismal economy so they cannot afford to make the trip to Europe legally. They are horrified by reports of a ruthless trafficker who transports Moroccans across the Strait of Gibraltar,

some of whom are never heard from again. Eventually, the heterosexual Azel becomes involved with a wealthy Spanish homosexual, Miguel, who offers the pair a way out of the country. When Azel breaks off his relationship with Miguel, he becomes a secret informant on terrorism for the Spanish police, thus risking his life in order to avoid the consequences of his undocumented status. The novel suggests that economic imbalances reduce large numbers of North Africans to various types of prostitution.

The moral dilemmas that besiege Ben Jelloun's characters when they feel forced to compromise their principles are yet another threat to their true identities. In the novel *Corruption*, a forty-year-old engineer with the Moroccan Ministry of Defense, Mourad, wages a lonely battle against the graft he witnesses among government workers. Even his wife encourages him to accept bribes so that he might fulfill his financial responsibility to his family. When Mourad finally caves in to the pressure and succumbs to temptation, he begins to experience bizarre dreams and hallucinations symptomatic of his inner turmoil. Ben Jelloun focuses again on identities of North African immigrants and their children in *Au pays* (2009; *A Palace in the Old Village*), the story of Mohammed, a dutiful and hardworking Renault automobile plant employee who, never completely at home in France, returns to his Moroccan village upon retirement and spends his life savings building an opulent home for his entire family. He is rebuffed by his acculturated children who reject their Berber heritage opting for European identities and spouses, despite the fact that European society often rejects them as outsiders.

Ben Jelloun's fiction depicts European hostility to North African immigrants as a major factor in their alienation. The subject of French racism in particular has been a topic of special interest in Ben Jelloun's nonfiction. *Hospitalité française: Racisme et immigration maghrébine* (1984; *French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants*) presents a scathing critique of nationalist prejudice in France toward North African immigrants and links the superior attitude of the French to the lingering effects of their time of colonial domination. Ben Jelloun has also sought to explain cultural stereotypes to young audiences, both by giving talks in schools and through a work he composed for his ten-year-old daughter, *Le racisme expliqué à ma fille* (1997; *Racism Explained to My Daughter*). *L'Islam expliqué aux enfants* (2002; *Islam Explained*), written in response to the 9/11 attacks, is also intended for young readers and attempts to dispel the popular caricature of the Muslim terrorist while

placing the Islamic religion within a historical context. Ben Jelloun's essays have taken up a number of such topical issues, including the Palestinian question and the Algerian Civil War. The poetry collection *La remontée des cendres; suivi de non identifiés* (1991; *The Rising of the Ashes*) is devoted to the anonymous victims of the Gulf War. The short story collection *L'ange aveugle* (1991; *State of Absence*) deals with the tragic consequences of mafia crimes in Italy.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Running-Johnson observed, "The subject of Ben Jelloun's cultural identity . . . constitutes a major theme of the considerable scholarly criticism that his work has occasioned." Running-Johnson here refers to the longstanding debate about Ben Jelloun's continuing ties to Morocco, particularly as it pertains to his choice of writing in the French language. Some Arab reviewers have accused Ben Jelloun of disloyalty and of pandering to Western audiences. He has also been charged with neglecting his political duty to Morocco by not speaking out more forcibly against the abuses of King Hassan II. In interviews, Ben Jelloun has expressed impatience with the debate. John Freeman noted, "Ben Jelloun has long written in the [French] language and is aware, as many exiles are, of the possible duplicity in this act. 'Arabic is my wife,' he has said, 'and French is my mistress; and I have been unfaithful to both.'" Still, Ben Jelloun has been vocal in criticizing French xenophobia, not just from a political standpoint, but also from a cultural one. He was one of forty-four French-language authors who signed a manifesto, "Pour une littérature-monde," that appeared in *Le Monde* in 2007 arguing that the term *francophone* is too often solely identified with the French state.

Western reviewers have focused on Ben Jelloun's fiction as it exposes the secondary status of Arab women and as it navigates between the conflicting poles of the North African immigrant identity. Addressing his aesthetic practices, critics have praised the poetry and rhythm of his language for capturing the Arab sensibility. They have also explored Ben Jelloun's stories as a reflection of his unique postcolonial perspective: a North African living in Paris who witnessed colonialism in the Maghreb and the transition to independence. The multiple narrative perspectives in Ben Jelloun's fiction have been frequently interpreted as an expression of his cosmopolitan outlook and awareness of the multiple influences constituting identity. Ben Jelloun's fiction, as well as his essays, have been analyzed for their dissection of ethnic politics in relation to transna-



tional capitalism. His Western critics have been quick to point out that Ben Jelloun does not attribute all of the migrants' problems to European racism. *Leaving Tangier*, for example, faults North Africans for idealizing their prospects in Spain, a state of self-delusion. Nicoletta Pireddu labels "migrant bovarysm," alluding to the ill-fated romantic dreams of Gustave Flaubert's heroine Madame Bovary.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Hommes sous linceul de silence* (poetry) 1970  
*Cicatrices du soleil* (poetry) 1972  
*Harrouda* (novel) 1973  
*Le discours du chameau* (poetry) 1974  
*Grains de peau* (poetry) 1974  
*Les amandiers sort morts de leurs blessures* (poetry) 1976  
*Chronique d'une solitude* (play) 1976  
*La réclusion solitaire* [*Solitaire*] (novel) 1976  
*La plus haute des solitudes: Misère sexuelle d'émigrés nord-africains* (nonfiction) 1977  
*Moha le fou, Moha le sage* (novel) 1978  
*A l'insu du souvenir* (poetry) 1980  
*La prière de l'absent* (novel) 1981  
*Entretien avec Monsieur Said Hammadi ouvrier Algérien* (play) 1982  
*Haut atlas: L'exil de pierres* [photographs by Philippe Lafond] (travel writing) 1982  
*L'écrivain public: Récit* (novel) 1983  
*La fiancé de l'eau* (play) 1984  
*Hospitalité française: Racisme et immigration maghrébine* [*French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants*] (nonfiction) 1984  
*L'enfant de sable* [*The Sand Child*] (novel) 1985  
*La nuit sacrée* [*The Sacred Night*] (novel) 1987  
*Sahara* [photographs by Bernard Descamps] (poetry) 1987  
*Jour de silence à Tangier: Récit* [*Silent Day in Tangier*] (novel) 1990  
*Alberto Giacometti & Tahar Ben Jelloun* (essay) 1991  
*La remontée des cendres; suivi de non identifiés* [*The Rising of the Ashes*] (poetry) 1991  
*Les yeux baissés* [*With Downcast Eyes*] (novel) 1991  
 \* *L'ange aveugle* [*State of Absence*] (short stories) 1992  
*L'homme rompu* [*Corruption*] (novel) 1994  
*Poésie complète: 1966-1995* (poetry) 1995  
*Le premier amour est toujours le dernier* (short stories) 1995  
*Les raisins de la galère* [*The Grapes of Despair*] (novel) 1996  
*L'auberge des pauvres* (novel) 1997  
*La nuit de l'erreur* (novel) 1997

*Le racisme expliqué à ma fille* [*Racism Explained to My Daughter*] (nonfiction) 1997  
*Labyrinthe des sentiments* (novel) 1999  
*Stratégies d'écriture* (nonfiction) 2000  
*Cette aveuglante absence de lumière* [*This Blinding Absence of Light*] (novel) 2001  
*L'Islam expliqué aux enfants* [*Islam Explained*] (nonfiction) 2002  
*Amours sorcières* (short stories) 2003  
*La belle au bois dormant* (novel) 2004  
*Le dernier ami* [*The Last Friend*] (novel) 2004  
*Partir* [*Leaving Tangier*] (novel) 2005  
*Yemma* (novel) 2007  
*Au pays: roman* [*A Palace in the Old Village*] (novel) 2009

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## CRITICISM

Cynthia Running-Johnson (essay date spring 2003)

SOURCE: Running-Johnson, Cynthia. "Ben Jelloun, Jean Genet, and Cultural Identity in *The Street for Just One: Alberto Giacometti*." *College Literature* 30, no. 2 (spring 2003): 162-73.

[In the following essay, Running-Johnson analyzes Ben Jelloun's essay Alberto Giacometti & Ben Jelloun (1991). Running-Johnson is primarily interested in what the piece reveals about Ben Jelloun's cultural and political identity and his friendship with controversial French author Jean Genet, an Arab sympathizer and fellow admirer of Swiss sculptor and painter Giacometti.]

Contemporary Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun and Jean Genet, the provocative postwar writer of France, have intertwined biographies, both in their personal lives and their work. Ben Jelloun, born in Morocco in 1944, went to France to pursue doctoral studies in social psychiatry in the late sixties. While completing his degree, he began what has become a distinguished career in both fiction and non-fiction. A highly prolific author, he is best known for his narrative- and gender-bending novels, *The Sand Child* (*L'Enfant de sable*, 1985) and its sequel, *The Sacred Night* (*La Nuit sacrée*, 1987), winner of the prestigious French literary award, the Prix Goncourt. Ben Jelloun has also published numerous essays, many on the political and social difficulties of Arabs in the Middle East, the Maghreb, and France, ranging from "The Highest of Solitudes" ("La plus haute des soli-

tudes," 1977), treating the plight of North African immigrants in France, to "Racism Explained to My Daughter" ( "Le Racisme expliqué à ma fille," 1998).

Ben Jelloun's first meeting with Genet came about in 1974 after Genet had published an article on several neglected Maghrebine authors, Ben Jelloun among them. Genet, by this time in his life, had moved from the period of most of his major literary works, novels such as *Lady of the Flowers* and *The Thief's Journal* and plays (*The Maids*, *The Blacks*, *The Screens*), to one of greater involvement in political causes. He worked, for example, with the Black Panthers in the US and, most importantly to him, with the Palestinians and other Arab groups. Genet's and Ben Jelloun's friendship, which lasted until Genet's death in 1986, was grounded in their common concern for Arab people, including immigrant workers in France. During those years, Ben Jelloun asked Genet to contribute to journals on the subject of the Palestinians, wrote about Genet, and interviewed him for the French newspaper *Le Monde* and other periodicals.

Considering the importance of political issues in the relationship between Ben Jelloun and Genet, it is interesting that their connection surfaces in an essay by Ben Jelloun on a quite different subject: artistic creation. His *Alberto Giacometti & Tahar Ben Jelloun*, first issued in 1991,<sup>2</sup> was reprinted four years later in smaller format as *The Street for Just One (La Rue pour un seul): Alberto Giacometti*. As the title indicates, it treats the Swiss sculptor and painter, Giacometti, who lived and worked in Paris from the 1920s until his death in 1966. In his essay Ben Jelloun describes his reactions to the artist, one of the major forces in postwar modernism, with his trademark thin, majestic figurative sculptures and intense portraits and still lifes. In addition to Giacometti, however, Jean Genet also occupies an important place in the piece. Genet had published a seminal essay on the artist, *The Studio of Albert Giacometti (L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti)*, in 1957;<sup>3</sup> and Ben Jelloun, in his exploration of Giacometti some thirty-five years later, makes frequent reference to his predecessor. He quotes liberally from *The Studio*, stating on the back cover of the 1995 edition. "I was led to Giacometti by Jean Genet."

The inclusion of Genet in Ben Jelloun's text is significant in biographical terms as a sign of the friendship of the two authors. In addition, it permits one to see and investigate another, more complicated question: that of language and cultural identity in relation to Ben Jelloun's work. Ben Jelloun writes in French, the language in which he was educated. The much-

discussed issue of writing in the tongue of the colonizer is especially pertinent and complex in Ben Jelloun's case because he has lived mainly in France for the past several decades and become a celebrated personality there. As a result of both his social journalism and his writing of fiction and poetry, he is a prominent spokesman on political and cultural aspects of France as well as issues pertaining to his country of origin. Ben Jelloun himself long ago tired of discussions of his "loyalty" to his Arab/Islamic heritage. In a 1993 interview he responded to a question on whether he still identifies himself as Maghrebine by a solid "Yes, of course," qualifying his answer in the following way:

But I say that so as to stop this sort of perpetual questioning that asks, "Hey, why are you writing in French? You're an Arab!" I don't have a problem with identity. When you get down to it, what matters to me is what I produce, what I write. So if what I write can be associated with a place, which is necessarily Morocco, that's good. But my ambition is that this "place" should be everyone's place.

(Spear 1993, 31)

The subject of Ben Jelloun's cultural identity, however, constitutes a major theme of the considerable scholarly criticism that his work has occasioned; and it will undoubtedly continue to be an important question for readers of this Francophone author whose life has spanned both the colonial period of his native country and its coming to independence in 1956. When one considers in addition the writer's engagement in Maghrebine and Middle Eastern political causes during the past decades, the question of his cultural position becomes even more significant. In Ben Jelloun's essay on Giacometti, the role played by Genet, a Frenchman with strong ties to Northern Africa—especially Morocco—and the Middle East, makes one reflect upon Ben Jelloun's relationship to both the French and the Islamic/Arabic cultures. For Ben Jelloun, Genet becomes a kind of middle man between them; at the same time, his presence brings into view the inevitable tensions which this double attachment includes.

The resonances between the two essays on Giacometti are remarkable. Genet's text, which Picasso called the most effective art criticism he had ever read (Lord 1985, 350), presents a lively picture of Giacometti and his work as well as foregrounding the author himself, through what Ben Jelloun calls in his essay the "insolent, rebellious rigor" of Genet's style (1991, 72). *The Studio of Alberto Giacometti* runs thirty-five pages in Genet's collected works and eighty-five in the 1995 reprint, which includes photographs by Ernest Scheidegger. It consists of short to medium-length pas-

sages, including descriptions of the artist's work, philosophical ruminations, and dialogues with Giacometti and other personalities, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Mozart. In typical Genetian fashion, it moves from the sublime to the outrageous—or at least the unexpected—and back again. At one moment he presents a conversation with a street person in which the wretched but spirited man details his masturbating habits; in the next line the author describes the elegance and power of Giacometti's work, in particular its ability to evoke "that precious point which makes us equal, that secret wound which we all share" (Genet 1995, 5. 51). This idea of the "secret wound" ("blessure secrète"), in fact, is the mainstay of the essay, the point to which Genet consistently returns throughout his turnings and twistings of subject and tone. Genet says that it is Giacometti's capacity to see the suffering which we all have in common and to communicate it back to us that makes the artist's work so effective and important.

Ben Jelloun takes up this thought in his own essay, which is of similar length and composition: eighty pages, alternating text and photographs of Giacometti's work. Ben Jelloun's essay resembles Genet's in its rather impressionistic character: it is divided into fairly short, loosely-connected passages in which he, like Genet, presents Giacometti's work and reflects upon its connections to writing and reality. As is the case for Genet as well as the many other French-language authors who have been moved to write on Giacometti, from Michel Leiris to Jean-Paul Sartre to Yves Bonnefoy,<sup>4</sup> Ben Jelloun is impressed by the solitude and strength of the artist's tall, hieratic figures and densely forceful busts and portraits. He says that it was through reading *The Studio of Alberto Giacometti*, though, that he realized the origin of their sense of separateness and anguished intensity: Genet's idea of the "secret wound" which unites all human beings and which Giacometti's work expresses so well. Ben Jelloun incorporates the words, "secret wound," into his own text as well as sentences from Genet's essay which expand upon the expression, sometimes enclosing the citations in quotation marks and acknowledging Genet's authorship, at other times not. Near the beginning of *The Street for Just One*, for example, he describes Giacometti's statues as follows: "They all originate from one abyss, a wound that is singular, absolute, total and without the least compromise. *That is beauty*" (1991, 10). This passage recalls Genet's lines—his connection of this "wound" with beauty—at nearly the same point in his own essay, "There exists no other origin of beauty than the wound, singular, different for everyone, hidden or invisible, that all men keep within, that they preserve and to which they

retreat when they want to leave the world for temporary but profound solitude" (1995, 42). Ben Jelloun first mentions Genet by name several pages later in his essay, retelling an anecdote from *The Studio* about how one of Giacometti's sculptures, hidden under a table in the artist's studio, had enough "force," contained enough "life" to make the writer notice it. Further on in the piece, Ben Jelloun returns to the idea of the "secret wound": he introduces his thought by the words, "Reading what Jean Genet wrote on Giacometti, . . ." and goes on to include the author's description of the "blessure secrète." He continues to cite Genet throughout his text.

Ben Jelloun mirrors Genet also in that, like his predecessor, he exposes his own "art poétique" alongside Giacometti's. In some of the most effective passages of his essay, Ben Jelloun discusses the way in which both he and Giacometti strive to reach "the limits of the real." Each one is guided by the raw material in which he works: the artist by his clay, the writer by his words, and both by the characters that they create. Not knowing where the material and characters will lead, they constantly rework their pieces, never arriving at absolute, final conclusions. (Giacometti was known to spend months on a single portrait, every day painting, then rubbing out the results and painting the image again.) Ben Jelloun discusses art in literary terms, transforming the artist's statues into "characters" acting in a human drama. He also "visualizes" his own writing, describes the fictional "space" which he creates: "Writing means constantly making and unmaking the space of this fiction woven by moving, elusive characters" (1991, 40-42). Near the end of his essay, the author brings writing and sculpting together in an especially effective example, presenting one of Giacometti's long, thin statues in verbal terms: he compares it to "a cry or more exactly a long phrase uttered throughout the night" (74). This "phrase" then returns to the form of visual line, "traced from bottom to top by a steady hand that simply wishes to translate the silence of the earth and the extreme solitude of being" (74). In the following line of text, the author includes both writers and artists in the pronoun "us," saying that the "solitude of being . . . gives us the courage to write or paint" (74).

Genet, in his essay, also underscores connections between the visual and literary arts and presents his own aesthetics through descriptions of the artist's sculptures and paintings. His discourse on artistic creation—with Giacometti as his prime example—includes ideas, themes and images that characterize his own work, as well. Most notably, he discusses the

notion (taken up again by Ben Jelloun) that solitude is the condition which links all people and things, and that art both originates in this state and evokes it. He describes Giacometti's pieces as being characterized by a constant, oscillating movement between intimacy and remoteness, between a startling immediacy and the majesty of past eras: "[His statues] are familiar, they walk in the street. . . . [T]hey are at the end of time, at the origin of everything, they never stop moving closer and stepping back . . ." (1995, 5. 43). "Their beauty . . . seems to me to exist in this unceasing, uninterrupted backward and forward motion from the most extreme distance to the closest familiarity . . ." (5. 54). This movement weaves a lively shell around the absence—solitude—which is at their heart, in a way making that negative space visible: "Giacometti tries to give concrete reality to what was only absence. . . . The entire oeuvre of the sculptor and draftsman could be entitled, 'The Invisible Object'" (5. 64). Such descriptions recall Genet's writing from both before and after this 1957 essay. His works abound with representations of enclosure: contained, often empty space that paradoxically produces a multiplicity of images and reflective movement. One thinks, for example, of the many representations of the anus—the fecund "eye of Gabès"—in the novels, functioning as a source of visions and thus of text; the glorification of "the image, the reflection" in the brothel play of *The Balcony* and *The Screens*; and Genet's directions in *The Screens* that the actors be a "felt absence" on stage (1976, 104-05).

In addition to the presentation of Genet's and Ben Jelloun's own artistic practices in their essays, their manner of expression—the playfully associative and sometimes convoluted structuring of their writing—also brings them together. At one point in his text, as Ben Jelloun gazes at a bust by Giacometti, his look sets off a spiraling series of associations: "this head" becomes "ours," then turns into "the wounded voice of Billie Holiday" and finally into the hand of Giacometti himself: "[T]his head is ours, the one that our insomnias have created in us. . . . It is the wounded voice of Billie Holiday when she is looking for a face, when she recognizes herself in this intense thinness, in the flatness of a profile destined to despair," and "[t]he voice of Billie Holiday is the hand of Giacometti cutting into the body of the bronze, to hollow out a gaze, a cry" (1991, 70-72). Through the transformations and substitutions in these sentences, the sculpture, the sculptor, the singer's voice and "we" become linked.

The evolution from one physical form to another and from the visual to the auditory echoes a similarly metamorphosing movement in Genet's writing. In

Genet's essay, the transformation takes place more often from section to section of his text rather than within individual passages, as he moves from statements on solitude, death, or history, to the transcription of bits of conversation between him and Giacometti, to the description of a piece, the artist, or his studio. More notable, perhaps, is the surprising change of tone which can occur in Genet's text. The author does not hesitate to interrupt lexically, semantically, and syntactically dense sentences with phrases of more relaxed structure and everyday vocabulary, often to wryly comic effect. They include confidential remarks and fillers addressed to the reader, such as, "Should I say it?" "Have I already said this?" or, in his last section, "I've said it very badly, haven't I?" In Ben Jelloun's essay, the author's more poetic and narrative examples of metamorphosis actually more closely reflect Genet's fiction, in which prosaic scenes often flower into rich flights of fantasy. The transformations in Ben Jelloun's "Billie Holiday" passage cited above bring to mind, for example, the spiraling thoughts of Genet's narrator in *The Thief's Journal*, when his description of the soiled sheet on his prison bed turns into a scene of lovers on horseback bounding through the countryside, or passages in *Miracle of the Rose* such as the one in which the chains around the hands of fellow inmate Harcamone, object of the narrator's desire, become a garland of flowers. In any case, Genet is a particularly strongly—"felt absence" in Ben Jelloun's text. Ben Jelloun's piece, in fact, emerges as an homage to his literary predecessor as well as to Giacometti. Ben Jelloun even seems to consider Genet as one of the objects of his study when he states that, through looking at Giacometti's statues, he has been able to better understand the author's independence, his lack of attachment to things and places. Ben Jelloun speaks often of Giacometti's work as a repository of memory, just as this essay "remembers" Genet.

Ben Jelloun's essay recalls his predecessor, then, in its elaboration of the idea of the "secret wound" and related concepts, its comparison between Giacometti's art and the author's own approach to creation, and aspects of its organization and style. One of the most striking ways in which Genet's presence is felt, however, is through a particular passage in Ben Jelloun's text: his description of a man seated across from him in the metro and the realizations that this encounter produces. The scene reprises a significant moment in Genet's essay in which the writer details his reactions to a man facing him in the train. In these similar sections of the texts, the authors develop the notion of Giacometti's capacity to communicate deep