



# LA CHASTE VIE DE JEAN GENET

## INTERVIEW WITH LYDIE DATTAS

**You've only published a few books. Do you write even when you're not writing?**

Lydie Dattas: Marrying a gypsy didn't make writing any easier, but it may have made my writing more intense. Because even when you're not writing you can still listen, and it's by listening to Piedmontese gypsies that I really learnt how to write in my own language. The most beautiful French I've ever heard isn't that of the great poets, but that of French tziganes. Of course, it's not a literary language, but its power was a great source of inspiration for me. Gypsies live so close to the powerful roots of life that their language has a vitality I've encountered nowhere else. They are poets who don't write—Alexandre Romanès and Jean-Marie Kerwich are exceptions that prove the rule. Even though they don't write poems, they're the creators of the most beautiful verbal inventions there are, and for that alone they should be at least as respected as real poets. Arthur Rimbaud doesn't stand a chance against them.

**In *La Foudre (Lightning)*, you talk about your habit of crossing out what you write. Are there books of yours that never saw the light of day, even though they've been written?**

My first poem collection, *Noone*, published when I was twenty, was at first a large book. But when I got the proofs, I was disappointed in myself, and cut about three-fourths of my poems. What was left was so small that the *Mercur* de France didn't want to publish it anymore! Thanks to the insistence of Jean Grosjean, they ended up doing it. Later, when I was about thirty-five, I wrote another book, and I showed it to him. At the time, I was married to a gypsy and resealed chairs and wove baskets. After reading my manuscript, Jean Grosjean congratulated me for reseating chairs, before saying, about my manuscript, "It's not as useful as a basket..." I threw it away that very night. I never regretted it because Grosjean had absolute pitch. He was an infallible reader because he never took into account literary trends. He looked for a real human necessity in the text. I was extraordinarily lucky to meet him, and even more not to let that opportunity pass me by. I believed in his judgment, and that allowed me to move forward.

**In the middle of what seemed like a break in your writing career, you wrote *La Nuit spirituelle (The Spiritual Night)* in 1977, after meeting Jean Genet. How did he react to it?**

Jean Genet had just moved into the building Le Bouglione, in Pigalle, where I lived with my husband, Alexandre Bouglione (now Alexandre Romanès). The night after he moved in, I went down to his apartment because I admired his books a lot. We talked, and I told him I disagreed with some of his positions. The next day, Genet had someone tell me that I was just a woman and that he hated women. That was the trigger for *The Spiritual Night*. It had reawakened this painful question that had haunted me for a long time: "Is there any legitimacy to a woman's writing?" or "Is writing a betrayal of the carnal calling of women?" But first, I had to kill Genet. To be scorned by someone I'd almost idolised had been such a humiliating experience that I had to bring him down to earth. I knew that I could only beat him at his own game: writing, because only writing mattered to him. I had to write something powerful enough that it would force him to come back to me. It was almost a matter of life and death. So I entered a trance-like state and I began writing *The Spiritual Night*. After reading it, Genet said, "It was like a wake-up slap," then, "It's as beautiful as what I love most: Nerval and Baudelaire." With perfect honesty, he came back to me and we became fast friends.

**Have you found an answer to the question posed by *The Spiritual Night*?**

Of course: women can write whatever they want, and there's no objection to make. But in the West, to be the equal of men, women imitate them in their worst aspects, which is the best way of remaining inferior to them. That happens even in literature. Women seem to deny this extraordinary power they have of giving birth, or they relegate it to an inferior position, as if it were humiliating. But giving life, and most of all raising a child and teaching him values, is just as extraordinary as writing a book. Instead of trying to become caricatural versions of men, women would do well to take control of their own kingdom instead. Women naturally have, in their youth, an immense power over men; they would be invincible if they reinforced it spiritually—and not intellectually. But in order to do that, they would have to recover an instinct they've lost in our western societies. Whether we're talking about women or men, the real problem is the lack of spiritual life—I'm not necessarily talking about religion—in the West today. All you'll get are meaningless recipes for happiness or meditation.

**You talk about the life gypsy women lead in *Lightning*. On what is this equilibrium based?**

My teachers weren't Bourdieu, Deleuze, or Lacan, but because of the life I've led, the poet Jean Grosjean and the gypsies. They awakened in me a desire for a simple life, a return to the primordial Eden. French tzigane couples have this camaraderie that reminded me of Adam and Eve and that I've found nowhere else. The equilibrium of this life is based on the respect of the differences between men and women, but also on harmony with the natural world that surrounds them. In my youth, in spite of all the hardships I had to face and of the toughness of the gypsies, I tasted paradise. Today, it's a world that's quickly disappearing. The harmful effects of technology are felt first by those pure people. We're doing to the gypsies what we did to the Inuit or to the Indians.

## What is it that our world has lost?

The modern world slowly destroys the human part of life. It's an evidence that everyone can see but against which no one fights. Just look at how everyone was seduced by technology. This world of images it conveys is first and foremost a world of numbers, which is in turn nothing but a world of money where the prestige of language loses ground every day. I didn't change environments when I was twenty because I wanted to lead a more exotic life—after all, the tziganes were as French as I was—but in the same way one chooses to be healthier, to get closer to a language that's more alive. By staying outside of modernity, gypsies have long managed to keep this powerful instinct of life and this sense of the other that our society seems to have irremediably lost. What I'm saying here is nothing but banalities but today, the attraction of progress is such, especially for the young, that one needs to be very strong to resist it. To resist the billions of images a screen flashes at you, you need to be stronger, psychically speaking, than to climb Mount Everest. Those who can still take an interest in their neighbours and content themselves with a simple life are the real modern heroes.

## What can poetry do, in this context?

We tend to think that poetry is just this small thing we add to our lives, like some superfluous luxury, when it is exactly the opposite: real poetry—that is, a word human enough to spread among people and move hearts—is the first sign that a civilisation is healthy. When a publisher stops publishing good poetry, or stops publishing poetry altogether, you know for certain it isn't doing well, because this sort of spiritual laboratory that is poetry is the best reflection of the vitality of a culture, of a people. Just like birds, when men are perfectly sane, they sing. When poetry becomes something that everyone finds boring, it's not a sign that poetry as a whole has become boring, but that there are no longer any publishers able to recognise great poetry for what it is. Of course bad poetry is bad! Readers can't be deceived, they don't want to read any anymore. But what about good poetry? After all, Victor Hugo was given a national funeral. Since poetry is nothing but language taken to its burning point, why would it be any different today? What politician wouldn't dream of having Jean Genet's or Rimbaud's lyricism? That's why we need good professional readers. By employing mediocre readers, a publisher can make a lot of money by publishing novels that correspond to the zeitgeist, but if he can't publish any great poet, if he doesn't have readers that are able to find them instead of being tricked by some show-offs, his company will have no literary future. The death of poetry is, in the long run, nothing less than the death of man.



## You have ties to the world of theatre through your mother, an actress. She even wanted you to become an actress as well.

Jean Grosjean used to ask, "Do you know your part?" Very early I had the feeling that I wanted to play my own role. The world is a theatre of the real, and the roles we play in it are by far the most interesting, since they involve actual births and deaths, and the risks of a text that's constantly improvised. In the East, there's no such thing as theatre, because people live their roles fully. But in the West, we've needed theatre to live our lives to the fullest. Today—and it's a great paradox—with the arrival of the virtual through technology, western theatre has taken on a whole new dimension. Threatened by a world that is ever more fake and menaces us with its special effects, theatre has finally found its calling: on the stage, people now take the time to live that they can't find in their daily lives, and thanks to the density of the dialogue, they give to their interlocutor—to the other—the possibility to exist. Going to the theatre today is almost like experiencing a sort of mental reeducation, an obligation to pay close attention to what the other is saying. Dramatic actors today are almost like the monks of a non-religious order, just like classical dancers. Anything that advocates a sort of slowness, of silence, of interiority, is an enemy of the dictatorship of the image.

## You left the world of the theatre behind to enter the very real world of the gypsies. What was your reaction when Olivier Py asked to present your texts at the Festival d'Avignon?

I've always been attracted to a secret and wild life, whereas my mother, although she was very secretive in her life, dreamt of being in the limelight. As a teenager, I built my identity against this world of illusions, because the constant moral suffering of my mother only made obvious the fragility of actors. Then I married a gypsy. I didn't see gypsy circus as a show, but as a small world moving within the big world. The glamour of theatre, with its gilded dressing rooms and its bigger-than-life actors is so powerful that I knew I would succumb to it if I didn't flee as far away as I could. With a poet's boldness, Olivier Py reopened this red velvet door inside me that I'd slammed shut in my youth. For a theatre director to point a spotlight at a body of work that was created in the darkest night of secret is a sort of divine twist of fate, which delights me the same way everything that is truly unpredictable—and thus alive—does. It's not easy to turn one's back on one's roots: in the way I dress, which I'd like to be as simple as possible, there's always some small vulgar detail that always finds its way in, despite myself, like some spell that would have been cast on me—a sparkly fringe, a gilded leather belt, one too many copper bracelets, which are probably related to the theatre clothes I used to see in my mother's trunk.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas.

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