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Dissidence is Bliss: The Ecstasy of Rebellion in the Works of Jean Genet

By Shane Fallon

Mentored by Harold Aram Veesser

August 2013

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
of the City College of the City University of New York

“We must see our rituals for what they are: completely arbitrary things, tired of games and irony, it is good to be dirty and bearded, to have long hair, to look like a girl when one is a boy (and vice versa); one must put ‘in play,’ show up transform, and reverse the systems which quietly order us about. As far as I am concerned, that is what I try to do in my work.”

-Michel Foucault

“What is this story of Fantine about? It is about society buying a slave. From whom? From misery. From hunger, from cold, from loneliness, from desertion, from privation. Melancholy barter. A soul for a piece of bread. Misery makes the offer, society accepts.”

-Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*

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## Introduction

To truly understand the process of human thought, one must go back in time to the moment of creation, the detonation of the Big Bang, and the formation of the universe, its galaxies, the sun, our solar system and the Earth. One must bear in mind the sentiments of the first life forms on Earth and the awkward, alien creatures that first ventured out of the depths of the oceans to take a chance at living on land. Over thousands of generations and millions of years, these creatures became mammals, some of these mammals became primates, and a branch of these primates broke off from the rest of their ape cousins and became man. Eventually, their brains discovered that through the use of their hands and thumbs a means could be devised from which one could record everything from one's thoughts to ones itinerary for the day. From there philosophy, the arts, science, and literature were born.

In order to understand the mindset of what has come to be known as the Western world, I feel that the most logical place to begin would be via the writings of the greatest thinkers of ancient Greece- Plato, Aristotle, and their many brilliant brethren and successors from Egypt, Asia, and beyond. From there one will be able to confidently submerge oneself into the next chapter of human history, the medieval, and the strange Ptolemaic universe of courtly love which governed their customs. From the ashes of the Black Death, this proverbial student of life would be lead to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the eighteenth century, and ultimately into the modern, where the abandonment of religion, the death of God, and the evolution of a massively destructive, systematic and orderly way of waging war and wiping out thousands of individuals in a matter of seconds would lead humanity's greatest minds to question whether we as a

human race had made any real progress since first crawling out of the oceans and forming coherent thoughts.

Unfortunately, such a study, while idealistic, is at its best unrealistic and its worst impossible. Such an undertaking would require the reading and study of thousands of years of work, comprising millions of texts and encompassing every field from abnormal psychology to zoology, and at the end of the day I doubt one would be able to make a semblance of real progress or walk away with any solid conclusions on the nature of existence. One would have to have the power, patience and objectivity of God himself to see such a project through, and would need at least ten lifetimes.

What we do instead, as aspiring professional academics and administrators is isolate a single point in a society's history and the work or works of a single person or text. By submerging ourselves in this "desert of the real" we are able to dilute the macro to the micro, and more confidently attempt to reach a solution to the problems of the future by becoming much, much more familiar with this individuals attempted solutions to the problems of the past. It is from here that I feel I have been directed, in a matter personal, political, spiritual and intellectual, to the works of Jean Genet, a twentieth century French author, born 1910, died 1986, whose work bore witness to many of the past century's less than luminous events.

Like most of the more rewarding things in life, in-depth study of Genet is both intensely difficult and intensely frustrating. I feel in the time given to pursue this project I have barely scraped the surface of my subject; but given another six months, year, lifetime or ten lifetimes I still do not think I would be able to give an analysis of Genet which would meet my personal state of approval. Some topics would hatch in my mind

almost via magic or divine intervention, and as such would take off without a hitch, others seemed like scholarly gold upon initial contemplation but after intense research and speculation proved to be little more than dead air and empty print. Still other ideas would manifest themselves to me, be written down, only to be forgotten and rediscovered buried underneath piles of paperwork and brainchild outlines which never spanned past the first few sentences. One memorable instance of creative dysfunction was the discovery of two separate pieces which I believed to be articles on the theme of Genet, Palestine and “the intellectual as guerilla,” only for me to discover that said pieces were not only interviews, but exactly identical pieces published at different points in time by different translators, in different journals no less, and that a far superior copy of the entire transcript was in one of my personal volumes all along!

My central theme in this project has been what I affectionately call the “ecstasy of rebellion” in Genet’s work. When I speak of “ecstasy” I find it easy to distinguish the notion of the word from the sexual, and nearly by association its pornographic aspect. True, there is plenty of sexy imagery to choose from in Genet’s writings, and while that does play a part in the “ecstasy” that I speak of, the real ecstasy I sought to uncover in this project is the childlike joy, mirth and rapture that comes from disobedience in the world of Genet, whether said ecstasy comes from stealing, whoring, or picketing against the oppressions of an empire nation. This is a man whose contradictions embodied every fiber of his being; a man who in the eyes of many constantly betrayed his nation, yet lived off their government until his twenties and sought its pardon when faced with lifetime imprisonment; a man who considered the Catholic church a primary adversary and yet admired pimps, criminals, and thieves with a reverence which bordered upon

saintly adoration. The rebellion in Genet's work coincides nicely with many of the revolutions and social conflicts of the twentieth and fledgling twenty-first century, among them the Second World War, the Spanish Civil War, the Algerian War for Independence, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, not to mention the civilian uprisings occurring worldwide at this very moment. Much more often than not we find him on the minority or losing team. I've found in a large part of my reading that while politics does play a part in the revolutionary soul of Genet, at his core his primary motivation is not death or bloodshed, but rather equality, love, a voice for all and a place at the table. An animosity towards conventional society certainly exists, but this sentiment is blended with a harsh, bitter realism that can only be attributed to many years in the trenches with what Franz Fanon called the "wretched of the earth." My hope for the readers of this essay is that they see the soft side of Genet, which merges so fantastically with his extravagant iconoclasm, and with that be able to see not only a clearer picture of him and his legacy, but walk away with a better understanding of more peculiar individuals and the fringes of society as a whole.

#### Acknowledgements

This project would have died before it was ever thought to be conceived were it not for Bernard Frechtman's translations of Genet's work into English. Frechtman was not only Genet's translator, but also his friend; and any non-French speaking reader of Genet would be less the wiser without his impeccable translations, which I am sure capture Genet's essence perfectly. Nearly fifty years after his suicide, the void left behind by this translator of great literature remains considerable. History may see him as something different, perhaps a twentieth century Constance Garnett, but in the here and

now and the context of this project I remain immensely grateful for his dedication to bringing Genet to the U.S.

I must also thank author and biographer Edmund White, whose 1993 tome *Genet*, while largely forgotten and currently out of print, is nevertheless definitive, at least in the study of Genet here in the States. While I have never met Mr. White, and while a member of a younger generation of homosexual men with far different ideas and opinions, I am nevertheless immensely grateful to him for gathering together the most immense and comprehensive study of Genet currently available in English, and possibly any other language.

The academic search engine JSTOR has been of immense help to me in uncovering articulate, insightful, and enlightening articles and criticism on Genet and his work that without their meticulous filing of their online database would have long been forgotten. My thanks also go out to the City College Cohen library, whose safe and quiet space provided many hours of study, writing, meditation and contemplation.

To my advisor on this project, Professor Harold Veaser, I am immensely grateful for help and advice on how to approach this potentially lugubrious subject, despite it not being your area of expertise, thank you for making the time for me despite both of our extremely busy schedules. My thanks also go out to City College professors Mikhal Dekel, Joshua Wilner, and Paul Oppenheimer for offering excellent courses in the MA program over the two years I have been here.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my friends and family for supporting me in my personal struggles to see this project through to completion, especially my parents and sister.



## A Note on Citation

The essays I cite in Chapters 4 and 5, “Angela and Her Brothers,” “Angela Davis is In Your Clutches,” “For George Jackson,” “Four Hours in Shatila,” and “The Palestinians,” have all been collected in the text *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*. I have cited this book as a single source in my Works Cited page and the page numbers cited throughout the manuscript are in accordance with their placement in this work.

## Chapter 1

### Faggotry, Faith, and the Great River: *Our Lady of the Flowers* as the Seeds of Discontent

*Our Lady of the Flowers* remains Genet's most widely read and widely misinterpreted novel. It is Genet at his most emotionally wrought, when his experiences as a ward of the French state, thief, prostitute and vagabond were still fresh in his mind and a part of the here and now. Written while the author was in prison awaiting trial for a litany of crimes, it is a difficult text to say the least while at the same time a cornerstone and usurper of modernism. In my years of study on this subject, I cannot help but observe how the majority of Genet criticism sees this text as the be-all-end-all to the Genet canon, when it is in fact merely a foundation for a school of metaphysical thought and post-secular intellect that continues to defy definition. Genet's school of exposition is always centered on the "Other," the unknown, the forgotten, who the rest of the world considers losers, freaks, et cetera. The great French writers of tradition-- Hugo, Balzac, Zola, and the like-- had with their massive tomes on the human condition, managed to make the outcasts of their day, the poor, into fleshed out human beings with heart and soul. Genet inherited this literary responsibility, and whether he was aware of it or not, he incorporated it into his own work before ultimately expanding upon and completely usurping it in a style all his own.

It is no coincidence that Genet's later years and death in 1986 directly related to the advent of the era of globalization, and he was always one to change with the times. He retained the vision from which Hugo and Balzac had started, but his idea of exploited peoples was expanded to include the downtrodden worldwide, the soldiers of misfortune,

and the wretched of the earth. The Algerians, Palestinians, the Black Panthers, the Baader-Meinhof group of West Germany-- Genet would become one with these groups across the decades of his distinguished career, while at the same time making them human in the eyes of many readers from the West. When it comes to *Our Lady of the Flowers*, we see how it all began and where the seeds of Genet's dissidence begin to grow. It is in this novel where Genet the downtrodden came into his own among oppressed demographics that were his birthright-- the prisoners and the homosexuals. It is from here that all else will organically flow in the literary garden of Genet, and it remains to admire a few of the blossoms he helped nurture.

Narrated by Genet himself- author, prisoner, and God-emperor- and revolving around the one man universe of his prison cell, the book is a series of stories about young men, perfect in physical beauty and the beauty of their crimes whose narratives themselves are inspired by the handsome young men from magazine ads and books which Genet has confiscated in secret from tattered remains of magazines and newspapers and placed on the walls of his cell to look at while he masturbates. There is no finer portrait of drudgery than this collage of muses our hero has assembled:

I do not know whether it is their faces, the real ones, which spatter the wall of my cell with a sparkling mud, but it cannot be by chance that I cut those handsome, vacant-eyed heads out of the magazines. I say vacant, for all the eyes are clear and must be sky-blue, like the razor's edge to which clings a star of transparent light, blue and vacant like the windows of buildings under construction, through which you can see the sky from the windows of an opposite wall

-(*Our Lady* 52-53).

It is wrong to see *Our Lady of the Flowers* as merely a story about male sexual deviants living and loving on the fringes of society- in my reading I have come to see it as both a manual of modernism and the closest a French author has come to magical realism. These aspects of the work, however, can wait until later. My goal in this first essay is several-fold. I wish to cast further illumination upon *Our Lady of the Flowers* in both a macro and a micro sense with regards to Genet's biography and his literary canon. The former will examine the work as the proverbial, seeds, roots, and foundation of his overall output, while the latter will see the text as an examination of Genet the individual and the evolution of his personal self, which will inevitably include a global political and aesthetic vision. The 'seeds' of our subjects rebellion against the systems and structures of his society have been divided into several areas in this essay: the invocation of *Our Lady of the Flowers* narrator, (Genet, or a more intensified astral projection of him) towards his lost mother, Gabriella, the mandatory examination in any study of this author of prison life and its structures, the metamorphosis of *Our Lady's* star protagonist Divine across class lines, courts of law, and gender, the canonization of the novels criminals *despite* society's condemnation of them, and last but not least Genet's use of simile and metaphor across the novels terrain, and how these seeming non sequiturs rebel against 'organized language' itself.

The minstrels of old in ancient Greece evoked the muse spirits to inspire and assist them in telling the stories they felt needed to be told, whether they be personal, historical, political or cultural. Thirty centuries later in my study of Genet, I find his most primal muse to be that first, most defining figure of his inspiration, contemplation, and life to be

the figure of his mother. Camille Gabrielle Genet was born in 1888, most likely to a poor, nomadic French family. In all his creative output, Genet refers to her by her second name, Gabrielle, or Gabriella. Edmund White believes Jean chose to refer to his mother by this name because he found it “more beguiling, [just as] he conferred on Gabriel in *Our Lady of the Flowers*, an infantryman dressed in sky-blue cloth, as an ‘archangel” (White, *Genet* 9). Gabriella was twenty-two and unmarried when she gave birth to her son on December 19, 1910. She had listed her profession as maid and governess upon checking into the clinic from which Jean was born; however what little evidence that remains would seem to suggest she was in fact a prostitute and vagabond. Camille kept her son with her until he was seven months old, at which point she abandoned him to the dominion of the French state, where he remained a ward in more ways than one until his early twenties, when the penal system and the streets became his sole caregiver. According to White, in early twentieth century France, the fate of bastard children was set in stone:

Most illegitimate babies were separated from their mothers only two or three days after delivery and placed with foster parents. Genet was fortunate in that his mother kept him with her for the first seven months of life. That Camille Genet lived with her child so long could be interpreted in various ways. Perhaps she hoped to raise him as her own but after a brave attempt was forced to give him up. Or perhaps she wanted to keep him until he could be safely weaned. Or perhaps she wanted to receive the initial bounty that was awarded unmarried mothers to encourage them not to abandon their children...If she had given him up sooner, she would not have been obliged to provide her real name on the official documents nor

to give her family name to Genet. Thanks to this technicality we know  
who Genet's mother was  
-(White, *Genet*, 10-11).

And thus the physical relationship between Genet and his mother was terminated and a far more complicated metaphysical and spiritual one was born. The infant Genet was then sent to a simple peasant town, Alligny-en-Morvan, to the care of a simple peasant family, the Regniers, and in the eyes of the French bureaucracy came to be known as identification number 192.102. Of Camille, the only evidence we know for sure is that she remained in Paris until 1919, where she died at the age of thirty, one of the nearly 100 million casualties of the worldwide, post-World War I influenza epidemic.

#### I. Sins of the Mother

When it comes to *Our Lady of the Flowers*, I do find that Gabrielle's influence permeates throughout, but it is a very subtle permeation indeed, much like a small candle setting the ambiance in a room where a far more dramatic scene is about to unfold. Nevertheless, her essence almost constantly lingers. At the time of the novels writing, Jean Genet was already over thirty years old, his mother was long absent and long dead; her very existence to him had faded like an aged scar. Yet the ghost of Gabriella still lingers in the heart of her son like the event horizon to a black hole, and according to White:

In Genet's fiction his mother is sometimes imagined as a noblewoman,  
sometimes as a prostitute or beggar whom he will pass on the street.  
Elsewhere Genet maternalizes Mettray, the colony of delinquents where  
he lived as an adolescent; he'll declare that Mettray was his true

mother... The two things that frequently 'sicken' the narrator of Genet's fiction are mothers and miracles, plump breasts and piety. Yet this mild revulsion seems to mask a deeper desire, since a religious vocabulary, if not a set of conventional beliefs, is everywhere invoked. Whenever Genet mentions motherhood he seeks to profane it, and his primary portrait of a mother in his first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, is of a murderous hysteric

-(White, *Genet*, 8).

The mother White speaks of is Ernestine, the mother of the scoundrel Louis Culafroy, who becomes the luminous being Divine. I must admit that upon first reading of the novel I saw little promise in Ernestine as a particularly essential character, I daresay that a traditional scholar of the novel would declare her an archetypal 'flat' character in the vein of Jane Austen's Mrs. Dashwood or Lady Bertram, merely important as a cushioning to the goings on of *Our Lady's* more prominent and scandalous male leads. To an extent, scholar Edith Whitehurst Williams agrees, but she brings up an immensely intriguing point on how Ernestine can in fact relate nicely to Genet's most primal point of rebellion and discontent, which is against the figure of the mother:

In the total fabric of the novel Ernestine does not loom so large, other characters such as Darling Daintyfoot, Our Lady, and Seck Gorgui occupying more prominent positions. But we must bear in mind that the free-associating Genet can include or exclude at will, and the fact that he introduces her at the emotion-laden death-scene [of Divine] accords her a certain importance. However, the role of Ernestine cannot be analyzed in

terms of conventional principles of narrative structure; the allusions to her are vague, often irrelevant, her behaviors incomprehensible in ordinary terms. She can be better understood if we examine the characterization from the viewpoint of the archetype...as the inescapable figure of a mother who excites both love and fear

-(Williams 23).

One could go on forever with an examination of Ernestine's non-sequiturs and acts of literariness, but I believe Genet puts it best when he describes Ernestine, and thus his mother as both having "already died four or five times, [and] the apartment [will] remain available for a drama more serious than [their] own deaths" (Genet 65).

## II. Gender Bending and 'Divine' Intervention

While Divine is not the proverbial 'Lady of the Flowers,' I believe that she remains the most fascinating, layered, and endearing personality in the novel. Genet, never a mere subject of novelistic form and technicality, drifts freely in and out between space and time, past and present, and along the ride one is witness to various stages of evolution and dissolution in his creations. We see at various temporal intervals how Divine, who at the time of her death was a washed up prostitute, vagabond, and general scab of Parisian society came to be at this destitute, hopeless point of existence when in the beginning she was Culafroy, a simple country farm boy. Many, many scholars of Genet have stated that Divine is merely Culafroy in a drag guise, but I dare go far enough to say that the Divine persona is not merely Culafroy in drag, but a bold faced action by Genet of completely altering his characters personality, sexuality, gender, and *anatomy* all on his own personal whim. Says Williams:



The lonely and sensitive little village boy, Loius Culafroy, is “transmogrified” into the Parisian faggot, “Divine.” From her garret overlooking the cemetery we witness her joys and despairs, follow her complicated trafficking into drugs and sex, and after approximately a decade, we watch her die, tragic, rejected, and classically consumptive in her old age (she is approaching thirty). The story begins and ends with the funeral of Divine [and is served to bookend the goings on of the novels other characters, even the title heroine, Our Lady]

-(Williams 23).

Continuing this thought, I believe that the best way of truly understanding *Our Lady of the Flowers* is by examining the character of Divine as a self aware, willfully shape shifting entity, effortlessly able to cross the lines between man and woman, gender and sexuality, respectability and criminal, all at Genet’s whim and command. This is where true rebellion against convention indeed exists, at a manipulation of ones social mores at the very cellular and molecular level. Says scholar Bernard Elevation, “Genet’s narrative, whether told in the first or third person, is of one piece; there is no point in supposing that the “I” of *Our Lady* is merely an observer...the meaning of *Our Lady* does not arise from its dramatic action, or from such generalized themes as the active and passive homosexual, the alienation of contemporary man, and the like. Instead, the work’s peculiar strength and presence emerge from its poetic language, from the sacramental and liturgical figures that mingle with sexual and other physiological imagery and coalesce somehow into a personal vision” (Elevation 408). I would even go so far to state that the ‘gender bending’ (to put that term very loosely) nature of Divine represents our authors

first concrete act in writing against one of his lifelong adversaries, the Catholic Church, and that by giving Divine these powers of transformation, transmogrification, and metamorphosis, he is usurping the orthodox doctrine of Jesus Christ himself.

### III. Home Sweet Home: Prison as Paradise in the Land of Genet

What is a prison, in the life and canon of Genet? In one sense, the national, and in this case the French, it is one of the crueler penal systems in the Western world. In another, the micro, in terms of the life of our author, it is his most consistent home from age sixteen to forty, when he is pardoned, never to return. In the canonical, via the novels *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *Miracle of the Rose*, and *The Thief's Journal* it is a web of contradiction, a place of squalor that is at the same time home to the most beautiful of men, whose beauty, like the length of their sentence and their sexual preference, remains fluid, uncertain, dangerous and intriguing. To Genet, the prison is a collective, yes, but not a cooperative community of thought, communication, cooperation and redemption but an organized free-for-all of stolen glances, public nudity, and the ever apparent 'gaze' of the guards, who at any time could strike our antiheroes down faster than the Almighty above. Scholar Michael Hardt makes a fabulous analysis of the Genetian prison environment, and excellently connects it to this special environments intriguing conceptions of time, reality, and person:

Time is always [the prisoners] primary concern...In prison time, the being itself of the inmates seems to have been emptied, reducing them to mere shadows that shuffle around the corridors. The weights of destiny, the fate imposed by the sovereign power of prison time seems to have pushed them out of their bodies, out of existence altogether. Prisoners are thus

forced to seek an essence elsewhere, detached from their wasted, impoverished existence. Interior life appears to some as a refuge outside of time and beyond the pain and tedium of the prison routine. 'No matter how much they expose me to the brutal eye of the prison authorities, no matter how many strip searches and humiliations, they can't touch the real me inside.' Other inmates take consolation in feverishly imagining the fullness of a life of freedom outside the walls of their imprisonment- either their real past, an alternative present, or a future after their release. 'The first thing I'll do when I get out is... Then I'll really be living.' This full being and full time cannot coincide with their existence, but must be projected always elsewhere. It should be no surprise that so many inmates undergo religious conversions. They are forced to grapple with one of the most intense metaphysical problematics and they suffer a properly ontological malady. They are constrained to an existence separate from being- this is their exile from living

-(Hardt 66).

As we have already seen, this is not the case for Genet. The 'metaphysical problematic' Hardt speaks of is for our hero an intellectual breeding ground, a garden for cultivation flourishing with sin, sodomy, dirt, and grime. Genet's cage, his cell, the place of containment for his heathen and illegal extracurricular activities is instead his own personal playground. His mind creates a place of camp, extravagance, and utter nihilism. The cult of Genet is not Christ, the Virgin, nor a philosophy of redemption but rather a cult of his fantasy world, fuelled by his libido, whose outlet lies in the form of

masturbation. Alone in his cell, after yet another long day of French penal drudgery, he evokes the spirits of fellow “thieves and hoodlums, whose faces enter my face and whose bodies, from afar, hurl mine to the ground. I long to have them within my reach...The memory of his memory made way for other men...Now I am exhausted with inventing circumstances in which he loves me more and more...I am exhausted; I have a cramp in my wrist” (Genet 76-7). With this scene, we can see that the fate of Genet as a hellion in every sense of the word has been sealed, and his vendetta and plot to awaken the consciousness of the world has only just begun.

## Chapter 2

### Farewell, Sartre: Genet's Second Stage of Rebellion as Betrayal of His Mentor

“The imposing girth of Sartre’s “introduction” to Genet’s *Complete Works* and the stultifying effect that its publication had on Genet has been discussed before. What is seldom analyzed in depth is the manifold meaning transmitted by Sartre’s title, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. A Pandora’s box, this title suggests mutability rather than the transfixed identity usually associated with the Sartrean project... Sartre’s Genet [is] a Proteus capable of assuming the roles of thief, stoolie, writer, high priestess, saint. Yes, Sartre attacks society by thrusting at it the very monster it created.

However, the significance we should infer from the title might not be so much the vengeful destruction wreaked by Genet’s role-playing, but rather the *triumphant indifference to being that Genet embodies*. Nothing is less certain than the presumption that the creature referred to in Sartre’s title is that twentieth-century writer so often compared to Villon and Sade”

-Robert Harvey, “Genet’s Open Enemies: Sartre and Derrida”

“It is interesting that Genet (contrary to what Sartre asserts in his massive study, *Saint Genet*) was already working in several different forms at the beginning of his career- drama, film, poetry, and fiction.”

-Edmund White, *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*, Introduction

“One of the most astonishing critical studies ever written about one writer by another.”

-*Time* magazine on *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*

It has been said that great things come in pairs, two heads are better than one, destiny is not an express train; one must pick up a lot of people on the way. Cliché, while for the most part irrelevant, still has a place of merit in the world of Genet and his extravagance. In the history of twentieth century literature, the story of the orphan son of a prostitute who metamorphosed into one of the giants of twentieth century French intellect remains one no less intriguing in the present day. To use one more cliché, in the end, success is all about who one knows, and in terms of Genet’s success he would not have made his way to the top of the French intelligentsia without his multilayered extended social network, which included some of the finest artists, writers, and philosophers ever to work in the humanities.

In my opinion, the first stage of Genet’s success as the “dark prince of French letters” would not have been possible without his friendships with two exceptional individuals, twentieth century polymaths Jean Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre. While young Jean’s relationship with the former is one endlessly fascinating and rampant with

brilliance, cattiness, and male homosexual drama that echoes the best feuds of Rimbaud and Verlaine, it is Jean Genet's relationship with the latter, Sartre, and the subsequent distance from and dissolution of that friendship, and its effect on the overall development of Genet the artist that I wish to focus on in this essay. It is my goal to illustrate how the influence of Sartre, directly and indirectly, magnificently corresponds to the second stage of Genet's rebellion against structure and establishment, in which he abandons literature forever and turns instead to experimental theatre and radical political activism, along the way leaving a considerable number of articles and fragments on the great artists in his wake.

### I. Meet the Cast, or Friendship and Fighting

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris in 1905, five years prior to Genet. Like Genet, he never really knew his father, as Jean-Baptiste Sartre died when his son was still an infant. Besides being male and natives of France, in regards to their early lives this is where our hero's similarities would appear to end. Sartre came from a long line of aristocratic French heritage and intellect. His famous relatives included his mother's cousin Albert Schweitzer, the Franco-German missionary who dedicated his life to helping the downtrodden in Africa. Despite the trauma of losing his biological father at a young age, Jean-Paul was privileged with a classical education by his grandfather and considered a prodigy. His exceptional education led him to Paris' elite school of philosophy, the Ecole Normale Superieure, where he gained his initial reputation in Paris as a philosopher and intellectual worth noting. Unlike the swarthy, dark-eyed, brooding homosexual menace Genet, Sartre, despite his horn-rimmed glasses, small stature (just barely five foot one) and otherwise unremarkable physical appearance was a notorious

ladies man- his fifty-one year relationship with fellow intellectual Simone de Beauvoir is the stuff of legend, and the couples 'open' (to say the least) parameters on their relationship continues to amaze. While Genet's creative output is sparse, polished, and specific, Sartre's published work includes everything from literary criticism, novels, theatre, personal essays, political pieces, and of course, philosophy. In one of the purer acts of humility, and yes rebellion that I have ever encountered both in and out of academia, Sartre was the first person awarded the Nobel Prize to turn the honor down. While widely considered, along with Camus, to be the father of existentialism, especially via his novel *Nausea* and play *No Exit*, I cannot help but feel that Sartre's legacy, while very rich, has been contaminated by gross generalizations and misreading of his work by lesser critics more intent on appearing interesting than actually understanding and comprehending the material. Even in his lifetime, Sartre's output and legacy was eclipsed and countered by the burgeoning structuralist and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s that swept across the United States and Europe. Despite many of his philosophies being disproven and his novels and plays becoming hopelessly trapped in the realm of high school syllabi, I still hold out hope that one day Sartre will receive the critical analysis and examination he deserves. Unfortunately, that day is not today. However, when examining these two different and hopelessly intertwined figures in this critical context, I believe it becomes easier for one to understand what exactly was the nature of Sartre's friendship with Jean Genet.

## II. Genet's Rise to Public Prominence and the Withering of the First Flower

Jean and Jean-Paul first met in Paris not long before the city's liberation by the Allies in 1944. The Second World War was nearing its end and the nation and peoples of

France were finding themselves at a crossroads. Their empire remained strong in name but the years under the Germans had spread the foul smell of death and discontent about the legitimacy of the French state, especially its far away colonies in Africa and Asia. Much of the French population in all corners of their society had collaborated subtly or directly with the Nazis, and the deportation of approximately 76,000 French Jews to Hitler's death camps by their own countrymen remains one of the lesser known and more despicable acts of the Second World War and twentieth century history. The eccentric, extravagant, larger than life Cocteau had introduced Genet and his works to the elite, literary members of Parisian society, and our hardened criminal in prison stripes was being transformed into a polished, published, controversial (and of course smolderingly handsome) man of letters. Meeting Jean-Paul Sartre, the undisputed king of French public intellectuals at this cumbersome time, was inevitable. Contemporary Genet commentator Stephen Barber does an excellent job of setting the scene for this great meeting of minds in his 2004 study for *Critical Lives*:

[Paris' liberation] in August 1944 created the conditions in which Genet could undertake an ascendancy into glory, although its raw components of celebrity, wealth and socialization proved unbearable assets for him.

While his books were available only in covert or anonymous editions during the second half of the 1940s, their status as expensive, luxury items started to generate income for Genet; in particular, he now began to acquire rich patrons who bought the handwritten manuscripts of his novels, such as Jacques Guerin, the collector who owned Proust's bedroom and its entire contents...His sudden celebrity made him appear to



have emerged from nowhere and enabled him to encounter the intellectual arbiters of post-Liberation Paris in the Saint-Germain-des-Pres cafes; although those cafes were crammed with new poets, all in hostile competition with one another, Genet's violently edged notoriety and the impact of his novels cleared an autonomous space for him

-(Barber 52).

Little has been written on the early years of Jean and Jean-Paul's friendship, but it is safe to say that despite their many differences of class, background, and of course sexuality, both did find a fulfilling personal and intellectual friendship from each other. Genet dedicated his fifth and final novel *The Thief's Journal* to Sartre and de Beauvoir, and when he was arrested yet again in 1948 for theft and sentenced to life in prison, Sartre and Cocteau spearheaded a campaign to the president of the French republic to pardon our hero for his indiscretions. Genet would never again be incarcerated. My research has shown that in many ways, Genet was a prophetic fulfillment and archetypal definition of Sartre's school of existentialist thought, which particularly emphasizes strong willed, self aware individuals actively persevering in an otherwise indifferent universe slowly obliterating itself via its own daily routine. According to Bernard Elevitch, "Genet's career, his continuance in time, is in Sartre's view more than historical; heroically, Genet takes part in events defined by larger meanings" (Elevitch 409). Later on in his excellent article "Sartre and Genet" Elevitch goes on to elaborate further on Sartre's almost messianic reverence of his friend:

For Sartre, Genet is the paradigm of existentialist theory; his commitment to thievery and homosexuality is not only a "consecration" but a free

choice in response to (but not determined by) the social environment. Genet steals because he seeks being or the good, as established by “right thinking” members of the bourgeoisie; at the same time, because he takes away one’s possessions, he represents change, negation, nothing... “A wrong way Descartes,” Genet “recognizes himself as being only insofar as he is perceived,” and in saintly abjection, blames himself for acts and habits of which (apart from society’s valuation) he is innocent. At the same time, he is a free agent who attacks the bourgeois battlements, a saintly conscience who challenges and would destroy moral complacency

-(Elevitch 410).

Sartre’s endorsement and fascination with Genet’s life and work would culminate in his 1952 opus *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. Originally intended as an accompanying commentary to what was then Genet’s collected works, *Saint Genet*, like all great and controversial works of creation, would eventually take off and become something much, much more than anyone thought it would be, and the text would leave a lasting imprint on the lives of both author and subject.

### III. *Saint Genet* And its Fallout

As I have already mentioned, Sartre’s *Saint Genet* was published in 1952, the same year Genet was up to his neck in a turbulent love affair with a significantly younger Italian prostitute named Decimo, which left him in an already heightened state of agitation and distress. Edmund White calls Sartre’s book a “very long existential psychoanalysis” of Genet that concentrates “more on his imaginative career than on his biographical development.” White goes on to state the idea that *SG* is Jean-Paul’s

“brilliant re-creation of Genet’s inner life” (White, *Genet* 431-32). I am inclined to agree with White, but I would be remiss in my study of both authors if I did not take a step further and state that *Saint Genet*, while of course a labyrinthine work of classic Sartrean brilliance, is in reality a recreation of Genet’s inner life, but only from Jean-Paul’s solipsistic point of view. White goes on to explore Sartre’s epistemology in composing the book and I cannot help in retrospect to observe this chain of events in a classic formation of cause and effect, like begetting like:

Sartre based his speculations on endless conversations on an abstract level with a cooperative Genet...[Unlike his previous literary studies of Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Flaubert] Genet was not a long dead classic writer ripe for new interpretation. He was still relatively young, vulnerable, exhausted after immense imaginative labors, unknown to one half of cultured Paris and considered by the other to be the bad boy of letters, Cocteau’s latest genius, a pornographer, a jailbird, a homosexual. In his novels Genet combined the need to describe his most shameful secrets with the most rigorous sense of privacy...Sartre’s book about Genet and Genet’s fiction are exact opposites, and one is the undoing of the other

-(White 432).

What White is saying is that Sartre’s book of ideas *on* Genet is ultimately incorrect when it comes to a scholarly analysis of Genet’s writings, as they are for the most part overlooked in favor of a largely un-objective fawning over Genet the man. Whether this is because Sartre was Genet’s contemporary, friend, and at the time of *SG*’s

publication the younger Jean's canon was incomplete will remain unknown. What is known is that the books publication had a devastating effect on Genet the man, resulting in him destroying a five year body of work and sinking into a deep depression for the better part of six years; that is until a new creative power emerged within our hero and urged Genet to put his creative skills to task on a new avenue.

I would be remiss in this analysis if I did not take a moment to examine yet another extremely fascinating subject that cross contaminates itself into the various thought webs of Genet, Sartre, and White. It involves directly Genet's homosexuality, the ideas towards homosexuality in the middle point of the past century, and in my opinion it remains a disturbing and fascinating piece of evidence in the context of gay rights and general worth of homosexuals, especially males, in the eyes of hetero-normative society.

White surmises, and I agree, that *Saint Genet* is not exactly a reflection of Genet the author and man but rather a refracted version of himself in the form of Sartre's school of thought. As with all creative processes, it requires a ritual of give and take on both sides. According to White, "the first voluntary step Genet makes is his decision to become what other people accuse him of being. Sartre's memorable formula is: 'I decided to be what crime made me... Like a bride who changes her name, her status, her very being by the act of marrying, the criminal becomes someone entirely different, a murderer, by committing a simple act.'" White then makes a scholarly assumption, all blatantly brought into evidence by Sartre's study, which at best leaves a sour taste in the twenty-first century readers mouth:

In Sartre's reading Genet then *chooses* to be a homosexual, to compound and confirm his outcast position as thief. Sartre thinks that homosexuality

is an emblem of Genet's inverted view of the world and of his thief's vulnerability to being nabbed from *behind*

-(White 434, emphasis mine).

In my opinion, this Voltarican<sup>1</sup> notion of dismissing Genet as yet another example of 'so-called Socratic love,' while at the same time using our hero as an archetype for one's own agenda of existential freedom of choice is not only wrong on a moral level, but it is an insult to artistic integrity and philosophical objectivism, especially from a mind as refined as Sartre's. As a twentieth century reader and an unashamedly zealous advocate of Genet and the legitimacy of the homosexual 'race,' I cannot help but find, as a bona fide child of the twenty-first century that history, the gay rights movement, and contemporary, continuously groundbreaking scientific research stating the biological, chemical, and genetic evidence which *proves* that homosexuality is not in any way a choice but a fact of birth to be the ultimate act of real, staying, ecstatic rebellion against an otherwise insensitive hetero-normative majority often dominated, subtly or outright, by bigotry, dogma, and hate. However, even in this mid-twentieth century context, I cannot help but liken Sartre's fascination with our hero to the relationship between primatologist and chimpanzee, with Sartre as the former and Genet the latter. Pages upon pages of correspondence and criticism, primary and secondary abound with clever anecdotes and psychoanalytic analysis by Sartre concerning Genet and his homosexuality. Sartre saw Genet being an apparent homosexual as some sort of political or aesthetic statement, and in this context he uses Genet as a convenient sieve through which his entire existentialist philosophy can be channeled. In this context, *Saint Genet*

represents one of the more egregious acts by one individual to project his personal ideas, philosophies, and opinions upon another. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and as with any overzealous parent or well-meaning friend, what the progenitor believes they are doing in the name of love ultimately is watered down to one of the more nefarious forms of hate. According to scholar Josette Pacaly:

Genet's work confronted Sartre with his latent homosexuality and anal fixation. [His] thick book [*Saint Genet*] can be read as a protracted and stubborn defense against tendencies he secretly satiates by evoking them. He thus satisfies both his id, which takes pleasure [in the material] and his ego, which is repulsed by it

-(Pacaly 217).

Robert Harvey goes a step further with the help of Pacaly's thesis to create an interesting parallel, ultimately a triumvirate between predecessor Sartre, contemporaneous Genet, and both men's mutual successor Jacques Derrida. According to Harvey, when seeking a vessel from which to channel their various aesthetic and personal treatments of philosophy, both scribes succeed in transforming, and ultimately perverting their hero into something that, however fantastic the result, is a creation entirely reflecting their own self interest:

As Genet ended up doing each time he set out to plumb his poetic imagination, Sartre and [to an extent] Derrida in turn, would create for Genet- but even more importantly for themselves- an object of devotion called "*Genet*," a sort of writerly fetish for whatever a "real" Genet might

have been, a textual ersatz that would serve as Sartre and Derrida's

'captive lover'

-(Harvey 104).

However, literary history has a knack for being beaten to death, and in the unending loops of time, the punishment becomes a constant rebuttal of otherwise insipid points with no hope for resolution. It is possible that in his study of Genet Sartre may have, however selfishly explored his own latent curiosity or interest in homosexuality, but when it comes to his decrees of homosexuality being a choice, however, in the interest of history and the continuing necessity of Sartre's writings on virtually any other matter, I must simply dismiss them as being a product of the authors time. There are many points of merit and demerit when taking a close examination of the relationship between Sartre and Genet, especially when considered in the aftermath of *Saint Genet's* 1952 publication. In this wheels within wheels conundrum of history, through all the Apocrypha and complexity of these two very different men, it remains shocking and exhilarating still to observe, practically firsthand, the betrayal of Genet by Sartre blossoming into an even more fantastic betrayal by Genet, of his mentor- an act of ecstatic defiance which continues to practically shake the letters off the page in its fury and need for a newfound form of self validation.

#### IV. The Phoenix: A Hero Rises from the Ashes and Embraces a new Artistic Medium

As I have already mentioned, following the publication of Sartre's work, Genet sank into a deep and crippling depression. Shortly after *SG's* release, he informed Cocteau that he had destroyed five years of work, and while completely falling out of the public eye went on a series of trips abroad to England, mainland Europe, and west Africa.

*Saint Genet*, while bringing our hero more attention and acknowledgement both in and out of Paris, was not short in the criticism it also raised, against both Jeans to many degrees. Louis Ferdinand de Celine, a longtime supporter of Genet but adversary of Sartre, was so disgusted by the book he turned against both men, as did Georges Bataille, another early twentieth century author who had reached the peak of his popularity in the early 1930s and never had regarded either writer very much in the first place. In many ways, it is almost a blessing that Sartre intervened when he did in the form of this work, otherwise Genet may never have forcibly come out of the confines of literature, reinvented himself as an artist and continued to dazzle the world. White phrases it best when dwelling upon Genet's impromptu career change and how it related to Sartre. In so many words, "in wishing to be consummately evil, Genet embraces the worst action he knows of: betrayal" (White 434). Over the next several years, as I have already mentioned, Genet completely abandoned literature and while not composing the major body of a text, nevertheless composed a series of fragments exploring the art of Rembrandt, contemporary sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti, and a variety of other subjects which never moved past the first stage of development, but nevertheless remain compelling fragments. It was in the medium of theatre from which Genet would ultimately emerge as something new: traces of the sodden, trappy creature of the night still lingering about him, but a powerful, directed figure who had cleared away the literary influences of his past and now stood ready as an intense political animal readily prepared to defend the rights of the subjected in as many corners of the globe as possible. *The Balcony. The Blacks. The Screens.* These are the names from which a new, evolved, and improved form of immortality would be sought.



## Note

<sup>1</sup> What I am referring to here is a lesser known, yet still controversial entry in the great Enlightenment thinker's *Philosophical Dictionary* entitled "amour nommé socratique," or "So-called Socratic love," which by Enlightenment and most pre-modern terms refers to homosexuality. Voltaire, a fellow Frenchman and intellectual great-great grandfather of Genet and Sartre, remains a figure of inspiration and reverence for all champions of freedom and enemies of oppression. However, his thoughts on homosexuality can only be forgiven, but not forgotten, as a product of his time. V describes homosexuality, among other things, as "a vice destructive of mankind," "an infamous outrage against nature," and "the highest degree of deliberate corruption." In an attempt to explain the phenomenon, Voltaire, ever the armchair scientist speculates:

"The young males of our species, brought up together, feeling the force which nature begins to display in them, and not finding the natural object of their instinct, fall back on what resembles it. A young boy often resembles a beautiful girl for two or three years by the freshness of his complexion, the brilliance of his color, and the tenderness of his eyes; if he is loved it is because nature is led astray: homage is paid to the fair sex by attaching oneself to one who has its beauties, and when his age has made this resemblance vanish, the mistake ceases"

-(*Philosophical Dictionary* 31-32).

## Chapter 3

### My Beautiful Caravaggio: *The Balcony* as Genet Channeling (and Usurping) the

#### Renaissance Master

“*The Maids*, which was first staged in Paris on April 19, 1947, but which had been conceived a few years earlier and had gone through several major rewrites- was Genet’s decisive move away from homosexuality [as an artistic form and means of rebellion] as a theme. As he said much later in an interview, [Genet] had decided to recast his personal concerns as a homosexual into other themes of opposition in his theater. In his plays, Genet treated the humiliation of family servants (*The Maids*), the splendors and miseries of whores (*The Balcony*), as well as the smoldering rage of colonized black Africans (*The Blacks*) and Arabs (*The Screens*)...A seven year period, from 1948 to 1955, elapsed between the time Genet composed his novels and the time he began to write his three full length [works], and during this period he was plunged into a nearly suicidal depression. The end of this gloomy period came when Genet made two discoveries. He met the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, and by 1955 the two men had become inseparable. Genet wrote a brilliant essay about Giacometti, a man above or beyond all vanity, who lived for his work and accepted his common humanity. Giacometti provided Genet with an image of how to grow old if not gracefully at least fiercely and with integrity. This encounter was seconded by a nearly mystical experience Genet had in a train, when he was seated opposite a repellent little man. Genet felt in a literal sense an exchange of souls back and forth between himself and this miserable specimen- and this exchange revealed to him that he, Genet, was not a singular, extraordinary being but in fact someone much like everyone else”

-Edmund White, Introduction to *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*, xiii-xiv

“You must do just what is in front of you. And besides that, you must do a picture.”

-Alberto Giacometti, *The Studio of Alberto Giacometti*, from *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*

Once upon a time, as Francine Prose relates to us in her fascinating 2005 study, a man was dying. This was no ordinary man, and the circumstances of his death, just as that of his life, were anything but conventional. The year was 1610, the man’s name was Michelangelo Merisi, and a mix of exhaustion, malaria, paranoia, and a misguided attempt of walking along the Tuscan coast attempting to catch up with the ship which had left him behind brought on his death. Merisi was thirty-nine when he succumbed to his illness, and despite being on the run for murder for the better part of the previous four years, he remained one of the most sought after and popular painters in Italy, if not all of Europe. Yes, while the flame of Michelangelo Merisi the man did go out one lonely day in 1610, history and its many, many afterlives would remember him by a different name- that of his hometown- Caravaggio, who Prose calls in the subtitle to her short but sublime study the “painter of miracles.”

Some 340 years later, give or take a decade, my study of Genet led me on a most unusual journey that along the way resulted in a convergence and ultimately an interlude with the Renaissance painter. Chapter Two of this project dealt with the few similarities yet vast differences which enhanced yet ultimately destroyed Jean Genet's relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre. In this piece, I would like to illustrate how despite the interference of centuries of history and virtually complete absence of comparative study on these two men, in my literary study and Genet's canonical output, JG emerges as a twentieth century heir apparent to Caravaggio's continuously groundbreaking aesthetic and artistic style. While a Genet/Caravaggio comparative analysis/appraisal can be applied to virtually any 'text' in either artist's canon, *The Balcony* will be the nexus of my examination, with Prose's study and the play's Grove Press edition serving as the text from which to go back and forth. When referring to the concept of 'ecstasy' in his writings which remains paramount throughout this document, I hope to convince my readers that in this case Genet's influence by Caravaggio is one purely subconscious, and the joy one can be sure Genet would have felt upon discovering his hindsight connection to this great painter is another key point which I hope to convey.

#### I. A New Beginning: The Theatre of Genet as the Transition from Micro to Macro, Personal to Political

*The Balcony. The Maids. The Blacks. The Screens.* The theatre of Genet contains a mythos all its own, whether or not these works are compared in hand with his novels and political writing. The very syllables which compose the titles set off a small flare, regardless how dim, of the immense controversy, acclaim, and contemplation these plays engendered upon their respective premieres. In the world of Genet, it is difficult to

remain objective, as his literary output and biography tend to merge so fantastically into one muddled, violent and continuously unpredictable entity.

One of the more interesting things about Genet and his entire creative process was his exultant leapfrogging in front, behind, and in between his creative projects. True, all writers have their own unique personal approach to their craft and their many creative endeavors over their career, but the return of Jean Genet to the creative process, half a decade after the debacle wrought to him by Sartre, remains legendary and fascinating. Continues David Walker:

Before, during, and after the rewrites of *The Balcony*, Genet was composing other plays (*The Blacks*, *The Screens*) and moving further and further to the left in political terms: from the Communist Party and a pro-Arab stance over Algeria, to endorsement of Castro and the student revolt in the sixties, to campaigning on behalf of Angela Davis, George Jackson, and the Black Panthers, and subsequently to support the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Baader-Meinhof group...He is clearly preoccupied by the tendency of revolutionary movements to be recuperated as aberrant offshoots of the dominant order...What emerges as a major theme in Genet's committed writings...is the situation of individuals and movements which are condemned to use the discourses of the society they are oppressed by and are thus in constant danger of distorting themselves and having their projects misrepresented...in effect, the theatre concerned with revolution must itself call into question the forms of theatricality which it engages

-(Walker 818-19).

In many ways, *The Balcony* can be seen as the perfect median in the canon of Genet's literary output. It embodies the best parts of his theatricality and political tendencies while at the same time paying homage to his five published novels and anticipating his much more radical output which is to come.

The duration of the plays context takes place within a brothel whose customers' primary fetish-fixation is that of role-play. In a wheel within wheels sort of style, the players 'play' the social archetypes of the elite governmental and societal institutions that corrupt and control them. Genet's characters "The Bishop," "The Judge," and "The General" are in reality working class day laborers that have fled to Madame Irma's brothel for solace from the unforgiving world outside. The play is set in an unnamed European city against the backdrop of an unnamed civil disturbance; one in which the opposing army of rebels is rapidly gaining more and more territory within the city. According to scholar Gene Plunka, "The brothel patrons search for an identity through masochistic or sadistic degradation rituals of power; their world of Being is the solitude that Genet cherished as a prostitute, thief, and vagabond, and although it is illusory, Genet longs for it" (Plunka 41).

Picking up from Plunka's thought, it is important to understand about *The Balcony* just how far down the rabbit hole these working poor are willing to take their fantasies. In many ways, the play is absurdity become practicality and hypocrisy become gospel. The patrons of Irma's brothel could be seen as understanding these roles better than they understand themselves, and the great amount of effort that goes into being, (as well as not being), in a position of extreme power:

Never- I affirm it before God who sees me- I never desired the episcopal throne. To become bishop, to work my way up- by means of virtues or vices- would have been to turn away from the ultimate dignity of bishop. I should have had to make a zealous effort not to be one, but to do that would have resulted in my being one. Having become a bishop, in order to be the one I should have had...I should have had to be constantly aware of being one so as to perform my function

-(The Bishop, Scene 1, 11).

Genet leaves his readers (and in this case also viewers) with some further delicious rhetoric from his make-believe courts of justice. The theatre of Genet is one of the few bona fide original art forms of the past century, and his soliloquies embody an irony that is not melodramatic, and a humor that is not coarse. Especially in *The Balcony*, JG tears down the curtains of illusion and deceit and exposes full on to his subjects the governmental and societal power structures his friend Foucault would later define so well. Says The Judge:

A judge! I'm going to be judge of your acts! On me depends the weighing, the balance. The world is an apple, I cut it in two: the good, the bad.  
*(Facing the audience)* Right before your eyes: nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeve, remove the rot and cast it off. But it's a painful occupation. If every judgement were delivered seriously, each one would cost me my life...Look, I beseech you. Don't leave me in this position, waiting to be a judge. If there were no judge, what would become of us, but what if there were no thieves?

-(The Judge, Scene 2, 17-19, various emphasis mine).

Eventually, the rebels reach the brothel, appropriately named The Balcony, and leave it ransacked and as a last stand and holdout in what is left of the city. With the help of Irma's friend and lover George (who is also the unnamed city's Chief of Police and whose role remains constant throughout) the Balcony's bedroom fantasies come to life when those in power are revealed to have been killed, and a quick succession is necessary for order to be restored. Thus, in a dazzling metamorphosis, working poor becomes hardly working tyrant, and Irma the oppressive and cruel boss madam becomes the obsessive and cruel Queen. With this stunning display of invalidation becoming legitimacy and rebel becoming emperor, Genet shows us his readers a darker and more delicious side of rebellion, human nature, and the incredibly possible undertones of power and influence such motivations rarely address. Says scholar David Walker:

The main interest in [*The Balcony*] lies in the processes of moral or intellectual negotiation for supremacy engendered by a shift in the traditional balance of power which the insurrection has brought to light...It is in any case a recurring theme in Genet's work that the social function of ideological signs is more profound and far-reaching the more precarious become the material forces that initially gave rise to them

-(Walker 819-20).

Yes, while it is true that the action leading up to this new crowning succession and replacement of heads has been exciting and chocked with a surplus of literary value, as always with Genet and all great theatre, the best is still yet to come. At this point,

however, I feel that it is necessary in my analysis to introduce how the work of Caravaggio plays into and defines *The Balcony*, and how Genet's play ultimately improves upon Caravaggio's template of work and gives it a great contemporary twist even the most heretical Renaissance master would not have been able to dream of during his lifetime.

## II. Caravaggio and Genet: *The Balcony* As Meiosis of Minds

The debate over what constitutes art and what constitutes obscenity has been raging since antiquity. With the mediums of artistic expression becoming that much more varied, a form of resolution still does not seem possible. All opinions are, after all subjective, and the discussion of great Renaissance masters and irreverent twentieth century theatre greats remains no exception. Prose's study is quick to observe, in his time and afterwards, historical judgment of Caravaggio has been swift, and often brutal:

According to [French Baroque painter and Caravaggio's contemporary] Nicolas Poussin's friend and biographer, Andre Felibien, Poussin despised Caravaggio and said that he had come into the world to destroy painting. For Caravaggio's portrayals of whores, criminals and laborers with rough hands and dirty feet threatened what Poussin considered to be the most essential principle of art- specifically, the notion that the artist should represent ideal beauty, perfect proportion, and classical decorum.

Moreover, Caravaggio's belief in painting directly on the canvas ran counter to Poussin's insistence on the necessity of elaborate planning and preparatory drawing. In 1789, Luigi Lanzi wrote that Caravaggio's figures



“are remarkable only for their vulgarity,” and during the Victorian era, John Ruskin grouped him “among the worshippers of the depraved  
-(Prose 7).

One of the concepts essential to understanding Caravaggio’s life and work was that he used a motif, style and philosophy of realism and naturalism in his painting some 200 years before the term was coined, the style embraced, and the school of thought become commonplace. Caravaggio’s contemporaries followed the school of ‘classical idealism’ made famous by Michelangelo, in which pristine, ‘perfect’ forms were embraced and the ‘meat and potatoes’ drudgery of day-to-day living was swept beneath the rafters. He also did not approve of the practice of ‘drawing,’ instead preferring to paint directly onto the expensive canvas without any outlines to help him along the way in his craft. Remember, this was an amazingly chaotic society whose arts were relied upon to relay a most specific sort of order; one which was rare out in the streets yet strived for in the chapels where Caravaggio’s work was adorned. To the best of his ability in this very different world, Caravaggio, like Genet, would play by his own rules:

In [Caravaggio’s] choice of models, he worked his way up from the demimonde to the world of the honest laborer and the pious, devoted poor.

Near the start of his career he was drawn to portray cardsharps and thieves, criminals at work, pretty-boy musicians and his Roman neighbors dressed up in the costumes and attitudes of saints. If his art depended on observing nature, on paying close attention to the visible world, there must have been plenty of opportunity to witness the full range of illicit activity in the taverns and streets around him, and to find visually arresting faces

and characters that required only a costume change for their transformation from street whores into repentant Magdalenes and virginal

Madonnas resting on the flight into Egypt

-(Prose 24).

From this evidence alone, I can only ask just how this differs from Jean Genet's glorious exaltation of the wretched of the earth- the thieves, the hookers, the vagabonds and the prisoners into his own ecstatic rendition of extravagance and gluttony, only instead of on paint, he delivers it to us in the form of the most beautiful words?

In a moment of historical irony, which can perhaps only be appreciated by myself, alone, Prose goes on to state how the ambivalent attitudes toward Caravaggio and his work continued to be relatively consistent to the opinions stated above. That is, until a 1950s Milan art exhibition brought his reputation and popularity back to life. Let us not forget, that at this time and nary a few hundred kilometers away, Jean Genet was making similar strides of notoriety and acknowledgement across the continent with his groundbreaking theatre. Prose states, and I am inclined to agree, that artists like Caravaggio (and as I hope to convey by this essay's conclusion Genet) exist for both their own and the rest of time:

...It seems less startling when we realize that, while Caravaggio was very much a creature of his era, he was also an anomaly, one of those visitors from the future who touch down sporadically along the time line of art [and literature], a painter [or writer] who simultaneously disregard and redefined the conventions of his age, who borrowed from antiquity and from the masters who preceded him while stubbornly insisting that he had

no interest in the past or in anything but nature, the street life of his neighborhood, and the harsh realities around him. Caravaggio was a preternaturally modern artist who was obliged to wait for the world to become as modern as he was

-(Prose 7-8).

This modern world, it would seem, does in fact still need the wisdom of Caravaggio and Genet.

### III. Enter Caravaggio and Chantal

Returning to the plot of *The Balcony*, I would like to use the remainder of this essay to describe just how Caravaggio himself, or at least his aesthetic, is incorporated into the plays overall themes. I believe it is represented most wholeheartedly in the plights of the revolutionary Roger and his lover, the desperate prostitute Chantal, who in death metamorphoses from whore to virgin, condemned to angel, and ultimately becomes the very face of the revolution.

By the time Roger and Chantal are first introduced, (in Scene Six of the Grove Press edition) Irma's brothel has already been attacked, Arthur the pimp is dead, and the brave couple has escaped from The Balcony and are attempting to make their way out of the city. Madame Irma and the others believe them to be dead, but they are in affect pinned down between the brothel and an assemblage of fully armed machine-gun men, a proverbial rock and a hard place if there ever was one. I don't think Genet is being facetious when he writes Roger and Chantal as being in love with each other- while not entirely common in this line of work, there are things more rare in the universe. As with all relationships, however, there is a fundamental difference between them, which drives

a wedge and ultimately tears them apart. Roger, an idealistic yet ultimately practical man, longs to merely have Chantal near him; yet Chantal, ecstatic about having finally escaped the brothel, longs to take flight, join the rebels and become something more than what she is:

“People say that I soar above the insurrection, that I’m its soul and voice, and you, [Roger]- you’re rooted in the ground”  
-(*The Balcony*, Scene Six, 55).

Ultimately, Roger does lose Chantal to the rebels cause and to her own desire for higher meaning and purpose. In a calling as religious as one in a Caravaggio painting, Chantal, a prostitute just like any of the painters many, many models is lured toward her destiny of becoming something greater, while at her roots remaining the scab society previously defined her as. David Walker phrases it best when analyzing the motivations of Chantal, how they relate to the rest of the cast, and how this action relates to the rest of the play and Genet’s literary output as a whole:

Ultimately *The Balcony* invites the audience to deconstruct that polar opposition which immobilizes the rebels on the margins of the system that spawned them. If the first version did seem to suggest that the closed world of the revolutionaries opposes the closed order of the dominant bloc from the outside, the play’s subsequent evolution moves towards a conception of political conflict occurring within a flux of overlapping, unstable definitions, structured by the relations of force between rival groups competing for the power to establish the significance of events such as Chantal’s death. Certain features of the later texts, as well as Genet’s subsequent political statements, make it reasonable to

suppose that the subversive element of *The Balcony* centers less on its documentary content than on those formal aspects of the theatre and language that Genet associates with 'la communication incontrollable... This play exists to foil the efforts of an ideology that seeks to foreclose on alternative possibilities of meaning; it derides any discourse which 's'empresse vers un ordre social acheve (p. 143) in an attempt to establish its authority

-(Walker 829).

Chantal then appears before the now reformed court, the living embodiment of the revolution, she is bowed to by her nemesis Irma, now the wicked Queen, and once this act has come full circle, she is shot dead. On Chantal's martyrdom, scholar David Walker phrases it best:

"In death, Chantal achieves that emblematic status she hoped for, but then her image becomes a mere pawn in the struggle for the control of meaning which is one dimension of the hegemonic process"

-(Walker 821).

Perhaps only Caravaggio's Judith or one of his many Virgin Mary's could portray such a moment with more poetic intensity.

## Chapter 4

### Jean and His Panthers: America, Misinterpretation, Mistranslation

““As I left [Columbia University’s] Hamilton Hall for the rally, I met a student of mine who had been particularly active on campus and who assured me that Genet was indeed going to speak and that he, the student would be Genet’s simultaneous interpreter. . . It was an unforgettable scene for two reasons. One was the deeply moving sight of Genet himself, who stood at the center of a large crowd of Panthers and students—he was planted in the middle of the steps with his audience all around him rather than in front of him— dressed in his black leather jacket, blue shirt, and I think, scruffy jeans. . . The other memorable aspect of that rally was the stark contrast between the declarative simplicity of Genet’s French remarks in support of the Panthers, and the immensely baroque embellishment of them by my erstwhile student. Genet would say for example, “The blacks are the most oppressed class in the United States.” This would emerge in the translators colorful ornamentation as something like “In this motherfucking son-of-a-bitch country, in which reactionary capitalism oppresses and fucks over all the people, not just some of them, etc., etc.,” Genet stood through this appalling tirade unruffled, and even though the tables were sufficiently turned that translator and not speaker dominated the proceedings, the great writer never so much as blinked. What I have never forgotten was the gaze of Genet’s piercing blue eyes; they seemed to reach out across the distance and fix you with an enigmatic and curiously neutral look.”

-Edward Said, “On Genet’s Late Works

“We are white, and therefore masters; the black, quite naturally is a slave.”

-Jean Genet, “For George Jackson,” 1971

The outcast archetype permeates throughout Genet’s writings, and nowhere is it more apparent than in his later work. In a way, he is very much a literary heir (while at the same time a foil) of fellow French master Victor Hugo, whose tomes dwelled on the plights of the poor, the gypsy minorities, and the handicapped to earn a place of legitimacy within the larger scope of their society. The political writings, mostly composed when he had abandoned literature and was intermittently working on his legendary theatre, centered on support and encouragement for twentieth century underdogs and outcasts such as the Algerians, the Black Panthers, and the Palestinians. It is his interactions with the Panthers, and his fervent anti-American imperialism and totalitarianism that I wish to focus upon in this chapter. The ‘ecstasy’ to be discovered here can be pinpointed in Genet’s stalwart feelings of anti-oppression sentiment directed at the American state and the joy and hope which comes with finally standing up to a tyrannical power, which while focused mainly on the Panthers, nevertheless overlapped

into commentary on the Vietnam War, the American invasion of Cambodia, the corruption of American president Richard Nixon and the like.

## I. Jean Genet and America

Genet once wrote in a letter to his friend and confidant, the iconoclastic poet Allen Ginsburg that the latter was his “only sunshine, only light in America.” He told William Burroughs “nothing [in America] is real. Everything is tape recorders and photographers. Reality in America is dead, absolutely finished” (White 592). Genet had met both authors of America’s Beat Generation in 1968, when *Esquire* magazine sent him to cover the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. This was Jean’s first trip to the United States, and he had accepted *Esquire*’s assignment, despite not being able to legally get into the U.S. due to his criminal record. Nevertheless, our hero snuck into the States via the Canadian border and produced a legendary cultural piece on the state of American politics and the Democratic Party. When the magazine refused to print the second article he produced denouncing the Vietnam War (despite several promises to the contrary) Genet tore up his manuscript in a fit of rage and embarked for Tangier to visit friends. This was his first visit to America, and he was not pleased. It would be nearly two years before our hero would return to the U.S.A., and this time he would have a fabulous entourage awaiting his arrival.

## II. George and His Friend Jean

“The fact is that courts, whether in America or elsewhere, are based on authority, a crude authority that adapts itself quite well to the arbitrary.”

—Jean Genet, Introduction to *Soledad Brother*

“...What is most surprising when we read these letters by a young black man locked away in Soledad Prison, is that they perfectly reflect the path traveled by their author- first the slightly awkward letters to his mother and brother, then the letters to his lawyer that develop into something extraordinary, part essay and part poem, and finally the last letters with their extreme delicacy, addressed to an unknown recipient. And from the first letter to the last, nothing was willed, written, or composed for the purpose of putting together a book; and yet here is a book, hard and sure, and I repeat, both a weapon in a

struggle for liberation and a love poem. I see no miracle in this, except the miracle of truth itself, the naked truth completely exposed.”

-Jean Genet, Introduction to *Soledad Brother*

When it comes to Jean Genet’s political writings on the Black Panthers, I feel the best method of exploring this part of his history is via his relationships with George Jackson and Angela Davis, two vastly different individuals who nevertheless played a vital role in Genet’s involvement with the organization as well as his attitudes toward American totalitarianism. Many a historian and critic have wondered why, out of all the various causes and conflicts afoot in the twentieth century, Genet would find himself drawn to the downtrodden African-Americans in the United States. The answer is simple: they asked him for help.

Anecdotally speaking, George Jackson was an epic hero who in his short life went from being a delinquent street urchin into a martyr and the very symbol of his people’s crusade for equality and justice. Arrested in 1960 for a seventy-dollar robbery of a convenience store, he would spend the rest of his life in prison, specifically San Quentin and then Soledad. While incarcerated, Jackson devoted himself to reading and political activism. By the time he officially joined the Black Panther party in 1969 he was a full-blown militant in the vein of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. In early 1970, an all out race riot erupted on the Soledad’s grounds. O.G. Miller, a prison guard and sniper lookout, quickly opened fire on the dissenting prisoners. Four were shot; the sole white man, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood was merely wounded, while the three others, all black, were killed. Three days later, the grand jury ruled not to file charges against Miller. Less than an hour later, another white prison guard, John Mills, was thrown off a railing from Soledad’s third floor. Prison officials, in an investigation that remains



controversial, indicted three inmates, all black, in the murder. Jackson, John Clutchette, and Fleeta Drumgo. History would remember them as the Soledad Brothers.

Jean Genet first came into acquaintance with Jackson via his writing. Jackson's lawyer, Fay Stender, asked Genet personally to compose an introduction to a collection of Jackson's letters written during his years in prison. (*Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* has since become a classic of both prison and African-American literature.) Stender hoped an endorsement from an author as distinguished as Genet would bring more awareness to her cause of proving Jackson's innocence and possibly even granting him his freedom. She was right, at least on the first count. Genet was exceptionally moved by Jackson's writing, and combined with his own memories of being incarcerated, agreed to do everything he could to help. Genet describes the epiphany he had about American society and race relations upon finishing the manuscript of Jackson's letters:

A white man kills three black men: he remains innocent. A white man falls from a wall: three black men will be sentenced. Without meaning to, I just formulated a sort of equation for black-white relations in America and throughout the Christian West...It is obvious that the trial of George Jackson can only be carried out in light of one fact that, without exaggerating its importance, must be stated: Jackson is black...That is the heart of the problem. Jackson + Soledad means Blacks + America, wherever it happens to be. This trial had lasted for three hundred years...It is still obvious that, as a whole, all the laws of which Man is so proud are not set up for the black. They are even set up against him

-(Genet, "For George Jackson 66-7).

By the time Genet became involved outright with the organization, many of its key leaders had been incarcerated or killed, often without legitimate charges or a proper day in court. The American landscape was a veritable war zone, with firefights between police and Panther members' commonplace across the country's urban areas. In the two years before Genet's association with the BP's, some twenty-eight *registered* members had been killed by police, and the casualties of suspected or unregistered supporters of the organization will in all likelihood never be known. Nixon, Vice President Spiro Agnew (that is before his resignation and arrest for fiscal fraud) and California governor Ronald Reagan had officially (and unofficially) declared war on the party. Genet, along with many other intellectuals in America and abroad, considered the measures taken by Nixon and his associates to be extreme, and outright or in secret, supported methods the Black Panthers employed to defend themselves and their cause. Genet applauded the work of these people he had adopted as his brethren, nowhere more so than in several excellent articles he penned on the subject:

...The Panthers are young. One sees the evolution of the people, at first subjugated, driven underground, then suspended in the air and floating-but not at random. Without denying their African origins, they have renounced the clothes, ornaments, and illusions that might make them believe they are simply African...Informed by the ideas of DuBois, Richard Wright, Fanon, Malcolm X, [Eldridge] Cleaver, [Huey P.] Newton, and [Bobby Seale], they have understood that a people long cut off from its true tradition risks losing itself in the one it has tried to

retrieve, but which presents itself, in fact, as a form of folklore that is very reassuring to the dominant nation. Over and against this, the Panthers have very deliberately chosen the revolutionary project. This is no doubt the source of their attraction to young whites, but it is also what puts them in ever greater danger, because the white administration sees them as an enemy of American capitalism, and, more generally, an enemy of bourgeois society

-(Genet, "Angela and her Brothers" 59)

It is through his support of George Jackson, and the events that stemmed from his trial that led to his second great friendship with this distinct group of people the legendary paean of revolutionary strength and beauty, Angela Davis.

### III. Angela and Her Brother Genet

"So everything is in place: your cops- who already shot a judge, the better to kill three black men- your cops, your administration, your judges are training every day, as are your scientists, to massacre more blacks. Blacks, first of all. Every last one. Then the Indians who have survived. Then the Chicanos.

Then the radical whites. Then the white administration. Then yourselves. Then the world will be delivered... What will remain after you pass: the memory, the thought, and the ideas of Angela Davis and the Black Panthers, and the liberated world will go on without you."

-Jean Genet, "Angela Davis Is in Your Clutches"

August 7, 1970 is a day that will live in infamy in the annals of African-American radical activism history. Early that morning, George Jackson's brother, Jonathan entered the Marin County Courthouse where the trial of the Soledad Brothers was to take place. Jonathan, heavily armed with concealed weapons, freed two Black prisoners before taking three jurors, an attorney, and Judge Harold Haley hostage, and demanded their lives in exchange for the freedom of the Soledad Brothers. Jonathan Jackson managed to exit the building, hostages in tow, along with two other freed prisoners from San Quentin and make his way into a getaway van. Upon proceeding by vehicle to the courthouses exit, the police were quick to open fire. Jonathan, freed San Quentin inmates James

McClain and William Christmas, as well as Judge Haley were all killed in the crossfire. Deputy District Attorney Gary Thomas, one of the hostages, was shot in the spine and left paralyzed for life, while one of the jurors Maria Graham was also wounded. The third freed San Quentin inmate, Ruchell McGee, was also critically injured. Several days later, police discovered that the firearms and weapons Jonathan Jackson was yielding in the attempted San Quentin inmate escape were registered to one Angela Davis, a twenty-six year old professor of philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles, who had recently been censured by her administration for teaching ‘irresponsible and inciting material.’ Davis, a confirmed member of the Panthers and registered member of the American Communist Party, was overnight placed on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Ten Most Wanted list and charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy to commit the aforementioned charges. Davis, a classically trained professor at the finest American and German universities, was also an exceptionally intelligent young woman, earning her PhD under Herbert Marcuse before turning twenty-five. She knew that if she turned herself in she would surely not live to see her trial date. Thus, in a chain of events reminiscent of the finest Hollywood thrillers, Angela Davis went into hiding and on the run. For two months after fleeing California and hiding out in the homes of family, friends, and anyone who would have her, Angela was finally apprehended and arrested in New York City in October 1970. She returned to California, was tried before an all white jury and acquitted on all counts. Davis, in the decades since has remained a teacher, activist, and champion of human rights, ran for Vice President twice on the American Communist Party ticket, and as of this essays writing is Distinguished Professor Emerita at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Genet saw a

great deal of connection between the Angela Davis manhunt, her trial, subsequent acquittal and the disjointed tendencies of the American news media. He felt that the American public as a whole was inherently fearful of the ‘Other;’ in this case those of darker skin living on their own homeland. The stunning, massive Afro wielding Davis, who had seemingly abandoned a promising academic career in favor of dissidence and revolution, was a subject massively scandalized by the American media, with little attention paid to facts or detail:

...Real news doesn’t exist in the United States...Between these various elements- black skin, Black Panthers, Soledad Brothers, [Angela Davis’] dismissal from university; absence of real news- is there not a connection, always the same one in the United States, namely racism?

-(Genet, “Angela and Her Brothers” 56).

Upon Jean Genet’s return to the United States in April 1970, the then twenty-six year old Davis had been one of the first to greet him. Davis, one of the few members of the Black Panther Party fluent in French, quickly became a fast and dear friend to our hero. The meeting took place shortly before Davis was asked to leave her post at UCLA, and she remembers an address Genet gave to students there fondly:

We thought Genet could help us create a multi-racial audience. When the audience, however, realized that Genet was speaking only about the Panthers, they began to whisper and someone interrupted him with a question about his fiction. Genet said, ‘I didn’t come here to speak about literature but about the Panthers.’ And half the audience walked out.

-(White 615).

Despite Genet's overlapping commitment to the Palestinian Liberation Organization during this time in his career, and Davis' eventual distancing from the Panthers due to her membership in the American Communist Party, the two would remain fond of each other and in contact until Genet's death from cancer in 1986.

#### IV. A Call to Arms and a Cry Against Empire

"Ever since you realized the intelligence of black Americans, ever since you figured out that they go far beyond you in their revolutionary thinking, you have decided...to annihilate them. Bobby Seale you're reserving the electric chair for him in Connecticut; George Jackson will be taken to the gas chamber in California; you will try to eliminate Angela Davis, and black people, you hope, will be scared into more and more indirect action, into serving you and keeping quiet...Even this television from which I'm speaking to you told us with disgust that Reagan popped a cork on a champagne bottle after Angela [Davis] was captured"  
-Jean Genet, "Angela Davis Is in Your Clutches"

From his initial meeting with Davis and the rest of the Black Panthers, Genet would find from the organization, and from Davis especially, lasting and meaningful friendships. Genet remained an extensive traveller and vagabond for much of his adult life, rarely living in the same city or even country for more than a few months. Despite all this, he followed the unfolding of events within the party with a very close eye. I feel that Davis' capture and the time before her trial, compounded with Jackson's murder by prison guards following an escape attempt, produced what can arguably be called the most ecstatically contrarian of his immensely controversial canon:

Black people, all black people, want to live...I have come to that part of my speech where, to help save the blacks, I am calling for crime, for the assassination of whites. Other meetings like this one will be held to raise money and to acquire arms to kill whites... You don't believe me? I'm joking in bad taste? I'm rambling incoherently? I'm just an asinine old fool? But this I declare: black people will be "like you" or you will no longer be"

-(Genet, "For George Jackson 69).

Reading passages such as these and the various fragments above I have chosen for epigraphs is something gut wrenching, eye-opening, enlightening and humbling. I am reminded of a sentence from the Carson McCullers short story in which a heartbroken old man asks a young boy, "Do you realize what a science like mine can mean?" For what else is Genet to these people but a compact old white man, weaker in body but forever luminescent in spirit and soul? Does one truly realize what a message like Genet's one truly, continuously revolutionary can mean to a person who allows it to come into their psyche and madly, deeply, passionately alter them into more passionate, caring, and *ecstatically dissident* individuals? With this thought in mind and these sentiments attached, the writings of Genet will continue to be something special and revolutionary to the very essence of the human soul.

## Chapter 5

### Jean of Arabia: Homosexuality, The Palestinian Identity, and the Crushing Engine of Majority

“Obviously, I am drawn to peoples in revolt...because I myself have the need to call the whole of society into question.”

–Jean Genet, 1980s interview

“Genet is, for all his empathy for the Palestinians’ predicament, not so much a partisan...as a connoisseur of pure rebellion.”

–Clifford Geertz

“[Jean Genet] stands for, and in fact becomes, the outcast unconfined by ordinary social formality or “human” norms... To read Genet is in the end to accept the utterly undomesticated peculiarity of his sensibility, which returns constantly to that area where revolt, passion, death, and regeneration are linked.”

–Edward W. Said

I have already dwelled rather extensively upon the various causes Jean Genet made his own throughout his incredibly fascinating life. No doubt his experiences working side by side with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (colloquially called the PLO by Western media) are no exception. His final work, *Un Captif Amoureux* (English: *Prisoner of Love*) can be seen as a bona fide sequel to his fictional works of autobiography such as *The Thief’s Journal*. It chronicles how Genet first came to live among Palestinian refugees in 1970 in a series of camps outside of Amman, Jordan and how their plight would surround the rest of his career and the remaining years of his life. *Prisoner of Love*, first begun in 1983, chronicled the events in the camps some ten plus years after the major events had taken place. Many of the freedom fighters Genet was writing about, for the most part Palestinian men barely out of adolescence, had either been killed or taken prisoner in the interceding time of the books composition, and Genet himself was losing his battle with throat cancer. During this time period, and despite being on borrowed time himself, Genet would go back and forth with working on the composition of the book, while via his usual modus operandi simultaneously devoting himself to other articles and projects. What separates this final period of creative output



from the rest of Genet's incredible life is that most of the pieces of lasting, important quality he composed during this time were centered on the people and land known as Palestine, and their fluid, ever evolving identity opposed at every turn by the self interested machines of oppression surrounding them. I would like to take some time in this essay to examine how Genet's status as a homosexual played a part in his devotion to these dispossessed yet spiritually resilient people, and it is my ultimate goal in this essay to illustrate Genet's ecstasy in supporting this downtrodden group of outcasts far, far beyond his beginnings as a thief and prostitute in France; as well as how I believe his previous creative output and political causes organically led him to this particular people at this particular place in time (much like some twenty years later Susan Sontag would be drawn to the siege of Sarajevo in Bosnia). Of course, in any study of Genet in this context, it would be utter negligence on my part if I did not devote at least a small part of commentary and analysis to Edward Said's sublime meditation of what he calls Genet's '*ecstasy of betrayal*.'

## I. Who are the Palestinians? History, Tragedy, and Constant Struggle

"Put all the images in language in a place of safety and make use of them, for they are in the desert, and it's in the desert we must go and look for them."

-Jean Genet, handwritten note atop final draft of *Prisoner of Love*

"It's not about right, it's not about wrong. It's about power."

-Proverb

The above epigraph was found scrawled across the final proofread draft of *Prisoner of Love*. Like all things great about Genet, it captures something inherently instinctive and impulsive about his person in that he chose to include this quick scrawl across the perfectly polished first page to a manuscript over a decade in the making. I cannot help but feel that Genet's interactions with the Palestinians served as the most pristine, organic means by which he could poetically end his artistic career. Allow me to explain. In the

latter half of the twentieth century, the Palestinians' conflict with Israel become the front and center focus of both the Eastern and Western media. Westerners and non-Westerners alike were compelled, with this hotbed of current events to direct their attentions back to the very beginnings of recorded human history in order to understand the extremely complicated and convoluted history of both the Middle East and one of the cradles of human civilization, The Holy Land. In a moment of poetic intensity, as Jean Genet's time on Earth came to an end, history compelled thinkers the world over to go back to the proverbial beginning, and to the deserts from which time began.

As absurd as it may seem, in order for one to properly understand this topic, I feel that it is necessary to explain just who the Palestinian people are- their history, struggles, and the like. Like the Sicilians, Armenians, East Timorese and Kurds before them, the people we today know as the Palestinians are a group of men and women who have been pillaged and taken advantage of by the larger powers around them for centuries. War, imperialism, colonialism, genocide, partition, regime, and revolution are all commonplace terms within their vocabulary. Gaza, West Bank, Bethlehem and Nazareth- these places of biblical lore and cable newsroom fodder is the land they call home. Their history, race, and culture can be seen in more than one light as a dumping ground by larger peoples and powers for their own agenda of dominion, whether in the forms of the English, Americans, Israelis, or in their very worst form the neighboring Arab nations. This is the real life and real time struggle which becomes something beyond the contemporaneous and the current affairs section in the newspaper; a race whose plight echoes the epic and biblical tales of old. The fact that their struggle takes place in the land

where much of these stories originated bears no small sense of historical, political, and literary irony. From the words of the master himself:

For me, if the word “Palestinians” occurs in a title, in the text of an article of 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

-Genet, “Four Hours in Shatila,” 209).

The men who Genet specifically speaks of are a group of soldiers known as Fedayeen (Arabic for “those who sacrifice themselves”), young men barely out of grade school who had dedicated their lives to their homeland’s cause. Each resistance cell was united in its loyalty to Yassir Arafat, commander-in-chief of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, colloquially known as the PLO. The departure of England’s colonial influence, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the complacency of the United Nations following the atrocities of Hitler’s Holocaust all contributed to a powder keg situation in the area which by the time of Genet’s arrival in 1970 had rapidly deteriorated into a severely unstable element. The formal creation of Israel in 1948 and the devastating effects of the Six Day War of 1967 had resulted in a massive exodus and subsequent diaspora of the native Palestinians, and those who stayed behind in the Holy Land were left bereft and practically homeless in a series of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and a smattering of other locations in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and

Egypt. The formation of the PLO under the leadership of Arafat represented the first positive effort by this unique people to campaign directly for their own identity, land in their name, as well as a place to freely express their political views without severe oppression and consequence. For Genet, as well as for me, the formation of the PLO represents the first legitimate form of Palestinian expression found in the Middle East following the formation of the Israeli state and the initial scattering in 1948. Genet phrased the entire Palestinian colonial and postcolonial situation most excellently in his May 1971 article, “The Palestinians:”

Europe massacres or threatens the Jews, while at the same time the Jews who have been spared are massacring or threatening the Arabs, with the help of English soldiers who want to secure a relay point to the Middle

East in order to protect the route to India

-(Genet, “The Palestinians,” 72).

Following the Six Day War and the ascent of Israel into a place of dominant political and military power in the Middle East, Arafat’s leadership, while welcomed at first, in the eyes of history would become convoluted into something quite different. He advocated a ‘by any means necessary’ plan in order to determine the PLO’s legitimacy; one which included guerilla warfare, bombings, and attacks on who the organization deemed its enemies at home and abroad. The PLO was named a terrorist organization by both the United States and Israel, and many have attributed Arafat’s decline in legitimacy to be a determining factor in the imperial powers decision to label them as such.

## II. *Prisoner of Love*: Implications and Discontents

“Serious and playful, romantic and unflinching, literary and factual, *Prisoner of Love* is a coming together of everything that was Genet: his art, his politics, and his humanity”

-Adhaf Soueif

I admit that this situation is very, very complex and almost impossible to take into account with major events continuing to unfold in this troubled region of the world almost daily. What I will instead focus on is the arrival on Jean Genet to the Palestinian refugee camps outside of Amman, Jordan in 1970, and the context of the Palestinians and their cause then and there. Genet, in an article published in 1982, remembered his time in these camps fondly:

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... 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... Everything belonged to everyone. Everyone was alone in himself

-(Genet, “Four Hours in Shatila, 208).

Remember, Genet had grown up in an age of colonialism, when the empire of France was strong and its fist was firm. His literary output and political awakenings had coincided with the gradual dismantling of Empire, and as a young man on he had always

advocated and rooted for the minority, the underdog, the small makeshift force taking on a seemingly unstoppable juggernaut. Palestine in 1970 was no different:

And yet, if the Palestinians found in Genet a passionate friend and a thoughtful interpreter, [later on] Genet, writing in the early 1980s, found in them the subject that would draw from him a powerful and layered articulation of themes that had informed his work of the 1940s and 1950s: the heroism of the outlaw, the beauty of the constant, willful overturning of the established order, the transfiguration of eroticism into chastity, the power of a nonreligious spiritual life, the weightlessness of death, the continuation of a feeling beyond the life of the individual who felt it, and the tensile and creative relationship between the image and its reality

-(Soueif xv).

What Soueif emphasizes upon here (and which I agree upon quite nicely) is the means by which Jean Genet's devotion to Palestine represented a full circle revolution of his interests. At the time of *Prisoner of Love*'s he was dying and had surely taken the time to look over his life's output. In a sense of historical time, Palestine represents humanity's beginning while at the same time serving as the destination of Genet's end. *Prisoner of Love* itself, as well as Genet's time among the Palestinians represents a return to the forms of writing which had made him famous: quasi-fictional autobiography, albeit in this case centered around contemporaneous political and historical events, a consistent homage paid by our author throughout to image, perceptions, the idea of reality, and homoeroticism permeating throughout the narrative. The swarthy, handsome young men Genet fell in love with in the PLO were surrounded on virtually every side by either

complacent bystanders (Egypt and Jordan) or outright adversaries determined to put a stop to their dreams of making a homeland for their unique identity. According to Edward Said, and later Ahdaf Soueif in her 2003 introduction to *Prisoner of Love*:

[Genet] has no inclination to “go native,” and he never goes in for generalizations on “Arab customs” or the “Arab mind” in either his descriptions of the Palestinians or his reflections on them and his feelings for them. More than that, [in] his opening scene...[he] is set up as a swipe at “orientalist” references and as a joke at his own expense

-(Soueif xii).

One of the things I love most about this final chapter of Genet’s creative life is his abject refusal to appear before these downtrodden people as an Anglicized, white, savior to this mysterious ‘other’ race in so desperate need of help from the machine of war which is the European powers. No, unlike T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger before him, Genet becomes a bona fide Palestinian; and the true ecstasy he finds in this poor and subjected people is becoming at one with them, while retaining his outcast identity which had served his creative aesthetic so well for the preceding half century. Said backs up (and anticipates) Soueif’s (and my) point in a 1990 article on Genet’s later writing, with a special emphasis on *Prisoner of Love*:

Genet was no ordinary visitor, no simple observer or Western traveler in search of exotic people and places to write up in some future book...[No,] his movements through Jordan and Lebanon had something like the effect of a seismographic reading, drawing and exposing the fault lines that a largely normal surface had hidden...I sensed that this titanic

personality had fully intuited the scope and drama of what we were living through in Lebanon, Palestine, and elsewhere

-(Said 30, emphasis mine).

Genet the lifelong contrarian would of course be the one to list the Palestinians proper foes in the correct context:

...The Palestinians' enemy, though it may be merged into one, has two faces: Israeli colonialism and the reactionary regimes of the Arab world...but the absolute enemy is America. And if America is in Tel Aviv, it is also in Riyadh, Amman, and Kuwait; it is in Tunis and Rabat; it is in the very heart of ancient Islam, just as it is in Brazil, Colombia, Thailand, Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Europe...By grasping its own singularity in such a short time, the Palestinian people had necessarily to create a kind of void around itself, almost imperceptible, a void between itself and the rest of the Arab world...Within this nebula, it was a star in the process of formation. It is not difficult to arrive at this comparison of the Palestinian people with a mass of matter in fusion, nor to see that this movement into itself isolates it, however slightly, from the greater cluster of Arab dust

-(Genet, "The Palestinians 73-8).

Who better than Genet to know that distinct place in ones world and society, that place of knowing where one stands and not, belonging yet not belonging, at once so sure yet so full of doubt? I find it unlikely that there is any thinker comparable when it comes to this level of self-awareness, and with such a gift of sharing this awareness with others to boot. This was a man who had been a ward of the state, a prisoner, an *enfant terrible*, a



playwright, a political dissident, an essayist and a memoirist. He had been praised and condemned by his country, its people, its religion, and its bureaucratic system of governance. In the late twentieth century, one of the world's more desperate times of need, Jean Genet at many times stood alone in his defense of the defenseless against the crushing, impersonal and soulless machine of empire and oppression.

### III. The Ecstasy of Betrayal and the Jubilance of Hope

Another very key point that I feel drew Genet to the Palestinian cause was what I mentioned earlier in Chapter Two and what Edward Said calls the 'ecstasy of betrayal.' In many ways, I cannot help but feel that the Palestinians represent the endpoint in a very long line of betrayals by our hero Genet throughout his distinguished life; whether they be of fellow thieves and prisoners, literature, theatre, or old friends and mentors. This time, however, Genet is embracing full on, more than ever a truly ecstatic betrayal of his native France, and I believe that there are a variety of legitimate points to coincide with this statement.

As I already mentioned in Chapter Two, from the end of World War Two on, the Empire of France was dying. Across the globe- Mauritania, Algeria, Vietnam- former French colonies were declaring their sovereignty and independence outright from their long time colonial oppressors. The conflicts raged long and hard, year after blood soaked year, with government after government collapsing under its own weight and seemingly no end in sight. France, while not directly involved in the dilemma involving Israel and Palestine, had played a central part in the construction of Egypt's Suez Canal and had at least a small passing interest in the region. I also mentioned briefly in Chapter Two of the lingering cultural guilt the people and government of France felt following WWII's

conclusion, in which 76,000 French Jews were thought to have died at Hitler's death camps, many due in part or outright to their countrymen's forfeiture of their citizenship to the Nazis. Sartre, De Beauvoir, and many other intellectuals in France supported the Zionist cause to exist in the Holy Land, and for reasons that remain unacknowledged the plight of the Palestinians was dismissed or outright ignored. I sincerely doubt that Genet, a lifelong outcast and victim at the hands of the French state, would take such rampant human rights violations and favoring of one ethnic group over another, nor would he once again be complacent to the inaction at the hands of his own countrymen. Yes, surely a deciding factor for Genet, whether a subconscious one or not, was his commitment to remain an opposition to all forms of tyranny until his dying day, and his betrayal of his home nation in favor of the ecstasy which comes with it is something Said describes beautifully:

Much more important than commitment to a cause, much more beautiful and true, [Genet] says, is betraying it, which I read as another version of his unceasing search for the freedom of the negative identity that reduces all language to empty posturing, all action to the theatrics of a society he abhors...For Genet, to betray is to assert that "exceptional" identity foisted unjustly on him by a society that has found him to be a guilty criminal, but it is also to assert his power to elude any attempts to rehabilitate or reclaim him... "Many of the most memorable fragments in the mysteriously digressive structure of *Un Captif* meditate on language, which Genet always wants to transform from a force for identity and statement into a transgressive, disruptive, and perhaps even consciously evil mode of

betrayal... ‘Anyone who hasn’t experienced the ecstasy of betrayal knows nothing about ecstasy at all’...To betray them is not to abandon them exactly, but to retain for himself the right not to belong, not to be accountable, not to be tied down...[Genet] traversed the space from the metropolitan center to the colony; his unquestioned solidarity was with the very same oppressed identified and so passionately analyzed by Fanon

-(Said, “On Jean Genet’s Late Work”, 32-40).

Yes, I think it remains a special kind of irony unique to Genet that his final work was left unfinished. In a way it can be seen as a symbolic, metaphorical, (but of course cliché free) message from our hero that his work was not quite done, and he was unironically leaving an incredibly enlightening blueprint and guide for future generations with his creative output. If an essential part of the writers toolkit is hope, than Edward Said put it best when he stated that Genet’s works “are...resources of hope.”

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## Afterword

“Only a handful of writers such as Kafka and Proust have as important, as authoritative, as irrevocable a voice and style.”

-Susan Sontag

“We talked about Sartre, whose enormous tome on Genet, I suggested, must have made its subject slightly uneasy. ‘Not at all,’ Genet replied unaffectedly, ‘If the guy wanted to make a saint of me, that’s fine.’ In any case, he went on to say, about Sartre’s strong pro-Israeli position, ‘He’s a bit of a coward for fear that his friends in Paris might accuse him of anti-Semitism if he ever said anything in support of Palestinian rights. Seven years later, when I was invited to a seminar in Paris about the Middle East organized by Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre, I remembered Genet’s comment.”

-Edward Said, “On Genet’s Late Works

“This final statement [found in *Prisoner of Love*]- Muslim and Christian, Arab and European, sacred and profane, public and solipsistic- is consistent with Genet’s contradictory and idiosyncratic enterprise. No other writer has been at once so moralistic and so immoral, so estranged from popular, middle-class wisdom yet so uncompromising in enforcing his personal code, so harsh in rejecting the good son who has stayed home and so loving of the broken body of the prodigal”

-Edmund White, Introduction to *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*, xvi

My academic study of Jean Genet ends here, but my personal journey with him is only beginning. Such a remarkable man, he traveled to so many places and came in contact with so many of his times most gifted minds, all the while being the same “blissful dissident” his society, century, and sexuality made of him. The anecdotes alone could keep the inquisitive students busy for decades. Did you know, for example, that Pablo Picasso called Genet’s essay of his friend and sculptor Alberto Giacometti the best art essay ever written? That Genet and American Nobel Laureate William Faulkner shared a meal together in 1955? What was supposed to be a meeting of two of the twentieth centuries most brilliant minds was instead an evening of stone cold silences, awkward, disjointed conversation and resentment and condemnation from both sides of the table upon the evenings conclusion. Edmund White says in *Genet* that only the 1922 meeting between Marcel Proust and James Joyce was a suitable comparison to clashes between great men! Did you also know that one of our hero’s favorite authors was Russian giant and fellow social outcast Fyodor Dostoyevsky? According to White:

Like Genet, Dostoevsky had been a prisoner and, in *The House of the Dead* had written about incarceration. Like Genet, the giant of Russian

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literature was fascinated by religion and royalty- and by *pure evil*... What Genet most admired [about Dostoyevsky, and later Alberto Giacometti] was what he called Dostoyevsky's "buffoonish" way of undermining his own moral points, his practice of creating distinct characters only to blur and distort them later or to let them drift out of focus. Genet declared that he only liked works of art that destroyed themselves, that were both player and target in an artistic shooting gallery

—(*The Selected Writings of Jean Genet* Introduction vii, various emphases and bracketing mine).

The list goes on.

Edward Said, who in the latter half of this project provided some of the best material for analysis, says it best when he remarks that "to read Genet is in the end to accept the utterly undomesticated peculiarity of his sensibility, which returns constantly to that area where revolt, passion, death and regeneration are linked" (Said, "On Genet's Late Works 36). Said also mentions repeatedly how he wishes Genet were alive to witness the *intifada* events of 1987, and I am compelled to agree with and expand upon that thought. How would Genet react to the worldwide spread of the HIV virus from New York's gay men to the women and children of Africa and virtually every other continent? What would be his input be towards France's ban on the Muslim hijab, the ongoing debates of homosexual equality, the Oslo Accords, and the breaking peace talks going on between Israel and Palestine? Would he be a voice for Darfur, Uganda, Cameroon, Jamaica, and the other postmodern tragedies of oppression, dictatorship and

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homophobia? Would he have come to America for the funeral of Allen Ginsburg and make it a point to catch up over coffee with Angela Davis?

Alas, the aforementioned thoughts are only mere speculation, and are better left for another time and a different field of creativity. Until that project is attempted, as responsible academics and administrative professionals, the best way to go about preserving Genet's intricate, extremely important legacy is to have his books kept read, plays performed, and his political ideals analyzed and prepared in the hopes of being applied to the more peaceful, better world that is to come.

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