THE GAY OUTLAW

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J'encule le monde.
—Genet, *Pompes funèbres*

Betrayal is an ethical necessity.

This difficult and repugnant truth is bound to be the major stumbling block for anyone interested in Jean Genet. Almost all his readers will sympathize with his biographer Edmund White, who confesses that he had "never comprehended" Genet's "purported admiration for *treachery*. . . . I recognize that a prisoner might be *forced* to betray his friends, but how can one be *proud* of such a failing?" [xiii]. Genet the thief, Genet the jailbird, Genet the flamboyantly horny homosexual: all this is acceptable, practically respectable compared with Genet's dirty little confession that he handed over to the police his "most tormented friend," and that, to make his act even more ignominious, to deprive it of any appearance of being "gratuitous" or "disinterested," he demanded being paid for his treachery.[1] There is no honor among thieves here, none of that loyalty to one's brothers in crime that gives to Balzac's Vautrin an irresistible moral appeal. (Vautrin could give respectable society a lesson in the respectable virtue of loyalty.) Whether or not Genet is telling the truth about his treachery is, for us, irrelevant; what matters is his rejection of any such appeal, his refusal to argue that the criminal world adheres more rigorously to certain ethical ideals than the "lawful" society in which those ideals originate.

This refusal only partially constitutes Genet's much more ambitious intention of imagining a form of revolt with no citational relation whatsoever to the laws, categories, and values it would contest and, ideally, destroy. An important project in recent queer theory, especially as it has been formulated by Judith Butler, has been that of "citing" heterosexual (and heterosexist) norms in ways that mark the weakness in them—ways that will at once expose all the discursive sites of homophobia and recast certain values and institutions such as the family as, this time around, authentically caring and enabling communities [Butler 23, 26]. Genet can perhaps contribute to the critical rigor of this project by providing a perversely alien perspective on it. He is essentially uninterested in any redeployments or resignifications of dominant terms that would in any way address the dominant culture. Not only does he fail to engage in parodistically excessive miming of that culture's styles and values; it would also blunt the originality of his work to claim, as Sartre does, that his embrace of criminality is designed to transform a stigmatizing essence imposed on him by others into a freely chosen destiny (as if he were "stealing" from the community that has excluded him in its judgment of him, and saying: "Only I am responsible for the being in which others have sought to imprison me").[2] Let's test a

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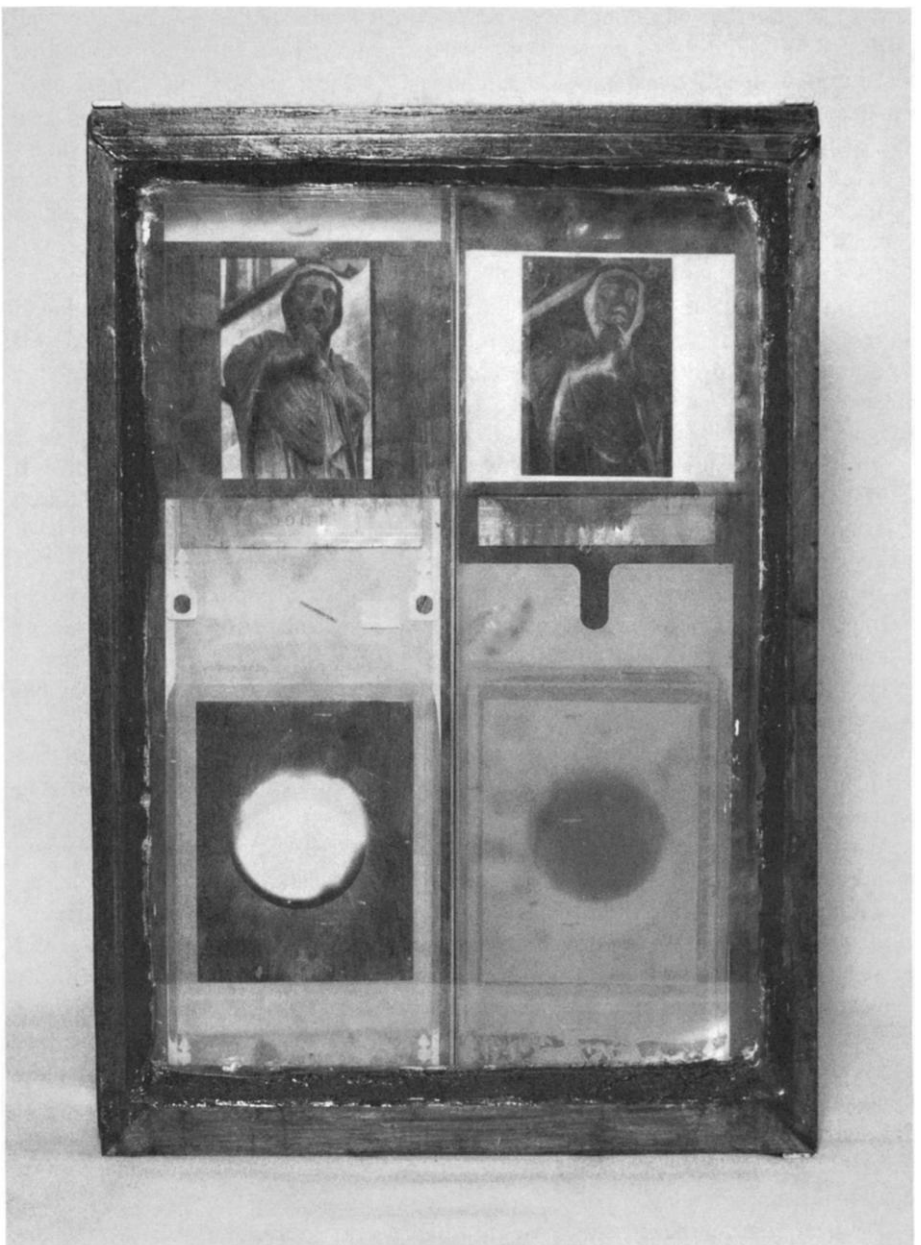
1. Genet, Funeral Rites *80;* Pompes funèbres *81–82. Subsequent page references to* Funeral Rites *will be given in the text (the translation and the original in that order). In the 1953 edition of* Pompes funèbres, *published by Gallimard as part of the* Oeuvres complètes, *several passages from the original version (also published in 1953 as a separate volume in the Collection imaginaire) are omitted. Frechtman's translation follows the version from the* Oeuvres complètes. *I have translated and indicated the few passages I use from the original text.*

2. This is a principal thesis in Sartre, Genet: Actor and Martyr. *For example: "Since he cannot escape fatality, he will be his own fatality; since they have made life unlivable for him, he will live*



more difficult position: Genet's use of his culture's dominant terms (especially its ethical and sexual categories) are designed not to rework or to subvert those terms but rather to exploit their potential for erasing cultural relationality itself (that is, the very preconditions for subversive repositionings and defiant repetitions).

This erasure cannot, however, be immediately effected. The process does include certain reversals, or antithetical reformulations, of given categories. Betrayal, most notably, instead of producing guilt, is embraced as a moral achievement; it was, he writes in *Funeral Rites,* the most difficult step in the "particular ascesis" which led him to evil [80; 81]. Even here, however, the reversal of value obscures the original term of the reversal, which is lost in what Genet insists, in *Prisoner of Love,* is the "ecstasy" generated by betrayal. Betrayal's place in an ethical reflection disappears in the immediacy of an "erotic exaltation," and this categoric displacement helps to save Genet's attraction to treachery from being merely a transgressive relation to loyalty [*Prisoner of Love* 59].

For Genet, homosexuality can't help but be implicated in betrayal once the latter is erotically charged. It would be convenient to separate the two (to take the homosexuality without the betrayal), but this reassuring move would miss Genet's original and disturbing suggestion that homosexuality is congenial to betrayal and, further, that betrayal gives to homosexuality its moral value. In *Funeral Rites,* where these connections are most powerfully made, Genet writes that "love for a woman or girl is not to be compared to a man's love for an adolescent boy" [18; 14]. If betrayal is somehow crucial to the erotic specificity of homosexuality, and if "incomparable" homosexuality is defined not only as male homosexuality but also as, possibly, a certain relation of dominance and submission between a man and an adolescent boy, then the moral argument for betrayal risks being dismissed as a perverse sophistry. It is inferred, one might say, from a highly restrictive erotics, and the very possibility of making such an inference would be enough to discredit the sexuality in which it is grounded. But the value of betrayal is a mythic configuration in *Funeral Rites,* and as such it has the universal particularity of all myths. It has been objected that the psychoanalytic Oedipal myth also describes a very limited situation: not only the fantasmatic anxieties of little boys (and not little girls) at a certain stage in their affective and sexual development, but also the fantasmatic field of the nuclear bourgeois family at a particular moment in European history, and perhaps also a certain crisis in a patriarchal community structured in conformity to an ancient Judaic veneration for and terror of the law-giving Father. But these arguments don't invalidate the myth, and the "truth" of the Oedipal complex has nothing to do with its empirical correspondences, with the number of families that might recognize themselves in the Oedipal triangle. For the complex is a myth about triangularity itself, about the dependence of all sociality on the disruptive effect of a third agent on the intimately conjoined couple. The Oedipal father is nothing more—and nothing less—than the voice that disturbs a copulative plenitude. It could of course be said that patriarchy has inflected and corrupted this necessary myth by asking us to believe that the voice delivers a terrorizing prohibition, whereas it *might* have been figured as a seductively insistent invitation to substitute sociability for passion. This would, however, be a superficial reading of the canonical version of the myth. If its *applicability* is not restricted to families that faithfully reflect its patriarchal structure, that structure is nonetheless a privileged vehicle for the dramatic metaphorizing of the subject's *need* to be summoned out of intimacy and into the social, to be saved from ecstatic unions that threaten individuation. The prohibiting father is not, after all, external to the scenario of union with the mother. He does not invade, from the outside, an unambivalent attachment; instead, he is a constitutive element *of* that attachment in that he saves the subject from the dangers of desire. He allows for the expression of the desire

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this impossibility of living as if he had created it expressly for himself, a particular ordeal reserved for him alone. He wills his destiny; he will try to love it" [49–50].

by guaranteeing that it will not be satisfied. In somewhat similar fashion, pederastic male intimacies do not delimit the field of applicability for Genet's myth of homosexual betrayal, although perhaps only "the homosexual" can make the ethical necessity of betrayal intelligible.

Funeral Rites was inspired by the death of one of Genet's lovers, Jean Decarnin, a twenty-year-old Communist Resistance fighter shot down in 1944 on the barricades in Paris "by the bullet of a charming young collaborator" [17; 13]. The "avowed aim" of *Funeral Rites* will be "to tell the glory of Jean Decarnin," but, as Genet confides at the very beginning, the work "perhaps has more unforeseeable secondary aims" [13; 9]. Indeed, a very curious aim rapidly takes over: that of singing the praise of the collaborator who killed Jean (Genet names him Riton) and, more generally, the Nazis who were Jean's (and France's) enemy. In other words, Genet mourns Jean through an act of treachery. "I have the soul of Riton. It is natural for the piracy, the ultra-mad banditry of Hitler's adventure, to arouse hatred in decent people but deep admiration and sympathy in me" [116; 133]. We can deal quickly with the banal reasons for this betrayal, reasons that seek to justify it, thereby depriving it of much of its force by implicitly recognizing it as wrong. There is first of all the distance between the particular intensity of Genet's mourning for Jean and the pompous flatness of official languages of elegy and mourning. The farther Genet can get from the canonical solemnity dictated by death, the more convincingly personal and sincere his chagrin will appear—to him and to us. In the face of the clichéd piety of the notice pinned to the tree at the site of Jean's death ("A young patriot fell here. Noble Parisians, leave a flower and observe a moment of silence" [45–46; 41]), Genet's nutty fantasies of Jean's soul now inhabiting a matchbox in Genet's pocket, or a garbage pail lovingly covered with flowers bespattered with filth when the pail explodes, testify to the originality of *his* grief, to that fierce refusal to let Jean go which inspires such cannibalistic fantasies as that of the hungry Genet, knife and fork in hand, greedily anticipating the taste of the skin and organs of his beloved corpse, salivating at the prospect of soaking the choicest pieces in their own fat. Treachery has a special function in this defiant rejection of the codes of mourning. Instead of allowing the code to stand in for him and be the impersonal carrier of and witness to his grief, Genet will prove his grief to himself by the pain he feels at his betrayal of Jean. If, as he writes, it is only in losing Jean that he realizes how attached he was to him, then suffering should be cultivated as perhaps the most reliable proof of love. To treat the dead Jean treacherously is torture; therefore Genet must have loved Jean. . . . The formula will serve self-knowledge in the future: "I would like to be an out-and-out bastard and kill those I love—handsome adolescents—so that I may know by my greatest pain my deepest love for them" [68; not in English].

This logic, which is Genet showing off as a writer, is ethical kitsch. Betrayal as an original act of mourning is nothing more than a straining toward *literary* originality, and as such it is the least gripping idea in *Funeral Rites.* Much more interesting is the demonstration of betrayal as inscribed within homosexual love itself. The act that appears to give Genet his best erotic high is rimming. Here is a fantasy of Genet as Hitler with a young Frenchman (Jean's brother):

> *Paulo's behind was just a bit hairy. The hairs were blond and curly. I stuck my tongue in and burrowed as far as I could. I was enraptured with the foul smell. My mustache brought back, to my tongue's delight, a little of the muck that sweat and shit formed among Paulo's blond curls. I poked about with my snout, I got stuck in the muck, I even bit—I wanted to tear the muscles of the orifice to shreds and get all the way in, like the rat in the famous torture, like the rats in the Paris sewers which devoured my finest soldiers.* [139; 163]

Genet's cannibalistic appropriation of Jean after his death turns out to be a continuation of their love-making before his death. Genet was already "eating him up," and what he was eating, we might say, was Jean already dead. It is as if, in his oral passion for his lover's anus, for the bits of fecal matter clinging to the opening, Genet had expressed a preference for what his lover's body had rejected, for that which was no longer of any use to the living Jean. In rimming, the other is momentarily reduced to an opening for waste, and to the traces of waste. Genet's fantasy goes further than this: not content merely to eat what Jean expels, he fantasizes transforming all of Jean into *Genet's* waste. The foraging tongue inspires a dream of total penetration, of entering the lover through the anus and continuing to devour him at the very site of his production of waste. Thus Genet eating Jean inside Jean could himself become the expeller of Jean's waste, or, more accurately, the expeller of Jean *as* waste. (Or perhaps Jean would expel *him* as waste. . . .)

The violence of this fantasy is ambiguous: Genet's excitement is murderous, but murder itself serves an ideal of perfect identity between the lovers. On the one hand, Genet's attack is the treacherous transformation of a form of sexual servicing into a serving up of the lover's entire being. In psychoanalytic terms, the fury of anality (suggested by the image of the attacking rat) reinforces the always potentially murderous impulses of orality. But Genet's amorous attack also eliminates differences between him and Jean. Rimming is a symbiotic operation for Genet. He erases the difference between Jean and himself not only through his fantasies of making a meal of his lover's corpse but also through his project of disappearing into Jean's body, of being "digested" by Jean from below. Thus Jean himself is implicitly fantasized as responding to Genet's oral cannibalism with a rectal cannibalism that devours Genet. The two have become one, and the slight discursive dizziness we experience in our constant references to "Jean" and to "Genet" as two is at least fantasmatically cured when the specular relation of Jean to Jean is momentarily perfected as an ideal identity between the two.

Sandor Ferenczi theorized that in intercourse with a woman a man seeks unconsciously to return to the security of an intrauterine existence [18]. Genet's fantasized ascent into Jean through his anus is a savage reversal of this coming back to a life-initiating and life-nourishing site in the mother's body. The "return" is now staged as reproductively sterile; from another man's body, Genet can only emerge, or re-emerge, as waste. Rimming thus replays the origins of life as an original death, both for Genet as subject and for the lover-mother. This death is "relived" both as fierce aggression and, in a parodistic reprise of the ecstatically sated infant slumbering at its mother's breast, as a lovely death within the "cool bower" of Jean's rectum, "which I crawled to and entered with my entire body, to sleep on the moss there, in the shade, to die there" [253; 304].

So that "charming young collaborator" who killed Jean simply makes real the death at the heart of Genet's love for Jean. For Genet this dense fantasmatic network of betrayal and death—which includes ceremoniously embellished memories of rimming, a murderous ripping into the lover's entrails, Genet's discovery of his love for Jean only when Jean can be imagined as an edible corpse, and a limitless tenderness for the traitor who in effect served Jean up to Genet as adorably and irresistibly lifeless—documents, so to speak, the availability of homosexuality to Genet's ascetic pursuit of evil. Far from rejecting what we would undoubtedly think of as a homophobic emphasis on the sterility of gay love, Genet joyfully embraces what might be called the anatomical emblem of that sterility. Could it be this failure to produce life, the absence of even a potentially reproductive site in (and exit from) the male body, as well as the "wasting" of sperm in the partner's digestive tract or rectum, that makes Genet refer to the love between two males as "incomparable"? These connections are overdetermined in *Funeral Rites* without ever being explicitly made. The jouissance of rimming is escalated—we might also say sublimated—to a celebration of Jean's death and a passion for his murderer and his

enemies. The pleasure of tasting Jean's waste is the pleasure of tasting Jean *as* waste, and this is to love Jean as dead, which is to will him dead and, finally, to make virtues of treachery and murder. These logically unjustifiable equivalences nonetheless have the "rightness" of an erotic crescendo, of an unreasoned yet irrefutable ratiocination of a very specific jouissance. The affective and ethical "deduction" to which this jouissance escalates—the amorous excitement in betraying Jean and handing him over, dead, to his murderer—keeps, as Genet says of betrayal in *Prisoner of Love,* the "erotic exaltation" in which it began. In Genet, murderous betrayal generalizes and "socializes" rimming without losing any of rimming's erotic energy. Genet's moral abstractions are not symptomatic substitutes for a repressed sexuality. The sexuality in which those abstractions are grounded persists not under but alongside the ascetic pursuit of evil. Indeed, the practice of rimming could be thought of as periodically recharging Genet's ethic of evil.

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This, I believe, is the intolerable moral logic of Genet's erotics. Nearly all his works relentlessly, and floridly, celebrate homosexuality, yet he is the least "gay-affirmative" gay writer I know. His demand that others find him hateful and unworthy of human society stands in sharp contrast to the tame demand for recognition (as good soldiers, as good parents, as good citizens) on the part of our own gay community, a community quite comfortably assimilated, for the most part, to the dominant culture. This in itself, I hasten to say, would hardly justify the interest many of us take in him—even though there is something salubriously perverse, especially today, in his refusal to argue for any moral value whatsoever in homosexuality. Yet until now I have been giving an insufficiently radical reading of his work, one that does not adequately cut him off from communal affiliations. What we have seen him do so far is to renegotiate the values of given terms: he repeats society's accusation of him as a homosexual outlaw, excitedly and meticulously seeking out every ramification, every implication of that accusation (much as his tongue industriously and lovingly sweeps up the sweat and excrement around his lover's anus), making of a sterile, treacherous, even murderous relation to others the very condition of his sexual pleasure. This, however, leaves Genet *socially positioned.* He is defiantly offering transgressive spectacles to others, making himself into a gaudy performance of his excited reception of their most lurid views of him. This is the best-known Genet, frozen in fussily obscene, self-theatricalizing postures, the Genet wondering as he writes if he has found the perfect "gesture." Here the aesthetic frequently arrests the erotic by monumentalizing fantasmatic moments, thus putting an end to the escalating movement I discussed a moment ago. Genet's preparation of the gesture and the poses by which we can only assume he hopes to be recognized and remembered counter the mobility and the destructiveness of his erotic energy. Through these tableaux he defiantly—and nondialogically—addresses society's interpellations of him.

More boldly than any other of Genet's works, *Funeral Rites* raises the possibility of an escape from the spectacular transgression itself, and, as we shall see, in so doing it also sketches an antimonumental aesthetics at odds with Genet's apparent cult of gestural beauty. In his most original move, Genet imagines a kind of *nonrelational betrayal.* This is all the more difficult to perceive in that it emerges from a familiar and comparatively banal ethical discourse. The parameters of evil appear to be clearly defined by the virtues that evil systematically flouts. Genet's claim of having reached, through the "particular ascesis" of his self-imposed training in evil, some sort of authentic "freedom" is belied by the apparent dependence of evil on social definitions of the good.

Having chosen to remain outside a social and moral world whose code of honor seemed to me to require rectitude, politeness, in short the precepts taught in school, it was by raising to the level of virtue, for my own use, the opposite of the common virtues that I thought I could attain a moral solitude where I would never be joined. I chose to be a traitor, thief, looter, informer, hater, destroyer, despiser, coward. [170–71; 203]

What kind of freedom is there in an evil that makes each of its moves in opposition to an accepted virtue? The threat of evil is considerably diminished when its entire field is determined, and in some way controlled by, the ethical arrangements it transgresses. Evil is already contained within those arrangements; its real destructiveness could even be thought of as an ethical necessity not in the sense I wish to argue for but rather for the sake of the good itself. The historical visibility of evil clarifies the ethical foundation of the social; it imposes, at the very least, a definitional reinforcement of those foundations.

But Genet is also aiming at something else, something pointed to by the deceptively banal notation that through evil one reaches solitude. I say "deceptively" because Genet doesn't mean, as we might expect him to mean, that solitude is the consequence of evil; rather, he embraces crime *in order to* be alone. Indeed, to find company in evil, to be surrounded by people who "are as at home in infamy as a fish is in water," he rather comically acknowledges, is enough to make him retreat into virtue [171; 204]. And of the traitor Riton, Genet writes:

I am keen on his continuing until the last fraction of a second, by destruction, murder—in short, evil according to you—to exhaust, and for an ever greater exaltation—which means elevation—the social being or gangue from which the most glittering diamond will emerge; solitude, or saintliness, which is also to say the unverifiable, sparkling, unbearable play of his freedom. [160; 191]

From these passages a new possibility emerges: that of evil (to continue using Genet's term) not as a crime against socially defined good but as a turning away from the entire theater of the good and its transgressions, that is, as a kind of metatransgressive *dépassement* of the field of transgressive possibility itself.

It is here that homosexuality reveals to Genet its richest potential for evil. For Genet, this potential is always rooted, as we have seen in the case of rimming, in a specific sexual practice. And, once again, the anus will provide the privileged passage to Genet's highest sublimations. Anal intercourse, even more than rimming, is extravagantly "developed" for its most radical moral and political implications in *Funeral Rites.* It is of course true that neither of these practices is an exclusively gay male privilege; nor do they exhaust the possibilities of homosexual eroticism. But the frequency with which they are practiced is irrelevant; for Genet, they mythically emphasize the sterility of a relation from which the woman's body is excluded, and—to anticipate my next point—the antirelationality inherent in all homoness.

The latter discovery may be the result of a positional preference. *Coitus a tergo* is of course a heterosexual option; correlatively, two men or two women can make love facing each other. But Genet appears to prefer to approach from behind the sexual opportunity that *is* behind, as if the configuration of the front of one man's body against the back of the other, while it is not the necessary gay male sexual configuration, most closely respects, so to speak, the way in which the anus (as distinct from the vagina) presents itself for penetration. And it is in this position, as the following extraordinary passage suggests, that Genet discovers the inestimable value of sex without exchanges. The German soldier Erik fucks the young collaborator Riton on the rooftop of an

abandoned apartment building where the two of them, along with some other German soldiers, have been hiding out during the liberation of Paris:

> *Leaning back against the brick monument, facing a Paris that was watching and waiting, Erik buggered Riton. Their trousers were lowered over their heels where the belt buckles clinked at each movement. The group was strengthened by leaning against the wall, by being backed up, protected by it. If the two standing males had looked at each other, [the one fucking the other by passing his cock between the other's legs,] the quality of the pleasure would not have been the same. Mouth to mouth, chest to chest, with their knees tangled, they would have been entwined in a rapture that would have confined them [*une ivresse qui ne sortait pas d'eux-mêmes*] in a kind of oval that excluded all light, but the bodies in the figurehead which they formed looked into the darkness, as one looks into the future, the weak sheltered by the stronger, the four eyes staring in front of them. They were projecting the frightful ray of their love to infinity. . . . Erik and Riton were not loving one in the other, they were escaping from themselves over the world, in full view of the world, in a gesture of victory.* [249; 299]

Here, then, is sexual pleasure (a *volupté*) distinct from sexual intimacy. Erik and Riton are "transported," and this is, we might say, a cultural as well as a sexual transport. The figurehead, *la figure de proue,* formed by their bodies projects them out of themselves and out of any absorption in each other—which is to say, out of a still-honored tradition that has idealized sexuality through the invention of the intimately conjoined couple. This quickie on a Paris rooftop thus takes on the value of a break or seismic shift in a culture's *episteme*: the injunction to find ourselves, and each other, in the sexual is silenced as, the soldier and the militiaman looking not at each other but in the same direction, the thrust of Erik's cock propels him and Riton into the impersonal Paris night. Our culture encourages, enjoins us to think of sex as the ultimate privacy, as that intimate knowledge of the other on which the familial cell is built. Enjoy the rapture that will never be made public, that will also (though this is not said) keep you safely, docilely out of the public realm, that will make you content to allow others to make history while you perfect the oval of a merely copulative or familial intimacy. The sodomist, the public enemy, the traitor, the murderer (Erik and Riton answer to all these titles) are ideally unsuited for such intimacies. Excluded from all triumphant communities (from the heterosexual family to the victorious Allies entering Paris), they are reduced, or elevated, to a kind of objectless or generalized ejaculation, the fucking of the world rather than each other. Because they know they will soon die, this act naturally has some of the desperate and brutal defiance of Genet's "J'encule le monde" [268], but it also contains— intriguingly for us—the promise of a new kind of fertilization. They come not with each other but rather, as it were, *to the world,* and in so doing they have the strange but empowering impression of looking at the night as one looks at the future.

For Genet, this "gesture of victory" toward the world, this looking at the future, depends on an unqualified will to destroy. Not only do Erik and Riton dismiss each other in their lovemaking (they come on the world rather than for each other); Genet's fantasy-machine has Riton shoot Erik after sex, and then, "all night long, all the morning of August 20, abandoned by his friends, by his parents, by his love, by France, by Germany, by the whole world, he fired away until he fell exhausted," finally to be killed by a French freedom-fighter [255; 306]. Never has Riton been more faithful to the Nazi cause he treacherously served than in this final orgy of murderous and suicidal violence. If there is an ethical hero of historical dimensions in *Funeral Rites*—and we must recognize this as the repellent center of Genet's book—it is Hitler: Hitler fantasized, to be sure, sexually

mythologized and even sexually ridiculed, but close enough to his monstrous real source that we cannot comfortably say that operative political sympathies are entirely irrelevant to Genet's fantasmatic scenarios. It is, however, important to note that neither territorial politics nor any specific genocidal ideology plays any part in Genet's fascination with Nazism in *Funeral Rites.* Hitler "destroyed in order to destroy, he killed in order to kill. Nazism sought nothing other than to erect itself proudly in evil, to set up evil as a system and to raise an entire nation, with oneself at the summit of this nation, to the most austere solitude" [217; not in English]. The Nazism for which Genet professes a nearly unqualified admiration in his ceremony of treacherous mourning for Jean Decarnin is a myth of absolute betrayal—the betrayal of all human ties, the attempted murder of humanity itself.

On the one hand, this admiration is extremely *light* in *Funeral Rites*—as if Genet himself recognized how improbable it is. With its casually obscene treatment of Hitler as an old queen, the work could hardly be picked up as a pamphlet for Nazism. With its frequent shifts of tone and its just-as-frequent shifts of subject positions (Genet both *speaks of* Hitler and Erik, for example, in the third person and *speaks them* in the first person), *Funeral Rites* is constantly reminding us that identities and convictions can't be assigned, in fantasy, to particular persons, that the subject responsible for the fantasy is nowhere to be located among its dramatis personae. We should probably even say not that Genet alternately worships and mocks Hitler, but rather that the *text is* alternately Hitler worshipped and Hitler mocked. But this very irresponsibility which, however unpleasant we may find it, could be appealed to in order to exculpate Genet at least in part for the opinions in *Funeral Rites* (but can fantasies have opinions?) is actually the most consummate betrayal in the work, and as such is wholly consonant with the Nazi myth it frivolously treats. That frivolity is Genet's treachery toward the ultimate treachery of Nazism itself. It is a sign of his refusal to enter into any communication whatsoever. Bataille brilliantly seized upon this refusal as central to Genet's work and, in my view, wrongheadedly condemned Genet for it. Genet writes without wishing to communicate, thereby depriving his writing of that "loyalty of the last resort" without which, for Bataille, no literary work can be "sovereign" [Bataille 194, 197].

But this is Genet's revolutionary strength. Both his abhorrent glorification of Nazism and his in some ways equally abhorrent failure to take that glorification seriously express his fundamental project of *declining to participate in any sociality whatsoever.* He is, as Bataille also saw, exceptionally *cold.* But the solitude Genet identified with evil is undoubtedly unattainable without that gift of coldness. In its celebration of pure destructiveness, *Funeral Rites* seeks to detach evil from its oppositional relation to good, from its dependence on a transgressive mode of address. The work, in its most profound and original resonances, actually makes the very word "evil" somewhat obsolete. It would replace the rich social discursiveness of good and evil with what might be called the empty value of solitude, a value that literature, always circulating within a symbolic network, can only name. Solitude is evil because it is betrayal, but it is not a betrayal defined by its opposition to loyalty. It is betrayal of that opposition, a betrayal opposed to nothing because it consists merely in a movement *out* of everything. Nazi murderousness—destruction for the sake of destruction—is, for Genet, the most appropriate historical emblem for this murder of given terms, but to have entered into serious "communication" with Nazism would have been to misunderstand its mythic importance as a horrific figure for a will to be no longer defined, in good *or* evil, as human. The Nazism of *Funeral Rites* is not a "cause"; it is the apocalyptic appearance in history of an impulse to erase history. Pure destruction does not choose its objects; to the extent that all objects are available for relations, there can be no loyalty, or connection, to any object. (Thus, within the Nazi ranks, Riton kills Erik.) In Genet, evil—the ethical corollary of Erik's penile aggression—is an antirelational thrust.

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We have yet to address what may be the most intriguing terms in Genet's description of his heroes' passionate dismissal of each other. Their positioning in sex is read both as a gesture of victory and as a looking at the future. They see nothing in the blanket of night spread over Paris, yet their gestures of annihilation and their own drop into nothingness are a possible restarting of relational activity. In what way? The scene immediately reminds Genet of Hitler discharging onto his enemies' territory millions of young German males: "It was thus that, from his room in Berlin on Berchtesgaden, Hitler, taking a firm stand, with his stomach striking their backs and his knees in the hollows of theirs, emitted his transfigured adolescents over the humiliated world" [249–50; 299]. They are their leader's poisonous seed. Very peculiarly, Genet appears to interpret the renunciation of intimacy implicit in Erik and Riton's sexual positioning as the precondition for an *identity* between the fucker and the fuckee. Genet simultaneously points his two fantasy figures in the same direction and uncovers a fundamental sameness between them—as if they were relays in a single burst of erotic energy toward the world. Relationality here takes place only within sameness. This is emphasized in an earlier passage when Hitler-Genet boasts:

> *Puny, ridiculous little fellow that I was, I emitted upon the world a power extracted from the pure, sheer beauty of athletes and hoodlums. In the secrecy of my night I took upon myself [*j'endossais*]—the right way of putting it if one bears in mind the homage paid to my body [*à mon dos*]—the beauty of Gérard in particular and then that of all the lads in the Reich: the sailors with a girl's ribbon, the tank crews, the artillerymen, the aces of the Luftwaffe, and the beauty that my love had appropriated was retransmitted by my hands, by my poor puffy, ridiculous face, by my hoarse, [cum]-filled mouth to the loveliest armies in the world. Carrying such a charge, which had come from them and returned to them, drunk with themselves and with me, what else could those youngsters do but go out and die?* [133; 155–56]

The men who mount Hitler, and who discharge themselves into him, are themselves penetrated by their own beauty, made drunk by their own jouissance through the medium of a Führer having become indistinguishable from that jouissance. This solipsistic intensification of sexual energy—the production of the soldier's orgasm by his own (retransmitted) orgasm—"completes" the Nazi murder of humanity with a suicidal self-replication and self-overloading in the murderous subject. This is a psychologically blank crossing over from one identity to another. It is not an identificatory leap into other sites or structures of desire (such as the heterosexual Proustian narrator's anguished attempts to inhabit lesbian desire); rather, different human subjects, traversed, shot through by an impersonal sexual current merely punctuate sameness. Yet this absolute narcissism also opens a path onto the world, a world emptied of relations but in which relationality has to be reinvented if the dangerously replicated self is to escape the fatally orgasmic implosions of Hitler's soldiers. (The successful blockage of energy within a perfectly realized and definitive homoness is incompatible with life.) The "future" that Riton and Erik appear to be looking out at must somehow emerge from the radical homoness of their homosexual adventure, from their refusal, or inability, to love anything *other* than themselves—which might be translated politically as their failure to accept a relation with any *given* social arrangement.

This is not, in *Funeral Rites,* a political program. Just as Genet's fascination with what he outrageously calls the beauty of Nazism is in no way a plea for the specific goals

pursued by Nazi Germany, Erik and Riton are positioned for a reinventing of the social without offering any indication about how such a reinvention might proceed historically or what face it might have. *Funeral Rites* does nothing more—but I of course think this is a great deal—than propose the fantasmatic conditions of possibility for any such proceedings. It insists on the continuity between the sexual and the political, and while this superficially glorifies Nazism as the system most congenial to a cult of male power justified by nothing more than male beauty, it also transforms the historical reality of Nazism into a mythic metaphor for a revolutionary destructiveness that could hardly fail to dissolve the rigidly defined sociality of Nazism itself. Yet the metaphoric suitability of Hitler's regime in this project can hardly be untroubling. It reminds us only too clearly that Genet's political radicalism is congruent with a proclaimed indifference to human life as well as a willingness to betray every tie and every trust between human beings. This is the evil that becomes Genet's good, and, as if that were not sufficiently repellent, homosexuality is enlisted as the prototype of relations that break with humanity, that elevate infecundity, waste, and the reduction of difference to sameness to requirements for the production of pleasure.

From a perspective that is also Genet's in some of his other work, we might say that there is only one reason to tolerate, even to welcome *Funeral Rites*'s rejection (at once exasperated and clownish) of relationality: without such a rejection, social revolt is doomed to repeat the oppressive conditions that provoked the revolt. This argument is strongly implied in Genet's early play *The Maids.* In his prefatory comments on how *The Maids* should be played, Genet scornfully dismisses any view of his play (which should, he says, be acted nonrealistically) as a "plea" on behalf of maids. "I suppose," he adds, "that there is a union for domestic servants—that's not our affair" [10; my translation]. Perhaps not; but Solange, defying Madame through her sister Claire playing the role of Madame, mocks her mistress's illusion that she was "protected by her barricade of flowers, saved by some special destiny, by a sacrifice. But she reckoned without a maid's rebellion. Behold her wrath, Madame [*C'était compter sans la révolte des bonnes. La voice qui monte, Madame*].[3] There is, then, a "rebellion" in *The Maids,* one more real than any revolt that might be realistically conceived. The condition of domestics is merely a social problem; what interests Genet is not the way society distributes predicaments but rather the way it assigns identities. It is the taking on—or attempted refusal—of those identities that determines the possibility of effective rebellion.

In a sense, Genet is an out-and-out social constructionist. There is no margin of being to which Claire and Solange can retreat, no secret inner place that their social nature couldn't reach or violate, and that might reconcile them to being (but not entirely being) maids. In *The Maids,* social roles are inner essences, and the question becomes: how do you get rid of an essence (or as a *pis aller,* change essences)? Interestingly, Genet answers this question through an intricate play with relations. The essence is indeed like a frozen block of being, but it has only a relational existence. Maidness is the relation between Madame and the two maids, as well as between the maids. What and how a maid "is" is entirely spelled out within the cultural construction of those relations. It includes not only being submissive to Madame, being in awe of her, idolizing and envying her beauty and her wealth, but also resenting her, willing her death. The maids' dilemma is that there is nothing they might do to Madame that would not confirm their identity as maids. Even to kill Madame—while it is not a necessary part of the social scenario within which they

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3. Genet, The Maids and Deathwatch *45; Genet,* Les bonnes *30. Subsequent page references to* The Maids *will be given in the text (the translation and the original in that order). Frechtman's translation is based on the 1954 version of the play, a version that is more sexually explicit and ends more triumphantly than the earliest, 1947 text (which has become the standard French text). I will indicate any discrepancies between the two versions in the passages I quote.*

are inscribed—would transgress their maid-subjectivity in a way allowed for by that scenario. Transgressiveness is a constitutive element of their identity. Furthermore, it is far from certain that killing Madame would liberate them from their disgust with each other as well as from their imitation with each other of their relation to Madame. Before Madame's return home, Claire taunts Solange by telling her that she, unlike Solange (who couldn't strangle Madame when Madame was sleeping), will have the courage to kill Madame by serving her poisoned tea, and she adds: "It's my turn now to dominate you!" [61; 59]. Their fate—and it has been the fate of more than one revolutionary movement—may be to repeat, after they have freed themselves from Madame, the very structure of oppression that led to their revolt. Revolt allows for new agents to fill the slots of master and slave, but it never necessarily includes a new imagination of how to structure human relations. Structures of oppression outlive agents of oppression.

The Maids does, however, suggest a mutation in the structure itself. Claire admits to Solange that as their habitual "ceremony" approaches its climax, she always protects her own neck, for "through her, it was me you were aiming at. I'm the one who's in danger" [55; 48]. Given the self-hatred (and the adulation of Madame) inscribed in their essence, this is normal enough. But in the final moments of the play, this potential violence is radically resignified, and in a way that ejects them from the field of resignification itself. Just before Claire, as Madame, insists that Solange give her the poisoned tea, Solange has a long monologue in which she imagines killing Claire for the latter's failure, a few minutes earlier, to make Madame take the poisoned drink. She gets excited at the idea of leaping into a new essence ("I'm the strangler. Mademoiselle Solange, the one who strangled her sister!"), with a new title: "Now we are Mademoiselle Lemercier, that Lemercier woman. The famous criminal" [93–95; 107–09]. But this exhausts her, and, ending the game, she tells Claire that they are finished, lost. Claire, however, has been listening and now insists that Solange really kill her (Solange, having returned to "reality," at first resists), but with a difference: not as her sister, but as Madame. This would seem to bring them back to the familiar scenario we saw at the beginning of the play. But then they were rehearsing for the murder of Madame. In despair, Solange, as we have just seen, also imagines really killing Claire. In this dialectical progression, the third and final step at once transcends, reconciles and erases the first two: Madame will be killed in play, but the play killing her will be the murder of Claire. Step three is both steps one and two, and neither one of them: it would be wrong to say that they have really murdered Madame, just as it would be wrong to say that Solange has deliberately done away with her sister. She hands the poisoned drink to "Madame," and it is Claire who will be poisoned. There is a real death that is doubly derealized: Madame survives (since it is Claire who is poisoned), but Claire, in a sense, also survives since it is she who gives the drink to Claire-as-Madame.

Only now can we appreciate the profound rightness of a superficially unnecessary aspect of the original ceremony: Solange becomes Claire when the latter takes on the role of Madame. This moving outside herself allows Claire to survive her own death. Before drinking the tea originally prepared for Madame and which she will drink *as* Madame, Claire reminds Solange twice that she, Claire, will now be living in Solange: "Solange, you will contain me within you," and: "It will be your task, yours alone, to keep us both alive. . . . In prison no one will know that I'm with you, secretly. On the sly" [96–97].[4] No one will know this. Solange will be condemned for killing her sister, whereas both she and Claire know that she has "really" killed Madame. The play's climax enacts their new knowledge that the only effective way of getting rid of Madame is through the ceremony.

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4. In French: "Solange, tu me garderas en toi," and: "Et surtout, quand tu seras condamnée, n'oublie pas que tu me portes en toi. Précieusement. Nous serons belles, libres et joyeuses" [110–11].

The problem has been all along how they might murder Madame without merely fulfilling their destiny as servile and rebellious maids. The answer, they discover, is to eliminate her as a relational term, and this can be done only if Claire's death is misinterpreted by others. Society, which has locked them into their maidness, will also liberate them by not seeing Madame's place in the murder. And we should emphasize that they have not simply switched essences—which is what Solange has in mind when in her monologue she anticipates being reviled as "the strangler" or when, remembering her wish to set the house on fire after killing Madame, she refers to "Incendiary!" as a "splendid title" [57; 51]. No: the social world of essences has been replaced by a private domain of fractured and multiple identities.

Because *no one will know* that Solange is harboring Claire within her, or that Claire was addressing Solange as Claire when she asked for the poisoned tea, or that Claire was impersonating Madame when she drank it, we could also say, so what? since nothing has changed in the world. But nothing *can* change in this world—or rather (and this, it must be acknowledged, is an uncertain wager), between oppression now and freedom later there may have to be a radical break with the social itself. What could be stranger? In this play, which, Genet insists, must not be taken realistically and which, within its unreality, nevertheless distinguishes between the maids' ceremony and their real lives, it is the unreal within the unreal that carries the heaviest social and political burden and promise. The maids' revolt (and the revolt of all oppressed peoples?) will be effective only if their subjectivity can no longer be related to as an oppressed subjectivity. Madame may attend Solange's trial, but she has nonetheless been killed as that difference from the maids that constituted them as maids. Once again, it is perhaps Genet's homosexuality that allowed him to imagine a curative collapsing of social difference into a radical homoness in which, all relations with the other having been abolished, the subject might begin again, differentiating itself from itself and thereby reconstituting sociality.

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Nothing could be more antagonistic to monumental art than this project. *Funeral Rites* in particular is a battlefield opposing two aesthetics. On the one hand, Genet promotes, and has been most easily recognized by, a notion of art as the cultivation of gestural beauty. This is art as a defiant display of a self perfected in its gestures, as a kind of antidialogic address to its audience. This gestural self, Genet seems to hope, might even outlive the phenomenal self that originally produced the gesture. Like Erik, who "desired his own realization," Genet, again like Erik, aspires to see himself "complete [*achevé*]" even if it were only for one day [119; 138]. Wholly "realized," a fully "finished" artifact, Genet can die, assured of the eerie immortality of a beautiful pose detached from both its source and its audience. On the other hand, Genet mistrusts beauty. It transforms a formula into "a closed thing, a thing in itself"; the showiness or dazzling quality (*l'éclat*) of "brilliant expressions" "arrest the mind," and those expressions become a "prison for the mind that embellishes them and refuses to escape" [187; not in English]. How might art indicate a way out of that prison—a prison that is also that of the self having reached solitude at the end of its ascetic pilgrim's progress toward evil, and in which difference has been reduced to intervallic sameness? (The soldiers fucking Hitler, Hitler himself, and the soldiers on the battlefield spatially distribute a single sexual energy; Claire *is* Solange, but at a certain inner distance from Solange's consciousness of their sameness.)

Once again, we must turn to Genet's cherished activity of rimming, which turns out to be as suggestive aesthetically as it is ethically. Not only do Genet's murderous fantasies as he rims Jean consummate their union as undifferentiated waste; Genet also resurrects a world as his tongue drills into his lover's anus:

Then I tried hard to do as good a job as a drill. As the workman in the quarry leans on his machine that jolts him amidst splinters of mica and sparks from his drill, a merciless sun beats down on the back of his neck, and a sudden dizziness blurs everything and sets out the usual palm trees and springs of a mirage, in like manner a dizziness shook my prick harder, my tongue grew soft, forgetting to dig harder, my head sank deeper into the damp hairs, and I saw the eye of Gabès become adorned with flowers, with foliage, become a cool bower which I crawled to and entered with my entire body, to sleep on the moss there, in the shade, to die there. [253; 303–41]

Even if Genet himself disappears (or "dies") during such a vision, a world is beginning to be born again. The rimmer in his jouissance has demiurgic powers. Genet is orally impregnated by eating his lover's waste. Having eaten Jean as death, Genet expels him as a world of new images. There is, to be sure, a resignifying reversal of given terms here: the anus produces life, waste is fecund, from death new landscapes emerge. It is, however, as if such reversals could take place only after the entire field of resignifying potentialities has been devastated. Relationality having been eliminated, values can be remembered posthumously and reversed without the risk of the reversal being contaminated by transgressed terms.[5] This is Genet's ingenious solution to the problem of revolutionary beginnings condemned to repeat old orders: he dies in order that repetition itself may become an original or initiating act. This can be accomplished only if dying is conceived, and experienced, as jouissance. The fertility of rimming depends on its being immediately productive. The hallucinatory excitement induced in Genet by his foraging tongue gives birth at once to the luxuriant bouquets and bowers of his writing. Not only does this type of sublimation bypass the social as a field of symbolic mediations of and substitutions for the sexual; it is not even the result of that "cathexis of ego tendencies" by a suspended or free-floating sexual energy, detached from specific sexual desires, which the early Melanie Klein equates with "the capacity to sublimate" [81]. Instead, sublimation here is an activity of consciousness coterminous with a particular sexual activity, indeed lasting no longer than that activity. The symbolic is a product of the body, and it is a by-no-means-insignificant element of Genet's subversiveness that he performatively refutes the reactionary (Lacanian) doctrine that instructs us to think of language as castration, as cutting us off from the potentially revolutionary power of the body.

Of course, Genet's visions are textual fragments; they have none of the closed monumentality of beauty's perfected gestures. Not only that; they are disposable. "The poet," Genet writes in *Funeral Rites,* "is interested in error since only error teaches truth . . . . Poetry or the art of using remains [*La poésie, ou l'art d'utiliser les restes*]. These errors may serve, or be, the beauty of the future" [190; not in English]. In a society where oppression is structural, constitutive of sociality itself, only what that society throws off—

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5. *Thus Genet must "betray" even the Palestinian revolution in his "mirror-memoir" of the two years he spent living with Palestinian soldiers in Jordan and Lebanon, which he called* Un captif amoureux *(*Prisoner of Love*). He insists both that his account (contrary to what the Palestinians expected) "was never designed to tell the reader what the Palestinian revolution was really like," and that the revolution itself took place so that the Palestinian mother and son in whose home Genet had spent a single night might "haunt" him for years afterwards. Having broken with both Christianity and Islam, having reduced the Palestinians to a mere replication of his own obsession with the configuration of a mutually protective relation between mother and son, he ontologically resignifies the Christian reference of that obsession (Christ and the Virgin) as the reoriginating, on the far side of a universal betrayal, of the coming-into-community of a universal human subject. Genet's "love" for Hamza and his mother, the "fixed mark" that has guided him, dates back to before Christ and is still "emitting radiations." "Had its power," he wonders, "been building up over thousands of years?"* [Prisoner of Love *331, 308, 177, 341].*

its mistakes, or its pariahs—can serve the future. In Genet, error is the aesthetic and social equivalent of fecal matter; it has all the paradoxical promise of fertility and renewal that Genet associates with waste. But as the waste of the mind, error also has the immense advantage of being expendable. Perhaps we won't need it; perhaps it will not serve. "This book," Genet says of *Funeral Rites,* "is sincere and it's a joke."[6] Just as the radical lightness mentioned earlier counters Genet's seriousness about Nazism (even while his betrayal of that seriousness is consistent with the massive betrayal of humanity itself in Nazism), so is he willing to be unfaithful to his own work. The humor in *Funeral Rites* is the tonal sign of Genet's refusal to establish a certain kind of communication—a culturally consecrated communication—between the author and his work. He will not be entirely serious about literature. To have Genet's authorization to think of *Funeral Rites* as expendable can of course be a relief to us: it makes us less worried about the author's fascination with betrayal, murder, and death. But Genet's partial dismissal of his work is itself culturally threatening. It betrays the ethic of seriousness that governs our relation to art, inviting us to view literature, for example, not as epistemological and moral monuments but, perhaps, as cultural droppings. In this, Genet is very much like Beckett, who, in his pathetic determination to fail, could only be in sympathy with Genet's scatological aesthetic. The cult of failure and the cult of waste: Beckett and Genet belong to a radical modernity anxious to save art from the co-optive operations of institutionalized culture. They defy us to take them seriously, to believe that they have either been successful artists or told us some important truths. But they do, finally, let us hear them failing or getting high on linguistic waste, and in so doing they compel us, perhaps in spite of themselves, to rethink what we mean and what we expect from communication, and from community.

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6. Frechtman translates "Ce livre est sincère et c'est une blague" [194] as "This book is true and it's bunk" [164].