

SAINT  
GENET

"AN

UNQUESTIONED MASTERPIECE"

—LONDON TIMES

ACTOR  
AND  
MARTYR

JEAN-PAUL

SARTRE

*Jean Genet is known in America chiefly for his disturbing plays, The Blacks, Maids, and The Balcony, and for the novel Our Lady of the Flowers. Born a foundling, raised in reformatories and prisons, Genet spent his first thirty years prowling the European underworld. His first novel was written in prison in 1940-1942. Seven years later, a petition signed by Cocteau, Sartre, Picasso, and others was presented to French President Auriol, who granted Genet a pardon. Writing of the perverse, the secret, and the evil, Genet has been compared to his famous countrymen Baudelaire and the Marquis de Sade.*

*Jean-Paul Sartre, author, playwright, and philosopher, was born in Paris in 1905. During World War II, he served with the Resistance. In 1947, Sartre founded the prestigious literary journal, Les Temps Modernes, of which he became the editor. Among his many plays are The Flies, No Exit, The Condemned of Altona, and The Respectful Prostitute. His novels include Nausea, The Age of Reason, The Reprieve, and Troubled Sleep.*

*Sartre's existential masterpiece, BEING AND NOTHINGNESS, was first published in 1943.*

*In 1964, Jean-Paul Sartre refused to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature.*

Jean-Paul Sartre

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*SAINT GENET*  
Actor and Martyr



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Originally published in French under the title *Saint Genet:  
Comédien et Martyr*

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publisher: George Braziller, Inc., 215 Park Avenue South,  
New York, New York 10003.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 63-15828

This is an authorized reprint of a hardcover edition published by  
George Braziller, Inc.



PLUME TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES  
REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA  
HECHO EN FORGE VILLAGE, MASS., U.S.A.

SIGNET, SIGNET CLASSICS, MENTOR, PLUME AND MERIDIAN BOOKS  
are published *in the United States* by  
The New American Library, Inc.,  
1301 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019,  
*in Canada* by The New American Library of Canada Limited,  
81 Mack Avenue, Scarborough, 704, Ontario,  
*in the United Kingdom* by The New English Library Limited,  
Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London, E.C. 1, England.

First Printing, April, 1971

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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*The original title of the present work, Saint Genet: Comédien et Martyr, loses its allusiveness in English translation. Saint Genet evokes the memory of St. Genestus (known in French as Genest, or Genêt), the third-century Roman actor and martyr and the patron saint of actors. His career is the subject of Le Véritable Saint Genest, a tragedy by the seventeenth-century dramatist Jean de Rotrou. In addition, the word comédien (which means actor—not necessarily comic) is used familiarly to designate a person who shams or “puts on an act.”*



*The absence of reference to Genet's later plays is explained by the fact that Sartre's study was published in 1952, at which time Deathwatch and The Maids were the only works Genet had written for the theater.*

# I

## THE METAMORPHOSIS

---

*Bandit, thief, hoodlum,  
scamp!  
It's the pack of decent folk  
A-hunting the child.*

—PRÉVERT

### THE MELODIOUS CHILD DEAD IN ME LONG BEFORE THE AX CHOPS OFF MY HEAD

Genet is related to that family of people who are nowadays referred to by the barbaric name of *passéistes*.<sup>\*</sup> An accident riveted him to a childhood memory, and this memory became sacred. In his early childhood, a liturgical drama was performed, a drama of which he was the officiant: he knew paradise and lost it, he was a child and was driven from his childhood. No doubt this "break" is not easy to localize. It shifts back and forth, at the dictate of his moods and myths, between the ages of ten and fifteen. But that is unimportant. What matters is that it exists and that he believes in it. His life is divided into two heterogeneous parts: before and after the sacred drama. Indeed, it is not unusual for the memory to condense into a single mythical moment the contingencies and perpetual rebeginnings of an individual history. What matters is that Genet lives

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<sup>\*</sup> *Passéiste*: one who is not adapted to the present age, who is not a man of his time, who "lives in the past."—Translator's note.

and continues to relive this period of his life as if it had lasted only an instant.

To say "instant" is to say *fatal instant*. The instant is the reciprocal and contradictory envelopment of the before by the after. One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life. One feels oneself to be one's own self and another; the eternal is present in an atom of duration. In the midst of the fullest life, one has a foreboding that one will merely survive, one is afraid of the future. It is the time of anguish and of heroism, of pleasure and of destruction. An instant is sufficient to destroy, to enjoy, to kill, to be killed, to make one's fortune at the turn of a card. Genet carries in his heart a bygone instant which has lost none of its virulence, an infinitesimal and sacred void which concludes a death and begins a horrible metamorphosis. The argument of this liturgical drama is as follows: a child dies of shame; a hoodlum rises up in his place; the hoodlum will be haunted by the child. One would have to speak of resurrection, to evoke the old initiatory rites of shamanism and secret societies, were it not that Genet refuses categorically to be a man who has been resuscitated.\* There was a death, that is all. And Genet is nothing other than a dead man. If he appears to be still alive, it is with the larval existence which certain peoples ascribe to their defunct in the grave. All his heroes have died at least once in their life.

"After his first murder, Querelle experienced the feeling of being dead. . . . His human form—what is called the envelope of flesh—continued nevertheless to move about on the surface of the earth."

His works are filled with meditations on death. The peculiarity of these spiritual exercises is that they almost never concern his future death, his being-to-die, but rather his being-dead, his death as past event.

This original crisis also appears to him as a metamorphosis. The well-behaved child is suddenly transformed into a hoodlum, as Gregor Samsa was changed into a bug. Genet's attitude toward this metamorphosis is ambivalent: he both loathes it and yearns for it.

He lives in terror lest the original crisis recur; he fears it as one fears an attack of epilepsy. "Querelle could not get used to the idea, an idea never formulated, of being a monster. He would consider,

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\* The candidate for shamanic functions is killed by the spirits. His body is cut to pieces. Then he comes to life again. Only then is he a shaman. Almost all "rites of passage" center about death and rebirth. The theme of death and resurrection similarly governs all initiations.

would regard his past with a smile that was ironic, frightened and tender at the same time, insofar as this past merged with himself. A young boy who has been metamorphosed into an alligator and whose soul appears in his eyes might in like manner—if he is not quite conscious of his maw, of his enormous jaw—consider his scaly body, his solemn tail that slaps the water or the beach or grazes other monsters. . . . He knew the horror of being alone, stricken by an immortal enchantment in the midst of the living world.”

The initial event determined Genet's inner climate, which will be horror.

“Few are the moments when I escape from horror, few the moments when I do not have a vision, or some horrifying perception of human beings and events.”

This horror is both fear of past metamorphoses and terrified expectation of their repetition:

“A young Italian . . . was laughing and relating some trivial experiences. . . . I took him for an animal that had been metamorphosed into a man. I felt that, in the presence of this privilege which I thought he possessed, he could, at any given moment, turn me, by his simple wish, even unexpressed, into a jackal, a fox, a guinea fowl.”

At every instant Genet fears “the miracle, that catastrophe of horror, horrifying as an angel . . . though radiant as the solution of a problem in mathematics, frighteningly exact.” But the aim of these passages is to give poetic expression to his fear: it is not literally *true* that Genet is afraid of being changed into a jackal. In the following passage, however, he expresses himself almost without transposition. Genet, who is in the presence of a handsome young man, is afraid of dying:

“Which is to say that either I would become aware of being suddenly naked in a crowd which sees my nakedness; or that my hands would become overgrown with leaves and I would have to live with them, tie my shoelaces with them, hold my cigarette, scratch myself, open the door with them; or that he himself would know spontaneously what I am at bottom and would laugh at seeing me thus . . . or that I would see and feel my penis being eternally devoured by fish; or that a sudden friendship would permit me to caress toads and corpses to the point of orgasm, for when I evoke these—and other—torments, my death is in danger of being the knowledge of my shame which has appeared in the play of the manifestations most feared in the presence of the beloved being.”

Note the connection between death and metamorphosis: “My

death is in danger of being the knowledge of my shame." "The child who is transformed into an alligator fears lest some gleam from the interior of his body or from his own consciousness illuminate him, hook on to his scaly carapace the reflection of a form and make him visible to men." When unmasked, he changes into himself. The metamorphosis that threatens him unceasingly is the constituent revelation that occurred one day through the mediation of others and that can recur at any moment.

And no doubt this myth is fed by ordinary and quite real worries. Having reached manhood, Genet, who considers himself a coward, is afraid of revealing his cowardice to his young lovers: "In the presence of the person I adore and in whose eyes I seemed an angel, here am I being knocked down, biting the dust, turning inside out like a glove and showing exactly the opposite of what I was."

As a professional thief, he is quite simply afraid of being caught: "A little old woman said to him quietly, 'What have you stolen, young man?' . . . a new universe instantly presented itself to Darling: the universe of the irremediable. It is the same as the one we were in, with one peculiar difference: instead of acting and knowing we are acting, we know we are acted upon . . . the order of this world—seen inside out—appears so perfect in its inevitability that this world has only to disappear."

But the striking thing is that the erotic humiliations of a homosexual and the occupational risks of a thief are tinged with an aura of the sacred. Confronted with a trivial, everyday event, Genet is "turned inside out," "like a glove"; the whole world is involved, one touches the ineluctable. These erotic and occupational accidents have a meaning which transcends them, and, as has been said of love, "They are much more than what they are," because they manifest the "immortal enchantment" that begot a monster and killed a child.

These metamorphoses fascinate him. He fears them and lives only for them. Apart from these brusque changes of Being, nothing in the world interests him. Having died in boyhood, Genet contains within him the dizziness of the irremediable, he wants to die again. He abandons himself to the instant, to the cathartic crises that reproduce the first enchantment and carry it to the sublime: crime, capital punishment, poetry, orgasm, homosexuality. In each case we shall find the paradox of the before and after, a rise and fall, a life staked on a single card, the play of the eternal and the fleeting. The very images and the words that designate them are of the same nature: from the bright scaffold spring roses, "lovely effect of

death"; from the "ebony prick" spring white flowers, death and flowering of pleasure; a decapitated head falls from the guillotine, a black member shrivels and droops. If metamorphosis is a death, death and pleasure are metamorphoses.

Thus, Genet lives outside history, in parentheses. He no more cares about his individual adventure—which he contemptuously calls "the anecdote"—than did an ancient Egyptian about his national history. He deigns to take notice of the circumstances of his life only insofar as they seem to repeat the original drama of the lost paradise. He is a man of repetition: the drab, slack time of his daily life—a *profane* life in which everything is permissible—is shot through with blazing hierophanies which restore to him his original passion, as Holy Week restores to us that of Christ. Just as Jesus does not cease to die, so Genet does not cease to be metamorphosed into a foul insect: the same archetypal event is reproduced in the same symbolic and ritual form through the same ceremonies of transfiguration. To Genet, as to the faithful of a religious community, sacred time is cyclical: it is the time of Eternal Recurrence. Genet *has been*, he *has lived*. As for the event that determined his fate, it has long since ceased to be a memory and has entered the category of myths, so that what has been written about the mentality of the primitive might be applied to Genet word for word: "What we might call [his] 'history' is reduced exclusively to the mythical events which occurred *in illo tempore* and which have not ceased to repeat themselves from that time until ours."\* Genet has no *profane history*. He has only a sacred history, or, if one prefers, like so-called "archaic" societies he is continually transforming history into mythical categories.

If we wish to understand this man, the only way to do so is to reconstruct carefully, through the mythical representations he has given us of his universe, the original event to which he constantly refers and which he reproduces in his secret ceremonies. By analysis of the myths we shall proceed to re-establish the facts in their true significance.

Genet is seven years old. The National Foundling Society has placed him in the care of Morvan peasants. Adrift in nature, he lives "in sweet confusion with the world." He fondles himself in the grass, in the water; he plays; the whole countryside passes through his vacant transparency. In short, he is innocent.

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\* Cf. Eliade, Mircea, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

This innocence comes to him from others—everything comes to us from others, even innocence. Grownups never weary of taking stock of their belongings: this is called regarding. The child is part of the lot, between two stools or under the table. He comes to know himself through their regard, and his happiness lies in being part of the stock. To Be is to belong to someone. If property defines Being, the quiet, sober steadiness of earthly possessions defines the Good. Good as good soil, faithful as a spade, as a rake, pure as milk, Genet grows up piously. He is a good little boy, a respectful and gentle child, weaker and smaller than his playmates, but more intelligent. He is always at the head of his class. In addition, he is serious, thoughtful, not talkative, in short, as good as gold. This Good is simple: one has parents whom one worships, one does one's homework in their presence, and before going to bed one says one's prayers. Later, one likewise becomes an owner of things and one works hard and saves. Work, family, country, honesty, property: such is his conception of the Good. It is graven forever upon his heart. Later on, despite the fact that he steals, begs, lies, prostitutes himself, it will not change. The local priest says that his is a religious nature.

This child is the victim of a cruel hoax. If you say to adults that they *are* innocent, they get annoyed, but they like to have *been* innocent. It is an alibi, an occasion for sentiment, a pathway to resentment and all forms of "*passéiste*" thinking, a ready-made refuge for times of misfortune, a way of asserting or implying that one was better than one's life. The myth of childhood innocence is a bastardized, positive and convenient form of the myth of Paradise Lost. As saints, intercessors and vestals of this pocket religion, it is the function of children, from the age of one to ten, to represent for grownups the original state of grace. Many of them find it to their advantage to become these sacred vessels, in particular those who are very secure, for example, the eldest of large families. But there are some whose actual situation contradicts the mythical virtues with which they have been adorned. Genet is one of these. He was given to believe, as were all the other village youngsters, that his soul was white; he therefore sees himself as white. Or rather, he sees nothing at all, but takes the grownups' word for it: they are able to discern his secret snows. This modest pride is going to determine his destiny: it consecrates, without his suspecting it, the priority of the object over the subject, of what one is to others over what one is to oneself. Nevertheless, the fact is that he *lives* his innocence, that he enjoys it, that it makes him happy. It would be

wrong to paint Genet's childhood in colors that are too dark since he has been careful to inform us himself that it was the most beautiful period of his life.

And yet, from this moment on he lives in a state of uneasiness. The pious and lawful vocables which he has been made to learn are not quite applicable to what he is and what he feels. But as he possesses no others, he can neither describe nor define his malaise. Unnamed, unnamable, marginal, unexpressed, this anxiety, which is faceless and without consistency, seems to him a negligible mood. Genet *does not perceive it*. Yet it expresses his deepest reality, which is contradictory, for his self-certainty contradicts the truth that he is for others. Innocent *in general*, he senses that he is suspect in particular. He is obliged, by error, to use a language which is not his own, which belongs only to legitimate children. Genet has neither mother nor heritage—how could he be innocent? By virtue of his mere existence he disturbs the natural order and the social order. A human institution with its birth register and its bureaucracy has come between the species and himself. He is a fake child. No doubt he was born of a woman, but this origin has not been noted by the social memory. As far as everyone and, consequently, he himself are concerned, he appeared one fine day without having been carried in any known womb: he is a synthetic product. He is obscurely aware that he belongs legally to administrative bodies and laboratories, and so there is nothing surprising in the fact that he will later feel elective affinities with reformatories and prisons. Being a fabricated creature, he will find his truth in sophism; being a child of miracle, he will be mineral or spirit; but he does not belong to the intermediate kingdom: to life. He will never care for sports or physical pleasures; he will never be gluttonous or sensual; he will never have confidence in his body. For want of having known the primordial relationship with naked flesh, with the swooning fertility of a woman, he will never have that tender familiarity with his own flesh, that abandon which makes it possible for others to reproduce within themselves and by themselves the indissoluble intimacy of mother and nursling. He is said to be "contrary to nature." But the reason is that, as far back as he can remember, nature has been against him. We others who issue from the species have a mandate to continue the species. Genet, who was born without parents, is preparing to die without descendants. His sexuality will be sterility and abstract tension.

How does the little boy foresee his destiny? I cannot say, but

there is no doubt that he already lives it in advance. Since his earliest childhood, the unknown mother has been one of the chief figures of his mythology. He both worships and hates her, smothers her with kisses and seeks to debase her. He is still fairly young when he addresses the Mettray Reformatory as if it were his own mother; he imagines that it appears to him "with all that is peculiar to women": tenderness, slightly nauseating stale smell emanating from the open mouth, deep heaving bosom, in short everything that makes the mother a mother. In short, the Mother Goddess, fertile and bountiful; better still, nature personified. Later, in his books, woman will appear only as mother. Genet disregards girls, except to turn them over to his handsome murderers who casually slaughter them. In fact, he peoples his works with guilty women whose children are dead and who mourn triumphantly, and if at times we do encounter amorous females in their forties, they too are mothers, incestuous and sacrilegious mothers, for they are laid by young lovers who could be their sons. But the theme of the "guilty mother" seems to be of recent origin in Genet's work. When he referred to the Reformatory in the past, that big woman was simply severe. At the beginning, *he* was the guilty one. Whenever the child tries to reach beyond the bureaucracy of which he seems an emanation to his true origins, he finds that his birth coincides with a gesture of rejection. He was driven out the very moment he was brought into the world. Later, it is all of society that will cast him out, but this social rejection is latent in the maternal rejection. The child senses that a woman tore him from herself, alive, covered with blood, and sent him rolling outside the world, and he feels himself an outcast. Ever since his birth he has been the unloved one, the inopportune, the superfluous. Undesirable in *his very being*, he is not that woman's son but her excrement. And we shall see how insistently, with what masochistic pleasure, Genet will later compare himself to filth, to a waste product. Psychoanalysts have observed that children often feel a parent's death to be a condemnation; the mother goes away so as no longer to see her unnatural son. The abandoning of a child signifies an even more radical condemnation! Is it a mysterious sentence that is punishing him for having committed the crime of being born? Is it a prophetic verdict that is making him pay in advance for future crimes? In any case, the judge is unknown, the child is ignorant of the charges and of the law, but the condemnation attacks his existence itself and eats away at it. Beneath the supposed innocence that adults have conferred upon him is hidden a sense of elusive guilt. Being nobody's

son, he is nothing. As a result of his fault, disorder has wormed its way into the beautiful order of the world, a crack has appeared in the fullness of being.

Being nothing, he possesses nothing. Whether judged from the viewpoint of Having or that of Being, he is equally at fault. He knows that he does not quite belong to his foster parents, that the public authorities have loaned him to them and can take him back, and that consequently nothing his parents own belongs to him. For others, things are warm, alive, elastic, but if he takes them in his hands, they die. He can name them, count them, even try to use them, but their dense opacity becomes an absence; it is to the others that they address their homey smile. If, later on, in the presence of the handsome young men who fascinate him, he re-experiences that strange impression of being *kept at a distance*, it is because it has never left him: "Whenever I was close to an object he had touched, my hand would stop three inches from it, with the result that things, outlined by my gestures, seemed extraordinarily inflated—bristling with invisible rays or augmented by their metaphysical double—to my now sensitized fingers." It is the material possession of things that is forbidden him, and his life will be a long effort to dematerialize them, to construct with air their metaphysical double, which is all he can possess.

Of course, he is neither cold nor hungry. He is given board and lodging. But there's the rub—he is *given* them. This child has had more than enough of gifts. Everything is a gift, including the air he-breathes. He has to say "thank you" for everything. Every minute a gift is put into his hands at the whim of a generosity that leaves its mark on him forever. Every minute Genet moves a little further away from his foster parents. All this bounty *obliges* him to recognize that they *were not obliged* to adopt him, to feed him, to take care of him, that they "owed him nothing," that he is *obliged* to them, that they were quite free not to give him what he was not free not to accept, in short, that he is not their son. A true son does not have to display his gratitude. He draws from the family purse, and it is his father's duty to bring him up. Deprived of everything through the kindness of others, Genet will later express his hatred of all generosity toward inferiors:

"Madame is kind! Madame adores us. She loves us the way she loves her armchair . . . like her bidet, rather. Like her pink enamel toilet seat. And we, we can't love each other. . . . Filth doesn't love filth. It's easy to be kind, and smiling, and sweet . . . when you're beautiful and rich. . . . But what if you're only a maid?"

A lady once said to him, "My maid must be pleased. I give her my dresses." "That's nice," he replied, "does she give you hers?"

Castoff of a society that defines being by having, the child Genet wants to have in order to be. However, the normal modes of appropriation are denied him. He will obtain nothing by purchase, nothing by heritage. The gift accords him a relative and provisional being but enslaves him forever to his benefactors. There remains work. But his work at school is also a gift: he *receives* general education just as later he will *receive* technical education; they want "to make a man of him." He helps in the fields, he helps at home. But this unproductive help confers no rights upon him. It will never pay for the care he is given; it is merely the expression of his gratitude.

A vicious circle. One might say about the little Genet what Rougemont has said about Don Juan: that he *is* not enough in order to have—and also the opposite: that he *has* not enough in order to be. Different circumstances might have broken the circle, might have dissociated being from having: had he been placed in a working-class home, had he lived in an industrial suburb of a big city, had he been accustomed, at an early age, to hearing the very right of ownership challenged, or had his foster father worked in a nationalized branch of industry, he might perhaps have learned that one *is* also what one *does*. But—height of misfortune—he had to be sent into the fields. Those who provided him with the first image of man were landowners. To that stern, that mineral race, the farmer and his land form an indissoluble couple: one *has* the property because one *is* the legitimate heir, and, vice versa, one *is* shaped by what one *has*. The peasant acquires the silent immobility of his field. Our future burglar starts by learning absolute respect for property.

How will this abstract child react to his double exile? By a miming of being and having, in short, by playing games, like all children. He will have two favorite games, saintliness and pilfering. Insufficiency of being prompts him to play the former, and lack of having, the latter.

Saintliness first. He is already fascinated by this word, which he will later call the most beautiful in the French language. Though he does not yet dream clearly of becoming a saint, he feels that a man is not worth much if he does not live on grasshoppers, if he does not die at the stake with a smile on his lips. This exaltation betrays his secret disorder. It is not unusual for young boys to have extreme tastes, for them to want to be perfect, to be every-

thing, to be first in everything, but if they want to become great captains or great doctors, it is in order to be great among men and of a greatness recognized by men. In Genet's mysticism, however, we discern a rejection of the human order. An abandoned child, he takes revenge by admiring the children who abandon father and mother to follow Christ. It pleases him that the saints are answerable only to God, that they long to wrest themselves from the species and that they go counter to their most legitimate desires in order to achieve within themselves an anti-nature. His contempt for his body makes asceticism easy for him. For the same reasons we shall later see him make of love a form of torture. But, above all, he asks God to give him the rightful existence that men deny him. He derives at least one advantage from his orphan's solitude: his inner life is not socialized. No gaze disturbs his original privacy. A mother claims to know everything, she makes her child feel that she can read his mind, he thinks he is never alone. One evening, at dinner, it suddenly occurred to a little girl that her mother was silly. The child blushed to her ears and left the table, convinced that her parents had *heard* her inner voice. For a long time, our wicked thoughts will seem to us to be public knowledge; for a long time, we shall lie to others to the very depths of our being. But no family ceremony has consecrated Genet's union with his social image. Alone, without words, without a secret witness, he lives with himself in a state of concubinage. This solitude will later be mated; he will talk to *himself*, will worship *himself*, reinventing for his own use the archaic myths of the double and of the twins. For the time being, he takes it into his head to elect God witness to his secret life. God compensates for the absent mother, for indifferent Society. In becoming an object of concern to an infinite being, Genet will acquire the being which he lacks. He will be a saint, since he is not a son.

Another and even more amusing game: from time to time God turns his head away; whereupon soft, silent, unperceived acts flow from the child. Thefts. The budding saint robs his foster parents and sometimes their neighbors. He robs them in all innocence, without remorse and without shame, and without ceasing to want to be a saint. In his eyes this petty pilfering does not count. He is hardly aware of what he is doing; his hands simply wander. Moreover, his foster mother wasn't shy about filching. She was an "honest woman," of course, and remained honest while stealing. Honesty is an eternal essence which is not dimmed by accidental lapses.

Besides, it is unimportant who suggested to him his first thefts; it is unimportant whether he first stole alone or with playmates.

The essential point is that he thinks less of stealing than of engaging in imaginary experiments in appropriation. He experiments, as scientists say, "just to see." He is feeling his way with the aim of establishing forthwith a possessive relationship with things. Since an owner is a man who can use a thing without having to say "thank you," Genet will lay hands, in secret, on personal effects, tools, trinkets—in secret, so as not to have to thank anyone. He will use them in solitude. But *using* is, in this situation, only a means of possessing. The aim is not merely to take the object but also to assume the familiar, expert, offhand attitude which will indicate, to invisible witnesses, that he is its real owner. The servant girls Solange and Claire\* do not rob Madame. They put on her dresses when she is out, they adjust them, drape them, they primp and preen; they admire themselves in the mirror, they receive the real caresses of the silk and satin as an investiture. Their sensations and gestures designate them, in their own sight, as Madame. It is Madame's reflection that they see in the mirror, and each in turn becomes more servantlike so that the other may feel more mistresslike. It is only a game. But should the dress be spotted, should it be burned by an ash, the imaginary using of it will end in real consumption: they will roll it up, carry it away and destroy it—and thus become thieves. Genet moves from game to theft with the same fatality. It is highly significant that his first acts of larceny did not spring from hunger and covetousness. These are needs that care not a rap about mine and thine, that demand simply to be satisfied. Under their pressure the hungry man challenges, provisionally or definitively, the right of others to possess. In the case of Genet, however, his thefts, far from challenging property, affirm it. This child who has enough to eat but whom society keeps at a distance wants, by means of a solitary act, to integrate himself into the community. He is aiming at the impossible. His austere and feverish quest for Being involves an imaginary satisfaction only. Thus is born that most peculiar nature which carries out a real operation whose aim and meaning lie in unreality.

The act is performed in two stages. The first does not count for anyone, not even for the one who commits it. The mind clouds over, everyone dies then and there, even the little thief. "The culprit is your hand."† In the absence of human creatures, a hand moves in the desert. When the people come to life again, nothing

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\* In Genet's play *The Maids*.

† Cocteau, *Anna la Bonne*.

has changed, except that there is a hundred francs less in a purse and a hundred francs more in a pocket. The second moment, on the other hand, requires the most intense consciousness: Genet begins his spiritual exercises. Outcast of a consuming society, the rites which he celebrates in secret reproduce the cardinal act of the society that excludes him: he sacrifices, he consumes, that is, he destroys. An object goes up in smoke, a piece of fruit melts in his mouth, his pleasure blossoms and fades, it is going to die. It is this process of dissolution that constitutes the entire ceremony. By a fictive communion he touches, on this stolen food, on this evanescent and stealthy pleasure, his imaginary being as fair-haired-boy-rightfully-possessing-the-fruits-of-his-earth; he eats it. Like "the youngster too vacillating to be included in the breed . . . who turned in on himself in the form of a slice of bread smeared with soft cheese, already the snow of peaks, the lily or other whiteness constitutive of inner wings,"\* he turns in on himself, he rewards himself. The pleasure is real. Real, too, the chewing and swallowing. But their reality is of no interest in itself; it is there only to lend a body to the desperate efforts of appropriation. The important thing is to use these real facts as symbols. The legitimate owner puts out his hand, picks a piece of fruit and eats it peacefully. Genet transfers to himself the owner's gestures and sensations so as to identify himself with the latter by an effort of mind. He takes in order to convince himself that he has the right to take; he eats as an actor eats on the stage; he is playing at possession; he embodies the owner as Barrault embodies Hamlet. However, he makes, at the same time, a considerable effort to be his own audience so as to catch himself in the act of possessing. Need I say that he is always about to succeed but never does? It doesn't matter. He already finds within himself what the Marquis de Sade called the "principle of delicacy," which makes him prefer nothingness to being, imagination to reality, tension to enjoyment. In short, his operation clearly falls into the category of poetic acts: it is the systematic pursuit of the impossible. No wonder that he wrote later that "the land of the Chimeras is the only one worth inhabiting" and that he quoted the following line from Pope: "Nothing is beautiful, save that which is not."† But what appears with the first thefts is not only that straining of the soul toward something beyond the true which will henceforth characterize Genet's inner tempo, but also the particu-

\* Mallarmé: *Poèmes en prose. Réminiscence. Œuvres complètes* (Pléiade), Paris, p. 278.

† This is not Pope's line but a translation of Genet's misquotation, from memory, of a French rendering.—Translator's note.

lar nature of his poetic procedure. He never dreams. He does not turn away from the world in order to invent better worlds, he does not abandon himself to images, to musings. His imagination is a corrosive operation that is practiced *on* the real, an operation aimed not at evading but at transcending reality, and, as we have seen, at dematerializing it. Other children would have played at ownership with imaginary belongings. A pebble would have been a gold piece. They would have made believe they were buying or eating. But our little thief wants to eat "for real," wants to have *real* pleasure in his mouth. Only, this real pleasure is neither wanted nor felt for its own sake; it is in the service of an impossible attempt to coincide, in the realm of the imaginary, with the essence of an owner of things. As a result, the whole system is derealized, the very enjoyment becomes imaginary. The true pleasure of a thief becomes a fictive pleasure of a fake owner. Reality is worn so thin that one can see the light through it. To imagine is to give the imaginary a bit of the real to chew at. For this reason, Genet will be able to say of the chimerical Ernestine: "She never left reality." No imaginary without reality. It is in the movement of the real to annihilate itself that the pale shadows of the imagination are embodied. And thereby, despite all the differences which we shall point out later, Genet's thefts are not so far removed from the object-poems produced by surrealism, the inner contradiction of which represents the pure instant of the falling away to nothingness, through which can be perceived the eternal absence of another world.

The thefts spread and multiply. Genet now robs neighbors. There is no more effective defense against the temptation to have *everything* than to own something. If you have only a crumb that has fallen from the table, your life will be spent in defending that crumb, in convincing others and yourself that it is the best of crumbs and that, in the last analysis, it contains the universe. Genet has nothing, which amounts to saying that he has an eminent right over everything. At this point there begins the systematic turning of the positive into the negative and the negative into the positive which later, carried to an extreme, will lead Genet to "saintliness." In the "land of the Chimeras," a conversion of signs is sufficient to change penury into wealth. This pariah whom the world rejects is secretly pursuing the eminent possession of everything.

We have all known the kind of bright, healthy child with "winning gaze" and "frank smile" whom everyone takes for a little angel. One day we realize that he steals things. At first we simply

can't understand, he seemed so nice! And then we feel personally offended. He fooled us, he's a little hypocrite. We start regarding his virtues as crimes; he assumed the appearance of honesty the better to deceive us.

We do not perceive the air-tight partition that separates his virtues from his pilfering. We do not see that he lives on two levels at the same time. Of course Genet condemns theft! But in the furtive acts he commits when he is all alone he *does not recognize* the offense which he condemns. He, steal? When what he is trying to do is to win, in defiance of destiny, a regular status, parents, property, when he is attempting to diminish his secret guilt and draw nearer to those whom he admires? What is he really seeking? To *be like others*, nothing more, and precisely because others are good and just, because they are right to be what they are. The truth is that he is impelled by anxiety. At times he feels obscurely within himself a kind of budding anguish, he feels that he is about to see clearly, that a veil is about to be torn and that he will know his destitution, his abandonment, his original offense. So he steals. He steals in order to ease the anguish that is coming on. When he has stolen the cakes and fruit, when he has eaten them in secret, his anxiety will disappear, he will once again find himself in the lawful and sunlit world of honesty. His conduct is not to be regarded as sneaky. He is really and truly well-behaved and virtuous, and there is only one life that counts for him, the one he leads in the presence of adults. Outside that life there is only a bad dream, a kind of nameless nightmare in which he sometimes feels he is going to be unhappy and from which he awakes very quickly, an obscure menace against which he has invented two exorcisms, the game of saintliness and that of stealing. I would compare this childish magic, which operates at the frontiers of nothingness, of sleep, to the fantasies of onanism rather than to anything else. To the child who steals and the child who masturbates, to exist is *to be seen by adults*, and since these secret activities take place in solitude, they *do not exist*. The truth is that little Genet has been taught an ethics *that condemns him*. He believes in it with all his soul, but by the same token he destroys himself, for this ethics of ownership casts him doubly into nothingness, as ragamuffin and as bastard. This is the key to his conduct and state of disturbance. In broad daylight he is luminous, honest, happy, but the more he asserts his happiness in the light, the more he ruins and tortures himself in the darkness. He is going to reduce himself to despair. If he steals, if he dreams of saintliness, it is not in defiance of peasant ethics, but because of

it. He has recourse to this double compensatory activity because he is unable to liquidate a system of values that denies him his place in the sun.

Shall I say he is unhappy? Not yet. In fact, one should emphasize the optimism and will to happiness that characterize this child in the depths of his heart. Not for a moment has he wanted to believe that there was no way out of the situation. Not for a moment does he imagine that he is condemned to poverty and bastardy—it would not be just, it would not be right. God will substitute for the absent mother, theft will substitute for property. A petty theft here, a slight ecstasy there, these are enough to maintain his inner balance. Quickly he returns to sweet, natural confusion. But while he is stealing in innocence, while he modestly covets the martyr's palm he is unaware that he is forging his destiny.

## A DIZZYING WORD

*Our sentence is not severe. Whatever commandment the culprit has violated is simply written upon his skin by the harrow.*

—KAFKA,  
In the Penal Settlement

The child was playing in the kitchen. Suddenly he became aware of his solitude and was seized with anxiety, as usual. So he "absented" himself. Once again, he plunged into a kind of ecstasy. There is now no one in the room. An abandoned consciousness is reflecting utensils. A drawer is opening; a little hand moves forward.

*Caught in the act.* Someone has entered and is watching him. Beneath this gaze the child comes to himself. He who was not yet anyone suddenly becomes Jean Genet. He feels that he is blinding, deafening; he is a beacon, an alarm that keeps ringing. *Who* is Jean Genet? In a moment the whole village will know. . . . The child alone is in ignorance. In a state of fear and shame he continues his signal of distress. Suddenly

. . . a dizzying word  
From the depths of the world abolishes  
the beautiful order. . . \*

A voice declares publicly: "You're a thief." The child is ten years old.

That was how it happened, in that or some other way. In all probability, there were offenses and then punishment, solemn oaths and relapses. It does not matter. The important thing is that Genet lived and has not stopped reliving this period of his life as if it had lasted only an instant.

It is the moment of awakening. The sleepwalking child opens his eyes and realizes he is stealing. It is revealed to him that he is a thief and he pleads guilty, crushed by a fallacy which he is unable to refute; he stole, he is therefore a thief. Can anything be more

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\* Genet, *Poèmes*, p. 56.

evident? Genet, thunderstruck, considers his act, looks at it from every angle. No doubt about it, it is a theft. And theft is an offense, a crime. What he *wanted* was to steal; what he *did*, a theft; what he *was*, a thief. A timid voice is still protesting within him; he does not *recognize* his intentions. But soon the voice grows silent. The act is so luminous, so sharply defined, that there is no mistaking its nature. He tries to go back, to understand himself, but it is too late, he has lost his bearings. The dazzlingly evident present confers its meaning on the past; Genet now *recalls* that he cynically decided to steal. What happened? Actually, almost nothing: an action undertaken without reflection, conceived and carried out in the secret, silent inwardness in which he often takes refuge, has just *become objective*. Genet learns what he *is objectively*. It is this *transition* that is going to determine his entire life.

The metamorphosis occurs immediately. He is nothing more than what he was before, yet he is now unrecognizable. Driven from the lost paradise, exiled from childhood, from the immediate, condemned to see himself, suddenly provided with a monstrous and guilty "ego," isolated, separated, in short changed into a bug. An evil principle dwelt in him unperceived, and now it has been discovered. It is this principle which is the source of everything. It produces the slightest impulses of his soul. The child lived at peace with himself; his desires seemed to him limpid and simple. Their transparency now appears to have been deceptive. They had a double bottom. Little Genet's shame reveals eternity to him. He is a thief by birth, he will remain one until his death. Time is only a dream in which his evil nature is refracted into a thousand gleams, a thousand petty thefts, but does not belong to the temporal order. *Genet is a thief*; that is his truth, his eternal essence. And, if he is a thief, he must therefore always be one, everywhere, not only when he steals, but when he eats, when he sleeps, when he kisses his foster mother. Each of his gestures betrays him, reveals his vile nature in broad daylight. At any moment the teacher may interrupt the lesson, look Genet in the eyes and cry out: "There's a thief!" It would be vain for him to think he deserved leniency by admitting his errors, by mastering the perversity of his instincts. All the impulses of his heart are equally guilty because all alike express his essence.

If only the dizzying word had been uttered by his own father, the discovery would have taken place within the indestructible family unit, in other words within the unit of a single collective mind. The young culprit, isolated for a moment within that mind like an

alien thought, would have been resorbed into it immediately. One doesn't rob one's family. But though his foster parents' tenderness might at times have given Genet the illusion of his being their son, it is dissipated the moment they become his judges. Because he is regarded as a thief Genet *becomes* a foundling. Father and mother unknown. Nobody wants to take responsibility for his birth. He seems to have produced himself, in defiance of everyone, in a burst of evil will: Evil is self-caused. At the same time, his faults are explained by dark forces whose origin antedate his birth: "That little thief, where does he come from? He surely takes after someone. Only a slut would abandon her son. A chip off the old block." In short, everything hangs together, everything becomes clear. Born of nothingness, the child has nothing, is nothing. His being has the substantiality of nonbeing. If it exists, it does so like a corrosive acid. Besides, does it exist? Is it not simply the foul beast that rushes through the troubled dream of an honest man?

Jouhandeau, another pariah, has aptly expressed what might be called the ontological curse: "The insult is perpetual. It is not only in the mouth of this person or that, explicit, but on all the lips that name me. It is in 'being' itself, in my being, and I find it in all the eyes that look at me. It is in all the hearts that have dealings with me. It is in my blood and is inscribed on my face in letters of fire. It accompanies me everywhere and always, in this world and in the other. It is myself, and it is God in person who proffers it in proffering me, who eternally gives me that execrable name, who sees me from that standpoint of wrath."

There is not even the possibility of shifting the blame to God by saying "since it's you who made me, *you're* the guilty one," for in this magical concept nature and freedom are one and the same: although the thief is enchained since he is unable to change, he is free since he is condemned. This is reminiscent of Calvinistic predestination which leaves the evildoer full responsibility for Evil while taking from him the possibility of doing Good. Being is here a subtle and radical perversion of freedom, a constant inclination to do evil, a kind of wrong-way grace, a specific gravity of free will which makes it always fall to the very bottom. In this futile maneuver, freedom is responsible for Being and Being petrifies freedom. Although Genet is free to be guilty, he is not free to change. The reason is that the wrath of the just wants to perpetuate itself; if Genet became honest, it would lose its object. This virtuous anger is relentless. It is not enough for it to murder a child; it must also contrive a hopeless future for the monster it has just fabricated. He

is told that prison and the penal colony are in store for him. Everything is decided; from an eternal cause derive irremediable consequences in the temporal order: "You'll end on the gallows!" In a state of dazzlement Genet contemplates the ineluctable course of the universe and the interdependence of the circumstances that will lead him to capital punishment. Only yesterday everything was possible. He was perhaps the son of a prince; he would perhaps become a saint. He lived in an anarchy of desire, his heart was gladdened by chance graces, the future was still open. But now all is in order: he has been provided with a nature, a guilty freedom and a destiny. He is ten years old and he already knows to the last detail the life that he will have to sip drop by drop: "The order of this world—seen inside out—appears so perfect in its inevitability that this world has only to disappear."

Indeed, what is the point of living? Time is only a tedious illusion, everything is already there, his future is only an eternal present and, since his death is at the end of it—his death, his sole release—since he is *already dead*, in short, already guillotined, it's better to get it over with right away. To vanish, to slip between their fingers, to flow out of the present and down the drain, to be swallowed up by nothingness. Who of us has not, at least once in his life, been struck, seized, crippled with shame and has not wanted to die on the spot? In vain: Genet remains alive, solid, bulky, scandalous, before the indignant eyes of adults. But he will preserve in the depths of his heart that old, sad, aching dream of disappearing. In fact, he will go even further: like old Lapérouse in *The Counterfeiters* who, lacking the courage to kill himself, decides that he is dead, Genet will henceforth date subsequent events from the day of his suicide. And later, in the dismal ceremonies which will restore the original crisis, the primary rite will be that of death.

Two types of persecution maniacs are found in asylums. On the one hand are those who are victims of a conspiracy. The entire world is secretly engaged in trying to destroy them. The passer-by is a spy, a provocateur, a judge, people are trying to dishonor them, imprison them, perhaps kill them. At least they remain free and sovereign in their heart of hearts. They scorn their opponents and foil their schemes. They enjoy their solitude with mingled pride and anxiety. But there are others who can no longer take refuge even within themselves, for the enemy is already installed there. Their persecutors have placed spies and torturers in the innermost recesses of their consciousness, in the privacy of their inner life. Their thoughts are stolen from them, they are made to utter words

which they loathe, their enemies infuse them, by means of strange instruments, with evil certainties, terrible convictions, frightful desires, which they do not recognize. I cannot imagine any suffering worse than theirs. Outside are horror, monstrous beasts, the hatred of a whole people, sometimes even of the universe. If they withdraw into themselves, they find the situation even more ghastly: those whom they were fleeing are already there, laughing and waiting for them.

It is these wretched creatures that the child Genet has suddenly begun to resemble. The contempt and anger of decent people would be bearable if he could return blame for blame and hatred for hatred. And that is what he probably would have done if the "accident" had occurred a little later. Had he been called a thief at the age of seventeen, Genet would have laughed. That is the age at which one liquidates paternal values. He would have had a thousand ways and means at his disposal. He could have retorted that his accusers were themselves scoundrels, could have pointed to evil everywhere and have forced it, by means of its very excess, to be resorbed, along with good, into a kind of indifference and wretchedness, he could have challenged the principles of public morality in the name of a Nietzschean or anarchistic ethic, could have denied the existence of values and deigned to recognize only the law of force.\* But it is a child who has been caught, a very young child, timid, respectful, right-thinking, one who has had a religious upbringing, in accordance with the best principles, who has been imbued with so passionate a love of God that he desires saintliness rather than wealth. Nor can he resort to self-defense by accusing adults, for adults are gods to this religious little soul. He is trapped like a rat: he has been so thoroughly inculcated with the morality in whose name he is condemned that it is part of his very fiber. No, whatever he does, the honest folk have the initiative and will not lose it. They have penetrated to the very bottom of his heart and installed there a permanent delegate which is himself. It is he himself who will be both the court and the accused, the policeman and the thief. It is he who will commit the offense and who will deliver sentence and apply it. If he tries to withdraw into himself in order to escape the censure of those about him, he will find an even more severe censure, his own. He will be a zealous self-tormentor and will henceforth experience his states of mind, moods, thoughts, even his perceptions, in the form of a conflict. The sim-

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\* Cf. Appendix II.

plest, most legitimate desire will appear to him as a thief's desire, hence as a guilty one. The adults triumph; they have found an accomplice who is none other than the accused. One isn't as lucky as that every day. In fact, the situation is even better: had the child developed normally, he would have gradually freed himself from this simple-minded morality, he would at least have made it more flexible, broader, would have perhaps replaced it by a religious ethic, by mysticism, by a liberal eclecticism or by anarchism, but he would have done so quietly, without turmoil, without inner catastrophe. But the terrible blow he has just received will forever prevent this amicable liquidation. Genet will not change. In his worst deviations he will remain faithful to the morality of his childhood. He will flout it, he will perhaps hate it, he will try to drag it with him through the mud, but "the original crisis" has burned it into him as with a red-hot iron. Whatever happens from now on, whatever he may do, whatever way out he may invent, one thing remains forbidden him: *self-acceptance*. The law of his consciousness is conflict. Until the "crisis," he lived in the "sweet confusion" of the immediate, he was unaware that he was a person. He has learned that he is and, by the same token, that this person is a monster.

"Guilt," he will write later, "gives rise, first, to individuality." Beneath the accusing finger, it is all one, for the little thief, to discover that he is himself and that he is other than all. And no doubt many people have testified to the fact that, around the age of ten, they discovered their individuality with amazement or anguish. The child Gide wept in his mother's arms and screamed that he "was not like other children." But this discovery is usually made without much damage. Adults have nothing to do with it. The child is playing alone, a slight change in the landscape, an event, a fleeting thought, is enough to give rise to the reflective awareness which reveals our Ego to us. And, as I have shown elsewhere, this ego is not yet anything to itself, except the empty and universal form of individuality. To be unlike the others is to be like everyone, since each is other than all and the same as itself. If the reflective operation takes place normally, it not only does not prevent reciprocal relationships, it produces them. I feel that I am other than Peter and I know that Peter resembles me because he feels he is other than I. However, the otherness that Genet discovers in himself excludes any reciprocity. It is not a case of an empty and universal form but of an individual difference that has to do with both form and content. There is Genet and there are all the others. And it is the height of irony that the child's dreadful loneliness

occasions a finer understanding among those who condemn him: when honest people baptize an evildoer, they are in raptures; they huddle together, the better to block his way; they would even be willing to love each other. Genet quite realizes that he is an oblate and that his sacrifice serves as a bond among his sacrificers. *All the others*, whatever the differences separating them, recognize that they are fellow creatures in that they are not, thank God, thieves. *All the others*, whatever their conflicting interests, recognize their kinship because each reads in his neighbors' eyes the horror that Genet inspires in them; they constitute a single monstrous consciousness that judges and curses. It is horrible to "achieve" unanimity, to see suddenly that it is possible, that it is present, that one is touching it, that one has built it, and to know at the same time that one has done so against oneself. It would be pointless for him to round on the others and exclude them in turn, for there is not a square yard on earth from which he can chase them; he possesses nothing of his own. Thus, the loathing he inspires is a one-way affair; he fills honest folk with loathing but cannot loathe them. The only feeling he retains in his heart is love, a humiliated, forbidden love which shamefully, humbly, seeks opportunities to manifest itself. Our Lady of the Flowers, in the criminal court, looks for the first time at the presiding magistrate who is going to condemn him to death: "It is so sweet to love that he could not keep from dissolving into a feeling of sweet, trusting tenderness for the judge. 'Maybe he ain't a louse!' he thought."

The child loves his judges, he tries to draw near them, to melt, even to the point of losing consciousness, into the unanimity which he has created. He finds no other way than to share the disgust he inspires in them, than to despise himself with their contempt. The trap works well. Genet tears himself apart with his own hands. He has now become an absolute object of loathing.

Once upon a time, in Bohemia, there was a flourishing industry which seems to have fallen off. One would take children, slit their lips, compress their skulls and keep them in a box day and night to prevent them from growing. As a result of this and similar treatment, the children were turned into amusing monsters who brought in handsome profits. A more subtle process was used in the making of Genet, but the result is the same: they took a child and made a monster of him for reasons of social utility. If we want to find the real culprits in this affair, let us turn to the decent folk and ask them by what strange cruelty they made of a child their scapegoat.\*

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\* Cf. Appendix I.

Action, whatever it be, modifies that which is in the name of that which is not yet. Since it cannot be carried out without breaking up the old order, it is a permanent revolution. It demolishes in order to build and disassembles in order to reassemble. From morning to night we heap up shavings, ashes, scraps. All construction entails an at least equal amount of destruction. Our unstable societies fear lest a false movement cause them to lose their balance. They therefore ignore the negative moment of our activities. We must love without hating the enemy of what we love, must affirm without denying the contrary of what we affirm, must elect without spurning those we have not elected, must produce without consuming. We rapidly cart away the dead, we stealthily recover waste, every day we mask, in the name of cleaning up, the destruction of the day before. We conceal the pillaging of the planet. The fear of knocking down the edifice is so great that we even take from ourselves our power of creating: we say that man does not invent, that he discovers. We reduce the new to the old. Upkeep, maintenance, preservation, restoration, renewal—these are the actions that are permitted. They all fall under the heading of repetition. Everything is full, everything hangs together, everything is in order, everything has always existed, the world is a museum of which we are the curators. Nevertheless, spirit, as Hegel says, is anxiety. But this anxiety horrifies us. We must eliminate it and arrest spirit by ejecting its springwork of negativity. Unable to get rid of this malignant postulation completely, the right-thinking man castrates himself; he cuts the negative moment away from his freedom and casts out the bloody mess. Freedom is thus cut in two; each of its halves wilts away separately. One of them remains within us. It identifies forever Good with Being, hence with what already is. As Being is the measure of perfection, an existing regime is always more perfect than one which does not exist. It is said to have demonstrated its worth. Anyone wishing to introduce the slightest improvement (and it is quite assumed that improvement is a pious notion which implies no destruction; it is a transition to a higher perfection which envelops and includes the prior perfection) is likewise required to demonstrate its worth and to give evidence, in all other respects, of an all the more profound attachment to Being, that is, to customs and traditions. To the right-thinking man, to be alone and to be wrong are one and the same; to isolate oneself is to withdraw deliberately into one's finiteness, therefore to will one's own nothingness. His dream is that history may end and that there may come at last the time of happy repetition within the great sleep.

No doubt he may fall short, but if he does it is as a result of omission, ignorance, weakness, in short, because of the patch of nothingness which remains in him and to which he submits, though detesting it. He will compensate for this particularity by strict obedience to the imperatives of the group. Moreover, to fall short is *nothing*, literally: our shortcomings are lacks of being and they are efficacious only through the Being which sustains them. The worst is not always certain.

The other half of his freedom, though cut away from him and cast far off, does not, however, leave him undisturbed. Poor right-thinking man: he wanted, in the beginning, to concern himself only with the positive and with Being, to obey unerringly, to realize on his own little plot of ground a small, local end of history. But the fact is that history does not stop; Being is paralyzed, surrounded by Nonbeing; and, in addition, man, man himself, be he respectful or scoffing, insolent or servile, cannot affirm without denying. If he poses a limit, he does so necessarily in order to transgress it, for he cannot pose it without at the same time posing the unlimited. Does he mean to respect a social prohibition? By the same impulse his freedom suggests that he violate it, for to give oneself laws and to create the possibility of disobeying them come to the same thing. The right-thinking man shuts himself up in a voluntary prison and locks the doors, but his stubborn freedom makes him leave by the window. "By the law," says St. Paul, "is the knowledge of sin." The decent man will make himself deaf, dumb and paralyzed. It is he who has eyes that see not and ears that hear not. He is, by virtue of himself, the most abstract negation: the negation of negation. He will define himself narrowly by traditions, by obedience, by the automatism of Good, and will give the name *temptation* to the live, vague swarming which is still himself, but a himself which is wild, free, outside the limits he has marked out for himself. His own negativity falls outside him, since he denies it with all his might. Substantified, separated from any positive intention, it becomes a pure negation that poses itself for its own sake, a pure rage to destroy that goes round in circles, namely Evil. Evil is the unity of all his impulses to criticize, to judge, to reject insofar as he refuses to *recognize* them and regard them as the normal exercise of his freedom and insofar as he relates them to an external cause. It is his dangerous inclination to develop his ideas to their ultimate limits when decency or discipline bids him stop midway. It is his anxiety, his fundamental disbelief or his individuality that comes to him from without, like Another himself, to tempt him. It is what he

wants but does not want to want. It is the object of a constant and constantly rejected will which he regards as other than his "true" will. In short, it is the maxim, both in him and outside of him, of the Other's will. Not the will of some particular Other, nor even of all Others, but of that which in each individual is other than himself, other than self, other than all. Evil is the Other. And it is himself insofar as he is for himself Other than Self. It is the will to be other and that all be Other. It is that which is always Other than that which is.

This strange object is a pure contradiction, which will not be surprising if we simply recall its origin: being the destruction of all, it destroys *itself*; it is, at every moment, its own contrary. If one had to examine its ins and outs, one would get lost in the maze of aporias and antinomies. It both-is and is not: as pure negation, it reduces itself to pure nonbeing; but since it subsists before our eyes as a temptation, since it has enough reality to inspire hatred, it must also *be*, to a certain extent. One may reply, like Christians, that it borrows its being from being. But in order to "borrow," it must also be. And, from a certain point of view, one must recognize that Being is first: since Evil is defined as Other than Being, it does seem that Being arises, at least logically, before its "Other." And since evil power is in essence a will to destruction, it must have a being to corrode, and it cannot at all manifest itself unless this being is given. But as, on the other hand, we have forged its concept by dividing that which was not divisible and by separating with a single stroke the two indivisible moments of human freedom, we are forced to recognize that Good and Evil are rigorously contemporary, that is, in religious language, that they are two equally immortal principles: the respectable man is Manichaeon. By Evil one therefore means both the Being of Nonbeing and the Nonbeing of Being. The same reasons will give rise to the second antinomy, for Evil, being first *the other than Being*, is relative in its essence, but as it is other *absolutely* and not in this or that particular respect, it must be an absolute in its own way. Absolute and relative at the same time, it is both an abstract principle and a particular will. Insofar as all kinds of attrition and ruin are ascribed to it, including those which are the effects of natural agents, it is a pneumatic principle that circulates through the world. There is an evil which is peculiar to consciousness as there is to everything, a leprosy that eats away at it and that is called hebetude, imbecility, darkness. But, in another sense, just as there is Good only in a will that wills itself unconditionally good, so there is Evil only in an intention

that wills itself expressly evil. Evil is then consciousness itself at the height of its lucidity, for an evil mind is all the more perverse in that it is more aware of its damnation and wills it more. It pursues both its triumph and its ruin; firstly, because it will be engulfed in its victory along with Good, secondly, because its passion for destruction must know no limits and because it must end by turning this passion against itself. It was for the purpose of planting despair in the very heart of the joy of hurting that "fiendish laughter" and "evil pleasure" were invented. The Evil of consciousness, which is opacity, and consciousness in evil, which is transparency, must meet at the limit. The fact is that in this free and radical undertaking of demolition which claims responsibility for all the consequences of its acts, including its own ruin, one takes pleasure in recognizing at the same time an absolute servitude. Right-thinking people have developed the myth of Evil by depriving human freedom of its positive power and reducing it to its negativity alone. Hence, the evil man, who is negative in essence, is a man possessed whose destiny, whatever he may say, will always be to harm. He is free to do evil; for him the worst is always certain. Indeed, it is not sufficient that his conduct have harmful consequences for others or that it seem blameworthy in the eyes of others. If Evil wants to become absolute, it must be an object of loathing to the one who commits it. If the evil man could be in harmony with himself, this harmony would have the appearance of Good, and if his behavior seemed tolerable to him, he would sin out of ignorance or precipitancy, but not out of malignancy. He must plunge into the worst and at the same time be dragged into it by a kind of inverted grace; he must plunge and resist simultaneously; he must want both to stop and to be pushed even further; he must adhere unreservedly to his aim to harm and must thrust it aside as the effect of an abominable inclination. The evil man approves and loathes himself; he loathes himself for approving himself, he approves himself for loathing himself. His entire consciousness is darkness at the core of his translucidity. This secret hebetude of consciousness is otherness: self and other than self in the absolute identity of self. Evil, which is Being and Nonbeing, Absolute and Relative, Principle and Person, Self-Respect and Self-Hatred, is, in the last analysis, both Order and Disorder. It is Disorder on principle since all its efforts are aimed at destroying order; as Claudel says: "It does not compromise." And yet, if it is to be effective, it must at least have power to destroy, that is, it must have a kind of order, a technique, traditions. It is thus a disorder of all orders, an order of

all disorders. It is a corrosive acid, a torment, an explosive, it is radical dispersion. It changes the most indissoluble unity into multiplicity. But since it strews Discord everywhere, since it is the greatest common factor, it must be the secret and imperceptible unity of all multiplicity.

If that is what Evil is, a geometric locus of all contradictions, it stands to reason that no one would dream of indulging in it unreservedly: "No man does evil voluntarily." Of course. What would he gain by it? Evil is gratuitous. It is a luxury activity that requires leisure and yields no profit. We are told that "crime doesn't pay," and that is so. Evil, like Good, requires that it be its own reward. If you steal, or even kill, in order to live, living is a good, you have reduced plunder and murder to the role of means. Evil is fatiguing, it requires an unmaintainable vigilance. Schiller, who was haunted by Kantian ethics, used to ask himself uneasily regarding each of his acts: "Have I probed my mind? Has a self-seeking motive escaped me?" Similarly, the evildoer should ask himself anxiously: "Have I really done Evil for Evil's sake? Have I not acted out of self-interest?" Furthermore, the evil action, even if performed for its own sake, should contain within itself—and should resolve—so many contradictions that it would require invention, inspiration, in a word, genius. It would thus be akin, as Genet often states, to a work of art. Better still, to poetry. The folk mind is clearly aware that evil is beyond its means. It has invented the myth of the man who sold his soul to the Devil. This future victim has not enough strength of soul to do evil *for Evil's sake*. He seeks his own advantage, his pleasure, he wants gold, women, power. And it is Satan who, through him, engages in destroying souls out of pure and gratuitous malignity. At the end of a lecture in which I had attempted to expound the views of some contemporary moralists in all their complexity, a bright-eyed minister came up to me and said: "It's so much easier to do one's duty." I must add that he corrected himself almost immediately. "And harder, too," he added. But I had understood his first reaction. Yes, Good, as they understand it, is easier than Evil. It is easy and reassuring "to do one's duty." It is a matter of training, since everything is repetition. Who would deliberately withdraw from the flock and its comfortable precepts to take up with that mutilated freedom whose bleeding stumps are writhing in the dust?

The conclusion that seems to follow is that the evildoer does not exist. It is only the Good man who is constantly preoccupied with Evil, since Evil is first his own freedom, that is, an enemy who is

constantly springing up and whom he must constantly down. But let us not jump to conclusions. The evildoer does exist; we encounter him everywhere, at all times. He exists because the Good man invented him.

When King Louis XVI was brought back from Varennes, the bourgeois deputies realized with terror that all they had to do to become republicans was to carry their principles a bit further. Everything—their interests, their conservatism, their contempt for the masses—contributed to inspiring them with horror of a republic, and yet the idea was present, silent, passive, vertiginous. Their own freedom presented it to them as the logical consequence of their earlier act. Were they going to loathe themselves? Fortunately other citizens called for a republic. The Club des Cordeliers circulated a petition demanding that the King be deposed. What a relief! The possibility which they feared now became quite foreign to them. It was still supported by a freedom, but this time it was a totally *other* freedom. It was as if this importunate part of their free will had actually withdrawn from them and gone off to lead an independent existence elsewhere. Supported by others, the idea of a republic ceased to be a temptation and became an object of horror. The petitioners were *evildoers*, and they were told as much. And whom does one strike in the person of the “dirty, greedy, sensual, negating” Jew? One’s self, one’s own greed, one’s own lechery. Whom does one lynch in the American South for raping a white woman? A Negro? No. Again one’s self. Evil is a projection. I would go as far as to say that it is both the basis and aim of all projective activity.\* As for the evildoer, we all have our own: he is a man whose situation makes it possible for him to present to us in broad daylight and in objective form the obscure temptations of our freedom. If you want to know a decent man, look for the vices he hates most in others. You will have the lines of force of his fears and terrors, you will breathe the odor that befouls his beauteous soul. In the case of those who condemn Genet most severely, I would say that homosexuality is their constant and

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\* Everything that can be said about projection has been said. I wish merely to relate an anecdote. A very good friend of mine had lived abroad for a long time, and his speech had become studded with Anglicisms. When he returned to France after the Liberation, we were delighted to see each other again, but shortly thereafter disagreements of a personal and political nature arose between us. We met frequently, but our relations were strained. One day, the discussion grew heated. He objected, courteously but with a good deal of annoyance, to my opinions (which had been his own before the war) and my conduct. As he grew more excited, his French became less correct and on three occasions the same Anglicism crept into his speech. The third time, he looked at me irritably and asked brusquely: “Why do you keep making that exasperating mistake?”

constantly rejected temptation, the object of their innermost hatred, and that they are glad to hate it in another person because they thus have an opportunity to look away from themselves. And I do not mean, to be sure, that this constantly rejected homosexuality seems to them an inclination of their nature. Quite the contrary, it is diffuse, it is a shifty something about persons and things, it is a certain disturbing appearance of the world that might very well open up suddenly and become dizzying, it is an inner uneasiness, it is the dim and constant consciousness that there is no recourse within themselves against themselves. Genet is useful to them; they can hate in him the half of themselves which they reject.

Thus, the evildoer is the Other. Evil—fleeting, artful, marginal Evil—can be seen only out of the corner of one's eye and in others. Never is it more perceptible than in wartime. We know the enemy only by comparison with ourselves; we imagine his intentions according to ours; we set traps for him into which we know we would fall if we were in his place and we avoid those which we would have set. The enemy is our twin brother, our image in the mirror. Yet the same conduct which we consider good when it is ours seems to us detestable when it is his. He is the evildoer par excellence. It is therefore during a war that a Good man has the clearest conscience. It is in time of war that there are the fewest lunatics. Unfortunately, one cannot always be fighting. From time to time there must be peace. For peacetime, society has, in its wisdom, created what might be called professional evildoers. These evil men are as necessary to good men as whores are to decent women. They are fixation abscesses. For a single sadist there is any number of appeased, clarified, relaxed consciousnesses. They are therefore very carefully recruited. They must be bad by birth and without hope of change. That is why one chooses men with whom the decent members of the community have no reciprocal relationship: so that these bad people cannot take it into their heads to pay us back in kind and start thinking of us what we think of them. And as Evil is negation, separation, disintegration, its natural representatives will be sought among the separated and separatists, among the unassimilable, the undesirable, the repressed, the rejected. The candidates include the oppressed and exploited in every category, the foreign workers, the national and ethnic minorities. But these are still not the best recruits. These people sometimes organize among themselves, educate themselves and become conscious of their race or class. They then discover, through hatred, the meaning of reciprocity, and the oppressor comes to personify Evil for them

just as they personify Evil for the oppressor. Fortunately there exist in our society products of disassimilation, castoffs: abandoned children, "the poor," bourgeois who have lost their status, "lumpenproletariat," déclassés of all kinds, in short, all the wretched. With these we are tranquil. They cannot unite with any group since nobody wants them. And as solitude is their lot, we do not have to worry about their associating among themselves. That is why, in general, we give them preference.

Genet fulfills all the required conditions. This abandoned child is an authentic castoff. He seems overwhelmed by a fabulous bad luck that guarantees us against any accidental return of reciprocity. Placed under observation for a time, he gave evidence of evil instincts and committed punishable offenses. This is all that was needed. By the gaze that surprised him, by the finger that pointed at him, by the voice that called him a thief, the collectivity doomed him to Evil. They were waiting for him. There was going to be a vacancy: some old convict lay dying on Devil's Island; there has to be new blood among the wicked too. Thus, all the rungs of the ladder which he has to descend have been prepared in advance. Even before he emerged from his mother's womb, they had already reserved beds for him in all the prisons of Europe and places for him in all shipments of criminals. He had only to go to the trouble of being born; the gentle, inexorable hands of the Law will conduct him from the National Foundling Society to the penal colony.

If we want to know ourselves, we have two sources of information: our inner sense furnishes us with certain facts ("I'm happy, unhappy, I'm attracted, repelled, by such-and-such a person. I have an urge to travel," etc.), and the people about us furnish us with others. These data sometimes overlap and complement each other. We can correct one body of data by means of the other. For example, I can observe that I am angry when my brother points out to me that I am losing my self-control. My family can even draw my attention to an irritation that I am trying to hide from myself: "You're white as a sheet, your hands are trembling," etc. And, vice versa, by revealing this anger to them I can enable them to interpret certain aspects of my behavior which would otherwise remain mysterious to them: "So that's why you didn't say good morning to so-and-so," etc. To hesitate as to which of two roads to take is often to turn one's head to the right, then to the left, to take a few steps in one direction, then a few in the other. If I hesitate, there is probably nothing more in me than the consciousness of these bodily movements. But, inversely, the witness who observes me and

*sees* me hesitating perceives nothing more than these same movements. Hence, the external perception of the witness and my inner sense agree on this point, and in this case there is no privileged observer.

But in the majority of cases, and particularly if it is a matter of feelings, qualities, traits of character, or complex behavior, we are unable to bring our inner data into line with the information given by our external informants because the two are not of the same nature. I am not an object to myself—at least not *at first*—and if I become one, this object is of a very particular nature. It remains the “incomparable monster” of which Malraux speaks, whereas to others I am first an object. Thus, the *objective qualities* which they recognize in me express not so much what I am in myself as what I am with *respect to them*. The quality that is being considered therefore represents a complex body of two terms: I and my witness, and the relationship between these two terms. In addition, most of the time it has a *practical truth*, that is, it is an item of information concerning, in particular, the behavior to adopt toward me. I therefore cannot internalize this information and dissolve it in my subjectivity. It is not *soluble* in my consciousness. If I am told that I am intelligent and witty or dull-witted and coarse, this information refers to the effect I produce on others. To be witty, for example, is to entertain a well-defined social set in conformity with certain rules. I cannot therefore have the intuition that I *am* witty; this intuition is necessarily given *to another*, and it is revealed by the pleasure he takes in listening to me. Similarly, I can know that I am *thinking* but not that I am *intelligent*. The idea of *intelligence* presupposes not only a certain intellectual ease or swiftness *observed from without*, but, in addition, certain subjective dispositions in the witness who recognizes this quality in me, for example, admiration and a readiness to have more confidence in me than in himself when it comes to solving certain difficulties: “See whether you understand this, you who are intelligent.” Hence, when all goes well we can distinguish our being-for-self from our being-for-the-other. We know that our consciousness is infallible in a certain very limited area and that its intuitions are obviously true. We also know that information which another furnishes us is only probable (A. considers me intelligent, but B. finds me stupid. Who will decide between them? And is it possible, in this domain, to decide by majority vote?) and that it does not concern our inner depths but rather our external relations with others. It is therefore quite true that these qualities which are recognized in

us elude our consciousness, not because they are hidden in an unconscious which is situated behind it, but because they are in front of us, in the world, and are originally a relationship to the other. "Wittiness" is, of course, a certain gift that I have—if I have it—without realizing it. But it is evident that this is no more a structure of my unconscious than an immediate datum of my consciousness. It is a feature which characterizes me not insofar as I am I to myself, but insofar as I am Another to Others.

But this information is sometimes communicated to us in such a way that we ascribe more reality to what others teach us than to what we could learn by ourself. Out of submission or respect, we take information which, in any event, is only probable as being an unconditional certainty. On the other hand, we are tempted to regard the information of our consciousness as dubious and obscure. This means that we have given primacy to the object which we are to Others over the subject we are to ourself. A young woman, for example, is having marital difficulties. She is not accepted unreservedly by her in-laws; she feels that her husband is slipping away from her. Tact, patience and a great deal of experience are required in order to keep him, in order to overcome the family's bias. Since she lacks these qualities, she feels that she is drowning. She flounders about. The difficulties are too great. She lives in a state of anxiety. And, as is to be expected, she reacts with anger, for anger is merely a blind and magical attempt to simplify situations that are too complex. Her consciousness will teach her all this if she observes herself with sufficient perseverance. She will become aware that she is trying to discard all rules by plunging into violence. She will therefore realize that anger is not a hereditary curse or a destiny but simply an inept reaction to a too complicated problem. If the problem changes, the mood will also change. Her husband, however, tells her that she is *irascible*. In a sense, this is true. It is a correct indication of the behavior to be adopted toward her by others. This *practical* notion indicates simply that she has disconcerting and unpredictable outbursts of temper and that consequently she must be treated with a certain consideration.

But if, out of remorse, out of masochism, out of a deep feeling of inferiority, this young woman adopts the social and objective datum as if it were the absolute truth about her, if she accuses herself of having an *irascible nature*, if she projects behind her, into the darkness of the unconscious, a permanent predisposition to anger of which each particular outburst is an emanation, then she subordinates her reality as a conscious subject to the Other that she is

for Others, and she grants to the Other a superiority to herself and confers upon what is probable a superiority to what is certain. She endows that which had no meaning other than social with a metaphysical meaning, a meaning prior to any relationship with society. In short, I would say that she alienates herself from the object which she is to others.

This type of alienation is widespread. Most of the time, however, it is a matter of partial or temporary alienation. But when children are subjected, from their earliest days, to great social pressure, when their Being-for-Others is the subject of a collective image accompanied by value judgments and social prohibitions, the alienation is sometimes total and definitive. This is the case of most pariahs in caste societies. They internalize the objective and external judgments which the collectivity passes on them, and they view themselves in their subjective individuality on the basis of an "ethnic character," a "nature," an "essence" which merely express the contempt in which *others* hold them. The Indian untouchable thinks that he is *actually* untouchable. He internalizes the prohibition of which he is the object, and makes of it an inner principle which justifies and explains the conduct of the other Hindus toward him.

The situation is exactly the same for the small caste of untouchables whom our societies have charged with personifying Evil and whom they overwhelm with prohibitions under the name of criminals. Yes, they are criminals. This means, in all good logic, that they *have committed* one or more crimes and that they are liable to punishments set down in the statute book. But by virtue of the ambiguity of the term, society convinces them—and they let themselves be convinced—that this objective definition actually applies to their hidden, subjective being. The criminal that they were to others is now ensconced deep within them, like a monster. They thus allow themselves to be governed by *another*, that is, by a being who has reality only in the eyes of others. Their failings and errors are transformed into a permanent predisposition, that is, into a destiny.

Such is the case of the child Genet. Society has charged him with personifying the Evildoer, that is, the Other. Now, as we have seen, Evil is a concept for external use only. Nobody will say voluntarily, before being recognized as guilty, "I want Evil." Evil, which springs from the right-thinking man's fear of his freedom, is originally a projection and a catharsis. It is therefore *always* an object. Moreover, as we have seen, if we attempted to establish it within ourself, the contradictory terms composing it would repel each other vio-

lently and would each collapse separately. But this matters little to us, since the fact is that we perceive it in Others. Yes, *for us* Evil is impossible. Therefore, we do not seek to actualize it. But since this Other desires Evil, it is for him to take over its contradictions. Let him manage as best he can. The proof, moreover, that one can make everything hang together, with the aid of an efficacious grace that probably comes from Hell, is precisely the fact *that there are* evildoers. There are evildoers, therefore Evil is possible. Such is our proof *a posteriori*.

But what happens, then, to the poor wretch on whom the decent man has projected all his evil desires, his sadism, his homicidal impulses and his lustful dreams? How does he manage to make a whole of all these contradictory postulations? Ah, that's *his* affair. The decent man doesn't give a damn.

The respectful consciousness of little Genet has begun its work. To all the others Evil is outside, in others. To him alone, poor hoodwinked child, Evil is *in him*.

*For the others*, his function is to take their forbidden desires upon himself and to reflect them like a mirror; *for himself*, he must incorporate these desires into himself, must internalize them, must make them *his* desires. Not that he is asked to *desire* the impure or to *will* Evil by deliberate intentions of his consciousness. He is required only to recognize this evil will as inspiring his daily desires, his ordinary wishes. The child tries to do this as best he can. His candor, his confidence, his respect make him the best auxiliary of adults. He has been told that he is bad, he therefore believes it. He conscientiously seeks the evil desires and evil thoughts of decent people at the very source of his subjectivity. He is a diligent evildoer.

But, as it happens, Evil is the Other. The Other than Being, the Other than Good, the Other than self. Here we have the key to Genet. This is what must be understood first: Genet is a child who has been convinced that he is, in his very depths, *Another than Self*. His life will henceforth be only the history of his attempts to perceive this Other in himself and to look it in the face—that is, to have an immediate and subjective intuition of his wickedness, to *feel* he is wicked—or to flee it. But this phantom—precisely because it is nothing—will not let itself be grasped. When the child turns to it, it disappears. When Genet tries to run away from it, suddenly it is there, like Carmen's rebellious bird.

The most immediate result is that the child is "doctored." He regards the existence of adults as more certain than his own and

their testimonies as truer than that of his consciousness. He affirms the priority of the object which he is to them over the subject which he is to himself. Therefore, without being clearly aware of it, he judges that the appearance (which he is to others) is the reality and that the reality (which he is to himself) is only appearance. He sacrifices his inner certainty to the principle of authority. He refuses to hear the voice of the *cogito*. He decides against himself in the very depths of his consciousness. He wants to regard the evident facts which his inner sense reveals to him about his own mental state as being mere lies, as approximations at best. On the other hand, he considers the merely probable hypotheses that the others set up about his conduct to be certainties. He makes every effort to believe that he must be informed of his particular essence by others and that he cannot attain it alone because it evades him on principle. The most inward part of himself is that which is most obscure to his eyes and most manifest to the eyes of others. He is a wrong-way Descartes who applies his methodical doubt to the content of the "I think," and it is hearsay knowledge that will provide him with his certainties. Out of a reverse idealism it is to himself that he applies the famous *esse est percipi*, and he recognizes himself as being only insofar as he is perceived. Our certainty of ourself finds its truth in the Other when the latter recognizes us. To Genet, the truth, separated from certainty, will be the intimidating, ceremonial, official thought of adults, judges, cops, decent people. He receives it without being allowed to practice it; it is communicated to him like a sentence. Nevertheless, his lonely, challenged, disregarded certainty of self grows within him like a weed in an abandoned garden.

No doubt, one does not impose silence on the *cogito*; consciousness will lose none of its transparency; it will not cease to reveal to him things that are indubitably evident. But he will zealously blindfold the eyes of his soul, will cast doubt on what is self-evident, will doubt the indubitable. Shuttling back and forth between two contradictory systems of reference, he regards as true what he does not succeed in believing, and as doubtful what he knows for a certainty. The most manifest intentions thereby become the most obscure; his passing states of consciousness are pure, iridescent reflections, without consistency. As for his own existence, since he attains it only through the mediation of others and merges it with the substantial being of "the Evildoer" or "the Thief," he is no more assured of it than of the existence of Greenland or of the Iron Mask. In short, he learns to think the unthinkable, to maintain the

unmaintainable, to pose as true what he very well knows to be false. We shall see later that he will build a whole system of sophistry on this procedure and that he will one day be able to turn it against the flabbergasted right-thinking man.

In his very depths, Genet is first an object—and an object to others. It is too early to speak of his homosexuality, but we can at least indicate its origin. Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out that feminine sexuality derives its chief characteristics from the fact that woman is an object to the other and to herself before being a subject. One can expect that Genet, who is the object par excellence, *will make himself an object* in sexual relations and that his eroticism will bear a resemblance to feminine eroticism.

It is possible to retrace with a certain accuracy the stages whereby Genet slowly transforms himself into a stranger to himself. And we shall see that it is simply a matter of progressively internalizing the sentence imposed by adults.

First of all, he wants to escape his destiny. He must awake from a nightmare. Caught, exposed, punished, he swears he will never do it again. Of course, in all sincerity. He does not recognize this act which has become objective and has suddenly revealed itself to be so terribly Other—simply because it is seen by the others; he hates it; he wishes it had never taken place. In hastily manifesting his will never to steal again, he tries to destroy symbolically his hardened, congealed act which encloses him in its carapace. Only a while ago he wanted to flee into the past, into the eternal, he wanted to die. Now he reverses the direction of his flight; his oath testifies to a wild impatience to escape into the future. Three or four years will go by during which he will not commit another theft; he has sworn not to. Already the years have gone by, he *is already* in the future, he turns upon this wretched present and confers upon it its true significance: it was only an accident. But at the same moment the Others' gaze again supervenes and cuts him off from himself. The others have not the same reasons as he to believe in his oath, because, in the first place, their indignation also mortgages the future. If—which is unlikely—it were demonstrated that the child would not steal again, their sense of outrage would have to simmer down. In order to perpetuate itself—for, like all passions, it tends to persevere in its being—it must change into a prophetic transport. It therefore postulates the eternity of its object. What it is already aiming at through the child thief is the adult, the hardened criminal, the habitual offender. Thus, in addition, this sacred emotion goes hand in hand with a legitimate mistrust. From a *practical*

point of view, the owners must take precautions; they would be guilty in their own eyes if they did not lock the closets. But these precautions foretold a future that challenges Genet's oath. They are directed to a future that is both foreseeable and unforeseeable. Foreseeable: Genet has erred, *therefore* he will err. Unforeseeable: no one knows the hour or day of the next offense. Since the adults are unable to know the date of it, their vigilance confers upon the future theft a perpetual presence. It is in the air, in the silence of the grownups, in the severity of their faces, in the glance they exchange, in the locking of the drawer. Genet would like to forget about it, he buries himself in his work, but his foster mother, who tiptoed off, suddenly comes back and takes him by surprise: "What are you doing?" This is all that is needed: the forgotten theft comes to life again; it is present, vertiginous. Distrust and prophetic anger systematically project the past into the future; Genet's future fills with misdemeanors which are repeated at irregular intervals and which are the effect of a constant predisposition to steal. Obviously this predisposition is simply the reverse of the adults' expectation. It is their vigilance, but turned around and projected into Genet, who in turn reflects it back to them. If they must be constantly on guard against his thefts, it is because he is constantly ready to commit them, and the greater their fear of being robbed, the greater seems to them his inclination to theft. Naturally, after that, how could he be expected not to succumb? It is the adults themselves who want him to relapse. He will fall into error again, as often as they want him to.

So he now adopts the point of view of honest people. He docilely establishes within himself the inclination attributed to him. But this inclination is, in its very form, *the Other's*. It is never within our own self that we discover the unforeseeable foreseeability of which I have spoken; we discover it in those who we are not. In our own eyes, we are neither foreseeable nor unforeseeable. I do not *foresee* that I shall take the train this evening—I decide to take it, and if there remains a wide margin of possibility in my plans, the reason is that they depend on others as much as on me.\* To be sure, I can at any moment change my plans, and I do not think of my versatility without a certain anxiety, but this anxiety comes from my feeling free and from the fact that nothing, not even my

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\* I can amuse myself by *foreseeing* what I shall be doing in ten years, but actually this future seems so remote that it appears to be that of another. And it is also true that the gambler who swears he will never again touch a card has only a limited confidence in his oath, not because he considers himself unforeseeable (or too foreseeable) but because he has a real and present knowledge of the inefficacy of oaths in the presence of his freedom.

own oaths, can tie me down. It is not a *fear* of a monster that may inhabit me and have reduced me to slavery, but rather the very opposite of such a fear.

Genet the thief will await himself as the others await him, with *their* expectations. Foreseeable to others, he will attempt to foresee himself. He will be afraid of his future thefts. Unforeseeable to honest people, he will become unforeseeable to himself; he will wonder every morning whether the new day will be marked by a theft. He will take precautions against himself as if he were another, another whom he has been told to keep an eye on. He will be careful not to leave *himself* alone. He will voluntarily leave an empty room to join his parents in the next one. He will keep an eye on himself; he will watch for the crisis, ready to call the others to the rescue against himself. He fears himself as one fears a fire, a flood, an avalanche. His thefts become external events which he is powerless to oppose and for which he is nevertheless responsible. He observes himself, spies on himself, foils himself, as if he were an odd instrument that one must learn to use. He struggles against an angel within him, an angel of Evil. In this dubious combat everything is inverted. Being oneself becomes being-other-than-self. It is no longer even possible to believe in one's own oaths; one distrusts them as one distrusts those of another. A foreign future challenges and mocks the future one has given oneself. And this future is a Destiny, a Fatality, because it is the reverse of *another freedom*. A freedom which is mine and which I do not know has prepared it for me, like a trap. In the depths of his consciousness Genet, like the animal in Kafka in the depths of its burrow, hears dull blows, scratchings. Another animal, a monster, is digging tunnels, is going to get at him and devour him. This other animal is himself. Yet he has *never seen it*.

For he has never seen it. A thief cannot have an intuition of himself as *thief*. The notion of "thief" is on principle incommensurate with the realities of the inner sense. It is of social origin and presupposes a prior definition of society, of the property system, a legal code, a judiciary apparatus and an ethical system of relationships among people. There can therefore be no question of a mind's *encountering* theft within itself, and with immediacy. On the other hand, the *Others*, all the Others, have this intuition at will; a thief is a palpable reality, like a tree, like a Gothic church. Here is a man being dragged along by two cops: "What has he done?" I ask. "He's a crook," answer the cops. The word strikes against its object like a crystal falling into a supersaturated solution. The solution imme-

diately crystallizes, enclosing the word inside itself. In prose, the word dies so that the object may be born. "He's a crook!" I forget the word then and there, I see, I touch, I breathe a crook; with all my senses I feel that secret substance: crime. I did not, of course, witness the theft, but that doesn't matter! The guilty man's torn, dusty clothes (he fell while trying to run away, he was beaten) contrast with the decent dress of the onlookers, with my own. They make me see that this man is beyond the pale. He is an untouchable *since* I cannot touch him without soiling my hands. The mud that stains his shirt and jacket is the mud of his soul *become visible*. He engages in a strange dance composed of false steps; he moves backward, forward, changes position by fits and starts; each of his movements is constrained. Quite simply because he is being taken to the police station by force and is resisting. But this constraint and force and vain violence manifest to my eyes that he is possessed. He is struggling against the Demon, and the incoherence of his gestures reveals his maladjustment: his foot stumbles on the sidewalk, he almost falls, and I know intuitively, by the simple contrast between his blundering haste and the slow, sure movements of the decent people about him, that he is a *déclassé*, an incompetent who has never been able, or never wanted, to submit to any discipline. I can read on this messy body that "Evil does not compromise." He has been struck and he is bleeding. His tormented face should tell me that he is weak, defenseless, that a pack has brought him to bay and bitten him. But I combine my loathing of Evil and my loathing of Blood. It is Evil that is bleeding, Crime is oozing from those wounds. And the look on his face expresses a state of daze (he has been half-killed), of fear ("What are they going to do to me?"), of anger ("They've hurt me!"), of shame ("All those people looking at me and yelling!"). But *to me* this state of daze is the sottishness of the alcoholic and the degenerate. Through his rage I touch Evil's inexpressible hatred of Good. His shame manifests consciousness in Evil. Five minutes before this fortunate encounter, Evil was still a merely abstract concept. A word was sufficient *to make me experience it*. A flesh-and-blood thief is crime accessible to all the senses.

Genet will never have this intuition. To be sure, he understands the meaning of the word. He has seen petty thieves being roughly handled by policemen. But he is condemned to read words in reverse. Honest folk give names to things, and the things bear these names. Genet is on the side of the objects named, not of those who name them. I am aware that honest people are also objects to each other. I am given names: I am this fair-haired man who wears

glasses, this Frenchman, this teacher. But if I am named, I name in turn. Thus, naming and named, I lived in a state of reciprocity. Words are thrown at me, I catch them and throw them at others, I understand, *in* others, what I am to them. *Genet is alone in stealing.* Later, he will know other thieves, but he will remain alone. We shall see that there is no reciprocity in the world of theft. This is not surprising, since these monsters have been fabricated in such a way as to be unable to make common cause.\* Thus, when he is given this staggering name, he cannot make out its meaning in the persons of those who name him. It is as if a page of a book suddenly became conscious and felt itself *being read aloud* without being able *to read itself*. He is read, deciphered, designated. The others feel his being, but he feels their feeling as if it were a hemorrhage. He flows into the eyes of others, he leaks, he is emptied of his substance. He has *vertigo*, in the strict sense of the word. When we stand on a precipice and suddenly feel dizzy, we feel that we are slipping away from ourself, that we are flowing, falling. Something is calling to us from the bottom of the gulf. That something is ourself, that is, our being which is escaping from us and which we shall join in death. The word is vertiginous because it opens out on an impossible and fascinating task. I have shown elsewhere that certain extreme situations are necessarily experienced as unrealizable. Well then, Genet is unrealizable to himself. He repeats the magic word: "Thief! I'm a thief!" He even looks at himself in the mirror, even talks to himself as to someone else: "You're a thief." Is he going to *see himself*, to feel a bitter, feverish taste, the taste for crime that he gives off for others, is he at last going to feel his being? Nothing changes: a child scowls at his own reflection, that is all. Later, his creatures, one after the other, will stand in front of mirrors and name themselves: "I'm Erik Seidler, the

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\* The same absence of reciprocity can be observed among homosexuals. Every one of them has been called "homo" at least once in his life, and the name has remained graven on his flesh. He meditates endlessly upon the word. Moreover, he frequently calls other men homosexuals and is amused by them. A homosexual at the critical age will quite readily say: "I met an old queen. . . ." But they do not allow reciprocity of naming. A coal dealer, a chemist, a judge have an intuition of what they are when another judge, another chemist, another coal dealer is named in their presence. But the homosexual never thinks of himself when someone is branded in his presence with the name *homosexual*. His relationship to homosexuals is univocal. He is *the one* who receives with horror the name homosexual. It is not one quality among others; it is a destiny, a peculiar flaw of his being. *Elsewhere* there is a category of comic, shady people whom he jokes about with "straights," namely, the queers. His sexual tastes will doubtless lead him to enter into relationships with this suspect category, but he would like to make use of them without being likened to them. Here, too, the ban that is cast on certain men by society has destroyed all possibility of reciprocity among them. Shame isolates. As does pride, which is the obverse of shame.

executioner's lover." "I'm a German." "I'm a soldier." "I'm the maid." They want the word, in striking their image, to cause a crystallization, to make them see what a German, what a maid *is*. But the word scoots away, the image remains dull and all too familiar. Erik ends by taking out his revolver and firing at his reflection. Yet the solution is there, in the word. Genet is relentless. "I'm a thief," he cries. *He listens* to his voice; whereupon the relationship to language is inverted: the word ceases to be an indicator, it becomes a *being*. It resounds, it bursts upon the silence, one feels it running over one's tongue, it is real, it is true. It is a casket, a box with a double bottom which contains within it what Genet often calls "the mystery." If one could crack this nut, one would find inside it the very being of the thief; the being and the word are one and the same. The states of consciousness are thus changed into signs. They are a flickering that try to light up the darkness of the name. The latter, which, on the other hand, is dark, massive, impenetrable, has become the being which is signified. "Such-and-such an idea occurs to me, such-and-such a mood, desire, comes over me. Is *that* what's called being a thief?" The word, which was a means, rises to the rank of supreme reality. Silence, on the other hand, is now only a means of designating language. The trick is done: we have made a poet of the doctored child. He is haunted by a word, a single word which he contemplates in reverse and which contains his soul. He tries to see himself in it as in plate glass; he will spend his life meditating on a word.

One may say: "A word, what's a word? He has thirty thousand others. They're his as much as ours. All right, as far as 'thief' is concerned. But if I say that Genet is blond or short or French, this re-establishes reciprocity, for, after all, he can say about me what I say about him." But that is not true. If you touch a single word, language disintegrates in a chain reaction; not a single vocable is spared. The word "thief" is everywhere, extends through everything. Whatever you may say about Genet, *thief* is the permanent predicate of your propositions, and this suffices for him to be unable to apply the epithet to you. Do you assert that he is *blond*? That means: A thief is blond. But a thief is not blond as a decent man is. He is blond *as a thief*. Introduce an imaginary quantity into your calculations and all the results become imaginary. And so for Genet: as the original intuition of his being is denied him, all other intuitions concerning him are also rejected. He is absolutely *other*; all words designate what is manifest to others and hidden from him *a priori*.

Our familiar relationship to language makes it invisible to us in ordinary daily life. "We are so steeped in words," says Blanchot, "that words become useless." Words do not even have to be uttered between father and son, husband and wife, between workers on the same job, because things themselves cry them out to us. At the dinner table, my grandfather used to point silently to the piece of meat he wanted served to him. The gesture in itself was ambiguous, but we understood it immediately because it had, in the past, accompanied a phrase which gradually was dropped. Furthermore, even when we do use words, we pay no more attention to them than to our clothes or our fork. We speak in shorthand, in broken sentences. To speak is to pass over words in silence. But this invisibility of the Word obviously implies a deep understanding between those who are communicating. "If you do not act toward the utterances of others in accordance with the social norms of your age and milieu," says Brice Parain, "you have already ceased to be able to understand and interpret them." Now, the fact is that Genet has no milieu; he is alone. The norms set by society do not concern him. No more is needed for him to be astounded by the strangeness of human speech.

To be sure, there is not a single child who has not experienced this astonishment. When the poet Michel Leiris was little, he used to say "*reusement*." One day he was corrected: "One doesn't say '*. . . reusement*,' but '*heureusement*' [happily]." "The word which until then I had used as a pure interjection, without any awareness of its real meaning, was linked up with '*heureux*' [happy] and, by the magical virtue of such an association, was suddenly inserted into the whole sequence of precise meanings. The sudden apprehending of the complete word, which until then I had always slurred, took on the quality of a discovery. . . . It was no longer a thing that belonged to me alone. It partook of the reality which was the language of my brothers and sister and also of my parents. What had been a thing peculiarly mine became a common and open thing. All at once, in a flash, it had become a shared, or rather a socialized thing."\*

But generally this astonishment does not last long. Usually it is precisely the Word which achieves the unity of the particular and the universal. If I talk about myself, I must universalize myself in order to be understood. Is not the very word "I" which I have just written a designation of myself and also of anyone? Words belong

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\* *Bifures*, p. 12.

to everybody; they are man himself as universal subject. If I say that I am unhappy, anyone will understand me, for anyone could have said and will be able to say that he is unhappy, and consequently, insofar as I *am understood*, I am anyone.

To Genet, however, there is no connection between the particular character that language has for him and the universal, socialized content of words. It is not even possible for him to express unambiguously the most immediate manifestations of his consciousness. He must have exclaimed more than once that he was unhappy, and his primary intention was to communicate knowledge of his state to others. What exactly was he trying to say? That he was lost within himself, that he was unable to feel guilty and that nevertheless he was making an effort to judge himself severely, that he seemed to himself to be both a monster and an innocent victim, that he had no more confidence in his will to mend his ways and that nevertheless he was horribly afraid of his destiny, that he was ashamed, that he wished his error were wiped away, though he knew it was irremediable, that he was longing to love, to be loved, that he was suffering above all from that ghastly, incomprehensible exclusion, that he begged to be readmitted to the community and allowed to regain his innocence. Now, that is precisely what is not communicable. To understand Genet's unhappiness really and truly would be to renounce Manichaeism, the convenient idea of Evil, the pride of being honest, to revoke the community's sentence, to annul its decree. The honest people would have to be ashamed of themselves; they would have to recognize reciprocity. The misfortune of a widow, of an orphan, that's something one is glad to understand: tomorrow we ourselves may lose our father, our wife, our child. These are recognized misfortunes that entail a ceremonial known to all. But to understand the misfortune of a young thief would be to recognize that I too can steal. The honest people obviously refuse to do this: "You shouldn't have stolen! You deserve what you got!" The decent man goes away, the child remains alone. Nevertheless, the remark is present, valid. It correctly designates his state of feeling. The child takes up the remark, repeats it to himself under his breath. The normal man expresses his unhappiness to others so as to be understood by them, hence to be like everyone else, whereas Genet, abandoned by all, repeats his lament without a witness so as to be understood by himself alone, hence to be more himself. Instead of the particularity's being socialized, it is the universal that becomes a means of achieving the particular. Or, to put it otherwise, he is trying to substitute himself for the missing wit-

ness, to be, for himself, someone else whom he informs of his suffering, someone else who, guided by the words, will make the intuitive discovery of his unhappiness as a *being*, that is, as an object. But the meaning remains stuck to the statement, for the purpose is to inform the other of what he does not yet know, and Genet knows only too well that he is unhappy. Thereupon the statement loses its indicative value. Falsely universal, falsely objective, it now serves only as a pseudo-communication, a pseudo-teaching. The words no longer designate the misfortune, they do not make it appear, they do not present it to the intuition of the other. The intuition of the misfortune exists in Genet long before he expresses it; it is his suffering itself, his actual suffering which words cannot increase or reveal. What purpose is served by his saying "I am unhappy"? To make his suffering exist in the absolute for a fictive witness. Dedicated to this phantom, the remark is transformed as the word "thief" was transformed. It contains Genet's being, his meaning, it is his misfortune become thing. He tries to impregnate it with his sufferings. But as the witness is no one, as Genet cannot be his own witness, it remains there, uttered and understood, an arrested flight toward nothingness; it contains, as it were, the being of the misfortune, that is, its objective aspect *for others*. But this very being, rarefied and evanescent, is, for Genet, only an absence.

His adventure is his having been *named*. The result has been a radical metamorphosis of his person and language. The ceremonious naming which transformed him, in his own eyes, into a *sacred object* initiated the slow progression that will one day make of him a "Prince of Thieves" and a poet. But at the present time he has not the slightest suspicion that he will glory in doing Evil. Overcome and bewildered, he merely submits. Referring to this period of his life, he will one day say that he was the football which is kicked from one end of the field to the other. He understands nothing of what is happening to him; he seeks himself gropingly and does not find himself. A dead child is smiling at him sadly from the other side of a glass, the paths leading to the woods are cut off. He is crushed by a horrible curse and guilt. He is a monster, he feels the monster breathing down the back of his neck, he turns around and finds no one. Everybody can see the huge bug, he alone does not see it. Other than all the others, he is other than himself. Child martyr, foundling, the others have hemmed him in, penetrated him, wander leisurely through his soul, like the judge, the lawyer and the executioner who entered Harcamone by the ear, descended to the

depths of his heart and left by his asshole. Genet is a crowd, which is nobody. It is the *reverse side of the setting*, the reverse of Good and of Good men's hatred of evil. Society is not more terribly present to anyone than to this child whom it aims to reject. He is not a man, he is a creature of man, entirely occupied by men. They have produced him, manufactured him out of whole cloth. Not a breath of air has been allowed to enter this soul.

Paralyzed by men's gaze, marked by man in his very depths and transformed by man in his perception and even his inner language, he encounters everywhere, between him and men, between him and nature, between him and himself, the blurred transparency of human meanings. Only one question confronts this *homunculus*: man. The child Genet is an inhuman product of which man is the sole problem. How to be accepted by men? How to become a man? How to become oneself? It is not freedom that he wants, any more than does Kafka's monkey which has been uprooted from its forest and locked up in a case. Oh no, not freedom! Freedom is a man's problem, a problem of a higher order; Genet is seeking *a way out*. But everything is so well contrived that he cannot find one anywhere. Whatever the behavior he adopts in an effort to reclaim the criminal that he is, his acts will emanate from this criminal and be able only to perpetuate him. Similarly, Stilitano tries to get to the exit of the Palace of Mirrors and collides with his own image everywhere. What is to be done? Reject the morality in the name of which he is condemned? We have seen that this was not possible. Turn in on himself and try to recapture his lost innocence? But since innocence comes to the child through others, since it is the others who have taken it away from him, only the others can give it back to him. Then should he submit? But to whom? And to what? Is he even asked to submit? Though the adults are prompt to condemn, they are in no hurry to absolve. If a man is a thief, he is theirs; if honest, he escapes them. What do they want of him? He is ready for anything. But the fact is, they expect nothing. They needed a culprit, they chose him, but they are quite unconcerned about what goes on in his mind. Let him be, if he likes, a good culprit, that is, not too hardened and not too ready to repent. Let him try to mend his ways, but without arrogance, and with relapses. Above all, let him realize that forgiveness is a matter of generosity; he will never be entitled to it, whatever he may do. It may be granted him one day out of charity. (Out of charity, in other words, out of caprice. The truth is that no one has the right to forgive.) Meanwhile, let him resign his freedom and put it into the hands of

those who condemn him, let him become their despised slave, let him worship them and loathe himself. Furthermore, he will gain nothing thereby, and if he thought he would that would be an additional offense. The child's suffering is so great that he asks nothing better than to conclude this bad deal. To obey, even without hope, to obey even a pitiless master, is also a way of escaping solitude. But the attitude which is imposed upon him is untenable. He is ready to hate himself if only he can manage to see himself face to face. But he never sees himself. His hatred, unable to settle on a real object, remains empty, abstract, acted rather than felt. Even his remorse is fake. Logically, the one who should repent is the child who stole. But this child stole innocently, and besides he is dead. The one who repents is the culprit they have manufactured. It seems to him that he is repenting the fault of another. In short, the culprit is asking the good man: "What must I do to *make amends*?" The good man replies: "Be abject." But, most fortunately, abjection is *not* a solution. In fact, it is the very state into which Genet has fallen and which he would like to get out of. He likewise rejects madness; the child is too upright, too real, too "willful" to make shift with imaginary escapes. He will consent neither to transferring guilt to other objects, nor to compensating for the original conflict by ideas of grandeur, nor to fleeing into a dream world. Madness does not pay. He did think of suicide. A little boy recently wrote to his parents: "Dear Daddy and Mama, I'm going to give you a nice surprise. I'm going to kill myself." And he did. The investigation concluded that the child had been mentally deficient. That was the best solution, unless the parents were sent to jail. I would bet that Genet must have thought more than once of giving his foster parents that nice surprise. The child steals, he is caught, he kills himself, that is, he carries the sentence of exclusion which society has delivered against him to its ultimate consequences. In so doing he anticipates the adults' desires and at the same time revenges himself on the adults, like the punished child who chastises his mother by depriving himself of dessert. It was, I think, Genet's optimism that kept him from adopting this conclusion in reality. I mean thereby to designate the very orientation of his freedom. Beyond certain limits of horror, honest minds are no longer sensitive to anything but the absurdity of the world. Their deaths are exemplary. But there are others who cling like vermin. Even in concentration camps they won't die. They have a deep, inner conviction that life has a meaning, that it must have one. The more horrible their situation, the tighter their grip. The more

absurd the world is today, the more necessary it is to hold out until tomorrow. Tomorrow, dawn will break. The present darkness is warrant of the fact. Genet is one of these. This austere and desolate soul has the will to survive his shame and is certain that he will win out. He will later say, in *Miracle of the Rose*, that in the most hopeless situations he always had an unreasoned conviction that they would offer a way out. But his original situation is the worst of all. And there is no way out of it. Since he does not kill himself, there *must* be one, despite the evidence.

## PLEASE USE GENET PROPERLY

I have tried to do the following: to indicate the limit of psychoanalytical interpretation and Marxist explanation and to demonstrate that freedom alone can account for a person in his totality; to show this freedom at grips with destiny, crushed at first by its mischances, then turning upon them and digesting them little by little; to prove that genius is not a gift but the way out that one invents in desperate cases; to learn the choice that a writer makes of himself, of his life and of the meaning of the universe, including even the formal characteristics of his style and composition, even the structure of his images and of the particularity of his tastes; to review in detail the history of his liberation. It is for the reader to say whether I have succeeded.

As the present work draws to a close, I begin to have a certain scruple: have I been fair enough to Genet? I think I have defended Genet the man against all and sometimes against himself. Have I defended the writer sufficiently? This study was meant to be an introduction to his work. What if it were to turn people away from it? I know what can be said: "Let him write, if he wants to, but we don't have to read him. His poems are premeditated crimes, he tries to base his salvation on our destruction and to trick us by means of words. These are excellent reasons for admiring his works from afar and for not buying them."

I admit that Genet treats his readers as means. He uses them all to talk to *himself* about himself, and this peculiarity may alienate readers. When he asks himself: "Should *I* steal?" why should he expect the answer to interest *us*? "What I write," says Genet, "is valid only for me." To which the public replies: "What I take the trouble to read should be valid for everyone. Let him preach theft!

One could at least discuss the matter, could take a stand for or against his views." But he does not say that one should steal. Quite the contrary, he knows that it is wrong of him to steal and it is in order to be wrong that he steals. But he does not even ask us to be wrong: he asks us nothing at all. If anyone planned to become his disciple, I'm sure he would answer: "How could anyone act like me if he's not me?" This poet "speaks to us as an enemy": is it worth while surmounting the horror he inspires only to discover in the end that he is the sole recipient of his message and that he pretends to communicate with others only in order the better to depict himself for himself in his incommunicable particularity?\* I am in an embarrassing situation: if I reveal that one can derive profit from his works, I incite people to read them but I betray him; if, on the other hand, I lay stress on his particularity, I likewise run the risk of betraying him: after all, if he has published his poems, that means he wants to be read. If I must choose between betrayals, I pick the former: I shall at least be faithful to myself. I have no police record and no inclination for boys. Yet Genet's writings have moved me. If they move me, that means they concern me. If they concern me, that means I can profit from them. Let us attempt to point out how Genet can be "used properly."

He plays loser wins with his work and you are his partner: thus, you will win only by being ready to lose. Let him cheat; above all, do not defend yourself by adopting attitudes: you have nothing to gain by putting yourself into a state of Christian charity, by loving him in advance and by accepting the pus of his books with the abnegation of the Saint who kisses the leper's lips. High-minded individuals have brooded over this infected soul: it thanked them with a fart, and they deserved it, for their polite kindness was only a precaution for disarming his wiles. You will deplore the misfortunes he suffers only in order to hide from yourself his free will to do harm. In that case, you are helping a thief by trying to find excuses for him; to find excuses for the poet is to wrong him. Furthermore, do not take refuge in aestheticism; he will drive you from under cover. I know people who can read the coarsest passages without turning a hair: "Those two gentlemen sleep together? And then they eat their excrement? And after that, one goes off to denounce the other? As if that mattered! It's *so* well written." They stop at Genet's vocabulary so as not to enter his delirium; they admire the poem so as not to have to *realize* the content. But form and

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\* Unlike Montaigne who also depicts himself in his particularity, but *for others* and with the intention of communicating.

content are one and the same: it is *that* content which requires *that* form. So long as you play at amoralism you will remain at the threshold of the work. So? So you must not resist, you must let yourself be fooled, must remain yourself, must let yourself be naïvely indignant. Do not be ashamed of being taken for a fool. Since this fanatical challenging of all man and all his loves is expressly meant to shock, then be shocked, do not fight against the horror and uneasiness that the author wants to arouse in you. You will appreciate this sophist's trap only if you fall into it. "But," you may say, "if I become indignant, then what distinguishes me from M. Rousseaux?" I understand what you mean. M. Rousseaux's fulminations are ridiculous; this critic's incompetence is so sustained that one is tempted to maintain the opposite of everything he says. Yet that is the necessary test: if we want to win, we must be humble to the degree of becoming like unto M. Rousseaux.

That is the only way out of hell: you will be delivered by the horror with which Genet inspires you, on condition that you use it properly. What M. Rousseaux cannot see and what M. Mauriac, who is shrewder, sees clearly but hides is that the horror is *recognition*. That monkeys are thieves and dogs homosexuals are facts that merely make you laugh. But Genet repels: therefore, he endangers. And I do not mean merely that he throws light on the mud that one wants to hide: even if you are pure as snow, completely unrepessed, even if you automatically go straight to virtue as the moth goes to the light and M. Rousseaux to error, Genet would still repel you, therefore you would still be endangered.

We ask the writer to communicate to us his reflections on general situations. We "normal" people know delinquents only from the outside, and if we are ever "in a situation" with respect to them, it is as judges or entomologists: we were astounded to learn that one of our bunkmates had stolen from the regimental cashbox or that the local storekeeper had drawn a little boy into the back of the shop. We blamed, condemned and stoutly declared that "we didn't understand." And if we grant the novelist the right to describe such baneful individuals "since they exist, since one runs into them," we do so on condition that he consider them from the outside and as species.\* That amounts to forbidding the thief to speak about theft, and the homosexual to speak about his love life. A person who laughs heartily when Charpini appears on the stage might be unable to read a single page of *Funeral Rites*: the reason is that

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\* This does not mean that he may not show us what they are thinking or feeling, provided he artfully suggest that we are separated from them by an abyss.

Charpini is only a *spectacle*; in exaggerating the idiosyncrasies of the invert he makes of the latter an insect: laughter is sufficient to shake it off. One is willing to allow a repentant culprit to confess his sins, but on condition that he rise above them; the *good* homosexual is weaned away from his vice by remorse and disgust; it is no longer part of him. He was a criminal but no longer is. He speaks of what he was as if he were *Another*, and when we read his confession we feel ourselves *absolutely other* than the poor wretch he is speaking about. Proust himself cleverly, and somewhat cowardly, spoke of homosexuals as if they were a natural species: he pretended to be making fun of Charlus or to pity him; he told Gide that he regretted "the indecision that made him—in order to give body to the heterosexual part of his work—transpose all the graciousness, tenderness and charm of his homosexual experience to the 'budding grove' of girls, with the result that there remained for Sodom only the grotesque and discreditable."\* What was the use of his subsequently denying that he had "wanted to stigmatize uranism"?† The fact is that he became his readers' accomplice. What matters to us is that he does not let us hear the voice of the guilty man himself, that sensual, disturbing voice which seduces the young men, that breathless voice which murmurs with pleasure, that vulgar voice which describes a night of love. The homosexual must remain an object, a flower, an insect, an inhabitant of ancient Sodom or the planet Uranus, an automaton that hops about in the limelight, anything you like except my fellow man, except my image, except myself. For a choice must be made: if every man is all of man, this black sheep must be only a pebble or must be *me*.

Genet refuses to be a pebble; he never sides with the public prosecutor; he never speaks to us *about* the homosexual, *about* the thief, but always *as* a thief and *as* a homosexual. His voice is one of those that we wanted never to hear; it is not meant for analyzing disturbance but for communicating it. J. Vuillemin once wrote the following about Shakespeare: "He sometimes succeeds in doing away with the divinity of the spectator. . . . In *Hamlet* the actor's point of view becomes true . . . the spectator's point of view is transformed in turn; though the footlights do not disappear, at least they grow dim. *We participate instead of seeing.*" That is precisely what Genet does: he invents the homosexual *subject*. Before him, the homosexual is the plaything of external occurrences; regardless of what he says and thinks, we are prompted to

\* *Journal d'André Gide*, Pléiade, p. 694.

† *Ibid.*

believe that his thoughts and words are more the effect than the expression of a psychophysiological mechanism; one has only to show it in order to reassure: since it is by nature an object for man, it falls outside the human. But Genet declares himself to be in the right, he ponders himself and ponders the world. You can try to reduce his vice to a physiological defect, but even if you establish the fact that there is something wrong with his secretions, you would not attain that absolute consciousness which approves of itself and chooses itself. A child who had seen Fernandel on the screen a dozen times once met him in the street. "What," he asked, frightened, "he *exists*?" When reading Genet, we are similarly tempted to ask ourselves: "Does a homosexual *exist*? Does he think? Does he judge, does he judge us, does he *see* us?" If he does exist, everything changes: if homosexuality is the choice of a mind, it becomes a human possibility. *Man* is a homosexual, a thief and a traitor.\* If you deny this, then renounce your finest laurels: you were pleased to exceed the speed of sound with the aviator, with him *you* pushed back the limits of human possibilities, and when he appears, it is *you* whom you acclaim. I see no harm in this: every human adventure, however individual it may appear, involves all mankind; that is what Catholics call reversibility of merits. But then accept the reversibility of crime; be willing to moan with all girl queens when they make love, be willing to break into apartments with all burglars. The reader may recall the story of the ward of the National Foundling Society who was beaten and underfed by the brutal peasants who had adopted him. At the age of twenty, he did not know how to read. He did his military service. When he left the army, the only thing he had been taught was how to kill. Therefore, he killed. "I'm a wild animal," he said. "The public prosecutor has asked for my head and he'll probably get it. But if he had lived my life he might be where I am now, and if I had lived his, I might be prosecuting him." Everyone in the courtroom was terrified, they had seen an abyss, they had seen a naked, undifferentiated existence which was capable of being everything and which, depending on circumstances, became a murderer or a public prosecutor; in short, human existence. I am not saying that this is completely true: it is not *this particular* public official who would

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\* He is *also*, of course, heterosexual, honest and faithful. Ancient dogmatism concluded that since he can be an honest man or a thief, he is therefore neither one nor the other. The result of this was that man was nothing. Contemporary thought, which seeks the historically concrete, views mankind as the totality of its contradictions. Since there are licit sexual relations, there is a human possibility of rejecting them and of seeking vice. Inversely, since there are vices, licit sexual relations become *normal*.

have become *this particular* criminal. The fact remains that the argument struck home, that it will continue to do so. And besides, the murderer demonstrated the truth of it afterward: he was reprieved, learned to read and changed. What is noteworthy in all this is the vacillation of the self that occurs in us when certain minds open before our eyes like yawning chasms: what we considered to be our innermost being suddenly seems to us to be a fabricated appearance; it seems to us that we have escaped only by an incredible stroke of luck from the vices that repel us most in others; we recognize, with horror, a *subject*. He is our truth as we are his; our virtue and his crimes are interchangeable.

Genet invents for us betrayal and homosexuality; they enter the human world; the reader sees them as his personal way out, the emergency exit that has been made for him. We shall not derive from these poems any *knowledge* about ourselves or others; one can know only objects; as for us who wander in the labyrinth of the homosexual sophisms that we are made to adopt even before we have understood them, we are changed into homosexual subjects. What will remain when the book has been closed? A feeling of emptiness, of darkness and of horrible beauty, an "eccentric" experience that we cannot incorporate into the web of our life and that will forever remain "on the margin," unassimilable, the memory of a night of debauchery when we gave ourselves to a man and came. There are books which address themselves, in each individual, to all, and we feel that we are *the* crowd when we enter them. Those of Genet are brothels into which one slips by a door which is ajar, hoping not to meet anyone; and when one is there, one is all alone. Yet it is from this refusal to universalize that their universality is due: the universal and incommunicable experience which they offer to all as individuals is that of solitude.

This does not seem, at first, to be a very new theme; many writers have complained of being lonely, often in agreeable fashion: people were unable to see their merits, their genius had raised them to such a height that nobody could breathe that rarefied air, etc. But this proud and melancholy loneliness is of no interest, except to students of comparative literature. Spiritual solitude in the great Romantics, the solitude of the mystics, solitude in Europe in the century of the Enlightenment, solitude in the eastern provinces between 1798 and 1832, in the French sonnet, among the predecessors of Malherbe: these are fine subjects for dissertations. Those people were not alone, or else one must believe in the solitude of adolescents "whom nobody loves, whom nobody understands";

invisible cohorts floated above their heads and future hands crowned them with laurel. Stendhal was not alone: he lived in 1880 with "the happy few"; Keats was more alone: "Here lies one whose name was writ on water"; but this despairing epitaph which he wrote for himself was addressed *to the Others*. You are not really alone so long as your thoughts are communicable, even if bad luck prevents you from communicating them, nor if you think you are right, even if against all, nor if you are sure that you are doing Good, nor if you succeed in your undertaking; you will not be really alone so long as you have a secret tribunal to absolve you. For a long time we believed in the social atomism bequeathed to us by the eighteenth century, and it seemed to us that man was by nature a solitary entity who entered into relations with his fellow men *afterward*. Thus, solitude appeared to be our original state; one emerged from it if all went well, but one could return to it if one's luck changed. We now know that this is nonsense. The truth is that "human reality" "is-in-society" as it "is-in-the-world"; it is neither a nature nor a state; it is made. Since a child first knows himself as a son, grandson, nephew, worker, bourgeois, Frenchman, etc., and since he is little by little defined by his behavior, solitude is a certain aspect of our relationship to all, and this aspect is manifested by certain types of behavior which we adopt toward society.\*

Man, says Marx, is an object to man. That is true. But it is also true that I am a subject to myself exactly insofar as my fellow man is an object to me. And that is what separates us. He and I are not *homogeneous*: we cannot be part of the same whole except in the eyes of a third person who perceives us both as a single object. If we could all be, simultaneously and reciprocally, both object and subject for each other and by each other, or if we could all sink together into an objective totality, or if, as in the Kantian city of ends, we were never anything but subjects recognizing themselves as subjects, the separations would cease to exist. But we cannot carry matters to an extreme in either direction: we cannot all be objects unless it be for a transcendent subject, nor can we all be subjects unless we first undertake the impossible liquidation of all objectivity. As for absolute reciprocity, it is concealed by the historical conditions of class and race, by nationalities, by the social

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\* Physical isolation is not solitude. A colonial who is lost in the bush may feel homesick for his native land, may miss his family, his friends, his wife. But as he continues to be part of society, as his relatives and friends have not ceased to love and approve of him, he remains identified *with all*: his relationship to all has simply changed from a concrete one to an abstract one without changing nature.

hierarchy. A leader is never a subject to his subordinates; if he is, he loses his authority. He is rarely a subject to his superiors. Thus, we usually live in a state of familiar and unthinking vagueness; we pass unnoticed. In our profession, our family, our party, we are not quite objects and not quite subjects. The Other is that instrument which obeys the voice, which regulates, divides, distributes, and it is, at the same time, that warm, diffused atmosphere which envelops us; and that is what we, too, are for others and consequently for ourselves. However, this immediate vagueness contains the germ of disequilibrium: you are with all, you write for all, you take God to witness, or the human race, or history, or your next-door neighbors; you are the docile instrument of a family, of a social group, of a profession, of a party, of a church; you receive your thoughts from the outside by means of newspapers, the radio, lectures and speeches and immediately redistribute them; not a moment goes by without your speaking and listening, and whatever you say or hear is what anyone would have said or heard in your place; from morning to night you submit to the tyranny of the human visage, you have no secrets, no mystery, nor do you want to have any—and yet, in a certain way, you are alone. And I do not locate this solitude in our private life, which is only a sector of public life, nor in our tastes, which are social and shared: I find it everywhere. Being a negation, it is the negative of our loves, of our actions, of our personal or political life. It is neither subjectivity, in the strict sense of the word, nor objectivity, but the relationship between the two when it is experienced as a failure. It is born within communication itself, as poetry is within all prose, because the most clearly expressed and understood thoughts conceal an incommunicable element: I can make them be conceived as I conceive them but am unable to make them live as I live. This solitude is found within mutual love: when you are unable to make your wife share a taste which you have in common with thousands of other people, when you remain separated from her within pleasure. In these examples, subjectivity does not succeed in dissolving objectivities. But we are *also* alone when we cannot *become objects sufficiently*: surrounded, supported, fed, re-created by your party, you may want to be only a cell of that great organism and yet you feel your solitude for the simple reason that it always remains possible for you to leave the party and that your very loyalty is deliberate, or else out of fear of being led one day to criticize the leaders and to refuse obedience, in short, because of the anxiety you feel when confronted with your freedom and exactly insofar as you

are not the stick or corpse which you are making an effort to imitate; the victor is alone because he cannot identify himself completely with the beautiful possession which is being led in triumph: because of his hidden defeat. This vague sense of a want of exact correspondence between the subjective and objective would still be nothing, for we spend our time hiding the fact from ourselves; but our professional mistakes, our thoughtless acts, our blunders and our mishaps suddenly exasperate it: the error, the slip, the foolish act creates a vacuum around us; suddenly the others *see* us, we emerge from the original indistinctness, we have become objects; at the same time, we *feel ourselves being looked at*, we feel ourselves blushing and turning pale: we have become subjects. In short, our solitude is the way we feel our objectivity for others in our subjectivity and on the occasion of a failure. Ultimately, the criminal and the madman are pure objects and solitary subjects; their frantic subjectivity is carried to the point of solipsism at the moment when they are reduced for others to the state of a pure, manipulated thing, of a pure *being-there* without a future, prisoners who are dressed and undressed, who are spoon-fed. On the one hand are dream, autism, absence; on the other, the ant heap; on the one hand, shame and the impotent hatred that turns against itself and vainly defies the heavens, and on the other the opaque being of the pebble, the "human material." The man who becomes aware of this explosive contradiction within himself knows true solitude, that of the monster; botched by Nature and Society, he lives radically, to the point of impossibility, the latent, larval solitude which is ours and which we try to ignore. One is not alone if one is right, for Truth will out; nor if one is wrong, for it will suffice to acknowledge one's mistakes for them to be forgotten. One is alone when one is right and wrong *at the same time*: when one declares oneself right as subject—because one is conscious and lives and because one cannot and will not deny what one has willed—and when one declares oneself wrong as object because one cannot reject the objective condemnation of all of Society. There is only one path leading down to the solitude of the unique, the path that leads, through impotence and despair, to error and failure. You will be alone if you know that you are now only a guilty object in everyone's eyes, while your conscience continues, despite itself, to approve of itself; you will be alone if Society ignores you and if you cannot annihilate yourself: Genet's "impossible nullity" is solitude. But awareness of it is not enough; you must live it, must therefore make it: on this basis, two attitudes are possible.

Bukharin conspires. That does not mean he is opposed *as a subject* to the government's policy. He does what the objective situation requires. Everything takes place among objects: objective deviations require their objective corrective; that is all. If he had seized power in time, the revolution would have continued without a hitch: who in the U.S.S.R. would have dared comment upon a change among the rulers? Had he won, he would have remained a stick and a corpse; as an instrument controlled by history, it would not have been he who changed things, but rather things would have been changed by him; and since, as Merleau-Ponty says, "the paradox of history . . . is that a contingent future looms up before us when it has become the present as something real and even necessary,"\* the manifest success of his victory would have finally dissolved him in the historical process. But he fails, and the necessity of his defeat reveals to him that his undertaking was impossible, that it was rejected a priori by objective reality. It had only the consistency of shadows and could have sprung only from a shadow, to wit, the Communist who turns against history.† Bukharin learns what he is not, what he will not do: he is *not* the historical process, he *will not make* the required correction. Since history rejects him, he now defines himself only by *nonbeing*: he is the man who *has not* succeeded, who *could not* succeed; he is error, he is impotence. Does he retain the hope that some day others will succeed? Perhaps: but they will be other men, with other means, in other circumstances. Their victory will demonstrate that his attempt was useless and premature; it will make him even more guilty. Come what may, history can only decide that he was wrong. It had not chosen him; he had chosen himself. Wrong, error, presumption, failure, impotence: these negations designate him, in his own eyes, as a *subject*. He is a subject because of insufficiency and not because of excess: because of everything that he did not understand, everything that he did not do. He is a subject because of the nothingness that is in him. Impossible nullity. Does he therefore think that he was mistaken even in his evaluation of the historical situation? Probably not: but it was not time to correct those deviations; history was taking another path, one that was slower but surer, the only possible and only necessary one. It was not *for him* to reason and reflect: *it was wrong of him to be right*. And since

\* Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur*.

† The Christian who turns away from God is likewise a shadow. For him the worst is not sure. In Marxist terms: a traitor is not sufficient to deflect the course of history. Jouhandeau's abjection, which reveals to him his *person* in and by the radical inadequacy of his being, is the religious equivalent of Bukharin's treason.

his intention was bound to lead to catastrophe, it was vitiated at the very beginning. "Here we encounter a stern idea of responsibility, which is not what men wanted but what they happen to have done in the light of the event." The opposition which seizes power can save a country that is in danger; the opposition which fails can only weaken it. "In the light of the event," Bukharin discovers at the same time, and by means of each other, his subjectivity and his betrayal. To be sure, he did not want to betray; but that was not enough: he ought to have wanted not to betray, therefore to lie low; he is blamed, here again, for a nothingness, an absence, in the intention; in like manner, a reckless driver is condemned for manslaughter *through negligence*, that is, for *not having thought* of slowing up: he is condemned for what there *was not* in his mind and not for what there was. Thus, Bukharin is a traitor. A traitor for having run the risk, in case of failure, of serving the enemies of the revolution; a traitor for having departed from objectivity, for having judged as a subject and for having accepted the possibility that his undertaking might remain subjective, that is, might be a failure and endanger the building of socialism; a traitor not for having discarded revolutionary principles, but, quite the contrary, because he still accepted them when he was endangering the revolution. Since he can appeal to neither his former comrades who condemn him nor his enemies whom he continues to hate, nor posterity which may not maintain the charge of betrayal but which will rank him among the blunderers of history, he is alone. He finds in himself only nothingness and failure. And since he is a nothingness, he attacks this subjectivity which isolates him; his last act, which unfortunately is also subjective, is to annihilate himself; he refuses to listen to his own testimony and to see himself as anything other than an object; he will now be only the traitor that he appears to be to everyone, still a stick but a broken stick; he pleads guilty. That is the first attitude: the solitary individual escapes from solitude by a moral suicide; rejected by men, he becomes a stone amongst stones.

Here is the second one. For Genet is the Bukharin of bourgeois society. Chosen victim of a compact and militant community, he was tossed into a ditch while it continued on its way; failure and impotence revealed his solitude to him too. He knows that bourgeois history will eternally declare him wrong. He is alone because he continues to affirm the principles which condemn him, just as Bukharin maintained to the very end the revolutionary principles in the name of which he was executed. "Since the accused

Marxists were . . . in agreement with the prosecution on the principle of historical responsibility, they became self-accusers, and in order to discover their subjective honesty we must examine not only the indictment but also their own statements." This sentence from Merleau-Ponty's book is applicable to Genet word for word: agreeing with the court as to the sacredness of private property, he becomes his own accuser in the name of the fundamental principle of the bourgeoisie which excludes him; in short, like Bukharin he discovers his subjectivity by judging himself according to the objective maxims of society. Both men confess. When the record is signed, one will be a traitor forever and the other a scoundrel in the eyes of eternity.

Bukharin, however, confesses to his betrayal with humility, whereas Genet takes pride in his. To be sure, Bukharin cannot entirely destroy the subjectivity which he discovers in the failure and which he condemns along with his judges: "Although he does not recognize personal honor . . . he defends his revolutionary honor and rejects the imputation of espionage and sabotage." On the eve of death, he is still arranging his defeat; this pure nothingness which cannot annihilate itself attempts, to the very end, to make the impossibility of living livable. But Genet is of another society, one that has other myths and other mores, and since bourgeois society recognizes the right of every individual to exist, it is this right which he demands. Bukharin, who is a black sheep of a revolutionary community, persists in calling himself a revolutionary; Genet, who is an outcast of a "liberal" society, demands, in the name of liberalism, freedom to live for the monster that he has become. This means that he persists in his failure, in his anomalies, that he heightens his exile and, since he is now only a nothingness, he becomes a proud consciousness of not being; impotent, evil, unreasonable and wanting to be unto annihilation, he will be nothing but the narrow limit which separates negativity from nothingness, nonbeing from the consciousness of being nothing. Negation of everything and even of negation, he chooses, in the light of the failure, to be the pure, incommunicable, irretrievable subjectivity oscillating between the Nothingness which cannot annihilate and the Nothing which causes itself to exist solely by the consciousness of not being. The Just spit in his face and list the wrong things he has done. But, unlike Bukharin, he proclaims in defiance of all that he *is right to be wrong*. He *alone* declares himself right; he **knows** that his testimony is inadequate and he maintains it *because* of its inadequacy. He is proud of being right *in the realm of the*

*impossible* and of testifying to the impossibility of everything. Do you finally realize who Genet is? Bear in mind Merleau-Ponty's comment on Bukharin, a comment which has aroused loud protest: "Every opponent is a traitor, but every traitor is only an opponent." You who do not share the principles of Soviet society call Bukharin a defeated opponent and you are indignant that he can be called a traitor. In that case, allow Genet, who horrifies you, to be, for others who do not share your principles, only a defeated opponent of bourgeois society. I know that he fills you with genuine disgust. But do you think that Bukharin does not fill the faithful Communist and the Stakhanovite with disgust? In any society, the guilty man is solitary and the solitary is guilty; there is no other way of assuming solitude than to claim the fault and consequently to arouse horror. For solitude is the social relationship itself when it is lived in despair; it is the negative relationship of each individual to all. Genet's origin is a *blunder* (there would not have been a Genet if someone had used a contraceptive), then a *rejection* (someone rejected that hated consequence of a blunder), then a *failure* (the child was unable to integrate himself into the milieu that received him). Blunder, rejection, failure: these add up to a *No*. Since the child's objective essence was the *No*, Genet gave himself a personality by giving himself the subjectivity of the *No*; he is the absolute opponent, for he opposes Being and all integration. Although he is a taboo object for everyone, he becomes a sacred subject for himself, and the subjectivity which he claims is the proud internalization of the object's pure being-gazed-upon, of the tube of vaseline, for example. Genet is first a pure thing—what Bukharin will be only by virtue of the confession and the death that follows immediately—a thing that cannot be assimilated (*because it is a thing*) to a society of subject-objects, and his subjectivity is only the internalization of his "thingness" as a separatory inertia. The insolence with which the tube of vaseline mocks the indignant cops is quite simply its *inertia*, an inertia that is lived and acted by the culprit as a gesture of bravado, a terribly active and anxious consciousness which *makes itself a passivity*: such is the *person* of Genet as a particularity. But also as a universal: theft, homosexuality and betrayal, as contents of this particular essence, come afterward: "One must first be guilty," that is, *an object for everybody*. In claiming absolute objectivity, Genet seems to be a particular opponent of a historical society: he achieves, for all, the pure form of opposition reduced to impotence. For all: for you and for me, for every reader. For we are all *at one and the same time vic-*

torious conformists and defeated opponents. We all hide, deep within us, a scandalous breach which, if it were revealed, would instantly change us into an "object of reprobation"; isolated, blamed for our failures, especially in unimportant circumstances, we all know the anguish of being wrong and of being unable to admit we are wrong, of being right and of being unable to accept our being right; we all oscillate between the temptation to prefer our self to everything else because our consciousness is, for us, the center of the world, and that of preferring everything to our consciousness; when beaten in an argument, we have all constructed "whirligigs" and sophisms in order to postpone the moment of "objective" defeat when we already knew in our heart that we were beaten and in order to maintain our error, that nothingness, against the blinding evidence. Thus, we have been kings of shadows and shams; it is indeed difficult for consciousness—which is, on principle, self-approval—to conceive of its errors and its death. In his latest article in *La Table Ronde* Thierry Maulnier discusses one of the strangest and basest inventions of our age, the Chinese accusation meetings at which the assembled population of the town or village enjoys the anguish, repentance, pallor and sweat of the accused persons and condemns them itself, anonymously, by a show of hands; it enjoys seeing the verdict written on the faces of the condemned, follows them to the place of torture and with mockery, insults and cries of joy watches them die."\* That is indeed base. But why "Chinese"? Or else we are all Chinese without realizing it, both Chinese victims and Chinese executioners, for I see in these accusation meetings the image of our situation: we are accusers with everyone else and at the same time we are alone and accused by everybody. Since the social relationship is ambiguous and always involves an element of failure, since we are simultaneously the laughing Chinese crowd and the terrified Chinese who is led to torture, since every thought divides as much as it unites, since every word draws one closer by virtue of what it expresses and isolates by virtue of what it does not say, since a fathomless abyss separates the subjective certainty which we have of ourselves from the objective truth which we are for others, since we do not cease to judge ourselves guilty even though we feel innocent, since the event transforms our best intentions into criminal desires not only in history but even in family life, since we are never sure of not becoming traitors retrospectively, since we constantly fail to com-

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\* Thierry Maulnier, "Mort Courageusement," *La Table Ronde*, January 1952.

municate, to love, to be loved, and since every failure makes us feel our solitude, since we dream at times of effacing our criminal particularity by humbly acknowledging it and at times of affirming it defiantly in the vain hope of assuming it entirely, since we are conformists in broad daylight and defeated and evil in our secret soul, since the one resource of the guilty person and his only dignity is obstinacy, sulkiness, insincerity and resentment, since we cannot escape from the objectivity that crushes us nor divest ourselves of the subjectivity that exiles us, since we are not allowed even to rise to the plane of being or sink into nothingness, since we are, in any case, *impossible nullities*, we must listen to the voice of Genet, our fellow man, our brother. He carries to an extreme the latent, masked solitude which is ours; he inflates our sophisms until they burst; he magnifies our failures to the point of catastrophe; he exaggerates our dishonesty to the point of making it intolerable to us; he makes our guilt appear in broad daylight. Whatever the society that succeeds ours, his readers will continue to declare him wrong, since he opposes *all* society. But that is precisely why we are his brothers; for our age has a guilty conscience with respect to history. There have been times that were more criminal, but they cared not a rap for posterity; and others made history with a clear conscience; men did not feel that they were cut off from the future; they felt that they were creating it and that their children would remain in tune with them; the succession of generations was merely a medium in which they felt at ease. Revolutions are now impossible. We are being threatened by the most idiotic and bloodiest of wars. The propertied classes are no longer quite sure of their rights, and the working class is losing ground. We are more aware of injustice than ever, and we have neither the means nor the will to rectify it. But the lightning progress of science gives future centuries an obsessive presence; the future is here, more present than the present: men will go to the moon, perhaps life will be created. We feel that we are being judged by the masked men who will succeed us and whose knowledge of all things will be such that we cannot have the slightest inkling of what it will be; our age will be an object for those future eyes whose gaze haunts us. And a guilty object. They will reveal to us our failure and guilt. Our age, which is already dead, already a *thing*, though we still have to live it, is *alone* in history, and this historical solitude determines even our perceptions: what we see *will no longer be*; people will laugh at our ignorance, will be indignant at our mistakes. What course is open to us? There is one which I perceive and which I shall discuss

elsewhere. But the course which one usually takes is to install oneself in the present moment of history and to will it defiantly with the stubbornness of the vanquished; one invents sophisms in order to maintain principles which one realizes are going to disappear and truths which one knows will become error. That is why Genet the sophist is one of the heroes of this age. He is held up to obloquy before our eyes as we are before the gaze of future centuries; the Just will not cease to cast blame on him nor will History cease to cast blame on our age. Genet is we. That is why we must read him. To be sure, he wants to impute to us mistakes that we have not committed, that we have not even dreamed of committing. But what does that matter? Wait a bit until you are accused: the techniques have been perfected, you will make a full confession. *Therefore*, you will be guilty. At that point you will have only to choose: you will be Bukharin or Genet. Bukharin or our will *to be together* carried to the point of martyrdom; Genet or our solitude carried to the point of Passion.

If we maintain the hope and firm intention of escaping this alternative, if there is still time to reconcile, with a final effort, the object and the subject, we must, be it only once and in the realm of the imaginary, achieve this latent solitude which corrodes our acts and thoughts. We spent our time fleeing from the objective into the subjective and from the subjective into objectivity. This game of hide-and-seek will end only when we have the courage to go to the limits of ourselves in both directions at once. At the present time, we must bring to light the subject, the guilty one, that monstrous and wretched bug which we are likely to become at any moment. Genet holds the mirror up to us: we must look at it and see ourselves.