

# Objects of Abjection: The Animation of Difference in Jean Genet's Novels

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## THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

Nothing is inherently animate or inanimate. Call objects animate when they present a problem, when they make one notice, question, or challenge their nature; inanimate when they do not. Inanimate objects precisely play their parts in a predictable world. Receptive and supple to the touch, they assert a complete and discrete function that is also a sort of authority: Touch or move me as you wish, I am unchangeable in shape, meaning, aspect. In Rilke's account these objects are "full"; in Genet's they are "rendered useful."

To this category belong the sweet, flat icons of advertising that Mark Miller describes, whose self-satisfied place in a system predicated on the cash nexus depends only on our passive affirmation. One may draw examples from Genet's work: A judge's gavel is "rendered useful" when it is banged to regulate a ("real") trial, a general's uniform when worn to war, a bishop's miter when donned for a christening. Each may be *important* when in use, but its importance is determined by its context and depends on a socially shared determination of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Such objects remind us that the system of meaning—of language, of ordered "differences"—depends on the separation of signifiers from one another (oat from goat, cat from hat, and so on) *within* a legible and comprehensive overall system: These small necessary differences never lead to a sense of *incommensurability*. Such objects never generate a difference that goes beyond the system's ability to promise linguistic uniformity. Though difference is inevitable between objects, no one of these objects is *out of the loop*. Nothing means something in *itself*.<sup>2</sup> Completely flush to the system,

such simple objects have what Genet calls “stiffness and poverty,” what Proust calls “Habit.” In his book-length study of Genet, Derrida calls such objects “remain(s).” Genet learns little from such objects, and they matter little to his writing.

On the other side of human experience lie animate objects. Sometimes we find ourselves examining something more closely than had ever seemed necessary before: It has managed to catch our attention somehow. While there is no object that has this quality inherently or constantly (Lacan’s claim for the phallus as the object extraordinaire of lack and excess notwithstanding), problem objects constantly surface in everyday life. A car can be just part of your way of getting around one day, but the next (when you’ve heard of a friend’s crash) a site of anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

Literary and philosophical texts choose to cite as their exempla of this sort of animation a remarkable range of material objects (Fisher). To Rilke, it is the incompleteness of dolls that draws forth a visceral response from humans: Other toys are satisfied with being only mechanical, but dolls evidence a lack.<sup>4</sup> To Proust, the madeleine pierces the veil that keeps Marcel pleasantly stupefied in the present: It threatens to bring back a past inaccessible in the world of ordinary material objects, inaccessible to those who reminisce without a material prop. To Andre Bazin, the almost-disastrous gestures of Charlie Chaplin remystify the world: In Chaplin’s films, objects have a life of their own, an intention and mobility that saps or shapes human actions.<sup>5</sup> And to Karel Capek (in an account that resonates with my own experiences as a klutz) it is the *genuine oaf* (Chaplin only plays one) who reveals the secret ambitions of the material world: Shoelaces really want to be tied to each other, the purpose of corners is to crack skulls, and doorways want to make us stoop unnaturally.

There are a great number of ways in which life can accrue around objects in the ordinary world. For example, at certain times everything in the world can be charged with agency. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, projects a feeling out from Dalloway’s mind onto all the objects around her, a sort of glowing emotional supercharge:

Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best. (12)<sup>6</sup>

Proust, too, explores what happens when objects flicker between possessing excessive life and being simply (boringly) unproblematic. When Marcel has

to change his living situation, for example, everything comes painfully alive. As Samuel Beckett describes Proust's work: "The fundamental duty of Habit . . . consists in a perpetual adjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds. Suffering represents the omission of that duty . . . and boredom its adequate performance" (16). When Habit lapses, objects start acting up. A temporary but all-embracing life pops up to endow all objects that impinge on consciousness in this liminal zone with attention-demanding pain. Voices, chairs, and beds all threaten Marcel—all stay etched in his memory.

But whether they spring to life playfully or with an anxious step into the abyss (e.g., ordinary objects made into torture instruments—hands kept outside the blanket, or the door opened and closed repeatedly by a malicious jailer [Scarry 40–41]), such objects make a claim *against* the smooth functioning of the system. I'm not just part of the furniture, says the rocking chair that slips away when the schlemiel tries to sit in it; I'm a deathtrap, says Stephen King's animated car, "Christine." A phone is generally only a tool (a sign in the language system) that assists in mediating long-distance conversation. If you are expecting a call, however, or if a sleeping parent means it cannot be allowed to ring twice, it gets endowed with mystical qualities that seem to inhere solely in the object itself, to lift it out of the "ordinary" realm. This is how objects "question" us, or call us out: how they suddenly seem able either to drain life from us, or to fill in our voids. There is more "difference" at work here than between one object and the next in the system. At times, certain things claim a larger sort of *distinction*—a distinction a great many thinkers acknowledge, but which few seem able to confront in all its radical alterity.

Genet is not alone in exploring the nature of animated objects, but he has managed to go where others haven't. Although there are many productive ways of talking about this overloading of the system of meaning by the sudden valorization of a few sites, almost all twentieth-century accounts seem to fall prey either to a rather brutal sociological reductionism or to an existentialist idealism. That is, most accounts of animated objects prior to Genet either rush to proclaim the forceful reintegration of the object to the system it had claimed to escape, or they rush to proclaim the successful disappearance of that object into a "higher" sort of reality: Either nothing can climb free or that which climbs free leaves the world behind entirely. Some thinkers even seem to fall prey to both fallacies.

In his *Theory of the Novel*, for instance, Lukács provides a convincing account of the reduction of objects, and ultimately people as well, to

*unproblematic* representations of their exchange value. Late capitalism has deprived things of the “glory” that used to glow in the stars as it did in human hearts: The “reified” object, like the reified subject, has lost the ability to glow with some sort of fierce *individuating* fire. Lukács supposes that nowadays the cash nexus has chained us all to a system where only one form of value (exchange value) determines meaning.

By contrast, Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* ascribes a splendid life to children’s toys only insofar as they step out of the system of exchange-values and return to a purely purposeless use-value.

The little trucks travel nowhere and the tiny barrels on them are empty; yet they remain true to their destiny by not performing, not participating in the process of abstraction that levels down that destiny, but instead abide as allegories of what they are specifically for.  
(228)

It also presents the most sophisticated Marxist case for considering an object free of its systematic attachments:

It is only infatuation (with the object contemplated), the unjust disregard for the claims of every existing thing, that does justice to what exists. . . . The existent’s one-sidedness is comprehended as its being, and reconciled. (76)

Adorno’s praise for the “sabbath eyes . . . that save in their object something of the calm of the day of its creation” (76) is beautiful. But it is also influenced, indeed fatally compromised, by the existentialism that he elsewhere denounces. To speak of toy trains climbing free of the exchange-value system and its compulsions is to posit that the linguistic system, and the taxonomic ordering of the world, are cognate with a system of political oppression—a system from which escape is possible.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in most modernist writing, there remains an assumption that objects are able somehow to gain “freedom” from systematic classification, just as the autonomous human in existentialist accounts is said to rise clear of an obligatory world to gain a life in the moment of choice. In such accounts, the negative space from which the moment of decision emerges—the systematic flatness from which a three-dimensional animate object springs erect—is either ignored or (systematically) trivialized to the point of nonexistence.

Genet is no Bourdieu: He has no desire to reduce the object’s seeming movement toward freedom to merely another gesture within a system that turns all deviations into “conditioned and conditional freedom . . . remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty” (95). But neither does Genet lapse into a pure worship of the object’s freedom. Rather, his work achieves the sort of inversion that allows objects to emerge into a more-than-systematic

life even as they reenter systematic flatness. His novels *enact* what could never be directly addressed in strictly philosophical writing: both the desire of an object to climb free of its system and, simultaneously, the striking affirmation of the language-system's guiding principle of "difference" implied by such "climbing-clear"—*in the moment of turning from the system, the strongest possible affirmation of the system.*

Genet deconstructs the false opposition between the system's flatness and the "erection" of objects striving to break free. He both allows that escape and analyses the conditions of the object's return. In his four closely related novels (or novel/memoirs), *The Thief's Journal* (*TJ*), *Our Lady of the Flowers* (*OLF*), *Miracle of the Roses* (*MR*), and *Funeral Rites* (*FR*), we can uncover a tangled, repetitive but highly revealing coming-to-grips with the peculiarities of the inanimate made live. Three objects surface time and again in his works: Penises, roses, and tubes of Vaseline help him to complete a brilliant anatomy of the disruptions that occur as objects attempt to claim a transcendent free-standing life for themselves.<sup>8</sup>

### AGGLUTINATED BY "DIFFERENCE"

Bliss and terror are twinned aspects of an object's departure from its ordinary place. The estranged pleasure an audience gets from watching Chaplin dodge animate rifles, or Buster Keaton run downhill pursued by boulders, counterbalances the horror that Capek's schlemiel feels opening a drawer of bloodthirsty kitchen knives. The pleasure a doll calls out in Rilke, or a toy train in Adorno, counterbalances the horror that shifting walls deal out when Marcel wakes disoriented in the middle of the night. And the horror that domestic objects (doors, hands, telephones) call forth in Scarry's account of torture is counterbalanced by the pleasure inherent in the sudden bursts of animation of the penis, rose, or tube of Vaseline in Genet's novels. Genet's critics have documented well the *sexual* dimension of these appealing objects (Bersani, White). But little has been said of the similarity between the *pleasure* that these excessively active items produce (the "quivering" and "oscillation" that the sexual mode induces in Genet's narrators) and the sort of *horror* that occurs when an object is invested with a power that one's own power as meaning-maker can no longer counter. When objects get the upper hand, that is, either bliss or abjection (or both) will replace the ordinary range of emotions that Genet associates with banal normality. To say this thrill is only sexual is to neglect the dread inherent in the frisson.

The pleasure that Genet gets from these objects is at every level dual—to begin with, what is at once the simplest and the most highly charged

moment in all Genet's writing: a tube of Vaseline that sits, circumspect and reduced, along with the arrested narrator in a police station in Spain. One pleasure the tube of Vaseline provides is that its durability resists the gaze of even the most hardened policeman: Its autonomy, despite its fragility (*because* of its fragility), is irreproachable. To that extent, the tube's fetishistic power still functions like Proust's madeleine, or like Adorno's trains. It is set in utter alterity to the homogeneous system from which it escapes. But Genet also brings out the Vaseline's liquidity, its ductility, its propensity to slide back into the world it stubbornly resists.

I knew that all night long my tube of vaseline would be exposed to the scorn—the contrary of a Perpetual Adoration—of a group of strong, handsome, husky policemen. So strong that if the weakest of them barely squeezed his fingers together, there would shoot forth, first with a slight fart, brief and dirty, a ribbon of gum which would continue to emerge in a ridiculous silence. Nevertheless, I was sure that this puny and most humble object would hold its own against them; by its mere presence it would be able to exasperate all the police in the world; it would draw down upon itself contempt, hatred, white and dumb rages. (TJ20)

Here are Genet's central themes in a nutshell: the putatively strong policemen against an apparently debased object; the (homo)sexual moment in the form of an invasive proclamation of strength by a straight, handsome male; the (mock) discharge at the moment of humiliation.<sup>9</sup> Most striking of all is the tube of Vaseline's duality: hard and resistant to the gaze, yet designed to emit an effluvial haze. The tube is a solid erection until used,<sup>10</sup> but the Vaseline that comes forth is both gas (like the fart or the rose's aroma) and thick white liquid (like sperm from a penis). It is the exemplary "ineffable" haze that springs into being around the most animate and the most *debased* objects in Genet's universe.

The Vaseline tube is granted a life so solid that it defies all the ordered moral universe, a universe that demands regularity, stiffness, straightforward order. Like the roses placed on a funeral pyre in order to counteract the "poverty and dryness" of the "remains," the Vaseline tube finds its most evanescent, its most memorable meaning in contrast to the stiffest, the "deadest" objects.<sup>11</sup> Negation (difference) is all, and abject grandeur is erected at the sites where the dry hardness of the universe seems most evident: An "elegant rose" of crystal appears in the configuration of three glasses carried by a brutal murderer (*FR* 142), the "metallic and pincering efficiency" of a sterile bureaucrat inspires Genet to erect his "gaseous text." A slit in the wall of a church or the hollowness of a religious statue is charged with the eros of its difference from the stable solidity of Catholicism; a

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soldier's buttocks glow softly "as rich as misty fog whose matter had the luster of pearl" only when he suddenly slides off the stiff pants of his Nazi uniform (*FR* 71).

But this tube of Vaseline, resisting the hardened gaze of the police, becomes animated by more than its *straightforward* identity as a site of opposition. It produces both a gassy fart and a viscous smear that endows it with the curious power all Genet's most beloved objects have: It pulls away from and reenters the system simultaneously.

Now as I write, I muse on my lovers. I would like them to be smeared with vaseline, with that soft slightly mentholated substance; I would like their muscles to bathe in that delicate transparency without which their dearest attributes are less lovely. (*TJ* 18)

This Vaseline is sunken into itself as far as an object can be—drawn into the system as a site of negation that all morality must abhor. Yet it is expansive, ready to smear all around it the haze that confuses, blurs, effluviates, and so *reincorporates* the object into a system dependent on just such departures. This is the crux of Genet's idea: Haze couples (copulates) with the tube's reduced solidity to produce a glowing object redolent of beauty, of sex, of saintly grandeur. The tube of Vaseline is emblematic of the elegance and excess that cohere around the sites that are both most abased and most blessed.

Jacques Derrida describes this moment of simultaneous detachment and attachment with illuminating (if not quite lucid) expansiveness:

Detachments of the sign. . . . That the sign is detached signifies of course that it is cut away from its place of emission or its natural belonging; but the separation is never perfect, the difference never consummated. The bleeding detachment is also—repetition—delegation, mandate, delay, relay. Adherence. The detached remain(s) collared thereby (par la) by the (par la) glue of difference, by the a (par l'a). The a of gl agglutinates the attached differentiae. The scaffold of the A is gluing. (167)

Derrida perfectly evokes the sense of rubbery adherence in objects that seem poised to escape their mortal systems: Whatever is leaving the system is also always returning to that system. Indeed, the act of *leaving* itself can reinforce the stability of the system. The gases and heavy white substances that surround Genet's key objects (Derrida enumerates elsewhere: "Sperm, saliva, glair, curdled drool, tears of milk, gel of vomit—all these heavy and white substances are going to glide into one another, be agglutinated, agglomerated, stretched out [on]to the edge of all the figures and pass

through all the canals" [139]) perform the role of *gluing* as well as blurring the edges of newly freed objects.

The simultaneous obscurity and "agglutination" that these hazes bring is not incidental but *essential* to all three of Genet's chosen objects. The rose in use becomes aroma: When passing action leaves a (metaphorical) glowing trace behind it in midair, Genet calls that a rose's "flowering" as well. The penis in "coming" (to life as an object) produces an obscuring glaze that marks the wounded site of its escape from the earthly economy. A tube of Vaseline disappears in a cloud of its own lubrication, and a fart is all effluvia.

Derrida points out that in Genet, the rose, more than any other object (except a fart), comes into full being by volatilizing and consuming itself:

The essence of the rose is its nonessence; its odor insofar as it evaporates. . . . The remain(s) remain(s) not. Whence its interest, its lack of interest. How could ontology lay hold of a fart? It can always put its hand on whatever remains in the john but never on the whiffs let out by roses. (58)

The rose both claims this ineffability and withdraws that claim at the moment of decision. Even when roses stand for seeming historical markers—the stain of Joan of Arc's period on the white shift she is burned in: "a rusty rose pinned at cunt level") or sexual genealogies ("a Spanish whore who wore a rose at cunt level, to replace the one she'd lost"), or for "the flowerings of Hitler's nightmares"—they leave a solid trace (very like what Derrida calls the "gassy text" of Genet's own writing): a corpse, a sexual cash-nexus, a concentration camp. But alongside that solid trace, there is always an added "ineffability" as well, one that works either by asserting its metaphoricality by time-honored historical association, or by standing in stark contrast to the dry, worldly, *useful* remains that surround it. This sense of negative space is part of Genet's remarkable sense of certain objects' peculiar animation. The dry faggots piled around Joan's feet make the last legible trace of her blood—poised for an impossible sexuality—a haunt of the literary rose, and a midair reminder of ineffable fecundity found only in her death and disappearance.

### CUTTING REJOINDERS

But what of the moment after flowering? What do these objects stand for in repose? The penis—the rose, the fart, and the Vaseline as well, but the penis most notably—disappears in use: Emission immediately produces collapse. Drooping and spent, the rose or penis has done its job, and returned

to a merely systematic identity. It does so by becoming, as Derrida puts it, "remain(s)." The corpse, the shit, the drooping body of a rose, the drooping wand of a former thyrus, the empty tube of Vaseline are all markers of a lost life. The "essence" of action (shitting, blooming, coming, greasing) has distinctly, but only just, departed. So the glory attached to all these objects is that of *abjection*—they are spurned, they are debased little relics of greatness. But because they are both *associated with* that greatness, and are its *opposite* (the remains, the leftovers), they have a special sort of abject grandeur.

They return immediately to flatness, but not without a fuss. The reintegration is complete, but it leaves at the place it occurs a palpable trace of bygone animation. To understand that process of marking, which makes the Genetian object a remarkable literary innovation, we need to follow the act of detachment-reintegration with scrupulous attention. The ejaculation, or the fart, or the rose, or the glowing Vaseline, calls down attention to itself not merely by proclaiming but by *enacting* its distinction from its surroundings. These moments of animation are precisely sites of cutting: The miracle in *The Miracle of the Rose* is an orgasmic moment of severing the head of a crotch-level rose on the body of Harcamone—and the coupage of flowers and penises throughout is cognate with their moments of glory. In each case, most revealingly, the moment of "coming/cutting" is when the quality Genet wants to write about—the erection, the rose aroma, the smell of the fart—is cut from the "remain(s)" that stand for the deadly solidity of the system (the corpse, dryness, poverty, efficiency, exchange-value). So the haze (the come, the aroma, the glue) in a final brilliance comes to stand as a glistening marker of an incision, a bleeding residue that marks painful (or exciting) removal at exactly the same time that it marks the collapse and reintegration of the sign.

The sign's stab at establishing its difference from other signs in the system becomes, through the aesthetic imposition of this haze, an affirmation not of difference but of Derrida's "differance." That is, what seems at first intended to mark a gap greater than the gap between two "ordinary" objects (or signs in the lingual system), a gap that escapes systematization, instead turns into a representation of the very sort of "gapping" that must occur within the system of language for meaning to function at all. The very gesture of removal that gives objects their allure is at the same moment a gesture of reincorporation: *only in partition reunion*.

It is through this abject conjunction, through these cutting rejoinders, that we can fully comprehend a central trope of Genet's novels: the attachment of one man to another expressed in his decision to "lower" himself into abject worship of the other's penis. At first glance this seems to imply

quintessential difference: a power imbalance that puts one into elevated life while the other deprives himself of life and autonomy. However, the very difference that the penis, unmoored like the tube of phenobarbitol, wants to claim—a difference that would glorify its possessor while humiliating the one who had to acknowledge his separation—turns, in its moment of climax, to a metonymic general glory. “The only homosexual in this story is me,” writes Genet at one point, but sex in his work is truly more generalized than that (“The Penal Colony,” *SW* 335). The ejaculation of the penis unmoors it from the world, but includes both penis and worshipper in a haze of bliss. The surroundings of the unmoored object receive the outpouring of haze, effluvium, or come that the site of incision and reinclusion produces. Thus what Derrida calls the “antherection” is the site of both castration and coming: cutting the penis off and regluing it with the agglutinated come of difference. What is dissevered is also agglutinated by difference.

If this way of figuring separation as agglutination works as a philosophical insight, the accomplishment rests on the way Genet has managed to bridge a different sort of systematic difference: He has posed—or resolved—a philosophical problem *aesthetically*. The tangible qualities of the objects that become Genet’s focus are represented aesthetically in the moments of soft haziness that exactly figure a dilemma—or perhaps a solution—founded on difference. That is, Genet has discovered through the work of art a way to represent objects that climb clear of their merely systematic difference, as well as a way to represent the dangers and the allures of that claim to ultimate thing-in-itselfness. But he has also found a way to represent their necessary failure as a contradictory affirmation *both* of the object’s successful separation from the world *and* of that gloriously coming object’s simultaneous relapse into a system of meaning, which always leaves around the residual edges of the resealed cut these glowing hazy traces (call them genealogy, or even history)—the lucid obscurity, the legible illegibility of the system’s continued difference within and from itself.

### AESTHETIC RADICALISM, POLITICAL EVIL

The aesthetic and philosophical accomplishments of Genet’s work have deeper implications than appear at first glance. The embrace of abjection—of humiliation that is also attachment to the power that spurns one—is the site of both escape from and reunion with the language game. But we ought also ask under what conditions the “abjection” and the “glorious superfluity” that Genet praises so highly can come into being. Power, in fact, appeals to Genet not only when it is debased, but whenever it is deployed.

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The abjection or humiliation that power undergoes in Genet's novels is above all a sign of power's splendid excess, the realization that power has power to waste, and can afford to undergo humiliation. How does that realization about the politics of Genet's aesthetics reflect back on Genet's model of hazy difference and reintegration?

Genet's praise of abjection valorizes abasement, but at the same time it glamorizes the condition of having an elevation from which to fall. The moments of greatest abjection in Genet come through encounters with "real"—which is to say politically valorized and institutionally supported—objects. The prosecuting policemen who surround the tube of Vaseline are handsome, the prison guards are beautiful, the Nazis are well armed and tragically arrogant: Of their guns, their uniforms, their badges, the same thing can be said. These objects—just like the systematically animate objects that stand for humiliation and evanescence—are able to stand apart, to cut themselves aloof. The gun of an errant Nazi or the badge of a policeman getting a blowjob from a thief is memorable because its splendor, its uselessness, lies all on the periphery of its "real" identity. Because it is marginal and yet the property of a "real" system (a powerful state), the policeman's penis gets to erect itself everywhere, at both boundary and center. The only caveat is that its glorious, its useless erection, is visible only at a boundary state between two entities. The penis of the strong man lowering himself to gay sex is both part of the armor of the strong and the point of entry of the weak: It must *lie between*, even as it *rises above*.

This simultaneous movement of abjection and elevation is captured perfectly in the assertion that "My courage consisted in destroying all the usual reasons for living and discovering others" (*TJ*28). It is this mixture of abasement and magnified glory that creates the *quivering*, or *oscillation* (the key words for the erotic in Genet), and that finds in the humiliation of *lowering* oneself before the world a figure for rising *above* it.

I no longer knew whether I dwelt in sumptuous destitution or whether my abjection was magnificent. Finally, little by little the idea of humiliation detached itself from what conditioned it; the cables connecting it with these ideal gildings were broken—gildings that justified it in the eyes of the world, in my eyes of flesh—almost excusing it—and it remained alone, by itself alone a reason for being, itself its only necessity and itself its only end. (*TJ*79)

The central importance of *negating* moral values never escapes Genet: His pride in abjection and his valorization of betrayal depend on their status as the supreme instances of moral transgression. "Caught between shame and shameful" (as Eve Sedgwick says of male heterosexual self-pity [139]),

the gesture of abjection or of betrayal turns its back on the norms of the word. Yet even here we are not spared the sentimentality of existential egotism, the desire to have it both ways. In that gesture of rebellion, abjection also generates a *laudable* isolation: It gathers to itself the solitary pride that belongs at the heart of that well-ordered world's grandeur.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the claim made by the traitor or the humiliated outcast is essentially *identical* to that made by an object that strives to separate itself from the world without acknowledging that such separation only places it more securely *within* the system it pretends to be leaving. Genet's work takes an inordinate pride in negating all the world's values: His life, too, was famously shaped by his taste for betrayal, and even for humiliation. Yet the pride and solitude his novels praise risk being nothing more than *recapitulations* of the system of virtue that the world has erected. If this is how the model of agglutinated differences is to be applied to human beings, there are serious problems. The inversion of opposites Genet preaches when, for example, he lauds the illicit love between a Frenchman and his dead lover's Nazi killer only glorifies the system he putatively escapes. If it is only by difference that the pleasure of resistance can be measured, only by the nature of the wall against which the shoulder is pushed that the substance of the work can be made known, then all putative human cutting-free seems to be capitulation: *in the moment of greatest separation, the moment of the greatest recuperation.*

Thus there is something fundamentally paradoxical about Genet's claim that by abasing himself in the face of overwhelming power a man (the gender is no accident) may turn the system of power on its head and discover a transcendent goodness in evil. In fact, that model of glorious abasement is the very sort of claim that his representation of Vaseline, roses, and penises had worked to *disprove*. The notion that a purely inverted relation to the world's good leads to an escape from its reckoning fails *politically* because it leads—in Genet at least—to a worship of power. But it also fails when measured against Genet's own ideas about the behavior of objects that are claiming some sort of free-standing transcendence for themselves. Genet loves the glorious refusal of an object to behave as it ought. But we have seen that he loves its surrender as well—the moments in which a sign's attempt to pull free of its place in the world is coupled with a hazy return to its remains. The power imbalance inherent in his depiction of French abasement before Nazis in *Funeral Rites*, however, suggests that his writing also assumes that a sign ought to possess some sort of *original* authority and power if it is to break free of its traditional confines. That is, Vaseline pales before the stored cultural charge in a Nazi's pistol.

Genet valorizes the weakness that comes from *abasement* before and *theft* of the powerful phallus (the strong laid low, or simply the strong success-

fully laid). But his praise of that abasement needs to be stringently examined, as does Genet's claim that his pleasure comes simply from the humiliation he has undergone. In light of his general disdain for all those without the power to work the system—most notably women and *ugly* people, but children as well—we need to ask why the gift of sexuality (perverted, depraved, inverted) is bestowed only on those moments of abasement that are attached to the strongest, the most powerful, and the most evil of men.

Eve Sedgwick's discussion of tears and heterosexual male sentimentality triggers a rich line of inquiry:

The sacred tears of the heterosexual man: rare and precious liquor whose properties, we are led to believe, are rivaled only by the lacrimae Christi whose secretion is such a specialty of religious kitsch. What claim, compared to this chrism of the gratuitous, can reside in the all too predictable tears of women, of gay men, of people with something to cry about? (146)

She astutely quotes Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Of what account is the pity of those who suffer! . . . (But) a man who is by nature a master—when such a man has pity, well! that pity has value!" (146). This is Sedgwick's "chrism of the gratuitous," the shameful glory of the spectacularly useless gesture. In Genet, this is the glory of the phallus possessed and useless, flowering and spent. The political context is different, but Sedgwick too posits that abasing the powerful has to do with the spacious (and perhaps specious) freedom those with power feel when they choose to deploy that power—even if they deploy it precisely by wasting it or throwing it into useless glory. They have sacrificed their masculine vigor for superfluity. But only because they first possessed it in order to relinquish it does the moment have elegance, beauty, or glory.

This *existentialism of the powerful* manages to reposition Genet himself, writer and thief, within the ranks of the powerful.<sup>13</sup> He too has beauty, the beauty of relinquishment, of abasement, the beauty of the noble and abject betrayer. Genet apologizes in *Funeral Rites* for making the depraved beautiful in order to give himself the heart to continue, but his apology does not go far enough. He cannot exclude from his work an infatuation with the act of relinquishment by the *powerful*—an infatuation that oozes out (clouds, hazes, farts, effluviates) onto the powerful person in full erection as much as it oozes onto that person after glorious (existential) relinquishment of power/beauty. His claim that beauty only works as an obscure aid to his true worship of perversity is disingenuous. The ooze of the sign's meaning here incorporates as well a powerful attachment to the powerful: *abjection only from the greatest heights*.

This deployment of power/abasement is visible in its full glory in this description of a young Nazi:

He was famous, young, handsome, rich, intelligent, loving, and loved. . . . The sufferings of that exceptional being could therefore have had only a noble source. His sufferings were of metaphysical origin. (FR 193)

Though the tone may be ironic, here and throughout Genet it is a strong handsome male's "sufferings" that we hear about. The problems and perversities would not interest Genet (wouldn't contain enough "potential energy") if they did not belong to someone who stood at the top of a supportive social, political, aesthetic, and ideological framework that applauded him at every turn. Anybody deprived of any one of the "ingredients" for happiness listed cannot help but be defined by that particular lack. Only those at the top of the heap are properly allowed to fling themselves to the bottom in a grand gesture.

### SINKING TO NEW HEIGHTS

Genet advances apologizing for his power worship, but still faintly hinting that this congruence of power and humiliation is the site of all great accomplishments. True, there are fascinating moments of vacillation, in which those who could choose to retain their power and their beauty turn away instead. But even these gestures of renunciation are fatally tainted. While Genet pretends to support only perversion, he remains obsessed with the power stored in the highest reaches of the power structure. His claim that he chose the French collaborationist militia and the young Nazis in France to people *Funeral Games* because they were the perpetual betrayers, hated universally for their decision to defy old moral codes, is bogus. In fact the militia, like the Nazis Genet writes about (he also writes about Hitler himself, hardly a rebel in the conventional sense of the term), were supported by an extremely powerful framework of authority—a *suprasocial* net.

Genet's notion of beauty and glory is so closely allied to the conventional bases of power that finally only Nazis, perhaps even only Hitler, can be properly centered enough for their marginalization to make waves. In making his heroes members of the militia and Nazis, Genet chose to pass in silence over the weak (womanly) figures of Gypsies, Jews, and homosexuals in Germany, hounded and then herded into groveling masses (bereft of manly beauty). This is a feeble capitulation to the very ordered system from which he claims that perversion can somehow lift him free. His ostensible sympathy for Lee Harvey Oswald notwithstanding (SW 450), what's revealed

in his attachment to power, and doubly reinforced by the way in which glory (in the moment of Nazi ejaculation, for instance) spills not only onto the perverse but also onto those who retain their hold on power (come comes on the soldier and the convict alike), is a political agenda at profound odds with Genet's professed left-wing radicalism.<sup>14</sup>

This reading of Genet may seem overeager. Genet may indeed be doing nothing more than mapping where sexual or aesthetic attraction lies, justifiably fixing on concatenations of power because it is there that objects glow most alluringly. It might even be argued that objects are never more seductive than the glowing power they contain: Witness the cachet of peeping into the private lives of the rich and famous on television. One might say that Genet represents (*presciently* even) an aesthetic viewpoint that is ever more evident in our own media-dominated society. The sites of power create the glamour that television, books, and magazines eagerly distribute around our society. As mass communications become increasingly sophisticated, our conception of power will increasingly be formed through the aesthetic appreciation of the icons that embody power.<sup>15</sup>

But even if this paper's task is merely to describe such an aesthetic, it is still worth pointing out that the epistemology of animate objects devised by Genet *himself* serves in some ways as a criticism of his politics. Genet's depiction of his prize objects as both desirous of freedom and tied irremediably to the world ought to inform all our thinking about what sort of life any autonomous object—or human being—may claim to have. Since we have seen in his work that the claim to rise above and negate the system returns (with a visible/illegible scar) to an assertion of the various differences built into system of language, Genet may instruct us on the duality inherent in being human. To be an object—or a *person*—within the system of human meaning making is to realize that attempts to climb clear of one's systems are inevitable, even attractive, but are also the very sites at which the reincorporation that defines language will take place. Genet reminds us—and ought to remind himself—that meaning is erected in the places language slips, cuts, and scars, and rebuilt where we strive to break away from it. Any claim to define all knowledge from a top or a center outward will slip on the erection and excision of meaning at multiple sites across the ceaseless system.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One might say that such objects lack *interiority*: no aspect of them escapes their initial, taxonomic locus. In our postromantic episteme, human beings categorically preserve interiority and resist the full implementation of an unfetish-

ized (a means-driven, rather than an ends-sensitive) economy of meaning. Even when all human beings are theoretically credited with unfathomability, however, it is fairly easy to point to ways in which we assume not others' volition but their unproblematic *predictability*: The science of statistics, for example, is an attempt to account exactly for, if not quite to instrumentalize, strangers.

<sup>2</sup> The model here is Saussure's system of linguistics, with its notion of necessary separation between signifiers as the basis for all linguistic production. Levi-Strauss expands this conception convincingly to cultural studies: In *The Savage Mind*, he argues that societies structure their social rules, and even their epistemological perceptions, by oppositions between homologous and heterogeneous objects.

<sup>3</sup> My argument here is comparable to William James's pragmatism: Any fact is held to be true as long as it holds, but *any* fact can be undermined. All objects function as components of a systematic cosmos of meaning; all differences are contained within the system—until the moment when they aren't (James). This paper argues that all objects can be inanimate, but any object is capable of filling out, of detaching itself from the walls of the world: The trick lies both in discovering *when* objects become significant and in assessing how a text works to reintegrate to the world an object that has taken on an extrasystematic life.

<sup>4</sup> To Kleist, marionettes contain an excess, a suprahuman mobility that commands our awe. Less and more can be indistinguishable in this situation.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in *The Gold Rush*, the way that a rifle barrel swung round wildly in a struggle unerringly follows Charlie in his frantic attempts to escape it.

<sup>6</sup> This passage foreshadows Genet: "bits and pieces" are connected by an integument that registers the difference between narrating mind and narrated world, and yet the text simultaneously attempts to *cloak* that difference with a *mist*.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin's discussion of the aura, by contrast to both Lukács and Adorno, strives to rescue for modernity a conception of the glow associated with *particular* objects for *particular* audiences. His attempt at once to rescue the object "from the burden of being useful" and to return its uselessness to a world of real social values by virtue of an obscuring "aura" is, along with Woolf's "mist," a true predecessor (if not quite a precedent) for Genet's notion of the *haze* associated with an object's departure from and reentry to the system.

<sup>8</sup> The marginal fourth object is the fart, the importance of which in Genet's novels rivals its place in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1.1.109–110).

<sup>9</sup> "The signature of homosexuality is this: A refusal to continue the world . . . the bitter need to mock virility" (letter to Sartre, SW 440).

<sup>10</sup> Compare another demiglorified demiphallus: "a tube of phenobarbital lying on a small painted wooden frigate is enough to detach the room from the stone block of the building, to suspend it like a cage from heaven and earth" (*OLF* 79).

<sup>11</sup> *Thief's Journal* figures perfectly the way that power depends on displacement and negative space—not on what is present but what has been *cut off*: "When a limb has been removed, the remaining one is said to grow stronger. I had hoped that the vigor of the arm which Stiltano had lost might be concentrated in his penis" (19).

## TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

<sup>12</sup> Solitude is not the only appeal: Genet also conceives of homosexuality, he tells Sartre in a 1952 letter, as a mimesis of death. Not death "in fact achieved"; instead, he wants aesthetically to "activate these funereal themes in the imagination, and to accomplish them in an act: the poem." But death in the poem, or the novel, is a movement toward solitude as well: "suicide, murder, theft . . . all capable of giving me a death that if it isn't real is at least symbolic or social—prison" (SW 440).

<sup>13</sup> One might even argue that all existentialism suffers from this overinflated sense of its autonomy. Existentialism deliberately suppresses its awareness of the power relations that must be in place to allow "individual free choice." As Arendt warns, existentialism can even substitute for an awareness of real social relations a hypothetical "Over-self."

The Self is the concept of Man according to which he can exist independently of humanity and need represent no one but himself—his own nothingness. . . . Heidegger has therefore attempted in later lectures to bring in, by way of afterthought, such mythologizing confusions as Folk and Earth as a social foundation for his isolated selves. (51)

<sup>14</sup> *Prisoner of Love*, a posthumously published memoir of time spent with the Black Panthers and PLO fighters, is as I have argued elsewhere a fascinating departure for Genet. In it, he proposes what I call "solipsistic solidarity": His alliance with the PLO is based on a personal, a selfish, and ultimately individuated desire to be with those whose whole lives are a pointed negation of his own culture's values. The investment in describing the real lives of those he travels with, however, makes them into more than mere agents for his own gesture of noble renunciation of the imperial West. Even as he vehemently denies that the fighters he travels with can appreciate their own singing as well as he can, doubt begins to creep in: "If such elusive sensations are perceptible to organs other than mine, perhaps what I took to be my own exclusive knowledge is available to everyone, and I have no secret life" (41). And by the memoir's end his own impending death has, ironically, sparked a sort of self-centered investment in other's lives. He maintains his claim to purely solitary pleasure, but now conceives of that pleasure as generally available to those whose minds he can imagine in concord with his own:

Wonder at the sight of a cornflower, of a rock, at the touch of a rough hand—all the millions of emotions of which I'm made—they won't disappear even though I shall. More and more I believe I exist in order to be the terrain and proof which show other men that life consists in the uninterrupted emotions flowing through all creation. The happiness my hand knows in a boy's hair will be known by another, is already known. (314)

Earlier, Genet had written that for a long time he remained jealous that sex could take place without him. Now, however, even life is allowed to proceed without Genet. In a sense, Genet's own selfishness has driven him to renounce his selfishness. He lives to be terrain and proof—but proof of a world that only exists inasmuch as it flows through the feelings of individuals other than himself. With this admission, Genet renounces his implacably confrontational attachments to

sources of power. Genet now calls himself a "prisoner of love" (188) because he can imagine meeting alien minds on a footing of equality and shared sensation, rather than in a binary of mastery and servitude.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Williams observes tellingly that modern Western citizens now witness hundreds of times as many "aesthetic events" (a category that ranges from ritual sacrifices to sitcoms) than members of any prior society. The amount of time we spend watching what is labeled as mimetic spectacle can profoundly affect the balance we strike in our minds between the aesthetic and the political, the theological, the ethical, etc. Time spent with an object, even if that time involves nothing more than dumb watching, shapes our forms of perception *regardless* of our attitude toward the specific semantic content of what we see.

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