

Autobiographical self-enunciation in Genet's *The Thief's Journal*

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Abstract

In this paper, I suggest Genet defiantly evades attempts at subjectification through confession, which is central to criminal discourse, Christian theology, penal reforms and autobiography as a genre. Genet teases the reader by invoking certain features of the genre only to gesture towards his subverting them. I explore the way in which Genet seeks certain amount of autonomy as homosexual French-outlaw authoring himself.

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Introduction

The Thief's Journal (1949) is Jean Genet's most autobiographical work describing experiences of his early twenties – his adventures in various prisons across the continent, in outlaws' ghettos, thieving, prostituting and reveling in exhilarating homosexual love relations. Although *The Thief's Journal* dwells on many incidents, characters and emotions that can be identified as that of its author, it resolutely defies the generic conventions of an autobiography or a journal. The identity between the author, the narrator and the protagonist, which Philip Lejeune regards as one of the defining features of the genre, cannot be succinctly established.

Genet's refusal to follow the generic codes is symptomatic of his greater resistance to structural regulation by the state and the society in its various manifestations. In the paper, I suggest Genet defiantly evades attempt at subjectification through confession, which is central to criminal discourse, Christian theology, penal reforms and autobiography as a genre. Genet teases the reader by invoking certain features of the genre only to gesture towards his subverting them. I explore the way in which Genet seeks certain amount of autonomy as homosexual French-outlaw authoring himself. Genet uses language to transform memory and to aestheticise his homosexual love and life of crime. His distinct use of language is central in establishing his difference from the bourgeois male/female reader of autobiography. He posits a self-referential world of betrayal, theft and homosexuality in opposition to that of the bourgeois reader.

The expectations of journal writing evoked by the title are systematically disrupted by Genet. Most of the events described in the text took place in Spain but incidents and anecdotes lived out in Antwerp, Paris, Marseilles, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Germany are also interspersed throughout the narrative. The chronology, which is one of the distinctive features of a journal, is largely absent. Writing in the late 1940's, Genet recounts the life lived between 1932 and 1940. Yet he constantly refers to his incidents of the late forties. The structure is loosely bound by 'the loves with which [he had] been preoccupied while writing about it'. (129) Moreover, Genet lost his notes for a

large part of the events and is recollecting mainly from memory.

Having lost a large part of this journal, I can no longer remember the words in which I recalled the adventure of Albert and D., which I witnessed, though without taking part in it". (*Journal*,137).

In the absence of the 'original' insights, he unabashedly reorganizes his experiences re-interpreting them in light of his latter-day subjective understanding. He categorically announces his motivations for reworking the past. He says, "I don't feel I have the heart to go into the whole story again, but a kind of respect for the tragic tone they gave their love makes it my duty to mention it". (137) His fidelity to certain bonds of beauty, abjection and morality can't be contested. What he remembers clearly of the incident, though, is that he 'was haunted for a long time by Albert's beauty'. He refuses to give a moral conclusion to the story which he might have given in the lost fragment. The refusal itself draws attention to the process involved in recounting past experiences and the moral agency that the author holds over those experiences.

Theorists of autobiography like Philip Lejeune and Nancy Miller point but the inherent tendency to 'lie' when representing one's own life. The 'autobiographical lie' arises on readjusting the 'facts' about oneself and the lack of objectivity in interpreting and then representing one's 'history'. Genet, on the other hand, points out the impossibility of recalling past 'states'.

If I attempt to recompose with words what my attitude was at the time, the reader will be no more taken in than I. We know that our language is incapable of recalling even the pale reflection of those bygone foreign states. The same would be true of this journal if it were to be the notation of what I was. (*Journal*, 63)

He is rather interested in reclaiming the past life for reflecting and structuring the present which can be creativity presented. He interprets his past to give it a sacred shape. The process of interpretation at work consistently draws attention towards itself and appears to be mythologizing of a myth.

I shall therefore make clear that it is meant to indicate what I am today, as I write it. It is not a quest of time gone by, but a work of art whose pretext-subject is my former life... Let the reader therefore understand that the facts were what they I say were, but the interpretation that I give them is what I am – how (*Journal*, 63).

Genet underlines the aestheticization (“a work of art”) involved in the process of self-presentation which is done through “interpretation” by him. It is significant that “the time” that stimulates these meditations is when Stilitano disappears deserting Jean. And later, struggling with memory of a “sublime and debased Stilitano”, he recognizes the difficulty of dwelling long on this period of his life. “My memory would like to forget it, would like to dim its contours, powder it with talcum, offer it a formula comparable to the milk bath which the elegants of the sixteenth century called *a bath of modesty*” (73).

The above quotations also point towards (dis)continuities between the author and the narrator Genet. The narrator is the literary thief Jean Genet, a plural and transformative character who features in the work of the author Genet. Loren Ringer points towards the duplicitous identity that surfaces not only in his autobiographical writing but interviews as well. He says, ‘for Genet, the question of truth in self-presentation strengthens the concept of a mutable, non-fixed identity or *identité aleatoire* whereby one fashion’s his/her own image which is then hiding another one’. Genet, in the *Journal* exemplifies this process but one identity doesn’t necessarily hide another and both are accepted as part of human nature. The announced and self-proclaimed unreliability questions the relationship between author and narrator while simultaneously rendering it unanswerable. The dispersal of identity of author/narrator also displaces authorial voice. Susan Marson in “The Empty Crypt: Autobiographical Identity in Genet’s *Journal du Voleur*” states that the ‘writer cannot be found at the centre of his ‘image’ but instead ‘appears in the space between them, in the mosaic formed by their juxtaposition’.

The narrator also distances himself from the protagonist, Jean by referring him in third person. “After many stays in jail, the thief left France. The reasons he went there are obscure.” (82). The distanciation here not only helps to bypass information but also suggests the impossibility of fixing those motivations to individuals. The continuous slippage of intention and actant points towards what Linda Anderson calls ‘multiple locations, both as contexts of reaching and positioning of the subject’. For post-structuralists, post Paul de-Man, “subject is totally divided, threatened by representation, forced to summon up rhetorically the ghosts of a self they can never hope to be”.

It’s not difficult to perceive that Genet is aware of the possibilities this dispersion of the subject offers him, to claim autonomy from the disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms of the penal system, bourgeois morality and normative sexuality. He does this by appropriating lyrical language conventions to glorify betrayal, theft and homosexuality, which are the purported subjects of the book.

Michel Foucault in ‘Discipline and Punish’ studies the reformatory at Mettray, France in the early nineteenth century. It is the reformatory where Genet was an inmate in

his teens. Foucault calls it ‘the model in which are concentrated all the coercive technologies of behavior’. Foucault indicates the processes of subjectification through surveillance and discipline which are practiced in the prison. The scopic mechanism, used by the authorities to observe the detainees, helps to keep them under check so that their behavior can be controlled. This mechanism also helps to individualize the detainee as his activities are carefully and singly observed. The disciplinary regime that the inmates are supposed to follow makes it easy to identify, classify and punish the offenders. It reinforces the validity and desirability of the punishment of those who deviate from the ‘normal’. Thus, the criminal is subjectified for observation and regulation.

Genet was not unaware of the mechanism in place in various prisons. Infact, he can be regarded as a product of such institutions, as Foucault observes.

Although it is true that prison punishes delinquency, delinquency is for the most part produced in and by an incarceration which ultimately, prison perpetuates in its turn. (*Discipline and Punish*, 301).

Genet, like other inmates called colonists in Mettray, was subject to rigorous discipline. He felt frustrated by the treatment.

I suffered there. I felt the cruel shame of having my head shaved, of being dressed in unspeakable clothes, of being confined in that vile place; I knew the contempt of the other colonists who were stronger or more malicious than I. (*Journal*, 156)

The effect produced on him is similar to what Foucault elaborates when he quotes from *L’Aumaneau populaire de France*,

The first desire that is born within him will be to learn from his cleverer seniors how to escape the rigours of the law; the first lesson will be derived from the strict logic of thieves who regard society as an enemy; the morality will be the informing and spying honoured in our prisons... Henceforth, he has broken with everything that has bound him to society. (*Discipline and Punish*, 267)

The shape that Genet gives this proposition is informed by the existential choice that he implies to have made. In response to the unjust and the rigorous discipline, Genet develops his own counter order.

The mechanism was somewhat as follows (I have used it since): To every charge brought against me, unjust though it be, from the bottom of my heart I shall answer yes. Hardly had I uttered the word or the phrase signifying it – than I felt within me the need to become what I had been accused of being. (*Journal*, 156)

To will and to become what the world accuses you to be is ‘heroic’. Sartre valorized Genet’s oppositional will in his mammoth introduction to *Oeuvres Complete* titled *Saint Genet*. Sartre viewed Genet as ‘enfant voleur’ – an innocent child who is caught stealing at the age of ten by his mean step

parents, internalizes their accusation and becomes the criminal he was destined to be. Sartre's reading has informed a great deal of criticism of Genet. Genet himself contributed to myth-making by intentionally blurring the lines of real/mythical and projecting a figure he wanted others to see in him. This has led subsequent biographers (Edmund White, for instance) and scholars to be suspect of his autobiographical works and other 'I' statements. Trying to segregate fact/fiction to find the 'real' Genet is bound to be defeated. And so is the Sartrean approach to view him as a product of his situation. Ringer asserts

Sartre's perspective robs Genet of his agency and therefore he is only the sum of what others think of him. Genet has internalized the other's gaze to such an extent that he then starts to watch himself, knowing that he is a thief and will steal again. (*Saint Genet*,)

Genet modified himself not according to the normative behavior desired by the disciplinary regime of the prison, which is endorsed by the bourgeoisie. He develops his own ethics and morality which are in strict opposition to the codes propagated by the other. Betrayal, theft, pride, abjection and homosexuality are the virtues that he abides by. Reflecting on these virtues, as they form an alternative theology with saintliness as the end, provides an understanding of the complex way in which Genet used the language to construct himself. The interplay of different subjectivities is foregrounded in the process. In a footnote, Genet informs the readers about his project in the journal.

The reader is informed that this report on my inner life or what it suggests will be only a song of love. To be exact, my life was the preparation for erotic adventures (not play) whose meaning I now wish to discover. Alas, heroism is what seems to me the most charged with amorous properties, and since there are no heroes except in our minds, they will therefore have to be created. So I have recourse to words. (*Journal*, 89)

Genet establishes the principles of his "lyricism" through which he transforms the mundane reality into majesty of symbolic representation (Tom Driver, 25). He attributes heroism where there is destitution, poverty and immorality as seen by the readers. Through words he conjures up a world of outlaws rendered desirable in body, assigned "heroic" deeds which are willed and justified and having tragic destinies. It is a moral world interpreted by "the apostle of inversion". He deliberately and willfully invests new meaning or gives an alternative meaning to words, objects and values that belong to the world of reading "other".

His loves are all enshrined as epitomes of beauty, embodying the virtues that he comes to love through them. At the centre of the work is Genet's troubled relationship with one-armed Serbian stud, Stilitano. The development of this relationship alone gives the sense of development of the protagonist Jean as he comes to terms with his own sexuality. Stilitano first appearance at a gambling house, where a beggar had just been killed in a brawl, is staged as "cosmic epiphany"

The dead man and the handsomest of humans seemed to me merged in the same golden dust amidst a throng of

sailors, soldiers, hoodlums and thieves from all parts of the world, the earth did not revolve: carrying Stilitano, it trembled about the sun. At the same time, I came to know death and love. (*Journal*, 34).

He describes how his memory reported the event in prosaic language. It is in recounting the feelings evoked by the events that he gives them cosmic dimensions. Genet makes it clear that Stilitano is more an abstraction of his mind. He says, 'I already knew that Stilitano was my own creation and that its destruction depended upon me.' (115). A heightened awareness of Stilitano's 'superb muscularity' compels him to describe his physique over and over in the text. His fixation with Stilitano's 'while, heavy blob of spit' is visualized in erotic terms.

It was therefore natural for me to imagine what his penis would be if he smeared it for any benefit with so fine a substance, with that precious cobweb, a tissue which I secretly called the veil of the palace. (*Journal*, 14)

Paul A Robinson regards Genet's "phallic obsession" and "intense desire to be sodomized" as the most revolutionary aspects of *The Thief's Journal*. The defining features of his lovers turn out to be their rump and penis. He fantasizes about Stilitano's "solid member, like a blackjack, capable of the most outrageous impudence" (19). 'All his brilliance, all his power, had their source between his legs. His penis, and that which completes it, the whole apparatus, was so beautiful that the only thing I call it is a generative organ' (21) His rump is 'more sinuous' than Java's, his companion while writing the journal. Marc Aubert has 'a member for which I would have given by life'. Armand himself 'would grow lyrical over his member'. His bravado about his cock inspires admiration in Genet. Walking at Lucien's side he muses that 'the only things I had ever owned were lovely pricks, whose roots are buried in black moss'.

There is a perceptible development in Genet's sexual identity that he projects and as he interprets it. In Stilitano, he seeks masculine potency with its sodomising promise. Stilitano is capable of treason and betrayal, the twin virtues that Genet regards as manifestations of great moral vigor and courage. Genet is 'proud of [Stilitano's] strength' as he was 'strong in his complicity with the police' (73). Along with Marc Aubert and others, Stilitano is indifferent 'to the rules of loyalty and rectitude' the 'sinuousness and multiplicity of their moral lines form an interlacing' which Genet calls adventure. It is significant that "rules" alluded to here belong to reader's moral world. Genet defiantly articulates his disdain: 'they depart from your rules, they are not faithful' (75).

Betrayal and homosexuality together become the most abject, self-denying and, thus, admirable attributes in a man. Inevitably, he is attracted to a man who is capable of betrayal, 'that he be able to break the bonds of love uniting him with mankind' (217). The "pursuit" of traitors and treason is one of form of eroticism. Genet claims that he has sought adventures whose 'heroes and details are erotic'. The French Gestapo, with which Lucien is associated, is the ultimate embodiment of treason and theft. Jean contemplates how "sparkling, unassailable" would homosexuality combined with the other virtues and would together be "set up as theological". From his fascination for betrayal through

Stilitano, his desire for Bernadini, the detective, his apprehensions on deserting Lucien and to the final betrayal of Armand, Jean's attitude towards homosexuality also underwent many modifications.

As Robinson notes that the clear division of "male and female, ravisher and ravaged, which had been his point of departure, gradually breaks down." To begin with Stilitano, Jean prefers the "toughs", heterosexual men belonging to the world of criminals. With Stilitano and his later muscle-bound analogue Java, Genet plays the effeminate, the "turtle-dove". It is significant to note that part of their attraction was in the fact that both the lovers 'took pleasure in betraying'. With Michaelis, the charming guitarist, Jean smiles with 'a slight cruelty' which he derives from memory of 'beautiful bird of prey, a miscreant of finest breed', Stilitano. Lucien, repeatedly referred as a child, makes Jean aware of his own masculinity. But soon, there is uneasiness with the new role, as Michaelis and Lucien are too soft. He yearns for "tougher, more dangerous and more tender body of a thief." Yet, he is anxious and troubled when contemplating betraying Lucien. "Shall I abandon him? Lucien would prevent me from living." And the only possible way out is "unless his quiet tenderness, his blushing modesty, became beneath my sun of love a tiger or a lion". (142)

Sartreans perceive a move towards "virilisation", which we have seen Jean is not quite comfortable with. Edmund White also acknowledges that Genet 'was a romantic by nature and more in search of love than sexual release'. He was regarded as a "high-born lady" by his rough admirers. In an interview in old age, Genet asserted

I never lived out my sexuality in a pure state. It was always mixed with tenderness, perhaps it was just a brisk, cursory affection, but until the very end of my sexual life there was always – well, I never made love in a void, I mean, without a bit of human feeling. For me it was a matter of individuals, of guys, of individuals, but not of roles.

Textually, though, there is a movement from the "turtle dove" to "tiger or lion". It is only in the case of Armand 'whose power issued from happiness, from abjection' that Jean feels justified in deception. It is in acknowledgement of Armand's "kindness", "tenderness", "moral elegance" and his own growing love for Armand that Jean finds the beauty and bravery in betraying. This treachery is also motivated by selfishness and seduction of Stilitano. The strength of the adversary also determines the purity of oppositional ethics keenly felt. For Genet, homosexuality, like theft, is a 'choice' through which he could irritate established societal virtues.

Abandoned by my family, I already felt it natural to aggravate this condition by preference for boys, and this preference by theft, and theft by crime or a complacent attitude in regard to crime. I thus, resolutely rejected a world which had rejected me.

Similarly, stealing determines a moral attitude which cannot be achieved without effort, 'it is a heroic act'. It requires the strength necessary for departing from conventional morality. Although Genet claims a smooth concordance of

homosexuality and crime, the two subjective selves—Genet, the thief and Genet, the homosexual—do not always exist in harmonious relationship resisting the conventional morality and disciplinary regime. There is an obvious preference for the criminal subculture determined by his choice for heterosexual rogues. The most disturbing aspect, which the subsequent gay activists have never been able to reconcile with, is the assaults on homosexuals, rolling queers. These attacks on vulnerable bourgeois middle-aged or old men, Robinson remarks, are justified by Genet by implying that class opposition took precedence over sexual identification. By stylizing abjection, betrayal, homosexuality and theft as sacred virtues despised by the institutionalized bourgeoisie, Genet stages the complex processes in subjectification of an individual in the criminal subculture. It is in response to the disciplinary gaze that Genet determines to prove his guilt. "The greater my guilt in your eyes, the more whole, the more totally assumed, the greater will be my freedom." The choice of genre allows him to stage this freedom. He presents his life as a legend, "the reading of it must give birth to a certain new emotion" which he calls "poetry".

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