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ROBERT HARVEY

Genet's Open Enemies: Sartre and Derrida

I'm looking for the total enemy. Someone with immeasurable and absolutely spontaneous hatred for me. A submissive enemy vanquished by me before he had a chance to get to know me. Irreconcilable with me, in any event. No friends. Friendless, over all else: an open [*déclaré*] yet unscathed [*non déchiré*] enemy. Clean, without defects [*net, sans faille*]. Color? A soft green like a cherry of effervescent violet. Size? Look, let him approach me man to man. No friends. I'm searching for a weakening [*défaillant*] enemy, one who comes to capitulate. I'll give him everything I can: whacks, slaps, and kicks. I'll have starving foxes bite at him, I'll make him eat English food, attend sessions of Parliament, go to Buckingham Palace, fuck Prince Philip and be fucked by him . . . dress like me, sleep in my place, live in my boots. I'm looking for an open enemy.

—Jean Genet¹

During two long silent rifts that gape inexplicably in the otherwise prolific career of Jean Genet, first Jean-Paul Sartre, then Jacques Derrida—each with his own style—intervened to build textual monuments to the outlaw poet. Both thinkers had made Genet's acquaintance well before the publication of *Saint Genet* (1952)² and *Glas* (1974).³ From all accounts, Sartre, five years older than Genet, and Derrida, twenty years his junior, had grown quite close to him. *Saint Genet* and *Glas* are not mere stop-gap measures offered to the public by eminent admirers of an elusive figure and they are more than encomia to the rhetorical power of a latter-day *poète maudit*. When the writer we may consider the most marginal and outrageous of our time can say

1. Jean Genet. [untitled]. In *L'ennemi déclaré. Textes et entretiens*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 6 (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 9.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1963).

3. Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1974, 1995), *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). Page references to the English translations of *Glas* and all other texts cited will be followed by references in brackets to the original French.

that the two most prominent philosophers in his cultural sphere have each published studies on him so imposing as to be valued as sacraments, something has occurred that must give us pause. In addition to being milestones in this century's unflagging intercourse between philosophy and literature, *Saint Genet* and *Glas* constitute complex intimate communicational matrices that the *humans* behind their authorial labels destined for the *human* behind their object of study.

To write on a living contemporary necessarily means writing for that individual. And to write for someone (especially one, as Genet was by Sartre and Derrida, considered a friend) means ensuring that the words are fashioned as to be directed to that person. This implicit appeal to be read by the person one writes on is *a fortiori* a gesture signaling the wish to be loved. Although paragons of antagonistic tendencies in twentieth-century thought, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida have nevertheless shared that one wish. Even if they held it at separate times, during halts in Genet's production that seemed definitive, that common wish was to become Genet's "open enemy" as Genet himself put it. One of my purposes in these pages will be to suggest what the situation of being Genet's open enemy might be for Sartre and Derrida. To reread *Saint Genet* and *Glas* today, that is, with the whole of Genet's work as a backdrop, is to appreciate how precisely Genet's two most illustrious (and industrious) commentators assimilated the implacable logic he had invented for his own personal (sexual) use.⁴ As Genet ended up doing each time he set out to plumb his poetic imagination, Sartre, and Derrida in turn, would create for Genet—but even more importantly for themselves—an object of devotion called "Genet," a sort of writerly fetish for whatever a "real" Genet might have been, a textual *ersatz* that would serve as Sartre's and Derrida's "captive lover."

What is the point in attempting some incongruous reconciliation between existentialism (or "Sartriism") and deconstruction (or "Derridism")? None. Not even over Genet's dead body could *that* cross-

4. Other revered, shorter studies are by Georges Bataille and Lucien Goldmann. Georges Bataille, "L'échec de Genet," in *La littérature et le mal*, (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. 9. (Paris: Gallimard, 1979): 305–07; "Genet et l'étude de Sartre sur lui," in "Jean-Paul Sartre et l'impossible révolte de Jean Genet," *Critique* 65/66 (1952): 819–32, 946–61. Lucien Goldmann, *Structures mentales et création culturelle* (Paris: 10/18 [Anthropos], 1970):267–302. Mention should also be made of the celebrated statement by Hélène Cixous that, in her opinion, the only three modern French authors writing in the feminine mode are Colette, Duras, and Genet. Hélène Cixous, "Le rire de la Méduse," *L'arc* 61 (1975): 39–54.

pollination take. Rather, I will argue that *Saint Genet* and *Glas* are much more interesting if considered, rather than inert monuments to their authors' mutual devotional fascination for Genet, as groping approximations of the open enemy "position" as it were. I have referenced Genet's "remains" because, if a meeting place between Sartre and Derrida *does* exist, it is on *that* body in the glory of its decomposition as they reconstructed it, before death, in the medium of commentary. I invite the reader to consider, for a moment, that *Saint Genet* and *Glas* are Sartre's and Derrida's readings principally of Genet's earlier works—preying upon a young corpus—that foreground a convergence heretofore intolerable to both Sartrean and Derridean gatekeepers.⁵ Intolerable as it might be, what might that convergence allow us to say, in general, about the intimate underpinnings of commentary? I would hypothesize that a game of seduction and counterseduction that Genet controls telegraphically by a linguistic manipulation inherent to his early writings, draws his two famous glossators into *con-verge-ence*. By *con-verge-ence* I mean, as can be plainly seen, to evoke Sartre's and Derrida's coming together in their mutual interest in androgyny. Throughout this reading, then, the bisexed inference you see in those first two imbedded words should be considered the key or *glue* of seduction. Further, I think it is time to consider openly what the little text Genet wrote in Tangier in 1970 seems to make obvious that he understood all along concerning his two "overwhelming" commentators: at bottom *Saint Genet* and *Glas* express the desire either to fuck Genet, be fucked by him, or both.

Anyone who has written on Genet knows that before pen is put to paper, *he* has already shown us how one writes and, especially, how one writes *on*. With scandalous rhetorical magic, Genet has the capacity to unleash the creatures of *our* imagination for their mad flights. He frees us to think what we usually silence. In *Saint Genet* and *Glas*, accordingly, Sartre and Derrida brashly entered territories they might easily have left unexplored had they not met Genet and come under his spell. One measure of the sea-change that Sartre underwent is the utter consternation into which *Saint Genet*—perhaps the first gay hagiography⁶—threw Genet's champion, Jean Cocteau. Reeling and unable to

5. "Guard" is the choice Leavey and Rand made in translating *gâfe*. Depending on context, "gatekeepers," "turnkeys," and "screw" are at least as suggestive (if not evocative of the notion of "keeping").

6. While it is perhaps understandable that in his recent tribute to the queer politics of Michel Foucault, David Halperin makes no mention of the arguably hagiographic

distinguish Sartre and Genet, Cocteau's journal registers the power of Genet's seductiveness, queered even further by the prism of Sartre's amorous commentary.⁷ As for Derrida, writing on Genet emboldened him to carry out a task that would, under all other circumstances, have been impossible. It was a critique that was no doubt painful even so. It consisted of exposing not only contradictions in Georges Bataille's rebuff of Genet but the fundamental blindness of this important Derridean forebear concerning his imagery. In thus releasing for public consumption their versions of "Genet" and thereby welcoming breakthroughs in their respective intellectual trajectories, Sartre and Derrida together become Genet's caressed, cherished couple linked, as vines climbing the Bacchic thyrus, in a sort of *affolement*: Darling and Divine.⁸

By literally eliminating Sartre from the body of *Glas*, by turning him into a mere allusion, Derrida redoubles Sartre's *virtual* presence everywhere. Christina Howells remarks that "What remained of a Rembrandt . . . ," the obscure text by Genet which, structurally at

impulse in *Glas*, I find it rather strange that he doesn't bother to acknowledge the obvious parallel between his title (and approach) and *Saint Genet*. See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

7. The mood of these entries from Cocteau's journal is telling. Halperin claims that, before Genet's 1964 interview with *Playboy*, nobody had asked Genet what he thought of Sartre's book (Halperin, 134–35). But when we read Cocteau, amid his contradictions, it is obvious that he had:

July 23, 1952. Santo Sospir. Finished Sartre's book. The last chapters sink into a disgusting mud. . . . By dint of thrusting filthy rags down his throat, he clogs the plumbing. I put the book down with a dreadful sense of discomfort. Who can swallow such a thing? . . . Slept little: Sartre's book the problem. Unbearable smell.

July 24. After all, is it Sartre's fault if Genet clogged the toilet by stuffing it with filthy rags?

August 14. Yes, it's true, Proust embarrasses and disgusts me, and not Sartre, in his terrible book on Genet. There is a clinician's high-mindedness in Sartre, a love of the subject he is dealing with, a directness. One is disgusted, alarmed but not embarrassed.

August 17. *To Genet.* I think Sartre is annoyed with what I wrote him . . . his book is more his own portrait than yours.

Jean Cocteau, *Le passé défini*. Edited and annotated by Pierre Chanel (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), *Past Tense*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Howard (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1987), 235; 263–64, 270. "July 24," my translation.

8. Genet, *Notre Dame des Fleurs* (Paris: L'Arbalète, 1948), *Our Lady of the Flowers*, trans. Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 74; 78.

least,⁹ gave Derrida the idea of pursuing with *Glas* a technique he had already experimented with in *Marges* (1972), "is clearly full of parodic allusions to the (Hegelian)/Sartrean notion of the universal singular, and verbal echoes of *Nausea* and *The Words*."¹⁰ François Laruelle has suggested that in following the "anthological" elaboration of values in Genet, Derrida returns to the ontological effects of that elaboration.¹¹ These are merely two examples of rhetorical and metaphysical effects with which Sartre had been highly concerned in *Saint Genet*. Ironically, these points of Sartrean contamination of Derrida occur through a transmission of authority and a gestural panoply characteristic of Genet's creatures. In beginning with "What remained of a Rembrandt . . ." and in brooding over the obscure poems entitled "le glas" and "le ciel" by Bataille (on whom Sartre had written an early essay), Derrida shows that, through Genet, he has been fecundated by the Sartrean thing.

Genet invented his ontogeny as poet in the eerily baroque prose of his prison writings. It is there that his imagination created the only world on which he could count absolutely: a capharnaum, a glory hole of miraculous transformations, a "Tavernacle" where "butcherboys are sometimes metamorphosed into princesses in flowing gowns" (*Notre Dame*, 228). Those gospels according to Saint Genet are the matrix not only of the œuvre to come but also that of the textual politics for which we now know him. Jean let the unfettered imagination of the prisoner take him to a tiny, dark domain that he could fill fully,¹² a foul-smelling hole in which he could envision and virtually fondle Divine and Darling (*Notre Dame*, 115 [87]), a carceral shithole where the long-lost mother, his old lady, could be reconstituted (*Miracle* 229–30 [253–54]), a place where, in a viscous fusion of opposites, shooting wad or hawking up and spitting gobs became anointments of the highest order. To a place where ugliness and bodily excretions may

9. From the title of Genet's short text, Derrida also derives the notion of *remainder*, so crucial to deconstruction in general and, specifically, to his reading of Genet's work.

10. Christina M. Howells, "Derrida and Sartre: Hegel's Death Knell," in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Derrida and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge [Continental Philosophy, 2], 1989), 180.

11. François Laruelle, "Le style di-phallique de Jacques Derrida," *Critique* 334 (1975): 320–39.

12. Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: Marc Barbezat-L'Arbalète, 1946); *Miracle of the Rose*, trans. Frechtman. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 204 [226].

miraculously appear as purer forms of beauty, it is no wonder that Sartre was lured: such reversals in the phenomenological domain fill *Being and Nothingness* where they demonstrate ontological claims. Little wonder that Derrida, whose entire enterprise critiques dialectical oppositional certainty by means of unassailable demonstrations that undecidability is the true essence of metaphysics, charts the ground rules for *Glas*, his *jeux de bordel* [bordello/border games] (Laruelle, 321), upon "ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes [what remained of a Rembrandt torn into small, very regular squares and rammed down/fucked in the shithole]," the title of Genet's double-columned text that appeared in *Tel Quel* in 1967.

* * *

It is just about in 1974 that, his health and harmony with his time fading, Sartre is succeeded by Derrida as premiere French philosopher. At that precise conjuncture, Derrida publishes a book—*Glas*—in which Sartre is virtually ignored. Yet *Glas* is a book largely devoted to the very same contemporary writer who had captivated Sartre in his heyday twenty-two years before. Derrida makes perfectly clear that he has no time for Sartre, no tolerance for the reckless speed with which Sartre appears to him to have torn through Genet's poetic language, no patience for his inaccuracy in quoting, for his messiness. Even assuming that existentialism is irrelevant to the evolution of deconstruction, to be the second philosopher (in so many generations) to embrace a renegade poet is to be in a remarkable position. Where one would most expect to find Derrida confronting Sartre as an incontrovertible forebear, he seems to have washed his hands of him. Yet by denuding, resurrecting, and enhancing the image of the Bacchic thyrsus (*Glas*, 247 [275])—Genet's emblem of the undecidable double sex, and the principle by which his imaginary world operates,—Derrida plunges in spite of himself into the crux of a question that had intensely preoccupied Sartre. Under Genet's tutelage, that preoccupation had become overdetermined in Sartre well before the world had ever heard of Derrida, let alone *Glas*. I have shown elsewhere that a *fantasm* of androgyny generated Sartre's description of a dramatic hand mutilation and resulting open wound in *The Age of Reason* as well as Sartre's exalted tale (in violet) of boyhood experiences at the movies with his

mother.¹³ An undecidable double sex was already Sartre's open secret at least since *Saint Genet*. A decade before the publication of *Glas*, he had honed that paradoxical sexual paradigm to stylistic perfection as this hallucinatory passage (interspersed with my commentary) from *The Words* attests:

I began my life as I shall no doubt end it: amidst books. [As we see later in this "autofiction," Sartre describes his project in terms of self-construction as book. What, we are compelled to ask, are a book's attributes!] Though I did not yet know how to read, I already revered those standing stones: upright or leaning over. . . . I felt that our family's prosperity depended on them. . . . I would touch them secretly to honor my hands with their dust, but I did not quite know what to do with them, and I was a daily witness of ceremonies whose meaning escaped me. [Here, Sartre's grandfather intervenes to demonstrate for him the proper handling of a book.] Hundreds of times I saw him get up from his chair with an absent-minded look, . . . leaf through [a volume] with a combined movement of his thumb and forefinger . . . then . . . open it sharply "to the right page," making it creak like a shoe. [In his zeal for the practical demonstration, grandfather Schweitzer's lesson initiates Poulou to the secret of the book's double undecidable sex.] At times, I would draw near to observe those boxes which slit open like oysters, and I would see the nudity of their inner organs, pale, fusty leaves, slightly bloated, covered with black veinlets, which drank ink and smelled of mushrooms.¹⁴

Derrida's discussion of Genet's imaginary concatenation of lilacs and cum follows immediately upon the first of three short, sharp, slashing asides aimed at Sartre through *Saint Genet*.¹⁵ Sartre's all-too-

13. For the first of these, see Robert Harvey, *Search for a Father: Sartre, Paternity and the Question of Ethics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), especially chapter 5, 110–11; for the second, see Harvey "Sartre/Cinema: Spectator/Art That Is Not One," *Cinema Journal* 30/3 (1991): 43–59.

14. Sartre, *Les mots*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), *The Words*, trans. Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1964), 40–41 [29–30].

15. In Derrida's voluminous writings, he has thus far written very little on Sartre. Christina Howells refers to these moments as "occasional [but] parricidal attacks on Sartre" (169). Juliette Simont, after considering both Sartre's and Derrida's approaches to Genet, concludes that Sartre is "too insistently expulsed" from *Glas*, thereby becoming *un spectre dialectique en revenance non maîtrisée* [a dialectical ghost whose haunting of the text cannot be mastered]" (137). Juliette Simont, "Bel effet d'où jaillissent les roses . . . (à propos du *Saint Genet* de Sartre et du *Glas* de Derrida)," *Les temps modernes* 510 [January 1989]: 113–37.

academic phenomenological ontology,¹⁶ Derrida implies, cannot apprehend "psychoanalysis" and "literature" properly, his "pre-Heideggerian misontology" and "vague Mallarméism" causes him to ignore poetry and rhetoric. Derrida attributes Sartre's failure to having "barely" (meant as litotes) missed the question of the flower (of rhetoric). Already in the structure of the flower a practical deconstruction of transcendence is at work. Thus *Glas* (and Derrida) will succeed where "existential psychoanalysis" failed because Derrida knows how to allow language to blossom and that is how style is recovered (*Glas* 14–15 [21–22]).

Of *Glas*, Bettina Knapp once wrote, rather dismissively, that the work "[should] be read only by those interested in Derrida's methodology."¹⁷ But the implicit dispute between Sartre and Derrida that I have rapidly limned goes well beyond a mere question of method. Theirs is primarily a difference that resurfaces concretely in terms not of Genet's style but of their own styles and even their habits of writing. We must think long and hard of Sartre, "the hyena with a stylograph," with quadrilled paper under hand at one end of this century's spectrum of writing technology, and, at the other, Derrida at his Mac. The one blackening reams of paper, constructing a dark and monstrous tomb; the other deploying a columnar hypertext where Genet's "I" serves as parasite, tattoo, or Judas with respect to Hegel whose figural language is, perhaps for the first time in the history of philosophy, highlighted and taken seriously (Laruelle, 326). By constructing a huge, intricate network for Genet's *je*, Derrida comes off looking quite "clean [and] without defects" as Genet would write of his ideal "open enemy" in the mock personal ad quoted epigrammatically. Sartre mastered and mounted his Spanish *genet* [jennet], as Cocteau no doubt sensed someone would when he referred to J.G. that way, while J.D. ("j'idée") tries out strategies for fusion with the object of his admiration by musing, for example, about the diuretic properties of *genêt* or *réséda des teinturiers* [dyer's weed], otherwise known as *herbe aux juifs* [Jews' grass]. By envisioning Genet as a mad botanist, Derrida is not far at all from Sartre who, in crediting Genet with creating himself from nothingness, reconstructs him as something of a do-it-yourself geneticist.

16. Cocteau wrote: "Sartre's book on Genet is a Sorbonne lecture" (*Passé défini*, 317).

17. Bettina Knapp, *Jean Genet*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 44. This is a reprint, with additional bibliographic material, of her *Jean Genet* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968).

If 1940 was the year that saw Sartre's philosophical discourse begin to shift from solipsism to solidarity, readers of *Saint Genet*, including Sartre himself, recognized the book as a watershed for personal contradictions whose lines of force had been patent in every text where sexuality surfaced. A maieutic Jean Genet was delivering a hidden Sartre to Sartre himself:

Genet's work confronted Sartre with his latent homosexuality and anal fixation. This thick book [*Saint Genet*] can be read as a protracted and stubborn defense against tendencies he secretly satiates by evoking them. He thus satisfies both his id, which takes pleasure [in the material], and his ego, which is repulsed by it.¹⁸

Although, in retrospect, one can perceive the Sartre of the undecidable sex in *Nausea*, *Being and Nothingness*, and elsewhere, defense mechanisms notwithstanding, Genet coaxes out a Sartre previously unimaginable. Overwhelming all readers in its path (not the least of which Genet), *Saint Genet* unleashes a Sartre not only favorably disposed to lyricism but fairly panting about poetic language at every page. This is a Sartre totally unlike the one who had, just a few years before, discredited existentialism's claim to understanding poetry with his *Baudelaire*. The haughty distance Sartre had taken from a Baudelaire reduced to pathetic narcissism, together with an understanding of poetry ideologically stunted by the polemical stance taken in *What Is Literature?* account for the bewildering distortions that flaw Sartre's 1947 study. Yet just as Sartre was writing *Baudelaire*, Genet was revealing to him what poetry (and sex) could be. At Genet's expense, *Saint Genet* served Sartre as a veritable writing cure and paved the way for his more nuanced (though, to my mind, less compelling) studies of Tintoretto and Mallarmé. Likewise for Derrida: adopting some not inaccurate cynicism as shorthand, it might be said that *Glas* is to Genet what Lacan's "Homage to Marguerite Duras" was to the author of *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*: a vast encomium, without doubt, but praise at the price of having known what the master teachers without the pupil's ever having "taken lessons."¹⁹

The off-handed dismissal of Sartre in *Glas*, together with the book's implicit promise to treat Genet with kid gloves (whereas *Saint Genet*

18. Josette Pacaly, *Sartre au miroir. Une lecture psychanalytique de ses écrits biographiques* (Paris: Librairie Klincksieck, 1980), 217.

19. See Jacques Lacan, "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein," *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 52 (December 1965): 7-15.

had manhandled him); the vociferous rebuttals of Sartreans to Derrida's rebuff: these are claims and gesticulations grounded in the assumption that Sartre's book, in aiming to make sense of one individual's fundamental choice, functions—of necessity—as totalitarian machine. Certainly for all Sartre's efforts at rhetorical analysis, his deeply-rooted Hegelianism spurs him to skim over much complexity in Genet's art. But *both* Sartre and Derrida are (to borrow an axiom from Genet) caught to a certain extent between the obligation instilled by our common apprenticeship of language to use "words heavy with precise ideas" and the desire to enjoy "banal, empty, hollow, and invisible expressions" (*Notre Dame*, 36). In this sense, would we not be equally justified in taxing Derrida for not seeing the bouquet for the flowers? And even for missing a few of the flowers for the style? No reconciliation, then, as I said before. But perhaps, after all, Sartre did not miss the anthological question embedded in Genet's early works. I would contend that this is precisely what perturbs Derrida to the point of jealously evicting Sartre from the textual space where he can be both vanquished by and irreconcilable with Genet: his open enemy.

The imposing girth of Sartre's "introduction" to Genet's *Œuvres complètes* and the stultifying effect that its publication had on Genet have been adequately discussed before.²⁰ What is seldom analyzed in depth is the manifold meaning transmitted by Sartre's title, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*. A Pandora's box, this title suggests mutability rather than the (trans)fixed identity usually associated with the Sartrean project. No need to pretend to compete with the Derridean florilegium: like those amorphous Japanese papers Proust immortalized, "*Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*" will expand, unexpectedly, into uncannily familiar shapes.

Sartre's Genet: a Proteus capable of assuming the roles of thief, stoolie, writer, high priestess, saint. Yes, Sartre attacks society by thrusting at it the very monster it created. However, the significance we should infer from the title might not be so much the vengeful destruction wreaked by Genet's role-playing but, rather, the triumphant *indifference* to being that Genet embodies. Nothing is less certain than the presumption that the creature referred to in Sartre's title is that twentieth-century writer so often compared to Villon and Sade. That equation is no more reliable than asserting too quickly that the

20. See, in particular, Jeffrey Mehlman, "Saint Genet: I as Another," in *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 167–86.

hand that wrote the first volume of *Jean Genet's "Complete Works"* is that of Jean Genet. As the book's subtitle hints, Saint Genet is the name of an actor who was martyred for his having played to the hilt a game of indifference about replacing the contents of the pronoun "I."

This title—"*Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*"—and nothing more alone promises the reader not a closed, unassailable sense of Genet's being, not a restoration of the one flower missing from the Genet bouquet, but rather a knot of paradoxes concerning identity in general. The name of Genet's doublet in Christian martyrology, "Saint Genet"—the Sartrean sign under which the *poète maudit* forges his destiny—conceals a veritable hagiographic labyrinth. Legend would have it that, while playing the role of a convert to Christianity before Diocletian, a mime named Gènes actually became infused with Christian faith. Intransigent before the Roman emperor's order to disavow his new beliefs, unmoved by torture, Genes was decapitated.

Secular historians cannot corroborate the existence of such an individual, at least not an actor in Rome. Things are more complicated. History has indeed recorded the story of a certain Genes who was an approximate contemporary of the patron saint of actors. But this documented Genes was martyred in Aries. Apparently this catechumen fled his functions in the *militia* during a wave of persecution either under Decius or Diocletian. Once caught, he was, as was customary, executed. A curious detail: having crossed the rather formidable Rhône by swimming during his attempted escape, Genes is thereafter invoked by persons in imminent danger of drowning.

Perhaps less than a theatrical paradigm, the legend of Saint Genes nonetheless came to inform several dramatic works, the most notable French example being Jean de Rotrou's 1646 play, *Le véritable Saint Genest*. If Sartre did not already know the play from extensive reading in his grandfather Schweitzer's library, his experience as a playwright, by the time he wrote on Jean Genet, as well as his intimacy with the Parisian theatrical milieu would have certainly familiarized him with the legend. Sartre's 1951 play, *The Devil and the Good Lord*, reveals an author deep in his study of Genet and preoccupied with the psychological paradoxes that actors confront while exercising their profession.

The successive metamorphoses that, according to Sartrean biofiction, define Jean Genet are predicated upon "twists" [*tourniquets*] similar to Hegel's *Aufhebung* but with more vigorous cumulative memory. On the basis of their phallic fallacy, though, Derrida will put Genet to work deflating both Hegelian and Sartrean models and substi-

tuting for them the image of the thyrsus (*Glas*, 27 [35]). Most pertinent, however, to my discussion of Sartre's title is that Sartre's *tourniquets* echo the evolution of the saint's legend and are applicable to the structure of Rotrou's play. The culminating section of *Le véritable Saint Genest* is a play-within-the-play during which Genest rejects paganism for Christianity. Rotrou's creature, Genest, must create the absent martyr, Adrien. The actor "creating" Genest—the actor *there* before the audience—has a double role to play. Before the mythic fear, generated by the legend, of losing one's identity, the actor who plays Rotrou's Genest playing Adrien is placed before a redoubled risk of falling into the abyss, of drowning in the vortex of identity.

The act of creation at the risk of death: this is how Sartre described human ambition to become *ens causa sui*. In the final pages of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's term for our impossible synthesis of the for-itself with the in-itself is *passion*: we are not only impassioned by the effort but by persevering at it, it causes our constant state of suffering.²¹ If there is a profession that lends itself well to this Calvary, it is acting. As Sartre argues as late as his *Family Idiot* (1970–1971) and shows as early as *The Devil and the Good Lord*, the actor (perhaps further purified by bastardy) survives a redoubled risk of death and is the best candidate for autogeny.

Judging from the material Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka assembled in *Un théâtre de situations*,²² it would appear that Sartre distills this argument from Diderot's reflections on acting. In *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1773–1778), Diderot affirms that the best actors know how to preserve themselves from falling into the trap into which Rotrou's Genest falls. According to Diderot, only the actor's *insensitivity* can preserve him not only from a lousy performance but from madness and death as well. Of the great actor, he writes: "I demand penetration and no sensitivity whatsoever."²³ Besides the aesthetic ideal of an "art enabling one to imitate everything" (*Paradoxe*, 127) that results from the conjunction of these two attributes, the actor's coolness shelters her/him from ontic indetermination. In the words of

21. Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943); *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 690–91. Cf. Harvey, *Search for a Father*, 6–8.

22. Sartre, *Un théâtre de situations*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (Paris: Gallimard, 1973); *Sartre on Theatre*, trans. Frank Jelinek (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

23. Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 127. Translation mine.

the "First"—the dialogue's dominant voice—"should he wish to cease being himself, how will he determine at what precise point he should place himself and stop?" (*Paradoxe*, 128). Indeed, once caught at his own game (*je/u*), the actor "loses his head . . . forgets himself" and the play "becomes torture for the spectator" (*Paradoxe*, 179–80). Were illusion not maintained, "the actor's condition would become the unhappiest of all conditions" (*Paradoxe*, 133). The slightest infraction against the conventions of distance would pull the actor down into depths where neither reputation nor identity can be saved from engulfment.²⁴

The "penetration"²⁵ proper to the actor whose manipulation of insensitivity contaminates spectators and the elaborate ceremonial proper to the writer whose manipulation of words contaminates readers: these are the revolutionary practices that Jean Genet taught Sartre and that inspire *Saint Genet*. We now know that in his zeal to explain, "his passion for knowing," Sartre turns these practices against his Saint-Just, penetrating the carapace of insensitivity protecting Jean Genet and nearly destroying him. Sartre believed that, such that he was invented in the book, the actor-martyr could preserve himself from total annihilation by maintaining firm control over the corrosive effects that his penetrating ceremonial harbors. In concocting this "Genet" who probably never did exist, Sartre ironically does not, as Derrida claimed, avoid the "anthological" question. That is, Sartre gives us a being who exists by the sheer grace of exploitative mastery over his own *lability*, the genetic metamorphic capacity of flowers.

* * *

Near the beginning of this essay, I suggested that if there were a common ground that could accommodate both "Sartrism" and "Derridism" it would be the body of Genet in the glory of its decomposition. Out of friendship—that noble sentiment whose attendant gestures, when amplified, may become so very suspicious—both Sartre and Derrida said what they believed Genet would have wanted them to say. Derrida showed that even before his death, Genet had already left us. But although "he is no longer there, . . . you live in his mausoleum or

24. I am indebted to the fine analysis of *Paradoxe sur le comédien* by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Diderot, le paradoxe et la mimésis," *Poétique* 43 (1980), 269.

25. Derrida engages in a fascinating discussion on what he calls Genet's *pénètre* [penetrating/penetrated being] (191–92 [215]).

his shithole"²⁶ (*Glas* 41–42 [51]). Sartre, in the same vein, before Derrida, but already belatedly on his way to understanding poetry, wrote: "Poetry is the art of using shit and making you eat it" (*Saint Genet*, 552). Though intent on pushing their readers (themselves first) as close to Genet's putrefaction as possible, Sartre and Derrida both learned from Genet the gardener's golden rule that only in the choicest manure can the most magnificent flowers be brought to blossom. "He knows that one only keeps what one loses" (*Glas* 207 [232]), wrote Derrida, and Sartre wrote simply, though not for the last time: "loser wins." After obediently ingurgitating their English food, Genet's open enemies shifted to the mode of producing remains—the work of imagination's dark hole, to be flushed out and got down, while there was still time, on paper.

26. Leavey and Rand, for some reason, chose to translate *chiottes* here as "latrine."