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## The Chiasmus of Mourning and Identification in Jean Genet

### Abstract

The theories of psychological identification proposed by Sigmund Freud and Kaja Silverman are explored in relation to Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites* and his later essay on Rembrandt. Genet can be seen to separate mourning (which for Freud lies at the basis of identification) from a process of generalized identification in which his difference from other people dissolves. A narcissistic formation of personality, evident in the symbolism of mirrors in *Funeral Rites*, gives to this process an added impetus. But the fundamental condition of possibility for such generalized identification is the void it reveals at the center of all personality. This void not only makes possible the different kinds of identification (heteropathic and idiopathic) described by Silverman, it also disturbs any clear distinction between them. It is for these reasons that the glamorization of Nazism in *Funeral Rites* is coextensive with a demystification of its power, and the often brutal eroticism of the book is suffused with an ineradicable dimension of tenderness. Taken further in the essay on Rembrandt, these themes lead to an ambiguous mysticism in which the source of creativity is revealed as inseparable from its ultimate obliteration.

### Keywords

Jean Genet, psychology, psychological identification, Freud, Kaja Silverman, *Funeral Rites*, Rembrandt, mourning, identification, narcissism, personality, Nazism, mysticism

## The Chiasmus of Mourning and Identification in Jean Genet

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*London*

Jaques Derrida's large and labyrinthine book *Glas* (1974) borrows its double-columned form (in one among its numerous strategies of parasitism) from a short essay by Jean Genet published in the journal *Tel Quel* in 1967. The slow toll of the death knell, sounded in both the title and text of Derrida's book, accompanies Genet's inquiry into the solemn power of Rembrandt's later paintings. The full intensity of this power only begins to be felt, in Genet's view, following the death of the painter's beloved wife Saskia. After experiencing this "baptism of fire . . . his early nature, which was bold and conceited, was little by little transformed." As a result, "he observed his mourning by metamorphosing gold chains, swords, and plumed hats into values, or rather into pictorial fetes." Genet concludes that "with Saskia dead—I wonder whether he didn't kill her, in some way or other, whether he wasn't glad she died—anyway, his eyes and hands are free. From then on he launches out into a kind of extravagance as a painter" (Genet, "Something" 84; "Ce qui" 24-25).<sup>1</sup>

Alongside these reflections on Rembrandt's art Genet sets an account of an incident from his own life with which (at first sight) they have no obvious connection. This autobiographical column of Genet's text, occupying the left-hand side of the page, is lengthier, more detailed, more ruminative and philosophical than the text on Rembrandt. It questions, with startling incisiveness, the very basis of personal identity and casts an annihilating light on Genet's earlier life and work. In a manner reminiscent

of Jean-Paul Sartre's expositions of human reality in *Being and Nothingness*, these wide-ranging considerations emerge from nothing more substantial than a brief exchange of glances with a total stranger in a train compartment, which precipitated in Genet an abrupt and involuntary obliteration of any sense of personal difference, of separate identity, inducing within him a sudden conviction of "the universal identity of all men" (78; 22). However, this is far from being the expression of a humanistic platitude, nor is it a political appeal to mutual solidarity. On the contrary, Genet is invaded by a mystical and disturbing sense that all people are the same—literally the same being, deceptively split into distinct fragments. Far from eradicating loneliness, this revelation served only to produce and intensify feelings of loss and sadness:

The world was changed. In a third-class carriage between Salon and Saint Rambert d'Albon it had just lost its lovely colors, its charm. I was already bidding them a nostalgic farewell, and it was not without sadness or disgust that I was entering upon ways which would be increasingly lonely and, more important, was entertaining visions of the world which, instead of heightening my joy, were causing me such dejection.

"Before long," I said to myself, "nothing that once meant so much will matter: love, friendship, forms, vanity, nothing that depends on seduction." (80; 27-28)

In one column, therefore, Genet describes how mourning liberated Rembrandt into the solemnity and sadness of his later art; while in the adjacent column a sense of identification with other people, taken to its furthest extreme, empties Genet of the erotic fires which had been at the source of so much of his own creativity. Derrida characterized the relation between these two columns as a "chiasmus" (Derrida 43). The themes of identification and mourning are separated and placed on opposed halves of the page, but there is, nevertheless, an interchange and reflection between them. The achievement of the later paintings of Rembrandt is to remove from his portraits all psychological individuality, so that each refers identically to the same "sadness of being in the world" (85; 27). The separate identities of his various sitters are therefore conflated, reflecting Genet's theme of mutual identification.

Genet felt that he was especially prone to the revelation on the train because of the particular cast of his mind, the ease with which he had always been able to imagine “flowing through his eyes into someone else’s body” (81; 28). Directly opposite to his question, “What was it that had flowed out of my body?” he places his claim that Rembrandt’s paintings “stop the time that made the subject flow into the future” (78, 84; 23). Derrida notes how this juxtaposition causes a flow of the signifier “flow” from one side of the divided text to the other. Nevertheless, a distinction is maintained: flowing is arrested in creative mourning, but released in the fatality of uncontrollable identification.

The transformation of mourning into rich aesthetic productivity was a process well known to Genet himself, since it forms both the theme and the structure of his book *Funeral Rites*. This book evolves as a complex web of identifications, leading Sartre to characterize it as a “hall of mirrors” in which each of the various characters is ultimately revealed to be a mask for Genet himself (Sartre 521, 540). Nevertheless, as I hope to show, mourning and identification are here, too, kept deliberately and wilfully separated from one another, and this separation is the conditioning factor for the book’s creation.

Though hardly a conventional account of mourning, *Funeral Rites* is one of literature’s most powerful evocations of the sense of loss which follows the death of a lover. Many passages describe, with acute sensitivity, the most universally recognized aspects of this experience. These are the very features of the mourning process which led Sigmund Freud to propose a profound theory of its significance, linking its deepest import to the role of identification in the formation of our psyche. A brief consideration of Freud’s theory will therefore reveal more readily the specific originality of *Funeral Rites*, enabling us to disentangle some of the reasons for the book’s unique fascination.

Freud considers mourning to be the process whereby libido is withdrawn from a lost object and returns to the subject’s own ego. This reversal is accomplished by the ego itself taking on the attributes of the beloved person, so that it too can attract the libidinal outpourings of the id, which have now lost their external focus. “It may be,” suggests Freud, “that this identification is

the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects.” The ego therefore “assumes the features of the object,” a process which effects “the transformation of object libido into narcissistic libido.” This, according to Freud, “makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of these object choices” (SE XIX 29). Identification following loss is the process whereby our character is formed, as the crystallized reflection of our past affections. Love precedes identity, into which it is transformed through loss (whether that loss is the result of death, or of desertion, or of abandonment).

Not surprisingly, Freud contends that an individual’s “first and most important identification” is with his or her parents (SE XIX 31). Genet, of course, was an orphan. We can deduce nothing from this fact alone (for his foster parents might have served as identificatory figures). But from the narcissistic formations evident in the details of his books, we may perhaps conclude that, in his case, we might productively set into play an alternative theory of *primary* identification: that expounded by Lacan in his concept of the mirror phase. This suggests that the primary identification on which all subsequent and secondary identifications build would be with the image of oneself, as seen in a mirror. “The child’s ego is formed by identification with its like . . . its own reflection which is and is not the body, which is like it. The child identifies with itself as an object” (Metz 48-49).<sup>2</sup>

In a scene towards the end of *Funeral Rites*, Erik drunkenly encounters his own reflection in a mirror: “He put out his arm to draw it to him, but his hand encountered nothing” (205). Genet, here, invokes the myth of Narcissus who (we should remember) did not pine away because he loved himself, but because he failed to recognize the beautiful image in the pool as his own. In the same way, Erik’s face in the mirror “became tragic and so handsome that Erik doubted that it was his own.” It is with this doubt that he trembles on the brink of the tragedy of Narcissus. “He was within an ace of losing his reason in his own beauty,” because that beauty appeared to him only in the mirror, where his body seems “solid,” “strong,” and “male” (*Funeral Rites*

Lacan explains how the child's image in the mirror apparently possesses a confident unity and coordination which the child itself lacks, thus forming an ideal ego to lure the child towards its assigned place in the networks of desire. Erik, however, does not seek to *coincide* with the image of maleness in the glass, but to "master" it. This desire to dominate turns into a state of inarticulate rage. He draws his pistol, and then "The gesture begun by Erik was continued by the image with set eyes. Its left hand opened the holster and took out the revolver, aimed it at Erik, and fired" (206). The potential fatality of fascination with the mirror could not be better expressed. Erik hallucinates being destroyed by his own image.

At a later point in the story (recounted at an earlier point in the book) Erik experiences another encounter with a mirror: "He passed a candy-vending machine and saw his black sleeve in the narrow mirror" (178). This time, however, the glimpse "fortified him against the image of himself" because "to the already sublime fact of being a tank driver in the German army was added the brilliance of his name . . . followed by a magical expression: . . . the executioner's lover" (178-79). The talisman formed by this phrase protects him from the dangers lurking in the mirror's shimmering depths. The executioner was the strong male who had sexually dominated the young and beautiful Erik, who is now taking the first steps towards becoming, in his turn, the dominant lover of the youthful Riton.

The primary identification created via the mirror is thus a complex and unstable formation. When beauty and desirability are alienated in the mirror image, the subject is left bereft and enraged. But if the image becomes merely a "dark block" (178) guarding his name, the destiny of that name (with its embodied history of past affections) will exceed all personal control.

The first encounter between Erik and the executioner is described in two separate passages. Just before the second of these there is yet another encounter between Erik and a mirror, described by Genet in the first person of close identification. "Stripped to the waist and wearing my wide black breeches," Erik stares into a mirror in which he sees reflected both himself and a

photograph of Hitler (61). This tableau resembles the Lacanian account of the mirror phase, in which the child sees reflected not only itself but also the mother who holds it. As Christian Metz observes, "The child sees itself as an other, and beside an other. This other other is its guarantee that the first is really it: by her authority, her sanction, in the register of the symbolic" (48). Fixed and frozen in a photo, Hitler's image forms an ideal ego for Erik, and when he makes love with Riton on the rooftop at the end of the book he feels himself at last fully identified with the Fuhrer, envisaged as the one who "emitted his transfigured adolescents over the humiliated world" (232).

According to Genet, Rembrandt's early relation to mirrors, evident in his first self-portraits, was complacent and without anxiety. Later, this self-immersion grew troubled and disturbed, leading to his greatest art (84; 24). Erik, by contrast, is disturbed by mirrors from the start: they offer a scattering of diverse identifications, deflecting him from one to another: Hitler, the executioner, his own image. The narcissistic formation of his psyche is the condition for this mobility of identifications, which resembles that of Genet himself who, as the book's author, scatters himself among its characters. His identification with these fictional figures is more extreme than that of most authors, and more self-consciously proclaimed and discussed. Indeed, a deliberate deflection of identification forms the initiating move which produces the book's narration as a perverse act of mourning, deviating from the Freudian paradigm.

Grief-stricken at the death of his lover Jean Decarnin, killed while fighting for the resistance in the last days of the war, Genet powerfully describes many of those fantasies which Freud found to be characteristic of all mourning. "The ego wants to incorporate the object into itself," writes Freud, "and, in accordance with the oral and cannibalistic phase of libidinal development . . . it wants to do so by devouring it" (SE XIV 249-50). Genet accordingly creates a vivid image of a cannibal feast at which he presides, eating Jean's corpse. His description is distinctive, however, because although he says "I belonged to the tribe," it is he alone who eats the dead flesh and hence "I was sure that I was the god . . . a divinity whom the Negroes dared not gaze at" (230-



31). By contrast, Freud's account of the symbolism of a cannibalistic totem feast (in *Totem and Taboo*) regards the practice as forming a community among the brothers who jointly partake in it. Genet is definitively set apart from any community, and this fact decisively affects the progress of his mourning.

Arriving at the place where Jean was shot, Genet finds a small group of mourners already standing there (38ff).<sup>3</sup> He feels constrained by their presence, afraid of "making ridiculous gestures" as a consequence of his grief. He realizes that, for the other mourners, Jean is dear to them *because* he is dead (since he died for France). They would not allow Genet to bring him back to life, even if he could. Were he to attempt such a resurrection, they would lynch him, identifying him with Jean's killer (since he would be taking from them the martyr who draws their sorrowful admiration). Hence, Genet experiences a sense of identification between himself and Jean's killer. This identification is initially felt as coming from the others, from an imagined enraged mob: it emerges out of Genet's separation from the "respectable" mourners.

A few pages later, there occurs the episode in the cinema which crucially determines the whole further course of the book. On the cinema screen (which serves here as a replacement, a relay, for the primordial mirror—cf Metz 48) Genet sees a newsreel showing a young member of the collaborationist militia being captured. The cinema audience is transformed by this sight into a jeering, laughing mob, united by their contempt for the captured youth (47ff). Genet is separated from them in (i) recognizing the boy's beauty; (ii) desiring him; and (iii) feeling sorry for him, despite the fact that the little militiaman might well have been the very one who shot Jean. Still drowned in his grief over Jean, Genet is "willing to do anything to forget about him." He therefore adopts a device, a trick, to do so. It is "the best trick I could play on that fierce gang known as destiny" (48). Destiny itself is perceived as a mob—just like the cinema crowd whom he describes with such revulsion. The trick Genet plays is a form of transference: he invests the boy on the screen (on whom he confers the name Riton) "with the love I felt for his victim" (48).

For this “work of sorcery” particular gestures are necessary. Exactly as at the site of Jean’s death, however, the surrounding crowd inhibit his ability to perform these gestures in reality—they sink, instead, into his vivid imaginary world: “My hands . . . clasp each other even though they do not move” (48). His “prayer” succeeds in shifting his painful libidinal attachment away from the dead Jean. “A bit of love passed over to Riton. I really had the impression that love was flowing from me, from my veins to his” (50).

And so we find again that image of “flowing,” used in the essay on Rembrandt to characterize identification. When the image of the boy leaves the screen, “An unbroken flow of love passed from my body to his, which started living again” (51). This vampiric fantasy gives life (Genet’s imaginative life) to the boy who in reality (and on the screen) had been captured and was probably due for imminent execution.

Imagining himself dressed in white, as Riton’s bride, Genet declares: “The wedding celebration would then merge with my mourning and all would be saved” (51). Funeral rites would fuse with a wedding celebration by means of “the double ray of my tenderness” towards both Jean and Riton.

As this last phrase indicates, a *total* transference of love from Jean to Riton has not been effected. Indeed, it is immediately following this scene that Genet first tenderly recalls vivid memories of his first act of sex with Jean—beginning that process of recollection and mourning described by Freud whereby each memory of the beloved is called up, one by one, and hypercatheted before the libido can be detached from it (SE XIV 245). Freud also remarks on the frequent occurrence in mourning of “self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object, i.e. that he has willed it” (SE XIV 251). In the cinema, Genet has deliberately and consciously willed Jean’s death and fused this Nietzschean acceptance of fate with an imagined love for the boy who might have killed him. In fact, in the course of the book, there is no actual description of Riton killing Jean. The designation “murderer of Jean” clings to Riton exactly as the epithet “executioner’s lover”

clings to Erik: it is the seed around which his character will be developed.

As a strategy for escaping the pain of loss, Genet's "trick" doesn't work (for that pain continues to be vividly felt and described throughout the book). Nor has he succeeded in erasing the love he felt for Jean, transferring it completely to Riton. He does succeed, however, in deflecting the identificatory process which Freud believed to be inevitably set in motion by every serious loss. Genet does not identify himself with Jean (whose personality and physical appearance are never described in any great detail in the book, and who therefore fails to appear before the reader with any vividness) but on the contrary with the boy who killed him. The figure of Riton gradually emerges (particularly in the later scenes) as a believable, poignant, and sorrowful portrait of a youth with little intelligence who joined the militia when the Germans seemed to be winning the war, and now finds himself despised by his countrymen and in exile in his own city. Genet (the despised thief and social outcast) will seduce us into sympathy with this boy whom decent and patriotic people must inevitably condemn. And, if we are able to encompass compassion for Riton, this will become a mere stepping stone for further possible identifications, notably with Hitler himself. Genet treads this dark road before us, lighting the way and inviting the reader to follow in his identificatory path.

In her book *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Kaja Silverman discusses the power and effectiveness of works of art which provide "the representational terms under which the spectator can be brought to identify at a distance with bodily coordinates which are both culturally devalued and markedly divergent from his or her own." She seeks to inquire how we "might be given the psychic wherewithal to participate in the desires, struggles, and sufferings of the other, and to do so in a way which redounds to his or her, rather than to our own, 'credit'" (185).

The examples in her book involve identification across racial and sexual boundaries—as, for example, with black gay men in Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston*. Though "culturally devalued" within American society as a whole, valuing and identifying with such marginal groups would be admired and sup-

ported within the world of liberal academia from which Silverman writes. *Funeral Rites*, on the other hand, invites loving identification with a young thug and murderer who has betrayed his country and is working for the Nazis. Such a character is culturally devalued both by today's standards, and even more so (in guilty reaction to recent acts of collaboration) when Genet wrote the book in 1945. The book may thus stand as a test of Silverman's claims for the moral and creative value of this process of identification, divorced from political sympathy with the *object* of that identification.

Silverman, however, seeks to distinguish the experience of identity-at-a-distance (which she celebrates) from the Freudian identification-through-mourning, which she characterizes as "murderously assimilatory." Acknowledging that it is a necessary feature "at the heart of normative adult subjectivity," Silverman believes that this Freudian identification participates in sustaining "the delusory unity and presence of the bodily ego" (23).

This distinction between identity-at-a-distance and Freudian identification, she assimilates to that between heteropathic and idiopathic identification as expounded by the German philosopher Max Scheler, quoting Scheler's definition of idiopathic identification as effecting "the total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own," as a consequence of which the other is "completely dispossessed and deprived of all rights in its conscious existence and character" (23). However, in Freudian identification-through-mourning it is the loss of the conscious existence of the other (through death or desertion) which subsequently causes one's *own* self to be eclipsed by the remembered characteristics of the other. Indeed, Freud uses a strikingly similar metaphor, saying that (as an effect of loss) "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego," which thereby suffers a (partial) eclipse (SE XIV 249).

I would therefore argue that Freud's account of identification (as the principal, and perhaps sole, process through which character and personality are formed) precisely undermines the ego's imagined unity, revealing it to be structured from the sedimented, multi-layered remembrance of past loves. It there-

fore has close affinities to the heteropathic pole of Silverman's distinction. Indeed, in her earlier book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Silverman's primary example of heteropathic identification was provided by Fassbinder's film *In the Year of Thirteen Moons*, which he specifically made as an act of mourning for his dead lover with whom, in the course of the film, he identifies himself (Silverman, *Male Subjectivity* 270).

In *Funeral Rites*, by contrast, Genet lives his mourning as a *refusal* of identification with his dead lover, substituting instead a different series of identifications whose nature cannot easily be characterized under either of the headings "heteropathic" or "idiopathic," since they involve both an invasive usurping of other people's lives and a simultaneous fragmenting and disintegration of his own ego.

The various figures with whom he identifies in the course of the book all have a real existence in the world around him: Erik is a German soldier in hiding, the lover of Jean's mother; Riton is the captured militiaman briefly seen on a movie screen; Hitler is the German Fuhrer, who was still alive at the time Genet began writing the book. But in the pages of *Funeral Rites* each of them takes on quite different characteristics. These additional traits are borrowed and transferred from Genet's own personality. In giving fictional life to these people, he feeds aspects of himself into their veins. It is only on the basis of these imagined similarities that he accomplishes the leap into identification.

For example, following a passage in which Genet has been ruminating on the fusion of hardness and elegance which he finds attractive in Paulo (Jean's brother), he begins a new paragraph with the sentence: "Puny, ridiculous fellow that I was, I emitted upon the world a power extracted from the pure sheer beauty of athletes and hoodlums" (122). Genet might well still be talking about himself and the effects of his literary work, but as the paragraph proceeds we discover that the first person narration has now been taken over by Hitler. Genet imagines a shared love of tough young men as a means of insinuating himself into Hitler's psyche.

The presence of Hitler in the book, confined to a relatively small number of passages, constitutes the heart of darkness of its textual system, “the diamond axis . . . on which the world turns” (117). Adopting this persona, Genet both cloaks himself in the dark glamour of Nazism and at the same time undermines the phallic pride of the familiar newsreel figure by presenting him as homosexual and castrated. One specific feature of Hitler himself enabled Genet to slip inside his skin: his evident addiction to gesture and spectacle. Hitler was always “playing the role of Hitler. He was representing me,” writes Genet (68). Eternally seeing himself before an imagined mirror, Hitler shares with Genet that narcissism which, far from being a closing of identity into itself, is in fact a primal splitting of the subject, through which the self contemplates and seeks to identify with itself. This slight split, this tenuous division between self and image, is sufficient to allow alternative identities to flow into the gap.

A more complex process of forming a link can be found if we trace the way that Genet identifies himself with Erik and usurps his imagined past. As with Riton, it is initially Erik’s contrast with and opposition to Jean that tempts Genet towards identification. “Since [Erik’s] force and vigor compensated for what (despite great austerity) was too frail in Jean’s grace, I have ever since made great efforts to live his life as a Berlin youngster” (18). Notice the literalization whereby Genet seeks, not to *imagine* Erik’s life, but to “live” it. “I attempted to retrace the course of his life and, for greater efficiency, I got into his uniform, boots and skin” (30).

The first scene in which he begins to describe this fictitious life is preceded and prompted by an incident in real life (that real life, at least, which is recounted as such in the book, separated from the fantasized scenes) in which Erik appears to express desire for Genet: “He pressed against my back. I felt his breath on my neck, and, close to my ear, he murmured: ‘See you tomorrow, nine o’clock, Jean.’ He took my hand and insisted ‘Nine o’clock, yes!’” (30). Genet is excited by the closeness of Erik, but immediately recalls that Erik had hated and bullied Jean, and had just remarked on the fact that Genet has the same first name.

sadistic desire, Genet deliberately steps back from this dangerous identification by choosing to consciously identify himself with Erik. His motivation seems to be not so much an avoidance of the masochistic position (which he habitually occupied in his erotic life) but an evasion of an unwanted identification with his dead lover.

As a scenario in which to embody his newly chosen identification, he concocts a fantasy in which Erik is submissively seduced by a Nazi executioner. He conjures up this story while “drunk with the somewhat blurry vision of a tall young Negro behind the windows of the cafe in the Boulevard de la Villette” (30). The blurred windows are transformed, as in a cinematic dissolve, into the fog in which Erik and the executioner meet. The beauty and desirability of the Negro intensifies the state of erotic excitement necessary for Genet to generate this imagined scene, and also deflects his excitement away from the person of Erik himself (whose good looks are those of the Germanic “blond beast” [206]). In other words, it is by this decisive turn away from the Aryan ideal of beauty that Genet channels his erotic energies into identifying with the young Nazi. Not only does he betray Jean by identifying with Erik, but this identification itself carries an ironic betrayal at its initiating core.

Towards the end of the book, Genet expresses a love for Erik which (like that for Jean) is distinct from identification. This is one of the terms on which the evolving eccentric process of mourning in the book will end (“I loved Erik. I love him” [226]). Within the unfolding of the fantasy narratives, this parallels Riton’s growing love for Erik, and Genet’s close identification with Riton. But, in one of the scenes of “real” life interspersing this fantasy, a further mediating figure intervenes: Jean’s fiancée Juliette. “It was she who occasioned my love for Erik,” writes Genet. Specifically, he sees her (“a dirty unkempt housemaid”) framed beneath the arch of Erik’s muscular arm. “What was there about Jean that had made him love so unlovely a creature?” muses Genet; “Never would I have the strength to bear my love for Jean if I leaned on that wretched girl. On the other hand I could indulge myself completely if I were supported by Erik” (225-26).

The characterization of Juliette as dirty and unkempt, however, points to her similarity with Riton, with whom Genet increasingly identifies. And if Jean was drawn to her qualities of abjection, this may well also have been what attracted him to Genet.

Two funeral processions wind through the pages of the book: in one Genet follows Jean's coffin; in the other, Juliette gets left behind by the hearse carrying her dead child (which may, or may not, have been fathered by Jean). The descriptions of Juliette are a curious mixture of comic derision and sympathetic tenderness. Her muddled thoughts are described so closely that the narration fuses, in these passages, with her consciousness. She and Riton are the two characters with whom Genet most easily identifies: the suffering guilty traitor and the bereaved mother. At the same time, he seeks to place a distance between himself and these figures of abjection by emphasizing that both are of limited intelligence (a characteristic which clearly doesn't apply to Genet himself).

He hopes the powerful strength of Erik will protect him from abjection. But, in the course of the novel, the "dark block of [Erik's] funereally-garbed body" (178) has been corroded and undermined from within. Genet, putting on Erik's skin, has turned him into an executioner's catamite and the cowardly murderer of a child. Just as Riton's final act is to shoot Erik dead after they have made love, so Genet has stripped him of all his invulnerable hardness by worming his way into his imagined life and turning it into a version of his own. As with the figure of Hitler, the book's celebration of Nazi glamour (whose eroticism it savors) is inseparable from a derision of its pretensions.

Identification in Genet's novel is therefore a process of mingling his own characteristics with those of people quite different from himself. There is a striking recurring image of inhabiting another's life by occupying an imagined space inside their body. Genet describes himself as living "at times inside [Erik] or Riton" (56). This relation does not constitute authorial mastery, for its terms are entirely reversible: Erik is described as "rising up inside me" (60) and "Jean will live through me. I shall lend him my body. Through me he will act, will think" (67). In these descrip-



tions, individual people are viewed as vessels or containers for disparate and separate incorporated personalities. Another passage tells us that: "At the summit of the maid's soul, in the noblest part of her . . . a nervous voice lost patience and cried, 'Be qui-et. Be qui-et.' But the poor girl herself could only hear a murmuring and did not understand what it meant" (86-87).

It is with a similar image of incorporation that Silverman sought to distinguish between idiopathic and heteropathic identification. The analogy she uses not only describes but also exemplifies such strategies of incorporation, for it is embedded in her text as a quotation from Max Scheler, who was himself quoting Schopenhauer, who had heard the story from an officer of the British army in India. Such a multiple-embedded quotation, in which the text speaks with borrowed tongues, disrupting the unity of the enunciating subject, constitutes (Silverman had earlier argued) a "heteropathic chain-reaction" (Silverman, *Male Subjectivity* 267). Allowing this chain reaction to continue, I quote the relevant passage once again:

A white squirrel, having met the gaze of a snake, hanging on a tree and showing every sign of a mighty appetite for its prey, is so terrified by this that it gradually moves towards instead of away from the snake, and finally throws itself into the open jaws . . . plainly the squirrel's instinct for self-preservation has succumbed to an ecstatic participation in the object of the snake's own appetitive nusus, namely "swallowing." The squirrel identifies in feeling with the snake, and thereupon spontaneously establishes corporeal "identity" with it, by disappearing down its throat. (*Threshold* 24)

Though the snake is intended to represent the ideopath, its physical constituents will inevitably be modified by absorbing the substance of the squirrel, just as a Freudian mourner takes on their lover's characteristics. The snake may seem the smug victor in this transaction, but the squirrel may well have carried poison in its flesh, some transforming quality inimical to the snake's current life and existence. Absorption of another can never leave the self unchanged.

The squirrel, on the other hand, identified at a distance with a desire other than its own but, as a direct consequence, failed to

remain at this protective distance. It is in the act of hurling itself down the snake's throat that the squirrel effects the identificatory leap (Silverman, *Male Subjectivity* 270). Genet similarly flings himself in fantasy into lives far removed from his own. This process resembles that of any other, more conventional, novelist. But by retaining his personal characteristics, and mingling them with these imagined other lives, he effects a transformation (at least in fantasy) in the objects of his identification.

On the one hand, this undermines any idealization of such figures as Hitler, who would seek to control and channel all identification directed towards them by becoming an ego ideal for their followers (SE XVIII 116). On the other hand, however, there remains an idealization of a specifically eroticizing kind which is still possible, provided it be recognized as a cloak which can be bestowed at will upon the most unlikely candidates. This is the "active gift of love" which Silverman has eloquently celebrated. Such idealization, she writes, "lights up with a glittering radiance bodies long accustomed to a forced alignment with debased images" (*Threshold* 79). This gift of love must be active, she argues, to "prevent the congealing of ideality into an intrinsic quality of the beloved" (77). These features can be clearly discerned in this description of Riton:

The straps of three loaded machine guns were wound about his shirt, went around the belt and up across the shoulders, crossed once on the chest and once on the back, and produced a copper tunic from which his arms emerged bare from the elbow almost to the shoulder, where the sleeve of the blue shirt was rolled into a thick wad that made the arm more elegant. It was a carapace, each scale of which was a bullet. This paraphernalia weighed the child down, gave him a monstrous bearing and posture that intoxicated him to the point of nausea. In short, he was carrying the ammunition supply. His uncombed hair was naked in the darkness. His battered thighs bent beneath the weight of armor and fatigue. He was barefoot. (66)

The dark glamour of power, incarnate in the bandoleers of bullets, renders the emphasized nakedness of arms and feet all the more vulnerable. This image, in which the book's eroticism finds its most concentrated icon, combines an attraction to the

spectacle of invulnerability with a tenderness for the figure burdened by its weight. Elsewhere, Genet describes Riton's life as "a frightful misery contained in a very beautiful vase" (148).

Genet's first reaction to the boy on the movie screen provides an extreme example of the active gift of love. But, in the subsequent course of the book, he proceeds to dissolve the separating screen between himself and the boy, absorbing himself as far as possible into the boy's imagined life. There would seem, therefore, no reason to insist, as does Silverman, that "the gift of love . . . strives to keep the cherished 'image' outside . . . maintaining the object at an uncrossable distance" (*Threshold* 76-77).

Genet identifies most strongly with Riton in that vulnerability and exclusion from society which gives his love for the boy its dimension of tenderness. This connection is firmly rooted in features of Genet's own life, and is therefore not entirely heteropathic, not completely a reaching towards someone quite different from himself. On the day the Germans entered Paris, Genet had (quite coincidentally) been released from prison. So the fall of France coincided with his own liberation (White 187). In a similar way, the defeat of the Germans coincided with the death of his lover, Jean. Hence Riton's feelings when he watches the victory celebrations, which "expel him from joy, from play, from pleasures, and . . . display the flags in honor of that exile" (215), are identical with Genet's own, and all distance between author and character is, at least momentarily, abolished.

Many years later, sitting in a scruffy railway compartment, Genet experiences a similar abolition of distance, but this time as an involuntary shock, neither active nor loving. Nor is it tempered by any trace of desire or idealization in the description he gives of his fellow passenger's "graceless body and face, ugly in certain details, even vile." He prefaces his account of this incident by saying: "A work of art should exalt only those truths which are not demonstrable . . . those we cannot carry to their ultimate conclusions without absurdity, without negating both them and ourself" (77; 21). It is this ultimate negation around which *Funeral Rites* (and his other literary works) had circled, and to which the incident on the train, described in the essay on Rembrandt, brought him finally face to face.

“Through idealization,” Silverman writes, “the subject . . . posits an object as capable of filling the void at the heart of his or her psyche” (*Threshold* 70). The simultaneous collapse of idealization, love, desire, and distance, left Genet with an awareness of “a solid emptiness [*un vide solide*] which did not cease to perpetuate me” (81; 29; Genet’s emphasis). A similar image had already appeared during the love-making scene at the very end of *Funeral Rites*. Riton fellates Erik who then kisses his lips “still parted, retaining the shape and caliber of Erik’s prick. The mouths crushed against one another, linked as by a hyphen, by the rod of emptiness [*un sexe de vide*], a rootless member that lived alone and went from one palate to the other” (237).

This reference to the typographical sign of the hyphen (in French, “*un trait d’union*”) calls to mind a well-known passage in Lacan’s writings, in which he explains the signification of the Phallus within his theory of the unconscious. “One might say that this signifier is chosen,” writes Lacan, “as what stands out as most easily seized upon in the real of sexual copulation, and also as the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is the equivalent in that relation of the (logical) copula” (Lacan 82). The typographical mark of the hyphen—the solid connecting bar printed on the page—impersonates the penis in its role of connecting bodies to one another. But, in Genet’s remarkable image, this physical connecting link has become “*un sexe de vide*” ‘a rod of emptiness,’ a shaped space rather than a solidity, an absence rather than a presence, without its function of connection being in any way lessened. The Phallus has thus been transformed into that “solid emptiness” which, in the Rembrandt essay, is discerned at the core of all identification.

So it is emptiness that links us, at the core of all identification, at the basis of all love, destroying distance as we fling ourselves headlong into each other’s echoing void, hollow containers for refracted light, split by mirrors into illusory separation. Every individual’s specific characteristics, Genet tells us, are “willed by that identity . . . which was forever circulating among all men” (79; 24). But this shared identity, lying behind *all* characteristics, can only be a void with no qualities of its own. In *Funeral Rites* the hollow loss of mourning becomes the occasion,

not for an idealizing incorporation of the dead, but for a straying and scattering of identity. Exiled from intense amorous exclusivity, Genet sets about linking himself to others through shared traits, until on the book's last page the imagined linkage of sex gives way to "un sexe de vide," revealing emptiness as the strongest, most universal connection of all. For all the sense of loss that this entails, it is on this basis alone that it will be "possible for every man to be loved *neither more nor less* than every other . . . to be cared for and recognized—cherished" (79; 24).

### Notes

1. My quotations from this essay are taken (with slight modifications) from the translation by Bernard Frechtman (Genet, "Something"). This was published three years *before* the essay appeared in *Tel Quel*. However, the English version prints the two parts of the text consecutively, rather than side by side. For this reason, I also give page references to the reprint of the *Tel Quel* version in Tome IV Genet's *Œuvres Complètes* (Genet, "Ce qui"). The page references to the English version are given first for each quotation.

2. This essay by Metz is particularly acute in distinguishing between primary, secondary, and tertiary identifications (Cf Metz 58).

3. From here on, I use the name "Jean" to refer to the dead lover, and "Genet" to refer to the author. The fact that they share the same first name, though little more than a coincidence, is an additional ripple in the waters of narcissism and identification. Decarnin's surname is used only in the book's dedication, a fact that intensifies the unity of their names in the pages of the text.

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