

Genet's Violent, Subjective Split Into the Theatre of Lacan's Three Orders

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In his brief book on Proust, Samuel Beckett states:

The laws of memory are subject to the more general laws of habit. Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. (7-8)

But in Proustian fictional memory, according to Beckett, there are breaks in the rule of Habit, "when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being" (8). And in such moments, existential Suffering pierces the "screen" of habitual memory and "opens a window on the real . . ." (16). These observations can also be applied to the writings of Jean Genet, particularly through the primal scene of his remembered rebirth as an author, although Genet's writings involve fantasy more than memory--in vomitory self-recreation.

Genet wrote his first novels in a prison cell, in an onanistic "compromise effected between the individual and his environment." Through the Habit of his writing (and other) instrument, Genet disseminated his Suffering and sexual eccentricities onto paper, opening an Imaginary window onto the Real within him. Even if this onanism, which Genet remembers as the origin for

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his novels, is merely an invented memory or a metaphor, the onanistic narcissism of his writing style remains apparent. Did he write to be read by anyone other than himself? Bataille, disagreeing with Sartre's consecration of "St. Genet," says:¹

In fact there is no communication between Genet and the reader --and yet Sartre assumes that his work is valid. . . . According to Sartre, Genet had himself "consecrated by the reader." . . . This leads him to maintain that "the poet . . . demands to be recognized by an audience whom he does not recognize." But . . . [according to Bataille] the consecrational operation, or poetry, is communication or nothing. (161)

If Genet wrote only for himself originally, he still imagined at least one reader. Indeed, the sole purpose of his writing would then have been to read it himself, to re-read himself and his imaginings, and to re-imagine himself through his written fantasies. He was at least communicating (and desiring communication) with himself. But then that "self" was an outside, future Genet-reader, whom Genet-the-writer was courting for potential communication/communion. This split between writing and reading moments, and between writing and reading Genets, reveals further splits between those moments (momentary selves) and the moment of the fantasizing-self. All three of these Genets and the splits between them reside within the moment when "the suffering of being" breaks through "the boredom of living" and prison habitation. The tripartite subjectivity of Genet, as writer, reader, and day-dreamer, illustrates both his imprisoned consciousness and its alienation from itself--in the desire for/of the Other.

This situation is not so different from any unknown writer, dreamer, and self-critic trying to be read by others--except that Genet was imprisoned by harder walls than Habit and the writer's desire to communicate. And yet, we are all (writers and non-writers) constituted as split subjects, according to Jacques Lacan (building on Freud's *Ich-spaltung*).

What I, Lacan, following the traces of the Freudian excavation, am telling you is that the subject as such is uncertain because he is divided by the effects of language. . . . [T]he subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing there more than half of himself. . . . [T]he subject is subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other. . . . That is why he must get out, get himself out. . . . (188)

Genet did get himself out--if only of prison--by writing and being read by the Other outside of it (particularly Sartre and Cocteau). His pursuit of "more than half of himself" in his onanistically disseminated characters (his imaginary

Others) gave birth eventually to a real audience, larger perhaps than he ever dreamed. And when Genet turned to writing for the theatre, real actors embodied his imaginary character-Others, seen by real spectator-Others. Genet's split subjectivity of dreamer, writer, and reader was then extended even farther into and in subjection "to the field of the Other." Directors, actors, costume, lighting and set designers, and technicians, as well as the nightly audience, to some extent did then (and still do) re-imagine and rewrite his plays onto the "live," public stage, as the real readers of his novels had been doing privately. The vomitories of theatres thus led into Genet-the-playwright's new, expanded (yet still onanistic?) vomitorium.

According to Herbert Blau, an American director of *The Balcony*:

Genet's drama courts the actor's suspicion and makes the experience of violation the main action of the drama. . . . The actor resists his scenario, and he should. The drama gains intensity of meaning from encouragement of the actor's natural grievances. (268)

In Blau's production, the play's sense of violation and resistance was played out between actors and script, between the actors and their characters, and between actor/characters and theatre audience.

Their task was to find the Self in the unison of their dependency. . . . As actors they would use the voyeuristic expectancies they could feel in the audience. (272)

Actors of Genet's plays (of any play) must find a "Self," a character they portray onstage--though their idea of who they are at any moment and the audience's are not identical, are always in dialogical flux in performance.

The actor-audience relationship of theatre mirrors Genet's tripartite subjectivity in both directions: the spectator reads, dreams, and (re-)writes the character the actor presents onstage as the actor is reading, imagining, and responding to the "voyeuristic expectancies" of the audience. The actors, especially in Genet's plays, imagine their characters and continually re-write (re-act) them onstage by reading their audience's (and fellow actors') reactions. And the audience of spectators is dreaming the play (like Genet, the onanist) as they perceive the performance--actually changing it within themselves and in their effect on the actors (like Genet, the writer). This interactive "gap" between stage and seats mirrors the gap between Genet and his written characters. It also illustrates the splits within Genet, projected through his imaginary Others, reflecting and subjecting him as he dreams, writes, and rereads them (and himself). Thus, his writing for the theatre both realized and extended his *Ich-spaltung*.

Genet began life as the fatherless child of a prostitute, as an outcast from society; his idea of "self" came through crime--through a violent self-engendering, as Ihab Hassan explains.

The outcast rebuffs not only society but also the very order of things. He works against nature, invents his sex and self, in order to sever all ties with creation. (180)

Yet this "rebuff" is a way of using the rejected laws of society and nature to "buff up" the outcast's own identity. The ties are never really severed; they are indeed tightened. The criminal supposedly builds his own scaffolding of identity as "outlaw" and temporarily escapes the law to prove it, but this status eventually brings him even more under the eye and hand of the law--as prisoner. His "self-scaffolding" seeks the cell bars. He needs to be caught to prove he is an "outlaw."

At the conclusion of Genet's first play (first written, not first performed or published), *Deathwatch*, a murder is committed in a prison cell by Lefranc for the sake of his watching Other, Green Eyes (and the audience). The act is a gift of love: to the "ego ideal" of Murderer that Green Eyes represents. Yet the act fails to unify Lefranc's ideal ego with his ego ideal,² it does not return him to the symbiosis of the mirror-stage (which is impossible, yet always yearned for). On the contrary, the act proves that Lefranc is a "fraud" (as Green Eyes tells him) and that is still his identity in spite of, and still more because of, his new deed. When the Guard arrives, he "leers at Green Eyes" --in Genet's stage direction (163), implying that only the known "Murderer" (Green Eyes) will be believed as being the (new) murderer. Even if Lefranc were to claim the killing, he would only be believed as a fraud.

The silent spectators of the theatre audience are thus placed in an ultimate (though impotent), juridical position. They have seen the "truth" that the Guard has missed. Yet they also see the criminals' identities locked into the performance of their own character-roles. If Green Eyes had committed the murder it would have been natural and magnificent as in the mythical past; but Lefranc, trying to imitate Green Eyes's greatness, commits a fraudulent murder, for he is not a Murderer. The killing of Maurice both succeeds and fails as a Symbolic act: it fails to secure Lefranc a new, transcendent identity, but it succeeds in proving the greatness of the Other, in whom his subjectivity and desire is constituted, the gaze and mirror of Green Eyes.

The outcast is also cast-in the role (and caste) of outcast. Genet's onanistic rebellion of writing gained him a new identity as novelist/playwright and freed him from prison walls, but it also further subjected him, in both Lacanian senses, to the Law of the Name- and No-of-the-Father. Unlike Lefranc, Genet changes his way of being in the world (to a degree), but he never escapes the scaffolding of language. He must continue to vomit, to hang himself on the scaffolding of his onanistically created characters, to prove his

new identity by being "caught" onstage and in print. He must, that is, until he stops. Only 13 years after his release from prison, Genet's last play is published. One reason might have been that the extension of his split subjectivity increased with each successive play. From *Deathwatch* through *The Maids* to *The Balcony*, Genet expands his setting and subject; and even further with *The Blacks* and *The Screens*, Genet's imaginary character reflections of himself take on black faces (with white masks) and histories, then Arab identities, causes, and fates.

In a 1984 interview with Ruediger Wischenbart, Genet was asked about his involvement with the Black Panthers and the PLO,³ about his "attraction to such groups." He responded (after referring to Proust):

I was thirty when I started to write. I was thirty-four or thirty-five when I stopped writing. It was a dream, a day-dream at least. I wrote in prison. When I came out, I was lost. I really found myself --my way around the real world--only in those two revolutionary movements: the Black Panthers and the Palestinians. That's when I submitted to the real world. . . . I acted under the conditions of the real world and not in the world of syntax. (42)

Yet, two sentences later Genet also admits: "Dreams are real." In Lacanian terms, the outer, Real world of objects and experiences and the inner, Imaginary world of dreams and day-dreams are linked through the Symbolic, "the world of syntax."⁴ But there is also a Real within (called the "unconscious") as well as a Real outside. "Dreams are real" (like plays) because they have meaning, because they are always already interpretable through the Symbolic, pointing to an unconscious Real. Thus, Genet's Imaginary "dream world" of writing, which he seems to denounce at the end of his life, linked the Real within him to the Real world outside him through the Symbolic: through his writings being published and performed onstage.⁵

However, in becoming Real outside him, Genet's plays also became more and more lost to him. Genet's tragic journey from onanistic writer, through gradually more "social" dramas, to the ideal ego of "intellectual guerrilla" (as the title of the Wischenbart interview refers to him) displays a continual, inevitable failure to reach the Real--to directly connect the Real within to the Real outside. For the Real, in Lacanian terms, is always mediated by the Symbolic and the Imaginary; it is always beyond reach.⁶ Genet seems to suggest this himself (indirectly) at the end of the Wischenbart interview (45-46). He says that he will "betray" the Palestinians as soon as they "establish themselves" (i.e. when they become more Real than Symbolic). Wischenbart asks if this statement isn't "just an ironic gesture." Genet insists it was an "honest" statement, but adds:

I am honest only with myself. As soon as I start talking I am already betrayed by the situation. I am betrayed by the person who listens to me. . . . My choice of words betrays me. (46)

Genet's extreme sensitivity to the split in human subjectivity, to the gaps between the personal Imaginary, the Symbolic of language expression (and of "self" constitution), and the Real outside/within yet always at a distance, indicates a reason for his "greatness" as a writer, but also a reason for the painful brevity of his writing career.

According to Ihab Hassan, Genet "undermine[s] all the assumptions of Being. He probes anti-consciousness" (208). In this sense, too, the words of Genet quoted above partake in Lacan's "tacit deconstruction of the neo-Freudian notion of a reality principle," which Ellie Ragland-Sullivan elucidates (184). Genet's plays, in the order he wrote them, direct their deconstruction more and more towards the reality principle(s) of society--and its myths. His second play, *The Maids*,⁷ again concludes with a murder, but this time it is the ritual playing out of a murder of the Master (Madame) by the Slaves (Maids). Yet, it is not only a matter of Slave *ressentiment* overcoming a Master's power, as in the Hegelian typology of Nietzsche⁸ and Marx, but also of a self-deconstructing ritual in which the Maids take turns re-playing and repaying their murderous *ressentiment*--toward each other. Madame herself apparently escapes.

Genet, the "outcast" playwright, depicts not a triumphant, Lukacsian struggle of proletarian heroes, but rather a doomed *ressentiment* which turns inward: between and within the Maids. They are trapped in their work/position/roles as much as the prisoners of *Deathwatch*. They play out their Imaginary and Symbolic murder of Madame in each other: of the Other in the other and the Other within. That is their only triumph. Thus Genet implicitly deconstructs both the "reality principle" of capitalist/aristocratic social status and of the Marxist proletariat.

However, Genet not only deconstructs the capitalist and Marxist reality principles, he also displaces (and yet re-replaces) the top of Freud's psychic topology. While Lacan splits the Freudian "superego" (*Über-ich*) between the identificatory *moi* (repressed by it) and the social *je* (thus formed) (Ragland-Sullivan 53); Genet's *Maids*, in a parallel, dramatic (Oedipal) and theatrical way, "murder" their common superego by ritually murdering Madame and dividing it (her) between them. But they also repeat--with every Real performance of the play and with the Imaginary ritual performed within the play--a resurrection (and re-erection of the phallic signifier) of her as the "Madame" within each of them. *The Maids* thus "probes anti-consciousness" by exposing the rule and rules of anti-conscience.

According to Ragland-Sullivan's reading of Lacan: "the residue of a child's development is the Imaginary as it asserts itself in adult life in relation to Symbolic order contracts, pacts, and laws. But the Imaginary tends to subvert

these laws, whether through innocuous irony or criminal acts" (179). The predominantly Imaginary "playing" of children likewise develops into adult theatre's assertive, "serious" Imaginary, often rebelling against and even trying to subvert society's Symbolic laws and representations. Yet Genet's plays rebel against their own rebellions, subvert their own subversions, and so approach (but never reach) the Real beyond.

The childish clients of Madame Irma's brothel in *The Balcony* play out their Imaginary fantasies onstage (in the various "rooms" the set turns to view), while offstage noises of a Real (or Realer) rebellion are occasionally heard. Is that Real(er) rebellion "outside" the brothel going to subvert its perverted Imaginary? Is the Imaginary violence within the brothel (with its own possibilities of Real-ity) itself a rebellion against the Real "outside"? The Imaginary violence within the brothel and the Real(er) violence outside--evidenced by the sound-signs of "machine gun fire" heard within--approach a violent meeting as the play suspensefully proceeds. But the walls of the Grand Balcony brothel, fending off the outer, Real(er) rebellion, also include: the Real eyes of theatre spectators "out there" in the darkness watching--from the Other side of the "fourth wall" between stage and seats.

The violent, Imaginary/Symbolic perversions of *The Balcony* take place in front of mirrors: the literal, onstage mirrors (described in Genet's stage directions), the mirrors in the Other character's eyes, and the mirror-eyes of the theatre spectators. The "Bishop" (the brothel client in bishop's vestments), for example, verges on a mirror-stage-like (and phallic) *jouissance* of costumed identity: first in the eyes of the "confessing" Woman (his whore) and then in the real mirror onstage (10-12). But, disrobed at the end of Scene 1, he looks down upon his Imaginary/Symbolic in-vestments, "which are heaped on the floor" and tries again to join his outward, social "I" (Lacanian *je*) with his inner sense of "myself" (Lacanian *moi*)--even though (and because) the gap between them is now clear:

Ornaments, laces, through you I re-enter myself. I reconquer a domain. . . . I install myself in a clearing where suicide at last becomes possible . . . and here I stand, face to face with my death.
(13)

In the mirror of his fallen vestments on the floor, the "Bishop"--or rather, the *moi* inside the costume--glimpses the gap between Imaginary and Symbolic. And he faces the Image of his self-death (*moi*-death), which would finally unite *moi* and *je* as Symbolic figure.

The "Judge," too, verges on *jouissance* in the mirror-image of his "Executioner" (the pimp, Arthur, who beats the Thief/Whore at the Judge's command), yet glimpses the gap between the Imaginary and the Real (and the Symbolic "word").

JUDGE: . . . I'm pleased with you, Executioner! Masterly mountain of meat, hunk of beef that's set in motion at a word from me! (He pretends to look at himself in the Executioner.) Mirror that glorifies me! Image that I can touch, I love you. . . . (He touches him.) Are you there? (18-19)

The client playing "General" in the brothel is also phallicly aroused, like the Bishop and Judge, by the potential of pure, hollow, Symbolic Being. In his brothel room, he "rides" and Imaginary horse (his whore) into Death, whereupon (in her words): "The nation weeps for that splendid hero who died in battle. . . ." (27).

However, the real(er) "hero" of the play is the Chief of Police, realizing his heroism by "putting down" the (supposedly) Real rebellion outside the brothel (49). But even the heroic Chief of Police needs a further revolution, a new brothel perversion of his own, to create his Symbolic place within the brothel--to bridge the gap between its Imaginary and the Real outside. After quashing the outside rebellion, the Chief of Police watches the former rebel leader, Roger, play an Imaginary "chief of Police" in one of the brothel rooms. The Real Chief, watching, hopes this new brothel perversion-scene will give him (or rather, his Image) a permanent, Symbolic status as one of the brothel roles, replayed over and over again. But Roger, still the rebel, perverts the perversion by castrating himself while playing the Chief of Police. And yet, the (supposedly) Real violence of Roger's further rebellion plays into the Chief's Imaginary/Symbolic intention, stated earlier in the play: "to appear in the form of a gigantic phallus, a prick of great status" (78). The Chief, however, must wait (supposedly) "two thousand years" for Roger's castrated penis to give birth to a new symbolic "Hero" in the Chief's Image. So, in the end, the Chief of Police exits into the brothel's Imaginary Mausoleum to await his *jouissance* of Symbolic resurrection.

Madame Irma experiences a double *jouissance* in *The Balcony*: first as Madame of the "Grand Balcony" brothel, through her assistant Carmen's mirror-eyes (37); then later as the new Queen, when the Grand Balcony extends and swallows the Real outside, after the rebellion out there (i.e. offstage) is put down. This extension of the Grand Balcony's Imaginary/Symbolic realm is depicted in the stage directions of Scene 8, moving the setting to the outside of the building: "The scene is the balcony itself, which projects beyond the facade of the brothel" (70). In the next scene (9, the last of the play), the newly empowered figures from the brothel, Bishop, Judge, and General, think they must create a new social order, "invent an entire life" (71 [General]); but actually they restore and embody the old Symbolic order, which they had perverted in their Imaginary brothel scenes. Their now public, Symbolic images are confirmed by their Photographers, who insist on "the classical pose. A return to order, a return to classicism" (73).

However, the job of being a public Symbol ruins the former, perverse pleasure of those same Imaginary roles; the Bishop, Judge, and General even threaten to rebel themselves against the Chief of Police (79-80). But then the greater, outside threat of rebellion returns, overshadowing their little uprising. The Chief of Police and Queen Irma realize that the Bishop's assassination of Chantal, Irma's former whore who was re-hired by the rebels to be their "singer" and "sign" of heroism (56), has failed to make Chantal a safe symbol (a "saint") for the re-newed order (81). This new threat of violence, however, also becomes the Chief's hope for Symbol-dom (prior to Roger's castration), stimulated by the words of Bishop and General. According to them, the "people" have "trembled so violently" that they are losing all hope and will "collapse": fall like Narcissus into the pool of the Chief's reflection of Symbolic order and fill him phallicly with their "drowned bodies" (85-86). But, as I've already mentioned, Roger's perversion of his own rebel Image in imitating his enemy, the Chief, becomes a further, subversive perversion of the Chief's hero Image through Roger's self-castration. And yet, this also serves to detach the phallic Symbol and reified Image of the Chief as "Hero"--as he himself had predicted (long before the expressed desire to appear as a phallus): "I'll make my image detach itself from me. I'll make it penetrate into your studios, force its way in, reflect and multiply itself" (48). Madame/Queen Irma's Symbolic brothel order is thus re-confirmed in power--through the very revolutionary violence supposedly attempting to overthrow it. The Real of the revolution outside is revealed as itself perverted by the Imaginary/Symbolic power within the brothel, by the desire for revolution being also a demand of the overall social order. (Perhaps the "outside" rebellion was always already just another room of the brothel.)

The Grand Balcony brothel, presented onstage in the play, *The Balcony*, has at its center the voyeurism and mirror-eyes of the Real theatre audience, situated behind the mirror of their watching. In the middle of the final scene, the Chief of Police turns to Irma's panoptic "mechanism" for viewing all the brothel studios and (according to Genet's stage directions) "the two panels of the double mirror forming the back of the stage silently draw apart, revealing the interior of the Special [Mausoleum] Studio" (87). But that "double mirror" (according to my theatrical imagination) not only reflects the onstage action, but also the sea of spectator's eyes and faces watching. So, the drawing apart of the backstage mirrors at this moment, showing the characters of Symbolic authority watching the scene in the Mausoleum Studio, also shows to the watching audience: an image of themselves splitting open, revealing the Imaginary/Symbolic "Mausoleum Studio" within them. Thus, that vision also reveals a reflection of the Real within the audience, viewing, re-imagining, and mirroring *The Balcony* onstage.⁹

The eternal return of the repressed, Real rebellion--outside and within the Symbolic and Imaginary of the theatrical event--becomes racial in the next play written by Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*. As Ihab Hassan has noted,

"Genet now reverses himself: the rebels . . . win" (202). And yet, in their gradual winning and overthrowing of White colonial power, the rebel Blacks must pervert themselves with White masks and with their slave performance before a specifically White (or Symbolically White) audience, according to Genet's demands.¹⁰ As the Chief of Police must wait "two thousand years" in a brothel "tomb" to change the Symbolic order of *The Balcony*, so must the Blacks of *The Blacks* masquerade as a show for Whites in order to eventually create a new, Black Symbolic order. The foolish "Court" of Blacks with White masks, watching from the balcony over the stage, reflect the watching White theatre audience. They thus represent the oppression of the old Symbolic, yet also act to subvert it. Change comes through the (supposedly) Real violence offstage and also onstage through the Imaginary/Symbolic violence of a ritually re-enacted murder. These two, elaborate, deceitful mechanisms combine, intersect, and copulate to finally create the possibility for new "gestures of love" by the murderer Village and the whore Virtue at the end of the play (128).

The Blacks' Real offstage rebellion, as reported during the play to the leader of the masquerade, Archibald, by the character, Newport News (running on-and offstage again and again), inseminates the onstage play with a violent purpose. But the onstage masquerade, masking the offstage violence, is also a revolution. The funeral rite and re-enacted murder around the absent, Imaginary body and Symbolic mask of a White girl (worn by a Black male) ignites a further ritual revolution onstage: the violent perversion of White Symbols of authority through their Imaginary re-playing. The Blacks impersonate Whites in order to kill and overthrow them, in order to kill and overthrow the White Symbolic and Imaginary of their own consciousness (and unconscious), in order to re-invent their own Blackness. They must overturn that which Virtue describes as: "what I see and what goes on in my own soul and what I call the temptation of the Whites" (24).

Early in the play, Archibald, mockingly re-assures the Real theatre audience that a safe, comfortable distance will be maintained between the stage and seats: "We shall increase the distance that separates us--a distance that is basic--by our pomp, our manners, our insolence--for we are also actors" (12). This increase of "distance" is also (in a Brechtian sense) basic to the re-creation of Black identity, Imaginary and Symbolic, throughout the play. The pomp, manners, and insolence of Blacks playing Whites and of Blacks playing Blacks draws out the strands of Symbolic order from Imaginary representation, creating a potential for re-presentation beyond the masquerade. And yet, the basic distance or gap between the Imaginary/Symbolic re-presentation and the Real social world beyond the theatre's masquerade (and within it, in its Real audience) remains present in the play. It is, in fact, increasingly revealed, deferring the climax and success of Black revolution into the realm of the dead. In the play's face-off between Black and White matriarchs, for example,

Felicity (the Black "Queen") calls forth the "beauty" and tragic perpetuity of Black, criminal violence.¹¹

FELICITY (with her hands on her hips; exploding): . . . Negroes, come back me up! And don't let the crime be glossed over. (to the Queen): No one could possibly deny it, it's sprouting, sprouting, my beauty, it's growing, bright and green, it's bursting into bloom, into perfume, and that lovely tree, that crime of mine, is all Africa! . . . (102)

THE [WHITE MASKED] OUEEN: And if I'm dead, why do you go on and on killing me, murdering me over and over in my color? . . .

FELICITY: I shall have the corpse of your corpse's ghost. (103)

The violence and criminal transgression essential to Genet's writing bothers some critics, such as Harry E. Stewart, who details "those real criminals and their crimes which are the object of Genet's . . . real, horrifying adoration" (635). Stewart connects the actual "Lilac Murder" (rape and dismemberment) of a four-year-old girl by one Louis Menesclou (mentioned by name in Genet's "Dedicace" of *Querelle de Brest*) to the allusions of Genet's first play, *Deathwatch*. Also, according to Stewart: "Genet's fascination with Gilles de Rais . . . reveals additional aspects of his attraction to vicious psychopaths--in particular his deep-rooted desire to 'become' them" (637). And Stewart lists several other "vicious psychopaths" attractive to Genet and "misused" (i.e. re-invented) in his literary adoration of them as characters in his novels and plays. I appreciate the evidence of Stewart's research, but take a different view: Genet's attraction to "real" and extremely violent criminals reveals not only a "deep-rooted desire to 'become' them," but also a genuinely violent "depth" and psychopathic "truth" to his writings.

Several of Jacques Lacan's early psychoanalytic writings also concerned the subject of criminal violence, according to Carolyn Dean (43, 51, 53).

Madness seeks an impossible reconciliation between the real and the ideal. It is this attempted reconciliation that constitutes the motive behind "unmotivated" or "inexplicable" crime, one that liberates the criminal from his madness at the same time as it perpetuates the discrepancy between who he is and who he wants to be that is the origin of his *folie* in the first place. For the crime, in fact, marks what Lacan calls . . . the limits of signification: it is the *passage à l'acte* by which the criminal moves from pathology to "cure"--from delirium . . . to the relief effected by the self-punishment the crime permits. The crime represents as well as a movement from the symbolic to the unrepresentable because it designates the limits of the symbolic. . . . (54-55)

Genet, the criminal, moved from onanistic, prison writing to novelistic and theatrical legitimacy, but he never left his violence behind him. In fact, his writings illustrate how essential violence is to the creative act of those novels and plays which approach the void between real and ideal, which touch the razor-edge of the Symbolic at "the limit of signification" and "the unrepresentable" Real. But such writing is also an instance of the intrinsic gap(s) in Being between Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real--the Lack and Want-to-be (Lacan's *manque-à-être*) of being human. Violent, psychopathic criminals and violent, criminal writers like Genet show us our human edges.

Particularly in Genet's plays, theatre audiences watch and contribute their own voyeuristic desires to those of the actors, director, and other theatre artists: to see, hear, and touch the limit edge(s) of being human. Though touching goes beyond voyeurism and is usually forbidden to the audience, the desire to experience with senses more intimate than sight and hearing, and to experience more intimate sights and sounds, is always a part of the theatre's Real-ity in the ever-present gap between stage and seats (even in less conventional, "environmental" plays where the audience is seated onstage or the performance takes place in a common space). The gap is accentuated in Genet's plays between stage and seats, between the spectators and the actors (and their characters), as Archibald tells the audience in *The Blacks*. But it is also mirrored onstage in accentuated gaps between characters watching and performing for each Other, often involving the erotic titillation and teasing (out) of each Other's voyeurism.

According to Lacan, "man's desire is the desire of the Other"--even in defiance of the Other (38).¹² Genet's characters demonstrate not only a perversely Imaginative desire for the Other, but also, in their subversive defiance, a desire of the Other's Symbolic order and power. They display a necessary violence and criminal "madness"--liberated, yet perpetuated in their revolutionary actions--as lacking, wanting subjects of the Other (and the Other's demand). The Other, of course, is also present in the seats of the theatre. It is that present Other to which and of which the actor/characters onstage are most immediately constituted; and it is the Other(s) onstage to which and of which the audience/spectators constitute their voyeuristic, perverse, and subversive desires in the theatrical experience of Genet's plays. The "mirror" of the gap (and gaze) between stage and seats, and the many mirrors onstage in Genet's plays (literally and also in the eyes and gazes of the characters) thus both reflect and are seen through--re-doubling Images and Symbols of the Real in violent juxtaposition.¹³

The desire for and demand of violent criminal beauty continues from the rebels of *The Balcony* and *The Blacks* to the rebelling Arabs of *The Screens*. But the gaps between Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real gape even wider, as the Arab rebellion (the Algerian War) moves onstage.¹⁴

In the first scene, an old Arab woman borrows her European-Other's Symbol of erotic beauty and feminine power, high-heeled shoes, and dances

"beautiful and proud" before her son; yet, as they both "burst out laughing," the valise full of Imaginary wedding presents "falls to the ground and opens . . . empty" (14-16). Like Felicity in *The Blacks*, this old Arab woman ("The Mother" is her title) comes to personify the perverse beauty of revolution: "I'll recite a hundred and twenty-seven insults a hundred and twenty-seven times, and each insult will be so beautiful, ladies, that it'll make you gleam" (44). Yet the ultimate force she eventually embodies is the cynical, reckless, omni-rebellious power of laughter,¹⁵ as she tells the audience: "I'm Laughter--not just any laughter, but the kind that appears when all goes wrong" (112). When her son, Said, a traitor to the Arab cause, ends up as the anti-hero of the play, she tells him to escape from both sides--and from his own legend in the making.

THE MOTHER: . . . Make a getaway. Don't let yourself be conned by either the old [Arab] girl or the soldiers. Don't serve either of them, don't serve any purpose whatever. I think they're going to make up a song about you. The words have been written. People are humming it. It's in the air. (She screams.) Said, squelch the inspiration, shit on them! (199)

As *The Screens* plays itself out onstage, the world of the dead grows in relation to the conflicts of the living. Genet represents this unrepresentable Real world of death as Being-in-Laughter. The dead on a higher level (or balcony) of the stage watch and laugh at the absurd struggles (on lower levels) of living, rebelling Arabs and their enemies, the colonists and soldiers. And, as representatives from both sides meet in death, they laugh together at the folly and madness of the living (169). Sergeant Gadget, for example, who died while shitting, laughs with the Arab women and explains the emptiness of "the uniform, the stripes, the decorations," an emptiness he had seen in his superior officers' (mirror) eyes--which "emptied" while he shitted, too (169-170). Said's Mother is there with him, laughing in the world of the dead. Even Kadidja is there. Even Kadidja, the vehement rebel matriarch, who in Scene 12 called upon "evil" to "impregnate" her people and then called forth the bloody gifts of revolution, which various Arab rebels drew upon the screens (97-101), even she ends up (with the Mother) "writh[ing] on the ground with laughter" when she's dead (155).

According to Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's view of Lacanian theory: "the Imaginary and the Symbolic place themselves as screens over the Real and prevent it from ever actually 'thinking' itself. In this sense the Real of psychic experience lies beyond the dream" (192). The Real of Genet's psychic experience (and that of actors and audiences) lies beyond the hyper-theatrical, Imaginary/Symbolic screen of his plays. And yet, the gaps between those Lacanian dimensions, are realized onstage in the infinite and sharp-edged mirrors of Genet's plays. This theatrical realization, like the limit edge of actual, violent crime, is a *passage à l'acte*, a "cure" for the pathological split

between ideal and real. Genet finds his final play-cure in the dream of death as Laughing-Being realized in *The Screens*. There the combined chorus of specters and spectators laughing together in an outdoor theatre climaxes the playwright's extending, split subjectivity: from solipsistic, onanistic, prison writer, through his pathological sensitivity to the *Ich-spaltung* of all human subjects, towards a tentative connection with the Other of theatre. Then, however, Genet stopped writing for the theatre, "cured" by the self-punishment of that crime.

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Notes

1. Sartre quotations within this quotation are from *Saint Genet, comedien et martyr* (page numbers not given in Bataille text).

2. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan explains Lacan's use of the terms "ideal ego" and "ego ideal": "In 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' (1921), he referred to the narcissistic investment in self as an 'ideal ego,' and the objects toward whom ego libido flows as 'ego ideals'" (31). See also Lacan's use of these terms in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*: "it is in the Other that the subject is constituted as ideal, that he has to regulate the completion of what comes as ego, or ideal ego—which is not the ego ideal—that is to say, to constitute himself in his imaginary reality" (144). Furthermore, as Ragland-Sullivan notes, "Freud confused both [ideal ego and ego ideal] as objects of Desire, representing wish fulfillment. Lacan's efforts have gone in the opposite direction; he tries to maintain a distance between the ideal ego and ego ideals (alter ego) and to separate both of these from the mechanism of desiring" (54).

3. According to a preface to the Wischenbart interview in *Performing Arts Journal*, Genet published a report on what he witnessed at the Chattila refugee camp in Lebanon on the day after the massacre (in September 1982) under the title "4 Hours in Chattila." And "between October 1970 and April 1971, Genet had been invited by the PLO at which time he visited Palestinian camps and military bases on the Syrian-Jordanian border" (38).

4. I do not mean to suggest a fixed topology. Lacan's three orders are "in-mixed" dimensions (Ragland-Sullivan 190), for which Lacan drew three overlapping, interlocking rings, tied in a "Borromean knot."

5. See also Genet's "dream" of an ideal theatre, expressed in "A Note on Theatre":

One can only dream of an art that would be a profound web of active symbols capable of speaking to the audience a language in which nothing is said but everything portended. (809)

He goes on to explain his attempt to reach this ideal in writing for the stage:

I attempted to effect a displacement that . . . would bring theatre into the theatre. . . . I hope thereby . . . [for] the advantage of signs as remote as possible from what they are meant first to signify, though nevertheless attached to them in order, by this sole link, to unite the author with the spectator. . . .

Implicit references to Artaud and Brecht might be seen in such statements, but they are also genuinely Genet.

6. See Ragland-Sullivan 188: "The 'real' Real is both beyond and behind Imaginary perception and Symbolic description."

7. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan has also written on Genet's *The Maids* from a Lacanian perspective—and in much more detail than I have here. See her essay, "Jacques Lacan, Literary

Theory, and *The Maids* of Jean Genet" in *Psychological Perspectives on Literature: Freudian Dissidents and Non-Freudians*, ed. Joseph Natoli (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1984).

8. *The Maids* repeatedly illustrates the attitude of Nietzschean *ressentiment* (in *On the Genealogy of Morals*): the Slave's deep envy of the Master's "nobility"—to the point of a reactive "Will to Power" over the Master. For example, the maid Solange: "now we are Mademoiselle Solange Lemercier, that Lemercier woman. The famous criminal. . . . I am not a maid. I have a noble soul" (95). Solange (and Genet) here assumes the gaze of the Nietzschean Slave's "venomous eye of *ressentiment*," which sees "the noble, powerful man" as "evil" (40), but she also turns it upon herself (in mirror-stage *jouissance*), assuming both nobility and evil (in the mirror-gaze of the Other maid and audience). This reminds one, too, of Genet's own rise to evil nobility as famous criminal/artistic genius, invited to dinner by the French President at the Palace of the Champs-Élysées. (See Hassan 180.)

9. This consciously hollow, theatrical Image (and Symbol) of Reality is repeated in Irma's words and actions at the very end of *The Balcony*: "facing the audience" she tells it to "go home" to an Imaginary/Symbolic "falsar than here" (96).

10. Genet is careful to insist on a White audience for *The Blacks*, even Symbolically—with a token White spectator, White masks given to the Black spectators, or a White mask on a dummy in the audience (4).

11. Cf. Genet's comment in "A Note on Theatre":

No doubt one of the functions of art is to substitute the efficacy of beauty for religious faith. At least, this beauty should have the power of a poem, that is of a crime. (810)

Genet continues:

It would be sufficient to discover—or create—the common Enemy, then the Homeland. . . ." But he also notes: "For me, the Enemy will never be anywhere. Nor will there ever be a Homeland, abstract or interior.

Genet-the-outcast's personal lack of place-ment (i.e. displacement) of Enemy and Homeland, which intensifies that desire, can be seen in the nearly impossible re-resolution of the Blacks' attempt to overturn and re-create their own (White masked) Symbolic order through the "beauty" of murder, rebellion, and love.

12. See also the "Translator's Note" (by Alan Sheridan) on "desire":

Lacan has linked the concept of "desire" with "need" (*besoin*) and "demand" (*demandes*). . . . There is no adequation between the need and the demand that conveys it; indeed it is the gap between them that constitutes desire, at once particular like the first and absolute like the second. Desire (fundamentally in the singular) is a perpetual effect of symbolic articulation. (278)

This relates, too, to my discussion of the "need" of the Chief of Police for the outside rebellion and for the perverse impersonation of him by Roger in *The Balcony*. The gap between this need and the Chief's demand to become a Symbolic (explicitly phallic [78]) and Imaginary Hero-figure in the brothel is graphically demonstrated by Genet when Roger as Chief castrates himself (93).

13. See also Lacan's discussion of psychoanalytic "transference," specifically: "it is in the space of the Other that he [the subject] sees himself and the point from which he looks at himself is also in that space" (144).

14. While the "outside" (offstage) rebellion of the other two plays moves inside the stage space in *The Screens*, the stage itself is turned inside-out, into an "open-air theatre," according to Genet's demand (9).

15. For a more extensive discussion of laughter in *The Screens*, see Herbert Blau's "Comedy Since the Absurd," *Modern Drama* 25.4 (Dec. 1982): 545-68.

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