Jean genet and his novels

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The known facts of Genet's early life are few. He was an illegitimate child, brought up on public charity. A thief and a homosexual, he spent much of his life between the ages of ten and thirty in reformatories and prisons.

Genet's early novels consist almost entirely of the author's personal preoccupations. Notre-Dame des Fleurs and Miracle de la Rose express despair and dreams of fantasy existences, thus providing an outlet for Genet's frustrations and aggression. Together with Journal du Voleur, these two novels appear to be autobiography. Rather than relating facts however, their aim is to reinterpret Genet's past life and to endow it with the deliberate motive of attaining perfection in solitude, evil and "sainteté"; they thus attempt to create a credible Legend for their author. This retrospective reappraisal is consciously written to coincide with the image forced upon Genet by the society which had rejected him as a child.

Pompes Funèbres and Querelle de Brest, as well as Genet's subsequent plays, are concerned less with Genet's own personality; they attempt to implicate the entire "civilised" world in an ethic, which theoretically shatters long-perpetuated assumptions concerning relationships between individuals and groups within society.

Genet's attack upon society's values is made effective by his use of language. His stylised technique, with its symbolism and lyricism, reassures and impresses; by contrast the ideas expressed aim to violate social taboos and to provoke a shock reaction in the reader.

For Genet writing provided first an escape, both imaginary and real, from prison life; it is his consequent reacceptance by society which allows the possibility of his "revenge". Genet, the self-confessed embodiment of Evil, sets out, by writing pornography, to destroy the Virtuous society which he loathes. Morally he both succeeds and fails in this task because of the flaw in society's ethic, whereby artistic creativity is rewarded, without reference to the philosophy expressed.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout the text with the exception of the Introduction, where full titles are given, the following abbreviations have been used for Genet's prose works:

Notre-Dame	Notre-Dame des Fleurs
Miracle	Miracle de la Rose
Querelle	Querelle de Brest
Journal	Journal du Voleur

Introduction

This study, Jean Genet and his Novels, will attempt to trace Genet's life before, during and after his prose writing and to establish the nature of the relationship which exists between his life and his work. It is generally accepted that the novels, and in particular Notre-Dame des Fleurs, Miracle de la Rose and Journal du Voleur, are autobiographical and, in view of the lack of a reliably objective biography, the reader and critic must rely heavily upon these works. In quoting statements from the novels as evidence of biographical fact it must be remembered that the author's aim is to reconstruct his past life not only as it was but also as he chooses to reinterpret it (1). Since Genet may be attempting deliberately to mislead the reader the factual validity of apparently true information and events must be questioned.

In considering Genet's novels, their form, content and recurrent themes, this study will aim primarily to examine motives, reasons and results from the point of view of the author who created the novels. Any attempt to assess Genet's work as revenge or as an attack upon society is inevitably confronted by two difficulties. Firstly it is impossible to evaluate objectively the actual effect of an author's attempts to change society or to persuade the reader of his point of view; and secondly Genet's writing considered solely as philosophy or propaganda, however anarchic, contains inconsistencies of attitude and statement which inevitably weaken his arguments and thus their potential power to convince others.

Thus, while neglecting neither Genet's attitude towards the world nor his very definite and deliberate attack upon civilised society and its

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(1) There are many occasions throughout the novels where Genet admits to this and similar aims:
Notre-Dame des Fleurs (Gallimard) 1969 pp. 114/188/195.
Miracle de la Rose (Gallimard) 1969 pp. 243/339.
Journal du Voleur (Gallimard) 1968 pp. 61-62/65/75-76/115-16/217-18/284-85.

values, this study will seek to interpret the novels from the point of view of their complex relationship with their author.

Jean Genet was born in Paris on December 19th 1910, abandoned by his mother and brought up by "L'Assistance Publique". It was not until the age of 21 that Genet discovered the place of his birth, 22, rue d'Assas, his mother's name, Gabrielle Genet, and the fact that his father was unknown. Thus he was both illegitimate and an orphan, cared for by the state until the age of 7, when he was adopted by a peasant family in the Morvan region of France (2). Here for a few years he probably lived a conventional childhood, being brought up to respect and adhere to the moral values of a rural, village community, where property, honesty and the family were the essential priorities.

By the age of ten Genet had already begun to steal small trivial objects. He was caught, punished and called a thief (3). The significance which can be attached to this labelling will be discussed at a later stage. Its effect however, as Jean-Paul Sartre points out, was to change the course of Genet's life, thought, outlook and attitude towards himself and others. After repeated offences, at the age of 15, Genet was sent to Mettray, a Borstal-like reformatory (4). The exact reason for his being sent here is uncertain (5). He spent three years at Mettray and its effect, rather than to reform was to harden his attitude towards the society which had imprisoned him. Genet met other delinquents, most of whom were probably more violent, less intelligent and less sensitive than he. Here however he felt part of a family, albeit a criminal one. The system inside the reformatory, like that of the peasant society outside, was rigidly structured with a defined and inflexible hierarchy based on power and status. Genet was again at the bottom of the scale.

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(2) Journal du Voleur (Gallimard) 1968 p. 46.
(3) Genet's statement concerning the age at which he began to steal appears in Journal du Voleur (extraits) p. 41 Les Temps Modernes No. 10 July 1946 pp. 33-56.
(4) Miracle de la Rose (Gallimard) 1969 p. 275.
(5) Two possible reasons. Laziness: Journal du Voleur (Gallimard) 1968 p. 47./ For gouging out a boy's eye: Miracle de la Rose (Gallimard) 1969 p. 405.

Physically he was neither imposing nor violent, and by the standards of the other inmates his criminal record was unimpressive. At Mettray too Genet seems to have gained his first homosexual experience, although he does comment in Journal du Voleur that he had a liking for young boys before he was sent to the reformatory (6). Adolescent homosexuality is a common enough phenomenon however, especially in all-male establishments, and thus Genet's participation would not have been remarkable. After his imprisonment at Mettray, which lasted from 1926 to 1929 (7), Genet ran away and joined the Foreign Legion, but deserted after only a short stay (8). The next fifteen years of Genet's life were a history of crime and imprisonment; he travelled throughout Europe's underworld, stealing and committing petty crimes wherever he went (9). Among the countries he visited was Hitler's Germany, but he stayed here only a short time because, as a thief he felt constricted and ill at ease. He writes in Journal du Voleur: "Le scandale est impossible. Je vole à vide" (10). During this period he moved in and became familiar with the underworld society of thieves, pimps, male prostitutes, homosexuals and murderers. All these were people upon whom he would base the characters of his novels.

The years from 1942 to 1948 were the most creative of Genet's life from a literary point of view. In this period he wrote his four novels, Journal du Voleur, and at least two of his plays. In 1942 Genet was in Fresnes prison in France. Here he wrote his first poem, Le Condamné à Mort, dedicated to the young murderer Maurice Pilorge, who had been executed in 1939 and to whom Genet also dedicated his first novel, Notre-Dame des Fleurs.

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(6) Journal du Voleur (extraits) p. 41. Les Temps Modernes July 1946.
(7) Genet spent 3 Julys at Mettray: Miracle de la Rose (Gallimard) 1969 p. 437.
(8) Journal du Voleur (Gallimard) 1968 p. 48.
(9) Journal du Voleur: pp. 18 (Spain)/50-52 (Czechoslovakia and Poland)/ 87-88 (Gibraltar)/97-98 (Italy, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Austria, Germany, Belgium)/ 134-137 (Holland).
(10) Journal du Voleur (Gallimard) 1968 p. 131.

Although introducing the reader for the first time to the themes and subjects which obsessed Genet, Le Condamné à Mort was an unoriginal and rather obscure poem. What technique it has was probably learnt from the professional song-writer who had once looked after Genet (11). In the same year Notre-Dame des Fleurs was written, also in prison, but this was not published until 1944 and only then at the expense of an "amateur" and in a limited edition. The circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of the novel are intriguing; how had Genet learned to write with such an obvious knowledge of literature? and how did the novel come to be published at all? Jean Cocteau, who appeared in court on Genet's behalf in 1942 could have been involved (12); another possibility is Olga Barbezat, a prison visitor and the wife of Marc Barbezat, who was later to publish many of Genet's works (13). In whatever way publication was achieved it soon became apparent that Genet's work was reaching a small but influential readership in the intellectual and literary circles of Paris, and by 1944 Genet the writer had probably been accepted by this society. It was now that Genet met Jean-Paul Sartre for the first time. Simone de Beauvoir mentions this meeting in La Force de l'Age (14).

The meeting was to prove significant, and in 1945 extracts from Genet's third novel, Pompes Funèbres appeared in Sartre's Les Temps Modernes (15). Early in 1946 Marc Barbezat published the second novel, Miracle de la Rose, which had been written in the prisons of La Santé and Tourelles, and which Genet claims to have finished in 1943 (16). In July 1946 extracts from the autobiographical diary Journal du Voleur appeared in Les Temps Modernes (17). In 1947 Genet turned his attention to the theatre,

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(11) Sartre mentions the song-writer in Saint Genet Comédien et Martyr (Gallimard) 1952 p. 395.
(12) Cocteau notes this intervention in La Difficulté d'Etre (Morihien) 1947, p. 267 (footnote).
(13) The help of Olga Barbezat is suggested by R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet (Peter Owen) 1968, p. 103; and by P. Thody, Jean Genet: A Study of his Novels and Plays (H. Hamilton) 1968 p. 13.
(14) La Force de l'Age (Gallimard) 1960 pp. 594-595.
(15) Les Temps Modernes. (Année 1. No. 3) December 1945 pp. 405-419.
(16) Miracle de la Rose (Gallimard) 1969 p. 469.
(17) See footnote 3 p. 2.

a development already hinted at in Notre-Dame des Fleurs (18), and in 1946 his ballet, Adame Miroir was produced. In April 1947 Jouvet produced Les Bonnes at L'Athénée. In its first production the play ran for thirteen weeks and succeeded in bringing Genet into the public eye. Thus he was a well-known figure in spite of the fact that his prose works were still unavailable in standard editions. In 1947 the complete version of Pompes Funèbres appeared, again however in a private edition only, due probably to the explicit homosexual descriptions and also to Genet's apparently pro-Nazi sympathies. There were rumours at the time that Genet had in fact collaborated, although both Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir denied this (19).

In April 1947 the play Haute Surveillance was published in La Nef (20). In December of the same year Querelle de Brest, the last of Genet's four novels was published, once again in a limited edition.

In 1948 Genet was threatened by La Relègue, the means in French law, whereby an offender, convicted more than a certain number of times of the same crime, may be imprisoned for life as a preventive measure. With the help of Sartre and Cocteau, who wrote a joint appeal to the court in Combat (21), Genet was pardoned his crimes. The pleas made in Genet's defence were that although he had been a habitual thief, he had not committed the one crime which was threatening him with life-imprisonment; and perhaps more decisively that Genet's literary work, comparable to that of Villon or Verlaine, had actually freed him from his life of crime. In 1950 François Mauriac attacked Genet and his supporters, notably Sartre, in Le Figaro (22). A considerable controversy arose; as a result Genet proabably gained in reputation from the attentions of such an established member of the literary world as Mauriac. In the same year Journal du Voleur

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(18) Notre-Dame des Fleurs (Gallimard) 1969 p. 140.
(19) Sartre: Saint Genet (Gallimard) 1952 p. 116.
Simone de Beauvoir: La Force des Choses (Gallimard) 1963 p. 2.
(20) La Nef (Paris), March-April 1947.
(21) Au Président de la République: Combat, July 16 1948 p. 4.
(22) R. N. Coe quotes two articles by Mauriac in Unbalanced Opinions - A Study of Jean Genet and the French Critics, (Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society) Sept. 1970. The articles are:
Un malencontreux appel, (Le Figaro 8.8.1950) p. 1.
L'Excrémentialisme, (Le Figaro 15.8.1950) p. 1.

was openly published in the standard Gallimard edition. This apparently autobiographical account of Genet's life as a criminal was thus the first easily accessible prose work, and its appearance hastened the general publication of his novels.

Although the years 1942 to 1948 were the most productive, little is known about Genet during this period. The appeal which Sartre and Cocteau made against la Relègue was successful, and from this time Genet committed no further acts of crime. In 1951 the Oeuvres Complètes de Jean Genet Vol. II was published by Gallimard; it contained Notre-Dame des Fleurs and Miracle de la Rose, in slightly expurgated editions, as well as the two poems, Le Condamné à Mort and Un Chant d'Amour. In 1952 Saint Genet Comédien et Martyr, a preface by Sartre to Genet's collected works, appeared as Oeuvres Complètes Vol. I. Jean Genet. This study immediately became a work of significance both to Genet and to his critics, and despite Sartre's highly personal treatment of Genet, this work has continued to exercise a great influence on all subsequent criticism. In 1953 Oeuvres Complètes Vol. III was published. This contained Genet's last two novels; Pompes Funèbres and Querelle de Brest, and the poem Le Pêcheur du Suquet. After the publication of Saint Genet however Genet wrote no new prose fiction; the 1950s were, as P. Thody points out, "a period of consolidation and controversy rather than of creation and development" (23). His plays were produced and he wrote short articles, mainly on the nature of art and the function of the artist (24). In 1959 Roger Blin produced Les Nègres, a most important event since it did much to make Genet a recognised dramatist. It is worthy of note that Genet's plays from Les Bonnes to Les Nègres show a

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(23) P. Thody: Jean Genet: A Study of His Novels and Plays, (H. Hamilton) 1968, p. 20.

(24) Two works of this kind were: L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti (Les Lettres Nouvelles, V, No. 52, Sept. 1957, pp. 199-218) and Le Funambule (Décines, L'Arbalète in L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti) 1958 pp. 173-204.

greater degree of social and political awareness than did the more subjective prose works, despite their author's apparent lack of political purpose. In 1961 Les Paravents was published. Due however to the practical difficulties in staging the play, it was not until 1966 that it had its first production. The political bias of the play caused open hostility among servicemen, who were outraged by Genet's apparently pro-Algerian sympathies (25). From this time Genet's fame has spread, even though his literary output has declined. From accounts of those who know Genet personally, it seems that he lives in hotels and owns nothing, although the earnings from his writing have ensured that he no longer needs to steal. Simone de Beauvoir in La Force des Choses and Violette Leduc in La Folie en Tête make numerous mentions of Genet, commenting on his personality and relating interesting anecdotes (26). His homosexual tendencies have been redirected towards looking after the stepson of Lucien Sénémaud, to whom Genet's poem, Le Pêcheur du Suquet was dedicated (27). According to Maurice Cranston Genet is discreetly married to a "motherly widow" (28).

Recently however Genet has reemerged into the public eye. In 1968 his Oeuvres Complètes Vol. IV was published. This included his first three plays, Les Bonnes, Haute Surveillance and le Balcon, as well as the shorter critical works: L'Etrange Mot d'..., Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien reguliers, et foutu aux chiottes, Lettres à Roger Blin, Comment jouer "Les Bonnes", and Comment jouer "Le Balcon". In the same year he was one of the writers who spoke to the demonstrators at the American Democratic Party Convention in Chicago (29).

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(25) See P. Thody, Jean Genet (H. Hamilton) 1968, p. 22; and J. Guicharnaud, Modern French Theatre (Yale U.P.) 1967, p. 269 footnote.
(26) La Force des Choses, (Gallimard) 1963. La Folie en Tête, (Gallimard) 1970.
(27) Candide Apr. 25. 1966 (Source quoted by P. Thody, Jean Genet, 1968, p. 24).
(28) Writers and Critics, Sartre, (Oliver and Boyd), 1962, p. 97.
(29) Rights in Conflict, (Bantam Books) 1968, p. A39 (photograph). Also newsreel in the film Prologue (?).

Following this public appearance Genet wrote two articles for American magazines: To the Members of the Assembly, a personal account of the Democratic Convention (30), Salute to 100,000 Stars, a highly stylised message to the American people about their country and about the war in Vietnam (31). A footnote to this article explains that Genet had been officially refused entry into the United States in 1965 on "moral grounds". Early in 1970 Genet spent two months in the U.S.A., working with members of the Black Panther Party, lecturing to students in a campaign to raise money and to popularise the movement. In this year May Day Speech was published, and Genet gave two interviews to French magazines (32). In this same area Genet was instrumental in publishing Soledad Brother, The Prison Letters of George Jackson (33). He also wrote the introduction to these letters (34). More recently still Genet has involved himself in the cause of the Palestine guerilla forces, and has written a short article about their living conditions (35). Late in 1972 Genet was deported by the Jordan Government (36), and in June 1973, after taking part in a Paris demonstration against the murder of an Algerian, he was arrested by the French police (37). These most recent activities and writings are of a manifestly political nature, although Genet himself still resists classification, preferring people to believe that he is more concerned with destruction and anarchy than with socialist revolution.

Thus Genet has written nothing of a strictly literary nature since Les Paravents in 1961. In the light of his present output it would seem likely that in any future writing Genet will concentrate his attentions on matters of a social or political nature.

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(30) Esquire, Nov. 1968, pp. 86-89. (Trans. R. Seaver)
(31) Evergreen Review, Vol. XII. Dec. 1968, pp. 50-53 and 87-88. (Trans. R. Seaver)
(32) May Day Speech (City Lights Books) 1970./ Genet chez les Panthères Noires, (Le Nouvel Observateur) May 25th 1970 pp. 38-41./ Tête à Tête avec Jean Genet (Lui) Dec. 1970 pp. 7-32.
(33) Slaughter in Court, L. Aarons, (The Guardian) Aug. 18th 1970.
(34) Soledad Brother (J. Cape and Penguin Books) 1971 pp. 17-24 (introd.).
(35) Les Palestiniens (Zoom) No. 8. Aug. 1971, pp. 72-92.
(36) Genet deported (The Times), Nov. 24th 1972.
(37) Why Frenchmen fear Les Flics, J. Dimbleby (Observer Supplement) 10th June 1973 pp. 16-21.

Claude Bonnefoy has written: "A la question 'qui est Genet' on ne peut guère répondre qu'en parlant de son oeuvre" (38). As has already been noted the first three novels, Notre-Dame des Fleurs, Miracle de la Rose, and Pompes Funèbres, and also Journal du Voleur are written as autobiography in the first person. In each work Genet takes part in the plot and involves himself with the characters. Many of the settings for the novels are places with which Genet is very familiar. Notre-Dame des Fleurs for example was written in prison; the story of the novel begins in prison, and it is from his cell that Genet introduces himself and his characters. Similarly Miracle de la Rose describes Genet's life at Mettray and at Fontevrault prison. He had actually been imprisoned in both these institutions. With these facts as a starting point it is possible to assume that the author can be identified absolutely with the narrator of the novels, but because of the nature of Genet's life and the lack of an objective biography it is difficult for the reader to ascertain the truth. He must depend solely upon what Genet himself has written, and must decide for himself what he believes, at the same time remembering that even this may be invention. In the first two novels at least the settings provide a framework of fact which is true to Genet's life. With Pompes Funèbres however, set in the last few days of the German occupation of Paris, it is more difficult to determine how much of what is described happened, and whether in reality Genet had anything to do with the events.

Subsequent chapters of this study will attempt to show that it is to Genet's personal advantage to obscure the facts of his life, and that much of his prose work is written with the specific purpose of recreating the past in a new and not necessarily faithful light. In writing the history of his life, his ideas and his emotions Genet makes no clear distinction between what is real and what is imagined. Since he writes about events which have taken place in the past, his view of the past will

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(38) C. Bonnefoy: De la Prison à l'Ecriture, (Magazine Littéraire) No. 27. March 1970 pp. 7-9.

inevitably be coloured by feelings which present recollection evoke. Moreover Genet does not pretend that his writing is a truthful account of his life:

> "La vérité n'est pas mon fait. Mais 'il faut mentir pour être vrai.' Et même aller au-delà. De quelle vérité veux-je parler? S'il est bien vrai que je suis un prisonnier, qui joue (qui se joue) des scènes de la vie intérieure, vous n'exigerez rien d'autre qu'un jeu"(39).

> "Ce livre, j'ai voulu le faire des éléments transposés, sublimés, de ma vie de condamné,...(40).

Despite these admissions and despite the many inconsistencies in Genet's work, the fact remains that the novels are the main source of biographical information.

It will be suggested that in his four novels Genet is creating a legend from his own life, a legend which is consolidated and summarized in Journal du Voleur. The characters of these works, while almost certainly based upon real acquaintances, are transformed by Genet's imagination to suit his subjective purpose, and the narrator of Notre-Dame des Fleurs is, in this context, as "fictional" as Divine or Mignon-les-Petits-Pieds. Why Genet found this process necessary or desirable may be more readily comprehensible if it is remembered that his life prior to 1940 had consisted of a continuous series of crimes and imprisonments. Having already begun to write and to create an imaginary world, it is probable that Genet recognised the possibility of recreating his own past and of endowing it in retrospect with a purpose and a direction. At the time of writing a certain lucid pattern is thus superimposed upon memories of past events. For example Genet maintains in Journal du Voleur that his original childhood decision to follow a life of crime and evil was a conscious one:

> "Le mécanisme en était à peu près celui-ci (depuis lors je l'utiliserai): à chaque accusation portée contre moi, fût-elle injuste, du fond du coeur je répondrai oui. A peine avais-je prononcé ce mot - ou la phrase qui le signifiait - en moi-même je sentais le besoin de devenir ce qu'on m'avait accusé d'être"(41).

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(39) Notre-Dame des Fleurs (Gallimard) 1969, p. 135.
(40) Ibid., p. 114.
(41) Journal du Voleur (Gallimard) 1968, pp. 185-186.

Because it is essential to his entire interpretation of Genet's life and motives, Sartre in Saint Genet has accepted this claim. Just as it is impossible however to be certain about the truth of such statements, it is equally difficult for the reader to establish a clear distinction between for example the 'fictional' Miracle de la Rose and the 'autobiographical' Journal du Voleur. In Genet's world it seems that all reality becomes allegory, and his characters reflections of himself.

While recognising that Genet's power to influence his readers in one particular direction is impaired by the obvious inconsistency of his own position, it is the effect of his writing on himself both in his personal life and in his subsequent literary activity, which will be examined in the following chapters. Chapters One and Two will consider Notre-Dame des Fleurs and Miracle de la Rose and the extent to which the reality of his situation as a criminal and a homosexual influenced Genet's decision to write.

Chapter I Genet begins to write; Notre-Dame des Fleurs

Before considering Genet's motives for writing, and subsequently examining the nature of his first novel, it is necessary to assess briefly his situation at the time and how he perceived it.

In 1942, at the age of 32, Genet had already spent 17 years of his life in and out of reformatories and prisons all over Europe. While writing Notre-Dame des Fleurs, he was obviously obsessed by the solitude and hopelessness of his life in general, and by his dilemma as an ageing homosexual in particular. There are numerous instances in the novel when, between dream fantasies of Divine and Mignon-les-Petits-Pieds, Genet comments upon the insecurity of his own position. Despite the bravado displayed by his characters Genet himself clearly felt anxious:

> "Je ne suis du reste pas sûr qu'elle (the guillotine) me soit épargnée, car je me suis rêvé dans bien des vies agréables; mon esprit, attentif à me plaire, m'a confectionné sur mesures des aventures glorieuses ou charmantes. Le plus attristant, c'est que, j'y songe quelquefois, les plus nombreuses de ces créations sont absolument oubliées, bien qu'elles forment tout mon concert spirituel passé. ... Mon esprit continue de produire de belles chimères, mais jusqu'aujourd'hui aucune d'elles n'a pris corps. Jamais. Pas une fois. Maintenant, il suffit que j'entreprenne une rêverie, ma gorge sèche, le désespoir brûle mes yeux, la honte me fait baisser la tête, ma rêverie se casse net. Je sais qu'un possible bonheur m'échappe encore et m'échappe parce que je l'ai rêvé.
>
> L'accablement qui suit me fait assez semblable au naufragé qui, à la vue d'une voile, se croit sauvé quand, tout à coup, il se souvient que le verre de sa lunette porte un défaut, une buée: cette voile qu'il apercevait.
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> Mais alors ce que jamais je n'ai rêvé demeure accessible, et comme je n'ai jamais rêvé malheurs, ce ne sont guère que des malheurs qu'il me reste à vivre. Et des malheurs à mourir, car je me suis rêvé des morts splendides à la guerre, en héros, ailleurs couvert d'honneurs, jamais par l'échafaud. Il me reste donc.
>
> Et que me faudra-t-il pour le gagner? Presque rien encore."(1)

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(1) Notre-Dame pp. 63-64.

Thus Genet is anxious both about his life and about the effectiveness of his fantasy creations. After appearing before the court and confessing to a crime, he suddenly senses the possibility of a life-sentence, and even mentions suicide:

> "... - je me serais, sans vaine ornementation autour de l'acte, empoisonné. Car, mes bons amis, je suis mûr pour la Relègue"(2).

Having mentioned "La Relègue" several times Genet goes on to contemplate, through the character of Marchetti, a future in prison:

> "Il a trente ans. Marchetti restera entre quatre murs blancs jusqu'à la fin des fins, et pour ne pas sécher d'ennui, ce sera son tour d'élaborer ces vies imaginaires, jamais réalisées, sans espoir de l'être jamais, ce sera la mort de l'Espoir. ... Nous occupons nos facultés à nous donner des rôles splendides à travers des vies de luxe;... Nous sommes blasés. Nous avons quarante, cinquante, soixante ans; nous ne connaissons que la petite misère végétative, nous sommes blasés".(3)

He is not only apprehensive, however, but also afraid of what such a future might hold for him:

> "Mais, maintenant, j'ai peur. Les signes me poursuivent et je les poursuis patiemment. Ils s'acharnent à ma perte....
>
> Peur? Et que peut-il m'arriver de pire que ce qu'il m'arrivera? Hors la souffrance physique, je ne crains rien. La morale ne tient à moi que par un fil. Pourtant, j'ai peur. La veille du jugement, ne m'aperçus-je pas tout à coup que j'avais attendu cet instant pendant huit mois, alors que je n'y songeais jamais? Il est peu d'instants que j'échappe à l'horreur. Peu d'instants que je n'aie une vision, ou une perception horrifiée des êtres et des événements" (4).

He has become aware of the gravity of his situation:

> "C'est la peur du jugement.
> Pèsent sur mes pauvres épaules le poids atroce de la justice de robe et le poids de mon sort"(5).

These comments are indications of the difficulties which Genet faced, and the emotions he felt, with regard to his real-life situation, at the time of writing Notre-Dame des Fleurs.

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(2) Ibid., p. 70. (As has been noted in The Introduction pp. 5-6, Genet was not actually threatened by "La Relègue" until a later date.)
(3) Ibid., p. 112.
(4) Ibid., p. 115.
(5) Ibid., p. 68.

This first novel relates the story of Louis Culafroy, a country lad who, at the age of 20 comes to Paris, and lives as the male prostitute Divine. On many occasions throughout the novel Divine is referred to as "she". It is "her" love-affairs with Mignon, Seck Gorgui and Notre-Dame which form the main subject-matter of the novel. Mignon, "un mac", lives with Divine for six years, but leaves to live with Mimosa II, and finally ends up in prison. Notre-Dame murders Ragon, is arrested, convicted and guillotined. Divine herself dies of tuberculosis. These events however are not related in chronological sequence, and the novel actually opens with the funeral of Divine. In an apparently haphazard fashion the narrative alternates between the childhood of Culafroy, the reality of Genet's own life as a convicted thief, and Divine's life as a prostitute.

In the opening pages of the novel Genet tells the reader how he intends to create his characters:

> "A l'aide donc de mes amants inconnus, je vais écrire une histoire. Mes héros ce sont eux, collés au mur, eux et moi qui suis là, bouclé. Au fur et à mesure que vous lirez, les personnages, et Divine aussi, et Culafroy, tomberont du mur sur mes pages comme feuilles mortes, pour fumer mon récit"(6).

On the surface Notre-Dame seems to be concerned mainly with Genet's search for sexual satisfaction. As has been noted above, Genet, the solitary homosexual, was no longer young and was already giving up hope of a future outside a prison-cell. Sartre has called Notre-Dame "an epic of masturbation"(7), and the almost monotonous frequency of the encounters between Divine and her handsome, virile lovers must certainly be intended to provide Genet with second-hand pleasure. In describing Mignon Genet admits:

> "Cela, c'est le portrait presque exact de Mignon, car - nous le verrons encore - il avait le génie du geste qui doit me troubler, et si je l'évoque, je ne peux m'arrêter de le chanter qu'au moment où ma main s'englue de mon plaisir libéré"(8).

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(6) Notre-Dame pp. 12-13.
(7) Saint Genet Comédien et Martyr (Gallimard) 1952, p. 416.
(8) Notre-Dame p. 16.

If Genet's depiction of sexual acts between his characters is detailed, lingering and exaggerated, it is because this is the only remaining means which he can envisage of gratifying his own sexual needs. His description of sex between Notre-Dame, Divine and Seck Gorgui is another example of the fantasy world he is creating(9). Through Mignon Genet admits that he is giving permanence to his fading memory of Roger, a Corsican he had once known and about whom he still dreams:

> "Je suis épuisé; mon poignet a des crampes. La volupté des dernières gouttes est sèche. J'ai vécu avec lui, de lui, entre mes quatre murs nus, et en deux jours, tout le possible d'une existence vingt fois reprise, embrouillée jusqu'à être plus vraie qu'une vraie. ... J'en fais un personnage que je saurai à ma façon martyriser: c'est Mignon-les-Petits-Pieds"(10).

Undoubtedly there is a strong sexual motive behind Genet's writing. By inventing a set of characters with whom he can identify, Genet not only lives out his sexual fantasies, but also builds a world, where as creator, he makes all others serve his subjective purpose, and where albeit in an imaginary situation, he is able to examine himself and gain mental control over his own life and pleasure. It is perhaps this particular kind of masturbation to which he refers when he writes:

> "Bien m'en prit d'élever l'égoïste masturbation à la dignité de culte! Que je commence le geste, une transposition immonde et surnaturelle décale la vérité. Tout en moi devient adorateur. La vision extérieure des accessoires de mon désir m'isole, très loin du monde.
>
> Plaisir du solitaire, geste de solitude qui fait que tu te suffis à toi-même, possédant les autres intimement, qui servent ton plaisir sans qu'ils s'en doutent, plaisir qui donne, même quand tu veilles, à tes moindres gestes cet air d'indifférence suprême à l'égard de tous ...(11).

In order to gain the maximum advantage from this self-centred world Genet sets out to convince himself that through Divine he is writing about himself. He writes that Notre-Dame will be his own story:

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(9) Ibid., pp. 148-150.
(10) Ibid., p. 29.
(11) Notre-Dame p. 68-69.

> "Il se peut que cette histoire ne paraisse pas toujours artificielle et que l'on y reconnaisse malgré moi la voix du sang: ... Ce livre ne veut être qu'une parcelle de ma vie intérieure.
>
> ... Et (je veux) refaire à ma guise, et pour l'enchantement de ma cellule (...), l'histoire de Divine que je connus si peu, l'histoire de Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs, et n'en doutez pas, ma propre histoire" (12).

And later he writes:

> "Mignon surtout je le chéris, car vous ne doutez pas qu'en fin de compte, c'est mon destin, vrai ou faux, que je mets, tantôt haillon, tantôt manteau de cour, sur les épaules de Divine" (13).

But as was suggested in the Introduction, Notre-Dame is no ordinary autobiography. Moreover, in Journal du Voleur Genet has denied that it was his aim to relive his past life:

> "Quand, à la Santé, je me pris à écrire ce ne fut jamais afin de revivre mes émois ou de les communiquer mais afin, de l'expression d'eux imposée par eux, que je compose un ordre (moral) inconnu de (moi-même d'abord)"(14).

Although this is not a completely reliable judgement, Journal being written some years after Notre-Dame, it does seem that in his first novel he is attempting rather to recreate his past and simultaneously to create a new, alternative present and future for himself. He is following the course of an existence which could have been his own:

> "De quoi s'agit-il pour moi qui fabrique cette histoire? En reprenant ma vie, en remontant son cours, emplir ma cellule de la volupté d'être ce que faute d'un rien je manquai d'être, et retrouver, pour m'y jeter comme dans des trous noirs, ces instants où je m'égarais à travers les compartiments compliqués et traquenards d'un ciel souterrain" (15).

In this review of his past Genet merges memories of his own childhood, with that of Culafroy. In one passage he actually writes both about Culafroy and about himself in the first person (16). Perhaps in an attempt to trace the origins of his own misfortunes Genet endows Culafroy with a dual existence. At night:

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(12) Ibid., p. 13.
(13) Ibid., p. 46.
(14) Journal, p. 181.
(15) Notre-Dame, p. 24.
(16) Ibid., pp. 74-75.

> "Culafroy devenait sous la lune ce monde d'empoisonneurs, pédérastes, filous, mages, guerriers, courtisanes,... (17).

While during the day: "il redevenait l'écolier pâle, timide, que le poids des livres fait plier" (18). The combination of horror and fascination which the child Culafroy feels for Alberto's snakes appears to be the origin of Divine's taste for evil. After relating the encounter between Alberto and Culafroy, Genet writes:

> "Et pour les serpents l'amitié insidieuse naissait. ... Culafroy et Divine, aux goûts délicats, seront toujours contraints d'aimer ce qu'ils abhorrent, et cela constitue un peu de leur sainteté, car c'est du renoncement" (19).

Through Ernestine and Culafroy Genet examines the Mother-Son relationship, which as a bastard and an orphan he himself had never known. Genet imagines the mother bent on the destruction of her own child. She had already missed the opportunity of killing him, having tried and failed to shoot him with a revolver (20). Since that time she had been waiting. She comes to Paris and rediscovers Culafroy, now Divine, but her feelings towards him remain unchanged. It seems that Genet is unable to allow the least suspicion of tenderness to enter into their relationship:

> "Cela gâtait à peine l'opinion qu'elle avait d'elle-même, de savoir qu'elle avait mis bas un être monstrueux, ni mâle ni femelle, ... Mère et fils étaient aussi lointains que s'ils eussent été à distance, s'appliquant sur le vide: un frôlement de peaux insensibles. Ernestine ne se disait jamais: 'C'est la chair de ma chair.' Divine ne se disait jamais: 'C'est pourtant celle-là qui m'a chié.'" (21).

And at Divine's funeral Ernestine can feel only relief:

> "Mais enfin ne lui échappe pas l'occasion merveilleuse si longtemps attendue. La mort de Divine lui permet de se libérer, par un désespoir extérieur, par un deuil visible fait de larmes, de fleurs, de crêpe, des cent grands rôles qui la possédaient" (22).

By retracing the life of his central character Genet is able to reexamine his own early life and thereby identify more convincingly with

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(17) Ibid., p. 74.
(18) Ibid., p. 74.
(19) Ibid., p. 92. (This episode concerning Alberto, the snake-catcher is included in pp. 90-96).
(20) Notre-Dame, pp. 18-21.
(21) Ibid., p. 200.
(22) Ibid., p. 17.

the adult Divine. Divine however is only partly the real Genet. As P. Thody writes: "the inspiration for the creation of her as a character seems to stem just as much from what Genet was as from what, in one way, he would have liked to be"(23). The many occasions on which Divine wallows in her own shame and degradation represent for Genet moments of glory, which in reality his nature did not allow him to experience. Clearly Genet envies Divine's attitude towards her own homosexuality and her reaction to the resulting insults of others:

> "Que l'on ne pense pas qu'elle avait honte de son métier. Elle avait su trop bien et très jeune pénétrer d'arrache-pied jusqu'au désespoir, pour, à son âge, n'avoir bu la honte. Divine, s'intitulant elle-même une vieille putain putassière, ne faissait que prévenir les moqueries et les injures"(24).

The occasion in a bar when Divine loses her crown of pearls and substitutes her set of false teeth, illustrates in a similar manner this self-defence mechanism, which Genet sees as working to Divine's advantage (25). As the incident in Journal du Voleur shows, when a cripple stumbles over his dress, Genet himself was incapable of displaying this degree of bravado:

> "'On ne boite pas dans mes robes!' hurla en moi la tragédienne enfermée. Mais on riait autour de nous. 'On ne boite pas dans mes toilettes', me hurlai-je. S'élaborant en moi, dans l'estomac, me sembla-t-il, ou dans les intestins, qu'enveloppe 'la toilette', cette phrase se devait traduire par un regard terrible. Furieux et humilié je sortis sous les rires des hommes et des Carolines"(26).

It has been suggested in this chapter that Genet's decision to write was motivated firstly by a complex mixture of sexual frustration and fear of possible life-imprisonment and secondly by curiosity about the origins of his misfortunes and of his criminal leanings. It is very probable that at the time of writing Genet saw no possibility of having Notre-Dame published. He has said that he wrote the novel, "sincerely, with fire and rage, and all the more freely because I was certain the book would never be read"(27). Had Genet restricted himself solely to the story

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(23) P. Thody: Jean Genet A Study of His Novels and Plays (H. Hamilton) 1968, p. 57.
(24) Notre-Dame, p. 73.
(25) Ibid., pp. 118-119.
(26) Journal, p. 72-73
(27) Interview in Playboy, April 1964, vol xi, No. 4, pp. 45-53.

of Culafroy-Divine and her love affairs, his "certainty" would be quite acceptable, and Notre-Dame could be legitimately regarded as a purely private, personal creation of no relevance to others. In the later stages of the novel however, Genet introduces the story of Notre-Dame, who in common with the other male characters excites Genet sexually. But there is more to this character than simply sexual attraction. In his attitude to his own trial Notre-Dame, the Murderer, represents for Genet the ideal criminal, who because of his absolute indifference to the gravity of his situation, comes close to achieving Genet's ideal of moral perfection. Similar characters will appear in all Genet's subsequent writing. Rather than his actual crime, it is Notre-Dame's indifference and moral insensibility which condemn him at his trial (28). Genet reveres the apparently deliberate "stupidity" of the young murderer, who despite the court's attempts to show him mercy, wills his own death. Asked why he killed Ragon, he replies: "J'étais dans une dèche fabuleuse" (29). Genet comments:

> "Cette dèche fabulause fit à Notre-Dame un piédestal de nuée: il fut aussi prodigieusement glorieux que le corps du Christ s'élevant, pour y demeurer seul, fixe, dans le ciel ensoleillé de midi. Le Président tordait ses belles mains. La foule tordait ses visages. ... La poésie travaillait sa matière. Seul, Notre-Dame était seul et gardait sa dignité, c'est-à-dire qu'il appartenait encore à une mythologie primitive et ignorait sa divinité et sa divinisation"(30).

From Genet's point of view it is Notre-Dame who finally triumphs and not the court; he is particularly scathing about the jury:

> "Malgré leur formation, qu'ils disent cartésienne, les jurés auront beau faire, lorsque, quelques heures plus tard, ils condamneront à mort Notre-Dame, ils seront incertains si c'est parce qu'il étrangla une poupée ou coupa en morceaux un petit vieillard" (31).

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(28) The trial of Notre-Dame: Notre-Dame pp. 176-195.
(29) Notre-Dame, p. 184.
(30) Ibid., p. 184.
(31) Notre-Dame, p. 186.

When asked to speak in his own defence, Notre-Dame considers the phrases: "J'l'ai pas fait exprès" (32), but finally answers: "L'vieux était foutu. Y pouvait seument pu bander" (33).

This particular scene in which Genet glorifies the murderer and his indifference towards the court and its justice, are perhaps the first signs of retaliation. Although Notre-Dame can not on its own be seen as a serious vehicle of revenge against the world, Genet does appear to be rejecting his own passivity. The inclusion in the novel of Notre-Dame leads directly on to an important theme of the second novel, Miracle de la Rose and to its central character, Hareamone.

Essentially Notre-Dame-des Fleurs introduces the themes which are to preoccupy Genet throughout his writing: homosexuality, death, the criminal, crime and punishment, the nature of evil, childhood, the Mother-son relationship, degradation, and despair. Miracle de la Rose, Pompes Funèbres and Querelle de Brest, rather than introducing new themes develop Genet's attitude towards himself and the world. Clearly he is searching for an escape, either permanent or temporary, from the impasse in which he finds himself. By exploring these themes he will examine and attempt a reconstruction of his own life.

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(32) Ibid., p. 192.
(33) Ibid., p. 192.

Chapter 2 Miracle de la Rose, Past Reality, and Present Introspection

Genet's second novel, Miracle de la Rose, develops the examination of the relationship between past and present, which was started in Notre-Dame. The novel is set in Fontevrault prison, and at Mettray, the reformatory, where Genet had spent three years of his adolescence. Miracle concerns Harcamone, himself a former inmate of Mettray, who murders a young girl, and is betrayed to the police by Divers. He is sentenced to life-imprisonment, but in prison commits a second murder, is condemned to death, and executed after a period of forty-five days. This novel also is concerned with Genet's own story, his adulation of Harcamone, and his love affairs particularly with Bulkaen, a young burglar, and then with Divers, an acquaintance from Mettray.

There are many obvious similarities between Miracle and Notre-Dame: Genet's obsession with his own past, his worship of the criminal and his degraded existence, and his recreation, of factual or imaginary love affairs. Whereas, however, in his first novel Genet saw himself through Culafroy and Divine, in Miracle he openly uses his own experience as a basis for his introspection. Notre-Dame mentioned only briefly Culafroy's entry into the reformatory (1), and it is not until Miracle that this period of Genet's childhood is considered in depth. Despite his later assertion in Journal du Voleur (2), he does write here that he was in fact trying to relive his childhood:

> "Par Harcamone, Divers et Bulkaen, je vais encore revivre Mettray qui fut mon enfance. Je vais retrouver la Colonie pénitentiaire abolie, le bagne d'enfants détruit"(3).

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(1) Notre-Dame, p. 131.
(2) Journal, p. 181. (See note 14, Chapter 1, p. 16.)
(3) Miracle, p. 230. (For other examples of wanting to relive childhood see p. 247/423.)

This chapter will seek to establish that through reliving his childhood at Mettray, and by linking it with his later life of crime, Genet is searching for a rationalisation of his present situation, so as to cope more adequately with it. It is this rationalisation which constitutes his Legend. Claude Bonnefoy has written of Genet's constant return to childhood:

> "A travers ces figures d'enfants et d'adolescents, il apparaît bien que pour Genet l'enfance n'est pas seulement à l'origine de certains de ses émois, elle est l'objet d'une quête, ce qu'il cherche à retrouver et à comprendre, en interrogeant ses souvenirs, mais aussi les regards, les sourires, réels ou inventés, de Riton et de Lucien. Car l'enfance est riche de possibles, riche aussi de contradictions. Mais de contradictions non conscientes, innocemment vécues. Elle seule peut vraiment être angélique et en même temps criminelle. ...
>
> L'enfance accepte la présence simultanée des contraires(4)"

Throughout Miracle Genet attempts to convince himself and potential readers that the time he spent at Mettray was worthwhile for him, and that it was indeed the ideal apprenticeship for his subsequent life of crime:

> "Nous étions des enfants sauvages qui allaient dans la cruauté bien plus loin que nos idoles les gangsters audacieux. ...
>
> La Colonie agissait donc sur l'homme que je serais. C'est ainsi qu'il faut comprendre "la mauvaise influence" dont parlent les maîtres, poison lent, semence à retardement dont la floraison est inattendue"(5).

The fact that so many of Genet's acquaintances from Mettray turn up again at Fontevrault prison as confirmed criminals, makes the general point that institutions such as Mettray rarely succeed in reforming their inmates. In particular Genet attempts to show that he himself was no exception to this rule. In the novel however Genet not only rediscovers the origins of his glorification of crime and his decision to become

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(4) Claude Bonnefoy, Genet, Classiques du XXe Siècle No. 76 (Editions Universitaires) 1965, pp. 78-79.
(5) Miracle pp. 409-410 (See also Miracle p. 308)

evil, but also shows that he has no illusions about the squalid reality which crime and evil represent. It is this juxtapositioning of his glorification of crime, with his obvious awareness of its ugliness and futility which results in the apparent inconsistency of Genet's own position in Miracle, and which at the same time gives the novel its atmosphere of total despondency. In one particular passage Genet's feelings of despair both with reality and with fantasy are very clearly stated (6).

Genet obviously wishes to remember Mettray with affection, as an institution which served as a substitute mother:

> "Il m'arrive de parler de la Colonie en disant: 'La vieille', puis 'la sévère'. Ces deux expressions n'eurent sans doute pas suffi à me la faire confondre avec une femme mais, outre que déjà elles qualifient habituellement les mères, elles me vinrent, à propos de la Colonie, alors que j'étais las de ma solitude d'enfant perdu et que mon âme appelait une mère. ... Je chargeai la Colonie de tous ces ridicules et troublants attributs du sexe, jusqu'à ce que, dans mon esprit, elle se présentât non sous l'image physique d'une femme, mais qu'entre elle et moi s'établît une union d'âme à âme qui n'existe qu'entre mère et fils et que mon âme impossible à tromper reconnaît" (7).

Having been disowned by his foster-parents Mettray was in fact his only family:

> "J'avais seize ans, j'étais seul au monde, la Colonie était mon univers. Non, elle était l'Univers. La famille B était ma famille" (8).

Genet however has no illusions about the nature of this particular "family", recognising that it was, "un système familial sévère" (9), and in spite of sentimental memories which it may evoke for Genet, Mettray is portrayed in the novel as a whole as a place of great hardship. Genet's first impressions of the colony (10), and the daily

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(6) Miracle, p. 353, (paragraph beginning: "Ce livre m'a coûté beaucoup...")
(7) Ibid., pp. 386-387.
(8) Ibid., p. 372.
(9) Ibid., p. 326.
(10) Ibid., pp. 307-308.

routine there (11), are described in starkly realistic detail. Bulkaen's treatment by the other inmates is a particularly disgusting example of the brutality and cruelty which characterised the atmosphere of Mettray (12). There can thus be no doubt about the true nature of the reformatory, or about Genet's full awareness of this. Fontevrault is described in similar, realistic terms in the first pages of the novel (13).

Miracle however is much more than simply a factual description of prison and reformatory life. Realistic passages in the novel occur interspersed among numerous and lengthy statements of Genet's personal feeling towards this criminal environment. Having described the primitive toilet arrangements at Mettray for example, Genet writes:

> "Pour de pareils instants qu'elle me donne, j'aime la Colonie. ... J'aime Mettray, ce paradis au coeur de la Touraine royale, toute parcourue de petites veuves de quatorze ou seize ans, et de mâles frappés par la foudre aux plus beaux endroits" (14).

On another occasion he refers to Fontevrault as: "le sanctuaire vers quoi montaient les rêves de notre enfance" (15). This apparent ambiguity of attitude towards prison is paralleled in Miracle by that shown towards the criminal characters portrayed. Thus Genet admits to the stupidity and brutality of his heroes, while simultaneously worshipping them for the way in which he can interpret these very qualities. He writes of his affairs with Bulkaen and Divers and idolises Harcamone from afar. As an adolescent he had loved them because they embodied qualities of hardness and brutality, which he himself lacked

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(11) Miracle, p. 232. (Other examples: p. 252, pp. 372-374)
(12) Ibid., pp. 447-449.
(13) Ibid., pp. 223-232.
(14) Ibid., p. 366.
(15) Ibid., p. 223.

and which enabled them to survive. The adolescent condemned as evil by society, felt that the most apparently evil criminals were the paragons whom he must emulate. The adult Genet realises the shabby reality behind his heroes' appearance:

> "Au fur et à mesure que j'écris de lui, je débarrasse Bulkaen de tout l'attrait que je lui voyais. J'ai donné sur le papier la vie à un être excellent, que j'ai paré de toutes les beautés de mon ami. J'ai dépouillé le Bulkaen de chair que j'aperçois se retirant peu à peu de la banalité. Je me demande s'il posséda jamais tous ces charmes que je découvrais en lui, le coeur battant. Le rôle de Bulkaen fut peut-être de se faire aimer, et c'est l'ivresse que me causait cet amour qui me permit mieux de découvrir - grâce au langage - les qualités de l'être idéal maintenant fixé. On peut demander si justement je n'aimais pas Bulkaen parce que je découvris aussi chez lui ces qualités. Je ne peux répondre" (16).

And despite the love he feels for Bulkaen, Genet can nevertheless write:

> "La dureté et la limpidité du regard de Bulkaen ne seraient-elles causées par la claire sottise, par un manque de profondeur!" (17).

Thus although Genet is aware of the truth, he defies his intelligence and persists in gloryifying base, stupid criminals because he finds them sexually attractive:

> "Même si la fin de ce livre doit montrer Bulkaen méprisable pour sa bêtise ou sa vanité, ou toute autre laideur, que l'on ne s'étonne pas si, conscient de ces laideurs puisque je les montre, je persiste à changer ma vie selon la direction de l'étoile qu'il m'indique (j'emploie, malgré moi, ses termes...), ... La fatalité se servira d'abord de mon amour pour lui. Mais mon amour - et Bulkaen - disparus, que restera-t-il?"(18).

In his search for an "ordre moral" Genet intends to stand by the basically emotional decision he took as an adolescent. The retrospective acceptance of this decision, is Genet's lucid reaffirmation that he

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(16) Miracle, pp. 396-397.
(17) Ibid., p. 294. (Also see Miracle, p. 246, "Ce monde, qui m'est nouveau ..... inégalable bêtise.")
(18) Ibid., pp. 235-236.

has been responsible for his past life. Thus the essential element in the creation, through writing, of his Legend is the appearance of having deliberately willed misfortune, while being fully aware of the implications behind this "choice". Instrumental in achieving this particular aim is the special, personal significance which Genet attaches to all aspects of his existence, described in the novel.

At the particular age when he was first called a thief Genet would have relied heavily upon the judgements of adults and upon the values which he had been taught by them to respect. He felt the need to live up to the expectations of others. Culafroy, having been sent to a reformatory, is involved in a theft. When asked why he stole, he replies: "Parce que les autres me croyaient un voleur"(19). If, as seems likely from this statement, Genet felt the need to confirm the beliefs of others, the almost painful adulation of evil depicted in Miracle is perhaps more readily comprehensible. The label 'thief' endowed the foster-child, originally a non-entity, feeling he had no inherited right even to be alive, with an identity (20). To the adolescent being a bastard and a thief implied shame and disgrace. Genet, the adult reinterprets these two facts together with his homosexuality as the signs of evil. Rejected by normal society, he feels the urgent need to belong to his new family, Mettray. Merely in order to survive here, he had to try to accept society's definition of his nature. At the time however he seems to have failed to achieve this acceptance:

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(19) Notre-Dame, p. 132.

(20) Many of the observations made in this paragraph are used by Sartre in Saint Genet. It is to be noted however that the statement of Culafroy in Notre-Dame was written at a time when Genet could not have been influenced by Sartre's existentialist interpretation of his (Genet's) life.

> "J'ai été long à me découvrir, long à entrer dans ma nature que je n'ai trouvée avec application que très tard , et je vis vers trente ans ce que les truands vivaient à vingt" (21).

Through Miracle he attempts finally to establish and accept this evil nature.

In his writing as a whole Genet suggests the existence of a certain special race of social outcasts, marked from birth with the sign of evil. At Mettray for example:

> "...les colons étaient tous nobles, même les cloches puisqu'elles étaient de la race, sinon de la caste, sacrée" (22).

In writing Notre-Dame Genet used as his immediate visual inspiration photographs cut from newspapers. Referring to one particular face he writes:

> "... si je l'ai cloué à mon mur, c'est qu'il avait selon moi, au coin de la bouche ou à l'angle des paupières, le signe sacré des monstres. La faille sur leur visage, ou dans leur geste fixé, m'indique qu'il n'est pas impossible qu'ils m'aiment, car ils ne m'aiment que s'ils sont des monstres - ..." (23)

Paulo in Pompes Funèbres is also described as bearing this sign of evil (24). Genet imagines many external features of criminals to be proof of their true nature. A way of walking, of putting one's hands in one's pockets, of lighting a cigarette, of smiling - can all reveal a reality beneath the surface. Thus Mettray and particularly its hierarchical atructure and rigid distinction between "marles" and "cloches" provides Genet, in retrospect, with the ideal opportunity of discovering those gestures and appearances in others symbolising the existence of evil for which he is searching. Having isolated these he will try to assume them into his own personality.

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(21) Miracle, p. 339.
(22) Ibid., p. 304.
(23) Notre-Dame, p. 12.
(24) Pompes Funèbres (Gallimard) 1953, p. 35.

Harcamone is the centre of the universe created in Miracle. He displays the absolute qualities of hardness and indifference which Genet admires. It is noted that at Mettray he had been above the petty distinctions between "marles" and "cloches" (25). Like Notre-Dame he seems to Genet to have deliberately willed his own death through his murders. In the act of killing the young girl Harcamone's thoughts are described as follows:

> "Il comprit que prenait fin l'avatar qui l'avait transformé en valet de ferme. Il dévait accomplir sa mission" (26).

In connection with his murder of the prison warder Genet allows no doubt as to Harcamone's motives:

> "Harcamone choisit de commettre un acte assez banal pour lui et qui, par la conduite d'un mécanisme fatal plus fort que sa volonté, le ferait mourir" (27).

Genet would like to establish that he too contained within him the power to predict and accept what fate had in store for him. Thus he uses his adulation of Bulkaen and Harcamone as a basis for his decision to lead a life of crime:

> "Ma foi en Harcamone, la dévotion que je lui porte et le respect profond que je porte à son oeuvre, étayant mon audace de vouloir pénétrer les mystères en accomplissant moi-même les rites du crime, ..." (28).

Although at the time love and respect were essential to his survival at Mettray, in retrospect Genet endows his idols with the proportions of divine beings. He refers to Harcamone for example as, "pareil à un Dalaï-Lama" (29), and as "l'archange Harcamone" (30). Harcamone and Bulkaen are linked together as God and priest:

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(25) Miracle, p. 359.
(26) Ibid., p. 457.
(27) Ibid., p. 266.
(28) Ibid., p. 256.
(29) Ibid., p. 257.
(30) Ibid., p. 397.

> "Bulkaen est le doigt de Dieu, Harcamone étant Dieu puisqu'il est au ciel (je parle de ce ciel que je me crée et auquel je me voue corps et âme)"(31).

Harcamone, the ideal, and Bulkaen his "earthly" representative thus serve as Genet's examples. It is their perfection which draws him towards his desire to be evil: "Pour atteindre Harcamone, il fallait passer par l'opposé de la vertu" (32). It is through the strength of the love he feels for them that he hopes to incorporate their attitudes of indifference and hardness into his own character:

> "J'amais un homme au point d'entrer dans sa peau, ses manières, et je devins très apte à découvrir chez les autres ces tics que l'on vole à celui qu'on aime" (33).

Genet even goes so far as to suggest tentatively that the origin of his taste for theft was the sight of two thieves kissing (34). Genet becomes so obsessed with wanting to appear evil that he endows each crime with its own ritual, made up of a series of traditional, predetermined gestures. While committing burglaries he maintains that:

> "Je faisais mes casses selon les rites que j'apprenais par des conversations avec les hommes. Je respectais les superstitions," (35).

In writing Miracle Genet thus creates a basis for his life as a criminal. He claims that the process of observing and imitating manifestations of evil in others was successful, and that he too became, for a certain part of his life at least, a professional criminal. For him this signified his final attainment of those characteristics he was accused of already having:

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(31) Miracle, p. 230.
(32) Ibid., p. 446.
(33) Ibid., p. 337.
(34) Ibid., p. 408.
(35) Ibid., p. 364.

> "Je voulus être moi-même, et je fus moi-même quand je me révélai casseur"(36).

It is his clear intention in the novel to show the process described above, whereby he became the Criminal:

> "Si j'écrivais un roman, j'aurais quelque intérêt à m'étendre sur mes gestes d'alors, mais je n'ai voulu par ce livre que montrer l'expérience menée de ma libération d'un état de pénible torpeur, de vie honteuse et basse, occupée par la prostitution, la mendicité et soumise aux prestiges, subjuguée par les charmes du monde criminel. Je me libérais par et pour une attitude plus fière" (37).

For Genet it is the effect produced by his appearance as a criminal which is of the greatest importance, and he does nothing to conceal the fact that the "evil" reactions and gestures he displayed in situations were learned and thus unnatural to him. By acts of will-power and imagination he contrives, for example, to transform feelings of fear and embarrassment into the appearance of anger and violence(38). It must be emphasised that Genet's efforts to transform himself from a passive, feminine character into a hard, indifferent criminal were only possible through his retrospective reappraisal of his life, and only then by the use of his powerful imagination. It is this reappraisal itself which gives rise to the many ambiguities of attitude shown by Genet in Miracle.

Despite Genet's brash claims it seems unlikely that he ever was the successful criminal he would have the reader believe. A genuinely successful criminal would not have found himself facing a possible life-sentence for being repeatedly convicted of similar offences. Neither would he feel Genet's passionate need to examine his life through literature(39).

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(36) Miracle, p. 242.
(37) Ibid., p. 243.
(38) Two examples of this transformation of feelings occur on pp. 123-124 and 186, Miracle.
(39) P. Thody, Jean Genet, (H. Hamilton) 1968, p. 92.

What Notre-Dame and Miracle together achieve is to establish a base of confidence for Genet's imagination. Whatever the facts of his life may be, and whether or not the reader chooses to be convinced, Genet has proved to himself that he is capable of utilising his imaginative powers and his intelligence to his own advantage. In order to make some sense out of his present situation, he has created a logical pattern from the chaos of his past.

Chapter Three will examine the particular logic, the inverted values, and some of the paradoxical terminology used by Genet as he works out his position in these first two novels, and attempts to convince himself of the plausibility of the imaginary existence he has created from his past.

Chapter 3 Predestination and Perfection

It has been seen that Notre-Dame and Harcamone were characters driven by an irresistible force towards their own destruction. Both commit senseless and irrational acts of murder; both seem unable or unwilling to defend themselves adequately against society's revenge.

It would appear probable that, in retracing his past Genet has felt himself confronted by a terrifying vision; he has had no real control over the events of his life. It is the despair which this vision causes and anxiety with regard to his future which make Genet, in Notre-Dame and Miracle, intent upon discovering in his early life the force powerful enough to have caused the accident of his birth and the misery of his subsequent life. Unwilling to accept responsibility himself, or to blame the prejudices of the society which condemned him, Genet decides in retrospect that this force was predestination. This then becomes a major theme in Genet's novels and in the lives of his characters, and is perhaps the first and most crucial element in his egotistical search for a rational explanation of his present dilemma.

With regard to Genet's characters who reflect and live their author's obsessions, and with regard to Genet's own attitude to the idea of a unique, predetermined destiny, R. N. Coe has written:

> "... it is important to realize that Genet's characters - and Genet himself - feel themselves to be the object of a fatal conspiracy; they are beings predestined for damnation, not by a personal God, but by the very natural order of the universe. They belong to the Elect, but they are chosen to be plunged headlong into humiliation and evil (1)."

Both R. N. Coe and P. Thody compare predestination in Genet's novels to

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(1) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, (Peter Owen) 1968, p. 49.

the Jansenistic concept of Divine Grace (2), as an irresistible power operating in two ways; both making men commit acts they do not consciously will, and by imposing the obligation to will these acts by making them seem necessary.

Destiny, for Genet, is the force which in retrospect and out of personal need, can be used to transform the extreme misery of his life into a necessity; at least necessities cannot be regretted, and must be accepted. Thus Divine acts in accordance with an apparently innate law which dominates her life:

> "Sachons déjà que Divine ne vit pas de gaieté de coeur. Elle accepte, ne pouvant pas s'y soustraire, la vie que Dieu lui fait et qui la conduit vers Lui (3)."

Often a character's destiny is almost visible in his physical appearance. As has been noted, this is the case with the criminals, whose photographs Genet attaches to his cell wall (4). Divine has a similar collection:

> "... ces extraordinaires photographies de beaux gosses qu'elle a dérobées à la devanture des photographes et qui portent tous les signes de la puissance des ténèbres (5)".

Harcamone in Miracle and Yeux-Verts in Haute Surveillance are men who feel themselves driven inescapably towards evil. In their own minds their future is already decided; they act as though they are programmed to follow predetermined patterns of behaviour.

In his childhood and throughout his life Genet feels that he has been controlled by a remote force operating without reference to his own personality, and thus depriving him of free-will. Like an object Genet feels himself being acted upon:

> "..., un nouvel univers instantanément s'offrit à Mignon: l'univers de l'irrémédiable. C'est le même que celui dans

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(2) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, (Peter Owen), 1968, pp. 228-232
P. Thody, Jean Genet, (Hamish Hamilton), 1968, p. 73.
(3) Notre-Dame, p. 59.
(4) Ibid., p. 12. (See alos Chapter 2, p. 27, and footnote 23.)
(5) Ibid., p. 30.

> lequel nous étions, avec ceci de particulier: qu'au lieu d'agir et de nous connaître agissants, nous nous savons agis"(6).

Notre-Dame is thus in part a recognition by Genet of the influence in his life of powers outside himself. Divine is lead inexorably to her death. What is of importance, and of particular relevance to Genet himself is the means whereby Divine manages to achieve an acceptance of her destiny, and to wallow in the misfortune which she is predestined to suffer.

In Miracle de la Rose Harcamone's progress from his first murder to his death seems inevitable, and it is his apparent acceptance of this terrible destiny, which in Genet's mind endows him with such magnificence. Bulkaen too, although perhaps less gloriously, submits to his destiny:

> "Bulkaen était un personnage tragique par son tempérament passionné, extrême, et il l'était par les circonstances de sa vie. ... Il aimait la prison vers laquelle il tombait, car elle l'arrachait de terre, et je sens que j'eusse été impuissant à lutter contre elle puisqu'elle était la forme, elle-même, prise par la fatalité pour arriver à son dénouement choisi" (7).

By his very name Lou-du-Point-du-Jour seems fated; Genet relates a prison conversation:

> "-Le point du jour, qu'est-ce que c'est?
> Je dis:
> - C'est l'aurore.
> Quelqu'un reprit:
> - C'est l'heure fatale.
> - Oh, je me fais par d'illuses, dit Lou en souriant. J'sais que j'y passerai.
> Il l'avaitddit si simplement que sa grandeur d'être prédestiné se double de cette simplicité" (8).

Predestination can be regarded as a particularly suitable explanation for Genet's life of misfortune, since it relieves him of the responsibility for his own failure (9), and simultaneously allows him to idolise sexually attractive, but unintelligent criminals.

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(6) Notre-Dame, p. 159.
(7) Miracle, p. 446-447.
(8) Ibid., p. 328.
(9) Ibid., p. 368, ("... je sens qu'il n'est pas dans mon destin d'être un grand bandit. En le devenant, je fusse sorti de moi-même,...")

In Journal du Voleur Genet claims that he willingly accepted accusations made against him:

> "... à chaque accusation portée contre moi, fût-elle injuste, du fond du coeur je répondrai oui" (10).

As was suggested in Chapter Two, this acceptance is a result of Genet's need to fulfill others' expectations. It is through these expectations that his destiny is expressed. In that as an adolescent he is fated to violate the very moral values which he reveres, he is trapped with no means of escape other than submitting passively to any forces which may affect him. It is only in retrospect, in the process of writing his life, that he recognises an alternative reaction; that of joyfully accepting his fate and, if possible, anticipating it.

At the time however Genet was trapped. As has been noted he felt himself acted upon, rather than acting (11). It is this particular view of himself which is largely responsible for Genet's obsession generally with the world of inanimate things, which he regards as being predestined to fulfill certain functions. Like Genet's feelings about himself, their use and reason for existence are defined by and associated in men's minds with their distinctive physical appearance.

The revolver, in Notre-Dame seems by its mere presence to suggest to Ernestine the murder of Culafroy:

> "La présence au fond d'un tiroir d'un énorme revolver d'ordonnance suffit à lui dicter son attitude. Ce n'est pas la première fois que les choses sont les instigateurs d'un acte et doivent seules porter la redoutable, encore que légère, responsabilité d'un crime. Ce revolver devenait - paraissait-il - l'accessoire indispensable de son geste" (12).

Similarly Ragon's tight tie suggests murder to Notre-Dame (13). Like their

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(10) Journal du Voleur, p. 185-186.
(11) See p. 34, and footnote 6.
(12) Notre-Dame, p. 19.
(13) Ibid., p. 184.

gestures, the clothes of prisoners represent for Genet an expression of the essential personality of their wearer (14).

Genet does not conceal the fact that for him objects have a very personal significance:

> "Chaque objet de votre monde a pour moi un autre sens que pour vous. Je rapporte tout à mon système où les choses ont une signification infernale ....." (15)

During an act of theft Notre-Dame becomes unnerved by objects, which seem to assume a sinister aspect:

> "Il va de meuble en meuble. Il s'énerve. Ses ongles restent aux rainures. Il arrache des étoffes. Il veut reprendre son sang-froid, s'arrête pour souffler, et (dans le silence), au milieu des objets qui ont perdu toute signification, maintenant que leur habituel usager n'est plus, il se sent soudain dans un monde monstrueux, fait de l'âme des meubles, des choses: la panique le saisit vif" (16).

Thus although Genet may identify with objects, the world of things is as much a manifestation of fate as is the world of other people. R. N. Coe has written:

> "In so far as the universe, in Genet's vision, is governed by a tragic and ineluctable fatality, this fatality works through the inanimate. Objects are the strong right arm of God" (17).

For Genet that point in time when a character realizes that there is no escape from his preordained destiny is the beginning both of his 'death' and of a glorious and unique destiny. Genet frequently refers to himself as being already dead. In his cell, contemplating his future in prison, he writes:

> "J'ai envisagé la condamnation la plus forte dont il puisse m'atteindre. Je m'y suis préparé soigneusement, car j'ai choisi mon horoscope (selon ce que j'en peux lire dans les événements passés) comme figure de la fatalité. Maintenant que je sais lui obéir, mon chagrin est moins grand. Il est anéanti devant l'irrémédiable. Il est mon désespoir et ce qui sera, sera. J'ai résigné mes désirs. Moi aussi, je suis 'déjà plus loin que cela' (Weidmann). Que toute

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(14) Miracle p. 330-331.
(15) Ibid.,p. 286.
(16) Notre-Dame, p. 60.
(17) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, (Peter Owen) 1968, p. 143.

> une vie d'homme, donc, je demeure entre ces murs. Qui jugera-t-on demain? Quelque étranger portant un nom qui fut mon nom. Je peux continuer à mourir jusqu'à ma mort au milieu de tous ces veufs" (18).

In Miracle Genet explains more exactly in the sense in which he considers himself to be dead:

> "... j'ai l'horreur de me savoir exclu de l'autre (monde), le vôtre, au moment même que je conquérais les qualités grâce auxquelles on peut y vivre. Je suis donc mort. Je suis un mort qui voit son squelette dans un miroir, ou un personnage de rêve qui sait qu'il ne vit que dans la région la plus obscure d'un être dont il ignorera le visage, éveillé" (19).

Characters are described as "feuilles mortes" (20), having no life of their own making, and finding themselves unable to develop beyond the point in time when they are fixed by society's definitions.

It is the function of Notre-Dame and Miracle to prove that in accepting his destiny, Genet actually controlled his own life, and the misfortunes which characterised it. Since he has been unable to deny the facts of his life, he would have gained nothing from describing his attempt and failure to be good; to show that his life had been at least a moral success, he must appear to have taken the initiative away from society. The following are two of the numerous statements made with this aim in mind:

> "Le seul moyen d'éviter l'horreur de l'horreur est de s'abandonner à elle" (21).

> "- Pour échapper à l'horreur, avons-nous dit, livre-t'y jusqu'aux yeux" (22).

Thus by accepting, anticipating and provoking destiny Genet's characters transform a weakness into a potential strength, they exploit their lack of freedom by willing their own inevitable destruction. In Journal Genet writes about himself:

> "Je décidai de vivre tête baissée" (23).

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(18) Notre-Dame, p. 205-206.
(19) Miracle, p. 246-247.
(20) Notre-Dame, p. 13.
(21) Ibid., p. 34.
(22) Ibid., p. 61.
(23) Journal, p. 104.

The function of Genet's writing thus far has been to rebuild a past in which his own desire and will-power have been seen to play a decisive role. The eventual outcome of this reinterpretation of his own life will prove sufficiently successful for Genet personally, so that in Les Nègres he will be able to demonstrate the same process applying no longer to one individual, but to an entire race of outcasts.

At no time does Genet suggest that the tasks he chose, of accepting his destiny, and of attempting to coincide with the image others had of him, were easy to achieve. He frequently refers to his efforts to crush those feelings which showed him to be human and intelligent:

> "Mettray qui comblait mes goûts amoureux blessa toujours ma sensibilité. Je souffrais. Cruellement j'éprouvais la honte d'être tondu,..." (24).

In describing one of his acts of theft he admits:

> "Je n'eus à vaincre que la honte de la sournoiserie à laquelle nous oblige, fût-ce une seconde, l'acte de voler" (25).

All Genet's outcasts are burdened with the task of becoming in reality what they are accused of being; his work implies a relationship in society between the virtuous and the outcast, which Genet sees as applicable to all oppressor-oppressed situations.

It has been suggested that Genet respects the values of the society from which he is excluded. By his writing he provides himself with an opportunity to play an important role in relation to this society: that of the outcast. In the past he has offended as a bastard, a thief, and a homosexual; in the present he is the pornographer who claims to be revealing the means whereby a quiet country boy, condemned to a reformatory for theft, first becomes a hardened adult criminal, and then writes novels in which he claims to have willed the miseries of his life.

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(24) Journal, p. 185.
(25) Miracle, p. 409.

By means of the written word Genet thus attempts to convince himself that he has been indispensable to those whom he regards as the upholders of an official morality. It is apparent in such descriptions as the visit to Mettray of the Bishop of Tours (26), and the trial of Notre-Dame (27) that from his position as outcast Genet views society as an entity held together by its striving after absolute virtue. (Eventually he will realise the flaw in this view.) In condemning him, this monolith, "votre monde" (28), as he calls it, denies Genet the opportunity of reaching perfection in goodness. In his own mind, and by means of a retrospective decision, his role in relation to this society has thus been to embody the opposites of those qualities which it idealises. He has portrayed himself as the yardstick against which society might measure its progress towards traditional virtue. Genet is perhaps writing about his moment of realisation of this role towards the end of Notre-Dame (29). His dislike of Hitler's Germany stemmed from a feeling that his presence was provoking no reaction:

> "Il me semblait que les dieux présidant aux lois ne se révoltassent pas, simplement ils s'étonnaient. J'avais honte. Mais surtout je désirais rentrer dans un pays où les lois de la morale courante font l'objet d'un culte, sur lesquelles se fonde la vie" (30).

Throughout his work characters act as perfect pariahs, and, as A. Cismaru suggests, in accordance with society's expectations and needs (31). From Genet's particular point of view Harcamone, in Miracle, by his second murder, serves to reinforce society's definition of what is good, and their judgement of the appearance of evil. Similarly Notre-Dame's attitude towards his trial strengthens society's grounds for demanding revenge.

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(26) Miracle, pp. 355-358.
(27) Notre-Dame, pp. 176-195.
(28) Journal, p. 175. (There are numerous other examples of the use of this term.)
(29) Notre-Dame, pp. 201-202.
(30) Journal, p. 131.
(31) A. Cismaru, The Antitheism of Jean Genet, (in The Antioch Review, XXIV. No. 3. Fall 1964), pp. 391-392.

Thus out of a frustrated desire for perfection in Good evolves the substitute desire for attaining the absolute in Evil. Genet's novels, as has been seen, portray characters driven by this same need. To strive for evil and rejection is in reality however to accept the inevitable, since Genet and his characters are already rejected and regarded by society as evil. Acceptance of destiny, and asserting his decision to be evil, are both literary techniques, which Genet uses to restructure his past. It is in his own mind and with himself that he is arguing this logic, and not out of any practical need to deserve his condemnation. As an intelligent and sensitive being, who felt himself faced with the unjustified prejudice of others, he suggests that the goal of willing himself to be evil was an almost unbearable extreme. It is for this very reason that in his writing Genet chooses a path which, if successfully followed will lead to misery solitude and abjection; it is this self-willed anihilation which his heroes display. Of Armand in Journal, for example, he writes:

> "Il m'apparut intelligent. C'est-à-dire qu'il avait osé franchir les règles morales, non inconsciemment, avec la décevante facilité des gars qui les ignorent, au contraire c'était au prix d'un effort très grand, dans la certitude de perdre un trésor inestimable, mais avec la certitude encore d'en créer un autre, plus précieux que celui qu'il perdait" (32).

Genet knows all too well the result of his early life of crime, the squalour, the misery, the solitude. His novels provide a logical sequence of cause and effect.

As has been suggested in Chapter 2, it is through imitating the gestures and appearances of criminals that Genet begins his quest for evil. In his own mind he sees that their indifference towards life in general, and towards their personal fate in particular, condemns his criminals. It is perhaps the indifference towards the majority opinion,

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(32) Journal, p. 232.

towards the accepted norm, which society considers to be most evil in Mignon, Notre-Dame, Divine and Harcamone. If this is true then such offences as murder, theft and homosexuality merely serve as the pretexts for their rejection and condemnation. And since it is the worst sin, indifference is also Genet's ideal quality, the one which he admires most in others, and which he would like to assume in himself. Having described Mignon, he writes:

> "Je dis de lui comme de tous mes amants, contre lesquels je bute et me pulvérise:
> 'Qu'il soit pétri d'indifférence, qu'il soit pétrifié d'indifférence aveugle.'
> Divine reprendra cette phrase pour l'appliquer à Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs" (33).

In addition to imitating those whom he admires, Genet also exploits his various "natural" misfortunes: his birth, his childhood thefts and his homosexuality. It is these which originally condemned him and set him on the path to misery.

Notre-Dame explored the roots of evil in the child Culafroy; Miracle illustrated the process whereby the delinquent became the criminal. Both novels portrayed outcasts who accept the role thrust upon them, moving further away from society, and the virtues it represents.

Genet's quest through literature for a unique destiny, thus begins with his identification with the criminal fraternity, which he assumes must represent the force of evil in the widest sense. Near the beginning of Journal he writes:

> "Vers ce qu'on nomme le mal, par amour j'ai poursuivi une aventure qui me conduisit en prison" (34).

Genet is less interested in the material success of his acts of theft than in the extent to which they enable him to approach the absolute. In Journal he cites one particular act of theft as symbolic of this decision to become the embodiment of evil:

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(33) Notre-Dame, p. 59.
(34) Journal, p. 9.

> "Sur la route d'Alicante, grâce à la résistance que je dus combattre, grâce à ce que je dus mettre en oeuvre pour abolir ce qu'on nomme le remords, le vol que je commis devint à mes yeux un acte très dur, très pur, presque lumineux, et que le diamant seul peut représenter. En l'accomplissant j'avais détruit une fois de plus - et, me le disais-je, une fois pour toutes - les chers liens de la fraternité.
>
> - Après cela, après ce crime, quelle sorte de perfection morale puis-je espérer?
>
> Ce vol étant indestructible je décidai d'en faire l'origine d'une perfection morale.
>
> - Il est lâche, veule, sale, bas... (je ne le définirai qu'avec des mots indiquant la honte), aucun des éléments qui le composent ne me laisse une chance de le magnifier. Pourtant je ne renie point ce plus monstrueux de mes fils. Je veux couvrir le monde de sa progéniture abominable" (35).

In spite of his adulation of evil personified by criminals such as Armand (36) in Journal, and of organised evil as represented by the Gestapo (37), it is clear that perfection in evil was never more than the aesthetic ideal of a writer. The petty crimes in which he was involved personally, could never have been regarded as a means of achieving this end. His own realisation of the nature of the criminal mentality, his fear that 'honest' people may merely be clever and undetected thieves (38), and his own failure to make the "big time" are probably the considerations which cause Genet to alter the emphasis of his aim; he widens his definition of evil. Thus instead of attempting to achieve perfection through crime, he directs himself towards a more attainable goal: that of perfection in solitude. Physical and moral degradation, squalour, passivity, poverty, sexual deviation, all of which characterised his real life, become deliberately chosen ends. Thus every past event which in reality caused misery and sorrow for Genet becomes an essential part of his mythical and apparently self-determined progress towards solitude.

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(35) Journal, p. 86-87.
(36) Ibid., p. 189-190.
(37) Ibid., p. 158.
(38) Miracle, p. 245.

It is clear at this point that Genet's obsession with absolute states of existence demonstrates in the author a need for and an obstinate belief in absolute values. If he has already discovered that evil is necessary so that good may exist, he now realises that the means of attaining these opposite goals may be identical. In his own mind he recognises that self-denial and a negation of personal pleasures and tastes can lead the sinner as well as the saint to a sacred extreme. Thus Genet arrives at realisation of the often stated idea that the absolute of any quality is the reflection of its opposite; R. N. Coe writes of this particular aspect of Genet's vision:

> "As in Spinoza, 'all determination is negation': every positive implies a negative, and vice-versa. ... In order that the Good may exist, Evil must exist also: Evil is Good reflected in the mirror, Evil is the all-powerful reflection by which Good may know itself to exist;..." (39).

Thus in Genet's writing, ugliness and beauty, masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity, reality and appearance are all opposites inextricably linked with one another. Through identifying with the negatives or opposites of society's ideal virtues he attempts to fulfil a role in relation to society.

Whether or not this aim is attainable, it is Genet's attempt to become the Outcast, the force for Evil, the absolute Reject, which is of significance. Chapter 4 will examine the resulting literary journey from solitude to 'singularité'.

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(39) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, (Peter Owen) 1968, p. 20.

Chapter 4 Solitude and the Homosexual Relationship

Genet's pursuit, through literature, of a unique destiny is directed both towards absolute evil and towards absolute solitude. These two aims are parallel in Notre-Dame and in Miracle, although at any one time the emphasis placed on each varies considerably. It would seem likely however that the aim of attaining absolute solitude is more in keeping with the reality of Genet's life. Through solitude Genet hopes to approach what he considers to be the ultimate human state: "sainteté" (1). As has been noted in Chapter 3, Genet feels himself forever excluded from reaching perfection in virtue; by means of his theory of the fusion of opposites he accepts evil or solitude as the inevitable alternatives. As has been suggested, his characters welcome with gravity events or opportunities which sever worldly bonds between themselves and others. In writing of Divine, Genet states:

> "Que l'on ne pense pas qu'elle avait honte de son métier. Elle avait su trop bien et très jeune pénétrer d'arrache-pied jusqu'au désespoir, pour, à son âge, n'avoir bu la honte. Divine, s'intitulant elle-même une vieille putain putassière, ne faisait que prévenir les moqueries et les injures. ... Un rien humiliait Divine" (2).

Again, with reference to Divine the reader is told:

> "Elle se coupa les cils pour être encore plus répugnante. Croyant ainsi brûler ses vaisseaux" (3).

Throughout Notre-Dame and Miracle there are many similar examples of characters deliberately undermining their own positions in relation to others. Genet sees this process as eventually leading both them and himself further away from the profane reality of everyday concerns towards the rarified atmosphere of the Sacred. The Sacred for Genet

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(1) The significance of Genet's use of this particular word will be examined in Chapter 5.
(2) Notre-Dame, p. 73.
(3) Ibid., p. 196.

is the world of religion, sexuality, violence and death (4). It is this realm which Genet's murderers inhabit whilst awaiting their execution; Clément Village murders Sonia:

> "Par un effort puissant de volonté, il échappa à la banalité, - maintenant son esprit dans une région surhumaine, où il était dieu, créant d'un coup un univers singulier où ses actes échappaient au contrôle moral" (5).

Although not actually committing murder Genet claims to have been prepared to go to any lengths to reach this extreme plane of existence:

> "Et n'est-il pas impossible que cela me conduise finalement jusqu'à la scatophagie - dont je ne pouvais sans nausée entendre parler - et, après elle, plus loin qu'elle, jusqu'à la folie peut-être grâce à mon amour de détenus dans ces cellules où je devais, renonçant à reconnaître mes pets dans l'enchevêtrement d'odeurs qui se mêlent, accepter, puis goûter indistinctement ceux qui sortent des macs, et par là m'habituer à l'excrément. Et peut-être me laissai - je si bien aller à cela parce qu'ainsi je m'éloigne du monde. Je suis emporté dans cette chute qui, coupant par sa vitesse même et sa verticalité tous les fils qui me retiennent au monde, m'enfonce dans la prison, dans l'immonde, dans le rêve et l'enfer pour atterrir enfin dans un jardin de sainteté..."(6).

Genet's ideal of the deliberately dehumanised being is eventually embodied in the character of Querelle in Querelle de Brest, who incorporates every extreme and its opposite within himself, asserting his evil nature, degrading himself violently and voluntarily, and achieving by his efforts a brilliant destiny. Actions which cause horror and repulsion in others and in a character himself, are thus calculated to lead to complete rejection and solitude.

In attempting to reconcile Genet's stated aim - to achieve absolute solitude - with the reality of his life, it should be remembered how Genet saw himself in relation to the external world. Since this world had shown itself to be almost exclusively hostile towards him, Genet feels convinced

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(4) For a more complete view of Genet's idea of "le Sacré", see R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, (Peter Owen), 1968, pp. 36-42.
(5) Notre-Dame, p. 105.
(6) Miracle, p. 392.

that the only valid relationship he can have is with himself. Only by exploring the depths of his own ego is there a possibility of realising an exceptional destiny, and since he feels his existence to have been fashioned entirely by the prejudices of others, he retreats into himself to discover the being behind his official image:

> "La solitude ne m'est pas donnée, je la gagne. Je suis conduit vers elle par un souci de beauté. J'y veux me définir, délimiter mes contours, sortir de la confusion, m'ordonner" (7).

By willing his own isolation he may also appear to rob others of the initiative, and to be pursuing a course of self-determined action. Thus to a large degree both absolute evil and absolute solitude are parts of Genet's search for Self.

In his novels, if not in reality, the descent which leads Genet and his characters to solitude is the result of a conscious and deliberate decision. In Journal du Voleur Genet's pride in being dirty represents this deliberately forced awareness:

> "J'eus du mal, mais chaque victoire obtenue - mes mains crasseuses orgueilleusement exposées m'aidaient à exposer orgueilleusement ma barbe et mes cheveux longs - me donnait de la force - ou de la faiblesse, et c'est ici la même chose - pour la victoire suivante qui dans votre langage prendrait naturellement le nom de déchéance" (8).

A similar display of determination directed towards the same end is described in Pompes Funèbres. Pierrot has inadvertently taken a hard, dried worm out of his pocket and put it into his mouth:

> "Il se trouva pris entre s'évanouir d'écoeurement ou dominer sa situation en la voulant. Il la voulut. Il obligea sa langue et son palais à éprouver savamment, patiemment, le contact hideux. Cette volonté fut sa première attitude de poète, que l'orgueil dirige" (9).

Solitude once attained, as in the cases of the convicted and condemned murderers Harcamone and Notre-Dame, becomes a glorious rather

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(7) Journal, p. 258.
(8) Ibid., p. 28.
(9) Pompes Funèbres, p. 67.

than a shameful freedom. The passive solitude of Divine gives way to the more calculated solitude of the narrator of Miracle, and more especially of the characters of Pompes Funèbres and Querelle de Brest. Solitude as a passive state evolves through Genet's development as a writer, into the more active quality, "singularité". There is a clear distinction for instance between the abandoned isolation of Divine, who accepts the shame of her situation by such acts as cutting off her eyelashes, and the utterly aloof solitude of Erik Seiler, who acts violently and deliberately to provoke his own dehumanisation, and who thereby achieves a unique destiny. Divine's indirectly causing the "accident" of a child's death (10), can be contrasted with Erik's deliberate murder of a child at play:

> "Si le seul péché - le mal selon le monde - est de donner la mort, il n'est pas surprenant que le meurtre devienne l'acte symbolique du mal et qu'en face de lui instinctivement on recule. On ne s'étonnera donc pas si je voulus me faire aider dans mon premier meurtre. ... Je pouvais tuer un homme sans danger, je saurais ce que l'on tue en soi; après avoir tué, ce qu'est le remords. ... Enfin, j'allais faire le premier geste décisif pour ma liberté. ... "Je m'effeuille" fut une pensée qui passa très vite, m'effleura. ... Le plus haut moment de liberté était atteint. Tirer sur Dieu, le blesser et s'en faire un ennemi mortel. Je tirai. Je tirai trois coups" (11).

Querelle's thoughts and emotions when committing murder are described in similar terms (12), Genet also writes of Querelle:

> "Les meurtres de Querelle, et sa sécurité au milieu d'eux, son calme dans leur exécution, sa tranquillité au milieu des ténèbres, avaient fait de lui un homme grave. ... On ne pouvait rien contre lui" (13).

Essentially then solitude is suffered whereas "singularité", once gained, is exploited as a potential source of strength. Perhaps the clearest example of the distinction between the two can be found in the juxtapositioning within one novel of the characters of Querelle and

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(10) Notre-Dame, p. 199.
(11) Pompes Funèbres, (Gallimard, 1953) pp. 67-69.
(12) Querelle de Brest, (Gallimard, 1953) pp. 210-214. (Querelle's murder of Vic)
(13) Ibid., p. 296.

Lieutenant Seblon. The former, as has been suggested, uses his solitude to build an exceptional destiny for himself, while the latter suffers from passive, guilty, repressed feelings of abnormality. Seblon and Querelle may perhaps represent, in much exaggerated forms, earlier and later stages in Genet's own mythical development; the point at which Genet feels himself become more like Querelle may be described in Miracle:

> "L'exacte vision qui faisait de moi un homme, c'est-à-dire un être vivant uniquement sur terre, correspondait avec ceci qui semblait cesser ma féminité ou l'ambiguïté et le flou de mes désirs mâles. ... Je m'avançais crânement dans la force avec une lourdeur, une sûreté et un régard droit qui sont eux-mêmes une preuve de force" (14).

Genet reserves his special admiration for those who, by a systematic destruction of normal human responses and emotions in themselves attain the state of "singularité". These are the men who have transcended their universal rejection and their profane existence, and show themselves to be hard and gleaming despite their fate. By writing the preface to George Jackson's Soledad Brother, Genet demonstrates that even now he identifies with individuals, who rise above their persecution by society to emerge strengthened.

Since the achieving of solitude depends upon a renunciation of human relationships and contact, it is perhaps appropriate at this point to examine the whole question of Genet's and his characters' relationships with others. It should be remembered that as a homosexual, and essentially a passive one, the outcast Genet must, at least in theory resolve the dilemma of surviving in a world where even the criminals and thugs he mixes with have an inbuilt loathing of homosexuality. Love, which could have resolved many of Genet's problems, is rendered invalid, since the passive homosexual is constantly rejected, precisely because those men

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(14) Miracle p. 241. (See also Chapter 2, p. 30. "Despite Genet's brash claims ..... life through literature (39).)

he worships are the most masculine of males. Although Divine assumes a female identity in her attempt to attract and keep lovers, she fails:

> "Pour Mignon, Divine est à peine un prétexte, une occasion. S'il pensait à elle, il hausserait les épaules pour se débarrasser de sa pensée, comme si la pensée était un dragon griffu planté sur son dos. Mais pour Divine, Mignon c'est tout" (15).

Genet's lovers in Miracle have been seen to be vicious and unfeeling rejects, scornful or ignorant of his love for them. In a description of Bulkaen the narrator is forced to speculate about his hero's emotions and to breathe life into him:

> "Mais cette force qu'il possédait n'était que la force de mon amour" (16).

Writing about Divers Genet states: "Il ne palpitait pas. Aucune faille, fente, ne laissait sortir une idée, un émoi. Il n'était pas poreux" (17).

Genet's emphasis on sexuality arises firstly from the nature of his lovers and their environment. The sex act however is for Genet more than an end in itself. He sees it rather as a means of achieving a unity with himself through his unity with another. In Miracle Genet comments on his own sexual relationships:

> "A présent, je sais qu'il est beaucoup plus beau que moi. Mais ma solitude m'a précipité vers cette ressemblance jusqu'à désirer qu'elle soit parfaite, jusqu'à me confondre avec lui-même" (18).

By merging himself sexually with a hero whom he idolises, he claims to be hoping to lose his identity as an isolated individual, and thus to achieve the "miracle" whereby he is able to observe his own self from outside.

Thus on the emotional, human level Genet needs the affection of others. As has been suggested, his novels provide him with the opportunity

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(15) Notre-Dame, p. 51.
(16) Miracle, p. 316.
(17) Ibid., p. 388.
(18) Ibid., pp. 444-445.

of living a phantasy existence; in reality his affairs probably ended in misery, solitude and betrayal. Similarly any self-knowledge gained through sexual union with another is incomplete, since in any relationship the two partners remain intrinsically separate. As a homosexual Genet feels that his relationships are particularly destined to failure. In his novels he reinterprets this realisation of approaching failure as the result of a determined decision on his part to make his striving for solitude and "singularité" more valid. To the reader Genet's attitude and behaviour will appear either actively anti-social, or the result of an innate character flaw, reinforcing society's rejection of him. Genet is thus an outcast by the apparent facts of his existence and by the personal assertions in his writing.

In examining more closely some of the fictional relationships, it is necessary to remember that rather than being individuals in their own right, Genet's characters are to a greater or lesser extent representative of the author himself. Writing of solitude and prison life in Notre-Dame Genet remarks:

> "Je veux dire que la solitude de la prison me donnait cette liberté d'être avec les cent Jean Genet entrevus au vol chez cent passants, car je suis bien pareil à Mignon,...(19).

In Pompes Funèbres the narrative changes many times, as Genet enters in turn into each of his characters. He writes of his creations in the novel:

> "Si le romancier peut aborder n'importe quel sujet, parler de n'importe quel personnage avec toujours une précision rigoureuse et obtenir la diversité, le poète est soumis aux exigences de son coeur qui attire à lui tous les êtres marqués à l'angle par le mal et par le malheur, et tous les personnages de mes livres se ressemblent. Ils vivent, à peine modifiés, les mêmes moments, les mêmes périls, et pour parler d'eux, mon langage inspiré par eux redit sur un même ton les mêmes poèmes" (20).

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(19) Notre-Dame, p. 168.
(20) Pompes Funèbres, p. 63.

Genet's choice of outcasts as lovers, originally due to the restrictions of his world, eventually becomes an integral part of his attempt to degrade himself by contact with what he himself finds instinctively repulsive. As was the case with other aspects of Genet's self-degradation, to distinguish clearly between what was genuinely willed and what was the unavoidable force of circumstances, is an impossible task. Much of the effect of Genet's writing however stems from the interaction and the confusion of these two possibilities.

Mignon seems indifferent towards Divine as a person (21); Genet writes of Bulkaen: "J'aimais Bulkaen pour son ignominie" (22). These are men who, as Genet himself admits, are deficient in normal emotions, and whose whole environment is characterised by rejection of and indifference towards affection. They are inhuman monsters, whom Genet forces himself to love. In Pompes Funèbres Genet, the narrator, compels himself to feel love for Riton, the fictitious character created to fill the role of the man whom logically Genet should find the most repulsive: the murderer of his lover Jean Decarnin:

> "Ma haine pour le milicien était si forte, si belle, qu'elle équivalait au plus solide amour. C'était lui, sans doute, qui avait tué Jean. Je le désirai. Je souffrais tellement de la mort de Jean que j'étais décide à employer n'importe quel moyen pour me débarrasser de son souvenir" (23).

Genet glorifies those whom both society, and therefore the civilised side of his own personality have outlawed, because they are beyond hope or salvation, and because they either accept or will this situation. He writes: "Mes aimés seront ceux que vous appelleriez: des voyous de la pire espèce" (24). By forcing himself to love them he will perhaps,

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(21) Notre-Dame, p. 59. (See Chapter 3, p.41.)
(22) Miracle, p. 446.
(23) Pompes Funèbres, p. 36.
(24) Notre-Dame, p. 65.

in some way, come to resemble them; if furthermore he can have sexual contact with them and with the violence and indifference which they represent, then he will have achieved two of his avowed aims. He will have approached evil, and he will have suffered such an attack on his own sensibilities that he will emerge closer to the state of "singularité".

The outcasts whom Genet idolises are of many kinds: other homosexuals, Negroes, Nazi soldiers, collaborators and young delinquents. Paradoxically however, in their attitude towards Genet, these people often reaffirm society's moral values. They reject Genet, the aesthete who loves them because of an "evil" nature which they themselves are unaware of. They also despise him because, despite all his efforts he is not of their kind; tenderness is too plainly visible through his feigned toughness.

In the novels the homosexual relationship, irrevocably destined to failure, mimics the "normal" heterosexual relationship in so far as its existence depends upon the observance of the traditional contrast between the active dominant male role, and the submissive, weaker female role. Thus in Notre-Dame Genet writes:

> "La jeunesse tendre de Notre-Dame, car il avait ses moments de douceur, ne comblait pas le besoin d'être soumise à une domination brutale qu'éprouvait Divine" (25).

In his relationship with Bulkaen, the narrator naturally assumes the passive role:

> "Sa dureté granitique, c'était la rigidité qui résultait de la crispation de toutes ses fibres en face de mon amour - et surtout de mon désir. Plus je faiblissais, plus il se durcissait, apparemment, pour moi seul et par contraste" (26).

Also in Miracle Genet makes a more generalised comment on this crucial aspect of the homosexual relationship:

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(25) Notre-Dame, p. 88.
(26) Miracle, p. 316.

> "J'ai trop vu de couples où le plus beau s'accommode du plus laid pour ne pas croire qu'il y ait là une loi de nature, une loi de compensation qui me console bassement,..."(27)

Despite this particular similarity between "normal" and "abnormal" relationships, Genet does not allow the reader to forget the very real differences:

> "Nos ménages, la loi de nos Maisons, ne ressemblent pas à vos Maisons. On s'aime sans amour. Ils n'ont pas le caractère sacramentel. Les tantes sont les grandes immorales. En un clin d'oeil, après six ans d'union, sans se croire attaché, sans penser faire mal ni faire du mal, Mignon décide d'abandonner Divine. Sans remords, qu'un peu d'inquiétude que peut-être Divine ne consentît plus à le revoir" (28).

From an emotional point of view Genet regrets this lack of love and stability; while from his intellectual position as a novelist writing retrospectively, he exploits the misery and solitude which accompany the break up of his affairs.

Divine makes a great show of her homosexuality while she is young, wallowing in her humiliation and despair. As she ages however she becomes increasingly obsessed with her inability to attract and keep lovers. In her attempt to interest Notre-Dame she believes that she is transforming herself at last into a virile male. But disillusionment follows:

> "Divine ne s'était pas virilisée: elle avait vieilli. Maintenant, un adolescent l'émouvait: par là elle eut le sentiment d'être vieille, et cette certitude se déployait en elle comme des tentures formées d'ailes de chauve-souris" (29).

Eventually, with the same callousness as Mignon, Notre-Dame abandons Divine for Seck Gorgui. Divine is thus the victim of her passivity and of her increasing age. Both are inevitable facts of her existence, both constitute her destiny.

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(27) Miracle, p. 352. (See also Miracle, p. 425, 468)
(28) Notre-Dame, p. 54.
(29) Ibid., p. 72.

The failure of the homosexual relationship to bring lasting happiness is transformed in Genet's novels into another element in the search for solitude. Although Divine feels despair, she nevertheless seems to accept her approaching loneliness:

> "Mais avec cette désolation, une joie nouvelle naissait en elle. La joie qui précède les suicides. De sa vie quotidienne Divine avait peur" (30).

It is perhaps the power of this "joie nouvelle" which Genet recognises in Journal du Voleur, when he claims to have initiated the break-up of his relationship with Michaelis. By doing this he has effectively transformed himself into the active partner (31). Thus solitude is seen to have been deliberately induced. Querelle's betrayal of Gil contains this same element of deliberate intention. Since in Genet's mind appearances count for everything this apparent indifference has the same effect, both for the abandoned lover, and for the "ideal" reader, as actual indifference. In Journal Genet seduces and robs ageing homosexuals, asserting an aggressiveness which bears all the signs, to his victim, of genuinely evil cruelty (32). From this exercise in cruelty Genet gains a feeling of power and solitude. In Pompes Funèbres and Querelle he uses the balance within the homosexual relationship to examine the nature of personal power. The earlier novels construct a theoretical basis from which he will assert that in any relationship the two partners, strong and weak, have an equal need of one another. Without the continual presence of weakness, strength cannot be defined. This whole question of power relationships is considered in an interesting light by what J. H. McMahon calls the Hangman-Erik-Riton dynamic (33).

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(30) Notre-Dame, p. 73.
(31) Journal, pp. 100-104.
(32) Ibid., p. 187-189.
(33) J. H. McMahon, The Imagination of Jean Genet (Yale University Press), 1963, pp. 71-82.

What Genet has attempted to do is to create an image of himself, which will appear to be the absolute negation of moral decency and normality, virtuous qualities which society admires. As self-appointed symbol of the world of outcasts Genet has decided that he is indispensable to society.

On the more mundanely practical level, Genet's very use of language, particularly in his descriptions of sexual encounters between his characters, serves to remove him from decent society. In so far as his attitudes further entrench society's prejudices, however, he ensures a place for himself in the continuing struggle between good and evil, normality and abnormality, conformity and rebellion. The very fact, for example, that Genet forces himself to love Riton would be enough to provoke feelings of revulsion and anger in patriotic French readers. Riton is the most despicable monster: a Frenchman actively collaborating with the Nazi occupation forces. He has betrayed his country and murdered his own compatriots. Who better to rave at, and to tear to pieces, as the cinema audience would have done, than this young traitor?(34) Who better to measure one's own virtue against? If Genet succeeds in provoking a violent reaction in the reader he will have almost effected the transformation of his own weakness into strength; his own negative qualities may perhaps have produced a response in "votre monde", which is very near to dependence. It is impossible to know whether Genet has provoked this reaction, but verbally at least he has almost succeeded in turning the tables on his enemies.

It is a short step from this point to assert that outcasts exist because they are needed. Certainly Genet considers that the French cinema audience in Pompes Funèbres, needed the film of Riton, if only to throw their own passive collaboration into insignificance. Similarly White society, in order to affirm constantly its special destiny and superiority,

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(34) Pompes Funèbres, pp. 35-39. (Genet creates the character of Riton from an unknown Milicien whom he sees arrested in a newsreel film).

needs its visual opposite, the Negro, not as an equal, since this would not serve its purpose, but as an inferior. The white queen in Les Nègres asserts in one short sentence both her superiority and her race's need of the Negro:

> "En échange d'un crime nous apportions son pardon et l'absolution du criminel" (35).

It is in his plays that Genet emphasises the social implications of the equation, which in its simplest form seeks to prove that in order to justify the existence of laws, police and judges, society demands and by its attitude creates criminals. The Deuxième Tableau of Le Balcon, in which the Thief, the Judge, and the Executioner play out their roles, makes this particular point. Addressing his two accomplices, the Judge says:

> "Je t'approuve, Bourreau! ... Miroir qui me glorifie! ... Bras, quintal de viande, sans toi je ne serais rien... (A la Voleuse) Sans toi non plus, petite. Vous êtes mes deux compléments parfaits... Ah la joli trio que nous formons! (A la Voleuse) Mais toi, tu as un privilège sur lui, sur moi aussi d'ailleurs, celui de l'antériorité. Mon être de juge est une émanation de ton être de voleuse. Il suffirait que tu refuses..." (36).

Out of a catastrophic personal life, characterised by an acute failure to form lasting relationships, Genet evolves a fictional world, where because he is master, all misfortunes appear to be the results of a series of conscious decisions. Although the attaining of solitude involves both physical and moral suffering and damage, Genet is gradually placing himself outside the reach of those who condemn him. In the final analysis however, and this is what was intended, it is his writing, rather than the reality of his life, which provide Genet with his unique destiny.

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(35) Les Nègres, (Marc Barbezat, L'Arbalète), 1963, p. 145.
(36) Le Balcon, (Gallimard, Oeuvres Complètes Vol. 4.) 1968, p. 52.

Chapter 5 Sainthood and Betrayal; Pompes Funèbres

The motives for Genet's and his heros' striving for solitude, and the means whereby they attempt to achieve it, have been discussed in Chapter 4. It is the state of solitude itself which will now be studied more closely. It has already been seen that in order to achieve a special destiny, numerous moral barriers within characters have been destroyed; decency and good taste have been outraged, sexual taboos have been violated, murder, infanticide and betrayal have been committed. Solitude is the quality used to describe the physical situation or the appearance of a character like Divine; on the spiritual plane Genet attempts to equate this with his idea of "sainteté". Near the beginning of Notre-Dame he writes:

> "J'en ai pour toute la durée d'un livre, que je ne l'aie tirée de sa pétrification et peu à peu ne lui aie donné ma souffrance, ne l'aie peu à peu délivrée du mal, et, la tenant par sa main, conduite à la sainteté" (1).

And a few pages later he writes: "Lentement, mais sûrement, je veux la dépouiller de toute espèce de bonheur pour en faire une sainte" (2). "Sainteté" is possible only for those who are able to escape from the profanity of every day life and concerns, and to attain the Sacred realm of existence mentioned in the previous chapter. The concept of "sainteté" is one which runs through all Genet's novels; all major characters who fulfill their special destiny are likened, if not to saints, to other mythical religious figures:

> "Ondoyé, c'est-à-dire béatifié aussi, canonisé quasi, fut Mignon, avant sa naissance, dans le ventre chaud de sa mère"(3).

A long passage towards the end of Notre-Dame is devoted to "La sainteté de Divine" (4). Alongside and through his characters Genet sees himself

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(1) Notre-Dame, p. 25.
(2) Ibid., p. 46.
(3) Ibid., p. 31. (Harcamone in Miracle is compared to "un Dalaï-Lama invisible, puissant et présent,..." Miracle, p. 257.)
(4) Ibid., pp. 198-199. (see also Notre-Dame, pp. 196-198)

as pursuing this same goal. Within the first few pages of Miracle he writes of: "mon aspiration vers une sainteté aux éclats assourdis..."(5); and: "C'est aussi la sainteté que je retourne chercher dans le déroulement de cette aventure" (6). In Pompes Funèbres Genet intends to make Riton into a saint (7).

Despite his frequent use of the term, Genet admits in Journal to not knowing exactly what it is: "Si la sainteté est mon but, je ne puis dire ce qu'elle est" (8). In considering why he chose to use this word, it must be remembered that he has already decided that, intellectually at least perfection in Evil is as valid as perfection in Goodness. In view of this and within the context of the novels, their characters and style, Genet's use of the word is understandable. Since however Christian connotations will cause a reaction in the reader to Genet's use of this word, the various definitions of "sainteté" in the novels should be examined more closely. In wishing to widen its application he almost goes so far as to change its meaning. He writes of the: "le sens chrétien que je veux détacher d'elle" (9); and yet in common with the Christian definition Genet does consider renunciation to be a crucial aspect of the quest for "sainteté":

> "Reparler de sainteté à propos de relégation fera crisser vos dents inhabituées aux nourritures acides. Pourtant la vie que je mène requiert ces conditions d'abandon des choses terrestres qu'exige de ses saints l'Église et toutes les églises. Puis elle ouvre, elle force une porte qui donne sur le merveilleux. Et la sainteté se reconnaît encore à ceci, c'est qu'elle conduit au Ciel par la voie du péché"(10).

Essentially Genet has chosen a life characterised by sin; in renouncing earthly pleasures he hopes to reach Heaven in spite of God and in spite

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(5) Miracle, p. 224.
(6) Ibid., p. 254.
(7) Pompes Funèbres, p. 102.
(8) Journal, p. 221.
(9) Ibid., p. 229.
(10) Miracle, p. 255 (see also Notre-Dame, p. 92.)

of the customary virtue which belief in him demands: "... la sainteté, qui est de vivre selon le Ciel, malgré Dieu" (11).

Thus by Genet's theory "sainteté" can be achieved by acts whose outcome is the direct opposite of those acts which lead the Christian Saint towards the same goal:

> "Si l'habituelle sainteté consiste à monter dans un ciel vers son idole, la sainteté qui me menait vers Harcamone en étant exactement le contraire, il était normal que les exercices m'y conduisant fussent d'un autre ordre que les exercices qui mènent au ciel. Je devais aller à lui par un autre chemin que celui de la vertu. ... Qu'on ne s'étonne pas si les images qui indiquent mon mouvement sont l'opposé des images qui indiquent le mouvement des saints du ciel. On dira d'eux qu'ils montaient, et que je me dégradais" (12).

For Genet then "sainteté" can be achieved through evil; as he writes in Journal:

> "La sainteté c'est de faire servir la douleur. C'est forcer le diable à être Dieu. C'est obtenir la reconnaissance du mal" (13).

Thus in Genet's mind "sainteté" consists of a state of moral perfection reached through the renunciation of everyday, human pleasure; he is in so doing broadening what he seems to consider to be a restricted use of the word. It can be claimed however that since he ignores the Christian associations of selflessness, and love for others, he is in fact perverting the term, and using it in an unacceptable way. P. Thody writes of Genet's insistence upon "sainteté":

> "What he does is take only two aspects of sainthood - the quest for absolute humility and the renunciation of all human pleasures - and present them as if they were the whole thing. He totally ignores the fact that sainthood has all the other connotations of holiness, patience, moral perfection and genuine devotion to the well-being of others. The characters whom he describes as saints in his books act for the most part in complete defiance of these moral and spiritual values, whose existence Genet does not even mention"(14).

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(11) Miracle, p. 256.
(12) Ibid., pp. 445-6.
(13) Journal, p. 217.
(14) Jean Genet: A Study of his Novels and Plays, P. Thody, (Hamish Hamilton, 1968), p. 51.

Certainly Genet's use of the word is deliberately provocative; the extent to which the reader is provoked however depends upon the strength of his own religious convictions and the degree to which he is able to enter into, or be taken in by, Genet's world.

"Sainteté" however is only one of the many references throughout the novels to God and religion: for Genet himself it represents an aspiration towards perfection. It represents also a kind of nostalgia for the world from which he is excluded. C. Bonnefoy has written:

> "Qu'il se veuille athée, qu'il ait la nostalgie du catholicisme sont deux vérités évidentes" (15).

Certainly Genet's Catholic upbringing has contributed very decisively towards both his desire for the absolute and his fascination with the pomp and ceremony surrounding official religious rituals. In Miracle much is made of the fact of Fontevrault prison having formerly been an abbey:

> "Il était voulu par Dieu que ces lieux n'abritassent que des communautés d'un seul sexe. Après que les moines, dans leur bure aussi, y ciselèrent la pierre, les détenus modèlent l'air de leurs contorsions, leurs gestes, leurs appels, leurs cris ou modulations, leur chant de lamantin, les mouvements silencieux de leur bouche;...(16).

Both Notre-Dame and Pompes Funèbres open with funeral scenes. To Divine as to the child Culafroy religion and the church are sources of great mystery. Divine feels strongly the powerful presence of God and the angels:

> "... ils (les saints du Ciel) n'effrayaient pas Divine parce qu'ils sont terribles, c'est-à-dire vengeurs des pensées mauvaises, mais parce qu'ils sont en plâtre, leurs pieds posés sur la dentelle, dans les fleurs, et que, malgré cela, ils sont omniscients" (17).

Genet too feels the same horror:

> "... car les anges me font horreur étant, je l'imagine, composés de cette sorte: ni esprit ni matière, blancs, vaporeux et effrayants comme le corps translucide des fantômes" (18).

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(15) Genet, C. Bonnefoy (Classiques du XXe Siècle 76. Editions Universitaires 1965), p. 85.
(16) Miracle, pp. 274-275.
(17) Notre-Dame, p. 87.
(18) Ibid., p. 10.

Certain aspects of Genet's attitude towards the existence of God are ambiguous; in Journal he does attempt to reationalise his views when he writes:

> "Refusant d'admettre un Dieu de lumière selon les explications des théologiens, Dieu m'était sensible - ou, plutôt que lui, une écoeurante impression de mystère - par quelques détails mauvais, sordides (et relevant d'une puérile imagination) de la liturgie romaine" (19).

Despite however C. Bonnefoy's assertion: "qu'il se veuille athée" (20), Genet's belief in the existence of God, is crucial to the construction of his legend. He sees the Just society as an entity which embraces the Christian virtues and strives towards the Christian concept of Goodness and God. Without this opposition, his own aim of perfection in evil and solitude becomes meaningless. For Genet God becomes the mythical force behind the universal conspiracy by which he is condemned and rejected. In Journal he writes:

> "J'entrais le jour dans les églises afin de me reposer. L'ordre moral ayant son origine dans les préceptes chrétiens, je désirai me familiariser avec l'idée de Dieu: à la messe du matin, en état de péché mortel, je communiais" (21).

Clearly Genet feels God to be at the source of his predetermined existence.

By making "sainteté" the aim of his legendary life Genet thus not only seeks to provoke a reaction within the minds of those members of the Good Society who read his novels; theoretically he also provokes God, challenging him to prove his existence and to destroy evil as represented by Genet himself. And yet because he feels himself to be the victim of destiny, he seems to recognise the irony of this challenge:

> "Le sourire de la tragédie est encore commandé par une sorte d'humour à l'égard des Dieux. Le héros tragique délicatement

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(19) Journal, p. 182.
(20) See note 15, p. 60.
(21) Journal, p. 182.

> nargue son destin. Il l'accomplit si gentiment que l'objet cette fois ce n'est pas l'homme, mais les Dieux" (22).

Thus everything, even Genet's rebellion, is predestined. Perhaps for this reason Genet writes:

> "Il paraîtrait logique de prier le diable, aucun voleur n'oserait le faire sérieusement. Pactiser avec lui serait trop profondément s'engager, tant il s'oppose à Dieu que l'on sait être le vainqueur définitif. L'assassin lui-même n'oserait prier le diable" (23).

And in Pompes Funèbres he writes:

> "Si j'écris les aventures intimes d'un prêtre catholique, n'imaginez pas qu'il suffise de pénétrer les secrets du mécanisme de l'aspiration religieuse. Mon but c'est Dieu. Je le vise et puisqu'il se cache derrière le fatras de différents cultes plus qu'ailleurs, il me semble habile de feindre de vouloir dépister là" (24).

The existence of God, the supernatural, but not necessarily benevolent force, is thus essential to the image of himself which Genet creates in his novels. For him the idea that God is dead would be quite unacceptable, since he must gain isolation, solitude, "sainteté" in the face of God. Without him he can have no unique destiny; his condemnation as an outcast becomes invalid.

From this basis Genet builds his criminals into saints, according to them the honours reserved for high-priests. They appear in imaginary ceremonials, in which their actions are charged with solemnly religious significance. The following is one example devised by the inmates of Mettray:

> "C'est Deloffre qui inventa le cérémonial. Chacun des trois enfants passant devant les bat-flanc eut sa fonction; Angelo portait sur ses mains une bassine pleine d'eau, avec son mouchoir qu'il y trempait, Lemercier lavait les pieds des marles déchaussés, Gevillé les essuyait avec sa chemise retirée puis, tous les trois ensemble, à genoux, baisaient les pieds lavés" (25).

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(22) Journal, p. 224.
(23) Ibid., pp. 224-225.
(24) Pompes Funèbres, p. 127.
(25) Miracle, pp. 428-429.

In Miracle the condemned cell is compared to : "la chapelle vers qui vont nos prières muettes" (26); and the prison inmate is compared to a: "moine d'autrefois" (27). Genet's theatre also depends very heavily for its effect upon the creation of a religious, ritualistic atmosphere. It is perhaps the symbolic aspect of religion which fascinates Genet the most. His great emphasis on the significance of gestures and appearances has already been noted; ceremonies themselves are composed of a series of ritualised gestures, each bestowed with its own symbolic meaning. The religious ceremonial is particularly attractive to Genet since it embraces his own personal preoccupations: perfection, death, the Absolute, the Mystic. The gestures and trappings of religion, expressions of the symbol in its purest form, represent for him the contrast between reality and appearance which runs through his work as a whole. He even invents a parallel between the religious ritual and his own acts of burglary:

> "... le cambriolage au moment qu'on le fait est toujours le dernier, non que l'on pense n'en plus faire après celui-ci, on ne pense pas, mais qu'un tel rassemblement de soi ne peut avoir lieu (non dans la vie, il nous conduirait, poussé davantage, hors d'elle) - et cette unicité d'un acte qui se développe (la rose sa corolle) en gestes conscients, sûrs de leur efficacité, de leur fragilité et pourtant de la violence qu'ils donnent à cet acte, lui accorde encore ici la valeur d'un rite religieux" (28).

The miracle also plays a central role in Genet's stated philosophy, since it too embodies the essence of the symbol, involving usually a transformation from the profane to the sacred. Thus water becomes wine, wine becomes blood, bread becomes flesh. As in the case of the Communion, what Genet finds most revealing and miraculous is that despite belief, will-power and faith, bread and wine, while symbolising flesh and blood,

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(26) Miracle, p. 300.
(27) Ibid., p. 339.
(28) Journal, p. 32.

remain in reality bread and wine. In Miracle Genet has the vision of Harcamone's chains being transformed into a garland of roses:

> "Je sentais, dans toutes mes veines, que le miracle était en marche. Mais la ferveur de notre admiration avec la charge de sainteté qui pesait sur la chaîne serrant ses poignets - ... - firent cette chaîne se transformer sous nos yeux à peine surpris, en une guirlande de roses blanches" (29).

Again what is miraculous to Genet is that, despite their symbolic appearance as roses, the chains nevertheless retain their reality as chains. In the same paragraph he writes:

> "Les gâfes ne voyaient rien d'anormal" (30).

The transformation, effected by means of imagination and emotion, may also seem relevant to Genet himself, since he employs a similar process in his writing, where he constructs from facts, a Legend whose mythical significance transcends its original reality. By belief and intellect the ugliness and futility of his own early life are transformed into what he claims to be a saint's apprenticeship; and yet his actual past remains unaltered.

For Culafroy, as for Genet, the most miraculous aspect of the miracle is that it is essentially fake:

> "Le miracle. Il s'attendait à voir les statues de plâtre dégringoler de leur niche et le terrasser; il était certain qu'elles le feraient; pour lui-même, c'était déjà fait avant que d'être fait. Il attendit la damnation avec la résignation du condamné à mort: la sachant imminente, il l'attendit en paix. Il n'agissait donc qu'après l'accomplissement virtuel de l'acte... Le ciboire était là. Il l'avait ouvert. L'acte lui parut si insolite qu'il eut la curiosité de se regarder l'accomplir. Le rêve faillit s'effondrer. Lou-Culafroy saisit les trois hosties et les laissa tomber sur le tapis.... Il laissa échapper le ciboire, qui, tombant sur la laine, donna un son creux.
>
> Et le miracle eut lieu. Il n'y eut pas de miracle. Dieu s'était dégonflé. Dieu était creux. Seulement un trou avec n'importe quoi autour" (31).

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(29) Miracle, pp. 233-234.
(30) Ibid., p. 234.
(31) Notre-Dame, pp. 102-103.

If the effort of will made by Genet's characters to achieve that state of solitude symbolised by Genet's use of the word "sainteté", is regarded as a development parallel to Genet's affirmation of his own uniqueness, then it is clear that for himself at least Genet has partly realised his aim after the completion of Notre-Dame and Miracle. Although subject themes remain basically unaltered the two novels that follow differ both in approach and style. What distinguishes Pompes Funèbres and Querelle de Brest is their tone of confidence, their greater degree of harshness and cruelty, and the less important role of the narrator in the sequence of events. The absence of self-pity and creative reverie, which formed very distinctive aspects of the two earlier novels suggests a recently acquired feeling of moral certainty in Genet as a writer, and perhaps as an individual. The heroes of Pompes Funèbres and Querelle seem to display an instinctive insight into the nature of power within personal and social relationships. The idea emphasised in Notre-Dame and Miracle, that by willing the extreme of inevitable misfortune a character can reach a state of sanctity, is continued a stage further in Pompes Funèbres; Genet's love for Riton is the exact opposite of what, by natural and accepted social laws, he should feel. Having affirmed his intention to forget his grief at the death of Jean Decarnin, by transforming this grief into a love for Riton, Genet continues:

> "Le meilleur tour que je pouvais jouer à cette féroce engeance qu'on nomme le destin, qui délègue un gamin pour son travail, et le meilleur tour à ce gamin, serait bien de le charger de l'amour que je portais à sa victime" (32).

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(32) Pompes Funèbres, p. 36.

In this way laws and apparently incontravenable rules of human nature seem to be defeated; freedom is being gained by an effort of will. Querelle forces himself to betray Gil, whom he loves, to the police, because he sees him as a threat to his own "singularité"; thus he appears to betray because he loves.

It is by such actions that Genet's heroes manifest and confirm their self-confidence and their "singularité". Having established this atmosphere of control, Genet disentangles himself personally from what he considers to be the dangerous dynamics of his work, and prepares to direct from a distance. He will now lead his characters to discover and implicate themselves in the workings of laws, which he has already constructed for himself.

Having decided to assume absolute control, Genet renews and redirects his pursuit of evil. He no longer however attempts to embody absolute evil himself, but rather creates superhuman characters more capable than him of making the necessary personal sacrifices. The evil he now seeks is concerned more with destruction in a practical, less spiritual sense. Betrayal, which Genet makes the dominant theme of Pompes Funèbres, is described thus by C. Bonnefoy:

> "... parce qu'elle rompt avec notre monde plus radicalement que le vol, elle procure au traître, l'irrécupérable par excellence, cet isolement orgueilleux et splendide dont rêve Genet" (33).

And Genet himself comments in Journal:

> "Trahir peut être un geste beau, élégant, composé de force nerveuse et de grâce. ... Personne ne se méprendra si j'écris: 'La trahison est belle", ... Je parlais de la trahison abjecte. Celle que ne justifiera aucune héroïque excuse. Celle qui est sourde, rampante, provoquée par les sentiments les moins nobles: l'envie, la haine, ... la cupidité" (34).

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(33) C. Bonnefoy, Genet (Editions Universitaires, 1965), p. 63.
(34) Journal, p. 257-258.

Pompes Funèbres is set in France occupied by and collaborating with the Nazis; betrayal and treachery are obsessions of the time.

Although he does write of Mignon in Notre-Dame: "pour soi seul il conserve sa figure de traître, aimant trahir" (35), the first significant inclusion of the theme of betrayal in the novels occurs at the end of Miracle, when, by making love to Divers, Genet feels that he is betraying Harcamone on the night before his execution. In part Pompes Funèbres may be an attempt to discover a justification for this betrayal. It is also possible that, having written two novels and having gained the interest and admiration of a number of intellectuals, Genet could have felt the lure of normal society tempting him for the first time since his early childhood with its comforts. Betrayal may thus have been emphasised to bring about a drastic rethinking among those who were prepared to reaccept Genet on behalf of the society which he had spent half his life rejecting. Certainly the treachery of the narrator, of Riton and of Erik would have evoked fierce resentment in the most liberal of Frenchmen of the time, in particular when the heroes of a French novel are either Nazis, or what is worse, members of the French Milice.

Thus it can be argued that the predominance of betrayal in the novel is explained by the interaction in Genet's mind of personal, social and literary motives. Unlike murder, which Genet had previously held to be the absolute in evil, betrayal, especially of close friends, of love or of loyalties, can never be justified on moral grounds (36).

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(35) Notre-Dame, p. 32.

(36) In spite of Genet's praise of betrayal, there is no evidence to suggest his ever having committed the offence himself. In fact as P. Thody points out Genet risked a prison sentence to protect Jean Decarnin's name. (P. Thody, Jean Genet, H. Hamilton, 1968), p. 114.

And in cases where there can be no moral justification for murder, the crime is punishable by the law and thus capable of creating heroes and martyrs. Betrayal on the other hand, though never justifiable, is seldom a punishable offence, since often it works to the advantage of the law. Hence the informer who betrays his friend to the police for money is the lowest possible outcast, since he is exploiting his own worst instincts for selfish personal gain and without any real risk to himself. He has no chance of glory, respect or martyrdom, and is despised both by those whom he has helped and by those whom he has betrayed. In this sense Genet finds informing to be the most satisfactory way for his characters to attain solitude, since this is a betrayal of official evil by personal evil. This kind of evil is Mignon's speciality:

> "Vendre les autres lui plaisait, car cela l'inhumanisait. M'inhumaniser est ma tendance profonde. Il renvoyait sur la première page d'un journal du soir la photographie de cet enseigne de vaisseau dont j'ai parlé, fusillé parce qu'il avait trahi. Mignon pensa: 'Vieux pote! Frangin.'
>
> Une gaminerie, née du dedans, l'exaltait: 'J'suis un faux jeton'" (37).

Betrayal of love is the second aspect of this theme in Pompes Funèbres. Genet, whose love for the dead Jean Decarnin should make him hate Riton, the imaginary killer, forces himself to love him instead (38). Genet also identifies with Erik Seiler, the character representing the Nazi invader, the force of evil, which through the death of Jean Decarnin destroys the force for Good.

In addition to enraging the good society, and thus reinforcing his own isolation, Genet may also be evolving a plausible justification for his betrayal of Harcamone. To hate Riton would be to cancel out and replace his love for Jean with a new emotion. By forcing himself to

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(37) Notre-Dame, p. 32 (for explanation of choice of betrayal, see pp. 52-53.)
(38) See note 32, p. 65 and note 23, p. 51.

feel what is most repulsive and illogical - love for Riton - Genet overcomes moral revulsion within himself. Perhaps what is more important is that he feels an intensification of his love for Jean; his grief at Jean's death is not swamped by a hatred, which might represent an escape from pain:

> "Sur Riton se déversaient les mêmes fleuves d'amour dont pas une goutte n'était retirée à Jean. Je conservais les deux gosses sous le double rayon de ma tendresse" (39).

In apparently loving both good and evil in the forms of Jean and Riton Genet is moving towards an acceptance of the existence of opposites within himself. It is this same ability to contain extremes within himself which allows Querelle to attain moral perfection and a "singularité" of which Divine or Lieutenant Seblon are incapable.

For Genet's purposes national treason does not prove as successful as these first two aspects of betrayal. The Milice's treachery represents Genet's ideal of organised evil, which hitherto he had imagined only possible inside prisons. The very existence of the Milice should realise Genet's dream of a disciplined order devoted to the destruction of Good. By their devotion to Evil the individual members have each attained their solitary destiny. This ideal however proves to be short-lived; Genet realises that organised Evil, however pure, cannot even exist unless eternally confronted with the power of organised Good, and the struggle of those trying to gain perfection in Goodness. Until now Genet seems to have taken these for granted; it takes the horror of war-time France to convince him that the "Good Society", "votre monde", is neither good, nor even committed to the final

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(39) Pompes Funèbres, p. 38.

attainment of Good. It is ironic that, while in Genet's mind betrayal isolates, it becomes in fact a common, officially encouraged mode of behaviour for almost a whole society. Inevitably this realisation shocks Genet:

> "Les Allemands déjà avaient rendu légale la délation et, quand il les eut chassés, le Général Koenig la conseilla par voie d'affiches sur tous les murs de Paris. ... Je ne m'en plaindrais pas si j'avais pris le parti d'accepter pour moi-même la loyauté, mais me voulant hors d'un monde social et moral dont la règle d'honneur me paraissait imposer la rectitude, la politesse, enfin ces préceptes enseignés dans les écoles, c'est en haussant - hauteur de vertu, pour mon propre usage, l'envers de ces vertus communes que j'ai cru obtenir une solitude morale où je ne serais pas rejoint. Je me suis voulu traître, voleur, pillard, délateur, haineux, destructeur, méprisant, lâche. A coup de hache et de cris, je coupais les cordes qui me retenaient au monde de l'habituelle morale, parfois j'en défaisais méthodiquement les noeuds. Monstrueusement je m'éloignais de vous, de votre monde, de vos villes, de vos institutions. Après avoir connu votre interdiction de séjour, vos prisons, votre ban, j'ai découvert des régions plus désertes où mon orgueil se sentait plus à l'aise. Après ce travail - encore à moitié fait - qui m'a coûté tant de sacrifices, m'obstinant toujours plus dans la sublimation d'un monde qui est l'envers du vôtre, voici que j'ai la honte de me voir aborder avec peine, éclopé, saignant, sur un rivage plus peuplé que la Mort elle-même" (40).

It seems surprising that it is only at this relatively late stage in his life that Genet becomes disillusioned. Can he really have viewed society as vast monolith, genuinely devoted to the final establishment of Virtue? Perhaps what he does is to use the spectacle of France in collaboration with the Nazis for a dual personal motive; firstly to demonstrate society's basic flaw, its official hypocrisy; and secondly to change into a more subtle form of revenge his own hitherto naïve attack upon society, which has relied for its effect upon his sincere and solitary pursuit of Evil.

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(40) Pompes Funèbres, pp. 108-109.

Just as Genet's imagination is utilised to justify desire for his lover's murderer, so in the realm of personal sexual relationships too, Genet makes use of these powers to resolve the dilemma of the weak partner - specifically Genet's own case, the passive homosexual - who suffers as a result of a relationship. Le Bourreau, Erik and Riton are linked in the first instance physically by the sex act, but more significantly by a line of descent in which, for a short period of time, each of the three becomes the absolute, the Perfection in Evil. This position of status is described thus in Pompes Funèbres:

> ""'Je suis seul à être Erik Seiler'. Cette certitude l'exaltait. Il était sûr que dans la rue personne ne le connaissait, mais il savait que la foule connaissait l'existence d'Erik Seiler que lui-même pouvait être. La renommée suffit, fût-elle de nature infamante, s'opposant donc à la gloire si la 'fama' est la gloire. D'avoir été l'amant du bourreau suffisait à sa gloire. Il était célèbre, jeune, beau, riche, intelligent, aimant, aimé" (41).

Each of the three characters attains in turn that state of being to which Genet's heroes have always aspired. But they are unable to keep this solitary position of power. By their relationships with each other they lose their quality of absolute hardness, of "singularité", of supreme isolation. As a result of the affair between Erik and the executioner for example, both partners undergo a change:

> "Il s'endurcissait. Et le bourreau en se déversant un peu dans l'oreille d'un gamin qui l'aimait devenait plus tendre. ... Erik s'était transformé. ... Ce qui était trop doux dans son visage avait durci" (42).

In all Genet's work a relationship is made up of a weaker and a stronger partner. Here for the first time, strength and weakness become relative and, what is more important, reversible attributes. In his confrontation with the executioner for example, Erik is the weaker of

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(41) Pompes Funèbres, p. 123.
(42) Ibid., p. 66.

the two men; as a result of their contact however he assumes enough of the other's hardness and virility to cause a change in the balance of power within their relationship. As has been seen above, the executioner becomes relatively softer, more tender and less remote. Roles are reversed. In his relationship with Riton therefore, Erik is automatically the dominant partner, but although he is alone and unique, his power can only have real significance in relation to another being. To prove himself, Erik needs the dependence, or relative weakness of Riton, and it is in the very act of proving his own strength that Erik initiates his own decline, and Riton's rise:

> "Erik se sentait fort, et tendre. L'idée que tout était perdu l'incitait à la gentillesse, pour la première fois" (43).

Here Genet is perhaps destroying the myth that man is irrevocably either passive or active. He has discovered an ethic at work in human behaviour, which grants the passive partner equality with, if not superiority over the active partner. Through this reversal of normal values, Genet may be rejecting the whole concept of man as a being determined solely by innate, inherited qualities. He may be asserting the potential power of an individual to change himself, and also the great influence of circumstances, environment, and especially contact with others and the judgements they make. Genet's personal view on the subject is clearly not unbiased, since this dynamic provides him with anescape route from the impasse into which he feels he has been forced by society. What is perhaps more important is that he has found an ethic applicable not exclusively to himself and the criminal

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(43) Pompes Funèbres, p. 76.

world, but, as he sees it, to society as a whole. Querelle demonstrates a continuation of the ethic in its application to an even wider range of humanity.

By showing that passivity has the potential to destroy activity, Genet is propounding his view of society's ideals of goodness, normality, masculinity etc. For him all such sacred and reputedly unassailable values are rendered imperfect, because they are dependent for their existence upon their opposites. Similarly, society's heroes, those men in whom it chooses to exemplify its values, are imperfect, since they too must be mirrored by their moral opposites.

While attacking artificial human categories, Genet examines in particular Good and Evil, and concludes that these too are artificial distinctions. There can be no eternal, everlasting Good, since the good French society can become almost overnight, the evil, collaborationist society. In itself this denial of the absolute nature of Good and Evil is far from original or revolutionary; Genet goes on to imply that any evaluation of human beings must be made with reference to other, more meaningful values. He admits in Pompes Funèbres:

> "Mon goût de la solitude m'incitait à rechercher les terres les plus vierges, après ma déconvenue en vue des rivages fabuleux du mal ce goût m'oblige à faire marche arrière et m'adonner au bien" (44).

Hitler for example, the implicit hero of Pompes Funèbres, is idealised in the first instance for his absolute Evil, although Genet recognises that it is his strength of purpose and the uniqueness of his destiny which really set him apart:

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(44) Pompes Funèbres, p. 107.

> "Les joailliers appellent solitaire un brillant de belle taille, je veux dire aussi: bien taillé. On dit 'son eau', c'est-à-dire sa limpidité, qui est encore son éclat. Sa solitude fait étinceler Hitler." (45).

Evil fails, not only because it can not be relied upon to provide a unique destiny, but also because in its absolute form it is something which can not be surpassed. Once one has committed absolute evil, one has nowhere else to go:

> "Tuer un homme est le symbole du Mal. Tuer sans que rien ne compense cette perte de vie, c'est le Mal, Mal absolu. Rarement j'emploie ce dernier mot car il m'effraie, mais ici il me paraît s'imposer. Or, et les métaphysiciens le diront, les absolus ne s'ajoutent pas. Atteint une fois grâce au meurtre - qui en est le symbole - le Mal rend moralement inutiles tous les autres actes mauvais. Mille cadavres ou un seul, c'est pareil" (46).

Since Evil can no longer be relied upon to gauge the value of a person or an act, one of Genet's alternative points of reference becomes Beauty. Despite its usual associations, Beauty is for Genet basically independent of man-made moral distinctions. For Genet an act may be beautiful irrespective of its Good or Evil characteristics and results:

> "De la beauté de son expression dépend la beauté d'un acte moral. Dire qu'il est beau décide déjà qu'il le sera. ... L'acte est beau s'il provoque, et dans notre gorge fait découvrir, le chant. Quelquefois la conscience avec laquelle nous aurons pensé un acte réputé vil, la puissance d'expression qui doit le signifier, nous forcent au chant" (47).

Erik Seiler is described in terms of his physical and moral beauty:

> "Sa beauté lui dictait des attitudes orgueilleuses,... Il n'était pas héroïque par pose et afin d'être digne de sa beauté - pour l'augmenter par example - car dans l'action il l'oubliait, mais parce que cette beauté (du visage et du corps) agissait, sans que lui-meme s'en doutât, dans tous ses actes, les commandait, les emplissait" (48).

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(45) Pompes Funèbres, p. 81.
(46) Ibid., pp. 141-142.
(47) Journal du Voleur, p. 23.
(48) Pompes Funèbres, p. 76.

The beauty of a person's act thus depends not upon its moral content, nor upon its result, but upon the beauty and the poetic perfection of its expression:

> "Il faut poursuivre les actes jusqu'à leur achèvement. Quel que soit leur point de départ la fin sera belle. C'est parce qu'elle n'est pas achevée qu'une action est infâme" (49).

Perhaps "achèvement" is the most significant word in this passage. Completeness for Genet requires a merging of opposite extremes. Thus if Good and Evil, taken as separate individual forces, are temporal, relative and ever-changing concepts, a union of Good and Evil contained within one act, within one character, or within one organisation, presents the completeness which Genet longs for, and which he considers to be symbolised by Beauty. Such a union may resolve the personal dilemma he feels with regard to the struggle within himself of Good and Evil. Genet admires Erik and Querelle because, while consciously choosing to commit evil acts, they do not deny the existence of Good within themselves. They are able to contain opposites. (50) They are complete.

Similarly Genet admires the Milice because it can be seen to represent both Good and Evil; its very existence blurs the distinction between the two extremes: "Elle était au point idéal où le voleur et le policier se rencontrent, se confondent" (51).

The great imaginative power Genet has employed in the construction of Pompes Funèbres has resulted in a somewhat intellectual novel, which by its idealisation of betrayal, and of the fusion of opposites, may serve to remove Genet even further from the society he detests. It may simultaneously implicate that society in the system of ethics

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(49) Journal, p. 227.
(50) An illustration of this idea can be found in the description of Erik's murder of the child; Pompes Funèbres, pp. 68-71.
(51) Pompes Funèbres, p. 130.

evolved throughout the narrative. As the creator of this system, Genet escapes its fundamental workings, while nevertheless, as has been suggested, benefitting in part from some of its theoretical effects. For the first time Genet has moved away from the closed prison world, and written a novel, less personal and less passionately sincere than Notre-Dame or Miracle, but a novel which sets his own personal obsessions in a wider social context. From this newly established position of confidence, Genet has perhaps made his first general statements concerning human nature as he sees it.

Chapter 6 Genet's personal philosophy: Querelle de Brest

Pompes Funèbres marked the beginning of Genet's outward movement, away from purely personal obsessions, towards a more generalised view of the world, dealing with an increasing breadth of humanity. Here fundamental themes evolved only slightly; although their application was widened. Pompes Funèbres thus represented Genet's aim of imposing his own carefully elaborated standards upon both his characters and his readers. Querelle is his attempt to consolidate this advantage and to transform it into complete victory. Although never explicitly becoming the character of Querelle in the novel, Genet clearly identifies in part with his inhuman hero, especially with regard to the latter's search for himself and his status in the world of others. Querelle forms the basis on which both Querelle and Genet succeed, in their own terms, in becoming masters of their own fate. Together they adapt the secret of power, discovered through the relationships between the characters of Pompes Funèbres, and use it to achieve their own aims:

Using the narrative "nous" Genet seems more detached and thus more calculating in his approach. Part of the opening paragraph of the novel sets the tone:

> "Nous parlerons de l'apparence mortelle du matelot. Nous avons assisté à des scènes de séduction. ... Nous voulons encore dire qu'il s'adresse aux invertis. A l'idée de mer et de meurtre, s'ajoute naturellement l'idée d'amour ou de voluptés - et plutôt, d'amour contre nature" (1).

Genet's novels, like Querelle's life, challenge the assumptions on which society is based. Pompes Funèbres has clearly proved, at least

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(1) Querelle de Brest (Oeuvres Completes Vol. 3, Gallimard 1953),p. 173. (Underlined sections signify Genet's italics.)

to Genet's satisfaction, that writing is a more successful means of revenge than the petty crime of his earlier years. It is a whole system of values that he is now trying to destroy, and literature can reach a wider audience than theft or even murder.

The reaction of the French people to the occupation forces of the Germans had given Genet an insight into the precarious nature of the Good society's ethic. Good and Evil could never again be held up as invulnerable absolutes to be revered. In addition to this, the very fact that Genet's novels are read at all suggests a distinct flaw in the concept of absolute Good, as Genet has until now viewed it. He has discovered that in the face of art and poetry, traditionally held ethics yield; even in this one small area, the distinction between Good and Evil becomes blurred and largely irrelevant. Since society distinguishes between pornography and art, Genet's writings are not violently suppressed. If he writes with enough poetic skill and with universal significance, then his works will be accepted. In the name of art alone subversive, destructive literature is permitted and appreciated. It is ironic however that the flaw which allows Genet his success as a writer also ensures the failure of his novels as serious vehicles of revenge.

The instrument of Genet's attempted revenge is the eventual resolution in Querelle of the problems caused by paradoxes, opposites and doubles. Genet's particular conclusions concerning the identity of opposites may if successfully reached, implicate and thereby condemn the entire spectrum of right-thinking society. It is the whole world which Genet mirrors in the characters of Querelle, not merely the seedy, underworld figures who take part in the action of the novel.

In the earlier novels Genet saw absolute evil as his main instrument of revenge against society; and this was each individual hero's aim. Genet's recognition of the illusory nature of absolute good however showed him the irrelevance of all absolute, subjective values. In the absence of values men are motivated by what are, on their own admission, base urges. Genet presents and exaggerates these in his characters to undermine the high ideals on which society still pretends to be based. It is Querelle's personality which reveals Genet's truth about the world, and it is his power over circumstances and over others which enables him to arrive at this conclusion.

As its central theme Querelle explores the nature of power and its workings within society. The relationship between Querelle and Mario for example, extends the idea, first expressed in Pompes Funèbres, that the strong ruling force in any relationship needs the other weaker partner, against whom to measure his strength. This idea is put concisely in Querelle:

> "Une gifle reçue vous redresse et fait votre corps se porter en avant, donner une gifle ou un coup de poing, sauter, bander, danser: vivre" (2).

Querelle can thus be regarded as a work of revenge, directed against civilised society. Genet is challenging the whole system of values and assumptions which condemned him as a child. In this, as in his previous novels, Genet sets his hero on the path which will lead him to "singularité". His eventual isolation illuminates the lives of others with a brilliant, unique authenticity, which he alone possesses. At this point Querelle is about to leave Mme Lysiane and La Féria to rejoin his ship:

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(2) Querelle, p. 200.

> "Madame Lysiane éprouvait cruellement que c'était grâce à Querelle qu'elle était, comme Mario et Norbert, sortie de la solitude où son départ les faisait rentrer. Il était apparu au milieu d'eux avec la soudaine promptitude et l'élégance du joker. Il brouillait les figures mais leur donnait un sens" (3).

Like his predecessor Erik, Querelle is savage and treacherous, murdering without justification and betraying those who attempt to love him. Unlike Erik, however, Querelle does not fall into the trap of establishing real, emotional relationships with others. It is Erik's tenderness for and submission to Riton, which is the cause of his fall from power. Querelle carefully avoids displaying such feelings himself, realising instinctively that they might lead him to a similar decline. Internal feelings of gratitude and love, manifest themselves in behaviour as their opposites: hatred, indifference or acts of betrayal. In place of natural gratitude to Vic for helping him smuggle ashore drugs, Querelle murders him. In return for the admiration and love of the young Gil, Querelle betrays him to the police. In short he avoids any involvement in the dynamic referred to in the previous chapter, whereby, through relationships power and influence can be transferred.

Querelle is the total embodiment of all Genet's earlier heroes; he contains all their paradoxical qualities. Divine, and Genet in Miracle cause their own humiliation and degradation; they provoke their inevitable destinies, but this only in retrospect. Querelle, by contrast decides, as far as he can in advance, to accept the inevitable whatever it may be, and to observe its effects on himself.

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(3) Querelle, pp. 345-346.

He decides after his murder of Vic, to allow himself to be buggered by Nono. Having made this decision, he wonders how the experience will affect him:

> "Querelle se releva aussi. Il regarda autour de lui, amusé, souriant, encore qu'il éprouvât la sensation intérieure de marcher au supplice. Il marchait avec dans l'âme le désespoir, mais aussi la certitude intime, inexprimée que cette exécution était nécessaire à sa vie. En quoi serait-il transformé? En enculé. Il le pensa avec terreur. En quoi est-ce, un enculé? De quelle pâte est-ce fait? Quel éclairage particulier vous signale? Quel monstre nouveau devient-on et quel sentiment de cette monstruosité?" (4).

Querelle has taken the initiative one stage earlier, than previous heroes. Whereas Harcamone murdered out of necessity and then accepted the consequences of his act, since he knew trial and conviction to be inevitable, Querelle murders and then himself fulfills the inevitable. Instead of accepting society's version of inevitability, the Law, however he constructs and sees in motion his own rules. These are parallel to those of society, and thus satisfy social feelings of guilt and remorse, which Querelle can not prevent in himself. And yet they are highly personal rules, which at no point touch upon or affect society.

Perhaps Querelle's success depends upon his capacity to be fully aware of the unique destiny he is living. He has moments of great lucidity which Genet's previous characters seemed to lack:

> "Querelle ne s'habituait pas à l'idée, jamais formulée, d'être un monstre. Il considérait, il regardait son passé avec un sourire ironique, effrayé et tendre à la fois, dans la mesure où ce passé se confondait avec lui-même. Un jeune garçon, dont l'âme apparaît dans les yeux, métamorphosé en alligator, s'il n'a tout à fait conscience de sa gueule, de sa mâchoire énorme, pourrait ainsi considérer son corps crevassé, sa queue géante et solennelle qui bat l'eau ou la plage ou frôle d'autres monstres, et qui le prolonge avec la même émouvante, écoeurante - et indestructible - majesté que la traîne ornée de dentelles, de blasons, de batailles,

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(4) Querelle, p. 217.

> de mille crimes, une impératrice enfant. Il connaissait l'horreur d'être seul, saisi par un enchantement immortel au milieu du monde vivant. A lui seul était accordé l'effroyable privilège d'apercevoir sa monstrueuse participation aux règnes des grands fleuves boueux et des jungles. Il redoutait qu'une lueur quelconque venue de l'intérieur de son corps ou de sa propre conscience ne l'illuminât, n'accrochât dans sa carapace écailleuse le reflet d'une forme et le rendît visible aux hommes qui l'eussent forcé à la chasse." (5)

Querelle is led by his own nature to a position of isolation and thus superiority over others. This process whereby conventional categories of Good and Evil are invalidated consists of a unique series of acts. Whereas Erik deliberately chose to commit evil as a means to an end, Querelle finds himself obeying an inner logic in his personality, which happens to produce acts considered evil by society, but advantageous to him personally. The immediate consequences of his murder of Joachim in Beirut illustrates this point; Querelle murders the homosexual Joachim in a fit of panic, steals his money and escapes. Ironically it is Querelle's friend Jonas who is arrested and executed for the murder (6).

Through Querelle Genet asserts that to achieve equilibrium within oneself, one must always balance an act with another, morally contradictory act. Querelle realises that to establish his own individuality, he must maintain his natural internal balance. As will be seen he betrays Gil, who offers him love, and has sex with Nono to expiate his murder of Vic. Querelle has in fact discovered for himself Genet's law of human relationships, the dynamic in which Erik and Riton were involved, but unaware of. It is this discovery which makes Querelle realise that to achieve and retain power over one's

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(5) Querelle, pp. 179-180.

(6) This episode is not recounted fully in "Oeuvres Complètes 3." It is referred to on p. 309 (Querelle): "Lors du meurtre de l'Arménien, Querelle avait dévalisé le cadavre". The whole episode appears in the English translation, Querelle of Brest, Blond, 1966, trans. G. Streatham, from the de-luxe edition, Querelle de Brest (Milan 1947).

Self and over others, one must avoid implicating oneself in the workings of the dynamic.

Natural sexual attraction certainly plays a large part in Querelle's success with both men and women; in the course of the novel he has sex with Mario, Nono, and Madame Lysiane; he is worshipped by Lt. Seblon, Gil and others. It is only by denying all reciprocal affections in himself, either by violence or by forced indifference that Querelle remains free and untouched by others. By society's laws and as a naval rating, he is far inferior to those whom he in fact dominates, and in particular to Mario, the Chief of Police, and to Lt. Seblon, his superior officer. By the laws of the relationship dynamic however, he dominates them all by his sexuality, his immense will-power, and by his refusal to submit to their demands for emotional dependence. Genet describes Querelle's strength thus:

> "Il était fort d'être si beau et d'oser ajouter encore à sa beauté l'apparence cruelle des masques; il était fort - et si invisible et calme, accroupi à l'ombre de sa force dans le coin le plus reculé de soi-même, fort d'effrayer et de se connaître si doux; il était fort d'être un nègre sauvage, naturel d'une tribu où le meurtre ennoblit" (17).

In Querelle, as in all Genet's novels, sexual relationships are used to express power relationships. Despite acting as the passive sexual partner with Mario and Nono, Querelle nevertheless avoids the emotional entanglement which would deprive him of his power. Unlike the Hangman and Erik, Querelle resists the temptation to prove his influence. Rather by his cold indifference, he forces others by implication to admit by their actions their inferiority and dependence

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(7) Querelle, p. 230.

on him, and this with no risk to himself. It is Querelle's very passivity in the sex act which reveals to him the others' urgent needs, thus transforming Querelle from victim into victor. Writing of sexual passivity in Querelle, Genet asserts:

> "Il existe une passivité mâle (au point que la virilité se pourrait caractériser par la négligence, par l'indifférence aux hommages, par l'attente détachée du corps, qu'on lui offre le plaisir ou qu'on l'obtienne de lui) faisant de celui qui se laisse sucer un être moins actif que celui qui suce, comme à son tour ce dernier devient passif quand on le baise. Or, cette passivité véritable rencontrée en Querelle, nous la découvrons en Robert qui se laissait aimer par Mme Lysiane" (8).

Thus Querelle's "singularité" is expressed in terms, not of official, institutionalised power, but of personal, sexual power, which in itself is sufficient to destroy the artificial social concepts of "power for good" and "power for evil". By inference the apparent sources of power represented by Mario and Lt. Seblon are revealed as false, since their personalities, and thus their functions are dominated by Querelle.

Querelle, by rejecting any need for others, and by maintaining control over his own human feelings of love and hate, achieves, first by instinctive imagination, and then by will-power, the supreme "singularité" to which Genet and his heroes have always aspired:

> "Querelle avait donc le sentiment d'une autre solitude: celle de sa singularité créatrice" (9).

Perhaps Genet himself, by creating this monster, has in some way, with this last novel reached a position similar to that of Querelle.

Having presented an overall picture of the aims of Querelle, it is now possible to examine more closely the individual themes of the

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(8) Querelle, p. 247.
(9) Ibid., p. 257.

novel. Throughout his writing Genet has reserved a special place for the convicted murderer and for the act of murder itself. Genet's first poem, Le Condamné à Mort, and his first novel, Notre-Dame are dedicated to Maurice Pilorge, "assassin de vingt ans" (10). Miracle has as its central character the double murderer Harcamone. It is the condemned murderer's unique personal position which has always fascinated Genet, since here a living being is reduced to the status of pure object. In that he is fixed for all time in the eyes and minds of others, he becomes a totally authentic being; he is already dead and yet still maintains the appearance of living:

> "Il s'agit donc d'une gloire céleste à laquelle j'aspirais, et Harcamone avant moi y avait atteint, tranquillement, grâce au meurtre d'une fillette et, quinze ans après, à celui d'un gâfe de Fontevrault" (11).

The murderer, like the child thief Genet, assumes the status of an object through the accusations of others:

> "On condamna Harcamone, après le meurtre de la fillette, à 'la vingt et une', et à son propos, le mot monstre fut prononcé" (12).

An important reason for Genet's fascination with the murderer and his act is his special relationship with death; the murderer both causes death, thus usurping God's position, and also, if convicted, will himself be condemned to death:

> "L'assassin fait parler le sang. Il discute avec lui, veut transiger avec le miracle. L'assassin crée la Cour d'assises et son appareil" (13).

The fact of his condemnation transforms Harcamone:

> "... la condamnation d'Harcamone lui était signifiée en fait par tout un ensemble de détails qui lui firent

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(10) Jean Genet, Poèmes, (L'Arbalète, 1948), p. 8. Dedication.
(11) Miracle, p. 224.
(12) Ibid., p. 457.
(13) Ibid., p. 304.

> comme monter un gradin par où il passait, quittant son état d'homme à l'état de mort,..." (14).

Genet is attracted by the grave beauty of the gestures involved in the act of murder, and the effect of the act upon the murderer himself. To Genet a murder of passion, for example the murder of Théo by Gil in Querelle, would be excusable, not deliberately evil, and therefore innocent. As has been suggested above Erik does not murder in passion, but with cold calculation. He deliberately chooses evil, by forcing himself to kill without motive:

> "L'âme d'Erik était méchante. Il tuait chaque fois qu'il était mal du tuer, parce que cela était mal" (15).

Society will show no mercy towards this type of murderer. Since his Evil is total and willed, there can be no extenuating circumstances.

Thus as a single evil act, murder is certainly the most serious, since, once committed it is totally irremediable and fixed. And yet as a means of achieving the absolute it fails, because of its nature as the perfect single act (16). For Genet the maintaining of this level of absolute evil presents insurmountable problems, since a repetition of his act returns the murderer once more to the realm of the routine, the Profane:

> "Au deuxième meurtre Riton fut plus calme. Il croyait s'habituer alors qu'il venait de commettre le plus grand mal. Il était déjà mort à la douleur et mort tout simplement puisqu'il venait de tuer sa propre image" (17).

By repetition the significance of the act is diminished. In addition to this individual failure, murder as a means of practical revolt against society also fails, since its usual outcome has been death on the guillotine. It is because of these shortcomings, that in

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(14) Miracle, pp. 398-399.
(15) Pompes Funèbres, p. 53.
(16) See Chapter 5, p. 74. Quote and footnote 46.
(17) Pompes Funèbres, p. 140.

Pompes Funèbres Genet emphasises betrayal as a more effective means of achieving his concept of evil or "singularité". Betrayal however also failed, as has been seen, by of the widespread acceptance of treachery.

In view of Genet's inability to find an infallible means of achieving the absolute in evil, he attempts in Querelle to incorporate evil into his hero's character, as one part of his nature. Thus Querelle reaches his position of power with the help of evil acts, and especially murder, but does not depend solely upon them. His murders of Vic and Joachim (18) are gratuitous reactions to situations in which he feels dangerously trapped. The thought of murdering Vic only occurs to Querelle as an inevitable necessity immediately after they have smuggled ashore the opium:

> Quand il fut juste à la hauteur de Vic, dont la manche de drap bleu de son caban rigide, lourd d'humidité, toucha la sienne, Querelle sentit dans tout son corps la présence du meurtre. Cela vint d'abord lentement, à peu près comme les émois amoureux, et, semble-t-il, par le même chemin ou plutôt par le négatif de ce chemin. (19)

Murder here however is used less as a symbol of absolute abstract evil, than as an act which destroys the status quo both of society in general, and of the individuals affected in particular. It must always be remembered when discussing murder and other acts of violence in the novels that Genet does not concern himself with the victim or his suffering, but with the act itself, and its effect upon the criminal who commits it:

> "Outre le bénéfice matériel qu'il en tirait, ses meurtres enrichissaient Querelle. Ils déposaient en lui une sorte de vase, de crasse dont l'odeur endolorissait son désespoir" (20).

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(18) The murder of Vic, Querelle, p. 211. The murder of Joachim, see note 6, p. 82.
(19) Querelle, p. 208.
(20) Ibid., p. 180.

It is the sense of destiny which the murderer assumes after the act which is of importance. Previously Genet's murderers have been presented as tragic figures, whom the author sees as yearning for sanctity and the chance to reject the world. By their acts they may anihilate God, but they also destroy themselves in the process; indeed according to Genet, self-anihilation is an essential corollary to the act itself. Querelle, by contrast, is not a tragic figure. After his murder of Vic Genet writes: "Nous appellerons Querelle un joyeux suicidé moral" (21).

As has been observed, murder as practical revolt fails in the earlier novels because society's justice condemns and executes murderers. Thus Notre-Dame, and Harcamone reached perfection only in Genet's mind, in the realm of the abstract. Expiation, the necessary balance to the act of evil, could be achieved only in physical death; in this way society reasserted its ethic, and thus cancelled out the acts of evil perpetrated against it.

Querelle attempts to provide an attack upon society, which will not be neutralised by this act of retaliation, but which nonetheless obeys the laws governing crime and expiation. Thus Genet has accepted that an act of evil must, to be complete, include a balancing element in some form of punishment; he is however careful to ensure that the practical and moral effects of this evil are not invalidated by the act of expiation. As has been seen Harcamone had to die; his act was completed by its logical opposite. Genet maintains that criminals themselves consider in advance that punishment will be an inevitable result, and therefore part, of their crime:

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(21) Querelle, p. 212.

> "Affirmer seulement que le criminel au moment qu'il commet son crime croit n'être jamais pris est faux. Sans doute refuse-t-il de distinguer avec précision la suite effroyable pour lui de son acte cependant qu'il sait que cet acte le condamne à mort" (22).

Thus after his murder of Vic, Querelle wills his own punishment; instead however of submitting officially to the law as represented by Mario, Querelle creates out of his own imagination a courtroom, a judge and a jury, who convict and sentence him (23). As punishment he forces himself to undergo what he most dreads; he submits to Nono, the brothel keeper, thus sacrificing his virility and expiating his crime. It must be stressed that for Querelle this imaginary sentence seems as real as any official legal pronouncement:

> "Il lui restait à accomplir la dernière formalité: son exécution.
> 'Faut que je m'exécute, quoi!'
> Nous disons sentir comme un assassin célèbre, un peu après son arrestation que rien apparemment laissait prévoir, dira au juge: 'Je me sentais sur le point d'être pris...'" (24).

When Querelle betrays Gil this act itself, by depriving him of the comfort and love which Gil was offering him, is its own punishment (25).

It is these acts which liberate Querelle, make him self-sufficient and independent of society. So that, however, such behaviour should not dare to produce the perfect crime, Querelle discovers a flaw in each of his crimes, an error which if detected will lead to his arrest and almost certain death:

> "Querelle alors commandait un autre meurtre. Aucun acte n'étant parfait dans ce sens qu'un alibi peut nous en rendre irresponsables, comme lorsqu'il commettait un vol, à chaque crime Querelle apercevait un détail qui, à ses yeux seuls, devenait une erreur capable de le perdre. De vivre au milieu de ses erreurs lui donnait encore une impression de légèreté, d'instabilité cruelle, car il semblait voleter de roseau ployant en roseau ployant" (26).

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(22) Querelle, pp. 211-212.
(23) Querelle's self trial: Querelle, pp. 211-215.
(24) Ibid., p. 214.
(25) Ibid., p. 338.
(26) Ibid., p. 215.

Querelle escapes from none of the real dangers of a murderer's precarious existence, and by noticing one small mistake in each crime, never allows himself to reach perfection. He is in fact never free from the fear of arrest and execution. He is constantly aware for example that Gil represents a threat to his freedom:

> "Gil étant sur le point de se révolter - à quoi peu à peu l'incitait l'attitude de Querelle, douce et un peu lointaine - l'expression particulièrement blessante le soumit. Querelle comprit admirablement qu'il prouverait être encore le maître, d'oser traiter avec tant de mépris celui qui pouvait le perdre. Magnifique de toupet et de science, il aggrava son jeu le rendant grave au point que la plus vénielle erreur perdrait le joueur" (27).

Querelle thus lives in close proximity with death, certainly as close as Harcamone awaiting execution. It is this proximity, symbolised in his fights with Mario and with his brother, Robert, which gives him his influence, and combined with his ability to approach the absolute without ever reaching it, it enables Querelle to maintain the delicate balance in his life, between catastrophe and the profane.

The necessary balance of crime and punishment also constitutes one of the many phenomena of duality which form a major theme of Querelle. By the time he wrote this last novel, Genet had come to the view that reality was a synthesis of opposites. He had already reached the conclusion that there were no absolute categories of Good or Evil; and that the one extreme could not exist in a vacuum without the other. Too often in the past he himself and his characters had suffered or failed because of their inability to contain these opposites within themselves. Thus the young Genet of Miracle, and Divine are tortured by the paradox of suffering shame and degradation in their present lives,

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(27) Querelle, p. 335.

while at the same time remembering nostalgically the innocent goodness of their childhood. In Genet's view, in order to aspire to the absolute however, one must, as Querelle discovers, be able to accept and exploit paradoxes, both physical and mental within oneself. Thus the novel is characterised on all levels by the frequent occurrence and juxta-positioning of opposites.

Character doubles, representing dual or split personalities fascinate Genet, but instead of creating one personality, split into its two aspects, Genet presents the two aspects personified as different beings each with an autonomous existence. Many of the characters in the novels are of course doubles of Genet himself. In each duality the truth exists by a merging of the opposite qualities. The most obvious double in Querelle is the physical similarity between the two brothers Georges and Robert Querelle, the latter representing the ordinary, the original Querelle - perhaps the innocent child Genet - and the former representing the transformed, corrupted being, hardened by murder and theft. Genet suggests that these two were once one being:

> "Il regagnait cette région de lui-même où il se retrouverait avec son frère. Il s'enfonçait au sein d'une confusion avec Robert mais d'où il tirait, d'abord les mots, ensuite et grâce à un mécanisme pourtant élémentaire, une pensée claire, peu à peu, vivante, et qui, à mesure qu'elle s'éloignait de ces profondeurs, le différenciait de son frère, provoquait des actes singuliers, tout un système d'opérations solitaires qui, lentement, lui devenaient propres, parfaitement siennes et qu'il partageait - en l'unissant à lui - avec Vic" (28).

Roger and his sister Paulette also form a dual male-female identity in the mind of Gil, who loves them both, but who fears what this confusion might reveal about his own personality. Gil is talking to Roger about Paulette:

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(28) Querelle, p. 181.

> "Oh! ... Oh! ... J'en ai drôlement envie. Et qu'est-ce que j'y foutrais. Toi, tu y ressembles. T'as sa p'tite gueule" (29).

Social functions and roles also have their doubles and their opposites; the murderer and his victim are each necessary to the other's existence; similarly the judge and the criminal. Perhaps the most striking dual identity is that of the policeman and the criminal. On many occasions Genet notes the similarity between these two:

> "Chargée de drainer les rêves, la police les retient dans ses filtres. Ainsi expliquerons-nous que les policiers ressemblent tant à ceux qu'ils chassent. Car il serait faux de croire que c'est pour mieux le tromper, le dépister, et le vaincre, que les inspecteurs se confondent si bien avec leur gibier" (30).

And in Journal he writes:

> "Mais si j'avais été seul, je sais que les policiers je les eusse adorés. Dès que j'étais bouclé dans ma cellule, c'est de leur puissance que je rêvais, de leur amitié, d'une complicité possible entre eux et moi, où, échangeant nos mutuelles vertus, ils se fussent révélés, eux des voyous et moi un traître" (31).

What fascinated Genet in particular about the police in Hitler's Germany was that their role merged with that of the criminal:

> "Les Allemands seuls, à l'époque de Hitler réussirent à être à la fois la Police et le Crime. Cette magistrale synthèse des contraires, ce bloc de vérité étaient épouvantables, chargés d'un magnétisme qui nous affolera longtemps." (32)

It is this same confusion of roles which attracted Genet to the French Milice; as he writes in Pompes Funèbres:

> "Si la police servant l'ordre, et le désordre la Milice, on ne peut socialement les comparer, il reste vrai que la seconde faisait aussi le travail de la première.

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(29) Querelle, p. 185.
(30) Ibid., pp. 222-223.
(31) Journal, p. 104.
(32) Ibid., p. 200.

> Elle était au point idéal où le voleur et le policier se rencontrent, se confondent. Elles aboutissent à cet exploit: combattre le flic et le voleur. Ainsi le Gestapo" (33).

Appearance and reality, passivity and activity, masculinity and femininity, love and hate, good and evil, strength and weakness, are all qualities which Genet's characters contain in varying degrees. What the characters in earlier novels did not realise was that their own true nature was not simply restricted to one particular aspect, selected at random by others, but was in fact composed of a merging of the various extremes. By asserting his new character Querelle, who accepts these opposing extremes within himself, Genet challenges the idea that people can be categorised and labelled merely because of their superficial appearance. He insists on the possibility of asserting will-power, and thereby effecting changes in what are normally considered unchangeable areas. He seems to be claiming that social prejudices and thus the assumptions made about the nature of others can be reversed. If it is possible for Querelle to force himself to react in an unnatural way, by betraying Gil who loves him, then he has shown that man has complete freedom of choice in his actions, whether or not he chooses to use it. Perhaps after all what distinguishes Querelle from Genet's earlier heroes is that he does not deny the existence within himself of tenderness.

Divine was physically masculine and psychologically feminine; her true sexual nature lay somewhere between the two. It was this fact that Divine could not accept. It is by contrast Querelle's realisation and acceptance of the emotional conflicts within himself,

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(33) Pompes Funèbres, p. 130.

which makes him superior to Divine. Allowing himself no qualms, he has sex with Mario and Nono, as well as with Mme Lysiane.

As a direct contrast to Querelle, who recognises that he is free to decide what he will be and how he will behave, Lieutenant Seblon believes himself to be fixed forever, and to be condemned to one particular fate; in his case homosexuality. He is only able to watch and admire Querelle from a distance, and is incapable of accepting the male-female conflict within himself. This terrible inability is illustrated in the following passage from Pompes Funèbres:

> D'un ordre donné sec au coiffeur du bord, le lieutenant Seblon se faisait couper les cheveux très courts afin d'obtenir une apparence virile - moins pour sauver la face que pour traiter d'égal à égal (croyait-il) avec les beaux garçons. Il ne savait pas alors qu'il les faisait s'éloigner de lui. Il était de belle carrure, large d'épaules, mais il sentait en lui-même la présence de sa féminité contenue quelquefois dans un petit oeuf de mésange, de la grosseur d'une dragée bleue pâle ou rose, et quelquefois débordant pour s'épandre dans tout son corps qu'elle remplissait de lait. Le sachant si bien que lui-même se croyait la faiblesse, la fragilité d'une énorme noisette verte dont l'intérieur blanc et fade est cette matière que les enfants appellent le lait. Cette féminité, le lieutenant le savait avec une tristesse immense, pouvait se répandre immédiatement dans ses traits, dans ses yeux, au bout de ses doigts, marquer chaque geste en l'amollissant. (34)

What Genet seems to be searching for is an acceptable version of the truth based on the reality of his own paradoxical life. He has perceived the dual, in some cases multi-faceted nature of reality, and realises that it is from the interaction of the various extremes that the truth emerges. He expresses this particular view through symbols and especially through the symbol of the Veil. In such instances truth is a synthesis of appearance and reality:

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(34) Querelle, p. 186.

> "Querelle sentait sur lui la poussière comme les femmes sur leurs bras et leurs hanches les plis d'une étoffe qui les fait reines. Un tel fard, laissant intacte sa nudité, le faisait dieu. Querelle se contenta d'aggraver son sourire" (35).

Querelle dominates others because, in the contradictory world created by Genet, only he is aware of the personal advantages to be gained by accepting and exploiting internal paradoxes. Finally it is only Querelle who emerges victorious from the labyrinth of the novel.

The character of Gil also forms a contrast to Querelle, since he is the inauthentic murderer, who has murdered in passion, and who feels remorse for his act. Because he cannot accept his murder as a part of himself, he does not feel guilt as Querelle does, neither can he accept the inevitable punishment. Others find themselves trapped in dead-ends because of a rigid inflexible view of themselves and the world, which they have neither the imagination nor the will-power to alter. Mario, for example is obsessed by his own image, both subjective and objective, as a symbol of virility and authority. Lt. Seblon is tortured by feelings of guilt for his repressed homosexual desires. Each of these characters is dominated by Querelle's influence.

Perhaps the only character who benefits from Querelle's existence in a positive sense is Mme Lysiane, the wife of the owner of La Féria. When the novel opens she is Robert's mistress; throughout she is fascinated by the similarity between the two brothers, and when she eventually becomes Querelle's mistress, she clearly learns much from the experience, both about herself and the nature of the world (36). It is interesting to note that Mme Lysiane forms the basis of Mme Irma in Le Balcon, a woman fully aware of the paradoxical nature of reality and the importance of illusion in men's lives.

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(35) Querelle, p. 229.
(36) See quote and note 3, p. 80.

In Querelle Genet has created his perfect anti-social being, the outcast who creates his own label, anticipates the inevitable, and who, by his success, wins revenge over others. Like Genet's previous heroes, Querelle does have normal feelings and emotions of love and tenderness: "Quand ils se quittèrent, Querelle aimait Gil..." (37), and when he is about to leave Mme Lysiane:

> "Quant à Querelle, en quittant la chambre de la patronne, il connaissait un étrange sentiment: il la quittait avec peine. Cependant qu'il s'habillait, lentement, avec un peu de tristesse, son regard se posa sur la photo du patron, accrochée au mur. L'un après l'autre il revit les visages de ses amis: Nono, Robert, Mario, Gil" (38).

Querelle, however has none of the weaknesses of the earlier heroes, remaining entirely independent of and outside society, with its moral and material comforts. Genet gives Querelle the role of existing in absolute isolation, and not belonging, as did Erik and Riton, to an organisation committed to evil. Genet had realised that evil, if institutionalised, becomes an alternative good, and this was not his wish. Querelle is endowed with the potential to destroy the fibre of society, through existing in defiance of its values and its standards. He represents the final stage of Genet's progress as an individual. The timid but rejected Culafroy has become the brilliant, unique Querelle. The growing stature and relevance of Genet's heroes reflect their author's increasing competence, and confidence as a theoretical power for destructive change in the world. If Querelle does not in fact destroy society this is because as an outcast, like Genet the writer, he needs his enemy. Certainly Genet needs the reader together with what he presumes to be his mistaken but innocent belief in Good and Evil. Without this his destructive attack has no aim. Total freedom would be for Querelle and for Genet an unbearable burden.

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(37) Querelle, p. 326.
(38) Ibid., p. 346.

Perhaps as R. N. Coe suggests, Genet's philosophy contained in the novel is, "the intellectual rationalisation of a deep emotional need to exist within the unshakable framework of an established order" (39).

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(39) The Vision of Jean Genet, R. N. Coe, (Peter Owen, 1968), p. 115.

Chapter 7 The Style of the Novels

It has been suggested in the Introduction to this study that Genet's original reasons for writing were subjective, concerned with expressing in words his obsessions with and his search for his own identity and image. Gradually through writing and publication this purely egocentric activity was directed more deliberately towards others. This fact partly explains the difference in style, tone and content, between Notre-Dame and Miracle, and Pompes Funèbres and Querelle. C. Bonnefoy has called Genet's writings from Le Condamné à Mort to Querelle and Les Paravents: "... ce passage progressif du subjectif à l'objectif,"(1). As has been shown, Genet's concerns and themes do widen progressively in their application and relevance to the world outside the author himself. This chapter will examine Genet's technique as a writer and will point out the parallel development which evolves between his personal progress and his style.

The novel is perhaps Genet's obvious choice of literary form, since it involves neither the restrictions of poetry, nor the practical complexities of the stage play. It is a broad category which allows total freedom of style and which is capable of containing simultaneously documentary, autobiography, fiction and fantasy. Whether Genet intended to communicate with others from the outset is a question which will be discussed in the Conclusion, although certainly in Notre-Dame Genet's main concern is with expressing feelings and fantasies for himself, albeit in a way which provides an apparently objective view of himself for others.

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(1) C. Bonnefoy, Genet, Classiques du XXe Siècle, no. 76. (Editions Universitaires, 1965), p. 16.

The general atmostphere created in both Notre-Dame and Miracle is lyrical, rhetorical, and above all literary. The opening paragraph of Notre-Dame provides an example of this.

> "Weidmann vous apparut dans une édition de cinq heures, la tête emmaillotée de bandelettes blanches, religieuse et encore aviateur blessé, tombé dans les seigles, un jour de septembre pareil à celui où fut connu le nom de Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs. Son beau visage multiplié par les machines s'abattit sur Paris et sur la France, au plus profond des villages perdus, dans les châteaux et les chaumières, révélant aux bourgeois attristés que leur vie quotidienne est frôlée d'assassins enchanteurs, élevés sournoisement jusqu'à leur sommeil qu'ils vont traverser, par quelque escalier d'office qui, complice pour eux, n'a pas grincé. Sous son image, éclataient d'aurore ses crimes: meurtre 1, meurtre 2, meurtre 3 et jusqu'à six, disaient sa gloire secrète et préparaient sa gloire future" (2).

In discussing Genet's style and technique, it must be emphasised that style is of the utmost importance in his achieving success, irrespective of whether the novels were intended for others. The fact that they are now read does not alter the highly personal motive behind their creation; indeed Genet's salvation depends as much on his ability to convince himself as on his power to influence others.

Since much of Genet's work is autobiographical, I now intend to look briefly at his method of character creation, and the resulting relationship between the characters and their author. It should not be assumed in the first instance that the narrative "I", used in all novels except Querelle, can always be equated with the real Genet. He uses his characters to represent various, often contradictory aspects of himself. In Notre-Dame Genet relives his childhood through the boy Culafroy. In the process of becoming Divine however Culafroy not only grows up, but ceases to represent Genet-as-he-was and becomes a complex

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(2) Notre-Dame, p. 9.

mixture of Genet-as-he-was and Genet-as-he-would-like-to-have-been. Through his writing he is able, within the confines of his cell, to live Divine's luxurious existence:

> "Elle songeait à sa mère et à Mignon. ... Puis des retours à Paris, et de nouveaux départs, et tout cela dans un luxe chaud, doré. Tout cela dans un confort tel, qu'il m'est assez de l'évoquer de temps à autre, dans ses détails les plus douillets, pour que les vexations de ma pauvre vie de prisonnier disparaissent, pour que je me console; console à l'idée que ce luxe existe. ... Et j'invente pour Divine les plus douillets appartements où moi-même je me vautre" (3).

A particularly clear illustration of this method of gaining second-hand excitement and experience occurs in Pompes Funèbres, when describing Erik about to commit murder, Genet suddenly switches the narrator, and himself becomes the character:

> "Je ne sais pas encore pourquoi il est nécessaire ici qu'Erik accomplisse un meurtre. ... Je pouvais tuer un homme sans danger, je saurais ce que l'on tue en soi; après avoir tué, ce qu'est le remords" (4).

In this way Genet commits an act, which in reality he was incapable of committing.

To Sartre Genet's writings are a constant reliving of that period of his life when he became for others the Evil-Doer; certainly the many children and adolescents who appear throughout the novels reflect a need in Genet to reexamine that particular time in his life. The experience of being labelled a thief and of being sent to a reformatory would, if related factually, seem dull and only faintly tragic. It is by projecting his feelings about these early events on to his characters that Genet gives them the weight and importance, which from his own point of view he feels they merit. Thus the trial of Notre-Dame must represent for Genet his own confrontation with his accusers; Notre-Dame's reactions

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(3) Notre-Dame, p. 126.
(4) Pompes Funèbres, p. 67.

to the court's pronouncements are those which Genet himself would like to have been able to express.

In recreating criminal acquaintances however as the heroes of his novels, Genet magnifies their reality as seedy underworld figures by transforming them into ideal characters. He projects on to them his own magnificent fantasies. Just as Genet tries to metamorphose himself into another, so his heroes constantly strive to ressemble someone else, imitating gestures characteristic of others and of the desirable qualities they possess. Lt. Seblon in Querelle is the supreme example of a man who denies his own identity, in his longing to become another:

> "... le lieutenant Seblon se faisait couper les cheveux très courts afin d'obtenir une apparence virile - moins pour sauver la face que pour traiter d'égal à égal (croyait-il) avec les beaux garçons. ... Il était attentif à n'être pas vu tout à coup comptant les mailles d'un imaginaire ouvrage de dames en se grattant les cheveux avec une imaginaire aiguille à tricoter. Il se trahit cependant, aux yeux de tous les hommes quand il prononça devant nous la phrase: "S'emparer du fusil", car il prononça fusil comme "asile" et avec tant de grâce que toute sa personne parut s'agenouiller devant le tombeau d'un bel amoureux" (5).

Since Genet often uses characters to represent particular aspects of his own personality, their nature as individuals can be regarded as essentially abstract or symbolic; thus there tends to be little real development of personality in the characters of the novels. K. Botsford makes this point:

> "His characters are amply divided into categories that have certain functions assigned to them. ... each character is thus an embodiment of a set of attitudes, of gestures if you will, to which the others respond. ... There is the feeling too that none of Genet's heroes acts as he pleases;..(6).

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(5) Querelle, p. 186.
(6) K. Botsford, What's Novel in the Novel - Jean Genet, (Yale French Studies, No. 8 1951, pp. 82-92), p. 90.

R. N. Coe makes a similar point:

> "... the figures who dance cerémoniously through the pages of Genet's novels are symbols and allegories rather than living beings. ... Genet starts with the ideal already in his mind - his essence, or archetype - and then selects, seemingly more or less at random, a living being to whom it can be attached" (7).

In Querelle for example Querelle is the Murderer, and Mario the Policeman; for Lt. Seblon Querelle is also the Sailor (8); Divine too wishes to become a symbol of the absolute:

> "- Voici, voici, regardez la Toute-Froufrouteuse.
> L'une d'elles, interrogée sur le boulevard par un inspecteur:
> - Qui êtes-vous?
> - Je suis une Émouvante.
> Puis, peu à peu, elles s'étaient comprises en se disant: "Je suis la Toute Toute", et enfin: "Je suis la T.T." (9).

Genet in no way tries to conceal the motives behind this process of character and self-creation, since his concern seems to be neither with the physical nor the mental credibility of his characters.

The narrative technique employed by Genet is also adapted as he progresses from Notre-Dame to Querelle. The subjective first two novels use the first person narrative, and whether or not this can be equated with Genet himself, the "I" introduces the characters and is called "Jean Genet".

Although the first person does appear throughout Pompes Funèbres, it is clear that Genet has withdrawn somewhat from events. Since on numerous occasions, in sudden changes of narrator, he becomes one of his imaginary characters (10), Genet cannot be said to have disappeared entirely from the novel; this effect however does represent a stage in his progress towards objectivity, the process which R. N. Coe calls, "a virilization in Genet himself" (11). It is certainly also an

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(7) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, (Peter Owen, 1968), pp. 116-7.
(8) Querelle, p. 263.
(9) Notre-Dame, p. 56.
(10) Pompes-Funèbres, p. 24 (Genet becoming Erik) / p. 98, (Genet - Riton) See also Note 4, p. 100.
(11) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, p. 141.

intellectualisation of his writing. This particular development does occur at the time when Genet was probably becoming aware of his potential ability to influence others. The form which the narrative takes in Pompes Funèbres can however be criticised on the grounds that it is pure fantasy, and it is perhaps for this reason that in Querelle, the "I" vanishes altogether and is replaced by "we", representing an invisible, almost anonymous, but omnipotent Prime-Mover (12), who guides the reader through the events of the novel, seeming on numerous occasions to collaborate with him in the examination of attitudes and characters. In the following passage Genet is obviously expressing his personal ideas, while simultaneously seeming to imply a wider acceptance of these ideas:

> "Il fallait qu'en nous-même nous pressentions l'existence de Querelle puisqu'un certain jour, dont nous pourrions préciser la date avec l'heure exacte, nous résolûmes d'écrire l'histoire (ce mot convient peu s'il sert à nommer une aventure ou suite d'aventures déjà vécues). Peu à peu, nous reconnûmes Querelle - à l'intérieur déjà de notre chair - grandir, se développer dans notre âme, se nourrir du meilleur de nous, et d'abord de notre désespoir de n'être pas nous-même en lui mais de l'avoir en nous" (13).

Here Genet makes no direct reference to himself or to his past life, although many of his characters still inevitably represent aspects of himself. Through the diary of Lt. Seblon, a device which allows the first-person narrative, Genet is able to present the thoughts of another, while remaining apparently uninvolved. The candidly expressed emotions which the diary contains may be regarded as those of the younger Jean Genet, before he had extricated himself from this state of destructive introspection.

Querelle himself ressembles Divine in his desire to reach the depths of humiliation:

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(12) J. H. McMahon, The Imagination of Jean Genet, (Yale University Press) 1963, p. 86.
(13) Querelle, p. 182.

> "Querelle sourit d'être si près de la honte d'où on ne peut plus remonter et en quoi il faut bien découvrir la paix" (14).

As has been pointed out already Genet does nothing to conceal the fact that both the characters and the "I" are creations of his imagination. J. McMahon stresses the crucial role of Genet's imagination in the success of his literary career, and thus his life (15). By his deliberate confusion of fact and fiction, Genet plays down the confessional nature of much of his writing; this may explain why, as he gains self-confidence both as an individual and as a writer, the "I" plays a progressively less important role in his novels.

Journal du Voleur, which is supposedly autobiographical, will not be dealt with at any length here. It does undoubtedly contain some truths about Genet's life, although once again Genet is quick to point out that he is less concerned with the facts as they happened, than with his present reinterpretation of those facts:

> "Ce que j'écris fut-il vrai? Faux? Seul ce livre d'amour sera réel. Les faits qui lui servirent de prétexte? Je dois en être le dépositaire. Ce n'est pas eux que je restitue" (16).

J. McMahon writes of Journal:

> "Its autobiographical reflections amount to a stop to catch aesthetic breath before Genet undertakes the more audacious works wherein will be incarnated, not the processes of memory transformed and transfixed, but an all-out attack on us" (17).

Journal would seem to be both a summary of Genet's past and a definite, conscious attempt to create a Legend for himself, a Legend which will build up his self-confidence and which can be used as a starting point for Pompes Funèbres, Querelle and the plays (18).

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(14) Querelle, p. 349.
(15) J. H. McMahon, The Imagination of Jean Genet. McMahon's study as a whole emphasises imagination. In particular, The Birth of an Imagination, pp. 13-32.
(16) Journal, p. 107, footnote.
(17) J. H. McMahon, The Imagination of Jean Genet, p. 49.
(18) Despite first publication dates it is generally accepted that Journal forms the mid-way point in Genet's prose writing.

Perhaps the most striking single aspect of Genet's writing is the violent clash between content and expression. Genet's refined lyricism, involving the use of symbols and metaphor, which are clearly the product of a rich and sensitive imagination, contrasts violently with the world, the events and the characters depicted. It is this paradox which gives Genet's novels their immense force, and their potentially dangerous implications. His choice of subject themes is strictly limited by his environment and his obsessions; his choice of expression seems to be determined rather by his motives in writing, and by his own personal philosophy.

If it is accepted that Genet's motives are first to create a myth for himself and then to revenge himself upon the world, then his choice of language appears more logical. To fulfill the first of these aims he must surround himself with an aura of glory, by way of contrast with the "profane" drudgery of his actual past life. His novels thus describe lyrically past events which were in reality squalid or insignificant. By language alone he endows the ordinary with sacred proportions, thereby giving himself importance and confidence, and transforming his activities into magnificent expressions of an inner strength. The result of this process, which is continually repeated, is Genet's Legend. A clear illustration of Genet's imagination and power as a writer can be seen in the descriptions of acts of theft which occur in Journal (19).

Only when he has convinced himself of the significance of his existence can Genet consider fulfilling his second motive, that of revenge. The particular form of revenge which Genet chooses would appear

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(19) An example of this can be found in Journal du Voleur, pp. 163-64: "Je sais le calme extraordinaire au moment d'accomplir le vol... ... dans un monde qui sera l'envers du monde habituel."

to be his persistent refusal to be "taken in" by what he sees as the myth of success. Although his writing is a deliberate attack upon the abstract, monolithic society which rejected him, and upon the values by which he was condemned, he carefully avoids involving himself in any practical revolt which might attempt to replace this society with an improved alternative. Thus he refuses to be termed a revolutionary(20), and admits to no social or political aim beyond that of committing himself verbally to the destruction of the status quo, for no other reason than that it is the status quo. The inconsistency of his attitude towards, for example, the heroes of his novels would seem in fact to represent a further extension of this refusal to succeed, rather than an unfortunate weakness in his arguments.

Ironically it is his ability to create beautiful phrases and images which makes him a writer of value to a civilised society, already in the process of questioning the ethics on which it is founded. Literature is amoral to the extent that quality of expression is generally considered to be a more important measure of art than the content or ideas expressed. It is this contradiction within a tolerant society, which allows the possibility, and at the same time the impossibility of Genet's revenge. The novels, especially Pompes Funèbres and Querelle are certainly subversive in intent and even potentially dangerous. This subversion is permitted, and perhaps thereby rendered harmless, by the respect reserved by society for the committed writer, even if his committment is to the destruction of that society.

It is this contrast between subject and language, which gives Genet's work its originality and its forcefulness. By means of imagery

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(20) Genet chez les "Panthères Noires", p. 38. (An interview with Genet by M. Manceaux, Le Nouvel Observateur, May 25, 1970, pp. 38-41.) See note p. 1.

Genet heightens the decadent nature of his world, while simultaneously making it "acceptable" to his readers. In the following passage Genet's style almost succeeds in diverting attention away from the subject under examination:

> "... un piédestal massif et pourtant léger en haut duquel dès quinze ans Mignon pisse avec cette attitude: les jambes écartées, les genoux un peu fléchis, et à plus rigides jets dès dix-huit ans. Car, insistons bien sur cela, qu'un nimbe très doux toujours l'isole du contact trop dur de ses propres angles vifs. S'il dit: 'Je lâche une perle' ou 'Une perlouze a tombé', il veut dire qu'il a pété d'une certaine façon, très doucement, que le pet s'est coulé sans éclat. Admirons qu'en effet il évoque une perle à l'orient mat: cet écoulement, cette fuite en sourdine nous semblent laiteux autant que la pâleur d'une perle, c'est-à-dire un peu sourds. Mignon nous en apparaît comme une sorte de gigolo précieux, hindou, princesse, buveuse de perles. L'odeur qu'il a laissé fuser silencieusement dans la prison a la matité de la perle, s'enroule autour de lui, le nimbe de la tête aux pieds, l'isole, mais l'isole bien moins que l'expression que sa beauté n'a pas craint d'énoncer. 'Je lâche une perle' indique que le pet est sans éclat. S'il bruit, il est grossier, et si c'est une cloche qui le lâche, Mignon dit:
> - Cabane à mon noeud qui s'écroule! (21)

For similar reasons and with similar effect Genet describes the first homosexual encounter between Riton and Erik in Pompes Funèbres:

> "Je conservai la queue dans la main. ... Puisqu'il venait de bander avec cette violence, sous une caresse, Erik était réveillé, et il ne se révoltait pas. J'attendis des secondes merveilleuses et de cette attente, du moment qui part du réveil de la queue, au bonheur, on ne s'étonne que ne soit pas né, comme du sang de Méduse Chrysaor, le plus fabuleux héros, ou des fleuves nouveaux, des vallées, des chimères, dans un bond sur un parterre de violettes, l'espoir lui-même en pourpoint de soie blanche, toque emplumée, poitrine royale, collier de ronces d'or, ou des langues de feu, un évangile nouveau, des étoiles, une aurore boréale sur Londres ou Frisco, une sonate parfaite, ou que la mort elle-même n'eut fait entre les deux amants une fulgurante apparition. Une deuxième fois, ma main pressa le noeud dont la grosseur me parut monstrueuse" (22).

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(21) Notre-Dame, p. 31-32.
(22) Pompes Funèbres, p. 99.

For the poet there are two separate worlds; the world of material reality, and that of unseen intangible essences. The poet's function is to reveal this second world, into which he alone has positive insight. Because it is an intangible world however the poet must communicate what he knows by symbols, identifying in material reality, to Genet the "profane" world, symbolic equivalents which reveal invisible truths. His choice of symbols is therefore crucial, since he must either use symbols which are recognisable and thus immediately and widely comprehensible, in which case he runs the risk of descending to cliché-ridden banality; or he must choose original and personal symbols. In this latter case he lays himself open to charges of deliberate obscurity (23).

Genet's solution to the problem of choice of symbols is typical. In general he uses symbols which are elementary and thus instantly recognisable. Indeed he depends for much of his effect upon the associations which already exist in the mind of the reader. He succeeds in avoiding bathos by presenting symbols in unexpected and anomalous contexts. His imagery gains much of its power from the repetition of certain symbolic themes, for example flowers, the Veil, and the sea, all of which recur with great regularity throughout his work.

Gesture, as has already been suggested, also gains power by its repetition. Genet's characters imitate the gestures of those they wish to ressemble. In this instance the gesture is the symbol of an inner quality. As an extension of this idea, a series of gestures, performed in a specific sequence, for example the Mass, forms the more complex symbolism of ritual or ceremony. It is object symbolism which will now be examined.

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(23) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet. (For a detailed analysis of Genet's symbolism, see Chapter 3, Traps and Allegories, pp. 66-98.)

Genet attempts to integrate his use of symbols into the main purpose of his writing. Flowers, for example, are used as symbols of desirable abstract qualities, as they are in conventional literature. Genet's own particular absolutes are however the diametrical opposites of those conventionally accepted. Thus for him flowers can symbolise the extremes of evil, degradation and ugliness, as opposed to goodness, purity and beauty. A clear illustration of this can be seen in Notre-Dame:

> "Le Bloc-Mignon marche à petits pas chaloupeux. Il est seul dans sa cellule. De ses narines, il arrache des pétales d'acacia et des violettes; le dos tourné à la porte, où toujours un oeil anonyme épie, il les mange et de son pouce retourné, où il a laissé pousser l'ongle des lettrés, il en recherche d'autres" (24).

Criminals in general are linked in Genet's mind with flowers, as he explains logically at the beginning of Journal:

> "Le vêtement des forçats est rayé rose et blanc. Si, commandé par mon coeur l'univers où je me complais, je l'élus, ai-je le pouvoir au moins d'y découvrir les nombreux sens que je veux: il existe donc un étroit rapport entre les fleurs et les bagnards. La fragilité, la délicatesse des premières sont de même nature que la brutale insensibilité des autres" (25).

Hooligans, traitors and murderers are all symbolised by flowers; in Miracle Harcamone is symbolically transformed into a rose, since as a convicted murderer he inhabits that sacred realm between sentence and execution, between life and death, which for Genet represents the most perfect attainable moral existence. (26) Mettray, clearly a place of great violence and cruelty is characterised by flowers and is said to blossom in the heart of France:

> "Je viens d'écrire le mot marronniers. La cour de la Colonie en était plantée. Ils fleurissaient au printemps. Les fleurs couvraient le sol, nous marchions sur elles, nous tombions sur elles, elles tombaient sur nous, sur

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(24) Notre-Dame, p. 163.
(25) Journal, p. 9. (Underlined section corresponds to Genet's italics)
(26) Miracle, pp. 461-464. (Harcamone's transformation)

> notre calot, sur nos épaules. Ces fleurs d'avril étaient nuptiales et des fleurs de marronniers viennent d'éclore dans mes yeux" (27).
>
> "Cette Colonie était, au coeur fleuri de la France, de la plus haute fantaisie" (28).

The young traitor Riton in Pompes Funèbres is symbolised by the edelweiss:

> "Qu'on ne s'étonne donc pas que pour moi Riton soit une fleur des sommets, un tendre edelweiss" (29).

Although he himself might seem to deny the fact, it can be said that for Genet the flower is the symbol of symbols. When he writes: "Je pense qu'elles ne symbolisent rien" (30), perhaps what he is denying is the assumption that flowers represent only particular moral values. Because society or civilisation has endowed the flower with certain random qualities, which make of it a symbol of eternal beauty, Genet's writing consciously attempts to destroy all conventional associations. He is attempting to re-establish that objects are neutral and thus cannot be used by man to symbolise one exclusive set of values. He thus chooses flowers as his key symbol in an attack on convention, by taking advantage of the flower associations which exist in the reader's mind to achieve his purpose. His writing appears lyrical, in as much as the flower symbolism suggests delicacy. The reality behind however is in violent contradiction to this suggestion. The relation thereby established between flowers and violence is intended to produce a shock reaction and even a disorientation in the rader's subconscious. Crimes evoke flowers:

> "Je suis poète en face de ses crimes et je ne puis dire qu'une chose, c'est que ces crimes libérèrent de tels effluves de roses qu'il en restera parfumé, et son souvenir et le souvenir de son séjour ici, jusqu'au plus reculés de nos jours" (31).

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(27) Miracle, p. 289.
(28) Ibid., p. 370.
(29) Pompes Funèbres, p. 37.
(30) Ibid., p. 106.
(31) Miracle, p. 256. (The crimes referred to are Harcamone's two murders).

In the following passage flowers become symbols of blood and death:

> "La tempe saigna. Deux soldats venant de se battre pour une raison qu'ils avaient depuis longtemps oubliée, le plus jeune tomba, la tempe éclatée sous le poing de fer de l'autre qui regarda le sang couler, devenir une touffe de primevères. Rapidement, cette floraison se répandit" (32).

The flower, usually a symbol of femininity, becomes associated in Genet's writing with the homosexual relationship. Once again Genet is perverting the beautiful and delicate meaning attached to the flower:

> "A petits coups, il (Dédé) bécota le visage, sans le toucher, sur le front, sur la tempe, et sur l'oeil, sur le bout rond du nez, sur les lèvres, mais toujours sans les toucher, Mario se sentit criblé de mille pointes de feu vite posées, reprises, redonnées.
>
> "I' m'couvre de mimosas", pensa-t-il" (33).

In general in Genet's work the flower symbol derives its force from its appearance in unexpected contexts. In one particular area conventional associations and Genet's usage do coincide; this is the role of flowers at funerals and their connections with grief and mourning"(34). Although the flower for Genet can be a means of expressing love for the dead, it is also, and perhaps this is the more important aspect, a symbol of decay and death itself. This dual association is illustrated in a scene in Pompes Funèbres (34).

Genet's obsession with flowers may have originated partly because of the meaning of his own name; he must have realized the irony and paradox of bearing the name of a beautiful flower, while being branded as a criminal by society. Ironically in Miracle Genet's name is confused by a prison guard with the royal name of Plantagenet (36). Throughout his writing Genet gives his characters wonderful sounding

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(32) Journal, p. 223.
(33) Querelle, p. 203 (see also Pompes Funèbres, p. 160).
(34) The paragraph: "Les fleurs m'étonnent...", illustrates Genet's respect for flowers, and their power to express grief. Pompes Funèbres, p. 106.
(35) Pompes Funèbres, p. 32: ('Mal peignée, ... regarder à qui qu'c'est.")
(36) Miracle, p. 227.

names, which both conceal their true nature as outcasts, but which must often convey the feelings Genet himself has for them. Mignon-les-petits-pieds for example, in reality a brute and a coward, is the object of Genet's and Divine's adoration. Genet is fascinated with names but sometimes gives no real indication of their precise significance; the crowd of mourners gathered together at Divine's funeral includes:

> "... Mimosa I, Mimosa II, Mimosa mi-IV, Première Communion, Angela, Monseigneur, Castagnette, Régine, ..." (37).

Later, however, in Notre-Dame Genet examines his choice of names:

> "(D'où viennent les noms de guerre des tantes? Mais, d'abord, notons bien qu'aucun d'eux ne fut choisi par ceux qui les portent. Pour moi, il n'en est pas de même. Il ne m'est guère possible de préciser les raisons qui m'ont fait choisir tels ou tels noms: Divine, Première Communion, Mimosa, Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs, Prince-Monseigneur, ne sont pas venus au hasard. Il existe entre eux une parenté, une odeur d'encens et de cierge qui fond, et j'ai quelquefois l'impression de les avoir recueillis parmi les fleurs artificielles ou naturelles dans la chapelle de la Vierge Marie, au mois de mai, sous et autour de cette statue de plâtre goulu dont Alberto fut amoureux et derrière quoi, enfant, je cachais la fiole contenant mon foutre)" (38).

In this case, then, names do have religious and mythical significance for Genet, and thus fit appropriately into the overall pattern of the world he has created.

I have suggested that by using symbols in inverted contexts Genet attempts to destroy conventionally accepted associations. His novels may appear glittering and beautiful on the surface because they contain numerous symbols usually associated with beauty. The squalid reality behind this appearance is thus revealed all the more violently as being degraded and ugly. Genet's statement in Journal concerning morality and beauty can be seen to apply in a very relevant sense to this inversion of symbols, if Genet's writing itself is considered as his particular "acte moral":

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(37) Notre-Dame, p. 14.
(38) Ibid., p. 187.

> "De la beauté de son expression dépend la beauté d'un acte moral. Dire qu'il est beau décide déjà qu'il le sera. Reste à le prouver. S'en chargent les images, c'est-à-dire les correspondances avec les magnificences du monde physique" (39).

In his treatment of the Mirror, another recurring symbol, Genet rejects the usual notion that the mirror reflects reality, and instead insists that appearance as reflected by the mirror is truer than the reality before it. In his earlier examination of his own childhood Genet had already realised that one's subjective opinion of oneself counted for nothing when confronted by the appearance-based views of others. In this context many of Genet's characters have encounters with mirrors, the mirror representing in the physical world of objects the scene of the confrontation between reality and appearance. Erik in Pompes Funèbres shoots at his image because it will not obey him, his reflection being beyond the power of his reality:

> "Le premier soir, Erik, ivre de vin, ivre d'être en face de lui-même, se regarda curieusement dans le vestibule. ... Il se recula un peu. Dans la glace, son image s'écarta de lui. Il tendit le bras pour l'attirer à soi, mais sa main ne rencontra rien; il sentait bien, malgré l'ivresse, qu'il lui suffirait d'avancer pour faire venir à sa rencontre son image renversée, mais il sentait aussi que, n'étant qu'une image, elle devait obéir à ses désirs. Il s'impatienta. Dans la glace, son visage rouge devint tragique et d'une telle beauté qu'Erik douta que ce visage fût le sien. En même temps, il exigeait de soumettre un mâle pareil, aussi fort, aussi solide. Il s'obstina et recula d'un pas. L'image recula. Un cri de rage rauque, inarticulé se forma dans sa gorge et se répercuta dans les corridors et les salons vides. Le fauve de la glace fit un tel mouvement de la tête que le calot tomba et les boucles blondes s'éparpillèrent sur le visage dont la mâchoire inférieure se détendit. Erik trembla. ... Le geste commencé par Erik, l'image le continua les yeux fixes. Sa main gauche ouvrit l'étui et tira le revolver, le braqua contre Erik et fit feu" (40).

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(39) Journal, p. 23.
(40) Pompes Funèbres, p. 141.

The fair-ground hall of mirrors, in which Stilitano loses his way and beats against his own distorted image in his attempt to escape (41), provides a further example of mirror imagery. This scene in Journal may have given Genet the idea for the ballet, 'Adame Miroir, in which appearance and reality are characters vying with each other for supremacy on opposite sides of a mirror (42). In the mirror, as in death, appearance and reality, the two irreconcilable opposites, confront each other.

The mirror however does not necessarily always exist as an object; on certain occasions characters are reflected in reality by their own doubles. Querelle for example is mirrored by his identical twin brother, Robert:

> "Querelle était l'exacte réplique de son frère, Robert un peu plus fermé peut-être et l'autre un peu plus chaud (nuance en quoi on les reconnaîtra, mais que ne pouvait percevoir une fille en colère.)" (43).

Robert and Georges Querelle are identical in appearance but diametrically opposed in reality, as shown by their deadly but inconclusive fight. The one reflects the other, although neither wins final supremacy. Both are equally real and equally illusory. In this case we are given the impression that the two men originally formed a single entity:

> "Querelle pressentait son frère. Sans doute venait-il de s'opposer à lui dans un combat risquant d'être mortel, mais la haine qu'il lui portait en surface n'empêchait pas de retrouver présent Robert dans le fond le plus retiré de lui-même. ... Dans leur jeunesse déjà, quand ils se battaient, on ne pouvait ne penser que derrière leurs faces torturées, dans une région plus lointaine, leurs ressemblances ne s'épousassent. C'est à l'abri de cette apparence que Querelle pouvait retrouver son frère" (44).

In this particular instance Mme Lysiane embodies the symbol of the mirror, being herself the meeting place where the confrontation of Georges and

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(41) Journal, pp. 282-283.
(42) 'Adame Miroir - A ballet-scenario by Genet. Performed by the Ballets Roland Petit, Théâtre Marigny, 1946. Paris (Hengel 1948).
(43) Querelle, p. 182.
(44) Ibid., pp. 261-262.

Robert occurs; she is the outsider, the third person who observes their duality (45). It is because she recognises the essential unity of the brothers that she sees her own role as a tragic one. She is excluded from their intimate relationship:

> "Ça me vide! ça me vide! ça me vide, vos ressemblances. Elle s'aperçut que ses cris étaient aussi frêles que ceux d'une femme de cire" (46).

In an even more desperate tone she continues:

> "Et naturellement y a pas de place pour moi. Moi, pour passer entre vous deux faut pas trop que j'y compte. Je suis à la porte. Je suis trop grosse... Oh... mais oui, voilà, je suis trop grosse!" (47).

If the mirror reflects the appearance of the reality which stands before it, the symbol of the Veil, both conceals reality and adds a further dimension to it. The main attribute of the Veil is the blurring effect it has on reality, making impossible any definite conclusions about the nature of what lies beneath, but also allowing for numerous personal interpretations. Here appearance only partially masks reality however; it is superimposed on reality without either destroying it or completely concealing it. Often the Veil for Genet masks and softens a hard virile reality. The stone-masons of Brest , covered by stone-dust provide an example of this (48). Lt. Seblon is sexually excited by the sight of Querelle veiled in coal-dust:

> "Ce beau garçon blond, secrètement adoré, apparaissait tout à coup, nu peut-être, mais revêtu d'une grande majesté. Le charbon n'était pas assez épais qu'on ne devinât pourtant la clarté des cheveux, des sourcils et de la peau, ni le ton rosé des lèvres et des oreilles. On savait qu'il ne s'agissait que d'un voile. Et Querelle le soulevait quelquefois avec coquetterie, avec émotion, dirait-on, en soufflant sur son bras ou en dérangeant une boucle de ses cheveux" (49).

For the person concealed the Veil is both a source of protection and a fine costume:

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(45) R. N. Coe gives an interesting explanation of the role of Mme Lysiane in the relationship between Georges and Robert: The Vision of Jean Genet, pp. 201-202.
(46) Querelle, p. 290.
(47) Ibid., p. 292.
(48) Ibid., p. 200.
(49) Ibid., p. 227.

> "Querelle sentait sur lui la poussière comme les femmes sur leurs bras et leurs hanches les plis d'une étoffe qui les fait reines. Un tel fard, laissant intacte sa nudité, le faisait dieu. Querelle se contenta d'aggraver son sourire" (50).

For the observer the Veil allows the imagination complete freedom, and for Genet this imagination is often of a sexual nature:

> "La nuit, face à la mer. Ni la mer ni la nuit ne me calment. Au contraire. Il suffit que passe l'ombre d'un matelot ... Dans cette ombre, grâce à elle, il ne peut être que beau" (51).

The Veil then is a symbol of the thin outer appearance which can mask and half conceal reality. It is significant that it plays such an important part in Querelle, Genet's conscious but refined attack on society. His lyrical language can, in its turn, be regarded as the Veil which masks the violence and the perverted nature of the themes. Fine words veil violent reality.

Although important in its own right the Veil is also one of Genet's sexual symbols. His concept of sexuality, as has been seen, is always characterised by the distinction between active and passive, male and female. These distinctions are symbolised respectively by images of hardness and softness. Male virility is symbolised by hard, sharp, clear objects, while feminine passivity is represented by soft, delicate, objects, of which the Veil and Lace are two examples. Male sexuality for example is referred to in numerous instances as a weapon: a dart, a V1-Rocket, German gunnery; on other occasions it appears as a steel rod, a column, a piston(52). All Genet's heroes are admired for their granite-like qualities of indifference, and of mental and physical invulnerability. To say as B. Knapp does that: "It is around the phallus as a source of creative energy that Genet's philosophy will

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(50) Querelle, p. 229.
(51) Ibid., p. 262. (This passage appears as part of Lt. Seblon's diary, and is in italics.)
(52) Miracle, p. 390-1. (German gunnery); Pompes Funèbres, pp. 78-79 (revolver); Ibid., p. 99. (V1-Rocket and dart); Ibid., p. 89. (polished steel rod, etc.).

be centred" (53), would seem a somewhat one-sided view, although it cannot be denied that the male organ does play an ostentatious role especially in the early novels. Sometimes a character's penis becomes for Genet a symbol of the personality itself (54). This obsession can be attributed to Genet's own passive homosexuality, representing his desirs for ideal and super-virile heroes and lovers. Thus the violence and hardness which characterise his sexual symbolism are as much an expression of personal desire, as they are a part of his literary technique.

Normal feminine symbols of softness occur only rarely in the novels; and they do not appear with reference to Genet himself as might have been expected. R. N. Coe suggests that the symbol most applicable to and representative of Genet's own sexuality is the Rose(55). Since his sexuality is neither the weapon, nor the softness that the weapon tears into - neither Genet nor Divine are actually women! - its symbol must represent a mid-way point incorporating both male and female characteristics; the Rose combines voluptuous petals with a hard thorn-covered stem. This same symbol of the hard stalk is used with reference to Querelle:

> "Si les meurtres de Querelle établissent autour de lui
> une haie charmante, parfois il les sentait se flétrir
> jusqu'à n'être plus qu'une tige de fer indifférente" (56).

Whereas the Veil was seen to reveal and conceal reality, uniform or costume obliterates reality and creates pure appearance, endowing its wearer with those qualities usually associated with the image of the uniform itself. Thus a uniform can protect and offer escape from danger:

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(53) B. Knapp, Jean Genet, Twayne's World Authors Series, 44, 1968, p. 37.
(54) Examples: Mignon, Notre-Dame, p. 51, 207. / Harcamone, Miracle, p. 369.
(55) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, p. 80.
(56) Querelle, p. 259.

> "L'homme qui revêt l'uniforme de matelot n'obéit pas à la seule prudence. Son déguisement relève du cérémonial présidant toujours à l'exécution des crimes concertés. Nous pouvons d'abord dire ceci: qu'il enveloppe de nuées le criminel; ..." (57).

By wearing naval uniform Querelle becomes a representative of the mass organised power implicit in the concept of the French Navy. For Lt. Seblon, on the other hand, wearing this uniform prevents him from pursuing in reality his repressed homosexual desires. Mario's uniform symbolises for Dédé the entire power of society's organised struggle against evil. Mario is revealed however as being no more moral in his behaviour than Querelle or Nono; his uniform provides him with a shield of accepted power for Good, to such an extent that Dédé's trust in the police image is shattered merely because he hears Mario using slang expressions (58).

In Le Funambule Genet, addressing himself to the tight-rope walker writes:

> "What of your costume? Both chaste and provocative. The clinging tights of the circus. Red-jersey, blood-red. It displays your muscular contours to perfection, it sheathes you, it gloves you, ... The red slippers, the sash, the belt, the edge of the collar, and the ribbons below the knee are embroidered with gold spangles. No doubt so that you sparkle, but chiefly so that, while going from your dressing-room to the ring, you lose in the sawdust a few loose spangles, delicate emblems of the Circus" (59).

This follows the instruction Genet has already given to:

> "... avoid luxury in his private life, if I advise him to be a little dirty, to wear sloppy clothes, down-at-heel shoes, it is so that at night, in the ring, the estrangement may be the greater, ..." (60).

In this case the uniform associated with the circus bestows a wonderful appearance of brilliance and life, and completely conceals, to all except the wearer, the reality beneath of a frightened, lifeless character.

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(57) Querelle, p. 173.
(58) Ibid., pp. 331-332.
(59) The Funambulists, Jean Genet, (Evergreen Review, No. 32, April-May 1964, pp. 45-49, trans. B. Frechtman), p. 47. From the original: Le Funambule, first published by Decines, L'Arbalete, 1958).
(60) The Funambulists, p. 46.

For Genet uniform thus has the power to transform an entire personality into a symbol, by abolishing his individuality. It can however provide invisibility as well aspower, as when in Querelle, Gil Turko puts on naval uniform and becomes anonymous among so many other sailors (61). In Le Balcon uniform becomes an integral part of the power system at work in organised society, and plays a role vital to the perpetuation of the existing social order. By wearing the uniforms of the Bishop, the General and the Judge, three imposters with very ordinary occupations, are able to quell a revolution. Here it is the very appearance of uniform which re-establishes the old order; the reality beneath the uniform is without importance, since the appearance is generally accepted.

There remains a further category of images which should be included in this examination of symbolism and which consists of references made throughout the novels and plays, to the sea and ships. These in the main tend to symbolise Genet's personal aspirations and the myth he creates for and around himself. Transportation by convict galley to French Guiana and in particular to Devil's Island, are mentioned with great frequency. In Genet's novels these places and subjects become ideals, representing the highest possible planes of existence; they are the equivalent of the Christian's pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and provide Genet with a spiritual heritage, an ancestry and a tradition, to which he can trace his roots and present existence. They are the symbols of his mythical dream. In Journal Genet attempts to explain his affinity with Guiana:

> "La Guyane est un nom féminin. Elle contient tous ces mâles qu'on nomme des durs. A quoi elle ajoute d'être une contrée tropicale, à la ceinture du monde, la plus fièvreuse - de la fièvre de l'or - où la jungle encore dissimule sur des marécages des peuplades féroces.

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(61) Querelle, p. 319.

> Vers elle je me dirige - car disparue elle est maintenant l'idéale région du malheur et de la pénitence vers quoi se dirige non ma personne physique mais celle qui la surveille - avec une crainte mêlée d'ivresse consolatrice. Chacun des durs qui la hantent est resté viril - ... - mais la débâcle lui enseigne l'inutilité de le prouver. ... J'aspire à la Guyane. Non plus à ce lieu géographique aujourd'hui dépeuplé, émasculé - mais au voisinage, à la promiscuité enfin, non dans l'espace mais dans la conscience, des modèles sublimes, des grands archétypes du malheur. Elle est bonne. ... Ce lieu semble contenir la sécheresse et l'aridité la plus cruelle et voici qu'il s'exprime par un thème,de bonté: il suscite, et l'impose, l'image d'un sein maternel, chargé comme lui de puissance rassurante, d'où monte une odeur un peu nauséabonde, m'offrant une paix honteuse. La Vierge mère et la Guyane je les nomme Consolatrices des affligés" (62).

This same category of images includes the sea, especially in the context of Querelle, where it represents freedom from social pressures, and the power of the Inevitable, the Irredediable. The novel opens with a startling comparison between the sea and murder, the perfect irremediable act:

> "L'idée de meurtre évoque souvent l'idée de mer, de marins. Mer et marins ne se présentent pas alors avec la précision d'une image, le meurtre plutôt fait en nous l'émotion déferler par vagues. Si les ports sont le théâtre répété de crimes, l'explication en est facile que nous n'entreprendrons pas, mais nombreuses sont les chroniques où l'on apprend que l'assassin était un navigateur, faux ou vrai et s'il est faux le crime en a de plus étroits rapports avec la mer" (63).

In Querelle Genet also comments:

> "Si la mer est naturellement le symbole de la liberté, chaque image l'évoquant se charge de cette puissance symbolique, se charge à soi seule de toute la puissance symbolique de la mer, ..." (64).

For Querelle the ship becomes a refuge from his crimes in a very practical sense. He is able to commit murders in the ports he visits with less than the usual risk of being caught(65).

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(62) Journal, pp. 269-270.
(63) Querelle, p. 173.
(64) Ibid., p. 284.
(65) Further references to such imagery: Notre-Dame, p. 82, 112; Miracle, pp. 286-7, 367-8; Journal, p. 11, footnote, pp. 11-12; Les Bonnes, pp. 141-2. (Gallimard, Oeuvres Complètes Vol. 4, 1968.).

Guiana exists in Genet's mind as a dream world to which he can only aspire; of the countries he actually visited however, Spain comes the nearest to fulfilling his desire for a spiritual home. It is the solitude, the aridity and the "...pauvreté honteuse et humiliée"(66), which cause him to identify with Spain. Genet ends Journal with the promise of a second volume of autobiography:

> "Je me propose d'y rapporter, décrire, commenter, ces fêtes d'un bagne intime que je découvre en moi après la traversée de cette contrée de moi que j'ai nommée l'Espagne" (67).

It has been suggested that Genet uses symbols as short cuts from profane reality to his Sacred realm. His use of symbols, which may take the form of objects, gestures, or ceremonies, is more than simply a means of enriching his writing; it is an attempt to re-establish the neutrality of images. Thus objects cease to symbolise an exclusive set of ethical values.

If Genet uses traditional symbols out of context, his treatment of events is even less conventional. He has admitted that the reliability and precise truthfulness of what he writes does not concern him. His novels themselves display a complete disregard for chronological sequences of events. For Genet's characters, as for Genet himself, past and present do not represent separate areas of existence, but points along a continuum, which reaches forward to include the future. Thus in Miracle, past and present exist simultaneously as Mettray and Fontevrault, the reformatory and the prison. The intermingling of the two existences which this involves is essential to the novel as a whole; the reader is forced to wonder whether the past is being analysed in the light of the present, or whether the present was an inevitable

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(66) Journal, p. 273.
(67) Ibid., p. 286.

result of the past. However this is resolved, past and present together look forward and point to the future, and in the case of Miracle, to Harcamone's execution. This particular technique also allows Genet to show most convincingly his theory of predetermination at work in his characters. In the chaos however, in which traditional structural elements are destroyed, the real structure of the world, as perceived by the human mind, is preserved, in so far as memory and reinterpretation of the past are important factors in the formation of attitudes towards the present. Notre-Dame is even less structured than Miracle, and in fact forms a stream of consciousness: the narrator, alone in his cell, allows his imagination and memory to wander haphazardly through past, present, future and timeless fantasy. In this way associations are set up and may either be pursued or abandoned; memories surge up to produce new associations and thought patterns. Characters seem to be created as they are required. Fantasy becomes confused with reality and time no longer exists as a restricting influence upon the narrator. In Notre-Dame Genet manages to live simultaneously on three parallel planes of existence: himself in prison, his present reality; his childhood past, through Culafroy; his projected fantasy future, through Divine. The constant shifts of place and time produced by the confusion of these three levels results in a novel which is a patchwork of dream, reality, past and present. The thread running through every fragment of this is Genet's own personality, whether it be factual, imagined, or fervently longed for. Symbols too tend to act as a stabilising force on this chaos, since they are repeated on all different levels of action.

The fragmentary nature of Notre-Dame and the simultaneous time levels of Miracle are probably the spontaneous products of the sensitive imagination of a desperate man, expressing his individuality amidst cruel and dehumanising surroundings. Pompes Funèbres however is characterised by a more rigid narrative framework, and the fragmentation which formed

a natural part of the first two novels, now appears as a deliberately manufactured device, occuring rather too frequently to be part of a subconscious pattern. Here the interwoven themes are tailor-made to fit together; the narrative dissolves into a somewhat contrived series of fantasies, based in the first instance on the young Riton, glimpsed by the narrator during a cinema newsreel. There follows a progression of incidents and relationships involving characters from reality and imagination. The novel becomes a rational intellectualisation which attempts to imitate the genuine impulsiveness of Notre-Dame and Miracle; and as a vehicle for Genet's ideas and themes Pompes Funèbres certainly suffers from its self-conscious style.

Although Querelle is also intellectualised, it has by contrast a more substantial nature, in which plot, themes and symbols are more fully integrated. Despite the destruction of the normal time-sequence - it is for example not immediately apparent that Querelle's murder of Joachim has taken place in the past before Querelle's present visit to Brest - there remains a recognisable and coherent pattern of cause and effect: because there does exist a link between this and other murders which Querelle commits.

Querelle thus seems to establish a new balance between the spontaneous chaos of the early novels and the overcomplicated and unnatural style of Pompes Funèbres. Nevertheless Genet remains determined not to relate a conventionally exciting story (68). He has never apparently been concerned with providing the reader with facts, but bombarding him with memories, fantasies and associations, some of which will produce an effect. Events form a convenient backcloth for Genet's personal obsessions.

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(68) Journal, p. 100. ("...ce que j'ai recherché surtout ... ce qu'eux-mêmes pourraient obtenir.")

I have tried to suggest, in dealing with some of the stylistic qualities of Genet's novels, that his success as an individual depends to a large extent upon his ability to express himself in words. The paradox which lies at the heart of his work, concerning the relationship between reality and appearance, is also reflected by his literary technique. In their own right both style and content have a certain originality; it is however the contrast between the two which gives the novels their power and influence.

Genet clearly feels that his attempt to unite paradoxes in his writing, in a way that he failed to achieve in real life, has been a success:

> "Ma victoire est verbale et je la dois à la somptuosité des termes..." (69).

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(69) Journal, p. 62.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the themes of Genet's novels consist primarily of the author's personal obsessions; originally, writing for Genet represented the opportunity for him to express his despair and his fantasies. Since his novels replaced his activities as a criminal, they became an outlet for emotions and aggression. There is however more to these works than a simple means of escape from reality. The idea that they succeeded in bringing about his reintegration into the society which excluded him, is only partially acceptable, especially in the light of his plays and his subsequent political involvements. To the extent that writing is the means whereby Genet succeeds personally in presenting himself, his work can be said to constitute an escape from his non-existence, both in his own eyes and in relation to others. Since however his novels have been read by and have had their effect upon others, there is more to be considered. The degree of influence Genet has had on his readers must constitute the degree to which he has communicated, deliberately or not, with the world outside himself. Writing if published becomes a social act and should be regarded as such.

Despite Genet's apparent lack of interest in his readers, and his indifference to communication, the novels, merely because they are published, may provoke feelings and emotions of anger, sympathy or simple interest; this is communication. In the self-centred process of creating a myth for himself, Genet arouses in his readers reactions for which he is directly responsible. His style is deliberately violent, and in attempting to force others to recognise the existence of a power in opposition to their world, it may provoke shock and embarrassment. It is the verbal violence and insolence of this challenge, which constitutes an act of aggression or revenge against our society.

His novels alone could have brought about Genet's complete reacceptance by society, had he so desired. They have brought him fame and the attention of respected authors, philosophers and critics. His personal ambition however seems to have been to create a Legend for himself rather than a relationship with his public. In Pompes Funèbres Genet refers to this particular ambition:

> "Je partirai vivre doucement dans un autre continent, observant la progression et les méfaits de la légende de ma réapparition dans mon peuple"(1).

Viewed from this angle Genet's denial of his aim to communicate is more readily understandable. He does nevertheless quite deliberately aim to violate society's conventions.

Genet realises the effect created in his early novels, by his insistence on filth, squalor, homosexuality and crime. In the first instance this crudeness is an obvious substitute for his former life of theft and sexual freedom, although in practice its effect reaches a broader section of society. Thus Notre-Dame and Miracle probably set out to cause offence by ridiculing ordinary notions of morality; they fiercely attack accepted standards of behaviour and exceed the limits of "good taste":

> "J'étais heureux de son supplice, de la trahison de Divers et de plus en plus nous étions capables d'un acte aussi atroce que le meurtre d'une fillette. Que l'on ne confonde pas avec le sadisme, cette joie que je connais quand on m'apprend certains actes que le commun appelle infamie" (2).

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(1) Pompes Funèbres, p. 87.
(2) Miracle, p. 445.

Genet's primary concern here was still with himself and his particular sainthood through "singularité". Pompes Funèbres and Querelle realize more fully the potential power of the deliberate violation of social taboos. "J'encule le monde" (3), Genet writes in Pompes Funèbres.

Despite these attacks, Genet is by no means a social reformer. Those parts of his writing, for example, which glorify the squalid aspects of homosexual love and the life of the criminal, are not apologies for abnormal behaviour. Genet is deliberately encouraging the reader to wallow in what he will find instinctively repulsive, giving him only a flimsy intellectually acceptable reason for doing so. Genet aims at all instinctive responses inherent in civilised man. In his attempt to pierce the silence surrounding certain areas of existence, he continually emphasises the degrading and disgusting elements of life. Pompes Funèbres glorifies betrayal at a particularly sensitive moment in French history, but in addition to aiming at this contemporary weak-spot, the novel also attacks the whole tradition of civilised society, which has always abhorred treachery. Genet's act of writing may be compared Pierrot's denunciation of prisoners:

> "A la septième cellule, pour désigner la victime, il ne fit qu'un geste du menton, mais si hautain qu'il eut le sentiment de jeter un défi à dix mille ans de morale et de les abattre" (4).

What makes Pierrot and Genet's other characters extraordinary is not that they are criminals, who have merely broken the law, but that they are men who have transgressed unwritten codes of morality. Genet feels that he was condemned as an evil child, not primarily for having stolen, but for having committed an act of evil against those who had shown him affection and Christian charity.

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(3) Pompes Funèbres, p. 140.
(4) Ibid., p. 120.

Genet's glorified outcast is thus the transgressor, the man who violates good taste and shatters taboos; the less rational the taboo the more violent the reaction provoked. The occasion when Riton kills a cat for food is described in especially nauseating terms, although logically the killing of a cat by a hungry man, is no different from the accepted slaughtering of cattle and sheep (5).

Religion, another particularly sensitive area of society's conscience, provides Genet with a wealth of taboos; his constant juxtapositioning of the concepts of sanctity, in a religious sense, and evil, constitutes an effective violation of even the most liberal conventions. Genet is consciously attempting to sully the purity of Christian virtue; in Divine's mind there is a link between her homosexual passions and a deeply felt religious fervour:

> "Je l'adore. Quand je le vois couché à poil, j'ai envie de dire la messe sur sa poitrine" (6).

Later, as she lies dying, she shows the same irreverence:

> "Mais, dit-elle au curé, je ne suis pas encore morte, j'ai entendu les anges péter au plafond" (7).

In his personal pursuit of "singularité" Genet attaches great mystic significance to his burglaries:

> "Je me détachais du sol davantage. Je le survolais. J'étais sûr de le pouvoir parcourir avec la même aisance et mes vols dans les églises m'allégeaient encore" (8).

Divine links Mignon sexually in an even more offensive way with Christ:

> "Mais pour Divine, Mignon c'est tout. Elle prend soin du sexe de Mignon. Elle le caresse avec des profusions de tendresses et les comparaisons que font les honnêtes gens égrillards: ... le Jésus dans sa crèche, ..." (9).

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(5) Pompes Funèbres, pp. 56-57.
(6) Notre-Dame, p. 34.
(7) Ibid., p. 203.
(8) Journal, p. 108.
(9) Notre-Dame, p. 51.

Coe has said that Genet's social function is that of the Pornographer. Paradox is the weapon he uses against our preconceived notions, our ethical and emotional values. He attempts to shatter our philosophical idées fixes by first demolishing our moral prejudices and presuppositions (10). It is thus by these unexpected means and with this unusual aim that Genet can be said to communicate. He reaches his readers by attacking what he thinks they most deeply believe in, setting his self-created image against society's right-thinking conscience. In that he is what society has forced him to be, Genet has a special advantage. Society has tried to conceal that half of itself personified by Genet; from his first childhood crime Genet's threat to the established order was recognised. Implicit in his original condemnation was the notion that Genet was already committed to the downfall of morality and decency. The outcast now seeks his revenge, not by pleading for justice, or mercy, nor by means of rational criticism, but by willing the total destruction of society, and the civilised values which support it; Genet partly explains his attitude at the beginning of Journal:

> "C'est parce qu'il possède ces conditions d'érotisme que je m'acharnai dans le mal. Mon aventure, par la révolte ni la revendication jamais commandée, jusqu'à ce jour ne sera qu'une longue parade, chargée, compliquée d'un lourd cérémonial érotique..." (11).

In view of his stated aims it is difficult to assess accurately the extent to which Genet has affected his public. Undoubtedly the publication of Sartre's Saint Genet, Comedien et Martyr brought Genet to the attention of readers and critics, and to a certain extent

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(10) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, p. 313.
(11) Journal, p. 10.

made of him an "acceptable" writer. François Mauriac however saw both Sartre and Genet as political symbols of the spiritual and moral degradation of Western civilisation (12). Mauriac the moralist is perhaps the closest approximation in reality to the Ideal Reader, at whom Genet seems to aim his novels. In so far as they have provoked little official reaction or anger, and have been accepted by literary society, Genet's novels have perhaps proved a failure in their intended aim. This may well be due to Genet's image of the society for whom he is writing; in fact his Ideal Reader either no longer exists, or does not read literature acclaimed by critics. Those who have read Genet are more likely to experience feelings of pity for prisoners and homosexuals, or anger against the system which first produces and then rejects such men. (It is probable that Genet's plays have provided him with a more realistic opportunity of reaching his ideal audience.)

The question of Genet's sincerity as a writer is an intriguing one. Amongst much of the serious criticism of his writing the fear exists that perhaps after all Genet has his tongue in his cheek as he describes the delights of homosexual affairs and idolises the squalor and cruelty of prison life. How for example is the reader intended to react to the following passage from Miracle?

> "La guerre, autrefois, était belle parce qu'elle faisait éclore avec le sang, la gloire. Aujourd'hui, elle est encore plus belle parce qu'elle crée de la douleur, des violences, des désespoirs. Elle suscite des veuves qui sanglotent, qui se consolent ou pleurent dans les bras des vainqueurs. J'aime la guerre qui dévora mes plus beaux amis" (13).

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(12) For the details of Mauriac's two articles see Note 22, p. 5.
(13) Miracle, p. 366.

We are unused to such overstatement and tend to assume that paradoxes of this kind must be satire or parody. The reliability of Genet's facts has been discussed in the Introduction, and although it should be remembered that much of what Genet presents as fact is fantasy or imagination, it is not this which alters his sincerity of intention as a writer. His task as a novelist may be compared to that of Guy in Journal, when the latter is arranging the funeral of his friend:

> "Ce n'est pas une sépulture que Guy pour un mort réclamait. Il voulait d'abord que les fastes du monde fussent accordés au voyou son ami descendu par les balles d'un flic. Au plus humble, tresser de fleurs le manteau le plus riche selon les hommes. Honorer l'ami, mais surtout glorifier, avec les moyens que s'accordent ceux qui les considèrent, les établissent même, les plus misérables" (14).

Difficulty in assessing Genet's sincerity arises if sincerity is held to be a virtuous quality, linked inextricably with honesty and goodness. Genet is neither honest nor good, and yet in that he adheres strictly to an absolute, may be wholly sincere in the pursuit of his ideals. Mauriac saw Genet as a sincere moralist of evil (15); Roger Blin has said that Genet wants us to see and believe in his sincerity (16); C. Bonnefoy writes this of Genet's sincerity:

> "Poète du mal, il est cependant un moraliste plus que beaucoup d'autres qui voilent leurs turpitudes et pleurent après la grâce. Et cela, moins par son aspiration à la sainteté - conçue comme un terme rédempteur après la traversée volontaire du mal - que par sa sincérité même" (17).

Certainly Genet writes of the same obsessions and with consistent gravity throughout his novels, despite the dichotomy, which as P. Thody points out exists between Genet's formal statement and his achievement.(18)

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(14) Journal, pp. 237-238.
(15) See Note 22, p. 5.
(16) An Interview with Roger Blin, B. Knapp, (Tulane Drama Review, Spring 1963), pp. 111-125.
(17) C. Bonnefoy, Genet, (Classiques du XXe siècle, Editions Universitaires, 1965), p. 123.
(18) P. Thody, Jean Genet, (Hamish Hamilton, 1968), p. 48.

The alternatives to believing in Genet's sincerity are to regard his work either as satire, or as social, political commentary. Although for example Genet would reject the suggestion that Miracle and L'Enfant Criminel (19) were works of irony, nevertheless satire cannot be entirely excluded from his attitude as expressed in these two works. His account of the visit of the Bishop of Tours to Mettray must be intended to contain some element of parody(20). There is something of the same tone about Genet's descriptions of the reformatory:

> "Pour de pareils instants qu'elle me donne, j'aime la Colonie. D'imbéciles vandales, Danan, Helsey, Londres, d'autres, ont écrit qu'il fallait détruire les bagnes d'enfants. Ils ne savent pas que, les détruisît-on, ces bagnes, par les enfants seraient remontés: ces gosses inhumains créeraient des cours des miracles (c'est bien le mot!) pour accomplir leurs cultes secrets et compliqués, à la barbe même des journalistes bien intentionnés (21).

Since Genet's tone remains grave, one can only assume that his intention is serious. Coe has suggested that Genet's skill is that he presents negative anti-social heroes, for example Riton, from a negative anti-social viewpoint; since the result is positive, and often shattering, overt satire is unnecessary (22).

Genet's negative characters, who reject all concepts of law and discipline, are an important part of his attack on the whole of society. A writer genuinely devoted to the well-being of the world in the foreseeable future would normally be expected to advocate either reform or revolution. Genet wants neither but desires and preaches society's total anihilation, an aim which he foresees coming about by a relentless continuation of the status quo. Since opposites and paradoxes are essential to his personal aim and philosophy, he never seriously contemplates an order which might follow this destruction. His experience of life in Hitler's Germany showed him that a society in which Evil

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(19) Jean Genet, L'Enfant Criminel, radio script, pp. 7-33, (P. Morihen 1949).
(20) Miracle, pp. 355-358.
(21) Ibid., p. 366.
(22) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, p. 257.

flourished was no place for him. Here his revolt against the established order has no real significance. He writes:

> "Il me semblait que les dieux présidant aux lois ne se révoltassent pas, simplement ils s'étonnaient. J'avais honte. Mais surtout je désirais rentrer dans un pays où les lois de la morale courante font l'objet d'un culte, sur lesquelles se fonde la vie" (23).

As a Frenchman in France however he is delighted to see his country terrorised by the Nazis (24). It is for these same reasons that Genet can never advocate the formation of an organised band of criminals committed to the actual overthrow of society. He dismisses the possibility of this idea in Pompes Funèbres:

> "Elle (la Milice) paraissait réaliser ce que désire chaque voleur: cette organisation, cette société libre, puissante, qui n'était qu'idéale en prison, où chaque voleur - et même chaque assassin - serait apprécié ouvertement et pour nulle autre raison que sa valeur de voleur ou d'assassin. La police rend impossibles les associations de malfaiteurs, et les grandes bandes sont vite détruites, quand elles sont autre chose qu'une imagination de journalistes ou de policiers" (25).

For Genet political or social movements seek to replace one concept of good or right with another. It is mass action which Genet rejects, since for him it is the individual's act of rejection which is of prime importance; evil or aggression without the motive of hatred in his aim; the destruction of society without the promise of a humanist utopia which normally seeks to replace it. R. N. Coe has written:

> "A purely emotional plea for, say, a return to the philosophy and practice of Auschwitz and Dachau could - in the context of present-day Western Europe at any rate - be the work only of a crank, a mad sadist or a dangerous political reactionary. Genet makes precisely such a plea, and then apparently adds insult to injury by supporting it with reational arguments. But the effect of the two in conjunction is to reverse the direction of our attention. Instead of the arguments leading us forward step by step until we are convinced that

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(23) Journal, p. 131 (see also p. 130).
(24) Pompes Funèbres, p. 51.
(25) Ibid., p. 129.

> their ultimate goal - the concentration-camp - is the right one, the abominable nature of the end sends us back over the arguments, and starts us enquiring whether their initial premises can conceivably be correct, if such is their logical conclusion. Yet these initial premisses are - in the majority of cases - the basic tenets of our ethics and of our religion: the concepts of sacrifice, of sanctity, of the Absolute, of the value of suffering, of humiliation... etc., etc. Heydrich was a Roman Catholic, after all" (26)

Thus Genet's aim is to attack society from within, by turning its own virtues against it.

This however is only one of Genet's theoretical positions in relation to society. In practice the novels also tend on occasions towards social, and perhaps political moralising. Certainly they reveal many of the injustices inherent in twentieth-century Western society. The trial of Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs scathingly criticises courtroom justice; in a somewhat omniscient tone, Genet writes of the jury:

> "Malgré leur formation, qu'ils disent cartésienne, les jurés auront beau faire, lorsque, quelques heures plus tard, ils condamneront à mort Notre-Dame, ils seront incertains si c'est parce qu'il étrangla une poupée ou coupa en morceaux un petit vieillard" (27).

Throughout his novels Genet's concern is always with the outcast , and the reject, whether he be the Negro, the criminal,the homosexual or the traitor.

Thus rather than pointing a way forward, Genet with his philosophy of destruction, is primarily contesting the system of absolute values and moral judgements on which society is based. Social, political and religious institutions are for him responsible for the creation and perpetuation of the myth of absolutes. Although in theory every other human being is his enemy, emotionally Genet is on the side of the oppressed. Consequently it is bourgeois society towards whom he

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(26) R. N. Coe, The Vision of Jean Genet, p. 177.
(27) Notre-Dame, p. 186.

directs his challenge. It is for this reason that he will later become involved, not with a bourgeois fraternity like the Mafia, but with the Black Panthers and the Palestine guerillas. In spite of his emotional allegiances however, neither his novels nor his plays represent a plea for the masses against authority. At the time he wrote the novels Genet's position was one of almost complete solitude; since then however there has been a gradual increase in the number of individuals and groups prepared to question the values on which society is based. Although Genet would never consciously attempt to lead a revolt against the establishment, he may well have anticipated recent trends, which although superficially political, are rather perhaps spontaneous reactions against the hypocrisy which surrounds "civilised" values.

Genet's real dilemma as a novelist remains; since his self-created myth depends upon an apolitical philosophy which condemns and rejects the whole of society, Genet can have no function outside the status quo. The total destruction of society, Genet's only alternative, remains unlikely. His plays too contain the same puzzling confusion of total rejection and social involvement. Despite Genet's denials that his plays are social commentaries, the spectator and the critic, seem convinced that they contain some social message. Les Nègres and Les Paravents have been regarded as expressing a kind of socialism. Genet's recent and continuing involvement with extreme political organisations makes it increasingly difficult to judge his work without some reference to their possible social significance (28).

Genet's novels, then, have created for their author a habitable, although an imaginary world, where he has reigned supreme. Both spiritually and actually they represented an escape from prison.

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(28) For Genet's involvement with the Black Panthers see: Genet chez les Panthères Noires, an interview with Genet by M. Manceaux, Le Nouvel Observateur, May 25th, 1970, pp. 38-41 and Tête à Tête avec Jean Genet, an interview, Lui, December 1970, pp. 7-32.

Through his pursuit of solitude and "singularité" he placed himself deliberately outside the social order, with its categories and institutions, and observed the world through the eyes of his liberated characters. Appalled by what he has seen, he has attacked not merely certain ideas or conventions, but the whole structure of society. But by his return to society as the Pornographer, the Avenger, he in effect acknowledges that he too is a product of that system of values he wishes to destroy. In 1964 Genet said in an interview:

> "You - that is, society - no longer interest me as an enemy. Ten or fifteen years ago I was against you. At the present time I'm neither for nor against you. We both exist at the same time, and my problem is no longer to oppose you, but to do something in which we're involved together, you and I alike" (29).

Such a statement would seem to be inconsistent with Genet's subsequent political activity. And yet despite this activity Genet still denies that he is a revolutionary in the accepted sense:

> "M. Manceaux: - Vous considérez-vous comme un révolutionnaire?
> Genet: - Ma situation est celle d'un vagabond et non d'un révolutionnaire" (30).

Having convinced himself, through his literary Legend of his own worth as a human being, Genet seems now to have committed himself to causes, with which he personally sympathises. Whether the course of action which he pursues is that of a "révolutionnaire" or that of a "vagabond", he would seem to have rejected the essentially egocentric activity of writing, in favour of personal involvement with others. In answer to the question: "Vous ne voulez plus écrire?" Genet has replied:

> "Je crois que Brecht n'a rien fait pour le communisme, que la révolution n'a pas été provoquée par 'le Mariage de Figaro' de Beaumarchais. Que plus une oeuvre est proche de la perfection, plus elle se renferme sur elle-même. Pis que ça, elle suscite la nostalgie!" (31).

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(29) Interview with Genet in Playboy Magazine, Vol. XI, No. 4, April 1964, pp. 45-53.
(30) Genet chez les Pantheres Noires, p. 38 (see note 28 p. 135).
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