Jean Genet

David Bradby and Clare Finburgh

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Jean Genet

Jean Genet's significance within twentieth-century theatre has long been understated. This timely book, the only introductory text in English to Genet's plays currently in production, presents an overview of an influential and controversial writer, whose work prefigured many recent postmodern and post-colonial developments in theatre and performance studies.

The volume offers philosophical, historical, political and aesthetic readings of Genet's plays in order to render the complexity of his theatre exhilarating, rather than intimidating. It goes on to explore ways in which different directors, designers and actors have approached his writing. A spectrum of productions spanning 60 years, from 1947 to 2007, illustrates the sheer range of theatrical styles that Genet's texts inspire.

Reflecting on his early life and later political activism as well as the key plays, David Bradby and Clare Finburgh provide a comprehensive discussion of a playwright and theorist whose work caused riots in France, and whose writing represents a unique synthesis of life and art.

David Bradby (1942-2011) was Emeritus Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway University of London. He was the UK's leading specialist in modern French theatre, writing several seminal works on the subject, including *Modern French Drama* (1984, 1991) and *Le Théâtre en France* (2007). He was also a prolific translator of French dramatists, including Michel Vinaver and Bernard-Marie Koltes.

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Part I

Life, politics and play-texts

1 Life and politics

Jean Genet is an elusive and enigmatic figure. This is partly because he worked to make it so, and enjoyed building legends around his origins. More than most novelists or playwrights, he deliberately undermined everyday assumptions about stable identity, both his own and that of others. When giving interviews, which he did only rarely, he responded to direct questions with oblique answers and would often draw attention to what might lie hidden behind the answers he offered. He also enjoyed challenging his interlocutors with paradoxical statements, like his one-time mentor, the French playwright, film-maker and artist Jean Cocteau. He seldom indulged in self-consciously clever aphorism dear to Cocteau, such as 'I am the lie that always tells the truth,' a phrase the latter used recurrently. But Genet liked to mystify his own assertions, and would warn interviewers to treat everything he said with suspicion. To Hubert Fichte, for example, he said:

> GENET: … If I'm alone I may speak a little truth. If I'm with someone, what I say is never completely accurate, I lie.
> FICHTE: But lies are doubly true.
> GENET: Ah yes. Discover the truth that lies within them. Discover what I wanted to hide when I told you some of these things.
>
> (Genet 1991: 176; 2004: 151, translation modified)

Coming from someone who had written a great deal in the confessional style, this statement is, and is intended to be, intriguing. When reading Genet, especially his early works of autobiographical fiction, one has constantly to be alert to what he was seeking to hide and what to reveal: in his life, just as in his fiction, the boundaries between real and imagined events are playfully unstable.

The key events in Genet's life have been recorded in several different versions, with the result that some uncertainties can never be resolved. No doubt this is fitting, given his resistance to conventional ways of thinking about identity. Throughout his life, Genet worked hard to maintain a distance between himself and conventional society. For example, he took care to avoid accumulating possessions and seldom had a fixed home, living a vagabond existence in various kinds of temporary accommodation. He could not have featured in the Sunday newspaper series which prints a photograph of the author's study, since he never possessed one. He was always on the move, and tended to gravitate towards cheap hotels close to the railway station of whatever town he found himself in. For Albert Dichy, director of Genet's archives and editor of many of his late writings, 'Genet's entire work is one long declaration of war.… There are two sides, two camps: on the one hand the world; on the other, Genet himself' (Dichy 1997: 21). In order to maintain his distance from commonly accepted moral codes, Genet made a virtue out of betrayal: he betrayed friends and foes alike and once wrote that it had cost him an effort to betray his friends but that it was worth it (Genet 2002: 888).

The story of Genet's life is further complicated by the fact that those who have written about him, beginning in 1952 with French Marxist-existentialist philosopher, novelist and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre, have mostly framed their accounts within their own theories of how he came to be who he was. These accounts differ not only from one another but also from Genet's own version of his life story, and so it is no simple matter to set out the events of his life. These problems were well understood by his biographer Edmund White who, while admitting that 'there's something very elusive about a life', nevertheless succeeded in constructing a plausible and highly readable account (White 1994). The details that follow here are

mostly drawn from White's biography, and the reader is referred to its 820 pages for more expansive elaborations of the facts, as far as they can ever be known, and for judicious accounts of the varying possible interpretations of the elements that are disputed.

Genet's birth certificate states that he was born in Paris, at the Tarnier Childbirth Clinic at 89, rue d'Assas on 19 December 1910. His mother, Camille Genet, was single, aged 22, and his father unknown; she was to die less than ten years later at the height of the great Spanish influenza epidemic that killed millions in the winter of 1918–19. But she had little influence on the young Jean, since she looked after him only for the first seven months of his life, and then abandoned him to the care of the Hospice des Enfants-Assistés on 28 July 1911. Edmund White points out that Genet himself, in *The Thief's Journal* (*Journal du voleur*), gives a different first name (Gabrielle) for his mother, and a different street number for the hospital in which he was born (White 1994: 9). So from the very beginning, key facts are disputed. The young Genet was officially declared a ward of the *Assistance publique* (public welfare service) and sent to its fostering agency in Saulieu, which placed him with Eugénie and Charles Régnier in the small rural village of Alligny-en-Morvan (ibid.: 5–11). His foster-father was a carpenter and his foster-mother ran a small tobacconist's shop. They undertook to bring up the baby boy until he should reach the age of 13, in return for which they received a monthly payment from the State. The family was pious, and the child was brought up as a Catholic: he was baptized in September 1910 and took his first communion in 1922. The Régnier family house was situated between the church and the village school. Genet appears to have responded well to the opportunities for instruction offered by both institutions: 'Genet was teacher's pet but also helped the abbé at mass and sang in the choir' (ibid.: 17).

So a few of the basic facts at least are unambiguous: Genet's first 13 years were spent in the country, where he was cared for by a foster family, was brought up in the Catholic faith and was a good pupil. At the conclusion of his primary schooling, when his year-group took the standard examination to qualify for the certificate of primary education, he passed out first in his district, the only one to receive

the grade of *bien* ('good'). But how was this experience received by the growing boy? The various accounts by Genet himself suggest that it was far from being a fulfilled childhood. His status as a foundling meant that he was always stamped as an outsider: the foundlings wore a special uniform which marked them out in the village. Many of the families who took them in treated them as little better than slaves, even though Genet was more fortunate, and seems to have been well cared for by Eugénie Régnier, at least in the early years of his placement with her. Another pointer to an unfulfilled childhood is the fact that he began to steal at an early age, something that is emphasized both in Genet's own accounts and in the recorded memories of others in the same village.

His early thefts provide a classic example of the contested interpretations of Genet's childhood. Sartre, his first biographer, painted a vivid scene, much quoted since, in which the boy's thieving was made the occasion of a public humiliation. At this point, in Sartre's existentialist interpretation, Genet made the foundational choice which brought into being the character he was to become: he decided that if society chose to brand him as a thief, he would accept the label and would devote himself to pursuing everything that was the opposite of a moral code founded on the sanctity of property (Sartre 1952: 61–88). Edmund White, however, can find no hard evidence that such a public humiliation really took place. In his view, the formative experiences on the development of the young Genet were those of love given and then withdrawn: first, the loss of his mother at seven months, then being cherished by his foster-mother, only to be displaced in her affections in 1918 (still only seven years old) when her own son returned from the trenches suffering from a wounded leg. With hindsight, White sees Genet as 'eternally suspended between the two systems', namely the Nietzschean will to self-definition through creating his own value system on the one hand, and the Christian ideal of renunciation, poverty and transcendence of the merely material through spiritual adventure on the other (White 1994: 43).

Genet's early novels, which all contain a strong autobiographical element, emphasize the possibilities of transcendence as found in the traditions of the Catholic saints' lives. Their titles make this plain:

Our Lady of the Flowers (*Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*), *Miracle of the Rose* (*Miracle de la rose*); and their focus is on moments when grim or painful physical realities are transformed into ecstatic visions. The concept of sainthood was never absent from Genet's writings, albeit subverted in many different ways, and he embodied a very Catholic scorn for material security combined with a permanent awareness of death. In his last interview (for the BBC) in 1985, when asked how he spent his days, he answered: 'Well, I shall reply as St. Augustine did: "I'm waiting for death"' (Genet 1991: 306; 2004: 265). The evident attraction of saintly renunciation on Genet, which retained its power from childhood to old age, sits curiously with the dominant tone of his early prose writings, in which he was fond of depicting himself as a 'tough guy'. Doubtless these two apparently contradictory qualities both found their origin in Genet's abiding sense of the separation between himself and the rest of society, a separation that he sought to emphasize, not to eradicate. This emphasis no doubt explains his appeal to other artists who see themselves as outsiders, and his construction as gay icon in the 1970s and 1980s. From playwright Heiner Müller, whose mix of poetic inventiveness and political engagement rivals that of Genet, to US punk rock singer and poet Patti Smith, and sexually subversive photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, Genet has inspired artists the world over.

The quality that all accounts of the young Genet agree on, is his fertile imagination. He was free to borrow books from the school library and became a passionate reader from an early age. He read the French classics as a matter of course, but his great love was for boys' adventure tales, especially those of Paul Féval, a nineteenth-century author who specialized in cloak-and-dagger stories of daring criminals. His titles include *Les Mystères de Londres* (*The Mysteries of London*); *Le Roi des gueux* (*The Vagabond King*); *Le Mendiant noir* (*The Black Beggar*).[1] All those who knew him in his first 13 years testified to his love of books and to this was added the attractions of popular films when travelling cinemas visited the village, beginning what White calls 'his life-long infatuation with film' (White 1994: 26, 27).

It was not only the content and the images of popular fiction that exerted their fascination on the growing Genet. He also experienced

an enthralment with the stuff of language itself. White picks out many examples of his delight in word-play and the association of ideas that comes from repeating words in such a way that one slips into another. For example, he transformed his childhood friend Solange Comte into *la comtesse* Solange ('Countess Solange') and loved to play on words, as in the example from *The Thief's Journal*: 'My life must be a legend, in other words, legible, and the reading of it must give birth to a certain new emotion which I call poetry. I am no longer anything, only a pretext' (Genet 1982: 98). As Edmund White states in the first line of the introduction to his biography, 'Genet had remarkable powers of self-transformation' (White 1994: xxxix), and in these two sentences from *The Thief's Journal* we see how he enjoyed playing with language in pursuit of self-transformation: he announces his intention to transform his life into something that can be *read*, a text that will not only be 'leg-ible' but will have a 'leg-endary' quality, thus making his lived experience into nothing but a 'pre-text' – an excuse for, but also the preliminary to, a text directed at readers. Genet's own versions of his childhood are thus all coloured by his early intention to confabulate his own legend, turning his life into fiction, and any understanding of how Genet experienced his childhood years must take account of the profound link that he saw between childhood and writing. His first books were all semi-autobiographical accounts of young men, sometimes very innocent, sometimes less so, but all facing the harsh facts of life, desire and death and the power struggles that are a part of all human relations at every level of the social hierarchy. In an interview given towards the end of his life he stressed that, for twentieth-century authors at least, to write was always to speak of childhood, citing Proust as the leading example of this (Genet 1991: 277; 2004: 239).

Although he had demonstrated his remarkable intelligence and aptitude for school work, no provision was made for him to attend secondary school. However, his scholastic success did allow him to escape the fate of the other orphans of his year-group, which was to be put to farm work as soon as their primary schooling was complete. Instead, arrangements were made for Genet to begin an apprenticeship as a printer at a residential college near Paris. To be sent to this college was quite a privilege, but after only a couple of weeks he ran

away, announcing to his fellow students that he was off to America or to Egypt, where he would get a job in a cinema (Dichy 2002: lxxx). He was picked up by the police a few days later in Nice. In April 1925 the public welfare officers gave Genet a second chance, placing him with René de Buxeuil, a blind composer of popular songs living in Paris, who had asked if they could supply him with a boy to help him get around. Little is known of exactly how Genet reacted to his new position, but it seems that he took the opportunity to learn all he could about writing songs and poetry. In an interview, Buxeuil also stated that the adolescent had already decided to write his memoirs under a false name (Moraly 1988: 28).[2]

Genet spent longer in the Buxeuil household than he had at the printing college. It was not until six months had elapsed that he stole some money and was sent back to the welfare service. He then underwent psychiatric observation at the Saint-Anne clinic in Paris. The psychiatrist's report detected 'a certain degree of weakness and mental instability' (Dichy 2002: lxxx) and recommended that he be placed with a youth organization. He was confided to a charitable institution whose mission was to assess the youths placed in its care and decide what sort of work they were capable of doing. Genet lasted two months before running away and being picked up by the police in Marseille and returned under police escort to Paris. But he soon ran away again, was picked up on a train heading for Bordeaux, and was imprisoned for three months at La Petite Roquette, a prison for adolescents awaiting trial, in which a rule of absolute silence was enforced. After this, he was given a last chance by the authorities, who placed him as a farm hand with a peasant family near Abbeville in the north of France. But he ran away yet again and was arrested in Meaux in July 1926 for travelling on a train without a ticket. He was sentenced to be detained at the youth penitentiary of Mettray in the Loire Valley until he reached the age of majority, 21.

The life of the boys at Mettray was governed by strict military discipline. Every moment of the day, from when they were woken (at five in the summer and at six in winter) to when they went to bed at nine, was accounted for, mostly with repetitive manual tasks; the punishments handed out for the smallest infringements were so harsh that many of the inmates attempted suicide, some successfully. In his

interview with the BBC, Genet remarks that the discipline was so severe that he was surprised that the French authorities found responsible men willing to take on the work (Genet 1991: 299; 2004: 258). Paradoxically, Genet appears to have achieved a kind of happiness there. It was his first experience of living in a closed society in which the rules of normal, heterosexual family life were set aside in favour of a different kind of power structure. Each new inmate was assigned to one of the so-called 'families', but these were families in name only. They consisted of dormitory blocks in which 30 boys would sleep, in hammocks, under the supervision of an older inmate singled out for this role and known as the 'senior brother' (*frère aîné*). From nine at night until the following morning, they were shut in and left to their own devices. In this atmosphere, the way to survive was to accept the role of young 'squire' to one of the more powerful, older boys. Genet appears to have taken well to this regime and to have enjoyed the rituals of submission and domination that flourished there. Looking back on the experience, he emphasized its theatrical quality: 'I believe that the relationships between the senior brother (the one placed in authority) and the other boys like me (whose relation was one of submission) produced a performance which the warders viewed with pleasure' (ibid.; translation modified). This emerges with great clarity in Genet's first and only completed film *Song of Love* (*Un chant d'amour*, 1950) and his play *Deathwatch*.

White emphasizes the erotic delights that Genet discovered, perhaps for the first time, at Mettray, and believes that it was his two and a half years there that did most to shape his future as a writer. He quotes Genet as saying that it was at Mettray, at the age of 15, that he began to write.[3] He then makes the interesting claim that 'for Genet "writing" was more a habit of mind, a way of sorting out powerful emotions, than of crafting sentences' (White 1994: 85). White's emphasis on the way the young Genet's feelings were shaped in this adolescent prison contains an important insight:

> How did he organize his feelings at Mettray? In precisely the same way that he would later animate his novels – around the themes of honour and treason, of domination and submission, of authenticity and dissembling, of fidelity and flirtation. In

> Mettray's medieval hierarchy Genet learned to be the page, the cabin boy, the vassal, even the coquette. He felt for the first time the quick, intense desire of rivalry, love and loss.
>
> (ibid.).

White argues that Genet's writing began as action rather than reflection, growing out of the behaviour he adopted in response to the interplay of powerful feelings aroused in him by the experience he underwent at Mettray. In 'The Criminal Child' ('L'Enfant criminel'), a text written for a radio broadcast in 1948 (but censored at the last minute), he celebrated the rigours of Mettray and deplored the campaign by prison reformers that had led to its closure. He expressed his admiration for young boys learning to devote themselves to evil, declaring: 'As for me I have chosen to be on the side of crime' (Genet 1979: 388–9). It is worth remembering that at this time homosexuality was a crime, with the result that Genet was bound to feel outlawed by right-thinking society. His way of overcoming this was to glamorize it and to make it into a positive choice, going far beyond the attitude taken up by many other homosexuals at this time. As Dichy expresses it, he declared war on society (Dichy 1997: 21). This was to enhance further his reputation as a counter-cultural icon among later artists.

Despite the romantic glamour he attributed to the rigorous life at Mettray, and his delight in being part of an exclusively male, criminal society, with its special *argot* and its own rituals, Genet's itch for travel must have made this penitentiary existence hard to tolerate. He ran away once, after a year and a half, and finally escaped for good in March 1929 by volunteering for the army. His unit was sent to Damascus in 1930 and to Meknes in Morocco from 1931 to 1933. This period of military service left him plenty of time to read, and he appears to have taken the opportunity. He later claimed to have read everything that fell into his hands, discovering the joys of pulp fiction and *Détective* magazine alongside the works of Dostoevsky, French novelist André Gide and many others. In 1934 Genet's period of engagement came to an end and he was at last free to wander as he had always wanted. He attempted to contact a number of writers whose work had impressed him by their willingness to deal with

homosexual desire, notably Gide. He secured a meeting with Gide, appealing to him for financial help on this and several subsequent occasions. He then travelled through France to Spain, spending some time in Barcelona and seeking out bars and cheap hotels in the rundown *barri gòtic*, where he encountered a range of underworld characters, many of whom are described or embroidered upon in *The Thief's Journal*.

A year later, he signed up for four more years in the army. This time he was transferred to the elite Moroccan Colonial Infantry Regiment, a company that saw itself as the rival of the French Foreign Legion. Genet later claimed that he had been in the Legion, but this was just an example of how he preferred, as White has it, 'glamorous near-truths' to the supposed facts. He spent eight months at the Regiment's barracks in Aix-en-Provence before he felt the pull of the open road again and deserted in June 1936. There followed a year of wandering in central Europe, which took him to Italy, Albania, Yugoslavia and Austria. He was arrested several times for theft and other infringements, and was expelled from both Albania and Yugoslavia. He took refuge in Brno, Czechoslovakia, where he requested political asylum. In January 1937 he was taken under the wing of the local League of the Rights of Man and spent some months living with one of the members of the League, Lily Pringsheim. He appears to have left a number of manuscripts with her, though these are now lost (Dichy 2002: lxxxii). He made a little money by giving French lessons to the wife of a Jewish industrialist, Anna Bloch, to whom he became very attached, maintaining a correspondence with her for some time. These letters too were lost for decades, but came to light after his death and were published in 1988.

He then returned to France via Poland, Germany and Belgium. Back in Paris, he was arrested for theft, discovered to be a deserter and condemned to eight months in prison. In the subsequent four years, while France underwent military defeat and occupation by the German army, Genet remained in or around Paris and was arrested eight times for theft – usually of small items, especially books. He sometimes sold the books he had stolen at one of the small *bouquiniste* stalls on the banks of the Seine in Paris. During his frequent stays in prison he began to write, trying his hand at all three literary genres:

prose with *Our Lady of the Flowers*, drama with *For 'the Beautiful One'* (*Pour 'la Belle'*), whose title later changed to *Deathwatch* (*Haute Surveillance*), and poetry with 'Le Condamné à mort' ('The Prisoner Condemned to Death'), his first work to be published (a small print run of 100 copies at his own expense) in 1942. Both works demonstrate Genet's extraordinary mastery of style, employing the most exquisite classical French to express passionate emotions that leap off the page with striking authenticity. 'The Man Condemned to Death' is a poem of 65 regular four-line verses celebrating his love for Maurice Pilorge, a man condemned to the guillotine who was executed in 1939. Its juxtaposition of classical versification with explicit images of gay sexual gratification in a startling mixture of literary and low-life vocabulary charmed Cocteau when he read it, and paved the way to Genet's escape from the cycle of repeated crime and imprisonment.

The prose works he wrote at this time, part autobiography, part fiction, were his way of affirming the life he had chosen to lead. They celebrate life on the margins and glamorize those whom most people would think of as despicable: pimps, murderers, robbers. Genet often pointed out that popular thrillers, detective fiction and films about daring crimes did exactly the same thing, while illogically ensuring a conclusion in which law and order are respected after all. He claimed that his work was more 'honest' in exploring the attractions of criminality without condemning it at the last minute. These writings were his way of affirming his identity as a radical outsider. From the first page of *Our Lady of the Flowers*, he addresses his reader as *you* (*vous*) and attributes to the reader all the values shared by bourgeois society. He then proceeds, quite deliberately and explicitly, to draw this bourgeois reader into a state of mind in which s/he finds her/himself seduced by people and events that s/he would normally condemn as evil. The prose is sumptuous, especially in the passages where it recreates for the reader a scene of ordinary prison life transformed by the power of Genet's imagination into an ecstatic vision, drawing strongly on traditional Catholic iconography. At several points in the narrative, Genet explicitly comments on his love of imposture, theatricality, transvestites. Through the power of his prose, he transforms his prison cells into places of erotic adventure

and spiritual enlightenment, where those condemned to death for the worst crimes may suddenly be transfigured and garlanded with flowers as in the appearance of some medieval saint.

Looking back over the various legends of his life, which Genet carefully constructs through his writings up until 1945, one is still struck by their originality and their protean quality, which makes them resist straightforward psychological explanations. For Genet specialist Jean-Bernard Moraly, the key to understanding Genet's project lay in his determination to master a literary idiom that would allow him to give lasting shape to the figures that thronged his fertile imagination. For Sartre, Genet chose his status as thief, homosexual and outsider as the only way available to him of affirming his freedom in the face of the oppression he experienced as a foster-child. For White, Genet's homosexuality and his thefts are intimately linked: the first sexual experience of the effeminate boy (as Genet is described in official reports) is to

> 'steal' the gestures of his idol.... The first act of homosexual love, then, is impersonation, but since he knew of the taboo, Genet links the guilt of theft to the guilt of homosexuality, which is another way of stealing, another form of forbidden appropriation.
>
> (White 1994: 38)

White disputes the theory of a progression in Genet's work, commonly accepted ever since it was proposed by Sartre, from the closed, private world of poetry to the more open form of the novel, and finally to the public, political nature of his plays. He disagrees with Sartre's Marxist-existentialist view that Genet's later writings, which tackle the world stage, treat more public or social concerns than his earlier works. White argues that, being conscious of being placed in a false position – a false son, a false pious choirboy, a false villager – Genet acquired an early understanding of social role-play. We have already noted Genet's comments on the theatrical nature of life at Mettray. White maintains that everything about his formative years developed this theatrical sensibility, and puts forward the view that