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Once a sodomite, twice a philosopher

[EDMUND WHITE](#)

JEAN GENET's attitude towards homosexuality underwent many modifications during the course of his eventful life - but also as his ideas were influenced by the societal changes occurring around him. In his novels he presents the role-playing, sado-maso-chistic form of homosexuality that he learned in reform school and prison. Whereas other ex-cons deplored the violence of prison, made pleas for reform, and bitterly denounced the forced homosexuality of an all-male penal society, Genet was virtually the only one to defend the system; as he put it, "As for me, I've chosen; I will be on the side of crime. And I'll help children not to gain entrance into your houses, your factories, your laws and holy sacraments, but to violate them."

As a teenager in the prison colony of Mettray, he was sought after by the other boys because he was attractive - and possibly because he was a real homosexual who took a genuine pleasure in the sexual acts he was forced into. He was treated as "a high-born lady" by his rough admirers. Because he was a romantic by nature and more in search of love than sexual release, Genet consistently finds tender significance in even the smallest gesture:

Villeroy took me under his wing. Rare was any tenderness between us. From that point of view you could say we were Romans. No tenderness with him, but sometimes, which was worth more, gestures of animal grace. Around his neck he wore a metal chain to which was attached a silver medallion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. When we made love, when he tired of kissing my eyes, I'd work my way down to his cock and in passing my mouth would loiter around his neck and over his chest in order to glide slowly down to his stomach. When I reached his throat he'd twist slightly and he'd slip this medal that hung from his chain into my open mouth. I'd keep it there for an instant, then he'd withdraw it and I'd suck his organ. After I'd swallowed his semen and kissed the tangled hairs on his body, my mouth would rise back up to his. When I moved past his throat he dropped his silver medal back into my mouth.

When he was 18 Genet went as a French soldier to Syria, where he had his first true love affair with a boy, a 16-year-old Damascus hair dresser. What impressed Genet was the affectionate, teasing attitude of the Syrians towards this romance: "At least everyone in the street I knew I was in love with him and the men had a good laugh over it. ... The women were veiled and scarcely visible. But the boys, the young men and the old men all smiled and were amused. They said to me, 'Aha! Go with him.'"

Although Genet previously and subsequently had many quick sexual encounters, the sex act for him was always linked to affection. As he put it in a conversation in old age, "I never lived out my sexuality in a pure state. It was always mixed with tenderness, perhaps it was just a brisk, cursory affection, but until the very end of my sexual life there was always - well, I never made love in a void, I mean, without a bit of human feeling. For me it was a matter of individuals, of guys, of individuals, but not of roles. I'd be attracted to a boy my own age - don't push me too hard to define it. I certainly can't define love, that's for sure. But I could only make love with boys I loved. Otherwise I would make love with certain guys just for the money."

In his thirties, the period when he was writing fiction, he seemed to distinguish between his romantic crushes on men, almost always tough straight men whom he was able to seduce only as "trade," and johns who paid him and whom he despised and sometimes beat up and robbed. Even after he'd become celebrated as an author and was living with a hoodlum nicknamed "Java," he would encourage Java to roll queers. His sense of solidarity with other thieves was certainly stronger than his links with other homosexuals.

Since Genet was attracted almost exclusively to straight men, he had to tolerate (and sometimes even seek out) their girlfriends and wives. In dealing with Lucien Sénémaud, his lover just after the War, Genet became friendly with Lucien's wife and kids and paid for their house to be built (Java helped out with the physical labor). This kind of homosexuality, so recent and yet so distant from us, was common throughout the old Mediterranean world, until the simultaneous enrichment of the working class and the weakening of traditional morality. Because of these two developments, young men were now free to marry young, and

premarital heterosexual adventures were increasingly tolerated. The ugly spectre of heterosexual dating had raised its sordid head.

Previously, no one spoke of it as "exploitation" or "perversion" if a kindly older man, well-heeled and avuncular, took a close interest in a poor youngster's prospects. Look at the case of J. R. Ackerley's father (recounted in *My Father and Myself*), who went from being a penniless if handsome guardsman to becoming one of the most prosperous merchants in England because of the intervention of a rich French aristocrat. Of course, if the word *homosexuality* was ever so much as whispered, the jig was up, but as long as the nature of the affection remained vague no one quibbled, certainly not the parents of the lucky boy.

Genet himself fell into the habit of referring to himself as the "father" of his lovers, who were at first younger, then much younger, finally just young. Genet gave the first real money he ever earned (the royalties from *The Maids*) to Lucien to build his house as well. Nevertheless, Genet was not a rich *bourgeois* helping out working stiffs but rather an ex-thief and vagabond, a child of Public Welfare, who'd made good by glorifying evil in his plays and novels.

The only affair Genet ever had with another *pur sang* homosexual, an Italian gigolo, was a disaster. The hustler broke his heart when he left Genet for a rich Englishman; as a result Genet wrote an extremely gloomy text about homosexuality that he could never finish and that was eventually published in 1954 under the title "Fragments..." Genet was also depressed at this time for two reasons: he thought he was dying of tuberculosis of the kidneys and he was no longer capable of writing fiction.

In his highly poetic essay "Fragments..." Genet tells us that homosexuality "is experienced as a theme of guiltiness." There is no way of getting used to it, of living with it. Homosexuality cuts each homosexual off from the world - even from the world of other homosexuals. Because language itself is built on a sense of shared human community, homosexuals can do nothing more than mock language" - alter it, parody it, dissolve it." Pederasty does constitute a civilization, though one that isolates rather than unites its citizens.

Faced with this extreme solitude, Genet imagines several half-hearted ways out of it. The older pederast finds a younger lover who can be sent into the world to do the pederast's living for him. Genet's lover becomes his "representative on earth" or "my frail ambassador amongst the living."

A second method of escaping the sterility of homosexuality is precisely through art, but a very special art, one consecrated to death, Genet's most enduring subject. Genet's strategy is to devise a book of the dead for a ghostly civilization, a homosexual Egypt of the imagination. Earlier Genet had explored this same possibility in a letter to Sartre. In it he said that the only way out for the homosexual was to turn the funereal themes of his life (a life of sterility) into works of art. Genet asserts that the function of the poem is to transform the funereal theme into an imaginary act and to "remove what was singular and limited in the act and to give it a universal significance."

As the years went by, Genet acquired a more optimistic view of homosexuality. In the 1970's he took up two great causes, the Black Panthers and the Palestinians, and he was quite open about his erotic interest in both groups (though there's no evidence he ever had sex with anyone of either group). He never disguised his homosexuality (or his atheism) from the Palestinians, who were shocked by both eccentricities, but who admired Genet for his courage in owning up to his predilections.

Genet never marched in a gay pride parade in France, mainly because by the time such marches were staged in Paris in the early 70's he was no longer interested in domestic political issues, and was concentrating exclusively on the fate of the Palestinians (at this delicate moment in their history he was virtually their only celebrated friend the West).

And yet Genet never downplayed his homosexuality either. He was sufficiently irritated by the Panthers' repeated references to their white male enemies (especially Nixon) as "faggot" or "punks" that he made strong objections, which caused Panther leader Huey Newton to issue his ground-breaking essay, "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements, August 15, 1970." Newton said that "through reading and through my life experience and observations," he knew "that homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in the society. They might be the most oppressed people in our society." Newton called for the freedom for each person "to use his body in whatever way he wants." He said that although some homosexuals were not revolutionary, others were: "maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary.

When we have revolutionary conferences, rallies and demonstrations, there should be full participating of the gay liberation movement and the women's liberation movement."

Genet himself had a few ideas about gays' revolutionary potential, which he expressed in a 1972 interview: "One is not a revolutionary just because one is a homosexual. ... There are some homosexuals who wish to affirm their difference and their special quality, and this need leads them to unmask the arbitrary character of the system in which they live. But there are others who wish to pass unnoticed and to blend into the system, thereby strengthening the system." What's important to notice is that despite the startlingly early dates of Genet's (and Newton's) statements, both men were primarily interested in how homosexuals can be drummed into serving (presumably more important) causes such as that of the Panthers.

One night Genet took too many of his powerful sleeping pills and danced in a pink negligée for four Panthers. Angela Davis later felt that Genet was communicating something serious about sexual identity and its flexibility to his audience. Kate Millet published her groundbreaking feminist study, *Sexual Politics*, at this time as well, in which she calls Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* a feminist work since it shows that "femininity" is not a biological reality but a social role anyone can assume, especially a man.

In France Genet would lend his name to an early gay liberation publication, but the fight for gay rights was never high on his list. He insisted in an 1983 interview that he had never written fiction to promote gay rights or any other political cause: "I did not write my books for the liberation of the homosexual. I wrote my books for another reason altogether - out of a taste for words, out of a taste for commas, even punctuation, out of a taste for the sentence." Genet remarked that artistic and political revolutions do not take place at the same pace and that quite genuine revolutionary messages are often presented in a lackluster, conventional academic style.

In a typically perverse aside, he also observed that the man who had done the most to liberate homosexuals, although he himself was heterosexual and in no way liberated, was Freud, by expounding the theory of universal bisexuality and the undifferentiated sexuality of children.

Whereas in the 1950's Genet had seen homosexuals as sterile and isolated, by the 80's he'd come to respect their courage and revolutionary potential - although typically he reserved his greatest admiration for sex changes. His fluent mind permitted him to associate the heroism of sex change with the suicidal courage of Palestinian soldiers - or with the joy in the face of death expressed by Mozart's *Requiem*.

No matter how quirky Genet's opinions, he must be credited with having lived out his homosexuality more candidly than any other writer of his generation. Whereas the narrator in Proust's novel is heterosexual and Gide published *Corydon* anonymously and Cocteau never fully acknowledged his authorship of *Le Livre Blanc* and Montherlant and Mauriac were closeted, Genet wrote novels in the 1940's in which the homosexual narrator is called "Jean Genet" - what's more startling, he's a *passive* homosexual (for if anyone were to admit to being gay it was naturally to strut about as a top man, whereas it's well known almost all writers are bottoms).

Genet showed the gay ghetto, not just some abandoned castle where aristocratic lovers embraced, he showed drag queens and their pimps, he mingled the races, he recorded gay slang. Most importantly, with Divine, the protagonist of *Our Lady of the Flowers*, he invented the drag queen for French literature (his most memorable character). Moreover, at a time when middle-class gay authors were promoting the metaphor of homosexuality as illness and mounting pleas for sympathy and compassion, Genet embraced the only other two alternatives--homosexuality as crime or sin, a far stronger position designed to frighten his hapless reader.

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