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Responses to the Human Condition in the Prose Fiction of Jean Genet

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CONTENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following is a list of abbreviations of titles of works to which this thesis refers. References are to editions cited in the Bibliography. Where two editions of Genet's early works of prose fiction are used, page references are to the edition in the relevant volume of the *Oeuvres complètes.* In the case of *Pompes funèbres* and *Querelle de Brest*, where a passage has been cut from the *Oeuvres complètes* edition, a reference to the 'L'Imaginaire' edition will be made.

NDF *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*
MR *Miracle de la Rose*
PF *Pompes funèbres*
QB *Querelle de Brest*
JV *Journal du voleur*

HS *Haute surveillance*
BA *Le Balcon*
SP *Splendid's*

FR *Fragments...*
CQR *Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes*
FU *Le Funambule*
AAG *L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*

SG *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*
GL *Glas*

INTRODUCTION

Genet The Artist

Throughout his life, Jean Genet was a man of many contrasting faces. As a child he was both a thief and a chorister; during his prison years he was at once a convicted, recidivist criminal and a poet championed by Cocteau; in later life he achieved notoriety not only as a successful avant-garde playwright but also as an advocate and chronicler of terrorism. While Genet inspired anger, revulsion or despair in some, he filled others with gratitude, loyalty and admiration, and in many ways his literary output provoked and still provokes the same ambivalent responses. Part of the fascination of Jean Genet lies in the variety of both his experiences and his achievements: indeed, it is difficult to predict whether, in years to come, his name will be associated more with his incarnation as man of crime, man of letters or man of politics. If Genet's life can be characterised in terms of turning points and changes in direction, the media he explores creatively are no less diverse. Genet may be best known for his theatre, but his work includes poetry, prose fiction, autobiography, film and essays.

Genet's public identity as criminal and homosexual *homme de lettres* in France was viewed from the outset with an ambivalence which, if somewhat tempered by time, has nevertheless endured to the present day. His earliest poetry and prose, whose sexual explicitness and glorification of murder only avoided scandal by being published in clandestine editions, were immediately championed by such prominent figures as Jean Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose letter to the Président de la République asking him to pardon Genet's recidivism based this plea on the grounds that Genet was "un très grand poète".[1] Cocteau, for whom the sheer quality of Genet's writing was clearly more important than any conventional moral considerations, even compared Genet to the great poet Rimbaud. At the same time, François Mauriac, perhaps the most prominent voice to condemn Genet at the time, vehemently denounced Genet's work on the grounds that it glorified vice without any moral perspective and was therefore, in his opinion, corrupting and nauseating. Mauriac also linked Genet's name with that of Rimbaud, but if Mauriac, like Cocteau, wished to see in Genet Rimbaud's heir, far from this being a laudatory comparison, he was actually asking Genet to follow Rimbaud's path into silence:

> Il y a pis que le vice et que le crime, c'est l'utilisation *littéraire* du vice et du crime, c'est leur exploitation méthodique. Votre vraie

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[1] Albert Dichy and Pascal Fouché, *Jean Genet, essai de chronologie, 1910-44*, 1988, p.278 [All references are to the editions listed in the bibliography unless otherwise indicated.]

> grandeur eût été de consentir à n'avoir d'autres témoins que vous-même. De son héritage, les misérables fils d'Arthur Rimbaud ont rejeté ce qui fait resplendir à jamais, entre tous les poètes maudits, l'auteur d'*Une Saison en Enfer*: son renoncement à l'exhibitionisme littéraire, cette vocation de silence à laquelle il est demeuré fidèle jusqu'à la mort.[2]

Not to be discouraged by the moralistic, Genet apparently delighted in his role as misfit in French literature. In a 1964 interview he told *Playboy*:

> I never tried to be part of French literature. To say nothing of the fact that French literature would hardly have welcomed me.[3]

Genet remained a controversial, even scandalous figure, amid ambivalent critical and public opinion, throughout his life, if for different reasons in each phase of his life and work. The first phase of Genet's literary output, in the Forties, was Genet's most intense in terms of creativity. In that relatively short period, he wrote and published a collection of six poems, the four works of prose fiction which constitute the focus of this thesis, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (completed in 1942, first published in 1943), *Miracle de la rose* (completed in 1944, first published in 1946), *Pompes funèbres* (completed in 1945, first published in 1947) and *Querelle de Brest* (completed in 1946, first published in 1947), an autobiographical prose text, *Journal du voleur*, and three plays, *Haute surveillance*, *Splendid's*[4] and *Les Bonnes*. His earliest works are fantasies about death and murder, prison and criminality, love and sex, presented through the intense subjectivity of poetic flights of fancy and speculative meanderings, the whole enveloped in a candid homoeroticism, and initially they could only be published in under-the-counter limited editions to escape censorship. Indeed, according to Edmund White, in 1956, having been charged with "pornography and an offence against public decency", Genet was given an eight-month suspended sentence and a fine for the clandestine publication of editions of *Querelle de Brest* and *La Galère* which, together with their explicit illustrations, were found by the court to be "in contempt of morality".[5]

Judicial condemnations aside, these early works were received if not with outright denunciation then often at least with some degree of hesitation by many of those who had access to them. The central aims of these texts appeared to be to glorify crime and criminals, to praise the act of murder and worship murderers as demi-gods, to delight in presenting every last detail, sometimes sordid, sometimes brutal, of homosexual sex, and to wallow in the filth of social misery and moral abjection. The characters in these works are typically thieves, prostitutes, pimps, traitors and killers, and the texts display little restraint in

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2 François Mauriac, 'Le Cas Jean Genet', 1949, p.1.

3 '*Playboy* Interview', 1964, p.50.

4 Not published until 1993.

5 Edmund White, *Genet: a biography*, 1993, p.410.

plumbing the depths of their socially and morally condemnable behaviour. But the outrage with which some – not least François Mauriac – reacted was no doubt exacerbated by the fact that Genet was not just a criminal and a homosexual writing candidly about criminals and homosexuals, a fact shocking in itself to 1940s sensibilities, but that he appeared to be describing himself and other characters in the most abject, even evil terms while showing not the slightest sign of remorse for the misdeeds, or guilt at the immoral desires or even venturing a plea for understanding. But while there were those for whom Genet could never be socially acceptable, others were able to look beyond questions of morality to appreciate the beauty of the poetry, the exquisiteness of the flights of fantasy encapsulated in carefully crafted sentences of impeccable French, and the sheer energy of works which, whether or not they were to an individual's taste, were nonetheless extremely important literary innovations.

In the second phase of Genet's creative output, the mid to late 1950s, it is theatre which predominates. *Le Balcon*, *Elle*,[6] *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* were all first written during this period. If one were to characterise the progression in Genet's work from the Forties to the Fifties, it might be in terms of an opening out from the highly subjective and introspective treatment of 'underworld' themes such as criminality and homosexuality to a more objective presentation – better suited to the theatrical medium – of broader social and political themes such as the nature of power and racial oppression. The temporal distance between the plays written in the first and second phases of Genet's literary career is matched by a progression in both content and style: the characters of *Haute surveillance*, for example, still speak and act like the heroes of the prose fiction, whereas the characters in the later plays find their own voice, just as Genet's dramaturgy finds the self-assurance of its own inimitable form. If *Le Balcon*, *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* brought Genet the public recognition and success which his under-the-counter prose fiction could not, they were no less dogged by mixed critical reception and scandal. *Le Balcon* had to be premièred outside France to avoid the scandal of censorship for the explicit presentation of a brothel on the stage, and *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* both caused public outrage because, through their brutally expressed anti-white racism, they provocatively mocked and condemned colonial oppression precisely during the sensitive time when the Algerian War was taking place. But, again, the more supportive critics recognised that, socio-political antagonism aside, the aesthetic quality and importance of these plays lay in the degree of theatrical innovation with which Genet had infused them, a quality which, for some, placed Genet firmly among the ranks of the avant-garde playwrights of the day such as Beckett and Ionesco.

By the end of the 1950s, then, Genet's literary corpus was almost complete. It did not only comprise the prose fiction, autobiography and theatre for which he is best known, but

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[6] Not published until 1989.

also a number of poems and one completed film, *Un Chant d'amour* (1950), all of which display similar preoccupations with incarceration and homoeroticism as the Forties prose. The body of Genet's literary output is also swelled, mainly from the 1950s onwards, by his essays and articles, which treat such diverse topics as criminality, homosexuality, fine art, literature, theatre and, particularly later, politics.

It is the essay, and the political article in particular, which predominates in the third phase of Genet's life and career from the 1960s to his death in 1986. These texts from the political period of Genet's life[7] have also met with controversy due to the support voiced in them for organisations who use violence and terrorism in their fight against racial oppression such as the P.L.O., the Black Panthers and the Baader-Meinhof gang. This third and last phase also saw a final return to the medium of autobiographical prose as Genet endeavoured to capture his experiences with the P.L.O. in his posthumously published *Un Captif amoureux.*

Throughout Genet's career, interest in his work has been matched, if not at times overshadowed, by fascination with his life, a fascination no doubt intensified by the apparently autobiographical nature of his prose texts. Since Genet's death in particular, some of the controversy surrounding his status as a man of letters, especially with regard to the early prose, has to a certain extent subsided on account of a change in perspective on his life and character. All the while Genet was considered to be a tough hoodlum and unregenerate thug writing amoral and potentially corrupting autobiography, the tendency to treat Genet as a 'cas' often dominated reception of his works. Now Genet has been to some degree recuperated, at least in so far as it has been revealed that Genet himself was actually no more than a petty criminal, and one with a wealth of erudition and culture. This has helped to make it possible at last to undertake a more objective appraisal of the more controversial themes explored in the prose fiction without recourse to issues of autobiographical veracity or the question of the morality or immorality of the author. This will be one of the tasks of this thesis.

The Criticism

Given the diversity of Genet's life experiences as he develops from recidivist criminal to under-the-counter novelist to successful playwright to political activist, and given also the variety of media utilised in his creative pursuits, including poetry, prose, film and drama, fiction, autobiography and non-fiction, one might expect the corpus of Genet criticism to display equal variety. And yet, after five decades, criticism has only begun relatively recently to display a similar diversity in areas studied and in approaches and perspectives

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[7] They are now collected in *Oeuvres complètes VI*.

adopted. There is a distinct bias towards one medium, Genet's theatre, over the others, and favourite themes tend to resurface in the criticism time and again. A brief survey of the development of Genet criticism will reveal the extent of this imbalance, along with the critical lacunae which persist, and will serve as an introduction to the way in which this thesis proposes to redress some of the inadequacies.

Criticism of Genet's works was relatively slow to get off the ground. Although Genet finished his first full-length prose text as early as 1942 and continued to write prolifically over the following seven years, in the Forties and Fifties, apart from one notable exception, Genet and his work were only really mentioned in reviews and newspaper articles. As Webb comments:

> Indeed, in the case of Genet, the non-academic appraisals have a particular significance since he was largely ignored in scholarly publications before 1960.[8]

The earliest criticism of Genet tends to be fairly general as regards content – due partly at least to the difficulty of obtaining texts until the *Oeuvres complètes* appeared – and the tone of some appraisals, particularly those by Mauriac and Rousseaux,[9] is distinctly moralistic and even condemnatory. A few critics, such as Saint Aubyn and Botsford,[10] do suspend moral judgement in order to provide more serious and lengthy early assessments of Genet's literary status, but interest in the author and the legend growing around him rather than in the works for their own sake was as strong then as it still is now.

The most notable exception from this period, and the first full-length work to be devoted to Genet is, of course, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, published in 1952, Sartre's oversized preface to and first volume of the *Oeuvres complètes*, which will be discussed more fully later in this thesis. Although Sartre's monolithic study constitutes the first book-length examination of Genet's five early prose texts and first two published plays, the emphasis is so squarely on existential biography that, rather than stimulate further interest in Genet's early texts in their own right, it actually gave rise to a substantial corpus of its own criticism – the most notable example being Bataille's response to *Saint Genet* in his *La Littérature et le mal* – which engages more with Genet through Sartre rather than with Genet himself and the works themselves. The way in which *Saint Genet* merges biography and literary criticism also further encouraged the reading of Genet's texts through his life and thereby, crucially, discouraged focusing on the texts for their own sake. Indeed, *Saint Genet*

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8 Richard C. Webb, *Jean Genet and his Critics: An Annotated Bibliography, 1943-1980*, 1982, p.ix.

9 André Rousseaux, 'Décomposition littéraire', 1951.

10 F.C. Saint Aubyn, 'Jean Genêt: a scandalous success', 1951;
Keith Botsford, 'Jean Genêt', 1951.

has had a tremendous but not wholly positive influence on Genet criticism ever since. Sartre was himself so influential, and his study so monumental, that many critics apparently simply did not dare to challenge the sheer weightiness of this dense volume. Indeed, in his 1970 essay, Coe blames *Saint Genet* directly for the neglect of Genet's prose, stating that,

> the most obvious reason for this critical vacuum in respect of the non-dramatic works is the existence of Jean-Paul Sartre. [...] *Saint Genet*, quite clearly, reduced not only Jean Genet himself, but the overwhelming majority of French critics to a silence and impotence from which neither has ever fully recovered.[11]

Saint Genet is still regarded by most as the seminal work on Genet, and as Chevaly comments: "C'est si énorme, si complet, si détaillé, si définitif que personne n'ose plus rien dire."[12] Considering the highly specific nature of Sartre's approach to Genet, the influence *Saint Genet* has had seems somewhat disproportionate.

Although the major part of Genet's literary corpus was written and published before 1949, apart from *Saint Genet* it was not until the 1960s, when Genet had published three more plays, that more lengthy criticism of his work began to appear, initially concentrating on his plays. In the early Sixties a number of chapters were devoted to him in studies on avant-garde theatre, for example by Esslin, Grossvogel, Pronko, Wellwarth and Brustein.[13] Thus, more critical space was devoted to Genet's dramatic works within just a few years of the most recent publications than had been accorded the prose texts published up to twenty years before. Even the greater accessibility brought to the first four prose texts by the publication of abridged editions in the second and third volumes of the *Oeuvres complètes* in the mid Fifties had passed almost unnoticed in comparison. Reviewing French criticism of Genet in 1970, Coe explains that this was probably partly because, to avoid scandal, no complimentary copies were issued to the press, and critics were afraid to risk their reputations by reviewing them.[14] Indeed, Coe goes on to add:

> Nor have later scholars or writers in France done much to remedy this neglect of what are clearly four of the most disquieting, original and provocative novels in contemporary French literature.[15]

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[11] Richard N. Coe, 'Unbalanced Opinions: A Study of Jean Genet and the French Critics', 1970, pp.31-32.

[12] Maurice Chevaly, *Genet Tome deux: l'Enfer à Fleur de Peau*, 1989, p.121.

[13] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1980;
David L. Grossvogel, *The Blasphemers: The Theatre of Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet*, 1965;
Leonard C. Pronko, *Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France*, 1962;
George Wellwarth, *Theatre of Protest and Paradox: Developments in Avant-Garde Drama*, 1964;
Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, 1965.

[14] Coe, 'Unbalanced Opinions', p.30.

[15] Ibid., p.31.

It was not until the mid Sixties that the first wave of full-length studies of Genet's theatre *and* prose were published, and, as Coe points out, the majority were not by French critics. The sudden interest in the prose outside France was probably encouraged by the publication in the early Sixties of the English translations of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Saint Genet*. At last, two decades after they were first published, critics such as McMahon, Coe, Thody and Knapp,[16] along with just two French critics, Bonnefoy and Magnan,[17] were according as much space to Genet's prose texts as to his plays. Although some of these studies still provide some of the best criticism of Genet's prose to date, they all suffer to some extent from a tendency to sacrifice close analysis of the texts to generalisation, abstraction and biographical readings. The two French studies in particular, with their thematic approach, give an overall impression of generality, and although Coe's book is probably the best, at times it becomes so embroiled in Sartrean philosophical theories that the rather abstract approach, although masterful, is nonetheless undermined by lack of anchorage in the text.

After these initial full-length studies, in the Seventies all went quiet again. Only Naish published a study of the whole oeuvre in that decade,[18] while the number of articles devoted to the prose decreased substantially to about a third of what there had been in the Sixties. Meanwhile, interest in the plays continued: Aslan's and Cetta's books[19] are devoted solely to Genet's theatre, and there were twice as many articles on the theatre as the novels.

For present purposes, the most important 1970s text on Genet was Derrida's idiosyncratic *Glas*, first published in 1972. Like *Saint Genet*, *Glas* clearly is not conventional literary criticism, but Derrida nonetheless provides much-needed original ideas on Genet's prose texts which have been greatly underrated. If Sartre's huge tome saturated Genet criticism to the point of leaving critics little room for manoeuvre, by comparison *Glas* was practically ignored. No doubt the sheer difficulty of Derrida's text has played an important part in this apparent lack of interest, but *Glas* nonetheless offers a new perspective which was so wanting in a decade otherwise rather indifferent towards Genet's prose.

The 1980s saw a resurgence in interest in Genet, although the bias towards Genet's theatre continued, with new book-length studies of the plays from Henning, Savona and

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[16] Joseph H. McMahon, *The Imagination of Jean Genet*, 1963;
Richard N. Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, 1968;
Philip Thody, *Jean Genet: A Study of His Novels and Plays*, 1968;
Bettina L. Knapp, *Jean Genet*, 1968.

[17] Claude Bonnefoy, *Jean Genet*, 1965;
Jean-Marie Magnan, *Essai sur Jean Genet*, 1966.

[18] Camille Naish, *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet*, 1978.

[19] Odette Aslan, *Jean Genet*, 1973;
Lewis T. Cetta, *Profane Play, Ritual and Jean Genet: A Study of His Drama*, 1974.

Oswald.[20] The early 1980s also saw the publication of Webb's excellent bibliography of Genet criticism,[21] which really brings home just how strong preference for the drama had been, with nearly three times more space needed to present the studies of the plays before 1980 than those devoted to the novels, and that is not including reviews of productions.

Particularly since Genet's death in 1986, Genet criticism has at last begun to develop a greater diversity of areas of research and critical perspectives. The author's passing inevitably made it easier to obtain more accurate biographical information and gave rise to substantial interest in separating fact from fiction and discovering who the man behind the legend really was. The fruit of this has been straightforward biographical works by Dichy and Fouché, Stewart and McGregor, and, most recently and most exhaustively, White,[22] and also semi-biographical attempts to situate the work in the context of the life, such as Moraly's analysis of Genet's development as a writer[23] and Chevaly's highly subjective portrait of Genet's sexuality as central to his life and work.[24] New studies which treat both prose and theatre have been published by Bickel, Malgorn, Plunka and Bergen.[25] Of these, the best are Bickel's socio-criminological approach and the new insights offered by Malgorn, while Plunka's study adds little that is really new to Genet criticism, and Bergen's published thesis barely keeps afloat in the sea of its own eclecticism. There has also been increased interest in Genet and cinema, with the study published by Giles,[26] and in Genet's manuscripts and texts as yet either still unpublished or published posthumously. In-depth studies of Genet's poetry, essays, his politics and political texts, and of *Un Captif amoureux* have yet to be written. But if Genet criticism has at last begun to display the richness and diversity one might have expected earlier in the half-century since Genet began to publish, perhaps the most astonishing fact is that there is still a dearth of close readings of Genet's early prose fiction.

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[20] Sylvie Henning, *Genet's Ritual Play*, 1981;
Jeannette L. Savona, *Jean Genet*, 1983;
Laura Oswald, *Jean Genet and the Semiotics of Performance*, 1989.

[21] Webb, *Jean Genet and his critics*.

[22] Dichy and Fouché, *Jean Genet, essai de chronologie*;
Harry E. Stewart and Rob Roy McGregor, *Jean Genet: A Biography of Deceit, 1910-1951*, 1989;
White, *Genet*.

[23] Jean-Bernard Moraly, *Jean Genet, La Vie écrite*, 1988.

[24] Maurice Chevaly, *Genet Tome un: l'Amour Cannibale*, 1989;
Chevaly, *Genet Tome deux*.

[25] Gisèle A. Child Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et Transcendance*, 1987;
Arnaud Malgorn, *Jean Genet: Qui êtes-vous?*, 1988;
Gene A. Plunka, *The Rites of Passage of Jean Genet: The Art and Aesthetics of Risk Taking*, 1992;
Véronique Bergen, *Jean Genet: Entre mythe et réalité*, 1993.

[26] Jane Giles, *The Cinema of Jean Genet: Un Chant d'amour*, 1991.

Critical Lacunae

One of the most noticeable gaps, then, which lies at the heart of Genet criticism even up to the present, is its failure to offer an adequate detailed treatment of the early prose fiction on its own terms, a failure which is often exacerbated by a reluctance to let these texts speak for themselves and leave all their idiosyncrasies and vitality intact. Much of the main wave of criticism in the 1960s is either rather general in nature or suffers from a tendency to over-abstraction; *Saint Genet* and *Glas* are somewhat limited by both Sartre and Derrida foregrounding their own preoccupations, and even the more recent critical works tend to bring their own critical frameworks to an appreciation of the texts before, or even instead of, assessing and interpreting them on their own terms. It is difficult to say whether this neglect of the prose is due more to the subject-matter of these works, replete with lustful murders and murderous lust, or rather to the sheer impenetrability of their heady poetry, as sinuous as a flight of fancy yet as dense as a page of philosophy.

It is the very density of the prose texts which existing criticism has failed to take full account of, and detailed analysis of the more speculative issues which are raised in the texts and explored within the narratives themselves is particularly lacking. This is perhaps partly attributable to the way Genet's prose works are regarded. The most common approaches are to consider them as texts which tell us about Genet, or perhaps which open a window onto the realities of life in the criminal underworld, or as works of deliberate social and moral rebellion, or even, more simply, as masturbatory fantasies. But although each of these perspectives has its own validity, none of them can take full account of the deeper existential issues with which Genet's prose fiction is undeniably permeated. Concentration on possible autobiographical elements runs the risk of missing the way in which the narratives and the themes they explore function in their own right; focusing on sociological aspects, such as Genet's depiction of criminal and prison hierarchies, draws attention away from the narrator's preoccupations with inner reality beneath social personae; if one treats the fiction first and foremost as a vehicle for or manifestation of revolt against norms of acceptability one is in danger of not giving adequate recognition to the intense subjectivity of the texts' more speculative meanderings and the way in which the narrative does not simply reflect an external reality but creates its own reality; and considering Genet's prose in terms primarily of self-gratificatory erotic dreams quite simply cannot take account of the distinctly philosophical level of exploration which is also found within the texts.

Perhaps one of the key factors which has confirmed and consecrated the importance of speculative ideas in Genet's texts is the very fact that substantial works have been devoted to him by two of the greatest and most influential thinkers in France of this century. But if Derrida's *Glas* had relatively little impact on Genet criticism, the interest shown in Genet by Sartre, rather than encouraging further appraisal of the philosophical dimension of

Genet's work in its own right, simply established a precedent for reading them through Sartrean Existentialism rather than within the texts' own parameters. Coe's study for one, with its emphasis on the symbolism of what Coe terms "Genet's philosophy of the mirror",[27] is, for the most part, couched in typically Sartrean rather than specifically Genetian terms. Furthermore, the publication of *Saint Genet* as the first volume of the *Oeuvres complètes* encourages potential readers of Genet to view it as the only authorised interpretation of his early work. As Julian Mitchell comments with regard to the critics of Genet who came after Sartre:

> Before they feel able even to approach Genet's actual works, they are obliged to clamber over and through the barbed and electrified wire of *Saint Genet*. [...] The best of Genet, I would argue, does not conform to any dialectic, however brilliantly constructed, and by imposing this, Sartre has muddied the critical water.[28]

After reading *Saint Genet*, Cocteau immediately expressed in his diary his own concern that what he regarded to be Sartre's misrepresentation of Genet's work could only have a detrimental effect upon it:

> Terminé le livre de Sartre. Les derniers chapitres s'enfoncent dans une boue nauséabonde. C'est dommage. A moins que le public ne vomisse pas l'oeuvre dont cette terrible étude est la préface et découvre avec surprise le côté féerique de Genet. On dirait que Sartre le lui refuse.
> Je quitte le livre sur un pénible malaise. Qui peut avaler cela?[29]

Although I would hesitate to maintain that Genet's works of prose fiction are *primarily* philosophical texts, what I am suggesting is that, while the predominant themes of Genet's prose fiction are, indeed, theft, betrayal and homosexuality – the three virtues in the narrator of *Journal du voleur*'s theology (JV p.167) – these themes are not only explored in their own right as ends in themselves, but are also means to a different end, vehicles through which a deeper layer of issues is presented and investigated. Much of the time, what we might term the sociological dimension of Genet's texts provides the backdrop against which – or the context within which – broader speculative issues are also explored. And although there is a good deal of concentration in the prose on the social role of the narrator or the characters, for the most part the underlying emphasis, particularly for the narrators, is on more introspective preoccupations and obsessions which are worked through and dealt with

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[27] Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.68.

[28] Julian Mitchell, 'Genet's Brutal Revenge', 1968, p.622.

[29] Jean Cocteau, *Le Passé défini I 1951-1952*, 1983, p.282.

primarily not externally but in an internal, speculative realm. The more speculative issues which are explored within Genet's prose fiction will constitute the focus of this thesis.

If one of the greatest lacunae in Genet criticism could be identified as its failure to undertake detailed textual analysis of his prose fiction, and particularly of its more speculative themes, I should like to suggest that one of its most serious flaws is the widespread failure to distinguish between the fictional narrators of these works and their flesh-and-blood author. The majority of critics read the fiction through the life without even questioning their approach, perhaps sharing with Chevaly the belief that, "son oeuvre est absolument indissociable de sa vie",[30] and this tendency was also probably encouraged by Sartre's method of making literary criticism serve existential biography to the detriment of the former. As William Thompson comments:

> Even if we acknowledge the importance of the biographical approach to the text, we must, at some point, separate the text from the author. And it is in this regard that the Sartrean analysis overemphasises Genet's writing as nothing more than self-explanation and self-reproduction.[31]

Recent critics still continue to blend narrator and author, fiction and autobiography in a rather misleading alliance; Bickel actually uses 'auteur' and 'narrateur' interchangeably, even referring to "le narrateur (Genet)"[32] without clarifying which is meant. This tendency is clearly largely attributable to the undeniable autobiographical elements in these works, but, as more accurate biographical information about Genet has revealed, the relation between author and narrator – particularly in the four works of prose fiction which precede *Journal du voleur* whose status as autobiographical text is perhaps less equivocal – is far more complex than a rather over-simplistic matter of equation. If there are autobiographical sources for themes, events and characters in the novels, once they are incorporated into the narrative they are fictionalised to the point that any attempt to establish the veracity of their inspiration can only provide unreliable information about Genet himself and risks detracting from their new meaning and status. As Driver comments, "what we read is not autobiography but memory turned into fiction and fiction turned into fantasy".[33] Derrida, for one, does acknowledge a distinction between author and narrator, although, typically, he does not establish this opposition without also collapsing it, and of *Pompes funèbres* he

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[30] Chevaly, *Genet Tome deux*, p.24.

[31] William John Thompson, 'Women in the prose fiction of Jean Genet', 1989, p.4.

[32] Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et Transcendance*, p.94.

[33] Tom F. Driver, *Jean Genet*, 1966, p.10.

asks: "Quant à celui qui organise les *Pompes funèbres* – c'est-à-dire littéraires – de J.D., dira-t-on que c'est l'auteur, le narrateur, le narrataire, le lecteur, mais de quoi?".[34]

In contrast, Genette insists that the fundamental separation of the narrator from the author should always be maintained, and this thesis will follow Genette on this point. It is this crucial distinction between narrator and author which underpins Genette's elucidation of his narrative theories through their application to Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* in *Figures III*. Genette makes it quite clear that even where there are obvious autobiographical elements in the narrative, and the author can be deemed to have drawn heavily from his own experience to create his text, author and narrator must still be considered as completely separate.[35] On the one hand there are the "événements racontés par le récit que constitue la *Recherche du temps perdu*" and on the other there is "l'acte narratif dont il procède", and as Genette goes on to state, both of these,

> sont fictifs et mettent en scène non Marcel Proust, mais le héros et narrateur supposé de son roman. [...] Quant à la narration productrice de ce récit, l'acte de Marcel racontant sa vie passée, on se gardera dès maintenant de le confondre avec l'acte de Proust écrivant la *Recherche du temps perdu*.[36]

Without reference to Genette, Henderson also compares Genet's prose fiction to *A la Recherche du Temps perdu*, and his thesis stands out from the majority of criticism in that he even intimates that critics of Genet, like critics of Proust, have fallen for an equation of author and narrator which in both cases is only apparent:

> Genet's first person narrator relentlessly undermines the boundaries between autobiography and fiction in the texts, often openly admitting that what he recounts is false. [...] Like Proust, Genet has often duped even his most astute critics into naively confusing the identity of the narrator with that of the author.[37]

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[34] Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, 1981, p.8 [All page references for *Glas* are for the right-hand column unless otherwise stated.]

[35] In 1961, Wayne Booth had introduced a third category situated, as it were, between the narrator and the real author: the implied author, which he defines, as Genette tells us in *Nouveau discours du récit*, as, "une *image* de l'auteur (réel) construite par le texte et perçue comme telle par le lecteur", to which Genette adds: "La fonction de cette image semble être essentiellement d'ordre idéologique" (p.97). Genette accepts the possibility that the reader may detect and construct a voice behind the narrator's voice which still could not be said to be the author's, but, while he does not go so far as to declare Booth's term invalid, he nonetheless maintains that, except perhaps in the case of an unreliable narrator, for the most part there is simply no need for this further category, since, as he declares, "un récit de fiction est fictivement produit par son narrateur, et effectivement par son auteur (réel); entre eux, personne ne travaille, et toute espèce de performance textuelle ne peut être attribuée qu'à l'un ou à l'autre, selon le plan adopté" (p.96). On this point, this study has opted to follow Genette and not to use the concept of the implied author, not because it rejects this category globally, but on the grounds that, in my opinion, any distinction between narrator and implied author in Genet's prose would be such a fine one as to be unnecessary.

[36] Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, 1972, p.73.

[37] Michael Stephen Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self: Confession in the Works of Jean Genet', 1991, pp.6-7.

The narrators may well bear undeniably strong similarities to the author of the work – in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, *Miracle de la rose* and *Pompes funèbres* the narrators even call themselves Jean Genet[38] – but they are nonetheless fictional personae, a point that Genet himself emphasised to Bourseiller in 1981:

> Le plus important, ce qui était le plus important pour moi, je l'ai mis dans mes livres. Pas parce que je parle à la première personne: le «je», dans ce cas-là, n'est pas autre chose qu'un personnage un peu magnifié.[39]

For Genette, the distinction between author and narrator renders pointless any attempt to explain either one through the other, as so much of Genet criticism attempts to do. As Genette says of Proust:

> Non pas certes que le contenu narratif de la *Recherche* soit pour moi sans aucun rapport avec la vie de son auteur: mais simplement ce rapport n'est pas tel que l'on puisse utiliser la seconde pour une analyse rigoureuse du premier (non plus que l'inverse).[40]

More recently, the general failure of existing criticism, apart from a few exceptions, to examine Genet's prose without recourse to biographical readings has to a certain extent been redressed by narratological studies such as the unpublished French dissertations by Barriquand and Leca.[41] However, while these are both admirable studies, the way in which their analysis is limited to purely formal aspects of narrative theory results in the analysis stopping just as their findings are potentially becoming most interesting. What they do not examine are the thematic implications of the narrative form of Genet's prose texts and the extent to which the way themes and ideas are presented, approached and explored in Genet's prose forms a vital and inseparable part of the reader's understanding of the issues themselves. It is from this perspective that this thesis will approach narrative form.

This thesis represents, then, a reaction against existing Genet criticism and, as such, its aim is twofold. Firstly, to begin to undertake some of the close analysis of Genet's neglected prose fiction that has been lacking, with particular reference to the more speculative issues which this thesis considers to be absolutely central to these texts. And, secondly, to separate clearly the narrators from the author in order to allow concentration on

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[38] NDF p.168; MR p.227; PF p.12.

[39] 'Entretien avec Antoine Bourseiller' (1981), *Oeuvres complètes VI*, 1991, p.217.

[40] Genette, *Figures III*, p.73.

[41] Pascale-Marie Barriquand, '*Pompes funèbres* de Jean Genet: Structure et technique narrative', 1986; Florence Leca, 'L'Esthétique du roman chez Jean Genet', 1987-88.

the former so that the themes can be examined as they are presented in relation to the narrative form of the texts themselves.

Since this approach constitutes a return to the texts themselves with the aim of examining their complexity primarily on their own terms and within their own boundaries, and of assessing speculative issues raised only by the criteria which they themselves propose, this thesis will locate itself in conscious isolation from research into both biography and autobiography, neglecting references to the author in order to focus more closely on the role of the narrators, and paying particular attention to the narrators' relationship to the narrated world and to the characters within it, their narratives being considered both on formal and, most importantly, thematic levels. Thus, this thesis will attempt to establish what kind of issues and obsessions are being explored through the narrative and, where relevant, the precise nature of the relationship between narrative form and these themes.

Responses to the Human Condition

Although this thesis will be concentrating on the more speculative dimension of Genet's prose fiction, it is worth emphasising that I am not suggesting that these texts present a coherent philosophical system, but simply that, overall, there is a remarkable degree of continuity in the fundamental issues explored in them which deserves more detailed critical exploration. Genet had intended to gather together his speculative ideas into a work of philosophy. As White tells us, he "hoped to elaborate his own philosophical system – a more coherent version of that which he had already adumbrated in his fiction",[42] but, apart from *Fragments...*, this central *oeuvre* of his career, *La Mort*, was never written. Apart from this and disparate ideas expressed in various essays, all we have are the prose texts themselves but, as White tells us, even Genet realised that the mental meanderings in them were rather haphazard.

Genet's prose texts clearly do not presume to present the existential experience of mankind as a whole or theories about the human condition *per se.* As Koch comments, if Genet is "a philosophic novelist", what he offers in his fiction is "a philosophic spectacle rendered in strictly poetic terms."[43] Typically, we are presented only with the narrators' subjective view of the human condition and their exploration of possible responses to it. With this in mind, this thesis will attempt to draw together the various aspects of central speculative issues which are explored in Genet's prose whilst remaining sensitive to their status in relation to the narrative form of the texts, and it will endeavour to identify and examine patterns and constants whilst, as far as possible, avoiding giving the impression

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[42] White, *Genet*, p.272.

[43] Stephen Koch, 'A Romantic of the Wretched Life', 1967, p.762.

that they are presented as elements in an integrated philosophical system. This thesis does not presume to represent the work of philosophy that Genet never wrote.

On a thematic level, the main focus of this thesis will be on the narrators' presentation of the human condition as they see it and the range of responses to it which they explore. It is my contention that what preoccupies the narrators most is what might be termed the 'immutability' of the human condition. Time and again we find the narrators focusing upon fundamental elements of existence, however they manifest themselves, which they perceive to be either impossible to change or beyond control, and this vision of the human condition in terms of imprisonment within the inalterable finds its most acute expression in the ultimate immutable aspect of the human condition, death itself. And yet, in spite of the centrality of these preoccupations in Genet's early fiction, these themes have still not been examined in existing criticism in sufficient detail, and the crucial matter of the narrative form of the narrators' speculation has been particularly neglected.

If studies have hesitated to highlight the immutability of the human condition as the narrators portray it in the prose fiction, this probably has much to do with *Saint Genet*, since Sartre's existentialist approach to Genet necessarily rules out any suggestion of an insurmountable fatalism in favour of an underlying, fundamental freedom. Such an approach is in danger of not taking full account of the narrators' own presentation of human existence as ruled by an inescapable fatedness, indeed almost an essentialism, or of the intricate stratagems they contrive as responses to this condition.

What is more surprising is that existing criticism provides so little detailed analysis of the specific theme of death in Genet's fiction, particularly since the exploration of death, mortality and related issues is the most sustained of any theme in the prose texts and verges on being the narrators' central obsession. White maintains that the death knell rings throughout Genet's writing, and goes on to state: "Genet's writing is about dying, about anticipating death, about dedications to the dead, about feeling already dead".[44]

Indeed, there are indications that Genet was himself obsessed with death. *Fragments...* is deeply infused with the presence of death and mortality, and in his preface to the Gallimard edition White tells us that *Fragments...* is but a foretaste of what was to be the central work of Genet's life:

> Ce texte en prose [...] représente une esquisse d'une oeuvre immense et inachevée, préalablement intitulée *La Mort*, et qui devait être composée d'éléments autobiographiques, de réflexions esthétiques et de considérations universelles et abstraites. (FR p.15)

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[44] White, *Genet*, p.100.

Although *La Mort* was never written, its projected title alone confirms the centrality of death both in Genet's own consciousness and in his work, and Genet made the link himself when, in a 1956 interview, having told Poulet about his plans for *La Mort*, he went on to explain: "Un homme comme moi voit la mort partout, il vit sans cesse avec elle".[45] White also emphasises Genet's life-long acute sense of his own mortality, telling us that, "tout au long de sa vie, il s'accrocha à l'idée qu'il hébergeait quelque part, à l'intérieur de lui, une mort imminente" (FR p.16). Indeed, *Fragments...* is addressed to a male prostitute dying of tuberculosis, an illness from which, in the forties, Genet also believed he was dying.

Those critics who do comment on death in the prose fiction tend to consider the theme primarily on a symbolic level, in terms of the 'death' of Genet's childhood or, following Sartre, Genet's 'death' through his petrification by the Other and self-alienation when he is branded a thief. This is, for example, the line that Coe takes:

> The real moment of death [...] comes for Genet when, in the eyes and words of others, he becomes a thief. At that instant, the being that he had been, the child, [...] died and was replace by an artificial being. [...] The heart of the Legend, then, is that Genet is dead: killed by a traumatic experience in childhood [...].[46]

Although such an approach may well have some validity, it fails to acknowledge the extent to which death is explored in Genet's prose texts in terms of an immutable physical mortality, in terms of life lived in impotence before the ever present shadow of one's future inevitable demise, and it runs the risk of reducing the very physical reality of death to mere abstractions. Bickel, writing more recently, does recognise that death is central in Genet's work,[47] but in her analysis death is also primarily a metaphorical concept: to be 'dead' is to be aware of one's inner void. Henderson's interpretation relies equally on metaphor, as he maintains that, in Genet, 'death' signifies artistic solitude: "Genet explains that what he means when he speaks of death is a metaphorical space of desertion and ecstasy where the artist works".[48] Bonnefoy was one of the earliest critics to insist not only on the primary importance of death in Genet's novels, stating that, "la mort, ici, est au centre de toute l'oeuvre, et lui donne sens",[49] but also to emphasise that it is with physical death that his work is chiefly preoccupied: "La mort, événement biologique, il s'efforce de la regarder".[50] However, Bonnefoy's study is introductory and general and does not provide close readings

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[45] Robert Poulet, 'Jean Genêt: "Fouillez l'ordure, vous trouverez mon secret"', 1956, p.11.

[46] Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.106.

[47] "Le thème de la mort revient systématiquement chez Genet au point de constituer une véritable obsession" (Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et Transcendance*, p.100).

[48] Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', p.65.

[49] Bonnefoy, *Jean Genet*, p.32.

[50] Ibid., p.26

of the full significance and complexity of the narrators' exploration of the inescapability of physical death.

Although existing criticism tends not to consider the theme of death in Genet's prose fiction primarily in physical terms, in the texts themselves death is explored in the first instance not symbolically or metaphorically but on the level of corporeal mortality, in terms of ageing, illness and dying. Moreover, death is most frequently expressed through the flesh-and-blood violence of murder, and it is this aspect in particular which, perhaps because of the taboo subject-matter, critics seem to be loath to examine on its own terms. However, if the way such themes are explored within the texts is to be fully appreciated, moral objections must, at least initially, be suspended so that the themes can be examined within the moral vacuum of the internal criteria and mechanisms of the texts themselves. As Hauptman also asserts, "the reader is forced to accept the transvalued ethic in its own terms, disquieting as it may be".[51]

In Genet's prose, to judge the characters by any other yardstick than the internal criteria of the narrators' own imaginary universe would be both meaningless and irrelevant. Naish recognises that such an approach amounts to a Wildean separation of morality and art, and he quotes Oscar Wilde's famous statement:

> I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticised from a moral standpoint. The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate.[52]

Davis comments on critics' reluctance to accept the 'immorality' of Genet's texts on its own terms: "All Genet's critics have been puzzled and troubled by the moral problems posed by his writing [...]. Genet's writing is particularly resistant to ethical recuperation; hence, I would suggest, the urgency with which his commentators attempt to recuperate him".[53] These attempts to recuperate the texts, however, run the risk of distorting the significance which the speculative explorations have within the aesthetic medium in which they are presented.

Some works of criticism do examine the immorality of the murderer figures, but often in the context of a sociological reading, in terms of murder being the most extreme means of transgressing both social and moral conventions. Or else the murderer is considered within the general theme of criminality, in which context the murderer stands at the pinnacle of the criminal underworld hierarchy. In a number of studies, the explanation given for why many characters in Genet kill is simply that they are taking life in the pursuit of absolute Evil, as though the supremely evil deed were committed for its own sake and as an end in

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[51] Robert Hauptman, *The Pathological Vision: Jean Genet, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Tennessee Williams*, 1984, p.23.

[52] Naish, *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet*, p.175.

[53] Colin Davis, 'Genet's *Journal du voleur* and the Ethics of Reading', 1994, p.51.

itself, but such readings rarely take full account of the intricacies involved in the narrator's presentation of the character's relationship to the murder he commits. Critics rarely wish to dwell on the portrait of the experience of killing or of having killed, or on the sense of achievement or even pleasure the murderer might derive from it, and they seldom really address the question of *why* a character kills in Genet, what reasons or motivations the narrator suggests lie behind his actions, and, of capital importance, why it might be that the narrators are so deeply preoccupied with having one after another of their characters commit murder, and the possible connection between these grisly explorations and the narrators' actual construction of the narrated world. Full analysis of all these issues will form the central core of this thesis.

It is the aim of this thesis, then, to examine the narrators' presentation in Genet's early works of prose fiction of the most fundamental, immutable aspects of the human condition which preoccupy them along with their exploration of possible responses to them, and this examination will be undertaken throughout within the context of the narrators' self-presentation and, particularly, their relationship to the narrated world they construct. To this end, analysis will focus primarily on *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, *Miracle de la rose*, *Pompes funèbres* and *Querelle de Brest*, only referring to *Journal du voleur*, along with various other texts by Genet, where relevant parallel ideas arise.[54] Because I will be focusing on the more speculative dimension of Genet's fiction, a full assessment of the texts on Genet offered by Sartre and Derrida will be undertaken in order to prepare the way for my own reading of the early prose works, and the ideas they explore which are particularly relevant to the approach and perspective of this thesis will be further discussed at the appropriate place in my own analysis.

In addition to *Saint Genet* and *Glas*, reference will also be made where pertinent to the ideas of another philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, for the reason that, whereas Sartre's existentialist reading of Genet's prose fiction is often cited as the seminal study of these texts, it is my contention that on certain important points many of the speculative issues which are presented and explored within Genet's fiction bear more affinities with ideas to be

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[54] This means that, because of the specific thematic and formal focus of this thesis, *Journal du voleur* will be considered to be different from the four previous works of prose fiction both formally and thematically. Whereas the narrator of *Journal du voleur* purports to be producing a narrative which is first and foremost autobiographical, and therefore concentrates almost exclusively on his own past experience as material to be explored in the narrative, the narrators of each of the four preceding texts construct a narrated world which is, to a greater or lesser extent, pure fantasy, and, as we shall see, this characteristic allows them to explore at length issues which have not formed part of their lived reality, such as Death, Mortality and Murder, which are not foregrounded in *Journal du voleur*. Thus, although the narrator of *Journal du voleur* does use his relationship to his narrative to construct through it a revaluation of his past, he does not exploit the further possibilities of his relationship to his narrated world as the other narrators do. *Miracle de la rose* is the only other early prose text in which the narrator purports primarily to be exploring his own past, (in *Pompes funèbres*, although the narrator does explore an event in his past, the fantasy thread of his narrative clearly predominates), and as such *Miracle de la rose* could also be considered to be more 'autobiographical' than fantasy-based, particularly in the narrator's presentation of the Mettray thread of his narrative. However, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* does develop and exploit fantasies which grow out of his present situation in the Fontevrault thread of his narrative, especially relating to Harcamone, with the result that *Miracle de la rose*, like the other three prose works before *Journal du voleur*, has the added formal and thematic dimensions on which this thesis is focusing which *Journal du voleur* lacks.

found in Nietzsche than with Sartrean Existentialism. The details of these affinities will be discussed in more depth later in this thesis, but at this stage it is important to emphasise that, while parallels will be examined, there will be no attempt to establish any direct influence of Nietzsche on Genet. Indeed, although we know from letters to Marc Barbezat that Genet had certainly read Nietzsche by 1961,[55] it is quite probable that he had not read Nietzsche's philosophy before writing his prose fiction. Genet's comments in conversation with Barbezat do nonetheless reveal the ideas which he particularly likes in Nietzsche and which, most importantly, he finds complement his own:

> J'ai lu à Corfou toute son oeuvre. Ce que j'ai aimé, ses idées qui me conviennent: au-delà du bien et du mal: le surhomme.[56]

Both Sartre and Derrida mention Nietzsche in the course of their studies of Genet, and Derrida even suggests that Genet's *Le Funambule* shows us how to read Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (GL p.143). However, neither of them examines potential parallels between ideas in Genet and in Nietzsche.

The analysis of responses to the human condition in Genet's four earliest works of prose fiction will be divided into four main sections. Part One will be devoted to an assessment of the treatment of the more philosophical level of Genet's prose provided by Sartre's *Saint Genet* and Derrida's *Glas*, with the specific aim in mind of establishing the relationship of the approach adopted in this thesis to these two central texts in the corpus of Genet criticism. Part Two will then represent a preliminary attempt to characterise the nature of the human condition which the narrators present in their narratives, taking full account of the inseparability of the themes themselves from the narrative form in which they are expressed. To this end, the first chapter will focus on narrative theory, drawing principally from the model proposed by Genette in order to clarify the narratological context within which the presentation of the human condition must be considered. The following chapters will then offer first of all a general examination of the ways in which fundamental, immutable aspects of the human condition are manifested within the narrative, before focusing more specifically on the immutable aspects of the human condition which obsess the narrators to the greatest degree, death and mortality. Parts Three and Four will then be devoted to a full investigation of the complex mechanisms involved in the responses to the human condition which the narrators explore. Part Three will focus on their presentation of attempts to assert a degree of control over various aspects of one's condition which cannot be changed. The section will start by characterising the process which lies at the heart of the

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[55] On 24th June 1961, Genet wrote to Marc Barbezat asking him to bring him all of Nietzsche, including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Gay Science* and *Ecce Homo*. (*Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat*, 1988, p.214)

[56] Ibid., p.261. Genet visited Greece repeatedly between 1958 and 1960.

responses to the immutable which the narrators explore and will then progress thematically, tracing a movement inwards from immutable elements which are experienced primarily in external reality, such as abjection and social passivity, to responses which are formulated and achieved only in an inner, aesthetic realm. Part Four will then examine the narrators' exploration of possible ways of transforming one's fundamental powerlessness before death and mortality. This section will analyse the narrators' portraits of confrontations with death in roughly chronological order in order to take account of the development in the type of responses pursued from one text to the next and also from one protagonist to the next.

PART ONE -
SARTRE AND DERRIDA ON GENET

CHAPTER ONE - SARTRE'S SAINT GENET, COMÉDIEN ET MARTYR

Sartre on Genet

Saint Genet comédien et martyr was originally commissioned as a preface to Jean Genet's *Oeuvres Complètes* and was begun in 1949, but the preface swelled to over six hundred pages so that, when it was published in 1952, it filled the entire first volume of Genet's *Oeuvres complètes*. That Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent, revered philosopher, should provide the introduction to a little-known writer who had only previously been published clandestinely by a minor publisher, had the effect of consecrating Genet's place in French literature.

In *Saint Genet*, Sartre traces Genet's development from child to mature writer through the application of 'existential psychoanalysis', described in *L'Etre et le néant* as a blend of biography, psychoanalysis, philosophy and literary criticism. Sartre charts Genet's progression from a child, when he believes his only 'freedom' is to try to *be* the way others see him, until, in adulthood, his writing liberates him from his fatalism and allows him to seize his freedom to shape himself, exploring characteristic themes such as alienation, the Other, Evil, ethics, language and art along the way. Sartre clearly describes the aims and method of his existentialist biography in a passage towards the end of *Saint Genet*:

> Montrer les limites de l'interprétation psychanalytique et de l'explication marxiste et que seule la liberté peut rendre compte d'une personne en sa totalité, faire voir cette liberté aux prises avec le destin, d'abord écrasée par ses fatalités puis se retournant sur elles pour les digérer peu à peu, prouver que le génie n'est pas un don mais l'issue qu'on invente dans les cas désespérés, retrouver le choix qu'un écrivain fait de lui-même, de sa vie et du sens de l'univers jusque dans les caractères formels de son style et de sa composition, jusque dans la structure de ses images, et dans la particularité de ses goûts, retracer en détail l'histoire d'une libération: voilà ce que j'ai voulu; le lecteur dira si j'ai réussi. (SG p.645)

Sartre's aim, then, is to encapsulate the totality of Genet by identifying the original choice that he made which determined every aspect of himself and his life and his development towards the writer he has become. Because freedom is central to Sartre's

philosophy, Sartre also states that it was his intention to focus particularly on the way in which Genet is gradually able to liberate himself from the limitations which social conditioning initially places upon his freedom. However, standing at a midpoint between the emphasis on absolute freedom in *L'Etre et le néant* and the shift to more socio-historical preoccupations in *Critique de la raison dialectique*, *Saint Genet* only constitutes a preliminary attempt to examine the pressures which internalised forces of social conditioning place upon an individual's assumption of his freedom. In practice, in 1952, Sartre's recognition of the consequences of the social context was not yet as fully developed as in his later 'biography' of Flaubert. Sartre later admitted this inadequacy in his analysis of Genet: "Il est évident que l'étude du conditionnement de Genet par les événements de son histoire objective est insuffisante, très très insuffisante."[1]

The starting point of Sartre's existentialist biography is to analyse Genet's childhood in order to identify the crisis and resulting choice which has defined the totality of Genet's life and evolution in so far as it manifests itself in every subsequent event of his life, in every aspect of his conduct and further choices he makes:

> Si nous voulons comprendre cet homme et son univers, il n'est pas d'autre moyen que de reconstruire soigneusement, à travers les représentations mythiques qu'il nous en donne, l'événement originel à quoi il se réfère sans cesse et qu'il reproduit dans ses cérémonies secrètes. La méthode s'impose: par l'analyse des mythes rétablir les faits dans leur signification vraie. (SG p.13)

In Sartre's view, a single, crucial event or *crise originelle* in Genet's life led to his metamorphosis from child to monster to artist, and Sartre's own tripartite structure which is divided into his first conversion to *Le Voleur*, his second metamorphosis into *L'Esthète* and his third metamorphosis into *L'Écrivain* mirrors these stages in Genet's development as Sartre sees them.

The 'evidence' on which Sartre bases his existentialist biography is drawn primarily from Genet's 'autobiographical' texts, supplemented by information obtained from Genet directly. Thus, Sartre looks at Genet in his third incarnation, as a writer who has published five prose texts and two plays in the 1940s, and attempts through Genet's writing to reconstruct the existential development which, following Sartre's theories, Genet must have undergone to reach that point. To fill in any missing pieces, he simply has to refer to his vision of the jigsaw of Genet's existential development as a whole.

The density of *Saint Genet* does not lend itself easily to brief summary. However, because, for Sartre, after Genet's *crise originelle* every subsequent act and attitude can be understood in direct relation to it, once the full purport of the *crise originelle* and Genet's

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1 Quoted in Christina Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, 1979, p.58.

response to it has been grasped, the rest of his study can be regarded in terms of progressive variations on a central theme which Sartre develops in the light of various ontological and socio-political perspectives.

Sartre begins his reconstruction of the original crisis by emphasising the social marginalisation into which Genet was born. What is most important to Sartre is that Genet was illegitimate, abandoned and then fostered to a family and environment in which he did not belong, and that Genet must have been acutely aware of his isolation:

> Il sait qu'il n'appartient pas entièrement à ses parents adoptifs, que l'administration l'a prêté, qu'elle peut le reprendre et que, par voie de conséquence, rien de ce qu'ils possèdent ne lui appartient. (SG p.17)

From a Marxist perspective, because, in bourgeois society, "la propriété définit l'Etre" (SG p.14), Genet's exclusion from property results in a sense of existential alienation: "Épave d'une société qui définit l'être par l'avoir, l'enfant Genet veut avoir pour être" (SG p.18). In Sartre's view, it is out of a conscious attempt to rectify this lack that Genet turns to stealing, initially precisely from the foster parents whose social standing excludes him from property.

The original crisis occurs when Genet is not only caught stealing but, crucially, labelled a thief:

> *Pris la main dans le sac:* quelqu'un est entré qui le regarde. [...] Une voix déclare publiquement: «Tu es un voleur.» Il a dix ans. (SG p.26)

The repercussions of this single critical event, with its existential and ontological ramifications, are, then, repeated, reflected and refracted throughout Genet's life, and the whole of Genet's subsequent development can be understood in terms of a constant reliving of and response to the *crise originelle*: "Genet a vécu et ne cesse de revivre cette période de sa vie comme si elle n'avait duré qu'un instant" (SG p.27).

When Genet is labelled by the Other, he feels that his immutable essence has been determined for him and he has been objectified:

> Genet apprend ce qu'il *est objectivement.* [...] *Genet est un voleur:* voilà sa vérité, son essence éternelle. (SG p.27)

Critically, having had his essence given to him, Genet does not feel free to change it – "libre pour être coupable, Genet ne l'est pas pour se changer" – and he therefore feels his life is mapped out for him: "on l'a pourvu d'une nature, d'une liberté coupable et d'un destin" (SG p.29). Believing he has no other option at this stage, Genet decides to be this 'essence' that others see in him, to be other than himself in a state of existential self-alienation:

> Puisqu'il ne peut échapper à la fatalité, il sera sa propre fatalité; puisqu'on lui rend la vie invivable il vivra cette impossibilité de vivre comme s'il l'avait créée tout exprès pour lui-même, épreuve particulière à lui seul réservée. (SG p.63)

Sartre admires this young child's self-assertion, for even though at this stage he has only asserted a very limited freedom within the "fatalité" of his social conditioning, the freedom to accept a given destiny, later he will seize the freedom to transcend it.

Genet's decision to be what others see in him constitutes an impossible quest to *be* what he is not by choosing to play the role he has been given: "Il volait parce qu'il «était» voleur; désormais c'est pour *être* voleur qu'il vole" (SG p.85). Thus, although Genet manifests the evil nature the Other sees in him in objective form, translating evil into criminal acts under the premise that, "le crime c'est le plus grand Mal-objet" (SG p.106), Genet has actually chosen appearance over reality, and it is in this sense that Genet is a 'comédien': "Il *n'est* pas méchant: il fait le méchant" (SG p.88). As Sartre explains: "Un acte qu'on accomplit pour *être*, ce n'est plus un acte, c'est un geste" (SG pp.87-88). This is the paradoxical method Genet employs to regain his freedom by, as it were, becoming his own cause. And because all subsequent choices reflect the original choice, if Genet chooses to be a thief then he must also choose, as a result, to be an incarcerated convict. Indeed, even Genet's passive homosexuality is regarded by Sartre as a choice which constitutes a further willed manifestation of the self-objectification which resulted from the *crise originelle*: "Par sa crise originelle et par la décision qui l'a suivie, Genet se trouve plongé dans une situation que l'on pourrait nommer pré-pédérastique" (SG p.95).

Sartre's equation of Genet's role as thief with his being an incarnation of evil stems from his view of the criminal underworld as scapegoats constructed by 'les justes' of bourgeois society as an objectified projection of the unacceptable negativity within themselves. It is in this sense that Genet becomes a 'martyr'. "Le mythe du Mal" is a construct of "les gens de Bien" (SG p.37). As Sartre explains:

> Nous avons vu, en effet, que la Société des honnêtes gens a fabriqué ce concept boiteux tout exprès pour le projeter sur les autres. Le Mal, c'est ce que fait mon ennemi, ce n'est *jamais* ce que je fais moi-même. Nous y avons reconnu cette partie négative de notre liberté que nous arrachons de nous-même pour la jeter, tunique de Nessus, sur une minorité ethnique ou religieuse. (SG p.173)

In Genet's case, "la société l'a chargé d'incarner le Méchant, c'est-à-dire l'Autre" (SG p.46), so that those who condemn him "peuvent haïr en lui cette moitié de soi qu'ils refusent" (SG p.40). Sartre's concept of Evil lies, then, at the very heart of his concept of existential self-alienation, and is explored both through and beyond Genet in *Saint Genet*.

> Le Mal, justement, c'est l'Autre. L'Autre que l'Etre, l'Autre que le Bien, l'Autre que soi. Voilà donc la clé de Genet, voilà ce qu'il faut comprendre d'abord: Genet est un enfant que l'on a convaincu d'être, au plus profond de lui-même, *un Autre que soi.* [...] Il affirme la priorité de l'objet qu'il est pour eux sur le sujet qu'il est pour soi. (SG p.47)

Sartre's equation of Evil with Non-Being and Appearance means that Genet's attempt to *be* Evil must fail, but this failure is also willed. Genet's love of betrayal plays a part in this, the link between Evil and betrayal being established by Sartre's definition of betrayal as "le Mal qui se fait mal à lui-même" (SG p.195). The process by which failure is willed also forms the foundation for Genet's drive for sanctity: "Quand le Mal était possible à ses yeux, Genet faisait le Mal pour être méchant; à présent que le Mal se révèle impossible, Genet fera le Mal pour être saint" (SG p.219). Genet is a saint and a martyr in so far as he has chosen ascesis by willing the opposite of what he really wants.

If Evil is equated with Non-Being and Appearance, it is also equated with what Sartre terms 'the Imaginary' – "c'est que le Mal s'appelle aussi, tout simplement, l'Imaginaire" (SG p.183) – and this link becomes the basis of Genet's metamorphoses to aesthete and then to writer. Having regained his liberty within what is imposed upon him by the Other, Genet turns inward to his imagination where he can construct his own imaginary Other. Since his acts were no more than 'gestes' anyway and were devoted to the *appearance* of Evil, Genet's quest to be his own cause has always been, at root, unreal or aesthetic – "néant pensant le néant, je suis ma propre cause" (SG p.183) – and therefore he continues his self-derealisation in an imaginary realm:

> Genet tentait d'irréaliser les choses par des gestes: c'était se donner trop de mal; il suffisait de parler: car la parole est geste et le mot est chose. (SG p.437)
> Dès lors Genet prendra l'habitude de faire l'économie du geste et de le remplacer par son équivalent verbal: la phrase. (SG p.439)

Indeed, the ontological impossibility of *being* evil could only be 'realised' by the imagination:

> [...] Il s'est avisé, dans une illumination soudaine, que le rêveur est un méchant. Qu'est-ce qu'un rêve, en effet, sinon une apparence. [...] Le Mal ne se *fait* pas; il s'imagine; là est la solution de toutes ses contradictions. Le Mal radical n'est pas le choix de la sensibilité, c'est celui de l'imaginaire. (SG pp.397-98)

Thus, in his pursuit of being, Genet develops from his first metamorphosis, 'le voleur', to his third metamorphosis, 'poète', via a transitional stage in which he first of all becomes "poète dans sa vie" (SG p.394), and all three stages express the fundamental project which emerged from the *crise originelle*. Genet's evolution has taken him, "de l'acte au geste et du geste au mot", and finally "du mot à l'oeuvre" (SG p.470).

The final transformation from aesthete into artist is simply a matter of imagining in a material realm, of continuing the derealisation of being and the transformation of reality but expressed through the written word:

> Tout est en place pour qu'il écrive, le dispositif est prêt; la technique, le vocabulaire, le style même sont déjà là. Mais il faudrait qu'il sortit du rêve: écrire est un acte, non un geste – et qui se fait avec de vrais mots. (SG p.446)
> Réaliser l'imaginaire, cela signifie: inscrire l'imaginaire dans la réalité *en lui conservant le caractère d'imaginaire.* (SG p.466)

Through writing, Genet also fulfils his final revenge on bourgeois society, "infecter les Justes de ses images" (SG p.469). But most importantly, through writing Genet can at last force the Other to see himself as he wishes and thereby resolve the alienation of the original crisis:

> Le recours à l'art est son ultime essai: jusque-là il ne pouvait être sa propre cause sinon en imagination puisque c'étaient les Autres qui l'avaient affecté d'abord et spontanément de cette altérité. A présent, il *réalise* cette imagination dans un objet-piège qui contraint les Autres à le voir comme il veut être vu. Il sera sa propre créature puisque son livre c'est lui-même se créant comme Autre, et obligeant les autres à insuffler la vie à sa création. (SG p.543)

Lastly, it is through writing that Genet finally becomes his own cause: "Genet existe – enfin! – en face de soi. [...] Il sera, pour de bon, son *créateur*" (SG p.576). He has transcended the objectification imposed upon him in the *crise originelle* by making himself into a literary object:

> Ainsi Genet s'évapore; il croit sérieusement, profondément à une transsubstantiation qui l'arracherait à sa vie vécue pour l'incarner dans ces corps glorieux, les mots. Le langage poétique, c'est l'âme objectivée. (SG p.576)

Genet has transformed his life into legend, into something to read. Through writing, he has not only reappropriated the bourgeois objectification of him which plunged him into the evil which he then willed, but has finally freed himself from the original crisis altogether. Through writing, Genet has achieved an 'autotherapy' or self-generated 'psychoanalytic cure':

> En nous infectant de son mal, Genet s'en délivre. [...] Par chacun [de ses livres] ce possédé se rend un peu plus maître du démon qui le possède. Dix ans de littérature qui valent une cure de psychanalyse. (SG p.602)

The self-alienation of the *crise originelle* has at last been reversed:

> A présent il a compris son erreur: il voulait se rendre tel que les autres le voyaient quand il fallait obliger les autres à le voir tel qu'il veut être. [...] Tenu pour voleur, il voulait le devenir: mais on ne donne pas l'être à ce qui est. Le coup de génie, l'illumination qui découvre l'issue, c'est le choix d'écrire. (SG p.607)

Through writing, Genet has regained his lost existential liberty:

> En se déterminant *dans son oeuvre* comme le Voleur, Genet échappe à cette détermination, il s'oppose à elle comme libre conscience créatrice qui ne saurait se définir qu'en termes de libre activité indéterminée [...]. (SG p.614)
> Il a gagné: il va et vient, il est libre. (SG p.629)

Assessment of *Saint Genet*

Whether an assessment of *Saint Genet* is positive or negative depends largely on whether it is considered primarily as a study *by Sartre* or a study *of Genet*. As a study *by Sartre*, *Saint Genet* is undeniably a *tour de force* of Existentialist theory and its application which occupies an important central position in the Sartre canon and constitutes a turning point in Sartre's thought. As Howells puts it, "*Saint Genet* is in a sense a half-way book, written when Sartre was moving from a Romantic notion of human tragedy towards a Marxist conception of human history".[2] If it has weaknesses as a piece of Sartrean dialectics, they are its length and style: the brilliance of Sartre's ideas is marred by a text which is unmanageably large, verbose and repetitive, and riddled with lengthy, self-indulgent digressions.

As a study *of Genet*, the status of *Saint Genet* is more problematic. Although a few critics do not question Sartre's own claim to have understood Genet profoundly – "quelles que soient les erreurs que je puisse faire sur lui, je suis sûr de le connaître mieux qu'il ne me connaît car j'ai la passion de comprendre les hommes" (SG p.158) – others have reservations. Even Genet himself was adamant to Bourseiller, in spite of Sartre's claim, that "je suis encore celui qui me connaît le mieux".[3] Sartre offers a brilliantly executed *existentialist* biography of Genet, but Sartre's 'Genet' and the real Jean Genet are not necessarily one and the same.

The realisation that Sartre has, in effect, created another Genet, as an ideal model to exemplify his growing interest in the social and moral dimension of his thought, has led many critics to conclude that Genet is simply a pretext, an apt vehicle for Sartre's

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2 Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, p.64.

3 'Entretien avec Antoine Bourseiller', p.216.

exploration of the theories and ideas which preoccupied him at that stage in his own development. Perhaps Cocteau was the very first to realise this, writing to Genet to express his view:

> Son livre est davantage le portrait de Sartre que le tien. [...] Il t'a plié à sa thèse et il te montre par rapport à elle.[4]

Cocteau's final opinion of *Saint Genet* is that: "Le livre ne représente pas plus Genet que la statue de la liberté à New York ne représente la liberté américaine",[5] and even Genet commented that Sartre had used him primarily as a model of freedom:

> Sartre suppose la liberté de l'homme et que chaque homme a tous les moyens à sa disposition pour prendre en charge son propre devenir. Je suis l'illustration d'une de ses théories de la liberté.[6]

Several critics assert that Sartre's Genet is less an accurate portrait of Genet than Sartre's projection of himself into the figure of the marginalised rebel he could never be. As a study on Genet, *Saint Genet* gives the overall impression that Sartre is determined to fit Genet into his framework, regardless of whether this meant, at times, forcing a square peg into a round hole. Collins sums this up:

> The closeness of the parallel between the Hegelian myth and Sartre's Genet raises a question whether Genet has been wrenched and twisted to fit the pre-established harmony of the Hegelian model, whether this life has been rationalistically derived from prior premises instead of being the result of empirical enquiry, whether the Hegelian dialectic has been used to tyrannize the life of Genet rather than to explain it. Sartre often seems to operate on the basis of a coherence rather than a correspondence theory of truth. Propositions are considered true to the extent that they agree, not with empirically verifiable data, but with other propositions in a series. Sartre's curious refusal to accept the chronology of events that Genet himself offered further fuels the suspicion that an a-priori formalism spoils the biographer's analysis.[7]

As a blend of biography and literary criticism, the flaws in *Saint Genet* can be divided into, on the one hand, inaccuracies in Sartre's presentation of biographical details, and, on the other hand, the fact that the biographical framework results in errors or lacunae in Sartre's analysis of Genet's literary texts. Since only Sartre's interpretation of Genet's prose

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4 Cocteau, *Le Passé défini*, p.317.

5 Ibid., p.282.

6 'Entretien avec Madame Gobeil' (1964), *Oeuvres complètes VI*, 1991, p.21.

7 Douglas Collins, *Sartre as Biographer*, 1980, pp.107-8.

fiction is of real relevance to this thesis, all that will be said about *Saint Genet* as biography is that more recent biographical research, particularly that undertaken by Stewart and McGregor, has confirmed that Sartre makes serious errors in some of the key details he provides of Genet's early life, including the event which constitutes the *crise originelle*, and that, because these 'facts' make up the very foundation upon which Sartre's entire analysis is built, in spite of Sartre's rather weak attempt to cover himself by saying "cela s'est passé ainsi ou autrement" (SG p.26), the impact of these errors on the plausibility of his analysis is far from negligible.

As far as literary criticism of the prose fiction in *Saint Genet* is concerned, although Sartre does make some penetrating insights, the intermingling of existentialist biography and literary criticism which makes up his methodology is extremely problematic. Sartre is not interested in the prose works for their own sake but regards them both as vehicles for and expressions of Genet's existential evolution, an approach which leaves Sartre's treatment of these rich texts, at best, partial, and, at worst, a misrepresentation. Most of his thematic comment is restricted to using the autobiographical material in them, no matter how unreliable, as evidence for his theories. Even if Sartre might be considered to be justified in using *Journal du voleur* to this end, at least by those for whom the status of this text as autobiography is not disputed,[8] his similar use of the preceding works of prose fiction as creations which explain their creator is highly questionable. LaCapra sums up the flaw in the way literary criticism is applied in *Saint Genet*, stating that Sartre uses Genet's writings

> not as texts but in their existential functions for Genet's personal development. Not so much *what* Genet wrote but *that* he wrote [...] is the existentially significant fact. What he wrote is of relevance in so far as it is interpreted as a symptom of his life process – a conception that itself depends upon an initial dichotomy between life and text, which is overcome only in a totalizing interpretation centred on the life.[9]

Genet himself was adamant that a writer's life and his work should be separated, telling Fichte in 1975: "D'abord, il ne faut pas confondre les plans: il y a le plan littéraire et il y a le plan vécu."[10]

On one level, this approach is questionable because, although Sartre divides Genet's life into three basic 'phases' corresponding to criminal, aesthete and writer, he backs up all three – even when affirming that "Genet n'imagine même pas qu'il puisse un jour écrire" (SG p.379) – with quotations from Genet's texts which, although they may well deal with

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8 Indeed, Sheringham regards *Journal du voleur* itself as an existentialist autobiography which "paves the way to *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr*", which he characterises as "the full existentialist version of Genet's life". (Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: devices and desires: Rousseau to Perec*, 1993, p.213.)

9 Dominick LaCapra, *A Preface to Sartre*, 1979, p.181.

10 'Entretien avec Hubert Fichte' (1975), *Oeuvres complètes VI*, 1991, p.159.

earlier phases in their subject-matter, represent attitudes to those periods and a distinct gloss on them which belongs to the last phase. In a sense, in Sartre's use of Genet's prose fiction as material for establishing the truth – "par l'analyse des mythes rétablir les faits" (SG p.13) – he and Genet are moving in opposite directions. The model to which Sartre makes Genet's life and work conform is a 'back-to-front' version of what Genet himself is doing in his prose fiction. Whereas Sartre, in his attempt to construct the existentialist biography of the man, uses the events and experiences which are presented in Genet's prose texts to try to trace them back to an original situation which will explain Genet in his totality, Genet is taking those events and experiences and transposing them into a purely aesthetic realm in order to explore and deal with the philosophical questions which preoccupy him through them. Sartre therefore misses the fact that the interest of Genet's fiction lies not in any truth that they may reveal but in the way that 'truth' is transposed into something else which reaches far beyond the realm of autobiography. Genet may indeed use his experiences, in the broadest sense, as his inspiration, but after that his own speculative exploration takes over and the original inspiration becomes secondary to the goals of his imagination and the aims of the fiction itself, and the whole of this process is encapsulated in the crucial relationship, both structural and thematic, between the narrator and his narrative within the texts themselves.

The existentialist biography Sartre constructs is not Genet's, then, but, if anything, that of Genet's fictional narrators, or at least it might have been if Sartre had confined himself to the 'evidence' of the texts themselves. Even if this were the case, however, although such a biography would have validity on its own level, it would nonetheless not take full account of the narrators' own stated aims in constructing their narratives in the prose fiction which cannot be reduced to simple autobiography, and still less to existentialist autobiography. Thus, whereas Sartre purports to be taking myths and from them establishing facts, he is actually only reinforcing the myths – much as Genet himself does in his fiction – but with the crucial difference that whereas Sartre builds his Genet-myth to explain the real Genet in his totality, Genet builds his own legend knowing it to be false and invalid. Thus, Genet's process is infused with a ludic dimension which Sartre's existentialist approach completely overlooks. Indeed, throughout his study, Sartre is guilty of regarding Genet's works too soberly and, in his determination to systematise and reduce, he denies their essential playfulness, spontaneity and vitality.

One of the most important consequences of Sartre's biographical approach on literary criticism in *Saint Genet* is that it leads Sartre, like other critics after him, to accept the 'je' of the novels to be synonymous with the author, thereby establishing a rather simplistic equation of the man and his works which seems, at best, somewhat misplaced and, at worst, rather naive. Indeed, Sartre even backs up statements about Genet with statements Genet's narrators make about characters they present in the third person, as though not just

author and narrator but also character were one. When Sartre declares, "Divine c'est Genet lui-même" (SG p.425), even if Divine could be said to represent Genet in some way, Sartre does not even appear to accept, still less account for, any element of fictionalisation. Because of this serious slippage between biography and fiction, between author, narrator and character, and between the real and its fictional transposition, Sartre misses the complex interplay between narrator and character which lies at the heart of the narrative form of the prose fiction.

It must be acknowledged that Sartre does provide some perceptive comment on certain themes in Genet's fictional works, but his ideas are limited in their scope and application by the way in which all issues raised through his literary criticism are subsumed under Sartre's overall existentialist framework in which every detail is relative to a single original point. This approach risks distorting Genet's prose fiction since, in order to make sure that the coherence of his presentation of Genet is not shattered by the lack of coherence of Genet's slippery and self-contradictory texts, Sartre is very selective about the material he chooses and his use of it. He rarely gives a reference or even a source for his quotations from the prose fiction, and often utilises material out of context. As Davis comments, focusing on Sartre's use of a particular extract from *Journal du voleur*, Sartre actually admits that he misreads Genet in order to make sense of him and his texts:

> Sartre's silence about the context of the passage weakens his analysis of it. [...] The inaccuracies and elisions in Sartre's quotation of the passage support his reading of the text but omit important aspects of it. [...] Sartre's account of the passage depends upon a reader who misreads.[11]

At other times, where the inherent capriciousness and unpredictability of the prose fiction might reveal 'counter evidence' which does not fit into Sartre's system, Sartre simply ignores it, or, as Davis puts it, "he suppresses and overlooks contextual and internal features which are discordant with his own account".[12] Sartre's incorporation of Genet's texts into his own philosophical vision also leads to a distortion which manifests itself through language. The two visions frequently part company as Sartre appropriates certain terms – Evil, Death, Sanctity – to his own heavily weighted meanings, and thereby either misrepresents or, at least, does not take full account of Genet's own conception and usage of them.

Taken as a whole, the literary criticism in *Saint Genet* has validity within the use to which it is put, and provides interesting analysis on its own level, but because Sartre's method precludes examination of Genet's works purely on their own terms, his criticism of them must be regarded as limited, somewhat biased in its aim, and, at times, misleading.

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11 Davis, 'Genet's *Journal du voleur* and the Ethics of Reading', pp.53-54.

12 Ibid., p.54.

Sartre's view of the texts primarily as embodiments of Genet's self-construction, coupled with his concentration on the themes which lie at the heart of his own philosophy, results in his either missing or offering inadequate exploration of the complex reasons why Genet's fictional narrators create their narratives and the narrators' own preoccupations which they contemplate through it, at the centre of which are the immutability of the human condition and death.

Sartre on the Immutability of the Human Condition and Death in Genet's Prose Fiction

Since, in *Saint Genet*, Sartre does himself deal with issues relating to a sense of the immutability of the human condition and to death in Genet's life and work, it will be useful at this stage briefly to examine the nature of Sartre's conception of these critical experiences in Genet's prose fiction as a counter-point to the full analysis of these themes later in this thesis.

An awareness, or at least a perception, of a kind of immutability is as important to Sartre's study as it is to this thesis, although with the subtle but fundamental difference that whereas it is my contention that, in Genet's prose fiction, the narrators' presentation of 'immutability' is of a total inability to change what *is*, since every aspect of the human condition which preoccupies them is inalterable, in Sartrean Existentialism the only absolute is personal freedom and even the crushing weight of social conditioning can, with application, be overcome. Thus, Sartre's existentialist gloss does not allow him to appreciate fully the narrators' own conception of fatalism and predestination.

Moreover, the sense of immutability which Sartre identifies in Genet is experienced primarily on a social level in the central event of the *crise originelle*, and is therefore bound up with social issues such as conditioning, the construction of identity, and the individual's relationship to the Other. In the prose fiction, however, this 'social' experience of the immutable aspects of the human condition constitutes only one of the levels on which immutability is faced. Indeed, the themes of social identity and social self-construction are not nearly so central to the narrators' preoccupations as they are to Sartre's view of Genet, since, although they are major themes of *Journal du voleur*, and are explored to some degree in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la Rose*, social identity only represents one of the minor themes in *Pompes funèbres* and *Querelle de Brest* and is overshadowed by exploration of other more prominent themes of which Sartre's narrow approach does not take sufficient account. For the most part, Genet's narrators present immutability as a personal rather than a social experience as it manifests itself in aspects of an individual's persona such as his passivity, inferiority, or homosexuality which, for Sartre, must be

matters of choice, but which are presented by the narrators as 'givens' which the individual is powerless to change. Thus, because his existentialist framework precludes any rigid sense of fatality or of insurmountable determinism, Sartre does not examine the immutable aspects of the human condition from the perspective of the narrators' own perception of them.

It is the contention of this thesis that the immutable aspect of the human condition which obsesses the narrators in Genet's prose texts to the greatest extent is mortality. However, in *Saint Genet*, Sartre typically limits his analysis of death to his own conception of it. Sartre acknowledges that death is one of the most prominent themes in Genet's prose texts – "Ses ouvrages sont remplis de méditations sur la mort" (SG p.10)[13] – but he goes on to insist that death is only presented metaphorically rather than literally in these works:

> La singularité de ces exercices spirituels, c'est qu'ils ne concernent presque jamais sa mort future, son être-pour-mourir; mais son être-mort, sa mort comme événement passé. (SG p.10)

Because Sartre is interested primarily in the development of his 'Genet', who does not kill and is not dying or dead in any physical sense, Sartre neglects the exploration of murder and mortality which takes place within Genet's own texts in favour of a broader concept of existential, metaphysical death into which these flesh-and-blood manifestations of death are subsumed. In Sartre's analysis, Genet's 'death' occurs when he is labelled a thief, because, for Sartre, 'death' signifies objectification by the Other and self-alienation: "la mort, c'est la condamnation par la société, qui tue un enfant et crée un coupable" (SG p.191). This association of 'death' with self-alienation is a development from *L'Etre et le néant*. As Collins explains, "in *Being and Nothingness* permanent alienation occurred only with death, but in *Saint Genet* Sartre shows that something approaching permanent alienation in life is not only possible but prevalent".[14]

Sartre's metaphysical conception of 'death' *is* connected with physical death: for Sartre, physical death brings about the end of the possibilities of the *pour-soi* with the result that all that is left of the individual is the fixed image others have of him – a "futur mort" is an "Autre absolu" (SG p.120) – and therefore, if this were to occur when the individual were still alive, causing an *en-soi* mode of existence in which all freedom to become would be sacrificed to *being* the label others pin on him, then he would, by Sartre's definition, be 'dead'. In *Saint Genet*, Sartre defines a dead man in precisely these terms, as, "un être qui n'existe plus jamais pour soi-même mais seulement en soi, c'est-à-dire par l'opinion que les autres ont de lui" (SG p.86).

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13 Although later he only rates death as "un thème mineur de son oeuvre" (SG p.474).

14 Collins, *Sartre as Biographer*, p.83.

To a certain extent, beyond their exploration of physical mortality, Genet's narrators also use death in a more metaphorical sense in so far as a narrator may refer to himself or a character as 'dead' while still alive. However, in contrast to Sartre's interpretation, in Genet's prose it is usually those who know their mortal fate is sealed and imminent who are described as 'dead', those who live their death before it happens as a means of facing its inevitability, such as the sick and dying, murderers and *condamnés à mort* who assume their destiny as future-executed, and soldiers in combat who know their days are numbered. But in these cases, being 'dead' while alive is not just abstractly connected to physical death but intimately linked with it, and it has more to do with awareness of the inescapable reality of one's future demise than with abstract existentialist notions of being labelled by the other.

Although one of Genet's narrators – whom Sartre equates with Genet himself – does indeed talk about the child in him being dead, I would suggest that this is a common expression for the irretrievability of the past and would hesitate to suffuse the comment with deliberate existentialist overtones. Genet's prose texts are too deeply permeated with dying, murder, execution and funerals, along with fear of ageing and dying, for a metaphorical, metaphysical sense of death to be uppermost. Sartre does make a vague equation between metaphorical 'death' and the funereal aspects of Genet's texts – "plus tard, dans les cérémonies funèbres qui restitueront la crise originelle, c'est le rite de mort qui tiendra la première place" (SG p.30) – but he is still regarding all that is funereal exclusively in relation to his existentialist analysis of Genet's early development, and thereby making an inflexible link which neither Genet nor his narrators make. For example, to regard the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*'s experience of the death of Jean D. primarily in terms of Sartre's construction of the *crise originelle* – "mort, Jean Decarnin s'identifie tout de suite à l'enfance morte de son amant" (SG pp.584-85) – is to miss the complex issues which are explored because of and through the narrator's bereavement which reach far beyond Sartre's narrow focus on self-alienation and ontology.

Sartre's somewhat one-sided presentation of death in Genet's prose, which rather distorts the way it is explored as a theme in the texts themselves, reveals a clear difference in perspective between Sartre and Genet on the significance of death. Sartre typically subsumes Genet's preoccupation with mortality into his own approach in which the fact of physical death is unproblematic; as Lovitt puts it:

> Death for Sartre just happens: it is the end of the game when we count the chips. The *game* is of ultimate importance.[15]

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15 Charles William Lovitt, 'Sartre's Use of Genet', 1965, p.119 footnote.

But in Genet's fiction, the narrators explore almost obsessively the possibility of spending one's life making frenzied attempts to come to grips with death, to face it, control it, even to defeat it.

One indication that Sartre has not appreciated the full significance of death in Genet's prose is in the way he interprets murder in terms of revolt against the society which labelled Genet as Evil. At one point, Sartre implies that murder is significant to Genet simply because it is the worst crime in society's eyes and therefore the surest way to deepen one's objective evil nature:

> Parmi tous les délits de droit commun que la Société condamne, le meurtre est celui qu'elle frappe le plus sévèrement: c'est donc celui qui constitue le plus sûrement son auteur comme le méchant aux yeux des hommes. (SG p.106)

This assertion really leaves unexplained the lengths Genet's prose fiction goes to to explore every moment and every detail of the experience of murder (when Erik shoots the boy, for example), the effort it takes on the part of the murderer, and the precise nature of the 'achievement' once it has been performed. Similarly, because of the centrality of ontology and identity in Sartre's study, the murderer's prime motivation must be to become 'The Murderer' – "on tue pour *être* criminel" (SG p.107) – but this limited reading does not take account of the confrontation with death itself which takes place during a murder in Genet's prose. Whereas, in Sartre's reading, Genet's murderers want to *be* something, it is my contention that, according to the narrators' presentation of them, they want primarily to achieve something in terms of taking control of an immutable aspect of their condition. Similarly, Sartre's perspective does not explore the way in which killing becomes inextricably linked with the murderer's own physical death. For Sartre, when a murderer is executed, his death must be a reflection of the original 'death' and a further manifestation of Genet's original crisis: "Pas de doute que Genet ne projette, dans ce mythe de l'instant fatal, cet autre instant qui l'a séparé de son enfance comme le couperet sépare la tête du tronc" (SG p.120). As textual analysis of death and murder in Genet's prose fiction, this clearly is not adequate.

Death is not just another theme in Genet's prose but an obsession. The narrators present characters who live their lives almost entirely in relation to death which, for the narrators, permeates everything they are and everything they do, not in the sense of a metaphysical death in childhood but the future reality of their physical demise. Sartre's interpretation of death in Genet's life and work provides a fascinating Existentialist perspective on the theme of death, but it fails to address in all its complexity the true significance and nature of the narrators' exploration of death in the prose fiction itself. If, at the very heart of Genet's prose, what Sartre finds is the pursuit of being, what this thesis

finds is an exploration of responses to immutability and death, as the rest of my analysis will aim to demonstrate.

CHAPTER TWO - DERRIDA'S *GLAS*

Derrida on Genet

Derrida's *Glas* was published two decades after *Saint Genet*, in 1972, and Derrida's approach to Genet's work in this text could not be more different from Sartre's. While Sartre might be said to overinterpret, Derrida tends more to underinterpret, or, at least, if Sartre does not hesitate to reduce Genet's texts to single meanings and the expression of a single aim, Derrida, in contrast, refuses to pin them down to any one motif or theme and declines to provide a 'key' to the works by tracing them back to a single originating experience as Sartre does. Derrida prefers rather to open up multiple allusions and associations, thereby keeping the vitality and infinite polyvalency of the texts and their inherent freeplay of signification intact.

If *Saint Genet* does not constitute conventional literary criticism because of its totalising biographical framework, neither does *Glas* but for the opposite reason of its more amorphous, deliberately unsystematised approach. As such, *Glas* is much more difficult to classify. As Hartman comments: "It is not only hard to say whether *Glas* is "criticism" or "philosophy" or "literature," it is hard to affirm that it is a book".[16] For Hartman, *Glas* is "a work in which commentary becomes literature by interweaving philosophical discourse, figurative elaboration, and literary criticism".[17]

Underpinning Derrida's approach to Genet's work is his conception, as it is expressed in *Glas*, of the nature of the text. Derrida completely rejects the notion of "*un* texte *un*" (GL p.236):[18] no text can be reduced to any single unitary meaning, system or logic. Texts cannot be unlocked and rendered totally comprehensible by identifying a "passe-partout" or "clé universelle" (GL p.40). There will always be elements which do not fit into the interpretative grid and which work the threads of it loose until the entire system which attempted to encapsulate the text and its meaning collapses into an unstable oscillation. It is impossible to grasp a "texte complet" (GL p.65) with clearly definable boundaries because there is always "un reste". And this is what interests Derrida – reflected in his fascination with Genet's essay *Ce qui est <u>resté</u> d'un Rembrandt...* (my emphasis) which also inspired the two-column form of *Glas* – as he obliquely follows the words of Jesus: "Ramassez les restes pour que rien ne se perde..." (GL p.274).

Neither the text nor its meanings are stable. "Le texte est donc un gaz" (GL p.82): its essence, like the essence of a rose, evaporates before it can be captured, and therefore, as

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16 Geoffrey Hartman, 'Crossing Over: Literary Commentary As Literature', 1976, p.268.

17 Ibid., p.265.

18 All references to *Glas* are to the right hand column unless otherwise stated.

Derrida comments in an oblique criticism of *Saint Genet*, it is a mistake even to attempt to capture it:

> l'essence de la rose, c'est sa non-essence: son odeur en tant qu'elle s'évapore. D'où son affinité d'effluve avec le pet ou avec le rot: ces excréments ne se gardent, ne se forment même pas. Le reste ne reste pas. D'où son intérêt, son absence d'intérêt. Comment l'ontologie pourrait-elle s'emparer d'un pet? (GL p.82)

The 'glas' of the title, "sonnent la fin de la signification, du sens et du signifiant" (GL p.42). The movement of signification within a text is not linear but an oscillation, a "mouvement de pendule" (GL p.224), and Derrida deliberately constructs his own polyvalent text to illustrate this, constantly rendering impossible any reader's attempts to make his text cohere into an indissoluble whole: "On veut rendre l'écriture imprenable, bien sûr" (GL p.90). As Parenti comments, "*Glas* est ailleurs".[19] The unity of Derrida's text is constantly interrupted by quotation or, in Derrida's terms, his "thèse" – the integrity of his analysis – is also "prothèse" – all the textual material additional to it, "coupures, répétitions, succions, sections, suspensions, sélections, coutures, greffes, postiches, organes sans corps propre, corps propre couvert de coups, parcouru de poux" (GL p.235). Derrida's own description of his text emphasises the absence of linear continuity and discursive language and its elusive, allusive character:

> Espaçons. L'art de ce texte, c'est l'air qu'il fait circuler entre ses paravents. Les enchaînements sont invisibles, tout paraît improvisé ou juxtaposé. Il induit en agglutinant plutôt qu'en démontrant, en accolant et en décollant plutôt qu'en exhibant la nécessité continue et analogique, enseignante, étouffante, d'une rhétorique discursive. (GL p.106)

This passage could refer either to Derrida's or Genet's text, but Derrida leaves the reference ambiguous to illustrate the absence of clear boundaries between their texts as between literature and criticism as genres. Later, he even poses the question: "Et de quel texte? du sien, du mien?" (GL p.147).

On a different level, Derrida also rejects any incontrovertible distinctions between author and narrator and even author and reader. But far from simply equating narrator with author as Sartre does, Derrida problematises these concepts and the genre of autobiography, typically referring non-committally to "l'auteur ou le narrateur". Because it is difficult to establish whether the signature is 'inside' or 'outside' the text, Derrida prefers to locate the narrating voice "entre l'un ou l'autre des seings" (GL p.148).

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19 Claire Parenti, '*Glas* par Jacques Derrida', 1975, p.38.

Derrida is interested in Genet's texts because they disregard the traditional tendency to create the illusion of a hermetically sealed, totally inclusive text and remain fragmentary, allusive and ambiguous:

> Néanmoins tous ces morceaux ne peuvent pas, naturellement, se lier.
> L'objet du présent ouvrage, son style aussi, c'est le *morceau*. (GL p.166)

Thus, a traditional critical approach to Genet's work – including existentialist biography – would be even more clearly misplaced:

> La force rare du texte, c'est que vous ne puissiez pas le surprendre (et donc limiter) à dire: *ceci est cela* ou, ce qui revient au même, ceci a un rapport de dévoilement apophantique ou apocalyptique, un rapport sémiotique ou rhétorique déterminable avec cela, ceci est le sujet, ceci n'est pas le sujet, ceci est le même, ceci est l'autre, ce texte-ci, ce corpus-ci. Il est toujours question d'autre chose encore. (GL p.277)

In the second half of *Glas* in particular, Derrida becomes increasingly preoccupied with attempting to define his 'method' – "je cherche la bonne métaphore de l'opération que je poursuis ici" – and finally proposes the brilliant analogy of "une sorte de machine à draguer" (GL p.285):

> Je plonge une bouche d'acier dans l'eau. Et je racle le fond, y accroche des pierres et des algues que je remonte pour les déposer sur la terre alors que l'eau retombe vite de la bouche.
> Et je recommence à racler, à gratter, à draguer le fond de la mer.
> [...]
> La matrice dentée ne retire que ce qu'elle peut, des algues, des pierres. Des morceaux, puisqu'elle mord. Détachés. Mais le reste lui passe entre les dents, entre les lèvres. On ne prend pas la mer. Elle se reforme toujours. (GL pp.285-86)

Derrida knows he can only extract a certain amount from the sea of the text, leaving "le reste" unsaid in the spaces and the absences of the text. Just as Genet ends *Miracle de la Rose* with the words, "le reste est indicible" (MR p.469), Derrida's tenet might be: "Regardez les trous si vous pouvez" (GL p.293).

If one passage encapsulates Derrida's approach in *Glas*, as Sartre's "Montrer les limites de l'interprétation psychanalytique [...]" passage does in *Saint Genet*, it is the following:

> Les morceaux, que je coupe et couds dans le texte désigné par le dénommé Genet ne doivent ni détruire sa forme ou casser son souffle (ne dites pas son unité, la question se posant ici de savoir

> ce que pourrait être *un* texte *un* et si quelque chose de tel existe plus qu'une unicorne), ni en recomposer ou ressaisir l'intégrité dans un de ces filets – formel ou sémantique – que nous avons feint de lancer et relancer sans compter: seulement pour montrer ou plutôt entraîner au-delà de toute manifestation que le filet n'opère que dans la mesure où il est redevable d'un reste. Il ne retient que des restes, de monumentales dépouilles, et laisse tomber le reste. Et de ce reste qui n'est pas, qui fait texte, la chute, le cas défalqué échafaude toutes les machines à écrire. Le reste est en tête et en queue, il ne s'agit pas de l'apporter sur un plateau.
> Si même nous pouvions reconstituer, morceau par morceau, l'emblème ou la signature d'un nom propre, ce serait seulement pour dégager, comme d'une tombe un enterré vivant, cela même que Genet, ni moi, n'aurions jamais réussi à signer, à rattacher aux lignes d'un parafe, et qui cause de ce fait. Le texte dénommé de Genet, nous ne le comprenons pas ici, il ne s'épuise pas dans la poche que je coupe, couds et relie. C'est lui qui la troue, la harponne d'abord, la regarde; mais la voit aussi lui échapper, emporter sa flèche vers des parages inconnus. Ce texte-ci (ou glas) ne se résume pas plus à une lecture de Genet – qui n'en forme ni l'exemple ni l'essence, ni le cas ni la vérité – qu'il ne se laisse rassembler ou flécher, avec d'autres, par mon parafe. Et tout ce qui en lui tiendrait à la forme singulière de la signature, de l'une ou de l'autre, garde une valeur tout à fait anormale. Il ne relève d'aucune règle, n'en procure aucune. L'opération doit être chaque fois singulière, et courir uniquement sa chance. (GL p.236-38)

In a sense, Derrida sets himself an impossible task: he endeavours to keep the spirit of Genet's text intact even though he knows it cannot be grasped as a whole. Indeed, the very nature of Derrida's approach is that it works because it does not work. There always remains something which he cannot 'catch'. Derrida rejects the tendency of conventional criticism to suppose it can deliver its decapitated text on a platter like the head of John the Baptist. There is no question of understanding Genet's text, since this implies putting an end to the process of signification which Derrida regards as infinite. The text will escape the critic as surely as it escapes the one who signs it.

If *Saint Genet* can be summarised by outlining its broadly linear development, the way *Glas* progresses through juxtaposition and 'reprises' means that summary could only distort. My aim here is, then, briefly to introduce some of the ideas in *Glas* which will be of importance to this thesis, in the awareness that I too am extracting 'les restes' in terms of disparate themes from Derrida's text but am leaving 'le reste' intact.

One of the central explorations in *Glas* revolves around Genet's surname, and the way Derrida opens out a host of complex, inter-related elements – such as Flowers, the Mother and the Immaculate Conception – from this simple starting point of 'nomination' not only testifies to Derrida's brilliance but also offers the reader of Genet a fresh and mysterious perspective on a key aspect of Genet's work.

Derrida explores Genet's written name from two interrelated perspectives, since his signature can either be incorporated into his text or stand outside of it:

> Premier cas: elle appartient au dedans de ce (tableau, relief, discours, etc.) qu'elle est censée signer. Elle est dans le texte, elle ne signe plus, elle opère comme un effet à l'intérieur de l'objet, joue comme une pièce dans ce qu'elle prétend s'approprier ou reconduire à l'origine. La filiation se perd. Le seing se défalque.
> Deuxième cas: elle se tient, comme on croit en général, hors texte. Elle émancipe aussi bien le produit qui se passe d'elle, du nom du père ou de la mère dont il n'a plus besoin pour fonctionner. La filiation se dénonce encore, elle est toujours trahie par ce qui la remarque. (GL p.5)

If the signature is internal it is part of the text and cannot point outside of it; if it is external then the text is complete without it. Derrida explores the external signature through the theme of the "nom propre" (The Mother) and the internal signature through the theme of the "nom commun" (The Flower). He is particularly interested in the way Genet transforms the external signature into the internal signature, or the Mother into the Flower – "Le nom de la mère serait - communément - celui d'une plante ou d'une fleur, à la différence d'une lettre, l's tombé, ou d'un accent circonflexe" (GL p.48) – in an attempt to reappropriate the text so that the 'filiation' between signature and text is not broken.

As far as the external signature is concerned, Derrida's insistence that this signature may not only point to the paternity but equally to the *maternity* of the text – "nom du père ou de la mère" – is crucial to Derrida's treatment of Genet. The name on Genet's birth certificate is not his father's but his mother's, therefore Genet's signature as author of his work is a mother-signature. Derrida exploits this to the full, placing him opposite the 'father-figure' of Hegel, exponent of patriarchal authority, and also destabilising through Genet the theory of the Name of the Father at the heart of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. As Todd succinctly summarises: "In the mother who abandons her bastard child, leaving only her name, Derrida finds a figure for the author / text / signature relationship".[20]

Genet's identity merges with his mother's through their shared name. Genet is at once himself and his mother, indeed, he is even his mother's phallus (GL p.145). Derrida blurs the distinction between self and other just as Genet does when one train passenger flows into another in *Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt*. Genet signs his mother-signature in order to appropriate his text by actively assuming his identity with his mother and thereby establishing his maternity over the text. Put another way, he tries to contain the text within the signature as though in a tomb: "tout le texte (par exemple quand il se signe Genet) se rassemblerait dans tel «cercueil vertical» (*Miracle de la rose*) comme l'érection d'un seing" (GL p.6).

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20 Jane Marie Todd, 'Autobiography and the Case of the Signature: Reading Derrida's *Glas*', 1986, p.4.

The assumption of maternity is central to the idea of the Immaculate Conception in *Glas*. In the absence of Genet's father, Derrida equates Genet's birth with a virgin birth:

> Le nom de celui qui paraît apposer ici son seing (Genet) est celui, on le sait [...], de sa mère. Qui aurait donc enfanté selon une sorte d'immaculée conception. (GL p.47)

Derrida then further exploits Genet's illegitimacy by linking it, with some slippage between author and character, to Notre-Dame's declaration "Je suis l'Immaculé Conception". More detailed examination of the way Derrida explores the Immaculate Conception in relation to Genet's fictional characters will be undertaken during my own analysis later in this thesis.

Regarding the author, Derrida uses the theme of the Immaculate Conception to express the way in which Genet not only becomes virgin mother of his text but also virgin mother of himself in so far as he gives birth to himself through his mother-signature, since "donner un nom" is an "acte de naissance" (GL p.9). Thus, Genet attempts self-possession through self-nomination – "s'avoir comme on s'appelle". He becomes the very act of immaculate conception in order to become the origin of himself as well as becoming the product of the conception and the birth. He even reinforces his pursuit of self-sufficiency by refusing all other possessions: "éviter d'avoir pour s'avoir" (GL p.287).

If the signing of Genet's name represents the author-mother giving birth to the text-son in an attempt to achieve self-sufficient unity, this hope is based on the belief that, "«ça me revient», le seing est à moi" (GL p.4). However, self-possession through the self-engenderment of the external signature is, crucially, not attainable. The signature remains outside the text and independent from it and therefore, in a sense, the text 'kills off' its author: "la structure de l'événement «signature» porte ma mort en lui-même" (GL p.26). Like all oppositions in *Glas*, the distinction between construction and deconstruction therefore also becomes blurred. Because the "nom propre" is 'non-propre', and because "on ne garde que ce qu'on perd" (GL p.289), the one who signs the external mother-signature is inevitably still-born, and his self-construction and self-destruction are one.

The author, then, is dead, killed by his own signature – "Le nom se donne près de l'échafaud" (GL p.17). In the act of signing, "son propre nom" becomes "son glas" (GL p.27):

> Les glas, tels que nous les aurons entendus, sonnent la fin de la signification, du sens et du signifiant. Hors de quoi, non pour l'y opposer, encore moins l'y apposer, nous remarquons la signature qui à travers son nom, en dépit de ce qui s'appelle ainsi, ne signifie plus.
> A *ne plus* signifier, la signature [...] n'est plus à l'ordre ou de l'ordre de la signification, du signifié ou du signifiant. (GL pp.42,45)

The signature sounds the author's death-knell – "Quand je signe, je suis déjà mort. J'ai à peine le temps de signer que je suis déjà mort" (GL p.26) – as though the name on the front

of the book were inscribed on a tomb-stone. Because his textual death is inevitable, he lives it in the past: "La mort nous ne l'attendons, ne la désirons que comme un passé que nous n'avons pas encore vécu [...]" (GL p.111). Even while he lives he is a dead man: "*je suis* et *je suis mort* sont deux énoncés indiscernables dans leur sens [...]. Traduction plus ou moins argotique du *cogito*: «Je suis donc mort.»" (GL p.111).

But Genet is determined to turn even this inescapable event into something willed: "Sa tombe, il n'aime que ça" (GL p.281). In his fear of being a passive victim of death, Genet attempts to reappropriate his own death through his text:

> Il a toujours eu peur qu'on lui vole sa mort et comme cela ne saurait manquer d'arriver à qui n'en a qu'une, il a d'avance occupé tous les lieux où ça meurt. Bien joué? Qui fait mieux, qui dit mieux, le mort (GL p.8)

Again, Derrida merges his analysis of the author's assumption of his textual death with analysis of the characters' self-construction as self-destruction within the texts. As I indicated earlier, however, Derrida's ideas at the level of the characters will be examined in detail later in this thesis.

Thus, the author's self-insemination / construction / destruction is undertaken not in relation to physical death but on a metaphorical, textual level. It is through writing that the author becomes mother of himself in his own self-extinction, and sounds the birth-cry which is his death-knell, as he consciously inscribes his own funeral (w)rites, and the text becomes his tomb, the signature his tombstone:

> Rêvant visiblement de devenir, à résonner, son propre (glas), d'assister à *son propre* enterrement après avoir accouché de lui-même ou opéré sa propre décollation, il aurait veillé à bloquer tout ce qu'il écrit dans les formes d'une tombe. D'une tombe qui se résume à son nom, dont la masse pierreuse ne déborde même plus les lettres, jaunes comme l'or ou comme la trahison, comme le genêt. Des lettres sans socle, un contrat avec l'écriture comme pompe funèbre. (GL p.59)

The text to which Genet 'gives birth' becomes infused with death as he attempts to, as it were, reappropriate his birth by reappropriating his death:

> Vous avez remarqué qu'il est toujours en train de vous fourguer son cadavre. Il veut que vous ne puissiez jamais vous défaire du corps très raide que sa littérature, sa pompe funèbre, aura bandé pour vous. (GL pp.110-11)

Indeed, Genet writes only for the dead, "tout est écrit pour la Mort, depuis la Mort, à l'adresse des Morts" (GL p.110). But Genet's birth-death is impossible. The fusion of construction and destruction is a paradoxical enterprise which bears within it the seeds of its

failure, or, as Derrida puts it, "le risque c'est de mourir avant d'avoir fini d'écrire son glas" (GL p.85).

If the significance of Genet's external signature is that it is maternal, his name can become an internal signature, an object within the text, because it is also "quasi animale ou végétale" (GL p.6). Genet's name can designate a Spanish horse (jennet) or, of particular importance, by adding a circumflex it can denote a flower (broom): "Le nom de la mère serait - communément - celui d'une plante ou d'une fleur, à la différence d'une lettre, l's tombé, ou d'un accent circonflexe, pour en cicatriser la chute" (GL p.48).[21]

Since the proliferation of flower imagery, and also, to a lesser extent, horse imagery, in Genet's texts facilitates the objectification or dissemination of his name within them, this process is also part of his project of self-creation or self-presence. Derrida quotes *Journal du voleur* to back this up:

> Quand je rencontre dans la lande [...] des fleurs de genêt, j'éprouve à leur égard une sympathie profonde. [...] Je suis seul au monde, et je ne suis pas sûr de n'être pas le roi – peut-être la fée de ces fleurs. [...] Elles savent que je suis leur représentant vivant, mobile, agile, vainqueur du vent. Elles sont mon emblème naturel [...]. (GL pp.254-55)

But if Genet only expresses explicitly a kinship with flowers, for Derrida the flower represents the means by which Genet gives birth to himself by transforming himself into a flower in his text:

> En apparence, cédant à la Passion de l'Écriture, Genet s'est fait une fleur. (GL p.17).
> Je m'accouche comme une fleur. (GL p.253)

The linguistic mechanism exploited to achieve this self-engenderment by self-objectification into the text is termed antonomasia, which Littré defines as, "une sorte de synecdoque qui consiste à prendre un nom commun pour un nom propre, ou un nom propre pour un nom commun" (GL p.253).

In one sense of antonomasia, then, Genet takes "un nom commun pour un nom propre" and turns flowers into the names of his characters such as 'Mimosa'. The name 'Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs' also links the act of flower-naming others with the fact that Genet's own flower-name is also that of a virgin mother. Indeed, all of the characters and their names originate from within Genet himself as Virgin Mother: "j'ai quelquefois l'impression de les avoir recueillis parmi les fleurs artificielles ou naturelles dans la chapelle de la Vierge

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21 Derrida also explores the 'meaning' of his own name by twisting it into *derrière* and *déjà*.

Marie [...]" (GL p.144). Thus, all of these flower-names bring us back to Genet: "Si toute sa littérature chante et tisse un hymen funèbre à la nomination, Genet ne fait jamais cas, noblesse oblige, que de s'appeler lui-même" (GL p.48).

In the reverse form of antonomasia, Genet takes "un nom propre pour un nom commun" and fills it full of his objectified name, by infusing it with horses – "Il est à cheval sur son nom propre" (GL p.48) – and, more prominently, with flowers. By this process he transforms his signature from the external signature which allowed the text to 'kill off' its author to an internal signature which attempts to reappropriate the text from inside: "A la limite, du texte, du monde, il ne resterait plus qu'une énorme signature, grosse de tout ce qu'elle aurait d'avance englouti mais d'elle seule enceinte" (GL p.55). He uses his 'nom propre' in an attempt to render his text 'proper' to himself.

Self-naming can be exploited as self-engenderment because the giving of a name is itself a symbol of re-birth, which fact allows Genet to say,

> voici qui je suis, où et comment je suis né, comment je me nomme, me baptise moi-même (Jean a baptisé le Christ), je m'appelle, je m'écoute, me surnomme fleur (le baptême est une seconde naissance), je nais une fois de plus, je m'accouche comme une fleur. (GL p.253)

It is hoped that if the self-nomination occurs within the text, as a floral self-creation, it will escape the 'death' of the internal signature. By giving birth to himself as a flower, Genet will make himself omnipresent in his text and thereby finally achieve absolute self-presence, or "s'avoir absolu" (GL p.276).[22] Because this process relies on the possibilities of Genet's name as signifier, the process also transforms the author-Genet into the narrator-genêt, where the "accent circonflexe" becomes a symbol of "ce qui le distingue de l'auteur et s'élève plus haut que lui" (GL p.240). Biological Genet is transcended by the self-created flower he has become.

But like the self-engenderment process of the external signature, that of the internal signature also carries within itself the seeds of its own inevitable failure: "L'effort pour *rendre* la fleur ne peut qu'échouer" (GL p.119), and for various reasons.

Firstly, the flower Genet transforms himself into can only be an artificial one, a construction in a fabric of words: "La rose est toujours plus ou moins postiche, la poche aussi, qui est fausse: elles se taillent l'une et l'autre dans un tissu" (GL p.81). And since Derrida's belief that signification is a never-ending process of differentiation means that no verbal construct can ever be fixed, this method of self-engenderment also fails, and Genet gives birth to himself as a flower which is decapitated / castrated:

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22 The term is an obvious derivation of Hegel's 'savoir absolu' which Derrida is busily deconstructing in the opposite column.

> La fleur phallique est coupable. Elle se coupe, se châtre, se guillotine, se décolle. (GL p.28)

Again, self-presence is 'achievable' only, paradoxically, in the moment of self-annihilation.

Secondly, although Genet has tried, through antonomasia, to render himself 'illisible' or 'imprenable' within an impenetrable text, his name hidden "dans quelque crypte littérale" (GL p.148), *Glas* is itself proof that Genet's text is not hermetically sealed since Derrida has penetrated it: "Je me suis introduit en tiers, entre sa mère et lui" (GL p.284). Derrida has even made another text out of it. As Todd comments:

> Genet's efforts to gather his dispersed signature back to himself, to reclaim his text, cannot but fail. The text falls; it escapes the prison of the signature; Derrida reads it and writes another text.[23]

Genet cannot contain himself within his text any more than Derrida can contain Genet or Genet's texts within his own.

And thirdly, Derrida's comment that, "il en irait autrement si la signature n'était qu'un effet de glas, autrement énoncée une classification [...]" (GL p.238), reveals that the process of nomination is itself totally unsuitable for the achievement of self-presence because naming, like signing, classifies, and therefore, through its etymology, it sounds the death-knell. While nomination seems to appropriate it in fact expropriates, in naming it unnames, it is used to manifest and delimit presence, but in fact it only reveals absence. Thus, just as the external signature 'killed off' the author, the flower also rings the death-knell: "Donc – ce qu'émet un coup de glas, c'est que la fleur, par exemple, en tant qu'elle signe, ne signifie plus rien" (GL p.45).

If much of *Glas* is devoted to the flower, far from Derrida setting up this theme as the key to Genet's artistic process and his texts, he does not construct without deconstructing. Derrida undermines the capital importance he seems to be according the flower by persistently emphasising the contradictory nature of the multiple associations of the flower, which in turn reflects the paradoxical nature of the generation of the text itself as giving birth to oneself into its tomb. For example, the stem of the flower links up with the phallus – and, because the name of the mother is a flower-phallus, this in turn alludes implicitly to the Freudian phallic mother – but at the same time, as the flower can be cut it must also link up with castration, which is then connected with the point that using the signature of the mother is not only an act of becoming one's mother but also of sounding one's own death-knell – the phallic mother is castrated even as she comes into being – with the fusion of erection and castration being expressed through the flower concept of "l'anthérection" (GL p.245). Thus, if Derrida teases out all the possible associations of the flower in Genet's texts, he also

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23 Todd, 'Autobiography and the Case of the Signature', p.12.

refuses to transform it into a symbol because this would limit and render quantifiable the infinite freeplay of signification operating within it:

> Ainsi la fleur (qui égale castration, phallus, etc.) «signifie» – encore! – recoupe du moins la virginité en général, le vagin, le clitoris, la «sexualité féminine», la généalogie matrilinéaire, le seing de la mère, le seing intégral, soit l'Immaculée Conception. C'est pourquoi les fleurs n'ont plus rien de symbolique. (GL pp.65-66)

Furthermore, the flower cannot be a symbol because a signifier is not static but constantly oscillating. Derrida sums this up in terms of, "le retournement incessamment instantané de la fleur: pénis/vagin, castration/virginité, érection/retombée, organisme naturel/artefact désarticulé, corps propre total/morceau fétichisé, etc." (GL p.177).

Thus, we might sum up the 'final position' of Derrida's study of Genet by echoing the words with which Genet ends his own study of Rembrandt which inspired the structure of *Glas*: "Et il va de soi que toute l'oeuvre de Rembrandt n'a de sens – au moins pour moi – que si je sais que ce que je viens d'écrire était faux" (CQR p.28).

Assessment of *Glas*

Published just over twenty years after *Saint Genet*, to a certain extent *Glas* represents a response to Sartre's monumental 'preface'. There are several oblique references to *Saint Genet* and its method which suggest that Derrida is attempting to provide an expansive improvement on Sartre's reductive approach. Derrida restores to Genet's texts their inherent infinite play of signification which Sartre, by identifying an ultimate key to Genet's life and work, sought to halt. As Derrida explains in a clear reference to *Saint Genet*, if he were to seek to establish a single meaning:

> Ce serait arrêter une fois de plus, et au nom de la loi, de la vérité, de l'ordre symbolique, la marche d'une inconnue: son glas, ce qui s'agit ici.
> Essayer de l'arrêter, une fois de plus, comme en 1952, où, à la sortie de prison, l'ontophénoménologue de la libération [...] insistait pour vous remettre, en main propre, en lieu sûr, les «clés» de l'homme-et-l'oeuvre-complète, leur ultime signification psychanalytico-existentielle. (GL pp.38-40)

While Sartre reduces Genet to an original crisis in relation to which the whole of his life and work can be understood, Derrida's aim is quite the opposite, not to limit or delimit Genet at all, and in this he is consciously trying to avoid the errors of *Saint Genet*:

> Ne pas arrêter la course d'un Genet. [...] Ne pas l'arrêter, le ramener en arrière, le brider. (GL p.50)

Derrida does not aim to improve on *Saint Genet* only in his approach but also on the level of ideas. One of Derrida's most prominent explorations in *Glas* is of the flower in Genet, a theme which is so all-pervasive in Genet's work that Derrida cannot resist pointing out that, in what he perhaps rather ironically terms "la plus agile et la plus intelligente des leçons d'ontologie phénoménologique de l'époque" (GL p.18), Sartre ignores this central motif completely.

Furthermore, whereas Sartre sacrificed literature to biography, Derrida does keep the integrity of Genet's works intact. As Davis comments, focusing on the contrasting ways in which each study uses the same passage from *Journal du voleur*, whereas Sartre "suppresses and overlooks contextual and internal features which are discordant with his own account", Derrida "is intensely sensitive to the textual features of Genet's writing which Sartre tends to neglect".[24]

However, as Davis goes on to say, the approach of *Glas* is not without its own problems:

> But Derrida's virtuoso demonstration that context is non-saturable, that multiple links and associations can always be found, that the text is never fully self-present 'in itself', has its own problems. [...] Derrida offers no criteria for arresting the exploration of textuality and no way of distinguishing between the different kinds of thing that can be said.[25]

Henderson even suggests that Derrida is also to some degree guilty, like Sartre, of putting his own process before his subject:

> Although Derrida avoids the pitfalls of biographical interpretation, *Glas* appears to be primarily an exercise in method, a realization of the prototype for a postmodern book. Both *Glas* and *Saint Genet* entomb Genet in a monumental work of literary criticism. For Sartre and Derrida, Genet's work serves as a pretext for the elaboration, application, or justification of a critical theory.[26]

Indeed, if Sartre can be criticised for using Genet as a suitable model to illustrate his own preoccupations, the same criticism might be levelled at *Glas*. As Spivak notes:

> Genet is, of course, a convenient figure for Derrida. A witting criminal, he can be played off of *The Philosophy of Right*. A homosexual, he will lend himself to the thematics of the

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24 Davis, 'Genet's *Journal du voleur* and the Ethics of Reading', p.54.

25 Ibid.

26 Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', pp.35-36.

> undecidability of the sexes. A lover/hater of flowers, he allows Derrida to contemplate the problematics of the flowers of rhetoric and of anthology-making.[27]

There are other internal problems with Derrida's approach, the most fundamental being that although Derrida, in contrast to Sartre, refuses to offer a 'key' to unlock and explain Genet and his texts, his identification of what he terms "la matrice transcendentale" (GL p.286), or the network of recurrent obsessions which 'generates' the text, does bring him very close to suggesting just such a key. Derrida himself voices this very concern, asking, "ai-je construit quelque chose comme la matrice de son texte?", and although he dismisses this possible flaw in his approach, by stating, "non, je vois plutôt [...] une sorte de machine à draguer", even as he reassures himself he continues to express his reservations: "mais c'est peut-être encore une matrice ou une grammaire" (GL p.285).

Furthermore, the way in which *Glas* proceeds through juxtaposition, ambiguity and paradox renders his text impenetrable to some readers. Anquetil characterises *Glas* as, "un ouvrage sauvage, insituable, qui défie tout commentaire et déjoue toute analyse".[28] For Derrida, however, the irreducible complexity of his own text is both necessary and inevitable if he is to leave the complexity of Genet's texts intact, and Derrida's approach restores to Genet's texts much of their lost (or ignored) mystery and sheer vitality. At the same time, however, Derrida is clearly aware that the paradoxical endeavour at the heart of *Glas*, to grasp Genet and yet not to, leaves him in a no win situation:

> Il va m'en vouloir à mort [...]. Si je soutiens ou valorise son texte, il y verra une sorte d'approbation, voire d'appropriation magistrale, universitaire, paternelle ou maternelle. C'est comme si je lui volais son érection. Sa mort [...]. Et si, de plus, j'expose comme un professeur la Grande Logique de cette opération je ne fais qu'aggraver le cas. Si je ne valorisais pas, ne «magnifiais» pas son glas, (mais qu'ai-je fait au total?), le sonneur se foutrait encore de moi. [...] Je suis donc de toute façon jugé et condamné, c'est ce qu'il a toujours cherché à faire: si j'écris pour son texte, j'écris contre lui, si j'écris pour lui, j'écris contre son texte. (GL pp.278-79)

None of these reservations about *Glas* alter the fact that it is an immensely rich text in which Derrida offers some magnificent insights and new perspectives on Genet's prose fiction of which critics of Genet have so far failed to take full account. To begin to do so constitutes one of the aims of this thesis, and, for this reason, detailed analysis of Derrida's ideas on immutability and death in Genet's texts will form part of my own analysis in the following parts.

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27 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, '*Glas*-piece: A *compte rendu*', 1977, p.42.

28 Gilles Anquetil, '*Glas*: Le nouveau livre de Jacques Derrida', 1974, p.9.

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Although both Sartre and Derrida offer, each after their own fashion, superb studies of Genet and his work, the task of providing detailed analysis of the more speculative dimension of Genet's prose texts on their own terms and within their own boundaries still remains to be undertaken. The reader of Genet who turns to *Saint Genet* or to *Glas* mistakenly expecting conventional literary criticism of Genet's prose texts will, of course, be disappointed. Each of these great minds, in its own idiosyncratic way, proposes powerful insights into Genet's fiction, but at the same time both studies are deeply coloured, in method and content, by the author's own preoccupations.

It has already been noted that, while *Saint Genet* has had a significant if perhaps disproportionate influence on Genet criticism and still holds a central position as a seminal work within the field, in comparison *Glas* has been almost ignored. Almost every work of criticism since *Saint Genet* has found it necessary to situate itself in relation to the line Sartre takes, with many adopting an overtly Sartrean foundation to their own interpretations of Genet's works, and yet the few critics since *Glas* who acknowledge the importance of Derrida's study of Genet tend to limit their comment to a brief assessment of *Glas* in an introductory exploration of the critical debate surrounding Genet's work. Both Bickel and Henderson take this approach, but Bickel's summary in particular is really more descriptive than evaluative. While so many are willing to accept Sartre's readings of Genet's texts, few attempt to examine Derrida's ideas – still less to develop them – in the specific context of Genet's prose fiction.

It is one of the aims of this thesis to begin to redress this balance: as a reaction to critics' readiness to give Existentialist or Sartrean readings of Genet's works of prose fiction, this thesis will examine them on their own terms in the first instance, and, at the same time, will attempt to take fuller account of some of the most prominent ideas in Derrida's text. This foregrounding of *Glas* rather than *Saint Genet* does not mean this thesis will be adopting a Derridean approach to the prose texts but simply that some of the ideas and theories Derrida offers in *Glas* will be explored and developed within the context of my own analysis of central speculative themes in Genet's prose.

This purely thematic use of *Glas* might at first appear problematic in so far as it might necessitate presenting Derrida's ideas with a coherence which runs counter to his own presentation of them in his text. However, although Derrida does not offer a passkey to unlock all the secrets of the text so that it can be viewed as a totality governed by a single unifying system, he does nonetheless draw together many disparate elements of the texts, along with their contradictions and ambiguities, and he does detect isolated patterns which he explores as fully as possible even while he is rejecting the possibility of exhausting them. Similarly, Derrida does reveal selected motifs which re-occur in Genet's texts, and to which

Derrida returns repeatedly in his own text, even while refusing to bind them into a false whole. It is precisely these patterns and motifs which will be explored in order to add an invaluable either comparable or alternative perspective on the issues raised in this thesis. In a sense, this thesis will be doing to Derrida's text what Derrida does to Genet's, trawling it for 'les restes', for disparate ideas and themes which are relevant to this study, whilst recognising that 'le reste' remains intact and, to a certain extent, ungraspable.

The primary concern of this thesis will therefore be as far as possible to let Genet's prose texts speak for themselves, and to examine the speculative issues explored within them on their own terms and within the context of their presentation within the narrative structures of the texts, while discussing, where appropriate, ideas to be found in *Saint Genet* and particularly in *Glas*.

PART TWO -
THE HUMAN CONDITION

INTRODUCTION

It is the aim of this section to suggest some of the fundamental elements of the human condition in Genet's prose fiction as the narrator in each text presents and explores it in the highly subjective realm of his narrative. Although it is not my intention to give the impression that the rather haphazard mental meanderings in the prose texts are actually presented as part of a coherent philosophical system, there is nonetheless a certain degree of continuity in the aspects of the human condition on which the narrators concentrate, and it is on these common features that this section will concentrate. The focus throughout will reflect the narrators' own focus particularly on the 'immutability' of the human condition, that is, aspects of the human condition which, according to the narrators' perception of them, cannot be changed in any fundamental way or over which it is impossible to assert any meaningful degree of control.

What follows, then, is an attempt to draw the threads of the narrators' presentation of human existence together in order first of all to gain an overview of the general characteristics of the human condition and then, against the background of this overview, to begin to pinpoint some of the immutable aspects of this condition which preoccupy the narrators most and to which they explore possible responses through their narratives. The narrators' deepest obsession, the immutability of mortality, will then be dealt with in its own right, before moving on to analysis of the responses themselves in the following sections.

Before attempting to determine the narrators' perception of the human condition in Genet's prose, if we are to understand the way in which it is portrayed within the texts themselves we need first of all to be clear about the level at which the human condition is presented, because this has an important bearing on the status of the ideas and explorations which the narrators present in their narratives and, particularly, on the role which the characters who inhabit the narrated world play within the narrators' speculation. Thus, before examining the portrait of immutability and death in closer detail, the first chapter of this section will be devoted to an examination of the narrative form of the four early works of prose fiction in order to establish, with the help of Genette's *Figures III*, the precise nature of the narrators' relationship to the narrated world they construct and to the characters with which they people it, and, perhaps most importantly, to examine the way in which the narrators exploit this relationship together with their purpose for doing so.

CHAPTER ONE - NARRATIVE FORM

One of the most distinctive features of Genet's early prose texts is the nature and role of the narrators within them. Every narrative must, by definition, have a narrator, whether his presence is made explicit or remains implicit, but if the typical nineteenth-century ominiscient narrator would, for the major part of the narrative, disappear behind the narrated world, only being felt implicitly as the voice telling the story with little or no self-reflexive intervention, in Genet's early works of prose fiction this is not the case. Genet's earliest prose texts predate but foreshadow the twentieth-century *nouveau roman* in so far as the narrators explicitly and self-consciously foreground their situation when writing their text together with their narrative processes. Because of the way in which the narrators highlight both their own self-expression and their role as creator of the narrative, the status of the vision of the human condition they explore in it becomes inseparable from their presentation of it. Thus, in order to appreciate the nature of the narrators' preoccupations, we need first of all to consider the nature of the narrators themselves, their relationship to the narrated world and, most importantly, the way in which they exploit their relationship both to the narrated world itself and to the characters within it.

As we saw in the Introduction to this thesis, there is a tendency amongst many critics of Genet to equate narrator with author, and then also with protagonist where the narrator is himself a character in his narrative.[1] This tendency has probably been encouraged not only by three of the narrators sharing their name and some personal details and experiences with the author, but also by the fact that one of the most central characteristics of Genet's narrators is that they all present themselves as authors who are not simply telling a story but creating a written text. In this sense Genet's prose texts resemble *A la Recherche du Temps perdu*, since, in both cases, we have what Genette refers to as "une narration directe où le héros-narrateur présente ouvertement son récit comme oeuvre littéraire, et assume donc le rôle d'auteur (fictif) [...]".[2] Henderson also compares Genet to Proust in this respect: "Like Proust's Marcel, Genet's narrator examines the processes by which he becomes an author, often reflecting upon the nature of literature itself in purely theoretical passages".[3]

Although one could only properly apply Genette's term "héros-narrateur" to the narrators of *Miracle de la rose* and *Pompes funèbres*, all of the four narrators assume the

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1 In spite of the fact that Lejeune's 'triple identity model' for autobiography, along with the author's prerequisite pact of honesty with his reader, are clearly not adhered to in these texts.

2 Genette, *Figures III*, p.248.

3 Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', p.10.

role of "auteur fictif" as they all refer to the book they are writing.[4] The fictional narrator-author of *Pompes funèbres* even draws attention to the recurrence of a funeral in "chacun de mes trois livres" (PF p.10), and later tells us that his previous books were written in prison (PF p.75), actually referring to *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* by name (PF p.11). If, in *Querelle de Brest,* the presence of the narrator is reduced, the 'je' of the preceding novels having been replaced with a 'nous', the role of author-narrator as self-conscious producer of a written narrative is nonetheless there. As Heed maintains, this "«nous» de modestie" still designates the narrator.[5] Indeed, although the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* does not tell us he shares the same name as his predecessors, the central preoccupations which he explores in his narrative, such as death, murder and homosexuality, are clearly strikingly similar.

Genet's narrators are not, then, traditional omniscient witnesses, but self-conscious creators. Rarely content simply to present themselves as observers, they prefer to narrate from their imagination and fantasies, subjecting their characters to their whims and obsessions. Their role and function as fictional authors is central to the kind of narrators we find in Genet's prose works, ones who generate a narrative which is mostly self-consciously fictional (or at least fictionalised) and subjective, and, perhaps most importantly, over which they have total control.

The actual act of generating the narrative, *narration*, constitutes one of Genette's terms in his tripartite division of the narrative into *narration*, *histoire* and *récit*. Briefly, and in Genette's own words, *histoire*, or *diégèse*, constitutes "le signifié ou contenu narratif", *récit* designates "le signifiant, énoncé, discours ou texte narratif lui-même", and *narration* is his term for "l'acte narratif producteur et, par extension, l'ensemble de la situation réelle ou fictive dans laquelle il prend place".[6] In other words, in Genet's prose fiction, we might regard *histoire* as the content of what the narrator writes, *récit* as the form of what he writes which conveys the *histoire*, and the *narration* as the actual process of writing itself to which the narrator himself often refers. Having established these three categories as distinct from each other, however, Genette insists on their reciprocity, and the impossibility of examining one in isolation:

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4 NDF p.9: "Et c'est en l'honneur de leurs crimes que j'écris mon livre."
MR p.469: "Si je quitte ce livre, je quitte ce qui peut se raconter."
PF p.9: "C'est à l'intérieur de cette tragédie que se place l'événement: la mort de Jean D. qui donne prétexte à ce livre."
QB p.387: "Le mouvement de ce livre doit s'accélérer."

5 Sven Åke Heed, '*Querelle de Brest* – un scénario de fantasmes', 1988, p.239. Further to this, for White the shift from 'je' to 'nous' constitutes a shift from antagonism to complicity: "[...] the narrator expresses himself in the first person plural, and this nineteenth-century 'we' suggests all the machinery of the traditional novel [...] as well as a new relationship with the reader - the 'we' of complicity rather than the narrative 'I' and the readerly 'you' of the earlier novels in their adversarial relationship." (White, *Genet*, pp.291-92).

6 Genette, *Figures III*, p.72.

> le récit, le discours narratif ne peut être tel qu'en tant qu'il raconte une histoire, faute de quoi il ne serait pas narratif [...], et en tant qu'il est proféré par quelqu'un, faute de quoi [...] il ne serait pas en lui-même un discours. Comme narratif, il vit de son rapport à l'histoire qu'il raconte; comme discours, il vit de son rapport à la narration qui le profère.[7]

This observation is particularly pertinent in Genet's prose since the narrators' frequent self-reflexive interventions draw attention not only to the thematic content of the narrative but also to *how* they present it and to the very act of creating it, including the circumstances of this act. As Genette's definition of *narration* makes clear, the term does not simply refer to the act which produces the narrative but also, by extension, to the situation in which the *narration* takes place, the 'situation de l'énonciation'. When Genette examines the *narration* of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* in more detail, he states that, when telling a story, "il m'est presque impossible de ne pas la situer dans le temps par rapport à mon acte narratif, puisque je dois nécessairement la raconter à un temps du présent, du passé ou du futur", and from this he draws the tentative conclusion: "De là vient peut-être que les déterminations temporelles de l'instance narrative sont manifestement plus importantes que ses déterminations spatiales". He then makes the general point that, as in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, "le lieu narratif est fort rarement spécifié, et n'est pour ainsi dire jamais pertinent".[8]

In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*, however, the "lieu narratif" is highly pertinent, to the content of each narrator's story, to the motivation behind his creation of it, and to the act of its production. In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, the narrator describes himself as being in a prison cell on the wall of which he has affixed newspaper cuttings with photographs of murderers whom he uses as models for the characters he imagines. The cell is therefore not incidental but intrinsic to the narration. Similarly, in *Miracle de la rose*, when the narrator is presenting his fantasies about Harcamone in particular, it is crucial that he purports to be fantasising while lying alone in a cell in the same prison. In both of these texts the narrative grows directly out of the narrator's present physical location and constitutes a response – both structural and thematic – to the location and the issues he associates with it. While the narrative of *Pompes funèbres* does not arise so much out of the narrator's "lieu narratif" as out of his emotional situation – his bereavement – we are nonetheless told that he is in a monastery as he writes, which is pertinent for the narrator at least in so far as his chosen environment is conducive to his solitary creative pursuit.

The narrators in Genet's early prose texts are, then, self-conscious 'auteurs fictifs' who draw direct attention – if to varying degrees – to their role of narrator-author, and this self-reflexive quality of their creativity renders the nature of the narrators' relationship to

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7 Genette, *Figures III*, p.74.

8 Ibid., p.228.

their narratives perhaps unusually explicit. Because this relationship varies from one text to the next, before examining the thematic dimension of the narrative form of these texts, it is important to clarify the purely formal relationship between the narrators and their narratives. To this end, for the purposes of this thesis, two areas in particular need to be addressed. Firstly, the different levels of the narrative and the formal status of the characters within them, and secondly, the question of the narrators' own presence in or absence from the narrated world. In both cases, particular attention will be paid to the way in which these texts blur and collapse any categories which they set up.

Turning first of all to narrative levels, Genette's term *diégèse* designates the world of the narrator's *récit premier*, in relation to which the act of narration itself is extradiegetic, and any secondary level of story-telling constitutes a metadiegesis.[9] Thus, in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, for example, the narrator's comments about his cell are extradiegetic, while the story of Divine, including her earlier life as Culafroy, constitutes the diegesis.[10] The extradiegetic level is presented as 'real' – at least within the text – and the diegesis as fantasy, or as Naish puts it, "an inner structure, given as oneiric or illusory, is contained within an outer framework, presented as objective fact".[11] Then, in *Querelle de Brest*, the story about Querelle told by the narrator forms the diegesis, and Seblon's diary is a metadiegesis, because, although they share the same subject, Querelle, Seblon has assumed the role of a secondary narrator and is allowed to speak in the first person. The narrator's own comment that Seblon stands outside the narrative reinforces this distinction between narrative levels. This metadiegetic level is of particular interest from a thematic point of view since Seblon's relationship to his diary and the aims he pursues through it represent a *mise en abyme* of the narrator's own relationship to his narrative.

Having established these narrative levels, however, in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* the distinction between diegetic and extradiegetic quickly becomes blurred, mainly because of the ambiguous status of the characters in the narrator's story.[12] Divine, for example, is at once presented as a character created entirely out of the narrator's imagination, specifically designed to represent himself, and as a 'real' person he has known in the past and whose 'true' story he is going to narrate. Thus, characters are, for the most part, completely under the control of the narrator and yet they occasionally appear to elude his grasp. The narrator himself expresses the characters' highly paradoxical status when he tells us, "Mignon,

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9 "L'instance narrative d'un récit premier est donc par définition extradiégétique, comme l'instance narrative d'un récit second (métadiégétique) est par définition diégétique, etc." (Genette, *Figures III*, p.239).

10 I disagree with Leca ('L'Esthétique du roman chez Jean Genet', p.28) that "Jean en prison" constitutes the diegesis, and that therefore the "Divine-Saga" is the metadiegesis, on the grounds that the narrator's comments about his cell are really part of the *narration*.

11 Naish, *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet*, p.200.

12 As we will see later, the ambiguity of the characters' relationship to the narrator takes on a particular significance in the context of the narrators' thematic relationship to his narrated world, but, for the moment, analysis will be restricted to clarifying the purely formal status of the characters in the context of narrative levels.

Divine, Notre-Dame, me fuient au grand galop emportant avec eux la consolation de leur seule existence en moi" (NDF p.68). Similarly, Marchetti, who is initially purely a figment of Divine's imagination, later turns up as one of Mignon's acquaintances, and Mignon himself is presented as one of the narrator's creatures, like Divine, at the diegetic level, and yet, again, the boundary between the narrator's fantasy and his 'reality', or between what is diegetic and extradiegetic, crumbles when Mignon is sent to prison and turns up in the cell from which the narrator is writing. The narrator deliberately increases this confusion when, on the extradiegetic level, a guard enters the cell and he asks himself: "Est-ce moi ou Mignon qui le recevra?" (NDF p.168). Genette's term for such transgressions of narrative categories is 'metalepses'.

The dual status of certain characters, both in their formal relationship to the narrator and their status within his narrative, recurs more than once in the following texts and is often intimately bound up with the relationship between the narrator's own stated circumstances – the 'situation de l'énonciation' – and his generation of a particular narrated world. For example, in *Pompes funèbres* there are two Eriks, the 'real' one whom the narrator meets at Jean D.'s mother's house, and the fictional Erik, an imaginary construct, partly based on the 'real' one, whom the narrator invents in his fantasy about Erik's past life before Jean D.'s death. In a passage rather inexplicably cut from the *Oeuvres complètes* edition, the narrator explicitly describes the way the fantasy Erik is pieced together:

> Je prends des gestes choisis sur des jeunes gens qui passent. C'est tantôt un soldat français, un américain, un voyou, un barman... Ils m'offrent tout à coup un geste qui ne peut être que d'Erik. (PF L'Imaginaire p.67)

The Erik fantasy itself culminates in a transgression of chronological coherence, since, as Naish points out, Erik is shot dead in the fantasy *before* the narrator meets him at Jean D.'s mother's house and begins his fantasy about him.

The presentation of Erik, then, illustrates the way in which the narrators are able to alter their formal relationship to their characters at will, by presenting them either as 'real' people – that is, real to the narrator with an existence distinct from his own – or as characters who are part of the narrator's own inner world. But if, in this case, the two levels on which Erik appears are clearly separable, in *Miracle de la rose* the status of Harcamone in his relationship to the narrator is far more ambiguous since there is a constant blurring of the Harcamone whom the narrator presents as another 'real' convict in the same prison as himself and the fantasised mythical figure into whom the narrator transforms him who can walk through walls and be entered by miniature men. Here the boundaries between the narrator's reality and his fantasy are blurred until they collapse altogether.

To complete this brief survey of narrative levels in Genet's prose fiction, then, although the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* makes fewer explicit self-reflexive interventions,

his characters still have a similarly ambiguous status in relation to him. If, at one moment, the narrator claims that, "en voulant préciser le mouvement psychologique de nos héros, nous voulons mettre au jour notre âme", the next he is finding that, "le personnage échappe à son auteur" (QB p.396).[13]

Further to his distinctions between narrative levels, Genette also proposes terms to express different kinds of narrators based on whether or not the narrator appears himself as a character in the diegesis. *Querelle de Brest* is relatively straightforward as the narrator is quite clearly heterodiegetic, or "absent de l'histoire qu'il raconte".[14] The narrator of *Miracle de la rose*, on the other hand, is clearly homodiegetic, or "présent comme personnage dans l'histoire qu'il raconte".[15] He appears as a character both in the Mettray-diegesis and in the Fontevrault-diegesis. *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* is more ambiguous because, although the narrator is technically heterodiegetic since he does not refer to himself directly in the first person within his narrative, at the same time the narrator declares that he is represented in it by a surrogate character, Divine, who even shares his age to make the equation more explicit – "il faut bien qu'elle ait mon âge, pour que je calme enfin mon besoin de parler de moi" (NDF p.125).

Pompes funèbres is even more complex because the narrator presents several interwoven threads of narrative, all of which arise out of the same circumstances and motivation – the narrator's bereavement and search for a means of dealing with it – but which in themselves are very different from each other. Some refer to what the narrator has just experienced while others refer further back in the past; some present 'true' accounts and others pure fantasy; and, the narrator himself is present in some and absent from others. On the last point, the narrator is homodiegetic when narrating Jean D.'s funeral, his visit to Jean D.'s mother's house, his trip to the cinema, and also episodes from his relationship with Jean D. before the latter's death, but he is heterodiegetic when narrating the Erik-Riton story. However, again there is metalepsis here, since, although the narrator of the Erik-Riton story is heterodiegetic in so far as he does not appear himself as a character within the story, the narrator does project himself into this particular thread of his narrative by merging with certain characters during various experiences by means of the simple substitution of third for first person pronoun. In these instances, rather than the narrator 'becoming' the character, he merges with the character while at the same time remaining himself and retaining a narrator's powers of omniscience, thus bringing about not a shift in focalisation but a temporary dual focalisation. As Barriquand explains:

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13 For more detailed analysis of the narratological structure of *Querelle de Brest*, see also Heed, '*Querelle de Brest*.

14 Genette, *Figures III*, p. 252.

15 Ibid., p. 252.

> Il est important de noter que la mise en oeuvre de ce processus n'empêche pas que les autres personnages soient décrits comme ils pourraient l'être par un narrateur omniscient et transparent. Ceci prouve que le narrateur ne renonce jamais à assumer à lui seul et entière la responsabilité d'une scène. L'incarnation dans le personnage du Führer notamment ne constitue pas d'obstacle à l'omniscience du narrateur par rapport au personnage de Paulo.[16]

This factor will be crucial in analysis of the thematic dimension of this process, particularly in relation to what kind of experiences are being pursued when the narrator chooses to merge with a given character.

Thus, the narrative form of Genet's prose fiction, particularly with regard to the narrator's relationship to his narrative and the characters in it, is riddled with narrative metalepses, and Genette comments that transgressions of the traditional relationship between *narrateur* and *histoire* have become a characteristic of the modern novel:

> on sait que le roman contemporain a franchi cette limite comme bien d'autres, et n'hésite pas à établir entre narrateur et personnage(s) une relation variable ou flottante, vertige pronominal accordé à une logique plus libre, et à une idée plus complexe de la «personnalité».[17]

Since Genet was writing his own prose texts in the 1940s, his use of narrative metalepsis places him ahead of his time.

Having established the purely formal dimension of the narrators' relationship to their narratives, we need now to consider from a thematic perspective the way in which the narrators utilise and, indeed, exploit this relationship in their presentation of their vision of the human condition. In other words, we need to consider the relationship in Genet's prose fiction between narrative form and theme, since the particular narrative framework in which the narrators' speculation is presented has a considerable bearing on the status of the ideas they explore within it. To this end, it will be useful to contrast these works with André Malraux's *La Condition humaine* which was written only a little earlier and which also presents a particular vision of the human condition but in a quite different and, arguably, more conventional way.

In *La Condition humaine*, Malraux constructs a coherent and systematic portrait of a universal human condition within which various characters illustrate a range of easily categorised responses to it. As Cecil Jenkins points out, in *La Condition humaine*, each character is "a separate destiny spinning on its own axis"[18] but at the same time they are

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16 Barriquand, '*Pompes funèbres* de Jean Genet', p.64.

17 Genette, *Figures III*, p. 253.

18 Cecil Jenkins, *André Malraux*, 1972, p.65.

linked by a shared ultimate destiny and by what Jenkins calls their common "metapsychology" of living towards that destiny.[19] In contrast, although the narrators in Genet's prose texts do explore speculative issues, and with a striking degree of continuity, they do not explicitly express a uniform philosophical vision, and the characters cannot be reduced so readily to the embodiment of distinct categories and types. Although *La Condition humaine* explores similar speculative issues to Genet's prose fiction, such as the limitations of human freedom, death and mortality, destiny, and humiliation and dignity, the status of these ideas within the narratives themselves is very different, and at the heart of this disparity lies the contrast between the narrators.

The narrator in *La Condition humaine* is more traditional than Genet's in so far as he assumes an omniscient role and, rather than foregrounding his own creative processes, he disappears behind a narrated world which embodies a carefully delineated view of the human condition and a set of characters through whom aspects of his vision are explicitly articulated. This means that, in *La Condition humaine*, the characters do not only share a common vision of the human condition but they are also basically lucid. Each character indulges in both internal ratiocination which is relayed to the reader by the narrator and in external discussion and his particular outlook and response to his condition are revealed explicitly through reliable interior monologue and dialogue.

The narrative form of Genet's works of prose fiction gives a very different perspective. Far from disappearing behind the narrated world, the narrators make their presence felt throughout, not only through self-reflexive commentary on the creative process but also, in the first three texts particularly, by devoting a high proportion of the narrative to reflections on their own situation, opinions or ideas. Thus, while Malraux's narrator presents an objective, universalised portrait of the human condition, Genet's narrators offer a very singular and idiosyncratic exploration of highly subjective preoccupations. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s statement that, "ce livre ne veut être qu'une parcelle de ma vie intérieure" (NDF p.13) is a clear indication that he is not presenting a universal vision of 'The Human Condition' *per se* but an introspective exploration of a spectrum of very personal issues, questions and interests. The nature of the narrators' relationship to the narrated world also affects the status of the characters within it, since, unlike the characters in *La Condition humaine*, the characters in Genet's fiction represent figures in the narrators' subjective fantasies and, as such, are too intimately bound up with the narrators' own preoccupations to represent universal types. This is a point that Malgorn also emphasises: "Genet ôte à ses personnages, jusque dans l'onomastique spéculaire, tout ce qui pourrait les rendre représentatifs d'une quelconque nature humaine."[20]

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19 Jenkins, *André Malraux*, p.73.

20 Malgorn, *Jean Genet*, p.49.

It is the form of the narrators' relationship to the narrated world and the characters in it, then, which prevents the characters from becoming universal types embodying aspects of a universal vision. And yet, at the same time, it is the very fact that any analysis of the characters, particularly in the first three novels, brings us time and again back to the narrators' subjectivism, that lends the subjective vision which is portrayed its continuity. As the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* comments, it is this subjectivism which leads him to describe his own narratives not as novels but as akin to poetry:

> 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. (PF p.74)

Indeed, if we accept the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*'s claim also to be the narrator of the previous two novels, and if we recognise the undeniable similarity of the issues explored in them which also extends into the fourth text, then a certain degree of continuity in the vision portrayed in all four texts becomes almost inevitable.

The degree to which the narrators' own subjectivism is foregrounded also either substantially reduces or even negates the characters' own lucidity and autonomy. Whereas the narrator of *La Condition humaine* simply disappears behind characters who constitute the lucid embodiments of or commentators on his vision, the thematic dimension of the narrators' relationship to their characters in Genet's fiction is much more complex. Indeed, they exploit a variety of relationships to their characters and it is this variety which lends the narrative form of Genet's prose texts some of its distinctiveness.

The full significance of the way in which the narrators explore their vision of the human condition by exploiting their relationship to the narrated world and the characters in it will be examined in the course of the following sections. For the moment, however, it will be useful to attempt to characterise the general ways in which the narrator exploits his role as 'auteur fictif' for his own purposes. Sometimes, the narrators suspend their description of a character while they continue with their own speculation, interrupting their construction of the narrated world with self-conscious intervention in the diegesis, just as they do, more traditionally, at an extradiegetic level. At other times, the narrators use characters as pretexts, initially describing a character's actions as though the character were an autonomous agent but then imposing their own speculative gloss upon them which reflects the narrators' own subjective preoccupations and to which significance the character himself

usually appears to be oblivious.[21] This is not to suggest that the more philosophical ideas are any less significant for this, it is simply that, rather than the character himself revealing the significance of an action or event or expressing his own view or attitude, as the characters in *La Condition humaine* usually do, the character himself simply represents an idea or experience and it is the narrator who summarises that experience and articulates the speculative dimension of it. The narrator may even suggest the character's thoughts rather than according the character the 'autonomy' of having his own inner mental life. And the narrators will use characters in this way regardless of whether they are homodiegetic or heterodiegetic in relationship to the thread of the narrative which they are glossing.

The narrators' relationship to their characters is most distinctive, and also most complex, when they take their exploitation of their role as creator a step further and set creatures up as their own representatives and delegates, and they do this in a variety of ways. Some characters are used by the narrators to represent themselves as they perceive themselves to be, sharing their passivity, for example, as Divine and Seblon do, and, as these two examples from *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Querelle de Brest* reveal, this happens particularly where the narrator is heterodiegetic and therefore would not otherwise be directly represented in the narrated world. At the other end of the scale, other characters, such as Harcamone, Erik and Querelle, represent an ideal embodiment of the way in which the narrators would like to be, and then there is a multitude of characters who fall somewhere between these two poles, many of whom simply embody one or more of the narrators' interests or obsessions.

Just as the narrators' relationship to their characters varies depending on what each of them represents to the narrator, the use to which individual characters are put is also diverse. Sometimes the narrator will address through certain characters issues which preoccupy or touch him personally, and at other times he will use characters to explore through them a wider range of ideas and possibilities. Either way, the actual way in which this happens ranges from the narrator projecting an experience onto a character who embodies it in the narrator's place to actually merging with a character in order to participate vicariously in the character's experience.

Taken overall, then, if the narrator of *La Condition humaine* is only implicitly omnipresent, the narrators in Genet's prose texts quite explicitly use various narratological devices to project their presence into their narrated world either directly or indirectly and regardless of whether they are heterodiegetic or homodiegetic, and this process is at its most complex and original when the narrators make their presence felt through fictional

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21 Sometimes, the question of whether a character has been accorded a degree of awareness or kept oblivious is itself left ambiguous. For example, in the presentation of Harcamone by the narrator of *Miracle de la rose*, the speculative dimension of the character's situation is quite clearly provided entirely by the narrator's own gloss, whereas in the case of Querelle it is more difficult to distinguish between the narrator's subjective gloss and the character's own perception of what he is experiencing or doing.

representatives, delegates and even surrogates. In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, the narrator uses Divine as his representative – "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" (NDF p.46) – and he tells us that, if he uses real murderers as models for the characters in his narrative, this expresses his desire to be them; in *Miracle de la rose*, the narrator does not only appear himself in the narrative but also uses his mind to join Harcamone and share with him the final days before his execution; in *Pompes funèbres*, in addition to the narrator's self-representation in his narrative, he also goes one step further and explicitly merges with various characters during crucial experiences.

In *Querelle de Brest*, although there are oblique references to the narrator having 'given birth' to Querelle, the element of the narrator's self-projection into and vicarious experience through his narrative is not so explicit. This is not to say, however, that this narrative process has disappeared from *Querelle de Brest* completely, since it resurfaces as Seblon's imaginary method of responding to his condition in his diary. In a sense, then, the apparent move towards greater objectivity in the narration of *Querelle de Brest*, which so many critics note, has actually only been displaced. As Leca suggests of Seblon:

> Tout se passe comme s'il était le substitut du "Jean Genet" narrateur, qui, voulant quitter la position subjective des trois premiers livres, ne l'aurait fait qu'à regret et aurait trouvé ce détour pour parler encore de lui et dire "je" et évoquer la production de ses créatures: inventer un personnage de personne trois (Seblon), qui dirait "je".[22]

Indeed, as Leca points out, the typographical distinction between diegesis and metadiegesis in the *Oeuvres complètes* edition of *Querelle de Brest*, where Seblon's diary is italicised, destroys the blurring and merging of primary and secondary narrators in the original edition.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the nature of the narrators, and the resulting nature of the narrators' relationship to the narrated world and the characters in it, has a profound effect upon the way in which a vision of the human condition is presented within Genet's prose fiction, and the overall effect that the narrative form has on the status of the speculative ideas explored within it renders these texts quite different in form from, for example, Malraux's *La Condition humaine*. Indeed, the extent to which the narrators in Genet's early prose explicitly foreground – if to varying degrees – their own situation, preoccupations and obsessions actually adds another dimension which *La Condition humaine* does not have. Although it would usually be problematic to speak of a narrator's motivation or purpose for constructing a narrative and for choosing the particular issues he explores within it, the narrators in Genet's fiction are quite explicit about their own aims and

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22 Leca, 'L'Esthétique du roman chez Jean Genet', p.82.

opinions and about their relationship, both formal and thematic, to the narrated world and the characters within it.

What this analysis of the formal and thematic dimensions of the narrator-narrative relationship in Genet's early prose texts reveals, then, is that the link between narrative form and thematic structure is inseparable from the narrators' chosen method of achieving their aims. In these works, narrative form is not simply a framework within which themes are presented, but is at once the vehicle through which themes are expressed and the very tool the narrators use to explore them. Thus, the link between narrative form and thematic structure is created by the narrator himself as he examines and develops the issues which preoccupy him, not through direct discussion of them, or even through his own lived experience, but by means of a highly subjective narrative in which these issues are explored in his imagination. Because the realm he creates is imaginary, within that realm he can use the power of his creative imagination to explore aspects of his past, his present and his condition and to confront or experience or attempt to attain all that he could not in external reality. Furthermore, by creating fictional delegates for himself and breathing himself into them, he can even participate through them in vicarious experiences and achievements.[23]

An apt model to express particularly the distinctive way in which the narrators in Genet's prose pursue vicarious experiences through their relationship to the narrated world was suggested to me in conversation by Edmund White. In *Histoires de ma vie*, Jean Marais recounts that Genet brought him a play he had written for him, but that he did not like it and so Genet tore it up.[24] The play was called *Héliogabale*. The incident happened in May 1943, indicating that Genet was interested in the figure of Heliogabalus when he was writing his prose fiction. According to White, what struck Genet about Heliogabalus was the way he sent out soldiers to live in his stead, and in *Fragments...* Genet makes a reference in a footnote to "Héliogabale dont le cocher porte les attributs – robe, manteau, collier – du pouvoir – quand l'Empereur vit seul, obscur, secret, dans une chambre vide du palais" (FR p.90). We find a similar idea expressed by the narrator in *Journal du voleur* who calls Lucien, "mon ambassadeur sur la terre" (JV p.275). White makes the link between the two himself, suggesting that:

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23 In *Saint Genet*, Sartre also identifies this process:
"Non content de tirer les personnages de sa propre chair, l'auteur s'incarne en eux et souffre de leurs souffrances: chacun d'eux lui fournit l'occasion d'explorer une humiliation, un désespoir, une colère. Descendu en Querelle il ressentira l'angoisse qui suit le Meurtre; [...] en Divine il fera l'expérience du vieillissement, en Erik celle de la beauté; avec le bourreau celle de la laideur; une fois, perdu dans les ténèbres touffues de Lysiane, il sera femme." (SG p.618)
"C'est une méthode d'investigation valable à la rigueur. Vous n'avez jamais commis de crime? Imaginez donc que vous allez en commettre un. Choisissez la victime, attardez-vous sur les motifs, tentez de ressentir votre peur avant et après l'assassinat, demandez-vous si vous auriez des remords, etc." (SG p.621)
The main difficulty with Sartre's analysis of this important process is that, in keeping with his overall approach, he relates it rather problematically not to the narrator but directly to Genet the author. Because of this, and also partly because Sartre does not mention the idea until near the end of his huge study, he does not explore the importance of this mechanism in the detail it deserves considering its centrality in Genet's prose fiction particularly to the link between narrative structure and presentation of theme.

24 Jean Marais, *Histoires de ma vie*, 1975, p.151.

> Genet seems to have been taken by the idea that Heliogabalus seldom appeared in public and ruled more as an absence than a presence. Genet himself later wanted his lovers to be his ambassadors on earth while he became more and more reclusive.[25]

What I am suggesting is that the relationship between narrative form and thematic structure in Genet's prose texts might be expressed in terms of the narrators' 'Heliogabalan' approach to life, which leads them, for various reasons, to prefer the imaginary pursuit of indirect exploration and vicarious experience over lived reality. This aspect of the narrators' narrative project will form a central part both of the discussion in this section of the narrators' presentation of the human condition and of the analysis in the following sections of their exploration of responses to aspects of the human condition.

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25 White, *Genet*, p.203.

CHAPTER TWO - THE IMMUTABILITY OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Having established the kind of narrators we have in Genet's prose fiction along with the narrative form which they exploit in order to present and explore their subjective vision, we can now move on to examine the nature of the human condition as they perceive it. On the evidence of the narratives themselves, the aspect of the human condition which preoccupies the narrators most is its very immutability. In their narratives, the narrators explore this all-pervasive lack of freedom both in direct relation to themselves as it manifests itself in their own experience and through a host of characters whom the narrators confront with various immutable aspects of their condition in the narrated world. They also examine their perception of the immutability of the human condition from various angles and at various levels, as it might manifest itself in inalterable aspects of an individual's personality,[26] or in elements of an individual's social circumstances which are perceived to be insurmountable, or in events or situations which seem to be inescapable or inevitable, or in more fundamental facets of an individual's existential condition.

Whether this immutability is presented and experienced in relatively minor incidents, such as finding oneself eating a dead worm, or through much more serious situations, such as finding one's fate in the hands of the criminal justice system, this sense of a fundamental impotence is usually experienced as an acute humiliation, which is part of the reason why, as we will see in the following two sections, the narrators devote so much time to exploring possible responses to the human condition which might enable the individual to transform his condition in some way. Taken together, all these disparate elements which cannot be changed or controlled add up to an overall vision of the human condition which is bleak because deeply fatalistic. To quote an expression which Genet uses in his later essay *L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, the narrators' presentation of the human condition in their narratives is the portrait of an "inhumaine condition", the chief characteristic of this condition being that it is beyond the individual's control, it is "cette inhumaine condition qui nous est imposée" (AAG p.41).

At the centre of the 'inhuman condition' as the narrators present it in Genet's prose fiction is the lack of meaningful presence of God. Genet is often grouped with atheist Existentialist writers, but in his works the question of the existence of God is not clear cut.[27] The narrator of *Pompes funèbres*, for example, tells us explicitly "mon but c'est Dieu", but he does not know where to find God because he is hidden beneath religion: "il se cache derrière le fatras des différents cultes" (PF p.149). Indeed, more ambiguously, earlier he

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26 This individual being either the narrator himself or one of his fictional representatives.

27 Coe offers full analysis of the question of belief in God in Genet in his *The Vision of Jean Genet*, particularly p.56.

states that he prays to God to keep him from the Devil and from God (PF p.23), and in an apparently throwaway comment cut from the *Oeuvres complètes* edition, he declares every creator to be "méchant" (PF L'Imaginaire p.108), as though the narrator himself, as an 'auteur fictif', has set himself up as a kind of aesthetic 'god' and as such inevitably emulates this cruelty.

As with Beckett's world, the clearest we can be about Genet's is to say that God may or may not exist, but there is absolutely no evidence of the presence of an actively loving God, or of a God who might intervene positively to bring salvation from misery and give meaning to suffering. In *Querelle de Brest*, Seblon even comments in his diary that when he is suffering he cannot believe in a God who would let him suffer and yet remain beyond his reach since this would only render acute his feeling of impotence:

> C'est quand je souffre que je ne puis croire en Dieu. Je sentirais trop péniblement mon impuissance d'avoir à me plaindre d'un Etre – et à Lui – impossible à atteindre. Dans la douleur je ne m'en prends qu'à moi. Dans le malheur, d'en pouvoir remercier quelqu'un. (QB p.406)

By far the most revealing comment about the nature of God in Genet's prose fiction occurs in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, when Culafroy tempts his damnation at the church altar but in fact makes the crucial discovery that God is hollow:

> 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. (NDF p.103)

What is most important about this experience of the young Divine is that it is narrated within the narrator's own revelation of what he terms "le mystère du rien et du non" (NDF p.99).[28] The narrator has just been recounting his discovery of the hollowness of Village's model soldiers and of the bust of Marie-Antoinette at home (NDF p.99), and now he links the three experiences together by describing the hollow ciborium which Culafroy drops in terms of "une forme jolie, comme la tête en plâtre de Marie-Antoinette, comme les petits soldats, qui étaient des trous avec un peu de plomb mince autour" (NDF p.103). Returning to his memory of Village's cell, the narrator concludes: "Ainsi, je vivais au milieu d'une infinité de trous en forme d'hommes" (NDF p.103), implying that it is not just God that is a void but the whole of mankind. In *Miracle de la rose*, the journey into Harcamone reveals that at his heart there is nothing more than a 'vide intérieur', a "trou noir" (MR p.464). If God the

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28 Bickel also offers discussion of these episodes in terms of what she calls 'l'expérience du vide' in *Jean Genet: Criminalité et transcendance*, pp.93ff..

Creator is hollow, man's very presence in the universe must be rendered as inexplicable as Creation itself. In a passage which perhaps parodies Roquentin's experience of contingency in *La Nausée*, we are told that Culafroy is so acutely aware of the inexplicability of his entire surroundings – "Il ne comprenait pas sa chambre, ni le jardin, ni le village. Il ne comprenait rien, pas même qu'une pierre fût une pierre" – that what he terms the "indifférence du décor" simply magnifies its hostility to his own inexplicable presence in it (NDF p.95).

This revelation of the hollowness of God and man has a profound bearing on the conception of individual identity which is presented not only in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* but in the whole of Genet's work. As in Sartrean Existentialism, Genet's characters are born without a given essence in terms of a fixed identity, but whereas, in *Saint Genet*, Sartre emphasises through the example of Genet's development towards aesthetic self-construction that to be authentic is to strive to be responsible for one's own identity, in Genet's prose, because this lack of essence is perceived as a 'vide intérieur' which cannot be filled, it simply constitutes part of the immutability of the human condition, an aspect of existence over which it is impossible to assume control. In the narrators' vision, the individual cannot define his identity in terms of his relative position to a divinity, but neither can he be absolute or self-sufficient himself. The complex ways in which the narrators and some of their characters may try to forge a degree of self-sufficiency for themselves in an attempt to transcend their inner hollowness will be examined later in this thesis.

Characters in both Sartre and Genet may endeavour at least to cover their 'vide intérieur' by attempting not to *become* but to *be*, by simply adopting and playing a given identity-role, but whereas Sartre would condemn this as *mauvaise foi* which has arisen out of the individual's anguished denial of his total responsibility for his own identity – and these inauthentic characters are offset by authentic Existentialist heroes – in Genet's works there is no responsibility to be assumed since there is no alternative to inauthenticity: in *Le Balcon*, the insurrectionist Roger, who has tried and failed to establish some kind of authenticity within society, is forced to conclude: "Aucune vérité n'était possible" (BA p.132). In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, when Divine attempts to assume a masculine role, because, in Genet, no identity can ever be more than role-play based on gestures, and because Divine plays the role badly, the result is not even a single, unified identity-role but a plurality of identities devoid of inner substance:

> [...] tout ce simulacre fut exécuté si malhabilement qu'elle paraissait être en une seule soirée quatre ou cinq personnages à la fois. Elle y gagnait la richesse d'une multiple personnalité. (NDF p.71)

It is worth underlining that this multiplicity, which Sartre would no doubt condemn as inauthenticity, is regarded by Genet's more playful narrator as "richesse", although, of course, the underlying immutability of the inner void has not in any way been altered.

Sartre's seriousness clearly leads him to overlook in *Saint Genet* much of the inherent playfulness in Genet's texts, just as his existentialist biographical approach results in his foregrounding aspects of Genet's texts which may not actually be central to the texts themselves. Sartre insists that Genet's initial attempt to *be* through appearance and gesture rather than acts is only *faute de mieux*, and that he eventually achieves his own authenticity in his writing. But Sartre's assertion in *Saint Genet* that Genet's primary aim throughout his prose fiction is self-construction is not reflected in the preoccupations which the narrators explore in the narratives themselves. Indeed, the theme of identity does not hold the central importance in Genet's fiction that it holds in Sartre's reading of these texts and within Sartre's philosophy as a whole. Self-construction does represent quite an important process in *Journal du voleur*, the text on which, significantly, Sartre bases much of his analysis in *Saint Genet*, but it is not nearly so prominent as a theme in the preceding four texts on which the analysis of this thesis is based. Similarly, although the theme of playing identity-roles within a fixed hierarchy may be particularly important in *Journal du voleur*, and also in parts of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*, it does not constitute the major preoccupation of the prose fiction taken as a whole. For example, whereas, for Sartre, the murderer kills primarily in order to become 'The Murderer', the reasons which the narrators suggest for why their characters seek the experience of taking life are far more complex than this, as later analysis will reveal.

Sartre does not believe any more than Genet does that an individual can complete the construction of his identity during his lifetime, but whereas, on the evidence of Sartre's analysis of Genet's aesthetic self-construction in *Saint Genet*, Sartre still apparently believes that authenticity is worth striving for so that at least the identity one leaves behind after death is of one's own making, Genet's narrators clearly do not share this view. When, in Genet's fiction, narrators or their characters adopt pre-existing identity-roles, such as 'voleur', 'maquereau' or 'travesti', it is not out of fear of constructing an authentic self but simply because there is no meaningful alternative. While Sartre's characters, condemned to absolute freedom, may assume inauthentic, given identities to cover their anguish, in Genet's texts there can only be sham. As Abood comments:

> Genet in his writings depicts human life as a farce, in which we are assigned or assign ourselves empty roles, one as arbitrary as the other, played out against the one true reality, the void.[29]

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29 Edward F. Abood, *Underground Man*, 1973, p.138.

Indeed, the narrators in particular exploit the 'vide intérieur' to the full, not, primarily, by seeking to construct an identity for themselves as Sartre maintains, but rather by exploring what the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* terms "mon goût de l'imposture, mon goût pour le toc" (NDF p.169). The narrators are themselves in no doubt that all identity is sham and they play on this, looking for nothing beyond the hollow role-play. The narrator of *Pompes funèbres* even exploits the interchangeability of identity in his narrative by collapsing the conventional distinction between narrator and character.

Because the narrators perceive the 'vide intérieur' to be immutable, in the absence of an alternative, if anything they exacerbate the fact that identities are mere constructs, fluid, multiple and external, and even depict characters who turn this to their advantage. Whereas Sartre's characters fear being trapped by the reifying Look of the Other, some of the characters in Genet's fiction actually adopt identities to hide behind, thereby almost revealing the foolishness of those who would believe that appearance could constitute an essence, that acts could constitute a man, that mere role-play could be raised up as an absolute identity, or that another's judgement could fix an identity totally and correctly. Mignon, for example, pretends to steal from a shop an item that he has actually bought, and when he is stopped for shop-lifting he is able to turn the tables on his accuser by revealing himself to be a "voleur de rien" (NDF p.164), and Querelle only constructs an external identity to shock and disorientate others, while inside his preoccupations lie elsewhere: "il leur propose presque chaque jour une déconcertante et scandaleuse vision de lui-même" (QB p.228).

It is through Divine that this exploitation of the inalterable 'vide intérieur' is, perhaps, explored in the most sustained fashion. Divine pursues what the narrator terms "le plaisir [...] de faire chevaucher des identités" (NDF p.138) in order to protect herself from judgement by using the insurmountable superficiality of all identity to throw those who would judge her off the scent: "pour dépister, semer les fantômes à la course" (NDF p.25). In a process not unlike the mythomania of Clappique in Malraux's *La Condition humaine*, Divine finally attempts to disappear into her own inner void by negating the Other altogether:

> Son détachement du monde va jusqu'à lui faire dire: «Que m'importe ce que pense X... de la Divine que j'étais. Qu'importe *à moi* le souvenir qu'il garde de moi. Je suis une autre. Je serai chaque fois une autre.» Ainsi, elle combattait la vanité. Ainsi, elle se trouvait toujours prête pour quelque nouvelle infamie, sans ressentir la crainte de l'opprobre. (NDF p.196)

In this sense, the theme of identity in Genet's prose fiction, far from being distinctly Sartrean as some commentators have maintained, could only be considered to be, if anything, an ironisation of Sartre's theories.[30]

Turning now from the more abstract immutable characteristics of the human condition as they are presented in Genet's prose fiction to the more specific ways in which the narrators present either themselves or certain characters as they encounter the immutable in their lived experience, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, there is a greater degree of lack of freedom in their experience of their condition than an existentialist approach in particular could take into account. Indeed, the characters' inability to take control of aspects of themselves, their situation or their circumstances except in a very limited way points to a stronger element of predestination and fatalism in the prose fiction than the majority of critics have acknowledged.

Coe generally takes a broadly Sartrean line in his analysis of Genet's works, although he is prepared to distinguish between an existentialist reading of the texts and the way in which the characters experience their own existence on this point. Coe asserts that in spite of Sartre's view of Genet as "the victim and elected scapegoat of a capitalist society", nonetheless "Genet's characters [...] 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".[31] However, lack of freedom and fatalism are still not as prominent in Coe's study as they are in Genet's prose fiction. Like Sartre, Coe tends to restrict his examination of possible limitations Genet and his characters may experience in the exercise of their freedom to specific matters of social identity, affirming later that "for Genet every gesture is a manifestation of determinism" because "freedom is only the freedom to submit to the fatal power of Others, transmitted through a universe of symbols".[32]

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30 Genet's most sustained meditation on the 'vide intérieur' is presented in his essay *Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes*, published in 1967. In this essay, Genet describes a bizarre experience of decantation in which he feels himself merging with another passenger in the train, and through this experience he discovers that no individual identity is possible. In a sense, the path towards this discovery, which was probably made soon after the prose fiction was written, was paved by the awareness of the interchangeability and ultimate immutable hollowness of all identities which was already in evidence in his fiction. Indeed, in *Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt* Genet even suggests that perhaps this revelation was only possible because it brought to the surface an awareness that was already deep inside him: "Mais ce regard posé sur le voyageur, et si atrocement révélateur, peut-être qu'il avait été possible par une très ancienne disposition d'esprit, due à ma vie, ou à toute autre raison?" (CQR p.28). There are, however, also clear differences between the essay and the early prose texts. In *Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt*, as a result of Genet's revelation that "tout homme *en vaut* un autre" (CQR p.21) – not social equality but existential indivisibility – Genet has developed and crystallised the impossibility of individual identity or singularity into "une sorte d'identité universelle à tous les hommes" (CQR p.22). Genet realises that separate, individual identities are no more than illusions created by the temporary physical division of the universal identity into physical bodies – "Je crus même comprendre que cette apparence était la forme provisoire de l'identité de tous les hommes" (CQR p.24) – and that a single 'identity' is shared by all men as though they were one. Now, Genet feels he is nothing more than "*un vide solide*" (CQR p.29), his own inner hollowness made flesh. There is a further difference between the fiction and the essay in so far as the reaction to the revelation in the essay is substantially more negative than the treatment of the 'vide intérieur' in the fiction: "tout se désenchantait autour de moi, tout pourrissait" (CQR p.29).

31 Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.49.

32 Ibid., p.71.

Although Thody recognises that Genet's work reveals that he "is obsessed with the idea of predestination, and has, in many ways, a fundamentally Jansenistic vision of the world",[33] he nonetheless limits his own analysis of predestination to his idea of characters being cast into the fixed social categories he calls "Elect and Reprobate".[34] Neither Thody nor Coe explores the full extent of the fundamental immutability at the centre of the narrators' presentation of the human condition which constitutes the focus of this thesis. As I aim to show, on the evidence of their narratives, predestination to a given identity-role may be part of one's immutable condition, but lack of freedom extends far beyond the individual's place within the structure of society and infuses every aspect of his existence. Even on the question of being unable to change given social roles, the fundamental lack of freedom reaches beyond the question of identity. As the narrator of *Journal du voleur* comments, when he talks of misery, he does not mean the individual's personal misery but "celle dont l'humanité est composée" (JV p.124).

One of the most prominent manifestations of the immutable which the narrators examine is their idea of a given personality which pre-determines whether they or their characters have the potential to assert themselves as active – and also the extent of that activity – or whether they will have to resign themselves to passivity. This becomes particularly apparent as it is confirmed in relation to other people in social situations in which, for obvious reasons, the struggle of the immutably passive character is usually the main focus. Thus, at one extreme there is Querelle, who has no trouble in actively dominating all those around him with the one exception of Mario, while at the other extreme, in the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s portrait of Divine it is clear that there is no question of Divine becoming an active partner in a relationship, just as there is no question of her becoming physically or mentally masculine, or of her becoming a hardened criminal, and all of this is experienced by Divine, as the narrator's representative, as acute humiliation into which the narrator, who apparently shares many of her socially passive attributes, mercilessly plunges her. It is largely because their lack of control, impotence and passivity are experienced as humiliation that most of the narrators' passive creatures want ideally, like the narrators themselves, to appear – and, indeed, to *be* – 'masculine' and strong rather than 'feminine' and weak, to be the dominant partner in relationships or to be the supremely audacious criminal at the pinnacle of the underworld hierarchy. But, as a narrator's or character's potential to assert himself is fixed, being limited by the nature of his given, immutable personality, these options are not open to everyone.

Thus, as we will see in the following sections, although, in the narrators' vision, no one can assume control of fundamentally immutable aspects of their condition – like their

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33 Philip Thody, *Jean Genet: A Study of His Novels and Plays*, 1968, p.73. Significantly, Cocteau also called Genet a "janséniste-rigide" (Cocteau, *Le Passé défini*, p.318).

34 Thody, *Jean Genet*, p.95.

mortality, for example – the degree of social activity that it lies within an individual's given potential to attain will have a bearing on the degree to which he is able to assert a semblance of control and activity within external reality and therefore on the degree of dignity he can attempt to win for himself in the social realm. Whereas a supremely socially active character such as Querelle can assert a semblance of control by dominating other people – even to the extreme point of killing them[35] – this option is not available to those characters who are imprisoned within and humiliated by the immutability of their social passivity, such as Divine, Roger, Dédé, Seblon and, crucially, at least the first three narrators. In a sense, then, as we will see particularly in Part Three, it is the socially passive characters, the representatives of the passive narrators as they perceive themselves to be, who are most likely to encounter and feel imprisoned within immutable aspects of their condition as they manifest themselves at the level of their personality and their potential to assert themselves actively in a social environment.

What preoccupies the narrators and their more socially passive representatives most in this context, then, is that they may not have been born with the potential to achieve a destiny which is active and dignified: "Un homme est grand s'il a un grand destin" (NDF p.188). In this sense, at the centre of Genet's secular Jansenism is the question of whether, as it were, the 'grace' has been bestowed on an individual so that he will be able to make an active stand in external reality – after all, making a stand in one's imagination is possible for anyone – through which he might attempt to raise himself out of his impotence and take control of and transform his lack of freedom in relation to himself and immutable aspects of his existence.

This idea of characters pushing their potential to the limit even within the boundaries of their fundamental lack of freedom may indeed be expressed in terms of roles. For example, the 'born' criminal in Genet's prose texts may test out the limits of his predestined potential by attempting not to change his criminality itself, which, because past acts cannot be undone, he perceives to be inalterable, but to ascend the 'underworld' hierarchy towards the position of murderer who stands at its summit. But hierarchical mobility is also only possible *within* a more fundamental lack of freedom, and some characters and, indeed, narrators will inevitably find that predestination limits their potential for ascension because they do not have the sign of the elect, which the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* calls "le signe sacré des monstres" (NDF p.12) or "les signes de la puissance des ténèbres" (NDF p.30).

This sense of a predetermined potential or election finds a strong parallel with Nietzsche in whose works fatalism is much stronger than in Sartre's, where freedom is always fundamental. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche talks of the need for each individual to test out the limits of his own power and potential, and he emphasises that the

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35 Although, as we will see, his social activity can still change nothing in the fundamental immutability of death.

degree of self-assertion achieved will ultimately have meaning only inside the individual rather than in a social context:

> One must test oneself to see whether one is destined for independence and command; and one must do so at the proper time. One should not avoid one's tests, although they are perhaps the most dangerous game one could play and are in the end tests which are taken before ourselves and before no other judge.[36]

Zarathustra also warns against the deception inherent in attempting to overcome one's given destiny: "Do not will beyond your powers: there is an evil falsity about those who will beyond their powers."[37]

Although the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* apparently ascends from the 'rank' of prostitute to that of 'casseur', such mobility is only possible for those who have the given potential to achieve it and for whom it is therefore their destiny. Thus, Divine does not find she has the potential to be more than a prostitute, and if Mignon is able to be a pimp, and therefore hierarchically above a prostitute, this is only possible because he is "né pour être mac" (NDF p.31). Even the ability to speak 'argot', another sign of 'rank', is something which must be born or given (NDF p.39). The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* is fully aware that he is not fated to become a particularly active, audacious criminal – "je sens qu'il n'est pas dans mon destin d'être un grand bandit" (MR p.368) – and that the fundamental lack of freedom of his condition renders any attempt to reach beyond his given destiny in external reality pointless. As we will see later, the narrators' sense of their own predestined limited potential plays an important motivating role behind the issues and experiences they explore through the narrated world.

If a fatalistic sense of the immutable manifests itself in Genet's prose fiction not just narrowly in terms of identity-roles but in the much broader sense of limited individual potential for change and control, perhaps the central image of lack of freedom in these texts is imprisonment. However, as with social categories, rather than incarceration being itself the source of a narrator's or character's deprivation of freedom, it is perceived more as a symptom of a broader condition, a concrete manifestation of the lack of freedom which is experienced at a much more fundamental level. Thus, although, for the first two narrators in particular, incarceration may well render their awareness of their lack of freedom more acute, the element of immutability lies not so much in the incarceration itself as in what they perceive to be their inescapable predestination to a life spent in prison. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* does not regard his imprisonment simply as an experience begun at a specific period in his life but in terms of an inalienable part of his inner being that has

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36 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, 1990, p.70.

37 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, 1969, p.300.

always been present: "Je crois que cette vie je la portais en moi jusqu'alors secrète et qu'il me suffit d'être mis à son contact pour qu'elle me soit, de l'extérieur, révélée dans sa réalité" (NDF p.115). The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* also affirms the fatalism behind his life as a convict, explicitly using words such as fate and destiny:

> [...] la prison était décidément l'endroit fermé, l'univers restreint, mesuré, où je devrais définitivement vivre. C'est celui pour lequel je suis fait. Il est fait pour moi. C'est celui où je dois vivre car j'ai les organes qu'il faut pour y vivre, où me ramène toujours la fatalité qui m'a montré la courbe de mon destin dans les lettres gravées sur le mur: «M.A.V.».[38] (MR p.246)

Similarly, just as the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* calls the inmates of the 'colonie' where Culafroy is sent "enfants maudits" (NDF p.131), implying that their fate is decided and beyond their control, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* describes what he calls the "destin habituel" (MR p.314) which leads most juvenile 'colons' at Mettray inevitably to become adult convicts at Fontevrault, and he speaks of his own inability to prevent himself from fulfilling this destiny.

Of course, although incarceration is a central theme in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* – the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* maintains that he is writing in his cell and, in *Miracle de la rose*, not only the circumstances in which the narrator writes but also the environment of his narrated world are prisons – neither *Pompes funèbres* nor *Querelle de Brest* deals with imprisonment in literal terms. And yet, partly because this physical deprivation of liberty merely reveals and also exacerbates a more fundamental lack of freedom, the prison motif simply recurs at a more metaphorical level. The narrator of *Pompes funèbres* writes from the prison-like environment of a monastery; Erik and Riton become temporarily 'imprisoned' in a hide-out from the fighting; in *Querelle de Brest* Gil is forced effectively to incarcerate himself in a disused 'bagne' when he goes into hiding.

One area in which the idea of predestination in Genet's prose fiction verges on essentialism is in the narrators' portrait of inescapable aspects of their own or of characters' personalities. These do not amount to an individual identity – and do not, therefore, fill the 'vide intérieur' – but they are deemed to govern and predetermine behaviour in a way which only highlights the immutability of their condition. In this respect, the narrators' ideas are again closer to Nietzsche than to Sartre's Existentialism, in so far as Nietzsche also emphasises a fundamental lack of freedom, and proposes that it is not freedom but lack of it which forms the basis of the actions which individuals perform.

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38 As the narrator explains later in *Miracle de la rose*, 'M.A.V.' stands for "mort aux vaches". This piece of prison graffiti also appears as one of the inscriptions on the cell wall in the last image of *Un Chant d'amour*.

Lack of freedom is central to Nietzsche's philosophy.[39] In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche declares that there is "probability but no truth: appearance of freedom but no freedom".[40] In the same work, in a critique of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche posits that "man can be made accountable for nothing, not for his nature, nor for his motives, nor for his actions, nor for the effects he produces" on the grounds that "the error of accountability [...] rests on the error of freedom of will".[41] Later, he even goes so far as to suggest that "the theory of freedom of will is an invention of *ruling* classes."[42] Continuing his critique of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche goes on to state that:

> a feeling of displeasure after a deed [...] rests precisely on the erroneous presupposition that that deed need *not* have taken place of necessity. Thus: it is because man *regards* himself as free, not because he is free, that he feels remorse and pangs of conscience. [...] No one is accountable for his deeds, no one for his nature [...].[43]

It is in similar fashion that, in Genet's prose texts, the immutability of the human condition often manifests itself in the way the narrators describe themselves or characters as though their whole person were determined by inalterable aspects of their nature or personality – coupled with external circumstances – which are beyond their control. For example, we are told that Bulkaen was "un personnage tragique par son tempérament passionné, extrême, et il l'était par les circonstances de sa vie" (MR p.446). Some characters even feel that their own actions are beyond their control because they are being dictated by objects, in the way that Notre-Dame's murder of the old man is triggered by the necktie. As the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* comments, sometimes "les choses sont les instigateurs d'un acte" (NDF p.19). Just as no one can ascend higher than the rank which lies within his given potential, for most there will be aspects of their personalities which will always lie beyond their ability to change them. Thus, in Mettray, some of the 'colons' will raise themselves out of their initial femininity:

> Si les durs choisissaient leurs favoris parmi les plus beaux jeunots, tous ceux-ci ne sont pas destinés à rester femmes. Ils s'éveillent à la virilité et les hommes leur font une place à côté d'eux. (MR p.359)

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39 Indeed, as we will see later, the possible methods of transforming impotence within the immutability of the human condition into control and freedom which Genet's narrators explore are also strikingly similar to the response Nietzsche formulates in his own texts.

40 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, 1986, p.302.

41 Ibid., p.34.

42 Ibid., p.305.

43 Ibid., p.35. [The moral dimension of this aspect of determinism will be discussed at a later stage.]

But other characters, such as Divine, Seblon, and the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* turn out to be powerless to surmount their predetermined, intrinsic femininity and concomitant passivity.[44] As the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* admits, he knows that

> il serait vain de me donner du mal pour paraître fort et maître de moi, car ma folle nature apparaîtra toujours par mille fissures. Non, j'ai perdu d'avance. (MR p.327)

It is certain characters' experience of their insurmountable femininity and passivity in particular – traits which they share with the narrators – which, partly because of the social stigma which condemns these traits as weakness, marks their experience of their impotence within the immutable as acutely humiliating. Divine, for example, is unable to render herself more masculine, but equally unable to command respect or be taken seriously in her femininity. It is important to note, however, that having a feminine or passive nature and the experience of a fundamental impotence are not in themselves synonymous. The narrators' creatures are not all passive, indeed many, such as Erik and Querelle in particular, are extremely active and assertive. However, the degree to which a character is active in his behaviour or in relation to other people is ultimately only relative, and even the most socially active characters remain nonetheless imprisoned within the most fundamental aspects of their condition.

One of the most important predestined elements of the narrators' and the majority of their characters' personalities is their homosexuality. Some critics have suggested – presumably following Sartre's analysis of Genet and his works – that the narrators and characters choose their homosexuality as a means of intensifying their rebellion against social norms, and such critics therefore miss the extent to which homosexuality is presented in the prose texts as something which simply *is*. For Sartre, who clearly cannot admit Genet's essentialism into his own existentialist system, Genet's sexuality must be chosen: "On ne naît pas homosexuel ou normal: chacun devient l'un ou l'autre selon les accidents de son histoire et sa propre réaction à ces accidents" (SG p.94). As such, Genet's homosexuality, and particularly his passivity within his homosexuality, constitutes a further manifestation of and response to the 'crise originelle' in which Genet 'became' a thief: "Genet, l'objet par excellence, *se fera objet* dans les relations sexuelles" (SG p.48). Indeed, Sartre even goes on to make the outrageous and ridiculous statement that Genet's passivity in homoerotic acts is actually a re-enactment of the original crisis in which he was caught from behind: "surpris à voler *par derrière* [...] quoi d'étonnant, après cela, s'il se sent davantage objet par ses reins et sa croupe et s'il leur porte une sorte de culte sexuel?" (SG p.96). Such a theory is typical of Sartre's overall tendency in *Saint Genet* to impose

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44 This particular point will be examined in more detail in Part Three of this thesis.

existential significance on Genet's life and work which leads him, in this instance, to overlook the simple fact that, as McMahon puts it, "Jean Genet enjoys sexual activity and prefers to have it in the company of men".[45] Indeed, Genet himself planned to counter Sartre's view.[46]

Sartre's certainty that Genet's choice to be a homosexual must reflect his self-objectifying choice to be the thief the Other sees in him, and his determination to provide an ontological explanation for Genet's sexuality – "la quête de l'Etre va conduire Genet à l'homosexualité" (SG p.88) – lead him somewhat dangerously openly to reject Genet's own version of events particularly, because it is so crucial to Sartre's analysis, on this point of whether Genet's criminality or homosexuality came first:

> Il a même écrit que la pédérastie avait précédé en lui le vol qui n'en était qu'une conséquence. Mais nous ne pouvons le suivre dans cette voie. (SG p.94)

In the prose works themselves, if there is a link between criminality and homosexuality in so far as most of the narrators and characters in these texts are criminals and homosexuals who are marginalised by society on both counts, this link is never presented as the dual choice it has to be within the existentialist biographical model Sartre constructs in which "c'est tout un que de vouloir être *le* voleur ou de décider qu'on sera pédéraste" (SG p.95). If the narrators and characters 'choose' their sexuality in any sense, it is only in so far as they might will it *after* they have accepted it as a fatality. They recognise that they are powerless to change what has been predestined, even when, as in the case of Seblon, the immutability of their sexuality is intensely unwelcome. Indeed, as far as Divine is concerned, far from choosing the passivity of her homosexuality, at one stage she actively attempts to masculinise herself, but she fails precisely because her passivity is an inherent part of her nature over which she has no control.

In the prose fiction, the narrators' creatures either *are* homosexual, like the narrators themselves, or they are not and they either assume their sexuality as predestined and

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45 Joseph H. McMahon, *The Imagination of Jean Genet*, 1963, p.251.

46 When Genet was asked by Fichte to give his own theory of homosexuality, Genet clearly rejected all existing theories of the origin of homosexuality including Sartre's:
"Je n'en ai pas. J'en ai plusieurs. Plusieurs ont été élaborées. Aucune n'est satisfaisante, que ce soit la théorie oedipienne de Freud, que ce soit une théorie élaborée par les généticiens, que ce soit la théorie sartrienne à propos de moi dans un de ses livres. Selon lui, j'ai répondu d'une certaine façon, mais d'une façon libre, aux conditions sociales qui m'étaient faites, ça ne me satisfait pas non plus. Enfin, je ne sais pas. Je n'ai pas de théorie de l'homosexualité. [...] Chercher à savoir pourquoi ou même comment je suis devenu pédéraste et comment je l'ai su, pourquoi je le suis, c'est une amusette... C'est un peu comme si je cherchais à savoir pourquoi mes yeux ont une pigmentation verte." ('Entretien avec Hubert Fichte', p.173)
White tells us that Genet did plan to define his own vision of homosexuality, thereby negating Sartre's, in *La Mort*:
"Genet avait le projet d'élaborer, dans cet ouvrage, une théorie de l'homosexualité sensiblement différente de celle de Sartre. Alors que celui-ci concevait l'homosexualité comme un choix ou, pour le moins, comme un enjeu stratégique dans les relations entre l'individu et le monde, Genet n'y voyait qu'une malédiction - ou, pis encore, une sentence irrévocable." (FR pp.15-16)
Apart from a fragment, however, the work was never written.

immutable or they do not, but there is no question of changing their homosexual nature even for those characters, such as Gil, who make a play of fighting against it. When Querelle has sex with Nono, he is not choosing to be a homosexual but choosing – for complex reasons which will be discussed later – to take part in a homosexual act, which is not the same thing and does not alter his heterosexuality upon which the narrator insists. The characters' lack of control over their own sexuality, and particularly over their passivity or activity as sexual partners, is one more aspect of their experience which, in the narrators' presentation of them, highlights their fundamental lack of freedom.

White points out that Genet's treatment of homosexuality in his prose fiction as simply 'given' singles out his writing from his predecessors because he does not seek to present either "a plea for understanding" or "a 'defence' of homosexuality" and his works are "neither 'scientific' nor apologetic".[47] Indeed, Genet does not even counter society's condemnation of homosexuality in his works but rather appropriates it, presenting homoeroticism as, in White's words, "entirely evil",[48] a process which constitutes part of the characters' 'choice' to assume their given sexuality along with its social unacceptability rather than a free original choice to be homosexual. The homosexual characters in the narratives, like the narrators, simply are homosexual, and there is no attempt within the prose fiction to question this fact or to try to identify a cause or formulate an explanation.[49]

When we put all these disparate elements together, then, as the narrators put them together within their narratives, they add up to an overall presentation of human existence as a condition in which the given or pre-determined elements far outweigh the real choices, where possibilities are overshadowed by limitations, where the will is almost completely negated by immutability and predestination, and where the dignity of freedom appears to be all but crushed beneath the weight of the humiliation of passivity. Against this overall backdrop, any degree of control the narrators or their characters manage to attain or changes they effect are either superficial, illusory or, indeed, imaginary and alter little or nothing in their fundamental condition. No matter what they try to achieve – and it will be the

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47 White, *Genet*, p.172.

48 Ibid.

49 On this point, Thody is quite wrong to state that the lack of self-justification in Genet's prose texts amounts to a generalised condemnation of homosexuality and homosexual lifestyles. In his book on Genet, Thody proceeds from the premise that the presentation of homosexuality, criminality and evil in the prose fiction expresses Genet's disillusionment and is therefore fundamentally ironic, and that Genet consciously undermines his glorification of all that society condemns and therefore shares that very condemnation with society. Thody is clearly unable or unwilling to read the prose texts on their own terms and to separate his own obvious distaste from the way homosexuality is presented within the prose works themselves. His constant need to apply his own values and moral judgements to Genet's texts results in a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of central aspects of them. In his article of 1969, ominously entitled 'Jean Genet and the indefensibility of sexual deviation', commenting on Genet's characters Thody actually declares that, "if homosexuals are as Genet describes them, then society has the duty of defending itself from the crimes to which their activities give rise, and the right to use its laws to protect any young people against what cannot fail to be the disastrous consequences of their deviation from the norm" (p.72). Apart from the fact that such a conclusion clearly misses the key element of immutability that lies at the heart of the characters' experience of their sexuality as of many other aspects of their existence, this outburst is underpinned by an overt, virulent homophobia which not only clouds Thody's reading of the texts but which surely should have no place in serious criticism.

central aim of Parts Three and Four of this thesis to explore the mechanisms they do pursue in their attempt to alter their relationship to their existence – their experience of being alive remains characterised by immutability, and their relationship to that experience one of impotence. The narrators' presentation of the human condition in Genet's prose fiction is truly the portrait of an "inhumaine condition" (AAG p.41).

As I have already begun to indicate, the narrators' presentation of attempts to confront the immutability of the human condition, on whatever level it manifests itself, and their exploration of possible ways of transforming one's relationship to it into control will be examined in Parts Three and Four of this thesis. But before we move on to examine responses, we need to focus for a moment on the aspect of the human condition which renders the experience of the immutable most acute: powerlessness in the face of mortality and death.

CHAPTER THREE - DEATH AND MORTALITY

Death constitutes a principal obsession in Genet's texts, and yet, as I have already indicated, existing criticism has failed to take sufficient account of its centrality in his writing. White tells us that Genet's very first attempt at writing was, in a sense, prompted by the death of a childhood friend:

> When Solange died of tuberculosis, Genet, then aged twenty, wrote his first poem. It was addressed to the girl he'd been so close to ten years earlier. It was his first adult literary expression (the poem, unfortunately, is lost).[50]

Sartre also alludes to this first piece of writing, and yet he fails to find the event which acted as catalyst to Genet's self-expression at all significant. However, death and mortality clearly remained central obsessions in Genet's writing, as the proposed title of what was to be the major project of Genet's career, *La Mort*, surely emphasises. Death is certainly a primary preoccupation of the narrators in Genet's prose fiction, and, as the ultimate aspect of the human condition over which they have no control, being faced with the immutability of death and mortality constitutes for them the most acute experience of their fundamental impotence.

The characters in the narratives are hemmed in by mortality on all sides. Their external reality is permeated with dying and killing, with funerals and executions. They live and breathe in an atmosphere of mortality which envelops their experience like a shroud, just as the fog envelops Brest.[51] The narrator of *Pompes funèbres*, apparently identifying himself as *auteur fictif* also of the previous two novels, even comments on his own preoccupation with death:

> Écrire, c'est choisir l'un entre dix matériaux qui vous sont proposés. [...] Pourquoi suis-je limité dans mon choix et me vois-je dépeindre bientôt le troisième enterrement de chacun de mes trois livres? (PF 10)

Indeed, in *Pompes funèbres* the narrator's obsession is at its most intense, and the narrative he produces within it as a response to his bereavement constitutes his most sustained attempt yet to confront his inability to have control over death. The narrators' exploration of

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50 White, *Genet*, p.36.

51 It is perhaps pertinent to note that the four main works of prose fiction on which this thesis is focusing were all begun during the war and, as such, were themselves written during a period when death was literally in the air as both soldiers and civilians were falling victim to the war in their millions.

attempts to overcome the immutability of death and mortality will be explored in detail in Part Four of this thesis.

In Genet's prose fiction, life itself is insurmountably funereal since death is always near. The very setting or environment of each prose work is infused with mortality. The prison location, which constitutes the abode of the narrator of both *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* and also the location of the narrative of *Miracle de la rose*, is described as deathly in so far as no escape back into 'life' seems possible from it, and this idea is encapsulated in two lines from one of the songs from Fontevrault prison: "Son nom est Fontevrault / Ce qui veut dire tombeau..." (MR p.343). In *Pompes funèbres*, France has itself become a graveyard due to the war and the Occupation, and in *Querelle de Brest*, set in the port of the title, the narrator associates the sea with death through its association with murder in the very first line of his narrative: "L'idée de meurtre évoque souvent l'idée de mer, de marins" (QB p.203).

For most of the narrators and their characters, every experience either takes place within the shadow of death or it in some way represents a confrontation with death. Some are dying, others are bereaved, still others kill or are killed. They go to funerals, they fantasise about murder and murderers, they have sex with killers and executioners. But whatever either the narrators or their characters do, the fundamental immutability of death and mortality remains and they are powerless in the face of its omnipresence and omnipotence. Even Divine's attic room significantly overlooks a graveyard which it will not allow the occupant to ignore – "Sa grande fenêtre précipite les yeux (et les ravit) sur le petit cimetière de Montmartre" (NDF p.14) – and it therefore becomes "le grenier sur les morts" (NDF p.58), and Divine cannot help but carry this proximity of death, both figurative and literal, with her everywhere, as the inescapable awareness of mortality insidiously becomes the most dominant force in her life:

> Les rapports de Divine avec le cimetière: il avait pénétré dans son âme un peu à la manière dont certaines phrases pénètrent dans un texte, c'est-à-dire une lettre par-ci, une lettre par-là. Le cimetière en elle était présent au café, sur le boulevard, en tôle, sous les couvertures, dans les tasses. (NDF p.53)

The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* also talks of the intense horror which overcomes him at moments when he is most acutely aware of himself as "un cadavre poursuivi par le cadavre que je suis" (NDF p.116). The immutability of mortality lies at the heart of Genet's prose fiction as it does at the heart of life itself.

In the narratives, death is presented by the narrators as the final humiliation and as such it rules the narrators' and, by extension, their characters' lives and inspires them with horror and fear in their powerlessness before it. When Paulo is faced with possible death at the hands of Hitler in *Pompes funèbres*, the narrator tells us: "Ce qui s'imposa d'abord à lui,

ce ne fut pas la tristesse de perdre la vie, mais l'horreur d'entrer dans la mort, c'est-à-dire dans cette rigidité solennelle qui fait de vous dire avec respect: sa dépouille" (PF p.97). Part of the reason why mortality is experienced as a humiliation is because the waste of this death over which the characters have no control means that their lives are finally lived for nothing, and this is given graphic expression in *Pompes funèbres* in the cruel irony of Juliette's frighteningly practical and logical response to her impotence before the loss of her child:

> C'est embêtant que ça meure et qu'on doive les enterrer, les gosses. Est-ce qu'on ne pourrait pas en faire de la soupe? Ça se déferait assez bien dans le jus, ça donnerait du bouillon assez gras. (PF p.86)

The immutability of death is also humiliating in Genet because, whereas for Sartre death is the culmination of the individual's life in so far as it finally fixes the identity that the authentic existentialist hero has devoted his life to constructing, in Genet death is simply obliteration. When Divine is gone, far from her leaving a final image of herself, she is simply forgotten, even by her lover Mignon, as though she had never been:

> Son émotion en face du cercueil? Nulle. Il ne se souvenait plus de Divine. (NDF p.21)

On the one hand, death is as empty as the hollow self, since it does not finally transform the 'vide intérieur' into plenitude but is simply extinction. After Divine's death the narrator tells us:

> La chambre était vide. Vidée. La mort fait le vide autrement et mieux qu'une machine pneumatique. (NDF p.203)

Yet at the same time, death does bring a sense of fulfilment, but only in so far as it is the individual's only ultimate goal: "la mort [..] est la seule réalité qui nous comble" (NDF p.204). Divine spends the whole of her adult life trying to be absolutely something, "la Toute-Seule", "la Toute-Persécutée", "la Toute-Folle", "la Toute-Dévergondée", "la Toute-Froufrouteuse", la Toute-Éplorée". She even attempts the impossible for a mortal being, simply to be absolute, by declaring: "Je suis la Toute Toute" (NDF p.56). But eventually, she is not absolutely anything until she is absolutely dead: "la Toute-Morte" (NDF p.205).

No matter what they do, in the narrators' presentation of them the characters are always passive victims of death and mortality because, at the most fundamental level, although they may be able to confront the immutability of death by choosing how and when they die, and even by making this decision for other people, they cannot choose not to die or will there to be no death at all. In this sense their impotence will remain ultimately

insurmountable, in spite of the fact that, as Divine only fully realises at the end of her life, the individual – and society as a whole – may attempt to conceal the truth of the omnipresence and omnipotence of death: "Elle reconnut que la mort avait toujours été présente dans la vie, mais son visage symbolique caché par une espèce de moustaches qui en arrangeaient au goût du jour l'épouvantable réalité" (NDF p.202). Many of the narrators and their characters at some time undergo a crucial, involuntary experience which strips the disguise away and forces awareness upon them. For some, such as Divine, it is the experience of ageing and terminal illness, for others it may be bereavement, or wartime, or simply press coverage of murder cases. But one of the key experiences in Genet's prose texts which strips away many of the opportunities to mask death and reveals to the characters the inescapability of their mortality, is incarceration.

In the narratives, prison is often described as a grave, as Fontevrault is in *Miracle de la rose*, and the prison officers as "gardiens de tombeaux" (NDF p.165). The presence of the *condamnés à mort*, for whom the prison will quite literally become their grave, infuses each cell with an atmosphere of mortality to the point that the prison is regarded as a tomb, not just by those who know it will be their last resting place but by all those who fear that they may never be released. For the narrator of *Miracle de la rose*, who is risking 'la relègue', a life-sentence would be a living death-sentence: "Condamné à la relègue, la mort est au fond d'une vie prisonnière" (MR p.264). The "relégués" are "condamnés à mort pour toute leur vie" since they are inhabiting a world "sans issue que la mort" (MR p.255). But this is, in fact, the condition of all mortal beings, for although the world outside the prison walls is in one sense a "monde de liberté", the underlying truth is that its inhabitants are no more free than the 'lifers' to change their ultimate destiny, as Divine and various other characters discover to their horror.

Thus, in the first two narratives in particular, the narrators' experience of incarceration, even before they know whether or not they will receive a life sentence, is, by association and in anticipation, already intensely funereal. It is not so much, therefore, that prison is a metaphor for death in Genet's prose fiction, but rather that the experience of imprisonment intensifies the narrators' awareness of their more fundamental imprisonment within their mortality. If, then, we accept the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*'s indication that he is the *auteur fictif* of the narratives in at least the first three of Genet's works of prose fiction, it is possible to suggest that it is the funereal experience of imprisonment, intensified by being the passive victim of a bereavement, which render acute the narrators' awareness that their relationship to death and mortality, like their relationship to the whole of "cette inhumaine condition qui nous est imposée", is one of impotence. The ways in which this impotence in the face of the immutability of death is explored and confronted with a view to overcoming it within the narratives that Genet's narrators create, including *Querelle de Brest*, will be explored in detail in Part Four of this thesis.

PART THREE -
RESPONSES TO THE HUMAN CONDITION 1

INTRODUCTION

Having examined the way in which the narrators in Genet's prose fiction present their subjective portrait of the human condition and suggested the aspects of it which preoccupy them most, it will be the purpose of this Part to explore in detail the strategies that they employ in their attempts to formulate an adequate response to the immutability of this condition within and through their narratives. The narrators themselves pursue their exploration of possible ways of assuming control of or even transforming the immutable both in direct relation to themselves and their own experience, whether 'real' or fantasised, and through their creatures and representatives in the narrated world. Analysis of the various strategies and processes they exploit will therefore remain sensitive throughout to the narrative form within which and through which the narrators' speculation is expressed.

As we saw in the previous section, although Genet's prose texts do not present, as Malraux's do, an objective portrait of a clearly delineated philosophical system, the explicit presence of a series of narrators all of whom share strikingly similar speculative preoccupations does lend an undeniable continuity to the vision of the human condition presented in each text. Thus, while it is not my intention to reduce the spectrum of responses to the immutable which the narrators explore to a single formula, the following analysis will attempt to piece together the many constants and detectable patterns in the types of strategies they pursue through their narratives.

To this end, a preliminary chapter will be devoted to characterising the nature of the mechanism which underpins the paradoxical attempts to assert a degree of choice and control in the face of immutable aspect of the human condition which the narrators' present and pursue. For this purpose, I will be exploiting the striking parallel between this mechanism and Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*. The remaining analysis of the responses themselves and the ways in which they are expressed or achieved will then progress thematically, tracing a movement inwards from responses to inalterable aspects of one's condition which manifest themselves primarily in social contexts, such as abjection, social passivity and social marginalisation, to responses which are formulated and 'achieved' only in an imaginary and, indeed, aesthetic realm.

CHAPTER ONE - WILLING WITHIN THE IMMUTABLE, NIETZSCHEAN *AMOR FATI* AND AESTHETIC TRANSFORMATION

In Part Two of this thesis it was established that, in the narrators' presentation in their narratives of the human condition as they see it, the individual's relationship to the immutability of his condition is characterised by a fundamental impotence and lack of freedom. The narrators depict themselves and their characters as being trapped by fundamental aspects of themselves and their lived experience which they are powerless to change and over which they are unable to have full control. This fact does not, however, in itself prevent them from desiring to be masters of themselves and their fate, but it does render the possibilities for them to express a degree of freedom and gain a modicum of control extremely limited.

Commenting on Malraux's *La Condition humaine*, Jenkins affirms that Malraux tries "to argue for Will over Fatality within an overall structure arguing for Fatality over Will".[1] It is in similarly paradoxical fashion that the narrators in Genet's fiction also present attempts to assert choices and control in the face of the immutability of the human condition in the awareness that the very fixity of the human condition necessarily precludes any such choices and that ultimately it is only possible to will or assume a degree of control *within* the broader context of the immutable. For the narrators, the pre-determined aspects of one's condition, on whatever level they manifest themselves, cannot finally be changed in any meaningful way, but making a stand of any kind, however ultimately futile, is considered preferable to giving in to impotence. Hence, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* does not mind loving "les opprimés" as long as they are "debout dans la révolte" (MR p.430).

Since Destiny cannot be overcome, the narrators exploit a process of mental sleight-of-hand which allows them to explore at least possibilities of self-assertion within it. As the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* affirms, "chacun au moins une fois dans sa vie [...] veut à tout prix être plus roublard que le destin" (NDF p.172). Faced with the immutable, instead of trying to change the facts themselves the narrators, along with their fictional delegates, attempt rather to change their attitude to them, and instead of trying to control their condition they endeavour to control themselves within it and their relationship to it. What this process finally amounts to is a struggle which may manifest itself in external acts but for which the battlefield is principally the mind and imagination. The narrators confront their essential unfreedom, both in their own right and through their characters, by making their stand in the only realm in which their freedom is unlimited, and they take on the immutable, which denies them all meaningful weapons against it, in an internal arena in which they can at least deploy their "intérieure usine d'armes" (QB p.332).

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1 Jenkins, *André Malraux*, p.75.

For the most part, since impotence is such an all-pervasive aspect of the narrators' presentation of the immutability of the human condition, the only 'freedom' or possibility for control will simply be to use one's mind and imagination paradoxically to will the inevitable or even to will that which already *is* or which has already happened. This is where the most striking parallel with Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati* lies.

The idea of *amor fati* is first introduced by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* where it is presented as an attitude which will transform the agony of having to turn away from all that he is powerless to change into the more positive and dignified response of affirmation. He cannot alter the nature of reality, but what he can alter is his inner relationship to it, by willing himself to see all that is negative as positive:

> I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.[2]

Amor fati is the process which transforms chance into intention and the given into the chosen. Ideally, one should be able not just to will but actually to love everything that is as an expression of that willing. As Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*:

> My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it – all idealism is untruthfulness in the face of necessity – but to *love* it...[3]

Nietzsche's philosophy is a perpetual battle between willed acceptance and nihilism in a world from which Darwin had eradicated the hope, the meaning and the purpose of the metaphysical. Sometimes the battle is joyous, sometimes desperate, but it is always exhilarating for the reader who accompanies Nietzsche on his journey. *Amor fati* is used in this battle primarily as a means of self-overcoming – in the words of Zarathustra: "I teach you the Superman. Man is something that should be overcome"[4] – through which Nietzsche aims to overcome present suffering by transforming its necessity into something positive and even beneficial. The idea of self-overcoming is crucial as *amor fati* demands incomparable self-possession which can only be achieved through an intense inner struggle

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2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1974, p.223.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, 1979, p.68.

4 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.41.

not with the immutability of external reality but with oneself. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche emphasises the extreme difficulty of this struggle to will: "My taste [is] far from uttering a wholesale Yes: in general it dislikes saying Yes, it would rather say No, most of all it prefers to say nothing at all...".[5] *Amor fati* therefore constitutes a supreme act of defiance within the immutable, and the noblest man is the one who can say yes in the utmost adversity and negativity, and thereby, paradoxically, be in control of himself even within his fundamental impotence.

The most extreme formulation of *amor fati* is expressed in Nietzsche's idea of the Eternal Recurrence: the Superman would not only will things as they are but would will every single aspect of his life to the point of welcoming even their repetition for eternity. Nietzsche actually proposed the idea of the Eternal Recurrence as a serious scientific formulation of the cyclic movement of the universe, and, although he was appalled by the implications of this attempt to explain the universe, it also constituted his attempt to accept and will it as fully as possible. This cosmic *amor fati* would be his only way not to be crushed by his suffering and pessimism in a hollow universe devoid of metaphysical consolation. Thus, Zarathustra is "the laughing prophet",[6] he is "the advocate of life, the advocate of suffering, the advocate of the circle".[7] Although his willing, his *amor fati*, changes nothing in that which lies perpetually beyond his control, at least he thereby asserts the dignity of courage on the level of his inner self-assertion:

> Courage [...] is the best destroyer, courage that attacks: it destroys even death, for it says: 'Was *that* life? Well then! Once more!'[8]

Amor fati can only assert freedom within the broader context of lack of freedom, dignity within humiliation, and control within impotence, and as such it amounts to complicity with that which makes one suffer, and ultimately it represents an attempt to live a paradox. But even though willing may win a minor battle within the immutable while the war is inevitably lost, this poor victory is still a victory of sorts, even if it is fundamentally an internal, imaginary victory over oneself.

We find a process very similar to *amor fati* operating in Genet's prose texts. In the narrators' eyes, the only way not to be – or at least not to feel as though one is – the passive victim of circumstances or events which are totally and insurmountably beyond one's control is to turn one's will inwards and make of it a Nietzschean "creative will", and use it paradoxically to "will backwards", to declare with Zarathustra's Superman: "But I willed it

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5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, 1990, p.115.

6 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.305.

7 Ibid., p.233.

8 Ibid., p.178.

thus!".[9] A comment that Keith Botsford makes about Genet could easily – and perhaps more accurately – be applied to the narrators and many of their characters in his prose: "What he lacks is the humility of the man who has undergone an experience, and he has instead the arrogance of the man who has *willed* it."[10]

Whereas some critics maintain that Genet's characters have abdicated their will – Knapp, for example, states that "all the homosexuals depicted by Genet have given up or renounced their *wills*"[11] – I would counter that the mechanism they apply is rather more complex than simple renunciation, since, as a last resort, no matter how paradoxical the process may be, even their very will-lessness before immutability can be willed and an inner sense of control, however poor, derived from it. As the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* confirms, sometimes the only means to self-possession is through willed submission: "Le seul moyen d'éviter l'horreur de l'horreur est de s'abandonner à elle" (NDF p.34). Of course, *amor fati* cannot provide anything other than a purely imaginary solution to the immutable – as McMahon affirms, "the very existence of the need for fantasy is the result of failure; it is compensation for the distempers and disorders of existence but is in no way a meaningful resolution of them"[12] – but in the absence of concrete alternatives, when the facts are immutable and only one's attitude to them can be changed, the imagination is the only tool which could be effective.

For Genet's narrators, then, as for Nietzsche, "the will is a creator".[13] When the will is internalised it becomes a tool which can be used to transform not external reality itself but one's relationship to it, by positivising what *is* into something which can be 'loved' at least inside oneself. It is only by recognising and exploiting the fact that, as Zarathustra declares, "willing liberates"[14] that the will can be applied not just to achieve acceptance of what *is* but to create freedom within lack of freedom and power and control within impotence, even though they can ultimately only be asserted within the realm of one's mind. What is important is not concrete victories, which would not be attainable, but the victories achieved over oneself. Significantly, Nietzsche's definition of freedom is the following:

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9 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.163. Although, as I indicated earlier, I am not suggesting any direct influence of Nietzsche's thought on Genet's prose fiction, it is nonetheless worth noting that Zarathustra is proposing the ideal attributes and attitudes of the Übermensch, and it was precisely the idea of the Superman which constituted one of the two key concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy that Genet told Barbezat he found particularly pertinent to his own thought. See *Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat*, p.261.

10 Botsford, 'Jean Genêt', pp.91-92.

11 Knapp, *Jean Genet*, p.26.

12 McMahon, *The Imagination of Jean Genet*, p.95.

13 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.162.

14 Ibid., p.111.

> *My conception of freedom.* – The value of a thing sometimes lies not in what one attains with it, but in what one pays for it – what it *costs* us.[15]

By a similar process of *amor fati*, then, the narrators in Genet's early prose works, and certain of their fictional representatives, appear to 'overcome' the immutable by gaining control not over external reality but over reality internalised. The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* affirms that, "je ne vis pas un seul instant sur terre qu'en même temps je ne le vive dans mon domaine secret" (MR p.247), and later he states: "Mais si elle est sans espoir extérieur, notre vie tourne ses désirs à l'intérieur d'elle-même" (MR p.300). Just as this process comes naturally to the child – the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* states that, "l'enfant est le re-créateur du ciel et de la terre" (NDF p.75) – the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* is sure it can still work for him as an adult. All he has to do to assert his will over the immutable is to take the reels of film of external reality and project them onto his "écran secret" (MR p.314).[16] The narrators' construction of a fantasised narrative in each of the prose texts can therefore be regarded as an aesthetic manifestation of their endeavour to pursue this mechanism of imaginary willing in their relationship to the imaginary narrated world.

Indeed, Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati* is, at root, an aesthetic response to existence. The idea of a willed, aesthetic validation of existence was central to his thought right from *The Birth of Tragedy* in which he asserts his belief that it is only through aesthetic creativity that the world can be willed by transforming it into something worthy of affirmation:

> In the consciousness of the truth he has perceived, man now sees everywhere only the awfulness or the absurdity of existence [...]. Here, in this extremest danger of the will, *art* approaches, as a saving and healing enchantress; she alone is able to transform these nauseating reflections on the awfulness or absurdity of existence into representations wherewith it is possible to live.[17]

It is a process of *amor fati*, by which all that is negative is transformed into something positive which can be loved not in reality but in the imagination, that lies at the heart of one of the most striking characteristics of the narrators' aesthetic pursuits: the poetic, almost Baudelairean[18] way they transform the ugly into the beautiful. It is in precisely these terms that, in a passage rather inexplicably cut from the *Oeuvres complètes* edition, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* describes his conception of aesthetics:

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15 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p.102.

16 As we will see later, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* does this almost literally when he transforms his relationship to the action he is watching on the cinema screen by reinterpreting it on his own 'inner screen'.

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism*, 1923, p.62.

18 According to Dichy and Fouché, Genet read Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* when he was only fourteen years old (Dichy and Fouché, *Jean Genet: Essai de chronologie*, p.89).

> Le poète s'occupe du mal. C'est son rôle de voir la beauté qui s'y trouve, de l'en extraire (ou d'y mettre celle qu'il désire, par orgueil?) et de l'utiliser. (PF L'Imaginaire p.190)

Rather like Winnie in Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours*, the narrators in Genet's prose fiction use words to fabricate an aesthetic acceptance, positivisation and 'love' of what is. As the narrator of *Journal du voleur* also declares: "Ma victoire est verbale" (JV p.65).

The way in which the narrators and many of their creatures will the immutable and transform the inescapable muck of their condition into gold,[19] then, may not always be artistic as such but it is always aesthetic in the broadest sense. In *Pompes funèbres*, when Pierrot asserts his will in order to transform the fact that he has mistakenly put a worm into his mouth into an act of choice over which he is in control, the narrator defines this act of willing explicitly as a poetic act: "Cette volonté fut sa première attitude de poète, que l'orgueil dirige" (PF p.78). In Genet's fiction, the effort of willing is poetic just as poetry, understood in the broadest sense, is itself the product of an inner struggle to will, and the concept of pride is central to them both as it is to the whole process of *amor fati*. In the words of the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*:

> La poésie est une vision du monde obtenue par un effort, quelquefois épuisant, de la volonté tendue, arc-boutée. La poésie est volontaire. Elle n'est pas un abandon, une entrée libre et gratuite par les sens [...]. (NDF p.144)

In the narratives, where either a narrator or one of his characters is faced with immutable aspects of his condition, he may not be able actually to change them, but what he can do is will them by transforming and positivising an internalised version of reality, since the imagination has the unique power to metamorphose all that it touches in a realm in which nothing is immutable and over which the 'poet' can have total control. Transformation is therefore not an attempt to alter reality but to alter one's relationship to it by altering one's perception of it inside oneself. The concept of *amor fati* itself does not simply mean accepting what *is* but loving it to the point of transforming all 'given' ugliness into chosen beauty. Indeed, the concept of beauty is itself doubly linked to *amor fati* in so far as beauty is not just in the eyes of the beholder who wills himself to see it but also emanates from those who display in external acts of self-assertion their inner self-overcoming and self-possession. When the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* admires the beauty he sees in a more active criminal than himself he asks, "que pourrais-je commettre pour être à la hauteur de sa beauté?" (NDF p.28), and, similarly, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* does

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19 On Christmas Day 1882, in a letter to Overbeck, Nietzsche wrote: "If I cannot find the magic formula to turn all this – muck to *gold*, I am lost" (R.J.Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy*, 1965, p.185).

not define beauty as an objective value or even primarily as a physical attribute but in terms of audacity and freedom: "L'homme est beau, quand il se délivre" (PF p.127).

There are many examples of what we might call 'aesthetic transformation' in the prose texts by which the narrators or their fictional representatives alter their relationship to what *is* and 'love' the immutable by transforming the muck into gold at least in their imagination. By willing in his imagination, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* carpets the stone floor of his cell just as the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* rides round the prison on horseback, transforms his cell into a room in a palace and imagines his straw mattress to be a bed adorned with jewels, ivory and silk (MR p.312), and the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* transforms a coffin into a matchbox so that he can take control of his inescapable bereavement by holding his dead lover in his pocket. Similarly, the young Culafroy is said to transform the sheets on the washing line into a ghostly labyrinth and his life into a ballet performed in its corridors (NDF pp.93-94), and then, as an adult, on one occasion Divine changes the humiliation of her arrest into the dignity of martyrdom by transforming her arresting officers into "les Saintes Femmes qui m'essuyaient la face" (NDF p.48).

Aesthetic transformation is often expressed through language, and, again, not only by the artist-narrators but also by their characters. For example, Mignon applies his imagination through language to transform his farts into pearls – "S'il dit: «Je lâche une perle» ou «Une perlouze a tombé», il veut dire qu'il a pété d'une certaine façon" (NDF p.31) – and transforms his need to defecate into a more pleasant if amusing image with the phrase, "J'ai le cigare sur le bord des lèvres" (NDF p.32). Indeed, in order to will and transform the immutable, language itself can be actively appropriated and dominated. As the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* asserts in words that echo *Alice in Wonderland*, "les mots ont le sens qu'on leur donne" (MR p.346). Redefining the language with which an experience is expressed can become in itself a way of redefining and thereby taking control of that experience. Words become the aesthetic tool which the imagination uses to control reality – "tout ce que je viens de dire l'est par des mots, plats ou lumineux" (MR p.287) – and the inner process of *amor fati* is realised aesthetically as poeticisation. As the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* explains: "Dans un poème, les mots habituels sont déplacés et replacés de telle sorte qu'à leur sens courant s'en ajoute un autre: la signification poétique" (MR p.372).

A good deal of critical attention has, not surprisingly, been devoted to the process of aesthetic transformation which is such a prominent feature of Genet's prose fiction. This process is often referred to in terms of poetic alchemy, particularly in the study offered by Barbara Gerber, and, indeed, the 'auteur fictif' of *Pompes funèbres* does himself refer to his total creative freedom in terms of "sorcellerie" (PF p.43), a term which perhaps echoes Baudelaire's "sorcellerie évocatoire". However, to use the term alchemy to describe the process of poetic transformation as it is utilised in these texts runs the risk of misrepresenting the subtlety of the *amor fati* mechanism operating within them. The crucial

difference between the idea of alchemy and the process of transformation as a form of willing which takes place in Genet's fiction is that, whereas the alchemist attempts to bring about the actual physical transmutation of base metals into gold, Genet's narrators do not attempt to metamorphose the ugly into the beautiful in any physical sense but to transform their inner attitude to it, so that they might see the ugly as the beautiful in their minds, thereby transforming it into something they can 'love'. The alchemist tries actually to change one thing into another in external reality, but Genet's narrators do not attempt to alter the immutable but only to take control of what is not immutable, their inner relationship to it.

Thus, when one of the narrators attempts to transform muck into gold, either directly or through one of his fictional delegates, this transformation of the immutable can only take place in his mind, where the given is internalised and poeticised, while, in external reality, the muck still remains immutably muck. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* is entirely lucid about this:

> 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. (NDF p.63)

By the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s own definition, poetry does not metamorphose reality but is the meeting point between two 'realities': "la poésie est la rupture (ou plutôt la rencontre au point de rupture) du visible et de l'invisible" (NDF p.188). Poetry happens when, as it were, external reality is met by internalised reality. To respond to external reality in a 'poetic' way is to see it with one's "regard intérieur" (PF p.44) and then to transform it with what the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* calls "un truquage de l'orgueil que l'on nomme l'art" (PF L'Imaginaire p.217).

Because aesthetic transformation, as a poetic form of *amor fati*, is essentially an imaginary response to what *is*, whereas the alchemist only needs to perform his magic once, the poet must perpetually re-assert his willed transformation of the immutable. Nietzsche's Zarathustra does not propose *amor fati* as a simple one-step solution to the human condition but illustrates himself how *amor fati* can be applied as an attempt at achieving affirmation over negation which must be sustained over a lifetime. In Genet's prose fiction, the external reality of what *is* is always present, underpinning the efforts of the imagination to transform it. As Sartre comments in *Saint Genet*, the reader is as aware of this as the narrator:

> Genet nous dénie toute jouissance: le diamant qu'il nous offre, il faut le chercher dans un crachat; plus ses feux nous attirent, plus la salive nous répugne; si le joyau nous fascine, nous ne pouvons oublier que notre main va toucher une substance ignoble. (SG p.434)

Indeed, the effort required on the part of a narrator – or, indeed, a character – to sustain his willed transformation of what *is* is an integral part of the imaginary process of *amor fati*, and therefore, where a narrator manages to assert that immutable ugliness is in fact beauty, he is not, as Thody maintains, merging opposite concepts. Thody states that, in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*,

> [Genet] offers not only an example of how ugliness is transformed into beauty but also an analysis of why this should sometimes happen: it is another elaboration of the Pascalian idea that '*les extrêmes se touchent*', this time with Genet's favourite dialectical notion of a quality reaching such a degree of intensity that it becomes its opposite.[20]

In fact, throughout Genet's prose fiction, where a process of *amor fati* can be detected, quite the reverse is taking place. It is vital to the process that the two concepts remain fundamentally opposite since otherwise no self-overcoming has been achieved through willing the transformation.

Thus, although the realm of the imagination provides the poet with unlimited freedom within its realm, there are times when the frustration that it cannot actually change or control external reality overflows. Hence, when, for example, the 'reality' of Bulkaen continues to refuse to correspond to the narrator's inner ideal vision of him, the narrator's fundamental impotence before the immutable explodes into violence: "Et, tout à coup, je fus quelque chose comme un dieu qui n'en peut plus des insultes des hommes, ni de leur arrogance, et je cognai" (MR p.404). But the narrator makes no real attempt to gloss or romanticise the sordidness or misery to the extent of trying to fool either himself or the reader. As Coe comments about the narrator of *Miracle de la rose*: "If he has one foot in the world of the Sacred, he none the less keeps the other firmly planted on the soil of the Profane",[21] and the narrator himself reveals quite explicitly his lucidity beneath the fantasy transformation:

> Dévêtue de ses ornements sacrés, je vois nue la prison, et sa nudité est cruelle. Les détenus ne sont que de pauvres gars aux dents rongées par le scorbut, courbés par la maladie, crachant, crachotant, toussant. (MR p.246)

However, when a narrator does reveal his lucidity about the immutable nature of external reality, Thody is quite wrong to suggest that this constitutes a jump "from a glorification to a debunking of crime"[22] and therefore undermines the validity of his process of aesthetic transformation of what *is*. In his determination to read Genet's prose fiction as

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20 Thody, *Jean Genet*, p.100.

21 Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.70.

22 Thody, *Jean Genet*, p.82.

an ironic poeticisation of the true sordidness of criminality and homosexuality, Thody misses the complexity of the willing and transforming mechanism which can only be understood at the level of the way in which it is utilised by the narrators and, indeed, certain of their characters within the texts themselves. As Henderson also comments: "Fiction and reality collide in Genet's text to prevent the kind of recourse Thody has to the author's intentions."[23]

Far from the 'truth' undermining its own transformation, because the fundamental aim of transformation is not to transform the 'truth' itself but one's relationship to it, the 'truth' is, in fact, the very object which is willed precisely by willing a positivised version of it through the transformative process. Each of the narrators takes an immutable aspect of his external reality as his starting point – the narrators of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* attempt to come to terms with their incarceration, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* with his bereavement, and the narrator of *Querelle de Brest*, although in a far less personal way, is nonetheless exploring personal preoccupations with murder and homosexuality – and constructs a narrative in which he transforms that reality, just as he portrays fictional representatives who will and transform aspects of their own condition as they encounter them within the narrated world. But, crucially, these aspects of lived reality are not poeticised in order to pretend to cover the truth up – as Cixous also maintains, "à aucun moment [Genet] ne fait passer de l'imaginaire pour de la réalité"[24] – but with the opposite aim of attempting to will it. Indeed, even when, as the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* tells us, all the convicts are glorifying their lives, and "chacun raconte de fausses aventures où il a le rôle du héros", they never let transformation become escapism and lose touch with their own reality:

> L'imagination, quand elle est si forte, risque de faire perdre de vue les dangers de la vie réelle de la situation du détenu. Elle lui masque la réalité, et je ne sais s'il a peur de tomber au fond de l'imagination jusqu'à devenir soi-même un être imaginaire, ou s'il craint de se choquer au réel. Mais quand il sent l'imagination le gagner trop, l'envahir, il passe en revue les périls vrais qu'il court et, pour se rassurer, il les énonce à haute voix. (MR p.257)

Transformation is not evasion, since escapism would undermine the process of *amor fati* as it would constitute a final relinquishment of control rather than its assertion.

External reality is willed and brought under control through its transformation even in *Miracle de la rose* in which the narrator claims that he only sought poetic transformation as a youth in Mettray but no longer as an adult in prison: "Mon enfance était morte et, avec elle,

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23 Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', p.89.

24 'Entretien avec Hélène Cixous', *Masque*, 1981/82, p.60.

en moi, les puissances poétiques" (MR p.240). He also claims that he no longer wishes to glorify convicts into heroes but only to expose the sordid reality beneath his fantasies:

> Ils ne sont plus que l'outrageante caricature des beaux criminels que j'y voyais quand j'avais vingt ans et, de ce qu'ils sont devenus, je ne dévoilerai jamais assez les tares, les laideurs, afin de me venger du mal qu'ils m'ont fait, de l'ennui que m'a causé le voisinage de leur inégalable bêtise. (MR p.246)

However, although such statements lead Thody to the conclusion that *Miracle de la rose*, like *L'Enfant criminel*, should be read as, "an indictment of the French prison and reformatory service, and a protest against the cruelty which it creates",[25] the narrator's apparent project to reveal the truth is perpetually superseded by his continuing need to transform the humiliating negatives of his existence into chosen positives. This continuing desire finds expression in the way the narrator internalises the 'reality' of both Bulkaen and Harcamone in order to transform them both into an image of them over which the narrator himself has control. Indeed, far from the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* rejecting as an adult the process of poetic transformation utilised in his youth, the whole *raison d'être* of the Fontevrault-Mettray axis in *Miracle de la rose* is precisely that the narrator conjures up Mettray – and not, crucially, as a result of Proustian involuntary memory but through the effort of his will – in an attempt to regain his former ability to transform his condition in his mind.

Thus, Nietzschean *amor fati* and aesthetic transformation are inextricably linked in Genet's prose fiction in so far as the narrators, along with some of their representatives in the narrated world, transform the negative aspects of their condition into poetic positives as a means of willing and even 'loving' them. Because it is not possible to alter the immutable in external reality, they use their imagination to transform the ugly into the beautiful and the muck into gold in their minds, and in so doing they alter at least their inner relationship to the immutable, thereby taking control of their condition not so much in the face of it as within it.

Before moving on to examine in greater detail the narrators' exploration of attempts to will and transform immutable aspects of the human condition through an aesthetic form of *amor fati*, it is important first of all to clarify briefly the way in which Sartre describes a similar mechanism in *Saint Genet* and any clear differences between Sartre's interpretation and a more Nietzschean reading.[26]

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25 Thody, *Jean Genet*, p.83.

26 Sartre does himself actually identify a parallel between Genet and Nietzsche (SG pp.385-90). However, although Sartre devotes several pages to explaining Nietzsche, he does not attempt any explicit comparison between the two thinkers. He therefore misses the opportunity to explore deep and striking similarities which remain to be fully examined.

In *Saint Genet*, Sartre characterises the process by which the oppressed, such as Genet, might will their condition with the phrase "vouloir ce qui est" (SG p.72),[27] and he identifies it as a Cartesian approach to external reality: "les opprimés tiennent compte de la situation réelle, ils visent, comme le conseille Descartes, à se changer eux-mêmes plutôt que l'univers" (SG p.69). Sartre also makes the direct link between willing, where there is no other immediate choice, that which *is* and asserting a personal sense of dignity. This is the dignity of a revolt which does nothing to alter one's actual situation but which is constructed within the confines of passivity: "La dignité fait de la passivité un défi et présente l'inertie comme une révolte active" (SG p.69). Sartre calls this victory which asserts itself even within defeat, "qui perd gagne" (SG p.83).

Where the main difference lies between Sartre's conception of Genet's "révolte passive" (SG p.70) and the narrators' presentation of responses to the human condition in Genet's texts,[28] is in the fact that, as we have already seen, for the narrators, the individual is imprisoned within a sense of the immutable which is more fundamental and insurmountable than Sartre's philosophy of existential freedom could possibly accept. And as I indicated earlier, Genet's 'thought' is more Nietzschean than Sartrean on precisely this point that Nietzsche's vision of the human condition, along with the response to it which he advocates, are built on a foundation of lack of freedom, predestination and fatalism which are absent as fundamental concepts from Sartre's philosophy but everywhere present in Genet's fiction. Indeed, Claude Elsen, writing as early as 1949, is quite adamant even that Genet's assumption of his homosexuality, which for Sartre must be a further chosen response to the 'crise originelle', was clearly a question of Nietzschean willing after the event rather than of conscious Sartrean choice:

> «Proust, écrit Sartre, a montré la pédérastie comme un destin; Genêt la revendique comme choix.» Sans doute. Mais revendiquer une fatalité n'a jamais suffi à la transformer en choix, et aux conclusions un peu hâtives de la dialectique sartrienne, on peut préférer le plus modeste *amor fati* de Nietzsche. Car, en l'occurrence, c'est bien d'une manière de fatum qu'il s'agit.
> [...] ce que fait Genêt n'est rien autre que camoufler en liberté un destin et un comportement à l'origine étroitement déterminés.[29]

The process of willing within the immutable in the prose texts is also closer to Nietzschean *amor fati* than Sartre's explanation of "vouloir ce qui est" would suggest in so

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27 In *Glas*, Derrida also identifies a similar process, which he describes in the phrase "on ne garde que ce qu'on perd" (GL p.289). Much of Derrida's exploration of this concept is related specifically to the generation of the text, but where he does examine the way in which it is presented as a theme within the texts themselves, his ideas will be commented upon at the appropriate point of my own analysis.

28 It is necessary always to bear in mind that Sartre's analysis focuses on Genet himself rather than on his texts, and that the way in which he uses the texts primarily for what they might reveal about Genet's own development clearly prevents him from commenting on them on their own terms.

29 Claude Elsen, 'Les masques d'Uranus', 1949, pp.1170, 1174.

far as, for Sartre, Genet 'wills what is' – he endeavours to *be* the thief the Other sees in him – only as a temporary response to the initial limitations apparently placed upon his freedom by the weight of social conditioning, but ultimately Genet will not simply accept this 'essence' but, through writing, he will seize the responsibility for his own self-construction. In Genet's fiction, however, as in Nietzsche, the only possibility is to will what is because there *is* no alternative.

Moreover, the narrow focus of Sartre's approach to Genet leads him to restrict his analysis of the idea of "vouloir ce qui est" – as he does much of his analysis of the major themes in Genet – principally to the question of social identity and Genet's response to the 'crise originelle'. Sartre therefore neither acknowledges nor examines the breadth of the spectrum of responses to the immutability of the human condition which the narrators explore in their narratives beyond the rather limited question of ontology. Whereas Sartre maintains that Genet's prime objective is to *be* – "sa vie ne sera qu'une aventure ontologique" (SG p.78) – it is the contention of this thesis that the prime objective of the narrators in Genet's prose texts and, by extension, of some of their main fictional delegates, is, like Nietzsche, not to *be*, but to transform their impotence into willing and control.

Now that the nature of the mechanism through which the immutable is willed and transformed has been clarified, it will be the aim of the following four chapters to examine in detail the manner and circumstances in which a process of *amor fati* is applied in the texts themselves, both by the narrators and many of their characters and also by the narrators through their characters and the narrated world. This analysis will broadly trace a movement, as it were, from external reality to an inner reality, first of all examining the narrators' exploration of ways in which immutable aspects of the human condition which are manifested in life in society might be willed and transformed, viewed from a perspective of responses to abjection and to the individual's position in relation to a sexual partner within a couple. The analysis will then begin to move 'inwards' as it explores the way in which the solitude of social marginalisation might be willed as chosen withdrawal not only from society but also from external reality, finally devoting a chapter to the narrators' completely internalised process of constructing aesthetic self-sufficiency and self-creation.

CHAPTER TWO - ACCEPTING AND WILLING THE IMMUTABILITY OF ABJECTION

As I have already suggested, the actual ways in which *amor fati* – responding to the immutable by willing the given and choosing the inalterable – manifests itself in Genet's early prose fiction are many and varied. Some figures in the narrators' narratives, including the narrators themselves, do confront their condition at the most fundamental level. For example, the narrator of *Journal du voleur* wills the immutable by welcoming the cruelty of the elements themselves – "Je refusai de leur dénier toute cruauté, au contraire, je les félicitai d'en posséder tant, je les flattai" – in an attitude which amounts to "complicité avec la nature" (JV p.79). But, for the most part, the narrators present either themselves or certain of their characters as being aware of the immutability of aspects of their condition most acutely on the level of their day-to-day lived experience, as it manifests itself to them through the inescapable abjection of their social misery. But rather than simply submit to this indignity involuntarily, they attempt, with what the narrator of *Journal du voleur* calls "l'acharnement volontaire des désespérés" (JV p.30), to achieve a sense of control within this aspect of their immutable condition by assuming their social humiliation as fully chosen, by resolving to regard as positive what society finds contemptible in themselves and their lives, and even by deepening their abjection in order further to reinforce the degree to which it is willed.[30]

Divine is weak, socially passive, feminine, humble, easy to exploit, somewhat pathetic. These are the abject elements of her immutable personality which predetermine her social role of male prostitute and transvestite, the upper limit of her given social potential. Her life is described as a "débâcle" (NDF p.59), of which abjection and vulgarity are essential, inalterable constituents, and the future holds nothing but a "destin misérable" (NDF p.188).

In the narrator's eyes, Divine cannot be otherwise and therefore neither can her life and her social existence, but rather than simply give in to her impotence within her immutable condition, through a process of *amor fati* she can transform it into at least a semblance of free choice. Her only possible response to these given elements over which she has no control is to turn inwards and control at least her relationship to them. Divine's response to the immutability of her abjection, then, is to will it inside herself, to transform the given into the chosen through *amor fati*. The vulgarity of her life and her whole being has been imposed upon her – "la vie la mette toujours en posture vulgaire, au contact de toutes

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30 Later, Genet further explores this process of willing social abjection in *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents*, adding the political dimension of the characters becoming martyrs to racial and colonial oppression.

les crasses" – and so, in the absence of an alternative, she decides to love her vulgarity, "elle chérit la vulgarité" (NDF p.26).

The immutability of Divine's personality traits manifests itself externally in inalterable physical attributes:

> Tout en Divine est mou. [...] Elle est celle qui est molle. C'est-à-dire dont le caractère est mou, les joues molles, la langue molle, la verge souple. (NDF p.107)

She cannot alter her 'softness' either externally or internally, so instead she wills what she cannot even begin to explain and thereby attempts to assume her condition absolutely: "L'explication fuit Divine, qui ne songe plus que ceci: «Je suis la Toute-Molle.»" (NDF p.108). Language is just one of the means Divine utilises in order to 'choose' what she has become.[31] Since her inner, given personality manifests itself in outer, physical attributes, Divine attempts to take control of her appearance in order thereby also to take control of what is inside her – or, at the very least, to appear to do so, as even an outer show of having overcome her impotence would be better than not asserting herself at all. Thus, she wills her immutable femininity as completely as possible by defining not her sex, which she cannot change, but her gender at least as 'woman',[32] and she expresses her desired control and self-possession outwardly by channelling it into a willed positive attitude which she literally wears like a mask, reinforcing it with the material trappings of her appearance:

> Ses yeux chantent malgré leur désespoir et leur mélodie passe des yeux aux dents qu'elle rend vivantes, et des dents à tous ses gestes, à ses moindres actes, et sorti des yeux, c'est ce charme qui, de vague en vague, se déplie jusqu'à ses pieds nus. (NDF p.25)

The much quoted episode in which Divine's tiara falls off in public represents a key example of the way that Divine attempts to transform the humiliation of ridicule into dignity through an outward display of self-possession while the real battle is fought, and any victory won, inside herself:

> De sa bouche ouverte, elle arrache son dentier, le pose sur son crâne et, le coeur dans la gorge mais victorieuse, elle s'écrie d'une voix changée, et les lèvres rentrées dans la bouche:

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31 The subtitle of Nietzsche's final text, *Ecce Homo*, is 'How One Becomes What One Is'.

32 The narrator actually uses Divine to problematise gender oppositions, revealing the purely arbitrary and constructed nature of gender categories beyond biological distinctions between the sexes by deliberately blurring them together: "Je vous parlerai de Divine, au gré de mon humeur mêlant le masculin au féminin" (NDF p.24). This links in with the hollowness of identity throughout Genet's prose fiction, which is epitomised in relation to gender by the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s declaration: "Je raffole des travestis" (NDF p.140).

> — Eh bien, merde, mesdames, je serai reine quand même. (NDF p.119)

Divine makes sure, then, that outwardly at least she is self-assured, indifferent to judgement and condemnation, and that her personality appears to be not given and immutable but chosen. She cannot avoid the inevitable insults that go with the external, socially contemptible manifestation of her inner reality, so she welcomes them by insulting herself first: "Divine, s'intitulant elle-même une vieille putain putassière, ne faisait que prévenir les moqueries et les injures" (NDF p.73). This strategy in particular has quite clearly been projected onto Divine by the narrator, who, as we know, has set up Divine as his imaginary representative: "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 [...]" (NDF p.24). Just a few pages before, the narrator was speaking of himself when he described exactly the same process through which he takes control of the inevitable by transforming his relationship to the humiliation of his abjection from impotent victim to instigator rather than trying to perform the impossible task of actually changing himself :

> Que j'annonce que je suis une vieille pute, personne ne peut surenchérir, je décourage l'insulte. On ne peut même plus me cracher à la figure. (NDF p.59)

In *Querelle de Brest*, Gil uses a similar strategy to will his intense shame when he is publicly ridiculed through jokes about his sexuality. Having finally decided to "vivre dans la honte" (QB p.279), he transforms his passivity as victim into active control, assuming his humiliation fully and thereby attempting to turn the tables on his persecutors precisely by transforming his own relationship to the situation:

> — Tu m'enculerais, toi? Et bien vas-y, te dégonfles pas! [...] Allez-y! Ça vous plaît de savoir que j'ai des hémorroïdes, alors allez-y! Tapez dedans! Foncez dans la merde! [...] T'as jamais pu m'enculer. Et c'est ça qui te travaille. (QB L'Imaginaire pp.90-91)

In each of these cases, no matter what strategies the narrator or the characters employ, externally the outcome is the same: the insult or ridicule still takes place and Divine, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and Gil have achieved nothing more than, as it were, cutting off their nose to spite their face. But internally, in the realm of their imagination, the only realm in which the immutable can be transcended, at least the indignity of passivity within abjection has been transmuted into the semblance of a more dignified activity. Indeed, to avoid the humiliation of receiving condemnation passively, Divine even goes one step further and makes her life-style reply only to her own morality which she constructs inside herself. By internalising her condition, she can even diffuse

God's potential damnation of her by willing it in her mind: "Divine fit de ses amours un dieu au-dessus de Dieu, de Jésus et de la Sainte Vierge, auquel ils se soumettaient comme tout le monde" (NDF p.80).

At its most extreme, Divine's innate and immutable weakness becomes masochism, which she experiences as "le besoin d'être soumise à une domination brutale" (NDF p.88), but through *amor fati* even this masochism inherent in her abjection can be fully assumed by willing it to the limit. When she not only loses Gorgui to Notre-Dame but, to her utter humiliation, becomes an outcast even within her own *ménage à trois*, it takes a supreme effort of will and self-overcoming to choose and even deepen this indignity, to be a willed martyr to it. An image used to describe Divine lighting each of their cigarettes is placed, as though insignificant, in parenthesis, and yet it neatly sums up her response: "elle met le feu à son propre bûcher, chaque fois" (NDF p.137). She wills this situation, to which her immutable personality has predestined her and over which she has no control, by loving it and thereby surmounting her impotence within it: "Elle consent, de rage, à aimer que s'aiment le nègre et Notre-Dame" (NDF p.139). Divine suffers one acute humiliation after another which isolate her from her lovers, and her response is to reinforce her own rejection and their betrayal of her as this is her only means of fulfilling her growing need for the dignity of control, at least inside herself:

> Elle ne voulut plus sortir que seule. Cette habitude n'eut qu'un effet: resserrer l'intimité du nègre et de l'assassin. (NDF p.152)

When she is hurt, used and abused, then, Divine transcends her humiliation paradoxically by intensifying it, playing the tragic role of victim to the hilt, even to the point of seeking out fresh ways to deepen her self-martyrdom in order to reinforce the extent to which she is not impotent but active within it. For Kate Millett, in assuming her position as persecuted feminine homosexual,[33] Divine is assuming the traditional role of woman as martyr in patriarchal society:

> In the novels, Genet is forever arranging things so that his own feminine last shall be first, shall triumph somehow, even if it be the victory of despair and martyrdom. His queens embrace their lowliness with such fervor they convert it to grandeur [...]. Through the miracle of Genet's prose [...] the masochism consonant with their role as slaves is converted to the aura of sainthood. How else

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33 It is important to note that, while Divine struggles to assume the *passivity* of her homosexuality, we do not actually see any of Genet's narrators or characters explicitly 'choosing' the 'given' of their homosexuality. In *Fragments...*, however, the application of a process of *amor fati* is extended to the 'faute originelle' of homosexuality (FR p.81). Homosexuality, along with its inherent sterility, can be willed as yet another immutable personality trait, and the individual's lack of control over his sexuality can be transformed into an act of choice: "La stérilité va surgir et s'ériger en acte" (FR p.82).

> does the good woman traditionally excel except through suffering?[34]

Millett later adds the important point that, "Divine's saintliness, her martyrdom, is only the destructive impulse, the masochism of her role carried to its fulfilment in self-immolation".[35] Divine becomes a Saint in so far as she pushes her willing of what *is* to the point of self-sacrifice. To further reinforce her willed martyrdom, when Divine has been abandoned by her lovers and is too old to attract new ones, she imagines herself being used even in her fantasies, but at least in her imagination she can be in control within her masochism by positivising her role at the centre of these encounters: "[...] la tête sous les draps, elle combinait des partouzes compliquées, à deux, trois ou quatre, et lors desquelles tous les partenaires d'accord devaient sur elle, en elle, *et pour elle*, connaître le plaisir" (NDF p.89, my emphasis).

Since, as we have already noted, Divine is the narrator's representative, his part in her self-martyrdom to the immutable aspects of her condition is crucial to our understanding of it. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* states quite explicitly that he is constructing in his narrative a fictional creature after his own likeness whose misery might deliver him from his own:

> [...] le pauvre Démiurge est contraint de faire sa créature à son image [...]. Dans ma cellule, petit à petit, il faudra bien donner mes frissons au granit. Je resterai longtemps seul avec lui et je le ferai vivre avec mon haleine et l'odeur de mes pets, solennels ou très doux. 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. (NDF p.25)

In other words, the narrator is exploiting his relationship to the narrated world over which, god-like, he can have complete control in order to address and even 'resolve' at least in an imaginary sense aspects of his condition which he can do nothing about in external reality. It is the narrator, therefore, who pushes Divine, in Heliogabalan fashion, to ever greater degrees of self-overcoming and martyrdom in his stead, until, as Millett points out, her willed assumption of her immutable condition is so absolute that her asceticism can be equated with sanctity: "Lentement, mais sûrement, je veux la dépouiller de toute espèce de bonheur pour en faire une sainte" (NDF p.46).

Although the character of Divine may represent, at the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s bidding and according to his gloss, not only the first but also the most sustained embodiment of willing and transforming the immutability of abjection through a process of

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34 Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 1977, p.344.

35 Ibid., p.349.

amor fati, we find similar responses to abjection expressed by certain subsequent narrators and characters. In *Miracle de la rose*, for example, on the subject of the 'miserable' act of stealing, the narrator also talks of establishing glory not in spite of but within the humiliating brevity of the act: "Il faut que votre orgueil sache passer par la honte pour atteindre à sa gloire" (MR p.409). The narrator's fantasy about being a galley slave also employs a strategy of *amor fati*. He could have used his imagination for escapism, but rather than changing his condition in the fantasy and thereby gaining only a temporary respite such as, for example, can be derived from the short-lived 'liberty' of stolen wealth (MR p.239), he seeks rather to transcend his condition by changing his relationship to it by a process of willed reinforcement: "voyez comme je parle de cette galère où, pouvant être le maître, je ne m'accordais que le poste le plus infime: celui du mousse" (MR p.288). This fits in with his overall aim to assume his abjection as absolutely as possible even by deepening it, just as Divine does in the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s presentation of her. At one stage this aim constitutes part of the reason the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* gives for intensifying the punishment he is already receiving – "aller à la Salle [de discipline] afin d'être plus profondément enfoui dans l'abject" (MR p.302) – and later he affirms: "J'ai descendu, comme on dit, toutes les couches de l'abjection" (MR p.373).

Similar to the depiction of Divine, Seblon also, according to his diary, establishes a sort of sanctity inside himself, or, what he calls, "divinité à l'intérieur de soi" (QB 407). He achieves this, in typically Nietzschean fashion, simply by exploiting slippage in terminology to positivise in his own mind aspects of his condition he would be powerless to change, declaring that, "l'humilité ne peut naître que de l'humiliation" (QB p.407). Again, where he is unable to alter what *is*, he alters at least his relationship to it and thereby transforms his impotence within the immutable into a semblance of control.

It is worth noting that the narrator of *Journal du voleur* also deals with his abjection by adopting an attitude of *amor fati*. Just like Divine, he wills his immutable humiliation, both past and present, by positivising it inside himself, and the way he achieves this is through deriving a sense of dignity by confronting his impotence rather than submitting to it:

> J'ai donc été ce petit misérable qui ne connut que la faim, l'humiliation du corps, la pauvreté, la peur, la bassesse. De tant d'attitudes renfrognées j'ai tiré des raisons de gloire.
> — Sans doute suis-je cela, me disais-je, mais au moins j'ai conscience de l'être et tant de conscience détruit la honte et m'accorde un sentiment que l'on connaît peu: l'orgueil. (JV p.124)

Thus, the narrator transforms his shame into pride not by trying to change his condition but by asserting his lucidity, and he offers a definition of pride in terms of "la connaissance d'une force qui vous permet de tenir tête à la misère" (JV p.124). He too chooses what *is* by

a subtle inner process of converting the given into the willed: "lentement je me forçai à considérer cette vie misérable comme une nécessité voulue" (JV p.20).

There is no question of the narrator of *Journal du voleur* trying to escape his condition, but only of developing his potential for re-valuing it: "Ainsi mon talent se développait de donner un sens sublime à une apparence aussi pauvre" (JV p.30). As he goes on to intimate, this attitude also constitutes his motivation for constructing the narrative we are reading, a motivation which he later characterises in terms of "la volonté d'utiliser, à des fins de vertus, mes misères d'autrefois" (JV p.69). Through his narrative, the narrator can reach beyond the immediate immutable elements of his condition and will and transform his whole life.

In the narratives, willing and transforming the immutability of abjection is not limited to choosing the way one immutably *is* but may be applied equally to willing an abject situation in order not to be a passive victim of it. In such circumstances, instead of trying to escape the situation, the narrator or character actively applies to himself a Nietzschean 'self-overcoming'. In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, for example, when Culafroy is asked to help remove his cell-mate's wooden leg, rather than giving in to his natural horror he controls it by means of an intense inner struggle from which he emerges victorious:

> L'horreur l'assaillit [...]. L'autre gosse avait défait les boucles et libéré le reste de cuisse. Par un effort sublime, Lou triompha. Il porta la main au bois comme au feu, tira à lui et se retrouva avec l'appareil brusquement embrassé contre sa poitrine. (NDF p.130)

Gil tries to deal with his fear after murdering Théo by adopting a similar attitude of self-overcoming: "la peur s'étant emparée de lui, il s'empara d'elle" (QB p.292).

The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* finds himself in an appallingly abject situation from which he cannot escape in the episode in which other prisoners are spitting into his mouth. The narrator, like Lou, does not submit to his impotence but transforms it into willing by using the power of his imagination to internalise his predicament and to reinterpret the humiliation of its negativity as a dignified, chosen positive:

> J'étais atteint à la face et je fus bientôt visqueux plus qu'une tête de noeud sous la décharge. Je fus alors revêtu d'une gravité très haute. Je n'étais plus la femme adultère qu'on lapide, j'étais un objet qui sert à un rite amoureux. Je désirais qu'ils crachassent davantage et de plus épaisses viscosités. (MR p.449)

In *Pompes funèbres*, the way Pierrot deals with his revulsion when he discovers that he has inadvertently put a worm into his mouth is an excellent example of *amor fati* and self-overcoming. Pierrot could stop the predicament in which he finds himself, but he cannot

alter the fact that it has happened to him, and so, rather than submit as powerless victim to an involuntary situation, by a supreme inner effort he transforms his relationship to it into one of control through the application of his will:

> 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. (PF p.78)

One of the most common abject situations in which the first two narrators in particular find themselves and to which they find themselves needing to alter their relationship is incarceration. In the absence of any more concrete alternative, the way in which they will the immutability of their imprisonment also involves a process of *amor fati*. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* cannot change the fact of his incarceration and so he transforms his relationship to it by internalising the prison itself – "je me suis fait une âme à la mesure de ma demeure" (NDF p.205) – and he even appropriates his imprisonment to the point of willing nothing else for himself, by loving it and making it his own in a sense of belonging:

> Ma bonne, ma tendre amie, ma cellule! Réduit de moi seul, je t'aime tant! S'il me fallait habiter en toute liberté une autre ville, j'irais d'abord en prison reconnaître les miens, ceux de ma race, pour aussi t'y retrouver. (NDF p.69)

The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* places himself in control of his incarcerated condition by a similar imaginary process, declaring, "que mon malheur n'obéit pas à des lois extérieures, mais qu'il est en moi, installé à demeure" (MR p.264), and he further reinforces the internalisation of his circumstances by merging with the prison through language: "la prison est en moi-même, composée des cellules de mes tissus" (MR p.245).

Typically, then, where physical liberty is unobtainable, the inmates will their lack of freedom. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* regards himself as "exilé" (NDF p.205) not in prison but at liberty, and, after a half-hearted attempt to escape, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* even talks of his "joie d'être repris" (MR pp.383-84). Inside the prison walls, the convicts manufacture for themselves a freedom within their immutable unfreedom. They achieve this by, for example, making at least the nights their own (NDF p.133, MR p.295), or by indulging in transformative fantasies, or, most commonly, by actively reinforcing the very criminality which brought them to this abject environment. Indeed, the convicts' criminality is itself regarded as given and therefore immutable, and they can only assert themselves within it by making it their own. As the narrator of *Journal du voleur* explains:

> Sans qu'ils le veulent, les gestes de ces gosses, leurs destins, sont tumultueux. Leur âme supporte une violence qu'elle n'avait pas désirée. Elle la domestiquait. (JV p.16)

It is as though criminality is the product of an individual's pre-determined personality and, as such, it is experienced with shame and passivity, and the only way to transform this given humiliation and lack of control into chosen pride is to will it and reinforce it. Although this intensification of what *is* will probably be expressed through external actions, it must primarily be pursued inside the criminal himself:

> S'il a du coeur – que l'on m'entende – le coupable décide d'être celui que le crime a fait de lui. Trouver une justification lui est facile, sinon, comment vivrait-il? Il la tire de son orgueil. [...] Il s'enferme dans sa honte par l'orgueil, mot qui désigne la manifestation de la plus audacieuse liberté. A l'intérieur de sa honte, dans sa propre bave, il s'enveloppe, il tisse une soie qui est son orgueil. (JV p.276)

Thus, although "le destin habituel" (MR p.314) which leads from Mettray to Fontevrault is almost impossible to avoid, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* welcomes it by regarding it inside himself as worth it: "je détournai les yeux dans la honte de n'avoir pu, moi, éviter d'en passer par là, mais fort déjà, victorieux car elle serait très belle l'aventure qui me vaut trois ans de Centrale" (MR p.314). The narrator even finds a strategy for taking possession of the sentence he can do nothing about, by making a calendar and sticking it on his cell wall: "Dans un seul regard, je peux saisir ma peine, la posséder" (MR p.264).

The degree to which the immutability of incarceration, as part and parcel of criminality, is transformed by willing it is even expressed by willing the most cruel child reformatory regimes rather than submitting to the indignity of a liberty not constructed by themselves. In *Miracle de la rose*, the narrator declares of prison reformers: "Ils ne savent pas que, les détruisît-on, ces bagnes, par les enfants seraient remontés: ces gosses inhumains créeraient des cours de miracles (c'est bien le mot!) pour accomplir leurs cultes secrets et compliqués" (MR p.366). Indeed, the possibility of an *amor fati* response to the juvenile prison system is pursued to the most extreme point in Genet's essay *L'Enfant criminel*, published soon after the prose fiction in 1950.[36] The essay constitutes a *tour de force* of acceptance and rationalisation transformed into willing and self-assertion, and of a disagreeable situation being seized for the opportunity to display self-possession and active control through audacity, strength and *maîtrise de soi*, as the following statements reveal:

> C'est avec une sorte de honte que l'enfant avoue qu'*on* vient de l'acquitter ou qu'*on* le condamne à une peine légère. Il souhaite la rigueur. Il l'exige. En lui-même il entretient le rêve que la forme qu'elle prendra sera un enfer terrible, et la maison de correction l'endroit du monde d'où l'on ne revient pas. [...] Il exige que le bagne qu'il a mérité soit féroce. Digne enfin *du mal qu'il s'est donné* pour le conquérir. (EC pp.382, 384)

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36 *L'Enfant criminel* was originally written as a radio broadcast but it was banned on the grounds that the ideas expressed in it were unacceptable.

An important point made in *L'Enfant criminel* is that, even if the self-assertion is in fact a rationalisation after the event, the drive does not lose its force because of the effort of will still required. As Genet makes clear:

> Chacun de ces criminels doit s'arranger avec son acte. Il faut bien qu'il en tire les ressources mêmes de sa vie morale, qu'il organise celle-ci autour de lui-même, qu'il obtienne d'elle ce que la vôtre lui refuse. (EC p.390)

Thus, the ideas expressed in *L'Enfant criminel* have nothing to do with issues of law and order, and everything to do with positing an inner process which could 'achieve' dignity within humiliation, activity within passivity and a degree of control within impotence.

Those characters who are presented by the narrators as being capable of an even more active response to immutable aspects of their condition may even move beyond simply willing what already *is* and deliberately seek out external situations in which to test out their self-overcoming and win small, chosen battles for freedom within the war which nonetheless ultimately cannot be won,[37] revealing once again that, in Genet's prose fiction, it is usually the *internal* struggle and victory which are all-important. For the most part, these brief opportunities for self-assertion or self-overcoming are quite trivial.

For example, in *Querelle de Brest*, Dédé periodically actively asserts himself in order at least to give the outward impression that he is not totally and irremediably passive in relation to Mario who is nevertheless quite clearly superior and dominant. Dédé rebels against his inferiority to Mario as and when he can, even if his desired 'activity' is expressed only in the occasional "timide geste de révolte", and even if that gesture amounts to no more than remaining "une seconde immobile pour se prouver à soi-même son absolue indépendance" (QB p.243) before carrying out the order he has been given nonetheless. If Dédé's small-scale self-affirmation seems at first to be unimpressive, it should nonetheless not be mistaken for self-delusion, for, as the narrators make clear, from small seeds great trees grow. What is important in Dédé's experience is the first steps he is taking towards full *maîtrise de soi* within immutable aspects of his condition through a gradual increase in audacity. When Dédé eventually kisses his superior, this may not seem like much on the surface, but, by the criteria of the narrative itself, it is an inner battle won in the war for freedom:

> La veille il avait, en embrassant Mario, rompu la molle séquence d'un mouvement commencé depuis longtemps, et ce premier acte audacieux lui faisait entrevoir la liberté, le grisait, et le fortifiait déjà pour lui permettre d'en tenter un second. (QB p.296)

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37 Of course, the most active characters will even confront the immutability of death itself, and this process will be explored in Part Four of this thesis.

This examination of the ways in which either the narrators or certain of their characters in Genet's prose fiction will and transform the immutable, particularly in relation to their abjection, has revealed, then, the extent to which they use a process of Nietzschean *amor fati* and self-overcoming in order to formulate an adequate, dignified response to the humiliation of their condition. Wherever an aspect of their condition is experienced as immutable, rather than attempting the impossible by trying to change it, and in preference to giving in as passive victims, they concentrate on altering their attitude to their condition, thereby altering their relationship to it at least inside themselves. The result is the achievement of a degree of control and of self-possession or *maîtrise de soi* which does not alter the immutable but at least establishes itself within it, and although this self-assertion is ultimately only imaginary, it is still regarded as infinitely more preferable to not making a stand at all.

One area in which the degree to which an individual has been able to achieve a sense of activity and self-possession inside himself may be expressed in the narratives relative not just to his personality or situation but also to other people is within the realm of intimate relationships.

CHAPTER THREE - PASSIVE-ACTIVE POWER RELATIONS IN THE COUPLE

One very important area in which certain characters in particular attempt, according to the narrator's presentation of them, either to assume or to try to transform their inherent, immutable passivity as it manifests itself relative to one another, is in the arena of power-based intimate relationships. It is worth pointing out from the start, however, that neither the characters nor their creators always or only enter into relationships for such complex reasons. Indeed, sometimes they seek intimate companionship out of a simple need or desire for a sense of fraternity. As the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* comments, "je crois que ce sont les rigueurs du bagne qui nous précipitent l'un vers l'autre dans des crises d'amour sans quoi nous ne pourrions pas vivre" (MR p.223). And elsewhere he notes inmates forming couples in search of the happiness and tenderness which are otherwise absent from their lives, or seeking temporary escapism from their condition, or trying to fill for a moment the hollowness inside themselves, or simply looking for physical enjoyment. Relationships fail, however, to achieve any of these aims except transiently and the lover is inevitably returned with renewed despair to the immutability of his condition once more. But even though intimate encounters may fall short of delivering these specific objectives, at the same time the narrators often portray characters playing out and reinforcing a degree of self-possession and control through relationships by a similar process of inner self-overcoming to the one we have identified in the narrators' exploration of responses to other aspects of their condition.

What is particularly important about the inner struggle with himself which, according to the narrator's gloss, a character may be undertaking within the arena of an intimate liaison is that it becomes crucial to an understanding of the way in which a dynamics of power operates within the relationship. Most critics categorise each of the two participants in the sexual encounter in accordance with a simple binary opposition of dominator-dominated, active-passive, or masculine-feminine, corresponding rather stereotypically to the traditional heterosexual model. However, if these power-based relationships in Genet's prose fiction are examined as they are presented within the texts themselves and in the light of the exploration of possible responses to one's immutable condition which the narratives also undertake, this reveals that the passive-active axis is much more complex than a pure binary opposition can encapsulate. For the narrators, in the same way that an individual might assert an inner degree of activity within the passivity in which abjection threatens to imprison them, erotic exchanges also represent situations where they can either attempt actually to transform their innate passivity into activity, or, by a much subtler and more imaginary process, they can transform their relationship to their passivity and thereby

establish at least a kind of paradoxical 'active passivity'. In this way, as we shall see, the binary opposites of passive and active are collapsed and problematised.

Divine is the principal representative of one of the narrators' creatures who, according to the narrator's gloss on her actions, achieves a degree of 'active passivity' by attempting not to transform her immutable passivity in intimate relationships into activity but to assert her activity within her passivity, in a by now familiar process of *amor fati*, and she is the first example of this attitude in Genet's prose fiction. She knows she cannot elevate herself out of her social passivity so she assumes it to the hilt, even to the point of masochism, bringing her passivity relative to others into her control at least in her mind by making it a matter of her choice, and even seeking out new relationships in which to reinforce her choice. Dobrez describes Divine's process of self-overcoming in the following terms: "Again and again she *allows* herself to be dominated by males whose banality and weakness she carefully conceals, submitting as it were not to the real lover but to an ideal, that is, to *herself*, to her own power over herself".[38] Divine worships Mignon like a humble slave worshipping a god – "Je l'adore. Quand je le vois couché à poil, j'ai envie de dire la messe sur sa poitrine" (NDF p.34) – and her dependent devotion contrasts sharply with the independence of his indifference:

> Pour Mignon, Divine est à peine un prétexte, une occasion. [...]
> Mais pour Divine, Mignon c'est tout. (NDF p.51)

For Divine, then, love and relationships are not characterised by passion but by anguish: "chez elle amour équivaut à désespoir" (NDF p.34).

Rather than simply submitting to her immutable passivity, by willing her subservience totally Divine transforms it into control at least over herself. Indeed, as Millett suggests with considerable scepticism, even when Divine is serving her dominator by performing the potentially humiliating act of fellatio upon him, through the application of her imagination she is able to reinterpret the situation from negative to positive and transform her own relationship to it from passive victim to active dominator:

> In a conversion typical of slave psychology, Divine perceives the situation as one in her control, quite as the male imagines it is in his. Darling believes he had made Divine suck him off: Divine persists in the belief she had made Darling come. Caught in a power trap, each believes he/she is in command.[39]

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38 L.A.C. Dobrez, *The Existential and its Exits*, 1986, pp.225-26.

39 Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p.348.

Strategies such as these constitute, then, for Divine her inner, active victories within her passivity: "elle eut l'orgueil d'avoir fait jouir un mac" (NDF p.30).

For the most part, we find that the narrators in the prose texts are also acutely passive in the couples they form. The passivity of the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* who is heterodiegetic is mainly expressed through Divine as his representative and is not explored in much detail in its own right, but the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* who, as a homodiegetic narrator, foregrounds his own experience to a greater extent, clearly finds himself in the subordinate role both to Villeroy in Mettray and to Bulkaen in Fontevrault. At Mettray he had even taken part in a marriage ceremony to Divers in which the narrator was the bride. The homodiegetic narrator of *Pompes funèbres* differs to a certain extent in so far as he maintains that he assumed the active sexual role with Jean D., but other memories he relates, such as the episode with the gun at the fun fair, are so clearly fantasy that it is impossible to say how reliable the narrator's accounts of himself are. We know little of the narrator of *Querelle de Brest*, although the only character whom he allows to speak in the first person is Seblon, who is the most immutably passive character in his narrative, but the narrator of *Journal du voleur* is, again, supremely passive in relation to others. Of his relationship with Stilitano he says, "j'étais son chien fidèle mais jaloux" (JV p.66), and he later describes Armand as "la brute parfaite, indifférente à mon bonheur" (JV p.151). Indeed, the narrator of *Journal du voleur* in particular increases his active self-overcoming within the passivity and vulgarity of his role in the couples he forms precisely by willing himself to love someone who is vulgar and debased.

In the case of Roger and Seblon in *Querelle de Brest*, there is an added dimension to their assumption of their innate passivity within the couple. In *Miracle de la rose*, some of the *colons* at Mettray who have the given potential are not destined to remain imprisoned in their initial subservient role of 'femme' but are actually raised up through their relationship with their hierarchical superior to become his equal. Similarly, in the couples they form with more socially active characters than themselves, Roger and Seblon, who, on the evidence of the narrator's portrait of them, do not have the predestined potential within themselves to assume a more active role in relation to others, hope in vain that, at best, this contact will elevate them from the humiliation of their passivity to a more dignified virility and, if this fails, that they will at least be able to share in the outer activity and self-possession of their lover. Thus, they want to transform their passivity into activity, but the means they employ to do this only reaffirms the immutability of their passivity.

Roger seeks to attain a semblance of pride within his passivity by simply being proud of being associated with another's achievements: "son cou était fier sous la main rugueuse et douce de Gil" (QB p.288). In this sense, he represents Genet's romantic vision of the figure who follows his/her criminal lover to Siberia, expressed in *Les Bonnes*, *Journal du voleur* and elsewhere. We are told:

> Le crime le faisait pénétrer dans un monde où les sentiments sont violents, la disposition du drame l'attachait à Gil sans qui le drame n'existait pas. Mais il fallait être lié au criminel par le plus solide lien et le plus étroit: l'amour. (QB p.319)

And later, even more explicitly:

> Il était fier de savoir que la magnificence de son ami allait être reconnue et que c'est lui, Roger, qui précisément était choisi pour aborder les puissances suprêmes. (QB p.327)

Gil becomes Roger's "idole", his "héros", to the extent that even when Gil's incessant talking betrays his fear, because Roger is "décidé à tout magnifier" in order to maintain the idol he needs if a modicum of self-assertion is to rub off on him, he simply reinterprets this sign of weakness as "la sublime expression d'un orage intérieur" (QB p.325). The degree to which this attitude reinforces his passivity is revealed by the fact that Roger does not attempt actually to experience the active self-assertion which he feels Gil achieves but is content to be his superior's 'right-hand man', simply hoping that his subordinate role will be deemed worthy of admiration in itself.

Seblon's principal characteristic is, similarly, not activity or self-possession but "feminité" (QB p.219), that is, in the prose fiction, passiveness and weakness. As in the case of Roger, there is no indication of any innate potential to overcome his immutable passivity. Indeed, although Seblon struggles to keep his given nature buried, as with Divine the external manifestation of his immutable personality through his body is completely beyond his control and could engulf him against his will at any moment: "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" (QB p.219). This femininity is rendered especially acute by his submissive and humiliated devotion to Querelle, a point which Seblon himself makes explicit in his diary:

> Plus j'aime Querelle et plus en moi la femme se précise, s'attendrit, s'attriste de n'être comblée. (QB p.312)

Seblon even describes this attraction in terms of a victim's attraction to his murderer (QB p.218), as though, knowing he does not have the given potential to achieve an activity of this magnitude himself, all he can do is attempt to partake in that glorious act of self-overcoming by willing his own role in it as victim.

Seblon is in constant turmoil as his awareness of the need to maintain dignity through self-control inevitably falls victim to the passiveness of his passion. For example, we are told: "Le lieutenant crut ne jamais avoir révélé son amour et en même temps espéra l'avoir clairement avoué" (QB p.266). He is fully aware of how important it is to retain his dignity,

and particularly in regard of his involuntary attraction to Querelle, but he does not have the necessary self-possession to assert this freedom. His pride is swamped time and again by the shame of his passive weakness, as we learn, for example, that, "la dignité lui commandait de renvoyer Querelle sur-le-champ, mais il ne trouvait pas la force de le faire" (QB p.269). Seblon's insurmountable dependency is contrasted vividly with Querelle's superior independence, as Divine is contrasted with Mignon, and this is expressed through the image of the shipwreck:

> J'essaierais de le sauver, mais davantage j'essaierais qu'il me sauve. Dans un naufrage chacun emporte ce qui lui est surtout précieux: un violon, un manuscrit, des photos... Querelle m'emporterait. Je sais qu'il *sauverait* d'abord sa beauté, dussé-je mourir. (QB p.276)

Seblon is so aware of his own immutable passiveness that he knows it is pointless to pretend otherwise, and that, in his own case, any outer sign of self-possessed virility he presents, like having his hair cut very short, will amount to no more than "apparence virile" (QB p.219). Thus, if for a moment his desire for Querelle's respect and love leads him to the momentary illusion of a possible strength and superiority, the self-deception is gone in the cold light of day:

> Cette violente projection spirituelle de lui-même lui avait donné tout à coup une vigueur dont il s'émerveilla. Il était fort, viril, mâle au point d'enculer Querelle s'il se fût offert. [...] Mais le lendemain sa virilité s'évanouissait, se dissolvait sous le regard malicieux de Querelle, elle ne pouvait résister à la comparaison de cette virilité terrible, indestructible, personnifiée par un corps splendide. (QB L'Imaginaire p.87)

Because Seblon cannot escape this magnetism, if he is to retain any sense of pride at all his passive inferiority must be willed. He knows that, in spite of his superior rank, he could never be superior to Querelle sexually, and in words which could easily have come from Divine's mouth, Seblon expresses his answer to this awareness in terms of absolute voluntary submission to him:

> Me jeter à ses pieds! Baiser ses arpions! [...] Il pourrait tout se permettre. Me cracher à la figure, me tutoyer le premier. (QB pp.218-19)

By applying the paradoxical attitude of *amor fati* to his passivity in the couple, Seblon wills his humiliation with dignity. If shame is insurmountable, it is not enough simply to swallow it as quickly as possible, like a bitter pill, it must be chosen with one's whole being, rendered absolute, sacred. Only then can humiliation itself become a source of pride – "L'orgueil ne

pouvant naître que de l'humiliation, l'officier se sentait présent au centre d'elle." (QB p.407) – and indeed, of freedom. Thus, Seblon finds his own self-possession, his own version of self-realisation, in terms of the total assumption of his immutable feminine weakness and passivity, and gives this graphic expression in his diary:

> Quelle joie soudain! Je suis toute joie. Mes mains, d'abord machinalement, ont dessiné dans l'espace, à hauteur de ma poitrine, deux seins de femme qui semblaient y être greffés. J'étais heureuse. Je recommence le geste et je connais la félicité. Une véritable plénitude. Je suis *comblé*. (QB p.274)

Just as Seblon fails to transform his immutable passivity into anything more than an outer facade of virility, in similar fashion both Divine and the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* attempt to achieve a greater degree of active self-possession by transforming their innate inferiority into domination of another. Both of them, however, fail to triumph in external reality and resort to their imagination in order to experience a sense of control and activity at least inside themselves.

When Divine meets Notre-Dame, whom she regards as even more socially passive and feminine than herself, she is sure that this will result in her own masculinisation within this couple:

> Jusqu'à présent, elle n'avait aimé que des hommes plus forts qu'elle et légèrement, d'un poil, plus âgés qu'elle, plus musclés. Mais vint Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs, qui avait un caractère physique et moral de fleur: elle s'en amouracha. Quelque chose de nouveau, comme une sorte de sentiment de puissance, leva (sens végétal, germinatif) en Divine. Elle se crut virilisée. Un espoir fou la fit forte, costaud, vigoureuse. Elle sentit des muscles lui pousser [...]. (NDF p.71)

However, although, in Genet's prose fiction, self-possession may well manifest itself through physical appearance – Querelle's "virilité terrible", for example, is "personnifiée par un corps splendide" (QB L'Imaginaire p.87) – appearance alone is not enough to ensure inner activity. It immediately becomes clear, then, that Divine is not actually transforming her predestined passivity but simply constructing a hollow appearance built on external, masculine gestures, and she is not even successful at that: "Elle chercha des gestes mâles [...] et tout ce simulacre fut exécuté si malhabilement qu'elle paraissait être en une seule soirée quatre ou cinq personnages à la fois" (NDF p.71). Divine's attempt at self-assertion fails utterly and her rejection even by a younger, effeminate man has the effect of reinforcing her humiliation: "Divine ne s'était pas virilisée: elle avait vieilli" (NDF p.72). Her impotence is complete when Notre-Dame not only forms a relationship with Divine's lover

but does so within Divine's own apartment, and Divine can do nothing but sell herself to keep both of them.

Rather than give in to this passivity, however, before admitting her defeat Divine simply resorts to her imagination and achieves at least in her mind that which she could not in reality:

> Enfin, pour couronner sa métamorphose de femelle en dur mâle, elle imagina une amitié d'homme à homme [...]. Et, pour plus de sûreté, elle inventa Marchetti. [...] Inventé, Marchetti vécut quelques aventures auprès d'elle, en secret. (NDF p.72)

When her impotence in external reality imprisons her completely, Divine's response to her immutable condition is to take control of it in an aesthetic dimension, using a strategy of mythomania not unlike that of Clappique in Malraux's *La Condition humaine*, a strategy which had always been at the heart of Divine's essentially passive response to her condition, even from the early days as Culafroy.

Divine's metadiegetic narrative constitutes an aesthetic *mise en abyme* of the narrator's creation of his narrative in so far as both of them exploit their position of control as creator to play out the transformation of their immutable nature by self-projection into an imaginary realm. Just like the narrator, Divine constructs, "un homme vivant à qui elle prêtait une âme, – toujours la même pour chacune de ces constructions: celle qu'elle eût voulu avoir" (NDF p.72). Later on, there is even a further *mise en abyme* within Divine's own fantasy when Marchetti is in prison and resorts to his imagination to 'achieve' at least inside himself what is now beyond his possibilities in reality: "et pour ne pas sécher d'ennui, ce sera son tour d'élaborer ces vies imaginaires, jamais réalisées" (NDF p.112).

The homodiegetic narrator of *Miracle de la rose* also, by his own account, makes an even more substantial attempt to transform his innate passivity into a more active role, and he claims to have achieved this "mue" (MR p.256) by fulfilling what he regards as his fated potential to ascend from the low status of prostitute to the relatively more 'active' role of *casseur*. He assures us:

> Je voulus être moi-même, et je fus moi-même quand je me révélai casseur.[...]
> 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. (MR pp.242-43)

This transformation takes place as a result of his 'graduation' from Mettray to Fontevrault, as the narrator assures us that, in the adult prison, "j'acquis une virilité totale – ou, pour être plus exact, [...] je devins mâle" (MR p.241).

Most critics, usually relating this experience to Genet himself in a biographical reading of the text, do not question that this transformation takes place. Coe, for example, states that, "as a crasher, he discovers in himself the beginnings of physical and moral courage, and thus he begins his liberation from passivity", and goes on to assert that, "his conversion to burglary has all the significance of a drive for freedom".[40] But, leaving biographical readings aside, a more careful examination of the text of *Miracle de la rose* puts the ascension which the narrator claims for himself into question.[41] If we examine the narrator's apparent "mue" in the light of the internal criteria set up within the texts themselves, although a certain degree of increased dignity is achieved through his ascension in terms of 'profession' – "Je me désenlisais de la prostitution et de la mendicité dont l'abjection m'apparaît à mesure que m'attire la gloire du vol" (MR p.316) – the deeper transformation to a greater degree of inner activity, manifested externally as masculinity, does not take place.

For a start, the authority of the "casseur" and even his apparent virility are actually, by the narrator's own admission, not the emanation of an inner solidity or substance but are in fact accorded to him by his jemmy, by a tool external to himself: "De son poids, de sa matière, de son calibre, enfin de sa fonction, émanait une autorité qui me fit homme" (MR p.242). It is the "pince-monsieur" which lends the narrator a superficial "dignité", "autorité" and "virilité" which he would therefore obviously be incapable of asserting from inside himself. The narrator is negating the authenticity of his new-found active identity even as he states it since, by the definition that he himself provides, virility is primarily not "un courage et une apparence physiques" but "une attitude de l'esprit" (MR p.286). To all intents and purposes, the narrator has advanced little from the days at Mettray when he adopted various recognised masculine gestures and even transformed his involuntary displays of fear into apparent displays of aggression (MR pp.325-26) in order to feign an inner "mue" while no fundamental change was brought about in his immutably inferior nature: "Je serais marle entre les marles et l'on ne saurait plus que je n'étais qu'un vautour" (MR p.326).

The most conclusive proof, however, that the narrator has been unable to alter his underlying passivity can be found in his failure to take on the active role with Bulkaen, a failure which is doubly humiliating considering the age difference which should render the narrator's dominance almost inevitable. Henderson also suggests that, if a degree of masculinisation has occurred on the level of criminal activity, this is brought down by the

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40 Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.114.

41 In *Saint Genet*, Sartre also views the "mue" presented in *Miracle de la rose* with some suspicion – "Rien n'est plus louche à y regarder de près, que cette prétendue «virilité» qu'il prétend avoir acquise" (SG p.455) – although the heterosexual explanation he provides for his opinion is totally lacking in insight into the complexity of the text: "un pédéraste peut aspirer à tout sauf à la virilité: pour être viril il faut coucher avec des femmes" (SG p.455).

affective side of the narrator's personality which has not altered since Mettray: "Bulkaen and Divers [...] jeopardise the narrator's newly-won sense of independence and masculinity".[42]

At first, the narrator attempts to use his attraction to the younger Bulkaen as a further sign of his virilisation. Before, because of his femininity, the narrator could have been seduced by any male – "Durant ces années de mollesse, que ma personnalité prenait toutes sortes de formes, n'importe quel mâle pouvait de ses parois serrer mes flancs, me contenir" (MR p.241) – but now that he is a "mâle" he is sure that he must be able to dominate what he takes for Bulkaen's femininity. However, right from the start, because his attraction to Bulkaen is not immediately reciprocated, he knows that the superiority he wants to assert is precarious. He desperately tries to hide his love from Bulkaen, because to reveal it would put him "en place d'infériorité à son égard" (MR p.258), and would allow Bulkaen to dominate him like a conquered country, "monté, botté, éperonné, cravaché et l'insulte à la bouche" (MR p.273). But although the narrator struggles to maintain an air of self-control, the pain of denying his love to Bulkaen in order to retain a superficial indifference is too great and an admission bubbles involuntarily to the surface. Having declared, "j'en ai rien à foutre, moi, de ton amitié" (MR p.273), the effort to overcome himself proves too great and the weakness of his true immutable nature breaks out of his control:

> [...] c'est tout à coup que se produisit en moi l'une de ces trop nombreuses déchirures qui me mettent l'âme à nu. Je dis:
> — Si j'ai le béguin pour toi, ne t'en occupe pas. (MR p.274)

Once the narrator has revealed his inferiority and his impotence within his immutable passivity, he descends from one indignity to the next, going without food to give it to Bulkaen who in turn gives it to his own lovers, giving Bulkaen his clothes if he asks, indeed, he says he would even give his eyes if only Bulkaen would love him (MR p.368). Far from his relationship to Bulkaen reinforcing his virility, it renders the humiliation of his passivity even more acute. Bulkaen blatantly rejects the narrator's affection, and yet the narrator can do nothing but sink deeper into his humiliation, telling Bulkaen: "Tu peux te foutre de moi, je te donnerai toujours ce dont tu auras besoin" (MR p.284).

Finally, the narrator is forced to recognise that he cannot seduce even a younger man and is left humiliated by his own unrequited, passive longing to be seduced just as before. Rather than cement his own transformation from passive to active, it is rather Bulkaen who is transformed as the narrator realises that he is utterly powerless in this 'relationship' over which Bulkaen has total control. Even Bulkaen's "féminité apparente" (MR p.352) is relatively more masculine than the narrator: "Plus je faiblissais, plus il se durcissait [...]. Il ne risquait pas de s'attendrir en face de moi" (MR p.316). Far from reinforcing his "mue", the

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42 Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', p.125.

narrator is left helpless in the indignity of admiring in the younger Bulkaen the virility of proud self-possession he wanted for himself but clearly could not attain:

> Bulkaen était plus haut que moi. J'étais sûr de ne jamais l'atteindre. [...] Il était plus haut que moi parce qu'il était plus fier. Il me regardait de très haut. Il ne m'aimait pas, je l'aimais. [...] Bulkaen était ma virilité. (MR p.425)

Like the representative of his predecessor, then, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* fails utterly to overcome his immutable passivity in relation to other people in reality, and resorts to transforming this impotence into control in his imagination. But unlike Divine, the narrator has not just an imaginary but an aesthetic arena in which to play this out. Unable to be active in a couple with Bulkaen, the narrator simply invents a weaker Bulkaen in a realm in which nothing is immutable, including his passivity as humiliated victim:

> Il se refusait, dans l'escalier, mais je l'invente plus docile. [...] Je suis obligé d'inventer les attitudes amoureuses qu'il aurait. (MR pp.285-86)

However, while Bulkaen is still alive and undermining the narrator's aspirations, the narrator's fundamental passivity prevents him from dominating Bulkaen even in his imagination – "Mais au moment qu'en pensée je vais le pénétrer, ma verge s'amollit, mon corps débande, mon esprit flotte..." (MR p.286) – and the narrator only achieves active domination when Bulkaen's activity has finally been extinguished in death:

> Mais si sa mort n'a magnifié Bulkaen qu'à mes yeux, elle l'a placé encore dans une région de moi-même où je puis l'atteindre. [...] Dans ma mémoire, notre aventure à deux prend des allures plus humaines. Quand sa dureté le quitte, une tendresse le vêt, chacun de ses actes, même le plus féroce, s'adoucit. (MR p.431)

It is worth adding that the narrator of *Journal du voleur*, who is insurmountably passive in relation to Stilitano and Armand, also attempts to assert his 'virility' with Lucien, but, as in *Miracle de la rose*, there are subtle indications in the text that, far from the narrator having transformed himself into a more active person, he has simply found an even more passive individual than himself who actually consents to assume the inferior role. Indeed, even in this couple the narrator's dominance is highly precarious, as their conversation reveals when the narrator's attempt to assert his superiority by declaring, "quand tu es comme ça, anéanti contre moi, j'ai l'impression de te protéger" (JV p.163) is met not with passivity but with a counter self-assertion, "moi aussi", and when the narrator asks Lucien if this means he appears weak to him, Lucien answers simply: "Oui... je te protège" (JV p.164).

Soon after this, the narrator reveals his awareness that Lucien's apparent passivity is actually a question of Lucien's consent and therefore of Lucien's activity rather than of the narrator's power to be in control within a couple – "Parfois j'ai peur que sa docilité à mon amour tout à coup n'obéisse plus" (JV p.165) – and the narrator further confirms the degree to which his activity is artificial and not the authentic product of his given potential by only managing to re-assert his virility in relation to Lucien through an act of cruelty, when the narrator leaves him for three days. As the narrator himself admits, he does not even achieve the greater activity that age might naturally bring, remaining always the immutably passive partner. As he comments, looking back on the sexual encounters of his youth:

> J'étais un enfant que son père conduit avec prudence. (Aujourd'hui je suis un père que son enfant conduit à l'amour.) (JV p.47)

Up to now, we have only been looking at how the innately passive characters in Genet's prose fiction deal with their inability to change their given nature when it inevitably places them in the position of inferiority within a couple. Although the central protagonists in these texts are often insurmountably passive in the couples they form, even to the point of humiliation, Coe is, of course, quite wrong to declare that, "sexually, all Genet's characters [...] are symbols of an excessively passive homosexuality".[43] For every passive partner in an intimate relationship there must also be an active partner, but it is important to be clear that, where characters are seen to be more passive or active relative to each other, this constitutes a social manifestation of the relative weakness or strength of their given personality and reflects the degree to which they have been able to achieve a sense of self-possession within their impotence, but does not alter their fundamental passivity within the immutability of their condition in the broadest sense.

For the narrators, then, an individual's relative passivity or activity is more a question of inner attitude than of physical strength or even of virility – as the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* maintains, virility is first and foremost "une attitude de l'esprit" (MR p.286) – although strength and virility may well represent an outer expression of inner self-possession. The fact that the liaisons in these texts are homoerotic only serves to emphasise the extent to which the active role is relative and must be affirmed through self-assertion because it is not, in the traditional view, dictated in advance by biology. As Querelle observes, the reason why so many of the sailors around him hate what they call "les tantouzes" is that, in a same sex relationship in which gender (where masculine equals active and feminine equals passive) parts company from sex, a homosexual man might threaten another man's

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43 Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.139.

possible dominance in a way that a woman, traditionally, could not: "ils cherchent à faire de vous une femme" (QB L'Imaginaire p.214).

What happens in Genet's texts, then, is that the stereotypical roles of masculine dominator and feminine dominated are actually re-established within all-male environments. As Millett comments:

> It would be hard to find a more brutal or unsavory definition of masculine and feminine than Genet's, since it is simply an exaggeration of that in current use. Masculine is superior strength, feminine is inferior weakness.[44]

Because erotic passivity represents a sign of an innate femininity and a concomitant inability to find sufficient self-possession to achieve an outer show of activity relative to another it is acutely humiliating, and so, in the narratives, everyone wants to be the active 'masculine' partner who is in control, as the following vulgar banter from *Miracle de la rose* illustrates:

> — Et moi, j't'encule!
> — T'encules les fesses de mon noeud, salope!
> — Ton noeud n'a jamais eu de fesses. C'est tes fesses qu'ont un noeud. (MR p.381)

Indeed, the sexual encounters depicted by the narrators often seem to have more to do with a battle of wills for the external expression of inner control than with pure physical pleasure, as each partner attempts ideally to be more active and 'masculine' than the other and therefore to prove that he is in control of himself and the situation by being in control of the other. There is often a tension, then, between passive and active as it is played out in the arena of eroticism, and this tension is expressed by Nono when he is about to have sex with Querelle: "Une chose l'intriguait, savoir qui enfilerait l'autre" (QB p.255).

Within this power struggle, one partner's innate social passivity will, however, inevitably be greater than the other, with the result that, whereas some characters may use eroticism to prove their control over themselves by asserting control over another, others, like Divine, as we have seen, find themselves restricted to asserting only an 'active passivity' by assuming their immutable social passivity through eroticism. And because social passivity and activity are only relative concepts, a given character's role may vary from couple to couple. The outcome of this is that the characters fall into a hierarchy, relative to each other, depending on their given potential in the social domain. Hence, in *Querelle de Brest*, for example, it is quite clear that Gil is superior to Roger – "il se connut un mâle en face de Roger" (QB p.286) – but inferior to Théo and Querelle. And Querelle

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44 Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p.340.

himself is superior to Seblon, but feels a slight inferiority to Mario who is described by Querelle as "un vrai mâle" (QB p.360) and who, as a policeman, is the only one who could send him to his execution.

The equation of the active sexual role and 'masculinity' is further reinforced by the idea that the source of masculinity is the phallus, and since, in the same sex couples in Genet's fiction, both partners possess the phallus, superiority is usually expressed simply through size. As Erik says of Le Bourreau:

> Sa queue est deux fois plus grosse que la mienne. C'est par elle – sans se servir d'elle – qu'il me domine. (PF L'Imaginaire p.68)

But as Erik's comment reveals, this domination by the phallus is not, primarily, sexual but symbolic. The way in which inner self-possession is often manifested externally through physical brawn has already been noted, and I would suggest that the significance of phallic power lies in the same principle. As Knapp also explains in her examination of the traditional natural and spiritual symbolism of the phallus:

> The sexual act is an externalization of inner processes. The phallus considered symbolically is the most powerful manifestation of man's inner energy.[45]

In Genet's prose fiction, however, because of the sterility of the homosexual relationships in these texts, the phallus clearly does not symbolise the procreative potential of sexuality but sheer inner force. Just as virility represents the outer expression of inner courage and even of pride – the narrator of *Journal du voleur* defines "l'orgueil" as "une vertu virile" (JV p.29) – the phallus becomes an external manifestation of self-possession. When Gil has an erection, the narrator describes it in the following terms:

> Tout son être, pour l'ériger, affluait à sa queue. Elle n'était plus que lui, mais elle l'était avec une vigueur providentielle, capable de rendre inefficace la honte. (QB p.285)

Similarly, when Harcamone has reached the height of his own self-overcoming as a *condamné à mort*, he is described as actually being himself the phallus of another man.

In spite of the somewhat stereotypical roles, perhaps the most important point to understand about the presentation in Genet's prose fiction of passive-active power relations in the couple is that, because erotic passivity and activity represent external manifestations of inner self-possession, and because virility is primarily an attitude of mind, it is not

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45 Knapp, *Jean Genet*, p.29.

necessarily the case that the partner within the couple who assumes the 'masculine' sexual role is actually the one who is in control of the situation in terms of also actively dominating the other mentally. This is a crucial point which rather over-simplistic readings of sexuality in these texts in terms of purely physical passive-active binary oppositions fail to take into account. For example, in his chapter on *Miracle de la rose*, Henderson states that, "in male homosexual intercourse, the passive or feminine partner allows himself to be sodomized by the active male",[46] and although this statement may be true of the presentation of some erotic encounters in Genet's fiction, it does not embrace the complexity of the concepts of passivity and activity as they are manifested in other couples such as the Hitler-Paulo and Querelle-Nono episodes, where the poles of the conventional passive-active axis are problematised and re-defined.

What these sexual encounters between Hitler and Paulo and between Querelle and Nono, and also an episode involving Erik and Le Bourreau, have in common is that, in each case, the active partner, who clearly dominates his lover through his superior self-possession and is in complete control of the situation, assumes the passive role within the couple, either as part of their intimacy or for the whole of the episode or on a single occasion in their relationship. Although the significance of these erotic incidents has been largely overlooked by critics, together they underline the fact that passivity and activity are not primarily external realities but attitudes of mind.

In *Journal du voleur*, one character expresses the defeat of France by Germany through a sexual metaphor, "on s'est fait enculer par Hitler" (JV p.118), and, in a sense, the Hitler-Paulo episode in *Pompes funèbres*, largely cut from the *Oeuvres complètes* edition, constitutes a graphic representation of this idea. In this couple, there is no doubt at all that Hitler is in total control of the situation and of Paulo. Hitler's active dominance is largely based on the fact that Hitler has taken control of death itself, and therefore, when Paulo is taken into the "alcôve secrète" where "Hitler aimait et tuait ses victimes" (PF p.97), Paulo knows his experience may not just be humiliating but fatal.

During their intimacy, when Paulo finds himself actually assuming the active role for a while, it is crucial that this is clearly not the result of Paulo's self-assertion but of Hitler's invitation:

> — Toi, maintenant, mon chéri. Je dénudai mes vieilles fesses et ma main conduisit la verge de Paulo. (PF L'Imaginaire p.164)

The text makes it plain that although Hitler knows that the passive position he adopts leaves him potentially unprotected, "cette partie nue de moi-même, dans cette chambre, je la sentais vulnérable", he also knows that power and control over others is ultimately a

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46 Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', p.120.

question not of physical position but of inner attitude: "J'étais sûr de ma force" (PF p.105). Indeed, Hitler in *Pompes funèbres* is the living proof that social power stems from inner rather than outer strength, since Hitler is described physically as a "petit homme chétif et ridicule" (PF p.100) and yet he has become "le Maître du Monde" (PF p.103). Similarly, Weidmann, murderer of six children, is described in *Querelle de Brest* as "un jeune homme timide, au teint blême, un peu cireux" (QB p.252). The narrators in these texts, usually weak and passive themselves, display a fascination with how the most outwardly weak and passive of men can find a power and self-possession within themselves which allows them to assert a degree of control not only over themselves but over the situations in which they find themselves and even over other people. Amusingly, although, unlike Erik, Hitler's inner strength does not manifest itself physically in muscles, he does possess one physical symbol of his socio-political self-assertion over his innate passivity: his moustache signifies, "cruauté, despotisme, violence, rage, écume, aspics, strangulation, mort, marches forcées, parades, prison, poignards" (PF p.101).

Although Hitler adopts a physically passive role, then, he is nonetheless actively in complete control since the pleasure is all his while Paulo is serving him. Hitler stops when *he* wishes in order to leave Paulo in no doubt as to who is calling the shots:

> Il craignit qu'un Français n'éprouvât sur lui-même un plaisir égoïste et méchant de possession, par un glissement très habile et par un refus des muscles du sphincter à retenir la bite, il se dégagea de Paulo, que d'une main ferme, irrésistible encore, il retourna sur le dos [...]. (PF L'Imaginaire p.165)[47]

Indeed, far from Paulo taking this opportunity to try to assert himself actively over Hitler, the fact that he has sodomised him increases his inner sense of passivity relative to Hitler because he is sure that he will not be allowed to live now, and the intensification of internal passivity is duly accompanied by a loss of external, physical virility:

> — «Il va me tuer» pensa Paulo. «Comme il ne pourra pas m'accuser ouvertement, on va m'empoisonner. [...]» Cette pensée le fit débander et Hitler eut la stupeur de voir le membre magnifique, sous ses yeux s'amollir, diminuer, fondre, s'affaisser sur les couilles brunes et velues. (PF L'Imaginaire p.166)

But while Paulo is clearly unable to dominate Hitler, whether he is in the active or passive sexual position, he can overcome his abjection as passive victim in his mind by struggling

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47 There is a parallel here with Heliogabalus which was suggested to me in conversation with Edmund White. According to legend, in his encounters with men the all-powerful emperor would *choose* to be bride, thereby retaining his active role by asserting his control over the relationship and over his apparent passivity from within it, just as a masochist who is seeking a willing sadistic partner may well negotiate the boundaries of his passivity with his prospective dominator beforehand, thereby ensuring that he fulfils his passive desire as a result of his active (or 'actively passive') will.

inside himself to transform his immutable passivity in both roles at least into self-control by attempting to dominate not the other but the humiliation and the fear inside himself.

There is a similar episode between Erik and Le Bourreau in which, although there is no doubt that Le Bourreau is the more active, dominant partner, on one occasion he too invites Erik to assume the 'masculine' role but clearly remains in control of himself, of Erik and the situation. The narrator states unequivocally that this is not Erik's initiative and therefore the nature of the passive-active power relation between them has not altered: "Ce n'est pas qu'il eût tenté lui-même d'agir en mâle, et il fut fort étonné lorsqu'une nuit le bourreau se mettant sur le ventre voulut être enfilé" (PF p.62).

Another important example of the physically passive sexual partner remaining the active, dominant participant mentally comes when Querelle goes to the brothel after murdering Vic to be sodomised by Nono.[48] Even though Querelle places himself in the position of *enculé*, it is quite plain that he dominates Nono by his greater inner self-possession. Querelle has even found sufficient *maîtrise de soi* to take control of death itself in an act of murder, and the fact that Nono has not would immediately render him inferior and passive relative to Querelle. It is in full knowledge, then, of his dominance – "le matelot savait qu'il serait le plus fort" (QB p.257) – that Querelle only appears to let chance decide who will be the 'enculé' but in fact cheats at dice by way of choosing to let the weaker partner assume a position of temporary authority. Although Nono may feel that he is in control during the act, afterwards the narrator leaves us in no doubt that Nono becomes aware that his sexual dominance over Querelle is not actually due to his own inner force, as we are told that, "en face de Robert, Nono reprenait sa véritable virilité qu'il perdait un peu avec Querelle" (QB p.299).

The point about the presentation of concepts of passivity and activity in Genet's prose fiction which these episodes reinforce is, then, that although a character may assert a degree of activity or simply actively assume their passivity in external reality – that is, in a social and even sexual situation – what is most important to the narrators is the degree of activity in terms of self-possession that the character, according to the narrator's presentation of him, has managed to assert inside himself. It is for this reason that, although inner activity may well be expressed through active sexual roles, just as inner force often manifests itself outwardly in physical musculature, the character's inner struggle for control primarily over himself – or the struggle which the narrator imposes on his creature – is by far the most important battle being fought, and the full significance of external actions can only be understood in terms of the narrator's presentation of the character's fight to overcome his impotence before immutable aspects of his condition.

Ultimately, the difference between those of the narrators' characters who assert themselves as active in sexual couples and those who can only assume a passive role does

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48 The relationship between the murder and the Querelle-Nono episode will be explored in Part Four of this thesis.

not constitute an absolute distinction but is only a question of degree. Throughout Genet's oeuvre, absolute binary oppositions are collapsed into relative concepts in a manner which, again, parallels Nietzsche, who writes in *Human, All Too Human*: "The general imprecise way of observing sees everywhere in nature opposites [...] where there are, not opposites, but differences of degree."[49] Even where a character or, indeed, a narrator manages to gain control over external situations and people, as we have already seen, they are not free to carry their social activity beyond their predestined potential and they remain powerless to change their given limitations.

Thus, no matter what victories either the narrators or certain of their creatures and representatives apparently achieve in external reality, their fundamental impotence is untouched by their endeavours. Whether they have asserted a modicum of self-possession and control by actively dominating another person or simply by 'actively' choosing to be dominated, in either case what has actually been 'achieved' is the same: activity within a more fundamental passivity, and control within a more fundamental immutability. In Genet's prose fiction, the immutability of the human condition being such, external reality is ultimately meaningless, since the only realm in which it is possible to assert oneself without limitation is in the mind and imagination. Partly for this reason, many of the most important characters, like their creators, often prefer solitude to society since it is solitude that facilitates inwardness and the internalisation of external reality into a realm which lies within their control. The narrators themselves then take this one step further, regarding solitude as the prerequisite for transforming immutable aspects of their condition through artistic creation. But even in the pursuit of solitude there is an unmistakable element of *amor fati*.

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49 Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.326.

CHAPTER FOUR - WILLING AND TRANSFORMING THE SOLITUDE OF SOCIAL MARGINALISATION

If the narrators, along with many of their characters in the narrated world, find themselves faced with the humiliation of immutable aspects of their condition such as abjection and passivity, for most of them their condition is also characterised by solitude. Sometimes they are physically isolated from the rest of society – they are imprisoned for their criminality, for example – and sometimes they are marginalised on the grounds of morality or of 'decency', more often than not for being homosexuals or prostitutes, criminals or traitors, or a combination of these. Usually, this social marginalisation is forced upon them because, although, according to the narrators' vision, nothing can be done about aspects of one's personality and resultant behaviour which are regarded as pre-determined, society has decreed that these aspects are unacceptable.

But rather than be a passive victim of isolation, by the application of a process of *amor fati* to social marginalisation this solitude becomes one more element of one's condition which can be not only willed but also positivised and reinforced. As the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* asserts: "Le désir de solitude [...], c'est *l'orgueil*" (PF p.58). Thus, for the most part, a narrator or character will not attempt to alter the solitude inherent in social marginalisation but his attitude to it, thereby transforming another negative into a positive and something given into something chosen.

As we saw earlier, the first two narrators in particular attempt to will the abjection of their immutable incarceration by actively transforming it in their imagination. One of the most important characteristics about incarceration which emerges from these narrators' presentation of it is that, although the convict, while being isolated from the rest of society, becomes part of a prison community, the hierarchies and camaraderie only exist on a superficial level. The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* even goes so far as to say that he is sickened by the idea of fraternity: "Il m'en coûterait de dire que les hommes sont mes frères" (MR p.317).[50] Beneath the false sense of community, in his cell the imprisoned man finds himself alone. Solitude is a bitter-sweet pill to swallow – "La solitude est douce. Elle est amère" (NDF p.97) – but to will it means to positivise it until it is only sweet.

If, then, on the one hand, the isolation of imprisonment is imposed, it can be regarded as positive in so far as it facilitates inwardness. Thus, although the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* states that, "la sévérité de la vie nous enfonçait en nous-mêmes", he is able to

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50 Similarly, in *Splendid's*, group criminal activity is described in the following terms: "Pas une seconde de douceur. Jamais entre nous de contacts. Jamais d'amitié. On vivait ensemble et toujours éloignés" (SP p.29). Sartre also correctly emphasises the fact that, far from Genet's criminals establishing an underworld community, no such fraternity exists: "Il n'y a pas de solidarité dans le mal, pas de «bande», pas de «gang», tout au plus des associations passagères qui se font au hasard d'un «casse» et se défont tout aussitôt" (SG p.138).

welcome it as "cette solitude dont la grandeur me fut révélée très tôt" (MR p.371), and he even talks of "cette paix d'être enfin en nous-mêmes" (MR p.460). Similarly, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* welcomes the solitude of the cell precisely because it returns him to himself: "la cellule de prison, que j'aime maintenant comme un vice, m'apporta la consolation de moi-même par soi-même" (NDF p.49). Indeed, Jouhandeau quotes Genet himself as having spoken about prison in precisely these terms:

> La Prison, ce n'est pas la Prison, c'est l'Evasion, la Liberté. C'est là qu'on échappe à l'accessoire, qu'on est rendu à l'essentiel.[51]

The solitude of prison provides welcome respite from the constraints of social existence.

One of the most important ways in which solitude is willed and transformed into something positive in the narratives is by regarding it as an approximation of the self-sufficiency that impotence within the immutable otherwise denies.[52] The narrators, along with a few of their characters, attempt to achieve a semblance of control at least over themselves by withdrawing from the superficial relativity of life in society into a solipsistic realm in which they make themselves as self-reliant, as 'singular'[53] and as absolute as possible. They exploit their solitude by viewing it as, in the words of the narrator of *Journal du voleur*, "une solitude me conférant la souveraineté" (JV p.197). The chief way in which this transformation of solitude into self-sufficiency is achieved is by transforming one's passivity in the face of social condemnation into willed provocation, that is, by actively pursuing socially or morally unacceptable behaviour: the pursuit of Evil.[54]

The majority of Genet critics examine the theme of the pursuit of Evil, which is so prominent in Genet's prose fiction, in terms of a rejection of the bourgeois society which rejected Genet, or in terms of an ontological pursuit of absolute negative being, or even simply in terms of a desire to 'épater les bourgeois'. However, while all of these readings have their own validity – and it is not the intention of this thesis to provide further lengthy discussion of them here – the status of evil-doing in these texts can also be regarded from a quite different perspective when it is examined in the context of the narrators' exploration of possibilities of gaining control within the immutable aspects of the human condition. Like

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51 Marcel Jouhandeau, *Portraits*, 1988, p.41.

52 The way in which the narrator takes this desire for godhead a step further and transforms solitude into a specifically aesthetic form of self-sufficiency, setting himself up as omnipotent god of the narrated world, will be examined in the next chapter.

53 In this context, singularity denotes a sense of self-sufficiency rather than a unique identity as such.

54 It is important to note that the characters do not only assert their moral self-sufficiency through the 'evil' of criminality, but also through their homosexuality, which is another form of Evil or "moeurs condamnées" (QB p.273) by society's codes. The narrator of *Querelle de Brest* confirms the social isolation of the pederast: "on sait avec quelle horreur la société écarte d'elle toute idée qui la rapproche de l'idée de pédérastie" (QB p.262). Indeed, in *Fragments...*, the narrator comments that his homosexuality does not only isolate him from heterosexual society but from all his fellow men – "Elle m'isole, me coupe à la fois du reste du monde et de chaque pédéraste" (FR p.77) – but, through the application of his pride, he is able to will this isolation as chosen: "L'orgueil changea l'exil en refus volontaire" (FR pp.85-86).

pirates who tattoo their bodies as a means of choosing to make life in society impossible for themselves, for the same reason, a narrator or a character will choose to pursue evil so that imposed isolation is transformed into a matter of free choice. As the narrator of *Journal du voleur* says of the pirates:

> Ayant eux-mêmes voulu cette impossibilité, ils souffraient moins de la rigueur du destin. Ils le voulaient, restreignaient leur univers dans son espace et son confort. (MR pp.348-49)

Thus, in the context of a desire to assert an element of control within one's condition, beneath the superficial social significance of evil behaviour, in the narratives evil is not simply pursued for its own sake but as a means to an end, and the end is the self-sufficiency of absolute isolation. Internalising and utilising inversions of existing codes of behaviour is only the beginning of this process, and, as the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* discovers to his exasperation, simply adopting the opposite of socially acceptable behaviour does not in itself transform isolation into the self-sufficiency of total solitude. As he tells us, "c'est en haussant à 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". However, the outcome is that, "voici que j'ai la honte de me voir aborder avec peine, éclopé, saignant, sur un rivage plus peuplé que la Mort elle-même" (PF p.128).

Moral isolation is still desirable in itself because it does bring with it a kind of freedom even within its humiliation, as Erik discovers – "La honte lui assurant qu'il ne lui restait aucun lien avec les hommes, il était prêt à tout oser" (PF p.78) – and as Gil also exclaims to Querelle: "J'ai pus rien à perdre. Je peux faire ce que je veux... Je suis libre" (QB p.339).[55] However, if moral solitude is to be absolute, the individual must appropriate the socially condemnable into his own self-sufficiency and, in so doing, establish his own morality by which to live, thereby moving through a transvaluation of accepted ethics into a realm 'beyond good and evil' in the Nietzschean sense, and we are reminded that the idea of "au-delà du bien et du mal" was one of the two principal Nietzschean concepts which Genet identified as closest to his own vision in his letter to Marc Barbezat.[56]

Briefly, for Nietzsche, there is no God – "God is dead"[57] – and therefore no metaphysical dimension – "To talk about 'another' world than this is quite pointless"[58] – and so morality must be no more than a human construct with no true relationship to the universe: "none of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it".[59] The arbitrariness of

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55 In similar fashion, the narrator of *Journal du voleur* asserts: "plus ma culpabilité serait grande, à vos yeux, entière, totalement assumée, plus grande sera ma liberté" (JV p.94).

56 *Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat*, p.261.

57 The first occurrence of this famous formulation in Nietzsche's thought comes in *The Gay Science*, p.167.

58 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p.49.

59 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p.168.

moral binary oppositions is similarly highlighted by Genet in *Le Balcon* in the words of Le Juge: "Le monde est une pomme, je la coupe en deux: les bons, les mauvais" (BA p.56). For Nietzsche, then, Good and Evil can no longer be considered to be absolutes. As Zarathustra exclaims:

> O my brothers, is everything not *now in flux*? Have not all railings and gangways fallen into the water and come to nothing? Who can still *cling* to 'good' and 'evil'?[60]

In Nietzsche's anti-teleological vision, there is nothing beyond the phenomenal world, no spiritual world guiding it, and although the world may be 'becoming', as Darwin's principle of evolution posited, it is developing without goal or purpose. This awareness could lead to despair and nihilism, but Nietzsche typically strives to establish a positive side to man's condition, and the positive side of the death of God is, for Nietzsche, the resulting anthropocentrism of man's experience of his existence. In the absence of the metaphysical, man must be dependent only on himself and on his own will. He has lost a guide and a given meaning, and gained his moral freedom.

The importance of Nietzsche was, then, precisely that his philosophy was the first to problematise the accepted conception of morality, before Darwin, as God-given and therefore absolute:

> Nobody up to now has examined the *value* of that most famous of all medicines which is called morality; and the first step would be – for once to *question* it. Well then, precisely this is our task.[61]

If humanity is not God's chosen species but merely another organism thrown up by the vagaries of evolution and living by the necessities of nature, and if the moral concepts of good and evil are therefore simply a question of custom and tradition, at best relative and, at worst, quite meaningless, then, for Nietzsche, to be immoral is not to be guilty of a transgression but simply to have assumed the anthropocentrism of the world and to have asserted a degree of freedom and self-sufficiency within it:

> The free human being is immoral because in all things he is *determined* to depend upon himself and not upon a tradition: in all the original conditions of mankind, 'evil' signifies the same as 'individual', 'free', 'capricious', 'unusual', 'unforeseen', 'incalculable'.[62]

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60 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.219.

61 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p.285.

62 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 1982, p.10.

I would suggest that it is in Nietzsche's sense of immorality that, just as Nietzsche called himself "the first *immoralist*",[63] Cocteau regarded Genet *because* of the nature of his immorality as "un moraliste":

> J'appelle une morale un comportement secret, une discipline construite selon les aptitudes d'un homme refusant l'impératif catégorique, impératif qui fausse des mécanismes.
> Cette morale particulière peut paraître l'immoralité même au regard de ceux qui se mentent ou qui vivent à la débandade, de sorte que le mensonge leur deviendra vérité, et que notre vérité leur deviendra mensonge.
> C'est en vertu de ce principe que j'ai écrit: Genet est un moraliste.[64]

It is in this sense also that the narrators present themselves and, indeed, many of their characters as 'moral' in their 'immorality'. They may, on a superficial, social level, be reinforcing the status quo by identifying themselves as 'evil' rather than 'good', but on a fundamental level, like Nietzsche, they are internalising passively received moral values and asserting their own self-sufficiency in relation to them. Morality is thereby subjectivised. As Zarathustra declares:

> The great dragon is called 'Thou shalt'. But the spirit of the lion says 'I will!'[65]

Thus, in Genet's fiction, as in Nietzsche, solitude and evil come together in the pursuit of self-sufficiency,[66] and the narrators, along with certain of their fictional delegates, move beyond social self-marginalisation, willed and reinforced through external acts, to establishing a self-sufficient 'morality' inside themselves. As the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* affirms: "A l'intérieur de moi-même je me suis créé un ordre de chevalerie dont je suis l'initiateur, le fondateur et le seul chevalier" (PF p.51). Similarly, according to the narrator of *Querelle de Brest*, Querelle is not simply adopting an inversion of morality but is acting "hors des lois du monde". He chooses rather a primitive morality which he can internalise to suit himself and acts in the spirit of "un nègre sauvage, naturel d'une tribu où le meurtre ennoblit" (QB p.271).[67] It is not the intention of the criminals in these narratives simply to establish an alternative, inverted society as a few critics have maintained, but to

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63 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p.87.

64 Jean Cocteau, *Journal d'un inconnu*, 1953, p.15.

65 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.55.

66 Indeed, in *Daybreak*, Nietzsche even writes: "He who is evil is at his most evil in solitude: which is where he is also at his best" (*Daybreak*, p.203).

67 Similarly, in *Journal du voleur*, the narrator tells us: "C'est par un chemin bien long que je choisis de rejoindre la vie primitive. Il me faut d'abord la condamnation de ma race" (JV p.33).

isolate themselves from all humanity and, in some cases, from external reality itself. As Bickel also comments:

> Le monde de la criminalité genétienne n'est pas le reflet inverti de l'autre monde. Genet ne construit pas un autre monde qui se contente de nier le nôtre; *il nie tout*, il nie son propre monde, sa propre société, voulant tout détruire, se voulant négation pure.[68]

It is in this sense that the narrators present some characters striving for sanctity, where to be a saint means to choose to live one's life in solitude, marginalised from society, pursuing an ascetic life-style in order to attain a total self-reliance and self-mastery while devoting one's life to becoming one with the absolute. The saint is the paradigm of renunciation, but according to the narrators, if one is to be in control of one's condition, this renunciation must, almost paradoxically, be actively asserted.[69] And it is typical of these texts that 'sanctity' is asserted blasphemously through evil.

Although the evil-doers in Genet's prose fiction undeniably run roughshod over human life,[70] their *primary* inner aim is, then, for the narrators, not actually to cause harm and pain to other people but to win a victory of control over themselves by pushing their audacity to the limit. As Nietzsche also asserted, inner experience is ultimately the only reality: "whatever may yet come to me as fate and experience [...] in the final analysis one experiences only oneself".[71] Similarly, the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* emphasises the positive value Querelle sees in the disparity between his own inner view of himself and the way in which society judges him – "Il était fort d'être pour soi une masse de lumière, apparence de nuit pour les autres" (QB p.271) – and of Querelle's murders the narrator states clearly, "sans doute s'agit-il là d'une opération qu'aucun homme ne peut juger" (QB pp.388-89). What this means for the reader of Genet is that, in order to understand fully the way in which the pursuit of evil functions within the narrators' exploration of responses to the human condition, as we saw in the Introduction to this thesis, the reader must, at least in the first instance, suspend moral objections and examine the narrators' speculation as it is presented within the speculative 'framework' of the texts themselves.

By the cold inner logic of the narrators' fictional world, then, total self-sufficiency would mean complete indifference to all other beings, and if the best way to assert

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68 Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et Transcendance*, p.69.

69 White makes the immensely astute comment that this paradoxical blend of asceticism and self-assertion brings together two contradictory perspectives: "Renunciation is the secret of life, just as the will is the source of art – both lonely virtues, far from the herd and spontaneity. If the will is a Nietzschean value, renunciation is purely Christian; Genet remains eternally suspended between the two systems" (White, *Genet*, p.37). In the case of the narrator and his characters in Genet's prose texts, their renunciation *is* their willing, they will their very renunciation, and the transformation is performed within the imagination, and then, in the case of the narrator, it is expressed through art.

70 Although Thody makes the ridiculous claim that, "Genet's criminals do very little harm to anyone except themselves" (Thody, *Jean Genet*, p.30), the 'body count' by the end of the first four prose texts reaches double figures.

71 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.173.

indifference and complete *maîtrise de soi* is through acts of cruelty, then so be it. Those of the narrators' characters who achieve the greatest degree of self-possession in their attempt to render their self-sufficient solitude as absolute as possible are the ones who push their isolation from society to the point of isolation even from humanity, further shrugging off the relativity of their social shell through a process of self-dehumanisation. Querelle, whose moral and social self-sufficiency is perhaps the most complete, is described from the start as "inhumain" (QB p.208), and even the much more passive narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* maintains that, "m'inhumaniser est ma tendance profonde" (NDF p.32).

For the self-sufficiency of solitude to be as total and non-relative as possible, then, the individual would need to cut himself off completely from all need for company. The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* describes the man he would admire the most as "l'homme qui ne s'est pas laissé prendre à l'amour" and "le chevalier plus fort que l'amour" (MR p.340). And it comes as no surprise that Harcamone, whom the narrator sets up as his ideal of solitary self-sufficiency in *Miracle de la rose*, is just such a man: "Je suppose qu'il menait une vie très chaste et je croirais assez qu'autant que son crime, cette chasteté le durcissait et lui donnait son éclat" (MR p.359). Similarly, although the fourth narrator's hero, Querelle, would like "un ami criminel", failing this he too wills and also positivises a total solitude for itself: "Querelle s'était donc enfermé dans sa propre solitude qu'il érigeait comme le monument le plus singulier" (QB L'Imaginaire p.143). Indeed, a comment in *Pompes funèbres* makes it quite clear that solitude is the fundamental state and company can only cover it temporarily. When Riton can feel Erik's body pressed against his in the underground train, the pleasure he feels is ephemeral and merely affords him a moment's welcome respite from his underlying solitude to which he must return:

> Et chaque fois que le contact était rompu, Riton reconnaissait sa solitude. Renoué, c'était la paix avec le monde, le calme, la sécurité. (PF p.143)

If one is not to be a passive, humiliated victim of this immutable, fundamental solitude, it must be willed and intensified. Love is the refuge of the weak, such as the narrators and Divine, not of the self-possessed, active hero.

One of the ways in which marginalised solitude can be deepened into a more total self-sufficiency in isolation even from fellow criminals is through betrayal. The narrator of *Pompes funèbres* defines betrayal as an indirect act of violence committed through language – "La parole tue, empoisonne, mutile, déforme, salit" (PF p.128) – and, as such, this particular path to self-possession can be achieved even by the most socially passive of individuals. Within her passivity, Divine betrays her friends as a means of intensifying her inescapable solitude and deriving a sense of glory through having actively provoked it:

> Elle vole et trahit ses amis.
> Tout concourt à établir autour d'elle – malgré elle – la solitude.
> Elle vit simplement dans l'intimité de sa gloire, de la gloire qu'elle a faite toute petite et précieuse. (NDF p.197)

It is in similar fashion that Dédé transforms his own passive relativity into self-sufficiency by betraying Gil: "Par ce geste, Dédé se détachait du monde de ses semblables" (QB p.401).

Betrayal does not only demand the self-overcoming required to commit an act of willed self-marginalisation, but challenges the perpetrator further to find the supreme self-sufficiency and self-control needed to face the personal pain of deceiving or informing on a friend or lover. Hence, far from betrayal being the act of a coward, the narrators regard it as the assertion of inner strength. The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* maintains that, "les marles les plus forts étaient des donneuses" (MR p.441), and the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* states that, "il fortifie la volonté du criminel quand la victime est son ami" (QB p.388).

Thus, in Genet's texts, however appallingly, unjustifiably destructive a character's actions may be, again the narrators place the emphasis not on delighting in the actual consequences to another for their own sake, to which the perpetrator remains largely indifferent, but on the inner victory attained. Thus, the motivation behind betrayal is almost never anger or revenge or even malice, but the pursuit of a masochistic stoicism in order to establish a sense of self-sufficiency even within a more fundamental impotence. When the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* is describing his chosen journey towards "la singularité", he asserts:

> Parmi les travaux qui marquent cette ascèse particulière, c'est la trahison qui me coûta le plus d'efforts. Pourtant j'eus le courage admirable de m'écarter des hommes par une chute plus profonde, de livrer à la police mon ami le plus martyrisé. (PF p.61)

Again, this parallels Nietzsche's statement that, "the value of a thing sometimes lies not in what one attains with it, but in what one pays for it – what it *costs* us".[72] In the same way that Corneille's Horace welcomes the pain of fulfilling his duty as an *épreuve* which will prove he is 'hors de l'ordre commun', the traitors in Genet's fiction do not betray their friends and lovers in spite of but because of the *maîtrise de soi* required to will their suffering and lock themselves into the freedom of their self-sufficient solitude. As the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* goes on to explain:

> Sans doute cette trahison me cause une souffrance inouïe, m'apprenant du même coup mon amitié pour ma victime et pour l'homme un amour encore vivace; mais au milieu de cette souffrance, il me semblait que demeurât, la honte m'ayant brûlé de toute part, au milieu des flammes ou plutôt des vapeurs de la

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72 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p.102.

> honte, d'une forme aux lignes sévères et nettes, d'une matière inattaquable, une sorte de diamant, justement appelé solitaire. Je crois qu'on l'appelle aussi l'orgueil et encore l'humilité et encore la connaissance. J'avais commis un acte libre. (PF p.61)

Indeed, the wartime situation of *Pompes funèbres* gives the characters the further opportunity not just to betray individuals but to betray their country, and the narrator himself is equally able to betray France through his treacherous writing.

Significantly, then, those characters who represent the narrators' ideal, and who the narrators set up as having achieved the highest level of self-possession and active self-assertion, such as Harcamone and Querelle, have not only withdrawn almost completely from society into a physical and moral solitude but have dared to place themselves – or rather, the narrators have placed them there – at the centre of their own inner universe. They are not just solitary, but have transformed their solitude into self-sufficiency. The narrator of *Querelle de Brest*, for example, emphasises the control and self-sufficiency at the heart of Querelle's solipsism: "Nous disons bien «une absolue solitude» c'est-à-dire solitude qui se veut solitude pour ce qu'elle est source, point de départ d'un univers calqué sur l'autre et le soumettant" (QB L'Imaginaire p.119).

But solipsism is not attainable only by those who establish it through active self-marginalisation. Even the most passive individuals can withdraw into themselves by simply cutting themselves off from society and perhaps also from external reality for a moment. As a child, Culafroy seeks out the solitude of his own room for the precise reason that there he is no longer a passive victim of what *is* but is at the very centre of his own reality:

> Culafroy entrait dans sa chambre. Aussitôt le voici dans son Vatican, pontife souverain. (NDF p.75)

Then, as an adult, Divine also prefers conscious separation from the outside world:

> Elle se sent assez bien protégée par le fait d'être dans son corps. Dehors règne l'épouvante. (NDF p.73)

Indeed, having retreated from the relativity of external reality into the absoluteness of solipsism within her own head by simply closing her eyes – "ses paupières se rejoignent, la séparent du monde" – we have one of the rare occasions when she believes: "Je suis heureuse" (NDF pp.41-42). Both as child and adult, the way in which Divine, who is the narrator's representative, withdraws into the self-sufficiency of an imaginary world, reflects and perhaps represents the process of the narrator-artist – which will be discussed in the next chapter – in whose imagination they move.

Thus, solitude is not simply one more humiliating immutable aspect of the human condition which is both imposed and willed through social marginalisation. Solitude can be

transformed into an approximation of the very self-sufficiency which the narrators' vision of the human condition precludes. Indeed, solitude is desirable in itself because it facilitates the internalisation of external reality which forms an intrinsic part of the narrators' – and, by extension, many of their fictional delegates' – 'poetic' responses to the immutability of their condition by which they attempt to will and take control of their condition in the only realm in which this is possible, in their imagination.

CHAPTER FIVE - THE PURSUIT OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY, NARCISSISM, AND SELF-CREATION

As we began to see in the previous chapter, then, the only way to achieve a semblance of self-possession even within one's impotence before the immutability of the human condition is by transforming willed isolation into self-sufficiency. Beyond the physical and moral isolation which can be achieved by willing and even provoking social marginalisation, however, once withdrawal from external reality into an inner, solipsistic realm has taken place, self-sufficiency can be asserted by various other imaginary means. And the narrators pursue their own self-sufficiency through specifically artistic means, attempting to achieve the absolute self-sufficiency of becoming their own source through aesthetic self-creation. But before we examine these entirely solipsistic methods, there is a bizarre process through which the narrators present either themselves or a character actually endeavouring to assert a solipsistic self-sufficiency paradoxically through their internalisation of their relationship to others in external reality. At the heart of this method is the transformation of the individual's relativity in relation to the other into the self-sufficiency of Narcissism.

In order to assert a degree of self-possession, then, even within their fundamental lack of control over themselves, either a narrator or a character will often use another person as a blank screen onto which, narcissistically, he projects an image of himself, which will often be idealised. In this sense, they are like the angels to whom the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* refers, who, in order to "éprouver la volupté de la possession" utilise a mechanism by which "l'amant se métamorphose en aimé" (MR p.313). They merge self and other into a narcissistic self-sufficiency by, at once, wanting to be the other and wanting the other to be oneself, in so far as the other represents the projection of an idealised self. It is in this way that Divine, for example, declares to her lover Gabriel: "Tu n'es pas mon ami, tu es moi-même" (NDF p.82), and Erik's love of the Executioner incorporates an element of regarding his lover as a kind of second self: "Il lui arrivait [...] de désirer être le bourreau afin de se contempler lui-même" (PF p.78). In the narrators' world, self-love – the amatory expression of a desire for self-sufficiency – can be expressed through externalising the object of love, while, at the same time, love of the other is often, at root, the expression of self-love.

The predominance of homosexual relationships in the prose texts renders the element of self-sufficient narcissism particularly acute. When the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* hears "un beau gosse" declare his love for "les beaux gosses", he observes that, "j'eus l'impression d'assister à une sorte de partouze intime où le seul partenaire, pour s'adorer mieux se partage en deux, ou encore où le double du miroir vient à la rencontre du

jeune homme et se confond en lui" (PF L'Imaginaire p.225). Because most of the characters, like the narrators, share the same sex as their lover, this makes it even easier for the lover to represent either the way they are or an ideal version of the way they would like to be. As Malgorn comments: "La séduction homosexuelle [...] est cette représentation d'une quête de l'autre qui est un semblable".[73] This point is also made by Marcel Eck in the section on narcissism of his essay on homosexuality, and although I would have serious reservations about applying his theory generally, it provides an interesting parallel to ideas which appear in Genet's prose fiction:

> Le fondement du narcissisme repose sur ce besoin de l'homosexuel d'indéfiniment retrouver un autre lui-même dans son partenaire. L'autre ne l'intéresse que dans la mesure où il est lui: lui tel qu'il est, tel qu'il voudrait être, tel qu'il voudrait être demeuré.[74]

To reinforce the self-sufficient narcissism inherent in relationships in the narratives, great emphasis is placed on physical resemblance. When Querelle kisses Mario, for example, his experience is described by the narrator in terms of a mirror motif which echoes the words of the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*:

> Pour la première fois Querelle embrassait un homme sur la bouche. Il lui semblait se cogner le visage contre un miroir réfléchissant sa propre image [...]. (QB p.362)

Perhaps the most striking example of the exploitation of physical resemblance as a means of 'achieving' self-possession occurs in the relationship between the narrator and Divers in *Miracle de la rose*. The narrator is unable to see himself from the outside – "je ne connaissais pas mon visage" (MR p.294) – and so he makes of Divers his narcissistic mirror-image, telling us that, "je regardais son visage que je croyais être aussi le mien" (MR p.444). The narrator goes on to say that "ma solitude m'a précipité vers cette ressemblance jusqu'à désirer qu'elle soit parfaite, jusqu'à me confondre avec lui-même" (MR p.445). Divers loses his autonomy as he becomes a mere externalisation of the narrator. Thus, the narrator merges perceiver and perceived in a self-sufficient union as he tries to become one not with the Other but, narcissistically, with the reflection of himself. Even with Bulkaen an element of this narcissism is in evidence as the narrator uses another as a mere shell onto which he projects himself. The narrator recognises this when he suddenly becomes aware of the true source of Bulkaen's beauty, realising that, "cette beauté était en moi et non en lui" (MR p.354).

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73 Malgorn, *Jean Genet*, p.60.

74 Marcel Eck, *Sodome: Essai sur l'homosexualité*, 1966, p.197.

For the narrator of *Miracle de la rose*, the aim of his relationship with Divers is entirely egocentric: not union with the Other but union through the Other with himself, or indeed his Self. On one level, he attempts to bring this about symbolically, by, for example, mixing their names together to become one, "ce nom de Divers, je le déformai pour le faire entrer dans le mien, mêlant les lettres de l'un et de l'autre" (MR p.280), and even by internalising Divers' name like a pregnancy, so that he is seen in terms of a being who has been brought forth from inside the narrator himself (MR p.279),[75] thereby intensifying his self-sufficiency in relation to him.

Further to this, not satisfied with the 'oneness' which their 'marriage' gives them, the narrator goes so far as to imagine that Divers is his twin, "sorti du même sein que moi" (MR p.387), their mutual mother being Mettray. Indeed, the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* even defines love itself as "conscience de la séparation d'un seul, conscience d'être divisé, et que votre vous-même vous contemple" (QB p.260). As twins, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* and Divers would be more than ever two halves of a whole, Divers literally being the separated other half of the narrator as they emerged from the same biological cell. And of course, if this were so, it would mean that any sex between them would not only constitute incest, but, as sex with the other half of oneself, it would in fact represent the ultimate act of self-penetration and self-possession.

It is in similar fashion that the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* asserts a merging of himself with Jean D., emphasising their oneness through their shared name. This coincidence is then reinforced by other external metaphors for their essential inner oneness, such as the mixing of their blood (PF L'Imaginaire p.60), and the narrator wearing Jean D.'s clothes (PF p.47). Also, the marriage which seals the unity of Jean and Divers in *Miracle de la Rose* is mirrored by the transformation of Jean D.'s funeral into a wedding by the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*, as he imagines that, "j'officiais en même temps à des funérailles et à des noces" (PF p.57).

Certain narrators, then, explore the possibility of establishing a degree of control within the immutability of the human condition by attempting to achieve self-sufficiency through relationships. This means that the narrator or character who attempts this is, paradoxically, using a situation in which he is clearly relative in his endeavour to attain absoluteness, or using the means of a couple in order to assert solitude. Typically, then, any self-sufficiency 'attained' through narcissistic relationships could only ultimately be imaginary, and, as such, the narcissistic desire for erotic self-possession of oneself through possession of the other finds its most complete expression, perhaps not surprisingly, not in relation to a separate being in external reality but in the solipsistic, self-sufficient realm of the imagination. Having withdrawn from the insurmountable relativity of relationships in

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75 "Ce nom [...] prit possession du monde, c'est-à-dire de moi. Et il m'habita. Dès lors, j'en jouis comme d'une grossesse" (MR p.279).

external reality, Divine divides herself into two for a sexual act of total self-sufficiency which she plays out in her mind: "Elle se voyait faisant l'acte sur elle-même" (NDF p.90). Indeed, the ultimate symbol of *sui generis* in Genet's prose could only be encapsulated in the image of a man with his penis in his own mouth in what would be a typically Genetian perversion of the motif of the snake swallowing its own tail.

The pursuit of self-sufficiency is at its most effective, then, when it takes place not simply partially but entirely in the individual's inner solitude. As Querelle's experience reveals, isolation from society, whether physical or moral, leads to awareness of the fundamental otherness of external reality in relation to the inner man. When Querelle's very first murder plunges him into "une région profonde" in complete withdrawal from society, this new perspective reveals to him the absurdity of the daily life in external reality of "les hommes insensés" (QB p.254) as the illusion of any objective significance to man's existence dissolves into Querelle's solipsism. In Genet's prose fiction, the inner, imaginary self-sufficiency of solipsism becomes prized above all else, particularly by the narrators. As the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* declares, the "pays des Chimères" is "le seul digne d'être habité", and to back this up he quotes Pope: "tel étant le néant des choses humaines que, hors l'être existant par lui-même, il n'y a rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas" (NDF p.70). And it is the narrators, as artists, who are able to exploit the potential of solipsism to the greatest extent, responding to the immutability of their condition by not only internalising reality in the inner, self-sufficient realm of their imagination, but actually creating an aesthetic parallel reality within it and then even exploiting their relationship to the narrated world to the extent of not just becoming non-relative and self-reliant but actually attempting to become their own source.

As we saw in the previous chapter, then, it is fundamental to a 'poetic' or aesthetic response to one's condition not to stop at self-isolation from society but to seek withdrawal from external reality itself into the self-sufficiency of solipsism. It is in this sense that 'l'immonde' might be chosen not solely for its immorality but precisely because, as the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* makes clear, "l'immonde" also represents "non-monde" (NDF p.202). Indeed, Witt even takes this a step further, and explains that, "exile from the "normal" world puts one in the antiworld, but exile from *l'immonde* is a state of total moral solitude, nowhere".[76] Beyond the evil means through which the isolation of social marginalisation might be willed and reinforced, beyond the simple inversion of accepted morality, and, indeed, beyond the whole realm of external reality, there is this "nowhere", this inner universe of the imagination in which the individual's condition can be transformed. This is the domain of the poet, both in the broadest and the more specific sense of the word, but it is the artist himself who is able to exploit the solipsistic potential of his solitude to the

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[76] Mary Ann Frese Witt, *Existential Prisons: Captivity in Mid-twentieth-Century French Literature*, 1985, p.164.

greatest extent. Only the artist can move beyond simply establishing a semblance of self-reliance inside himself and actually attempt to render his self-sufficiency absolute by using the realm of reality internalised to attempt to become his own source in an aesthetic act of self-creation.

One way in which the narrators in particular will and positivise solitude is precisely by regarding withdrawal from society into self-sufficiency as the pre-requisite for artistic creation: "le poète est asocial" (PF L'Imaginaire p.190). Because, as we have seen, solitude promotes inwardness, it is natural that the isolated man's imagination should come alive in response to solitude. When Gil finds himself imprisoned alone in his hide-out, he naturally turns inwards and his imagination begins to assert itself within the immutability of his situation – "l'imagination se développait avec une extraordinaire vigueur" – and for the narrator this clearly constitutes in embryo the artist's response to external reality: "Gil faisait (sans qu'il s'en doutât) l'apprentissage douloureux de la poésie" (QB p.336).

The artist does not, however, simply use solitude as a suitable catalyst for creativity but actually reinforces his control over his relationship to his solitude by incorporating it into his imaginary pursuits where it can be further willed, transformed and made his own. In other words, the artist internalises his self-sufficient solitude and reasserts it as a specifically aesthetic self-sufficiency. Thus, while the first two narrators welcome, after the event, the isolation imposed upon them by incarceration because the cell facilitates the solitude necessary for the internalisation and imaginary transformation of external reality, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* actually recreates the solitude of the prison cell by isolating himself in a monastery in order to write, thereby rendering his former incarceration doubly willed: "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" (PF p.128). The link between imprisonment and the monastic life was first suggested in *Miracle de la rose* since Fontevrault was in fact a former monastery, and Witt reinforces the parallel specifically in relation to artistic creation and the transformation that can be 'achieved' through it:

> Genet's cellular meditations prepare him for creation as a monk's cellular rituals prepare him for spiritual elevation. [...] The cellular rites involve a process of turning fatality inward, conforming a regime imposed by others to the prisoner's own will.[77]

It is not simply the case, then, that these narrators write from a cell but that the writing appropriates and re-creates the self-sufficiency of the cell within itself. As Dichy observes:

> Sans s'ériger directement contre la prison, le poème la double de l'intérieur, la fait glisser dans son propre territoire, obéir à ses lois. [...] Ce mouvement a pour premier effet de placer le poète au

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77 Witt, *Existential Prisons*, p.160.

> centre des opérations, d'instituer le prisonnier en monarque de sa prison. Par là, il transforme l'espace carcéral en lieu *imaginaire*, ouvre le cercle d'une intériorité au coeur d'un univers rigoureusement fermé sur une extériorité [...].[78]

As Witt indicates, further cells, like Divine's attic, are then reproduced within the narrative itself, a process which she describes in the following terms: "It is as if the prison cell were a biological cell or a fertilized egg capable of multiplying itself and then contracting its multiple selves back into one."[79]

For the narrators, then, artistic solitude is just the first step in asserting a specifically aesthetic self-sufficiency as an inner response to their fundamental lack of control within their condition. Indeed, the narrators can actually reinforce their aesthetic solitude and self-sufficiency by provoking a further aesthetic manifestation of their willed social marginalisation by means of provoking the condemnation of their narratee. The narrator of *Pompes funèbres* describes his literary project in terms of, "la poésie ou l'art [...] d'utiliser la merde et de vous la faire bouffer" (PF L'Imaginaire p.190). As Henderson states, with reference to the narrator of *Journal du voleur*, but his comments are applicable to all the narrators:

> Unlike a traditional confessing subject, he does not endeavour to explain his crimes or win pardon or understanding. He seems instead to seek out his reader's condemnation. Ironically, the more the narratee condemns him, banishing him to the margins of society, the freer the narrator feels in his singularity and exclusion.[80]

Henderson may find this 'ironic', but this process is inseparable from the way in which the narrators strive to render their self-sufficiency as absolute as possible – even if it is only aesthetic and imaginary – as part of their artistic response to their condition.

The narrators transform their solitude into self-sufficiency and take control of the immutability of their condition by internalising it, then, just as, in turn, some of their characters do. But as artists, the narrators are also able to take this process a step further and actually create their own aesthetic parallel reality over which they can aim to have total control in a way that would be impossible in external reality. The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* describes the way that external reality is brought under his control inside himself:

> C'est du plus profond de moi que j'arrache mes mots, [...] et ces mots, chargés de tous les désirs que je porte enfouis, les exprimant, au fur et à mesure que je les écrirai, sur le papier,

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78 Albert Dichy, 'Jean Genet: la prison imaginaire', 1987, p.40.

79 Witt, *Existential Prisons*, p.161.

80 Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', pp.222-23.

> referont le monde détestable et adoré dont j'ai voulu m'affranchir.
> (MR p.248)

The narrators transform their inner sense of self-sufficiency into the divinity of godhead by setting themselves up as god of the narrated world.[81] When the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* says of Ernestine, "elle sert un texte qu'elle ignore, que j'inscris" (NDF p.20), his words could be applied by each of the narrators to all of their fictional characters.

Thus, as aesthetic god of their own inner reality, the narrators assert a freedom which the immutability of the human condition otherwise denies them. Just as the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* declares every creator to be "méchant" (PF L'Imaginaire p.108), the narrators can also assert their power through divine malevolence. Each narrator pushes his characters to the limits, giving them their own destinies by his choice, and he sanctifies or martyrs them at will. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* actually gloats over his aesthetic omnipotence – "Mignon et Notre-Dame, votre destin, si rigoureux le tracerais-je, ne cessera d'être – d'une façon très éteinte – tourmenté par ce qu'il aurait pu être encore et qu'il ne sera pas grâce à moi" (NDF p.67) – as though he were gaining an aesthetic revenge over the constraints of his own miserable condition. As Naish comments: "In driving his creatures to relentless doom he paradoxically assumes control of his own literary destiny".[82]

The characters are the narrators' creatures and they control them like a puppeteer controlling his marionettes,[83] irrespective of whether the narrator is heterodiegetic or homodiegetic, and irrespective of whether a character is presented by the narrator as 'real' – that is, as someone he claims either to have known in the past or to know in the environment from which he narrates – or as a pure figment of his imagination. Everything becomes material for the narrators' creative mind, to the point that real and imaginary are blended together into the single 'reality' of the aesthetic world. For example, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* says of Bulkaen, whom he presents as 'real', "j'ai le toupet de penser que Bulkaen ne vécut qu'afin que je fasse mon livre" (MR p.236), and later the narrator even admits that, far from presenting Bulkaen as he was, the reality of Bulkaen has only served him as a "modèle" which he has internalised for his own purposes: "Par les jeux et les trucs du langage, il m'aura servi à définir un être, à lui donner la force et la vie" (MR p.397). The characters may have evolved from 'real' people, but for the narrators they represent personifications of their own purely subjective desires and wishes. As the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* intimates when speaking of Divers: "Quand je tins son visage dans mes mains, je

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81 As we read in *Le Funambule*, God is present through the solitude and self-sufficiency of the artist, where 'God' signifies the individual who has asserted his will to achieve a supreme degree of self-possession: "Dieu ne serait donc que la somme de toutes les possibilités de ta volonté appliquée à ton corps sur ce fil de fer? Divines possibilités!" (FU p.23).

82 Naish, *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet*, p.201.

83 Although, at the same time, as we saw in the Introduction, the narrator often likes to give the impression that they have their own reality and frequently escape his control.

tins le visage d'un personnage de rêve qui aurait pris corps" (MR p.390). Thus, the artist is truly the characters' divine creator in so far as he fashions them in his own image – "le pauvre Démiurge est contraint de faire sa créature à son image" – although, typically, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* cannot resist parodying the creation of his own first 'Adam' through the addition of characteristic vulgarity:

> Dans ma cellule, petit à petit, il faudra bien donner mes frissons au granit. Je resterai longtemps seul avec lui et je le ferai vivre avec mon haleine et l'odeur de mes pets, solennels ou très doux. (NDF p.25)

As god of their aesthetic parallel reality, the narrators do not only have control over the characters who inhabit it but the whole of the narrated world obeys only their own rules. Everything is, as the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* puts it, "à ma guise" (NDF p.13). Thus, the 'auteur fictif' can do away with all pretence of verisimilitude and flout even the immutable passing of time by, for example, keeping Mignon the same age throughout *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* even though Divine ages and dies (NDF p.28). As the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* comments, the self-sufficient inwardness which imprisonment promotes facilitates this aesthetic freedom: "En cellule [...] on est maître du temps et de sa pensée" (MR p.353). Indeed, the very fact that the inner realm of the imagination allows the artist to assert the freedom and control which the immutability of external reality renders impossible leads the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* playfully to question which is actually more real:

> Ne criez pas à l'invraisemblance. Ce qui va suivre est faux et personne n'est tenu de l'accepter pour argent comptant. 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? (NDF p.135)

In Genet's early prose texts, then, for the most part the narrators conduct their own responses to the immutable aspects of the human condition which preoccupy them in and through the self-sufficient realm of the imaginary, narrated world. In their own inner reality they are able to assert the freedom and control to explore their internalised condition and even to 'experience' in their minds a multiplicity of situations and actions which would lie beyond their predestined potential in external reality. As the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* asserts:

> Il suffisait de peu de chose pour que je quitte l'aventure désastreuse que vivait mon corps, que je quitte mon corps (j'ai donc eu raison de dire que le désespoir fait sortir de soi-même) et me projette dans ces autres aventures consolantes qui se déroulaient parallèlement à la pauvre mienne. (MR p.383)

By means of the aesthetic medium, then, the artist can project himself, either as himself or through a fictional representative, into imaginary scenarios in which he can not only will and transform aspects of his own condition but even play out, assume control of and participate vicariously in obsessions and ideals which would normally lie outside his own experience. Thus, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s admission that he is "depuis longtemps résigné à être moi-même" is inseparable from his aesthetic re-creation of his idols and heroes "dans mon désir d'être eux-mêmes" (NDF p.167). Although what he is writing is fiction, the motivation for writing as well as the source of the content lie deep within himself. Hence, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* calls himself, "un prisonnier, qui joue (qui se joue) des scènes de la vie intérieure" (NDF p.135), and the comment in parenthesis emphasises the extent to which the narrators' aesthetic pursuits are primarily deeply subjective.

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, if the narrators transform their artistic solitude into a kind of aesthetic divinity, as omnipotent god of their inner, imaginary realm they can reach beyond the control within their immutable condition which they assert through their creatures and actually use them to perform their own self-creation in the ultimate aesthetic act of self-sufficiency. Indeed, when Witt identifies the narrator's desire to retreat from society not just into the "antiworld" but into the 'non-monde', she goes on to describe this self-sufficient, aesthetic realm in terms of "the state of utter isolation and nonbeing that he must rigorously will in order to emerge victorious through rebirth and re-creation".[84] Not content simply to will themselves as they are, the narrators use their poetic imagination in order to attempt to render their control over themselves and their self-sufficiency absolute by becoming their own source. This brings us back again to a particularly revealing phrase in the quotation from Pope which the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* gave in support of his pursuit of solipsism: "Tel étant le néant des choses humaines que, *hors l'être existant par lui-même*, il n'y rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas" (NDF p.70, my emphasis).

The desire for the absolute self-sufficiency of being one's own source is expressed for the first time in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* through the powerful image of the narrator, alone in his cell, wishing he could swallow his own head:

> Il m'est arrivé [...] de désirer m'avaler moi-même en retournant ma bouche démesurément ouverte par-dessus ma tête, y faire passer tout mon corps, puis l'Univers, et n'être plus qu'une boule de chose mangée [...]. (NDF p.27)

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84 Witt, *Existential Prisons*, p.164.

Indeed, as this desire reveals, for this self-sufficiency to be completely non-relative, the individual would need to assert himself not only as the origin of himself but of the whole universe. As White notes: "[An] egotistical sense of causation, the idea that one is the centre of the universe, is a constant feature of Genet's best writing".[85] Similarly, the narrator of *Journal du voleur* comments that nothing can console him "de ne pas contenir le monde" (JV p.229). Absolute self-sufficiency would clearly only be remotely possible in the realm of the imagination, and, indeed, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* projects his desire and its momentary, imaginary attainment onto Culafroy as he glosses the experience of his representative as a child in terms of his own preoccupation with total self-possession:

> Certain soir, Culafroy eut un geste large, démesuré de tragédien. Un geste qui dépassait la chambre, entrait dans la nuit où il se continuait jusqu'aux étoiles, parmi les Ourses et plus loin qu'elles, puis, pareil au serpent qui se mord la queue, il rentrait dans l'ombre de la chambre, et dans l'enfant qui s'y noyait. (NDF p.77)

The narrator even refers to the corridors of the prison, which he internalises and within which he attempts to become his own source, in terms of the self-sufficient uroboros, describing them as "ces longs couloirs parfumés qui se mordent la queue" (NDF p.66). The image of the snake as 'tail-eater' provides an oblique reference to the symbol of the uroboros, which Neumann describes in terms of the, "beatific uroboric state of autarchy, perfection, and absolute self-sufficiency".[86] This ancient Egyptian symbol of "uroboric autarchy"[87] brings us back to Derrida's thoughts around the idea of Genet's self-creation in which context the Uroboros is particularly apt since, just as, according to Derrida, Genet needs to 'become' his own mother in order to perform his own immaculate conception, one aspect of the Uroboros is that it represents a creativity which is self-sufficient, indeed, hermaphroditic. As Neumann writes:

> It slays, weds, and impregnates itself. It is man and woman, begetting and conceiving, devouring and giving birth, active and passive, above and below, at once.[88]

In the analysis of *Glas* in Part One of this thesis, we examined the way in which Derrida relates the idea of the Immaculate Conception specifically to his conception of the author's relationship to his text. Genet as author-mother gives birth to the text-son, thereby attempting to engender himself both through the actual generation of the text and through

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85 White, *Genet*, p.280.

86 Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, 1954, p.33. On the symbol of the Uroboros in Genet, see also Gerber, 'Ambiguity and Redemption in the Prose Fiction of Jean Genet', p.92.

87 Ibid., p.34.

88 Ibid., p.10.

his own linguistic self-incorporation into it by the process of antonomasia. This purely textual perspective on the Immaculate Conception is clearly intimately bound up with Derrida's fascination with the signature and, as such, it arguably tells us more about Derrida's own view of textuality than about the processes which are being explored within the parameters of the narratives themselves. But Derrida's ideas about the author's purely textual self-engenderment are interspersed with references to certain characters in the narratives who are also presented by the narrators as reaching beyond their attempt at establishing self-sufficiency to pursue an inner self-creation which parallels the narrators' own. Thus, the process of becoming one's own source is not just pursued rather abstractly through the author-text relationship but at the level of the narrators' relationship to their narratives *within* the text themselves. We will now turn, then, with further reference to *Glas*, to the way in which the narrators attempt to render their self-sufficiency absolute by means of an aesthetic self-engenderment achieved through the creation of characters who represent them within the narrated world.

The two main characters Derrida examines in relation to the idea of the Immaculate Conception are Notre-Dame and Harcamone. In Genet's prose fiction, the concept of the Immaculate Conception is actually explicitly applied to Notre-Dame. When Notre-Dame appears in court, it is the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* who tells us that there is an aura around Notre-Dame in which can be read: "Je suis l'Immaculée Conception" (NDF p.178). I would suggest that, in context, this relates to the fact that the murderer is held up almost as a god, primarily by the narrator but also by the crowd in court, because he has taken life and death into his own hands in an act of total moral self-sufficiency. Derrida then goes on to use the concept to link Harcamone with Notre-Dame by stating that, when the four men make the journey to Harcamone's heart, they find there "l'Immaculée Conception et la Rose Mystique" (GL p.101).

Derrida does comment on the bizarreness of the actual wording of the phrase used to describe Notre-Dame, but typically he does not limit its significance by pinning it down to a single meaning. The phrase "Je suis l'Immaculée Conception" actually encompasses several perspectives in one, since it describes Notre-Dame at once as the act or event itself which led to a virgin birth and as the outcome of the immaculate conception. The narrator thereby makes of Notre-Dame both the progenitor – or, rather, progenitrix – and the product of the conception, both the act of creation and the passive result of it. It is as though a question which is quoted yet almost lost among a host of other disparate fragments later on in *Glas* – "Comment un homme peut-il naître une fois vieux?" (GL p.274) – has not only been asked but a 'solution' has been found. In regarding Notre-Dame as the Immaculate Conception and, by extension, as the immaculate conception of himself, the narrator is

negating the father while fusing the figures of both mother and son in his one character.[89] The narrator does not actually have Notre-Dame speak the words, but even as they are manifested through the aura which surrounds him they signify a performative utterance of solitary self-creation: for the narrator, Notre-Dame, who is about to seize control of his destiny by not just willing but actually provoking his own execution, is becoming the very origin of his own birth. A man born of himself (his own mother) by his own act (conception) without the intervention of another (immaculate) would have assumed total control over his condition. He would be utterly self-sufficient and he would have attained the goal of "s'avoir absolu", as Derrida calls it in an obvious pun on Hegel's pursuit of Absolute Knowledge explored in the opposite column.

Thus, through the idea of being not only one's own mother but furthermore one's own Immaculate Conception, Derrida links Notre-Dame and also Harcamone to the Virgin Mary, just as, of course, the narrator himself does in the case of Notre-Dame through the name he gives him. Indeed, the prose fiction, and especially *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, is suffused with the colour blue which the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* explicitly associates with the Immaculate Conception.[90] Derrida then further reinforces his perception of the two murderers' suitability to assume this role of virgin mother precisely by emphasising their own virginity: "Comme les bourreaux, comme Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs, comme toute fleur, Harcamone est vierge" (GL p.104).[91] In addition to this, as Derrida points out obliquely, Divine actually merges her own identity with that of a lover whose name, significantly, is Gabriel, declaring, "tu n'es pas mon ami, tu es moi-même" (GL p.116). In so doing, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s representative does not only become her own virgin mother but also the Archangel, making her responsible not only for her own conception but even for the Annunciation of it. Indeed, Divine even takes her self-sufficiency a step further, by transforming her love of Gabriel into the love of him as her child – "Je t'aime comme si tu étais dans mon ventre" (NDF p.82) – thereby placing herself at the origin even of her own annunciation. And typically, by merging the characters – or at least refusing to distinguish between them – just as Derrida stretches the concept of the Immaculate Conception, which is only related to Notre-Dame in the actual text, to include Harcamone, he also applies Divine's assumption of her own Annunciation to Notre-Dame whom he sums up in these very terms: "Notre-Dame, vierge né d'une vierge, qui s'annonce lui-même – c'est un archange" (GL p.115).

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89 Nietzsche's Zarathustra expresses an idea which is strikingly similar: "For the creator himself to be the child new-born he must also be willing to be the mother and endure the mother's pain" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.111).

90 Having stated that Village's room is blue, he goes on to describe it as, "bleu comme le tablier de l'Immaculée Conception" (NDF p.107).

91 Although, at the same time, the relevance of these murderers' virginity may be put in some doubt when we consider that the two key murderers in the two following novels, Erik and Querelle, are definitely not virgins.

If the main focus of Derrida's exploration of self-engenderment is the author-text relationship, which he then explores alongside the concept of the Immaculate Conception as it is manifested at the level of the characters in the texts, one area which he does not examine as such is the narrators' self-creation through self-projection into the narrated world, either as themselves where they are homodiegetic or, where they are heterodiegetic, through fictional representatives. In the case of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, for example, the narrator's application of the Immaculate Conception to Notre-Dame reflects that achieved vicariously by the narrator who projects his own Immaculate Conception through aesthetic (self-)creation.

In order to become their own source, then, the narrators must be responsible not only for their own birth but for their own insemination, and this adds an erotic dimension to the narrators' project of aesthetic self-creation. Since the narrators do not only attempt their self-engenderment through the Derridean process of the actual generation of the text but also give birth to themselves indirectly through fictional representatives and self-projection, the immaculate conception of their characters and themselves can be expressed at once in terms of eroticism and auto-eroticism. The narrator of *Pompes funèbres* describes his imaginary self-projection into Erik through a specifically sexual image – "je m'enfonçai dans son passé, doucement d'abord, hésitant, cherchant la voie, avec la lenteur un peu inquiète d'une queue qui cherche le cul" (PF L'Imaginaire p.32) – and, in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, the narrator describes the act of writing about his characters in terms of caressing them, while all the time, alone in his cell, the narrator is actually caressing himself. The narrator says of Mignon: "Je ne peux m'arrêter de le chanter qu'au moment où ma main s'englue de mon plaisir libéré" (NDF p.16). Literary auto-creation and actual auto-eroticism grow out of each other and the self-sufficiency of masturbation becomes the erotic paradigm of the narrator-character relationship as the narrator engenders and possesses both himself and the other and himself through the other. As the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* declares: "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 [...]" (NDF p.69).

At one point in *Glas*, Derrida maintains that Genet's writing is within the Oedipal (GL p.113),[92] but if, on an erotic level, the project of aesthetic self-creation can be linked with a distortion of the Oedipus myth[93] (the desire to kill the father and sleep with the mother here becomes the desire to negate the father by merging with the mother in the act of auto-insemination), the parallel with Narcissus (which here becomes the desire to inseminate

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92 It is, however, important to bear in mind that, as Derrida is keen to point out, this is not the classic Oedipal triangle of psychoanalysis. Derrida could not possibly subscribe to such a theory because the phallus as central fundamental symbol of sexual difference acts as a transcendental signifier for a fully explicable coherent system, a construct which Derrida utterly rejects as he rings the "glas du phallogocentrisme" (GL p.315). At one point he states: "A nommer ici Oedipe, on ne sémantise pas, on ne gonfle pas de sens chaque atome textuel, on crève au contraire ce qu'il faut depuis peu appeler le mythe d'Oedipe comme mirage sémantique" (GL p.240).

93 Derrida even suggests a fusion of the myth of Oedipus with the myth of the Virgin Birth by merging the two mothers into 'Marie-Jocaste'.

oneself as one's mother) is perhaps even stronger in so far as the author, as it were, reinforces his self-sufficiency by assuming and playing all the roles himself in the drama of his self-engenderment. A passage which comes later on in *Glas* also makes this overlap particularly clear:

> Jalousie insatiable, de soi-même, déjà (je manque, je me manque): abattre les cloisons, les clivages, les galandages pour occuper toutes les places à la fois, s'aimer à la place de l'autre, [...] s'avaler, s'attoucher, s'accoucher, se donner naissance et se donner le sien, puis se bander à mort, se masturber enfin ou se baiser soi-même en s'écoulant: je m'ec, je m'enc (GL pp.251-52)[94]

Indeed, many of the structures in Genet's early prose works are more narcissistic than oedipal, and narcissism can be considered as a central characteristic of the narrators' aesthetic pursuit of absolute self-sufficiency and, as such, it is in turn reflected, as we have already seen, in their presentation of characters' endeavours to assert total self-possession through narcissistic eroticism.

If the narrators are a kind of aesthetic Narcissus, their pool is the narrated world and the reflection they see in the water is their own reflection in the characters they create as their fictional representatives and into which they project themselves. Narcissistic writing becomes a means by which the narrators attempt to achieve total possession of themselves by possessing themselves through the other who represents their own self-externalisation within a solipsistic realm over which the narrators have ultimate control. Thus, narcissism becomes the model for the narrators' relationship to their characters. The aim of the narrators, as of the tightrope walker, is, then, self-coincidence by the amatory merging of self with other. Le Funambule, who represents the artist, is described as "Narcisse qui danse" and as "un amant solitaire à la poursuite de son image" (FU p.19). In this sense, then, the process which we have already examined by which certain characters project themselves onto another in order better to seize themselves in narcissistic self-sufficiency mirrors – and, indeed, constitutes a vital part of – the narrators' own aesthetic process.

Thus, the narrators, and some of their fictional representatives, attempt to transform their passivity within the immutability of their condition by asserting a degree of control within it in the form of establishing a semblance of self-sufficiency, and even by pursuing the ultimate self-sufficiency of self-creation. However, if there are strong elements of the myth of Narcissus in the pursuit particularly of the self-sufficiency of self-possession, it must not be forgotten that, when Narcissus 'achieves' fusion with his watery reflection, the

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94 Derrida plays throughout on the two meanings of the verb 'bander' depending on whether it is used transitively or intransitively. The pun is particularly apt for the link between sex and death that it represents, a link which is often exploited in Genet's own texts. "Je m'ec" is a reference to the unfinished word in *Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt* to which Derrida returns repeatedly.

moment of self-coincidence is obliterated by simultaneous self-destruction. If Le Funambule performs the dance of Narcissus, it is also the dance of death:

> Mais tu ne t'approches et ne te saisis qu'un instant. Et toujours dans cette solitude mortelle et blanche. (FU p.20)

If the cell from which the narrators generate themselves is a womb, it is also a tomb. And as Neumann asserts, while Uroboros "the tail-eater" symbolises creativity, it also has a "deadly, devouring aspect".[95]

Having devoted this section to a general examination of the narrators' exploration of responses to the immutability of the human condition in the various ways in which it manifests itself, the next section will deal with the ultimate immutable aspect of the human condition, mortality, and the responses the narrators formulate to the omnipotence of death itself.

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95 Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, pp.27-28.

PART FOUR -
RESPONSES TO THE HUMAN CONDITION 2:
DEATH AND MORTALITY

INTRODUCTION

As we have seen, the narrators in Genet's prose fiction present themselves and the characters who embody their preoccupations as being imprisoned within the immutability of the human condition as it manifests itself to them in various aspects of their lives and being. But rather than be passive, humiliated victims of the immutable, they struggle to assert a semblance of control over themselves and their condition and a degree of self-sufficiency within their fundamental impotence, even if they are ultimately only free to pursue such a response in the inner realm of the imagination, changing not the immutable aspects of their condition but their inner relationship to them. Up to now we have been examining the general spectrum of ways in which the narrators and their fictional delegates are faced with aspects of themselves, their circumstances or situation which they are powerless to change or control in external reality along with the mechanisms involved in finding an adequate response to them. However, the facet of the human condition which clearly obsesses the narrators to the greatest degree, and which therefore deserves treatment in its own right, is the immutability of mortality and death.

In a way, the narrators' sense of powerlessness in the face of mortality, which is projected onto many of their characters, ultimately negates the validity of all the effort to establish a modicum of control and self-sufficiency in the face of immutability, since death will inevitably obliterate any semblance of self-possession attained and, as such, constitutes the final humiliation for the narrators and their fictional delegates in the narrated world. This is why it becomes so important in the narratives to attempt to transform this future, miserable demise into something positive, glorious or even beautiful, into something that can be 'loved'. Hence, just as the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* declares that, "il faut mourir dans une apothéose " (PF p.90), in *Miracle de la rose* a boy exclaims: "Mourir en beauté, c'est beau" (MR p.232), and even Divine recognises that, "la mort n'est pas une petite affaire", and feels the need to "mourir dignement" (NDF p.47). As with all other immutable aspects of the human condition, however, it is only possible to transform death into something positive through *amor fati*, by transforming it from something passively given into something actively chosen. To 'love' death, it must be willed even in the most horrifying manner, by willing one's own execution, for example, for as the narrator of *Miracle de la*

rose declares, "la mort sur l'échafaud [...] est notre gloire" (MR p.223). The final negation of freedom can only be positivised if it is transformed into a chosen apotheosis.

The final paradox, then, of the narrators' exploration of responses to the human condition as they present them within the narrated world is that, in order not to be passive victims of their mortality, the narrators' chosen creatures must actively bring about their own demise, an act which, whether it is carried out directly or indirectly, literally, symbolically, or even vicariously, constitutes the ultimate act of *amor fati* through self-martyrdom. Driver likens this method of confronting death with the myth of the dying king:

> The ideal destiny of a mythical king is that he should die, and that not by accident but as the fulfilment of his royal nature. Thus his death proceeds from himself, even if it comes by another hand. The agent, in fact, is not important. What matters is that the king should die under his own condemnation.[1]

Again, this process also finds a parallel in Nietzsche who writes in *Ecce Homo* that, "man will rather will nothingness than *not* will".[2] If the immutability of mortality means that, for the narrators, there is no possibility of control over death other than through 'choosing' it, and no prospect of asserting self-possession except, finally, by self-annihilation, then any attempt to achieve the absolute self-sufficiency of self-creation can only ultimately be fulfilled through self-destruction.

Just as the fundamental inseparability of self-creation and self-destruction constitutes a prominent feature of Derrida's reading of Genet's prose in *Glas*, the aim of this section will be to explore their inseparability as the central paradox in the responses to the immutability of death and mortality which are explored in the narrated world. The narrators and characters in the four early prose texts will be considered in a broadly chronological order in order to reveal elements of development in the relative degree of activity asserted in confrontations with death from one text to the next and, in some cases, from one protagonist to the next. But before we begin a detailed examination of the specific processes and methods which the narrators employ in their exploration of possibilities of seizing control within the immutability of mortality, it is important first of all to look in general at the ways in which narrators or characters are actually confronted with the inescapability of death and at the spectrum of possible responses to which this awareness leads.

The narrators present either themselves or characters being made aware of the immutability of death and needing to formulate a response to it in various ways. As we began to see in Part Two, some are not directly faced with death through personal

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1 Driver, *Jean Genet*, p.22.

2 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p.114.

experience but are nonetheless aware of the omnipresence of mortality in their life or situation. For example, the narrators of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* reveal that the experience of incarceration brings home to the prisoner the inescapable linearity of his life, especially when he has been 'relégué' or cannot be sure of his release, and the presence of the *condamné à mort* envelops the whole prison with a shroud of deathliness.

Others find themselves faced much more directly not only with the omnipresence but also, more importantly, with the omnipotence of death. In some cases, either a narrator or a character is suddenly confronted with death as something which has already occurred, through a bereavement, for example, as is the case with the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*, while others find themselves faced directly with the inevitability of their own future death, either through terminal illness, as Divine is, or because the character is in a situation where a violent death seems imminent, as is the case for the *condamnés à mort* and for the soldiers in *Pompes funèbres*. And then there are a few characters, such as Notre-Dame and Village, who find themselves undergoing their most powerful personal encounter with death when they find themselves almost involuntarily taking the life of another. But no matter how narrators or characters are faced with the immutability of death and mortality, whether it be immediately related to their own mortality or to the death of another, the inescapable fact of their own mortality lies either explicitly or implicitly at the heart of their experience.

As with other immutable aspects of the human condition, what those who are touched by death have in common is their desire not simply to submit as the passive, humiliated victims of the ultimate aspect of their condition which lies beyond their control, but to assert a degree of control even within the immutable omnipotence of death. As we have seen, however, while all the responses which the narrators explore are underpinned by a process of willing what *is* through transforming one's relationship to it, because some of the narrators' representatives are capable of a greater degree of active self-assertion in external reality than others, the actual means through which their responses are pursued vary greatly.

Awareness of the inescapability of death gives rise to a range of responses in the narrated world. Generally, the most socially passive characters, like the passive narrators themselves, usually try to attain a degree of inner 'active passivity' by attempting to be master at least of themselves and of their attitude in the face of death so as not to perceive themselves as a victim of it. Others 'choose' and even provoke their own death in an act of fatal *amor fati*, often assuming their future death more fully by attempting to 'live' it before the event. And the most socially active of the narrators' delegates try to assert themselves as master of death itself by actually taking life.

Most importantly, all of these confrontations with death take place within the narrators' imagination, as they also attempt to test, taunt and defy death, to refuse to be ruled by its

reign of fear, to experience death, to live it, to transcend it and ultimately maybe even to assume control of it. The narrators experiment with a spectrum of responses to the immutability of mortality not by placing themselves in mortal danger in external reality but remaining within the safety of the narrated world. It is for this reason that there is a greater degree of fictional delegation involved in the narrators' exploration of responses to death than to any of the other aspects of the human condition which, as we have seen, they often present in more direct relation to themselves. The way in which the narrators exploit their formal and thematic relationship to the narrated world will therefore be of particular importance to the following analysis. The narrators use an imaginary realm, then, to project their willed experimentation with killing and dying onto representatives and substitutes who kill and die in their place, and this 'Heliogabalan' process is reflected in a striking passage written after the prose fiction which appears in *Fragments...*:

> Il est assez d'enfants perdus, me dis-je, je voleral l'un d'eux. Qu'il vive à ma place. Qu'il se charge de mon destin. Quel destin si je veux être mort? Qu'il se charge de ma mort. (FR p.91)

Because the fact of death cannot be altered, by applying an inner process of *amor fati* the narrators explore various possibilities within the narrated world of altering one's attitude and even one's relationship to death. The responses themselves may be 'accomplished' in the narrated world passively or actively, indirectly or directly, symbolically or literally, but the response which predominates in the prose texts is exemplified by those characters who, according to the narrators' gloss of their actions, attempt to transform their relationship to death from passive, humiliated victim to active participant through murder and suicide. The result of this is that the narratives, like the lives of many of the narrators' creatures within them, are transformed into long rehearsals for death, as the narrators, who accompany their representatives on their journey towards control even over death itself, construct their own aesthetic 'pompes funèbres' within their imagination.

If we return, then, to the first central protagonist in the prose fiction, Divine, and examine the way in which she responds to the immutability of her mortality as the narrator's representative, we can begin to trace the development in the responses to death which the narrators articulate through their characters from one text to the next, from those who confront death tentatively and indirectly to the ultimate in self-sufficient killing machines.

CHAPTER ONE - DIVINE: PASSIVE PRECURSOR TO THE ACTIVE MURDERERS

Divine is the only character in Genet's prose fiction who is confronted with the immutability of her mortality through terminal illness. Most of the characters who die in these works meet sudden, violent deaths, and they have usually been – or are going to be – murdered or executed. No matter how they die or are killed, what these characters who are defeated by their mortality have in common is, firstly, that they are all doubly passive victims of death in so far as it is not just the case that their death is unavoidable but even the circumstances of it are beyond their control, and secondly, as the narrators' representatives, they attempt to transform their relationship to their inescapable demise from humiliating impotence into a more active role by willing it. The difference between them lies in how this process of choosing the immutable manifests itself.

If the *condamné à mort* is to will his demise while awaiting execution, he has to sustain his self-assertion in the face of his inevitable death over an extended period of time. In contrast, the murder victim may only have a few seconds to transform himself from passive, humiliated victim into active, dignified participant in his fate, and this is sometimes expressed in terms of a bizarre complicity between victim and murderer, such as the scene described in Seblon's dream:

> La victime – innocente – encore qu'elle souffrît atrocement, aidait le meurtrier. Elle indiquait les coups qu'il fallait porter. Elle participait au drame, malgré le reproche désolé de ses yeux. (QB p.313)

In a sense, Divine's response to her acute awareness of her own mortality falls somewhere between these two scenarios, in so far as she is more active in relation to her approaching death than the murder victim, but she is less active than the *condamné à mort* who is himself, clearly, a murderer.

Even before she is aware that she is actually dying, Divine experiences her ageing, an insidious sign of her mortality, as a living death: "Sa vieillesse la faisait se déplacer dans un cercueil" (NDF p.89). Unable to escape the humiliation that her ageing is making her less and less attractive, Divine decides to will it by actively reinforcing her ugliness:

> Elle se coupa les cils pour être encore plus répugnante. Croyant ainsi brûler ses vaisseaux. (NDF p.196)

For a time, by retreating from external reality into the solipsistic realm of her "ciel intérieur", Divine is able to assume and transform the inevitability of her future demise by living it to

the full and even hastening it as chosen: "Elle ne vivra plus que pour se hâter vers la Mort" (NDF p.197). Indeed, long before, she had already assumed her mortality symbolically by carrying the cemetery which her apartment overlooks inside herself wherever she goes, and by living her social isolation as a kind of 'death': "A force de me dire que je ne vis pas, j'accepte de voir les gens ne plus me considérer" (NDF p.117). However, because this response to the immutability of death is symbolic and imaginary, it must be constantly reaffirmed, and this demands a perpetual and painful re-assertion of Divine's active will and self-possession:

> Ce petit geste pour se détacher du monde, Divine l'a recommencé cent fois. Mais, si loin qu'elle s'en écarte, le monde la rappelle à lui. (NDF p.198)

Because she is willing against herself, although she would like to achieve the necessary self-control not to be death's passive, humiliated victim, she actually has an ambivalent relationship to her mortality.

When Divine can stand the passive humiliation of ageing and dying no longer, she decides to take control of her immutable mortality even more actively by committing suicide: "Elle voulut se tuer" (NDF p.199). Even in her early days of misery, of eating rubbish out of dustbins as Culafroy, she had been drawn to the comparative tragic beauty of the idea of actively killing herself – "Le suicide fut sa grand préoccupation: le chant du gardénal!" (NDF p.42) – and the narrator emphasises that his representative's desire to commit suicide, which reflects his own, is not simply the desire to escape misery but to commit an almost unbelievable act by which an impotent mortal can actually choose to bring about a personal apocalypse. The narrator tells us:

> Un jour, à portée de ma main, se trouverait bien une fiole de poison qu'il me suffirait de porter à ma bouche; puis attendre. Attendre dans une angoisse intolérable, l'effet de l'acte incroyable, et admirer le merveilleux d'un acte aussi follement irrémédiable amenant après soi la fin du monde, d'un geste de si peu de poids s'ensuivant. (NDF p.42)

Thus, Divine decides to take active control of her own death by willing it to the extent of realising it in a supreme act of *amor fati*, while the narrator, who is passively waiting in his cell to hear whether he will receive a life sentence – a 'living death' sentence – is exploring his own desire to overcome his impotence through suicide through his creature in his narrated world. As the narrator indicates, Divine is, after all, "ce que faute d'un rien je manquai d'être" (NDF p.24).

Although Nietzsche does not put mortality at the centre of the process of self-overcoming as the narrators in Genet's prose fiction do, there is nonetheless a further

striking parallel with a distinction Nietzsche makes in *Human, All Too Human* between what he calls "involuntary (natural) and [...] voluntary (rational) death".[3] Indeed, as the most laudable response to the irremediable decline of one's powers, Nietzsche advocates a response which is very similar to Divine's self-assertion in the face of her impending death:

> Suicide is in this case a wholly natural and obvious action, which as a victory for reason ought fairly to awaken reverence [...]. On the other hand, the desire to carry on existing from day to day, anxiously consulting physicians and observing scrupulous rules of conduct, without the strength to get any closer to the actual goal of one's life, is much less respectworthy.[4]

Bizarrely, however, having decided that she wants to commit suicide, what Divine actually *does* is kill not herself but another, and the narrator provides no gloss to explain the mechanism which links the decision to the act. Typically for such an insurmountably socially passive character, even this indirect act of symbolic or projected suicide is committed in the most passive and indirect way. Divine does not exactly kill but lets a life be lost, by loosening the balustrade on her balcony knowing that a child will fall to her death. And as Divine watches the child fall, she experiences a degree of self-possession she has never achieved before. She surpasses herself:

> Arrivée dans la cour, [Divine] attendit que l'enfant vînt jouer sur le balcon et s'appuyât au treillage. Le poids de son corps le fit tomber dans le vide. D'en bas, Divine regarda. Elle ne perdit aucune des pirouettes du môme. Elle fut surhumaine, jusqu'à, sans pleurs, ni cris, ni frissons, recueillir avec ses doigts gantés ce qui restait de l'enfant. (NDF p.199)

Through this action, she has attained a supreme degree of self-overcoming, she has surmounted her natural propensity to goodness, willed evil and thereby seized control of a given part of herself by destroying it: "sa bonté fut morte" (NDF p.199). At the same time, the narrator pushes his creature to an act of audacity and self-overcoming in the face of death which surpasses his own ability. Divine may only commit a symbolic act of suicide and an indirect act of killing, but she does nonetheless assert control over mortality by causing a death. In contrast, the narrator is only able to face his own 'living death' by assuming it – "Je peux continuer à mourir jusqu'à ma mort" (NDF p.206) – only achieving his own more active confrontation with death through an imaginary proxy, and this method constitutes the narrators' usual way of exploring responses to the immutability of death and mortality.

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3 Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.355.

4 Ibid., p.47.

As the title of this chapter suggests, although many critics overlook the fact that Divine does herself cause a death, the first central protagonist in Genet's prose texts is in many ways a passive precursor to the string of more active murderers who follow her. For this reason, before examining each of the subsequent major killers in detail, it will be useful to pinpoint the general characteristics of the process which lies at the heart of these characters' responses to death which she prefigures.

Divine only causes a death indirectly, but after her – or rather, from Notre-Dame onwards – the killers become increasingly active and audacious in their displays of apparent mastery over death which the narrators present through them. The figure of the murderer is quite literally the starting point even of the first narrative, since the very first word of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* is 'Weidmann', whose murder trial and execution brought him international notoriety in the 1930s, and, as Stewart points out,[5] the prose fiction is riddled with references to other famous murderers and *condamnés à mort* of the time. As the reference to Weidmann emphasises, killing is immediately associated with "gloire" (NDF p.9), but, when the acts of killing in the narratives, along with their preparation and aftermath, are considered in the context of the narrators' presentation of responses to the immutability of mortality, it soon becomes clear that this sense of glory has little to do with the murderer simply standing at the pinnacle of the criminal hierarchy, and much more to do with the narrators' exploration of killing as an inner 'victory' over death itself.

The narrators' murderous delegates kill in order to experience the superhuman self-control and transcendence of all earthly limitations that Divine experiences momentarily as she watches the child fall to her death. On the one hand, as the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* maintains, killing is absolute evil:

> Tuer un homme est le symbole du Mal. Tuer sans que rien ne compense cette perte de vie, c'est le Mal, Mal absolu. (PF p.167)

Indeed, the connection the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* makes between murder and evil even leads him to suggest that maybe his fascination with evil – "Mon art consistant à exploiter le mal" (PF L'Imaginaire p.190) – is actually the expression of his obsessive exploration of death: "Est-il vrai que le mal a des rapports intimes avec la mort et que c'est avec l'esprit de pénétrer les secrets de la mort que je me penche avec tant de ferveur sur les secrets du mal?" (PF p.125). But if murder is evil, in these narratives it is also next to godliness, in so far as the individual who kills is assuming divine control over life and death and is thereby raising himself up to the level of a demi-god. As the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* explains:

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5 Harry E. Stewart, 'Jean Genet's Favorite Murderers', 1987.

> Déjà l'assassin force mon respect. Non seulement parce qu'il a connu une expérience rare, mais qu'il s'érige en dieu, soudain, sur un autel [...]. (NDF p.62)

This idea of playing at being not a god that giveth but a god that taketh away is reflected, somewhat controversially, in Genet's 1968 essay on the subject of the Vietnam War, 'Un salut aux cent mille étoiles':

> S'il a beaucoup été question, depuis Nietzsche, de la mort de Dieu, il faut garder à l'esprit que c'est Dieu qui a tout commencé en décrétant la mort de l'homme. Oui. Mais si cela est vrai, et la chose ma paraît d'une extrême importance, chaque homme qui tue se fait lui-même le complice de Dieu ou, ce qui revient au même, son instrument, ainsi que les Inquisiteurs avaient coutume de dire.[6]

Indeed, in *Pompes funèbres*, written over twenty years beforehand, the narrator sets up Erik, through an act of murder in which the narrator himself shares, not just as God's accomplice but as his adversary: "Tirer sur Dieu, le blesser et s'en faire un ennemi mortel" (PF p.81). Thus, in the narrated world, because the murderer is divinised by his assertion of mastery over death itself, he is able to enjoy for a moment a total self-sufficiency. After killing the old man, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* describes Notre-Dame experiencing an intense but transient moment of uroboric self-sufficiency – "il devient énorme, capable d'avaler le monde et lui-même avec, puis se dégonfle" (NDF p.61) – and, after rivalling God, Erik admits: "Je savais que mon retour sur terre serait terrible" (PF p.81).

However, as Tchen in Malraux's *La Condition humaine* discovers in similar fashion, because the feeling of godhead which can be attained through taking life is only momentary, if the murderer wishes to render his mastery over the immutability of death as complete as possible, this moment must be perpetually reasserted. Like the more lucid murderers in Genet's prose fiction, Tchen also attempts to transform his passivity in the face of death and mortality into activity. Like them, Tchen knows that, as he puts it, "assassiner n'est pas seulement tuer",[7] he too experiences the self-overcoming required to surmount his horror of killing as self-sufficiency – "il était seul avec la mort, seul dans un lieu sans hommes [...] rien de vivant ne devait se glisser dans la farouche région où il était jeté"[8] – and he also

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6 'Un salut aux cent mille étoiles', *Oeuvres complètes VI*, pp.327-28. There is also a striking parallel in Hemingway's explanation in *Death in the Afternoon* for why human beings kill – which he explores in the context of bullfighting – in which he talks of the "spiritual enjoyment" and "aesthetic pleasure and pride" of killing and goes on to state that: "One of its greatest pleasures, aside from the purely aesthetic ones, [...] is the feeling of rebellion against death which comes from its administering. Once you accept the rule of death thou shalt not kill is an easily and a naturally obeyed commandment. But when a man is still in rebellion against death he has pleasure in taking to himself one of the Godlike attributes; that of giving it. This is one of the most profound feelings in those men who enjoy killing." (Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, 1932, pp.232-33)

7 Malraux, *La Condition humaine*, p.10.

8 Ibid., pp.12-13.

experiences the painful return to his own relativity once the moment of godhead has passed, leaving him having to begin again, and searching for a means to attain this self-sufficiency absolutely. Tchen's ultimate aim, then, is absolute self-possession – he even defines "le sens de la vie" in terms of "la possession complète de soi-même"[9] – and the only way he finds to render this instant of self-possession absolute is by asserting control over death in the act of his own self-annihilation. Tchen makes his assassination into a suicide attack, thereby fusing killing the other with killing himself in what he intends to be a supreme act of divine self-sufficiency.

Although Tchen's murder is superficially a political act, his experience nonetheless provides a particularly striking parallel with the more active murderers after Divine in Genet's prose fiction, since it establishes a connection between killing and suicide which lies at the heart of the strategies for achieving self-possession and even control in the face of death and mortality which the narrators present through them. Divine decides to kill herself but fails to bring about her own death, and yet the bizarre, unexplained leap she makes from suicide to causing the death of another establishes early on a link between suicide and murder which is not explored in detail in Divine's case but which obtains throughout the prose fiction. After Divine, the fiction is peopled by more active murderers who do exploit this connection in their own attempts to take control both of their own mortality and of death itself.

The link between the death of another and one's own death or mortality can be either symbolic or quite literal. For example, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* merges the imagined death of his fantasy murdered victim with his own death until they become almost indistinguishable:

> Mais tuer, te tuer, Jean. Ne s'agirait-il pas de savoir comment je me comporterais, te regardant mourir par moi? (NDF p.62)

Similarly, after killing Théo, Gil imagines that the funeral of his murder victim is his own: "C'est Gil qu'on enterre" (QB L'Imaginaire p.133). But 'tuer' can become synonymous with 'se tuer' quite literally if the act of killing another leads to the perpetrator's own death when the murderer is himself executed for his deed, or, as the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* puts it, the "assassin" is "assassiné à son tour" (NDF p.178).

Thus, it is in the figure of the condemned man that murder and suicide become fused together almost indissolubly, regardless of whether this was the killer's initial intention. As Bickel comments, the *condamné à mort* "réunit les deux fonctions antithétiques de sacrificateur et de sacrifié".[10] Murder plunges the perpetrator into an inescapable death

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9 Malraux, *La Condition humaine*, p.185.

10 Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et Transcendance*, p.109.

sentence, and although the murderer's own mortality was inescapable anyway, this way at least the imminence of his death is the result of his own act. The *condamné à mort* can will the time and manner of his death by willing both the crime and the punishment, and the indirectness of his 'suicide by murder' carries a distinct advantage over Tchen's method. Whereas, in actual suicide, the moment of inner 'triumph', both over death and over oneself, is simultaneously extinguished in the act itself, the way in which the *condamné à mort* provokes his execution by murder, or by willing it after the murder, allows him to 'live' his suicide, to live his death as willed in suspension.

I should like to suggest that it is partly because murder is so closely linked with suicide that the actual details of the murders themselves are, for the most part, played down in the prose fiction, the narrators showing no desire to wallow in the gore of their creatures' acts, preferring rather to explore the murderer's – and, indeed, their own – inner relationship to the act. As Bonnefoy also comments: "Les scènes de meurtre, il les décrit brièvement, s'attachant plus au sens du geste – aux conséquences qu'il entraîne pour le meurtrier – qu'à la mort même de la victime".[11] Moreover, the murders are not presented as murder for its own sake but are deeply connected with the characters' – and the narrator's – inner struggle for self-possession in the face of the immutability of death. Even where the narrators refer – perhaps unpalatably – to their love of real murderers, such as Pilorge, their emphasis is not so much on the physical, bloody reality of murder or even on the crime itself as on how the killer deals afterwards, as a *condamné à mort*, with the inevitability and imminence of his own death. This is clearly revealed by the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s description of his fascination with Pilorge:

> Plus qu'à un autre, je songe à Pilorge. Son visage découpé dans *Détective* enténèbre le mur de son rayonnement glacé, qui est fait de son mort mexicain, de sa volonté de mort, de sa jeunesse morte, et de sa mort. (NDF p.62)[12]

Rather than concentrating on the death of the other, then, the narrators focus more on the killer's relationship to his own inevitable demise and on their preoccupation with the suicidal dimension of murder which the narrators project onto their fictional delegates in the way that the 'narrator' of *Fragments...* describes himself using his 'enfant perdu': "S'il tue, il se tue: prison, échafaud, bagne, autant de morts qu'il vivra à ma place" (FR p.91).

Thus, far from advocating murder, or even suggesting that murder could actually represent a viable stand against the immutability of mortality in external reality, the

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11 Bonnefoy, *Genet*, p.26.

12 Whereas, in his article 'Jean Genet's Favorite Murderers', Stewart condemns what he regards as Genet's concealment or distortion of the horrific acts of the real murderers which he claims to adore on the grounds that, in Stewart's opinion, this constitutes a deliberate attempt to mislead the reader into justifying the unjustifiable, it is my contention that this criticism does not take full account of the status and significance of murder within the narrators' own imaginary exploration of possible internal responses to the immutability of the human condition.

narrators are more interested in the theoretical possibility of committing a murder within the narrated world, and in what this might represent on a more speculative and, at the same time, aesthetic level. Indeed, it is precisely because of the immutability of death that any degree of control and self-possession 'won' through murder as an act of supreme self-assertion could only ultimately be realisable in an imaginary or aesthetic realm anyway. In the interview with Fichte, Genet clearly emphasises the absolute separation of the purely imaginary from the real, relating his point specifically to the presentation of murder in his fiction:

> D'abord, il ne faut pas confondre les plans: il y a le plan littéraire et il y a le plan vécu. L'idée d'un assassinat peut être belle. L'assassinat réel, c'est autre chose.[13]

The distinction which lies at the heart of this statement is, I would suggest, clearly reflected in the narrators' own aesthetic and purely imaginary exploration through their creatures of derealised responses to death and mortality.

Although Divine may not immediately stand out, then, as one of the many murderer anti-heroes in Genet's prose fiction, she does nonetheless represent the first in a long line of imaginary killers, at least in so far as she causes a death, and the rough pattern of the progression from one text to the next and from one murderer to the next will be traced throughout the course of the following chapters. After Divine's initial indirect act, the more active murders committed by the killers who follow her progress from strength to strength on all levels: in terms of the extent to which the act is willed by the perpetrator, either after the event or, better still, before; in terms of the degree of self-mastery required and attained in order to carry out the deed; and in the concomitant degree of control over both his own mortality and death itself which, in the narrator's eyes, the character has achieved.

Throughout, this progression in certain characters' audacity is generated by the narrators who push them from one 'triumph' to the next. From *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* onwards, each narrator takes as his models real criminals and moulds his own creatures out of them – "A l'aide donc de mes amants inconnus, je vais écrire une histoire" (NDF p.12) – and he makes it quite clear that the murderers' transformation of their fundamentally passive relationship to the immutability of death and mortality into apparent mastery even through self-annihilation is one which he wishes to attain for himself: "J'irais bien facilement à la guillotine, puisque d'autres y sont allés, et surtout Pilorge, Weidmann, Ange Soleil, Soclay" (NDF p.63). The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* declares in frustration whilst developing Notre-Dame's murderous career, "j'aimerais tuer" (NDF p.62), but his own exploration of the possibility of asserting control over death and the speculative significance

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13 'Entretien avec Hubert Fichte', p.159.

he attributes to it is undertaken only through his imaginary creatures and representatives within the domain of the narrated world.

Thus, while none of the narrators of the first four prose texts has, according to their self-presentation, actually committed a murder himself in external reality, they are able through their imaginary delegates to explore the willing and self-overcoming required to carry out the act at least in an aesthetic realm.[14] As Lange comments: "Genet is committed to an attitude of fatalism, but he is resolved to represent the downfall and destruction of human beings as the triumph of the puppeteer-poet".[15] The way in which the narrators explore possible responses to death and mortality through aesthetic murders closely reflects comments that Genet himself made to Fichte. When, in 1975, Fichte, perhaps rather cheekily, asked Genet why he had not committed a murder himself, Genet's reply was: "Probablement parce que j'ai écrit mes livres". A little later, he then goes on to explain that "je dirai que les pulsions de meurtre ont été déviées au profit de pulsions poétiques".[16] Genet is apparently suggesting that he sees himself as having written his novels instead, as symbolic murders, just as later Genet would call the texts of George Jackson "le meurtre par le livre".[17]

To Fichte's next question – "Est-ce que vous étiez habité par l'idée de commettre un meurtre?"[18] – Genet replied: "Ah oui! Mais d'un meurtre sans victime". Here, although the reply was in the affirmative, the emphasis Genet places on the aesthetic perspective is clearly paramount, and although, because of the distinction between author and narrator that has been made for the purposes of this thesis, I have no intention to pursue these comments in relation to Genet himself, the idea of the "meurtre sans victime" nonetheless neatly encapsulates the narrators' own imaginary process in their own aesthetic exploration of responses to death. As the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* comments:

> Que de morts j'ai pu souhaiter! En moi-même je garde un charnier
> dont la poésie aurait à répondre. (PF p.161)

Thus, in the narrators' explorations of possible ways of asserting control over mortality, since it apparently is not their destiny to become a "grand bandit", the narrators commit murders only within the realm of the imagination, utilising the murder weapon of the mind. But in so doing, although the narrators' method of confronting mortality falls short of

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14 This is a process on which Bickel comments in relation to Ernestine's unfulfilled desire to kill Divine – "le type même du criminel genétien est l'assassin imaginaire qui projette son crime mais ne le réalise pas vraiment" (Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et Transcendance*, p.40) – but which she does not examine specifically in the context of the narrator-character relationship to which it is central.

15 Victor Lange, 'The Solitude of Jean Genet', 1963, p.26.

16 'Entretien avec Hubert Fichte', p.160.

17 Ibid., p.102.

18 Ibid., p.160.

their active ideal, at least the narrators are able to 'participate' in these ultimate crimes, even if only through surrogates or vicariously, and in this sense their aesthetic process allows them to rise above the simple desire to share in another's active glory – the 'Siberia' syndrome – which is all their most passive characters such as Roger and Seblon can hope to attain. The narrators are not assuming the punishment without daring to commit the crime, as the narrator of *Journal du voleur* condemns Vincent de Paul for doing,[19] but are attempting to share the 'sinful' self-assertion of their creatures. The narrator of *Journal du voleur* describes this process of aesthetic self-projection and vicarious experience in the following terms:

> Créer n'est pas un jeu quelque peu frivole. Le créateur s'est engagé dans une aventure effrayante qui est d'assumer soi-même jusqu'au bout les périls risqués par ses créatures. [...] Le créateur se chargera du poids du péché de ses personnages. [...] Tout créateur doit ainsi endosser – le mot serait faible – faire sien au point de le savoir être sa substance, circuler dans ses artères – le mal donné par lui, que librement choisissent ses héros. (JV pp.235-36)

In many ways, more than in *Journal du voleur*, this is what the narrators of the preceding works of prose fiction are doing.

Having established the significance of Divine as passive precursor to the more active murderers who follow her, and having outlined the general characteristics both of the progression from one killer to the next and of the narrators' role behind their characters' confrontations with death, the central murderer figures and the responses to death and mortality which they assert will now be examined in more detail as they appear in roughly 'ascending' order from *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* through to *Querelle de Brest*.

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[19] The narrator of *Journal du voleur* says of his heroes: "Je refuse de me délecter de ses peines si je ne les ai pas encore partagées. Je vais encourir d'abord le mépris des hommes, leur jugement. La sainteté de Vincent de Paul, je m'en méfie. Il devait accepter de commettre le crime à la place du galérien dont il prit la place dans les fers." (JV pp.242-43).

CHAPTER TWO - NOTRE-DAME AND HARCAMONE: TRANSFORMING INVOLUNTARY KILLING INTO ACTIVE SELF-DESTRUCTION

If Divine only confronts death by causing her victim to lose her life indirectly, the murder committed by Notre-Dame in the same text, and Harcamone's first murder, represent a progression from these extremely passive beginnings in so far as at least they both kill 'directly', that is, with their own hands. Their actions are nevertheless still lacking in active self-assertion since the narrators present both of these murders as 'involuntary' in so far as they are imposed upon the perpetrator by destiny rather than being freely and actively chosen. The interest therefore lies not in the act itself so much as in each character's response to an event which they perceive to be completely beyond their control.

When Notre-Dame strangles the old man, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* describes the forces which cause Notre-Dame's act explicitly in terms of an insurmountable predestination. This point is emphasised both before the murder – "[Notre-Dame] sait que son destin s'accomplit" (NDF p.60) – and afterwards – "le destin [...] présida à l'assassinat du vieillard" (NDF p.183). Indeed, for the narrator even the victim is, "un de ces mille vieillards dont le sort est de mourir ainsi" (NDF p.60). Similarly, Harcamone's first murder is also, by the narrator's account, committed involuntarily in so far as he is portrayed as being pushed to it by an inner destiny. The narrator states that Harcamone, "était l'émanation d'une puissance plus forte que lui" and insists that, "il devait accomplir sa mission" (MR p.457).[20]

Thus, although each of these murders is more active than Divine's crime, because they are involuntary they still fall short of the active ideal. Because of his passivity, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* refers to Notre-Dame as "l'assassin innocent" (NDF p.64), a phrase which could also be applied to Harcamone on the occasion of his first murder, and this idea of the 'murderer in spite of himself' contrasts sharply with the narrator's paradigm of lucid, willed self-sufficiency: "l'assassin conscient, voire cynique, qui ose prendre sur soi de donner la mort sans en vouloir référer à quelque puissance, d'aucun ordre [...]" (NDF p.62). The narrator can imagine the crime he would like to commit himself – "plutôt qu'un vieux, tuer un beau garçon blond" (NDF p.62) – but in his insurmountable passivity, the narrator can only "chanter l'assassinat" (NDF p.61), transforming his own relationship to mortality through imaginary means. He is desperate to transform the crippling limitations of his own impotence into control by taking direct action:

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[20] Of course, there is a certain amount of self-reflexive irony in this statement and others like it since the underlying omnipotent force which is driving Harcamone to his fate is, in fact, the narrator himself playing at being an aesthetic god.

> J'en ai assez de satisfaire sournoisement mes désirs de meurtre en admirant la pompe impériale des couchers de soleil. Assez mes yeux s'y sont baignés. Passons à mes mains. Mais tuer, te tuer, Jean. (NDF p.62)

However, although the narrator declares his intention to progress from symbolic to 'real' murders, his own exploration of the 'reality' of murder still continues only through his fictional representatives and surrogates.

By the narrators' criteria, then, although Notre-Dame and Harcamone have achieved more than the narrators themselves, their murders are still not ideal because they were not willed. But since the fundamental immutability of the human condition means that an individual can only ultimately control his attitude to his condition, through *amor fati*, rather than the condition itself, destiny can be transformed into choice if the crimes are willed afterwards by 'willing backwards' in Nietzschean fashion. Thus, although the narrators are not yet exploring through Notre-Dame and Harcamone a struggle for self-overcoming in order to commit their murders, they are examining the possibility of their two passive, involuntary murderers asserting themselves more actively *after* the event, and they achieve this by actively willing the consequences of their action which relates it to their own mortality, thereby transforming their imposed destiny into a chosen goal. In this respect Notre-Dame clearly represents a progression from Divine's passive willing of her own death in so far as he actively provokes his death, and then Harcamone takes Notre-Dame's response another step further.

Having committed a murder which was beyond his control, Notre-Dame transforms his passivity in relationship to it into activity by assuming his act afterwards together with its consequences. In this sense, Notre-Dame constitutes a progression not only from Divine, who does not kill directly, but also from another more minor figure in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* who does kill, Clément Village. Like Notre-Dame, the murder which Village commits is also involuntary in so far as he kills his lover, Sonia, in a fit of passionate despair. However, Village is clearly not envisaged as possessing the strength within himself to will his murder afterwards, but is shown transforming not his relationship to the crime but the significance of the crime in his imagination: "Il avait ordonné, vengé, sacrifié, offert, il n'avait pas tué Sonia" (NDF p.105). But as the narrator himself comments, while Village seeks only escapism, Notre-Dame goes on to achieve a victory of self-assertion in the face of death: "[Village] refusa de voir le gouffre pour échapper au vertige-folie, ce même vertige auquel plus tard, cent pages plus tard, Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs ne résista pas" (NDF p.106).

Notre-Dame goes to the apartment of an old man and, according to the narrator's description of the scene, the old man's necktie triggers his own murder in a reflex which is beyond Notre-Dame's control. But although Notre-Dame does not consciously will the murder he commits, he wills it afterwards by willing his own execution for this crime instead

of a lesser sentence, thereby reinforcing the murder-suicide connection. He cries out to the court: "Ah! la Corrida, non, pas la peine, j'aime mieux claquer tout de suite" (NDF p.194). In this he resembles Pilorge, on whom the narrator models Notre-Dame, as details of Pilorge's death sentence for murder reported in *L'Oeuvre* illustrate:

> Pilorge avait [...] écrit lui-même au président de la République, insistant auprès de lui pour être exécuté le plus rapidement possible. Le fait étant assez rare vaut d'être signalé. [...] Qu'il s'agisse de crânerie, de forfanterie ou d'inconscience, Maurice Pilorge a fait preuve, de toute évidence, devant la mort d'une certaine élégance et d'un humour que nous ne nous défendons d'admirer. Il a su donner au châtiment suprême un petit ton léger, gai, spirituel, enjoué, auquel on n'était pas habitué.[21]

While Pilorge's true motives for his actions cannot be ascertained, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* glosses his own creature's willing of his death with a significance which reflects his own preoccupations. The narrator emphasises that, if Notre-Dame desires the punishment which befits his crime, this has nothing to do with shame (NDF p.184). Indeed, as the narrator underlines when Ernestine is planning to kill her son, "ici, n'est-ce pas, la morale n'a que faire, ni la crainte de la prison, ni celle de l'enfer" (NDF p.18). By the criteria of the narrator's own narrative, it would be more shameful not to have murdered at all, and this point is expressed in the reaction to Notre-Dame which the narrator projects onto the public gallery in the courtroom:

> La foule était honteuse de n'être point l'assassin. [...] La foule était honteuse de ne point mourir. C'était la religion de l'heure, d'attendre et d'envier un jeune assassin. (NDF pp.177-78)

Death is approaching the courtroom – "La mort s'avançait à pas de loup sur la neige" (NDF p.186) – but rather than be its passive victim, and victim also of his involuntary murder, by a process not unlike Divine insulting herself before she is insulted but with his very life at stake, Notre-Dame asserts his control over the imminence of death by refusing to succumb to the terror by which it reigns. Thus, although Knapp is quite wrong to state that Notre-Dame "is the 'perfect' hero, since he murders lucidly and fearlessly", she is absolutely right when she says that he "faces the guillotine as a superman, master of his emotions, stronger than death itself, since he is capable of annihilating fear".[22] According at least to the narrator's gloss of his self-assertion, Notre-Dame is truly a Nietzschean 'superman' since, through a supreme effort, he actually wills the immutable to the point even of refusing the chance to escape when it is presented to him. For the narrator, Notre-Dame has chosen the

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21 Dichy and Fouché, *Jean Genet, essai de chronologie*, p.198.

22 Knapp, *Jean Genet*, p.15.

self-possession of self-sacrifice over the humiliation of saving himself and becomes a Christ-like figure who martyrs himself by his own will:

> Notre-Dame était condamné à la peine capitale. [...] C'était l'apothéose. C'est fini. [...] Les gardiens lui parlèrent et le servirent, comme si, le sachant chargé du poids des péchés du monde, ils eussent voulu attirer sur eux la bénédiction du Rédempteur. (NDF p.194)

The narrator thereby transforms Notre-Dame into a sacrificial figure who achieves what his admirers, who, like the narrator himself, do not have the given potential to attain such heights, can only dream of.

After the example of Notre-Dame, Harcamone's assumption of his irremediable act, particularly in relation to his own mortality, is taken a step further, and the response to death which Harcamone embodies is developed at greater length by the narrator of *Miracle de la rose*. Having committed an involuntary murder for which he has only been given a life sentence, "la vingt et une" (MR p.457), fifteen years later Harcamone commits suicide through murder by replacing the first, involuntary act with a fully willed one when he kills the guard in order to provoke his execution. The narrator has Harcamone kill a guard whom he particularly likes in order to rule out any question of a grudge or of anger which might diminish the significance of Harcamone's confrontation with his own mortality which is realised through his action. The narrator even calls Harcamone's second victim Bois-de-Rose, the wood from which coffins are made, thereby neatly reinforcing the link between the death of another and his own death. The phrase which the narrator uses to describe the way in which Harcamone assumes control over his own immutable mortality highlights the paradoxical blend of active and passive in the 'suicide by murder' mechanism as he actively wills his own death by electing to receive it passively, choosing to plunge himself into the irremediable in the form of the crime-punishment continuum: "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" (MR p.266).

In converting his life sentence into a death sentence, Harcamone has, significantly, assumed the deathliness of his prison existence far more actively than the narrator has been able to. The narrators of both *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* only manage to will their own mortality symbolically, by reinforcing the deathliness of their incarceration "en marge des vivants" (NDF p.115). As the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* declares:

> Le monde des vivants n'est jamais trop loin de moi. Je l'éloigne le plus que je peux par tous les moyens dont je dispose. Le monde recule jusqu'à n'être qu'un point d'or dans un ciel si ténébreux que l'abîme entre notre monde et l'autre est tel qu'il ne reste plus, de

> réel, que notre tombe. Alors, j'y commence une existence de vrai mort. (NDF p.114)

In similar fashion, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* also assumes his deathly prison life as absolutely as possible:

> Je suis un mort qui voit son squelette dans un miroir [...]. Je n'agis plus et je ne pense plus qu'en fonction de la prison, mon activité se limite à son cadre. (MR p.247)

Even more abstractly, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* reacts to the autumn which he feels is central to his life, "la saison de base de ma vie", by intensifying it as an inner autumn over which he has control: "Je le crée à chaque instant" (MR p.327). In contrast, Harcamone does not stop at 'living' the deathliness of his life sentence but makes that very deathliness a concrete reality. Indeed, in assuming for himself the power over life and death itself, in the narrator's eyes Harcamone ceases to be a mere mortal being and ascends to the realms of the divine: "quittant son état d'homme à l'état de mort", Harcamone becomes "«supra-terrestre»" (MR pp.398-99).

Thus, although Harcamone may appear from the outside to be, as it were, 'cutting off his nose to spite his face', on the inside, through a process of *amor fati*, according to the narrator he is in fact 'thumbing his nose' at his impotence within his immutable mortal condition. Harcamone may ultimately only be willing what is eventually inevitable, but at least his mortality has been brought under his control in so far as he wills his death on his own terms, thereby sparkling for a moment before the light goes out forever. If life was a humiliation, for the narrator death becomes Harcamone's victory precisely because it is 'chosen': "Il mourait, et cette mort était plus belle que sa vie" (MR p.252). Indeed, as the narrator points out, to punish Harcamone for his crime he would have had to have been deprived of his death sentence – "Pour punir Harcamone, le directeur eût dû attendre que la mort fût commuée en travaux forcés à vie" (MR p.367) – while his willed execution represents his apotheosis, his chance to die with dignity: "Harcamone mourut noblement pendant les quatre mois qui suivirent cet assassinat" (MR p.266). In the eyes of the narrator, through his self-assertion in the face of death, Harcamone becomes a miracle.

Having secured his death on his own terms, Harcamone then 'lives' his suicide 'in suspension' while he awaits execution, and this chosen situation chips away at death's omnipotence in so far as he has moved beyond death even while he still lives, he is "hors du monde avant la mort" (MR p.301). For the narrator, Harcamone has successfully transformed his passivity in relation to the immutability of death and mortality into activity and is therefore no longer bound by the chains of external reality, just as, in the narrator's eyes, he is no longer bound by his chains which the narrator transforms symbolically into garlands of flowers (MR pp.233-34). Harcamone is untouchable now, having rendered all

further forms of punishment meaningless: "l'assassin était plus fort, grâce à son destin, que tous les moyens de représailles" (MR p.367). He becomes a paradigm of inwardness and self-sufficiency – "Même ouverts, ses yeux étaient fermés" (MR p.416) – and has moved beyond all need to people his solitude: "La dureté d'Harcamone et son destin l'avaient écarté de l'amour quel qu'il fût" (MR p.413).

In Harcamone's case in particular, the significance of his act in terms of a glorious, self-possessed confrontation with death is articulated solely through the narrator's interpretation of his actions to which Harcamone is largely oblivious. In this respect, the narrator's relationship to Harcamone is not unlike the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*'s relationship to Notre-Dame, but what is particularly interesting is the readiness with which the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* continues to exploit his relationship to his creature regardless of the change in his own status from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic narrator. Whether the narrators present the narrated world as pure imaginary construct or whether they maintain an aura of 'reality' by apparently writing about their own situation, all of their characters, regardless of whether they are based on real models or are figments of the narrator's imagination, are nothing more than their pawns and delegates within the narrated world.

Thus, just as the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* imposes his own speculative significance upon Notre-Dame's actions, it is in the eyes of the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* that Harcamone has succeeded in transforming his relationship to his mortality from passivity to activity beyond even the limitations of his own humanity – "Une telle gloire n'est pas humaine" (MR p.224) – and, just as there was no question of Notre-Dame feeling shame for his murder, for the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* Harcamone is not sullied by his crimes but actually rendered pure by them:

> C'est que le sang purifie, à des hauteurs peu communes élève celui qui l'a versé. Par ses meurtres, Harcamone avait atteint à une sorte de pureté. (MR p.269)

The narrator sets out to find a personal god – "Il faut bien que j'aille à la recherche d'un Dieu qui est le mien" (MR p.254) – and, since God is to be found in heaven, the narrator transforms Harcamone into a god by simply placing him in his own internalised heaven: "Harcamone [est] Dieu puisqu'il est au ciel (je parle de ce ciel que je me crée et auquel je me voue corps et âme)" (MR p.230).

Harcamone is raised up to the heights of a demi-god, then, even though he is probably unworthy of such status. As Coe puts it, "glory, beauty and halo are applied to a commonplace thug with an I.Q. of about twenty".[23] While the narrator transforms Harcamone's chains into flowers as a symbol of his transformation of a "thug" into an "être

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23 Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.69.

exceptionnel" (MR p.233), Harcamone himself knows nothing about this miracle, he is "insoucieux du prodige" (MR p.234). It is the narrator who lends a poetic significance to Harcamone's actions and fate – "Je suis poète en face de ses crimes" (MR p.256) – and although, at times, the narrator suggests that his esteem for the murderer is shared by the other inmates in the prison (MR p.233), later he admits that he is probably the only one for whom Harcamone represents such a significant figure: "Bulkaen [...] ne paraissait pas être touché par cette influence et, peut-être, personne que moi – et Divers pour d'autres raisons – n'en était touché" (MR p.269).

The clear discrepancy between the 'real' Harcamone and the narrator's vision of Harcamone leads Bickel to state that, "nulle figure criminelle n'est plus durement remise en question que celle d'Harcamone", implying that Harcamone's status is undermined by the narrator's revelation of his actual stupidity,[24] but I would counter that this discrepancy nonetheless does not detract from the significance of the murderer *to the narrator* which must, after all, be central to our understanding of the narrated world. The narrator makes no pretence of maintaining verisimilitude, as his description of the journey into Harcamone clearly illustrates, and the narrator explicitly states that he is presenting his own, imagined interpretation of Harcamone's motivation and inner processes:

> Je ne saurais dire avec précision comment l'idée de mort vint à son esprit. Je ne peux que l'inventer mais je connaissais Harcamone si bien qu'il y a des chances pour que je tombe juste. (MR p.263)

At one point, the narrator even declares that he does not really care whether or not Harcamone acts lucidly since his own internalised, poeticised vision of the murderer, or what he terms "mon culte porté à l'assassin" (MR p.235), is all that interests him: "La vérité, je crois, c'est qu'il ne savait penser ni parler, mais qu'importent les raisons qui correspondent à une attitude composant un poème?" (MR p.270).

In the narrated world, what is important is not the 'reality' of any figures or events from the narrators' past or present which they may incorporate into their fantasies, but the significance they hold for them within their imagination. Indeed, the process by which externals are derealised and transformed within the narrators' inner reality is fundamental to the nature of their aesthetic exploration of responses to immutable aspects of the human condition. Thus, there are two Harcamones in *Miracle de la rose*, the one whom the narrator presents as another 'real' inmate in the prison from which the narrator says he is writing, and another poeticised Harcamone who becomes the narrator's creature and who embodies aspects of the narrator's own preoccupations. As we will see in the next chapter, this

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24 Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et Transcendance*, pp.73,75.

dimension of the narrator-character relationship is developed even further in *Pompes funèbres.*

The imaginary significance of Harcamone to the narrator is that the murderer, in a supreme act of self-possession, wills a destiny which the narrator himself can only dream of or, indeed, fulfil vicariously through an imaginary surrogate or proxy. In fact, the narrator is exploring Harcamone's glorious transformation of passivity into activity through his conversion of his life sentence into a death sentence at a time when the narrator purports to be waiting to hear whether he will himself be 'relégué', and it is as though the narrator were testing out through his creature the possibility of achieving an active response which he knows actually lies beyond his own given capability. Thus, if, for the narrator, Harcamone's actions are motivated by the desire to transform his impotence in the face of his sentence into control of his destiny, this projected idea grows directly out of the narrator's own sense of his powerlessness within his condition. The narrator reveals this himself when, having stated that he bases his invention of the process which leads Harcamone to will his execution on his own knowledge of Harcamone, he goes on to add: "enfin j'ai moi-même éprouvé cet immense désespoir de la condamnation perpétuelle et, pire encore ce matin même, puisque ce fut le sentiment de ma damnation perpétuelle" (MR p.263). Indeed, the narrator states right at the beginning of his narrative that Harcamone's willed execution represents an ideal transformation of the ugly humiliation of the immutability of death into something chosen and therefore beautiful that the narrator would dearly love to attain himself:

> Les crimes d'Harcamone n'eussent peut-être été rien à mon âme si je ne l'avais connu de près, mais l'amour que j'ai de la beauté a tant désiré pour ma vie le couronnement d'une mort violente, sanglante plutôt, [...] me fi[t] secrètement élire la décapitation qui a pour elle d'être réprouvée, de réprouver la mort qu'elle donne, et d'éclairer son bénéficiaire d'une gloire plus sombre et plus douce que le velours à la flamme dansante et légère des grandes funérailles; et les crimes et la mort d'Harcamone me montrèrent, comme en le démontant, le mécanisme de cette gloire enfin atteinte. (MR p.224)

At one stage, the narrator had planned to will this ideal, 'beautiful' death for himself by starting a relationship with Bulkaen who would lead him to it:

> Je savais déjà qu'il me conduirait à la mort. Je sais à présent que cette mort sera belle. [...] Sa mort sera violente et la mienne la suivra de près. (MR pp.235-36)

However, although the narrator wills his fate in his imagination – "je bâtis une vie imaginaire, dont Bulkaen était le centre, et je donnai toujours à cette vie, vingt fois reprise et transformée, malgré moi, par le jeu des événements inventés, une fin violente:

assassinat, pendaison ou décollation" (MR p.240) – he is unable to realise such an active, glorious fate in external reality. In his relationship with Bulkaen, the narrator's passivity prevents him even from managing to seduce the younger man, and when Bulkaen is eventually shot the narrator does not participate in his death in any way.

Apparently in awareness of his own insurmountable limitations, then, rather than attempting to achieve Harcamone's ideal self-assertion in the face of death for himself – "Je ne désirais pas l'accès au crime éclatant" (MR p.445) – the narrator chooses rather to use his imagination to accompany Harcamone on a symbolic and miraculous journey. Indeed, although the narrator does not have the given potential to achieve a fate like Harcamone's for himself, he does achieve a degree of self-overcoming through the very act of choosing to adore this murderer when his natural reaction to him is actually ambivalence. When the narrator first dares to approach "la cellule des condamnés à mort", he is both "poussé et retenu" (MR p.250), and although the thought of Harcamone, who embodies both "lumière et ténèbre" (MR p.230), fills the narrator at once with "admiration" and "crainte" (MR pp.224, 257), to accompany Harcamone on his journey fully he must take control of his own fear and transform it into unqualified willed adoration.

The narrator even tries to 'assist' Harcamone through his liaison with Divers who played a secret part in Harcamone's downfall by causing his 'relégation': "Je voulus partager son secret afin de me sentir son complice et jouir avec lui d'être cause d'un des plus grands malheurs du monde" (MR p.309). Although Divers is probably as unaware of the narrator's inner preoccupations as Harcamone, the narrator does not only attempt to share in Harcamone's glory but also to use Harcamone as inspiration in the hope that some of Harcamone's audacity and self-possession will rub off on Divers and himself, declaring that "de plus en plus nous étions capables d'un acte aussi atroce que le meurtre d'une fillette" (MR p.445) and "par lui, notre âme était ouverte à l'extrême abjection" (MR p.446). However, the narrator's own 'actualisation' of his desire will clearly only be carried out within his imagination and, ultimately, vicariously, as he later admits, echoing the method of St. Vincent de Paul which is condemned by the narrator of *Journal du voleur*: "Je voudrais prendre sur moi le meurtre d'Harcamone" (MR p.467). When the narrator symbolically places the 'decapitated' flower which prefigured Harcamone's execution between his own teeth he thereby transforms himself in his mind not into a murderer himself but into the next best thing, "le fiancé mystique de l'assassin" (MR p.452).

The narrator uses his imagination, then, to, as it were, "vivre en Harcamone" (MR p.450), joining Harcamone mentally as he lives his 'suspended' suicide and thereby attempting not just to be with Harcamone but also to participate vicariously in the aftermath of the murderer's active response to his mortality. Indeed, because Harcamone's own death does not immediately follow the murder he commits, for his 'victory' over death to be sustained it must be willed every day in a perpetual process of re-assertion through which

his "horreur" is transformed into "calme" (MR p.234). Thus, while Harcamone, like an acrobat on a tightrope, lives his death even while he is suspended between life and death, the narrator tries to share in this experience, watching his 'tightrope walker' closely, like the 'narrator' of *Le Funambule*, "pour l'accompagner dans sa chute et dans sa mort" (FU p.18). Finally, the narrator imagines a journey right to the centre of Harcamone, commenting ironically that: "Je m'étonne encore du privilège qui me permettait d'assister à la vie intérieure d'Harcamone" (MR p.463). This fantasy constitutes the culmination of Harcamone's apotheosis as the narrator performs the miracle in his imagination through which Harcamone finally transcends the limitations of his condition completely: "Sans changer d'un pouce, il devint immense, dépassant la cellule qu'il creva, emplit l'Univers" (MR p.462).

As we have seen, then, Harcamone represents a progression from Notre-Dame in so far as the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* pushes Harcamone's confrontation with death a step further than his predecessor by having him not just actively assume the murder he committed involuntarily but actually replace it with a deliberate murder in order to provoke his own death. The underlying goal which the narrators explore through these two characters is nonetheless the same. Both Notre-Dame and Harcamone, as the narrators' representatives, are imagined attempting to take control of the ultimate immutable aspect of their condition, their very mortality, by pushing the process of *amor fati* to an extreme point. Unable to alter or escape their given mortality, the narrators gloss their actions in terms of attempts to render their self-possession in the face of death absolute through the only means that this could ultimately, if paradoxically, be possible: by willing their self-annihilation. We are reminded that, if the Uroboros symbolises self-engenderment, the snake is, at the same time, devouring itself, and if the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* wanted to swallow himself, it was to become, "une boule de chose mangée qui peu à peu s'anéantirait" (NDF p.27).

The paradoxical mechanism in Genet's prose fiction which merges self-creation and self-destruction is explored at length by Derrida in *Glas*, although Derrida himself is clearly more concerned with relating these inseparable concepts to his idea of the signature and the author's relationship to the text he constructs than to the characters themselves. At the heart of the self-creation process, however, as we saw in Part Three, is the idea of the Immaculate Conception which recurs throughout *Glas*, and although Derrida uses this idea principally to encapsulate the author's attempt to become his own 'textual origin' by merging with the mother at the level of the maternal signature, in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* the phrase is actually applied to a character. Thus, Derrida uses the concept of the Immaculate Conception to express the mechanism of self-creation through self-destruction which he

identifies at once at the level of the characters, the narrator and the author, as he typically collapses the distinction between these levels.

Just as, according to Derrida, the only way for the author to attain 'self-presence', given that the text inevitably 'kills off' its author, is ultimately by giving birth to himself as a corpse, so too on the level of the characters the ultimate self-creation can only be 'achieved' by making it coincide with self-destruction. When the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* states that Notre-Dame silently declares himself to be the Immaculate Conception, the narrator is using the ultimate symbol of self-sufficient creation to gloss Notre-Dame's confrontation with death in terms of an active assertion of self-sufficiency through making himself his own origin, and this both parallels and expresses the narrator's own process of aesthetic self-creation which was examined in the previous Part. But what is crucial for present purposes about this process which the narrator imposes upon Notre-Dame is precisely that Notre-Dame is becoming his own cause in terms of seizing control of his mortal condition by willing his own death by execution.

For Derrida, if self-possession or 'self-presence' could only be possible by merging self-engenderment with self-annihilation, then, by extension, the crucial figure of the Mother in Genet's work cannot be considered in isolation from Death – or as Derrida puts it, "on n'est donc jaloux que de la mère ou de la mort" (GL p.188) – and this is precisely because, in Derridean terms, the Immaculate Conception and the death-knell are one,[25] and therefore the ideal would actually be to be one's own murderous mother giving birth to oneself as a corpse.

The Mother and Death go hand in hand both in Genet's text and in Derrida's, and their relationship is fused into the figure of the murderous mother. Indeed, towards the end of *Glas*, Derrida actually implies that this is the only kind of mother in Genet, as his final conclusion about the term 'la mère' is that, "on sait maintenant que ce mot ne veut plus rien dire que ce qui suit, obsèque, reste après avoir tué ce qu'elle a fait naître" (GL p.359). Derrida even makes the oblique observation that "guillotine est aussi un nom féminin" (GL p.189). The figure of the murderous mother represents the very fusion of birth and death, or of self-creation and self-destruction, which lies at the heart of the narrators' exploration of attempts to assert self-possession in the face of the immutability of mortality through Notre-Dame and Harcamone.

If Derrida expresses the fusion of self-creation and self-destruction in *Glas* by merging the Immaculate Conception with the death-knell and the Mother with Death, this fusion is also expressed in Genet's texts through a merging of sex and death, copulation and killing. The blurring of boundaries between eroticism and mortality is such a prominent and recurring feature of the responses to death which the characters pursue, and particularly

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25 This links up with a passage Derrida quotes from Genet in which he writes, "La Vierge Mère et la Guyane je les nomme Consolatrices des affligés" (GL p.189), and also with the inmates' view of Mettray as a Mother, since, as we saw earlier, incarceration is experienced in Genet as a living death.

in *Pompes funèbres*, that it will be dealt with more fully in the following chapter. In the present context, suffice to say that, because absolute self-engenderment must, for the reasons stated above, coincide with self-annihilation, it is particularly apt that the act of murder which leads to Notre-Dame's execution, and which therefore brings about his own self-construction through self-destruction, is in fact committed with an overtly phallic neck-tie. Derrida links these elements together in a tight self-mother sex-murder birth-death creation-destruction continuum:

> Notre-Dame qui étrangle avec le détachement d'un phallus que sa victime commence par lui offrir, par lui tendre (son cou, sa cravate) est vierge, et conçu sans péché, comme sa mère («Je suis l'Immaculée Conception») dont il est aussi le phallus. Qu'elle lui a donné. Il est sa mère et lui, et sa mère est sa victime. Il s'étrangle donc en disant «Je suis l'Immaculée Conception». (GL p.145)

To continue briefly with Derrida's line, then, because the phallus belongs both to the 'phallic' mother and to the murder victim (in the form of the neck-tie), in killing his victim Notre-Dame also kills his mother and himself, both symbolically and, after the trial, actually. The centrality of the phallus in this episode renders the sex-death equation unmistakable, and this equation is facilitated by the slippage in Derrida's text as the phallus is regarded both as marker of sexual difference and origin of reproduction. The murder Notre-Dame commits is a sexual killing. His single act encapsulates both insemination of another/the mother and his/her murder on the one hand, and both auto-insemination and self-castration/suicide on the other hand. The comments Derrida goes on to make in respect of Notre-Dame provide the most pronounced twist on the Oedipal construct – although not without self-parody – as the distinct roles which operate within it are melted mercilessly into one:

> Le fils ou le phallus de la vierge couche donc immédiatement avec sa mère, [...] le fils qui est la mère est aussi le père qui est la mère qui est le fils [...]. (GL p.146)

In a sense, Harcamone is himself the fusion of self-engenderment and self-annihilation personified, since the narrator describes him as a Phallus: "La queue se confondait avec Harcamone; ne souriant jamais il était lui-même la verge sévère, d'un mâle d'une force et d'une beauté surnaturelles" (MR p.369). But if, as a murderer, Harcamone wills his own death, as a phallus he wills his own castration, and this fusion is embodied by Derrida in his term "anthérection" (GL pp.183, 245) which in turn reflects the prefigurement of Harcamone's death in *Miracle de la rose* in the image of the decapitated/castrated flower which the narrator cuts from the 'garland' of Harcamone's chains.

The idea of pursuing self-creation through self-destruction is described quite explicitly in a passage in *Miracle de la rose*, which Derrida also cites, in which the narrator clearly

merges construction and destruction into one process in his presentation of Harcamone's self-assertion in the face of his immutable mortality:

> On sait qu'Harcamone mourut noblement pendant les quatre mois qui suivirent cet assassinat. Il fallut qu'il élevât son destin comme on élève une tour, qu'il donnât à ce destin une importance énorme, une importance de tour, unique, solitaire et que de toutes ses minutes il le construisît. Construire sa vie minute par minute en assistant à sa construction, qui est aussi destruction [...]. (MR p.266)

In this passage, the terms "unique" and "solitaire" reinforce the self-sufficiency which must lie at the heart of self-creation, and the emphasis on "minute par minute" underlines the fact that, during his suspended suicide, the process through which Harcamone 'constructs himself' by willing his death must be perpetually re-asserted. But perhaps the most important point here is precisely the collapsing together of apparently opposite processes, and Derrida explains the merging of self-creation and self-destruction in Harcamone's act of 'murder by suicide' by commenting that Harcamone clearly cannot possess his life completely unless, and until, he can possess it in its entirety, that is, when his life is itself 'complete':

> Il tue [...] un gâfe, répétant le meurtre de la fillette et déguisant ainsi son suicide. Il se comporte comme l'artiste de sa vie. Il construit sa vie comme une colonne ou comme une tour, mais il ne peut la voir, l'avoir, savoir qu'en y mettant fin. La structure de la tour est telle que sa construction revient, pierre par pierre, à sa destruction [...]. (GL p.155)

Thus, the only way to control one's life would be to control one's death, to be, like the son of God, "l'alpha et l'omega" (GL p.276), and the only way to 's'avoir' would be to 'se tuer', and in Genet's prose fiction this mechanism is central to the narrators' exploration of the ultimate response to the immutability of their mortal condition, and the ultimate assertion of *amor fati.* However, although construction and destruction merge, the semblance of control asserted over one's own mortality can only be savoured if the actual moment of self-annihilation is not immediate and the actual process of willing death is repeatedly re-asserted through an indirect or suspended suicide. This goes a long way to explaining the narrators' preference for murder followed by willed 'suicide' by execution rather than, for example, a suicide assassination. In Malraux's *La Condition humaine*, Tchen attempts to defeat his mortal destiny through a suicide assassination, aiming to assume control of both death itself and his own mortality in a single moment of absolute self-possession. But Tchen's attempt is defeated by destiny itself. Having willed his suicide but failed to achieve it in the attack itself, when Tchen finally fires the bullet that kills him it is not as a result of his conscious will but a simple reflex, and destiny has won: "Un furieux coup de talon d'un

autre policier crispa tous ses muscles: il tira sans s'en apercevoir".[26] In contrast, in Genet's prose fiction, the narrators present confrontations with death and mortality which are usually more prolonged, as their fictional delegates live their lives as a process of dying, "pierre par pierre", or as a perpetual preparation of their own funeral rites.

Just as, for Derrida, the pursuits of the characters both reflect and embody the author's own textual assumption of his death,[27] Notre-Dame's and Harcamone's construction through destruction is also inseparable from the narrators' own aesthetic explorations through their creatures in the narrated world. We have already seen the extent to which Notre-Dame and Harcamone fulfil the narrators' own aspirations specifically in terms of the way in which they seize control over death and mortality, but the narrators can also be regarded as attempting their own self-creation through self-destruction by aesthetic means – similar to Derrida's idea of "l'écriture comme pompe funèbre" (GL p.59) – in so far as they use their relationship to the narrated world to prepare their own funeral (w)rites.

The nature of the aesthetic process through which the narrators confront and even will their own mortality is reflected in a revealing manner in a letter Genet wrote to Sartre around 1952, shortly after the prose fiction was written. In this letter, Genet is reflecting on the funereal quality of his life within the specific context of the sterility of his homosexuality, but what is of interest to the present idea is the method Genet proposes for exploring and enacting the funereal aspect of his psyche: "Les thèmes funèbres [...] exigent d'être *activés, accomplis*".[28] In his awareness that realising these so-called "thèmes funèbres" in external reality would result in his own death – "Si l'un de ces thèmes est *activé*, accompli en fait, il va provoquer ma mort réelle" – significantly, Genet tells Sartre that the alternative is to express them through art: "Il faut donc que je l'accomplisse dans *l'imaginaire*". Genet then goes on to set out the functions of the poem in relation to his aim of 'activating' funereal themes in his imagination, and the first two points in particular provide a striking parallel with the narrators' relationship to the narrated world:

> 1- Me délivrer d'un thème funèbre qui me hante.
> 2- Le transformer en acte (imaginaire).

The text in which the narrator's imaginary preparation of his own funeral rites is most prominent is Genet's third work of prose fiction which bears the apt and revealing title *Pompes funèbres.*

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26 Malraux, *La Condition humaine*, p.236.

27 As Dichy also comments, quoting the statement in *Miracle de la rose* that "l'auteur d'un beau poème est toujours mort" (MR p.359): "écrire et mourir ne sont, chez Genet, qu'un même chemin" ('Jean Genet: la prison imaginaire', p.40).

28 This letter is reproduced translated into English in White's *Genet*, pp.383-86. For present purposes, however, all passages which I quote from this letter have been taken from the original which is reproduced in the French language edition of White's biography.

CHAPTER THREE - *POMPES FUNÈBRES*: THE NARRATOR'S VICARIOUS PROGRESS TO ACTIVE KILLING

Pompes funèbres represents by far the clearest and most explicit example of a narrator exploiting his relationship to his narrated world in order to explore, play out and confront within it his own preoccupations and obsessions, and, in particular, to formulate through his creatures a response to the immutability of death in an attempt to transform his inner relationship to mortality at least in an aesthetic, imaginary realm. But if the mechanism which underpins the narrator's speculation in *Pompes funèbres* represents a continuation of the processes we have been examining in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*, it also constitutes a clear development, both on the level of the intensity with which responses to death and mortality are explored and in terms of the more acute interdependency between the narrator's stated situation and motivation for constructing his narrative on the one hand, and the thematic content of the narrative itself on the other. For this reason, if an understanding of the narrator-character relationship – considered both thematically and formally – is important to an understanding of the speculative dimension of all four of Genet's early works of prose fiction, in *Pompes funèbres* it becomes crucial.

This progression in *Pompes funèbres*, which manifests itself in an increase in intensity of the confrontations with death and in the tightened connection between the narrator and his narrated world, grows out of the fact that, compared with the preceding two texts, the narrator presents himself as being much closer to his material, both thematically and, as a result, also formally. While the narrators of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* are only touched by death personally through the 'deathliness' of their prison existence, and become preoccupied with mortality in a relatively abstract and detached manner, in contrast the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* has been confronted with the immutability of death directly and brutally through the sudden, violent death of his lover, Jean D., and as a reaction to this his own preoccupation with death has become an obsession. His aesthetic vision is so coloured by his personal experience that, as Malgorn comments, everyone in his narrated world is considered almost exclusively from the perspective of death:

> Tous les personnages du livre, Jean, mais aussi Hitler, Erik l'officier allemand ou Riton le milicien, sont décrits à partir de leur mort réelle ou symbolique. Ils forment une galerie, non de portraits mais de masques mortuaires.[29]

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[29] Malgorn, *Jean Genet*, p.40.

The narrative in *Pompes funèbres* constitutes the most sustained exploration of death and mortality so far, and the characters make up the broadest range of lucid and cold-blooded killers, as the narrator drenches his narrative with death and murder, forcing it down his reader's throat like the "famille de charcutiers" feeding the French on the corpses of the young (PF p.33).

Because the responses to death which the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* explores through his narrated world can only be fully understood in the context of their inseparability from his own circumstances, before examining the thematic dimension of his narrative, it is particularly important in the case of *Pompes funèbres* to establish first of all the precise nature of the narrator's relationship to his narrative and the resultant connection between theme and narrative form.

Far from the narrative form of *Pompes funèbres* simply being an arbitrary framework within which the themes are presented, because the narrator actually uses the construction of his narrated world as the means he has apparently chosen not just to explore his preoccupation with death but actually to try to deal with his bereavement, the form of his narrative has become at once the vehicle through which the narrator's preoccupations are expressed and the very tool he uses for their exploration. The narrator is not simply exorcising his grief by articulating it, and if this were the case, the relationship between theme and narrative form in *Pompes funèbres* would, perhaps, not be particularly unusual. What makes it so bizarre is the way in which the narrator actually exploits his relationship to his narrated world and the characters in it in an attempt to transform his unbearable passivity in relation to the immutability of his bereavement into activity.

As far as the most important purely formal characteristics of the narrative are concerned, as we saw in the main Introduction to this thesis, while the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* is clearly heterodiegetic and the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* homodiegetic, in *Pompes funèbres* the narrator's status varies. He is homodiegetic when narrating episodes from his own life as he presents it, such as Jean D.'s funeral, his visit to Jean D.'s mother's house, his trip to the cinema, and also memories from his relationship with Jean D. before the latter's death, but he is heterodiegetic when narrating the Erik-Riton story which is pure fantasy. The fact that the narrator's formal relationship to the Erik-Riton fantasy is different from the other threads of the narrative becomes important when we begin to look at the way the narrator exploits his relationship to it in his assertion of a response to his bereavement.

But what is perhaps most significant about the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*'s formal relationship to the Erik-Riton narrative in particular is the way in which he blurs and collapses conventional distinctions between narrator and character in what Genette would term 'narrative metalepsis'. Although the narrator is heterodiegetic for this thread of his narrative, he actually projects himself into it by, at specific moments, merging with certain

characters by means of the substitution of first for third person pronoun.[30] Naish calls this process, "transgressive identification".[31] In these instances, rather than the narrator 'becoming' the character, he merges with the character while at the same time remaining himself and retaining a narrator's powers of omniscience. For example, when the narrator has entered the consciousness of Hitler, he is still able to report the thoughts of Paulo. What is happening, then, is not a shift in focalisation but a temporary dual focalisation. This process represents a clear progression from the way in which the previous narrators, whether heterodiegetic or homodiegetic, used Divine, Notre-Dame and Harcamone as their representatives to carry out responses to death and mortality in their place. Merging with his characters allows the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* not just to control his characters' experiences and their significance to him but actually to imagine himself participating in them vicariously, thereby taking his own aesthetic responses to immutable aspects of his condition onto a new level.

The fact that the narrator's personal circumstances, as he presents them, bring him closer to the exploration of responses to death and mortality than in the preceding texts renders his motivation for beginning his narrative even clearer than before. Although the narrator suggests early on that his bereavement is just the starting point of his narrative, talking of, "la mort de Jean D. qui donne prétexte à ce livre" (PF p.9), it soon becomes clear that his aim runs much deeper than this. The narrator states quite explicitly that his narrative represents "la décomposition prismatique de mon amour et de ma douleur" (PF p.17). The death of his lover plunges the narrator deep into the domain of death – "Vingt-quatre heures après avoir touché les cheveux de Jean, je crus marcher dans la mort" (PF p.64) – but one of the most central aspects of his experience, and the aspect which leads him to formulate an active response to his situation, is his unbearable passivity in relation to this unpreventable and unchangeable death, emphasised by the phrase "Jean m'était enlevé" (PF p.21), which, in turn, reveals to him his impotence in the face of the immutability of his own mortal condition. This awareness is brought home to him most acutely directly after his visit to the Morgue:

> En remontant la rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin, alors que je nageais sur des vagues de tristesse et de deuil, songeant à la mort, en levant la tête je vis au bout de cette rue se dresser un ange de pierre immense et sombre comme la nuit. Trois secondes après je comprenais que c'était la masse de l'église de la Trinité, mais pendant trois secondes j'avais senti l'horreur de ma condition, de ma pauvre impuissance en face de ce qui me semblait être dans la nuit (et moins dans la nuit parisienne d'août que dans la nuit

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30 This process of substitution is apparently prefigured, although for different reasons, in *Miracle de la rose*, although attention is only drawn to this fact in *Journal du voleur* when the narrator makes the following comment: "Dans un livre intitulé *Miracle de la Rose*, d'un jeune bagnard à qui ses camarades crachent sur les joues et sur les yeux, je prends l'ignominie de la posture à mon compte, et parlant de lui je dis: «Je...»" (JV p.181).

31 Naish, *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet*, p.119.

> plus épaisse de mes pensées chagrines) l'ange de la mort et la mort elle-même, aussi impossibles à fléchir qu'un rocher. (PF p.10)

The narrator's initial reaction to seeing Jean D.'s body also reveals the humiliation at the heart of his pain, as he begs deliverance for himself through prayer: "Mon Dieu, pardonnez-moi. Vous me voyez tout simple, tout nu, tout petit" (PF p.24). His narrative constitutes an attempt to transform the humiliation of impotence into the dignity of a sense of control by changing the humiliating defeat of death, which the nature of Jean D.'s state funeral, which the narrator finds sordid, only magnifies, into a glorious victory in his own imaginary 'funeral rites':

> Chaque action me blessait. Il fallait une compensation à Jean. La pompe que lui refusaient les hommes, mon coeur se préparait à la lui offrir. (PF p.21)

The narrator is fully aware that his poetic response to what *is* alters nothing in external reality – "les mots sont des mots et [...] ils ne changeaient rien aux faits" (PF p.36) – but he aims nonetheless to change at least his attitude "aux faits", and what he sees with his "regard intérieur" (PF p.44).

Typically, then, since the narrator is as powerless to deliver himself from his grief as he is to alter the fact of his lover's death, by applying *amor fati* to his situation he seeks rather to transform his humiliating passivity and impotence in the face of his bereavement and will his pain as chosen and even 'loved' by actually intensifying it: "Je sais bien que ce livre n'est que littérature, mais qu'il me permette d'exalter ma douleur au point de la faire sortir d'elle-même et de n'être plus – comme le feu d'artifice cesse après son explosion" (PF p.134). It is this intensification of his pain which the narrator is pursuing in his narrative, and the narrated world becomes the arena in which he tries not only to come to terms with Jean D.'s death but to transform his relationship to it from passive to active by attempting to assume it, to take control of it, by exploring death precisely within a medium which is within his control.

The division of the narrative into separate threads in relation to which the narrator is either homodiegetic or heterodiegetic results in the narrator dividing his attention between direct reflections on and responses to his own circumstances on the one hand and a more indirect exploration of his response to death itself on the other. On the more immediate level, although the narrator looks back on his visit to the Morgue and then other events such as visits to Jean D.'s mother, because the narrator returns repeatedly to the sight of Jean D.'s body in the coffin, throughout his narrative it is as though, mentally, he never leaves his dead lover's side. In response to this, the narrator attempts to take possession of this death over which he has no control by symbolically taking possession of Jean D.'s body.

One of the ways in which the narrator attempts to assert a poetic control over his passive relationship to his bereavement through taking possession of Jean D. is by using his imagination to transform his matchbox into Jean D.'s coffin so that he can carry it in his pocket:

> Il n'était pas nécessaire que cette bière, aux proportions réduites, fût vraie. [...] J'accomplissais dans ma poche, sur la boîte caressée par ma main, une cérémonie funèbre en réduction [...]. Ma boîte était sacrée. Elle ne contenait pas une parcelle du corps de Jean, elle contenait Jean tout entier. (PF p.25)

Even having Jean D.'s fleas on his own body is used by the narrator as part of this process of possessing his dead lover, as the narrator declares with pleasure that, "vraiment ils représentaient les restes vivants de mon ami" (PF p.32), even suggesting that this allows Jean D. to live on. The narrator can possess Jean D. dead in a way he could never possess him alive, a point which leads Bersani to go so far as to assert that

> his death is the happy condition for a total possession. The loved one's presence no longer interferes with the lover's assimilation of him. Jean now exists nowhere except in Genet's imagination.[32]

Similarly, the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* also asserts: "Morts, Bulkaen et Harcamone sont à présent en moi-même" (MR p.366).

Much more graphically, the narrator also attempts to subsume Jean D.'s death into himself and to let Jean D. 'live on' as a part of himself, by means of an act of aesthetic cannibalism that results in the narrator 'containing' his dead lover as his tomb (PF p.14).[33] Although the narrator expresses his desire to consume Jean D. in vivid detail, telling us of his wish to "porter son corps, [...] le découper en morceaux dans une cuisine et le manger" so that, "la chair pourrait s'assimiler à la mienne" (PF p.24), he is also keen to emphasise the degree of self-overcoming required to accept death to the point of wanting to devour one's loved one in what amounts to an imaginary active complicity with death:

> Manger un adolescent fusillé sur les barricades, dévorer un jeune héros n'est pas chose facile. Nous aimons tous le soleil. J'ai la bouche en sang, et les doigts. Avec les dents j'ai déchiqueté la chair. (PF p.14)

Love, then, as the desire to possess the other, is ultimately expressed by the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* as the desire to assimilate the other fully through cannibalism – the

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32 Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*, 1978, p.287.

33 For a fuller and fascinating discussion of cannibalism in *Pompes funèbres*, see C.J.Rawson, 'Cannibalism and Fiction Part II: Love and Eating in Fielding, Mailer, Genet and Wittig', 1978.

narrator of *Miracle de la rose* also describes kissing as "la forme du primitif désir de mordre, et même de dévorer" (MR p.468) – and then by extension, on an aesthetic level, cannibalism becomes the symbolic model for the way that Jean D. is incorporated into and possessed through the narrator's narrative, as Henderson points out: "the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* devours his dead lover, spitting the flesh back out as the words of his text".[34]

For the most part, however, while the narrator presents the immediate aftermath of his bereavement in the 'real'[35] thread of the narrative, it is in the Erik-Riton story that the narrator's response not only to the death of Jean D. but to the fact of mortality in general is played out with the most intensity and also with the greatest opportunity for poetic transformation. Significantly, it is also in the Erik-Riton story, in relation to which the narrator is heterodiegetic, that he utilises the process of merging with individual characters in order to share vicariously in their experiences as he plays out various confrontations with death through them. Indeed, through imaginary vicarious participation the narrator pushes his 'Heliogabalan' use of his characters onto a new level as he no longer simply uses them to kill or die in his place, in the way that the 'narrator' in *Fragments...* suggests he will use his 'enfant perdu', but actually attempts to share these imaginary experiences with them.

The first time the narrator merges with a character actually comes quite early in the text, before the narrator begins the Erik-Riton fantasy as such, when he merges with Erik, the German soldier who has become Jean D.'s mother's lover. At this point, the narrator offers a straightforward reason for doing this: he wants to facilitate his reconstruction of Erik's past by thinking himself into Erik's life and being:

> Dès la première fois que je le vis, au sortir de l'appartement, je m'efforçai de remonter le courant de sa vie et, pour plus d'efficacité, je rentrai dans son uniforme, dans ses bottes, dans sa peau. (PF p.27)

On this occasion, the narrator imagines himself as Erik during a sexual encounter with the executioner. When this episode occurs, neither the experience nor the process by which the narrator shares in it appears initially to be of great significance to the narrator's overall attempt to transform his relationship to the immutability of Jean D.'s death, but the second occasion on which the narrator talks of reconstructing Erik's past life, he makes a direct connection between his bereavement and this fantasy. It is on the second occasion, which occurs immediately after and grows out of the narrator's trip to the cinema, that the narrator incorporates a purely imaginary character, Riton, into Erik's past. I would therefore suggest that the key to the link between the Erik-Riton fantasy and the narrator's bereavement, and

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34 Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', p.162.

35 The term 'real', here, is only being used loosely in order to make a distinction, but recognising that there is a good deal of slippage between the two levels.

also between the narrative form of this fantasy and the themes explored within it, is to be found in the narrator's experience in the cinema.

In the cinema, as the narrator watches on the screen a rooftop battle between a *milicien* and a French soldier, in a bizarre process he transforms this scene in his mind so that he is witnessing Jean D. being shot. He then uses his imagination to transform his relationship to his bereavement from impotent victim to master of it by means of changing not the facts themselves but his role in them. Because the death of the 'real' Jean D. has already happened and is therefore completely beyond the narrator's control, rather than using his imagination to prevent Jean D.'s on screen representative from being killed, he chooses rather to use the powers of his imagination to transform his passivity into a semblance of activity by 'willing backwards' in an attempt, through *amor fati*, to will Jean D.'s death at least in his mind.[36] The narrator sets out to transform his bereavement into a result of his choice by not just willing the shooting but actually placing himself at its origin, instigating and demanding it, and he can find no better way to seal the event as absolutely chosen than by actually loving the soldier, whom he calls Riton, who kills Jean D. for him. The narrator describes what he is doing in the following terms:

> Je souffrais tellement de la mort de Jean que j'étais décidé à employer n'importe quel moyen pour me débarrasser de son souvenir. 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. J'implorai l'image du petit gars: — Je voudrais que tu l'aies tué! (PF p.42)

What follows, then, is an extraordinary internal struggle on the part of the narrator, a *tour de force* of willing in which he desperately takes control of his situation by taking control of his attitude to it, transforming himself from victim of the death of Jean D. to his posthumous killer by using the murder weapon of his imagination. This episode, in which the narrator endeavours to will his lover's death by forcing himself, in a literal expression of *amor fati*, to love his murderer, is one of the most magnificent in the whole of Genet's prose fiction, and yet it is often misunderstood. It is not the case that the narrator simply loves the *milicien* whom he hates because love and hate are the same thing in Genet as some critics, rather oversimplistically, have suggested.[37] When the narrator says, "Ma haine pour le milicien était si forte, si belle, qu'elle équivalait au plus solide amour" (PF p.41), he is clearly stating that his love and his hate are equivalent in their intensity, not that they are in any

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36 White suggests a Freudian explanation for this process: "Partly, of course, this action arises from what Freud called the repetition compulsion – the desire to repeat painful events from which one suffered passively but which this time one engineers, precisely in order to overcome the original sense of helplessness" (White, *Genet*, p.279).

37 For example: Coe states that "Genet finds himself not hating but *loving* Riton" because "at this point of white-heat, the two emotions become interchangeable" (Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.149).

way the same or interchangeable. If love and hate were simply interchangeable then the narrator would be able to love the *milicien* immediately, but he cannot. He declares near the beginning, "Je veux aimer Riton", but admits a little later that, "Je n'aimais pas Riton, tout mon amour était encore sur Jean" (PF p.42).

What is crucial here is the effort it takes to transform his hate of Jean D.'s imaginary murderer into love and thereby to take control of the pain caused by his bereavement, reminding us of Nietzsche's statement that: "The value of a thing sometimes lies not in what one attains with it, but in what one pays for it – what it *costs* us".[38] For the narrator, this process is acutely painful, it costs him dearly, but when he cries "Tue-le!" and is shot through with pain he can only maintain his control by willing even more:

> Une affreuse déchirure m'arrachait les fibres. J'eusse voulu que ma souffrance fût plus grande, qu'elle s'élevât jusqu'au chant suprême, jusqu'à la mort. (PF p.42)

The self-overcoming is so difficult that the narrator has to close his eyes and struggle deep within himself to assert the necessary self-possession to build his love for Riton little by little. He has his first breakthrough: "Un peu d'amour passa sur Riton" (PF p.43). He pushes his self-overcoming further:

> Une troisième invocation silencieuse s'éleva de moi et me tira de moi:
> — Descends-le, je te le donne.
> Sortie de mon corps immobile, replié, affalé dans le fauteuil, une autre vague d'amour se déversa sur le visage d'abord, ensuite sur le cou, le buste et tout le corps de Riton enfermé dans mes yeux clos. (PF pp.43-44)

The narrator pushes his self-possession further and, after a supreme effort, he is finally able to declare: "Sur Riton se déversaient les mêmes fleuves d'amour dont pas une goutte n'était retirée à Jean" (PF p.44).[39] The pain this almost inhuman feat of self-overcoming has cost the narrator makes it equivalent to an extreme assertion of Cornelian stoicism – indeed, Chevaly describes the narrator's 'victory' in precisely these terms, declaring: "C'est Chimène admirant l'assassin de son père et s'en punissant avec délices"[40] – but, in the absence of an alternative, he has at least begun to change his relationship to the immutability of death

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38 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p.102.

39 Henderson describes the narrator's achievement in the following terms: "In an effort to rid himself of his grief, the narrator begins an operation of betrayal, negating all that Jean D. represented by transferring his desire onto the image of his killer" (Henderson, 'Discourses of the Self', p.139). However, this statement reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the narrator's inner process. The narrator himself makes it quite clear that his aim is not to *transfer* his love from Jean D. to Riton but to love Riton *as much as* he loves Jean D.. After all, the narrator's entire attempt to transform his relationship to his bereavement is not undertaken in order to stop loving Jean D. but precisely *because* of his continuing love for him.

40 Chevaly, *Genet Tome deux*, p.52.

from passive to active and brought his bereavement under his own control by willing the killing of Jean D. as absolutely as possible. For the moment, he has played what he calls his "jeu qui consiste à rouler le destin" (PF L'Imaginaire p.54) and won.

In the cinema, however, the narrator's inner victory can only last as long as the episode on the screen. What I want to suggest is that he constructs the Erik-Riton thread of the narrative in order to sustain and develop the experience of transforming his impotence before death into control. The narrator's superficial reason for constructing the fantasy is the continuation of his reconstruction of the 'real' Erik's imagined past, but now the narrator incorporates Riton into the story, giving the reason that, watching the *milicien* he calls Riton on the screen, he has discovered who Erik must have been fighting alongside in the 'revolt of Paris', and he is going to reconstruct this period. But if this is the superficial connection between the narrator's 'real' situation and the fantasy thread of the narrative, the *underlying* link is revealed by what he goes on to say:

> J'essaye de vous présenter ces personnages tels qu'on peut les voir éclairés par mon amour, non pour eux, mais pour Jean, et surtout afin qu'ils réfléchissent cet amour. (PF p.45)

The narrator is constructing the characters in the fantasy not just to explore Erik's past but to reflect his love for Jean D., and what is crucial here is that this love for Jean D. has, immediately before, been transformed into the willing of his death, and this transformation has been achieved through the narrator's first experience by substitute of the act of killing. The Erik-Riton fantasy therefore represents the arena within which and through which the narrator carries out his exploration and assertion of responses to his bereavement in particular and to mortality in general through further imaginary but chosen experiences of death and murder that would lie beyond his reach in external reality. Whereas in 'reality' the narrator knows he is characterised more by the weakness and passivity of tenderness rather than by the strength and activity of indifference and cruelty (PF p.22), and although the narrator feels he is more likely to die of embarrassment than in a willed moment of glory – he admits half comically: "Ma mort risque bien d'être la connaissance de ma honte apparue dans le jeu des manifestations les plus redoutées en face de l'être aimé" (PF p.64) – in his explorations through his narrated world he admits of no restraint or limitation to his power.

After an initial foray into Erik's past, then, the Erik-Riton fantasy itself is generated by the narrator out of his trip to the cinema, and the cinema scene constitutes the link between the homodiegetic 'real' narrative and the heterodiegetic fantasy narrative and represents a microcosm of the way in which the narrator attempts to achieve an active response to death and mortality through his narrated world. Because his only means of asserting control over the immutability of Jean D.'s death was, anyway, by using his imagination to 'will it

backwards', the continuation of this process is ideally suited to an imaginary, aesthetic realm where it can also be more easily sustained.

Although a few critics have dismissed the unusual narrative technique of merging with substitute characters as gratuitous, it actually plays an important part in the narrator's further imaginary confrontations with death and mortality. Indeed, it is my contention that the actual moments when the narrator projects himself into his creatures are not arbitrary but follow a pattern or progression which both reflects and embodies the narrator's endeavour not to be a victim of Jean D.'s death. In the cinema, because the narrator could not stop himself from being a victim of his bereavement by altering the fact of Jean D.'s death, he chose rather to will his death by using the imaginary substitute he named Riton to kill an imaginary substitute for Jean D.. In the Erik-Riton fantasy, the narrator then reinforces and extends his control over his bereavement through a sustained exploration of confrontations with death in which the narrator himself, by merging with certain characters during key experiences, participates vicariously. Moreover, there is a clear progression in the experiences the narrator shares with certain characters, from indirect confrontations with death to outright murder, and this progression reflects the narrator's own development from victim of his lover's death to becoming his imaginary killer.

The first character's mind into which the narrator inserts himself is, as we saw earlier, Erik's, and in this first instance, the narrator appears only to be interested in understanding Erik by reconstructing his past. When the Erik-Riton fantasy is underway, however, the narrator merges with various characters, and it soon becomes clear that what is important to the narrator is not who the character is but what experience the character offers at a given moment for the narrator's vicarious participation. The kind of experiences he seeks are quite clearly confrontations with death and murder designed to bring the narrator, through his imaginary substitute, step by step towards the vicarious experience of killing. Whereas, in the cinema, the narrator merely witnesses a proxy killing for him, in the Erik-Riton fantasy he furthers his control over his fear and impotence before death and the pain this has caused him by working towards participating vicariously in the taking of life. Even the first time he merges with Erik, before the cinema and the fantasy, the sexual encounter with le Bourreau which the narrator experiences through Erik also reflects this aim. Through this experience, the narrator is able to begin to come to terms with his great fear and revulsion of death and killing and to begin to overcome them. Le Bourreau repeatedly asks whether the narrator in Erik is frightened because of who he is, forcing the narrator in Erik to suppress his terror and to transcend it. Even before merging with Erik, and almost in preparation for his own vicarious experience through his creature, the narrator had emphasised the degree of self-overcoming it would require of Erik/himself to love the executioner:

> Haïr n'est rien mais aimer ce que l'on hait cause l'écoeurement. L'embrasser ou se laisser embrasser par lui n'était pas terrible mais ce l'était que bander et jouir sous ces baisers reçus et donnés. (PF L'Imaginaire p.111)

According to the narrator, Erik knows that, in order not to be defeated into passivity by death's apparition, he must push to the limit and *will* it, "allons jusqu'au bout" (PF p.54). It is not enough simply to accept le Bourreau; to assert his liberty from death's reign of fear totally he must actually love him, as he must eventually will and love death itself to avoid being its victim:

> Sans doute il avait surmonté les premiers sursauts de dégoût et peu à peu s'était habitué à cette idée d'être l'ami du bourreau. (PF p.62)

For Erik, loving death's hangman constitutes his first indirect step towards domesticating death itself, while for the narrator, his vicarious experience through Erik represents a further step in his endeavour to alter his relationship to his bereavement by, at this stage, altering his attitude to it.

The second time the narrator merges with Erik it is within the Erik-Riton fantasy. This time, before entering his creature, the narrator makes it quite clear that, although externally Erik is a composite of the 'real' Erik plus various other attributes taken from passers-by, internally Erik owes more to the narrator: "Les sentiments sont les miens" (PF L'Imaginaire p.67). Indeed, a little later, the narrator expresses even more explicitly that he is at once participating in Erik's experiences and pursuing his own through him, "revivant les angoisses d'Erik et le faisant vivre par mes angoisses mêmes" (PF p.84). On this second occasion of merging with the German soldier, the narrator in Erik progresses from confronting the taking of life indirectly, through the intimate encounter with someone who kills, to actually assisting Le Bourreau with an execution. The narrator in Erik tells us explicitly that assisting another killer is his psychological preparation for committing an act of murder himself:

> Un jour j'exigeai d'assister comme aide, comme second, à l'exécution d'un criminel. C'est moi qui tint la tête sur le billot. Je n'aspirais pas à la place de bourreau fonctionnaire, mais je me tuais moi-même afin de pouvoir tuer plus tard sans danger. (PF L'Imaginaire p.67)

On the next occasion, which again was cut from the *Oeuvres complètes* edition, the narrator merges with Riton just after Riton has killed the cat. In this passage, the narrator in Riton tells us that, before killing the cat, he had in fact tried to bring himself to shoot a stranger but his nerve had failed him at the last moment:

> Avant le coup du chat, j'avais essayé en vain, de mettre un type en l'air. [...] Dans le haut de la rue du Temple je repérai un type, pas trop grand. J'ai une bonne matraque. [...] A chaque mètre je me disais: «Y a personne, je l'descends ici.» [...] Je l'ai bousculé en passant, puis je l'ai insulté et je l'ai frappé: un coup de poing dans la gueule. Il a éte le plus fort. J'ai dû foutre le camp. (PF L'Imaginaire p.99)

The narrator will progress on to shooting another victim through a different substitute, but before he does so it is perhaps significant that he first of all merges with Le Bourreau when Erik meets him in a café, and it is almost as though the narrator is using this brief self-insertion into an experienced killer to boost his own courage to go on to kill. Soon after, the narrator does note the inspiring influence Erik's relationship with Le Bourreau has had on him, and it is certainly with redoubled courage that, on the next occasion of merging, when the narrator projects himself into the mind and body of Erik, this time he does go through with sharing the experience of shooting a stranger, when the narrator in Erik kills the young boy.

Before narrating this crucial imaginary event, the narrator confesses enigmatically that he does not know why it should be necessary for Erik to commit a murder, but it is revealing that the explanation he does offer for inventing this episode when he does has more to do with the narrator himself than with Erik in his own right: "cet acte d'Erik vient ici, à cet endroit même parce qu'il s'impose à moi" (PF p.79). The way the narrator in Erik describes the killing of the boy places the action firmly within the progression of vicarious experiences up to this point: "Aussitôt, en regardant le visage délicat et ironique par sa délicatesse du gamin, je compris que le moment était venu de connaître un meurtre" (PF p.79). The narrator shares with Erik every minute detail of the experience from noticing the boy to pointing the gun and finally pulling the trigger and watching the boy fall, and he explicitly states that through this experience he wants to uncover "le secret de la mort" (PF p.80). The instant of firing the weapon is perceived by the narrator as a supreme moment – both for himself and for Erik – of courage and self-possession, as self-liberation from all that might have stopped them from taking life, as a victory over their fear and horror of death, as an instant in which they have diffused the mystery of death to make it their own in a triumphant moment of divine control over death itself:

> Le doigt sur la détente. 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. (PF p.81)

If, in the cinema, the narrator was only able to will the shooting of Jean D. by a substitute, now the narrator has found the strength to overcome his impotence before the death of another to the extent of actually experiencing in his imagination what it would be like not just to will such a murder but to perform it. While the narrator experiences the possibility of

asserting control over death through Erik, rather than attempting to understand what it might be like for *Erik* to commit a murder, he uses the character as a vehicle for his own vicarious experimentation. This is a point that Rawson makes in the context of the ambiguity which is caused when the narrator – whom she calls Genet – switches from third to first person in his narration of the shooting of the boy:

> Genet's lordly determination not to clarify emphasizes that it is of little consequence whether the act was done or who is deemed to have done it, and that the real issue is his own involvement in it in the *now* of the narrative. [...] He is [...] enacting a total unconcern with understanding Erik as a separate being, at the very moment of giving him and his introspection the centre of the stage. What he is in effect declaring is his participatory exploitation of the personage.[41]

Rawson's comment re-emphasises the status of the characters within the narrated world who are presented by the narrators not, primarily, as independent agents but as pawns which the narrators exploit as vehicles for their own speculation.

Once the act is accomplished, the boy is dead and the moment of control over death is passed, the narrator in Erik finds his self-possession diminishing because of his horror of the physical reality of the death he has caused: "j'éprouvai l'horreur d'être en relation physique et magique avec un cadavre chaud" (PF p.82). However, having fought to transform his passivity into activity by asserting his freedom and won, the narrator in Erik is loathe to let his victory over himself be undermined by a return to the humiliation of inner limitations: "Ma lâcheté me causa quelque honte" (PF p.82). Instead, then, he draws on the example of Le Bourreau to strengthen his power to will: "Il m'a enseigné le courage. Je veux" (PF p.82). Imagining the hangman holding him round the waist,[42] the narrator in Erik confirms and reinforces the self-overcoming he has achieved to will the shooting of the boy through which he has also symbolically willed his own 'shooting' of Jean D., and forces himself to prove his self-possession in the face of death by taking a long look at the corpse. Having thereby sustained his self-assertion through to the end, when Erik becomes afraid now, as the narrator emphasises, he is, "effrayé, non par le remords ni les sanctions possibles, mais par sa gloire" (PF p.83).

If vicariously shooting the boy constitutes for the narrator a major victory over himself and over death, the subsequent occasions when he merges with characters reflect and further explore this new found control over his impotence. The next time the narrator enters

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41 Rawson, 'Cannibalism and Fiction Part II', p.305.

42 The narrator later comments that, just as Erik draws his inspiration and support from the example of the superior self-assertion of the Le Bourreau, so too the power of Le Bourreau is supported by the figure of Hitler who stands hierarchically above him, not just in terms of social standing but, chiefly, in terms of the degree of control over death that each man has achieved: "La grande ombre du bourreau marchait à sa droite soutenue par la masse plus grande et légèrement plus pâle de Hitler" (PF p.83). In this context, 'size' is clearly a question of inner activity manifested in outer acts rather than actual physical mass.

a character, in a passage cut from the *Oeuvres complètes*, he merges with Juliette when she is exploring the possibility of informing on Jean D.. The connection between this experience and the narrator's own situation lies in the fact that the narrator describes the process by which he wills Jean D.'s death as a betrayal, and I would therefore suggest that it is the experience of mustering enough self-possession to betray Jean D. that the narrator is experimenting with vicariously through Juliette, as though he were further testing out the limits of the freedom he has won so far. The comment applies to both of them when the narrator in La Boniche says: "Je me sentais fort de ma liberté, ivre de ma liberté, ivre un peu" (PF L'Imaginaire p.131). At this stage La Boniche does not go through with the betrayal, and this episode therefore constitutes only an initial testing out of "je peux" before the act is completed in "je veux".

There is a brief scene in which the narrator merges with Erik while he is trying to break away from Le Bourreau, as though his personal victory over death means that he no longer needs the executioner's influence, and then, significantly, the next occasion of merging is introduced explicitly as a betrayal of Jean D.. The narrator overcomes his pain faced with his lover's corpse and asserts his freedom and self-possession by letting his respect for Jean D. be replaced by the shameful insult of indulging in a sexual fantasy involving Hitler. It is not in spite of but because he recognises that, "on éprouve une sorte de honte à penser, lors d'un deuil, aux gestes de la volupté", that the narrator proves he is in control of himself and his bereavement by doing just that:

> J'ai dû me faire violence pour écrire les scènes érotiques qui précèdent [...]. Je veux dire que, franchi le malaise d'avoir profané un cadavre, ce jeu dont un cadavre est le prétexte me donne une grande liberté. (PF p.97)

In a sense, the 'scène érotique' between Hitler and Paulo represents in itself a progression from the earlier scene in which the narrator merged with Erik while he was confronting his fear of killing through his sexual encounter with Le Bourreau since this episode does not involve a mere executioner, who may have killed hundreds, but Hitler, who has ordered the death of millions and is portrayed as the personification of death: "le Führer des Allemands doit en général personnifier la mort" (PF p.10). It is also a progression in so far as the narrator does not merge with the one who must overcome his fear of death but chooses to savour through Hitler what it would be like to inspire the fear of death in others.

The Hitler of this fantasy has not just murdered one lover – and not just in his imagination – but many, in the secret alcove where "Hitler aimait et tuait ses victimes" (PF p.97). Moreover, this Hitler has not just shot a small boy but has explored death in all its conceivable forms, partly as a rehearsal for his own, and the narrator vicariously shares in this as the narrator in Hitler declares "j'ai déjà fait le tour de toutes les morts possibles" (PF

p.101), for the first time exploring not only the death of another but also his own future death as equally willed and chosen:

> J'ai choisi toutes les morts. Aucune ne me surprendra. Je suis mort déjà souvent et toujours dans la magnificence. (PF p.102)

Having reached these heights there seems to be nowhere further for the narrator to progress, and the remaining instances of the narrator merging with characters seem simply to play out further opportunities for self-assertion, such as the narrator in Riton daring to instigate sex with the older and more powerful Erik, and, in a passage cut from the *Oeuvres complètes*, the narrator in Erik deciding he wants to kill Le Bourreau, to kill the killer. And then, like the narrator's momentum in creating his narrative, the instances of him merging with characters simply peter out.

The penultimate scene of *Pompes funèbres*, in which Riton shoots Erik, is rather hurried as the narrator goes off the boil in the closing stages of his composition. This time, the narrator does not project himself into the killer, but the significance of the scene is that it brings the narrator full circle back to a further re-enactment of his original endeavour, first played out in the cinema, to transform his impotence before his bereavement into willing the shooting of his own lover, Jean D.. Riton's whole *raison d'être* within the narrator's fantasy was as his chosen substitute to carry out his willed killing of Jean D. after the event – at one point, the narrator declares explicitly: "J'ai l'âme de Riton" (PF p.88) – and, if anything, this re-enactment of that earlier scene, this time with Erik as the victim, actually establishes a closer parallel with the narrator's own situation than the cinema film since now Riton is not simply killing the enemy but has to find the added strength actually to shoot his lover.[43] The parallel between Erik and Jean D. is reinforced in an early remark, cut from the *Oeuvres complètes*, in which the narrator commented that, "Erik allait à son destin avec la même fougue que Jean D. allait au sien" (PF L'Imaginaire pp.115-16).

There is another important difference between the two re-enactments: whereas, at the end of the cinema scene, the narrator treats the initial victory there over himself and his bereavement as a starting point for the further exploration of it in the fantasy he begins to construct, the final scene ends, perhaps as we would expect after the extraordinary inner struggle which the narrator has pursued, with a final assertion by his substitute of victory over death: Riton does not simply kill his lover, but dances on his body. By a sustained process of merging with his characters and self-substitution, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* has finally transformed his pain and impotence before his bereavement into a supreme moment of control and self-possession. He has exploited his relationship to his

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[43] The scene also symbolically makes up for an earlier episode in which the narrator imagined himself putting his gun in Jean D.'s mouth at a fairground but was unable to pull the trigger: "Je tremble de honte au souvenir de cet instant, car c'est moi qui flanchai" (PF p.92).

narrated world in order to alter his relationship to death and mortality and has apparently emerged victorious.

Like his predecessors, then, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* expresses his aesthetic exploration of active responses to death and mortality by creating fictional delegates who commit imaginary murders which represent the ultimate act of asserting control over death itself. While this constitutes a continuation of a process begun in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, there is also a clear progression from the preceding two narratives, both in terms of an intensification of the narrator's preoccupation with death into an obsession, and in so far as the narrator does not simply use proxies to achieve in his place what lies beyond his own capability but merges with surrogates in order to share vicariously in their experiences. There is also a further important difference in the narrator's presentation of his murderer figures which may also be attributable to the change in the narrator's personal circumstances and which signals an alteration in his presentation of the link between the death of another and one's own death.

The murderers whom the narrator presents in *Pompes funèbres* differ from Notre-Dame and Harcamone fundamentally in so far as the war-time suspension of normal laws allows them to kill without becoming *condamnés à mort*. This is significant because it breaks the mechanism that transformed murder into a suspended suicide which is so important in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*. This is not to say, however, that the relationship between the death of another and one's own death is absent from *Pompes funèbres*. It is rather the case that, whereas, in the previous two texts, the narrators present the murderer figures converting their murders into willing their own death, in *Pompes funèbres* the link between the death of another and one's own death is experienced primarily inside the narrator himself.

At the beginning of this analysis of *Pompes funèbres* it was noted that, while the death of Jean D. revealed to the narrator his unbearable passivity in relation to this unchangeable event, it also revealed to him his fundamental impotence in the face of his own immutable mortality. Similarly, the narrator tells us that Juliette experiences her child's funeral as her own – "C'était elle la morte qui parcourt solennellement, pour la dernière fois, le chemin des vivants, s'exposant au respect de tous, morte encore vivante qui marche à la tombe" (PF p.85) – and this reflects the narrator's reference to Jean D. as "mon enfant" (PF p.74). It is as though the death of his lover plunges the narrator into a living death, and, characteristically, the only way he can formulate an active response to this state which has been imposed upon him is to intensify it inside himself:

> C'est chez les morts eux-mêmes que j'étais descendu pleurer, jusque dans leurs chambres secrètes [...]. J'exposais ma douleur dans les champs amicaux de la mort, loin des hommes: en moi-même. (PF p.35)

Indeed, the whole of the narrative can be regarded in terms of a willed intensification of the narrator's sense of his own mortality through choosing to plunge himself ever deeper into the realm of death into which his bereavement has thrown him. The narrator does not only attempt to take control of the death of his lover by projecting himself into imaginary surrogates but also seeks to assume his own mortality by merging with Jean D. himself. He does this by not only exploiting the coincidence of their shared Christian name, telling us playfully that he will publish his text "afin qu'il serve la gloire de Jean, mais duquel?" (PF p.123), but further by describing the funeral in terms of a marriage, which reflects the marriage which unifies Jean and Divers in *Miracle de la Rose*: "j'officiais en même temps à des funérailles et à des noces" (PF p.57).

In a sense, the narrator's personal experience of the connection between the death of another and his own death constitutes a reversal of the process which the narrators of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* pursued through Notre-Dame and Harcamone. Whereas these killers murdered first and then chose to confront their own mortality afterwards, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* first of all experiences an involuntarily confrontation with his own mortality through the death of another and then it is from within this inner death that the narrator performs his own imaginary experimentation with murder. Thus, if the murders committed by the narrator's representatives in *Pompes funèbres* do not lead to their own deaths, they often nonetheless represent a symbolic expression of suicide which is, in turn, intimately linked to the narrator's sense of his own mortality.

This more symbolic equation of murder with suicide expressed in *Pompes funèbres* has more in common with the way in which Divine kills another as a substitute for killing herself than the way in which Notre-Dame and Harcamone kill another – or at least assume the murder after the event – in order to bring about their own death. Le Bourreau, for example, makes a perhaps conscious effort to resemble his guillotined victims – "il coupait presque ras ses cheveux bruns, si bien que sa tête toute ronde était celle d'un décapité" (PF p.31) – rendering himself metaphorically not only 'giver' but 'receiver' of death. It is as though the executioner were exploiting a process whereby what he does unto others he also does unto himself. Similarly, when Erik takes part in his first execution, he says he is indirectly experiencing his own death through it – "je me tuais moi-même" (PF L'Imaginaire p.67) – and just before killing the boy, Erik directly equates wanting to know "ce que l'on éprouve en tuant" with "ce que l'on tue en soi" (PF L'Imaginaire p.119). It is as though killing and dying were inevitably concomitant experiences, implying that each additional killing in his murderous 'career' takes him one step closer to achieving the ultimate active confrontation with death, which could only be killing himself.

Erik is a prime example of a character who, as the narrator's creature, spends his life transforming his relationship to his own immutable future death from passive to active by not only willing it but actively preparing to transform his death from a humiliating event into

a moment of chosen glory. And when Erik is described like an Ancient Egyptian, accumulating fine possessions for his tomb (PF p.89), this leads the narrator to describe life itself explicitly in terms of the preparation of one's funeral rites:

> Nous agissons aux fins d'un bel enterrement, de funérailles solennelles. Elles seront le chef-d'oeuvre au sens exact du mot, l'oeuvre capitale, très justement le couronnement de notre vie. Il faut mourir dans une apothéose et il n'est guère important qu'avant ou après ma mort je connaisse la gloire si *je sais* que je l'aurai, et je l'aurai si je passe un contrat avec une maison de pompes funèbres qui se chargera de réaliser mon destin, de l'achever. (PF p.90)

The narrator's comment clearly reflects the fact that he is himself in the process of constructing his own funeral (w)rites through his literary 'chef-d'oeuvre' even as he conducts an aesthetic exploration of his response to the death and funeral of another. In a sense, then, the narrator does himself become, like Harcamone, a kind of *condamné à mort* if only on an aesthetic level, for as he says at one point, commenting on the living death from which he writes, "j'ai donc en face des choses le détachement des condamnés à mort que j'ai vus en prison" (PF p.76). Just as Harcamone wills his own physical death through willing the physical death of another, the narrator does the same in an imaginary realm, as willing the physical death of his lover becomes inseparable from willing his own death through aesthetic means. Having worked up to and achieved his murder of Jean D. through Riton's symbolic killing of his lover, it is more than simply ironic that afterwards, when Riton reacts to his fear of being passively shot with thoughts of actively ending his own life, the narrator puts into Riton's mouth a plea addressed, significantly, to the dead: "Aide-moi à mourir" (PF p.191).

If *Pompes funèbres* represents the most sustained experimentation with responses to death and mortality in Genet's prose fiction, it also provides the most explicit exploration of the peculiar link in these texts between death and sex. Perhaps because of the taboo subject matter, this theme has received insufficient treatment by existing criticism. Coe, for example, notes that, "the sexual act is associated with the dissolution of life", and he establishes a superficial link between mortality and eroticism on the grounds that, "sex and death are hedged about with the same taboos" and "rape and murder offer the same types of temptation",[44] but he does not examine the full complexity of the death-sex connection as it is presented in the prose fiction. The equation of death and sex is, in fact, in evidence throughout Genet's prose fiction. There is nearly always, in the narrators' presentation, something funereal about sex on the one hand and something erotic about death on the

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44 Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p.41.

other, and these two perspectives merge as two sides of the same coin, being brought together and encapsulated in the image of the hanged man's erection, to which Gil adds a twist by calling his erection "mon pendu" (QB p.216). Indeed, the narrators often collapse together mortality and eroticism so thoroughly that it is almost impossible to say which was the primary impulse or attraction. At this stage, before examining in more detail the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*'s particular exploitation of the link between sex and death as part of his exploration of responses to death and mortality within his narrated world, it will be useful first of all to examine the general spectrum of examples in the prose texts of 'funereal sex' and 'erotic death'.

A blending of death and the erotic is apparent from *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* onwards. Indeed, it forms the basis of the first narrator's construction of his narrative in so far as he explicitly states that he is generating his characters out of his fantasies about the pictures of executed murderers on his wall. One of these characters is Divine's lover Notre-Dame, and the narrator is able to use his representative to imagine having sex with killers, just as the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*, even more explicitly, merges with Erik having sex with Le Bourreau. When the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* describes the murder which Notre-Dame commits, he reinforces the erotic dimension of the killing by noting that the old man is strangled with a 'phallic' neck-tie and that afterwards Notre-Dame has an erection and masturbates. The death-sex connection resurfaces in *Miracle de la rose*, particularly in the necrophilic overtones of the episode in which Deloffre attempts to resuscitate his drowned lover, Toscano, which the narrator describes as "le simulacre d'amour qu'il avait fait sur son cadavre" (MR p.443). There is also an element of necrophilia in the narrator of *Miracle de la rose*'s statement that Bulkaen's death finally allows the narrator to 'possess' him, thereby fulfilling the narrator's unrequited love for Bulkaen at last: "plus rien n'empêche qu'après sa mort, je jouisse de lui et avec lui, et sa mort, au lieu de le rendre inviolable, c'est par elle que je le viole" (MR p.432).

A link between eroticism and murder is also expressed at the beginning of *Querelle de Brest*, when the narrator states that, "à l'idée de mer et de meurtre, s'ajoute *naturellement* l'idée d'amour ou de voluptés" (QB p.204). Indeed, when Querelle feels the presence of murder inside him just before he kills Vic, the narrator's description implies that murderous desire and amorous desire might actually be two sides of the same coin: "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*" (QB pp.245-46). The equation between sexual love and death also recurs after Querelle's first erotic encounter with Nono, when the narrator describes Nono in the following terms: "Il serrait Querelle avec la même passion apparente qu'une femelle d'animal tient le cadavre de son petit" (QB p.260). Even more bizarrely, the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* merges eroticism not just with murder but with being murdered. When Querelle slits Vic's throat, the victim falls as though he is,

"s'abondonnant dans une attitude presque voluptueuse" (QB p.248), and even more explicitly, in a passage cut from the *Oeuvres complètes* edition, Querelle is struck by the fact that the face of the Armenian he has strangled resembles the face of a man "pendant ses jouissances solitaires", and to reinforce this, Querelle even arranges his victims hands inside his trousers so that they look "prêtes pour le plaisir" (QB L'Imaginaire p.216).

In addition to these examples of 'funereal sex' and 'erotic death', a rather more clichéd merging of death and sex is also expressed through weapons of death being portrayed in phallic terms or the male sexual organ being described as a lethal arm. The narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* tells us Ernestine's gun is like "un phallus en action" (NDF p.20), and he describes Notre-Dame's murder weapon as phallic because it could, at any moment, "bander roide dans la main sèche du Président" (NDF p.183); the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* talks of "la verge des canons hitlériens" (MR p.289); and Erik's penis is likened to a doodlebug: "c'était son arme secrète, le V I derrière quoi se repose le Führer" (PF p.117).[45]

It is in *Pompes funèbres* that mortality and eroticism are merged most frequently and prominently. On the one hand, thoughts of death can turn to thoughts of sex – the narrator says of Pierrot, "il pense au tombeau, au poteau d'exécution, à l'oeil" (PF p.16) – and on the other hand, aspects of the erotic can be regarded as deathly, as the narrator tells us that "l'oeil de Jean pour moi redevient funèbre" (PF p.190), and he describes his rather bizarre desire to climb into it and die there. Indeed, as White, amongst others, points out, the very title of this work, suggested by Cocteau, points to the blending of sex and death which recurs throughout the text. As White explains rather colourfully:

> '*Pompes funèbres*' is the common phrase in French for 'undertakers'. [...] But a '*pompe*' in *argot* is also an act of fellatio, so the title could mean 'Funeral Blowjobs'.[46]

The title may well refer to the episode in which the narrator 'remembers' making Jean D. suck his revolver at the fairground, a scene in which murderous and erotic desires are intermingled to the point of becoming indistinguishable as the narrator orders his lover: "Allez, suce, jusqu'à ce qu'il décharge" (PF p.92). But this blend of the funereal with the erotic, and specifically with fellatio, is also established at the beginning of the narrative, when the narrator describes Jean D.'s funeral rites in terms of, "la sublime image de celui qui s'accomplit à chaque deuil de la queue débandée", and he goes on to reinforce the

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45 There is also a line in *Le Condamné à mort* which describes the penis in terms of a weapon: "Mon sexe qui se rompt, te frappe mieux qu'une arme" (*Oeuvres complètes II*, 1951, p.214).

46 White, *Genet*, p.248.

connection by commenting: "Une saveur funèbre, après l'amour, a souvent empli ma bouche" (PF p.17).[47]

The narrator's awareness of the erotic aspect of his lover's funeral is further expressed in his depiction of some of his characters' erotic experiences as distinctly funereal. For example, when Riton first slips his hand inside Erik's trousers and touches him through his underpants, the narrator describes this contact in terms of entry into the domain of death, "son petit doigt cogna contre l'étoffe – c'était frapper à la porte des ténèbres et les voir s'ouvrir sur la mort" (PF p.114), and when Riton is sodomised by Erik on the rooftop in their final scene together, he describes this penetration as a desire to be killed by his lover, and all but cries out: " Oh! qu'il me déchire tout! Mais tue-moi!" (PF L'Imaginaire p.303).

While *Pompes funèbres* both continues and extends the fusion of two taboos begun in the preceding texts, the narrator also takes his presentation of the death-sex connection onto another level, by using sexuality as a further arena in which his exploration of confrontations with and possible responses to death and mortality can be carried out. The sexual encounters between Erik and Le Bourreau, and between Paulo and Hitler, as we saw earlier, constitute the most sustained examples of scenes in which a character has sex with a hardened killer as a means of achieving a degree of self-overcoming in the face of death not just literally – in so far as Paulo, for example, actually fears for his life while he is with the Führer – but also symbolically. And the more symbolic level is being pursued particularly by the narrator himself, who vicariously experiences both passive and active roles in these sexual, deathly encounters as part of his own attempt to transform his relationship to death from being a passive victim to asserting a semblance of choice and even control. These episodes require no further comment here, but together they foreshadow a liaison between Querelle and Nono in the following narrative which takes the possibility of using an erotic encounter to assert control even over one's own mortality to a new extreme.

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47 Both Sartre and Derrida comment on the link between fellatio and castration, although only Derrida makes the further link, through the image of the cut flower, between fellatio, castration and decapitation.

CHAPTER FOUR - QUERELLE: MASTERY OVER DEATH

In *Querelle de Brest*, compared with his predecessors, the presence of the narrator is greatly reduced. He does not state explicitly that a certain character is his representative like the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, he does not take part in the diegesis himself like the homodiegetic narrator of *Miracle de la rose*, and he does not merge with characters during crucial experiences like the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*. The narrator of *Querelle de Brest* does, however, identify himself as the creator of his characters and his most prominent creatures do embody many of the same preoccupations with death and mortality that we saw in the previous texts. In many ways, the fourth narrator is more conventional than his predecessors, and, indeed, *Querelle de Brest* is a more conventional text, particularly in so far as the narrator's relationship to his narrated world is not exploited to the extent that it is in the first three prose works. This is not to say, however, that the narrator has withdrawn behind his narrative completely. The narrator's presence is still felt and although the self-reflexive interventions are substantially reduced in number and length, they are still there, providing the reader with clues as to the narrator's on-going relationship to his aesthetic explorations.

As we saw in the Introduction to this thesis, the most obvious way in which the nature of the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* has progressed from the previous texts is that he refers to himself throughout not in the first person singular but in the first person plural, and although some critics have suggested that this change signals greater distance between the narrator and his narrative, it also has the effect of rendering the material and ideas he explores more universal. The narrator says himself at one point that, "notre rôle [est] de signifier l'universel d'un phénomène particulier" (QB p.395). At the same time, the 'nous' transforms the relationship between narrator and narratee from the antagonism of the previous text into a sense of complicity. As Heed comments:

> Le narrateur établit le contact avec le narrataire avec qui il continuera le dialogue tout au long du roman. Il essaiera non seulement de lui «présenter» l'histoire mais de l'impliquer dans la création du roman. Il s'agira pour lui de faire passer ses propres fantasmes au narrataire qui les rendra siens.[48]

Although it has not been the purpose of this thesis to examine the narrator-narratee relationship, Heed's insight emphasises that even though the narrator's self-presentation in *Querelle de Brest* may be different from the first three prose works, the narrated world still represents to him a realm in which his own preoccupations and obsessions – "ses propres

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48 Heed, '*Querelle de Brest*', p.243.

fantasmes" – can be explored through indirect, imaginary means. As we will see, many of the narrator's own reflections on his relationship to his creatures clearly indicate that, in terms of constructing delegates which might embody and exemplify his own speculation, his own conception of his relationship to his narrated world is, in fact, not radically different.

In the case of Querelle the narrator indicates that he has a similar dual status to his predecessors, revealing that while he may give the impression that Querelle is an autonomous being, he in fact constitutes an idealised but inextricable part of the narrator's own inner reality:

> 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. (QB p.214)

Indeed, in his reference to his 'désespoir', the narrator implies that Querelle represents to him an ideal that he wishes he could be part of, rather than Querelle simply being a part of the narrator's own presumably unfulfilled and unfulfillable aspirations, and he goes on to refer to Querelle as, "ce personnage idéal et héroïque, fruit de nos secrètes amours" (QB p.214). The narrator even goes on to suggest that he will realise his own ideal by personifying it as a character within his narrated world: "Enfin, pour être visible de vous, pour devenir un personnage de roman, Querelle doit être montré hors de nous-même" (QB p.214). In his article on *Querelle de Brest*, although White refers to the author rather than the narrator, he nonetheless neatly encapsulates this ambiguity of the figure of Querelle, both as the narrator's own creature and as a symbol of what the narrator himself can never attain: "the hero is at once a creature of Genet's imagination, subject to Genet's whims – and a desirable, unobtainable man the author envies".[49]

Just as the narrators of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* both present a murderer figure who stands out from the other characters in the way that he exemplifies an active response to death and mortality, after the proliferation of killers in *Pompes funèbres* the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* once again creates a key figure through whom the possibility of asserting control over death itself is played out. But if the centrality of Querelle might represent a return to the form of the first two prose texts, the manner and extent of his self-assertion in the face of death and mortality signal a definite development. The progression up to Querelle could be summarised in the following terms: Divine confronts death indirectly, by causing a death indirectly, but fails to will her own death through active self-assertion; Notre-Dame kills involuntarily but assumes his act afterwards and thereby actively provokes his execution; Harcamone also kills involuntarily but kills again as an act

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49 Edmund White, 'Jean Genet's purest perverse romance: *Querelle*', 1974, p.4.

of will in order to transform his life sentence into a death sentence; and Erik works his way up to his first killing which is not only totally lucid but also gratuitous. Then there is Querelle, who not only kills completely voluntarily but who kills repeatedly and then even moves beyond willing his own death to defying it.

In *Querelle de Brest*, the all-pervading atmosphere of mortality is more subtle and metaphoric than in the preceding texts, but it is nonetheless unmistakable. There is no focus on ageing and dying as in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, no shadow cast by a central *condamné à mort* as in *Miracle de la rose*, no war-time environment in which killing is happening on a national scale as in *Pompes funèbres.* But if the port setting of *Querelle de Brest* might at first appear to be a release from the funereal atmosphere of prisons, incarceration, occupation and bereavement, the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* signals the omnipresence of death in the narrated world he constructs from the outset. In the opening line, the narrator makes a direct association between killing and the setting of his narrative – "L'idée de meurtre évoque souvent l'idée de mer, de marins" (QB p.203) – thereby also indicating that his interest in murder precedes his apparent interest in sailors, the latter growing out of the former. The narrator also reinforces the deathliness of the sailors' environment by emphasising his own perception of what he calls "l'apparence mortelle du matelot" (QB p.203), as though the sailor's mortality were inscribed in his very being. The unreality of the deathliness which the narrator imposes upon the milieu of his narrated world is then both symbolised and compounded by the constant fog which envelops Brest like a shroud.

It is within this chosen atmosphere of mortality, then, that the narrator pushes the response to death which is exemplified by Querelle to a new extreme as Querelle does not simply pursue his own self-possession in the face of mortality or even stop at assuming a limited degree over control over death but is actually presented by the narrator as attaining a certain mastery over death. This development is accompanied by Querelle apparently having a different attitude to death to his predecessors. Whereas the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*, for example, was keen to emphasise through Erik that the path to asserting control over death by killing involves a long and difficult process of self-overcoming in order to transform his humiliating passivity in the face of mortality into activity, for Querelle, death is not humiliating and cannot rule him by fear since it is simply natural. In a clear progression from the reaction of the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* to the immutability of his bereavement, when, as a child, Querelle sets eyes on his mother's exhumed coffin, he comes to the simple conclusion that, "c'est un malheur qui va de soi et rentre dans l'ordre du monde" (QB L'Imaginaire p.59), and the narrator draws attention to the connection between this attitude and the attitude he manifests in his responses to death as an adult: "Enfin, sa façon simple de considérer ce malheur est comparable à l'attitude qu'il eut un jour en face de la mort" (QB L'Imaginaire p.59). Querelle's powerful indifference is later confirmed by the narrator through Gil: "[Querelle] avait plaisanté sur la mort et Gil avait eu l'impression que,

pour le matelot, la mort d'un homme est sans importance" (QB p.338).[50] I would suggest that it is Querelle's total lack of fear and humility in the face of death which allows him to set himself up as a veritable master of death and mortality more potently and in a more sustained manner than any other character in the prose fiction. In order to 'achieve' his mastery over death, the narrator's most monstrous creature utilises in combination all the by now familiar tools for attempting to alter one's relationship to the immutability of death: direct acts of killing, symbolic confrontations with death expressed through sexual encounters, and the sheer power of his imagination.

In the first two narratives, the narrators presented Notre-Dame and Harcamone asserting their self-possession and control not only in the face of death but specifically in the face of their own mortality by transforming their murders into suspended suicides through willing their executions. The wartime backdrop of *Pompes funèbres* and the effective suspension of normal peacetime laws meant that this avenue was closed while, at the same time, the opportunity for freer experimentation with taking control over death was opened up. In *Querelle de Brest* we return to a situation in which being executed for murder is once again a very real possibility, and yet Querelle represents a significant and unique progression from his earliest predecessors in so far as, after killing, he does not convert the murder into an act of willing his own death but actually defies his death, believing, according to the narrator's interpretation, that he has placed himself beyond mortality as its conqueror. A similar if rather foolhardy attitude of indestructibility is expressed in *Pompes funèbres* both in relation to Paulo – "Paulo ne pouvait pas mourir car rien ne saurait détruire une dureté comme celle qui le composait" (PF p.99) – and by Erik – "un homme comme moi ne peut pas mourir" (PF L'Imaginaire p.135) – but the way in which Querelle 'achieves' his own 'immortality' is unprecedented in Genet's prose fiction.

Querelle's response to his fundamental passivity in relation to death is not just to alter his attitude and inner relationship to it but actually to set himself up as bringer of death, not just asserting a degree of control but attempting to subjugate death under his mastery completely, becoming "l'ange de l'Apocalypse" (QB p.208). Of all the murderous heroes in Genet's prose fiction, Querelle is not only the most self-possessed and ruthlessly audacious but also the most self-sufficient. In his diary, Seblon describes Querelle as an angel because he sees him as, "un être de plus en plus inhumain, cristallin, autour de qui se développent les bandes d'une musique basée sur le contraire de l'harmonie" (QB p.208). In his complete moral isolation, Querelle has created such a solitary 'otherness' about him, that he sometimes appears to be less a member of the human race – at times he is "saisi par un

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50 Gil's feeling that death is "sans importance" for Querelle is a reference to the fact that he does not feel pity for his victim or remorse for his deed as Gil does after killing Théo. The comment is not suggesting that death holds no importance in Querelle's life. The intensity with which Querelle transforms his life into one confrontation with death after another is a clear indication that this is not the case.

enchantement immortel au milieu du monde vivant" (QB p.211) – than a supernatural creature of the night:

> Querelle avait apprivoisé la nuit. Il avait su se rendre familières toutes les expressions de l'ombre, peupler les ténèbres des monstres les plus dangereux qu'il portait en lui-même. (QB p.375)

Although several of the murderers in the prose texts kill more than once, Querelle represents the first actual serial killer. This may be partly attributable to the fact that, although murder affords him, like the other killers, a temporary moment of victory over death, like Tchen, Querelle has to repeat the act in order to sustain this sense of mastery both over death and his own mortality. There are times when Querelle's recognition that his 'victory' over death and mortality through murder is only relative reveals his underlying vulnerability:

> Si les meurtres de Querelle établissaient autour de lui une haie charmante, parfois il les sentait se flétrir jusqu'à n'être plus qu'une tige de fer indifférente. Cette sensation était terrible. [...] Il était soudain nu et pauvre parmi les hommes. Effectivement, il se ressaisissait. (QB p.306)

The same thing happens if at any point he feels in danger of losing his life, and in Querelle's encounter with Mario, who could arrest him, the narrator states that, "la mort était là, le guettant, alors qu'il avait été si souvent la mort guettant sa proie" (QB L'Imaginaire p.172). As the feeling of being in control of death after a successful confrontation with it gradually fades, and the sense of his own mortality creeps back into his consciousness, Querelle knows he will have to kill again to redress the balance one more. But, as with all those characters whom the narrators use to embody responses to the immutability of death and mortality through murder, what is most significant about Querelle for the narrator is not so much the murders themselves but his perception of Querelle's inner relationship to them. The easiest way to characterise Querelle's 'victory' over death and mortality in more detail is in contrast to Gil's defeat.

Both Querelle and Gil commit a murder – Querelle has apparently committed several – and yet one of these murderers is presented by the narrator to be active and praiseworthy, at least according to the narrators' own criteria, while the other is presented as passive and humiliated, and the couple they form in *Querelle de Brest* allows, for the first time, a comparison of a successful with an unsuccessful response to death. The contrast between these two killers emphasises that what is central to responses to the immutable is not, primarily, the act itself but the transformation of the individual's relationship to the immutable.

In relation to Roger, who is passive and inferior, Gil is able to believe that he can attain the activity, power and self-possession he so desires. We are told of his "désir d'être dur, net, cassant" (QB p.217). In spite of early references to Gil's "audace" and "méchanceté", however, Querelle has ascended so much higher than him that the fact that Gil is named after the evil child-murderer Gille de Rais seems quite ironic. When the narrator makes the comparison himself – "Gil devenait quelque chose d'aussi hideux que Gille de Rais" (QB p.373) – he is actually referring to the public's romanticised misconception of Gil and not to the real man. Gil's desire for self-assertion will only be realised in a relative sense. Querelle hopes to find in Gil his murderous equal, "un garçon ressemblant, ayant sa grandeur et sa carrure" (QB p.329), but he is disappointed:

> L'assassin était un gosse maladroit, un meurtrier pour rien. Un sot. (QB p.329)

Despite an apparently promising start, in which Gil manages to summon up a certain amount of courage and audacity, the main mistake Gil makes is that, compared to Querelle, he kills for the wrong reasons, in the wrong frame of mind, and he chooses the wrong victim, and even Gil himself is aware of this immediately after the event:

> Il ne servait à rien d'avoir tué Théo. [...] C'était un crime vide comme un seau sans fond. C'était une erreur. (QB p.321)

If Gil recognises what he calls "l'inutilité de son meurtre" (QB p.320), it is important to be clear that his act is not 'useless' because he does not derive any material profit from it but pointless primarily because it does not constitute a personal victory over himself or his condition. The narrator makes it quite clear that even though, after Querelle's first murder, all his subsequent murders result in robbery, the primary motivation for killing his victim lies much deeper than mere self-enrichment: "il ne le frappe pas pour le dévaliser, mais il le dévalise *parce qu'il l'a frappé*" (QB p.366). The jewels stolen are not sold but buried as an increasing hoard of symbols of Querelle's increasing personal success in asserting his control over death, "la preuve efficace de son courage et de son existence" (QB p.310).

Thus, Gil's murder does not fail as an active response to death because he does not gain financially from it but because it is not a willed assertion of self-possession and control but a spur of the moment lashing-out motivated by his own failure to get the better of his tormentors and his refusal to admit his growing homosexuality. And ironically, even in that sense he fails, for while Gil kills Théo for doubting his heterosexuality, as far as the police, his fellow sailors and the public are concerned the vengeance proves Théo must have been right. Gil's act does not, therefore, transform passivity into activity but simply reveals his weakness and self-delusion. Gil kills in a moment of hate, revenge and alcohol-induced loss of control. His act therefore bears none of the signs of self-overcoming required of Querelle

to kill his friend and accomplice, of Erik to kill the innocent boy, or of Harcamone to kill the prison officer to whom he bears the least malice. Even Querelle's betrayal of Gil is sought not in spite of but because of what it demands of Querelle in terms of self-assertion and active freedom because the two men have become close. Indeed, the narrator insists that, "il éprouvait une grande douleur à voir Gil mordre à l'hameçon et manger le ver" (QB p.377). As he did with Jonas, Querelle increases his self-assertion by adding to murder the sacrificial, stoic betrayal unto death of another's trust. The narrator offers us an explanation of this process which, significantly, he expresses in the first person, as though he were imagining through Querelle what he himself would like to achieve:

> Je viens de courir une aventure où une partie de moi-même était engagée (mon affection pour la victime). Je sais exécuter une sorte de pacte (non formulé) avec le Diable, à qui je n'abandonne pas mon âme ni mon bras, mais quelque chose d'aussi précieux: un ami. (QB p.388)

Through his act of betrayal, then, Querelle reinforces his freedom from any constraint on his actions, whether moral, affective or otherwise. The final immutable constraint will, of course, be his own death, but, unlike Notre-Dame, Harcamone and, indeed, Tchen who all assert their control over their own mortality in an act of suicidal glory, Querelle builds his response to his own inevitable demise in carefully prepared ascendant stages. Gil is incapable of such stoic self-control, as is revealed by his weak, passive and totally misplaced loyalty which the narrator is quick to emphasise: "Indiquons dès à présent que Gil ne parlera jamais de Querelle aux policiers" (QB p.398). Even Seblon toys with betraying Querelle, in order to be worthy of him in pseudo-Cornelian manner, although, in his even greater, insurmountable social passivity, he is unable to go through with it.

Thus, the example of Gil reveals that, for the narrator, killing in a moment of passion or fury does not constitute an active response to death and mortality unless the murder is willed – preferably at the time but if not then at least afterwards – and committed or assumed as the expression in external reality of the perpetrator's inner self-possession. On the occasion of his first murder, Querelle takes great pains to ensure that his own self-possession was without fault at every moment. Just as Harcamone replaces an involuntary murder with a voluntary, chosen one, within a single murder Querelle follows up a reflex blow which happens too fast to be totally within his control with a second stab which ensures that his will was behind both:

> Le crime fut alors vite accompli: le jeune Russe l'avait insulté, Querelle frappa et, d'un coup de couteau, il lui creva un oeil. Ecoeuré par l'horreur, pour sortir d'elle, il trancha la gorge du garçon. (QB p.339)

He then renders the whole experience a conscious act of laughing in the face of death: "Enfin, spontanément et plutôt pour bafouer le mort qui risquait de le hanter, il prit dans la poche de son pantalon une pipe de bruyère et la plaça entre les dents de sa victime" (QB p.339). Although Gil aspires to such supreme self-possession, he knows that he does not have the self-sufficient indifference to assert his control over death to this extent: "Gil s'acharnait, tuait (ou voulait tuer) complètement la pitié en lui, qui le menaçait encore" (QB p.338).

Querelle, then, is the master of his crime, and not vice-versa, and has taken control of death itself:

> Querelle a déjà accepté - non d'être dans le crime - mais de porter en soi le crime. [...] En l'acceptant, l'idée du meurtre lui était plus que familière, de son corps elle était une exhalaison dans laquelle il baignait le monde. (QB p.303)

But Gil simply does not have the given courage to will and assume the full potential significance of his act: "Assassin c'était trop pour son corps et son âme de dix-huit ans" (QB p.333). Gil remains imprisoned by his murder, because the remorse which weakens him and threatens to take him over is the opposite of freedom, and this incarceration of his will and self-control is expressed physically by his literal captivity in the disused *bagne*. Without guards or even locked doors his immutable weakness plunges him back into passivity and dependency and he becomes once more the humiliated victim of the very forces over which, for a moment, he had control. Thus, unlike Querelle, rather than overcoming death – even if only temporarily – by direct unflinching confrontation with it, Gil regretfully, fearfully and involuntarily experiences his victim's burial as his own.

Gil becomes aware of his weakness as soon as he enters the police station for interrogation, for he is overcome with fear, shame and self-reproach, and the narrator tells us that, "il se reprochait de n'avoir pas été assez magnifique" (QB p.315). Rather than freely willing his murder, he actually tries in vain to undo it and take it back: "recroquevillé dans l'angle, accroupi entre les pierres humides, la tête basse, il essaya de détruire son acte en le décomposant en gestes dont chacun était inoffensif" (QB p.321).[51] Gil abdicates rather than

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51 In this he resembles Yeux-Verts in *Haute surveillance* who, rather than assume his crime, dances in an attempt to undo it:
"J'ai voulu revenir en arrière. Halte! Impossible! J'ai fait des efforts. Je courais à droite et à gauche. Je me tortillais. J'essayais toutes les formes pour ne pas devenir un assassin." (HS p.197)
The murder committed by Yeux-Verts bears a resemblance to Harcamone's first murder in so far as he kills a young girl involuntarily – "C'est la fatalité qui a pris la forme de mes mains" (HS p.198) – but whereas Harcamone wills and even re-asserts his act after the event, thereby transforming his passivity into activity, Yeux-Verts, like Gil, does not. Hence, it is Lefranc and not Yeux-Verts who is the hero of *Haute surveillance* because, as Plunka states:
"Unlike Vincent de Paul, Lefranc commits the crime and willingly accepts responsibility for it. [...] Lefranc chooses to create his destiny, unlike Yeux-Verts, who has no will of his own and falls victim to deterministic forces." (Gene A. Plunka, 'Jules Lefranc: Jean Genet's Eternal Galley Slave and Patron Saint', 1992, pp.19,24).

asserts his own *maîtrise de soi* and confirms his lack of freedom and humiliating passivity by burying himself in fatalism:

> Il [...] arriverait à conclure que le crime s'il avait coulé dans son bras, son corps et le cours de sa vie, sa source était hors de lui.
> Cette façon de comprendre son acte enfonçait Gil dans le fatalisme, c'était un obstacle encore à ce désir de surmonter le crime en le voulant, délibérément. (QB p.323)

Although Gil attempts to assume his act verbally, declaring, "j'ai bouzillé Théo et j'ai bien fait", and even echoes the stoic words of Corneille by affirming, "si c'était à refaire, je recommencerais" (QB p.338),[52] Gil does not follow through his words with his will. He never really overcomes his sense of shame, even when his apparent glory is erroneously confirmed by the press. His reputation is and remains inauthentic.

Because self-assertion in the face of immutable aspects of one's condition is not a question of altering facts but of changing one's relationship to them, as the narrator points out Gil could always compensate for any passivity in his attitude at the time of the murder by replacing an involuntary act with a wholly voluntary one afterwards, as both Harcamone and Querelle do. Querelle, himself a serial killer, now wants Gil to be a lucid, willed murderer like himself, to be his protégé, progressing from murder by accident to deliberate murder in complete self-possession:

> Ça serait marrant qu'à Brest y ait un petit Querelle de lâché dans le brouillard. (QB p.366)

Gil is apparently aware that he can only transform his humiliating passivity into activity if he compensates for his mistake by committing a fully willed murder with a clear motive, "pour rattraper ce crime inutile, il faut en commettre un (le même) et qui serve" (QB p.321), but he evidently lacks the given potential to realise it. In his final encounter with Seblon, in spite of his assertive words – "Le fric ou je tire dans le ventre" (QB p.380) – he only actually wounds Seblon in the shoulder to make him drop the bag of money before running away.

Another sign that Gil cannot rise to the exemplary standards of Querelle is that, instead of willing the solitude of self-sufficiency, he naively seeks fraternity – "il croyait à l'existence d'une bande dangereuse, d'une véritable société s'opposant à la société" (QB p.327) – which Querelle, like Harcamone, rises above in order to make his self-sufficiency

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This reading challenges the traditional view of *Haute surveillance*, which derives from Sartre, that Yeux-Verts must be the hero of the play because, whereas the murder Yeux-Verts commits is predetermined, signalling him as one of the elect, Lefranc's crime is gratuitous and therefore vile. According to the prose fiction, for a murder to be admirable the question of gain is far less important – indeed, it is absent from most of the murders in the fiction – than the extent to which the killing is willed and assumed.

52 Both Rodrigue in *Le Cid* and Horace affirm their respective killings with the words: "Je le ferais encore si j'avais à le faire".

even more complete. Querelle knows Gil could only attain Querelle's level of glorious self-assertion in victory over death if he had acted as Querelle had, hence his plan, with an obvious double motive, to let Gil assume the glorious sentence for his own:

> [...] grâce à Querelle, il serait paré d'un meurtre véritable [...]. Il lui prêtait, il lui confiait un de ses meurtres. (QB pp.329-30)

While bestowing his gift with tongue-in-cheek altruism on Gil, Querelle is in fact doing two things for himself. In one sense, Querelle is cheating his own destiny, something he has done before when he let his friend Jonas be executed for his own murder of Joachim, the Armenian homosexual:

> Le tribunal maritime condamna Jonas à mort. Il fut exécuté. Querelle [...] permettait que Jonas – un vrai pote – fût tué. (QB L'Imaginaire p.217)

At the same time, Querelle is also making it possible to live out his own destiny vicariously through Gil who becomes his self-projection, a mechanism which reflects the narrator's own process. If Querelle can make Gil admit to the murder not only of Théo but also of Vic, then, as the narrator tells us, "Querelle, dans une terre fertile, va déposer un germe de Querelle qui lèvera, et croîtra" (QB p.366). The element of vicariousness is strengthened by the factor of friendship, because the inherent element of narcissism in love allows the victim to be the extension of his aggressor. As the narrator explains with regard to Querelle, "l'amitié [...] le lie à la victime – et [...] fait de celle-ci le prolongement de la personnalité de l'assassin" (QB p.388).

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, one of the ways in which Querelle constitutes a significant and unique progression from Notre-Dame and Harcamone in particular is that, unlike them, he does not convert his assumption of the murder he commits into an act of willing his own death by choosing to be executed for his crime but actually defies his death. This is not to suggest, however, that the connection between the death of the other and one's own death has finally been broken. Indeed, the narrator actually reinforces it, insisting that:

> Affirmer seulement que le criminel au moment qu'il commet son crime croit n'être jamais pris est faux. [...] Il sait que cet acte le condamne à mort. [...] Nous appellerons Querelle un joyeux suicidé moral. (QB p.249)

It is because of this that the most active, 'voluntary' murderers in Genet's prose fiction are often described as dead even before their physical death, as though they have willed their own death directly through the act of murder and are experiencing a lived death

immediately inside themselves. The narrator describes Querelle's experience in the following terms:

> Querelle après son premier meurtre connut ce sentiment d'être mort, c'est-à-dire de vivre dans une région profonde – plus exactement, du fond d'un cercueil, errant autour d'une tombe banale d'un banal cimetière [...]. (QB p.254)

Similarly, the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* tells us that Riton experiences his second killing as his own death – "Il était déjà mort à la douleur et mort tout simplement puisqu'il venait de tuer sa propre image" (PF p.165) – and the narrator of *Miracle de la rose* says of Harcamone that, "sa vie avait été tranchée déjà puisqu'il avait connu la mort" and goes on to assert that, "il lui appartenait plus qu'à la vie" (MR p.360). However, whereas Harcamone faces execution, and *Pompes funèbres* ends with Riton apparently wanting to be shot, Querelle's willed death remains an inner death, and his power over death extends to a sense of mastery over his own mortality.

Querelle differs from the murderers who become actual *condamnés à mort*, then, in so far as the sense of immortality he has won through taking control of death leads him to push his self-possession in the face of death to the point of taunting it with his superiority in a manner which is unprecedented in the prose fiction. Querelle even reinforces the transformation of his passivity into activity by willing the clues which could lead to his capture and execution, irrespective of whether they were left deliberately at the time:

> Et, afin de n'être pas avalé par le désespoir, souriant, Querelle offrait son erreur en hommage à l'étoile qui le protégeait. En lui s'établissait l'équivalent affectif de cette pensée: «On verra bien. Je l'ai fait *justement* exprès. Exprès. C'est bien plus marrant.» (QB pp.307-8)

Similarly, Querelle keeps his victims' dirty possessions in full awareness that they are "objets constituant autant de preuves contre ses alibis et risquant de le perdre" (QB p.212). He thereby at once beckons to and precociously evades his own death, treating mortality as a game that he is not only playing but winning. We see Mario's defiance functioning in a similar manner, for precisely when he is in the greatest danger, "il sortit davantage, s'exposant avec l'idée folle, qu'à force de vitesse et d'agilité, il dépisterait la mort, et que, même tué, la mort ne ferait que le traverser" (QB p.263).

Querelle's liaisons with Nono and Mario are part of this audacious assertion of mastery over his immutable destiny, for they could hold his life in their hands. In order to control his own destiny, he knows he must be absolute master of himself when with them, but his relations with them are no less shrouded with the same ambivalence as the clues left behind and the objects retained. While Querelle naturally fears the fulfilment of his destiny,

this fear merely increases his desire to will it in order not to be defeated by that very fear which could hold his freedom hostage:

> Mario et Norbert. Une donneuse et un flic! Qu'ils ne le dénoncent pas tout de suite serait plus terrible encore. (QB p.231)

As the narrator maintains, it is only by living life on the brink of death that the indignity of death is transformed into a glorious intensity of living:

> Nous appelons belle l'attitude de vie et laide l'attitude de la mort. Mais plus belle encore, l'attitude qui vous fait vivre vite, jusqu'à la mort. (QB p.236)

This is what Querelle, like the *miliciens* in *Pompes funèbres*, achieves, and the longer he evades his destiny, the more he feels himself to be "un personnage exceptionnel" (QB p.294). The star which protects him is inside himself, it is his courage shining through – "sa confiance en elle [...] était sa confiance en soi" (QB p.386) – and everything he does is designed to augment that confidence, to "nourrir toujours son étoile", to increase his self-possession and his victory over the immutability of death itself.

If the extent of Querelle's assertion of his 'immortality' in defiance of death singles him out from his predecessors, the actual way in which he fulfils the murder-suicide link through his murders and wills his own death as a result of willing the death of another also constitutes a progression. Rather than provoking his actual death, Querelle pushes the self-sufficiency of his victory over death a step further and, by using the power of his imagination, he further takes control even of his arrest, trial, sentence and execution by playing out his "sort étonnant" (QB p.250) firstly within an imaginary realm and then through a symbolic scenario over which he has total control. In this sense, Querelle's symbolic method of willing his own death represents a progression from, for example, Harcamone. When Harcamone kills the guard his act sets the wheels of justice in motion, plunging himself into 'l'irrémédiable', and, as a *condamné à mort*, the actual mechanism through which his chosen suicide is fulfilled is actually beyond Harcamone's further control, it is "un mécanisme fatal plus fort que sa volonté" (MR p.266). In contrast, because Querelle's 'suicide' is only imaginary and symbolic, he is able to maintain full control over his own willed enactment of his destiny to the 'end'.

Immediately after committing each murder, Querelle does not only will but also 'realises' his arrest in his mind, feeling the imaginary hand of "un idéal policier" on his shoulder. He then plays out his trial in his imagination – "il comparaissait devant la Cour d'assises qu'il se composait après chaque meurtre" – before finding a suitable environment in which to receive his chosen, imaginary sentence: "Il cherchait un endroit tranquille, aussi retiré qu'une cellule, assez seul et solennel pour devenir un lieu de jugement" (QB p.250).

The 'poetic' means through which Querelle wills his destiny represents a *mise en abyme* of the narrator's own construction of and self-projection into his narrated world. Although the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* does not state where he is as he writes, Querelle's choice of a 'cell-like' secluded place to facilitate his fantasy reflects the chosen 'lieu de narration' of the narrators in the three previous works, and we are reminded that, as we saw earlier, Gil's initiation into an imaginary response to his condition is also prompted by his incarceration in the disused 'bagne' (QB p.336). To reinforce this parallel with the narrator's own aesthetic process, Querelle's relationship to his "autocondamnation" (QB p.249) also reflects the narrator's relationship to his narrated world in so far as there is the same ambiguity surrounding the creator's presentation of his fantasy as at once 'real' and purely imaginary:

> Avec plus d'intensité, il se réfugia dans sa vision. Il la précisa. Il était là et il n'y était pas. Il assistait enfin à la projection du coupable dans la Salle des Assises. Il la suivait et la commandait. (QB p.252)

There is also a strong reflection of the narrator's own process in the way that Querelle projects himself into an imaginary surrogate self who at once bears Querelle's experience for him and, at the same time, through whom Querelle experiences vicariously the trial which he is evading in external reality but over which he has total control in his mind: "Souverain, au pied de cet arbre il commandait à son double imaginaire des attitudes de peur, de révolte, de confiance et d'effroi, des tremblements, des pâleurs" (QB p.252).

Querelle completes his imaginary realisation of his arrest and trial by finally willing his sentence which he pronounces inside himself: "La Cour vous condamne à la peine capitale" (QB p.252). He then proceeds to the 'fulfilment' of his execution – "«Faut que j' m'exécute, quoi!»" (QB p.252) – and it is important to be clear that although Querelle's 'execution' is presented in terms of expiation for the murder – "Toute mise à mort est une souillure: d'où se laver" (QB p.256) – the narrator insists that this has nothing to do with remorse. Indeed, he describes Querelle's act of murder in terms of "cette fête, cette solennité qu'est la mise à mort" (QB p.256), that is, a celebration, not of death itself but of Querelle's assertion of mastery over it. Moreover, those murderers in the prose fiction who, like Querelle, assert the most active responses to death and mortality do not will the punishment that complements the crime in order, like Gil and Yeux-Verts, to undo their act but to reinforce it.

The actual way in which Querelle not only wills but actually simulates the culmination of the 'murder-suicide' mechanism through the symbolic medium of sexual intercourse constitutes one of the most bizarre processes in the whole of the prose fiction. In the previous chapter we examined the way in which the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* in particular extends his exploration of responses to death and mortality to include confrontations with death that are enacted through eroticism. In *Querelle de Brest*, when Querelle initiates an erotic encounter with Nono at La Féria, the exploitation of the death-

sex connection is taken a step further. The narrator refers to Querelle's motivation quite unambiguously in terms of the enactment of his death sentence – "Querelle comprit que l'instant était venu qu'il «s'exécute»" (QB p.254) – with the difference that instead of actually becoming "un mort", Querelle becomes "un enculé" (QB p.255). As Gerber comments:

> Anal intercourse is in this case the "demonic modulation" of the punishment meted out in accordance with the Book of Revelations, "If any man kills with the sword, he must be killed with the sword".[53]

Throughout the course of this thesis we have seen that, because the responses which the narrators present in the narrated world constitute responses to the immutable, more emphasis is placed on changing one's attitude than on attempting in vain to alter the facts of one's condition. Thus, when Querelle chooses to enact his execution symbolically through being sodomised, although the two acts themselves are clearly quite separate, the metaphoric connection for Querelle is that both experiences are utterly passive. The "humiliation profonde" (QB p.276) suffered by Querelle *enculé* is, then, representative of the deep humiliation of death itself, and by willing and thereby transforming his relationship to this "rite sacrificiel" (QB p.254) from passive to active, he also thereby asserts his control over his own death. Indeed, Querelle further asserts his mastery over mortality by gaining pleasure from his own willed 'death', even reinforcing this by asking himself, "si lui-même devait essayer de plaire à l'exécuteur par des caresses" (QB p.259). As we saw earlier, although Querelle assumes the passive role in his liaison with Nono, there is no submission, either to Nono or, symbolically, to his own death. When they are playing dice to decide who will sodomise whom, the fact that Querelle cheats is a clear indication that the apparent passivity of the ensuing experience is actually the result of his active free choice from the outset.

Thus, as a result of Querelle's choice, Nono becomes Querelle's sexual executioner, and Querelle his sexual hanged man: "Querelle bandait comme bande un pendu" (QB L'Imaginaire p.66). But if, in Querelle's imagination and in the narrator's, Querelle 'dies' by Nono's 'sword', because his symbolic mastery over his own mortality places him beyond the limitations of his own condition, this imaginary death also constitutes a rebirth:

> Pour renaître, mourir. Après il ne craindrait personne. Sans doute la Police pourrait-elle encore s'emparer de lui, lui couper le cou: il devrait donc prendre des précautions, ne pas se trahir, mais en face du tribunal fantastique qui s'érigeait en lui-même, Querelle n'aurait plus à répondre de rien puisque celui qui avait commis le meurtre était mort. (QB p.256)

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53 Barbara Leslie Gerber, 'Jean Genet: The Writer as Alchemist; Metamorphoses in Fiction and Reality', 1968, p.64.

Querelle may not have actually altered either his external situation or his immutable condition, but, inside himself, as far as the narrator is concerned, he has rendered himself invincible.

If Querelle represents the narrator's ideal, in a sense the character of Seblon might be considered to be closer to the narrator's own personality – at least on the evidence of his three predecessors – in so far as he is presented as being insurmountably socially passive, particularly as regards his homosexuality. In addition to this, the status of Seblon within the narrated world, particularly in the context of Seblon's manipulation of his relationship to Querelle through his diary, also both closely reflects and develops the narrator's aesthetic relationship to his ideal creature. Indeed, Seblon is the only character in the prose fiction who, like the narrators, uses an aesthetic medium to carry out imaginary explorations that he would not dare to undertake in external reality. At one point, he declares in his diary: "Je me sens une nature démoniaque à force d'avoir *imaginé* des sujets de scandale" (QB p.207). Seblon is also the only character who speaks at length about himself and his situation in the first person, and this is particularly significant when we consider that this is the first text in which the narrator does not refer to himself as 'je'. This perhaps suggests that the narrator is transferring his voice into Seblon for the extracts from the lieutenant's diary, projecting himself into a fictional delegate in a similar way to the narrator of *Pompes funèbres*. As if to augment the temptation to identify Seblon as an example of the narrator's self-projection, the narrator states that Seblon stands outside the book he is writing, just as he himself stands outside his narrated world: "Seblon n'est pas *dans* le livre" (QB p.263).

Of course, the most direct link between the narrator of *Querelle de Brest* and the fictional author of the diary is the object of both of their admiration and love, Querelle. Seblon transforms Querelle according to his own ideal vision just as the narrator does. It is in Seblon's eyes that Querelle is an angel of the Apocalypse:

> A force de méditer de Querelle, d'user par l'imagination ses plus beaux ornements, ses muscles, ses bosses, ses dents, son sexe deviné, pour le lieutenant Seblon le matelot est devenu un ange [...]. (QB p.208)

Seblon uses Querelle as a blank screen onto which he projects his own desires in a *mise en abyme* of the narrator's own artistic process. Seblon replaces all the unknowns – the "sexe deviné", for example – with his own hopes and preferences, thereby transforming Querelle in his imagination into the self-possessed, self-sufficient ideal Seblon himself would love to become but never will, just as, indeed, the narrator does. Thus, Querelle is the fictional delegate of both the narrator and Seblon.

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This roughly chronological analysis of the presentation of responses to the immutability of death and mortality has revealed, then, elements of a progression in the degree of activity and self-mastery the murderers in the prose fiction attain from one text to the next and from one protagonist to the next. However, to end where we began, all of the responses which the narrators present are fundamentally inner responses which alter nothing in external reality. In the face of the immutability of their mortal condition, the narrators explore through the narrated world possibilities of changing not the facts themselves but one's relationship to them, implementing a process of *amor fati* or 'active passivity' in order at least to establish a semblance of control, self-possession and self-sufficiency in the face of the immutable so as not to be its totally passive, humiliated victims.

In Malraux's *La Condition humaine*, Gisors lucidly comments that, "Il est très rare qu'un homme puisse supporter [...] sa condition d'homme", and that, at the heart of man's attempts to transform his passivity in the face of the immutability of his condition into control, there is what he terms "la volonté de déité: tout homme rêve d'être dieu".[54] But Gisors also recognises that all such responses to the human condition, precisely because it is immutable, are ultimately vain: "On peut tromper la vie longtemps, mais elle finit toujours par faire de nous ce pour quoi nous sommes faits".[55] Indeed, awaiting his execution, Kyo comes to the conclusion, like Tchen, that, "mourir est passivité, mais se tuer est acte",[56] but just as Tchen, as it were, cuts off his nose to spite his face only to find that destiny has the last laugh, so too Kyo's final act of 'heroism' and self-possession in the face of death is thrown into doubt by Tchen's own reflection on the pointlessness of all human affairs: "n'était-ce pas le Destin même, cette force qui les poussait vers [...] les portes mêmes de la mort?".[57]

Thus, the final irony of *amor fati* is that it actually reinforces the very impotence in the face of the immutable which the response was supposed to transform. The narrators in Genet's early works of prose fiction, exploiting their relationship to their narrated world, also play their own "jeu qui consiste à rouler le destin" (PF L'Imaginaire p.54) and yet, in the final analysis, they have changed nothing. But at least the narrators have found a realm in which they are free and everything can be explored and transformed, the realm of the imagination. By withdrawing into their minds, the narrators are able to experience, either through representatives or vicariously, a multitude of possibilities which they would not be able to attain in external reality. They can be active, take control of themselves and their destiny,

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54 Malraux, *La Condition humaine*, p.229.

55 Ibid., p.333.

56 Ibid., p.303.

57 Ibid., p.234.

render themselves self-sufficient, and even set themselves up as gods, and although their 'victories' will eventually be obliterated in their final, passive mortal defeat, at least their narratives and their delegates within them will live on.

CONCLUSION

If a scholar was asked to draw up a list of the greatest philosophical novelists in 1940s France, it is highly unlikely that the name of Jean Genet would figure among them. While the like of Sartre, Malraux and Camus were enjoying success with celebrated *romans à thèse*, Genet was publishing his own prose works in under-the-counter editions to avoid pornography lawsuits. However, while Genet's fiction may not either present or adhere to an explicit, unified philosophical system, from a detailed reading of the texts themselves it is possible to piece together, as this thesis has attempted to do, a highly idiosyncratic and subjective portrait of the human condition and possible responses to it which critics have tended to neglect. If the thematic starting point of this thesis was dissatisfaction with critical treatment of some of the more speculative themes which are explored in Genet's prose texts, the methodological starting point was frustration with the tendency of critics even today to read Genet's fiction through his life rather than separating the narrators in these works from their author. The overall aim of this thesis crystallised into an examination of responses to the human condition in Genet's prose texts as they are presented and explored by the narrators themselves in relation to the narrative form of each text.

The failure of critics to examine the ideas about the human condition which are explored in the prose fiction specifically on their own terms has, then, left a lacuna in criticism of Genet which this thesis set out to begin to fill. Although it does not claim to represent a definitive study of the vision of the human condition which is depicted in Genet's prose fiction, it does draw attention particularly to the all-pervasive sense of what I have termed 'immutability' in the narratives, that is, the sense of fatalism and predestination which lie at the heart of the narrators' perception of their condition. Throughout the narratives, the narrators' most central preoccupation is, as this thesis has demonstrated, precisely with the immutability of the human condition as they see it, with aspects of their experience which they cannot change or over which they are unable to assume control, and yet existing criticism, perhaps in its reluctance to cross swords with Sartre or to take on the sheer density of *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, has largely avoided lengthy consideration of the more 'essentialist' dimension of the speculation undertaken in Genet's prose in favour of semi-existentialist and neo-Sartrean readings. It is the 'overinfluence' of *Saint Genet* on Genet criticism, coupled with the 'underinfluence' of Derrida's *Glas*, which led to a preliminary section of this thesis being devoted to an assessment of the studies which two of the greatest thinkers of this century have devoted to Genet and his works, in order, as it were, to clear the way for a fresh interpretation of the speculative dimension of Genet's prose texts whilst also situating my own research in relation to them.

The main body of this thesis was then devoted first of all to an examination of the main characteristics of the human condition as the narrators present them in the prose fiction, and then to the range of possible responses to the immutable aspects of this condition which the narrators explore in and through their narratives. But before the textual analysis could begin, it was necessary to establish the precise nature of the narrative form within which and through which the narrators' speculation is expressed. This analysis revealed not only the narrators' varying formal relationship to the narratives they are constructing but also the nature of the link between the narrative form of their aesthetic endeavours and the thematic dimension of their narratives. An attempt to establish the connection between theme and narrative form led to one of the most important aspects of this thesis which was the formulation of various models through which the narrators exploit both their formal and thematic relationship to their narratives, and particularly to the imaginary narrated world and the characters within it, in order to present and explore their subjective preoccupations.

Although, in the case of conventional novels, it might be considered problematic to talk of a narrator's motivation for constructing a narrative, or of what he might be hoping to achieve in so doing, it is one of the main contentions of this thesis that, through self-reflexive intervention, the narrators in Genet's prose texts make their relationship to their own narratives quite explicit and even suggest some of their aims and intentions. This finding has allowed me throughout to consider the portrait of the immutability of the human condition and responses to it from the perspective of the narrators' relationship to the ideas and issues they explore. The most interesting element of this relationship is to be found, as this thesis has revealed, where the narrators do not only intervene but actually explicitly nominate fictional representatives and delegates amongst their characters to explore in their place experiences and possibilities which the narrators elect to pursue not in external reality but in the realm of the imagination. The process through which the narrator of *Pompes funèbres* transgresses conventional narratological divisions by actually merging with fictional surrogates in order to share vicariously in specific experiences through them constitutes one of the most original and bizarre techniques in the whole of Genet's prose fiction. Although existing criticism has had little to say about this startling mechanism, this thesis has attempted not only to take full account of the narrator's formal relationship to his characters in these instances but further to assess the thematic implications of his pursuit of this process in *Pompes funèbres* and the way in which it is utilised as a tool to express his speculation.

Emphasis on the narrators' formal relationship to the narrated world has been maintained throughout the analysis of their presentation of the human condition and exploration of responses to it, adding a crucial narratological dimension to the examination of themes which existing criticism tends to lack. Before examining the responses

themselves, an attempt was made to establish the main immutable characteristics of the human condition as the narrators depict them, focusing especially on the aspects of it which render the individual's awareness of his inherent passivity and impotence in the face of his immutable condition particularly acute, such as insurmountable aspects of his given personality, elements of the individual's social circumstances which are perceived to be inalterable, and, the immutable aspect of the human condition which obsesses the narrators most, the inescapability of death and mortality.

Analysis of the responses to the immutability of the human condition which the narrators explore through their narratives began with an attempt to identify an underlying process which characterises the way in which the narrators try to achieve the impossible, experimenting in their narratives with imaginary possibilities of paradoxically changing the inalterable and assuming control of the immutable. The examination of such a process led to one of the most original findings of this thesis, the striking parallel between responses to the human condition which are presented in Genet's prose fiction and Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati*. A full examination of parallels between Genet's prose texts and ideas in the philosophy of Nietzsche has yet to be undertaken, but this thesis has at least suggested one area in which the comparison with Nietzsche is both striking and revealing.

The analysis of the narrators' imaginary exploration of responses is underpinned by the unifying mechanisms of *amor fati* – or willing what *is* to the point of loving it – and of poetic transformation, through which the narrators use their imagination, expressed through an aesthetic medium, in an attempt to surmount their fundamental impotence and passivity in the face of immutability as they see it by experimenting with attempts to change not the inalterable facts themselves but their inner relationship to them, and by assuming control not *over* immutable aspects of their condition but *within* this very immutability. Thus, although it has not been my intention to reduce the speculative dimension of Genet's prose fiction to a single philosophical line or perspective, I have endeavoured nonetheless to suggest a pattern which runs through the narratives while at the same time, during the course of the analysis itself, attempting to keep the energy and vitality which are inherent in the formal and thematic slipperiness of these texts intact.

After examining the way in which the narrators experiment with responses to immutable aspects of the human condition as they are encountered in a social environment, such as abjection, social passivity and social marginalisation, one of the most significant and original contributions this thesis makes to the body of existing Genet criticism is the application of Derrida's ideas in *Glas* regarding the author-text relationship to the way in which the narrators themselves present their own speculation through their relationship to their narratives. Although this thesis does not claim to offer anything like a definitive reading of the prose fiction through *Glas*, it does begin to tease out certain areas in which Derrida's ideas reveal a fascinating alternative perspective on the prose fiction which existing

criticism has not yet fully examined. The relationship between the material in *Glas* and Genet's own texts could in itself provide fruit for a further thesis.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the speculation which is presented in Genet's prose fiction but which critics have tended to neglect is the narrators' exploration through the narrated world of possible responses to the immutability of death and mortality. The lack of critical interest in these themes is probably attributable to the fact that this particular aspect of the speculative dimension of these texts is for the most part expressed through the narrators' aesthetic experimentation with murder. However, if the way in which the narrators choose to pursue this particular area of their speculation precisely through social and moral taboos has been considered by many critics to be obscene, unpalatable or even evil, as this thesis has attempted to show it also constitutes one of the most strikingly original aspects of Genet's writing.

The narrators' exploration of possible ways in which an individual might, through a process of *amor fati* and of poetic transformation, transform his fundamental relationship to the inescapable fact of death from passivity to activity and actually assume some degree of control not only over his own mortality but even over death itself, is expressed by the narrators through imaginary experimentation not only with murder but also with such taboos as cannibalism and necrophilia. It is the contention of this thesis, however, that the nature of the responses to the human condition which the narrators are presenting through these means can only be understood if they are judged, at least in the first instance, by the criteria which the narratives themselves set up and within the narrative form through which they are presented. This is not to suggest that an ethical reading of the prose fiction would be invalid but simply that maximum comprehension of the narrators' preoccupations can only be achieved by attempting to establish what the narrators' speculation means to the narrators themselves and the nature of its status within the patterns and structures, both formal and thematic, which they themselves set up.

Such an approach naturally raises a multitude of ethical problems because it requires the reader and critic of Genet to suspend moral judgement and immerse himself fully in the amoral and, indeed, immoral realm of the narrators' own solipsism as though this aesthetic domain were hermetically sealed. Although this thesis has chosen to separate the imaginary from the real world as utterly as it has attempted to sustain the distinction between fictional narrator and flesh-and-blood author, I am not suggesting that this is the only suitable method with which to engage with texts such as Genet's. Indeed, the challenge of offering a full assessment of the ethics of reading Genet's prose fiction has yet to be taken up. At the same time, I would nonetheless maintain that it is impossible to do justice to the speculative dimension of these texts without taking account as fully as possible of the highly subjective, solipsistic nature of the narrators' enquiry, and the extent to which the subject-matter may

sometimes appear to be unpalatable but is always derealised when it is internalised by the narrator-artist into the inner realm of his imagination.

To return to the starting point of this thesis, although Genet has achieved world renown as an avant-garde dramatist, critical opinion of Genet's prose fiction is almost as ambivalent today as it was in the days of those under-the-counter editions. What some dismiss as pornography, others venerate as poetry, and while some cannot forgive Genet his failure to respect taboos, others cannot help but admire his boldness and innovation. Because Genet's prose texts exploit without mercy or restraint areas of human experience which the majority of readers would probably rather not have thrust upon them, it would be easy to write these texts off as only having minority appeal, but to do so would be to ignore and neglect the fact that, through their transgression of taboos, they actually address fundamental questions relating to human existence. Genet's early works of prose fiction may not be to everyone's taste, but for those who do make the journey through the narrators' solipsistic aesthetic domain, the experience may be shocking and challenging, but it is always exhilarating.

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