

Empathy for the Devil :

The Daimonic in Therapy

A tribute to Jean Genet on the centenary of his birth

Abstract The work of Jean Genet - playwright, novelist, poet, essayist, and tangential existentialist – is as countercultural today as it was when it first appeared. It presents profound and unsettling questions to contemporary culture; it challenges its cherished values – identity, nationality, property, gender, fidelity. It presents a formidable challenge to psychotherapy, a profession presently undecided as to what its function might be, whether providing a sedative which will make people more docile or instead helping human beings to become freer, find meaning in their lives and negotiate their relationship with what Rollo May called “the daimonic”. As charted by Sartre, the life of Jean Genet provides a heart-rending example of how it is possible to realize one’s creative potential to the utmost even when being brought up in the direst circumstances.

Keywords otherness, exile, the wound, solitude, freedom.

Introduction

The weather was fine. The world was disintegrating.

(Jean Genet)

Jean Genet writes from a place of *double exile*: exile from being and exile from having.

In a psychological era weighed down by the dread of non-being and the anxiety of not-having, his work is the expression of our private fears.

In a psychological era that bows to the supremacy of the relationship in therapy and overlooks existential solitude, his work speaks of absolute, irreducible aloneness and of exhilarating freedom.

In an era muddled by our collective *idolatry of being* - whether clad in Judaeo-Christian or Muslim garments, in Buddhist robes of reified emptiness, or in Heidegger's theology of language, Genet speaks from the heady place of *non-Being*. He speaks as if he were *already dead*, looking at life with the ironic look of a ghost or of a wandering ascetic who understands life as mere *anecdote*.

In an era frantic with the *idolatry of having*, spurred on by the theft known as *property*, which begets status which begets respectability which begets a semblance of substance to a self which deep in our heart we fear to be ephemeral, Genet speaks eloquently as pickpocket and burglar, singing the praise of saintliness and thieving, showing sovereign disregard for those delusional bourgeois values which current mainstream psychotherapy endorses or at the very least fails to disparage.

In an era of blurred differentiations and obliging compromises, Genet speaks for paradox, pathos, and the sheer *fever of thought*.

In an era of facile ecumenism, he speaks for absolute otherness and irreducible difference. Genet's work restores the original meaning of absolute as *insoluble*, i.e. irreducible otherness. With Genet the *absolute* ceases to be synonym of system-building; it abandons all customary transcendental getaways as well as cognitive/behavioural (and psychoanalytical) coaxing of humans into docility and mechanical efficiency.

We do not find in Genet the customary delusions of inter-subjective communication, at least not before we have experienced existential aloneness and the inevitable yoke of necessity, what Buber called "the sublime melancholy of our species" (Buber, 1970, p. 68); not before we have

experienced the sheer impossibility of creating a long-lasting bridge between an I and a Thou – which only *chance*, accident, or the rare willingness for me and you to have a taste of our common wound may bring together (Bataille, 1992 p. 19).

Most unacceptable of all to our contemporary culture of manically optimistic self-development is perhaps the fact that we do not find anywhere in Genet the idea of “growth” but instead the *unchangeable* nature of a self that does not and cannot ever “grow” and remains loyal to its preferred modes of perception: sterility, deceit, abjection and, above all, a refusal to perpetuate our overrated species.

Honesty

*Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst,
Yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!*
(Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*)

First among overrated middle-class principles is *honesty*, pride and glory of both secular and religious Protestant ideology, forever thriving on Sisyphean tasks of self-development. Honesty however, as Sartre reminds us in an uncustomary metaphysical leap, “is an eternal essence which is not dimmed by accidental lapse” (Sartre, 1963, p 11). An essence, one might add, which betrays inconsistency when it becomes ornament.

Genet’s work is a slap in the face of entire regiments of improvers and self-improvers, first of all us therapists, last inheritors of a Northern-European, Northern-American ideology of Puritanical descent - all of us counsellors, coaches, psychotherapists, meditation facilitators and psychiatrists whose business is to polish a brick in the hope that it will shine like a mirror.

As a thief, Genet played at possession and toyed with our most cherished values. He stole, so as to convince himself that he possessed – like an actor on a stage, like an actor who has forgotten his lines and quickly devises some on the spot for the applause of an ephemeral audience.

With Genet, death ceases to be the overrated event at the end of this short story we call our individual life. It ceases to be the grandiose being-towards-death and becomes direct experience of death in life: becoming dead already, living a posthumous existence. This means of course being *completely alone*.

What would I do with Jean Genet as a client? What would his presenting issues be? He would start tales of innocence lost and by the end of the session convince me that innocence itself is a construct manufactured by our parents who needed to dream up a paradise lost. He would mess with my mind: an illegitimate child, a fake child singing the praise of prisons and reformatories, lyricizing the forbidden pleasures born in captivity. After he'd gone I'd realize he has nicked my little wooden statue of the Buddha.

He would be unredeemable; being nothing, possessing nothing. He would be holy, untouchable, he would be *homo sacer*, as the convict on death row, or like a man exposed to shame by the invisible tribunal that doles out condemnations on the stage of public repute.

He would be holy, like an asylum seeker who no longer cares for asylum, like an immigrant who doesn't give a damn about the new land, like a homeless who knows the very idea of home is overrated.

Not Waving but Drowning

My own Genet starts with his posthumously published *Un Captif amoureux*, rendered into English as *Prisoner of Love*. Written in his late years, it is a unique book – a mixture of journal writing, poetic prose and sharp political observations, recounting his experiences with both the Palestinians and the Black Panthers, both parties personifying extreme dispossession and suffering as well as an impossible, poignant and heartrending revolt against injustice and oppression.

From *Captif amoureux* I worked my way back to his early, staggeringly lyrical, indefinable works: the poetic novels *Miracle of the Rose* and *Our Lady of the Flowers*, his plays *Querelle*, *The Blacks* and *The Maids*.

Jean Genet was an orphan, a thief, a hoodlum, a homosexual, a spinner of tales, a prostitute, and a self-mythologizing individual who stole from his friends and betrayed them time and time again. He was also a true poet in the classical sense of an individual embodying the rare Orphic gifts of vision, musicality and the wild desire to go up close to the very heart of the world and bravely listen to its jarring racket and its hidden symphony.

Fear of the Other

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
(Robert Johnson)

Rollo May (1969) writes of the *Kuenstler* in the middle ages, a term describing both a craftsman or artist as well as someone with no specific occupation, with a way of life outside the hierarchy of social and economic values, an outsider who would routinely arouse suspicion and be perceived as evil. In his book on the work of influential sociologist Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss (1987) wrote of the inevitable existence within every culture and society, no matter how densely structured, of individuals who are placed outside its system representing forms of compromise unachievable at the collective level.

In Genet we find much that contemporary mainstream psychotherapy chooses to ignore. He writes from the farthest reaches of individual freedom. Mainstream western culture would not hesitate to call such a voice *evil*.

In his seminal work *Love and Will*, Rollo May brings forth the hypothesis of the *daimonic*, defined as “any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person” (May 1969,

p 123). He also describes it, crucially, as an “archetypal function of human experience - an existential reality”.

Being possessed by daimonic energies leads one to psychosis; suppressing them leads one to the anti-daimonic, which is according to Rollo May another work for *apathy* (ibid). Eros, sex, anger, rage, craving for power: the things the daimonic evokes are powerful and unambiguous.

Commitment

Just as every cop is a criminal/ And all the sinners saints

(Jagger & Richards)

Genet speaks from the reverse of *commitment* (to a cause, a group, a nation, a family, a community) and in favour of betrayal. Is commitment an overrated value? Writer and psychotherapist Adam Phillips reminds us of the “interesting double meaning” of the word, both “an order to send someone to prison or to a mental hospital, and an obligation willingly undertaken” (Phillips, 2009). Commitment is a key word in the history of psychiatry, psychotherapy and the penitentiary. We commit an individual to an institution, a jail, a hospital.

Commitment to the values and identity of a nation state is perhaps an overrated virtue. The very notion of nation state is arbitrary, founded on political scheming, financial gain and sentimental tosh. Musil sums this up wonderfully when he writes: “There are so many inexplicable things in life, but one loses sight of them when singing the national anthem.” (Musil, 1978, p. 557).

It is the very creation of a nation state that engenders the proliferation of refugees. Genet’s position on the subject couldn’t be clearer. He told Tahar Ben Jelloun: “As you know, I’m on the side of those who seek to have a territory, although I refuse to have one” (White, 1993, p. 720). After his death in a room of the Jack’s Hotel in Paris on the night of the 14th of April of 1982, Genet’s friends decided to bury him in Morocco, in a cemetery where he used to go and walk in the evenings. The coffin, wrapped in a burlap bag, had a label which read ‘immigrant worker’. An

appropriate statement: Genet had been the constant immigrant, the homeless wanderer with no national identity and no desire for any identity, with one exception: that of being a *poet*.

Commitment to one's society can of course manifest as the genuine, courageous stance Adler called *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* (communal feeling). It may also manifest as blind conformity. The very word *community* has become meaningless, a populist formula decorating the mind-numbing speech of politicians. This type of social commitment is overrated, and Genet would choose rather treachery, betrayal and unfettered individual freedom. His is the freedom of the man of genius who leaves a remarkable contribution to 'community', though not in the way his community expects of him but in a highly original form; a legacy of poetry, aestheticism and politics that takes its inspiration from radical ethics rather than the building of homogeneity and domination.

In a perverse and grotesque twist of perspectives, Genet – a thief, a convict for many years of his life – defiantly tells us of his being committed to prison as bliss, as a confined space of forbidden and abject pleasures as well as a workshop for his poetic prose.

In order to be able to speak for the individual, Genet takes on the voice of evil, of the shadow, of what is bent on destroying logos, the solar rationality of noon, and being itself. In order to do so, Genet becomes a poet – given that poetry and aestheticism are, for Sartre, the best ways to bring about the destruction of Being.

The destruction is set in motion by absorbing the real into the imaginary, by *drowning* the real into the imaginary. I cannot think of a more antithetical stance to the dominant psychological mode of our era, cognitive/behaviourism. Like de Sade before him, Genet gives voice to the extreme possibilities of imagination. Unlike de Sade, whose writings are mind-numbingly boring, he does so through a beautifully baroque prose style that mixes elevated speech and slang to great poetic effect.

Poetry in Genet is not ornamental eulogy of nature's beauty but instead contemplation of the "imposture behind it" (Genet in White, 1993, p 211), as he wrote reminiscing his vagabond days in Andalusia in the 1930s:

I dared not even notice the beauty of this part of the world – unless it were to look for the secret of this beauty, the imposture behind it, of which one will be a victim if he trusts it (ibid)

The Impossibility of Communication

The impossibility of communication expressed by Genet in his novels confirms its crucial role. Sartre saw in *La Nausée* the impossibility of communication and perhaps overlooked – according to Georges Bataille – that when being is revealed to us, it reveals itself as scandal.

Scandal is the same thing as consciousness: a consciousness without scandal is alienated consciousness: a consciousness, experience proves it, of clear and distinct objects, intelligible, or thought to be so. (Bataille, 1985, p. 200)

With the publication in 1952 of *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, Sartre celebrated a living author of forty-two , mixing analysis, philosophical investigation and biography, pointing out that freedom alone can account for a person in his totality, demonstrating that genius is not a gift but the way out one invents or reinvents oneself in desperate situations.

In the book, Sartre traces Genet's three essential steps, or metamorphoses, in Genet's life. In the first he becomes what others accuse him to be: a thief. In Sartre's words: "I decided to be what crime made of me" (in White 434). He becomes Cain, the accursed, the evil person. The person we send to prison, whom we name thief and murderer -even if he happens to be a child of ten- takes on the identity bestowed on him by the mob morality (Blacker, 2010). We insist to know, motivated by prurience and vengefulness the details of his crime. We continue to project our own unfulfilled unexpressed daimonic energies onto him. The second step is from Cain to aesthete and dandy, espousing an inverted vision of beauty as the ugly. The third metamorphosis

is that of becoming a writer, and more precisely a poet, one who works out of inspiration, and in Genet's case, inhabiting an unfeasible realm between lyricism and pornography, the sublime and the unpleasant.

Clandestine in broad daylight, these paradoxes are unclassifiable and it is by virtue of their singularity that they are disturbing (Sartre cited in White 1993, p. 436)

With the Black Panthers and the Palestinians he was the dreamer inside the dream. He loved them because he saw in them the perennial exiles. An enthusiastic supporter of the Black Panthers and of the Palestinians, Genet also made it clear that his patronage would be withdrawn at the time of victory. His support was for the vanquished, the downtrodden, and the defeated: as soon as the Palestinians would win their cause (a mere utopian hypothesis of course), his support would also be withdrawn.

“Temptation to betray – Edmund White comments - arises when people ignore the collective emergency and attend only to private desires”. (White, 1993, p. 719) It is the inalienable response of the individual: Genet wants to honour the collective but remains true “to his equally radical (and politically rooted) need for independence” (White, 1993, p. 720). Loyalty to oneself may mean at times betraying the group; artistic eccentricity must somehow deconstruct the heavy-handedness of political empty rhetoric.

Loyalty to what?

Genet's life and writing contradicts loyalty to the homeland and the arbitrary notion of the nation-state. Home, property, homeland, family: the very stuff of bourgeois identity, of a self-satisfied existence lived within the confines of which mainstream therapy wants to send back the wayward, the incongruous, the depressed, the bereaved, the maladjusted.

Sartre made Genet into a Saint, but Jean Genet stayed well outside the established, canonized version of the existentialist church, whose accepted givens and established tenets rest on the one

hand on a radicalized version of the rationalism of the Enlightenment (i.e. Sartre) and on the other on a theological discourse devoid of God yet equally mystifying (i.e. Heidegger).

Genet tiptoes outside the existentialist church because he is above all an artist. But it is precisely to the artist that we must look if we want to find both liberal values and the necessary element of irony. We wouldn't have needed the lessons of post-modernism if we had learned this basic tenet from our best artists. To accept this would mean to understand therapy as an *art form*. It would mean following Genet in asserting that the wound is to be appreciated and even cultivated as the fertilizer of artistic creation as well as self transformation. It would also mean accepting that the therapeutic endeavour has largely developed within the constraints of Judaeo-Christian values and aspiring to move beyond its stifling influence.

The Elevated Speech of the Dispossessed

What is it that we really want to say? Is the implied, unspoken speech - which psychotherapy might help unravel – punctuated by the rhythm of sex & death? And when all external loci of evaluation are identified and duly discarded, all conditions of worth unpacked and neutralized, what speech, what language do we find? If we follow Genet, we will say that we will find *elevated language*. In his controversial plays *The Blacks* and *The Maids*, the downtrodden and the dispossessed are neither humble, morally redeemed individuals nor funny two-dimensional human beings who speak the broken language of realism. When asked about the seeming incongruity of poor black people speaking such an elevated language, Genet replied:

If people tell me that Blacks don't talk that way, I'll say that if you would put your ear against their heart, you would hear more or less that. You have to be able to listen to what is unformulated (in White, 1993, p 491)

Contemporary mainstream psychotherapy is in many ways a process of indoctrination, or *acculturation* – being reprogrammed in the language and worldview of the seemingly integrated middle-classes.

But it is from the borderline of human experience that we continue to learn about the psyche, as well as to respond to the rhythms and cadences of high art and poetry. In Shakespeare as in Ovid we find, according to Ted Hughes, a keen interest to express what it feels like to be possessed by passions to the point of combustion (Hughes, 1997, ix)

Instead, we condescendingly lower the breadth and level of discourse to the lowest denominator – to cognitive behaviourism, submitting to the dominant belief that what clients want is a quick fix. In re-educating the unwell, we also sanitize the natural menace, revolt and offensiveness that is part of the borderline experience: an operation not all too dissimilar from what Genet, inspired by Frantz Fanon, experienced in the late fifties when he saw black people on Broadway presented in inoffensive postures for the delectation of the audiences.

The inferred speech of the downtrodden, of those who have to go through this valley of tears and experience suffering fully and unreservedly (the privileged and the rich can afford *not* to live) is all but trivial, hum drum and prosaic. The language of suffering is exalted poetry – whether the sufferer succeeds, like Genet, to rise from the ashes, from the poverty and the pain, or whether, like the majority, succumbs to the weight of injustice.

In this perspective, the task of the skilled therapist is to help such language come forth. For Sartre, *saying* - rather than *being said* by others is a crucial step towards freedom, and the same is true for Jean Genet.

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