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Mairéad Hanrahan, *Genet's Genres of Politics*. Oxford: Legenda, 2023. i + 218 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £93.57 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781781887110; £0.00 UK (no cost with Jstor access). (eb). ISBN 9781781884393.

Review by Clare Finburgh Delijani, Goldsmiths, University of London.

It is widely held that Jean Genet's works underwent a course correction at some point during his career, from the realm of introspective fantasy expressed via literature to the arena of international politics, disseminated via journalism.[1] Mairéad Hanrahan's new book posits and indeed comprehensively demonstrates that Genet's profound concern with power, whether in the structure of class, gender, sexuality, or racialization, is evident from his earliest writings. Moreover, as the title of her monograph suggests, his political resistance to hierarchy is embedded deep in his vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, and poetry, in other words in the very genre in which he chose to write. To this end, her own words quite crisply summarize her argument: "*How* Genet is political is as important a question as *what* his politics are" (p. 1). This dynamic between the political and the poetic, neither of which Genet ever subordinates to the other, results in the fact that his writing is "primarily textual," insists Hanrahan, regardless of how overt or oblique its politics might be (p. 8). Genre, poetics, and writing become profoundly political since they contribute crucially to Genet's pervasive, comprehensive destabilization and disorganization of meaning, where he not only challenges the perceived limits of identity and shatters systems of privilege and hierarchy on a textual and fictional level, but also seeks to "affect the very real world in which those constraints materialise" (p. 197). Hanrahan incisively encapsulates the main premise of her study: "for Genet, writing is both irreducibly political and irreducible to politics" (p. 4).

Nearly forty years after Genet's death, scholarship occupies tens of metres of shelf space not just in French libraries but also in the English-speaking world, where he has had an immense and enduring impact on areas ranging from theorizations of gender, sexuality, and racialization, to popular culture.[2] Hanrahan's survey of extant criticism is, incidentally, exhaustive throughout the book. Perhaps thanks to the fact that she excels in the close textual analysis of poetics, rhetoric, and style that constitutes a necessary element in all French literary studies, she is arguably the most feted English-speaking Genetian in France. Not that her meticulous scrutiny of text eclipses critical theory in her examination: with immense efficiency, her introduction synthesizes the ideas of a range of Marxist theorists, including Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, and most notably Jacques Derrida, enabling her to speculate on the capacity of Genet's writing to effect political transformation. The theorist to whom she repeatedly returns throughout the book, though, is Genet himself, whose numerous

interviews, as well as his writings on art, culture, and politics, provide a prism through which to analyse his poetics and politics.

Honoring the title of her book, in each chapter Hanrahan treats a different genre: novels, theatre, journalism and the memoir. Chapter one performs the dual function of examining Genet's novels, and of illustrating how the "pervasive undecidability" of his texts prevents his political standpoints ever from being unequivocal (p. 8). Notably, Hanrahan argues that accusations of antisemitism, based on Genet's apparent sympathy for the Nazis, must be placed under scrutiny, since "his work is fundamentally incompatible with totalitarian thinking" (p. 35). The utmost care and sensitivity with which she treats this white-hot topic renders her arguments sufficiently robust to withstand even the latest, and arguably most acute escalation in tensions, between Israel and Palestine and the knock-on ramping-up of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racism. Hanrahan is absolutely clear: "all allegations of antisemitism need to be taken very seriously; any racism on Genet's part should be recognized as such and vigorously challenged" (p. 150). Given the exemplary meticulousness of her research, we can take her at her word when she states that there is no mention anywhere of Genet denying the Holocaust or voicing satisfaction at its having taken place. And while consistently condemning Israel's use of crushing military might and displacement and persecution of Palestinians, Genet never once contests Israel's right to exist as a homeland for Jewish people. With close reference to the main accusations that Genet was antisemitic, by Éric Marty and Ivan Jablonka, Hanrahan argues that since Genet never stratifies the world into a rigid hierarchy, claims that he was a Nazi sympathizer and championed the persecution of Jewish people, are inevitably tenuous.[3] *Pompes funèbres* is, first and foremost, a fictional account and not a transparent expression of Genet's views, insists Hanrahan. Moreover, given that it was written after the end of the Second World War, "[i]t's about Genet's hatred for the victors, for France, not his hatred of Jews or love of Hitler and the Nazis" (p. 193). Consistent with the ethos that governed his life and works, Genet sides with the losers.

Chapter two turns from novels to theatre, maintaining the argument that Genet's politics are contained as much within the genre of his writing as in its themes. Rather than treating his more overtly political plays--*Les Nègres* (1959), produced during the US Civil Rights Movement, condemned the racist European construction of Blackness; and *Les Paravents* (1962), written during the Algerian War of Independence, staged a condemnation of colonialism and an exposition of anticolonial emancipation--Hanrahan selects *Les Bonnes* (1947) and *Le Balcon* (1956). Her delicate comparison of successive drafts and editions of the plays reveals how Genet increasingly favoured poetic opacity over the clarity of a political message. His theatre is at its most political when least realist, suggests Hanrahan, since the on-stage ceremony maintains a distance from the profanity and absence of ritual, which, for Genet, forms the basis for the utilitarian, instrumental, rational West.

Summarizing some of the main approaches to Genet's literary oeuvre, notably the author's refusal to indulge readers or audience members with stable, definitive, or conclusive meaning, chapters one and two are of special use to newcomers. Moreover, quotations, which are legion, are included in both French and English translations. Chapters three and four, frequently founded on unpublished archival documents from the Institut Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporaine, including letters, speeches, and notes in various stages of completion ranging from comments scribbled in an immediate reaction to something, to substantial texts clearly written with a view to publication, are most revelatory. While chapter three focuses on these

largely journalistic writings, Hanrahan maintains her premise that Genet's change in genre does not represent a turning point, since language by no means becomes instrumentalized into a mere tool for political communication. The chapter draws heavily on material written on the Black Panther Party, much of which comes to light here for the first time. Decades before the notion of intersectionality became common currency, Genet was acutely aware of the overlapping forms of domination and compound oppressions that subordinate minoritized individuals and groups. Criticizing the Marxist term Lumpenproletariat of *lump*ing marginalized and criminalized people into one homogenous block, Genet entreats societies to consider the multiple ways in which it excludes its members. Allegedly destined for a book on the Black Panthers promised to their Chief of Staff David Hilliard, these texts could almost be imagined as Volume 2 of Genet's collected writings, *L'Ennemi déclaré. Textes et entretiens* (1991), were it not for the fact that the author requested that they remain unpublished, no doubt, speculates Hanrahan, because he considered their poetic density and luminosity to be insufficient.

Finally, chapter four treats the memoir, although Hanrahan repeats her warning that Genet's approach to text is idiosyncratic and hybrid, never leaving genres intact, constantly troubling each one, rendering it "at odds with itself" (p. 10). The destabilization of meaning, identity, and category begins at the "most minute, microtextual level," she writes (p. 197). With a surgeon's scalpel and an entomologist's eye, she meticulously, painstakingly identifies, for instance, that Genet's first novel, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1943), contains thirty-seven instances of the word *poétique* and related terms such as *poésie*, highlighting the fact that lyricism is as central to his novels and other writings as to his early poetry. Other poetic figures identified by Hanrahan, such as the paronyms "solitaire" and "solidaire," or the paronomastic shift between "neuve," "naïve," and "vive," illustrate the ludic expression, textual intensity, and semantic slipperiness that characterize all Genet's writing, regardless of its genre. Once again, in this chapter, Hanrahan returns to antisemitism, arguing that, far from singling out Jews for discrimination, Genet condemns as authoritarian Judaic values, which were also inherited by Catholicism, since they enforce obedience to an oppressive Law. For Genet, this intrinsic notion of hierarchy is inseparable from Europe's consolidation of colonial empires across the globe.

Over the course of compiling this review, I went to synagogue. Not having been since the death of the last family member a decade ago, rather than being lulled by the cadences of the ancient Aramaic, I came to the prayers with renewed curiosity and, having just finished *Genet's Genres of Politics*, with the eyes of a Genetian critic. Feeling acute discomfort at precisely the submission that Genet located as the foundation of Judeo-Christian European culture, and that he spent a lifetime seeking to overthrow, I balked at uttering the holiest words of Judaism: "May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which he has created according to his will."[4] In one of the many precious archival documents cited by Hanrahan, Genet writes: 'Il faudra que tombent beaucoup de masques et que [s]'élabore une politesse--jamais codifiée, toujours inventée--qui…nous mette si à l'aise qu'elle nous enveloppera d'un sourire.' (document GNT 6.20, cited 118). The fact that the rabbi had married his husband in that same synagogue, and in his sermon invited the congregation to pray both for the Israeli hostages held by Hamas during the current hostilities between Israel and Gaza, and for the millions of Palestinians suffering intolerably from indiscriminate bombing, from starvation and disease, seemed to go some way towards inventing the politeness, the irreducible respect for others, central to Genet's ethics. While questioning periodization into the pre-political and the political, Hanrahan does identify an evolution in Genet's late works, where

"the tiniest, most elementary sign of life is enough to undermine the most powerful edifice" (p. 191). Artistic revolution does, according to Genet, have the potential to transform the world. If Genet could witness the gender, ethnic, religious, and national fluidities permeating some spaces today, an affirmatory indeterminacy to which he dedicated his every word and towards which his contribution has surely been essential, perhaps he would be enveloped with a smile.

NOTES

[1] For Hadrien Laroche, this watershed took place around 1968, when the student protests in Paris sensitized Genet to the Palestinian liberation movement. Hadrien Laroche, *Le Dernier Genet. Histoire des hommes infâmes* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010). Carl Lavery, on the other hand, pinpoints the transition from the personal to the political as the train journey that Genet describes in his essay *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti* (1957), where he came to the realization that he was worth no more than the decrepit old man sat opposite him. Carl Lavery, *The Politics of Jean Genet's Late Theatre: Spaces of Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[2] Studies of gender influenced by Genet include Toril Moi, *Sexual-Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977). Genet's impact on anti-racist writing can be seen in Frieda Ekotto, *Race and Sex Across the French Atlantic: The Color of Black in Literary, Philosophical, and Theater Discourse* (New York: Lexington Press, 2011); and Houria Bouteldja, *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2016). The best-known instances of Genet's presence in popular culture are David Bowie's song "The Jean Genie" (1972) and Patti Smith's songs and poetry, as she states in her memoir *M Train* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2016).

[3] Éric Marty, *Bref séjour à Jérusalem* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); *Jean Genet, post-scriptum* (Paris: Verdier, 2006); Ivan Jablonka, *Les Véritiés inavouables de Jean Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

[4] "The Mourner's Kaddish."

Clare Finburgh Delijani
University of London
C.Finburgh-Delijani@gold.ac.uk