

Action for Art's Sake: Rethinking Jean Genet's Political Turn

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Abstract. When recapitulating the career of the French writer Jean Genet, critics and biographers have gathered around the idea of a pivotal moment in the 1960s when Genet abandoned literature and turned to political activism. However, Genet continued to write and publish texts, many of which appear to be literary, up to his death in 1986. In this article, Genet's late works are reviewed and the notion of the turn is questioned. It is argued that the construction of a political turn in Genet's career unjustifiably reduced the weight of his late works and neglected their pioneering hybridity. Rather than abandoning literature, the late Genet enhanced his aesthetics of subversion by developing a more referential style.

Keywords: aesthetical norms; canon; literariness; political literature; activism

When summarizing the French writer Jean Genet's life and works, critics and biographers have assembled around the idea of a political turn in Genet's career, a pivotal moment when Genet stopped writing (Stella 1993: 26), underwent a metamorphosis (Plunka 1992: 267), or abandoned literature (Davis 1987: 16). This turn is commonly said to have occurred in the 1960s, a decade during which Genet became increasingly engaged in the Afro-American civil rights movement, i.e. the Black Panthers, before starting to speak and write in favor of the Red Army Fraction and the Palestinians during the 1970s. Edward J. Hughes, like most critics and biographers, considers the 1961 play *Les paravents* (*The Screens*) as marking the end of Genet's literary phase. According to Hughes, *Les paravents* was Genet's penultimate literary work and the time span of 1968–1986 encompasses "Genet's overtly political phase" (Hughes 2001: 135–136). Hadrien Laroche upholds this chronology, considering 1968 the starting year of Genet's political phase, metamorphosis, or *sortie* (Laroche 1997: 7–10). As for Jérôme Neutres, he claims that the texts that Genet wrote during his activist period do not present themselves as literature (Neutres 2002: 245), and Marie-Claude Hubert, to cite one last example, believes that Genet stopped writing after *Les paravents*, when art lost its *raison d'être* in his mind (Hubert 1996: 7).

Some critics, however, express themselves less definitively. Clare Finburgh, for instance, although locating a “turning point in the 1950s” and marking the play *Les nègres: Clownerie* (*The Blacks: a Clown Show*; Genet 1958) as a “pivotal text”, refrains from using words like abandonment or metamorphosis. Instead, Finburgh claims that Genet’s “private revolt of individualistic characters [...] evolves into a social and political ethics of collective revolt”. She emphasizes that “the commitment to singularity, solitude and individuality in Genet’s early works is held in tension with, and not subsumed by, his later *engagement* with commonly shared causes” (Finburgh 2006: 79). According to Finburgh, then, Genet’s focus shifts from individual to group-oriented situations, in this sense making a political turn while not necessarily abandoning literature. Albert Dichy, in the anthology *Flowers and Revolution* (Read & Birchall 1997), sees Genet’s career as “one long declaration of war” to be divided into three – not two – phases: the period of the novels, ending around 1949, the period of the theatre, ending with *Les paravents*, and finally the phase of political fiction during which the “poet of the most confined space in the world (the prison cell) became the chronicler of planetary wars” (Dichy 1997: 21–23).¹ A few critics speak against the idea of the turn, arguing that the opposition of politics and poetics is not relevant for Genet. Jacques Derrida, for instance, pertinently remarks that Genet’s “engagement was always that of a writer and a poet who acted only at the margin, by speaking and writing, and who never separated the idea of revolution from that of the poetic event, whether for May 68, the Black Panthers, or the Palestinians” (Derrida 2004: 23). All the same, the notion of Genet turning away from literature in the 1960s is a remarkably common one among his critics and biographers, despite the fact that Genet continued to write and publish texts until his death in 1986. In this article, I will return to some of the texts Genet wrote in the 1970s and 1980s and review the notion of the turn in light of these texts. Is it fair to say that Genet positions himself outside of literature from the late 1960s up to his death in 1986? If not, how did the notion of the turn become so widespread? Lastly, what are the identified and anticipated consequences of this line of criticism?

¹ It should be noted that the term “political fiction” is used in the subtitle only and not in the body text, so it is unclear whether it was chosen by Dichy or by the editors of *Flowers and Revolution*. Dichy using this word would suggest that he views Genet’s late works as literary, but since in the body text he only uses the terms “chronicler”, “work”, and “book” (Dichy 1997: 23), and since in other texts he generally refrains from labeling Genet’s late works as literature (Dichy 1993: 16–24; 2010: 9–13), the heading may well have been formulated by the editors.

Before engaging a discussion on the alleged political turn of Genet, it appears necessary to account for my use of the concepts of literariness and politicity, two terms that have been profoundly discussed and debated throughout the history of criticism. Since my study concerns Genet's works from the 1970s and 1980s, and since it is also grounded in various statements from the period of 1987–2006 regarding Genet's abandoning literature, i.e. ceasing to produce or perform literariness, I will use views on literariness which appear to have been particularly widespread during this period of time. Firstly, I would like to quote Roland Barthes, who in *Le plaisir du texte* (*The Pleasure of the Text*; Barthes 1973) points to the literary text's tendency to challenge its own premises. Literature, as defined by Barthes, stands out as the kind of language that reflects on itself and even undermines itself in order to confront the reader's preconceptions. Like a comedian who refuses to be funny, the literary text annihilates its own genre. Moreover, Barthes underlines that literature breaks lexical and grammatical structures, and uses irony to destabilize itself rather than to mock others (Barthes 1973: 51). While the political text is designed to make the reader adhere to a certain view on how society's resources should be distributed in the real world (Gerstlé 2004: 79), literature in its purest form does not make stable and unequivocal announcements. An articulated ideological position in literary discourse can at any time be abandoned, for instance by means of the self-reflective and genre-destructive irony Barthes is talking about. If in a political text irony is generally used to thwart the opponent's position, in literary discourse irony does not subjugate the other, but rather serves to destabilize the narrative itself, thereby opening up for new interpretations, new positions, and new lines of thought. Barthes' view on irony echoes the late 18th century poet and critic Friedrich Schlegel, who in his famous fragments pointed out that literary irony differs from rhetorical irony in that it can alter the interpretation of the text altogether (Schlegel 1991: 5–6). Let me reiterate that, after Barthes, influential theorists have moved in the direction of undoing the opposition between the literary and the political, thus presenting models of literariness that incorporate political traits and functions. In *Le partage du sensible*, for instance, Jacques Rancière questioned the conception of a distinct limit between political and literary texts, emphasizing the politics of literature and the poetics of politics. Both politics and art, declared Rancière, perform fictionality in that they concretely re-arrange signs, images, and relationships between what we see and what we say (Rancière 2000: 62). In *Politique de la littérature* Rancière argued that the communicative (i.e. political) function and the poetic function of language are entangled, both in the realm of social discourse and in poetry (Rancière 2007: 14). It is necessary to bear in mind that the effects of any discourse –

not just literary discourse – are finalized by receivers who are in principle free to refuse, accept, or modify the reading contract initially proposed by the speaker. The speaker, or writer, is in turn influenced, as Hans Robert Jauss pointed out in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, by the aesthetic, political, and cultural trends of his or her own era, as well as by the literary and historical canon that is actualized by the work in question. The succession of texts throughout history thus influences conceptions of literary and non-literary genres: reading modes are partly determined by the readers' horizon of expectation (Jauss 1982: 23). In other words, when a text deviates from literary conventions and personal expectations, the reader is led to modify previous reading modes and reconfigure existing genre hierarchies: what appears to be “literary” or “political” is subject to contention. To add one last thought in this interdiscursive line of criticism, Frederic Jameson demonstrated in *The Political Unconscious* that literature, even modernist literature that poses as apolitical, is charged with ideology and has political potential. Jameson went on to say that literature also produces ideology and challenges reigning traditions. Note that ideology, in this line of argument, is not only expressed by content but also by form, mode and genre. For example, the form of a poem conveys other values than that of a detective novel, and moreover it seeks a different readership. In conclusion, literary and political traits and functions can be understood to merge in many texts, producing an aesthetic of urgency and social relevance. Literary discourse nevertheless distinguishes itself by setting up unstable structures and by undermining its own genre and reading mode, a quality that encourages reader engagement.

Genet (1910–1986) is best known for the novels and plays of his early career. He was an orphan who spent many years in reform schools and prisons before being pardoned by the French president in 1949. During and shortly after his prison years, Genet wrote five novels, three plays, and one collection of poems. After his release and pardon, Genet was quiet for a few years, before writing and publishing three more plays between 1955 and 1961. Following another silent period, Genet started writing again after his 1968 declaration of support for the African-American civil rights movement, the Black Panther Party. The fact that he had two long periods without publications *before* 1968 makes the idea of his stopping to write after this year even more challenging. During the last two decades of his life, Genet published about 30 essays and one book of memoirs (Genet 1986; 1991e). In these later texts, Genet commented on contemporary politics, using a personal and often poetic language, sometimes incorporating characters and scenes, actions and descriptions, irony and subtle allusions, much as in his earlier overtly “literary” writing.

For example, there is his report entitled “Quatre heures à Chatila” (“Four hours in Shatila”; Genet 2010; first published in *Revue d'études palestiniennes* in early 1983) on the massacre at Shatila, Lebanon, a Palestinian refugee camp that Genet was one of the first non-Lebanese people to enter. Instead of just giving a personal account of what he observed in this camp, Genet elaborated on the intrinsically poetic features of the setting, for example, viewing piles of dead bodies as form, as art. Genet's main biographer Edmund White saw “Quatre heures à Chatila” as “a poetic evocation of an intolerable event” and editor Paule Thévenin observed “an excitement in the writing itself that contradicts the tragedy being depicted” (White 1993: 706–707). While a traditional reporter would perhaps have mentioned the large number of flies to emphasize the presence of rotting bodies and death, Genet adopted the perspective of the insects and wrote that *they* were getting used to *his* smell (Genet 2010: 184). Narratologically, Genet had surpassed both the traditionally journalistic zero focalization known as “the fly on the wall” method as well as the more subjective *new journalism* incorporating the reporter's feelings in a first-person narrative. Instead, he developed the avant-gardist perspective of the insect present at the scene.

As for his observations of the dead bodies, he did not stop at describing them but went on to reflect on the process of perception as if to show that a writer can come closer to the object than can a photographer or traditional reporter. His method involved transgressing stylistic and moral boundaries in a poetic way. See, for example, how he introduced the concept of love when discussing dead bodies:

Si l'on regarde attentivement un mort, il se passe un phénomène curieux : l'absence de vie dans ce corps équivaut à une absence totale du corps ou plutôt à son recul ininterrompu. Même si on s'en approche, croit-on, on ne le touchera jamais. Cela si on le contemple. Mais un geste fait en sa direction, qu'on se baisse près de lui, qu'on déplace un bras, un doigt, il est soudain très présent et presque amical.

L'amour et la mort. Ces deux termes s'associent très vite quand l'un est écrit. Il m'a fallu aller à Chatila pour percevoir l'obscénité de l'amour et l'obscénité de la mort. Les corps, dans les deux cas, n'ont plus rien à cacher : postures, contorsions, gestes, signes, silences mêmes appartiennent à un monde et à l'autre. Le corps d'un homme de trente à trente-cinq ans était couché sur le ventre. Comme si tout le corps n'était qu'une vessie en forme d'homme, il avait gonflé sous le soleil et par la chimie de décomposition jusqu'à tendre le pantalon qui risquait d'éclater aux fesses et aux cuisses. (Genet 2010: 178)²

² If one looks attentively at a dead person, a curious phenomenon occurs: the absence of life in that body is equivalent to the complete absence of the body as such or rather to its

In this passage, Genet alludes to friendship and love while stepping over piles of dead bodies. Later in the text, the sexual allusions are more explicit. He sees four male corpses in a bed, each covering the next one's back, "as if they had been caught up by an erotic rut while they were decomposing" (Genet 2010: 184). Genet's unconventional style can be seen as an attempt to pull the reader closer to the human and living aspects of the dead. By introducing love, friendship, and sex into the narrative, Genet creates an implicit analepsis that actualizes the fact that all of these bodies used to be living and loving beings capable of connecting with other humans, including the reader. At the same time, he brings to mind what occurred between life and death: the camp was invaded; the people were tortured and killed. While the average photographer or reporter settles for portraying death as a *fait accompli*, Genet reassembles past and present into a sort of still life. His description of the massacre dissolves the opposition between dead and alive, illustrating the French translation of still life as *nature morte* (dead nature). When Genet lets the short and simple phrase "Love and death" start a new paragraph, he further emphasizes the non-contrasting relation between the two concepts, an idea that is then repeated by more coordinators: "the obscenity of love *and* the obscenity of death," "to one world *and* to the other" (my emphasis). In French, the similitude is even more obvious since the words *l'amour* and *la mort* sound nearly the same, the only opposition being a single vowel, [u – ɔ].

Genet further emphasized this similarity in a televised interview for the BBC only two and a half years after he wrote "Quatre heures à Chatila." In this interview, Genet mixes up the words love (*l'amour*) and death (*la mort*): "Did you say 'love'? I thought you said 'death'" ("Vous avez dit 'l'amour'? J'ai entendu

uninterrupted recoil. Even if we approach it, it seems impossible to touch. That is if we look at it. But if we make a gesture in its direction, if we fall down near it, if we move an arm or a finger, the body is suddenly very present and almost friendly.

Love and death. When one of these words is written, the other comes instantly to mind. I had to go to Shatila to perceive the obscenity of love and the obscenity of death. The bodies, in both cases, have nothing to hide: postures, contortions, gestures, signs, even silences belong to one world and to the other. The body of a man from thirty to thirty-five was lying face down. As if the whole body was only a bladder in the shape of a man, it had swollen in the sun and by the chemistry of decomposition until the pants were stretched to bursting point at the buttocks and thighs.

(All translations into English are mine unless stated otherwise. Since relevant grammatical details are lost in translation, my analysis is based on Genet's original texts in French even when English translations are available. The English translations, then, are only intended to help non-francophone readers follow my reasoning and do not constitute objects of study.)

'la mort'") (Genet 1991f: 299 [French transcript]; Williams 1993: 54 [English transcript]; Ali 2015: 00:01:47–00:02:15 [video]). Artist Joe Banks later made a video installation based on Genet's mishearing for the Freud Museum in London. Banks declares that Genet's comment revealed unconscious predispositions in a way that resembles a Freudian slip (Ali 2015: 00:02:30–00:02:58). Judging from Genet's teasing face when he made the comment, it seems equally reasonable to assume that Genet was only pretending to mishear. It is worth noting that Genet had problematized the love–death opposition in earlier works, such as the novel *Pompes funèbres* (*Funeral Rites*; Genet 1953), in which making love to the executioner becomes part of the mourning process. So rather than just revealing unconscious predispositions, the comment appears to be a conscious performance by Genet. Banks is open to this possibility, although his primary interpretation is Freudian: "Possibly, the *l'amour–la mort* mishearing was something that he used as one of his conversational ploys in situations like this. But undoubtedly it did have a really profound resonance with a lot of the imagery in his work and also with his own life experiences" (Ali 2015: 00:05:03–00:04:19).

Thus "Quatre heures à Chatila" is neither political plea nor journalistic report. It opposes the conditions set up by the news-oriented scene, i.e. the massacre of civilians in an area burdened by political instability. It expresses literariness according to Barthes's definition in that it disrupts the anticipated narrative line. Positioning itself between reportage and short story, it annihilates its own genre in order to produce something unexpected, uncanny, and artistic: a testimony by a human who identifies himself with a fly rather than a reporter.

When Genet's narrative becomes more analytical, for instance in developing the idea that Israeli military facilitated the massacre, he alters this mode too by stating that he hates Israel and loves the Palestinians (Genet 2010: 186–190). Interestingly, he adds that he believes the Palestinians are in the right because *he* loves *them* – not the other way around. While in most political argumentation the leaning of the speaker is carefully grounded in theory and facts, Genet openly speaks for the primacy of emotion and attraction. This will come as less of a surprise to a reader who knows Genet as a writer of highly personal novels and plays often centered around physical attraction, gratuitous violence, and petty crime. Genet – young or old – was not interested in numbers or labels; his focus was on the sensual side of human rebellion. "Quatre heures à Chatila", then, is to a large extent a logical continuation of Genet's oeuvre: its close-up perspective on human bodies and its willingly narrow-minded analysis clearly resemble earlier works like *Journal du voleur* (*The Thief's Journal*; Genet 1949) and *Pompes funèbres* (Genet 1953).

In addition to “Quatre heures à Chatila”, I would like to mention Genet’s unconventional memoir *Un captif amoureux* (*Prisoner of Love*; Genet 1986), which mainly deals with the writer’s memories and thoughts on the Palestinian revolution. Edmund White has pertinently remarked that “for a book about one of the most ideologically heated conflicts of modern times, *Prisoner of Love* is curiously cool and unpolemical” (White 1993: 719). This 600-page book starts off with a reflection on language, writing, and reality. In the French original, Genet mixes the literary *passé simple* and the present tense, rather than employing the non-literary *passé composé*. Also, his reflection on the act of writing brings literary discourse’s self-reflexivity to mind: “The page that was blank at first is now full of small black characters, letters, words, commas, exclamation marks, and thanks to them the page is said to be readable” (“La page qui fut d’abord blanche, est maintenant parcourue du haut en bas de minuscules signes noirs, les lettres, les mots, les virgules, les points d’exclamation, et c’est grâce à eux qu’on dit que cette page est lisible”; Genet 1986: 11).

Like “Quatre heures à Chatila”, *Un captif amoureux*, although dealing with real-world revolutions, slides away from conventional political readings as it focuses on emotion and desire in a limited interpersonal setting. When evoking the killing of three members of the Palestinian Fatah party, for instance, Genet refrains from situating these men in a political hierarchy, instead ranking them in order of sympathy: “Kamal Nasser, whom I knew, was the most sympathetic, Kamal Adnouan the least [...]” (“Kamal Nasser, que je connus, m’était le plus sympathique, Kamal Adnouan le moins [...]” Genet 1986: 262). As for the death of these men, what interests Genet is not the political or legal human rights context but rather the method by which they were trapped. Genet, in this section, devotes a whole page to describing the hippie-styled haircuts of the era before stating that the assassins disguised themselves as hippies to get close to the targeted Fatah-members. Genet’s world is a world of bodies, weapons, haircuts, disguises, and ruses, all of which exist in their own right, that is, not because they confess to a particular ideology or play a certain role in history, but because of their physical properties and the effects they have on the writer’s sexuality and aesthetic sense. Sometimes Genet explicitly emphasizes the connection between the political and sexual, as if to say that this hidden logic needs to be exposed. Thus, Genet famously revealed in an interview that his commitment to the Arabs and Afro-Americans is in part driven by sexual desire (Genet 1991a: 156). In *Un captif amoureux*, Genet analyzes the drive behind the adolescents of the Black Panthers, claiming that they are governed by sexuality rather than by ideology (Genet 1986: 424). The Black Panthers Party, according to Genet, was a phallic movement that “preferred erection to election” and strived to “rape” Victorian traditions:

Encore au début de 70, le Parti avait souplesse et raideur qui évoquaient un sexe mâle – aux élections ils préféraient son érection. Si les images sexuelles revinrent, c'est qu'elles s'imposent, et que la signification sexuelle du Parti – érectile – paraît assez évidente. Ce n'est pas qu'il ait été composé d'hommes jeunes, baiseurs qui déchargeaient avec leurs femmes aussi bien le jour que la nuit, c'est plutôt que, même si elles paraissaient sommaires, les idées étaient autant de viols gaillards mettant à mal une très vieille, déteinte, effacée mais tenace morale victorienne[.] (Genet 1986: 425)³

Genet displays the sexual side of political action both explicitly and implicitly: physical desire is distinctively laid out as a reason for revolutionary struggles and it also saturates the writer's imaginary. Since sex-related explications are rare in political discourse on the American civil rights movement, their occurrence in *Un captif amoureux* challenges the notion of Genet's late works being political rather than literary.

Another detail that supports the idea of Genet's staying within literary discourse after the 1960s, rather than turning away from it, is his use of rhyme and alliteration in "Violence et brutalité": "Le grain de *blé* qui germe et fend la terre *gelée* [...] la coquille de l'*œuf*, la fécondation de la femme, la naissance d'un enfant" (Genet 1977:1, my emphasis). Neither structure nor stylistics, then, satisfactorily explains why so many critics have characterized Genet's late writing as nonliterary. It is worth stressing that these texts are *also* political in a number of ways. Many of Genet's essays express support for the Black Panthers movement and for the Palestinians (Genet 1991e). He continuously develops arguments and ideas that concern the political world. However, this politico-historical framing, rather than reducing the text's literariness, enhances it. Genet's *Esquire* article on the Democratic National Convention of 1968, for instance, sets up a historical frame and names several politicians, before suddenly focusing on the muscular legs and imagined penis of a nearby police officer. Then again – equally suddenly – the narrator turns back to the political context of Afro-American civil rights as he reflects on the policeman's capacity for "neutralizing a Black" (Genet 1991d: 311–312). The postcolonial framing adds signification to Genet's policeman and inversely the political context is illustrated by his physical appearance. As stated above, a returning reader will

³ Even at the beginning of 1970, the Party had the flexibility and stiffness of a penis – they preferred erection to election. If the sexual images return, it is because they impose themselves, and the sexual significance of the party – érectile – seems rather obvious. It is not that it was composed of young men who had sex day and night, it is rather that their ideas, even if they were brief, were more about raping a very old and faded but still tenacious Victorian mentality[.]

not be surprised by sudden shifts between political and sensual observations. In Genet's world, activism and sex are connected. His inserting a curious foreword to the collection of essays and interviews entitled *L'ennemi déclaré* provides another example of conscious blurring of textual genres.

Je cherche un ennemi défaillant, venant à la capitulation. Je lui donnerai tout ce que je pourrai : des claques, des gifles, des coups de pieds, je le ferai mordre par des renards affamés, manger de la nourriture anglaise, assister à la Chambre des Lords, être reçu à Buckingham Palace, baiser le Prince Philip, se faire baiser par lui, vivre un mois à Londres, se vêtir comme moi, dormir à ma place, vivre à ma place : je cherche l'ennemi déclaré. (Genet 1991e: 9)⁴

Albert Dichy, the editor of this collection of essays and interviews – a book that constitutes the sixth and final volume of Genet's collected works – sees Genet's insistence on letting this parodic text introduce his essays as a way of indicating an appropriate reading mode. The foreword, according to Dichy, sets the tone for the collection and supplements it with a secret note (Dichy 1991: 331). However, the notion that Genet wanted his essays to be read more freely or literarily when they reappeared in his collected works does not constitute a valid argument against the turn. On the contrary, Genet's possible resistance to seriously political reading modes at the end of his life suggests that these readings were practiced in reality. Notably, Genet's late works generated several heated ethical-political debates (Ågerup 2017). All the same it is interesting to see that Genet, in the realm of this collected works volume, inaugurates his allegedly political writings with a text on poor food and sex with the prince. I concur with Albert Dichy that this is hardly by accident, and believe that it pertinently illustrates Genet's intention to blur genres that was discussed earlier.

Before concluding it is worth taking a closer look at the most strikingly political texts written by the late Genet. Perhaps there are widely read texts that are political enough to shadow the more hybrid texts quoted above. Let me point, then, to one of the most obviously political texts penned by Genet in this era. Genet's pro-Afro-American manifesto "Pour George Jackson" ("For George Jackson"; Genet 1991c) was originally intended as a speech to

⁴ I am looking for a failing enemy, coming to surrender. I will give him everything I can: smacks, slaps, kicks, I will have him bitten by hungry foxes, serve him English food, make him attend the House of Lords, be received at Buckingham Palace, fuck Prince Philip, be fucked by him, live for a month in London, dress like me, sleep for me, live for me: I seek the declared enemy.

be delivered in London, but instead the text was distributed by mail to some one hundred French intellectuals. The political aim is evident: the text was written in support of the incarcerated Black Panther George Jackson and of Afro-American prisoners in general. To give an example of the style in which Genet wrote the manifesto, let me quote a passage where he threatens the white reader's life:

Nous vous demandons maintenant de manifester pour la libération de Jackson, de Seale, d'Angela Davis, comme vous l'avez fait, avec vos moyens, en faveur des Rosenberg. [...] Les Noirs, tous les Noirs veulent vivre. Comment pensez-vous qu'ils s'y prendront si vous ne corrigez pas votre animalité européenne ? C'est simple, les Noirs vont vous tuer. Ils devront vous tuer si vous commettez l'assassinat de Jackson, de Seale, d'Angela Davis. Ils vont tuer tous les Blancs, sans distinction, qui veulent les tuer sans distinction. Arrivé à cette partie de mon discours, afin de sauver les Noirs, j'appelle au crime, à l'assassinat des Blancs. D'autres réunions comme celle-ci se tiendront pour obtenir de l'argent et des armes pour tuer des Blancs. (Genet 1991c: 86–87)⁵

How should this call to murder be read, if not as Genet's campaigning in favor of George Jackson and the Black Panther's Party? There seems to be little room here for irony; the message is clear and uncompromised. Seen as an isolated text, then, "Pour George Jackson" does not present itself as literature. However, in light of Genet's taste for rebellious violence, the text can be viewed as an imagery of revolt and revenge, a theme he repeatedly developed in his younger years. Dialoguing with German writer Hubert Fichte, Genet revealed that he finds murder – fictive or real – beautiful on condition that it is the accomplishment of a long-lasting revolution. In other words, violence is aesthetic when it appears as transferred accumulated revolutionary energy (Genet 1991a: 159). The power and beauty of the Panthers' rebellion, then, depends on the centuries of slavery and racism that preceded this activism. Thus, "Pour George Jackson" and similar texts from this period, although explicitly political, are consistent with the younger Genet's aesthetical vision

⁵ I am asking you to protest for the liberation of Jackson, Seale, and Angela Davis, like you did before, by your means, in favor of the Rosenbergs. [...] The Blacks, all Blacks, want to live. How do you think they will react if you do not correct your European animality? It's simple: the Blacks will kill you. They should kill you if you assassinate Jackson, Seale, and Angela Davis. They will kill all Whites, without discrimination, all Whites who want to kill them without discrimination. Now, in order to save the Blacks, I call on you to commit a crime, to kill the Whites. Other meetings like this will be held to collect money and arms to kill Whites.

and “frontal attack” on society, as Dichy describes the first phase of Genet’s career (Dichy 1993: 21–22); they do not lend obvious support to the idea of his abandoning literature.

In conclusion, the notion of Genet’s political turn is understandable if one takes into account the political framing of his later texts and his support for the Palestinian and Afro-American revolutions. However, these texts have prominent literary traits, such as poetic meter, irony, self-reflexivity, and interference with genre conventions. Rather than turning away from literature, Genet mixes literary and political traits in order to form and perform a discourse that depends on both characteristics. The idea of the turn nevertheless affects Genet’s reputation and the status of his works. On this topic, I would like to highlight the three-volume encyclopedia *Histoire de la France littéraire* (*The History of Literary France*) that was recently published by the prestigious house *Presses Universitaires de France*. With the exception of *Un captif amoureux*, Genet’s late works are not mentioned in this encyclopedia. What’s more, the encyclopedia refrains from mentioning Genet’s forthcoming commitment to the African-American movement when discussing his anti-racist play *Les nègres: Clownerie* (Genet 1958). As for *Les paravents* (Genet 1961), Genet’s allegory of the Algerian War that caused riots and parliamentary debates in Paris, *Histoire de la France littéraire* reduces this reception to a mere misunderstanding (Ryngaert 2006: 207). By playing down the political dimension of Genet’s work this literary encyclopedia reinforces the separation barrier between his literary and political phases.

I have suggested elsewhere that some of Genet’s critics, applying a dualistic view on literature and politics, may have drawn this demarcation line with the objective of conserving the image of a high-rank literary writer free from ideological contamination (Ågerup 2017: 8–9). However, the voices that expressed the idea of Genet’s turning away from literature were too many and too heterogeneous for this explanation to be valid for the critical trend as a whole: the advocates of the turn came from different critical traditions, wrote in different languages, and were active in different decades. Moreover, it is important to stress that Genet participated in building the turn as he emphasized the importance of his encounter with the Panthers and the Palestinians and their capacity to give his life new meaning. For instance, Genet said in an interview for Austrian radio in 1983 that after leaving prison he was lost and did not find himself until he joined the Panthers and the Palestinians (Genet 1991b: 277). Hadrien Laroche, whose book *Le dernier Genet* (*The Last Genet*; Laroche 1997) deals with Genet’s so-called political phase, uses this interview to support his thesis of a metamorphosis taking place in Genet’s life around the year 1968. As Laroche begins his quote with the sentence “Quand

j'ai terminé l'écriture, j'avais trente-quatre ou trente-cinq ans, mais c'était du rêve" ("When I finished writing I was thirty-four or thirty-five, but it was made out of dream", Laroche 1997: 7), one can easily get the idea that Genet talks about ceasing to write altogether, something that would support the notion of a distinct turn in Genet's career: a "passage from one world to another", a "sortie", or a "metamorphosis" (Laroche 1997: 8–10). However, if one reads a transcript of the whole interview, it looks like Genet refers to the five books he wrote in prison and not to writing in general: "Si vous voulez, j'ai commencé en prison à écrire cinq livres, pas six, mais cinq. [...] Donc, quand j'ai écrit j'avais trente ans, quand j'ai commencé à écrire. Quand j'ai terminé l'écriture, j'avais trente-quatre ou trente-cinq ans... ("I started in prison to write five books, not six, but five. [...] So I was thirty when I wrote, when I started to write. When I finished writing I was thirty-four or thirty-five..."; Genet 1991b: 277). What's more, Genet wrote several plays after leaving prison and before living with the mentioned revolutionary groups. Still, Genet's theater director Roger Blin confirmed the idea of Genet's reawakening as he said to American press that Genet joined the Panthers "to feel alive again" (White 1993: 581). Nevertheless, the alleged rebirth hardly excludes the possibility of producing literature. So why did Hubert, for instance, declare that Genet, in this era, "does not write anymore, except for expressing the political struggle he is engaged in. He has abandoned the slow imaginary reconstruction of himself in favor of intervening in the real world" ("Genet désormais n'écrit plus, sauf pour dire l'action politique dans laquelle il s'est engagé. Il a abandonné la lente reconstruction imaginaire qu'il avait accomplie de lui-même par l'écriture pour intervenir dans le réel"; Hubert 1996: 146)? Hubert, it seems, adheres to the dualistic view of literature according to which one either writes slowly about one's life, i.e. produces literature, or intervenes in reality, i.e. performs activism. Subjected to this binary view, Genet's work loses on both counts: his late texts are reduced to political instruments and by the same token the social relevance of his earlier works is downplayed.

All things considered, the primary texts do not give ample support to the idea of a political turn in Genet's works by the end of the 1960s. To isolate his late works and reduce them to activism is to disregard his lifelong project of challenging conventional thinking and identity building. Rather than just political manifestos, Genet's late production also consists of literary essays that use political contexts to create an aesthetic of historical relevance. The invention and maintenance of the political turn can be understood as a sign of uneasiness in the face of hybrid reading contracts and of historically anchored subversion. Furthermore, the notion of the political turn separates works with different scope and referentiality, and protects different phases in the writer's

career from being associated with each other. As a consequence, binary genre structures are fortified and pioneering forms are kept away from the literary canon – at least for the moment.

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