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Issue Three

Hall of Mirrors: Phallocentrism in the Novels of Jean Genet

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"A male that fucks another male is a double male"
(*Our Lady of the Flowers*, p. 190).

The representation of homosexuality in the novels of Jean Genet has provoked an almost unanimously negative critical response. Contemporary gay writers and critics see Genet as part of a vanished generation, who abjectified their gayness and eroticised their own oppression. Genet's fantasies of swooning before uniformed tyrants, of being raped by Hitler, or, during his coverage of the 1960s student protests, his unstinting praise for the tight trousers of armed policemen, have all been seen to reinforce heterocentric assumptions about the simpering effeminacy of gay men and to naturalise the dominance of macho heterosexuality. In this paper, however, I want to consider the extent to which Genet's representation of masculinity and male bodies, both gay and straight, are informed not by a system of sexual normativity but one of phallocentrism and phallic privilege. Genet's scrutiny of the system of phallocentrism, and the role of the phallus within it, cannot be seen to unquestioningly valorise heterocentric assumptions about binarised sexual categories but rather elucidates the logic underlying these.

In a special issue of *Magazine Littéraire* recently devoted to Genet, Philippe Sollers celebrates Genet's novels as "the most beautiful pages in literature on the male body".^[1] What distinguishes Genet's representation of male bodies, according to Sollers, is the way these illuminate obscurities within masculinity. For Sollers: "Men are, finally, the great unknowns of literature. Their sexuality is rarely portrayed, as though we always already know what it will come back to".^[2] Sollers here emphasises something that has been widely argued in recent studies of the body: while cultural assumptions about corporeality have traditionally been determined by the universalised experiences of white, heterosexual men, the specificity of this corporeality has tended to efface itself from language and literature. That is to say, while bodily norms have been determined and defined by the white heterosexual male body, it is the bodies of women and "others" that have been marked: eroticised, spectacularised, pathologised, criminalised or demonised. Genet's books are written both in and against this history; so that his attempts to unveil and eroticise the naked male body are also inscribed with the difficulties inherent in doing so. At the end of *The Miracle of the Rose*, his account of the culture of prisons and reform school, Genet realises that the strength of this culture derives from the fact it is structured like a sphere whose "centre was everywhere" (p. 159). Curiously, this formulation closely echoes both the definition of the universe given by the Renaissance writer Giordano Bruno - "We can assert with certitude that the universe is all centre, or that the centre of the universe is everywhere and the circumference nowhere" - as well as Pascal's definition of nature - "Nature is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere."^[3] The reason these observations repeat each other so closely, I think, is because they are all about power, whose centre, as Foucault has famously recognised, "is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."^[4] In his introduction to *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures*, Russell Ferguson argues that the centre's power derives, precisely, from the way its ubiquity

effaces its specificity, so that its dominance can be threatened by "the very process of becoming visible."^[5] But because the knowledges and languages used to reveal the centre are in effect a product of that centre, the centre adroitly effaces itself in and through the very processes designed to make it visible. Feminist theorists, for instance, have widely remarked on the act of near wizardry by which the specificity of the male body vanishes behind a cloak of universality: "So long as men claim to say everything and define everything," reflects Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, "how can anyone know what the language of the male sex might be?"^[6] Because Genet's representations of male bodies do attempt to construct a language of the male sex, a number of feminist theorists, such as Elizabeth Grosz and Hélène Cixous, have suggested that Genet's work is sympathetic to feminist critiques of normative languages. Of course there are substantial differences between feminist projects and Genet's novels: most importantly, Genet is not a critic of phallocentrism; on the contrary, he is its intoxicated acolyte: "I remember that live tool to which I would like to raise a temple" he says of Mignon in *Our Lady of the Flowers* (p. 142). And of Gorgui in the same text: "When I see him lying naked, I feel like saying mass on his chest" (p. 71).

It is important to recognise, of course, that despite phallocentrism's endurance as a dominant cultural force, the meaning of phallocentrism, and particularly the phallus by which it is centred, is neither transcultural nor transhistorical. On the contrary, the dominance and invisibility of the phallus derives precisely from the volatility of its signification, its ability to constantly transform itself while maintaining a system of power perceived as stable, unchanging and universal. So while we may define phallocentrism as a system of power derived from the status and privilege accorded the phallus, the phallus itself is a much more problematic and elusive term: the invisible everywhere-centre of masculinity and male corporeality. Within the minutely differentiated definitions of the phallus, we can, however, identify two basic theoretical positions: those who view it as natural, essential, biological; and those who see it as acorporeal, abstract and cultural. These positions may seem opposed, but in fact they are both necessary to and reinforce one another. Lacan's definition of the phallus in 'The Signification of the Phallus' is a case in point, revealing the extent to which Lacan remains tied to corporeal definitions of the phallus even while emphatically repudiating them:

In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a phantasy. ... It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolises. ... For the phallus is a signifier ... intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier.^[7]

Of course, as Freudian doctrine also defines the clitoris as an "atrophied penis," there is never any real question here of the phallus symbolising the female sex. However, what interests me about Lacan's insistence that the phallus is *not* the penis is the deft way this enables him to elevate its cultural position even further, to transform the phallus into a transcendental signifier. Yet Lacan's formulation remains conceptually tied to corporeal definitions of the phallus, as Judith Butler recognises in *Bodies That Matter*: "If the phallus only signifies to the extent that it is not the penis and the penis is qualified as that body part that it must *not be*, then the phallus is fundamentally dependent upon the penis in order to symbolise at all. Indeed, the phallus would be nothing without the penis."^[8] While Butler's concern is to "displace" this relationship in order to open the way for a lesbian phallus, for the most part feminist and gender theory has tended to uncritically reinforce this alignment between the phallus and the male body, in general, and the penis in particular. Many areas of masculinity studies - and I am thinking here particularly of the mythopoetic men's movement inspired by Robert Bly - have conflated concepts of masculinity and the phallus, so that each term is seen as the manifestation of the other. Genet's novels, on the other hand, represent the phallus as irreconcilably dual: while it belongs naturally and unquestioningly to the muscular heterosexual body, at the same time it only ever experienced it as a performative, regulatory force.

When Genet's eponymous narrator in *The Miracle of the Rose* remembers how he protectively transformed himself from a weakling into a tough in order to survive the violence of the Mettray reform school, he emphasises that his success is due in part to

reserves of "natural" virility, but is primarily enabled by his mastery of a conventionally tough manner:

I suddenly realised I had to use [my] agitation, to make it look as if it were due to anger. With a slight shift, the signs of my confusion could all become signs of a splendid anger. ... Before long, I fell into the habit, when stepping back and bending over, of putting my hands on my thighs or bent knees, in the posture of a man about to dash forward, a posture whose virtue I felt as soon as I assumed it. I had the necessary vigour and my face became surly. My posture was no longer due to the jitters but was a tactical manoeuvre. ... All these gestures soon became natural, and it was owing to them that I was peaceably admitted ... to the society of the toughs. I became the centre, the keystone, of a strict family system (pp. 118-19).

While this account of his transition from jittery margins of masculinity to its swaggering centre emphasises that "toughness" is a performance enacted by and through his body, its success is nevertheless determined by Genet's "necessary vigour," whose source we are left to imagine. However, Genet's interest is clearly not in the extent to which the signs of toughness evoke a real or essential toughness but in the signs themselves. For Genet, phallic power is produced by the conventions and stereotypes of masculinity: "I strode jauntily in my strength," he writes, "with a weightiness, a sureness, a forthright look *which are themselves proof of force*" (*The Miracle of the Rose*, p. 25; added emphasis).

Genet's representation of phallocentrism as a system that exists in and through its own enactments both anticipates and is elucidated by Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender, arguing that

[G]ender is not a noun ... but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes. ... [G]ender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence ... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.[9]

Butler's work on gender parallels Genet's to the extent that both see gender as a process rather than a fixed biological identity. And as Butler cautions and Genet makes clear, while men may experience masculinity and virility performatively, involvement in the system of phallocentrism is not voluntary. Genet's adoption of the role of a tough is compelled by his awareness he will be judged by the other boys and that if he cannot pass as a tough, he will be labelled a jerk or fag: "I had a feeling that my [whole] life depended on my attitude at that moment ... for I realised that the children's insight was extraordinarily acute. [According to some] very sure method, they were testing me and, depending on my reaction, I would be classified as a big shot, jerk or fag" (*The Miracle of the Rose*, p. 139). Genet, however, is never entirely certain about this "very sure method" by which he knows himself assessed. The narrative of *The Miracle of the Rose* is, in effect, a meditation on the elaborate and recondite rules of masculinity, an attempt to make sense of its coded gestures and secret languages. When Genet tries to find his way through this labyrinth into the centre of masculinity, to become a "big shot among big shots" (p. 119), he discovers that even the most dominant men also experience their masculinity as a performance, an exaggeration. He wonders whether the prison isn't "a house of illusions" (p. 219). Mettray's society is so unreal, and the distinction between illusion and reality so blurred, that Genet can no longer decide whether each prisoner "is afraid of falling into the depths of the imagination until he himself becomes an imaginary being or whether he fears a collision with the real" (p. 43). For Genet, the system of phallocentrism is like a hall of mirrors - an image that occurs frequently in his work. The hall of mirrors is characterised, of course, by its problematisation of its centre and circumference: they are designed to trap people inside by obscuring their edges and doors, by becoming all centre.

Genet's halls of mirrors are not fairground amusements but dangerous places, within which men are threatened or even menaced by their images. Exemplary of this is the

pivotal scene in *The Thief's Journal* in which Genet sees the muscular Stilitano furiously lost inside a hall of mirrors:

Stilitano, and he alone, was trapped, *visibly* at a loss, in the glass corridors. No one could hear him, but by his gestures and his mouth one could tell he was screaming with anger. He was looking at the crowd in a rage, and they were looking at him and laughing. ... Everyone had found the way out, except him. ... Stilitano, exhausted with yelling and bumping into the plate glass, had resigned himself to being the laughing-stock of the onlookers and simply squatted on the floor, indicating thereby that he refused to go on (*The Thief's Journal*, p. 265; original italics).

What strikes Genet most about Stilitano's distress here is the fact it is public, that it is seen. Stilitano is spectacularised before a jeering, hostile crowd; his confusion, rage and resignation glaringly visible. While this scene doesn't lessen Stilitano's power over Genet, it does reveal to Genet that even "real" men can become lost within the labyrinth of phallogentric convention, bewildered by the images and illusions of masculinity.

Of all Genet's narratives, only the posthumously published *'Adame Miroir*, recently released in France, is set entirely within a hall, or rather palace, of mirrors. A muscular young sailor, the embodiment of the ideal lover Genet tells us, dances before a mirror whose reflection's movements do not follow his own. The reflection springs out of the mirror begins to dance erotically with the sailor before both are pursued by a domino - a figure in a hooded black cape - who, Genet states, does not represent death. The domino, nevertheless, knifes the sailor in the back and drags his body into the wings before returning to capture the reflection. The domino unravels his cape and begins to wrap it about the reflection; under his hood, we see, the domino has become the sailor. Their roles are reversed with the exchange of their costumes: the image, now clothed as the domino, pursues the domino, who is now the sailor. The sailor finally leaps back through the glass, while the domino disappears between the panels of a trick mirror, leaving the stage empty.

This scenario forms a kind of template to one of Genet's best-known plays, *The Balcony*. The setting here is a brothel, also called "a house of illusions," whose clients enact their fantasies before mirrors. Indeed, the women the men hire seem incidental to a pleasure whose real object is the mirror itself. Though her own series of trick mirrors, the brothel's Madame watches the men watching themselves dressing up as a bishop, a judge or a general, and shrewdly notes that what excites her clients is not their conviction these clothes give them "real" power or authority, but rather their awareness it does not, that they are conjuring an illusion. They "want everything to be as true as possible," Madame Irma says. "Minus something indefinable, so that it won't be true" (*The Balcony*, p. 36). The "real" police chief, on the other hand, constantly inquires whether anyone has asked to imitate him yet, as though his authority, too, derives from the circulation of the Police Chief image. Meanwhile, outside the brothel a revolution is steadily approaching. When the revolutionaries succeed in assassinating the queen and her dignitaries, the royalist police chief installs Madame Irma and her costumed brothel clients in their place, restoring order from the brothel which now passes as the palace, and thus temporarily ending the revolution.

What characterises both *'Adame Miroir* and *The Balcony* is the way the "real" consistently fails to maintain its dominance against the increasingly aggressive incursions of images and illusions that refuse to remain behind glass. A useful way to think about this relationship between real and illusion in Genet's work is through Derrida's theory of "dangerous supplementarity." Derrida argues that western thought perceives the world in terms of "binary hierarchies" - sets of oppositions like man/woman, culture/nature, real/imaginary - in which one term dominates the other. However, as Derrida writes, the apparently unassailable privilege of the dominant term is surprisingly precarious, an illusion both produced and undermined by its supplement. For Derrida, the relationship between dominant and supplementary terms points to an impossibility within the system of language: on the one hand, the terms are seen as opposites, hence exterior to each other; but at the same time each term *requires* the

other in order to signify at all. Derrida compares this difficulty within language to that within subjectivity, in which the subject's sense of self is both produced and problematised by his/her mirror image: "The specular dispossession which at the same time institutes and deconstitutes me is also a law of language. It operates as a power of death in the heart of living speech: a power all the more redoubtable because it opens as much as it threatens the possibility of the spoken word."^[10] This "power of death" in Genet's work takes the form of the domino, the revolution, Stilitano's "refusal to go on."

Masculinity and phallogocentrism, too, are both constituted and deconstituted, underpinned and undermined, by the system of binary hierarchies - particularly those of masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, and, most crucially, penis and phallus. We might think of the penis as the dangerous supplement of the phallus, as the term which both enables and destabilises its cultural dominance. As Naomi Schor cogently argues in *Bad Objects*, representations of penis and phallus simultaneously reinforce and undermine one other:

To subject the penis to representation is to strip the phallus of its empowering veil for ... while the phallus can be said to draw its symbolic power from the *visibility of the penis*, phallic power derives precisely from *the phallus's inaccessibility to representation*.^[11]

This complex interplay between visibility and invisibility, between penis and phallus - in which both terms simultaneously expose and obscure each other - points to the impossibility at the centre of phallogocentrism. It may be the visibility and presence of the penis which enables the invisible centrality of the phallus, but the highly regulated and circumscribed nature of representations of the penis itself suggest a certain discomfort about this. When Genet becomes attracted to the heterosexual Armand in *The Thief's Journal*, Armand's penis is the one part of his body that remains inaccessible to Genet, that Armand will not let him see. As a consequence, it becomes ideal, enormous, the phallus (in a description censored from the French editions of this text): "Unable to see it, I invented the biggest and loveliest prick in the world. ... Beneath my fingers, I felt, sculpted in oak, its full veins, its palpitations, its heat, its pinkness, and at times the racing pulsation of the sperm" (p. 43).

The penis is the dangerous supplement of the phallus, not because it can never fulfil the expectations of the phallic ideal - can never be as large, potent, tireless - but because it reveals the extent to which the phallus both depends on and undermines its own binary phallogocentric. In his analysis of Roman concepts of sex and gender in *The Body and Society*, Peter Brown notes that although Roman patriarchs were seen as naturally and self-evidently superior, they were also subjected to an exhaustive range of regulatory and normative practices designed to enforce a rigid self-control: "It was never enough to be male: a man had to strive to remain 'virile'."^[12] Genet, too, says of his characters: "[one might] say that we were Romans" (p. 140), and certainly the culture of Mettray parallels a Roman patriarchy in that both enforce a rigid system of self-control as a supplement to a masculinity which, to use Derrida's phrase, "ought to lack nothing at all in itself."^[13] Yet men's self-control is necessary, because the phallic power and appetite that define dominant masculinity also problematise it. In his *Phallos: Sacred Image of the Masculine*, Eugene Monick identifies one of the key archetypal figures of the phallus as that of Dionysius, who represents a transgressive, ecstatic, hysterical, intoxicated masculinity.^[14] Cultural imaging of the phallus elucidates the danger which is not external to it but rather derives from within it. The penis, too, simultaneously constitutes and deconstitutes the male body, proving and problematising its definitive closure and self-control, threatening the very self-containment it assures. And the more priapic that penis is, the closer it approximates the phallus, the more it exposes the subject to powerful, convulsive appetites: "wild nature will always [make itself visible] through a thousand a one cracks," Genet warns in *The Miracle of the Rose* (p. 121). The penis, and specifically the ejaculating penis, convulses masculinity, confounds not only the limits of the body but the self, which swoons, spasms, loses itself.

When Armand boasts that he can lift a heavy man on the end of his penis he simultaneously glorifies and undermines cultural assumptions about virility (and, as a

measure of the degree of discomfort this idea generates, this scene has been censored from all French editions of *The Thief's Journal*):

"My cock," [Armand] once said, "is worth its weight in gold."

"It's not heavy," said a seaman.

"Heavier than that beer mug you've got in your hand!"

"I doubt it."

"You want to weigh them?"

"OK."

Bets were quickly laid, and Armand, who was already unbuttoned and had a stiff hard-on, put his prick on the seaman's flat palm (*The Thief's Journal*, p. 135).

Given that this is where the scene ends, the point of the passage is clearly not whether Armand's penis is "really" heavier than the sailor's beer mug or how closely it "really" approximates phallic dimensions. Rather, this scene establishes a narrative about virility, a causality between priapism in heterosexual men and homoerotic experimentation.

Of course, it must be remembered that Genet's representations of priapic handlebar-moustached men are the fantasies of a gay man, and so readily fall into a standard conversion plot. Nevertheless, Genet's sense of the phallus as both empowering and endangering men's heterosexual dominance, exacerbating both their virility and a predisposition towards homoeroticism, is a culturally pervasive one. Imaging of the phallus makes explicit this internal split between masculinity and something wilder: the satyr, for instance, is half-man, half-goat, while Priapus has the horns of a bull. It is the phallus that collapses the centre of masculinity into its margins, extinguishing the very categories of heterosexual and homosexual, penis and phallus, body and mind on which the system of phallocentrism depends. The phallus's directives are always double, irreconcilable, requiring men be both virile and rational, sexually rapacious and self-restrained. Genet's representations of the male body play with this satyrism crouched at the centre of phallocentrism like the minotaur in a labyrinth, and it is in this way Genet's representations of the male body are *satirical*, exploiting the possibility for bacchanalian wildness and excess that is always-already within masculinity, revealing, amongst other things, the extent to which phallicism forms a point of continuity between gay and heterosexual men. In this way, characters like Armand, Mignon and Stilitano conform to, but do not confirm, traditional assumptions about masculinity. Instead, they reveal the series of imperceptible shifts by which virility may cross over into hypervirility and dominant masculinity merges with its margins.

Genet's accounts of the nature and function of phallocentrism reveal to him the extent to which all men experience their masculinity as illusory, as something enacted through their bodies, but never fully understood. In his furtive correspondence with the macho Bulkaen in *The Miracle of the Rose*, Bulkaen's pseudonym is "Illegible": "Pierre Bulkaen will remain for me the indecipherable," Genet writes (p. 63). Masculinity itself, for Genet, is fabulous, illusory, indecipherable. But it is his relationship with the resolutely heterosexual Stilitano that most clearly reveals to him that all men have a fundamentally mysterious and confused relationship with the phallus. Although Stilitano has lost his right arm, Genet does not see this as a kind of castration but believes that the strength and potency of his missing limb has been concentrated in his penis, intensifying his phallic power. He fantasises that Stilitano has "a solid member, like a blackjack" (p. 23). Subjecting himself entirely to Stilitano's will, he soon becomes the stronger man's "right arm"; when he is granted the intimate privilege of undressing Stilitano, however, he unbuttons his trousers to find not the steely blackjack he has dreamed of but, perplexingly, a bunch of cellulose grapes. "Whenever some queer at the Criolla, excited by the swelling, put his hand on Stilitano's basket," he muses, "his horrified fingers would encounter this object which he feared might actually be balls" (p. 52). In this moment of discovery, with the bunch of plastic grapes between them, Genet realises that the virile heterosexuality he has assumed to be so natural and unproblematic is artificial, even freakish, and fundamentally dionysian, making men susceptible to an orgiastic fervour which ends by confounding the rigid separation of hetero- and

homosexual men. As a consequence, Stilitano's grapes become a kind of fetish for Genet. When Stilitano leaves them on the mantlepiece, he cups them lovingly in his hand and presses them against his cheek. What excites him, he realises, is the way these reveal to him that the masterful Stilitano might share, after all, his own confused relationship to the system of phallocentrism that regulates his perception and behaviour. "I shall prudently refrain from comment upon this mysterious wearing of the bunch of grapes," Genet reflects, "yet it pleases me to see in Stilitano a queer who hates himself" (p. 55).

Endnotes

- [1] Sollers, Philippe, 'Physique de Genet,' *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 313, Septembre 1993, p. 40. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [2] Sollers, Philippe, 'Physique de Genet,' *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 313, Septembre 1993, p. 40. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [3] quoted in Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Fearful Sphere of Pascal,' Trans. Anthony Kerrigan, in *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 226-27. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [4] Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, Trans. by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 93. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [5] Ferguson, Russell (ed.), *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 10. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [6] Irigaray, Luce, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 128. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [7] Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits: A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 285. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [8] Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 84. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
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- [10] Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 141. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [11] Schor, Naomi, *Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1995), p. 112, original emphasis. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [12] Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 11. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [13] Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 145. [Return to endnote reference.](#)
- [14] Monick, Eugene, *Phallos: Sacred Image of the Masculine* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1987), pp. 86-89. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

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