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# Genet in Displacement

Mairéad Hanrahan

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- 1 Jean Genet was a writer constantly in displacement, both in his life and in his work. A key element of his legend was his preference for living in hotels for most of his adult life, using the Gallimard offices as his personal address for correspondence. This left him free to travel at very short notice, as was most notably the case in 1970 when he responded immediately to requests from the Black Panthers and the Palestinians to lend them his support, intending in the latter case to stay for a week but famously remaining with them for nearly two years. Similarly, his work is endlessly in movement. From the beginning, he roamed restlessly across genres: within a few years of his meteoric explosion onto the Parisian literary scene in the 1940s, he had made a name for himself as the author not only of the prose fictions and plays for which he is still best known today but also of poems and a series of short texts on a wide variety of topics. The ease with which he moved from genre to genre was echoed in the way his works themselves troubled generic boundaries. No genre he practised survived his experimentation intact, from his playing with the boundaries between fiction and autobiography in his first novel, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1943), to the challenge to the conventions of memoir writing posed by his final work, the posthumously published *Un captif amoureux* (1986). Perhaps less well known is that Genet was also drawn to work across different media; in addition to the film (*Un chant d'amour*) he directed, he wrote several screenplays and a ballet staged in 1948 by Roland Petit. Indeed, his trajectory places in question the very notion of what an artistic medium might be; the work he accomplished in training his lover, Abdallah, for his circus performances on the tightrope was arguably a form of artistic creation in another medium, especially given that the text he wrote about him – “Le Funambule” – refers to him as an “artiste” and has a claim in many respects to be considered as Genet’s *ars poetica*. In Genet’s corpus, there is an exceptionally fluid border between the fictions that first made his name and other textual genres, other artistic forms.
- 2 From the outset, then, fiction is in displacement in Genet’s work. But displacement is also a key function of fiction for Genet. His first novel asserts this explicitly; commenting that he finds some consolation in imagining for his characters the “luxe

fou, chaud, doré” that is entirely lacking in his “pauvre vie de prisonnier”, the narrator of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* adds:

Et, s’il m’est refusé, je l’évoque avec une si désespérée ferveur que parfois (plus d’une fois) j’ai bien cru qu’il allait suffire d’un rien – un déplacement léger, imperceptible, du plan sur lequel je vis – pour que ce luxe m’entoure, soit réel, et à moi. Qu’il suffit d’un léger effort de ma pensée pour que je découvre les formules magiques ouvrant les vannes.<sup>1</sup>

- 3 He has the impression that a tiny imaginary displacement may be enough to transform reality dramatically. The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* (1946) is even more categorical that a slight displacement may be more potently effective than a wholesale negation of the familiar:

L’horreur infernale ne réside pas dans un décor d’un fantastique inhabituel, hirsute, inhumain, délibéré. Elle accepte le décor et les manières de la vie quotidienne; seul un détail ou deux les transforme (un objet qui n’est pas à sa place, ou qui est à l’envers, ou qu’on voit du dedans), prend le sens même de cet univers, le symbolise, révélant que ce décor et ces manières relèvent de l’enfer. Ainsi en poésie. (RP 440-441)

- 4 Poetry defamiliarises; it constitutes a process more of displacement than of replacement. Elsewhere, Genet describes theatre in very similar terms:

Toute représentation théâtrale, tout spectacle est une féerie. La féerie dont je parle n’a pas besoin de miroirs, d’étoffes somptueuses, de meubles baroques: elle est dans une voix qui se casse sur un mot – alors qu’elle devrait se casser sur un autre – mais il faut trouver le mot et la voix; elle est (la féerie) dans un geste qui n’est pas à sa place à cet instant [...]

J’aurais voulu que mon texte soit en porte à faux, et qu’une féerie naisse de lui.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that not just fiction but art more broadly derives its impact from its capacity to offer a vision of the world that is partly at odds with a realistic, “everyday” perspective, rather than one that sets itself in outright opposition to it. But if art in general thus offers a displacement of reality, Genet also suggests that that displacement has a specifically fictional dimension. This is most evident in a short essay dealing with painting rather than literature and containing a very concrete image of displacement, whose implications this article will now seek to explore.

- 5 “Ce qui est resté d’un Rembrandt, déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers et foutu aux chiottes”<sup>3</sup>, is often considered to be Genet’s artistic credo. The essay is in two parts which advance simultaneously rather than in succession, in two columns of unequal width and length; this was notably the text that inspired Derrida to give his book on Genet and Hegel, *Glas: que reste-t-il du savoir absolu?*, its unusual columnar structure<sup>4</sup>. In Genet’s left-hand column, the narrator reflects on an incident that had profoundly marked him some time previously, when catching the eye of a fellow traveller in a train gave him a profound shock that jolted him out of himself. He claims that the encounter brought about a shift in perspective involving a reconsideration of his entire value system, insofar as the discovery of a universal “equivalence” between men regardless of their outward appearance undermined any possible hierarchisation: at issue was the revelation that no man is worth more than any other. What is at stake is the realisation not just that all men have the same value but actually are the same: he corrects his original formulation that the encounter confronted him with “une sorte d’identité universelle à tous les hommes” (OC IV 22) to the realisation that “j’étais identique à cet homme” (OC IV 24).

6 This last insight – that a person’s defining specificities are not the manifestation of a distinctive individuality – is also a core preoccupation of the right-hand column, which offers an appreciation of Rembrandt. Genet proposes that the painter’s perspective had similarly undergone a dramatic transformation, following the tragic loss of his wife. While the early Rembrandt “*passé son temps devant la glace. Il s’aime, il se gobe, si jeune et déjà dans la glace! [...] Aucune inquiétude n’est visible dans cette simulée quête de soi*” (OC IV 24), Saskia’s death was to prove a “*baptême du feu*” that would profoundly change his painting. Instead of seeking to beautify its object by designating the distinguishing characteristics that set it apart from others, for Genet the force of Rembrandt’s later work lies in its attention to the matter that constitutes its commonality with others of its kind. It highlights the bodily condition of his characters, making it impossible to ignore that under all the sumptuous clothing “*les corps remplissent bien leurs fonctions: ils digèrent, ils sont chauds, ils sont lourds, ils sentent, ils chient*” (OC IV 22). This recognition of human materiality has broader ontological implications. Rembrandt’s focus on the fact that a person is inescapably a body serves not to emphasise that person’s individuality but rather to trouble the very notion of a distinct identity: “*Plus je les regardais, et moins ces portraits me renvoyaient à quelqu’un. À personne. [...] Aucun détail, aucun trait de physionomie ne renvoie à un trait de caractère, à une psychologie particulière*” (OC IV 26).

7 The displacement in perspective separately explored in each column is in turn extended and amplified by the form of the essay itself; the text’s double structure means that reading it inevitably involves a constant shifting between the two columns, the two accounts of transformation. Moreover, a striking moment in the right-hand column implies that a similar shift in perspective is indispensable in order to view a Rembrandt painting properly:

On n’a pas tellement de recul, dans le musée de Cologne. Il faut se placer en diagonale, dans un angle. C’est de là que je l’ai regardé, mais la tête en bas – la mienne – retournée, si l’on veut. Le sang me venait à la tête, mais que ce visage qui riait était triste! (OC IV 27)

Astonishingly, to look at the painting, he must – “il faut” – not only move to the side, view it from an angle, but actually turn upside down. Artistic truth is accessed via a literal displacement, by shifting one’s own perspective.

8 This thematized shift is reflected at various levels in the very writing of the essay. One of its most singular features is that the narrator constantly corrects and revises himself. In the left-hand column:

je découvris, en l’éprouvant comme un choc, une sorte d’identité universelle à tous les hommes.

Mais non ! Cela ne se passa pas aussi vite, et pas dans cet ordre (OC IV 22)

(J’écrivais d’abord cette phrase mais je la corrigeai par celle-ci, plus exacte et plus désolante: je connaissais que j’étais identique à cet homme.) (OC IV 24)

Comment, je fus incapable de le dire, comment je passai de cette connaissance que tout homme est semblable à tout autre, à cette idée que tout homme est tous les autres hommes ? (OC IV 26)

And in the right-hand column:

Qui est cette Madame Trip ? Ce Monsieur...

Non. Je ne me suis jamais demandé qui étaient ces dames ou ces messieurs. (OC IV 26)

9 Genet’s own writing thus itself repeatedly performs an adjustment in position analogous to the one that he describes diegetically. Furthermore, the foregrounding of

a visual rather than a verbal perspective is of greater significance than merely a function of the importance of Rembrandt at the level of discourse, and can itself be read as a shift in Genet's position. The fundamental dislocation at stake in the left-hand column is inherently a matter of a gaze, a (double) "regard". In one of the essay's most quoted passages, he explicitly presents his previous belief in the idea that a person's appearance was the manifestation of an individual identity, of a difference that distinguished them from others, as an *optical* illusion:

Puisque divers incidents de ma vie m'avaient contraint à la poésie, il faudrait peut-être que le poète utilisât cette découverte nouvelle pour lui. Mais avant tout je devais noter ceci : les seuls moments de ma vie que je pouvais tenir pour vrais, déchirant mon apparence et laissant à découvert... quoi ? *un vide solide* qui ne cessait de me perpétuer ? – je les aurai connus lors de quelques colères vraiment saintes, dans des trouilles également bénies, et dans le rayon – le premier – qui allait de l'œil d'un jeune homme au mien, dans notre regard échangé. Enfin, dans ce regard passant du voyageur, en moi. Le reste, tout le reste, me paraissait l'effet d'une erreur d'optique provoquée par mon apparence elle-même nécessairement truquée.  
(OC IV 29)

Genet casts the difference between truth and falsehood as a difference specifically between one kind of gaze and another, between a gaze that discovers the truth and an optical illusion. Significantly, he does so in a passage that for the first time in the text makes reference to the fact that he is a poet, not a visual artist. Given that the difference between a "true" perspective and a "false" one is patently not exclusive to any one medium, the question arises of what is at stake in Genet's adoption of a visual rather than verbal positioning in the very passage where he draws our attention to the fact that he is a poet.

- 10 Given that Genet's plays are known above all for troubling the opposition between "appearance" and "reality", it is all the more perplexing that the essay as a whole explicitly deploys the language of revelation; there are six separate uses of the word "révélation" and one description of the narrator's "regard" as "atrocement révélateur". The experience in the train is a revelation, the gist of which is furthermore that appearances are illusory. In the last quotation above, he deems the only "true" moments of his life to have been those in which a torn appearance lays something bare, and the optical illusion is the effect of a faked or trick appearance. The distance could scarcely be greater from his emphasis in *Les bonnes* (1947) or *Le balcon* (1956) on the performativity of identity. However, at issue here is not at all the – logocentric – notion of an essential truth deformed or skewed by outward appearances that, for example, Derrida repeatedly deconstructed. What is at stake here is something very different indeed. Firstly, the object of the revelation is invisible: what the torn appearance uncovers is "un vide solide". Far from bringing something into view, the revelation is of something that exceeds any attempt to make it visible. Secondly, and more bewilderingly, the tear that makes the "vide solide" perceptible is not in the appearance of the viewed but of the *viewer*: "déchirant *mon* apparence". Similarly, at the end the optical error is not that "I" am deceived by the appearance of the outside world that I mistook to be true, but rather is an effect of *my own* "apparence elle-même nécessairement truquée".
- 11 The message Genet gleans both from his experience in the train and from Rembrandt's painting, then, is that truth involves a change, a shift in the position of the viewer, as much as it is a matter of the object one seeks to understand. The artistic vision that he both admires and proposes is in effect a capacity for double vision, a capacity to

maintain a double focus, a focus on two separate things at the one time. Across the different essays on art, that double focus most explicitly involves a simultaneous focus on both the artist's medium and the world he seeks to represent; a common feature is the insistence that the works of the artists in question are unusual in constituting a celebration of their medium. In "Le funambule", Genet praises the acrobat not for what the tightrope enables him to do but for giving life to the tightrope: "Le fil était mort – ou si tu veux muet, aveugle – te voici : il va vivre et parler"<sup>5</sup>. The intermedial dimension already thematised here – the acrobat makes the rope speak – is even more pronounced later, when the voice given the rope is that of a poet, a *singing* voice:

Ton fil de fer charge-le de la plus belle expression non de toi mais de lui. Tes bonds, tes sauts, tes danses – en argot d'acrobate tes : flic-flac, courbette, sauts périlleux, roues, etc., – tu les réussiras non pour que tu brilles, mais afin qu'un fil d'acier qui était mort et sans voix enfin chante. Comme il t'en saura gré si tu es parfait dans tes attitudes non pour ta gloire mais la sienne. (OC V 10)

- 12 Literally sparkling himself (as the description of the sequins of his costume in the opening line of the essay emphasises: "Une paillette d'or est un disque minuscule en métal doré, percé d'un trou" (OC V 9)), according to Genet the acrobat's greatest achievement is to make the steel rope glitter. Similarly, "L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti" emphasises that the sculptor's work is a hymn to its medium. When Giacometti asks Genet if he thinks that his statues have lost by being cast in bronze, Genet hesitantly replies:

MOI : Vous allez encore vous foutre de moi, mais j'ai une drôle d'impression. Je ne dirais pas qu'elles y gagnent, mais que c'est le bronze qui a gagné. Pour la première fois de sa vie le bronze vient de gagner. Vos femmes, c'est une victoire du bronze. Sur lui-même, peut-être. (OC V 45)

And Giacometti's drawings similarly serve to exalt the matter from which they are made. They reveal the diamond hidden in the carbon of the pencil: "Les lignes brisées sont aiguës et donnent à son dessin – grâce encore à la matière granitique et, paradoxalement assourdie, du crayon – une apparence scintillante. Diamants". Furthermore, they transform the page itself into a diamond: "Diamants encore plus à cause de la façon d'utiliser les blancs. Dans les paysages par exemple : c'est toute la page qui serait un diamant dont un côté serait visible grâce à des lignes brisées et subtiles [...]. Et c'est du blanc – la page blanche – que Giacometti aurait ciselé" (OC V 60-61). Finally, in "Le secret de Rembrandt" (1958) the painter's shift in perspective after Saskia's death led him also to transfer his taste for luxury in the scenes he represented into the matter with which he represented them, leading him to "nous proposer la magnificence singulière de la couleur. On peut dire qu'il est le seul peintre au monde respectueux à la fois de la peinture et du modèle, exaltant à la fois l'un et l'autre, l'un par l'autre" (OC V 35).

- 13 The art that Genet most admires is thus one that shifts its focus incessantly between being true to the outside world and being true to itself. Or, in Giacometti's words:

LUI: On doit faire exactement ce qui est devant soi.  
Je dis oui. Puis, après un moment de silence :  
LUI: Et, en plus, il faut faire aussi un tableau. (OC V 62)

Similarly, the approach required by the work of art is determined by both the viewer and the viewed, as the opening sentence of the right-hand column of "Ce qui est resté..." emphasises:

Notre regard peut être vif ou lent, cela dépend de la chose regardée autant, ou plus, que de nous. C'est pourquoi je parle de cette vélocité par exemple, qui précipite l'objet au-devant de nous, ou d'une lenteur qui le rend pesant. (OC IV 21)

As much as a reflection of external reality, art is always also a displacement of it insofar as it has an inherently inaccurate dimension. The framing of the essay as a whole emphasises the importance of that structural inadequation: art that would be wholly true to the world would be false. An assertion of the paradoxical falsehood of artistic truth in the opening sentence of the left-hand column:

C'est seulement ces sortes de vérités, celles qui ne sont pas démontrables et même qui sont "fausses", celles que l'on ne peut conduire sans absurdité jusqu'à leur extrémité sans aller à la négation d'elles et de soi, c'est celles-là qui doivent être exaltées par l'œuvre d'art. (OC IV 21)

echoes in the closing sentence of the right-hand one:

Et il va de soi que toute l'œuvre de Rembrandt n'a de sens – au moins pour moi – que si je sais que ce que je viens d'écrire était faux. (OC IV 28)

Genet's "message" in this essay is thus that art is true to the world by being false to it: it is an intrinsically inexact, incongruous displacement of reality.

- 14 Artistic truth, then, is a falsehood – a fiction – that inescapably involves a process of displacement, a shift in the position of the viewer or subject. Art, in other words, always involves stepping outside oneself. Genet's turn to the visual to elaborate his own poetic credo is therefore more than a reflection of his identification with the vision of the world that he recognises in the work of Rembrandt or Giacometti; it is itself a figure of the message he wants to convey. He adopts a new position because the vision he seeks to develop inherently involves a shift to the side, a shift out of oneself: no single viewpoint can suffice to tell the kinds of truth art seeks to tell.
- 15 A short piece obviously cannot develop in any detail how the vision of art Genet elaborates in this essay is reflected throughout his own corpus. It would be important to show how the celebration of matter that he highlights in the artists he admires is at work in his own writing from the very beginning: few other writers make the signifier visible, celebrate the body of language itself, as thoroughly as he does. Similarly, the attack on hierarchy that his elaboration of the "equivalence" of all men theorises in "Ce qui est resté..." is not a new departure. Genet's celebration of matter as much as the form of the work crafted from it is itself a dehierarchising gesture that challenges conventional artistic priorities. I have similarly argued elsewhere that a challenge to privilege is the defining feature of Genet's writing from the outset<sup>6</sup>. But writing this essay has shifted my own position slightly. I would now argue that whereas Genet's writing had earlier attacked hierarchy by seeking to destabilise rather than abolish it, "Ce qui est resté..." explores his recognition, in the wake of his epiphanic encounter in the train, of a new egalitarianism that saddens him insofar as it signals the final destruction of any belief in an essential difference between men, a belief that had been the condition of his eroticism: "Pendant encore un peu de temps si toute forme humaine assez belle, – de la beauté conventionnelle – et mâle, conserva un peu de pouvoir sur moi, c'était, pourrait-on dire, par réverbération. Ce pouvoir était le reflet de celui sous lequel si longtemps j'avais cédé" (OC IV 30). The essays on art repeatedly highlight a fundamental egalitarian impulse in the artists he discusses to which his new theory of "equivalences" sensitises him. Hence, for example, his realisation that for Giacometti "une ligne est un homme: il la traite d'égal à égal" (OC V 60) chimes with the latter's view that all people are equally beautiful:

LUI, *me regardant avec un air émerveillé*: “Comme vous êtes beau!” – Il donne deux ou trois coups de pinceaux à la toile sans, semble-t-il, cesser de me percer du regard. Il murmure encore comme pour lui-même: “Comme vous êtes beau.” Puis il ajoute cette constatation qui l’émerveille encore plus: “Comme tout le monde, hein? Ni plus, ni moins.” (OC V 71)

To end with “Ce qui est resté...,” the very sentence where Genet states the equivalence of all men contains perhaps the most supremely telling example of how Genet’s writing systematically and fundamentally undermines privilege:

je connus soudain le douloureux – oui, douloureux sentiment que n’importe quel homme en “valait” exactement – qu’on m’excuse, mais c’est sur “exactement” que je veux mettre l’accent – n’importe quel autre. (OC IV 51)

Disconcertingly, while the first guillemets highlight the word “valait”, the emphasis is immediately displaced on to “exactement”. No privilege survives; any word is worth exactly any other. A perfect example of how Genet’s writing brilliantly performs the dehierarchisation it proposes thematically.

## ENDNOTES

1. Jean Genet, *Romans et poèmes*, eds. Emmanuelle Lambert and Gilles Philippe, with Albert Dichy, Paris, Gallimard, 2021, <Bibliothèque de la Pléiade>, p. 130. Henceforth RP.
2. Jean Genet, *Théâtre complet*, eds. Michel Corvin and Albert Dichy, Paris, Gallimard, 2002, <Bibliothèque de la Pléiade>, p. 903-904.
3. Jean Genet, “Ce qui est resté d’un Rembrandt, déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers et foutu aux chiottes”, *Œuvres complètes IV*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, p. 19-36. I will use OC IV to refer to volume IV of the *Œuvres complètes*.
4. Jacques Derrida, *Glas: que reste-t-il du savoir absolu?*, Paris, Denoël, 1981 [1974].
5. Jean Genet, *Œuvres complètes V*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, p. 9. I will use OC V to refer to volume V of the *Œuvres complètes*.
6. See my *Genet’s Genres of Politics*, Cambridge, Legenda, 2023, <Research Monographs in French Studies 50>.

## ABSTRACTS

Jean Genet was a writer constantly in displacement, in both his work and his life. Focussing on a moment in one of his essays that thematises a specific form of displacement, this article explores its broader implications for Genet’s conception of the work of the imagination. In “Ce qui est resté d’un Rembrandt”, he uses a very concrete image of displacement, claiming that to look properly at the Cologne Rembrandt self-portrait it is necessary to shift perspective in a particular way. I show how the essay suggests that for Genet artistic truth involves a shift in the position of the viewer or subject as much as it is a matter of the object one seeks to understand. While some readings of this essay interpret it as a watershed in Genet’s work, I argue that it offers an insight into the fictionality of his writing in general.

Jean Genet était un écrivain constamment en déplacement, tant dans son œuvre que dans sa vie. En se concentrant sur un moment précis évoqué dans un de ses essais qui thématise une forme



spécifique de déplacement, cet article explore ses implications plus larges pour la conception qu'avait Genet du travail de l'imagination. Dans "Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt", il utilise une image très concrète du déplacement, affirmant que pour observer correctement l'autoportrait de Rembrandt à Cologne, il est nécessaire de changer de perspective de manière particulière. Je montre comment l'essai suggère que pour Genet, la vérité artistique implique un changement de position du spectateur ou du sujet autant qu'elle concerne l'objet que l'on cherche à comprendre. Alors que certaines lectures de ce texte l'interprètent comme un tournant dans l'œuvre de Genet, je soutiens qu'il offre un aperçu de la fictionnalité de son écriture en général.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** essays on art, Rembrandt, perspectival shift, medium

**Mots-clés:** essais sur l'art, Rembrandt, déplacement de perspective, médium

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