

GENET'S *JOURNAL DU VOLEUR* AND THE ETHICS OF READING

ETHICAL CRITICISM IS THEORETICALLY SUSPECT and almost universally practised: this at least is implied in the opening pages of Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep*.¹ According to Booth, all literature is didactic, in that it presents some values as preferable to others; and nearly all criticism is judgemental, though often in oblique and disguised ways.² Ethical choices are inherent in our aesthetic criteria and our hermeneutic protocols; and as Marxists and feminists have long understood, moral judgements play an important role in criticism despite the awkwardness, embarrassment or guilt with which we make them. In this respect the controversy over Paul de Man's wartime journalism has had at least some beneficial effect by encouraging a more public discussion of the values which inform literary theory and critical practice. David Hirsch's contention that modern theories are condemned to a 'moral vacuum' and that they 'seek to blind and deafen readers to all that is human'³ represents one extreme position, whereas critics such as Hillis Miller and Barbara Johnson have tried to demonstrate the relevance of the most sophisticated literary theory to ethical, social and political issues.⁴ Whichever side we might take, the disagreement indicates a lack of self-confidence and a need for self-justification amongst literary critics. It also points to an attempt to incorporate critical reflexivity within ethical enquiry: 'What am I doing when I read?' may contribute to the broader question 'How should one live?'

The essays collected in Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* make a powerful case for the realignment of literary criticism and moral philosophy. Nussbaum argues that novels in particular are the allies of the moral philosopher in that they conduct a properly philosophical investigation into the human good; the novel is committed as genre 'to the pursuit of the uncertainties and vulnerabilities, the particularity and the emotional richness, of the human form of life'.⁵ Yet the suspicion remains (in my mind at least) that Nussbaum learns only from those texts that say the sorts of things that she is prepared to hear. Henry James seems exactly to match her requirements; but after a promising start, Proust is ultimately too solipsistic; and despite Nussbaum's intelligent and sympathetic account of Beckett's novels, they finally provide only a negative lesson, being too deeply religious not to despair at the withdrawal of the absolute, distracting from the 'loving acceptance of the world'⁶ which Nussbaum regards as the moral lesson of the novel.

This article concentrates on Jean Genet's *Journal du voleur* because it poses particular difficulties about the sort of ethical criticism which

Nussbaum advocates. Its stance seems to be at the furthest possible remove from the generous moral ideal which Nussbaum finds in the fiction of Henry James and which she is tempted to regard as characteristic of the novel as genre.⁷ The narrator of *Journal du voleur* constantly refers to the ethical dimension of the text and makes extensive use of ethical vocabulary; indeed, the strategic abuse of the language of ethics is an essential part of the attempt to deflect and to appropriate the secure linguistic mastery attributed to the reader.⁸ In case we are in any doubt, we are informed that the true subjects of the book are ‘la trahison, le vol et l’homosexualité’ (p. 193), described as ‘ces trois vertus que j’érige en théologiques’ (p. 167). All Genet’s critics have been puzzled and troubled by the moral problems posed by his writing, which Sartre describes as subscribing to a parodic version of the Kantian categorical imperative: ‘Agis comme si la maxime de chacun de tes actes devait servir de règle dans la caverne des voleurs.’⁹ Genet’s writing is particularly resistant to ethical recuperation; hence, I would suggest, the urgency with which his commentators attempt to recuperate him. Most readers have endeavoured, by one means or another, to show that Genet is less hostile than he might appear to their own moral outlook: a gesture which seems both inevitable and curiously fragile, given the variety of sometimes contrary ends that Genet had been made to serve.¹⁰ In what follows I will be guided by two interrelated questions: what are the ethics of Genet’s text? and, what does it mean to read Genet ethically? Finally, I shall discuss how Genet’s text may be compared with the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas, whose work constitutes the most important sustained contribution to ethics in French in the post-war period; and we shall see that crucial aspects of Lévinas’s philosophy elucidate, and may also be elucidated by, *Journal du voleur*.

I shall begin by quoting in full a passage from near the beginning of *Journal du voleur* in which the ethics of the text and its relationship with the reader are already adumbrated. In a long parenthesis, the narrator describes what he might do if he were to meet his mother; the passage is prompted by his description of a tube of vaseline found on him on an occasion when he has been arrested by the police:

(En le décrivant, je recrée ce petit objet, mais voici qu’intervient une image: sous un réverbère, dans une rue de la ville où j’écris, le visage blafard d’une petite vieille, un visage plat et rond comme la lune, très pâle, dont je ne saurais dire s’il était triste ou hypocrite. Elle m’aborda, me dit qu’elle était très pauvre et me demanda un peu d’argent. La douceur de ce visage de poisson-lune me renseigne tout de suite: la vieille sortait de prison.

– C’est une voleuse, me dis-je. En m’éloignant d’elle une sorte de rêverie aiguë, vivant à l’intérieur de moi et non au bord de mon esprit, m’entraîna à penser que c’était peut-être ma mère que je venais de rencontrer. Je ne sais rien d’elle qui m’abandonna au berceau, mais j’espérai que c’était cette vieille voleuse qui mendiait la nuit.

– Si c'était elle? me dis-je en m'éloignant de la vieille. Ah! Si c'était elle, j'irais la couvrir de fleurs, de glaïeuls et de roses, et de baisers! J'irais pleurer de tendresse sur les yeux de ce poisson-lune, sur cette face ronde et sotté! Et pourquoi, me disais-je encore, pourquoi y pleurer? Il fallut peu de temps à mon esprit pour qu'il remplaçât ces marques habituelles de la tendresse par n'importe quel geste et même par les plus décriés, par les plus vils, que je chargeais de signifier autant que les baisers, ou les larmes, ou les fleurs.

– Je me contenterais de baver sur elle, pensais-je, débordant d'amour. (Le mot glaïeul prononcé plus haut appela-t-il le mot glaviaux?) De baver sur ses cheveux ou de vomir dans ses mains. Mais je l'adorerais cette voleuse qui est ma mère.) (pp. 21–22)

With some inaccuracies and elisions (which I shall discuss in a moment), Sartre quotes this passage in *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* and uses it to illustrate Genet's relationship with his reader (*Saint Genet*, pp. 561–63). The reader at first responds favourably to the discreet appeal for pity of the abandoned child. The narrator's dream of meeting his mother and treating her with proper filial affection seems to comply with the expectations of society; even the twist towards the end of the passage, when the narrator suggests that the humble might show affection by signs in accordance with their poverty, seems reasonable. But the reader has now been duped into accepting, if only for a moment, an unacceptable conclusion, which Sartre paraphrases as: 'Vomir sur les mains de sa mère c'est lui rendre le plus bel hommage' (*Saint Genet*, p. 561). The reader's initial recognition of his (Sartre's reader is male) own values in the text facilitates an identification which, at the end of the passage, leaves him compromised by Genet's inverted morality: 'Et voilà l'honnête homme en train de dégueuler sur sa vieille mère' (*Saint Genet*, p. 563).

In *Glas* Derrida quotes the same passage rather more accurately than Sartre, and with greater sensitivity to its context within *Journal du voleur*.¹¹ The passage constitutes a parenthesis within an episode which is already a digression from the main narrative: the description of life in Barcelona is interrupted by the account of a scene 'qui précéda celle par quoi débute ce livre' (p. 20) and which describes how the Spanish police once discovered a tube of vaseline on the narrator; this account is in turn interrupted by the passage quoted above. So the meeting with the old woman is doubly embedded in the text, part of a narrative present located after the incident with the tube of vaseline which took place before the events previously recounted. In Derrida's presentation a convoluted textual chain has priority over narrative thread or thematic pattern: the contents of the tube make the narrator think of 'une veilleuse' (p. 21), which then leads to the image of 'une petite vieille', the 'voleuse' who then becomes a 'vieille voleuse'. Similarities of sound ('glaïeul'/'glaviaux') contribute to a series of metonymic and metaphoric relations which link this passage to other parts of Genet's text: connections are established between flowers and spit, the phallus and sperm, swords and semen (*Glas*, p. 208); the tube of vaseline is

linked with the mother who in turn is associated with the Virgin Mary, the phallus, the clitoris (*Glas*, p. 225). Derrida amply demonstrates that this series of associations and developments could be extended indefinitely, or else described quite differently; formal and semantic features are produced by a practice of writing which emerges like vaseline from a tube.

Although Derrida is not directly engaged in a critique of Sartre at this point, his response to the passage in question prompts two series of comments on Sartre's reading:

(1) Sartre's silence about the context of the passage weakens his analysis of it. He requires a reader who can identify — even if only temporarily — with the values apparently espoused by the narrator; only on the basis of this identification can the later reversals have their full effect. Sartre's analysis depends upon the existence of a reader who is prepared repeatedly to suspend his distaste, however recently it has been aroused. In this instance at least, it seems unlikely that the reader would be so gullible. Immediately before the imagined encounter with the mother, Genet's narrator describes a tube of vaseline 'dont la destination paraissait au monde' (p. 21); this would surely forewarn Sartre's self-righteous heterosexual reader in a fairly unambiguous fashion that the values of the text were in conflict with his own.

(2) The inaccuracies and elisions in Sartre's quotation of the passage support his reading of the text but omit important aspects of it. He leaves out the first sentence which refers to the tube of vaseline and which describes the old woman as 'une image'; he begins instead with a much more solid assertion: 'Une petite vieille m'aborda' (*Saint Genet*, p. 561; Genet's text reads: 'Elle m'aborda' (p. 22)). Sartre subsequently elides phrases which, presumably, he regards as unimportant; in the following quotation I have italicized phrases omitted by Sartre (in each case he acknowledges the omission by use of elision marks):

En m'éloignant d'elle, une sorte de rêverie aiguë, *vivant à l'intérieur de moi et non au bord de mon esprit*, m'entraîna à penser que c'était peut-être ma mère *que je venais de rencontrer*. Je ne sais rien d'elle qui m'abandonna au berceau, mais j'espérai [Sartre has *espérais*] que c'était cette vieille voleuse *qui mendiait la nuit*.

– Si c'était elle? *me dis-je en m'éloignant de la vieille*.

Genet's text emphasizes right from the beginning that it is describing an event of which the primary importance is private and imaginary. It is 'une image', amplified by 'une sorte de rêverie aiguë, vivant à l'intérieur de moi'; the narrator demonstrates that he has no desire for a real encounter with his mother by the repetition of 'en m'éloignant'. Sartre suppresses this, as he suppresses the repetition of 'me dis-je', which occurs twice in the passage: if the narrator speaks, it is for himself only, he is both the source and destination of his own message. The first speech recorded in *Journal du voleur* is similarly self-addressed ('– Il a bien fallu, me dis-je, que le crime hésite longtemps', pp. 12–13), and throughout the text the narrator shows

a particular fondness for the first-person reflexive pronoun. More consistently than Sartre implies, the narrator keeps his reader at a distance; we are permitted to observe and be shocked, but not to share an experience or understand a reasoning which proceeds as if motivated by rigorous, unspecified principles.¹²

Sartre's account of the passage depends upon a reader who misreads, who fails to observe the warning signs that would preserve him from becoming the text's fool. Sartre repeats the error he diagnoses. He suppresses or overlooks contextual and internal features which are discordant with his account; and rather like the bourgeois reader whom he describes reading Genet, he opens himself up to the text's mockery when he finds in it a reflection of his own concerns. Misreading, in detail and in general, appears then as an inevitable step in making acceptable sense out of Genet's writing.¹³ It would be unfair to Sartre not to acknowledge that he is fully aware of this. The final chapter of his study, 'Prière pour le bon usage de Genet', can be read as a reflection on the ethical necessity of misreading. Given the inevitability of betraying Genet (and it is striking here how the theme of betrayal extends beyond Genet's texts to characterize his commentator's response to them), Sartre ultimately accepts that he will use Genet for his own purposes:

Jugez de mon embarras: si je révèle qu'on peut tirer profit de ses ouvrages, j'invite à les lire mais je le trahis; que j'insiste au contraire sur sa singularité, je risque de la trahir encore: après tout, s'il a livré ses poèmes au grand public, c'est qu'il souhaitait d'être lu. Trahir pour trahir, je prends le premier parti: au moins serai-je fidèle à moi-même. (*Saint Genet*, p. 646)

Derrida, as we have seen, is intensely sensitive to the textual features of Genet's writing which Sartre tends to neglect. But Derrida's virtuoso demonstration that context is non-saturable, that multiple links and associations can always be found, that the text is never fully self-present 'in itself', has its own problems. Genet's text, according to Derrida, makes it impossible to say, 'ceci est le sujet, ceci n'est pas le sujet' (*Glas*, p. 277). Derrida offers no criteria for arresting the exploration of textuality and no way of distinguishing between the different kinds of thing that can be said; and by showing how it is never possible to say *everything* about the text, he conspicuously fails to say *anything* about the moral shock occasioned by the image of the abandoned child dribbling and vomiting on his mother. In reference to Bataille's essay on Genet, he is scathing on 'l'académisme sentencieux de ce discours édifiant' (*Glas*, p. 277), but he remains oddly reticent about the ethics of reading Genet and of his own commentary in particular. More damagingly for the prospects of ethical criticism, his attempts to avoid critical mastery (see *Glas*, p. 285) foreshadow a potential collapse of any critical project; the markers of caution with which he refers to writing 'about' Genet¹⁴ suggest a disowning of the hermeneutic act of faith which underpins any critical practice: criticism requires the belief

that we are *at least in some sense* writing about (not 'about') the texts we cite, but Derrida's cautions and quotation marks indicate serious reservations in respect of even this belief. His slightly embarrassing statements of enthusiasm for Genet's writing ('Écriture merveilleuse. Incroyablement précieuse', *Glas*, p. 204) signal an anxiety over how to proceed or, once proceeding, how to stop. Genet's revenge against Hegelian Absolute Knowledge is to leave his readers insecure about even local questions of critical protocol; and Derrida expresses an anxiety about being unfaithful to Genet which is remarkably similar in formulation to that voiced by Sartre (though Sartre is more sanguine about the inevitability of betrayal): 'Je suis donc de toute façon jugé et condamné, c'est ce qu'il a toujours cherché à faire: si j'écris pour son texte, j'écris contre lui, si j'écris pour lui, j'écris contre son texte' (*Glas*, p. 279).

The fact that both Sartre and Derrida share a sense of unease about their appropriations of Genet's text looks too consistent to be entirely coincidental. Genet's relationship with his critics is particularly elusive; his texts lend themselves to scenes of self-recognition in which critics find their own reflections: 'Genet, c'est nous', as Sartre concludes his study (*Saint Genet*, p. 661). Genet's texts, then, stage an encounter with a critic or reader which does not finally take place. As Derrida in particular is acutely aware, the peculiar self-consciousness of Genet's writing lies in its ability to anticipate, facilitate and ultimately exceed this non-encounter (see *Glas*, p. 299). Such a non-encounter is precisely what is described in the scene where the narrator of *Journal du voleur* imagines what he might do if he met his mother. The passage, as I have said, forms a parenthesis within a digression; at the centre of this double embedding is a non-event, the description of a meeting which does not take place. The narrative obstructs the expected relay between text and world, or between narrator and reader, by excluding both experiential referent and communicative intention: it is concerned with 'une image', 'une sorte de rêverie aiguë, vivant à l'intérieur de moi', in the course of which the narrator establishes himself as his own addressee ('me dis-je'). This does not make the passage uninterpretable, but it does divest the reader of any security as privileged addressee in a closed communicative circuit. The reader's position is also made uncertain by the extreme fluidity of meaning and values. The text effects a series of inversions typical of Genet's writing: the tube of vaseline is an object of shame reinvested as an object of pride; dribbling and vomiting are charged with the same meaning normally attributed to conventional signs of affection.¹⁵ But the inversion can hardly be taken as definitive. Vomit is likely to retain its ordinary sense for the reader whilst being ennobled by the narrator; dribbling on the mother appears disrespectful, or at best infantile, whilst being qualified in the passage as a sign of love. The characteristic strangeness of Genet's text depends upon the tension established between the new values explicitly espoused and their more

conventional counterparts. Adoration and vilification are both signified by the same actions; as Genet wrote in his late essay on Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, 'Tout acte a donc une signification et la signification inverse'.¹⁶

The passage describing the narrator's non-encounter with his mother reveals an urge to retain control over both event and interpretation which is characteristic of the rest of the text and which lies at the heart of its ethical significance. The narrator refuses to be surprised by an unexpected meeting or a fortuitous meaning; his narrative may be ambiguous, but its ambiguity is contrived and controlled. The narrator aggressively asserts his command over text and reader; and this may serve to compensate for a loss of sovereignty experienced through events narrated in *Journal du voleur*, in particular through erotic fascination. The experience of desire undermines the secure self-possession of the narrator: when he falls for Stilitano, he first blushes, then describes himself as 'Détruit' (p. 36), 'dominé' (p. 37), 'perdu' (p. 38); he feels 'trouble' (p. 36), 'un vide' (p. 36), 'panique' and 'détresse' (p. 39); he compares the encounter to 'un rapport d'oiseau cruel à victime' (p. 39). The self is transformed by the encounter; but its endangered sovereignty is reaffirmed through the manner in which the encounter is presented in *Journal du voleur*. Several passages give us forewarning of Stilitano's importance in the book. We are told that he has only one hand and that he is a coward (p. 14); his spit has been described (pp. 17–18), and the narrator has recorded his reflections on Stilitano's penis (pp. 24–25). The encounter is anticipated and deferred: 'Pour mieux parler de Stilitano, le manchot, j'attendrai quelques pages' (p. 27). When the narrator finally meets Stilitano, it entails for both him and the reader an act of recognition rather than an unexpected encounter: 'Immédiatement je reconnus Stilitano' (p. 35). Then, in an apparent digression which narrates a chronologically earlier episode, it is revealed that the narrator had in fact already encountered Stilitano after the murder by Pépé of a street gambler (p. 43). The chronological priority of this first encounter is overturned in the text as the description of it is preceded by accounts of later meetings and reflections. Even the reliability of the narrator's recollections is brought into question by a typically casual disclaimer: 'Ce qu'alors j'éprouvai je l'ignore' (p. 39). Genet's *Journal du voleur* masters the shock of desire by asserting the primacy of the text itself over the traumatic experiences it records; the act of narration is privileged over narrated events: 'Ce que j'écris fut-il vrai? Faux? Seul ce livre d'amour sera réel' (p. 113).¹⁷

When surprised by the Other, the narrating self reassembles a sovereignty which was temporarily dispersed. The story of the relationship between the narrator and Stilitano follows a gradual reaffirmation of the former's ascendancy. After the initial shock of desire, the narrator begins to assert control: he encourages Stilitano to become a thief (p. 61) and is

delighted when he witnesses his cowardice (pp. 71–2). He describes himself as Stilitano's 'valet', yet he insists that he owns the object to which he is subservient: 'J'étais le valet qui doit entretenir, l'épousseter, le polir, le cirer, un objet de grand prix, mais qui par le miracle de l'amitié m'appartenait' (p. 64). When he meets Stilitano again in Antwerp, the narrator allows himself to love him ('je me laissais l'aimer', p. 136) rather than succumbing to an uncontrolled emotion. Even when obeying Stilitano's orders after a drug-smuggling incident, the narrator insists that it is he who is in control: 'car je savais déjà que Stilitano était ma propre création, et qu'il dépendait de moi que je la détruissais' (p. 144). In a footnote he describes how he feels no emotion when he reads of Stilitano's arrest (p. 144); and finally he gets Stilitano to demonstrate his suppressed homosexuality in an unambiguous act (pp. 301–04).

The text becomes a site for the construction of a sovereign self, impervious to the surprise of chance encounters. The potentially shocking confrontation with the Other is at least in part avoided by the consistent gesture of seeing each person as a new version of an already familiar category. The narrator concedes that his lovers and characters resemble one another (pp. 106, 219); when he first sees Robert he is drawn to him only because he sees him accomplishing an action (spitting on his hands) which he immediately *recognizes*: 'S'il n'avait craché dans ses deux mains pour tourner un treuil je n'eusse pas remarqué un garçon de mon âge. [. . .] Ce crachat dans ses mains je ne le vis pas: je reconnus la crispation de la joue et la pointe de la langue entre ses dents' (pp. 153–54). The narrator's endeavour is to reduce experience to the already-known, to deny any remnant of irreducible otherness in the encounter with the Other. Even his use of the future perfect tense suggests a future that is already in a sense past because it can only repeat what has already been seen; the narrator refuses to be surprised: 'A tout comportement, le plus étrange en apparence, je connaissais d'emblée, sans y réfléchir, une justification. [. . .] J'aurai donc traversé les pénitenciers, les prisons, connu les bouges, les bars, les routes sans m'étonner' (pp. 114–15).

This rejection of the unforeseen is reproduced in the way the narrator attempts to construct his own reader. Addressed throughout as *vous*, the reader is established as the repository of values antithetical to those espoused in the text. The narrator practises 'une morale inverse de celle qui régit ce monde' (p. 206); he decides to be 'à l'inverse de vous-même' and to explore 'l'envers de votre beauté' (p. 110). His theological virtues (theft, betrayal, homosexuality) are chosen in opposition to the presumed values of the implied reader. Constructed by society as its negative image (see p. 198), the narrator in turn attempts to construct the reader as his own inverted reflection. He acknowledges the need for the complicity and recognition of the reader ('J'aspire à votre reconnaissance, à votre sacre', p. 306; see also p. 17); but the Other, rather than an independent self, is

characterized as an alter ego, a mirror image whose gaze confirms the narrator's ascendancy. Genet's text seeks to maintain a solipsistic self-absorption which excludes the unforeseen and the accidental. In an extraordinary passage the narrator describes how the self becomes its own companion, establishes the external world as a divinity of which it is the privileged creation, and finally draws this divinity into itself and identifies with it.

Tant de solitude m'avait forcé à faire de moi-même pour moi un compagnon. Envisageant le monde hors de moi, son indéfini, sa confusion plus parfaite encore la nuit, je l'érigeais en divinité dont j'étais non seulement le prétexte chéri, objet de tant de soin et de précaution, choisi et conduit supérieurement encore qu'au travers d'épreuves douloureuses, épuisantes, au bord du désespoir, mais l'unique but de tant d'ouvrages. Et, peu à peu, par une sorte d'opération que je ne puis que mal décrire, sans modifier les dimensions de mon corps mais parce qu'il était plus facile peut-être de contenir une aussi précieuse raison à tant de gloire, c'est en moi que j'établis cette divinité – origine et disposition de moi-même. (p. 96)

The narrator of *Journal du voleur* appears as weak ('je suis corruptible à l'extrême', p. 235) and hazardously susceptible to desire and longing, but also as divinely strong ('je suis mon propre dieu', p. 24). He is the 'conscience réfléchissante' of his companions (p. 295), in full possession of the world and experiencing it only as a region of himself ('cette région de moi-même: la Guyane', p. 16; 'cette contrée de moi que j'ai nommée l'Espagne', p. 306); he establishes himself as incapable of surprise, the source of his own inscrutable principles and commandments.

The ethical significance of this stance should be made clear by a brief account of the importance of the encounter in the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas. For Lévinas the key issue of ethics is what he calls 'le choc de la rencontre entre le Même et l'Autre'.¹⁸ The most consistent move in Western ontology, according to Lévinas, has been to reduce the Other to the Same; anything new or alien is classified as an aspect of Being or an object of knowledge, and thereby its otherness is eliminated. Western philosophy has been an Odyssey which, like the journey of Ulysses, ultimately leads back to its point of departure; it explores alterity only to rediscover sameness. Lévinas prefers the story of Abraham to that of Ulysses: 'Au mythe d'Ulysse retournant à Ithaque, nous voudrions opposer l'histoire d'Abraham quittant à jamais sa patrie pour une terre encore inconnue et interdisant à son serviteur de ramener même son fils à ce point de départ.'¹⁹ In the story of Abraham the ultimate destination is not known in advance; the encounter with the unknown takes precedence over the reappropriation of the familiar. This encounter is a shock because the Other, for Lévinas, is not simply *autre*, another self, but *Autrui*, radically and irreducibly Other, a stranger whose strangeness does not disappear with greater familiarity. The Other appears as an enigma, disturbs my

tranquil possession of the world and challenges my spontaneity and autonomy. The encounter with the Other is the foundation of ethics: 'L'étrangeté d'Autrui — son irréductibilité à Moi — à mes pensées et à mes possessions, s'accomplit comme une mise en question de ma spontanéité, comme éthique' (*Totalité et infini*, p. 13). The crux of Lévinas's thought is that the encounter occasions a *mise en question*, challenging the primacy of the Same, of consciousness, of Being or of knowledge; and through this challenge I discover the fundamental ethical relationship of obligation and responsibility for the Other summarized in the commandment 'Tu ne commettras pas le meurtre'.

From a Lévinassian perspective, Genet's *Journal du voleur* does not so much reject traditional ethics as reproduce in a particularly extreme form a gesture inherent in Western philosophical discourse. Genet dramatically refuses exposure to alterity and affirms the demands of the self over the claims of the Other. Lévinas's account of ontology highlights crucial features of Genet's book:

Elle n'est donc pas une relation avec l'autre comme tel, mais la réduction de l'Autre au Même. Telle est la définition de la liberté: se maintenir contre l'autre, assurer l'autarcie d'un moi. La thématization et la conceptualisation, d'ailleurs inséparables, ne sont pas paix avec l'Autre, mais suppression ou possession de l'Autre. La possession, en effet, affirme l'Autre, mais au sein d'une négation de son indépendance. 'Je pense' revient à 'je peux' — à une appropriation de ce qui est, à une exploitation de la réalité. (*Totalité et infini*, p. 16)

For Lévinas the encounter with the Other entails an approach, an acknowledgement of the proximity of Same and Other that does not imply the denial or annihilation of either; Genet's narrator on the other hand *distances himself* from the woman who may (or may not) be his mother ('En m'éloignant d'elle [. . .] en m'éloignant de la vieille'). The encounter is avoided because it takes place only in the imaginary, entirely within the confines of the self ('vivant à l'intérieur de moi et non au bord de mon esprit'). Meaning is bestowed by the narrator rather than accepted from elsewhere ('n'importe quel geste [. . .] que je chargeais de signifier autant que les baisers, ou les larmes, ou les fleurs'). The narrator turns out to be Ulysses rather than Abraham. His story is one of rediscovery and recognition: he loses Stilitano in Spain, but meets him again in Antwerp; in what is chronologically the last event to be narrated he returns to France as Ulysses returned to Ithaca ('je pris le train et je revins en France', p. 232); and it is even suggested that he may be returning to a more conventional (though still homosexual) morality at the time of writing the text ('Mon amour pour Lucien et mon bonheur dans cet amour m'invitent à reconnaître une morale plus conforme à votre monde', p. 165). Dispossessed of himself by Stilitano (see pp. 142, 205, 207), the narrator repossesses himself through writing, affirming his ability to create and destroy the agent of his dispossession (p. 144). Rather than an encounter

with alterity, the text narrates the struggle for the recovery of selfhood which involves the solipsistic negation of the non-self: 'j'avais atteint une solitude me conférant la souveraineté' (p. 197).

If Lévinas lays the ground for an ethical critique of *Journal du voleur*, Genet's text can nevertheless furnish the basis of a searching response. The work embodies a malicious wisdom: the Other represents a threat to the wholeness of the self which can be countered with betrayal or violence. Lévinas's protestation that such action is not in accord with the fundamental ethical relationship does nothing to exclude its possibility. Indeed, Lévinas seems distinctly uneasy when it comes to explaining why we should accept responsibility for the Other rather than loyalty to the self, why we should respect the commandment not to kill rather than defending ourselves with violence. Lévinas acknowledges that it is just as possible to kill the Other as it is to obey the commandment not to kill:

Il serait inutile d'insister sur la banalité du meurtre qui révèle la résistance quasi nulle de l'obstacle. Cet incident le plus banal de l'histoire humaine correspond à une possibilité exceptionnelle — puisqu'elle prétend à la négation totale d'un être. (*Totalité et infini*, p. 173)

A curious tension is established here when murder is qualified as both banal and exceptional: it occurs all the time but tells us nothing about fundamental ethical relationships; it appears ethically unimportant because it represents a possibility rather than a responsibility, a sign of our lack of power over *Autrui* rather than our power; there is no point in discussing it further ('Il serait inutile d'insister'). War is possible, Lévinas argues, but peace, 'la présence préalable et non-allergique d'Autrui', is originary (*Totalité et infini*, p. 174). The 'banal' occurrences of murder and war are excluded from consideration because they are 'exceptional'; and a major weakness of Lévinas's philosophy lies in its failure to establish a regulative link between ethical responsibility and actual behaviour, between fundamental ethical experiences and ordinary acts of violence. Lévinas criticizes Heidegger for preferring Being to beings, yet perhaps he is guilty of committing an equivalent error in preferring *Autrui* (whom I cannot kill) to *les autres* (whom I can kill). He tells us a great deal about our responsibility, but very little about our possibilities.

The theological virtue of betrayal proposed by *Journal du voleur* involves an implicit acknowledgement of the priority of its opposite: only where responsibility is expected can betrayal be possible. Curiously, then, Genet rejoins Lévinas in the implication that the relationship with the Other is characterized by obligation; where he differs is in his concentration on the fact that responsibility does not entail compulsion. In some respects, then, the texts of Genet and Lévinas confirm one another's assumptions whilst challenging one another's priorities. Read from the perspective of Lévinas, Genet's *Journal du voleur* appears dangerously solipsistic in its relegation of the Other to a mere bit player in the drama of the self. But by comparison

Lévinas appears utopian in his unconditional respect for the alterity of the Other, concentrating as he does on obligation, respect, responsibility, hospitality and generosity. Reading Genet in conjunction with Lévinas can serve to focus attention on the pervasive but often occluded knowledge in Lévinas's texts that ethical obligation does not regulate moral choice; I am just as likely to respond to the Other with violence as with respect, to banish him from my house as to invite her to enter (see *Totalité et infini*, pp. 147–48). *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Lévinas's most important work along with *Totalité et infini*, is movingly dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust,²⁰ yet the book itself has nothing to say about those victims; in the face of its own tragic knowledge, it can appear at moments like an exercise in wishful thinking. As Maurice Blanchot observes, 'Comment philosopher, comment écrire dans le souvenir d'Auschwitz [. . .]. C'est cette pensée qui traverse, porte, toute la philosophie de Lévinas et qu'il nous propose sans la dire, au-delà et avant toute obligation.'²¹ Lévinas has described his life as dominated 'par le pressentiment et le souvenir de l'horreur nazie',²² yet his life's work on ethics seems reticent or struck silent when faced with the areas of human cruelty charted with chilling intelligence by Genet.

Wayne Booth argues that ethical criticism 'attempts to describe the encounters of a story-teller's ethos with that of the reader or listener';²³ in similar vein, Martha Nussbaum proposes a mutually respectful alliance of philosophy and literature based upon a commitment to shared values.²⁴ But Genet offers a less amicable partnership built on shifting sands of pretence, indifference and betrayal; his unedifying texts demonstrate that non-encounters and sham dialogues may be just as characteristic of the experience of reading as the encounter or the alliance described by Booth and Nussbaum. Genet's work requires a less placid, more anxious account of the relationship between literature and ethics. The texts of Genet and Lévinas (for example) can be made to ask questions of one another which leave neither with the final word. The result, however indecisive, may yet contribute to what Genet's narrator, in a mischievous characterization of his own endeavour, describes as 'la poursuite d'une aventure morale' (p. 128).

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¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988), pp. 17–20.

² Booth, *The Company We Keep*, pp. 5–6 and 152.

³ David H. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz* (Hanover–London, Brown University Press, 1991), pp. 165 and 117.

⁴ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987); Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). See also Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Lévinas* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992).

⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 390.

⁶ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 311.

⁷ See Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 162; Nussbaum summarizes elements of James's moral ideal as 'a respect for the irreducibly particular character of a concrete moral context and the agents who are its components; a determination to scrutinize all aspects of this particular with intensely focused perception; a determination to care for it as a whole'.

⁸ See Jean Genet, *Journal du voleur* (Paris, Gallimard, 1949; Folio 493), p. 122: 'J'utilisais le moyen le plus court, mais je ne l'eusse pas fait si, en moi-même, ces objets, ces sentiments (la trahison, le vol, la lâcheté, la peur) n'eussent appelé le qualificatif réservé par vous à leurs contraires.' Subsequent references to *Journal du voleur* are given in brackets in the text.

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris, Gallimard, 1952), p. 83. Subsequent references are given in the text. On Sartre's pastiche of the Kantian categorical imperative in *Saint Genet*, see Christina Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 43–44.

¹⁰ I have discussed this issue briefly in 'Un captif amoureux and the Commitment of Jean Genet', in *French Studies Bulletin*, XXIII (1987), 16–18. For analysis of the different uses made of Genet by critics, particularly Sartre, Bataille and Derrida, see Gisèle A. Child Bickel, *Jean Genet: Criminalité et transcendance* (Saratoga, Anma Libri, 1987), pp. 1–22.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Glas: Que reste-t-il du savoir absolu?* (Paris, Denoël/Gonthier, 1981 (first edition Galilée 1974); two volumes paginated consecutively), pp. 203–05; subsequent references are given in the text.

¹² Elsewhere, however, Sartre is more sensitive to this aspect of Genet's writing; see for example *Saint Genet*, p. 646, where Sartre refers to Genet as 'l'unique destinataire de son message'. On the failure of communication in Genet's writing, see Georges Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, Idées (Paris, Gallimard, 1967), pp. 199–244.

¹³ For discussion of the dynamics of misreading, see Barbara Johnson, 'The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida', in *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore–London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 110–46.

¹⁴ See for example *Glas*, p. 50: 'C'est la première fois que j'ai peur, en écrivant, comme on dit, "sur" quelqu'un, d'être lu par lui'; see also p. 210.

¹⁵ See Serge Meitinger, 'L'Irréel de jouissance dans le *Journal du voleur* de Genet', in *Littérature*, 62 (1986), 71.

¹⁶ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré: Textes et entretiens* (Paris, Gallimard, 1991), p. 214.

¹⁷ This aspect of *Journal du voleur* has been thoroughly analysed in Michael Sheringham's excellent article, 'Narration and Experience in Genet's *Journal du voleur*', in Robert Gibson (ed.), *Studies in French Fiction in Honour of Vivienne Mylne* (London, Grant & Cutler, 1988), pp. 289–306.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, 4th edn (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971 (first edition 1961)), p. 12; subsequent references are given in the text.

¹⁹ Lévinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 3rd edn (Paris, Vrin, 1974 (first edition 1949)), p. 191.

²⁰ Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, 2nd edn (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1978 (first edition 1974)), p. v.

²¹ Maurice Blanchot, 'Notre compagne clandestine', in *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*, edited by François Laruelle (Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1980), pp. 86–87.

²² Lévinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*, 3rd edn (Paris, Albin Michel, 1976), p. 374.

²³ Booth, *The Company We Keep*, p. 8.

²⁴ See for example Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 282–83 and 390.