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Prison Time

Prisons and their inmates have too real an existence not to have a profound effect on people who remain free.

—Jean Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*

Lenin liked to think of prison as a university for revolutionaries. In a rather different way, Genet too was schooled in revolution during his time in prison. He studied intensively the transformative powers of love and desire. Genet's revolution centers around the destruction of the empty time that now imprisons us, and the constitution of a new time, a new rhythm of living. It is a transformation that is both material and immaterial, social and divine. Prison might well seem an unlikely or eccentric point of departure for a collective project of storming the heavens, but in Genet we find that prison time lies at the heart of our social order, and that its destruction is the condition for any revolution.

Prison time is the obvious form of punishment in our world. Freedom, that is, the control of our time, is conceived as the keystone and the most coveted possession in modern society, equal to all. By an indubitable logic, then, the paradigm for punishment is the loss of this most precious asset that all possess equally: time.¹ Prison takes our time in precisely determined quantities. Like the equations between labor-time and value, our society sets up an elaborate calculus familiar to all of us between crime and prison-time. Theft of a car equals six months; sale of illegal drugs equals five years; murder equals ten years. The concrete crime is abstracted, multiplied by a mysterious variable, and then made concrete again as punishment in a precise quantity of time. The calculations are utterly arbitrary (they do not even have the

1. "How could prison not be the penalty *par excellence* in a society in which liberty is a good that belongs to all in the same way . . . ?" (Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Vintage Books, 1977], 232).

YFS 91, *Genet: In the Language of the Enemy*, ed. Durham, © 1997 by Yale University.

horrible metonymic correlation of cutting off a hand for theft), but, while we may often question relative values on the two sides of the equation, we seldom doubt the viability of the calculus itself. Punishment equals time. Its logic is simply obvious from within our modern society. Through the prison, power is invested directly into time as a series of disciplines, regimentations, orderings.² Time is the measure of power, and once a sovereign power has our time it is loath to let it go. (Genet tells us, for example, that the corpse of a certain inmate was not given over to his family but had to remain temporarily in the prison because he still had three years left on his sentence.)³ Power in our society is above all power over our time.

Inmates commonly refer to the time they spend in prison as qualitatively different from time outside. Prison wastes time, destroys time, empties time. Prisoners get time for their crimes and do time to pay their dues. You can do your time hard or you can take it easy—that is a matter of attitude—but it is all equally wasted. The time is empty because of the repetitiveness of the prison schedule and routine. Time stretches out and collapses in a kind of optical illusion. Each day is filled with precisely specified, required activities and appointments. Time moves at a snail's pace; the day is never-ending. You watch that fly on the wall and its motions seem infinitely slow. Mealtime never seems to arrive. Look back at those days from a distance, however, and they are indistinguishable. They fold into each other like the bellows of an accordian. Time spent seems to have no duration, no substance, because of the precise repetition of its component parts, the homogeneity, the lack of novelty. Prison time is devoid of chance, it is fated time. Nothing is unforeseeable. All is planned in advance by a higher power. The many hands of prison authorities all seem to make concrete the all-powerful hand of fate that moves the inmate along the programmed path of prison time. Inmates try in vain to hold on to this ephemeral, fleeting time, giving it some concrete, if only symbolic, substance, crossing out days on a calendar, scratching notches in the wall—they mark time.

Inmates live prison as an exile from life, or rather, from the time of

2. "Time, operator of punishment." "Power is articulated directly onto time; it assures its control and guarantees its use" (Foucault, 160 and 108).

3. ". . . as for Botchako, if it is true that every prisoner must put in the time to which he was sentenced and as he still had three years to go, his family will not be able to claim his body until three years have elapsed . . ." (Jean Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, trans. Bernard Frechtman [New York: Grove Press, 1965], 234).

living.⁴ Time is always their primary concern. (Any inmate would trade twice the severity of punishment for half the time.) In prison time, the being itself of the inmates seems to have been emptied, reducing them to mere shadows that shuffle around the corridors. The weight of destiny, the fate imposed by the sovereign power of prison time seems to have pushed them out of their bodies, out of existence altogether. Prisoners are thus forced to seek an essence elsewhere, detached from their wasted, impoverished existence. Interior life appears to some as a refuge outside of time and beyond the pain and tedium of the prison routine. No matter how much they expose me to the brutal eye of prison authorities, no matter how many strip searches and humiliations, they can't touch the real me inside. Other inmates take consolation in feverishly imagining the fullness of a life of freedom outside the walls of their imprisonment—either their real past, an alternative present, or a future after their release. The first thing I'll do when I get out is . . . Then I'll really be living. This full being and full time cannot coincide with their existence, but must be projected always elsewhere. It should be no surprise that so many inmates undergo religious conversions. They are forced to grapple with one of the most intense metaphysical problematics and they suffer a properly ontological malady. They are constrained to an existence separate from being—this is their exile from living.

Those who are free, outside of prison looking in, might imagine their own freedom defined and reinforced in opposition to prison time. When you get close to prison, however, you realize that it is not really a site of exclusion, separate from society, but rather a focal point, the site of the highest concentration of a logic of power that is generally diffused throughout the world. Prison is our society in its most realized form. That is why, when you come into contact with the existential questions and ontological preoccupations of inmates, you cannot but doubt the quality of your own existence. If I am living that elsewhere of full being that inmates dream of, is my time really so full? Is my life really not wasted? My life too is structured through disciplinary regimes, my days move on with a mechanical repetitiveness—work, commute, tv, sleep. I do not have the same physical discomfort or the sexual deprivation, but even without the walls and bars my life ends up being strangely similar. More precisely, my time, whether cheerful or

4. “. . . the inmate tends to feel that for the duration of his required stay—his sentence—he has been totally exiled from living” (Erving Goffman, *Asylums* [New York: Anchor Books, 1961], 68).

drab, is often equally empty, equally wasted. I look back on my days and weeks and have the same experience of time folding onto itself, compressed like an accordion because it is empty. I live prison time in our free society, exiled from living. But how could one redeem time, how could one live a full time? The very existence of prison makes these questions necessary and urgent.

The miracle of Genet is to transform the empty, homogeneous time of prison life into full time. He attacks the problem at its point of highest intensity and seems to grasp a fullness of time where it is most denied. When the narrators of Genet's novels insist repeatedly that they love prison, he is not simply enjoying the perversity of reversing our expectations.⁵ "I am not trying to be scandalous."⁶ A response to social mores and common notions aimed only at violating public opinion would be a mere reactive gesture, confirming the norms in their transgression. No, that love of prison is real and true. The love of prison, however, should not be confused with a simple desire to be in prison or a preference for prison over the society outside. Genet's characters do not choose to go to prison because of their love for it or because of its beauty; they do all they can to avoid arrest, and do nothing to resist their release. Theft and assault are given as the proximate causes of imprisonment, but finally the characters seem to be guided to prison by the force of destiny. What we need to understand and elaborate in Genet is the complex relationship between love and destiny. In a first moment, we will see that love involves our power to accept the force of destiny in a state of divine abjection; then, in a second moment, love takes an active role, capable of transforming the world and forging a new destiny.

THE SAINTLINESS OF EXPOSURE

During the theft, my body is exposed. I know that it is sparkling with all my gestures. The world is attentive to all my movements. . . .

—*The Thief's Journal*

The fullness of being in Genet begins with the fact that he never seeks an essence elsewhere—being resides only and immediately in our exis-

5. "I love Mettray, that paradise in the heart of royal Touraine" (*Miracle of the Rose*, 171). "I've got lots of time for making my fingers fly! Ten years to go! My good, my gentle friend, my cell! My sweet retreat, mine alone, I love you so!" (Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, trans. Frechtman [New York: Grove Press, 1963], 129).

6. Genet, *The Thief's Journal*, trans. Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 214.

tence. And the exposure of that existence is what allows being to appear. This is the first key to understanding Genet's transformative ontological project. The primary appeal of theft, for example, is that in the act the thief is fully exposed. Genet's thief is neither the invisible body that slides unperceived in and out of the social order; nor is he the sovereign criminal that tries to force the world to obey his own rules. This thief is the exposed body open to the world. It should not be surprising that Genet finds this same exposure in the body of the prisoner.⁷ Prisoners are never really alone, but always open to contact with other inmates and guards. Two prisoners might share an intimate moment crossing paths on the stairs, but it is never long until another inmate passes along or a guard questions them. In effect, the prisoner is exposed to the prison itself, a complex organism that consists of walls, gates, inmates, guards, and so forth. Like that of the thief, the body of the inmate is exposed, open to the world. In this exposure the bodies are fully realized and they shine in all their gestures.

Genet's exposure is in part the acceptance of the reality of material forces, the acceptance of fate. Exposure to the world is not the search for an essence elsewhere, but the full dwelling in this world, the belief in this world. The unexposed might construct an interior world, a separate realm of depths and abysses; exposure, in contrast, lays all of being equally on the surface, in the flesh. Exposed being is univocal, being is said always and everywhere in the same voice. It is not defined by being different in itself. When we expose ourselves to the force of things we realize this ontological condition, the immanence of being in existence. We merge with the destiny we are living and are swept along in its powerful flux. Here we enter "the universe of the irremediable. It is the same as the one we were in, with one peculiar difference: instead of acting and knowing we are acting, we know we are acted upon" (*Our Lady of the Flowers*, 246). The world is as it is, things are as they are, thus, irremediably.⁸ They have always been that way but now their surfaces seem to sparkle and glow. Exposed, irremediable, we lose

7. "In general, of course, the inmate is never fully alone; he is always within sight and often earshot of someone, if only his fellow inmates. Prison cages with bars for walls fully realize such exposure" (Goffman, 25).

8. "The Irreparable is that things are just as they are, in this or that mode, consigned without remedy to their way of being. States of things are irreparable, whatever they may be: sad or happy, atrocious or blessed. How you are, how the world is—this is the Irreparable" (Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993], 90).

the separateness, the detachment of our selves. Fixed identities melt, our boundaries dissolve, and we merge with the force of things into the univocal surface of the world. Exposure is a sort of sublime passivity, a joyful abjection. The juvenile delinquents merge into the colony itself; the inmates enter the oneness of the prison; the thief's gestures glitter in the unity of the world. Exposure is precisely the realization of the univocity and singularity of being, and our equal and absolute immersion or participation in it.

Exposure is the first step on Genet's path to divinity. But why should he burden with religious terminology this ontological claim about the immanence of essence in existence and the univocal oneness of being? Is it merely a reactive kind of heresy and mockery, revenge on the Catholic Church for the suffering it has caused? That may be true in part, but that reactive gesture in no way accounts for the intensity of Genet's experience. Genet finds divinity where life has a heightened intensity, a charge, where the world seems to sparkle, where in the exposure of its surfaces the oneness of being shines forth. The divine is not hidden in any beyond, any transcendental space, but immanent and exposed in the surface of things. "One is a saint by the force of things that is the force of God!" (*Miracle of the Rose*, 264; translation modified). The force of God is nothing other than the force of things, the material surfaces of existence. (*Deus sive Natura*, as Spinoza says.) Saintliness is, then, precisely our openness to the force of things, our exposure to the world. The saint can be recognized by a certain abjection with respect to the force of things, a passive acceptance of circumstance. Genet defies abjection. This abject body of the saint, however, should not be conceived simply as subject to and dominated by the force of things—that would still be to conceive it as separate. Rather, through its openness, its exposure, the saint's flesh is infused with the force of things and becomes one with it. Exposure actualizes the divinity of the flesh. The existence of the saint is always condemned, swept along in the force of destiny. Genet finds this saintly exposure most intense in the gestures of the thief, in the bodies of abject convicts, and in the faces of murderers condemned to death, but these are not unique instances, they are instead examples or singularities that allow us to recognize the divine across the surfaces of being, throughout the world. And this in turn should help explain Genet's narrators' mysterious love of prison. "I loved my Colony with my flesh . . ." (*Miracle of the Rose*, 237). This love is the ultimate sign of exposure. In the flesh of the saint,

essence (the force of God) coincides fully and irremediably with existence (the force of things); this divine coincidence makes the body glow. That is why the flesh of a saint is always bathed in a halo.

This exposure is erotic precisely in the sense that it dissolves the separateness, the self-possession, the discontinuity of individual things, and thus opens onto an absolute continuity across being. In movement and rest, bodies decompose certain relationships and compose others under the sway of the material flux of desires. This operation overcomes or rather melts away the prison of the self and its isolation. Genet loses himself in erotic exposure, or, more precisely, his boundaries, along with the boundaries of all things, are transformed into thresholds open to flows and intensities, swept in the divine tides of the force of things. Together with a long tradition of mystics, Genet discovers a divine energy in erotic exposure.

THE ABOLITION OF TIME

[T]he walls crumbled, time turned to dust.

—*Miracle of the Rose*

Exposure itself, however, is not enough for Genet. Our abject acceptance of our existence and our openness to being, risk a certain indifference. Exposure must be accompanied by a power of constitution and love to fill that exposed being. Prison walls separating us from our desires, isolating us from contact, prohibiting encounters, seem to make love impossible. The sexual deprivation that is one of the centerpieces of the prison regime is only indicative of a more general deprivation of affect. Genet challenges this isolation, this exile from affect, with an active project. In Genet's writings the amorous event (whether fantasized or experienced in the flesh) shakes the very foundations of the prison walls and destroys their powers of separation. An inmate fantasizes about his loved one condemned to death, for example, and the walls dance, shaken by the seismic energy of the event: "The prison leaps and trembles! Help, we are moving!" ("Le condamné à mort," *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 215). Or alternatively, two inmates share a spark of love in the corridor and "the walls crumbled, time turned to dust . . ." (*Miracle of the Rose*, 46). In the moment of the event the segmentations or striation of prison space dissolve and give way to a smooth space of love. The inmates are no longer isolated but fully exposed. Exposure is the condition of possibility of the amorous event

and vice versa. Like the musicians parading around Jericho, the event seems to have the mysterious power to batter down walls.

This destruction of space, however, the tumbling of walls that Genet imagines in the moment of love can only remain partial. Even Harcamone, the glorious saint awaiting execution, mustering all his strength along with the amorous energy sent by Jean—even he is not powerful enough finally to perform the miracle of passing through all the prison walls. The reality of prison walls is infuriatingly stubborn. The miraculous power of the event is perhaps better understood in temporal terms—“time turned to dust.” When love arises, prison time, its regimentation, and its tedium wither away. “I should have liked to talk to you about encounters. I have a notion that the moment that provoked—or provokes—them is located outside of time, that the shock spatters the surrounding time and space . . .” (*Our Lady of the Flowers*, 146). We should be careful to distinguish events from encounters here. Encounters are provoked by events that come from the outside; in fact, it would be more proper to say that the event itself transports us outside time. The event has no time of its own, it is never present, it has no duration. It strikes like a bolt of lightning, or arrives as a herald from far away announcing the abolition of time. In the passionate event, for an infinite and infinitesimal moment, we escape the tedium and emptiness of prison time.

The event is never actual (neither in the temporal nor existential sense of the French *actuel*); it is purely virtual. The event is thus not properly understood as a state of things. It may be actualized in a state of things or an encounter—an arrangement of bodies, affects, and so forth—but it always remains distinct, outside that actualization, that state. The event is a *klinamen*, a moment of rupture like the throw of the dice. It shatters the fixity of the destiny we had been living. It opens up the chaos of chance and cuts a path or plane across its universe. This is the region outside of time that provokes Genet’s encounters. The event never occurs in time. It ruptures time, defies destiny—time turns to dust. On the other hand, however, the event is the very potential that subtends time itself. It is at once the abolition of time and its condition of possibility. One might call the event transcendent, then, in the sense that it seems to fly above or outside our temporal existence. This transcendence, however, inheres within temporality itself, as its condition of possibility; it is an innermost exteriority. It may be more clear, then, to recognize the event as pure virtuality: real without being actual, ideal without being abstract. The event is the pure imma-

nence of the virtual that is not actualized.⁹ Perhaps the halo that surrounds divine objects is caused precisely by the pure immanence of what remains inactual in them. It is the glow of the virtual. The event has no beginning, no end, no duration—and as such it gives us no time for living. Death might be imagined precisely as this virtual state of being outside of time.¹⁰ The experience of the event is thus both ecstatic and unlivable.

CEREMONIAL CONSTITUTIONS

We are a book of familiar and living history in which the poet can decipher the signs of the Eternal Return

—*Miracle of the Rose*

The event shatters prison time with a pure and unlivable liberation. It is the moment of pure chance, the moment of the throw of the dice, the opening of the universe of chaos, the absolute destruction of the destiny we had been living. The event itself, however, is unlivable precisely because it refuses actualization, because it has no time. The event destroys prison time but fails to offer an alternative. It is the pure negation of time itself. Living requires an alternative time, a positive articulation or actualization. We have to elaborate the event [*dresser l'événement*] as a mode of life, a living state of things.¹¹ The first step of this temporal constitution will move from the event to the encounter. Without this articulation of an alternative time, our escape from prison time is only a flash, not even a moment, brief and ephemeral—we are still confined to an exile from living. In other words, we have to construct a way that the moment of love will return, that it will repeat incessantly to mark a temporal density, a duration that will be the material structure of a new time. The eternal return of the moment of love will be the fabric of our new destiny.

Saintliness consists, then, not only in the abject openness that makes possible the arrival of the event, that makes possible the birth of love, it also involves a positive and active construction. The saint is finally defined by his or her creative powers. Divinity is not only the realization of being in existence, it is not only a matter of exposure, it

9. “[I]t is the pure immanence of what is not actualized or what remains indifferent to actualization, because its reality does not depend on it. The event is immaterial, incorporeal, unlivable: pure *reserve*” (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* [Paris: Minuit, 1991], 148). Translation mine.

10. See, for example, Genet, *The Screens*, trans. Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 144.

11. See Deleuze and Guattari, 36 and 151.

involves also the constitution of being itself. If Genet is God, as Sartre tells us, his divinity lies not in his playing at God, an omnipotent creator separate from its creatures in a private or fictitious world, but rather in Genet's revealing our common potential to constitute reality, to constitute being.¹² The power of creation, the power to cause our own existence, is divine.

The constitution of being requires a consistency over time, a continual repetition, a duration. This is a point at which Genet, like his beloved Sudanese revolutionary Mubarak,¹³ shows himself to be profoundly Spinozian. Like Spinoza, Genet too begins his entire project from the simple affirmation: we still do not know what bodies can do. Our exposure casts us fully on the material plane of bodies and the force of things. But how are different bodies composable in new relationships, new encounters? How can we make our joyful encounters return? How can we constitute a new mode of living, a new world, out of these joyful encounters? An event may intervene in our life and give rise to a joyful encounter, but we cannot guarantee that joy will return since the cause of the encounter comes from outside, unknown to us. The fortuitous joyful encounter, however, is a gift—it presents us with a certain opportunity. If we recognize what is common to that body and our own, if we discover the way that body agrees with our own and how our bodies together compose a new body, we can ourselves cause that joyful encounter to return. This is how Spinoza conceives our active constitution of a joyful mode of living.¹⁴ And love is the driving force in this constitution. The organization of joyful encounters is the increase in our power, our power to act and our power to exist—that is a Spinozian notion of love. This eternal return of the joyful encounter is a constitution of being, not in the sense that it fixes an immobile identity (far from it), but rather in that it defines a movement, a becoming, a trajectory of encounters, always open and unforeseeable, contin-

12. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint-Genet*, trans. Frechtman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 476.

13. "The only boss I recognize is a Jew—Spinoza" (Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray [Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989], 296).

14. "When we encounter a body that agrees with our own, when we experience a joyful passive affection, we are induced to form the idea of what is common to that body and our own. . . . We must then, by *the aid of joyful passions*, form the idea of what is common to some external body and our own. For this idea alone, this common notion, is adequate" (Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Margin Joughin [New York: Zone Books, 1990], 282–83. See also, Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993], 95–100.

uously susceptible to the intervention of the new events.¹⁵ The return of the joyful encounter is the first thread from which we will weave an alternative, constituent time.

The encounter, in contrast to the event, already presents a certain notion of duration, but in order really to constitute time those encounters have to return. Genet's writings are filled with incessant repetitions; the books seem to be written in waves. Encounters return in the form of the ceremonial. "My adventure, never governed by rebellion or a feeling of injustice, will be merely one long mating, burdened and complicated by a heavy, strange, erotic ceremonial (figurative ceremonies leading to jail and anticipating it)" (*The Thief's Journal*, 10). Genet's ceremonials are always ceremonials of love. They consist in the infinite repetition of joyful encounters. The ceremonial finally brings the event into time, making it a time of living. It is thus the constitution of a new destiny that insists on its own rigidity, insists on being carried out without fail.

Genet is well known for his propensity for betrayal, even of those he loves. But we should be careful on this point. He will betray any fixed or constituted identity and he will disobey the law, at times only to prove that he will not be ruled by them. His affirmation of betrayal is the refusal of any obedience, an absolute insubordination: "don't serve any purpose whatever" (*The Screens*, 199). This general betrayal is the proof of singularity. We should not extend this notion, however, to mean that Genet refuses "to participate in any sociality at all."¹⁶ Genet will betray any purpose or fixed identity but will pursue unendingly a process of constitution, a becoming, a ceremonial. "You've no right to change anything in the ceremonial, unless, of course, you hit upon some cruel detail that heightens it."¹⁷ The only departure from the ceremonial will be one that intensifies its line of constitution. One might say that Genet does not betray the ceremonial, but that would imply a relationship of subordination to it. It would be more accurate

15. "The *klinamen* . . . provokes an encounter with the neighboring atom and from encounter to encounter there is a pile-up [*un carambolage*] and the birth of a world. . . . Each encounter is aleatory. . . . [I]nstead of conceiving contingency as a modality or exception of necessity, one must conceive necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingents" (Louis Althusser, "Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre," in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, vol. 1 [Paris: Éditions STOCK/IMEC, 1994], 541 and 566).

16. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 168.

17. Genet, *The Blacks*, trans. Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 18.

to say that his life, his new mode of living is constituted by the rhythm and movement of the ceremonial. Genet abandons himself (and any notion of self) in his equal immersion or participation in the ceremonial. This ceremonial is the basic figure of the new time, the time of joyful encounters, that we will to return.

How silly it would be for Genet to follow the classical dictate about the unity of time in his theater. What sense would it make to create drama if we were only to repeat in it the time of the world we had been living, the empty prison time of our society? Already in the solitude and detachment of prison Genet discovered the power of creating time. "In the cell, gestures can be made with extreme slowness. You can stop in the middle of one. You are master of time and of thinking. . . . That is what the luxury of cell life is composed of. . . . Eternity flows into the curve of a gesture" (*Miracle of the Rose*, 156). The time Genet created in his cell was perhaps a first elaboration of the temporal constitutions he would articulate on stage. His private prison ceremonies, conducted in the dark, under the covers, were experiments in miniature of the collective ceremonial creations of the theater. What theater must do above all is create a new time, that is, a new rhythm and mode of living. It is perhaps symptomatic of this mandate that in the production of *The Screens*, Genet is continually preoccupied with the varying speed and slowness of the dialogue. The letters to Roger Blin, the play's producer, and the instructions in the margin of the text are filled with indications on the rhythm in which the actors should deliver their lines: "very fast," "very, very slowly," "very rapid," "make the rhythm of Sir Harold and Blankensee more lively." The dizzying accelerations and luxurious slowness are the construction of a new gait, a new pace for existence. The ceremonies, as they gather a collective mass and repetition, create a new temporality that is not limited to the few hours of performance but expands into a new time of living.

As Sartre suggests, Genet realizes he is bound to destiny and thus he makes destiny his own.¹⁸ This formulation, however, risks obscuring the complexity of this operation and the transformation involved in it. Genet does not simply accept the dead, homogeneous, empty time imposed on him by society, nor does he resist it in a dialectical struggle. He abandons that time, abolishes it in the pure virtuality of

18. "Since he cannot escape fatality, he will be his own fatality. . . . He wills his destiny; he will try to love it" (Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 49–50).

the event, outside of time. Prison time, our common destiny, expels all chance, but the event opens up chance like the moment of a cosmic throw of the dice, shattering destiny in the chaos of the universe. In a second moment the dice fall back, come to rest, and display a new number.¹⁹ This is the constitution of a new destiny, as fixed as the first but now full of our desire. Here is the joyful encounter that we will to return eternally. The ceremonial must be performed precisely because it is the repetition of our desire—you have no right to change anything unless you intensify our desire. We will it to return. And yet this ceremonial time, this new destiny can be shattered at any moment by a new thunderbolt coming from outside time, a new event, opening again the entire process. Event-encounter-ceremonial: Genet's process of transformation has this clearly defined trajectory of constitution. The new time that emerges from the process is the destiny that Genet makes his own.

REVOLUTIONARY TIME

There were the Zengakuren in Japan in 1966; the Red Guard in China; the student unrest at Berkeley; the Black Panthers; May 1968 in Paris; the Palestinians.

—*Prisoner of Love*

Genet's literary work is never entirely separate from his life outside the writing. The boundaries of the work continually blur with autobiography and reportage. One might speculate that the fact that art is consigned to a realm separate from life is what led Genet at different times in his life to abandon writing to pursue his project in a larger realm. What is important, in any case, is that the constituent time that we have been tracing not be isolated to the work of art but extend to a time of living, in other words, that it enter or constitute history. History, however, as it is often conceived, appears merely as the crystallization of prison time, homogeneous and empty. Long temporal series collapse under the fixity of one immobile destiny, one idea, one homogeneous stream of progress—with the same accordion effect we experience in prison. In such a notion of history, there seems paradoxically to be no movement and no time, only a rigid pantheon of constituted identi-

19. "[T]he hand of the dice player, raised up high, hovers a moment then turns over and spills the numbers on to the marble, spills fate on to the café table. The dice make a terrible noise as they fall, urgent as the beat of a drum. But now that fate has spoken the gambler's fingers relax and come back to rest on the table" (*Prisoner of Love*, 249).

ties, nations, and sovereign powers. A notion of history founded on the event is something altogether different. The time of this history is always becoming, always unforeseeable, open to chance, and continuously formed by our desires, our joyful encounters.²⁰ Any notion of sovereignty is destabilized by this perpetual and unpredictable movement. History is thus now recognized as the chaos of a multitude of desires become coherent, temporarily, in constituent groups, patterns, or movements—in a procession of encounters. This constituent history, in contrast to a constituted history, is the extended elaboration of the ceremonials that animate the time of Genet's writing.

Every revolution arrives as an event that blasts open the continuum of history.²¹ The revolutionary event always bursts into history from out of time—"to have been dangerous for a thousandth of a second" (*Prisoner of Love*, 239). But then the revolutionary movement must articulate that event in time with a repeated series of gestures and encounters. Genet is drawn to certain revolutionary groups, then, in part because of their theatricality. He discovered a kind of living theater, for example, in the hair styles and dress of the Black Panthers. In effect, Genet finds in revolutionary movements the same ceremonial constitutions he worked to create in his own novels and plays, cast now on a larger scale. These groups manage to live collectively, for varying durations, an open, constituent history.

Genet was charmed by a card game that he witnessed during his time with the Palestinians. The fedayeen were forbidden by their leaders to play cards; gambling might lead to other vices and allow outsiders to question the morality of the fighters. The fedayeen played poker nonetheless, but with imaginary cards in their hands. They considered their empty hands carefully, dropped nonexistent cards on the floor and picked them up nonchalantly, and triumphantly showed their winning combinations with luxurious slowness and solemnity. They carried on their game or ceremony with a serene calm. Their leaders did not want them handling kings, queens, and jacks—all symbols of power. They had no power in their hands, no sovereignty, no

20. "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], 261).

21. "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" (Benjamin, 261).

fixed territory or identity. Real cards, even as mere symbols of sovereign powers, might have mitigated their exposure. Instead, in their virtual card game the fedayeen were totally exposed; their existence was completely open to chance, to the event of revolution.²² The fedayeen were like living dice cast on the open desert floor. “[M]any of those who fought in the case of the Palestinians—those card-players without cards—were regarded in Europe as outcasts without any real identity, without any legitimate link with a recognized country, and above all without a territory belonging to them and to which they belonged, with the usual proofs of existence . . . ” (*Prisoner of Love*, 204). Genet saw the Palestinian movement as completely open, without sovereignty, identity, or fixed territory—a constant flux of revolutionary desire.

Revolution is defined by the continuous movement of a constituent power. Whenever a revolutionary process is closed down in a constituted power—a sovereign identity, a State, a nation—the revolution ceases to exist.²³ In the same way, revolutionary time should be conceived as a constituent time in contrast to the constituted, homogeneous, empty time of sovereign powers. Revolutionary time finally marks our escape from prison time into a full mode of living, unforeseeable, exposed, open to desire. This mode of living is at all times constituent of our new, revolutionary time.²⁴ Prison time, however, will always return as soon as that revolutionary time is closed down, as soon as rebels allow the revolt to congeal, as soon as a constituted power is erected. We do not break out of prison once and then remain free; our alternative existence must be a continuous project in perpetual motion. Revolutionary time is a never-ending means without an end. Any end would destroy it. Genet will only tolerate this new constituent time. “[T]he day when the Palestinians are institutionalized, I will no longer be at their side. The day when the Palestinians become a nation like another nation, I will no longer be there” (Interview with Wischenbart, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 6, 282). Genet will betray the Palestinians, as he will betray any identity, when it has closed down

22. “[T]he card game [of the Palestinians] . . . is a style, a principle of deterritorialization . . . ” (Guattari, “Genet retrouvé,” in *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* [Paris: Galilée, 1989], 283).

23. See Antonio Negri, *Constituent Power*, trans. Maurizio Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

24. “Liberated time is a *machine* of constitution.” “Outside of a materialist, collective, and dynamic conception of time it is impossible to conceive of the revolution” (Negri, *Macchina tempo* [Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982], 330 and 253).

revolutionary time in merely a new sovereignty. Becoming a State like all the others would negate the revolutionary force of the Palestinians.²⁵ Genet may betray a constituted State but he will never deny the revolutionary force of things. He may betray any identity (in fact, he would happily betray all identities) but he will continuously, without fail, abandon himself to the constituent time, the ceremonial time, the revolutionary time that always remains open and exposed. This revolutionary time is the time of love.

25. "The idea of accepting some territory, however small, where the Palestinians would have a government, a capital . . . the idea was such heresy that even to entertain it as a hypothesis was a mortal sin, a betrayal of the revolution" (*Prisoner of Love*, 266).