CHAPTER SEVEN

GENET : ARTAUD REALISED
Modern playwrights have paid homage to Antonin Artaud in various degrees of acceptance—some by introducing shock tactics and spectacle, others by reducing the dramatic significance of the spoken word in the theatre. But it is Jean Genet—the criminal as dramatist—who has faithfully explored that mysterious territory which was blueprinted by Artaud. The arrival of Jean Genet has made Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty relevant and meaningful, and the spiritual exploration of this mysterious universe will, hopefully, not end with Genet. As we see his plays or read them critically, we begin to see how Artaud's theatrical vision is being gradually realized. Everything Genet does recalls the master:

We intend to base the theatre upon the spectacle before everything else...the theatre must give us everything that's in crime, love, war or madness if it wants to recover its necessity...a violent and concentrated action is a kind of lyricism; it summons up supernatural images, a blood stream of images, a bleeding spurt of images in the poet's head and in the spectator's as well...the image of a crime presented in requisite theatrical conditions is something infinitely more terrible for the spirit than that same crime when actually committed...a drama which, without resorting to the defunct images of the old myths, shows us that it can extract the forces which
struggle within them...a theatre that induces trance, as the dances of the Dervishes induce trance...a passionate and convulsive conception of life...the reality of imagination and dreams will appear on equal footing with life...great social upheavals, conflicts between people and races....

The theatre-going public has been acquiring a taste for Genet's theatre that is incandescent, incantatory and inflammable. It sets the audience free from their inhibitions and liberates them because stage violence and spectacle do have a therapeutic effect though Genet does not create a dramatic experience keeping therapy in mind - no dramatist ever does - it is just his mode of dramatic communication. He reaches the innermost sanctum of the audience by a direct assault on their aural and visual senses; the words are skilfully deployed not to heighten their own meaning but to add to the incantatory magic of the spectacle.

Genet's personal life, as revealed in his autobiography The Thief's Journal and Sartre's remarkable book Saint Genet (1952), may have created the dynamics of defiance and into revolt transmuted into drama, but the mode of communication, that of a series of incantatory, mirrored, mock-ritualistic spectacles was dictated by a desire to reach the audience directly, by-passing conceptual language or mediation of a lineal development of a suspense-ridden, conventional plot.
By the ritualistic enactment of the ghosts of his own mind, those figures of authority who tortured him, he almost transcends his own personal life and in the process reveals what lies behind the facade of social structure. He discovers that behind this facade lies another facade of deception which reveals a still further deception...a pyramid of fantasies with no reference point to look at the world, a hall of mirrors with no exit, a 'Kantian' phenomenal world which echoes back our own limited sensibilities. Man is trapped in this hall of illusions as Stilitano the notorious thief mentioned by Genet in The Thief's Journal was trapped in the hall of mirrors much to the mockery and amusement of the spectators:

Stilitano was alone. Every one had found the way out except he. Strangely the universe veiled itself for me. The shadow that suddenly fell over things and people was the shadow of my solitude confronted with this despair, for no longer able to shout, to butt himself against the walls of glass, resigned at being a mockery for the gaping crowd, Stilitano had crouched down on the floor, refusing to go on...

That's the absurdity of the situation: not to know the truth, not to find the way out of the labyrinth. When life is constantly subject to mutability, it becomes impossible to know reality from illusion, face from mask. Pirandello too makes dramatic use of illusion but behind that illusion there is reality. For him that is the end. For Genet there is no end to illusion because behind that
illusion lies another... *ad absurdum.* He is not asking us to accept illusion as reality; he is not asking us to come to terms with illusion; he is not asking anything; he is a dramatist, not a philosopher.

Genet's theatre is like a labyrinth of distorting mirrors where man, in order to break out into reality howls in anguish which echoes back at him with a savage mockery. This interminable sequence of grotesque images, fantasies, deceptions, nightmares is viewed from the abysmal depths, from the point of view of the lowest, the most degraded human beings, homosexuals, cut-throats, prostitutes, maniacs and neurotics, covered with a thick layer of excreta. His mode of dramatic communication is mock-ritual and does not depend upon the strength of plot construction. Like other Absurdists he does away with the traditional dramatic action from exposition to resolution. It is the unfolding of the pattern consisting of distorted stage images buttressed with an equally tortured incantatory language that shocks and fascinates the audience as a living dramatic experience. In a world of fantasy, language, more incantatory than analytical, is subservient to the visual; the total poetry of the theatre.

However, his first play *Deathwatch* has the appearance of being written in a naturalistic convention though he insists that it is to be presented as if it were a dream.
The long act takes place in a cell where three characters—Green Eyes, Lefranc, and Maurice—live in a hierarchy topped by the absent Snowball, the convicted negro murderer. Green Eyes, too, is a murderer but of a lesser breed because his act was not of his own choice; the act chose him. But he is an idol to Lefranc, a petty thief, and to Maurice, a juvenile delinquent. Lefranc and Maurice struggle to win the esteem and friendship of Green Eyes. On behalf of the illiterate Green Eyes, Lefranc writes letters to his girlfriend, but attempts to separate her from him. Green Eyes, having discovered this, asks his two admirers which of them would be willing to murder the girl after he was convicted and sentenced to death. But then the prison guard enters and offers Green Eyes a cigarette from the absent Snowball. Green Eyes offers the guard his girlfriend, thus shattering his own image.

Maurice taunts Lefranc about his phoney crimes till Lefranc, in order to approximate to the image of his hero, Green Eyes, strangles Maurice in cold blood. Lefranc says to Green Eyes, "I wanted to take your place—your luminous place." Then Green Eyes discloses that he did not choose to murder. It was done just in a fit of frenzy. Lefranc looked for glory in crime, in the murder of Maurice, because of some deeper need. In order to become one with Green Eyes he commits murder but is left alone, desolate. Green Eyes lives in the image of Snowball as Lefranc and Maurice live.
In the reflected glory of Green Eyes as they perceive it, they perceive it, thus all three characters live not in their own identities but as images of others, reflections of reflections.

The effect of the play would be marred totally if it were staged as a neurealistic play because in that case it would slide into melodrama. The play has to be presented as a ceremonial with an exaggerated dreamlike movement of poetic intensity. Genet asked for harsh colours, gorgeous make-up and stylized gesture - "the whole play unfolds as if in a dream." Apparently the total meaning of the play would depend upon, and would emerge from, the theatrical mode. Genet had to make stage directions explicit because the text of the play does not incorporate and control the ritualistic mode of performance as it does in his later plays like The Balcony, The Blacks and The Screens where dramatic conventions have become stage techniques. In other words, in Deathwatch a particular mode of performance has to be grafted onto a play written in a different mode. The result may not be very satisfactory but it shows the direction in which the playwright wanted to move.

However, Deathwatch, theoretically speaking, is Genet's first attempt in probing the idea of illusion. Lefranc through the murder of Maurice digs into the illusion to reach the reality - Green Eyes - whose purity as we have seen turns out to be a mirage. Through
violence he wanted to reach the stature of Green Eyes and Snowball - the divine or the diabolical, but the act of violence turns to ashes in his mouth. Nonetheless, the play does not show that Genet is tilting against his enemies or trying to destroy the establishment. Structurally it seems to have been influenced by Sartre's Huis Clos, and has homosexual overtones.

Genet's next play The Maids is a mock-ritual but has the same pattern as Deathwatch. Claire and Solange, two sisters, who are maidservants to Madame, act the part of the Madame, and her maid. Claire plays the role of the Madame, and Solange, that of the Maid Claire. The Madame who is being dressed by her maid acts arrogant and haughty while the maid acts servile, and they both use barbed language and taunt each other. The illusion of the ritual act is shattered by the ringing of the alarm clock. Whenever their mistress is absent the two servants indulge in this fantasy turn by turn. They have a love-hate relationship with their lady. They write anonymous letters to the police to get Monsieur, the Madame's lover, arrested. But Monsieur is let out on bail which frightens them because they might be found out. They decide to kill the Madame by giving her poisoned tea when she returns. On seeing the telephone off the hook she is informed of the Monsieur's release on bail and she rushes out without having tea. They, once again, start the game and
acting

Claire insists on playing her role to the limit, that is, she insists on being served the poisoned cup of tea and dies in the role of the Madame.

Claire and Solange are mirror-images of each other who try to become images of the Madame who herself reflects the glory and affluence of her lover, Monsieur. This is the mirrored cell in which the two servants find themselves trapped. As Claire says, "I am sick of seeing my image thrown back at me by a mirror, like a bad smell." While role-playing as the Madame, Claire condemns the whole lower class: "Your frightened, guilty faces, your puckered elbows, your wasted bodies, only fit for cast-offs! You're distorting mirrors, our loathsome vent, our shame, our dregs." Thus their reflections, which reflect each other, are the reflections of their upper class superiors who themselves reflect, in their turn, people superior to themselves. "In this pyramid of fantasies," says Jean Paul Sartre, "the ultimate appearance destroys the reality of all others."5

The absurdity of the situation is that what we regard as the reality is nothing but a reflection of something else... thus leaving us with no final reference point, no anchor, no point of certainty - only probabilities, shifting images, reducing man to hopelessness, desolation. It is interesting to note what Genet himself says about The Maids:
I tried to establish a 'distanciation' which, in allowing a declamatory tone, would carry the theatre into the theatre. I thus hoped also to obtain the abolition of characters...and to replace them by symbols as far removed as possible, at first from what they are to signify, and yet still attached to it in order to link by this sole means author and audience; in short, to make the characters on the stage merely the metaphors of what they were to represent...

Claire and Solange cease to be mimetic representation of characters in real life. They are symbols of that attitude that binds outcasts to the society in which each relation is a reflection of something else. Thus the theatre becomes a palace of illusion where a character tries to achieve reality of being by piercing the illusion, but to no purpose. It is no surprise that the only way Claire could become the Madame, the reality, is by taking the cup of poisoned tea herself. The only way Solange could achieve the reality of being Madame is serving her (Claire-Madame) the poisoned tea.

It is a difficult exercise standing for too long in Genet's palace of mirrors, because we too begin to feel like his thief-hero, Stilitano who hid his face in the hall of mirrors in the fair ground.

Claire: I'll drink it anyway. Let me have it (Solang brings the tray). And you've poured it into the best, the finest tea set. (She takes the cup and drinks, while Solange, facing the Audience, delivers the end of her speech)
Solange: The Orchestra is playing brilliantly. The attendant is raising the red velvet curtain. He bows. Madame is descending the stairs. Her furs brush against the green plants. Madame steps into the car. Monsieur is whispering sweet nothings in her ear. She would like to smile, but she is dead. She rings the bell. The porter yawns. He opens the door. Madame goes up the stairs. She enters her flat - but, Madame is dead. Her two maids are alive: they're just risen up, free, from Madame's icy form. All the maids were present at her side - not they themselves, but rather the hellish agony of their names. And all that remains of them to float about Madame's airy corpse is the delicate perfume of the holy maidsens which they were in secret. We are beautiful, joyous, drunk, and free!

The whirligig of the world of illusion continues unabated.

As an absurd play The Balcony is a highly entertaining series of ritualistic spectacles presented against repeated bursts of machine guns. The communication with the audience, aural and visual but not dependent upon the traditional mode of dramatic communication viz., plot-action line, is immediate. As the play proceeds we begin to realize that behind this charade, behind this hoax, Genet is asking a metaphysical question: What is reality, if all is role-playing?

The Balcony is a brothel where the clients indulge in fantasies of power. It is a house of deception, of illusion. As Y use Irac says: "The grand Balcony has a worldwide reputation. It is the most artful, yet the most decent
house of illusion." And as one finishes critical reading of the play or goes out of the theatre, one's critical consciousness begins to question the reality itself: Isn't the world itself a grand balcony where everyone is playing a role? The idea of role-playing has been a part of modern man's consciousness since long, but Genet presents the whole reality of man as absurd. The questions which the dramatic presentation raises are very disturbing.

The play opens with a sodomurated Bishop who has already played his role, sitting in the middle of the stage and being asked to go home. He is being disrobed and in this process he begins to shrink to his ridiculous puny size though he becomes more and more eloquent. It is through the eloquence of role-playing clients of the brothel that Genet hurls abuses at the audience and shocks them into a new awareness.

The language instead of becoming an instrument of character or a means of development of story or dialogue, is used for its sonority to heighten the spectacle or stretch it for lyrical effect even though it becomes absurd etymologically.

The Bishop: (Turning to the mirror and declaiming)
Ornaments! Mitres! Laces! you, above all, oh gilded cope, you protect me from the world. Where are my legs, where are my arms? Under your scalloped, lustrous flaps, what have my hands been doing? Fit only for fluttering gestures, they've become
This is not a soliloquy of self-revelation but a soliloquy of abuse. Through this incandescent but derogatory language Genet not only demolishes the symbols of authority but makes the spectacle the poetry of sight and sound. Language does not reveal character because Genet has abolished character. It does not advance plot because there is no plot. It does not advance the argument because the play has no argument. Genet sets the words on fire and lets them crackle and sparkle to add further luminousness to the spectacle. As a playwright he wants to startle the audience.

He does not hesitate to use double-entendre to unsettle the audience. In Scene II, the impersonating Judge says to the girl role-playing as thief: "... you are caught... under your skirt (To the Executioner). Put your hand under her skirt. You'll find the pocket..." Of course the scene opens with judge crawling and licking the feet of the thief. The Judge's role is dependent upon the role of the Executioner - "masterly mountain of meat, hunk of beef that's set in
motion at a word from me." And without the thief, says the judge, "You'd deprive me of being." The world is like an apple - the Judge slices off the rotten part, but someone has to play the rotten part. Minos would not be Minos if the condemned in hell were not to be judged. And no hell, no Cerberus. Therefore, the Judge asks the girl thief to enact the role of the thief so that he may be able to play the role of the Judge:

The Judge (to the girl): Madame, Madame, please, I beg of you. I am willing to lick your shoes, but tell me you're a thief...

The Thief (in a cry): No yet! Lick! Lick! Lick first!

While this mock ritual is being performed, the rebels in the town are advancing - to change roles in a role-playing world.

In another studio the General is speaking to a semi-naked girl enacting his war-horse: "But what a gallop! Along the rye-fields, through the alfalfa, over the meadows and dusty roads, over hill and dale, awake or asleep, from dawn to twilight..." Then follows the poetic description of the war raging from one horizon to another... death in action and the distant cry of a general like Napoleon...To Snow...Moscow. And last, the death of the General and the final procession through the city. At every turn Genet hurls abuse at the symbols of power.
The Girl: The procession has begun... We're passing through the city... We're going along the river. I'm sad... The sky is overcast. The nation weeps for that splendid hero who died in battle...

The General: (starting): Yere!

The Girl (turning around, in tears): Sir?

The General: Add that I died with my boots on!

While the Girl sings Chopin's Funeral March the audience has enjoyed another poetic spectacle in which another symbol of authority was mocked at, ritually.

From her control room Irma looks into every studio with the help of a view-finder, she says, "Each individual when he rings the bell and enters, brings his own scenario, perfectly thought out. My job is merely to rent the hall and furnish the props, actors and actresses." In the outside world, the so-called world of reality, too, the public roles are nothing but mere images congealed according to their functions. In the theatre the same images of life are mirrored before the audience in an exaggerated, distorted and abused form. In fact the roles enacted in The Balcony could be easily re-enacted as reality in real life because there is so little difference between the reality of The Balcony and the reality of life. As Chantal, the runaway prostitute from the Balcony who joins the rebels as the heroine, says, "At least the brothel has been of some use to me; it's taught me the art of pretence of acting. I've had.
to play so many roles that I know almost all of them. And I have had so many partners... And such artful ones, such cunning and eloquent ones, that my skill and trickery and eloquence are incomparable. I can be familiar with the Queen, the Hero, the General, the heroic Troops...and can fool them all."

Just as Chantal from the brothel becomes the heroine of the revolution, when the Bishop, the General and the Queen die, they are replaced by their counterparts from the brothel. The people accept them as real because they fit into the image of those functions. As the court Envoy, persuading Madame Irma of the Balcony to become the Queen, says "Everything beautiful on the earth you owe to masks."

The last scene opens with a burlesque of the new rulers (from the brothel) and the crowd. The photographers are busy concocting new images for the public figures who are unfolding their new plans as a victorious political party busies itself with grandiloquent malo-believes. Reality is what the photographers and phrase-makers manufacture. As the Envoy says, "But have things happened otherwise? History was lived so that a glorious page might be written, and then read. It is reading that counts."

The scene, of course, is theatrically, hilarious. The Chief of Police is to be represented as a massive phallus. In real life we might abuse a man of power and
call him a prick. But here a playwright calls the phallus a mimetic representation of one of the most powerful functionaries of the state: The Chief of Police. And when the Bishop, the General and the Judge try to seek real power—images turning into reality—the Chief of Police pushes them and they topple over. He wants to be "the One and Only, into whom a hundred thousand want to merge."
The Chief of Police is the only public figure whose role has not been played in the studio of the brothel. He is anxious to be played in the studio of the brothel, and wants to be apotheosized. And at last someone turns up to impersonate him in one of the studios. It is Roger, the disillusioned revolutionary leader who dresses up grotesquely as the Chief of Police, and enacts the "Hero."

"Everything always takes place in the presence of a woman. It's in order for a woman's face to be witness that, usually..." Earlier he wanted to play this role of a hero in the revolution before Chantal, the ex-prostitute symbol of revolution. But having failed there, he comes to fulfil his fantasy in this new role. But, then, the cock crows, real life tries to penetrate. But it cannot. Truth outside has failed, everything has crumbled. Reality cannot replace illusion. He mimics the act of castrating himself signifying that the Chief of Police has achieved his ambition of becoming an image.
Roger's act of self-castration is similar to the self-poisoning of Claire in *The Maids*. By bringing about revolution he wanted to seize power and replace the Chief of Police who wielded absolute power in the state. Having failed to overthrow the Establishment, he enacts a ritualistic representation of the Chief of Police by a ritual act of self-castration. But a new revolution is brewing outside. For the fourth time there is a burst of machine-gun fire.

"Who is it? ... Our side... Or rebels... Or?"

"Someone dreaming, Madame."

Reality momentarily asserts itself but for how long? Truth is not possible because the illusion would prevail. Madame Lina has to prepare for another day, other roles, other images. As she tells the audience.

You must now go home, where everything - you can be quite sure will be faler than here.

It cannot escape one's notice that the scenes of *The Balcony* do not have a logical development of one from the other. They are loosely strung. If, for instance, Scenes IV and VIII are cut out it would not make any difference to the loosely strung structure of the play. Normally, plays have either the suspense of the plot or the suspense of the unfolding pattern to keep the audience engaged. In *The Balcony*, neither kind of suspense is used. And at the
end the play begins to peter out. Kenneth Tynan complained:

The first or expository half is flawless; out of an anarchic, unfettered imagination there emerges a perfect nightmare world. But the second half is argumentative, and logic is necessarily a fettered thing, bound by rules to which M. Genet, who has flouted rules all his life, is temperamentally opposed. Just when the play cries out for an incisive, satiric mind like M. Sartre's, it branches off into a confusion so wild that I still cannot understand what the scenes in the rebel camp were meant to convey. As an evoker, M. Genet is magnificent, as an explainer, he is a maddening novice.

It is true that some of the scenes do not yield the themselves to clear conceptual language to which we are used and which gives us a sense of security. But a playwright whose dramatic aims are towards a spiritual region like that of Antonin Artaud may not bother about clarity of dramatic idiom. But what the play illuminates is how we live a life of elaborate deceptions. Since dramatic experience is revealed in its totality, and its significance comes as a flash, it is not enough to hold it in the palm of one's hand for debate and dissection.

The interest of the play lies in how the mock ritual is used to perceive afresh the reality outside. Brilliant spectacles, heightened aurally, re-inforced by the incantatory spoken word add to the poetry of the theatre. It is a true marriage of the various elements of the theatre into a thrilling experience - the prerequisite for dramatic
communication. The Balcony is a most successful modern play and a disturbing one.

The Blacks presents the ritualistic enactment of the murder of a white woman by negroes who enact their own fantasies of hatred against the whites in a grotesque manner. Genet insists that there should be at least one white man among the audience. If no white spectator is available then a negro should put on the mask of a white man. He aims to secure audience participation by insisting upon the presence of a white audience. This participation takes the form of a direct address to the audience which recurs throughout the play.

The stage itself has an audience of whites (blacks putting on white masks). They are the distorted mirror images of the white audience in the auditorium. This stage audience of the white shows the hierarchy of the white—the queen, the governor, the bishop, the judge, the missionary and the queen's valet. Before these two audiences, one in the auditorium and the other on the stage, the negroes enact the murder of the white woman. The murderer is a black named Village who reconstructs the scene in which a beautiful white woman is attracted by Village's sexuality and invites him to her bedroom where she is seduced and then strangled. After the black actors have indulged in their fantasies of rape and murder of the white woman.
they waylay the queen and her court and brutally murder them. The missionary, who takes the cross before the flag, is castrated.

The negroes play the role which is thrust upon them by the rich white colonists. As Archibald, one of the characters who acts as a stage manager says, "We are what they want us to be. We shall, therefore, be it to the very end, absurdly."

But behind this clownish, grotesque, representation of the black's view of the white we are informed what is happening in the actual world. One of the characters, Newport News, reports that a negro traitor has been tried and executed and a new revolutionary delegate has been sent to replace the executed traitor. So what happens on the stage is highlighted by the actual happening in the real world. When Genet was asked to write a play for an all black cast, he said, "What is black? What is colour?"

The negroes of this play are the downtrodden outcasts of society who role-plays are expected of them. As Archibald says, "On this stage we are like guilty prisoners who play at being guilty." They dream of revenge because they are denied the right to participate in a real world, with real human emotions of love and kindness. What is left is hatred and revenge. As Village tells Virtue, the black prostitute whom he loved for a fleeting moment:
"When I behold you, suddenly — for perhaps a second — I had the strength to reject everything that wasn't you and to laugh at the illusion. But my shoulders are frail. I was unable to bear the weight of the world's condemnation. And I began to hate you when everything about you would have kindled my love and when love would have made men's contempt unbearable, their contempt would have made my love unbearable. The fact is, I hate you." The only emotion left to them is their hatred. But what would happen to them if they were deprived of their hatred?

One might regard The Blacks as a proof of Genet's awakening social consciousness, and might express the apprehension that like Adaré he might change to the political theatre of commitment, but the theme is similar to what was expressed in his earlier plays. For instance, in Deathwatch, the negro character Snowball is regarded by the white characters Green Eyes, Lefranc and Maurice, as some superhuman. "He shines. He beams. He's black but he lights up the whole two thousand cells," says Green Eyes. The number one big shot feared by jailers and adored by the inmates. In homosexual adoration, Green Eyes says, "He's got the luck to be a savage... He's got the right to kill people and even eat them. He lives in the jungle. That's his advantage over me... I'm alone, all alone. And too white. Too wilted by the cell. Too pale."
The subject of the black attracts Genet not because of his awakened social conscience but because of his instinctive fascination with the primitive and primordial in the black. Besides, his identification with the blacks becomes closer because like him they are outcasts. They play the role of outcasts because the society of the whites has thrust that role upon them just as Genet in real life played the role of a thief to the limit. However, the play not only represents how the blacks look at the whites and how they think the whites look at them, but it also dramatically shows a secret longing in the blacks to rape the whites, to conquer them sexually. The problem of the whites and the blacks lifts itself from the political and racial plane to the sexual plane— but, again we are getting trapped in Genet's hall of mirrors because sex and power are mutually reflecting mirrors.

Genet's next dramatic venture The Screens is a chaotic, bizarre play to be staged at several levels with several actors who play multiple roles. The screens are stage devices where the live events are represented. The Algerian-French conflict is shown not from a heroic point of view but from the abysmal depths. Everything is degraded in this nightmare which has the foulest stench, as if Genet viewed the dramatic events from a gutter-hole. May be this was the only way he could dramatize his disgust of the whole affair.
Genet's theatre studies the human condition, the loneliness and the alienation of man and his absurd search for certainty in a world where there are only probabilities, without any anchor.

And he does this through a mode of dramatic communication which he shares with the other Absurdists, a mode so well characterised by Martin Esslin, "the abandonment of the concepts of character and motivation; the concentration on states of mind and basic human situations, rather than on the development of a narrative plot from exposition to resolution; the devaluation of language as a means of communication and understanding; the rejection of didactic purpose; and the confrontation of the spectator with the harsh facts of a cruel world and his own isolation."
Notes


