Genet's New Play: The Screens

By MARC PIERRET

In Jean Genet's *The Screens* the revolt of the Algerian Arabs against their French colonizers is not characterized by the emancipation of human beings. Although the colonizers are described as oppressors inflated with their own power, the misery and the intolerable condition of the oppressed are not denounced in order to promote the liberation of the colonized people. On the contrary, these misfortunes are exalted so that the humiliated individual has the opportunity to make his misery the occasion for an inner experience based on the absolute contrast and conflict between his values and those of the Other—an unceasing contestation through which Said achieves a sovereignty which no action founded on the hope of a more just world could yield. For hope can take root only in this world, and the hope of claiming one's rights is lost in the desire to become the Other. The subjective, ascetic, and tragic experience of Said has indeed no political value. Genet has not written an historical play.

We must doubly guard ourselves against being fooled by the dramatic illusions of this extremely complex work. Like all great poets Genet succeeds in making the very unreality of the theatrical situation one of the dimensions of the poetic reality he wishes to show us. Thus during the performance of *The Screens* the spectator will be constantly mystified; he will think he is watching an action, whereas what is happening to the Arabs is always fictional. Fictional because they are dominated by colonial laws and power; any real grasp of the world is forbidden them; their very being is lived by their masters who use them as the instrument of colonization. What attracts Genet first of all is this impossible situation of the excluded one. This is Said's situation, and also Genet's. He wants to live it to the end, right to death which contaminates and transfigures all reality. The radical criticism which Genet levels against society is strictly apolitical, but profoundly disturbing and subversive. It strips bare the foundation of existence. After having undergone this revelation, it is up to each man to give a meaning to this, his own, experience.

When we say that Genet has identified himself with the Arabs we fall into the trap, we run up against the screens of fiction. On the contrary, it would be more appropriate to recognize that the dramatist has traced certain special aspects of the decolonization process, of the "objective historical" scale, back to his own personal destiny. Although we expect a work about the Algerian war, we must be prepared to read a play in which the Algerian war merely serves a rhetoric itself dependent on a predetermined poetic universe.

It is particularly striking that the author of *The Blacks* and *The Balcony* seems here to have deliberately devoted himself to frustrating all possibilities of an ideological validation of his own work. Some critics, on the other hand, had believed that by including history (to which, in fact, he had given only a purely theatrical role) his work would develop towards a representation of the world—a representation pointing the way to the future and drawing its support from those objective forces which govern historical evolution.

Genet's refusal to write politically engaged theatre is here so evident that one can almost see in this refusal the subject of *The Screens*, in Henry James' sense of the word.

"If we had the misfortune to take the country's misfortunes seriously, then farewell our misfortune and farewell our pleasures." Thus speaks Warda, the prostitute in the brothel. This is the stake of the primordial question which Genet has in mind when he asks: What kind of liberty does one lose in becoming involved in the revolutionary project? "Revolutionary project" is, however, too vague a term to define the war of liberation waged by the Arabs against the French Algerian bourgeoisie. We can too easily interpret as we wish the circumspect use made by the rebel leaders of the Marxist ideology. This vagueness immediately restricts the "philosophical" scope of the question and prevents us from considering Genet as a counter-revolutionary author. In my opinion, if Genet answers this question negatively by making Said, whom he favors, a traitor to the national cause, it is for the purpose of demonstrating the impossibility of reducing consciousness to any role whatsoever. Even the most humble, the most theatrical, or the most abject role—such as that which Said plays at the end of the drama when he is executed—does not finally fix consciousness. To call a French author a reactionary because he makes the radical assertion that the Algerians tend today to borrow modes of thought and blind patriotism from the colonials they fought yesterday is only a typical reaction on the part of our Leftist do-gooders who will feed their sanctimonious depression by dreaming that the Africans will accomplish their work for them.

Of course I hasten to add that *The Screens* could not for long withstand this kind of near-sighted analysis. Nothing is further from a thesis play than this burning work with its constrained and ironic lyricism, whose perfect verbal coherence never for an instant ceases to hunt our consciousness right down to its most well-guarded ramparts. The play breaks through our alienation as spectators and reveals itself to us as an extreme, poetic experience—an alienation comparable to that of Said caught in the trap of his own ever-moving negativity which is worshipped by the crowd.

Here we touch upon the central theme of this play which, if it were to be related to a current mode of thought, would most certainly better reveal itself to us by evoking the atheistic mysticism of Georges Bataille or the metaphysical interrogation of Heidegger than the demonstrative and already didactic anarchism of the young Brecht.

To be nothing, less than nothing ... The fleshy, bloated, ridiculous, and terrible fullness of colonial power is possible only when the native is reduced to nothingness. Thereafter the native has no other way out—if he wishes to live—except to be this negativity which he is for his masters, or to revolt against them. But as I pointed out earlier, by revolting, the native paradoxically begins little by little to resemble his masters. Slowly he passes from negativity to positivity, and along the way he loses the reasons for his revolt. He becomes courageous and intelligent; he is possessed and rehabilitated by the seriousness of a project which gives him a certain virtue. He is looked at with fear—he is a fighter.

Within this framework—or rather in this relation of the self to the world—Genet is once again unwilling to take into account the historical evolution resulting from the conflict between the opposing forces. And these forces are themselves economically determined by all kinds of material interests, ideological superstructures, ethnographic conditions, etc.... He leaves these reflections to the historians and the dialecticians, materialist or otherwise. The poet remains on the individual level, which is more static. On this level there exists a fixity in the structure of sensibility and imagination. But there is much more real movement here as well, the movement in which the need for the absolute exerts itself in the evanescent, fluid, obscure, and scarcely identifiable immediacy of everyday life. The danger for Said, whatever his choice, is that he may become someone—a hero or a beggar-thief; for even the humiliation into which others transform your flight or your refusal can fill you with being and distill in you honorable thoughts. These thoughts push you over the brink and you topple into the Good, along with cathedrals, uniforms, and vamps. This is why Said becomes a traitor in whose skin, however, he does not agree to immobilize himself. Perhaps "why" is too strong a word. Said does not reason; reason arises from the Good. It is better to understand Said's behavior (he seeks the lowest depth of abjection; his very search for it is itself abject) as a mystical renunciation, an attempt to escape the grotesque and afflicting positivity of symbols. But, unfortunately, he is bound to these symbols by his own stubbornness.

"Certain truths are not applicable, otherwise they'd die ... They mustn't die but must live through the song they've become," cries Ommu at the end of the play. These are the inapplicable truths which Genet tries to communicate to us throughout the entire length of *The Screens*. Said dies for them because he demands absolute communion with his own legend (the negation of all legends). Said wants a communion so perfect that it will not permit the Other's look to seize him and bring him into the world. Because of his speed Said overtakes everyone and, arriving at the end of the race, he finds himself confronted by the same death he fled from. His life is changed into a song: the corrupting song, corroding all the limits and all the impossibilities in the midst of which, deadened, sleepy, reality rests—the reality which "lives you" even before you make a gesture.

The fact remains that this play—and I have only sketched some of its intellectual problems—so absolutely without ideological, and therefore political bias, vigorously expresses those deepest conflicts which pit the individual against himself and against others in our society—a society which is hierarchical, sado-masochistic, and dominated by patriarchal myths. The contingent truths found in *The Screens* attest to the authenticity of a thought which wants to be unique and whose uniqueness, although pro-vocative and violent, is never gratuitous.

Poet of the imaginary, Genet is also a realistic author. All his power springs from the fact that he is able to make us forget that he is a writer so that he may then drag us to the outermost limits of knowing and not-knowing. Detaching himself from the bitterness and hate he feels for the bourgeois world, Genet uses these very emotions as instruments of meditation on the being and non-being of the Word. But the Word can become meaningful only after it has been stripped of all the feeling society has heaped on it in order to possess it. For Genet poetry is an act of stripping away. He creates death. When the human landscape surrounding Said is touched by the falseness of his acts, it crumbles and collapses.

Genet is the only dramatist who consciously uses theatrical illusion to betray the spectator during the performance and deliberately make him feel ill at ease. What you see is a lie; but you remain suspended like some Damocles over his sword which has been stuck between his bedpillows. The chicken-yard is a fake. Said's suitcase is empty. Only the bitterness of his despair counts. He is the one who is not.

Genet's writing touches the very source of conflict. His work, especially *The Screens,* illustrates the vocation of men—which is to refuse the fate others impose on them and to deny the cultural conspiracy which maintains the illusion of their freedom.