

**Genet – The Man and the Author
who Chose to be a Criminal**

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Introduction

In his books and plays, Jean Genet (1910-1986) – the author, playwright, philosopher, criminal and homosexual – depicted criminality as a factor whose existence depends on society. He described himself as a criminal, and saw himself as such throughout his entire life, despite the fact that he became an author whose work even today is taught in high schools (in France, England, Italy, and elsewhere) and in universities. The great philosopher Jean Paul Sartre described Genet as the dean of doomed playwrights, and as someone whom society labeled as “bad” and thus turned into a criminal.

In this article, we will attempt to posit a new thesis. We argue that Genet was not pushed by society into a life of crime and not labeled even when he committed crimes. Rather, we believe that he chose to be a criminal. Reviewing his personal history, we see Genet as a person whose positive “preparatory ground” gave him a great “personal strength” that allowed him to place society into the dock. It seems to us, after reviewing the various events in his life, that Genet developed a negative orientation towards conformist society and the fact that it treated him like an object instead of as a person who should be consulted and whose wishes are to be respected to the greatest extent possible. The social system treated him according to predetermined policies, on an administrative basis rather than a humanistic one. Genet, we believe, took this extreme condescension negatively. He developed a negative orientation towards the various social systems as well as those who carried out their policies, and thus created for himself a negative attitude towards society in general.

The welfare system uprooted him from his home in the village. It did not allow him to continue his schooling, despite the fact that he excelled in his studies, and

instead pushed him in the direction of learning a trade which he did not desire. He never adapted to the demands of the system and from hereon we find a contrarian attachment to the direction of the deviant, the other, and the criminal.

We believe that using his otherness and his criminality, Genet protested against what he felt were the society's crimes against himself and those like him, those whom at the time were called "Children of Paris". These were children who were placed with foster families after having been abandoned by their parents and whose lives were ruled by the strict laws of the revenue and welfare system. Genet developed a negative orientation towards society and interpreted all acts of society directed towards him in a negative way. He felt betrayed by a society which did not reward him for excellence in his studies and for being a good child, a dutiful child, a child who acted according to the norms of family and society. It was difficult for him to accept the traumatic facts of life, that he had been abandoned by his biological mother; that the foster mother, who loved him so dearly, passed away; and that his studies did not continue beyond six years of schooling.

As a young boy, Genet rebelled against what he felt were society's betrayal of him through deviant behavior which intensified with time until it bordered on the criminal. He felt that society had cast him out, even though he had done no wrong. Society had limited his opportunity for self-fulfillment and effected violent changes in his life that he objected to, all in an arbitrary and inhumane fashion. Subsequently, he rejected the norms and rules of conventional society and sought out a different type of social bond.

His transfer to a criminal institution due to his transgressive behavior strengthened his negative orientation towards the world and subsequently provided him the opportunity to choose the criminal world as his own. He learned to be a

criminal at this same institution in Mettray. He ceased to view himself as a member of conformist society, and he held this view until the end of his days. His criminal activities lasted 18 years (from 1926-1944), and during this time period he spent 44 months and 16 days in jail on and off. His reputation as an author came when Sartre became his champion, and turned him into a writer and playwright in high demand. Subsequently he gained not only success but also a solid financial position.

Having established these facts, we will try to solidify our thesis claiming that social labeling was not the factor that turned Genet into a criminal, but rather it was a personal choice, based on the circumstances of his life, to turn to a life of crime.

Genet's Birth

Genet was born on December 19, 1910 to Camille Gabriel Genet, following a complicated pregnancy. His mother was admitted to Tarnier hospital in Paris on October 31st, 48 days before she gave birth. She was hospitalized due to complications. After the birth, they remained in hospital for 11 more days before being released on December 30, 1910. Genet was born an illegitimate child. He remained in the custody of his 22-year-old mother for seven months and nine days. On July 28, 1911, she turned him over to the Authority for the Welfare of Abandoned Children in Paris at the Hospice des Enfants Assistés located at 74 Rue D'Enfer, Rochereau, Paris. According to a French law from June 27, 1904, children who were handed over to the Welfare Authority were placed with foster families living in the countryside.

Genet was given a number (192.102) by the Welfare Authority and from that moment left the custody of his mother and became the custody of the state. He was examined by the Health Authority and the examining physician, a Dr. Variot, noted that he was in good health.

On July 29, 1911 he was transferred to an agency which located a foster family for the baby. He was examined by a physician, Dr. Courtois, who also noted that his health was good except for a hernia which required treatment. That day, a foster family was chosen for Jean Genet. Mme. Eugenie Regnier and her husband, Charles, from the village of Alligny-en-Morvan served as his foster parents. The village was located far from Paris, in Nord Est du Masif Central. It was a mountainous area, rich in green pastures and forests but its ground was not fertile. In this village and its environs during this time (1911) there were 772 children under the age of 13 who had been placed with foster families. The area had a good reputation for foster families, and a third of the abandoned children in France were sent there. This was an honorable way to enhance the revenue and welfare of the families. The government gave the foster family a monthly stipend from the government, and in return the family was responsible for the upbringing and education of the child. The system of foster parenting was under strict government control and inspection. When a boy reached the age of 13, he would be moved from the custody of the foster family to the custody of a patron whose job it was to prepare the child for agricultural work. A girl reaching the age of 13 would be transferred from the family to the care of a lady of the house.

*The facts are based on a study of many years, following the findings of Dichy and Fouche (1988)

There she would learn to be a housekeeper (*Bonne a Tout Faire*). As adults, these children would serve as much-needed working hands in this agricultural area.

The agricultural settlement that Jean Genet grew up in had a population of 1650 residents at the time. Alligny en Morvan was a small village in this large region. The children in the foster families kept their biological surnames, and thus the

schoolteachers were able to differentiate between them and the children of the local families. In addition, one could differentiate between the children based on the clothes they wore. The children in foster families wore special clothes provided by the authorities. Generally speaking, as adults most of these children would intermarry or marry one of the children from the same area. The foster children were viewed as desirable by the people in the area. They represented a “reserve force” for the inhabitants and also served as working hands who knew the place. The locals considered children as part of their community.

The Family of Charles et Eugenie Regnier

Genet’s foster family received him on July 30, 1911. He was brought to them by the ceremonial manager of the Social Welfare Administration in the regional capitol of Saulieu. Nine years earlier, this same dignitary had brought the Regnier family a girl named Lucie Wirtz for adoption. The Regnier family took care of her with great love.

This girl was already nine years old and in a few short years was destined to move to a different family who would train her to become a housekeeper. She would have pleasant memories of the Regnier family as well as the brother, Genet, who joined them. She recalled that the infant Genet arrived on a Sunday. “He was so thin, so small, so beautiful.” These recollections were made when she was 88 years old. At the time they received Genet, the foster parents were already 50 years old. The patriarch of the family was a carpenter, not a farmer as he would be described by Genet and Sartre. He did, however, have one cow, and some chickens and rabbits for the use of the family – as did a many of the inhabitants – but not much more than that. His carpentry shop was beneath the house, which was located not far from the offices of the village council. The Regnier family had no property and no income from any stipend whatsoever save for the money it received for being a foster family. Its

income came from the handiwork of the family patriarch, along with a tobacco shop run by his wife. The store was also located in their house, and thus both of the couple worked from their home. The Regnier family succeeded in making a living from hard work and industry in the carpentry shop, the tobacco shop, the small green field it had, and from the cow, chickens, and rabbits. Along with this, the matriarch of the family baked her own bread and cooked food she had earned from her the couple's own hard work of the couple and from their garden. In addition, as aforementioned, they received a government stipend for fostering two children.

The Regniers had a good reputation in their village of Alligny. They were considered a united and dignified couple. They were honest people, described by Lucie Wirtz, who grew up in their foster care, as her real parents. She continued to visit their home and saw them as her true parents. Interestingly, even Genet in the handwritten manuscript of his "Diary of a Thief" notes that they were "good people", good-hearted or brave-hearted (*de tres Braves Gens*; it appears in the manuscript of his diary on page 122 but the statement has been struck from the printed version). This statement of Genet's is important, since he rarely had kind words about other people, especially not in his adulthood.

The matriarch of the family, Eugenie, was born on January 16, 1857 in Alligny en Morvan. She and her parents were all natives of the area (*Originaires*). Unable to find work in the region, she moved to Paris where she found a position as a maid (*Domestique*) at the home of a Belgian spinster at 119 Rue Grenelle. She received from her mistress a room (*Loge*) above the house for her use. At this time she met her future husband, Charles Regnier, who came from Morvanelle. She married him and some time afterwards gave birth to a daughter, Berthe. Later, following the death of the lady of the house, she convinced her husband to return to her parents' home in

Morvan where her second and last child, Georges, was born on May 24, 1893. Her foster daughter describes her mother as a happy, energetic woman who kept a tight rein on the household. She taught her children values, about obeying religious decrees which were sacred in her eyes, and to act in an enlightened and respectable manner. The members of her household, including both biological and non-biological children, made sure to attend Sunday prayers as well as the religious lessons given by the priest, Abbe Charrault, every Thursday afternoon. In 1982, Genet described himself as someone who received a Catholic education. “J’ai eu une enfance ... Catholique.”

His foster mother, Eugenie, loved and cared for him with motherly devotion. She would call him *mon Jean*, “my Jean”. His sister, who was also a foster child in the Regnier family, says that the mother always protected him, sometimes “with the fierceness of a lioness”, when he would fight with his friends. He was actually given preferential treatment by the matriarch of the family. His childhood friend Joseph Bruley tells that Genet suffered an emotional crisis when his foster mother Eugenie died on April 4, 1922, when he was only 11 years old. It is surprising that Genet does not pay this mother who cared for him with such love for over a decade, more respect.

The father, Charles, was born in Moux, a commune near Alligny on May 16, 1865. Following his military service, which he spent in the region of Paris, and following his marriage to Eugenie, whom he loved and respected greatly, he returned, as aforementioned, to Alligny en Morvan at her insistence. At the end of his military service he worked as carpenter around Paris and succeeded in amassing some savings, as did his wife, who was a housekeeper. Thus they were able to afford a large house in Alligny. At the bottom level of this house he set up his carpentry shop and his wife set aside a room in the house for the tobacco shop.

Charles was a straight-edged man, an accomplished carpenter who was hailed by members of the community as a "man of conscience." They gave him the nickname "Champion". He was assisted in his carpentry shop by his son as well as by an apprentice worker. He built up a reputation in the area because of the quality of his furniture; the local villagers preferred the caskets that he built to all others. Genet was given his own corner in father Charles' carpentry shop, something which he was very proud of.

Charles was a quiet, easygoing man. He did not speak much and gave the four children in his household, even when they grew older, freedom to do what they wanted in his carpentry shop. He loved them, did not scold them, and gave them a great degree of freedom. At home he was also always calm and pleasant. The foster daughter, Lucie Wirtz, testifies that she never saw or heard him angry, nor scold anyone for anything: "Durant toute mon enfance, Je ne l'ai pas entendu une fois crier ou se mettre en colere"

He was a pleasant man, and the members of his household, as well as the members of the community, enjoyed his company. He was tall, which also added a degree of dignity. In contrast to his devout wife, he preferred the café to the church on Sundays. The death of his wife in 1922 was a blow for him, but he continued to run the household pleasantly and calmly as in the days when his wife was alive. In 1930, his only son, Georges, left the house to seek his fortunes in Paris. Charles was left alone in the large and empty house, with his daughter Berthe, who lived in the same village, taking care of him. He passed away on July 16, 1939.

Genet the Child

10 days after his arrival in the village (on September 10, 1911), the baby was baptized in the local church by the local priest, Abbe Charrault, who served the community

between the years 1907 and 1929. This priest was also responsible for Genet's religious education during his childhood in Alligny en Morvan. At the occasion of the baptism, the child was given a godfather and godmother. The chosen godmother was Lucie, his "sister", who was older than him by nine years and who was a foster child with him in the Regnier family. The chosen godfather was a relative of the father who lived in Paris. These relatives would occasionally come to visit the Regnier family. They became very attached to the child Genet and saw themselves as responsible for him. The institution of godparents was very widespread in France. The godparent would accept responsibility for the child and was responsible for him, along with the parents.

Genet grew up in a large house in the center of the settlement. It was one of the most beautiful houses in the village. The house had a large courtyard and a gate. The courtyard contained the family bakery and access to his mother's tobacco shop. On the other side of the house, in the back, there was a vegetable garden which was well-tended by the mother. The yard was surrounded by a nice wall made up of gray bricks. The house was furnished respectably. The walls were decorated with pictures, and it served the members of the household well. The house was the closest one to the school, and Genet needed only minutes to get to class. Genet was proud of his parents' house and he describes it in his book as "the house with the slate roof," (*Ardoise*). He claims that only his house and the church had slate roofs, something he was very proud of. His house provided him with a sense of security. From comments made later on in his life, which underwent the reconstruction of memory (that is to say they weren't necessarily accurate) there is a sense of exaggeration in the positive direction.

The First World War, which lasted from 1914 to 1918, shocked the world, including the Genet's village. Most of the men in the village and the neighboring settlements were conscripted to fight the war during these years. As a result, the young Genet grew up in a house surrounded primarily by women. In 1916, when he was six years old, he was accepted into the first grade. In his writings, he gives his first grade teacher the nickname *Fee*, "Fairy". His school, which was for boys only, had three classes in each of which between 40 and 50 students studied. During wartime, the three classes were combined into two, one for smaller pupils and the other for older ones. Genet received special treatment from the headmaster of the school, who lived above the school – which, as aforementioned, was near Genet's house – and whose wife was Genet's teacher. The headmaster gave him private lessons to augment the meager amount they were taught in school during these difficult years of the World War I.

At the end of the war in 1918, Genet knew how to read and write. One could not necessarily say the same of his schoolmates, most of whom trailed behind him because of the difficulties of wartime. His foster sister, who was also his godmother, describes Genet as a bookworm, "with his nose constantly burrowed in a book." His classmates remember Genet as a quiet, calm, and shy student. At home he is described as a master of his domain, who loved to play with his dolls and baptize (*Bapthème*) them, along with his other toys or dogs and cats. He also liked to conduct burial services for dead birds. His foster parents gave him a great deal of freedom, (*une grande liberté*). One of Genet's neighbors says he had a golden childhood. He was like a little king.

"Il a vraiment eu une petite enfance dorée..." "Il était comme un petit roi".

Genet and his Schoolmates

By age 10, Genet was a good pupil and was considered to be one of the five outstanding students in his class. His teachers would read his essays to the class. The young Genet was a shy and introverted student who hurried home at the end of the school day. Generally, he would not have friends around to his house, and did not visit others. He did not fight with others, did not like sports like the others. He hated violent games and always preferred to be alone in his corner.

His childhood friend, Joseph Bruley, argues that Genet never had any close friends. He was a lone wolf, a unique child who ultimately preferred the company of girls and women. When he did play with others, he preferred to play with girls. (Jean Genet – “Diary of a Thief” , *Les Temps Modernes* 10, 1946. P. 41). Genet had a friend, Andree Cortet, with whom he loved drawing dresses, exchanging recipes, and baking cakes.

A quarter of Genet’s classmates were like him, children who had been placed with foster families by the authorities. This shared fate helped many of them form bonds of sympathy or mutual aid. Some of these children were lucky, like Genet who was handed over to the custody of a relatively established family; others were sent to very poor families and experienced hunger and deprivation. One of Genet’s friends, Louis Cullaffroy, who was not lucky like Genet, remembers him as someone who gave him support, sympathy, and protection.

The First Theft –A Symbol of Something Else

Sartre believes that Genet performed his first theft when he reached the age of 10, which is to say in 1920-1921.

In “Diary of a Thief” (p. 41), Genet himself describes his lust for stealing. Even as a small boy, Genet writes, he would steal from his foster parents. By the time he

was 10 Genet claims that he was able to steal from the people he loved without feeling any remorse, despite the fact that he knew they were poor.

It is reasonable to assume that Genet's stealing represents deep emotional issues, and we should not view his unusual behavior in a simple manner.

He also stole at school – pencils, rulers, and even books. Louis Cullaffroy, says, “When something disappeared from class, we knew we would find it at Jean Genet's.” He also stole money from his foster mother's cash drawer in her tobacco shop. He would buy sweets and share them with his friends. Two of his friends, Felix Roncin and Marc Kouschner claimed that he always had money in his pocket. In the village, they knew to “watch out” for this child who would regularly take things which did not belong to him. Because of his family's standing, as well as the sympathy he was given at school and in the church, no one complained about him, either to the police or even to the welfare authorities who supervised the foster children. Contrary to Sartre's claims, Genet was never evicted from the village for his thefts, nor was he sent by the authorities to a juvenile correctional institution.

On April 4, 1922 Genet's foster mother passed away. He continued to live in the same house, and was now cared for by his foster sister, Berthe, and her husband, Antonin Renault, who lived in the house and also cared for the widower father, Charles.

The sister, his foster mother's biological daughter, was a good mother to Genet, albeit a less authoritarian one. In addition, she had recently given birth and Genet was forced to share her affections with the baby. Berthe's husband was a good man, but stricter than Berthe's father. And Genet did not care for his authority.

It is important to note that in the last two years Genet spent in the house at Morvan following the death of his foster mother he ceased stealing completely. There

is no record at all that this transgressive behavior continued. At the onset of puberty, Genet began developing a separate sense of self. These two years, without his foster mother to protect him, were different than what had come before. But even so he was happy.

Genet's Communion

Three months after the death of his foster mother, on June 4, 1922, a public celebration was held to mark Genet's communion. Abbe Charraut, the priest who had baptized Genet, led the service and the prayers with all the requisite pomp and circumstance. It was seen as a good affair. Among other things, guests received a picture of Jesus with the motto *Ego Sum Panus Vivus*, "I am the bread of life".

Underneath the picture was inscribed the Genet's name: Jean Marcel Genet (which was misspelled as "Genest"). The priest respected Genet and always treated him with warmth and affection, and even let him participate in the church choir.

Genet and Primary School

As aforementioned, Genet was one of the best students in his class. Later, between the fourth and sixth grades, he turned from a good pupil into a brilliant and successful one. Most of his friends who were in foster care were pushed into studying a trade due to their intellectual limitations. Not Genet, who continued to climb higher and higher towards a primary school diploma, the highly valued *Certificat D'etudes* which few managed to attain. His teacher was proud of him, encouraged him, and gave him special attention.

During this time, Genet began to be more sociable and even to stand out in a group. His self-confidence increased, to the point of occasional arrogance. At times he became bitter, and even protested, when he learned that the foster children were being

exploited by their foster families. He defended them and even spurred them not to be passive in the face of their exploitations.

He showed great development physically as well, which also added to his self-confidence. A Dr. Courtouis, in a medical examination performed on December 9, 1923 when Genet was 13, notes:

State of health: Very good

Height: 1.56

Temperament: Good

Constitution: Good/Strong

Dental examination: Good condition

Diploma

On June 30, 1923, a government car came to collect the candidates for final examinations. In the village of Alligny there were three primary schools; from these, only five students qualified for taking the final exams, and Genet was one of them. He was the only one of the five who was in foster care. On July 15, 1923, 15 days after the test, the results arrived and showed that Genet had passed them successfully. Genet's success brought with it monetary prizes for his foster family, his teacher, and for Genet himself. The prizes were awarded by the authorities.

And with this, Genet finished his education. The government was not responsible for providing him any more schooling. It neither encouraged him to continue his studies nor supported him any further in his education. The six years of studies were a treasure that would serve Genet for the rest of his life. With the help of this treasure he became a national and even international author.

Genet's Relationship with the Opposite Sex

There are various theories about Genet's homosexuality. What do we know about his ties with members of the opposite sex?

For many years, the French segregated male and female education. There were separate schools for boys and girls. Despite this, boys and girls could meet at clubs, at church, and in the streets in nearby neighborhoods and especially in the villages.

In the last years of his studies, Genet had a girlfriend named Solange Comte, whom he greatly adored. She was his junior by only 15 days. She lived far from Alligny, in a settlement called Chevenon, but she would spend her summers at her grandparents' home near Genet.

Solange was a quiet, pleasant girl. Everyone remembers their walks through the village. Her father was a teacher. Her mother, a *Modiste*, died young at age 33. Everyone remembered the mother's beauty and pleasant nature.

Solange and Genet had a close friendship. They often walked together through the fields. They would climb the hills towards the boulders rising higher and higher. In two of his works, *Notre Dame des Fleures* and *Les Bonnes*, Genet mentions Solange and in one of his books even calls her *Comtesse Solange*, "The Countess Solange". We do not know if Genet continued his relationship with Solagne after he left Alligny. We do know that Solange contracted a severe respiratory disease and died at age 19. Genet knew other girls. He was a favorite of the female friends and acquaintances in his childhood, something which is reflected in his various literary works.

As an adult, he declared himself a homosexual. It appears to us that he also made a decision based on the reality in which he lived. He chose a path of which denied responsibility for anyone else and his homosexuality enabled him to do this.

He chose the homosexual life, which lacked commitment and emotional ties.

Throughout his adult life he was never involved emotionally with anyone and never maintained any ties over long periods. In his sole television interview, conducted by the BBC towards the end of his life, he declared that all his relationships with girls were superficial, temporary, and passing. He said the same about his connection with boys. When asked directly with how many men he had had homosexual relationships, he answered "with hundreds ... with thousands." Had he ever had a stable personal relationship before? His answer was negative. As an adult, he declared himself to be a homosexual. His sexual relationships, like his personal relationships, served a need and were not a means for strengthening his feelings of sensitivity.

The separation vector was the dominant vector in Genet's life and he tended to obscure the basic unifying vector that most people have.

In his last years, he lived alone in an apartment hotel in Morocco. He was financially well off and in this, according to him, he found peace.

The end of the war and the return of the men

The eight-year-old Genet saw the war end men return home. We do not know how Genet reacted to the return of peace and quietude to the village which came with war's end.

Genet, according to his godmother, his sister in the foster family, Lucie Wirtz, never understood why his biological mother abandoned him and refused to raise him like other mothers. His foster mother loved him and took good care of him, a fact which only strengthened the question that loomed in his mind: "I am a good boy. I study well. Everybody loves me. So why did my biological mother abandon me?"

He never knew and possibly never bothered to find out the truth. France kept very precise administrative records and he could have found out the facts had he

bothered to do so. We easily discovered that on July 28, 1911 he was placed in foster care by his mother and up until that point lived with her mother at 1 Rue Barocca, Paris. He was born at the Tarnier clinic in Paris on December 19, 1910 at 19:45. His mother's name was Camille Gabrielle and she registered his name, Jean, in Paris in the VI Arrondissement.

The mother was a housekeeper who became pregnant by one of her employers. For the few months that she had the child, she took good care of him. But it appears that she ran out of strength and means and so decided to give her son away to foster care or adoption. All the medical documents testify that she cared for her son with great dedication, and it was the harsh reality of life that forced her to part with him.

A positive preparatory ground

We argue that Genet had an infancy filled with love, and a comfortable childhood in general which was filled with affection, support, recognition, and a sense of accomplishment.

The death of his foster mother was undoubtedly traumatic for him. However, he had had many good years of successes, love, and recognition. We argue that Genet's "preparatory ground" created positive molecular memories. The positive experiences in infancy and childhood provided him with a strong spirit. The feelings and experiences of a person are a result of his environment, especially in the tender years. The feelings that arise in him as a result of the circumstances of his environment are extremely important.

The young Genet had significant memories which were stored in his brain cells. They remained as memories at the molecular level, generally subconscious but which helped foster in him a sense of power and strength. In the case of negative experience, the sense fostered inside was one of powerlessness. These "mental tapes"

accompanied him throughout his life. As far as we know, we have billions of nerve cells which contain primarily positive and/or negative memories. A person's perception is holistic. We perceive and inscribe in our memories and in our molecular (chemical) memories every detail we get from our various senses: sight, smell, space, and other various and sundry feelings.

These memories do not necessarily form in us a distinct awareness. But they do form an internal sense which can strengthen or weaken our sense of self. If a memory is awakened in us for whatever reason, we will experience it with all its different feelings. We experience the feelings and emotions we had during the original event being remembered. Memories of the past, if awakened, are not reconstructions of the event, but rather a re-enactment of the incidents as they occurred originally.

Penfield (1952) a brain surgeon at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, published an important work that sheds light on the workings of the brain the area of consciousness. He stimulated the brain by stimulating the lobes with a low-current electrode. The subjects were given local anesthetic and could thus cooperate with the surgeon. The brain was mapped into regions with reference being stimulated. Penfield found that memories remain inscribed completely, even if the person has no ability to recall the event. The brain works as a tape recorder, which records every significant event from the fetal stage through the rest of one's life. Memory storage is a physical-chemical process. The recorded facts become molecular structures. The memories recorded in these molecular structures are a real-subject reflection of that which is recorded. The molecular inscription happens only with those things that the person experienced personally and these are the forces which shape us. Each one of us carries inside of ourselves, in our memory tapes, a picture of our lives. Our present and future lives are driven by the pictures of our lives which we carry within us. The will and the

intellect are, according to Bergson's philosophical outlook (Brooks, 1977, p. 11) only a surface phenomenon, whereas the deeper phenomenon are the instinct and the imagination. These have the power to control a person, and their origins are in the same "preparatory ground", which contains the molecular memories which move us.

In his configurative approach to social deviance, Shoham (1980) argues that the chances that an average person will be labeled as a deviant grow in direct proportion to his deviant behavior; but the deviance becomes a social fact only when the behavior of the person or the group is labeled as deviant by society's supervisory authorities. According to Shoham's configuration model, social deviance arises from the combination of deviant behavior itself and its being labeled as such by society. In this model, the deviant behavior is a preparatory factor expressed in terms of probabilities; the process of categorization is the identifying power that defines the social attitude towards the deviance, and thus society's actions towards it (p. 135).

We propose then to add to Shoam's configurative model, a double link, a person with the strength to resist being labeled, who can thus neutralize the social labeling directed against him.

Genet the Defier

Genet, the man who defied, accused and judged society in his plays, his books, and his statements was the model for some of Sartre's ideas and he was the basis for the categorization rule (1962, 1963, 1980) of Becker, Kitzos, Kay Erickson, Shohan, and others. Sartre and others held up Genet as society's scapegoat, as someone who was labeled negatively in order that society could through him achieve its goals. The creation of a "bad boy" is necessary in order to set up a "good boy" in contrast to this. The conformist world, which seeks social anchors, creates the rules and through them it locates offenders and fights them in order to attain a normative world. In Genet's

view, the dialectic between the criminal and the conformist world is eternal, and no resolution of the conflict is possible without the conformist world being willing to accept the offenders; in the criminal world it (the conformist world) is the variable.

Genet, like the founders of Categorization Theory, believed that society created him as a criminal to serve its needs. His role is to be a criminal and he accepted these orders from society willingly and to the extreme.

He saw himself as an illegitimate child who was abandoned by his birth mother and handed over to a bureaucratized social system which by its nature, he believed, was aloof and devoid of altruistic motives. Society looks for means in order to fulfill its selfish aims. Society is functional and self-interested and seeks to extend its control in order to fulfill its goals. By categorization, Genet argued, society defines roles for its members, who will all serve society and let it attain the goals set by those who lead it.

Society sets up a stereotyped version of reality and forces the individuals in it to submit to its decrees. Society wields great power. It can crush its most creative artists using bear hugs, the various awards and citations – the Oscar (“the curse of the Oscar”), the Nobel (“Nobel’s noose”), and the rest of the awards – which delude the artist and fill him with anxiety. This paralyzes the artist and by doing so allows society to manage his life and place him in a rut that it has defined for him.

Society, in its conventionalization and its economic and social power, forces the creative person, the artist, to run from his true self, from realizing his unique mission, and forces him to merge into the stream it has designated for him.

Shoham (2004) calls this the Jonah Syndrome.

Material success, which is awarded by society, harms the dialectical energy which is at the core of creativity. The creative artist is stricken by anxiety, which

blocks his continued creativity as he fears of losing all the benefits (recognition, financing, social caresses) that society provides him. Society's bear hug strangles the rebellious artist and if he does not submit to society's will then he is categorized by society as "insane", as someone whose soul is not well. In that case, he can choose between the open road, suicide, or commitment to an asylum.

Sartre published his work "Saint Genet", which led to the strengthening of Genet's reputation and to his (Genet's) release from prison. (President Coty pardoned him). It also dried up Genet's well of creativity for five years. The public recognition of Albert Camus's works deprived him of the dialectical tension that was so crucial for his work. The great Van Gogh lost his mind due to, among other things, the opposite problem, lack of recognition of his greatness and his works of darkness.

The Prophet Mohammed was recognized as a prophet in Medina but not in Mecca, the city where he lived for many years. "No prophet is accepted in his own town." Mohammed's closeness to Mecca created rejection and scorn for him. Society has the power to bring close and strangle or to push away and shame.

Genet grew up, we believe, in a well-tended, protective, and loving environment. Because of singular incidents of the death of his foster mother; because of his inability to understand the circumstances of his life – despite being in his own mind a good boy, his biological mother abandoned him in his infancy; according to Sartre he "escaped" and got on the train without buying a ticket. He was caught and turned over to the authorities who put him in a home for juvenile offenders and his foster father did not come to find him.

Genet reads a new map of the world and he interprets it according to new experiences. He came to the conclusion that society did not want him. Society rejects and disappoints him. He rejects it and turns, both consciously and unconsciously, into

what he thinks he should be. He “chooses” the nonconformist way as his way of life. He clashes with society and finds his way into the criminal world, which he prefers to society’s treachery.

Genet used his skills in order to succeed in the criminal world that he chose. As his clashes with conformist society increased, he styled his personality in the opposite direction from conformist society. He expelled all conformity directed at him. He loved to hate what he once was.

Genet enjoyed a positive “preparatory ground” which strengthened him and gave him strong experiences. He was able to stand up to conformist society’s conventionalization and point a finger at it, accusing it of being hypocritical, uncaring, evil, exploitative, and of alienating all real values. He hated himself, his nationalism, and his country so much that he hoped for the victory of the Nazis over France and when they conquered Paris, he was pleased.

A Positive Preparatory Ground

Testimonials about Genet from his foster sister and his childhood friends

Lucie Wirtz, Genet’s foster sister who was 10 years older than he, remembers the day Genet arrived in their shared home clearly. It was on a Sunday. After church services, M. Roclore, the director of the agency responsible for transferring children to foster families, arrived holding the baby Genet. At the gate to the house, the baby was handed to his foster mother. She tells that her mother was afraid at first because Genet was so small for his age. But he was so beautiful that she accepted him.

Lucie Wirtz has many happy memories of her foster parents and the loyal care they gave her and Genet. She continued to visit the family even after she was transferred, as was customary in France, to a new home to learn the trade of a housekeeper in charge of the household (*Bonne a tout faire*). In an interesting

statement, Wirtz says that the Regnier family was “the family around. I lived with them from age two until age 13. They loved me and I loved them. Later, as an adult, even when I discovered who my biological parents were, I continued to regard the Regniers as my true family since they were my parents...As long as they were alive I continued to visit them and felt that they were my real parents.” She added that, “My father, M. Regnier, was my good father. I never saw a better or nicer man than he. I never heard him say an angry word. He always treated us with love, pleasantness, and a respectful attitude. He was always calm and quiet. He spoke little and did much. With his craft, he was an artist and he worked constantly.

“My mother, Mme. Regnier, was an active woman, full of life, active, dynamic, and, despite all this, a good mother. She was very religious, not like her husband who on Sundays preferred to go to the café instead of attending the village church with the rest of us. She came to church with us on Thursdays as well, so that she could go to religious classes and pray with the priest.”

Lucie called Genet by the pet name Jeannot, and he shared a room with her. When, at age 13, she was transferred to a new foster family, the room became his alone. It was a room which was not too big, and which had a window with a view of the garden. He would decorate the walls with pictures. In the room there was a writing desk and a chair in addition to the bed. The house generally was furnished simply, as you find in a village, but in good taste. There were also some expensive items of furniture, but not many.” She tells that at age 13 the authorities transferred her to another village, a few kilometers from the Regnier house. However, each time she came to the village she would visit her parents, that is to say the Regnier family. She would always see Jeannot with his nose in a book that he borrowed from the library. He was beautiful, calm, and loved living in the big house.

She says that on one of the occasions she came to visit her family she found the nine-year-old Jean alone in the house. She felt he had something he wanted to talk to her about. She told him he could speak freely, and he then surprised her by saying: "There's something I don't understand and that is, why did my mother abandon me?" In her words, Genet was anguished. He often asked her questions, including personal questions about herself – why did her parents abandon her? She tried very hard to explain to him that things are sometimes difficult and hard to understand, and that you must accept this as a fact of life. But Genet was unwilling to accept this. He continued to declare that this kind of behavior was forbidden and should not be allowed to happen!

When his sister was asked whether Genet was a thief, she answered in the negative. Perhaps in his youth he stole some sweets, but no more than that. After 1920, she heard that Genet was in prison. This surprised her greatly, as it did Berthe, the biological daughter of the Regniers who took care of Genet after Mme. Regnier's death.

Later she saw Genet's picture in the newspaper. There was an article on Genet the writer and on one of his plays which was being performed in a Parisian theatre called the Odeon. Wirtz got dressed up and went to see the play. At the end of the performance she asked to see Genet and was told that he had left the day before. She claims that from the moment he left the village, she never saw him again. She also claims that she neither knows where he lives, nor the city he resides in, nor his address. She was not able to track him down and regretted that Genet never bothered to find or meet with her.

Another version can be found in the words of Marie-Louise Robert, who rented a room in Genet's house between the years 1913 and 1921. The Regniers, as

mentioned, had a large house, and between the years 1913-21 they rented a part of it to the Robert family. Their daughter, Marie-Louise was roughly Genet's age (she was born in 1909, while he was born in 1910) and remembers fondly the eight years they lived in the same house.

During the First World War, she remembers that all the men were gone, save for Genet's father who worked long hours in the carpentry shop. She describes him as a calm, good-hearted man with a wonderful temperament who buoyed everyone around him with his good spirits. Along with Genet and with her brother Gabriel, they spent a lot of time playing in the carpentry shop, and the good father allowed them to do or make whatever they desired. She describes Genet's life as "ideal". "He was a prince," who lived like the king of the house. His mother loved him dearly and always protected him, whether he was guilty or not.

Marie-Louise tells that one day, a cousin of hers came to visit them. As they were playing, he accidentally hit Genet. The mother heard Genet crying and came running. Then, like a wounded lioness protecting her cubs, gave Marie-Louise's cousin a smack. She says that they were all stunned and no one dared say word. She states that Genet, whom his mother called *mon Jean*, "my Jean," loved him greatly.

According to Marie-Louise, Genet liked to pilfer coins from the cash drawer of his mother's store. He would use these to buy sweets for everyone. When Marie-Louise's mother dared to inform Mme. Regnier one day that Genet was stealing money, the mother rejected the claim and became angry with her – how dare she make an accusation about her son like that?

They played together often, the three children – Genet, Marie-Louise, and her brother Gabriel. They would play for hours in the garden; a favorite game was baptizing various animals they found there. They baptized the family dog dozens of

times, play acting the same ceremony that the village priest would perform. They enjoyed burying the dead birds they would find in the garden and performing funeral rites for them. Likewise, they would place crosses above the graves of the buried birds. Matchboxes served as caskets. Sometimes they played with dolls and performed plays, with each one of the three performing a role in the play.

Genet never liked rough games; he always preferred quiet ones. Since Genet preferred not to invite friends from school over to his house, the three fulfilled each other's needs and they were happy to spend long hours together.

Early in 1921, the Robert family left Genet's house. Later on, she states, they heard that the mother had passed away. She believes that Genet was probably hit terribly by the news, since he loved his mother dearly and he was her little king. He was the most important person to her. She states that the biological daughter, Berthe, took care of her father and Genet. She and her husband moved into the house. Her husband was more assertive with Genet than her father, and Genet had a much more difficult time with her husband.

We see again with the testimony of Marie-Louise that Genet had a wonderful childhood, which included role models who strengthened his personality and provided him "personal inner strength" and a "strong personality". Genet's "preparatory ground" was filled with memory tapes of a positive type, and this lasted until he was 13 years old. The trauma over his mother's death undoubtedly marked him, and this significant loss was not easy for him to deal with. It is lucky that his sister, Mme. Regnier's daughter Berthe, stepped in to care for him, so that the transition was easier to bear. This helped ease things slightly for young Genet.

Another testimonial is given by Joseph Bruley, who studied in the village school with Genet for eight years, despite the fact that he was born in 1910 and was a

native son of Alligny. His parents were residents of Alligny where his father was the village cobbler. Bruley became successful later on in life. He was employed in the telephone service and rose through the ranks to become the supervisor in charge of the Paris area. He lived in Paris, but also owned a house in Alligny.

Bruley testified that he had not seen Genet since 1923. He had spent eight years with him, in the village's elementary school. For most of these years, they sat next to each other. "We had a longstanding rivalry between us as to who would be the top student." In the French educational system, students received a monthly report card and a ranking of their position in the class. The two competed with each other to see who would come at the top of the ranking. They would alternate, with Bruley ahead one month and Genet the next. Bruley, however, admits that Genet was better than he was in all the subjects; that Genet was a good student whose grades were difficult to beat.

According to his testimony, his parents loved Genet. "His mother passed away when he was 12. He was never involved in theft, not at age 10, as we see written in the books, and not at age 13. Everything is a fantasy made up by intellectuals and authors. He was a boy like all the rest of us. He didn't smile much. He liked to dream occasionally and generally behaved in a normative manner. He played with us like everyone else and liked to take walks in the country and enjoy nature. I have no doubt," says his childhood friend, "that the death of his mother was very traumatic for him and left him deeply wounded."

"The two of us were in the church choir [*Enfant de Choeur a L'eglise*]. Genet excelled. He pronounced both the Latin and French correctly and he could do this better than any of us. His mother, Mme. Regnier, who was very pious, dreamed that

one day he would choose to go into the clergy. She hoped and prayed that he would become a priest!"

His friend Bruley adds that the two of them were among the five students from the village and the region who earned the right to sit for the final exams (the *Certificat D'etude*), and that Genet received the highest grade of any of them.

The celebrated their communions with great pomp and circumstance. "Over the years, Genet would become a famous author. Once, after one of his plays was a success in London I sent him a postcard and he wrote me back with a reply which proves that he remembered me, the village, and our experiences together. He promised that he would come to the village for a visit. But he never did, and in the meantime [1986] has died. I am convinced that he belongs to France and in his writings he bought his mistakes:

"Cher Camarade, tu as rachete tes fautes. Tu appartiens a tous les opprimes du monde, tu appartiens a la France, dors en paix, dans le repos eternal"

Bruley continues, and notes that Genet was shy by nature. "His parents loved him greatly, despite the fact that they had two children of their own. Granted. Georges and Jean may not have gotten on together, but that is in the nature of brothers. It is possible that George envied Jean, who was his mother's favorite. Indeed, Eugenie Regnier dearly loved Jean Genet, especially when she believed that he would become a priest in the future."

Never in her wildest dreams would she have believed that "her Jean" would become a thief, a gang leader, someone who evaded military service, a volunteer in the Foreign Legion, without a name and without an identity who would later run away from the Foreign Legion, a nomad, someone who would be jailed in France.

Bruley adds that Genet was a pious child, a loyal Catholic, extremely proper (*tres droit*). "I find it hard to hear people say he was a thief.... It just isn't logical!" (*Ce n'est pas logique!*). He says that there were many foster children, who were called "Children of Paris", whom the authorities brought to Alligny. He believes that they were treated the same as the local children, despite the fact that in the village you could easily distinguish between the "Children of Paris" and the rest of the children. "In a village community, everyone knows everything about everyone else." The "Children of Paris" were examined by a physician, Dr. Cortois, who was sent from Paris to keep a watch on their health. This was another way to distinguish the "Children of Paris".

"What was funny," says Bruley, "is that two of these children became extremely wealthy. These were Jean Genet and Louis Cullaffroy. These two children were different from each other. Genet was quiet and calm and liked quiet games and taking walks in nature. Cullaffroy, on the other hand, was athletic, liked physical games and wars, loved to run in the fields and destroy birds' nests."

Bruley admits that while he liked Genet and preferred him to the others, he cannot actually say that they were friends. He does not think Genet had any close friends. He remembers long walks and Genet took together in the fields and on the road to Crotto, as well as the endless talks, including discussions about their deepest thoughts, as well as tender conversations, "as children have."

Genet was quiet and pleasant, although he could be stubborn. Bruley remembers a particularly strong reaction of Genet's to a priest's forgetfulness. They were choir boys together. One day, the priest forgot to reward the children of the choir with the coins he would generally give them. "Genet became angry and organized the children

of the choir in a rebellion... He forced the priest to apologize and to promise that he would never again in the future forget ... to reward them.

“At the end of our primary school studies in the village, I was sent to college in Corbigny while Genet – who had been a much more accomplished student in our primary school – was left for another year in the village.” He remained behind because he had not yet turned 13. “Children of Paris” were taken to study a trade, but only after they turned 13.

In the meantime, Genet’s foster mother passed away and his sister Berthe and her husband Antonin took on the task of caring for him. He got along well with Berthe, but not as well with Antonin. Antonin was strict and he also liked to drink. The two of them did not get along. Genet refused to work because it bored him, and his main chore became taking the family cow out to pasture. He also taught himself some English and spent a lot of his time in the fields with the cow daydreaming.

Bruley remembers that when he was in college, Genet sent him a picture postcard where he wrote sentences filled with words in English. After a year, when he had reached age 13, Genet was transferred to a trade school from which he often ran away. It bored him. Afterwards, he was placed in the home of Rene de Bruxeuil. He never managed to acclimate himself to that house, and would steal from the landlord. The authorities transferred him to a juvenile penitentiary in Mettray.

We believe that in this rough institution for young offenders, Genet’s criminal tendencies came to fruition. At the penitentiary he experienced rejection. He discovered a world in which everything was run by force, a world he knew almost nothing about. The day-to-day routine was defined by the tyranny of the more

aggressive boys in the institution. These were the ones who were chosen as “monitors” and who dictated the lives of their friends and cellmates.

Mettray had once been an institution for training future sailors in the king’s navy. It had always been a tough and difficult institution. The boys did not sleep in regular beds. Rather, they slept in hammocks instead of beds. Everything was cold, alienating, and repugnant. The educational staff had little interest in education. The only goal of the staff was to control and subjugate the youths. Genet was not used to all this. He suffered from it and so decided to strengthen his position. He understood that the society was stronger than him and it determined his fate. So he chose a path that would enable him to stand up to society, fight it, hold up its hypocrisy for all to see, and gnaw away at it as best he could in an attempt to beat it.

He chose the criminal path as an alternative which would enable him to stand up to conformist society. He felt alone in his fight. His biological mother, in his eyes, had abandoned him. His foster mother and father, who had loved and respected him, had died. He had to survive and the only way to do so was through criminality.

Genet read the map. Society didn’t want him. Society had cast him out. The way to survive was not to flatter it in hopes of gathering some crumbs from its table. The best way was by declaring war, mocking it, insulting it. It was by choosing a way of life completely the opposite of conformist society. To stand up proudly and choose the life of a criminal with all the freedom of the criminal.

Thus we believe that his positive “preparatory ground” gave Genet a positive self-image. “I am no worse than them”... War is war ...I’ll show their true faces ... I will show them how they really look in the mirror of reality ... I will show them what they are trying to hide so cleverly... the evil of their ways ... their weakness ... their

destructive sexual urges.” Genet does not leave conformist society an escape hatch. He is sure that without him and his criminal flock, society could not construct itself and its outward appearance as it did. Conformist laws and social codes were created because criminals existed.

Additional testimony comes from another of Genet’s childhood friends, Jean Cortet, who lived in Alligny. Cortet, born in 1914, was Genet’s junior by four years. He was the son of well-to-do farmers. His parents owned a castle in the village, where he continued to live. He remembered Genet well. Despite the difference in their ages, they studied in the same class during certain periods. He remembers that Genet would prefer to sit in the back benches. He liked his solitude, did not like to play games, and was not particularly sociable. Friends liked to call him “the rabbit.” He doesn’t remember why, and did not have anything to add about the origins of this nickname. Perhaps because he would choose a spot to sit and not move from it, much in the way a rabbit does.

Cortet claimed that he could still hear Genet’s voice in the church choir, especially his language and his precise pronunciation. Genet was the only one who could sing the prayers in Latin so well. He remembers that Genet preferred to play with the girls than with the boys. Genet did not like rough games. This observation comes up repeatedly from various different people who knew Genet.

Genet was a friend of Cortet’s sister, Andree, who was his age. He loved to draw with her, especially pictures of dresses, or to exchange recipes for dishes or cakes. Cortet believes that Genet had a mentality closer to that of the girls. He did not, as mentioned before, like violent games. He was the complete opposite of Louis Cullaffroy and the two were in fact not close.

Cortet denies the story which spread amongst their friends that Genet stole money from the cash drawer of his loving mother's store. He adds by the way that Genet's mother spoiled him and gave him a great deal of freedom. He describes Genet as a good student who finished his studies with success. Genet stayed in the village for an additional year, due to his youth. In this year he was forced to help out with the chores. "He was lazy. .. Therefore he took the family cow out to pasture." Cortet tells that he would always see Genet on the way to the pasture with a book tucked under his arm. He heard that after leaving the village, Genet was assigned to be a housekeeper at the residence of a well-known musician, Rene de Bruxeil. He remembers that Genet returned once to the village and brought his sister sheet music that Bruxeil had composed in the manner of songs of the day: 1) The soul of roses 2) I have lost the light 3) The soul of violins. "Later we heard that he stole from the composer, who was blind, and was sent from his home."

Another school friend, whom we have already mentioned, was Louis Cullaffroy who was born in Paris in 1909 in Tarnier, the same maternity hospital where Genet would be born a year later. Like Genet, he too was placed in foster care in Alligny.

Afterwards he became successful and amassed a great level of wealth. In 1988 he was still the president of a respectable industrial concern in L'auge. He remembers his classmate at Alligny well. He says that, like Genet's biological mother, his own birth mother – who came from Savoie – was fired from her job by the same superior who impregnated her. At the time she lived and worked in Paris, the large city where work could be found. Without a job, without a source of income, without money or resources she was left without any means. She gave birth to Louis on January 16, 1909.

Later, she met a man named Cullaffroz who took pity on her and recognized her son as his own. The mother took ill, and in 1912 she died. The day afterwards, her husband handed three-year-old Louis to the welfare offices so that they might find him a foster family. He was placed in foster care. The clerk misspelled his name with a Y instead of a Z, and thereafter he was known by the new name of Cullaffroy. He tells that he discovered this story after conducting an investigation when he was 55 years old. He describes himself as someone who had a difficult childhood. He was placed in foster care at age three to a poor farming family, and he was forced to bear the hardships of their life in addition to the difficult work that his foster family demanded from him. The parents gave him little food, and he was forced to work in order to earn it. "In the morning I would get a glass of milk, but only if I had already put in an hour's work."

He says that he suffered especially from the fact that his foster father was an alcoholic. "In the evening, when he was drunk, he would turn into a violent beast. More than once, he threw me out of the house and I was forced to sleep in the barn with the cows." When comparing his life with Genet's he says:

"Genet was lucky. Actually, he was doubly lucky. First, he was placed into the care of a carpenter's family rather than a farmer's. Genet's parents lived in a big house and he wasn't forced to work for his keep. They loved him and he lived in conditions which allowed him to study. Genet never missed school, and he always arrived to class on time. His parents did not exploit him. They defended him and he lived well. Secondly, Genet lived close to the school, which helped bring him closer to the teachers. They helped him succeed, and he did indeed succeed.

“During the war, Genet studied private lessons from M. Choppart, who was the most important teacher in school. He taught him to read and write. M. Choppart lived above the school, near Genet’s house. Everyone took care of him, as opposed to us who lived far away. No one cared for us.

“I met Jean Genet in 1916-1917 in school. I don’t remember this period so well. In 1921, I got to know Genet better. We studied in the same class. Our teacher was Leon Jacob. Jean Genet was a star student. He was especially good at the French language. His competitor was Marc Kouscher. Jean Genet was a calm student, usually alone, who kept his distance from friends. He would play with friends very rarely. The teacher used to read Genet’s compositions to us.

“We all respected him and his knowledge. He would steal from the teachers in class. We knew this. He would steal pencils and other small things and not bother to hide them. He would hand them out to others. Once, he discovered the school’s stationery cupboard. He robbed it and handed items out to the students in the class. I don’t know why he liked me in particular. I got a nice pencil box filled with colored pencils from Genet’s theft.” His schoolmate testifies that they did not know each other well, and were not close friends. They were acquaintances who shared a class. The friends did not complain about Genet, and did not turn him in to the teacher, because they respected him. His friend does not think Genet stole money, but he would not rule this out this possibility.

According to Cullaffroy, while the “Children of Paris” and the children of the village studied in the same class, he believes the teachers and staff treated the children differently based on their origins. “In the village they discriminated between us and treated the ‘Children of Paris’ differently than the local children. The villagers often

called us 'Bastards of Paris' (*Culs de Paris*). They would blame us whenever something bad happened in the village. They saw us as the representatives of evil and badness. If a fire broke out, they would come looking for us. And if they found something damaged or someone committed a theft, they would always look to us. Some of them would call us 'fire starters' (*Les metteurs de Feu*”).

“You need to understand that there was also discrimination between the children in the church choir. There was a choir made up of the local children which sang at the weddings and the funerals of the notables, and a choir made up of “Children of Paris” which sang at the weddings and funerals of the poor.

“It’s important to note that the natives were good people who lived difficult lives. The area was poor and the inhabitants earned their daily bread under great objective difficulties.”

In 1922 Louis Cullaffroy was sent to a farmer to learn the agricultural trade. He says this was when he heard that Genet had been sent to an institution for juvenile offenders. He also says that M. Roclore, the head of the welfare agency, would threaten naughty children, telling them that if they did not return to the path of righteousness he would send them to Jean Genet. The hint was clear to all.

“I was told,” Cullaffroy says at the end of his statement, “that Genet mentions me in one of his books. It’s important to remember that we weren’t alike at all, and in fact we were quite different from each other. But the common denominator between us is that we had both been abandoned and put in foster care, me at age three years and he at age seven months.”

Again we see that Genet enjoyed preferential and loving treatment in both his closer and wider environment. The children he grew up with admired him and gave him

preferential treatment. Everyone remembered him as a good child, loved by his foster parents.

His criminal actions at the house of his patron the composer led the authorities to place him in a juvenile penitentiary, a place where he doubtlessly thought he did not deserve to be confined. This institution contributed significantly, in our opinion, to the fact that Genet chose to be a criminal. And as long as he was a criminal, then he would be a “real” criminal, one who was a threat to his surroundings.

One of his classmates, Jean Pouteaux, gives a different account. He was born in 1909, and was a year older than Genet. His parents were farmers. He himself joined the police and finished his career in Paris. Following his retirement from the police force, he returned to the village of his birth. He gave his testimony when he was an senior citizen, following his retirement.

He remembers Genet as a smart child, but not one whom he liked. He claims that while Genet enjoyed wonderful treatment from his parents, he (Genet) was outraged that the other “Children of Paris” did not and were exploited by the farmers in the village. He tried to influence the other “Children of Paris” to steal from the masters of their houses, on account that these were exploiting them. He turned the children against their foster parents.

Pouteaux saw this as ingratitude. As a son of the village and son to parents from the village, he could not tolerate Genet’s incitement of the “Children of Paris”. He speaks of an incident which involved a fistfight between himself and Genet, but notes that Genet did not tell on him despite the fact that he slapped Genet hard enough that marks appeared on Genet’s cheek. In his estimation, Genet was not an honest child, although he cannot recall any incident where Genet was caught stealing in the village.

We feel it is important to note that young Genet's "preparatory ground" gave him the inner strength and the ability, even at his young age, to rebel and incite the "Children of Paris" not to accept their fates like helpless sheep. He incited them to steal from their parents, and thus to express their frustrations. The person who is able to rebel and incite is the same person who has a great inner strength, which takes its power from the positive "preparatory ground" inscribed in him. Genet had a good biological mother and good foster parents, and they satisfied his basic needs, and gave him warmth, strokes and hugs, love, and absolute protection. Genet had a personal "inner strength" which enabled him to act and scream out for imminent justice, as it was seen from viewpoint of a child.

Another of his childhood friends, one younger than him by three years, was Camille Harcq who was born in 1913. She was orphaned at a young age and grew up in her grandfather's house in Alligny. She met Genet in 1922, while coming back to her grandfather's house which was located 50 meters from Genet's. She says she has fond memories of their shared childhood. Genet was a good friend. You could ask him anything and he would happily agree to help. She had many conversations with him. He was always good to her and never turned his nose up to anyone. Indeed, she remembers that as children they saw Genet as being different from everyone. "We loved to play and he loved to read. We loved to talk and he loved being alone (*solitaire*). It seemed to us that he had a secret he was keeping to himself. When he met a group of children he did not stop and did not join us, but passed by, greeted us, and kept going.

"On days when the weather was nice, his favorite pastime was to sit on a particular bale of hay, always in the same spot, and read for hours without changing his position." She notes that in her imagination she sees him clearly, as if he was there

now. She says that Genet was different from the other children. He was always dressed well, always clean and organized. He never looked disheveled. He looked like a city boy and not a country boy. He had an elegance that the others lacked. He was tall, his hair was curly, his body was athletic, and he seemed like someone serious. He spoke beautiful French. He never spoke in the local dialect (*patois*). When people spoke to him in *patois*, he always answered in polished French. He understood the local dialect, but did not want to use it. He was not an ordinary child, even beyond being extremely intelligent (*tres intelligent*). He always looked to learn, even in the breaks at school he preferred to read rather than play.

“Theft? Those are just stories. Even when he took pennies from his mother he just bought sweets which he would share with all of us. Those are childish acts, things we all did.

“When rumors came to Alligny that he had stolen from the home of his patron (Rene de Bruxeuil) and had been sent to a juvenile penitentiary, I was very surprised.... It did not seem like Genet. He was not the kind of child who could act in this kind of negative way. He was not the thieving type.”

And she adds: “I lived in Paris for 15 years. Life there was extremely difficult... Genet did not have a family. He did not have anyone. ... He just stumbled... But over the years he made something of himself and became a writer worshiped by many. He wasn't like everybody. He was a special person.”

Genet had a childhood friend, another “Child of Paris”, who was Jewish. His name was Marc Kouscher, born in Paris in 1909 when his mother was 19. The mother gave him away immediately to the welfare agency and he was brought to Alligny when he was just eight or 10 days old. The family who took him as a baby treated him as excess baggage. They would tie his leg to the table. When he was three, the welfare

agencies discovered this and freed him from this harsh family. He was placed with a different family, who treated him very kindly.

He remembers Genet well. In his words, Genet was a good student, with a rich vocabulary, one who kept apart from his friends and was different from anyone else. When the Jewish friend, who was older than Genet by a year, introduced himself to Genet in 1920-1921, he introduced himself as the top student in their village school. Kouscher pushed himself to be the best, and in fact succeeded in doing better than anyone, including Genet. In the final exams for primary school (*certificat d'etude*), he excelled. He claims that Genet respected him, and that they never fought. In his estimation, Genet was never a particularly law-abiding child, nor was he honest with his friends. His behavior wasn't masculine, but rather feminine.

In the village, a rumor spread that he had stolen the money box from his mother's tobacco shop. Kouscher himself warns against believing these rumors. However, he claims that Genet liked to swipe whatever he came across in class, be it a pencil, eraser, or pencil case. One time, Kouscher remembers, Genet stole the class dictionary.

Genet, according to Kouscher, was no different than other "Children of Paris." They all swiped and stole. "In the village, they called us 'Bastards of Paris' and when they were mad at us they would call us 'Children of Satan'. We weren't like the village children, and we felt ourselves to be different from the locals. We never had normal shoes. We only had wooden clogs and our clothes, which were provided by the welfare agency, were different from those of the village children. Personally, I was marked as a Jew, since this is what my mother declared. So they would not let me pray in the church and I did not take part in the church choir. During religious classes they would always take care to remove me... and I felt I was being punished. When I

reached age 13, nobody wanted to sponsor me, which would allow me to continue my studies and fulfill my ambition to become a teacher. Despite the fact I was a good student in every school and all the years I had learned there.... Indeed, when I was six I promised myself to be the best student of all... and I fulfilled this promise. During final exams at the primary school, I was the youngest one there by two years... But this did not impress the administration or the villagers.... They sent me to learn to be a farmer instead of sending me to continue my education like I so dreamed of doing. "I have to point out," he continues, "that I lived four kilometers from the school, and I made sure to arrive in class each morning, sleet or snow. I never missed class. "Yes, I was often called 'dirty Jew' (*sale juif*), but Genet never called me that. I never fought with him.... Like I said, he respected me, and I had admiration for him because he was always the first in class in all the subjects we studied. I never forgot that."

An unusual negative opinion about the young Genet's personality comes from his childhood neighbor, Felix Roncin. This friend was born in 1909 and spent all his life in Alligny. His house was located above his parents' store across the road from Genet. He describes Genet as a child who stole not only from school (pencils, erasers, etc), but also from his mother who loved him so dearly, and from his foster brother Georges whom he envied. His friend thinks that Genet stole from Georges as a form of revenge, because he was jealous of him and feared their mother loved him, Georges, the best because he was her biological son.

According to Roncin's testimony, Genet would steal money from his parents and buy sweets and chocolates. According to rumors, Genet would give these to friends, but he himself (Roncin) never received any. The clever Genet never bought sweets or chocolates from Roncin's parents' store himself. He would send a girl, a fellow "Child of Paris" who was borderline mentally retarded, to do his forbidden

errands. In this way he protected himself and they could never tie him directly to the thefts.

Genet was, he says, a serious child but different from others, even in the way he would fight with his friends. He would not hit like the boys, but scratch like a girl. He also enjoyed telling his mother about his friends' schemes. She would protect him and blame his friends. He was indeed a mama's boy.

From the various testimonials of his childhood acquaintances, we get a picture of Genet as a child whose childhood gave him his singularity: love, admiration, respect, and protection.

This smart child understood the uniqueness of his situation, and could not accept the fact that his biological mother had abandoned him. He rebelled against this fact. He was jealous of his brother Georges because he could not accept the fact that Georges was his foster mother's biological son, whereas he was only a foster son, a "Child of Paris", and not a real son.

The fact that his foster mother died and left him – abandoned him – also weighed upon him, despite the fact that his foster sister continued to care for him along with her father and husband, and made sure to fulfill Genet's needs, and give him respect, love and everything else a growing boy needs.

Genet found it difficult to accept the fact that the educational system "abandoned" him after primary school. He would not agree to go to work. A year later they tried to train him for a trade by uprooting him from the only home he had ever known. The rigid French administrative system acted from an orientation of brute strength, without the cooperation of the "uprooted", the youths who upon reaching the age of 13 were transferred to the next station in their lives. Genet, as said, rebelled internally against this decree.

Genet the child, and afterwards the youth, apparently expressed his rebellion through his stubbornness and through the unusual way of swiping and stealing as revenge. As an introverted child, he developed a lifestyle of passive rebellion which was expressed in his stubbornness, as well as his vindictive thievery, through which he vented his frustrations. His foster mother apparently understood this and made sure that his behavior would not cause him to be labeled negatively. His mother died and he was uprooted from his house to continue his training when he was still at a tender age (13), at the cusp of adolescence. Thus he experienced the system as something which trampled him and decided what would be done with him in a completely arbitrary manner.

Genet rebelled. He stole from the home of his supposed patron, the blind musician. The system reacted in an extreme manner and expelled him. It placed him in an institution for juvenile offenders. Genet rose up and chose to fulfill what he saw was the fate society had decreed for him, to be a criminal. His egocentric conception of himself and his uniqueness boomeranged on him. He rebelled against the decree of society. He would not accept the social determinism which ran his life.

Genet's Criminality

Genet's formal criminal career started in 1926 and ended in 1944. During this time period he spent a total of 44 months and 16 days in prison. Along with his stay at the juvenile penitentiary in Mettray, he was incarcerated in a number of other prisons such as those in Fresnes, Chalon, Auxerre, Brest, Marseille, Tourelles, and Paris.

At the start of his criminal career, on two occasions (April 29, 1926 and July 19, 1926), the courts found him not guilty, but sentenced him to a juvenile penitentiary. In 1937 a court found him guilty and sentenced him to a months' probation. In all other cases he was sentenced to a few months in jail. His longest

sentence was in 1940, when he served 10 months. Another long sentence came in 1942, when he was jailed for eight months. His final release from prison came on March 14, 1944 and thereafter he did not return to prison.

A chronological survey of his crimes starts with the same theft from the house of the blind composer Rene de Bruxeuil. In April 1925 the revenue agencies sent him for evaluation at the Clinique Sainte Anne psychiatric hospital in Paris, where I spent a research year in 1974. This large hospital housed a psychiatric evaluation center along with a large and established forensic institute, and there he was indeed diagnosed.

On December 11, 1925 Genet was placed in a youth center on Rue Vaugirard in Paris. On February 9, 1926, he decided to escape from there and travel to Marseille. He was caught, but escaped again on March 6, 1926. This time, Genet was caught riding the train without a ticket and tried. He was sent to the juvenile penitentiary in Colonie de Mettray on December 2, 1926.

In this institution, we believe Genet's criminal tendencies came into being. Here he discovered that the world was different from the home of his parents, Eugenie and Charles Regnier. Genet was an intelligent child who had been abandoned by his mother at birth (1911) and taken into foster care with a loving family. There, again, his mother died (1922) and at age 13 he was forced to leave and to serve as an aide to a blind musician. He stole from his master and was sent, as aforementioned, to an institution for juvenile offenders.

Genet's 18-year criminal career was varied. It was based on a negative and contrarian view of the conformist word. What the world saw as ugly, Genet saw as beautiful. What the world saw as bad, Genet saw as good. He saw the conformist

world as hypocritical, slick, filled with double standards, corrupt, and exploitative of others especially if the other was weak and different.

Crime for Genet was the redemption from the conformist world. It was a way to experience power, freedom, and self-fulfillment. Power because the criminal enterprise demands the investment of tremendous energy. The criminal world ignores the rules and norms accepted by others. The Hebrew word for world, *olam*, hints at disregard, *hitalmut*. By joining the criminal world, Genet showed his disregard of society's decrees and he felt no responsibility for the conformist world. He owed nothing to anybody. The freedom from the world of commitments and his establishment in world of crime allowed him to escape from morality and law and also gave him the right to disconnect himself from feelings about his past.

We believe Genet chose to be a criminal, and thus cast his freedom to his fate. From hereon, he was Genet, the man the conformist world feared. He formed a criminal gang which he led, although he gave a certain amount of freedom so that its members would not feel constricted.

He saw the world of crime as a hierarchical world parallel to that of the conformist one. He aspired that his "ideal criminal" would stand up proudly and reject the "table crumbs" that conformist society wanted to give him. He saw in crime a separate and parallel experience to the conformist world. Prison, in Genet's eyes, was a place for rest and recuperation. Genet saw the guards as "neutral people", who made their living from this work like guards at cemeteries who do not care who is buried in the ground so long as they do not disturb their work or keep them from getting their salaries at the end of the month.

Genet was convinced that the conformist world needed the criminal one. Without criminals, society would have no legislatures and no laws. There would be no

police, jailers, or even judges. The often all-powerful judge would become obsolete if there were no criminals. He deduced from this that society owed a lot to the criminals, beyond their contribution to the lock, bar, door, and safe box industries. The world would be lifeless were there no criminals. In this manner, Genet strengthened his “flock” of criminals and entreated them to be proud criminals.

Genet was convinced that he had been forced to become a criminal by a society that had stigmatized him from the moment he had been uprooted from his mother's house and from the village in which he had grown up. He fought against the same society which marks people and thus turns them into its servants as whores and criminals. Thus it protects itself and establishes its own liberty.

In this article, as stated, we have developed a different thesis. We have attempted to base our claims that Jean Genet indeed chose to be a criminal, learned to be a criminal, became sophisticated in the criminal world and became a writer who painted the criminal world in unique colors which cause us to think twice.

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