The Notion of Saintliness in Jean Genet

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There can have been few novels published in the twentieth century which have more firmly rejected the traditional christian bourgeois morality than the one I propose to study in this article. It is the novel of a counter-culture *par excellence,* and has come to be seen as the definitive literary statement of a radical alternative. Its main character, a homosexual prostitute with a criminal record, moves in and epitomises the specific milieu of his culture, carrying with him all the detail of its particularity. He is arguably the last literary figure, if judged solely on his superficial reputation, to whom most people would turn for enlightenment on the notion of saintliness, and yet it is precisely this notion that is at the centre of much of his significance, and to which this article is devoted. Genet does not simply describe his creation periodically as a 'saint', without further qualification, but rather carries this epithet through in the context of a developed understanding of what he considers it to mean. Our possible initial reaction of feeling that 'saint' is probably used as a more eye-catching term for 'hero' or 'star'—a sort of linguistic shock-tactic—is thus, on closer examination, transformed into a conviction that the word 'saint' is used simply because it is the only word that is right; it is the only word that means what the author is trying to say, and as such deserves, and indeed demands analysis.

Our Lady of the Flowers[1] first appeared in France in 1943, and then in a revised edition of 1951. It was first published in Great Britain in 1964. Like all Genet's novels, of which it is the first, its subject is the world of homosexual criminality, and, in common with its successors, it shocked and revolted much of its early readership.

It is written in the first person, the narrator identifying himself as Jean Genet, from a prison cell, and takes the form of a series of largely sexual fantasies and reveries woven around characters sometimes loosely based on people known to the author, but substantially of his own invention. Despite the title of the book (Our Lady of the Flowers

[1]The French title of Genet's novel is *Notre-Dame des Fleurs.* It is very reluctantly that I quote throughout in English, since much of Genet's genius is in his language, but given the difficulty, even now, of acquiring Genet's works in French, and the relative facility of buying them in English paperback editions (*The Miracle of the Rose* and *The Thief's Journal* are currently available in Penguin Modern Classics, *Querelle of Brest* and *Our Lady of the Flowers* in Panther Fiction), it seemed the only realistic solution. It is perhaps also appropriate to point out here that I have included examples of the use of the word 'saint' where the word occurs in the original French, even if it is translated by the English 'holy'. For example the sentence 'Divine est morte sainte et assassinée—par la phtisie' (*Oeuvres Complètes,* II, 14), which is translated 'Divine died holy and murdered—by consumption' (Panther, p. 60).

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is the nickname of a young murderer whose trial is described near the end of the work), the most fully depicted character is one Louis Culafroy, nicknamed Divine. This begins and ends with her[2] death, tracing in between, though without much chronological order, the story of her[2] childhood and adult life, and particularly her relationship with the 'male' homosexual known as Darling (Mignon).

The question of Divine's saintliness is introduced as soon as her death is mentioned right at the beginning of the novel, but it is not until the very end that the nature of this saintliness is revealed in all its complexity. 'Divine died holy and murdered—by consumption' (p. 60)[3] is the stark statement of fact by which Genet opens the main part of the work, but it is a statement that cannot fully be appreciated until the whole career of his hero and victim has been examined. Divine's saintliness is not simple, but it is sufficiently important for Genet to return constantly to it, and so ultimately to make its nature and its relationship with the author relatively clear.

Our most obvious introduction to the question will be in a study of the ways in which Divine, within the inverted world that is her *raison d'être,* possesses certain of the common attributes of the saint, and of these, supremely, the acceptance of suffering.

Even as a young man, Louis Culafroy seems to invite derision and pain. In his first affair, with a youth called Alberto, he soon learns what rejection means, and experiences, as a result of a broken promise, a profound anguish—'the idea of Alberto's betrayal was so acute that it established itself despotically in Culafroy's mind, to such a degree that he declared: "My despair is immense" ' (p. 154-155). This experience is repeated again and again; even by her regular lover of later years, Darling, Divine is rejected and taken up again, only to be rejected a second time.

Curiously, though, the betrayal that becomes such a familiar agony for her does not reduce the love for the person who betrays her, but rather intensifies it by its association with suffering. Early in the work we read of the way in which Darling betrays Divine by 'selling' her friends to the police (p. 81). Divine knows nothing of this aspect of her lover, but Genet assures us that 'had she known it, she would have loved him all the more, for to her love was equivalent to despair' (p. 84). Darling, on the other hand, is unaware of the suffering he is causing, and treats her feelings with total contempt. When Divine is first abandoned by him, the separation causes pain to her only: 'In the twinkling of an eye, after six years of union, without considering himself attached, without thinking that he was causing pain or doing wrong, Darling decided to leave Divine. Without remorse, only a slight concern that perhaps Divine might refuse ever to see him again' (p. 107). They do meet, and indeed live together again, but the suffer-

[2]A note on pronouns! When Genet refers to his character as Divine he always uses the feminine forms. When he refers to 'her' as Louis Culafroy, however, he uses the masculine. The translation follows this procedure, and I have done likewise. The references to Louis Culafroy are exclusively concerned with the character's childhood.
[3]All references to Panther Fiction edition.

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ing continues as Divine now believes that she is a superfluous onlooker of another couple, Darling and Our Lady: 'When she saw them enter, Divine thought she had been forgotten and replaced' (p. 127). Eventually, as we know, she is again forsaken by Darling, who, 'little by little [. . .] had grown weary. He neglected Divine and left her. In the garret, she then had terrible fits of despair' (p. 148). On other occasions she is persecuted by individual members of the group—of the Negro Seck Gorgui we read that he 'played with her like a cat with a mouse' (p. 169), and of Mimosa, who remarks on Divine's appearance, that she does so 'maliciously, to hurt Divine' (p. 142-3). Elsewhere she feels excluded by other couples, such as that formed by Our Lady and Seck, who use her garret for their pleasure, whilst 'she [. . .] remained alone, abandoned' (p. 217); yet of this couple too we read that 'she consents, out of love, to the Negro's and Our Lady's loving each other' (p. 206). And so on, until Divine can finally cry out in total despair: ' "My life? I'm desolate, I'm a Valley of Desolation" ' (p. 271).

Alongside this acceptance of suffering, whose motives we shall examine in due course, is a reluctance on her own behalf ever to inflict pain on those she loves. Genet speaks of Divine's first meeting with Our Lady in terms of 'the kindness of this giddy creature'. She has asked Our Lady a question (Genet does not say what the question is), which has clearly hurt him so much that Divine 'sees his face decomposing visibly', and her immediate reaction is to 'run [. . .] after the pain she has caused in order to overtake it and stop it' (p. 105).

On another occasion, when the sentimental element is absent from the encounter, the same concern is still evident: 'One day, in the police wagon, on the way back from court [. . .] she asks an old man: "how many?" He answers: "They slapped me with three years. What about you?" She's down for only two, but answers: "Three years" ' (p. 103).

This feeling is of course most prevalent in her relationship with Darling, and his total indifference to her feelings is not reciprocated. On one occasion, when Divine has become friendly with a soldier known as the Archangel, she refrains from bringing him back to her room. It is 'out of fear of Darling, especially out of fear of hurting him [that] Divine has not dared take the soldier to the garret' (p. 140). A final example of this generosity comes during a poignant interview with Our Lady, significantly after he has betrayed Divine, during which she 'smiled gently so that both of them would not be moved to the point of despair [. . .] and so that Our Lady would not dissolve in that humiliation' (p. 221-222).

This combination of gentleness and suffering is part of a constant experience of humiliation in the character of Divine, 'in the course of that calamity which is her life' (p. 113). She has been destined to suffer—'Divine does not live with gladness of heart. She accepts, unable to elude it, the life that God makes for her and that leads her to Him' (p. 112) and as a result of this 'she offers up to God her love and sorrow' (p. 112).

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But Divine's saintliness is not that simple. Her acceptance of, and at times search for humiliation cannot be understood independently of Genet's relationship with her, and it is to this that we must look for further elucidation.

Divine, to put it in its most absolute terms, is Genet's Christ. That is, she is the bearer of the same suffering that Genet bore (and this is surely the meaning of his remark 'from myself I make Divine' (p. 239)). By taking onto herself the inadequacies of all who surround her, and by continuing to love them, she suffers in the same way that Genet himself suffered, and indeed suffers for Genet. Genet as author is thus the creator of the saviour figure, but is also its archetype, and as such is saved by it. In addition to this, Divine, by this process of bearing pain vicariously, also justifies herself, and thus in becoming a saviour figure, assures her own saintliness: 'It will take me an entire book', Genet explains, 'to draw her from her petrification and gradually impart my suffering to her, gradually deliver her from evil, and, holding her by the hand, lead her to saintliness' (p. 74). The creative and redemptive process, at once egoistic and altruistic, is dwelt upon again in other parts of the work, as Genet makes abundantly clear his role for her: 'In the final analysis, it is my own destiny, be it true or false, that I am draping (at times a rag, at times a court robe) on Divine's shoulders.

Slowly but surely I want to strip her of every vestige of happiness so as to make a saint of her [. . .]. And I, more gentle than a wicked angel, lead her by the hand' (p. 97-98). A more brutal interpretation of the process is spelt out later by Genet, when he says: 'Divine needs a few jolts which squeeze her, pull her apart, paste her back together, shatter her, till all I have left of her is a bit of essence which I am trying to track down' (p. 110). This is the 'essential form of the Saint' of which Genet speaks in the final section of meditations which he calls 'Divinariana' (p. 271).

But this is still too simple, because it assumes a total acceptance of almost unavoidable goodness by the creature, whereas the reality lies in Divine becoming totally human, just as her creator Genet was totally human; Divine must take on Genet's *full* destiny, and not just his noble suffering. Because of this, he will make of her not a pure and unsullied saint, perfect because passive, but rather a struggling and reluctant one. Necessarily, then, he will make her a saint who believes she has the free will to shape her own destiny. Divine will thus, while accepting her suffering, enjoy the power to seek to resist her eventual sanctification by Genet (to whom she refers as God)[4] in a

[4]This whole question is very problematic, but in the long final meditation entitled 'The saintliness of Divine', beginning on p. 274, God and Genet are clearly synonymous. Divine is obviously a sufficiently convincing character, in whose existence we believe, for it to be inconceivable for her to refer to her destiny being in the hands of 'her author', for example. and so it is with God that she generally concerns herself. There is no doubt however that the creator of her destiny is Genet, who says of this character: 'I want . . . to re-fashion in my own way, and for the enchantment of my cell . . . the story of Divine' (p. 59-60). There is also a whole allegory of free will and predestination to be drawn from this section, but for the purposes of this article it is perhaps enough to say that Genet has ultimate power over a character who believes she is free—Genet finally gives to Divine the destiny that was planned for her, although she believed she was fighting against it.

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variety of ways—'She made some gestures of frightful despair, other gestures of hesitation, of timid attempts to find the right way, to cling to earth and not rise to heaven [. . .]. She had to stand her ground, whatever the cost. Had to hold her own against God, Who was summoning her in silence' (p. 274).

Divine's election to saintliness has been known to her since childhood—(on one occasion we are told that Culafroy 'whispered aloud a cry: "Lord, I am among Thy elect" ' and thus 'for a few steps, God carried him off towards His throne' (p. 187))—and it is this very awareness of predestination to saintliness that makes her commit one terrible and conscious act of evil to counteract her apparently holy destiny, an act which is not revealed to us until the last section of the book. This, the most significant gesture of defiance that Divine makes, referred to by Genet as 'killing herself', is performed, it seems, initially of her own volition—'She wanted to kill herself. To kill herself. To kill my kindness' (p. 274)—but ultimately in co-operation with Genet/God—'The following brilliant idea therefore occurred to her, and she carried it out' (p. 274)—so that she believes she is using her free will against the holy destiny that Genet/God has planned for her. The incident begins when Divine tricks a little girl into leaning on a balcony, which she has deliberately made insecure, and which then gives way. 'From below, Divine watched. None of the child's pirouettes was lost on her. She was superhuman, to the point of—without tears or cries or shudders—gathering with her gloved fingers what remained of the child. She was given three months of preventive custody for involuntary manslaughter, but her goodness was dead' (p. 275).

Her goodness was dead, yes, but not her saintliness. Her goodness had to die, because her full destiny was to absorb the whole of Genet, whose complexity transcended, while incorporating, such a narrow concept. Her saintliness, however, as Genet's, is ultimately to try to forsake the very notion of predestined goodness—to cancel out her election, to react against this 'too wondrous a glory' (p. 274)—and thus she seeks not to escape from suffering, but rather to counterbalance the goodness which she receives from it by a premeditated act of evil. Of course this rejection of holy predestination does not alter her eventual fate, since it is in itself, for Genet, the ultimate humility.

Thus her death takes her unawares, and 'one day, when she wasn't expecting it, as she lay still in bed, God took her and made her a saint' (p. 274). It is in this way, through the saintliness of Divine, that we come to recognise what constitutes the saintliness of the author, identified by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Saint Genet comédien et martyr.*[5] It is not because of her simple goodness, but in her total acceptance of humility, accompanied, or rather exemplified by the refusal of the honour of saintliness, that Divine 'dies holy', carrying the totality of her creator, and able to say, like him, 'I have placed myself lower than dirt. I could not do otherwise' (p. 113). It is in so doing that she

[5]This massive essay forms Volume I of Genet's *Oeuvres Complètes.* Sections are reproduced in translation as an introduction to the Panther Fiction edition, pp. 9-52.

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illustrates completely Genet's definition as formulated in *The Miracle of the Rose* that saintliness 'is recognised by the following: that it leads to Heaven by way of sin'.

How far, then, does this strange, sad, twilight creature fit in with any traditional standards of saintliness that are not those of Genet, but of accepted hagiography? Are we simply dealing with a private canonisation of Genet's according to his own theology, totally irrelevant to, and indeed at odds with the notion of saintliness as understood by the universal church for centuries?

Divine finds spiritual values independently of the majority ethos, since her whole social context is far removed from the *bien pensant* criteria of moral orthodoxy; it is genuinely a counter-culture, since it creates its values entirely with reference to itself, and not to a broader social framework. Her qualities, therefore, are manifested according to the ethic of the microsociety, rather than being adjusted to those of society at large; for her suffering is understood as suffering first of all for and at the hands of a homosexual lover, and is the outcome of a total spiritual and sexual devotion to him; it gives all, and asks and expects nothing in return, having as its *raison d'être* the abnegation of self in order that another, or others, may themselves escape suffering. The same may be said of her gentleness, never a weak characteristic, but rather a positive and caring affection; frivolity, which accompanies these two, and which is so much a part of the whole ethos, prevents them from ever becoming sentimental excesses.

But it is the final act of Divine that singles her out for saintliness, curious as this may seem, since in it lies the ultimate humility in terms of the ethos which is hers; the killing of the child constitutes the ratification of her martyrdom by the refusal of its merits—as she is prepared by her creator to receive the reward, she makes this gesture to demonstrate her own unwillingness to take it. It is the ultimate example of the publican figure, the 'unrighteous' man who is justified by his acknowledgement of spiritual worthlessness.

As a saint, then, Divine is far removed from the saintliness of the majority. Her qualities are not *per se* the attributes of saintlinesss, since incorporated into the context of compromise, normality, and accepted social values they would lose their significance. Such values as they are understood by the majority moral code may represent a viable approach to spiritual achievement for the many, but Divine is one of the few. Her saintliness is extreme, not everyday; exceptional, not normal. She has the qualities of the saints of legend, and she has these not *despite* the fact that she represents a counter-culture, but rather *because* of it. The saints whose lives have become part of universal mythology, far from conforming to orthodoxy, generally lived totally at variance with it. Their interpretation of counter-culture was different, but was none the less disruptive, shocking and unacceptable to the majority.

I would argue then that Divine's saintliness, if we have difficulty in recognising it, is strange for us not because she represents too modern,

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but rather too traditional a notion of such a concept. She refuses to compromise, and as such may seem removed from our experience; but such a form of saintliness, as understood by Genet, is precisely a concept which fits in very well with his world-view, 'inverted' and threatening as it is. He can and must use such a term because he is describing a world that is so different from normal western assumptions that no other would be sufficiently powerful to portray it. Not only *can* saintliness of this kind exist in the context of a counter-culture; it is in itself, by its very nature, the complete expression of counter-cultural tendencies.

If a conclusion is to be drawn, it is therefore not first of all that the notion of saintliness helps us to understand Genet, but rather that Genet has something to teach us about saintliness. For him, it is the lifestyle of the social outcast, of the man whom society alienates from itself because he does not conform. It is a conscious denial of the mainstream, the approved, the established, in favour of a radical alternative, and as such is epitomised by the life of Divine. When Genet uses the term 'saint' he does so knowingly, and in so doing flies in the face of respectability; but this respectability is pharisaic, and Divine's revolt can thus be seen not simply as saintly by the criteria of a perverted credo, but as an exemplification of a fully christian kind of saintliness in its most extreme form.

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