Competing Images. The Posthumous Reception of Jean Genet

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Abstract

Since the death of Jean Genet, his name and oeuvre have been the subject of heated debate. Influential critics have argued that Genet was an aristocratic anti-Semite, rather than a revolutionary poet who took sides with the outcasts. In this article, I analyze the positions, patterns, and strategies of this multifaceted debate, suggesting that provocation and marginalization constitute an integral part of Genet's aesthetics. In the act of judging Genet from historical, political, and ethical perspectives, the critics operate as executors of his literary project, confirming the paratopic position the writer presumably desired.

Keywords

ideology, paratope, aesthetics, canon, criticism

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Jean Genet's ascension to literary sainthood begins with an accusation. The young Genet, an orphan and an outcast in the rural Morvan, was subject to suspicion and, due to his dubious origins, finally accused of thievery. However, instead of shaking the label, Genet decided to embrace it to fulfill all the mordant potential that it promised. From this inaugurating act sprang the literary Genet. Genet's early initiation into a mental, if not physical, sort of underworld predicates his awareness of the problems of subcultural existence in a society ruled by signs, symbols, and rituals. His writing often focuses on the detailed qualities of inanimate objects, attributing meaning to them and in the process forging almost personal relationships with them. Jean Genet (19 December 1910 – 15 April 1986) was a prominent and controversial French novelist, playwright, poet, essayist, and political activist. Early in his life he was a vagabond and petty criminal, but later took to writing. His major works include the novels Querelle of Brest, The Thief's Journal, and Our Lady of the Flowers, and the plays The Balcony, The Blacks, The Maids and The Screens.