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Queer Writing: Homoeroticism  
in Jean Genet’s Fiction

While previous criticism of Jean Genet’s fiction, particularly that undertaken within the context of GLBTQ studies, has concentrated predominantly on the autobiographical framework of his narratives, this study will offer new critical approaches to Genet’s homoerotic writing that do not rely on traditional notions of authorial intention. The concept of homoerotic writing elaborated in Genet’s narratives, this study argues, demonstrates how attempts to inscribe sexual specificity need not be framed as the direct expression of a stable, intending sexual subject. Attention to this widely overlooked aspect of Genet’s work has a potentially important contribution to make to contemporary GLBTQ criticism in that it thinks through what a specifically queer writing might be, neither naturalising nor negating the role of the writing subject, and emphatically resisting not only a simplistic identification of the writing subject with the text produced, but also the erasure of that subject from the scene of the text.

Jean Genet  
ou: Je n’ai  
ou: jean jeûné  
ou: j’en jeûné  
ou encore: n’ai-je  
ou neige.

— Jean Genet, letter to Antoine Bourseiller  
(“Il faut désacraliser l’auteur” 94)
Of all the strange and self-invented characters found in Jean Genet’s fiction — the transsexual street hustlers and imitation gangsters and nationless vagrants — the most compelling is undoubtedly that of Genet himself. In a series of texts framed as autobiographical, Genet’s eponymous narrators recount the events of a life whose improbabilities and contradictions would strain credulity if it had not already been widely reported in the national press. Genet is the reform school boy and prison inmate with only the most rudimentary education who was hailed by Cocteau during a court appearance as “le plus grand écrivain de l’époque,” before he had published a single book (Cocteau 326-27); the author of ground-breakingly explicit homoerotic texts written during the German Occupation of Paris, when identified homosexuals risked deportation to concentration camps, but whose works defend acts of gay bashing; the chronicler of degradation and vagrancy whose prose is so seductive that the conservative novelist François Mauriac begged him to follow Rimbaud’s lead and cease writing altogether, in order not to corrupt the reading public (1); the author of a series of insistently autobiographical novels whose eponymous narrators continually warn the reader they are lying and unreliable. The controversial circumstances in which Genet’s writing first came to public attention, coupled with the shape-shifting qualities of both author and fictional narrator, has had a determining influence on the critical reception of his work ever since. When Bataille declared that “dépouillé du halo dont l’entoure un snobisme littéraire, Genet seul est plus digne d’intérêt” (202), he succinctly articulated an approach that still dominates critiques of Genet’s fiction, which have continued to focus almost exclusively on the autobiographical framework of his narratives, reading Genet’s texts as primarily important for what they reveal about their author’s own experiences as a homosexual, hustler, or prisoner.

In many respects, this approach is one encouraged, even impelled, by the texts themselves, which repeatedly and deliberately obscure the dis/continuities between the author and narrators. For Genet is a character who famously, and spectacularly, exceeds the pages of his novels, and whose first literary invention can be found not in his early published work, but in the series of court records, government documents, and newspaper reports in which the petty criminal known variously as Genest, Gejietti, Jenet, Genêt, Ganetti or Gallien