jean_genet,_the_architect

NICK KORODY

About halfway through Jean Genet's semi-autobiographical A *Thief's Journal*, the narrator, homeless and destitute, wanders up and down the Spanish coast. He takes shelter wherever he can find it — a cave, a coastguard's hut, a cemetery — and imagines the place as if it were his home:

> *"When I walked miserably along in the rain and wind, the tiniest crag, the most meager shelter became habitable. I would sometimes adorn it with an artful comfort drawn from what was peculiar to it: a box in the theater, the chapel of a cemetery, a cave, an abandoned quarry, a freight car and so on. Obsessed by the idea of a home, I would embellish, in thought, and in keeping with its own architecture, the one I had just chosen. While everything was being denied me, I would wish I were meant for the fluting of the fake columns that ornament fa ades, for the caryatids, the balconies, the stone, for the heavy bourgeois assurance which these things express."*

A few pages later, the narrator sleeps with a coast guard. As they embrace, he imagines smugglers successfully landing on the coast, unencumbered by the watchful gaze of the guard. His caresses become a form of complicity with thieves. "There is a relationship between flowers and convicts," Genet writes at the beginning of the book. Throughout it, an obsession with beauty and a refusal of social norms run alongside each other, two sides of the Mobius strip topography of Genet's double. Genet's refusal envelops architecture and its normative values, with beauty and longing as the orienting position towards something that could be described as a queer and alternative relationship to place.

Genet's narrator adorns the crag with "what was peculiar to it" and "in keeping with its own architecture." This is not the erection of a building in the mind for its later materialization in form, or the abolition of what exists for the sake of the new, but an architectural response to an existing form. It requires an intimacy with context rather than a drafting table. Architecture remains beholden to a telos of novelty, while Genet's narrator observes, and maintains a relationship to, the existing form of the place that he temporarily inhabits. His creative output is tethered to what already exists; he embellishes rather than builds anew. And this activity, this architectural praxis, is entirely contained "in thought."

Genet also describes a particular relationship to historical style, to style as a marker of historical periods and a relationship to the past existing in the present as a trace. Ornament and artifice are revealed to be loaded with meaning, with the capacity for assurance. His is an ahistorical relationship to ornament, but to be ahistorical is to remain in conversation with history, bound to it, even as it is filtered through the present. Just as any neo-historical practice invents and iterates on the past rather than replicating a style perfectly, here history is an object that is translated and therefore subject to creative reinvention.

Without recourse to permanent shelter, the itinerant figure maintains home as an ideal, a horizon, which can be constructed within the virtual sphere of the imaginative faculty. He does not need a deed to certify his ownership of land, nor a wall to delimit the borders of his property. Rather, home becomes a moveable object, a way of seeing and relating to place. It is a survival mechanism for the destitute: a desire for belonging that is never quite satisfied, that is never allowed to the narrator. For while temporarily occupying these places, Genet's narrator maintains awareness of his role as a stranger and an intruder. Home is a verb, delineating the enclosed qua the excluded; here, home—or domestication—remains at a distance. One can never own a place, can never absolutely strip it of its otherness, banish its ghosts or its vermin. One must keep to the existing architecture. Genet is the decorator, not the builder.

Architectural discourses—or at least, architectural conversations—widely maintain as self-evident that decorating is somehow less than architecture, conceived of normally as the act of constructing anew. This assumption extends into disparagement: a mere decorator, one might say. That decorating is commonly associated with women and gay men is undoubtedly integral to this aspersion, if not necessarily its origin. If queerness is, as David Halperin writes, "by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant," if it is "not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative," then a queer architecture would, likewise, not be some essential thing but rather a position taken in relationship to the normative. And if construction can be said to be the normative orientation of architecture, one that continous unimpeded by resource shortage or the desecration of entire cities, then decorating could be considered a queer position, not just because it's been associated with queer men but because it fundamentally challenges this normative position.

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The architecture of Jean Genet involves a parasitic occupation of place, not the intrusion of form into pure space. It stands contra the constructive ideal of normative architecture since at least the early modern period, since Rousseau and his hut, since the cleaving of architecture from decoration. It replaces novelty with an embellished relationship to history, ownership with transience, intimacy with place over the fetishization of space. For Genet, belonging is a desire, a horizon, a flicker—not a state. The idea of a home is revealed to be the essence of home, not a virtual appendage. In orienting towards this idea or ideal, one's surroundings can transform, without even a brick being laid, a tree being helmed, or another home being demolished.

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