

## Trained to the Blade

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At the conclusion of *The Balcony*, Irma warns the audience, upon leaving the theater, that everything 'at home' will be even more false than it is here, which is not meant as a commentary on the falseness of reality *per se*, but rather on the hollow forms of power put in place by authority, to which Genet, throughout his work, poses an implicit counterpoint: a real power that appears, never so starkly outlined as when a person holds in his or her grip the sole means to determine an outcome.

Irma simulates this position in her exchange with the Envoy:

Envoy: We're engaged in a race against the clock. It's we or they. Madame Irma, think speedily.

Irma (*holding her head in her hands*): I'm hurrying sir. I'm approaching my destiny as fast as I can.

But the act of approaching one's destiny, for Genet, is never an act of the mind, or of calculated, rational resolve--no one can think their way to a destiny-- but rather a moment lived in the body. In conversation with a friend, we started off talking about s/m, how someone fresh to the scene may at first go through the motions--play acting as a way to hedge bets--showing up at parties, unsure if they can do it, get past the initial crux, the shyness and uncertainty of advancing an interest, to tie someone up, for instance, or whip them. Or, on the other side, to allow another person to put a gag in your mouth, or handcuffs on your wrists. At first you talk about what you are going to do, then, all of a sudden, you're doing it. My friend referred to a crossover point from 'toe in the water' to 'all in.' This is the point where a person in a scene moves past performance and internalizes the role they are playing at a deeper level, moving past external form to personal engagement. Or as Roger declares at the end of *The Balcony*: "If the brothel exists and if I've a right to go there, then I've a right to lead the character

I've chosen to the very limit of his destiny... no, of mine... of merging his destiny *with* mine" (my emphasis).

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I would like to begin this chapter by discussing a piece of sadomasochistic fiction by well-known erotic writer, Pat Califia, from whose story, "Calyx of Isis," I have drawn my title. The narrative follows the process of organizing and executing a large, multi-player scene, in which the central figure, Roxanne, will be brought to an outer limit and asked to choose whether or not, as her destiny, she is willing to become the property of her dominant, Alex. All of the women invited to participate in the sadomasochistic orgy have lives and jobs outside the Scene, and we assume, when and if Roxanne decides to allow Alex to own her, that she will continue unimpeded in her everyday life, at the same time permeated by the awareness of another person's absolute erotic possession of her. The scene under construction, will—and eventually does—take place in a lesbian bathhouse, whose proprietor, Tyre, reserves a separate floor for acting out the 'extraordinary' 'special cases.' Tyre, who is rich beyond reason, does not take on such challenging projects for commercial gain, but rather out of personal aesthetic and erotic interest.

In the first encounter, when Alex phones to ask for a meeting with the boss, Tyre responds to Alex's voice: "The woman had a harsh-edged New York accent, and her rich alto sent caterpillar-feet down Tyre's spine. 'My name is Tyre...' [she purred], 'and you are?' When the two women subsequently meet, their mutual erotic attraction culminates in a ritualized duel, complete with stilettos, kickboxing, and knives. Both women, despite their erotic identities as tops, both have surrender in them and guard it as their greatest luxury. Signs of the respective masochism are revealed at the same time the zippers come down and the snaps undone. "Alex did not wear anything under [her] jacket, and Tyre was bare beneath the spandex. Their breasts were nearly the same size. If anything, Alex's were bigger, and the feel of her hard nipples between Tyre's slim fingers made [Alex] grab for a similar

target. She came up with metal as well as flesh.” The rings on Tyre's nipples represent her capacity for submission, a willingness--on the right terms--to be mercilessly gripped. Despite their strong masochistic sides, however, neither woman allows herself to feel aroused at being controlled, at least not to the point of becoming vulnerable to the other.

This duel sets the stage for the 'scene' Tyre will conduct with Roxanne in the subsequent orgy. A kind of dual seduction. Having been invited to play with Alex's slave, it is as though, by taking Roxanne's measure, she implicitly tests her for signs of Alex's tutelage. Wasting no time, she introduces her play persona, which is organized around the concept of herself as priestess of the blade. Her performance evokes a chain of sacrificial symbols, with the knife as emblem of the seriousness and extremity of her brand of play. “Tyre had pulled a slim blade, Damascus steel with a horn handle, from the sleeve of her jacket. She ran its edge up the back of Roxanne’s legs. The girl... immediately froze, obviously trained to mind the blade.” Her perfectly taut presence, an absolute obedience to the object, speaks to her high level of experience, the many times she's done this in the past, a shocking clarity of comprehension. Some critics, like Jill Dolan, make the mistake of reading Roxanne as ‘mere receptor,’ some kind of depersonified antenna for sensation, when in fact the story tirelessly examines the nuances of her responses, the need, as we noted in Tyre and Alex’s own masochism, to have certain truths burned or whipped home. Unlike those characters, however, Roxanne emerges as a ‘bottomless pit’ of submission, a person with unlimited capacity to interact with and extend, through apparently superhuman resources, the will of her dominants. Her response to the knife is just an early sign—as though we as readers are getting acquainted with her at the same time and through the same measures as Tyre—of a taste for the real. “The knife traveled the inside of Roxanne’s thighs... When the tip of it probed her clit, she jumped a little, then steadied herself.” Steeling herself to endure the benign intensity of how the knife, replete with lethal potential, conducts its casual examination of her genitals, Roxanne grows more and more turned on. “Shoulders, neck, upper arms felt the fine scrape of Tyre’s weapon.” Tested in her capacity to exist as property, she thrills to the demand of belonging to this cruel mistress, Tyre/the knife in one, who could, in a moment of inattention slice through her clit. Breathless

with desire and suspense, Roxanne seeks to become motionless as inanimate matter. “Then the blade disappeared between her slip and her skin, and its tip plunged up through the thin material.” In case, we, the reader, doubted what Roxanne intimately knows, that Tyre’s blade is really made of hardened steel, Califia verifies its sharpness: “The silk made a grieving sound as it was cut, as if it knew it could not heal itself.”

Everything there is to know about a top will be revealed in how she conducts a scene. Another error Dolan makes in her reading of the story is to say that, by the end, each of the dominatrices has become indistinguishable from the others. On the contrary, each is indistinguishable as a ‘person’ from her play persona, which becomes sharper, more defined, as the scene, in its ambitious collaborative improvisation, unfolds. Tyre *is* Damascus steel: her knives are made of it, her heels and the tips of her boots. She identifies with its unwavering solidity, and seeks to live up to it, as to a birthrite. In the closing pages of the story, Roxanne, having endured destiny after destiny, living out any number of possible extreme forms of being with each of the eight respective dommes--having been made to bleed, cry, and come in a series of interconnected scenes, allowing each top to see her will made potent and awe-provoking through Roxanne’s responses—submits to the humiliation of Joyous Day drawing a finger up her slick thighs, in irrefutable proof of the pleasure each top has been able to draw from this unthinkable tough cookie. Cue Tyre’s final entrance as the priestess who will prepare the ‘victim’ for a ritual piercing, to signify her newly sealed consent to abdicate possession of her ‘self’ to Alex. Tyre, then, enjoys the final access to Roxanne, before the moment when, in order to gain recognition from her, the other dommes will have to ask permission of and pay tribute to Alex. She approaches with her knife which, this time, is recruited in the service of separating Roxanne from the almost impossibly fine hairs on her labia. Erotic toy? Signature weapon? We are given to believe that only Tyre, among the participants, possesses the mastery to make the knife bend to her will, and to execute this painfully demanding task of separating Roxanne from herself, without drawing blood or inflicting harm.

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In Genet's work, as well, the knife appears as an erotic instrument, second only in Genet's symbolic hierarchy to the erect male cock. The knife, he says, symbolizes a hard-on, a source of pleasure through domination, but also a source of erotic power so rooted in the person—as if knives actually sprang into being *from* the erotic desire to control—that, despite the efforts of institutionalized authority to wrest them from an individualized grip, they are an inseparable erotic possession. To disarm a man from his knife is tantamount to dividing him from the source of his personal force which, for Genet, is irreducibly erotic. In the text of a radio broadcast, titled *L'enfant criminel*, Genet describes visiting a reform school where the executive administrator opens the drawer of his desk to exhibit the tin knives which the administration has used to replace real knives, in order to reduce violent incidents among the juvenile inmates. He proudly tells Genet: "They can't kill anyone with that." We can recognize the logic from elsewhere in Genet's work: False authorities giving the boys false knives, supplying them with prison-approved stage props for acting out the motions of rebellion or threat. To the radio audience, Genet poses the question: "Was he unaware that by departing from its practical destination the object is transformed, that it becomes a symbol?" The knife, in other words, goes from being an ordinary weapon, to becoming the symbol of a boy's erotic center. Genet continues: "Its very form sometimes changes. We say that it becomes stylized." In place of the original knife then: a nail or piece of jagged glass, a screwdriver stolen from the shop, or a file. The delinquent, says Genet, will carry this new object "concealed in the lining of his jacket or, rather, of the trousers—not for convenience, but in order to be closer to the organ it symbolizes."

A step-up from hand-to-hand combat, knives heighten the stakes of any fight. Wielded, not in place of personal strength, but as an extension of it, they serve as a sign that the combatant means business, i.e. that he is willing to kill or be killed. They spring up all the time in the text of *Querelle*, wielded by the assassin in Vic's murder, appearing unexpectedly in the titular hero's duel with his twin, at which point, the erotic tension becomes too much for the sibling rivalry to bear, a fight they willingly put down, with a sigh of relief from all implicated spectators, the reader included, who are undecided if they really want to watch twin brothers making love in a public place. The culminating knife scene,

however, occurs late in the novel, as if by divine intervention, gracing the police detective, Mario, with an eroticism in excess of his official function. We are told that Mario's sexual cravings--"his desire to love Dede [his informant] in forbidden ways"--alienated him from the police force "whose conduct must always be quite beyond reproach." Somewhat tongue in cheek, the narrator says: he reserved the right to negotiate with the enemy along lines that will eventually become apparent." 'Enemy' registers here as the *real* perpetrators of crime, not just the peripheral suspects whose tedious task it is for Mario to interview. While Dede provides the conduit for information from really shady suspects, Mario wishes to meet with his illicit sources one-on-one, a face-off much to be desired from Mario's point-of-view, as a means of affirming the cop role he has internalized, above and beyond the expectations of the Force. When he finally gets the opportunity to meet Querelle alone in a dark and foggy secluded place, there is a fleeting moment when Mario considers pulling out his 6-35 ("the copper's natural weapon"). He even thinks about "including Querelle's death in his service record: self-defense while attempting to arrest the suspect." At this point in the narrative, Mario is still hanging on to his 'copper' side, as if, after years of performing official police functions, he's forgotten how to *be* Mario. Suddenly, however, a "marvelous, heaven-scented flower, buzzing with golden bees, sprang up inside him," the blossoming of heaven-sent inspiration, but also the blossoming of his hitherto repressed erotic center, at once homosexual and sadomasochistic: "He pulled *his* knife." (my emphasis) From the desexualized man's body comes the eroticized man's knife, perhaps a throw-back to the days before he joined the Force, when he fought his own battles. With this transformation comes a different Mario, who stands *his* ground, takes *his* chances, and travels equipped with *his* own instrument of decision: Cock and blade. He wields the knife and *is* the knife: "It was at that very moment that [Querelle] actually *saw* the sharp and mortal presence of a blade, in there among Mario's palpitating and slightly blurred outline." "Only the blade, even when it was invisible, could lend the clenched fist, the bent arm such sudden lightness, make [the cop] appear almost careless and certain of himself... in his eyes a look of irrevocably distant calm."

Thus Querelle's response to Mario's knife which, crucially, in the darkness and the fog, he cannot fully make out, just the moonlight on the blade which "was white, milky, of a somewhat fluid consistency." Both Querelle *and* the narrator appreciate the fact that what arouses such profound, metaphysical fear is the *idea* of a knife, a fear that grips him so completely, he does not even try to mask his cowardice:

He opened his mouth and experienced the wonderful, redeeming shame of hearing himself stammer:

"Y-you don't want to cut me with that..."

Up until now, in sadomasochistic terms, Querelle has remained erotically unavailable to his presumptive masters, males like Seblon, who lords over him an official supremacy, and Nono, a more terrestrial, testosterone-based kind. Try as they might, they cannot gain control over the 'swirling energy' at Querelle's core, powerful enough to kill, to the tune of corpses strewn across the globe in the wake of undetectable crimes. Feeling his own power to seduce the Lieutenant, Querelle taunts him mercilessly with his bumps and grinds, his veil dances, a flash of his armpit, bared for Seblon's exclusive viewing pleasure. Overpowered by Nono's brute sodomitical power, he still retains a piece of himself, failing to give in entirely to Nono's act of penetration, even finding his way to seeing something 'feminine' in Nono, after he has allowed himself to be fucked by the brothelkeeper. Never until now, facing the flare-up of Mario's erotic truth, has Querelle been afforded the experience of genuine submission, to feel a readiness to surrender, to forego even the effort to raise his defenses. In this respect, Querelle resembles Harcamone, the hero of Genet's novel, *Miracle of the Rose*, who, until sentenced to death, exists forever walled inside a walking fortress of his own construction, designed to ward off crushing blows. For Genet's adult murderers, the mature version of his *enfant criminel*, there is no trust in benefactors who promise protection. The only way a character like Querelle can let go of his defences is at knife point. Like Roxanne, he is one tough customer, perfectly 'trained to the blade.'

“What bizarre spirit-force,” the narrator asks, “represented by a cop in a light blue jersey, tensed to spring, had emanated from Querelle’s own body to confront him thus?” One factor is that the cop and he meet on common ground; in each other’s presence, they feel the possibility of a mutual profundity. “Querelle had been able to contain this poison without danger to himself as long as it remained within him, or as long as he merely spouted it into the wall of fog. But tonight, his own venom had appeared to threaten him.” Querelle is so steeled against the possibility of self-surrender that he imagines it—actually as much of the negative literature on s/m does—as a death drive, leading directly and inevitably to his own destruction. We find in his references to ‘poison’ and ‘threat’ a terror of release, an assumption that, by allowing the sadism he has expressed (through his own murderous acts) to convert to masochism, he will be heralding his own death sentence. Up until now, this thought has also tolled the knell of his erections, where the thought of surrendering to another male kills erotic desire, bringing with it a cascade of connected associations: arrest, trial, condemnation, and the obligatory trip to the guillotine. Querelle, however, has a natural feel for the blade and responds, against his own better judgement, to its authority. This ‘weakness’ proves his redemption. “Mario folded the blade back into its handle. Querelle sighed, defeated... The weapon created by intelligence had made short shrift of the nobility of the body, of the warrior’s heroism.”

In the style of a dom/sub scene, roles have been established, structures decided upon, measures taken between players. “Mario straightened himself and put both hands in his pockets. Facing him, Querelle did the same, but with a slowness he owed himself because of his recent humiliation.” The formality of the exchange creates a solemn setting for Querelle’s concession, although, at the same time, Mario is quick to restore a jovial tone to the proceedings: “I never wanted to hurt you. It was your idea to start a fight...” This act enables Querelle to recuperate a little dignity, a semblance of pride: “Listen, Mario....there was no call for you to give me that shit back there in the old bagnio.” As harmony is restored and the tension of battle fades from their gestures, the two men amble into the fog, “side by side like brothers.” Although nothing overtly sexual has happened here, from Querelle’s point of view, some place deep inside, everything has changed, a material alteration at the level of



consciousness. It's like he's had the first real orgasm of his life, knows what it feels like to surrender and, furthermore, despite the popular lore, he hasn't dissolved, died, or emerged less masculine. The specter of his own masochism no longer haunts him. "He was relaxed." The act of fellatio that follows is a consummation made possible by realizing that he can safely lower his defenses. As a train rushes past, the narrator says: "Querelle was overwhelmed by such a strong feeling of abandonment that he let Mario do what he wanted." The abandonment of which the narrator speaks evokes the sense of self-abandon Genet elsewhere lauds as the highest virtue, something available only to genuine artists and revolutionaries.

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Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan write: "I have read that sadists and masochists parody oppressive institutions and relationships and thereby rebel against them." The parable of the tin knives is instructive, for it suggests how, from Genet's perspective, *real* rebellion can only be conducted with *real* weapons. And by extension, *real* desire. In a letter to director Roger Blin, Genet writes: "Real paratroopers have given me a hard-on. I've never had an erection over stage paratroopers." The tendency to see s/m as a costume parade comes from a lack of visceral understanding of where the symbols come from. Drawn from real sources of control--many institutional--and put in the service of individual pleasure, sadomasochists play with real police gear, real bull and signal whips, real chains. What turns players on, like Genet's real paratrooper, is a knife capable of cutting, handcuffs capable of resisting a genuine effort to escape. By replacing real knives with fake ones, real bullets with blanks, real cops with actors, one removes, as the reform school administrator implicitly does, the source of erotic heat. Guns that shoot blanks, whips that don't leave real marks, are like promises of intimacy that never come to pass.

In an article written for *Drummer* magazine, Jack Fritscher describes the successful realization of Chuck Weichelt's "lifelong fantasy of a place where, for a weekend, masculine gay men could

experience imprisonment, immobilization, and interrogation from masculine straight men who were cops, sheriffs, and guards.” Why straight? We might as well ask why real? Attending a fetish fair in Toronto last year, I noticed a pair of real cops, walking down Church Street, who had relatively dingy uniforms and sizeable paunches, compared to the buff young fetishists in shiny visors and mirrored shades. Guys like Fritscher, attracted by Weichelt's Academy, want more reality, the authenticity of which often lies in tawdry or mundane details. The appeal of straight cops, sheriffs, guards is that they enjoy the same rituals as sadomasochistic gay men, understand the symbolism, are expert in handling the instruments, so much in fact that they are willing to spend off-duty time replaying in this kinky setting the selfsame routines they perform every day on the job. In choosing to ‘play’ with real cops, visitors to the Academy implicitly test their own skills against players who are even more hard-core, who practice the moves and hone their dominant persona on a daily basis. These straight cops arrive at the Academy, ready to play, with the same self-confidence and professionalism of the dominatrices hand-picked by Tyre; they have a stamina for the roles and know them, in ways that guys merely pretending to be cops for the duration of a play-scene could not, from the inside-out. Like Joyous Day and EZ, dominatrices whose names wink at a reputation built up over years, the cops arrive for their shifts at the Academy with monikers like Officer Karate and Redneck Cop. Fritscher, a gonzo journalist in the mould of Hunter Thompson, who shows up under-cover for a weekend stay, is not disappointed with what he finds: “The cops took on an ever-changing cast of strangers who could not get enough of their manliness, of their force at restraint and confinement, of their confidence with guns and intimidation, of their inventiveness at prison brutality...” It is a reminder that using sadomasochistic toys, many of which come from an arsenal of tools employed in law enforcement, can be like using construction tools to make love. Handcuffs, pistols, interrogation hoods, chokeholds, toilet bowls, gas masks, electrodes: all hold the potential for misuse, for turning contact into inadvertent force, if not used by someone who knows how to use them precisely, with the purpose of defining a position, a silent dialogue carried on between the instrument and the 'condemned', an initial communication in which the topman establishes his credentials, commands the attention and trust of his playmate/'victim,' who has probably played this scenario hundreds of times, in his own imagination

or with other gay men, but never with someone so intimately familiar with potential nuance. Fritscher says it was like dancing with Baryshnikov.

Moreover, Fritscher notes, it's impossible to throw these guys. They've got that quality that comes from having performed a role over and over, not in Judith Butler's sense of being coerced through repetition into identity, but with passionate engagement and choice, with a constancy that would be impossible if they didn't thrill (one way or another) to the immanence, within the role, of personal, erotic power. Comparable to watching a vast, potentially destructive ferry slide silently into a narrow docking space, these guys slide a noose around the neck of a 'condemned man' standing on a chair, perfectly sure of their footing and virtuosic skill. Just in case anyone thought 'straight cops' don't have a sense of humor, Fritscher says these guys were every bit as practiced as queers at camping it up, playing "big wild boys who got off on their own sadism." Like Genet's drag queens, impossible to shock with ever more preposterous attempts to shatter the solemnity, "They were nonplussed by the weirdest bondage and hoods and rough interrogation and execution scenarios." Reading Fritscher's account, I am impressed at the ability of people of different genders, different sexual orientations, different class backgrounds to meet inside the logic of s/m. There is a kind of Esperanto that has to do with shared fantasies, which players have gone to the trouble to act out to varying degrees, some through mental details, others through rigorous training. Fritscher describes his favorite officer's skill at a particular chokehold that he practiced daily at the gym. Regardless of the sadistic roles they undertake, it is hard to miss the masochism that drives such tireless training, as well as the willing sacrifice of spare time—that could be spent golfing or hosting barbeques—but even more than that their constancy. It is clear that what engages them is love of the role, the points at which exterior form and internal self lock together, and a person becomes gripped by the character they start off merely playing. The Academy cop knows, from on-the-job training, how to become the wild boy, the hard-ass, the redneck—"in role-playing, sex dialogue drips innuendo when laced with a Dixie drawl from "Ah've always depended on the kindness of strangers" to "Who's yer daddy?" and "You hear me, boy? You call me: 'Sir, Yes, Sir!'"—and who, from the redneck impersonating Blanche, to Blanche

impersonating a bootcamp officer, is in consummate control of the underlying character, in a way no actor ever could be. Fishing around for a way to pay tribute to these pro-doms, Fritscher writes: “For someone who has had sexual contact with approximately 13,000 men, it’s interesting to me that some of my gay partners rather blur, but every moment at the Academy seems distinct as a fourteen-year-old boy’s first wet dream.”

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Fritscher compares the layering of fantasy and reality to Genet's plays, but the Academy inverts the logic of *The Balcony*, in which, rather than real cops playing at 'law enforcement' in the facsimile of a prison, a fake bishop, judge, and general are appointed to replace their real predecessors in the new, counter-revolutionary government. A stronger parallel, however, connects the Academy cops to Irma's stable of whores: As the cops bring with them a strong whiff of the real, the girls employed at Irma's bordello have committed sins and crimes that the customers can only dream of and, if given the opportunity, the whores give the impression of being able, like Officer Karate or Redneck Cop, to think of endlessly innovative ways to spice up otherwise humdrum infractions. In other words, their skill *as* prostitutes does not implicitly come from working shifts at The Balcony, but from their experience outside. The play is widely recognized as departing from the graphic eroticism of Genet's novels—the recondite rituals carried out in the play do not involve sex acts—but this is like saying that what goes on at the Academy is non-sexual, just because the participants keep their clothes on and refrain from oral sex and intercourse. Like the officers who know how to establish intimacy with a Magnum, Irma's employees bring that extra edge, that *je n'sais quoi*, to wearing handcuffs or handling a bullwhip.

The client playing the Bishop expresses dismay at the idea that the fantasied transgressions he's been getting off on might just be authentic, something that this girl would do for real. She asks: “Reality frightens you, doesn't it?” To which the client pragmatically responds: “If your sins were real, they'd be crimes, and I'd be in a real mess.” The girl further taunts him: “Would you go to the police?”

The saucy insolence of the whores is born, like that of Genet's *enfant criminel*, of intimate experience with officious priests and patronizing judges, of Genet's own acquaintance with the rituals of arrest, interrogation, and court trials. The clients' relative timidity (relative, that is, to the nerve of the Academy's customers who allow themselves to be tied up, 'tortured' with real electrodes, shot in the chest [with blanks], even buried alive) causes them to hold this possibility at a distance, and to fetishize reality instead—finicky concern over whether the blood on the General's boots is real, whether the lice in the Tramp's wig—while wilfully ignoring the *real* reality, in other words, the Carmen's, Arthur's, Chantal's, and nameless new girls, the ones who are literally trained to the louse, to the blade, who go rigid with recognition of a scenario they know like their own soul, their own dreams. 'Let me be your sinner.'

In the same way the *enfant criminel*, who carries a weapon concealed in the lining of his trousers, represents for Genet the penal institution's failure to nip power in its erotic bud, so the whores in *The Balcony* stand for the vitality of that erotic power, a power which the rebel factions seek to turn to an expression of their own will. Roger, the plumber who has liberated Chantal from Irma's establishment, rescuing her from the brothel so she can realize a more authentic role as his girlfriend and helpmate in the revolutionary struggle, fails, like Seblon vis a vis Querelle, to master "all that swirling energy." Chantal eludes both roles, 'choosing' instead to turn coat and serve as muse or mascot to a rival rebel cell, whose leaders recognize in her voice and gestures an exorbitant value, precisely because they do not *serve* the Revolution, but embody it. As Chantal tells Roger in another scene: *On dit de moi que... j'en suis l'ame et la voix*, they say I am its heart and soul, or literally, voice and soul, in which we find an impossible to ignore pun on 'l'ame' and 'lame,' as if to say Chantal will be the Revolution's blade, or, perhaps like Mario, in whose outline the blade appears like an emblematic soul, she will carry its blade inside her song.

"Chanter veut dire se mettre au service d'une cause." When Lucien Goldman saw the original French production of the play, he took it as evidence that Genet had renounced the rituals of the

imaginary, just as other critics leapt to the conclusion that he had renounced erotic rites, in favor of social engagement. In a similar spirit, the rebel leaders see Chantal's song as a means to spur the masses to rise up in a common cause. What becomes clear, however, is that Chantal, no more than Mario or the Academy cops, lacks any broader, political objective than the realization and enjoyment of her own erotic power, as expressed in her song. What stands out at the heart of the bloody spectacle--"la plus terrible" according to Arthur--is the image of a girl, who was singing. At the same time he utters the words, *une fille qui chantait*, a window shatters, then a mirror, as if the words themselves had broken through the partition dividing the brothel from the revolution, and--as a metaphor for the same event--had brought an end to the fake rituals enacted there. The image of *une fille qui chantait*, in the face of danger, anticipates a scene Genet would describe later in *Prisoner of Love*, in which three Palestinian freedom fighters, dressed in motley camouflage appear to him in the wee hours of the morning:

It was as if three scattered Queens of the Night, wearing faint moustaches and leopard-print came together in the morning to carol with the confidence, recklessness, and detachments of prima donnas, oblivious of their weapons and their clothes.

Like Chantal, the fedayeen sing. The insolence with which they face dying reminds Genet of nothing so much as the haughty Montmartre queens who, in *Our Lady of the Flowers*, deflect the mockery of onlookers with excessively vulgar gestures. "[A]t any moment," Genet continues, "[they] might be silenced forever by a hail of bullets from Jordan as accurate and melodious as their own singing." The bullets are transfigured to the point of representing a swell of applause that simultaneously exalts and brings an end to their performance. Likewise Chantal: *C'est mon role d'etre exposee. Si je dois mourir, ce sera criblee de balles!*

Roger, in the final scene of *Le Balcon*, appears dressed as the Chief of Police. Everything about him is the spitting image of the Order's finest: ermine collar, black boots, slicked-back hair, only

amplified: broader, taller, slicker (more like the fetish cops on Church Street than their real counterparts), all the consequence of theatrical effect. The Mausoleum Studio, fabricated as a facsimile of the Hero's Tomb, comes complete with a male prostitute, costumed as a slave, to represent the real-life unpaid laborers toiling at the outskirts of the city, to construct a real version of the Tomb to recognize and honor the Police Chief's victory in squelching the Revolt.

Carmen (*pointing to the slave*): Make him talk.

Roger (*playing his role*): You can talk? And what else can you do?

The Slave (*lying on his belly*): First, bow; then, shrink into myself a little more. (*He takes Roger's foot and places it on his own back*) like this!... and even...

Roger (*impatiently*): Yes... and even?

The Slave: Sink into the earth, if it's possible.

Roger (*drawing on his cigar*): Sink in, really? But there's no mud!

The Queen (*to the others*): He's right. We should have provided mud. In a well-run house... But it's opening day, and he's the first client to use the Studio...

Recognition of the shameless artifice, the presentation of illusion as reality, offends Roger, affirming him in the retrospective rightness of the rebels' cause and sadness, as he thinks about its new after-life as nostalgia: "Everything's washed up... And what's saddest of all is people's saying: 'the rebellion was wonderful!'" Carmen seeks to bring him back to his new illusionistic reality: "You mustn't think about it anymore. And you must stop listening to the sounds from outside." It is as though Carmen's nudge brings Roger back to the reality of his present circumstances, because here he is, having gained access to mission control, a saboteur's dream. No one suspects his real identity, and, at that moment, when everyone watching the scene believes, like the administrator in Genet's radio broadcast, that everything real has been lopped off, that authority is protected from attack by emasculated actors with nothing but bulletless guns and knives made of tin, what does Roger do but pull out a *real* knife? Piercing the veil of the otherwise theatrical universe, erected by power as a means of safeguarding its own defense, the

knife, or rather the *idea* of a knife, or, excuse me, the *idea of a real knife*, makes everyone freeze. It is hard not to see in the gesture a reprise of Mario's inspiration ("a marvelous flower") and frozen tableau, in which we find one of Genet's favorite images: man at the crossroads, holding a knife before him, in a crystallization of the moment of personal choice, or, to borrow from the description in *Querelle*, the moment where choice becomes an internal state, 'hanging in the balance' of a single individual. Roger, in the aftermath of revolt and its implicit repression, might represent the last armed man, but the fact is that he *is* armed, and there is no doubt, judging from the responses of Carmen, as well as the onstage audience, consisting of Irma, the Chief of Police, and the surrounding pasteboard dignitaries, that these people, coming from the origins they do, know a real knife when they see one. The beauty of a real knife, as we saw in the episode with Mario, is that even the idea of it evokes *real* fear. In the compressed framework of the scene, it feels like the whole balance of power *could* turn on that blade: if Roger, for instance, seized Carmen, started making demands, insisted on a meeting with the 'real' Chief of Police (who's quaking in his pants right now). Roger, however, in his iconoclasm, is bent on destroying images, so determined that images are the problem--so hell-bent and angered that people only respond to the power of images over them--that he wastes this extraordinary opportunity and fails to make the possibility of rebellion *real*. Turning the knife, the *idea of whose reality* is holding everyone on stage entranced, upon himself, he seeks to mutilate the Cop's Image, as if it were the place where power really lives. In other words, as if people were ever moved on a visceral, passionate, embodied level by ideas alone. By cutting off his own nuts, Roger chooses a form of immolation that plays directly into authority's hand, executing the emasculation and destruction of erotic power that, in the Police Chief's image, the State finds most difficult to control.

It's meaningless to talk about s/m as pure 'acting out' of power, which would make it no different than theater games. Its actual practitioners want everything to be hard and real. In every enactment, there is a seed of real danger, real capture, real harm, and an agreement on both sides to play the edges. If you didn't trust in its *reality*, how could you have any fun? And yet, as the scene between Mario and Querelle suggests, the most profound exchanges of power, of accepting someone



else's mastery, one's own defeat, and vice-versa, can occur without a drop of blood, a flourish of force, an ounce of coercion. This is the absolute that s/m seeks, in all of its varied games, to find and re-stage, the turning points that coincide with an intensification of arousal and belief, and which we have been made to believe we can't experience at all, in real time, or real space, without 'real' consequences, such as loss of self, power, even life. Somehow giving in to these forces, which are after all identical to the ones that organize our world and lives, to seek out more intimate contact with them, to surrender to their erotic power, to learn to handle the instruments through which they flow, to use them to communicate tenderness, to turn power into art: that makes the 'real' authorities nervous. They would rather sadomasochists played with fake knives, castrating the very source of our arousal, undermining the logic of who we really are.