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**EMBODIED NARRATIVES: AN EXPLORATION OF RITUAL, VIOLENCE, AND
BRUTALITY THROUGH JEAN GENET'S "THE THIEF'S JOURNAL"**

by
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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PROFESSOR ROSELLI
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Acknowledgments

Especially in the Humanities major, a thesis serves as a means to synthesize a diverse array of knowledge, to draw connections and probe the boundaries of ‘discipline’ which we began testing during our first year of college. In my case, however, this thesis feels like the culmination of more than just eleven months of reading and writing, or four years of an undergraduate education. It has been a rewarding process, and I have many individuals to thank.

Firstly, I would like to thank my loved ones. To my parents, Leslie and John: thank you for reading to me, for giving me the gift of curiosity, and for encouraging me to pursue my passions. To my siblings, Will and Sarah: thank you for pushing me to work harder and dream bigger. You inspire me every day. To my friends, thank you for your endless support, your humor, and the countless memories made both within the classroom and beyond it. When I think of Claremont, I think of you.

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Introduction

I first picked up a copy of *The Thief's Journal* at Bridge Street Books in Georgetown during the summer of 2019. In anticipation of my daily Metro rides to and from my internship, I wanted a book that would last me the two months that I was living in the District, something that I could ruminate on as I prepared to write my thesis. Little did I know that *The Thief's Journal* would travel with me from Washington, D.C.; to my apartment in Chicago; to Dallas, Texas; to Colorado Springs, Colorado; and to Claremont, California. Jean Genet has been on my mind since I first plucked *The Thief's Journal* from its home on the corner shelf of the bookstore, almost as though he chose me and not the other way around.

Reading Jean's work in transit on the Metro, surrounded by strangers with briefcases and copies of the *Washington Post*, was one of the most uncomfortable experiences I had while living in the District. This was not because *The Thief's Journal* was particularly explicit—it had its moments, but then again, so does any good memoir—but because it seemed so deeply personal. It did not feel like something I should have been reading on public transportation, in the presence of strangers, or frankly, at all. Even so, there was something in Jean's words that resonated with me, like he was communicating something beyond the words on the page themselves.

My entry point for the text was ritual. Jean is vocal about his relationship to the Catholic Church in Europe throughout the journal, oscillating between participation and subversion, most frequently holding both in conversation and simultaneous existence with one another. His experience, while nuanced by the intersections he held as a gay, low-income man in France on the brink of the Second World War, parallels mine as he moves through spaces of ritual significance, also creating his own ritual meaning and practice throughout the course of his work. Growing up in a liturgical Episcopalian tradition has given me an interest in rites as they exist within spiritual practice, but Jean's work blurs the lines between the sacred and the secular and

contests my former views of the function of ritual. To Jean, ritual exists as much within the act of theft or the relationships between himself and his community as it does in traditionally ritualistic settings such as the Catholic church. Ritual is not solely a practice of connection with a spiritual entity so much as it is a manner of moving through space and time, making sense of it as we do so.

Because rituals influence the way we interact with the world around us, it followed that I would not be able to analyze ritual frameworks within *The Thief's Journal* without also examining the structures that surrounded it. My analysis has taken me from religion to its larger social milieu, and finally to the causes and symptoms of ritual such as violence, brutality, and emotion. Each of these elements represents a small portion of the work that Jean accomplishes within *The Thief's Journal*, the extent of which I would not be able to cover if I were writing a dissertation, let alone a thesis.

Even so, this thesis will attempt to elucidate a number of interlocking systems of analysis and interpretation which Jean employs in the development of his story, both within his narrative and the act of writing itself. *The Thief's Journal* and the work accomplished within the text does not necessitate a conclusion, nor do I seek to provide one. A great beauty of Jean Genet's text is its open-endedness and its fluidity: it evades definition and falls apart upon the establishment of any sort of binary within it. As we will observe within this work, Jean Genet thrives as he exists simultaneously within seemingly opposing spaces, thwarting binary categorization by eschewing any sort of middle ground, preferring to occupy two 'opposite' categories at once. If Jean defies categorization, then I will not categorize him, either. As such, this thesis will take on a non-traditional format to reflect the interlocking, inconclusive nature of the text.

The format of my thesis is inspired by LaPlanche and Pontalis' seminal work, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. This seminal text is written encyclopedically, dialoguing with itself from entry to entry. Given that the fingerprints of psychoanalysis are present throughout much of Jean Genet's written work, I found LaPlanche and Pontalis' book to be an appropriate inspirational source, especially given the interwoven nature of the analysis I aim to conduct in this thesis. The pages that follow are formatted in entries, formatted to allow a reader to flip back and forth according to their curiosity and preference. As Jean demonstrates in *The Thief's Journal*, some narratives make more sense when they are not relayed chronologically: in this way, the time, context, and significance of a work lie in the hands of both the writer and the reader. The goal of an encyclopedic format is to create a more intimate dialogue between concepts, giving a reader the freedom to think and engage with the concepts at hand in a manner that extends beyond a linear framework.

Aside from thought alone, *The Thief's Journal* necessitates action. There is something visceral about the narrative that stirs the reader, galvanizes their conscience, creates change and spurs to action. It certainly did so for me: *The Thief's Journal* had such a profound impact on the lens through which I see the world that I have dedicated months of my last year of college to living inside the text, making myself comfortable enough to ask questions and respond. It turns out that I am not alone: the more time I have spent with *The Thief's Journal*, the more I have seen traces of Jean Genet in the people and environments around me. As I analyzed the text, I also responded to it, and so did my peers. Scattered throughout this encyclopedia, you will find a series of journal entries presented in dialogue with the text of *The Thief's Journal*. Some of the journal entries are accounts of my experience, some of them are borrowed from the stories that my peers relayed to me, but all of them are blended together to create the narrative of one

experience, part fact and part fiction. The truth lies in the response to the text more than it lies in the narration of events themselves: when compiling these entries, I was more interested in the underlying sentiment of the journal entries at hand than I was in preserving the complete factual integrity of the events and instances relayed to me. After all, as Jean Genet's text demonstrates, the greater importance of a narrative is not what the narrative *says* and more what it *means*; that is, the underlying impetus and significance of events, as well as the act itself of communicating them.

The exchange between event and communication is dialogical, executed with the aim of creating and facilitating learning and growth through the process of meaning (un)making. As expressed in the introduction of Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, dialogue is a means to engagement more so than a quest for immediate, definitive answers. Upon interaction with a conceptual and poetic text such as *The Thief's Journal*, curiosity is key, present in the willingness to sit within the narrative, listen well, and respond accordingly. This thesis has been an exercise in those practices, in learning how to check my presumptions at the door, to learn from Jean, to take what I can in the moment, and to trust that I can return and ask questions again.

The Body

Both the physical written text of *The Thief's Journal* and the experiences which Genet describes through his written words are manifestations of a lived, bodily experience. Genet experiences the world viscerally; his instincts drive him from subject to subject as he writes¹, and the events of the text are manifested through the feelings which Genet encounters both within his own body and through contact with the other bodies within the story: Lucien, Stilitano, those from whom he steals. His chosen words imply a kind of physicality, drawing the reader into the intimate ritual of writing as he draws the words off the page².

In Genet's writing, the body becomes an (un)holy place of sorts, a physical location for the ritualistic aspects of daily life: his interactions with pilgrims, his contemplative reflection, and the acts of thievery and 'depravity' from which he draws meaning. From a certain lens, Genet's own body is the physical epicenter from which he draws the contents of his writing: his signifiers, signifieds, metonyms, the words before they are physically drawn on the page. His experiences are manifested bodily, translating to a physical action of writing: through his reverence—and simultaneously, his irreverence—for the body, Genet creates an ecosystem for the rituals which he creates to manifest themselves.

The significance of thievery to Genet is revealed through the physical, instinctual reaction of his body as he steals. He writes, "My body is afraid. In front of a jeweler's window: as long as I'm not inside, I don't think I'm going to steal. No sooner do I get inside than I'm sure I'll come out with a jewel: a ring or handcuffs. This certainty is expressed by a long shudder which leaves me motionless but which goes from the back of my neck down to my heels. It peters out at my eyes and dries their lids. [...] I am alive with thought from my heels to the back

¹ See 'Consecration'

² See 'Consecration,' referencing the importance of the 'g!' in the written text.

of my neck” (Genet 147). Genet intimately weaves the emotional and the physical together until they are indistinguishable, equating the sensation of theft to the physical confirmation that he is alive. In Genet’s hands, the anticipation of a robbery becomes a multifaceted entity, no longer confined to a negative connotation. He endows it with sensation, lifting the word (love this here; love the play on words) off the page by the bodily manifestation to which he tethers it. This description is reminiscent of the words of Søren Kierkegaard, who explored the physical and psychological power of emotion within his work, *The Concept of Anxiety*.³ Kierkegaard writes, “Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye looks down the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss; suppose he had not looked down. Hence, anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself” (Kierkegaard 152). Kierkegaard notes that anxiety, as an emotive state, is both catalyzed and embodied physically, describing it in bodily terms: the sensation of anxiety is akin to dizziness, instigated by a metaphorical glance at the abyss, either real or imagined.

This abyss takes on the form of freedom, perhaps too much so; freedom, like anxiety, is a notion with which Genet is intimately familiar. In the aforementioned passage of *The Thief’s Journal*, to ‘look down’ is to enter into a crime; to take a risk of possibility with a positive or negative consequence to be confirmed. Akin to Kierkegaard’s depiction of fear, Genet leads with his body: he senses his fate through a visceral physical reaction before he is able to identify it in words, “a ring or handcuffs.” As Genet makes choices that provoke anxiety, he flirts with the bounds of freedom and confinement, finding meaning as he enters and exits both spaces.

³ I must note here that, although Kierkegaard’s general concept of anxiety is useful in this context, we must set aside his opinions of anxiety and gender within *The Concept of Anxiety*. These opinions—a product of Kierkegaard’s time—are both disputable and unhelpful when considering Genet’s work.

With Kierkegaard's lens of anxiety, as well as our understanding of the language of physical embodiment which he assigns to it, we can return to Jean Genet's work with fresh eyes. Genet extends the notion of the physical-emotional connection to the gravity of the work he conducts as a thief: the actions he takes are endowed with their meaning through the physical reaction of his body, preceding an emotional reaction and existing viscerally before any label of 'good' or 'bad' is assigned to it. This physical response can be considered as a form of anxiety, the infinite possibility of a theft and its implications laid out before Genet without need for assessment; his bodily response is beyond the necessity of knowing. Even so, the physicality of the moment remains preserved in Genet's writing, where he bridges the gap between mind and matter.

Diffusing the border between the emotional/conceptual and the physical allows Genet to transform the contents of *The Thief's Journal* into a rite of its own; a conduit between his internal and external worlds.⁴ Genet's description of thievery hinges on the paradoxically inconsequential of the consequence: regardless of the outcome of the action, the sensation of the crime remains. In this sense, the meaning of an act of theft is based in instantaneous action as much as it is in whatever happens afterwards; the feeling and meaning of being in the space of theft maintains as much importance as the punishment or reward obtained, necessitating physical action independent of any concrete consecutive result. Genet describes the act of absconding from the scene of a theft, regardless of whether the crime necessitated an escape. He writes, "I am one enormous temple, the throbbing temple of the looted room. [...] Though I know that I am

⁴ In her work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas states that ritual may serve as a frame through which we see the world (64-65). People make meaning through repeated, meaning-endowed action, conducted both together and separately. These actions create a lens, a code of belief, a premonition that your ritual might hold some sort of larger meaning, perhaps in its consequences or its instantaneous result. Genet operates within this framework, each theft taking on a greater meaning than what he manages to steal. See 'Ritual.'

not being followed, I shall zigzag in and out, I shall take certain streets, I shall retrace my steps, as if trying to cover up my tracks. [...] It is as if I were being carried away by the speed itself with which I perform the theft” (148). In this instance, Genet demonstrates the power of his personal, physical ritual: whether or not he is being *chased* has no bearing on his need to run. His movements are premeditated in their randomness; the importance of them lies in the action of running rather than any direction he might take. Genet’s body, then, becomes both the temple—as he describes it—and the ritual, the action and the space within which it is enacted⁵.

As Genet writes of his rite of thievery and his own corporeality in spiritual terms, he simultaneously works through this same terminology to deconstruct the sacrality of what could be construed as a ‘rite’ or a ‘temple.’⁶ Working within the written text, Genet calls the sacred into question as he identifies with it. The words he uses counteract the divine nature of his descriptions as he places them on the page, a phenomenon which is aptly described by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his theological critiques of the church. In her book, *Leviathan and the Air Pump*, Steven Schapin and Simon Schaffer call upon Hobbes’ critique of the corporeal/incorporeal substance binary⁷ to examine the power of language to draw ruin upon any defined incorporeal category. Schapin and Schaffer write, “The universe, being ‘the aggregate of all bodies,’ there is no part thereof that is not also *body*... and therefore *substance incorporeal* are words, which when they are joined together, destroy one another, as if a man should say, an *incorporeal body*” (98). Creating paradoxes within his writing that reflect upon his own being, Genet plays with the *substance incorporeal* as he voices incongruencies that extend to his own body. He is a sedentary temple and a thief on the run, living in reverence of his own actions as he

⁵ The analysis of Genet as occupying a *both* rather than an *in-between* is visible throughout this thesis.

⁶ That is, the temple of Genet’s body is not limited to the sacred connotation which is assigned to it. See ‘Consecration.’

⁷ The duality of body and soul, for example

flies in the face of the socially accepted mandate and the divine power who stood behind it: *thou shalt not steal*. The substance incorporeal in which Genet deals are words, but the ‘destruction’ to which Schapin and Schaffer allude also functions for Genet as a form of creation: a way in which he can bring the *substance corporeal* to the page and the *substance incorporeal* into his own embodied memory. Just as the line between the physical and emotional is blurred in Genet’s work, he also diffuses the boundary between that which is written and that which is embodied⁸.

The embodied writing within which Genet operates is visible in his depiction of Stilitano, a character whose body becomes a locus of Genet’s interpretation of events, his narration, and the power of language in his narrative combination of the present and the past. Genet’s narrative moves through Stilitano, who acts as a conduit between the events and settings of the narration, serving as an embodied ideal of the place where Genet encounters him. We first meet Stilitano—in the company of other thieves—at the ‘start’⁹ of the journal, where Genet writes, “Their delicacy in particular was violent. Violence of the design of Stilitano’s only hand, simply lying on the table, still, rendering the repose disturbing and dangerous. [...] Even when at rest, motionless and smiling, there escaped from them through the eyes, the nostrils, the mouth, the palm of the hand, [...] through that brutal hillock of the calf under the wool or denim, a radiant and somber anger, visible as a haze” (6). There is something striking to Genet about the nature of bodily submission in the men he describes, especially in Stilitano. Genet seems to return to the image of the hand as he traverses the bodies in front of him through his words, and although the “palm of the hand” in question is not endowed to any one man, as a reader I am drawn back to Genet’s previous description of Stilitano’s “only hand.” The fact that Stilitano is one-handed is the first written

⁸ See ‘Consecration’

⁹ ‘Start’ is placed in quotations here because, as I will continue to reference in this analysis, *The Thief’s Journal* does not follow a faithfully chronological narrative structure.

depiction that we receive of him. The hand—an extension, or perhaps a replacement, of Stilitano’s character—lies motionless on the table, and yet Genet describes this gesture as “violent,” a violence specifically rooted in delicacy. How something delicate could be simultaneously violent is where the basest semantic interpretation of Genet’s words breaks down: a *substance incorporeal* in action. Even so, there is truth in the physical nature of Stilitano’s body which defies denotative logic. The violence which Genet observes in Stilitano’s body is a vapor, something nearly intangible but still present, rolling off the body in a manner that is detectable through instinct: anxiety, the hairs that stand up on the back of your neck. The violent vapors of the body, present in the vulnerable surrender of Stilitano’s only hand on the table, are detectable even as the semantic horizons of Genet’s words reach their limit. The truth of the “delicacy [...which was particularly] violent” lies in sensory observation, the understanding in the moment of *feeling*, comprehending the sense of violence emitted from the body that can only be construed as such, even in a moment of stillness. Although the words ‘violence’ and ‘delicacy’ may have the power to destroy each other—a violent act might easily crack a delicate object, as the beak cracks the egg¹⁰—when placed into relation through physical experience, the violent and the delicate can coexist, even augmenting each other. The violence transmitted through delicate bodies allows Genet to extend beyond the capacity of his words into a territory that is reliant on the physical to exist: the sensory experience of these men confirms the words that seem antithetical until they are embodied. Using the physical, Genet moves beyond the *substance incorporeal* in a manner that will echo in the rest of his narrative.

¹⁰ See ‘Writing.’

Communal Ritual

The streets in Chicago are empty by 7 in the evening. It's too early for the late daylight of summer, the restaurants and bars are closed, and there's food at home. There are more lights in the buildings as they ascend, but none on the first floor: there's no need. We're all safe in our rooms, together but apart.

Things started to feel too quiet by Week Two. We missed the buzz of the nightlife, the sound of neighbors on patios and teenagers roaming the streets in a pack, drawing the ire of neighborhood lifers out for their evening stroll. We lost the rhythm that made the city ours, the thrum of the traffic and the El returning under our feet, over and over into the night. Instead of a pulse we hear sirens making their rounds to and from the hospital. People stand in lines for food, six feet apart. We're afraid of each other. Eventually, I think someone got sick of it.

The first night I thought I was hearing things. The city let out a quiet roar around 8pm, lights flickering in the windows of the high rises on the other side of Dearborn. The second night I heard it again. This time a little louder, a little closer. I walked out on the balcony and looked up.

The buildings were alive. All of the activity from the streets seemed to have verticalized, shadows of residents braving the Chicago cold to stand on their balconies, waving flashlights and banging pots and pans, playing music and dancing, screaming messages of love and encouragement into the night air for anyone to hear. Those who didn't have balconies flicked their lights on and off. Children in pajamas stood in the windows of their high-rises until their parents came to pull them to bed. A woman's voice soared above the noise: "I love you, Chicago."

It's been a month now. In self-isolation the days have a tendency to run together, but my city's new nightly ritual gives me something to look forward to. It's something we can do

together, putting a punctuation mark on days that can sometimes feel monotonous at best and joyless at worst. It's a moment to look forward to, a chance to dance or scream or laugh at the neon pink flashing Christmas lights that the family in Marina City decided to hang from their windowsill. 8pm brings us together, even as our current circumstances keep us apart.

We may not be going to church right now, or temple, or Sunday brunch. We don't meet our friends for a beer or pick up another novel from the neighborhood bookstore. This summer there won't be Cubs games or Jazz Fest, and children won't play in the fountains at Millennium Park. No one really knows when this is going to end, nor how. We don't have our routines, but we have 8pm. When everything else is uncertain, it serves as an anchor point, one constant we've found amidst empty streets and crowded waiting rooms. It's no Wrigley Field, but it's not half bad. For now, I'll take it.

Consecration

The interplay between violence and brutality within Genet's work is manifested not only through the act of writing itself, but also through the storyline and characters that he portrays. Through a simultaneously retrospective and instantaneous lens, Genet is able to subvert the ritualistic tropes and roles of his characters as he engages with them, juxtaposing violence *against* brutality inherited from these characters. Creating and re-creating the individuals who surround him within *The Thief's Journal* gives Genet the means he needs to confront the structures that surround him and these characters, each human in the narrative a conduit for the systems of oppression that construct and manifest them. good

The temporally fluid nature of *The Thief's Journal*—that is, its dependence upon the act of writing rather than a faithful portrayal of events—affords Genet the power to manipulate narrative structure in order to depict and impose violence, brutality, and ritual through his characters. Both through how Genet manipulates his characters and through the detail of how these characters have acted upon Genet, each piece of the reconstructed narrative serves a purpose beyond itself. Shifting from object to subject, blurring the lines between autonomy and manipulation, Genet superimposes meaning upon the people with whom he interacts over the course of his journal. To observe this, it is helpful to begin with the analysis of an essential initial narrative element: Genet's tube of vaseline. As explored in the vaseline entry,¹¹ the “little gray leaden tube of vaseline” (Genet 12) takes on the role of a sacred object as it is manipulated by the policemen who hold Genet in custody. Embodying both that which is rejected by society—homosexuality—and that which Genet holds as meaningful, the “gray leaden tube” creates a duality between physical existence and personal meaning that delineates ritual significance.

¹¹ See ‘Vaseline.’

Manifesting the abject through the shameful nature of its use, the vaseline serves as a conduit that allows Genet to glide (love it) from his location in prison to a spatially and temporally distinct experience. He writes, “In describing [the tube of vaseline], I recreate the little object, but the following image cuts in: beneath a lamppost, in a street of the city where I am writing, the pallid face of a little old woman [...] The gentleness of that moon-fish face told me at once: the old woman had just got out of prison” (Genet 13). As Genet jumps from a humiliating encounter in a prison cell to the intimacy of an interpersonal interaction with a stranger, the reader can sense a kind of transference:¹² the indication of the abject—originally made clear through the organic transition between subjects through the act of writing. In this manner, not only is the woman Genet observes intrinsically linked to the ritualistic designations assigned to the vaseline, but she also serves as a conduit to observe how the violence of *The Thief’s Journal* functions through characters portrayed in the text.

The transition from a tube of vaseline—such a personal object—to the depiction of a stranger implies that perhaps Genet and his subject are not so far removed from each other, after all. This presumption is affirmed through Genet’s gut: the transition from his own experience of imprisonment to the act of observation and recognition he finds as he lays eyes on the woman under the streetlamp. Looking into her face, Genet sees himself in her: he writes, “‘She’s a thief,’ I said to myself. As I walked away from her, a kind of intense reverie, living deep within me and at the edge of my mind, led me to think that it was perhaps my mother whom I had just met” (Genet 13). Genet feels an affinity for this woman that is rooted in an emotion that he senses, an inkling that transcends empirical evidence and relies on something intrinsic as its source. Before

¹² By ‘transference,’ I am referring to the organic link between Genet’s perception and description of the vaseline and the woman under the streetlamp. The vaseline’s meaning is not superimposed upon the woman; rather, it provides a link between the two entities in Genet’s writing.

he identifies her as his possible mother, he identifies her as a thief: an identity that he personally holds, placing him on the fringe of society. This commonality that links them is also their link to the abject: the idea that society has spit them both out, or that they have chosen a life that places them on its margins, yet they still exist in prisons and under streetlamps, both within and outside of the milieu that surrounds them. Even so, the woman that Genet describes only holds an identity as a thief because he assigns it to her: he situates her within the world based on the experiences that he possesses. This world is constructed from Genet's gut, the sensory input and emotions that he possesses. The role of 'thief' which Genet assigns to the woman he observes—and the role of 'formerly incarcerated,' and that of 'mother'—could be true, or it could be a fallacy. However, the truth of the designation does not matter in this situation; rather, the importance of the aforementioned titles lies in the meaning that they endow upon the woman under the streetlamp. How Genet views her is more important than her identity through his act of writing, for the roles which he assigns to the woman allow him to filter his experience of her into his own narrative understanding.

It is important to note the wavering integrity of the word 'experience' here: that is, what is taken as indisputable fact is reliant on facets of identity that are consistent with what a society at large considers to be testimonially reliable. In her essay, *The Evidence of Experience*, Joan W. Scott touches on a variety of alternative views of experience and the evidential uses that come of it. She writes, "the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems—those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves" (Scott 778). Upon consideration of varying analyses of 'experience' as a concept, Scott comes to a conclusion that pieces of experiential evidence written into history must be taken along with a

consideration of the historian's positionality, along with that of the owner of the experience and the intersections that determine how they move through the world (Scott 796-797). This is essential when reviewing Genet's work in *The Thief's Journal*, as so much of the information upon which he relies is based in gut, reflected through the process of writing, and manipulated temporally and spatially to suit the need of a piece that extends beyond a faithful narrative account. Great!

We return to Genet's observation of the woman under the streetlamp with an acknowledgment of the emotional positioning which he assumes within his act of writing the account. Genet finds affinity in the woman's character as a thief, but he goes further in his hope of her as a mother, and the visceral instinct he possesses which draws him to this yearning. This splanchnic intuition must not only be attributed to Genet's experience of seeing, but also in the context he carries within him: he was raised without a mother, and this distinction affects every aspect of his life. From the surname he carries to the label of bastard imposed upon him, a great deal of the intersections of shame which Genet possesses—and embraces¹³—are rooted in motherlessness. For this reason, the figure of a mother becomes nearly an extension of his imagination, simultaneously fictionalized and manifested through his experiences. He writes, “I know nothing of her who abandoned me in the cradle, but I hoped it was that old thief who begged at night” (Genet 13). Although Genet has no logical basis for which to claim the old woman he observes as his mother, he pins his hopes on a figure of a thief, who shares an affinity with him that becomes almost symbolic in nature, a corrupted version of a Divine Mother. nice

As Genet describes the woman—in hypothetical terms—as his mother, his language transfers her to an iconographic status, an object to be venerated. Extending his fantasy of the

¹³ See ‘Vaseline’

woman, he says that “if it were [that the woman was his mother], I would cover her with flowers, with gladioluses and roses, and with kisses! I would weep with tenderness over those moon-fish eyes, over that round foolish face!” (Genet 13). In this manner, Genet pantomimes a performance of reverence towards the woman that parallels the common behaviors towards images of Mary: the presentation of flowers representing new life, the kisses and tears that pilgrims shed when approaching an icon. He creates a parallel between the woman and the Divine Mother, seemingly institutionalizing the image of motherhood that he describes by semantically linking it to the practices of veneration of the Catholic church. However, Genet’s invocation of a religious institution is not a reflection of his adherence to the practices of the Church: rather, invoking the paragon of motherhood within institutionalized religion gives Genet the ammunition that he needs in order to desecrate the foundations of the marginalization which he faces.

Genet relies on the interplay of words—not semantics, but the vocalization of the signifier itself—to create a simultaneously consecrated and desecrated relationship between himself and the woman under the streetlamp. Genet writes, “‘I’d be glad to slobber all over her,’ I thought, overflowing with love. (Does the word *glaiëul* [gladiolus] mentioned above bring into play the word *glaviaux* [gobs of spit]?) To slobber all over her hair or vomit into her hands. But I would adore that thief who is my mother” (Genet 13). His prior reference to gladioluses—a flower known to signify strength and moral character—is auditorily and visually corrupted through the act of writing, two semantically distinct entities of flowers and saliva becoming connected through a metonym¹⁴ that Genet only grasps as he writes it. Just as he would give his mother gladioluses, the gift of a pilgrim to an icon, Genet would also give her the refuse of his own

¹⁴ The word ‘metonym’ here takes on a Derridian significance: the space between the signifier (what is used to express a notion; a written word or a sound, for instance) and the signified (a notion, entity that exists independent of the signifier) charged with meaning that is not contained in the word itself.

body. The word *glaviaux* signifies a glob of spit, calling to mind the act of spitting on the street: generally socially reprehensible, intentional, and ultimately an act of disrespect. The words *glaiëul* and *glaviaux*, in this light, may seem antithetical; the function of one seeking to honor the woman Genet observes, the other seemingly to dishonor her. However, Genet does not place these words in opposition to one another, opting instead to inhabit both sides of the desecration/consecration binary. In Genet's eyes, both the gladiolus and the glob of spit are valuable in relation to the woman who may be his mother, marking her as simultaneously venerable as a mother and reprehensible as "the old thief who begged at night." Through what she *is* as his hypothetical mother, the woman under the streetlamp is placed in a socially celebratory context: the position of motherhood is placed on a pedestal that even Genet cannot avoid as he worships her, a connection established through blood. However, through what she *is* in her action, the act of begging and thievery, the woman under the streetlamp manifests her own rejection from the social structures that would venerate her as a mother; the world has spit her out. The duality of the woman's relationship to Genet—as well as her (dis)integrated relationship to the world around her—is manifested through Genet's work in the written and spoken word.

The analysis of *glaiëul* and *glaviaux* begins in the act of vocalization: how do the words sound when they roll off the tongue? The act of speech is inherently physical, and thus carries with it the emotional charge of any action contained within the body. Julianna De Nooy explores this connection—specifically, the link between Kristeva,¹⁵ Derrida, and—by extension—Genet in her book *Derrida, Kristeva, and the Dividing Line: An Articulation of Two Theories of Difference*. De Nooy is particularly interested in the 'gl' sound that is contained within *glaiëul* and *glaviaux*, examining the semantic undercurrent of the physicality of the vocal. De Nooy pins

¹⁵ See 'Vaseline'

the underlying sentiment of ‘*gl*’ to the abject, the body spitting out the sound in rejection. However, before discussing the physical sound, De Nooy first discusses the entity of ‘*gl*’ as it is, not as it is written or spoken. Referencing the work of Derrida, she writes, “*gl* seems to be what slips through totalizing structures, what prevents a text from ever being whole, what prevents a reading from accounting for everything. It’s the leftover that refuses to be bound to a text, that escapes incorporation into closed systems. [...] *gl* is what confounds structuralist readings by refusing to respect the dictum ‘tout se lie’” (De Nooy 225-226). From this perspective, the use of *glaiëul* and *glaviaux* come into contact with one another through austerity, the ‘*gl*’ transcending their individual meanings through their mutual disconnection from the structure of the text. Just as the details of the woman under the streetlamp’s existence prevent her from existing fully within the social structure she inhabits, so does the mutual *gl* of *glaiëul* and *glaviaux* dislodge these words from their semantic positioning in the text in order to position them in relation to one another.

The denotations of the two aforementioned words are utterly distinct, and yet they are linked in Genet’s mind by the physical declaration of their signifiers. When De Nooy expands upon the notion of ‘*gl*,’ transitioning from the written signifier to the spoken word, she refers to the phonetic ‘*gl*’ in terms that are themselves corporeal, indicative of essential functions of the body–visceral functions, deeper than words–before they extend to denotative meaning. She writes, “Kristeva and Derrida could agree that the *gl* is an effect created by repetition. [...] In Kristeva’s theory, the alliterative and assonant networks manage to activate a ‘phonic instinctual memory’ [...] However Derrida suggests that [...] *gl* might pass from anal to oral, as Kristeva argues, but what is to stop it from sliding in with the phallic, saliva becoming sperm in the to-ing and fro-ing between the glob of spittle and the gladiolus” (De Nooy 232). As De Nooy aptly

recognizes, the connection between the *glaiëul* and the *glaviaux* lies in the physicality of the words themselves. Although the ‘*gl*’ itself defies structural definition and interconnection, the feeling of these two vocalized entities provides a gateway for Genet’s connection between the two of them. Although their connotations—new life, abjection—are seemingly distant from one another, these two words draw together through their manifested similarities when their signifiers are drawn off the page and into the mouths of their subjects. As his narrative draws these words together, Genet dissolves the semantic boundary between consecration and desecration through the interplay of words, indicating that there may not be such a large difference between these two entities, after all.

Isolation

The French press in my apartment in Chicago only comes out on weekends. Early in the morning, after what would have been my mother's yoga class, alongside a bowl of berries—now dependent on when we go to the supermarket—the coffee sits in its glass cylinder, a little too saturated, just like mine.

My French press is packed in a box somewhere back in Claremont, wrapped in the newspaper that I could find on campus, the headline *Coronavirus Comes to California* stuffed in a ball to keep the glass from breaking. I didn't have time to use it; I drank coffee from cans or the cup handed to me by a kind dining hall worker in white plastic gloves. We couldn't touch the dispenser anymore.

It wouldn't have mattered if I poured my coffee from the dispenser myself, or if I still had the time to measure the grounds, stir the water, press the plunger, sit on the sofa like I did before. It feels wrong to maintain a routine like that when there are people to see, maybe for the last time. When you're awaiting the moment when you put your books in a plastic crate, when your paint set goes in the suitcase, when you're worried enough about your family that you probably don't need the caffeine, anyway. So I packed my French press first, I stuffed my journal and my favorite pen in my backpack. I removed my art from the walls, took flowers out of vases, put the bottles of wine that were meant for a celebration on the kitchen counter with a corkscrew. I packed my bags with the least amount of ceremony and traveled home to Chicago.

Mornings look different now. It's hard to develop a ritual when you don't have a sense of your place in the world, when there isn't the certainty of a routine to solidify where you are and what you're doing. If I sit on the couch, I'll sit there for hours—there's no reason to get up. Silence is interrupted by conference calls. Coffee comes from tiny plastic cups in a Keurig during the week, a relic of an era when we didn't have time to stand at the kitchen counter and

wait for the four minutes to elapse. I guess the Keurig has a purpose in itself, a promise that someday we'll take our caffeine in a travel mug, that we'll cram ourselves into cars on the L and that our neighbor's cough into an elbow won't feel like a death sentence. That's a covenant I could swallow with my coffee.

Sunday mornings still include the paper, fold-out sections about the economy and the weekly music review, the magazine and the op-eds. The 'Weddings' section is thinner than usual. We sit at breakfast, passing newsprint from hand to hand, stacking the pieces we've read in the center of the table, and for a moment, things might feel normal. We drink our coffee, we talk to each other, we read about the world. Somehow, though, our routine feels more important at this moment. It's one rhythm that exists from before, and now we read about the world because we can no longer enter it.

After breakfast, my mother turns on the church service, streamed live from two blocks East. There's a choir of five voices—spaced six feet apart, we are assured—and a homily from the bishop. There's no Eucharist because there are no mouths to feed—or perhaps too many, and the diocese banned communion two weeks before the pandemic was declared, anyway. The service is only thirty minutes long. I excuse myself after ten, opting to stand under the shower water and think. Solitude is rarer now; we all savor it when we can. Five minutes in the shower feels like a prayer, and when I leave the bathroom my head feels clear, too.

I'm not exactly sure where God is in all of this. I don't find Her in the radio broadcasts, and I don't feel quiet enough in the mornings to find Her anymore. For once, I don't think She's present in the rituals I held before—at least, I haven't seen Her there. I think I found God, however, in what is now that was not before. Yesterday I walked down to the street and found a line snaking around the block; a truck was at the end of it, handing out packages of food. It

wasn't something that you would find in my neighborhood in the days where morning coffee was followed by a run on the lakeshore trail or a trip to the farmers' market on Chicago Avenue. But at that moment, the food truck had more meaning than any rhythm I previously held. It acknowledged that things weren't normal, and—in the lack of normalcy—it responded accordingly.

Rituals shape the way we view the world, but in a way, the world can also shape the way we view rituals. When the world around us shifts, are things that it forces us to abandon, patterns that don't serve us or those around us anymore. Sometimes those new vacancies are filled; sometimes the vacancies lead us to question whether we needed that *one* action to ground us, in the first place. Ritual slows us down, like a cup of coffee on the couch, but it also mobilizes us. Both mutable and constant, ritual lies in the balance of how we see the world and how the world shapes who we are. It changes us, and we change it back. Maybe somehow, we're moving towards something better.

Ritual Memory

My childhood was steeped in ritual. When I was one, I was baptized in a Catholic church alongside my brother. We wore white christening gowns and were passed hand-to-hand to the baptismal font, where my family—one side large and Italian Catholic; the other small, Southern, and Protestant—gathered to witness the water, the oil, and the candles that marked our official entry into the faith of our parents, our first religious ritual. We checked that box; no purgatory for the small Catholic babies in hand-me-down white lace christening gowns. My father holds the taste in his mouth like a bitter pill. It may have been a ritual, but it wasn't his.

One of my first memories is kneeling at the communion rail of Hope Lutheran Church, fascinated by the gleaming chalice of wine from which I could not yet sip. My parents had compromised on Lutheranism shortly after I was baptized, a balance between the liturgy of my mother's youth and the egalitarian values that my father held dear. They themselves could not strike that balance with each other, but for me, the church was a middle ground; a place where the facets of my upbringing which normally came into conflict were reconciled to one another.

Everything in that sanctuary was so much bigger than me, but for some reason it never felt intimidating. I was taught to approach the altar during worship, to touch what interested me, to sit where I could see and ask questions if I didn't understand. The priests were comfortable with the phrase 'I don't know,' and the largest message that was imparted upon me was that I was loved by my Creator, and that love was not contingent upon anything beyond the fact that I existed.

Unlike many others who have grown up in the Christian Church in America, I was never shamed from the pulpit, and nor were my peers. As a result, Sunday liturgy felt shiny, above reproach, like a celebration. Looking back, my memories of church feel anomalous, so far removed from anything I or my peers have experienced since I went to college. I catch myself

idealizing those Sunday mornings, our priests delivering blessings with joy. Using their positions of power to encourage the congregation towards justice and advocacy, the church leadership encouraged us to root ourselves in a community of believers: The Church, they called it. Capital 'C.' As such, the rituals of Hope Lutheran, which were the same year after year, felt both comforting and encouraging, giving me an understanding of faith that—as far as I knew—was oriented towards justice and peace.

As such, it was not until college that I witnessed first-hand the damaging effects of the larger institutional Church, the facet of Christianity that transcends denomination. The slights against the theological understanding that had been nurtured in me for 19 years were severe: exclusionary doctrines that forced my friends and mentors out of their jobs for their Queer-liberationist Christian perspectives. A political climate that justified violence against women, people of color, and other marginalized communities, its leaders backed by a Bible that said nothing in defense or encouragement of the oppressed. The stark realization that this alternate theology could be used to turn my own body into an object. The final blow, my home church in Claremont coming clean about their views towards the LGBTQ+ community: views which they had masked, downplayed, and blatantly misrepresented in the name of evangelism and increasing the membership of college students like me.

Commence the jadedness, skepticism, downright anger manifested in tense talks over coffee—a formality, really—with a team of local pastors who seemed more interested in my physical presence than the words coming out of my mouth. My own internal dialogue: *Are you listening to a word I'm saying? Why don't you understand, why can't I make you understand how wrong this is? What else is your church hiding behind the rituals and excuses that accompany them? What sauce did they steep you in?* I fume into my coffee and swallow the

ingratiating comments and excuses, the “please come back” and the “we value your presence.” I refuse to walk through their doors ever again. I will not be another head for them to count, a tally to mark on their growth chart when they boast to their wealthy missionary donors about the number of souls that *they* have saved this year.

At once, the building where I had worshipped for two years lost its meaning. God waited for me outside the church doors, pacing back and forth with impatience. “Thank Me, I thought you’d never leave,” She sighed. She grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me to a quiet place.

As I write this entry, I have no church. There is no shiny silver chalice or communion kneeler in my dormitory, and I cannot conceive of entering into a “contemporary Protestant” worship space—read: homophobia and misogyny veiled by smoke machines and designer sneakers—at any point in the near or distant future. Even so, I have not completely abandoned my notion of the Divine; however, in my break with certain strains of organized religion, I have been drawn to reconceptualize Him—or Her, or Them—in the way that I move throughout the world.

In her classic anthropological work, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas posits that—among other functions—a ritual serves as a frame, aiding our perception of the world by “linking the present with the relevant past” (Douglas 65), creating our experience through a simultaneously singular and relative interpretation of the actions of said ritual. The actions that we personally identify as ritualistic inherently aid us in building our own reality and identifying our place within it. Growing up, the rituals that governed my worldview included Communion, the Prayers of the People, and the Passing of the Peace. They also included the front page of the *New York Times* at breakfast, our semi-annual visits to my grandparents’ house in Mount Kisco, and—once I was older—my nightly trips to the basement laundry room, where I would weigh myself on the

bathroom scale that my parents had hidden there. Each of these actions manifested a cause and effect: the changing state of the news, my grandparents' failing health, a number that would determine how I carried myself for the following day. Dictating my place in a world that was so much bigger than me, in a sense they were as much of a religion as my Lutheranism.

Today my rituals are different. I hide from the news in the morning, instead opting for a hot shower and a clear head before my roommates awake. The edges of my thoughts are diffuse and intangible before my first cup of coffee, which I make in the French press that my mother bought for me when she last visited, the spring of my freshman year. I christened it with light roast, the only type of coffee that smells like home to me. What was once an act of comfort has become a necessity, but I take pleasure in the act of filling the kettle, scooping the grounds out of the blue cardboard container, stirring the water and steeping the beans until the liquid is a deep amber.

No one else is awake at 6:30, so I retreat to my favorite corner of the sofa and look out the window, cupping my steaming coffee in my hands. My thoughts come creeping in as my mug drains, but I do not touch my coursework until the coffee is gone. Sometimes I let myself sit there for a while longer, if I have the time. I write, sort my thoughts into neat categories, put them in a place where I can make sense of them. Sometimes I pray, sometimes I can't string together the words. And sometimes the morning is so quiet and pristine that I swear that I can feel God sitting next to me, looking out the window with Her feet curled under Her, just like I am.

Ritual Violence

French theorist René Girard posits that at the root of ritual lies inherent violence. This violence is latent—sometimes translated until it is unrecognizable—but nevertheless, it leaves traces on the obligatory ritual act. The violence that Girard describes is not only a symptom of ritual, but also its cause: he goes as far as to state that “ritual is the imitation and reenactment of spontaneous, unanimous violence” (Girard 104), a product of an original violent act which necessitates both penance and repetition: the containment of the Id through selective, controlled fulfillment of violent urges.

In the interest of self-preservation, the relation of the internal experience to the external world through ritual requires a sacrifice: a displacement of the guilt, shame, or culpability of the individual or group. This displacement is projected onto a third party that accepts the brunt of the “very real (though often hidden) hostilities that all members of the community feel for one another” (104). In this manner, just as ritual is demarcated by the relation of internal feelings and sentiments to external perceptions and judgments of the world, so is it defined by the borders and limitations instilled to distinguish the members of a community from those outside of it.

Girard continues to emphasize the importance of unanimity to the effective performance of ritual violence, arguing that rituals—especially ritual sacrifice—operate in a binary of all-or-nothing (104), in which the ritual may only be completed if every member of the community participates. However, it is impossible to achieve this unanimity if the community cannot unite behind the violence it commits. As such, the victim of the ritual violence in question must be readily distinguishable from the ritual actors. Girard explains that “the ritual victim must come from outside; otherwise the community might find it difficult to unite against it” (107). There is an inherent marginalization that is required to exist in order to complete an act of ritual violence. Demarcations of this difference, when applied broadly, could range from existence outside of the

boundaries of the community, differences in lifestyle, or physical indicators which exclude an individual from participation in or identification with the sacrifice itself. If we are to accept Girard's theory—acknowledging that it displays a somewhat narrow perception of what constitutes a ritual—then Jean Genet, in his identity as a poor, gay Frenchman traveling through Europe, takes on the role of victim in another's ritual as well as a practitioner of his own.

Genet is well aware of his position as both a Frenchman and a man whose Frenchness is negated due to other facets of his identity. He writes, "Excluded by my birth and tastes from the social order, I was not aware of its diversity. I wondered at its perfect coherence, which rejected me. I was astounded by so rigorous an edifice whose details united against me. [...] This order, fearful and feared, whose details were all interrelated, had a meaning: my exile" (Genet 174). As he reflects on the social structure which is built without him in mind, Genet describes a system that acts in unanimity: every individual element within this structure, from the "stars on a general's sleeve"¹⁶ to the "flower beds" (174) functions in concordance to ensure his exclusion. Because he is demarcated as 'other' on the basis of his economic class and sexuality, Genet is predisposed to strains of violence that do not affect French citizens whose intersections of identity are held to be socially acceptable. The jail time, humiliation by French authority figures, and sustained poverty which Genet faces are perpetuated at the hands of the nation-state in the name of maintaining order, upholding the existing social structure and stunting any variety of deviance which may arise. By perpetuating violence upon an individual outside of the immediate community in order to prevent violence within the community, the French government

¹⁶ In light of collective, communal violence, the detail of the general's sleeve and the stars that signify his rank are especially important. Prior to the events of *The Thief's Journal*, Jean Genet served in the French military before being dishonorably discharged due to homosexual conduct. The institution within which he served, a mark of the French government and a symbol of belonging and uniformity, spit him out in light of his "birth and tastes," which were beyond him to change. Even so, Genet maintains his French-ness while describing these elements in the French language.

perpetuates a pattern that is eerily similar to the descriptions of ritual sacrifice that René Girard discusses.

When theorizing the function of ritual violence, Girard posits that “the rite [of ritual violence] is designed to function during periods of relative calm; [...] its role is not curative, but preventive,” stating that, through frequent repetition and the deliberate targeting of sacrificial victims outside of the community, the smaller violence of the ritual itself acts as a preventative measure against the sacrificial crisis of intra-communal violence that would occur in its absence (Girard 107). When observing the patterns of imprisonment and release, humiliation and shame which Jean Genet suffers at the hands of the government, we can view Genet as not only the perpetuator of his own rituals, but also as the victim of ritual violence himself. The structures of incarceration that Genet endures exist under the premise of preventing violence and social disorder, and yet, in doing so, they perpetuate a violence of their own. The brutality of the prison system is targeted at social outsiders, largely supported without question by the people of the nation-state, who believe that incarceration is better than the possible violent alternative. Like any violent ritual, Genet’s humiliation and imprisonment must be imitated and revisited, over and over: he is released, he is arrested, he returns to jail, the social order is once again restored, another violent influence in custody. By cordoning off the least congruent members of their society, the French government engages in their own ritual practice, shaping their worldview through the violence they perpetuate as they decide who is worthy of belonging.

Even so, Genet subverts his place within French society by creating a position for himself, unapologetically taking up space in the social milieu that is designed to exclude and do violence against him. To combat the deliberate marginalization that he faces, Genet acts with an equal measure of deliberation, endowing meaning upon his actions as he occupies traditionally

French spaces *as* a Frenchman, regardless of socially-prescriptive factors that would render him ‘un-French.’ He writes, “Hitherto I had acted against [the social order] slyly, in the shadow. Now I dared touch it, dared show I was touching it, by insulting those who composed it. Whereupon, recognizing my right to do so, I recognized my place in it. It seemed natural to me that waiters in cafés should call me ‘Monsieur.’” (Genet 174). By engaging directly—physically—with the society that attempts to reject him, Genet reestablishes his French-ness by claiming it for himself, accepting the title of ‘Monsieur’ as evidence of his belonging within French society. Because he occupies both a blatantly French and an inherently anti-French identity, the position of ‘outsider’ that the French nation-state has imposed upon Genet loses a portion of its power over him as he refuses to claim that identity as his own. By existing both fully as a Frenchman and as an outsider, Genet dilutes the meaning of the ritual violence that the nation-state imposes upon him: as he cannot fully assume the role of the ‘other,’ he is unable to fulfill the necessary criteria to be considered a proper sacrificial victim. Genet’s self-insertion into French cultural spaces, as well as the verbal affirmation of his belonging by members of the community, eliminates the possibility of unanimity and renders any kind of ritual violence ineffective. In this manner, Genet’s simultaneous presence within and outside of the community serves as a tool for subversion, allowing him to claim his Frenchness while simultaneously disrupting the French cultural systems that reject and oppress him.

As Genet deconstructs the established insider/outsider binary, he affords himself the agency to place his own interpretive lens over the violence inflicted against him, existing within French society while remaining un beholden to the moral codes and ritual cycles that define it. Genet subverts his own humiliation by humiliating his tormentors, finding pleasure in the shame that he is meant to face at their hands. This subversion is a result of Genet’s ability to claim his

own place in French society by making one for himself, establishing direct, defiant contact with the social order that rejects him. By refusing to endow his repeated incarceration and abuse with the significance assigned to it by the nation-state, Genet breaks the power of this ritual over his personhood. This in turn gives him the space he needs to both reframe the rituals of the society around him, and to create his own code of meaning for the actions that he takes.

Genet's actions run specifically contrary to the ethos and purpose of the society that surrounds him, and yet their subversion lies partly within the deception that he employs to execute them: while visibly existing in the world, he acts silently against it. In deceit, he places others into the role of sacrificial victim, as he himself has been placed. When describing this substitution, Genet uses the language of the nation-state, paralleling the violence committed against citizens to describe his own ends. Genet reflects that "[i]t was Stilitano who fought in my place. He was ready to drink with the queers, he preened himself in their presence, he skinned them. [...] As for him, he was unaware of the secret purpose I was making him serve and that he was what is called the homeland: the entity which fights in a soldier's place and sacrifices him" (Genet 172-173). By placing Stilitano in the role of original sacrificial object, Genet creates a microcosm of the nation-state which he manipulates for his own purposes. In drawing a direct comparison to the methods of war that allow a nation to sacrifice their soldiers for the cause, Genet emulates an original act of violence—the war and sacrifice that the nation-state conducts—by creating a parallel within his relationship to Stilitano.¹⁷ In creating a new state of sacrifice that operates within moral code that he assigns to it, Genet exercises control over his portion of the world around him. Although he operates within and emulates the social structure around him, he

¹⁷ Stilitano's role as a sacrificial subject/object is innately tied to his physicality. See 'Body.'

employs these same social structures to construct his own opposing code of conduct that places a lens over the manner in which he chooses to live his life.

Vaseline

I keep getting stuck on the vaseline.

It's such a small object—commonplace, really—and yet, as it is passed from Genet's hands to the hands of the guards who imprison him, it becomes laden with meaning, an imbalance of knowledge, and of power within the humiliation to which Jean Genet is subjected.

Vaseline carries its own specific cultural context and meaning before it is linked to Genet's personal experience. Consider the use of vaseline: a lubricant and a humectant, it soothes chapped skin and creates slip on the places where it is applied. Its use is either cosmetic, hygienic, or sexual: all of these implications are inherently private and personal, an interaction between the object of vaseline and its owner. Even Genet's signifier of vaseline is physically distanced from the signified. In French, petroleum jelly is referred to as *la reine de la glisse*¹⁸, or 'the queen of the glide.' This term is charged with the physical and conceptual distance indicated by a difference in class—*la reine*—with the 'glisse' implied but not explained; one knows of the lubricating effects of the vaseline but need not ponder the use of this lubrication. As such, petroleum jelly carries with it a sense of implicit discretion which is violated when brought into the open, transferred from Genet's pocket to the hands of the guards who imprison and humiliate him.

Genet writes that his tube of mentholated vaseline "was partially rolled up. Which amounts to saying that it had been put to use. [...] [I]t was the very sign of abjection, of that which is concealed with the greatest of care, but yet the sign of a secret grace which was soon to save me from contempt" (12). Genet's tube of vaseline *is*, but it also *represents*. It is a

¹⁸ The word 'glisse' holds meaning that extends beyond its denotative context. Genet plays with the 'gl' throughout his work, emphasizing its ability to create a visceral sense of the abject *off* the page through the words that he places *on* the page. The 'gl' holds a context of its own that is disruptive, disconnected, and indicative of the body of its speaker. See 'Consecration.'

demarcation of Genet's identity as a gay man in 1930s France, something that he carries with him and employs like the tube of vaseline in his pocket.¹⁹ In the hands of another, the vaseline is rejected, ridiculed, expelled from its tube onto the floor (14); it loses the discretion that clings to it, its displacement from Genet's ownership betraying a facet of his identity that remained guarded until the vaseline was expelled from its container. The physical expulsion of the vaseline by an external agent has a twofold significance. At once, the *reine de la glisse* becomes tangible, visible, and accessible, its meaning becoming clear in the physical nature and presence of the contents of the tube. In the same vein, the tube itself becomes a displaced symbol of Genet's sexuality, assuming a phallic quality that is exacerbated by the liquid expelled through manual stimulation. Genet finds meaning in the expulsion, the personification of the abject which he endows upon an external object. There is a sense of shame implicit in the revelation of the tube of vaseline, a personal object in the hands of the outsider, but there is also a kind of pleasure that results in this humiliation; the climax of the vaseline leaving the tube, *la reine de la glisse* wearing Genet's shame like a diadem. Giving life and gravity to an object like a tube of vaseline by dwelling within the space between signifier and signified, Genet's hands a tube of vaseline is transformed into a ritual object.

The concept of ritual is intimately linked to violence. As explained in René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, the act of ritual—specifically that of ritual sacrifice—acts as a form of displacement, creating distance between the community in need of vengeance or repentance and the sacrifice itself. The sacrificial act delineates the start and end of the violence: the violent act, and the sacrifice that resolves the violent event and prevents future violence from occurring (14). However, in order to complete a sacrifice of any kind, one must employ some kind of sacrificial

¹⁹ See 'Writing.'

object, talisman, or scapegoat to replace the pain, humiliation, or violence that they would otherwise endure. The sacrificial object, then, links the internal shame or guilt of the practitioner to an observable external symbol, accessible and tangible beyond the individual's experience. When employing this definition of ritual and sacrifice, Genet's vaseline assumes the role of a sacrificial object as well as a ritual one. Because of its underlying meaning and usage, which is never explicitly communicated to his prison guards, the small tube of petroleum jelly serves to displace Genet's physical body²⁰ and the violence and humiliation—as well as pleasure—which would be inflicted upon it. Genet writes, "I knew that all night long my tube of vaseline would be exposed to the scorn—the contrary of a Perpetual Adoration²¹—of a group of strong, handsome, husky policemen. So strong that if the weakest of them barely squeezed his fingers together, there would shoot forth [...] a ribbon of gum which would continue to emerge in a ridiculous silence" (14). The seizure and subsequent expulsion of the vaseline between the fingers of the prison guards is a violent act, intended to provoke shame and to degrade Genet even further than his incarceration already has. However, even though the vaseline carries with it a degree of inherent humiliation, there is also a displacement of pleasure that accompanies this violent act. The tube is phallic in nature; it emits its contents through physical touch by a man in power, simulating a kind of climax that Genet seems to feel although it exists outside his own body. The shame, violence, and subsequent pleasure catalyzed by the vaseline establish it as a portion of a sacrifice, absorbing the violence of the prison and standing in the place of Genet himself. The interaction between internal emotions such as humiliation and arousal and the physical presence

²⁰ See 'Body.'

²¹ Genet frequently interplays the concepts of consecration and desecration, both in reference to external objects and to his own body. He weaves these two terms together, juxtaposing them while diffusing the barrier between them. What is sacred may be easily defiled, and what has been desecrated carries its own kind of sacrality. See 'Consecration.'

and influence of the outside world highlight Genet's ability to draw out the ritual significance of everyday objects, landmarks of the greater goals and frameworks that impact the course of his life.

Genet spends his time both fleeing and pursuing headlong the rituals in which his life is steeped. He is a Frenchman, running from his Frenchness while embracing it with a degree of self-loathing, questioning the social framework in which he exists while conceptualizing his existence within that framework, creating his own standards of purity and contamination that mark his actions as sacred and secular while eschewing the Catholicism which envelops the society around him. As he wavers between meaning and oblivion, Genet abides in a metonym, illuminating the character of ritual and our attempts both to adhere to and escape it.

In her anthropological work, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas explores the concept of ritual as a framing mechanism for our everyday life, a way in which we can connect "the present with the relevant past" (65). In this sense, rituals may not be religious, but are inherently endowed with a kind of faith that gives them their meaning, even if that meaning lies apart from any obvious religious experience. We perform rituals with a trust and expectation that someday they may have an impact upon our lives. Rituals are personal and communal, spiritual and secular, meaningful and meaningless, ethereal and intensely commonplace. They are constructs passed hand to hand, existing as we make them to be. One's tube of vaseline is another's abjection, one's Blood of Christ is another's pinot noir. Genet, however, is beyond imposing this binary. As a man, he exists in the in-between; his understanding of ritual, translated through his writings, reflects as much.

The lens of Genet's writing presents a kind of viscerality, establishing a connection between the author's experience and the reader's gut. This internal knee-jerk response to Genet's

work may be recognized as the truth of a human experience that transcends ‘universality’ by presenting threads of humanity that stretch beyond the merely explicable. The words of the *Thief’s Journal* are enough to make a reader squirm, relatable in the pain of their expulsion, the unforgettable shame, the pleasure that is riddled with guilt, the dictations of sacred and secular, internal and external that we create to define our lives, and the rituals that exist to preserve these distinctions.

Violent Memory

The crack of a wrist on the bathroom sink. Digging your nails into the palm of your hand until the moment has passed. The ache of your knees on the pew kneeler, or the thud of your feet on the treadmill. The shudder that runs up the back of your neck. Someone else's eyes. Someone else's hands.

She arrived in the office with the motivational posters, the wilted houseplant, the administrative assistant who looked into her and saw that she was carved hollow, like every woman to walk through their doors. This happens all too often. All the stories are different, and yet all of them are the same. She settles into the corner of the cold leather sofa, anticipating the inevitable: pens poised, a sympathetic moan here, a tissue there. The narrative repeating, repeating, repeating, echoing in the cavity of her body.

They speak to her about reclamation. She doesn't know how, when she looks at her arms and sees another's fingerprints that she can't seem to wash away.

They fade slowly, on runs at night where she leaves her pepper spray in her desk drawer. When she gets lost in her work, looks up from her writing, realizes that it's three in the morning and she's created something beautiful. When she goes dancing again and hears the music above the sound of her own breathing. When she explores a new place, alone, just to prove that she can.

Sometimes the healing looks like rage. She offers prayers of vengeance and feels ashamed. She doesn't take them back.

Other times the healing looks like forgiveness, like taking the time to sit in her body. She only ever forgives herself; she apologizes every morning. She sees the space between the marks on her body. She reads too much, uses up the paint on her palette, drinks too much coffee, laughs too hard, fills her own crevasses again and again until she feels whole, and more real than she did before.

Her healing process began with creation, she realizes. The art of taking what was done to her and turning it into something that she can control, manipulate, wield as an emblem of all that she has learned. *Of all the things I could be*, she thinks, *I am not small*. She turns words and actions back in on themselves, releasing what she has made into the world. She trusts that the words she chooses will reach their intended target, that they will resonate with kindred spirits. She trusts that those same words will return a hurt. When she writes, she exhales. She moves forward, becoming something new.

Writing

Throughout his later work, Genet establishes an important theoretical distinction between the concepts of violence and brutality in relation to their actors. In his aptly titled essay, *Violence and Brutality*, Genet asserts that while violence is framed in a manner which conflates it with brutality, when the two terms carry distinct meanings: in fact, in Genet's eyes, violence is a necessary and beneficial force. He writes, "The kernel of wheat that germinates and breaks through the frozen earth, the chick's beak cracking open the eggshell, the impregnation of a woman, the birth of a child can all be considered violent. And no one casts doubt on the child, the bud, the kernel of wheat" (Genet 171). From the trauma of the momentary action—the pain of childbirth or the fracturing of an eggshell—comes something new and beautiful; a life that has the capacity to do violence of its own, to create and recreate. As such, violence takes on an integral role in Genet's work, not just within its ritual capacity but also as it instigates the creation of the written words themselves.

Genet notes that violence, in addition to its necessity in creating life, is an integral force in combat against its counterpart for which it is often mistaken; brutality. While violence is as constructive as it may be perceived damaging or injurious, brutality's social role is purely destructive in its support of a normative social structure. Genet writes that brutality is "the gesture or theatrical gesticulation that puts an end to freedom, for no other reason than the will to negate or to interrupt the accomplishment of a free act" (Genet 171). As such, brutality is an inherently institutional force, countering the threatening force of free action with a breed of restriction that is meant to quell it. If this is the case, then violence—although frequently conflated with brutality in a public context—serves as a necessary antidote to brutality. While brutality is institutionalized, violence only remains as 'violence' as it exists unrestrained by social norms and structures. While brutality is manufactured, violence is organic. Brutality stifles life;

violence exists to enhance life.²² Genet finds the necessity of violence in this counterbalance: beyond its capacity to create, violence also holds the capacity to vanquish brutality. He says that “[j]ust as the examples of necessary violence are innumerable, so are acts of brutality, since brutality always steps in to oppose violence—by which I mean, again, an uninterrupted dynamic that is life itself. [...] Of course, no enumeration could exhaust the facts, which are like the multiple avatars through which brutality imposes itself. And all the spontaneous violence of life that is carried further by the violence of revolutionaries will be just enough to thwart organized brutality” (Genet 172). The violence of life—that is, of creation—is enough, in Genet’s eyes, to temper the forces of brutality. In this sense, violence becomes not only natural, but also necessary, and Genet licenses himself to conduct a violence of creation of his own through his writing.

If rituals necessitate violence to reach their completion, as René Girard suggests, then Jean Genet’s *The Thief’s Journal* can be considered as a ritual act of its own. Unlike a strictly narrative autobiography, Genet’s seminal work hinges upon its lack of narrative structure, its shifts back and forth through time and place, and the manner in which it plays with experiences in truth. This is to say, *The Thief’s Journal* is not an exercise in retelling so much as it is an exercise in—and a celebration of—the act of writing itself. He explains, “We know that our language is incapable of recalling even the pale reflection of those bygone, foreign states. The same would be true of this entire journal if it were to be the notation of what I was. I shall therefore make it clear that it is meant to indicate what I am today, as I write it. [...] It will be a present fixed with the help of the past, not vice-versa” (Genet 64). *The Thief’s Journal* is, in this

²² Or, in some instances, to create life. Consider the mechanics of conception, birth, and death: there exists an inherent violence within each of these processes. Creation implies some sort of destruction, be it of an eggshell or a constructed narrative. In Genet’s case, violence may serve to (re)create a life through the pages of a book. See ‘Ritual Violence,’ ‘Consecration.’

regard, a byproduct of a momentary action of writing: not a ritual object, but a ritual in itself.²³ Each of Genet's experiences informed the creation of the work, although it may not have been directly translated into the resulting text as such; Genet's life serves as a precursor to the work which he accomplishes within the pages of his book. Faced with a life of ostracism due to factors outside of his control, such as his identity as a gay man or even his name—inherited from his mother, who gave birth to him out of wedlock—Jean Genet is no stranger to the brutality of a sociopolitical system that thrives through the eradication of difference. The acts of violence which are committed against Genet throughout *The Thief's Journal*, ritualized through their institutionalization within the nation-state, are reflective of the descriptions of brutality that he identifies in his later work. Brutality is the ritual of a larger structure against the one: in a similar vein, the violence of the one is sufficient to combat this brutality. As Girard notes, the violent ritual thrives upon its unanimity; if any member of the community chooses to abstain or contest the ritual, it loses its power (Girard 104). Through this lens, Genet's writing becomes not only an act of violence through its creation, but also a pointed counteraction towards the forces that seek to confine him.

The Thief's Journal is inherently self-interested, operating in parallel with—and simultaneously against—the social milieu which surrounds it. In his work, *Violent Histories*, David Gascoigne highlights the power of language itself—separated from its semantic capacity—to deliver a blow, to commit brutality. Although this brutality has been committed against him—in part through language—Genet is left with the capacity to reciprocate the blows he has suffered through a channel of words. Gascoigne writes that “Genet explicitly attributes his writing to the

²³ One of the most indicative aspects of *The Thief's Journal*'s nature as a ritualistic text is its tendency to jump between narrative moments that Genet links through language and transferent, connotative instinct. As he strays from a purely narrative context, Genet opens an avenue through which the a more profound resonance is afforded to the words which he chooses. See ‘Consecration,’ ‘Ritual Violence,’ ‘Vaseline.’

fact that he was assaulted in French. [...] For Genet, [...] writing is thus a hostile act, an attempt to return a hurt. This violence is, however, as much that of self-defense as of vengeance” (Gascoigne 95). Because Genet’s writing is informed by the past while still grounded in his present, momentary experience, it has the capacity to fill both a vengeful and a defensive role.²⁴ As Genet notes in his later work, there is something offensive in the creation of life, something that needs to tear or break, a necessary violence. He needs this violence in order to exist, and the words on the page serve as a conduit for this existence. Genet’s writing rejects the brutality he faces by counteracting it with a violent work of his own, but the self-preservational element of his writing serves an essential purpose in countering institutionalized, standardized violence: through his writing, Genet is able to occupy multiple opposing spaces at once, deconstructing the social categories which he has the capacity to inhabit as he takes ownership of each of them, holding the contradictions of these identities without abandoning them.

The contradictions which Genet embodies fit within his definition of violence as random, untamed, uncategorized. As expressed within *Violence and Brutality*, the moment in which these forces are institutionalized, the random act becoming assigned or designated, the act in question ceases to be free and brutality takes hold. In the interest of freedom, avoiding immediate categorization or identification is imperative. William Haver explores this reality in his essay *The Ontological Priority of Violence: On Several Really Smart Things About Violence in Jean Genet’s Work*. To Haver—through his exploration and analysis of Genet—violence is intimately connected to the acts of sight, thought, and identification. The transcendental quality of violence is tempered and brought towards the institutional by the act of thought; the identification and

²⁴ Here it is important to acknowledge that, in the violence of writing, Genet employs not only the French language, but also the words which are weaponized in order to shame him. This is evidenced throughout *The Thief’s Journal*, briefly referenced in the above entries. See ‘Vaseline.’

categorization of a previously free entity. Violence, like anything else, is not dependent upon intuition in order to exist. It is housed in our intuition, in our gut, before we can identify it or assign it any kind of positive or negative value. It is a knee-jerk, like an itch before you scratch it. Haver describes this phenomenon of pre-categorizational seeing as “at once absolute separation, or non-understanding, as well as the equally absolute irrelevance of understanding or communication for identity. Here, seeing is not the opportunity for interpretation, understanding or judgment: seeing bypasses cognition, *what* you see is what you see” (Haver 6). To exist without categorization is dynamic, allowing the subject of sight to grow beyond a binary as its viewer neither identifies it nor assigns it any aesthetic or moral identification. This absolute freedom circumvents brutality in its liberty, but it also opens spaces for critique that would not exist if the work were defined in any more formal regard. Although violence necessitates seeing without identification, Haver also states that “violence causes thinking. Violence is not merely given *to* thought as an object or aporia, but is the very possibility of thinking” (Haver 11). To raise thought through the creation of a piece of literature that defies standard identification may seem paradoxical, but it gives Genet the platform that he needs in order to both defend himself and combat the brutality he faces. Employing literature as his weapon, Genet asserts his French identity through the poetic, carefully chosen language of *The Thief's Journal*: although he is outcast by French society, his creative, imaginative writing reclaims the notion that he is a Frenchman. In this sense, by creating a work that lies so far outside the canon, impossible to identify as a piece of fiction or an autobiography, Genet writes purely for himself: the side effect of this writing is a protection against the labels of the world around him, an act of self-definition through his refusal to define himself. Through this avenue, he raises questions in his reader,

deconstructing the structures of brutality that seek to stifle him by existing beyond the reach of their categorizations.

Conclusion

As I write this conclusion, I have spent almost 11 months with Jean Genet on my nightstand and my bookshelf, in my backpack and my commuter bag. *The Thief's Journal* has traveled with me to five states and seven cities. The journals—mine and Genet's—have been on the Metro, the 'L,' and more flights than I can remember. Last month, *The Thief's Journal* accompanied me to a funeral, sitting in my bag throughout the service. However, despite the amount of time I spent with Jean Genet over the past year, a part of me feels that I still barely know him.

To say that my thesis is 'finished' would be inaccurate. I don't think it could ever be fully complete, because the subject material that it covers is constantly expanding. Finding an end is a challenge. In a sense, it is like putting a defining border on what there is to say—or, at least, what I have to say—about Genet and *The Thief's Journal*. What originally drew me into Genet's work was its capacity to expand, constantly unfolding on itself as I traversed its pages. What started as a gut feeling turned into an analysis of scenes, symbols, the resonance of the words themselves in the mouth of the reader, the details of Genet's writing drawn into sharper relief with every chapter. The more I read, the more questions I had, and—although I hope that I have shed some light on the contents of *The Thief's Journal*—it is not my intention to answer those questions. Even by writing a thesis, I have confined Genet in a way that I am not sure that he would have appreciated. Even so, I have managed to learn a few things about Genet's writing—and about the function of writing and ritual—through *The Thief's Journal*.

As observed throughout this thesis, writing is a ritualistic process in and of itself: it forces a writer to create a link from their internal world to their external one, making meaning of past experiences while creating a new one on the page. Genet is hyper-aware of this ritual, simultaneously displaying it as he writes and obscuring it so that the reader must work in order to

find it. Genet's ritual of writing is most visible in his transitions between times and spaces within his journal: the instances in which he floats from one thought to another, guided by the connections he makes within himself, are indicative of the innately personal and emotional nature of writing. *The Thief's Journal* becomes a manifestation of Genet's connection between internal and external worlds in this regard, allowing him to make sense of a series of events that connect themselves to one another as a web, rather than a linear narrative. In this sense, Genet's writing communicates through visceral links between periods in his life, elucidating facets of his identity, his relationship to the world, and the way he sees the structures of power that surround him. Through writing, Genet finds his place, and then he transgresses it.

As he shatters the social boundaries that are meant to confine and define him, Genet's writing also serves as a weapon, a means for him to deconstruct the narratives that surround him and fight back against the brutality imposed upon him by the nation-state. He comes intimately close to the actions and language of his oppressors, turning them in on themselves in order to establish a creation of his own: he does not shy away from the labels of shame, dishonor, and desecration that are assigned to his behavior as a thief, or a gay man, or a vagabond. Rather, Genet leans into the language that is meant to deplore his behavior, using the terms that were meant to subjugate him with gusto, asserting his control over both his language and the narrative it is meant to produce. It is through language that Genet conducts violence; his creative, painful effort that gives life to a new entity, a reclamation of the brutality conducted against him. As he creates, Genet demonstrates the power of the word as it is written, spoken, and signified, both to vindicate wrongs committed against him and to galvanize his readers, pulling them ever closer to his own lived experience.

Relaying the events of his journal as such gives Genet the immense capacity to communicate through the holistic entity of writing. He manipulates both the denotative meanings of his words and their connotations, plays with the physical projection of the words themselves, linking the writing to his body, the medium through which he ultimately communicates. Genet demonstrates an understanding of how his words function at a level that transcends their structure, relying on entities beyond the construction of sentences and immediate meaning-making in order to convey a sentiment beyond the signifier itself. He chooses words that create a sensation in his readers, prompting chills, disgust, perhaps triggering a memory or sentiment that inspires thought-tangents of the reader's own, their personal *glaiëul/glaviaux* connection. Through Genet's work, writing becomes embodied, and the body returns to the written page. In my opinion, this is where *The Thief's Journal* holds its power: by bridging the divide between what is written and what is experienced, Genet opens a door for endless analysis and discovery, the mobilization of the reader's own subconscious connection to the text. The links that can be made are endless, dependent both upon what the reader sees upon first glance and what they continue to see as they return to the text with new insight from their own lived experience and external readings.

I personally experienced this phenomenon when reading Genet; the more I wrote, the more questions I had, the more I desired to write. Even when piecing together the final edits of my thesis, I saw opportunities for expansion, for new entries, for inquiries and observations beyond the scope of that which was already written. Thankfully, this thesis is written in an encyclopedic format, which creates a kind of open-endedness that is conducive to the continued analysis and questioning that Genet provokes. A good encyclopedia is in a constant state of expansion, its entries shifting with time and understanding, the curiosity of its writers, and the

questions they decide to ask. So too did my process and understanding shift as I wrote my thesis; for this reason, there are a number of encyclopedic entries that never saw the final draft. However, my copy of *The Thief's Journal* is full of marginal notes, points of expansion, and questions that I will hopefully be able to explore and revisit as I return to Genet's work over time. For now, here is a short list of possible moments for expansion within this thesis, as well as topics which I would be interested in exploring as I continue to engage with Jean Genet and *The Thief's Journal*.

Jean Genet's relationship to organized religion as evidenced within his contact with Catholic clergy members and his participation in—and subversion of—traditionally solemn religious rites.

Genet's relationship to his own masculinity and the masculinity of other men, specifically those with whom he is romantically and physically involved.

Relationships to legal systems and law enforcement within *The Thief's Journal*, tracing the subliminal influence and impact of Genet's time in prison and its manifestations within his discussion of law enforcement and the crimes in which he partakes.

Physical touch and the contact between bodies, which Genet often describes in deeply symbolic detail.

The role of punishment within the text, especially as it intermingles with concepts of pleasure and love within the text. *Qui aime bien, châtie bien*.

The influence of the Second Spanish Republic on Genet's writing, especially as he crosses borders and encounters the varying ethe of the nation-states which he inhabits.

The traces of Creation narratives—including but not limited to the book of Genesis—in the latter half of *The Thief's Journal*, especially as Genet references his own creation in the form of writing.

The symbolic weight of the flowers that appear throughout the journal.

Genet's relationship to the physical space of the Church, and the ways that this relationship to physical space is depicted through the physical nature of his writing.

Genet's journey towards his own version of sainthood, his progress towards Guiana.

I do not expect to provide concrete answers to any of the inquiries listed above, nor do I consider concrete answers to be a goal. Genet's work is conducive to thought, to continued probing without an agenda. The process of writing this thesis has given me the tools I need to return to Genet's work in the future, to approach it without fear, and to sit with it, seeing what it has to say. *The Thief's Journal* is the story of Jean Genet's life, and yet it seems to reach beyond its own pages to find its reader, tapping into latent curiosities and pinging off of our own individual stories, the journals we carry within ourselves. Through all of its unanswered questions, *The Thief's Journal* has given us a gift, the opportunity to return, time and time again, with fresh eyes.

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