

Thief in the Studio: Genet and Giacometti

Gilles Lazare

Genet writes, he is stealing; stealing moments of insight from the studio of Giacometti. He is performing as much as he is an object of scrutiny, part of the tussle of the artist working with his media, a version of Jacob's struggle with the Angel, from which the artist returns victorious, yet wounded, limping. That wound is a memory, a vertiginous moment of knowledge that persists, indefinitely. Giacometti is exposing Genet's object-solitude, his essential core of being, stripping away all the superficiality of existence to bring forth something that yet remains impermeable to the viewer's gaze. Between the two men one can discern a kind of alchemical process being invoked: a retreat into silence, and language; an offering of all sides to the story, the tension between existence and death. The fundamental questions of life are being proposed, quietly dwelt on and then the responses communicated in the aporia, the pauses and spaces between silence and language.

The studio is like a mediaeval artisan's workshop – Giacometti like a monk, or an anchorite, and yet again like some alchemist on the quest for the philosopher's stone. There is a powerful sense of the devotional in his work, very clearly present in his drawings, paintings and especially in the sculptures. They often seem to function like icons – Genet notes a certain analogy between his encounters with Giacometti's statues, and the peculiar experience of his relationship to an object in the Louvre (a statue of the god Osiris). It is as though Giacometti's statues are goddesses, that they are in some way as sacred to Genet as that god, Osiris, was palpably figured in the Louvre statue. The notion of being in relation that was of such importance to Bataille is here extremely resonant: Genet is in the moment of a profound encounter with existence made manifest in his encounter with the statue. That relation is one which Genet expresses as the revelation of an intrinsic solitude, and in that discovery itself resides a moment of anguish,

It is Giacometti's work that makes our universe even more unendurable to me

Genet typifies this aspect of the latter's work as a wound, and suggests that it is the function of Giacometti's art to attempt to discover this wound in each thing, "in order for it to illuminate them". What this discovery provokes is a notion of (critical) distance between the object and the viewer, a rupture in the continuity of experience exposing an uncanny knowledge of the self. And in that distance is also the point at which the tension between object and viewer is experienced, for the statues have the seeming ability to be both approaching and receding at the same time,

in a sovereign immobility.

Genet notes the fracture in Giacometti's work between his busts of Diego (and by implication the walking figures of men) and those statues modelled on Annette. In the busts there is a kind of fore-shortening which dulls the keenness of one's encounter with the sculpture. It is as though the terrible wholeness, the complete object-solitude of the motionless female figures is never achieved in the male figures, somehow their wound is not complete, not fully experienced in the work itself. Their visible movement is made static exactly by the representation of motion. In contrast to the female figures the male statues are only partially wounded, their movement limps rather than involving the viewer in a

dizzying and uninterrupted rush from a past toward a future.

But the wound is more than just that, it is an orifice puncturing the coherence of forms and providing a space for communication. Vulnerability is the humility of an unaggressive flow of ideas and experiences. Giacometti draws Genet; Genet figures Giacometti. In the shared moment of reflection, concentration and solitude, an immense intimacy is created that follows the nature of the two men's works, both textual and visual. Death is crucial to Genet's reading of Giacometti's work. The statues are somehow like funerary objects, but more, always excessive, as though no description can tie down their meaning. Perhaps this is what makes them intolerable. The material, bronze, is not the dead matter which weighs down the work, but a node in the network of the viewer's experience and knowledge of space, an expression of movement, from the heads down to the mass of the "clubfoot" which root these beings to the earth. Genet suggests that there is an anxiety here, caused by the deliberate slippage of matter to the base; an anxiety of being, in solitude, inscribed within the world. That anxiety is like another which Genet notes when Giacometti shows him some drawings, one

of which "represents a tiny figure at the very bottom of a huge white sheet". Two questions propose themselves to Genet, and he is caught between them:

Maybe he means, "To emphasise so large a white surface by means of so tiny a figure?"

Or else, "To show that the proportions of a figure resist the destructive powers of a huge surface"

But what really impresses Genet is Giacometti's encounter with the sublime of which this drawing is evidence, and that Giacometti's encounter with the sublime is a daily ritual, of constantly daring to push his materials' limits, of dealing with the threat of being "overcome", of annihilation.

Each object creates its infinite space.

Genet uses the word oscillation repeatedly to try to put across something of the movement in Giacometti's work. It is the movement of contradiction, of the artist's attempt to work a fragile reality out of the everyday ephemera and ethereal nature of human interaction. The statues work by virtue of a stillness, an absence of time which allows for the viewer to fall into reverie, to experience being in relation to an immutable and mute nature. They are out of time, oscillating between a "boundless past" and a "boundless future". This is for Genet their "beauty"; it is a fundamental "recognition" (which he sees that Giacometti "restores to us") of the "kinship" of objects and existences. It is not any kind of projection, but an inner revelation of "what is most irreducible" in a human being. Giacometti's works, although formally very far from Rembrandt, have some of the ability to communicate in their roughness the same detail and feeling for the animating force of life which Genet sees in that artist:

each person and each thing is grasped in its truth, which leaves all plastic beauty far behind,

and in that moment of truth, Giacometti's figures,

finally know death because too much life has amassed within them.

Genet was clearly among the first modern writers on art to recognise the elemental importance of the intrinsic relationship between space and sculpture, of an understanding of complex interactions that occur between all things and all existences. A continuous process of transformation is affected which itself oscillates between objects and subjects, not in terms of oppositions, but complementaries. Space and sculpture are inextricably linked, and this knowledge must be located – in touch perhaps? Genet provokes an excruciatingly poignant understanding of tactility when he invokes,

Giacometti, or the sculptor for the blind

It is not a facile comment; indeed it reveals something which is of increasing importance now, when curatorial practice forbids the touching of sculptures;

it is Giacometti's hands, not his eyes, that create his objects, his figures. He does not dream them, he feels them.

In the studio something occurs for Genet, an "absolute reality" that is transmitted to him like some secret code in the materials themselves, in their vibrancy as unfinished works, so that even the 'finished' bronzes are brought within this constant evolution. This is not a 'progress' however, but a cyclical transformation. Always Genet is forced back to that which is in its essence incommunicable, untranslatable: the material. His hands caress the sculptures, find articulation in their very roughness and smoothness, a kind of braille of emotion. In that moment of anguish made manifest in Giacometti's work, what can Genet communicate to us of his experience but that it is profound, that it opens up for him a knowledge of himself in another's work that he was hither-to unable to access? That the statues survive, and that they are the traces of human interaction at its most raw and exposed? Perhaps this is why Genet catches upon Giacometti's comment that he once thought of burying a statue. Not as some memorial to himself, but (Genet figures) as an offering to the dead. Genet talks of them emerging from the flames of the oven, "residue of a terrible firing". Could they be phoenixes, rising from their own consummation? or something else, figures (goddesses) of a terrible serenity, scorched, corroded, yet incorruptible. Perhaps this is the source of their uncanny terror, a familiarity so hard to actually identify, to reach from within the self to draw out.

And this is ultimately what the statues provoke, a confrontation, a struggle from which the viewer returns victorious but wounded; that wound being a recognition and a point of insight into that most precious solitude, "our surest glory" and source of our "entire being", the communication of a resolute humanity.

"I am alone," the object seems to say, "hence caught within a necessity against which you are powerless. If I am only what I am, I am indestructible. Being what I am, and unconditionally, my solitude knows yours."

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Jean Genet, *The Studio of Alberto Giacometti* (1957), trans R. Howard, in *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*, ed. E. White, (Ecco Press 1993)

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