



Moyra Davey

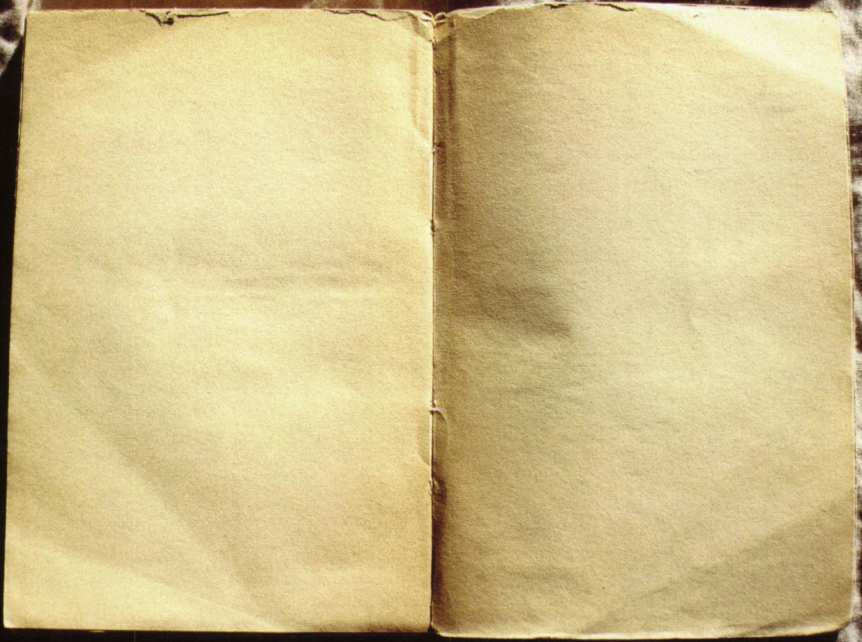
Burn the Diaries

Blankness

In a volume of interviews Jean Genet constructs the story of his life. The retelling differs slightly each time, swayed by discrepancies of memory and the desire for an ever more perfect story. An editor scrupulously corrects and reorders everything in endnotes, so that we have both versions: Genet can freely spin his tales, and we can possess the true record.

The white of the paper is an artifice that's replaced the translucency of parchment and the ochre surface of clay tablet; but the ochre and the translucency and the whiteness may all possess more reality than the signs that mar them.

Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review Books, 2003).



Snow

Asked about the defining moment when he knew he'd be a writer, Genet told of buying a postcard in prison to send to a German friend:

The side I was supposed to write on had a sort of white, grainy texture, a little like snow, and it was this surface that led me to speak of a snow that was of course absent from prison, to speak of Christmas, and instead of writing just anything, I wrote to her about the quality of that thick paper. That was it, the trigger that allowed me to write.

Jean Genet, *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, trans. Jeff Fort, ed. Albert Dichi (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2004).



Paper

Christopher Hitchens was brave in death (as was Dennis Potter), and said he had no regrets about the drinking and smoking that caused his illness: writing was the most important thing to him, and the late nights and the talk were part of it. Genet, Potter, Hitchens, and Hervé Guibert wrote prolifically through terminal illness. It was all they cared about.

Still another thing: I don't have any more paper . . . would you try and procure some (preferably a very thick school exercise book, because I write on my knees since there's no table).

Edmund White, *Genet* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

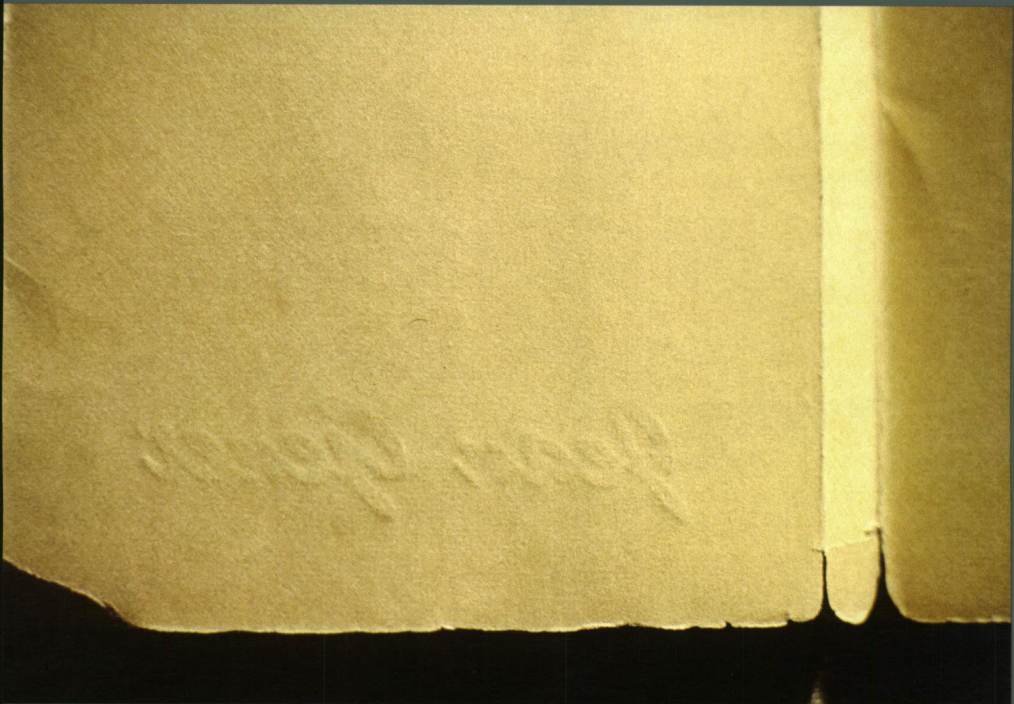


Childhood

To create is always to speak about childhood. It's always nostalgic.

Desultory day, but thinking I could make my own diary an object of study. Or simply begin with "burn the diaries."

Edmund White, *Genet* (New York: Knopf, 1993).



155th Street

Peed behind parked car on 155th Street and wonder why we can't just piss in the park like the doggies, or on the rocks by the Hudson, where I squat and think of Roni Horn.

... under H's skirts, under the fur-edged coats ... the bodies are performing their functions ...

Jean Genet, *What Remains of a Rembrandt Torn into Four Equal Pieces and Flushed Down the Toilet*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Madras and New York: Hanuman Books, 1988).



Sleep

Cut Genet in half to read on the subway. Then drop into embalmed sleep. B. comes home from school and I talk to him from my dreams. Walk Rosie and pee twice under the West Side Highway. Think of Eileen Myles's image of her Rosie arching about to dump a load.

In *Thief's Journal* Genet has a similar description of a dog shitting: It squeezes, its gaze is fixed, its four paws are close together beneath its arched body; and it trembles from head to reeking turd.

Eileen Myles, *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* (New York: O/R Books, 2010).

Jean Genet, *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, ed. Edmund White (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993).



Diary

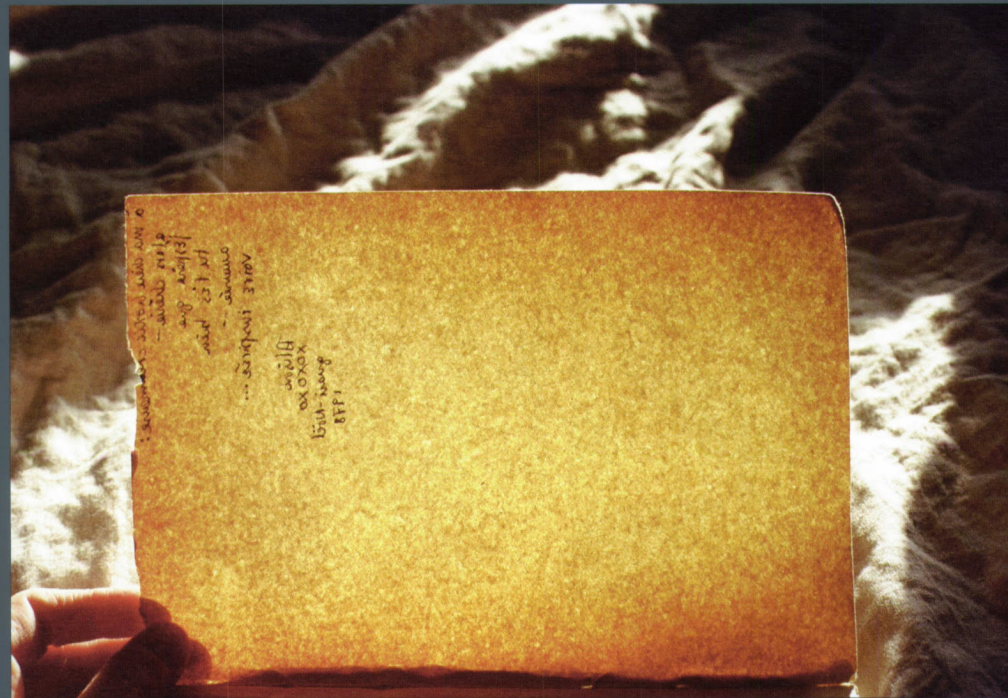
Up a 6. Sit in kitchen with lights off and watch dark blue sky turn pale blue, then white, now rose. Lights twinkle. Listen to clock tick. Heat hiccupping through pipes.

Yesterday, simultaneously reading Duras: *To be without a subject for a book* . . . And John McPhee: *You begin with a subject, gather material, and work your way to structure from there. . .*

Not the other way around.

Marguerite Duras, *Writing*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

John McPhee, "Structure: Beyond the Picnic Table Crisis," *New Yorker*, January 14, 2013.



Complete Works

I have Susan's Gallimard editions of the *Complete Works* of Jean Genet, many pages uncut. I can dip in here and there, but Genet is way too hard to read in French. I took the books down from the shelf where they'd lived untouched for over ten years, loaned to me by Susan before she died. On the back flyleaf of Volume One I notice for the first time the inscription from Alison, written in French.

I bought these volumes along the quays. I have very few books at my place because when I've read them I give them away or abandon them or throw them away, not wanting to keep literature written by other people.

Edmund White, *Genet* (New York: Knopf, 1993).



Discipline

When the ambulance arrived, [Larkin] looked up at Monica wildly, begging her to destroy his diaries.

The dross of the diary. The compulsion to scribble, the delusion that we can hold on to time. Countering this neurosis is the anxiety of being read, the fear of wounding; and just as strong the dread of being unmasked.

I put my papers in order. (Dennis Potter)

Will you dispose of all my papers. (V. Woolf, suicide note)

He destroyed his papers. (Freud)

He burned his papers. (?)

Towering pile of diaries on desk; the existential weight of years of hoarding. The journal is "good object" when it receives something that can be put to use. Weighing this against the aimless drive to sometimes just run ink or soft lead across the page until the book, full, goes into a drawer, and another one is started. I think of burning, but prefer the image of burial and water, slightly less absolute in the sense that the book could survive in an altered form; as per Genet, no words or letters, just the bluish white of the page.

Hermione Lee, "How to End It All," in *Virginia Woolf's Nose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).



Vanity

The bleaching white light of vanity. To his former lover, Java, Genet wrote:

How old are you? Thirty-six or thirty-seven? As for me, I'm not ashamed of being fifty and of appearing sixty; it's even rather restful.

Jean Genet, "To Java," trans. Edmund White, in *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*, ed. Edmund White (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993).

Canadian-born artist Moyra Davey has lived and worked in New York City since 1988. Her photographs and videos were included in the Whitney Biennial, the São Paulo Bienal, and *New Photography* at MoMA, New York, all in 2012. Davey has produced three narrative videos: *Les Goddesses* (2011), *My Necropolis* (2009), and *Fifty Minutes* (2006). She is the author of *The Problem of Reading* (2003) and *Long Life Cool White* (2008); "Burn the Diaries" is an excerpt from an artist's book forthcoming from Dancing Foxes (New York) and MUMOK (Vienna).

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