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Genet: A Biography by Edmund White (review)

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Edmund White. GENET: A BIOGRAPHY. New York: Vintage, 1994. Pp. xlii + 728. \$17.00 paper.

To Adam Block's curiosity in 1990 over Edmund White's progress on his biography, White responded: "It will all be news to you—to you or anybody, even to a Genet scholar. I have an enormous treasure-trove of information that no one else has. . ." (*Out/Look* 3.2: 60). Like the life that White spent over seven years researching, this response now deserves reevaluation.

Undeniably categorical, White's self-introduction of sorts to his monumental biography of one of France's most elusive, if not celebrated, *poètes maudits* rings surprisingly true some four years later. White is to be commended for tirelessly collecting together and linking the myriad and often intentionally disjointed pieces of the puzzle that was the incredibly rich existence of this controversial figure who himself was constantly rewriting his own legend. He must be praised for his remarkable resistance to judge the very man at the center of the life journey he chooses so eloquently and with unparalleled detail to present. He thus leaves reevaluation of this life where paradox, politics, theatricality, and "appalling pettiness" (480) often intersect to those for whom his invaluable 21-chaptered testament to the virtues of patient and thorough research represents the essential, catalogic, and most stable first step.

With its 61 pages of notes, 23-page index, 45 illustrations, and 22-page chronology by Albert Dichy (head of the Fonds Genet in Paris), its large number of citations from unedited or unpublished correspondence, film scenarios, manuscripts and interviews, White's study convincingly disproves many of the myths concerning the outspoken literary vagabond. Saintliness, for example, was a concept conferred upon Genet by himself, not imposed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Similarly, Genet chose to be what crime made of him; he, not Sartre, originated the idea that he chose to embrace and merit the word "thief" after it had been thrust on him by other people (6-7, 28). Charting Genet's life from his early childhood in the Morvan (far less lonely than had previously been believed) to his cancer-ridden years (by which time the aging writer-activist had both created and in many cases broken with a veritable extended "family" of friends and old lovers—many of whom benefitted grandly from his earnings), White shows that Genet's work moves around theater rather than towards it from autofictional prose and that *Un chant d'amour* is one of several substantial cinematic projects.

Before breaking with him in the 1960s Genet instructed Bernard Frechtman: "You have agreed to take care of my affairs. Do it well—no, *very well*, or *not at all*. If that bores you, if what I want you to do goes beyond your abilities, tacitly accepted, tell me, I will work something out without you" (462). Ultimately, the demands imposed by Genet's replacement of the adverb "well" with "very well" forced the break with his American translator. Some 30 years later this break is replaced with the permanent, albeit posthumous link that is established between Genet and his American biographer. White takes care of the affairs of Genet not merely "very well" but "masterfully."

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Michael Sheringham. FRENCH AUTOBIOGRAPHY. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. Pp. xiii + 350.

In *French Autobiography*—which bears the subtitle *Devices and Desires*, which in turn has its own subtitle, *Rousseau to Perec*—Michael Sheringham engages, with subtlety, com-