Divine Blasphemies

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Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled; not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by the certainty of profaning it.

—Georges Bataille

Our Lady of the Flowers is populated by pimps and queens, sharp-edged and beautiful, willing to betray a lover or a friend for a few dollars or simply for illicit, vengeful joy. The most radiant of them is the angelic child murderer known as Our Lady of the Flowers. He is guileless and silent, with a cherub’s soft smile. Before he’s arrested, a detective tells him, “I don’t like your looks.” His visage is so pure that those around him are immediately suspicious of its glamor. Not wary of beauty itself, merely cautious of its propensity to lack roots that extend deeper down to the soul, these others are gluttonous for disjuncture: “this angel must be two-faced, with flames and smoke” (262).

The novel, written in its entirety during one of Jean Genet’s many stints in prison, is a mélange of half-concealed memories and masturbatory fantasies. The faces of young, murderous boys are pasted on his prison wall with chewed bread, all revealing the “sacred sign of the monster,” a “flaw on the face or in the set gesture” that lets their evil shine through the cracks in their soft lips and sky-blue eyes (55). This betrayal of the soul by its body fascinates and arouses him. These wicked angels, these child killers, saturate Genet with pleasure. They keep him up at night in his cell, desperate and longing under the thin blankets.

Betrayal seeps through all of Genet’s carnal fantasies, which, as he readily admits, are the crux of the novel’s creation. He revels, as do his characters, in the act of betrayal, and views it as a catalyst for their spiritual growth, even as he delights in it as a selfish, pleasurable act. Our Lady of the Flowers is steeped in references to Catholicism: angels, the Virgin, “the Eternal in every pimp” (32). The drag queen Divine, in whom Genet places much of himself,
is forced to suffer beautifully throughout the novel in the name of holiness: “Slowly but surely I want to strip her of every vestige of happiness so as to make a saint of her.” Betrayal becomes a path to godliness, a kind of morality that is not governed by the “usual” laws, but is a morality nevertheless, with its own notions of Good and Evil (99).

In Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Sabina is drawn to a life of betrayal. We are taught, Kundera says, that this is the worst of all possible crimes, “but what is [it]? . . . Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown” (91). Sabina’s whole life is a series of betrayals, one leading to the next. For her, they form a personal morality based on what Kundera calls *lightness*—the singular nature of life, the airy weightlessness of its happening once and never again. Sabina’s path of betrayals scatters the dead weight of family, lovers, and history as she moves, weightless, through the world. Even her plans for death—to have her ashes scattered to the wind, to “die under the sign of lightness”—speak to an aesthetic of transient insubstantiality (273).

Genet’s language of lightness echoes that of Kundera. Of the life, death, and legacy of Divine, he says, “I am forced to use words that are weighed down with precise ideas, but I shall try to lighten them with expressions that are trivial, empty, hollow, and invisible” (70). Emptiness: what Sabina feels when she abandons her family, a lover. Neither she nor Genet holds stock in weight. It binds itself too close to kitsch—that charming, sticky notion of universal brotherhood saying that we are and must (there is the weight, in that decree of must) be proud when we “see children running on the grass,” that we can and must hold the same values, and that those values contain a kind of beauty divorced from the subtleties and variances of our reality, from death, from shit (251).

Here is how our Great Divine Died. . . .
Filth, an almost liquid shit, spread out beneath her like a warm little lake, into which she gently, very gently—as the vessel of a hopeless emperor sinks, still warm, into the waters of lake Nemi—was engulfed, and with this relief she heaved another sigh, which rose to her mouth with blood, and another sigh, the last. (304-05)

Genet martyrs her—marks her with heartache, afflicts her with consumption, and then watches her die. Even in her last moments, however, he uses disgust as an antidote to heaviness, to the noble narrative of death. She’s not a nun in
the convent, weighed down by her own stony dignity; she’s an aging queen, dying in her own shit with only her estranged mother beside her. To sanctify her, Genet must debase her completely and utterly.

Betrayal as necessity. The betrayer as a father who lets his son fall without catching him, to teach him the cruelties of the world. James Hillman, in his essay “Betrayal,” says that full fatherhood is the ability to betray as well as to lead, to lead your loved one into your betrayal of them, to let them jump from the highest step and then to let them fall; all this to raise them to a place of self-reliance, to a higher level of being. Genet is like God, betraying the holy Son to raise him up to heaven, akin to Hillman’s description of holy men and gurus, who are said to have a coldness that comes from their holiness, “as impersonal as nature itself,” echoing the chaos of creation (77).

Nothing is impersonal for Rainer Marie Rilke’s narrator in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The horror of the banal takes on a profound weight. He’s stricken by the greasy, sunken indentation in the headrest of his armchair in the same way that he’s chilled by the man he follows in the street, whose nervous ticks become increasingly violent until they completely overtake him, felling him on a crowded bridge. These sights plague Brigge, suck him into their grasp, and eventually spiral him into a nervous breakdown that rests on the inescapable heaviness of the quotidian.

Divine’s life is a heavy object for Genet, but he renders it in frivolities and fripperies that loosen the weight from our shoulders. Rilke gives no such reprieve. Brigge, in his journals, fills every event—the mask of a drowned beauty hanging on a doorway, tiny, shining objects falling from a table—with a precious, melancholy substance. If Genet is obsessed with becoming lighter, airier, more saintly, Rilke is trapped in his self and his body. Like Kundera’s Tereza examining her naked form in the mirror, feeling the deep void between empty bodily reflections and the soul resting deep in her bowels, Brigge is fixated and disturbed by the grotesque, inescapable nature of his reality.

Rilke writes that death is a thing that’s carried inside oneself like a kernel inside a fruit, a thing that gives weight and form to a person. All of us hold our death inside us; it rests like a pearl in chests or in wombs. Pregnant women smile “dense, almost nourishing” smiles when they think of the child and its death growing, weighty, inside them. It has its own mass, exists in conjunction with the person it inhabits. Each one, even the death of the smallest infant, encompasses “that which they already were, and that which they would have become” (23). Rilke’s scenes of death are tangled, drawn-out affairs. For him, death is heaviness—the heaviness of the specific, of the individual. He’s
concerned with the profound weightiness of everyday, the physicality of reality.

Where Genet is always trying to claw his way from under the dirt and blood of the dark alleyways and the cramped, fetid garrets, to raise them to the heights of frivolous ecstasy, Rilke exists completely of and inside them; for him, they’re inescapable. His moments of joy and despair are culled from the physicality of their being, not of their ethereal lightness. His deaths, of which there are many, twist and moan in corporeal splendor—each as personal as Tomas’s love for women in The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

Both fixate on the tiny sliver of the individual that rests within the impersonal body, built by chance and circumstance, non-reflective of its inner mechanisms. Inside, there are the little flickers of astonishing precision. For Rilke, this is the culmination and termination of a life. For Tomas, they are the subtleties of each woman he goes to bed with. Each of them is searching for that one-millionth part that separates each of us, and that cannot even be guessed at—what Kundera calls the “unimaginable” (199).

Brigge and Tomas are both consumed with their heaviness, the unstoppable force that keeps them on their path even in the wake of the pain it causes. Tomas is unable to stop himself from spending his twelve hours a day as a window washer looking for his next sexual conquest. Brigge is unable to look away from the horrors that terrify and disturb him, to disengage from the slimy, gray sheen that makes up the minutiae of his days. For him, “choice or refusal there is none,” just as Tomas is trapped in the inescapable “Es muss sein,” (It Must Be) (Rilke 67, Kundera 196).

Sabina’s life is a continuous struggle against the heaviness of kitsch, but Tereza’s refusal of weight is specific. Her life is swallowed up by the burden of her love for Tomas, and she longs to “learn lightness” through a betrayal of that love. She and Genet share an obsession with the body’s connection to the soul inside, and both seek to understand the discrepancies of their conflicting connections and alienations through the path of the erotic.

Tereza is alienated by her body. The incongruities between her skin and her soul disconcert her, trap her inside a machine made not of her own design, but of the whims of the universe. She sees no subtleties in it that draw her out onto the surface of her form, that fill in the contours with her soul. She sees only a mask of flesh. She comes into herself at the moment of her act of infidelity with an engineer, when she ceases to see her body as a banal, divorced entity. A birthmark, “a holy seal” imprinted onto her, convinces her of her own divine completion (155). This connection of body and soul could only arrive in concert with an alien betrayal, as “a stranger’s penis was mov-
The most holy exists at the site of the most profane. In her unfaithfulness to her husband, Tereza feels her soul rise to cover the exterior of her body. This joining of the two, newly realized, is “intimate and alien beyond all others, incomparably exciting” (161). The erotic is a form of destruction, a violence that brings us closer to death, which Georges Bataille, in *Death and Eroticism*, claims is a means of continuity through humanity’s shared cyclical process. Eroticism is the search for that brief frenzy of connection achieved by circling closer to death, by means of violence. By giving herself to a man she doesn’t love and by whom she is simultaneously repulsed and aroused, Tereza is filled with an ecstatic hatred, and spits in his face at the moment they come together.

The throes of developing passion run so high that they run freely together with pain, sending pangs of ache throughout the body at the thought of the desired object. This pain, which Bataille characterizes as a violence done against the self, is necessary for eroticism to exist. The ache of passion links the act of love with that of sacrifice, for which stripping oneself to nudity is traditionally a symbol. Tereza sacrifices her fidelity, though it pains her, to merge soul with body, to feel crests of emotion so strong that hatred and pleasure are indistinguishable. Her nakedness, in Bataille’s view of eroticism as continuity, exists “in contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence,” and announces her intention to search for connection through the obscene (17).

Obscenity, as defined by Bataille, is the uneasiness that troubles our sense of being as discontinuous individuals. It’s the sticky synthesis of disparate bodies and souls that allures and discomforts us precisely because it requires us to relinquish ourselves, but it also requires trust that the violence of unity won’t last long enough to destroy us completely.

When enacted for the elevation of its participants, betrayal cleanses through suffering; it forces a recognition of oneself. Accomplished with ill intent, it denies all hope and trust, and brings about alienation and self-destruction.

Hillman is clear about these distinctions, fraught as the subject is with the shadow of unnecessary and damaging violence. Indeed, the multitude of flawed betrayals in Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* brings about despair, irrevocable misunderstanding, insanity, and death. Edward Ashburnham feels “tossed” like a “parcel” between his wife, Leonora, and the young woman, Nancy, whom he loves (290, 291). The narrator, John Dowell, says that nearing the end, the two women “flayed the skin off him” (274). Leonora decides
to destroy him by taking away the only thing he had truly loved, Nancy, under the guise of protecting her and “for the sake of humanity,” but inside the two women exists the desire to see him truly suffer (275). Nancy seals his fate with a note sent from another continent—charming, casual, and with no trace of affection. In the last moments of the novel, Ashburnham cuts his throat with a pen knife while his wife reads Nancy’s telegram with a smile.

Hillman distinguishes between disastrous betrayal and betrayal that raises its participants to higher consciousness in two places—the “motif of love and/or the sense of necessity” (77). Genet’s betrayal of Divine, because of his affinity with her, is enacted with love, and the desire to sanctify her. His use of Christian imagery and language arises from this necessity. Religious ecstasy, for Bataille, “begins where horror is sloughed off,” a state unavailable without suffering (69).

According to Hillman, it is the moment when Jesus realizes that his Father is going to let him die, when his trust has been utterly broken, that “he becomes truly human, suffering the human tragedy” (70). The story of the martyred saint also ends in death and betrayal—betrayal to his enemies, betrayal by his God for letting him die. The paradox in each story rests in the necessity of the sacrifice. Without it, those sacrificed couldn’t know the realities of the world, the exquisite pain of duty on the path to sainthood, the glory of Heaven, which requires earthy suffering as its penance.

The left hand closes, then arranges its fingers in the form of a hollow organ which tries to resist, then offers itself, opens up, and a vigorous body, a wardrobe, emerges from the wall, advances, and falls upon me, crushes me against my straw mattress, which has already been stained by more than a hundred prisoners, while I think of the happiness into which I sink at a time when God and His angels exist. (Genet 55)

Genet martyrs himself in his prison cell. His body, at first, resists the demands placed upon it, then slowly, so slowly, gives itself to the crushing weight of God, the weight of his own destruction, of his pleasure, and the feverous spell of profane ecstasy that binds them together. The unity of the obscene that calls on him to relinquish himself, to be overcome by his passions, finally serves to render him empty, sated, lightened.

For Genet, betrayal is beauty’s twin shadow. It leads him lightly through the depths of his depravity, shapes him, through Divine, into something ethereal, heavenly. The violence he enacts upon her, the trials and shame, only
serve to make her more beautiful. His body, clawing in space, intertwines with hers, drags them both so deep that her pain becomes indistinguishable from his most exquisite ecstasies. The transgressions against her only serve to cast the weight from her like scattered ashes, until she dies sighing with relief, having transcended all of the horrors that befell her until even the shit that surrounded her like a shroud couldn’t weight her down.

WORKS CITED


