On Jean Genet’s ‘mystical experience’ (with a coda on Jean de Saint-Samson)

Marc De Kesel

One day, riding in a train, Jean Genet’s gaze coincidentally crossed the one of an unknown passenger, sitting opposite him. Genet is suddenly struck by what he literally calls a revelation. The moment of union he experiences a revealed radical equality between him and the unknown person, as well as between him and all human beings. That experience of union will slumber in his memory for the rest of his days.

In a short text entitled *Rembrandt Torn into Four Equal Pieces and Flushed Down to The Toilet* (1964), Genet talks about that experience in terms close to those used to describe an *unio mystica*. Yet, instead of depicting that moment as one of intense delight and satisfaction, Genet speaks of dismay and sadness – a strange, uncanny, negative feeling which he will never be able to shake off. What is so sad about that experience? It destroys, so Genet writes, the most crucial dimension of human intercourse: eroticism.

In his lecture Marc De Kesel compares the erotic dimension of Jean Genet’s experience, with the mystical experience Jean de Saint Samson describes at the end of his *Epithalame*. There too, eroticism is at stake, and not in an unambiguously positive sense. That comparison, so De Kesel suggests, may lead to the core of what for us, moderns, is at stake in a mystical experience.