Stealing Home:
Three Scenes Towards a Theory

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Betrayal, theft, and homosexuality are the basic subjects of this book.[1]

SCENE ONE: THE FAMILY-MACHINE

The thief walks silently up to the door and puts his bag on the ground. He has been watching the house for some time, getting to know it like one might get to know a lover: it moods, its fears, its whiteness, its emptiness. I see his hand caress the white pilotis as he walks past them, I feel his heart beating in the ecstasy of the act.

He opens his bag and takes out his pick. Gently, but with strength, he penetrates the keyhole. The house starts to moan, silently to itself, but I can hear it, and he can too. With expert fingers he caresses the pick in the lock until the door swings open, and the first penetration is echoed by a second, as the thief enters the house.

The thief, in this fictional scene of architectural violation which I have invented, is Jean Genet, French novelist, playwright, homosexual, and thief, subject of studies by Sartre and Derrida. The house, as some of you may have guessed, is Le Corbusier's Villa Savoie at Poissy, which is, more perhaps than any other, the iconic modern house. It is, in a sense, and it is in this sense that I will be speaking of it in this talk, the House of Architecture. The scheme of this scene is simple: the thief breaks into the house of architecture to steal meaning.

Our thief is unlikely to have studied architectural theory, but even he is likely on opening the steel door of the house to recognize that he is in a house like few others – if indeed he realizes it is a house at all. With the ostentatiously placed garage (and perhaps he has seen cars making the spiral entrance), the washbasin in the foyer, the stair pressing down like a screw holding the upper floors to the ground, the house will appear more like a factory – or maybe a machine. Which of course is really saying nothing, since we all know that the house was, for Le Corbusier, just that: a machine for living in. But what does that mean, exactly?

Le Corbusier gives us a bit of a clue on the next-to-last page of Towards a New Architecture. In speaking of the man of today – that is, of 1925 – Le Corbusier makes the claim that

> ...his town, his street, his house, or his flat rise up against him useless, hinder him from following the same path in his leisure that he pursues in his work, hinder him from following in his leisure the organic development of his existence, which is to create a family and to live, like every animal on this earth and like all men of all ages, an organized family life.[2]

In other words, the "living" that the house is to be a machine for, is first and foremost the life of the family – that is, for Le Corbusier writing in 1925, a life centered around procreation, an explicitly heterosexual life. We could then think of the house-machine as a kind of sociodynamic engine operating on a principle not unlike the Carnot cycle, where differing reservoirs – in this case the male and the female – engage in carefully controlled fluid exchanges resulting in a net production of some sort of energy which we could call for the moment the family. We could even draw a representation of this scheme in terms of the section of the house, with (at Savoie) the (arguably) male domain of the ground floor dominated by the chauffeur and garage, the (arguably) female realm of the roof garden (this was after all Madame Savoie's boudoir in an early scheme for the house), the layer of interchange, or catalytic layer of the main floor in which the family relations play out, and, of course, the two dissimilar modes of vertical transportation, the ramp and the stair, which between them complete the circuit, assuring the flow of energy: the ramp up, the stair down.

The analysis is crude, I admit, and the results are not particularly surprising. After all, the Villa Savoie comes squarely

out of a domestic tradition which is explicitly a gendered tradition (although traditional discourse regarding the house in 19th century France tends to analyze the house in terms of zones of separation – the interior as the realm of the female, the exterior as the domain of the male – rather than as a single zone of intercourse). I would suggest that the Villa Savoie acts as an exceptionally clear re-presentation, a distillation if you like, of the typical; reading the Villa as a sociodynamic engine opens up for us the extent to which all houses are designed to function as such engines. Such a reading also raises a prime question, since our thief, if we identify him with Jean Genet is not simply a thief but (and perhaps first) a homosexual: what then is the role, the position, the locus of the person who does not participate in the productive cycle within the family-machine? One answer to this question is simply none. Genet, therefore, as a homosexual, cannot live in a house. Genet, it seems, with one exception, never did: he lived in orphanages, reformatories, prisons, jails, hotels, huts, dives – but never a house (although it seems he designed and had built at least two – which he gave away as gifts to former lovers on the occasion of their marriages[3]). With, as I said, one exception: as a small child he lived for some time in a foster home in a village in the Auvergne. And even there, even as a child, Genet was uncomfortable in the house: what he describes rhapsodically in Notre Dame des Fleurs is not the house, but the outhouse where he would find his refuge. And it was here, in this house, that the event which Sartre makes claim for as the founding event of Genet's career took place: he was discovered in the act of stealing. Genet was named – became – a thief[4].

But this too is simply recognition. The house is both participant in and constructor of an economics of sexual desire which is, because of its necessary connection to the role of the family, explicitly a heterosexual economics. The homosexual is not seen to participate in this economy. Worse still, the homosexual diverts sexual energy away from the family, in other words, away from work useful to society. In other words, the homosexual acts as a source of friction in the domestic cycle, stealing away energy. For Genet (and not only for Genet), to be a homosexual is already and always to be thief – and it is the house, the family-machine, that has produced this situation.

And so it is with our thief at Poissy: he lurks, he hides, he may or may not break in – it doesn't matter. He need not steal goods in order to be a thief, although he may want to do so in order to fulfill his destiny. So we place him in the house: we imagine him hiding out on the roof terrace. We see signs of his occupation in the otherwise empty house. We imagine him watching scenes of family life on the terrace below. We imagine late-night rendez-vous with Savoie Fils, on the roof terrace, in the realm of Madame, of the mother, or perhaps furtive kisses with the chauffeur on the stair. We imagine this ghostly presence, in the house but not of it, writing in his furtive nights as he hides away on the roof his great novel of longing, of unhomeliness, of transformation, of prison, of this prison:

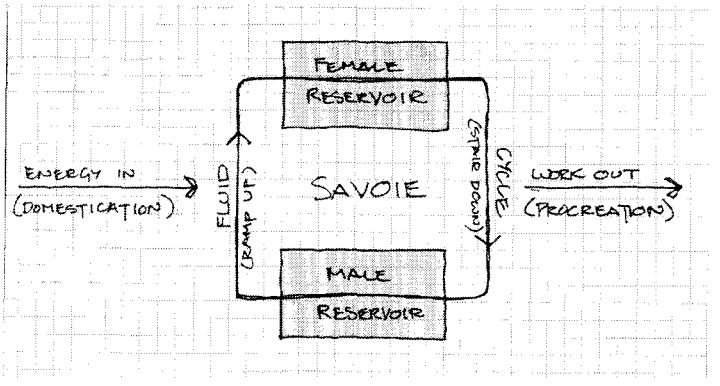
There are things one could say about destinies, but note the strangeness of that of monasteries and abbeys (which prisoners call the bee): jails and preferably state prisons! Fontrevault. Clairvaux. Poissy![5]

SCENE TWO: THE UN-HOUSE

Jean Genet's play Les Bonnes (The Maids), first produced in 1947, opens with a simple domestic scene set in Madame's boudoir. Madame is being dressed with the assistance of her maid, Claire. The scene, which opens as a ritual, degenerates as the two women argue over names and details until the maid is literally about to strangle Madame. The maid is about to achieve her transformative destiny through this ritualistic murder – about to, but destiny is frustrated just at the critical moment by the ringing of an alarm clock, a ringing which immediately throws the play into a vertiginous chute. The opening ritual of the play is shown to be false: both maid and mistress are actually maids, and sisters: Claire, who played Madame, and Solange, who played Claire. One impersonates the mistress, the other her own sister. Further, the stage directions require that the two maids are to be played by boys, and by boys instructed to act badly. But the maids, in acting out their ritual, would act badly: they are not professional actresses, but maids. An abyss starts to open.

Which only deepens. The opening ritual of the play is then reenacted, with the "real" mistress and with the maids playing "themselves." Gestures become quotable and quoted, breaking up the naturalness and continuity of the piece. Lines are quoted without quotation marks. The actors are suspended not above but within a void of their own making. Or rather, a void of their own pretense, a void opened up through the performance.

It is important for our purposes to remember that the locus of this abyss, the space in which it opens up, is a domestic space: indeed, it is perhaps the most private and intimate of spaces, it is Madame's dressing-room, with the required props and costumes to be found in Madame's closet. The two maids must be understood as essential components of this space: unlike Madame, who is able to come and go, and Monsieur, who



indeed never sets foot in the house (although he may in fact be in prison), the maids cannot leave the room, let alone the house. We could – since we are after all discussing Genet – say that the maids are prisoners in the house, but I think it is equally the case that the house cannot function without the maids, or rather, that the maids form a constitutive element of the house. Without the maids, the house would in some sense cease to exist. With the maids, the house only exists as a perpetual scene of danger, only kept in check – and only just – by the ritualized murders carried out by the maids.

Inasmuch as this play is about dis-play, about opening up to view the closet, revealing the abyss of reflection and role-playing, an ideal setting for such a scene would have to be a house which puts its interior on display. There is of course one house, in fact a close contemporary of The Maids, which perhaps more than any resembles the Plexiglas box in a museum used to display an artifact: Phillip Johnson's Glass House of 1949. The Glass House, of course, opens up a void of its own within the tradition of the domestic, and a least a two-headed void: on the one hand, the incessant transparency calls into question all of the notions of privacy so dear to the heart of at least American domesticity; there remains no Wrightian cozy nook near the hearth. On the other hand, the glass becomes inhabited with multiple reflections, filling this domestic space with a domestic scene which is virtual, multiple, and fragmented. If the fenetres a longuer at Savoie were for looking out of, turning the villa into a watch-tower looking out over the landscape, the glass walls at New Canaan had a dual purpose: for looking in, exposing the domestic to view, eliminating the role of the thief; and for looking at through the fractured image of that same domestic scene in which the line between the real and the virtual, the real and the simply made up blurs.

This line of argument can be taken further, for just like the maids in Genet's play, the Glass House has a sister, a kind of twin: Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House. These two houses mirror each other, play off each other, even, to some extent, impersonate each other. What is more, just like the two sisters, these two houses are imposters, or should we say actors: neither of them is really a house. I mean this first of all in the simple sense that neither is designed to be lived in. They are pavilions, buildings which may try on the clothes of domesticity, but know that when the alarm clock rings, they must go back to being what they are. The Glass House, indeed, is not even a house in the sense of being a place in which to sleep: famously, the sleeping quarters are in a separate space, underground and out of site (indeed, in this sense the glass house only plays at display). More to the point, in terms of this discussion, however, is that neither house is a house in the sense of being a machine for housing the family. Neither is a locale in which the domestic as a real activity can be achieved other than as a temporary, perhaps ritualistic, play. Of course, the same can be said for Savoie, which was not in fact the Machine for Living In – a phrase which Le Corbusier used to designate mass-production houses – but a one-off villa, and in fact a weekend house. They are, in fact, non-houses.

Which, of course, should come as no surprise: no-one would accuse Philip Johnson – or Mies, for that matter – of holding great faith in the American myth of the family. The name that does immediately spring to mind when one thinks of modern domestic architecture is, of course, Frank Lloyd Wright, who summed up his ideas about new domestic architecture in a set of nine points in a paper entitled simply "Prairie Architecture." While Wright may be interesting to this discussion on a number of other grounds (after all, a scene not unlike that described in The Maids actually did take place, devastatingly, at Taliesin in August 1914), my real point here is simply that it would be hard to imagine a house which more fully satisfied Wright's nine points than Philip Johnson's Glass House. To take only the first of Wright's points:

FIRST – To reduce the number of necessary parts of the house and the separate rooms to a minimum, and make all come together as enclosed space – so divided that light, air, and vista permeated the whole with a sense of unity[6].

The Glass House follows this ideal to the letter and perhaps to the point of absurdity, reducing the parts of the house arguably to one, eliminating in the process the differential reservoirs required for the operation of the sociodynamic engine. Hence, as much as the glass house sits outside of the domestic tradition, it at the same time sits squarely inside that same tradition, again like Claire and Solange in the domestic scene of Madame's Boudoir, creating through its ritual make-believe a scene of danger only kept in check by its adherence to those very rituals. The un-house, the anti-domestic, is not in itself a threat.

SCENE THREE: PLAYING HOUSE

On June 11 of 2003, the Ontario Court of Appeals in Toronto, Canada, struck down as unconstitutional legislation which defined marriage as "the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others." In so doing, the court opened up the possibility for same-sex marriage in Ontario, a right which will likely soon be extended to the rest of Canada.

The ruling also unleashed a storm of controversy; in fact, opinion is fairly divided in Canada in regards to the issue of same-sex marriage (although divided, according to pollsters, heavily on demographic lines, with older Canadians being particularly opposed and younger Canadians being particularly in favor). For about a month after the ruling, our newspapers and talk-shows were full of editorials, letters to the editor, passionate callers, and so on, arguing many sides of the issue. To my admittedly biased eye and ear, the discussion seemed far more passionate on the side of those opposed to same-sex

marriage. As early as June 12, for example, Ralph Klein, Premier of Alberta, promised to use the constitution's "notwithstanding clause" to override marriage rights for gays and lesbians, should they be legislated by Ottawa.

Further, the arguments opposed to same-sex marriage took on, as the debate wore on, an increasingly abstract tone. These arguments tended to follow five lines of thought:

1. The problem is the process – that judges (who are not elected in Canada) should not be allowed to challenge legislation (which is, of course, precisely the role of the judiciary);
2. That marriage has always been about the family and about procreation, and that to allow homosexuals to marry would therefore somehow debase the institution;
3. That the word marriage has always been defined in terms of one man and one woman, and maintaining the time-honoured meaning of a word is more important that maintaining the constitutional rights of people;
4. That legalizing same-sex unions is to run rough-shod over the rights of religious institutions to not recognize such unions; and
5. That legalizing same-sex marriage is something we must not do as it may cause a worsening of relations between Canada and the United States.

I have not been able to find an example of a piece (although there are no doubt some out there) which takes issue with the substance of the court's judgment, nor one which claims that gays and lesbians do not deserve the rights and privileges which are associated with marriage. In fact, this is the part of the situation which is for me the most puzzling. Gays and lesbians in Canada already have, and have had for some years, the right to "domestic partnerships" which give, in fact, all of the rights and privileges pertaining to marriage – except the right to use the word marriage. In other words, it would seem that the fight for rights has already been won – or lost, depending on how you look at it – some time ago, and with relatively little controversy. So why is it that this last point, the symbolic point, the one about the word, is the one that raises the passions?

And of course, what does this have to do with architecture?

In his pseudo-autobiographical novel, Miracle of the Rose, Jean Genet describes in some detail the Colonie Agricole Pénitentiaire de Mettray, in which Genet spent some years as a youth. Genet describes this Colonie, or Reformatory (worthy of study in its own right in light of nineteenth century French Utopianism) in terms of the social relationships (real or imagined) that arose between and among the colonists. The key is a statement which the Director makes to Genet on his first day at Mettray: "...You will not be unhappy. The other boys... The Mettray Colony is not a penitentiary, it's a big family."[7]

But the Director's words ring false: Mettray was not a family, could not become a family except through the social relationships and the imaginations of the colonists. It is in this setting that we must understand the lyrical passage in which Genet describes his mock marriage to another colonist, Divers.[8] This is the first of the two central transformative scenes in the novel, the transformation of Genet into the bride of Divers, which carries with it the transformation of the colonists into a symbolic family, and hence the transformation of Mettray, this three-storey white stone structure, into a house. The mock wedding, while fictitious, has real effect, in that it allows the colonists to superpose their own structure on that of the Colony, to claim ownership over it.

And this confusion, this exchange of status between the real and the fictional is, I think, precisely at the root of the controversy over gay marriage in Canada, for the marriage of two people in our contemporary society is at root no different from the "marriage" of two colonists at Mettray: it is simply a convention, agreed upon by a group of people to have a certain meaning. And like the two colonists, this marriage has a distinct effect: it, along with other institutions like it, is constitutive of our society. However, unlike the marriage in Genet's novel, marriage in our society cannot admit its conventional basis, but must posit itself as foundational, or natural, or in some other way necessary. To do otherwise would be to call into question the very nature of our society.

Which brings me to the crux of my argument: if after the preceding two scenes I still need to make the point that this an architectural issue, I will try to do so now bluntly by claiming that the primary role of architecture is to establish and reinforce the notion that our institutions are necessary, real, and permanent. Architecture is able to do this because it is itself one of these very institutions, positing itself as having those same characteristics: necessity, reality, and permanence. Architecture, in order to maintain this position – and excuse me for saying it, but this fiction – must deny the extent to which the merely constructed, the imaginary, and the transient sit at the very core of our ideas about architecture.

And so it is the case with the house, which is by convention, by discipline, both the architectural manifestation of the institution of marriage and the machine for procreation, for living in with the family. If the homosexual in such a house can only be a thief, stealing energy from the system, diluting the ability of the machine to do the work of society, then the role of two homosexuals living together as a couple in the machine is worse: it is a sham, it is make-believe. The two men, or two women, are like the actresses in The Maids, masquerading first as each other and then as the "missing" gender in order to participate in an event which they themselves have shifted from the real to the ritualistic precisely through this confusion of identity. Same-sex marriage, then, can only be seen as a parody of "real" marriage, a dysfunctional and onanistic performance

of its rituals. It is seen as not necessary, but play; as not real, but imagined; as not permanent, but as transient and without foundation. It is exactly what "real" marriage posits itself as not. Hence, to accept unions of gays or lesbians as other, to give these unions a name other than marriage, does not threaten, just as Johnson's Glass House does not threaten by virtue of its otherness in relation to the "real" domestic site. To accept same-sex marriage as marriage, however, is to expose the constructed, conventional nature of all marriage, to unlock the door for more change, to question the ownership of the institution. For this is, after all, what the argument is about: ownership, property, and therefore, theft. What is not clear to me, anymore, is who plays the role of the thief?

NOTES

[1] Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1964; Evergreen Edition, 1987), 171.

[2] Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (London: John Rodker, 1931; Mineola, New York: Dover, 1986), 288.

[3] Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 315.

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 17.

[5] Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1966; New Evergreen Edition, 1987), 64-65.

[6] Frank Lloyd Wright, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings*, eds. Edgar Kaufmann and Ben Raeburn (New York: Meridian, 1960), 45.

[7] Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, 90.

[8] Ibid., 72.

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