

# Less or More Black and White? Reassessing Genet's *Les nègres* in Light of Both Published Versions

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Je suis furieux. Je me donne depuis 15 jours tant de mal pour corriger cette pièce et la rendre possible, et vous me compliquez tout. [...] Envoyez-moi le manuscrit. J'ai besoin de contrôler, mais avec cette imbécile manie de vouloir me conserver les manuscrits, je ne peux jamais corriger. À quoi jouez-vous ? Je ne signerai pas une réédition des *Nègres* si je ne peux pas corriger ce texte, s'il est mal imprimé.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the five plays by Jean Genet performed before his death in 1986 exists in more than one published version.<sup>2</sup> Critics have discussed the differences between the various published versions of each play<sup>3</sup> with the exception of *Les nègres*: the drama commissioned by Raymond Rouleau, first published by Marc Barbezat in 1958, first performed in a production by Roger Blin at the Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris in 1959, and published in a revised edition the following year.

Why have the changes Genet made to *Les nègres* remained undiscussed? Perhaps the attention of critics, like that of the audience described by Bernard Frechtman, Genet's American translator, has been diverted by the ceremony at the heart of the drama (Frechtman 5). Could a study of the changes Genet made to the play lead to a better understanding of ambiguity in *Les nègres*? When Genet "cleaned up" the text in the late 1950s, "suppressing" everything, as Blin recalls he did, that "didn't work" (White 431), did the dividing line between the staged and the real in his complex work so intensely concerned with difference become less or more black and white?

## A Framework of Confusion

Derek F. Connon's study of "confusion," of what he terms Genet's "art of upsetting" the audience in—and of—*Les nègres* usefully frames these questions. Picking up on Graham Dunstan Martin's observation that the play is calculated to offend its spectators, to frighten them, or stimulate their worst racial instincts (Martin 519), Connon notes that Genet achieves this in both obvious and subliminal ways. Among the more obvious ways, Connon lists the ritual

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1. Genet 1988b (letter of 9 October 1959 to Marc Barbezat).

2. *Les bonnes* 1947, 1954, 1968b; *Haute surveillance* 1949, 1965, 1968c, 1988a; *Le balcon* 1956, 1962, 1968a; *Les nègres* 1958, 1960; *Les paravents* 1961, 1976.

3. See for example Saint-Léon, Kennelly, Bougon, Walker 1982 and 1984, and Aslan 1972.

murder of a white woman reenacted by black actors before a stage audience of white caricatures played by masked blacks, and the mixed response to the symbolic figures of the white Court by the white audience in the auditorium. Among the ways he sees as acting on a more subliminal level, Connon draws our attention on the one hand to the fragmentation of the ritual re-enactment of the murder at the heart of the play. He points out that it helps Genet trick us into blaming ourselves for the disquieting feeling we have—derived in part from questions that arose over the true identity of the victim—that the details of the murder are shifting like a mirage. On the other hand, Connon also explores the rich layering of action in the play, showing how it deepens the ambiguous relationship of illusion to reality in Genet's work. Comparing Genet's intentions in two of the plays he wrote before *Les nègres* to his intentions in this drama, Connon writes:

The multi-layering in this work is even more complex than that of *Le balcon*: in *Les bonnes* it is relatively easy to sort out one layer from another, even if the opening of the play sets out to confuse us; with *Le balcon* we have seen that the relationship between layers is deliberately ambiguous; in *Les nègres* the layers proliferate and overlap to an alarming extent. (428)

As evidence of this layering, Connon notes: first, the problem posed by the relationship of the Court to the ritual; second, the theme of love between Vertu and Village; finally, Connon discusses at some length the third complicated strand in this dramatic work, which he sees as having been written deliberately to confuse: the real revolution taking place in the wings. Alluding to the studies of Joseph H. McMahon, Jean-Marie Magnan, Philip Thody, Edmund White, Jean Decock, Richard N. Coe, and Martin Esslin, Connon reminds us that critical opinion of the status of the revolution is not unanimous: McMahon, Magnan, Thody, and White accept it as "real"<sup>4</sup>; Decock, Coe, and Esslin put its reality into the same question as they do theatrical reality in general. Nonetheless, he summarizes, all accept the basic situation being presented to us: that of actors playing "actors," who—in order to distract the audience from events taking place off stage—are enacting a ritual. For Connon, however, this is a gross simplification. He writes:

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4. Although not mentioned by Connon, both Blin and Aslan also consider this action "real. Blin recalls: "Tout dans le spectacle est faux. Des comédiens jouent le procès des Noirs par des Blancs, puis le procès des Blancs par des Noirs, et ça c'est de l'ordre de la représentation. Mais pendant ce temps, en coulisse, se déroule la seule chose sérieuse et réelle, le jugement d'un Noir par d'autres Noirs. Ville de Saint-Nazaire, qui est chargé de rendre compte de ce qui se passe dehors, est le seul personnage qui soit hors du jeu" (137). Aslan echoes Blin: "Spectateurs blancs conviés à constituer dans la salle l'audience nécessaire à tout cérémonial, nous n'assistons en réalité qu'à une partie de la cérémonie, à savoir un spectacle de parade dissimulant, masquant le véritable événement qui, lui, se passe derrière le rideau, un règlement de comptes qui ne nous regarde pas ; il ne concerne que les Noirs" (1990:184).

If Genet is to suggest to us that the ritual is merely a blind to take away our attention from events happening off stage he clearly needs to give us some hint that those off-stage events are occurring, but those hints must be subtle enough to suggest a serious attempt on the part of the characters to keep them secret. And yet what do we find in *Les nègres*? Genet, the master of ambiguity, presents us with one of the worst-kept secrets in the history of drama. (428-29)

Connon then goes on to explain that Ville de Saint-Nazaire, the only character in Genet's drama who provides a link between on-stage and off-stage actions, is distinguished from the other characters: attention is drawn to him when he is dismissed from the stage by Archibald, the master of ceremonies; and Genet is uncharacteristically heavy-handed in the attitude towards secrecy manifested in the dialogue of the play. "The worst way," Connon points out, "to keep a secret is surely to begin by pointing out that there is a secret to be kept." We should not, therefore, take this "real" action at face value, he argues. Critics have overlooked what is really going on, something "so much more in keeping with the allusive nature of Genet's work." To support his case, Connon points to where Ville de Saint-Nazaire exits the stage. On two different occasions, Ville de Saint-Nazaire wants to exit stage-right. But Archibald instructs him to exit stage-left. Connon suggests that the off-stage action serves to divert our attention:

there is another level of illusion between the external reality of the performance and the action that has generally been accepted as "real," the execution of the black traitor. That is to say that the actors are playing "actors," who, in order to distract our attention from events taking place off-stage right, are playing "actors," who, in order to distract our attention from events taking place off-stage left, are enacting a ritual.

This situation, Connon believes, is deliberately confusing:

The audience will obviously be puzzled about what is meant to be "real" and what is not, perhaps even about what is real and what is not, for the idea of actors playing to an audience is repeated on so many different levels that there is bound to be a degree of blurring in the mind of the spectator between the various levels, including, perhaps, even that of reality itself. And the off-right action, which must now be taken to be the "real" action rather than the off-left action, has the additional threat of being unspecified, giving free rein to the imagination. So the multi-layering will cause the audience to feel both confused and threatened. (432)

Could Genet's early (and to date unperformed) version of *Les nègres* shed light on what is happening stage-right? If performed instead of the later version (as the early version of *Les bonnes* often is), would it be liable to leave audiences as puzzled, confused, and threatened?

## Behind the Deletions

Other than peripheral changes made between the two editions of *Les nègres*—which include the deletion of one of the letters “c” in the cry of “coccorico” (1958:117, 144, 146; 1960:138, 171, 173), the addition of three footnotes referring to Blin’s staging of the play at the Théâtre de Lutèce in the second edition (1960:64, 146, 176), and the integration of thirty-three photographs of Blin’s production taken by Ernest Scheidegger into the second edition,<sup>5</sup> only four short sequences differ between the first and second editions of the play. The seeming superficiality of the changes is more likely the real reason critics have not compared the two versions. Except for one line (part of one of the four sequences in question) which is substituted for a gesture in the second edition, each change represents a deletion in the dialogue of the drama. One might thus also ask whether the relationship between Genet’s cutting dialogue from the script and confusing the audience is parallel or inverse.

The least troubling change made between the first and second editions of *Les nègres* occurs in the lines Genet cut from the Black who played the Governor before the “lyrical” massacre of the Court. Still, these cuts do touch on the issues of certainty, ambiguity, and of what Cannon terms “the clear dividing line between reality and the fiction of a play” (427).

First, from the answer of the Black who played the role of Governor to Archibald’s question: “Jusqu’où acceptez-vous d’aller ?” the line following his clearly bold “Jusqu’à la mort” has been cut. In the first edition of the play, the Black playing the Governor adds: “Et qu’on se rassure, chacun de nous *saura* choisir pour le Blanc qu’il incarne ce soir, l’arme *la plus sûre et la plus infâme*” (140; emphasis added). While not specifying the weapon each Courtmember will choose, this Black nevertheless presents it in categorical, no uncertain terms.

Second, from the speech he makes before being “shot dead” by Village—only immediately afterwards to be instructed by Archibald to die (center-stage rather than on the spot)—, Genet cuts the very section in which the Governor seems to fall apart, with the very “real” trembling that overtakes him seeming to undermine the resigned calm with which he faces his fate. But even more striking is the Governor’s calling into question of “reality”: both his trembling and the definitiveness of his fate. In the second edition, the Governor’s interrogative “Quoi ? Vous dites que je tremble ? Vous savez bien que c’est la goutte militaire ?” is directly followed by his commanding “Eh bien, soit, visez donc ce cœur indomptable. Je meurs sans enfants... Mais je compte sur votre sens de l’honneur pour remettre mon uniforme taché de sang, au musée de l’Armée. En joue, feu !”. In the first edition, it is followed first by this sequence in which both his state of mind and the true aims of the Blacks become even harder to decipher:

Eh bien, vous ne parlez pas ? Oh, vous me reprochez les dix mille adolescents écrasés par mes chars ? Eh quoi ! un homme de guerre

5. 1960: cover and 9, 10, 11, 12, 21, 22, 39, 40, 49, 50, 67, 68, 77, 78, 79, 80, 89, 90, 107, 108, 117, 118, 119, 120, 129, 130, 146, 147, 148, 149, 167, 168.

ne saurait faire mordre la poussière à des lurons qui grandissent ?... ((Il tremble de plus en plus fort))... *Non, je ne tremble pas de plus en plus fort*, j'envoie à mes troupes des signaux d'alarme... Vous n'allez tout de même pas me tuer *pour de bon* ?... *Si* ?... *Non* ?... (1958:143-44; emphasis added)

A second sequence cut by Genet between editions of *Les nègres* is more closely related to the issue of distraction raised by Connon. This sequence directly precedes the showdown between Félicité and the white queen, who with her Court comes to judge the Blacks. As with the sequence involving the Governor, this sequence—while on one level seeming to bring to light that there was no crime and that in their distraction the Court members have been duped—also tends towards ambiguity. It gives Félicité's explosive "Eh bien, Dahomey ! Dahomey ! Nègres, venez m'épaulez. Et qu'on ne laisse pas escamoter le crime. ((À la reine.)) Personne n'aurait la force de le nier" (1958:125; 1960:146) a troubling context. It raises questions over what has really occurred in—and/or during—the ritual reenactment by the Blacks. In the second edition of the play, Genet juxtaposes the very adjective suggesting certainty in Village's "Madame, méfiez-vous. Vous êtes une grande Reine et l'Afrique *n'est pas sûre*," which is directed at the white queen (1960:123; emphasis added), with Félicité's interruptive "Assez ! Et reculez !", which is directed at all the Blacks. However, in the first edition of the play Genet inserts between them the following sequence in which Village underlines the reality of the Blacks' fear while justifying the ritual that has been played out before the Court as a substitute for a reality that never was:

VILLAGE : Puisqu'il est encore temps, rentrez. Reculez. Remontez l'escalier. Rentrez chez vous. *Vraiment*, nous avons peur et nous tremblons, car vous êtes belle, mais...

LE JUGE : Nous avons entendu le récit, et la ferveur de votre chant nous a touchés : même le blanc de vos yeux en prenait un sale coup...

NEIGE ([humble]) : C'était pour mieux l'exalter, monseigneur.

VILLAGE : Il faut m'écouter, et rentrer. Ou bien alors, doublez, triplez vos escortes. Nous vous sommes soumis et dévoués, mais...

BOBO ([obséquieuse]) : Car vous êtes belle et vous sentez bon...

VERTU ([souriant]) : Et finalement nous avons imaginé cette mise en scène pour offrir avec délicatesse des chaises à votre suite...

VILLAGE : ... *puisque'il n'y a pas eu de crime, madame*...  
(1958:123-24; emphasis added)

This brings us to the third sequence that Genet changed in rewriting *Les nègres*. It is the only sequence that can actually be considered part of the ritual. Here, goaded on by the other Blacks to the strains of the *Dies iræ*, Village is to enter the bedroom of his victim and kill her. While the first two portions cut

from this sequence seem not really to remove—or add—much to the play, the effect of the elimination of the third portion is more troubling.

The first portion cut by Genet is the very militaristic, but uneven

Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq ! / Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq ! /  
Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq ! / Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq ! /  
Six !

which is sung out as though during a strident march by the Court. Genet had originally inserted it as a jarring descant between Neige's softly encouraging

Expire, expire doucement, / Notre-Dame des Pélicans, / Jolie  
mouette, poliment, / Galamment, laisse-toi torturer...

and Vertu's

Endeuillez-vous, hautes forêts / Qu'il s'y glisse en silence. / À ses  
grands pieds, poussière blanche / Mets des chaussons de lisière.

The second portion cut by Genet is Neige's

Étendez-vous sur son chandail / Votre coude sur son mouchoir /  
Vous ne reverrez plus le jour...

which directly follows Vertu's "À ses grands pieds, poussière blanche / Mets des chaussons de lisière" and which directly precedes the sequence in which the Judge asks the Governor what he can make out in his telescope.

Now if the second cut portion, sung out by Neige—as with the portions Genet did not cut, which are sung out by Neige and Vertu—, seems in some way designed to push Village to murder and is thus directly linked to the ritual at hand, the relationship of the beginning of the third portion cut by Genet to what is unfolding onstage and offstage is less clear. Indeed, this very relationship is at the heart of the ensuing argument between Vertu and Neige, and through it are raised still more troubling questions over the nature of reality, referentiality, and the blurring of the boundaries between the layers or levels of truth and/or performance in the play.

VERTU : Et vous ma tendre abeille / O mon regard abeille d'or /  
Que ton vol direct le conduise / Jusqu'à mon cœur...

NEIGE ([hurlant]) : Mentreuse !

VERTU : J'ai dit la vérité.

NEIGE : Au moment qu'il nous trompe avec toute la pâleur du  
monde.

ARCHIBALD : Mesdames ! Silence !

NEIGE ([accusant Vertu]) : C'est elle ! Elle a changé des mots et  
vous ne vous en aperceviez pas. Elle chantait son amour.

VERTU : J'ai le droit d'inventer. Les Nègres improvisent. Je ne parlais pas en mon nom, mais au nom de toute ma race amoureuse, non de Village, non d'un homme, mais...

NEIGE : De qui ?<sup>6</sup>

As Neige claims, Archibald has been distracted in order not to notice that Vertu has changed the words of the drama to suit an undisclosed referent. How? And, more important, why? It could not have been by Ville de Saint-Nazaire who, while slowly making his way onstage during Félicité's great tirade, has not been noticed by Archibald. For as the stage directions make clear, Ville de Saint-Nazaire is only noticed now:

ARCHIBALD ([il s'aperçoit soudain de la présence de Ville de Saint-Nazaire, entré très lentement, alors que Félicité disait sa grande tirade]) Vous ! Je vous avais dit de ne venir nous prévenir que quand tout serait achevé. C'est donc fait ? C'est fini ? (1958:98; emphasis added)

By cutting this and the other two sequences, Genet eliminates from *Les nègres* the questions they might have raised. Likewise, in the changes he made between the first and second published version of *Les nègres* to a fourth section of the play, he seems to remove some of the mystery surrounding the backstage action(s). While the cuts made in this section are more scattered than in the first three, all relate in some way to the judgment at hand off-stage left.

Roughly in the middle of the exchange taking place between Archibald and Ville de Saint-Nazaire (after Ville de Saint-Nazaire surprises Archibald by appearing onstage earlier than expected), the strands of the confusing layers of this drama seem at once to intersect and overlap. And again, the issues of the measurability of certainty, reality, and the levels of audience are raised.<sup>7</sup> In both the first and second editions of the play, we have the following sequence:

6. 1958:97-98. Two—more superficial—changes in this sequence (on pages 100 and 102) also relate to the Vertu/Neige conflict.

7. It should be noted that the only other sequences cut by Genet—which occur later on in the play—further complicate the layering. They are:

VILLAGE ([insistant]) : Nous peser ? Avec leurs balances d'or et de rubis ? Et pensez-vous, s'ils s'en vont mourir, qu'ils me laisseront aimer Vertu — ou plutôt que Vertu pourra m'aimer ?

VILLE DE SAINT-NAZAIRE ([à Village]) : Tu as peur ? Vous avez eu tort de vous donner comme comédiens.

ARCHIBALD : C'est par honnêteté. Nous nous donnions surtout comme Nègres.

VILLE DE SAINT-NAZAIRE ([souriant mais précis]) : Vous n'avez pas essayé de les négrier ? De leur greffer des narines et des lèvres bambaras ? De leur crépeler les cheveux ? De les réduire en esclavage ? (1960:127)

and:

ARCHIBALD : Tout acteur sait qu'à une heure fixe le rideau sera baissé. Et presque toujours qu'il incarne un mort ou une morte : Phèdre, Don Juan, Antigone, la Dame aux Camélias, monsieur le Docteur Schweitzer... ([Un long silence.])

ARCHIBALD : Vous êtes sûr qu'il soit coupable ? Et surtout qu'il soit le coupable que nous cherchons ?

VILLE DE SAINT-NAZAIRE ((un peu ironique)): Vous auriez tout à coup des soupçons ?

ARCHIBALD : Réfléchissez : il s'agit de juger, probablement de condamner, et d'exécuter un Nègre. C'est grave. Il ne s'agit plus de jouer. L'homme que nous tenons et dont nous sommes responsables est un homme réel. Il bouge, il mâche, il tousse, il tremble: tout à l'heure il sera tué.

VILLE DE SAINT-NAZAIRE : C'est très dur, je le sais. Mais je sais que si la comédie peut être menée devant eux ([il montre le public]), nous ne devons plus jouer quand nous sommes entre nous. Il faudra nous habituer à prendre la responsabilité du sang — du nôtre. Et le poids moral...

ARCHIBALD ((l'interrompant)) : Tais-toi.

(1958:98-99; 1960:115-16)

However, in the second edition of *Les nègres*, what follows Archibald's "Tu n'empêcheras pas, comme je te l'ai dit, qu'il ne s'agisse d'un sang vivant, chaud, souple, fumant, d'un sang qui saigne..." and Ville de Saint-Nazaire's "Mais, alors, cette comédie que nous jouons, pour vous, ce n'était qu'un divertissement ?" (1960:116) is stripped of its mysterious shroud. In the first edition, we have:

ARCHIBALD : Tu n'empêcheras pas, comme je te l'ai dit, qu'il ne s'agisse d'un sang vivant, chaud, souple, fumant, d'un sang qui saigne, *en somme...*

VILLE DE SAINT-NAZAIRE : Mais, alors, cette comédie que nous jouons, pour vous, ce n'était qu'un divertissement ? *Elle n'avait pas pour but de détailler...* (1958:99; emphasis added)

In the first edition, the "précisions" of both men, Archibald's summation ("en somme...") and Ville de Saint-Nazaire's apposition ("Elle n'avait pas pour but de détailler..."), are left unfinished. Attention is drawn to them not by what they tell us but by what they leave unsaid, in the dark. And in the middle of the sequence directly following this one—in two lines also cut from the play—, after the Judge (referring to the Queen's understanding of what is unfolding on stage) asks the Valet, who has just reentered: "Elle sait ce qui se passe ?" the

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~~DIOUF : Nous le savons tous, que le seul événement qui pourrait nous arracher à ce jeu de miroir, c'est le sang qui coule.~~

([On entend un bruit de pas dans la coulisse. Diouf affolé remet son masque. Les autres Nègres paraissent apeurés. Ils vont tous, en masse, avec madame Félicité, se grouper à gauche de la scène sous le balcon où apparaissait la Cour. Le piétinement et le bruit deviennent plus précis. Enfin, de la coulisse de droite, semblant descendre un chemin, à reculons, sort d'abord le Valet. Il rote et titube. Manifestement, il est ivre.]) (1960:132-33).



Valet replies: "Les Nègres gueulent assez fort" (1958:100). It is as though he implies that everything has just been spelled out loud and clear.

### Suppressing the Truth?

But what? And why then did Genet make these cuts? If, as Cannon observes, the dramatist's goal was to leave audiences of *Les nègres* feeling upset, confused, and threatened (437), and if, as these cut sequences suggest, in the first edition of the play matters seem even more ambiguous than in the second, by making these cuts Genet surely lessens the potential upset, confusion, and threat of the audience.

Before writing the dozen paragraphs that constitute "Pour jouer *Les nègres*" Genet wrote a much longer, "windy" (White 274) introduction to his play. Perhaps the manuscript pages of this introduction hold clues to his true intentions. But as Genet's publisher, Barbezat convinced the dramatist to eliminate them. He considered such an introduction uncharacteristic of the dramatist who, Cannon reminds us, was characteristically *ambiguous* (429).

Hoping to learn more about Genet's intentions in writing *Les nègres*, I wrote to Barbezat in October 1993, asking him about the suppressed introduction. As Barbezat had not yet responded at the time, I asked him publicly about it at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where he had just spoken on a panel about his role as Genet's publisher (see Alphant). In response, Barbezat denied knowledge of such an introduction. But immediately after his claim of ignorance, the publisher's wife, Olga, arose from the front row of the auditorium where she had been sitting. She turned to me and confirmed that Genet had, indeed, written it. Olga Barbezat explained that this introduction was so unlike anything else the dramatist had written that her husband had convinced him never to publish it.

Some three weeks after this public confirmation of the existence of an unpublished introduction to *Les nègres*, I received the following letter—a written "confirmation"—from Barbezat himself:

Monsieur,

Je n'ai pas perdu de vue votre lettre du 16/10/93 et j'y réponds aujourd'hui.

Vous étiez présent, du reste, à la soirée du Centre Pompidou consacrée à Jean Genet et Olga Barbezat vous a répondu à la question que vous avez posée. Genet a pris la décision de ne jamais publier l'introduction aux *Nègres*; elle ne sera jamais publiée et vous pouvez considérer qu'elle n'existe pas.

Je vous prie d'agrèer, Monsieur, mes salutations distinguées.

Marc Barbezat

Pages that at the same time exist but do not exist? Whether or not he intends the decidedly Genetian overtones, Barbezat makes his position—both as publisher and "conservateur" of Genet's works—unambiguous, very black and white. Indeed, coupled with this ironic afterword, the seeming reduction of the apparent upset, confusion, and threat of the audience through the lessening of ambiguity in the cuts made from the first to the second published version of *Les nègres*

appears in retrospect counterbalanced in the shift between stages: from genesis to (self-) censorship, from performance to (non-) publication. As critics of Genet, privy for now, at least, only to what Barbezat feels is actually worthy of Genet and to what he has actually published, we are faced with—and inevitably frustrated by—the questions within the play and pertaining to it that are raised by Genet's (and Barbezat's?) cuts and the larger, more pressing question of the possible implication or implications these questions have on our past—and will have on our future—interpretations of the play. Perhaps we can accept this frustration at never being able to know the truth as a compromise solution. Like Vertu in her last, unfinished line to Village at the end of the play ("Ce qui est sûr, au moins, c'est que tu ne pourrais jamais enrouler tes doigts dans mes longs cheveux blonds..."), we might ultimately embrace an impossibility as the only certainty.<sup>8</sup>

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8. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Fourteenth Annual International Colloquium on Twentieth-Century French Studies in Columbus, Ohio.

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