

Notes On “The Criminal Child”

anonymous

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“The Criminal Child” has, until now [*ed. – afterword written in late 2015*], never appeared in its entirety in the English language. Such a remarkable oversight – remarkable because it concerns a writer as significant as Jean Genet – would be reason enough for us to render a translation and bring it to print. But, in reading it, reasons far beyond the bibliophilic impulse reveal themselves and insist on the urgency, timeliness and import of this text.

Though never read on air, Genet intended “L’Enfant Criminel” as a radio address. Fernand Pouey, the director of dramatic and literary broadcasts for French radio, solicited Genet to speak on his radio program, “Carte Blanche”, in 1948 as a bit of commentary on proposed reforms to France’s youth prisons. (Around the same time Pouey also commissioned Antonin Artaud to broadcast “To Have Done With the Judgement of God” – both pieces were censored by the powers that be.) A small edition of Genet’s text was published the next year and was then all but forgotten.

Genet was asked to give commentary on the issue – the youth prisons – because of his own time spent in the institutions in question. Two years prior he published his novel *Miracle of the Rose* which recounted his own experiences in Mettray, a penal colony for youth. Mettray was Genet’s teenage home for roughly two and a half years (interrupted only briefly by a short-lived escape), beginning in 1926. By the time it was closed in 1939, it had functioned for a century as an ‘agricultural colony’, modeled on the German *Rauhe Hause* (“Houses of the Wild”) where delinquent children were supposed to be reformed; to learn discipline and morality through forced agricultural work.

The presence of Mettray – and its reformatory failures – permeates *Miracle of the Rose*, “The Criminal Child” and Genet’s whole body of work. Whereas his entire life he was an outsider – a sissy, a dreamer, a reader, a delinquent – at Mettray he was a thief among thieves, an outcast among many, an amorous youth admired by the older ‘toughs’ of the colony. Something began for Genet at Mettray. He attests to a creative impulse born in himself at the penal colony: “If to write means that you feel emotions or feelings so strong that your whole life is shaped by them, if they’re so strong that only by describing or evoking or analyzing them can you understand them – if so, then it was at Mettray that I started, when I was fifteen – it was then I started to write.” Nowhere in Genet’s writing do we find penance, or reform. There is no assimilation or reconciliation at the end of his tales. He remained true to Mettray and to his delinquent youth. “The Criminal Child” is his pledge of illicit allegiance.

The stance that Genet intended to take in his radio address is remarkable because it throws a wrench into the neat periodization with which some, such as Hadrien Laroche, have tried to organize his thinking. Laroche's book, *The Final Genet*, begins with Genet, in 1968, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, entering the occupied Sorbonne [ed. – *a university in Paris*], encountering Maoists and Palestinian combatants, and shortly thereafter writing "his first political text." Laroche posits that after that point, Genet's political turn, he concerns himself with 'Man' and his experience. And yet here, two decades prior to this supposed turn, we read Genet intervening in a political question, but refusing to play the game on its terms. Those familiar with his post-1968 writings will recognize this mode of refusal – poetic, magical and distinctly anti-political. His refusal to be periodized likewise undermines the role fashioned for him by the Left. He disrupts the fantasy of a transition from the first (criminal) Genet to the last (revolutionary) Genet. This text thickens the consistency between the supposedly distinct early and late – not to mention the criminal and insurgent – works of Genet. Something remains invariant in all imagined periods: his hostility.

Regarding Genet's hostility toward attempted reforms, it is noteworthy that he wrote this address in the same year prominent artists and writers such as Cocteau, Sartre, Colette, and Picasso were formally petitioning the French state to pardon his past crimes. They insisted that his work tore him away from his past – reformed him – and that a pardon was necessary to secure his reformation. And so in "The Criminal Child", we find an affirmation of crime and a condemnation of bourgeois art at the very same moment that his crimes are to be forgiven for art's sake. Through these words, he takes a side; swears an oath to his past, to crime; makes a declaration of enmity toward the society in which he lived.

Edmund White accounts for Genet's enmity by instead characterized his turn toward anti-imperialism as simply a "sturdier platform from which to attack French society." He also insists that Genet was already considering the question of revolution at the time of this writing in the late 1940's. Regarding that time, he said that, "although Genet was wrestling with new sympathies for communism, he remained essentially anarchic, anti-social, inassimilable." His interests, then and later, in revolutionary activity had little to do with parties or institutions, but everything to do with the messianic, power, terror, and the attempt "to introduce the worm to the fruit."

Though he spent his later decades traveling and conspiring with various avowed revolutionaries, Genet eschewed the label for himself. His concerns, though at times intertwining with those of revolutionaries,¹ were different. Even Laroche had to admit, when citing the remarkable interview that Genet gave to Hubert Fichte, that: "As a man of revolt, Genet cannot join revolutionary groups – the [Black] Panthers, the PLO [*Palestine Liberation Organisation*], or any other. And even if he is with them, he is still alone... [His revolution] is isolated because it is made of bodies. These bodies are not those of the Palestinians, but the result of events. The event of a body is solitude... Genet turns away from the Revolution – an empty word over which the great powers fight – to consider the revolutions of each person, experienced through the body,

¹ ed. – "As the 60's drew to a close, Jean Genet travelled to the United States on two occasions with the intention of contributing to the struggle there for black liberation. In addition to months spent traveling alongside and speaking on behalf of the Black Panthers, he agreed to write an introduction to a compiled volume of the writings of imprisoned black revolutionary George Jackson, awaiting trial in California for the murder of a prison guard. [...] Much of Genet's writings focused on the fantastic underpinnings of prison life and his writing about Jackson continued this[...] As in his own prison writing, he articulated the way that sexual, racial, and libidinal ritual upholds and justifies the perpetuation of the prison order" (Bædan #3). Genet also went to Jordan during upheaval.

as an event.” Genet’s introduction of worm to fruit, then takes the form of an abrupt disruption – a pause or opening wherein to explore the insurgency of the body – each body – in singular revolt.

If Genet’s insurgency began long before ’68, and if his early commitments to crime and revolt endured long after, then we are called to read his supposed political works in a new light. How, for example, does this text about the power of a prisoner’s writing augment and complicate his communiqués in solidarity with George Jackson and other Black Liberation prisoners? What does his deification of inmates accused of killing guards in prison (as in *Miracle of the Rose*) tell us about his later years spent agitating for the freedom and mourning the death of Jackson, charged with the same crime?

Rather than the distinct and opposed figures of Genet-the-Criminal and Genet-the-Revolutionary, we see instead Genet-who-disorders. His stance disrupts on many levels. His life testifies against the possibility of progressive reform of criminal children. His words obstruct the supposed transition from criminal to proper revolutionary. And finally he intervenes into the conversation of systemic reform in the present. While the question of the reformation – even abolition [ed. – see *‘Everything is Sanitised, But We are Constantly Wringing Our Tired Hands’*] – of this country’s monstrous prison system has reached all the way to the halls of power and the streams of the spectacle [ed. – *speaking from the US*], Genet insists on other questions. He explicitly criticizes those who wish to “win souls back to society.” He laments the banal life to which reform damns the child criminals; he laughs at those who desire to safeguard moral purity and offer pity to children who want none. He emphasizes the futility of society’s attempts “to eliminate, or render harmless, the elements that tend to corrode it.”

Genet asks us to imagine a hostility toward prison that doesn’t proliferate it (in some affirmation of the society which mandates imprisonment) – a refusal of control that doesn’t diffuse control through all of life. He reminds us that “whoever, by gentleness or privileges, tries to attenuate or abolish revolt, destroys all his chances to be saved.” Against the well-intentioned reformers – the future architects of more sinister ‘houses of reform’ – Genet maintains his enmity.

This enmity in Genet’s writing is coded as evil: his code word for an ethics of the outside, of rebellion. Genet’s admires his fellow criminal children precisely for the recognition of their roles as adversaries of society – their ardor for evil. “Evil: I mean just this will, this audacity to follow a destiny opposed to all the rules.” This evil is a secret – the children’s secret – but can be shared between them and used to forge lasting bonds of friendship and insolence and joy. The criminal children conspire in an “adventure against the rules of the Good” and Genet remains their accomplice. This conspiracy signifies a “lovely courage”, and Genet remains loyal to this sign.

Enmity, evil, the revolution of each body, obstruction of progress, a refusal of the terms of the game – a mode is emerging here; a mode hostile to reconciliation; a magical mode.

Those familiar with Genet’s depiction of Mettray in *Miracle of the Rose* will surely have grasped the magical nature of his memory of the place. When he writes of it, he writes as a mystic. He writes of love put through ordeal, of enchanted potions, of a secret world of childhood populated with monks, witches, shamans and deities. In his book, time opens up and flows in many directions; images of the distant past permeate the less distant and the present. He de-

clares writing an act of worship, as devotional to the figures of his past. He sings an evocation of memory so as to have a clearer, more naked, view of life. “The Criminal Child” offers a sharper focus of this mystical image. Here Genet details some of the workings of his own internal cosmology, the rites and methods of his unique magical system.

Genet reveals a system of initiation, not into an order, but into an adventure: one ineffable to the uninitiated, but shared between himself and other youthful offenders. “The young criminal already refuses being so indulgently understood, and the solicitude of this understanding on the part of a society against which he has revolted by committing his first crime. Having, at 15 or 16, or even earlier, come of age in a way that the good people will still not have done at 60.” Genet elucidates a storybook feeling – a desire for self-projection into “the most magnificent, the most audacious, ultimately the most perilous life” – that underwrites a young criminal’s ‘coming of age’. Their initiation forces open the door onto forbidden places, lovely landscapes. Genet’s criminal rites, his corporeal and metaphysical breaking and entering, announce a “young sovereign taking possession of a new realm.” In having the audacity to free himself of a state of torpor, the audacity to break the all-powerfulness of the world, he enters onto other worlds, hidden worlds of numinous forces and multifold potentials.

In the introductory pages of *The Thief’s Journal*, Genet writes, “with fanatical care, ‘jealous care,’ I prepared for my adventure as one arranges a couch or a room for love...” and correspondingly, in “The Criminal Child” he details that ritualistic care. To the initiated, he offers profound instruction:

Dress in outfits of dread and ignominy. Robe yourself in codes and attire which mocks the empty ritual of courts and tribunals. Perfume yourself in the secret odors discovered in criminal ritual work. Forge and carry weapons, psychic weapons and metal ones, weapons all the more powerful for their deviation from intended purposes, their profanation. Carry these close and conceal them under your mattress at night. Arm yourself with these in pursuit of criminal manifestations yet unimagined. Learn the names of your adversaries, of the sites which you must overcome – *Saint-Maurice, Saint-Hilaire, Belle-Isle, Eysse, Aniane, Montesson, Mettray, King County Juvenile Detention Center, Juvenile Hall* – and commit them to memory, charge them with meaning, weigh them with terror, project them onto destiny. Develop subtle argots, secret languages. Keep them hidden from the authorities. Sing songs of evocation, obscene complaints. Oppose your language to the language of society. Pay attention to signs and sigils carved and painted onto walls – *M.A.V. (Mort aux vaches)*², *B.A.A.D.M. (Bonjour aux amis du malheur)*³ – and read these as you’d read inscriptions on the walls of an ancient temple. In them, sense the mystery of the past, but also the curve of your own destiny. More than anything, arm yourself with memory: memory of the now-abolished places of your youth wherein you first found power, memory of the childhood which is dead and of the poetic powers which accompanied it, memories of those who populated that secret world, that fabulous hell. Speak the names of the dead in order to speak of the world of death, the kingdom of darkness. Carve onto a wall the mantra: “Just as I am guarded by a prison door, so my heart guards your memory.” Swear an oath to not let your childhood escape. Do not

² Death to cops.

³ Greetings to friends of misfortune.

live a moment on Earth without at the same time living in a secret domain. Let what has been destroyed carry on, continue in time. Guard it. Bring it with you wherever you go. Trace it up through the roots into the vegetative reality of each present moment. Find those who harbor the same memories. Build conspiracy between you. Let the honesty of your memories – the honesty of remembrance of paradise – build unbreakable bonds between you.

The youth prison is Genet's fountain of memory, but each of us has our own clandestine world into which we were initiated as youth. It was there in those spaces that we learned magic as a force of liberation, self-creation, and world-building. Though our childhoods are gone, we can access that space again in remembrance and invocation. He instructs us to find or build a psychic space: a space brought to life by the comings and goings of our memories, our youth, the creative urge. He advises us to create a corner of the world whose image lives in our very souls – an "ideal and cruel place situated deep in the child's heart" – and to project the image of that inner space onto the brick and mortar walls of this world. Project the desire buried in your heart and in the hearts of the child criminals. Dwell in this internal garden, this internal theater, this space of love and war and dreams of escape. Find others who've been there and live together in accordance with its ways. Build your inner temple here and consecrate it to "amorous passion."

In this temple you can now face your ordeal. Here you may cross a blazing fire and come back as someone else. Let the names committed to memory evoke all their violence, their force, their virility. "For it is indeed that which children wish to conquer. Their demand is that the ordeal be terrible." In this space, find the strength to face any test: brawls, billy clubs, dormitories, silences, prayer, punishment, clogs, scorched feet, marches in the sun, cold water, whatever disciplinary regime. We must remember that miracle recorded by Genet wherein Harcamone, condemned to death for murdering a prison guard, transfigured his chains into a garland of roses, one of which Genet clipped and concealed. We must recall his "ecstasy... shot through with a slight trembling, with a wave frequency that was alternate and simultaneous fear and admiration" in witnessing such a miracle. As we imagine him holding the rose we can hear the instruction articulated by contemporary practitioners of the Ordeal path such as Raven Kaldera, who writes:

Take the rose into your hands, and squeeze the thorns until your hands bleed, even as you smell the scent of Aphrodite. When you can understand why there is no contradiction there, the first step of the path will be open to you.

Genet's ordeal path individuates those who walk it. It must be faced in solitude, alone, "un-nameable and unnamed". In this namelessness the ordeal seeker is charged with "an even more dangerous power". In this state Genet witnessed miracles, an entire secret life – gardens, monsters, deserts, fountains – found within the most minute secret spaces of the solitary heart. He gestures toward the possibility of emerging purified from such solitude. White, recognizing the incompatibility between self-exploration and conformism, affirms the necessity of individuation within Genet's system:

Cruelty and violence are the poetic expression of the youngsters' affirmation of Evil and rebellion. If they had been obedient and had acquiesced to the prison system, submission would have led to the extinction of their individual differences, whereas rebellion sharpens their individuality. Instead of being interchangeable sheep, each

is a distinct hero. Finally, since for Genet crime itself is beautiful, he supports the cruelty of the unreformed prison system because it turns youngsters into hardened criminals.

“Supports” – White’s word – doesn’t quite fit here. Genet is explicit in his enmity toward this society, its prisons surely included. He sees the prison as an obstacle to be overcome in a path of criminal becoming, a path of individuation. This is the folly of trying to read him as ‘the political Genet’. To say that Genet supports (or doesn’t) any given state policy enmeshes his words in a political mode unbefitting the text at hand. Genet neither supports the prison nor desires to reform it. He seeks to escape it and into “the nocturnal part of man, which cannot be explored, where one can only enter if one is armed, if one is coated, if one is covered with all the ornaments of language.” His ritual work prepares the initiate to enter this nocturnal space. Here one may find the jewels with which to encrust a crown such as described in *Miracle of the Rose*. Here is the heaven he speaks of, the one he creates for himself and to which he is devoted. Here are the depths of the self, stirred by feelings of love both violent and mystic. Genet populates his nocturnal heaven with spirits, demons, deities, ancestors, and figures from his past with blue eagles carved across their chests, youths who stand “the way Mercury is depicted”. This inner space is nourished by solitude and dreams of escape. For him, the writings of a prisoner are uniquely positioned to create such an internal cosmology. Dreams are nursed in darkness.

Those who are sentenced to death for life... know that the only means of escaping horror is friendship. By abandoning themselves to it, they forgo the world, *your* world. They raise friendship to so high a plane that it is purified and remains alone, isolated from the creatures who fathered it, and friendships – on this ideal level, in the pure state, as it must be if the lifer is not to be carried away by despair, as one is said to be carried off (with all the consequent horror) by galloping consumption – friendship becomes the individual and very subtle sentiment of love which every predestined man discovers (in his own hiding places) for his inner glory. Living in so restricted a universe, they thus had the boldness to live in it as passionately as they lived in your world of freedom, and as a result of being contained in a narrower frame their lives became so intense, so hard, that anyone – journalists, wardens, inspectors – who so much as glanced at them was blinded by their brilliance. ... [their] audacity to live (and to live with all one’s might) within that world whose only outlet is death, has the beauty of the great maledictions, for it is worthy of what was done in the course of all the ages by the Mankind that had been expelled from heaven. And this, in effect, is saintliness, which is to live according to Heaven, in spite of God.

A perverse heaven, a nocturnal dreamscape, an internal door opened onto the dangerous and marvelous: this is where Genet found “the walls crumbled, time turned to dust...”

This text was censored, nearly forgotten, and has until now remained untranslated. It was forced into a sort of exile, and we have taken autonomous measures to bring it back, to will it into existence. This is not unlike the clandestine publication of Genet’s early novels: each initially smuggled from prison, published without imprint or publisher information, circulated illicitly

and with much scandal. There is a long tradition of pirated editions of Genet's work. Years before *Our Lady of the Flowers* was published in English, an un-permitted edition was made available under the title *The Gutter in the Sky*. On the dust jacket of that illegal edition is a lovely note from Richard Wright declaring: "Genet has created a world that is out of this world. He is a magician, and enchanter of the first order." Diane di Prima, in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, recalls: "We did a small run of Jean Genet's *Le Condamne a Mort*, put into English by me and Alan, and Bret and Harriet Rohmer. Alan's method of translating Genet was to pick up French gay hustlers on 42nd Street and bring them back to Cooper Square to help with the slang. (A great pick -up line, no? "Come home with me, baby, and help me translate Genet".) We did a bilingual edition, and had to pirate the French, as Gallimard owned the rights. They sent us an acid letter at some later point. I am not sure who got the letter, as we purposely left publisher and place off the title page, just put the alchemical logo of Poets Press: a dragon eating its tail, flanked by the sun and the moon."

The very poems di Prima mentions were first printed underground by Genet at his own expense. It is only fitting to steal the words of a text by a writer whose rites have always disregarded rights; whose practice consistently involved the theft of the written word. Genet said that "the unwelcomed word" is the means by which poetry escapes its prison. As a poet and also an enemy, he affirms the use and power of poetic weaponry. He speaks from the shadows and into the void. He stays at the edge of night and writes only for those – beautiful, criminal, unrepentant – who can hear him. The totality of Genet's work– and "The Criminal Child" especially – consists of words unwelcomed, but that nonetheless forced open the door onto the world. A long and arduous poem, of the truest sort.

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