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Genet, crime and the *passage à l'acte*

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If I am nothing but what I am, I am indestructible.

—Jean Genet, *The Criminal Child*

For Genet, crime cuts the marginalized subject from bourgeois society. Repressive prisons, juvenile homes and other penal institutions, Genet argues, create a barrier, protecting the criminal subject from society and its values. Attempts to rehabilitate only make entry into bourgeois society easier. Rather than a program of rehabilitation, Genet argues for more discipline, more punishment. Thus, in *The Criminal Child* Genet writes of juvenile delinquents, “I don’t want to invent any new plan for society to protect them.” Any such system of “re-education” he argues, would only deprive the children of “their violence, their vigour, their virility.” Punishment as a means to protect the criminal, through discipline and violence, enforces and hardens the criminal mentality. Such punishment protects and preserves the criminal characteristics, making the subject indigestible to society.

The act of crime, for Genet, demarcates the space between the subject and society: by marking the subject as criminal, and

making them an enemy of the state. Passing through the act of crime, alters the subject's very being.

An act of crime, then, can be understood as a form of resistance, an act that serves to separate the subject from the overwhelming and indeed, annihilating, ever-present force of society. The crime act successfully cuts the subject off from society, in a sense, freeing them from it.

What Genet's concept of crime speaks to is the crisis of the bourgeois world. Though we speak of crises (financial crises, recessions or depressions) as if they were aberrations, crisis is inherent to capitalism, as Marx wrote in *Capital*, "Crises are never more than momentary, violent solutions for the existing contradictions, violent eruptions that re-establish the disturbed balance for the time being."

Genet refers to the act of theft and the criminal world as being "the reverse of the customary world." The criminal world he is describing is a world within "the customary world." When he engages in an act of theft, Genet enters a secret, other world. In *The Thief's Journal*, he writes:

And what happens during a burglary? When I have broken the lock, as soon as I push the door it thrusts back within me a heap of darkness, or, to be more exact, a very thick vapor which my body is summoned to enter. I enter. For a half hour I shall be operating, if I am alone, in a world which is the reverse of the customary world. My heart beats loudly. My hand never trembles. Fear does not leave me a single second.

For Genet, the act of crime can be understood as both an instance of acting out and an instance of *passage à l'acte*. By engaging in an act of crime the subject is saying no to society and also attempting to exit the symbolic order.

Crime can be understood as an encounter with the real: it propels the subject directly into the world, "the place where

the real bears down.” When Genet describes the act of crime, he describes the act as a dropping back into a void, “Of their own volition, or owing to an accident which has been chosen for them, they plunge lucidly and without complaining into a reproachful, ignominious element, like that into which love, if it is profound, hurls human beings.” Indeed, the passage to the act marks the subject’s exit out of the symbolic order and, at the same time, their radical rejection of the big Other. This void, external to the subject, is not unlike the void of death Genet describes in his essay “The Tightrope Walker”:

Look: to surrender yourself better to Death, to make it live in you with the most rigorous precision, you will have to keep yourself in perfect health. The least illness would restore you to our life. It would be broken, this block of absence that you are going to become.

It is death, he is describing, and yet the death Genet speaks of is the death of the self, the ego. This death is a becoming nothing, an emptying out of the self. Similarly, in his essay “On Alberto Giacometti’s Studio,” Genet describes the relationship between the artist and the object and the process of emptying one’s self of the self in order to enter the void of the object:

This capacity to isolate an object and make its own, its unique significations flow into it is possible only through the historical abolition of the one who is looking. He must make an exceptional effort to divest himself of all history, so that he becomes not a sort of eternal present, but rather a vertiginous and uninterrupted passage from a past to a future, an oscillation of one extreme to another, preventing rest.

In both instances, the subject—through the discipline of solitude—divests themselves of who they are—everything that

makes them different from others including their personal history—and enters a void, what Genet refers to as “the other universe,” a world radically apart from society. The move Genet suggests is one where the subject who he calls the criminal must remove themselves from the world of appearances. He must rid himself of this attention to the visible world and retreat in solitude. And, perhaps especially, because it is an emptying out of the self, this act allows for the possibility of a communal.

Though seemingly paradoxical, Genet’s return to the self, a move that frees the subject from their ego, this remove into solitude, is a means of cleaving the subject from society. There, in the void of their interior, they can see the world, society, from a distance—now that they are separated from it—and from this distance they can nourish what separates them from that society. This space away from society, this emptied subjecthood, this death, is what Genet denotes as the criminal mind. Here, emptied of the self, aligned with and living among other outcasts (the poor, unemployed, ill, the proletariat), there might just exist the possibility for something entirely new to appear.

Cynthia Cruz is the author of six collections of poems. She is also the author of *Disquieting: Essays on Silence. The Melancholia of Class: A Manifesto for the Working Class*, an exploration of Freudian melancholia and the working class, was published in 2021 by Repeater Books.