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*Symbolic Knives*, 2024

Ceramic knives; leather, silk and wood canteen

*Actual Knife*, 2024

Hand-engraved stolen Victorinox Swiss Army Knife™ carried by the artist

In his essay 'The Criminal Child' (originally written for broadcast on French radio but subsequently censored), Jean Genet recalls a conversation with the director of a children's reformatory similar to the one in which he had been incarcerated as a youth. This conversation is really a baroque performance of show-and-tell. Opening a drawer in his desk, the director proudly offers the non-plussed Genet a view of some twenty knives confiscated from the imprisoned children:

*'Monsieur Genet,' he said, 'the rules require me to confiscate these knives. And so I do. But look at them. Do you think they're dangerous? They're tin. Tin! You can't kill anyone with tin.'*

To which Genet responds:

*Did he fail to realize that, divorced from their practical application, objects are transformed into symbols? Their very forms change, become stylized. Their work is silent, cutting deeper and deeper into the children's souls. Buried in a straw mattress at night, or hidden in the lining of a jacket, or in pants – not for the sake of convenience but to be closer to the organ of which it is the essential symbol – they represent the murder the child will never actually carry out, even as they plant a seed in his dreams that drives him, I hope, toward the most criminal acts. Why bother to confiscate these knives? The child will choose some other, seemingly more benign object to represent murder, and if that, too, is confiscated, then he will safeguard a precious, perfectly precise image.*

Symbols are deadly, what more is there to say? Except, pay attention to the choreography of this exchange – to whom what is revealed, and when. The director thinks he reveals something to Genet, a something which is no thing: knives that cannot kill, the impotent fancies of children. But what he cannot see, and which in his blindness he places before the man whose life has taught him to look on the eye level of these young delinquents, is that a symbolic force is locked within the dullest, least promising of matter. This is, of course, a metaphor for the criminal children themselves, and the different ways both adults perceive them. However, for Genet, this exchange also illuminates one facet of the character of art.

Material can be invested with symbolism: this is the first lesson learnt by the children and the artist. That much is plainly stated in Genet's rejoinder to the director. Yet, again, there is another set of messages buried deeper for those who care to look. The artfulness of children, and indeed, of criminals, goes unnoticed by society. Judges, teachers, and jailors chalk up the behaviour of their wards to some perverted yet natural tendency, which becomes the object of public fascination, the subject of sensational news reports, of books and plays and other works of art. Yet, rather than presenting the creativity of these wayward souls as simple deviations from the norm, Genet proposes that it is in fact an inverse image of the fine arts and literature so valued by polite society, and in inverse relation too – criminal children nourish their cruel imaginations on the cruelty they see represented everywhere, as an ornamental bauble of bourgeois culture.

Dominant society – the power which the director represents and which both scorns and is afraid of the impotence of the child and the criminal – undertakes a dishonest process of symbolisation. Genet describes how the ‘prisons for children’ have been renamed with such genteel euphemisms as ‘Moral Rehabilitation Facility’, ‘Reeducation Centre’ and ‘Home for the Rectification of Delinquent Youth’. The powers that be have stripped these institutions of the symbolic name ‘Prison’ or ‘Penitentiary’, and replaced it with something more homely, more purportedly honest (since it comes with a more transparent and relaxed approach to the children), because it is less cruel. However, all this reform serves to do is to hide the real cruelty of society. The judge might show up to court in a ‘tattered robe with a lining that may not even be silk, but is rayon or percaline’ simply because he needs no ceremony to do his job. Such carelessness is afforded those in high positions.

Why do children make knives out of tin? These young delinquents do so out of a romance for evil which exists because society has monopolised ‘the good’ and made ‘the bad’ a subject for fairy tales. Only in evil exists the ceremony, the glamour, the imagination which is missing in society at large and for which the child hungers. Thinking too, perhaps, that he is better than his well-behaved peers, he produces weapons to take them down a peg, not realising in his arrogance that he buys into the fantasy at the very heart of the world he so despises; the world which – seeing that he has accidentally discovered this secret – forces him out to be punished or reformed.

For Genet, art is dependent upon ‘resistant material’: the criminal, the child, the abject, the tragic, the evil. These are the true artists perhaps, or perhaps true artists are like them. If so, these poets and painters must be afflicted by the same theatrical hubris. Though they may hope to cut through the romance of the false artist, who packages up society’s evil in neat little parcels tied with words and images rather than string, how do they know if their tin knives are sharp enough? If they can delineate a precise enough dream of murder, a dream that will kill society and not those society wishes to die.