

Introduction

I was offered time on French radio, on a program called 'Carte blanche'.^{*} I said yes so I could speak of criminal Childhood. My text, which was initially accepted by Mr. Fernard Pouey, has just been rejected. Instead of pride, I feel some shame about this. I would have liked to make the voice of the criminal audible. Not his plaint; rather his song of glory. A vain need to be sincere stopped me from this, but to be sincere less due to the exactitude of facts than because of obedience to the somewhat raucous accents, the only ones that could communicate my feelings, my truth, the feelings and truth of my friends.

The newspapers were already stunned that a stage was offered to a burglar—and a queer. So I cannot speak into the national mike. I repeat that I am ashamed. I should have remained in the night, though at the edge of day, and now I move back into the shadows from which I tried so hard to tear myself.

The speech you will read here was written to be heard. I publish it anyway, but with no hope of it being read by those I love.

On the radio, I wanted to precede it with a cross-examination (administered by me) of a judge, a prison warden, and an official psychiatrist. They all refused to appear.

J.G.

The Criminal Child

Let everyone understand well, and excuse, my emotion, as I must now disclose an adventure that was also my own. To the mystery that you are, I must oppose and unveil the mystery of children's prisons. Spread out in the French countryside, often in the most elegant part, there are some places that will never cease to fascinate me. These are the penitentiaries whose official and overly polite title is currently: "Youth Club for Moral Improvement", "Re-education Center", "Delinquent Children's Recovery House", etc. The change of title is already a sign. The expression "Reformatory" and sometimes "Penitentiary", having become a sort of proper name, or, to be more precise, designating an ideal and cruel place situated deep in the child's heart, has a violence that the educators have tried to weaken. However, I hope that the children secretly, and despite terminology which reveals a fairly laughable hygiene, heed the call of the Penitentiary or the Prison. Except, now, let the children place them in a moral region, rather than in a definite place. It's stupid to attack the name, thinking that the idea of the named thing will change, since this thing is, dare I say, alive, as it is made by movement alone, just by the coming and going of the most creative element: the delinquent—or criminal—children. I want to repeat that this corner of the world, bearing one of the titles cited above, has its reflection, its image even, its home, in the soul of the children. I will come back to this soon.

Saint-Maurice, Saint-Hilaire, Belle-Isle, Eysse, Aniane, Montesson, Mettray[†]—these are some names that are perhaps nothing to you. In the head of every child who has just committed an offence or a crime, they are the definitive projection of their destiny.

"I've been sentenced to the twenty-one", they say.

They (purposely) make a mistake, since the sentence of the tribunal that judges them is as follows: "Acquitted as having acted without discernment, and entrusted until adulthood to the patronage of recovery..." But the young criminal already refuses the indulgence and solicitude of being understood in this way by 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 decent people will still not have done at 60, he holds their kindness in contempt. He demands that his punishment be without gentleness. First of all, he demands that the terms defining it bear the sign of a greater cruelty. It's with a sort of shame that the child confesses that they have just acquitted him or that they have condemned him to a light sentence. He wishes for rigor. He demands it. Inside he holds on to the dream that it will take the form of a terrible hell, that the prison will be the corner of the world from which you don't come back. In fact, you didn't come back. When you came back, you were someone else. You had come across a blazing fire. And the names that I mentioned earlier are not just any names: they are charged with meaning, with the weight of a terror that children exaggerate even more. Indeed, these names are the proof of their violence, their force, and their virility. For it is indeed that which children will conquer. Their demand is that the ordeal be terrible—so as, perhaps, to exhaust an impatient need for heroism.

Mettray: in my youth, it was among the most prestigious names. Under the blows of a generous imbecile, Mettray is gone. Today it is an agricultural colony, I think. Back then it was a severe place. After his arrival in this fortress of bay trees and flowers (Mettray was not enclosed by walls) the young outlaw who, from then on, was known as a colonist, was the object of a thousand forms of care destined to prove to him his criminal success. He was enclosed in a cell painted entirely in black (even the ceiling). Then he was dressed in an outfit known in the region for the dread and ignominy it evoked. Then, and throughout his stay, the colonist faced other tests: brawls, often mortal, that billy clubs never disturbed, dormitory hammocks, silences during work and meals, ridiculously pronounced prayers, punishments in the barracks, clogs, scorched feet, marching in the sun at a measured pace, the bowl of cold water, etc. We knew all that at Mettray, to which, as echoes respond, the torture of the pit at Belle-Isle responded, as, in other colonies, the grave, the tomb, the empty bowl, the barracks, the play of barrels, and the discipline room responded.

High schools and elementary schools have their discipline, which could seem just as severe, just as pitiless to sensible natures. We would answer that schools are not made by children; they are made for them. As for penitentiaries, they are really the physical projection of the desire for severity buried in the hearts of young criminals. I would not impute these cruelties that I enumerated to the directors or guardians of yesteryear; they were but the attentive, ferocious, but also conscious witnesses, witnesses of their role as adversaries. These cruelties had to be born and develop by necessity from the ardor of the children for evil.

(Evil: I mean just this will, this audacity to follow a destiny opposed to all the rules.) The criminal child is one who has forced open a door opening onto a forbidden place. He wants this door to open up to the loveliest landscape in the world: he demands that the penal colony that he has earned be ferocious. Worthy, in the end, of the evil he has granted himself so as to conquer it.

For some years now, well-meaning men have been trying to make all this kinder and gentler. They hope (and sometimes succeed) in winning souls over to society. To return us, so they say, to the straight path. Fortunately, the reforms are on the surface. They will only change the form.

But what have they done? They've given the guard the new name of monitor. They've also dressed him in a uniform that is supposed to remind one less of prison guards. They've required him to use less physical violence and insults, and forbidden the use of blows. Inside this Patronage, they've made discipline gentler. They've given to those they call the re-educated the possibility of choosing a trade. They've granted more freedom in work and play. Children can talk amongst themselves, even addressing the warders or the director! Sport has a privileged place. Saint-Hilaire's soccer teams are matched against those of neighboring towns, and sometimes the players travel alone from one town to the other. The press is tolerated at the Patronage—always a preselected press, a purified one. The food is better. There's chocolate on Sunday mornings. Finally, there's the measure that ought to complete the effectiveness of the reforms: argot is banned there. In sum, young criminals are granted a life closer to the most banal life. It's called regeneration.

Society seeks to eliminate, or render harmless, the elements that tend to corrode it. It would seem that it wants to diminish the moral distance between the misdeed and the punishment, or really, the passage from the misdeed to the idea of punishment. This attempt at castration speaks for itself. It doesn't move me in the least. In fact, though the colonists at Saint-Hilaire or Belle-Isle lead a life that appears to be similar to that of a school of apprentices, they cannot be ignorant of what it is that gathers them here, in this particular place—that it is evil. And because it is a guarded secret, never exhaled, this reason inflates each intention in each child.

The usual argot which has been forbidden has been replaced by another, even more subtle, which, through the workings of a mechanism that I cannot explain here in front of this mike, overtakes the argot of Mettray. At Saint-Hilaire, one of the ones I had brought out of his shell said to me one day:

"When I said to you that the friend saved himself, don't tell the director that I said that he doed."

He had come out with the word. It was the same one that we used to use at Mettray to name the kid who gets away, saves himself; the one the villagers see running in the woods like a doe. I had just been informed of a secret language, more knowing than the one they were trying to ban, and I asked myself whether it wasn't being used to express feelings that were hidden with too much precaution. The educators had a salvationist's naiveté, and his kindness of soul. One day the director of one of the Patronages showed me, in his desk, a panoply he seemed proud of: about twenty knives taken from the kids.

"Mr. Genet," he said to me, "the Administration makes me take these knives from them. So I do it. But look at them. Are you going to tell me that they are dangerous? They are made of tin. Tin! You can't kill anyone with that."

Did he not know that, the more it deviates from its practical destination, the more the object is transformed, becoming a symbol? Even its form changes sometimes: you might say it's stylized. That is how it acts, in a muffled way; in the souls of children it does the most terrible things. Buried under a

straw mattress at night, or hidden in the fold of a jacket, of a pair of pants above all—not for comfort but so that it can lay besides the organ of which it is the deep symbol—it is the very sign of the murder that the child will not actually commit, but which will render his fantasies fecund and lead them, so I hope, towards the most criminal manifestations. So what is the point of taking it from him? The child will choose another object to signify murder, something apparently more benign, and if someone doesn't take that as well, he'll keep in himself, preciously, the more precise image of the weapon.

The same director showed me the scout team he formed to reward the most docile children. I saw a dozen young boys, furtive and ugly, who had let themselves fall into the trap of good intentions. They sang ridiculous road songs that were far from the evocative power of the sentimental or obscene plaints sung at night in the dormitories and cells. Looking at these twelve kids, it was clear that none of them was chosen, elected, so as to take on some audacious expedition, even an entirely imaginary one. But I knew that in the interior of the Penitentiary, in spite of the educators, there existed groups, gangs really, where the bond, what made them stick together, was friendship, audacity, ruse, insolence, a taste for laziness, an air about the forehead at once somber and joyful—this taste for adventure against the rules of the Good.

I will excuse myself from using a language apparently more precise than my own. Please consider that I am looking to define a moral attitude and to justify it. I recognize that above all I want to interpret it, and to do so against you. But aren't you yourselves the first to speak of the "Power of the Shadows", of the "dark power of Evil"? You don't back away from metaphor when it can convince. Now, I find in it a more effective use when I speak of the nocturnal part of man, which you cannot explore, which you cannot enter unless you are armed, unless you are coated, embalmed, unless you are covered with all the ornaments of language. But above all, when someone tries to do the Good—let's note that I'm distinguishing quite rapidly between Good and Evil, though in fact these are categories that may only be distinguished after the fact; however, I'm still speaking to you; I grant you this politeness—if someone tries, I was saying, to do the Good, one knows where one is going and what the Good is, and that sanction will do good. When it's Evil, no one knows what they are talking about anymore. But I know It is the only thing that can arouse the verbal enthusiasm beneath my pen—the sign, here, of the allegiance of my heart.

In fact, I don't know of any other criterion for the beauty of an act, an object, or an entity, than the song it arouses in me, which I translate into words so as to communicate it to you: this is lyricism. If my song is lovely, if it has upset you, will you dare say that he who inspired it is vile? You can say that there have always been words charged with expressing the haughtiest attitudes, and that I would have recourse to them so that the least appears haughty. But I can respond that my emotion calls for precisely these words and that they come naturally to serve it. So, if your soul is low, call the movement that carries the child of 15 to an offence or a crime 'thoughtlessness'. I will use another word. For you need a ferocious nerve, a lovely courage, to stand against a society this strong, institutions this severe, laws protected by a police whose strength is as much in the fabulous, mythical, unformed fear that it installs in the souls of children as in its organization.

What leads them to crime is the storybook feeling, that is to say, a self-projection into the most magnificent, the most audacious, ultimately the most perilous of lives. I translate for them, for they have the right to use a language that helps them to venture out... Where, do you think? I don't know. They don't know either, even if their reveries seek precision, but it's beyond your spaces. And I wonder if you don't follow them out of spite, because they hold you in contempt and abandon you.

I expect nothing of you. This whole time I haven't been speaking to the educators, but to the guilty. For society, in its favor—I don't want to invent some new device for it to protect itself. I will tell it a secret: it will know well, all by itself, how to protect itself from the graceful danger of criminal children. I speak to them. I ask them to never be embarrassed by what they do, to keep intact inside themselves the revolt that has made them so beautiful. There are no remedies, I hope, for heroism. But be careful: if among the decent people who are listening, there are some who haven't changed the station, let them know that they have to take their shame, the infamy of being beautiful souls, all the way. Let them swear to be bastards all the way to the end. They will be cruel so as to further sharpen a cruelty with which the children will shine, resplendent.

Whoever, by gentleness or privileges, tries to attenuate or abolish revolt, destroys any chance of salvation. And no one can forgive crime if he is not first guilty and condemned.

These sorts of aphorisms seem to just come up, aroused by the lyricism I was talking about earlier. I grant it. I pronounce them with the support of just one authority: the pain that I would undergo if I had to say the opposite. And you, what do you use to support your moral rules? So let a poet, who is also an enemy, speak to you as a poet, and as an enemy.

The only means that great persons, honest people, have of safeguarding some sort of moral beauty, is to refuse all pity to the kids who don't want any. Do not believe, then, Ladies and Gentlemen, that it is enough for you to incline towards the criminal child with care and indulgence, with a comprehensive interest, to have a right to his affection and his gratitude. You must be this child, you must also be the crime, and sanctify it with a magnificent life, that is to say, with the audacity of breaking with the all-powerfulness of the world. Once we are divided (after us, the ones who desired it, who dared this rupture) between the not guilty (I do not say innocents)—between the not guilty who you are, and the guilty who we are, know that it is an entire life that you are leading from this side of the bars, from where you think you can, without any danger, and for your own moral comfort, hold out to us a helping hand. As for me, I have chosen: I will be on the side of crime. And I will help the children, not to win back access to your houses, your factories, your schools, your laws and sacraments, but to destroy them. Alas! I fear I no longer have that virtue, since due to what is not solely an error on the part of the organizers of this talk, the chance to speak on the radio is too easily granted to me.

The newspapers still show photographs of bodies overflowing in silos or littering the plains, caught in the barbed-wire brambles, in the cremation ovens; they show nails torn off, skin tattooed, tanned for lampshades: these are the Hitlerian crimes. But what nobody realizes is that in the children's penal colonies, in French prisons, children and men are martyred by torturers. It doesn't matter if some are innocent and others guilty in the eyes of either a superhuman or merely human justice. In the eyes of the Germans, the French were guilty. We were so mistreated in prison, and in such a cowardly manner,

that I am jealous of you in your tortures. For it's similar to and better than what we do. Due to the effects of heat, the plant has flourished. Since it was planted by the bourgeois who made the stone prisons, with their guards of flesh and spirit, I rejoice to finally see the sower devoured. Decent men, who are today golden names in marble, applauded when we were cuffed at the wrists, while a cop beat our sides. One little flick from their henchmen was vivified by the boiling blood of the heroes of the North; it developed until it became a marvelous plant, beautiful in tact and skill, a rose whose petals were twisted, rolled-up, showing the red and the pink under a hellish sun and named with terrible names: Maidenek, Belsen, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Dora. My hat goes off.

But we'll go on being your remorse. And for no other reason than to once more embellish our adventure, because we know that its beauty depends on the distance that separates us from you, for in the place we'll reach—I know it—the shores aren't different, but we'll make you out on your well anchored beaches, little, slender, angry—we'll sense your impotence and your benedictions. Besides, rejoice! If the malicious, the cruel, represent the force against which you fight, we wish to be this force of evil. We will be the matter that resists and without which there are no artists.

A bunch of romantic talk, you say.

Now, I know that the morality in whose name you pursue the children is not one you ever apply. I don't blame you for this. Your merit consists in professing principles that tend to govern your life. But you have too little force to give yourself over freely and entirely to virtue, or to Evil. You preach one and disavow the other, from which you nevertheless profit. I acknowledge your practical sense. Alas, I can't sing it. Now accuse me of lyricism! But if it happens that one of your judges, a clerk of the court, or a prison warden makes a song hatch and rise up in my chest—gentlemen, you'll be the first to know.

Your literature, your fine arts, your after-dinner entertainment all celebrate crime. The talent of your poets has glorified the criminal who, in life, you hate. So deal with the fact that, for our part, we despise your poets and your artists. Today we can say that an actor needs a rare presumptuousness to pretend to commit murder on the stage when, every day, there are children and men whose crime, even if it doesn't always lead them to their death, grants them your spite or your delicate pardon. Each of these criminals has to come to terms with his act. He needs to pull together all the resources of his moral life, which he must organize around himself; he must obtain from it what yours refuses him. For him—and for him alone, and for a very brief time, since you have the power to cut off his head—he becomes a hero as lovely as those who touch you in your books. To continue to live with himself—if he lives—he needs more talent than the rarest poet.

Your heroes, though, the ones that fill your books, your tragedies, your poems, and your paintings, are puffed up; they get to be the ornaments of your life, while you hold their unhappy models in contempt. You are doing it right: they refuse the hand you hold out.

If those who are listening saw the film *Sciuscià*[±], they were moved by the delicate play of feelings among children tied to one another by the most subtle of loves. They admired an adventure that they dare not live, but no one would ever think that such charming heroes exist in real life. That they steal real bank notes from their real parents. True, what is called the talent of actors has afforded us such

lovely images; however, those who were their more or less exact models suffered for real; they bled, they cried (less often), and the glory of the world was denied them. You therefore support heroism when it is tame (I will note in passing that your charmers, your artists, tame it for you, by always approaching it from afar). You know nothing of heroism in its true nature, in the flesh, how it suffers in the same everyday way that you do. True greatness brushes past you. You ignore it, and prefer a fake.

So, if children have the audacity to say no to you, punish them. Be hard with them so they don't go easy on you. But after long enough, you will cheat. At your Tribunals, your Courts, you no longer observe the ceremony of the ritual—not that you have replaced it with a more intimate cruelty, a cruelty in a suit, I dare say—but, due to a grave sloppiness, you arrive at the courtroom with a patched-up robe whose cuffs are sometimes not even silk, but rayon or cotton luster. You should apply all the rules of the code, and above all the most formalist. The criminal child no longer believes in your dignity, for he has realized that it was made of a faded sleeve, a tattered braid, a threadbare fur. The luxury, dust, and poverty of your sessions upset him. He is ready to offer you the little bit of majesty that he can obtain from a more solemn session, where he secretly appears as you continue what to his eyes is a childish simulation. For a moment, familiarity might lead you to touch his cheek, grasp his chin, if you did not fear that someone would accuse you, not of paternal indulgence, but of abominable sentiments.

But I'm just talking, right?—and my humor is a little much for you. You're sure that you will save these children. Fortunately, you will never be able to oppose anything to the beauty of the older rogues they admire, to the ferocious murderers, other than ridiculous watchmen, squeezed into poorly cut and ill-fitting uniforms. None of your functionaries can take the children and make them succeed in the adventure they themselves have begun. Nothing will replace the seduction of the outlaws. For the criminal act has more importance than any other, since it's the one through which you oppose yourself to such a great moral and physical force.

You also believe in the beauty of Vacher, of Weidmann, of Ange Soleil. § I rise up against this affirmation: "... that there were in them marvelous possibilities that one could have taken the side of..." That is a language that can only be yours, that of Society, but you would truly be in pain if I rigorously interrogated you. They have drawn out of themselves those most marvelous possibilities.

If you can't conquer the children with gentleness, what's left for you is to heal them, since you have psychiatrists. About them, it's enough to pose some simple questions, questions that have been posed hundreds of times. If their function is to modify the moral behavior of children, what morality will they lead them to? The one taught in school manuals? But scientists don't take that seriously. Some particular morality elaborated by each doctor? Whence does he draw his authority? What good are these questions?—they will be conjured away. I know that it's the usual morality, and the psychiatrist invokes it when he gives the children the lovely name of maladjusted. How can I respond? I will always oppose my ruse to your trickery.

Today, since it has been allowed (through I don't know what error) for a poet who was once one of theirs, to speak into this mike, I want to reiterate my tenderness for these little pitiless youths. However, I have no illusions. I speak in the void and in the darkness; but even if it were just for myself, I would still want to insult the insulters.

* [The expression *carte blanche* means a blank check, a free rein. —T.N.]

† [As is suggested by the context, this is a list of notorious French reformatories. —T.N.]

‡ [1946 Italian neorealist film, the first major work by Vittorio De Sica, known as *Shoeshine* in English; it is about two shoeshine boys in post-World War II Italy. —T.N.]

§ [Three famous murderers. —T.N.]