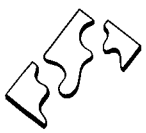
Toys



Jay Mullin
Queensborough College

What a toy is does not go without saying; it is not a matter of going to a toy store and pointing. Otherwise we could never feel about a toy that it is a failure—that it fails to perform the function of a toy. If to ask what a toy is is to ask what performs that function, then it is to ask what that function *is*. If to ask what a toy is is to ask what a toy is for, it is to ask what a *good* toy is in the sense of a toy that does well what it ought to do.

In a sense there is no problem in stating what a good toy is; the problem lies in taking cognizance of what such a statement says. A good toy is one which a child can at once play with and learn from; a good toy is one in which playing and learning reveal and display their togetherness. Certainly toys that merely instruct, or are mindless fun, are not good toys.

These statements are easy to make, and nobody would disagree with them. Or rather, only those who hate childhood would claim that merely-instructive toys are good for children, and only those who hate adulthood would claim that stupid toys are good for children.

We could say, then, that our problem—the problem of understanding what a good toy is—is really the problem of understanding what playing and learning are. What we commonsensically know about the nature of a good toy suggests that playing and learning are only properly what they are —are only good, or productive of good—when they are somehow interrelated. The merely-educative toy is not truly or properly educative: children who learn without playing learn to learn without playing; they learn to segregate learning from playing; they learn to regard learning as distinct from and as more *real* than playing; they learn to despise playing. On the other hand, the merely-entertaining is not truly educative either: children who play without learning learn to despise learning as superfluous. At best they make learning *into* play, into a game that is *about* nothing beyond itself as another example of play.

One feature of a bad toy is that smart children can see through it. What children intuit when they reject the educational or stupid toy is that they mis-represent life—they have an angle on it but do not dwell at the center of it. They are ruled by fixed ideas, whether of education or entertainment. The good toy pleases because it dwells at the center: it reflects, because it exemplifies, the nature of life. And it does so by exemplifying the togetherness of playing and learning. The toy reminds us: this is what life is really like (when it is really life): the unity of pleasure and reason. The comfortable character of that interaction is bound to encourage children. Witnessing the compatibility of these two supposedly deadly enemies—in fact their indispensability to each other—is bound to encourage them to trust the very parts of themselves that they consider their deadly enemies.

The good toy, then, is good because it teaches the child that playing and learning belong together. The good toy does not combine the functions of the educational and the entertaining toys: rather, it rejects them decisively. The good toy, that is, rejects the idea of a one-sided child.

This criticism of one-sided toys claims that it is not good for the child to learn to despise either playing or learning, or that it is not good for parents to bring up either little eggheads or little brats. Yet the egghead and the brat are not problematic *for the reason that* one hates to play and the other to learn. The *reason* we think of them as problems has to do with *what* hating playing or hating learning brings about. One-sided children are bad not because they hate—that is just to repeat that they are one-sided—but because by hating they segregate one part of the whole from another and so fail to take cognizance of the whole as such. One-sided children are aware *only of parts*; they are never moved to ask the question: What moves the parts or relates them to one another in such a way that each part has its distinctive place? Instead, the one-sided child must solve the problem of the possible chaos of the world—the possible chaos given by the fact (which is given to all of us) that there is learning and playing, reason and emotion, day and night—by imagining, not that each part has its place within the whole, within life, but that one part controls the others. One-sided children see contradictions rather than distinctions. This means that they are unable to apprehend what collects the parts of life, or that they are unable to apprehend life.

Effort and Enjoyment

The subject of toys is useful, then, because it prompts us to raise the question of the need for the togetherness of playing and learning, i.e., the need to apprehend togetherness or the idea of life itself or the whole. The good toy will be one which exemplifies a remembrance of the togetherness of playing and learning, just as the bad toy exemplifies its absence. It is useful for us to examine toys because it is useful to remember what is whole. Toys are loved because they imitate the whole; they are loved not for themselves but for what they imitate, i.e., for what they allow us once more to apprehend.

Toys are fundamental insofar as playing and learning are fundamental. That toys are needed to encourage an awakening of the need for the togetherness of playing and learning, and that a childhood without toys is inconceivable, suggests that it is essential to awaken the need for the togetherness of playing and learning, or that it is essential for the child—for the human—to apprehend the unity and difference of just these two. In other words, if a healthy child is one who develops from a helpless mass into a truly social actor, then apprehending the unity and difference of playing and learning—mastering (recognizing the nature of) playing and learning—is itself somehow essential to becoming a truly social actor.

Our problem, the problem of articulating what a good toy is, is really the problem of articulating the nature of playing and learning. One thing we know about the nature of playing and learning is, as we have said, that they are only truly productive of good when they co-exist. But what would it mean to say that they co-exist?

Play—whether we think of the immediacy of touching and handling, or of experimenting with new and different things and ideas, or of simply amusing oneself by giving oneself over to whatever spontaneously presents

itself to consciousness—seems to have to do with an absence of resistance or with freedom. Yet touch would not be what it is without resistance, and freedom is too loose a word to characterize activities that surely have their own "inner necessity" or integrity. Play, then, is not the same as freedom or the absence of resistance in the sense of an absence of limits; a game, for example, involves resistance (other players) and necessity (the rules).

Yet, for all that, to play a game is to play rather than to work because the resistance is not "real" (only a poor sport would lament not having overcome it) and the necessity does not implicate the player, does not allude to *the player's* limitations (the rules belong to the game, not to me; they are arbitrary). Play is essentially unserious; anyone who *works* at play (as some people think some psychologists advise) is foolish. In the same way, while failure at work is respectable, failure at play is only pitiable. In the former case, the problem is that one has made an inadequate effort while in the latter case the problem is that one has forgotten that *any* effort is by nature inappropriate and thus inadequate. One who "has trouble having a good time" is pathetic because having trouble is alien to play, and so to have trouble playing is deeply *not to know* what play is.

But just as one who can have trouble at play is pitiable, so one who cannot have trouble at work—at learning—is pitiable. One who cannot make mistakes in one's work is really only playing. Play is trouble-free because it is itself satisfaction: in playing one need not oppose resistances or suffer the limitations which make opposition impossible. If playing and learning refer to the ability to be satisfied and the ability to work (in a sense, the ability to feel complete and incomplete), then our claim is that good toys teach about the togetherness of work and satisfaction. And if good toys teach about the togetherness of work and satisfaction, then it is essential (as essential as toys are) to anyone who would become an adult to recognize that work and satisfaction belong together. We (adults) need to examine toys because it is useful to remind ourselves of the meaning of "together." One-sidedness is an inadequate way of being for the "object" as well as the "subject."

Toys as Cultural Artifacts

Every toy teaches something. Even the toys enjoyed by eggheads and brats teach: they teach abstraction. They may teach, for example, that body and mind contradict one another; in so doing, they recommend particular conceptions of body and of mind. Toys teach in the sense that they represent the world; a toy appeals to children only insofar as its universe embodies or alludes to what is most real for them. The toy represents to the child what is natural or what is Other.

Some toys, of course, explicitly declare that they represent the nature of reality. Toys which depict environment or "worlds" are common. There are miniature police stations and fire houses, even entire miniature towns. Insofar as these toys amount to small-scale *reproductions* of the adult world, or particular regions within it, the deep claim they make about the nature of the adult world is that it is *already formed*, i.e., it is there independent of any activity on the part of humanity. Children who are presented with literal reproductions of worlds learn to segregate them-

selves from the world.[1] They learn to treat themselves as observers—and so, in the same way, their speech as description. The world is given to humanity, pre-formed, already whatever it can possibly end up to be. The world stands before humanity, mute yet self-sufficient. And it is the latter that provokes awe in the child: here is something utterly independent of me, utterly without need of me. The intention of the toy, if it is to relieve children of their self-centredness, is fulfilled by inculcating self-doubt, which, if the toy is only interesting or vivid enough, will transform itself into selfless absorption. But since the absorption originates in the effort to silence doubt—in this case, to find a place for oneself in this pre-established universe—the child rises only to a higher selfishness. The world-toy fails to teach children confidence because it fails to teach them *about themselves*. The world-toy is a distraction—a distraction from children's experience of themselves as chaos, i.e., as either everything or nothing. The world-toy solves the problem of children's inability to place themselves in the world, to see themselves as part of it. But it does so artificially: children participate, not by experiencing the essential togetherness of self and world—the self as "microcosm"—but by orienting to the world as the external demand they must satisfy. The world-toy solves children's problems by compelling them to forget themselves, for a time.

Children's relation to the world-toy—their history or development in terms of it—mirrors the relation of people to their world. For in the latter case too what is fixed at the outset is a distinction between self and world, a distinction which preoccupation with the uniqueness of the self requires: when the self alone is regarded with wonder (which is to say, with adoration and much confusion), then the world can only appear as that which stands against humanity.[2] Then humanity's only options are to flee the world by attempting to return to the self (modern art, madness) or by attempting to control the world (modern science). But where fleeing is impossible, the only alternative is to find a place for oneself *within* what is already given. Because the togetherness of humanity and world is not apprehended, tyranny and servility are the only ways humanity has of relating to the world as object.

The toy which presents the world as object encourages absorption. Though this appears to induce wonder, a pre-formed world is precisely that which replaces wonder—with precision. Children confronted with such a toy know they can break it and must not; but this means they must exercise caution but not care. That is, they must not wonder. The realization that they can break it—that humanity has that power—only reinforces the idea that humanity and world are deeply estranged from one another. What truly belongs to the world cannot destroy the world. Children must exercise caution in the sense that they must inhibit themselves, must resist imposing themselves upon the precious world which stands before them. The world-toy's orderliness suggests that to question is to destroy.

Though children can destroy the world-toy, they do so only if they are overcome by rage. For they see that what is before them, as against their chaotic self, is organized, self-sufficient (indifferent), and capable of placing—of making organized and self-sufficient—people who lay aside their selves and agree to become at one with it. Children decide not to destroy

because they understand that, while they may be superficially stronger, they are profoundly weaker than the world placed before them. Thus their absorption in the world-toy is not undertaken for the latter's sake; it cares not for what it is with but for itself, its own survival. Such toys, when used properly, are nothing if not comfortable. They are all-encompassing: they encompass children, they protect them from the confusion that questioning entails. They allow children to be passive, to forsake the anxiety over survival which the toy itself engenders. The toy restores the very safety of which it robbed the child in the first place. And yet it does more than that: it provides them with the idea of a kind of security which does not appear and disappear as if automatically and irrationally.

The world-toy provides a feeling of security which is itself secureable: security is no longer the perhaps momentary experience of peace but the understanding that, so long as one continues to participate in the world of the toy—that is, to imagine oneself to be sheriff's deputy or ambulance driver or tax collector—one has a right to expect to remain secure. The toy teaches that safety can be methodically provided for: peace is no longer simply the absence of conflicting inner demands or freedom from the disapproving glances of elders but rather positive, practical, methodic activity—the activity of doing one's job, of playing one's part (as deputy, etc.) if only in imagination. Safety, then, need not be associated with holding one's breath or hiding or wishing: one can be secure without being invisible. The world-toy encourages the development of persons who, though deeply shy in the sense that they think only of their own safety, need not be literally shy but instead can be active and gregarious. If the shy person's problem is to exist without making a difference, then the world-toy teaches how this can be done. Prior to exposure to such a lesson, the timid child must think that to not make a difference one must not exist (e.g., hold one's breath). The world-toy introduces an element which as it were mediates between existence and non-existence: namely, a *world* in which, when one gives oneself to it, one exists (breathes, acts) without existing (questioning, making a difference). One does not make a difference in the world of the world-toy because the toy itself defines all the possible activities and functions of its users; the child does not participate in the constitution of any course of action. Anyone could be sheriff's deputy. The world-toy, in short, is a miniature bureaucracy.

Of course not all world-toys depict actual bureaucratic environments. Besides police stations and modern kitchens there are, for example, electric train sets whose cars carry needed food and fuel and which run past mountains, fields with cows grazing, and so on. Clearly such a toy is not a depiction of bureaucracy, of a division of labor that exists, not in order to do most effectively what is most needful, but in order to satisfy the anxious imperative of modern humanity to be invisible. Here the child's task is to transport necessary resources from town to town, and to make sure the occasional wandering cow is not hit. There may even exist miniature farm sets where the child's task is to grow the very food carried by the electric trains. And these are very different tasks from that of the little homemaker-to-be, who is simply asked to push the button on the miniature microwave oven. But if the question which all these toys arise in order to pose and answer is, "Do I fit in somewhere?", then they are only

superficially different. What they all provide children with is a picture of a smoothly functioning organism which invites them in on the condition that they refrain from reforming it. Though it is necessary to distinguish nature from convention—growing food from pushing buttons—and especially so since children, in innocence, will treat everything as nature unless encouraged to do otherwise—children's needs are to know how *their* nature relates to the nature with which they are presented in the shape of a toy. If the toy teaches children to fit in, to master the techniques of one or another preformed task, then it is teaching them to be bureaucrats. Whether they prefer to be farmers or district attorneys is of secondary importance. What is fundamental is the presentation of the world (the toy) as sheer externality, and externality as relief from the torment of confronting one's confused and contradictory self. In any case what the child learns to love at best are roots. The world-toy offers a world, an environment, a home: henceforth, the child learns to identify the experience of security with the experience of place, of setting. The feeling of comfort which marks real security is seen by the child as being granted by the environment. Only accomplishing the tasks generated by the world-toy provides for security. The world-toy establishes the idea that the grounds of security, far from being mysterious and ineffable, are accessible to vision as well as to reason: they are located in the pre-given environment, in roots. Thus the toy substitutes one experience of security for another: it removes the mystery instead of encouraging the child to trust in it. One learns, not to love what cannot be seen—which formerly alone provided for security—but, at best, to feel pity for its impotence. The mysterious source of security which the child learns to disregard in favor of a surer thing, i.e., in favor of the bright light of the environment, is the (intermittent) experience that even confusion is desirable.

The miniature environment requires a user who—whether on account of youth or lack of imagination—is so in need of a place that one will gladly co-operate with the toy in its effort to absorb one's difference from it. Yet there are other toys which can assimilate more inventive or resourceful natures. Chief among these are puzzles. Collections of interlocking pieces are no different from preformed environments. They are simply preformed environments which happen to have been taken apart; the child is given the responsibility for putting the pieces back together again. Since the problem of how to reconstruct the environment is solved by referring to the image of the constructed environment, which, aside from being pictured on the package, is implied in the fragments into which the construction has dissolved, neither the problem nor its solution belong to the child. Yet such toys are more interesting than world-toys which do not come apart—they are more advanced—because they teach or allude to deep features of the environment which the other type ignores. For one thing, the puzzle teaches that the world, if taken apart, can be put back together, or that taking apart the world has no real consequences since every act of destruction is necessarily an act within the world. In other words the puzzle suggests that destruction is not immoral or a sign of disease but is a logical impossibility. To fail to construct is to be intellectually deficient rather than morally deficient. The unconstructed character of the world becomes the *child's* problem. The set of interlocking pieces represents a world whose logic is absolutely self-referential; any problem with it (with recon-

structing it) is somebody else's problem. It recognizes nothing outside itself, and it shows this by including destruction of itself as an activity generated and nurtured from within its own boundaries. Such a world is open to infinite rearrangement but is closed to all change. Where the world-toy disqualifies reconstruction, the puzzle assimilates it. In this way it makes reference to an adult environment characterized by endless and meaningless variety—meaningless, that is, except as a distraction. It is an environment in which everything remains ultimately the same—an environment, in short, which is friendly to self-distortions of all kinds yet is hostile to influence, the one experience in which every child naturally participates. By denying influence, the puzzle denies childhood. The puzzle represents a world that tolerates any activity—including its own dismemberment—as long as the activity can be traced back to itself, to its own exercise of influence, its own standards, as the source of activity. This is seen, perhaps, in the fact that there is so little to do with a puzzle but put it together and take it apart again.

Since the puzzle is after all a toy, its function is to speak to the question of the place of the user within the environment represented by it. Children's concern is with themselves; a toy that offers them no answer to the question of their place would be a useless toy. Here the puzzle is most instructive. The world's disorder, of which the puzzle announces its celebration, is mirrored in that of the child. The puzzle teaches that the problem of disorder can always be construed as "someone else's" problem, i.e., as an external problem of technical reconstruction, a problem of intelligibility. What is disorganized can always be reorganized according to rule, according to method. The puzzle thus teaches the child to be concerned with boundaries rather than grounds or principles, anatomy rather than spirit.

In claiming that the world-toy distracts children from themselves, we may have abstracted from the experience of childhood. The enthusiasm of childhood is an enthusiasm or passion for oneself, for seeing oneself everywhere. Perhaps no toy can dampen that enthusiasm and still succeed as a toy, i.e., as something the child enjoys. If so, we would need to ask the following question: what does the world-toy teach children *positively* about themselves (rather than about themselves as a lack—of order, rationality, etc.)?

One thing we know is that the world-toy, including the puzzle, is not for infants. What does this tell us about the difference between a child and an infant? Here it may help to think of the difference between a world-toy and, say, a rattle. What is essential to the rattle being a good rattle (i.e., for a baby) is that it provides immediate gratification. Just grab it, shake it, and—if you are a normal baby—begin giggling, drooling, etc. The rattle *always works* (for the baby). If the baby is cranky, and shrieks in disapproval as the parent tries to cheer it up by taking up the rattle, then the problem is not that the rattle failed to work—it does what it always does—but that the baby chose to ignore it. It chose to ignore it because what it hates about the rattle *is* just that it always works (is never, as it were, in a cranky mood). The rattle *never resists* the baby although the baby may resist it. The rattle never shows the baby that the baby is doing wrong; it does not

teach the baby that to be cranky is not good. For example, it does not show the bad consequences of crankiness. As far as the baby is concerned, being cranky simply entails being free for a while from the incessant din of rattles (and cheerful rattle-like parents), and that is hardly a bad consequence. The rattle, then, always works in that it makes no demands on the baby: it does not require that the baby be a fit companion to it. If the baby is unfit (cranky), then the rattle gets tossed aside. The rattle fails to work only in the sense that the baby chooses to treat it as not working and not because the baby fails to give it what it needs in order to work. The failure is in that sense *always* the rattle's: such is the world of immediate gratification and crankiness.

The rattle, then, does not challenge the child; it does not provoke it to try to become a fit interlocutor for it, i.e., to try to make it work. The rattle, for its part, shows this by never resisting the child. It is otherwise with world-toys. Children can fail with them—they can fail to make the electric trains work, and they can fail to make the puzzle pieces fit together. Thus children must have not only desire but skill in order to play successfully with such toys: they must *master* them as well as sympathize with them.

It may appear as if the difference between the rattle and the world-toy is not very great when we consider how little skill or mastery is involved in learning the difference between pulling the switch that makes the train go forward and the one that makes it go backward. But this mistakes the meaning of mastery—it regards it as a technical rather than an essential matter. The rattle is for babies because it subjects itself to the baby's moods or whims. The rattle does not respond to the baby but rather gratifies it. The latter responds the same way to everything, and so its "response" is, so to speak, irresponsible—except to babies, who are encouraged precisely and naturally to be "everything," i.e., to express without reserve any humor to which they happen to be subject. Sheer gratification fails to respond (resist) in that it fails to invite its interlocutor to be something rather than anything; it fails to encourage its interlocutor to *limit* itself in any way. The world-toy teaches children that, in order to play with it, they must master themselves—they must not pull any switch they please but only the right ones. Of course this "must" carries little weight if children are indifferent to whether the train moves forward or backward or off the tracks or not at all. Perhaps there is little reason why they should care, and perhaps in all probability they don't. The reason why they love the train set is, after all, that they know they are responsible for making the trains run, and they are excited that they *can* make them run. This does not necessarily mean that they feel like tyrants, for they know they have to do things the correct way. Otherwise the trains will refuse to do what they want them to do. Children, then, are excited neither by the mere fact that the trains move forward or backward, etc., or that they can lord it over the feeble little toy (for they are in awe of it, and so in a sense respectful of it) but by the recognition that, *if they do the right thing, the trains will be set in motion.*

Children's excitement in this sense points beyond egocentrism. We do not want to ignore the fact that they are excited too when the train set arrives at the house and they watch their parents show them how one makes the trains move—or, more to the point, we do not want to ignore the

fact that children can be excited by watching real trains in motion (without even imagining that somebody somewhere is pulling any switches at all). While such experiences point beyond egocentrism, we need not ignore them in order to make the claim that children's excitement is due fundamentally to their experience of the reality of mastery. How else can we account for their pleasure in observing real trains in motion? Their pleasure is neither the passive appreciation of external beauty nor the passive gluttony involved in allowing the senses to be flooded by movement but rather the pleasure, which is neither selfish nor selfless, of being in the presence of power. Children are excited by the train's power, its *active* character. They are excited by their parents' (and their own) ability to run the electric train, not because first their parents and now they themselves can usurp the authority once seen to be exercised in "real life" by the train itself—not, that is, because they can replace or give the lie to power—but because now they are closer than ever before to participating in the reality of power. If children saw themselves as replacing the train's power, then they would have no respect for the train. Consequently they would have no respect for their own ability to make the train run.[3] Power, then, is not the same as control, for control experiences no resistance. To be excited by one's ability to make the trains run, then, requires that one regard it as an achievement. To regard it as an achievement means to regard it as the result of an encounter with what resists it. In the case of the electric trains, children's power is their ability to resist the temptation to do as they please and instead to pull the right switches. To say that children are *merely* pulling switches, that in reality the train moves because etc., etc., is superficial. Children's power lies in their ability to encounter what resists the exercise of power. And the train is there to remind them—by failing to move or stop if the right thing is not done—of the need for that encounter.

In the same way children are fascinated by the movement of the real train because they know that it could just be standing there doing nothing or even not be there at all. This ability to emerge and come to a stand seems to sharply differentiate the train from the children, who do not see themselves as powerful in that sense because they are always already present to themselves as what they are, think, feel, and so on. Or else they are not present at all: children are either sheer self-expression or sheer self-forgetfulness. They know only either the familiar or the fantastic. They never experience power because they never resist themselves—they either simply are themselves or else they escape from themselves into fantasy. The good of the world-toy, then, is that it provides an opportunity for the child to experience resistance as a pleasurable activity. Resistance is not grave self-analysis but the need to discipline oneself in order that one might be able to *do* something. And the latter is never either familiar or fantastic.

Mastery, then, is not a matter of commanding, assimilating, or destroying anything, nor is it a matter of acquiring some technical competence. Rather, it means meeting what naturally resists one, what naturally stands in the way of doing something rather than anything or nothing. But even if something is better than anything or nothing, how do we know that something in a particular case is or is not worth doing? The train set teaches children to make the trains run; it teaches them to exercise mastery, to do something, and so to encounter what naturally resists such an achieve-

ment. And we have suggested that the train itself matters very little to the child (or should matter very little); what children are excited by is their own mastery. Our task, then, is to formulate toys as educative in the sense of encouraging children to learn to do something (to care about *what* they are doing) rather than anything (to simply care *that* they are doing). The difference between something and anything, then, is the difference between responsibility and indifference. But to say that children care more about their exercise of power than about the trains suggests that the train set may not be helping them grow up after all—it may be merely engendering the artificial strength of indifference.

We might begin to show respect even to indifference by pointing out that the experience of mastery to which it refers, and which the train set offers children, gives the latter a sense of their own "identity." That, perhaps, is what the notions of limit, self-control, and "something" refer to. This introduces some tension into our discussion of the nature of a good toy, and the question in particular of whether the train set is a good toy, for now to decide the status of the train set seems to require formulating the place of "identity," and the question of the place of identity is ambiguous to say the least. Acquiring an identity could be an essential stage in becoming mature or it could be the method by which one guarantees one will remain merely self-assertive or insular.

The question is this. If the train set teaches mastery, and if mastery in the best sense is the experience of one's own particularity, one's own particular ability to do something (particular), then what more is required of identity such that identity could blossom into maturity? (And does the train set contribute to this development? And if not, what does?) A sense of identity that issued in mere self-assertiveness or insularity would be one which treated itself as if it were the whole: its mood would be one of self-congratulation rather than gratitude. If identity requires gratitude in order to become social, then it must treat its achievement of identity as a response to a demand rather than the mere discovery of what it already by itself is. That is, it must treat what enables it to achieve its identity as an essential rather than merely fortuitous feature of its identity. To treat one's identity as the whole, as if it did not imply alterity essentially, is to treat whatever enables one to achieve identity as external to one's identity. To merely discover one's identity means to forget that the very act of discovery is itself a feature of one's identity. To be indifferent to alterity is to forget that the very struggle that issues in a sense of identity belongs to one's identity, and so helps transform identity into fate. That identity as fate is always re-achieved suggests that alterity is an essential feature of maturity's self-understanding.

Yet we have said that the best children are ones who are not interested in the train. Does this mean, however, that their relationship to it is instrumental or exploitative? To say that children do not care about the train is perhaps to say that they care instead about the *interaction* between themselves and the train (they care about resistance, in some sense). So, for example, children do not want to read a book describing trains; rather, they want to participate in the work of getting the train to run. (And *then* perhaps they will learn to read.) Only in this way does their relationship to the train become one which enables them to experience mastery.

The Faceless Toy as Contemporary Icon

But what would it look like for children to experience mastery in such a way that they at the same time experience their essential need for the struggle which provides for the experience of mastery? Does the train set encourage such an experience? To address these questions we have first to address the question, what *is* the need for alterity that we are repeatedly referring to?

It may help to think of a kind of toy that engenders a sense of identity as mere selfishness. One example is the futuristic toy, e.g., the electronic, computerized toy which, like a creature from outer space, does what human beings can do without in any way resembling them. What such a toy represents is abstract action—action without an actor. Though robots have faces, it is of no consequence that they do. Their faces do not function as faces; they do not moderate the character of their owners' speeches. To face is to confront the obvious—to open oneself up or expose oneself to the presence of what lies simply before one. The face is that by means of which one opens oneself up and submits to what lies before one: it is that which we hide when we are ashamed of the truth.[4] The face is that which acknowledges the exoteric; the face acknowledges shared knowledge or common sense. The face acknowledges what all can understand—not the wisdom that is private or mysterious but that which is accessible to all. The face is that which respects the fact that we, even though we seek esoteric knowledge, necessarily partake of exoteric knowledge, i.e., are necessarily exposed to it. One with a face is one who experiences the appeal—which is not necessarily to say the authority—of common sense. One with a face is one who recognizes that, even though one desires and seeks wisdom, one remains desiring and seeking, i.e., one remains within the relationship between the social and what transcends it.

The robot, then, is the faceless person *par excellence*. The robot is the person who represents wisdom but not desire, the esoteric but not the exoteric, the rare but not the common, identity but not alterity. Generally the robot is treated as denying the emotions, but that denial is simply an example which points to the denial of whatever would stand between wisdom and one's complete possession of it. The robot stands for untempered wisdom, wisdom without temperance. Therefore, while it may literally have a face, it does not need one. Toy manufacturers are beginning in their way to realize this for they have begun producing robots without faces. These toys represent, not a person, but wisdom incarnate. It is not a coincidence that the person who represents wisdom does not look at all like a person. For such a replica *cannot* look like a person. A child would reject as incredible a toy that attempted to unite in one figure the characteristics of absolute wisdom and everydayness. It is obvious that Ken and Barbie dolls are not omniscient. The most popular omniscient-person toy of recent Christmas seasons is named Merlin:

> Parker Brothers, a company that built an estimated $95 million business on the global success of Monopoly is pushing a smart new toy named Merlin that is making magic in the marketplace. Merlin isn't very cute: he resembles a red Slimline telephone. But the micro-computer in his middle can make him play tick-tack-toe and five other games. He is also programed to play 48 musical notes, allowing his controller to tootle almost anything from Boogie Oogie Oogie to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.[5]

That the robot is meant to embody perfection is compatible with the fact that many robots are produced who have emotional and not merely intellectual capacities. This is the case in the film "Star Wars," where figures resembling vacuum cleaners and other machines are shown crying, etc. But insofar as the machine represents the film's version of an ideal person, or at any rate a highly advanced and so approximately ideal one, its emotions are seen to be either irrelevant or dysfunctional. The machine, that is, is one whose emotions ought not (and, in principle, need not) affect his capacity to get the job done or answer the question. Emotions ought not to distract. They must never announce a new mood, a new interest; they are allowed no life of their own. The cheerful emotions may even make intellectual work more pleasant and so may even, like Muzak, improve efficiency. The most sophisticated robot assimilates the expression of emotion to the practice of omniscience:

> 2-XL robot cannot walk. But the $50 Mego toy does talk—in a pleasant, lively voice all its own. 2-XL asks true-false questions, correcting wrong answers and congratulating the respondent for right ones. It also gives multiple-choice tests, cracks amusing jokes and plays a few games.[6]

In some cases assimilation is unsuccessful. Then emotion is sheerly dysfunctional. While some robots in "Star Wars," for example, displayed incompetence, the potential for perfect assimilation—i.e., the potential for untempered wisdom—characterizes all robots alike. Robots who cry are simply incompetent.

The first thing that appears troublesome about the robot-child relationship is that the robot does all the work. The child does not participate in forming the robot. The robot is self-sufficient; it can talk even if nobody is listening. The child can sit back and imbibe the robot's wisdom. The position in which the child is thereby placed is ambiguous. On the one hand the robot seems to be completely at the child's disposal (since the robot does all the work, and it does so at the child's command); on the other hand the child seems to be at the robot's disposal (since the robot is the only one who can teach). What the robot teaches is already, it seems, what the child wants to know: namely, how to be self-sufficient. If this is so, then the robot is not much of a teacher for it does not teach new needs; it only satisfies old ones. The robot teaches that in order to become self-sufficient one must show an interest in having answers rather than in raising questions: one must be willing to cultivate intelligence independent of wonder. To wonder means to be *limited* in what one can know in that one only comes to know what one is interested in: to wonder means to display a kind of intelligence that is mediated by one's particularity or by one's character. Wonder, then, implies an interest in self-knowledge. The robot, on the other hand, represents self-forgetfulness as command.

The robot shows an interest in perfection—an interest in not having a character, or in not being interested. It does not teach new needs in the sense that it does not teach new interests but rather complete disinterestedness. The one who has no interests is alone capable of knowing everything and, thus, of being in control. To know everything is to "prove" that one is above being interested.

The robot is greater than humanity—it knows everything rather than something—because it is never distracted, it never needs to do anything

but acquire information. The robot's mastery resides in its subordination of its life to the rule of the technical. This does not mean that robots only possess information about technological subjects but rather that the robot technologizes any subject. A computer can store information on art which, however, remains mere information. The robot acquires information on art without having to *undergo* the experience of art (without being moved by art). This is to repeat that the robot represents action without an actor: the robot acquires information on art without having to learn what it is to be an artist, i.e., without having to imagine viewing life from the *standpoint* of art. The robot acquires information without having to move, without having to adopt a standpoint, i.e., without having to alter its conviction that the acquisition of knowledge is alone definitive of humanity. Knowledge is treated as humanity's servant; to say that the robot is informed about art is to say that art *comes to it*. This obstinacy makes possible the robot's learning everything rather than merely something. The robot teaches children, then, to learn or to live without moving: it teaches them to cultivate knowledge without experience or what Plato calls "correct opinion" (Plato, *Meno*). The robot knows the way without having traversed it; it knows about life without having lived it. It appeals to children who themselves desire knowledge without experience. (Of course the child tends to desire experience—sheer experience, any experience. But that is to say that the child desires experience *abstractly*, as if it were already knowledge.)

Where the train invites the child to learn by participating in a relationship with it—by learning how properly to live with it—the relationship between child and robot, if it can be said to exist at all, is segregated from any learning that takes place there. Aside from answers to questions which the child may learn by playing guessing games with a computer toy, the child may, of course, generate a personal relationship to the toy; but this relationship is either unrelated or subordinated to the learning relationship in which information is distributed and consumed. To learn is to acquire rather than to act, to consume rather than to produce. Since a child cannot do very much, yet feels the impulse to do much, a child's efforts more often than not fail. It is not surprising, then, to find children who would like, if it were permitted, to do nothing at all. The robot teaches children that doing nothing *is* permissible, not in the sense that mommy and daddy will approve, but in the sense that they ought to, since doing nothing does not mean being spoiled but being perfect. The robot itself is perfect and does nothing, i.e., it knows though it does not live. It represents a self-sufficient person. And therefore it teaches the child just the opposite of what the world-toy does: namely, that a person can be self-sufficient, can exist apart from the world, or can seek correct opinion rather than knowledge. As long as people acknowledge their inseparability from the world, as long as they recognize that they are an instance of and so participants in life, they can seek only knowledge and not correct opinion (they can seek only knowledge and not control). For in that case they recognize that wisdom necessarily includes the ability to place one's experience or one's life within the whole. To acknowledge humanity's inseparability from life (to seek knowledge rather than correct opinion), then, is to acknowledge the essentiality of the limits of knowledge, to which the fact that people live makes reference. To place one's experience within the whole is to place the fact that

humanity is limited within the whole. If knowledge differs from correct opinion by the fact that it alone takes experience into account, then this means that knowledge, as against correct opinion, distinguishes between part and whole, or between what is human and what transcends the human. To think that people ought to seek correct opinion, then, is to think they ought to seek not knowledge but perfection. The robot embodies perfection, or knowledge cleansed of experience. But what allows the robot to be perfect—to be disinterested—is that it has no face: the robot does not acknowledge what unites it with humanity. So, for example, it denies the emotions. It may, of course, "know" about the emotions, just as it may know about art. But since it is committed to correct opinion or perfection, it will regard emotion as a (technical) problem, i.e., as something which merely gets in the way of knowledge (correct opinion) and so which *need not* get in the way. Emotion can be eliminated, ignored, or treated with condescension. The robot's happiness is grounded in its freedom from emotion. To be committed to correct opinion is to be committed to the theory that people and knowledge are incompatible. The robot teaches that emotions must be subdued or that people must not expose themselves to the appeal of its unity with humanity.

The robot controls the child in the sense that it has all the answers—so, for example, a child is easily "impressed" by a robot. But what the robot's having all the answers really teaches the child is that it is good and necessary to learn to control the emotions for the sake of the acquisition of correct opinion. But the control of emotion means the control of one's sense of unity with other people: by the pursuit of destiny, the robot means the pursuit of one's own ends. The robot controls the child but it teaches the child to be interested in having control of others. This is already a concrete feature of their interaction: the robot's labor is not a response to the child's *labor* but whim. Where playing with the train requires the child's interest and concentration, the robot requires only the child's curiosity. Thus the robot can only serve the purpose of gratifying the desire to consume. The problem is not that the child is not interested in the robot but that to play with the robot the child must be interested in nothing. The latter is an absolute requirement for competent use of the robot. If the child were interested in something, the child would generate the conversation. But to seek to involve the robot, as one involves the train, in what concerns oneself (e.g., in a story about oneself and the train) is to misunderstand how to play with robots. The pursuit of correct opinion requires the repudiation of interest; to be interested is to fail to be a good listener. Being interested means being able to learn something but not everything: interest imposes limits. The robot teaches that the less we care the more we acquire.

The robot teaches disinterestedness as a solution to the problem of having a self or being limited. Why being limited would be a *problem* does not go without saying; that is why robots are offensive to common sense. Or, that is why "everybody knows" that robots are not good toys. But does this help us to see in what sense, if at all, the selflessness taught by the robot is any worse than the selfishness taught by the train? We have suggested that the mastery taught by the train is good; in what sense is it good? Perhaps mastery, as distinguished from control (disinterest), *takes the risk of being particular*, of identifying itself. The problematic status of

the train set, then, would have to do with the possibility that in encouraging particularity (a sense of one's own unique powers) it fails to encourage sociality. The robot creates a child with no interests; the train set may create a child who is pre-occupied. What is the difference between the experience of one's particularity and the practice of specialization?

Specialists know what they are but not that and how what they are is related to what they are not or to the whole. Specialists, too, are faceless. They do not face out into the world. They face always inward, and in that sense fail to have a face. They have an identity, i.e., they can be seen. But they themselves do not see. Specialists have an identity but no influence (though they can be effective): that they do not see means that what they see does not make a difference to them. Their vision never reproduces itself since they have no vision.

Of course, even specialists often have opinions, even extreme opinions. Yet even opinionated specialists are faceless since they refuse to regard their specialization itself as an "opinion," a kind of seeing, and so something that belongs to the whole or points outward. Specialists *sometimes* have opinions; *sometimes* they see. They fail, then, to see that what they see *is* their very specialization—they fail to see, that is, that what they see is what makes them "special." Specialists are faceless because they refuse to treat their specialization as a social activity—as something they owe to the whole. Instead, they either face inward (specialize) or outward (opine) as they please, and in that sense always face inward. The specialist leads a split life, an unwholesome life: one has identity but no integrity.

Facelessness, then, resembles irresponsibility. Not having a face means not seeing, not being responsive toward what lies before one, and so not recognizing that who one is may be a reflection of the way in which one is responsive.

What has all this to do with the train set? The train set teaches the child mastery or identity; we are interested in transforming identity into integrity—into the desire to be responsive to the whole in accord with one's particularity (identity). The first step, we suggested, is for the child to recognize the importance of *resistance*. The importance of resistance, we now see, lies in the fact that it reminds us of the need to be responsive to something—otherwise we could never experience our way of seeing—our mastery—as part of the whole. The temptation, then, for children who begin to love the very things that resist them, is that they will come to regard the struggle with what resists as a challenge or a pastime. Resistance, then, could be experienced mechanically. Does the train set provide the kind of resistance that can be truly respected, i.e., continuously renewed *as* resistance? How can it if it (a) can be so easily mastered and (b) is the child's possession (i.e., in the child's service)? But then toys that didn't fulfill these conditions would not really be toys. A toy, then, is not meant to supply the kind of resistance a person needs in order to be truly social. Yet it prepares children for that experience by encouraging them to recognize that the experience of resistance is enjoyable.

People are not toys, and yet toys teach children how to enjoy being with people. Toys, then, point beyond themselves: they point to the ability to give pleasure to others (the ability to have "integrity").

The point is: a good toy prepares the child for the experience of literacy: the experience of reading (including "reading another") and of writing as the masterly outcome of careful reading. Good writing, of course, gives pleasure. The child gives nothing to the train. Such is the latter's fate as a toy. Yet if the toy gives the child a sense of integrity—a sense of identity as the pleasurable encounter with resistance, the pleasurable *active* display of what one is—then it is a good toy. A child with integrity will naturally be generous; a child with integrity offers itself to interaction. The love of toys, then, needs to be supplanted by a love of literacy insofar as the practice of literacy in the deepest sense refers to the ability to encounter and ascribe integrity to others. The child enjoys integrity because to experience integrity is to experience how one's identity belongs to the whole and is granted by the whole in the sense that one's continuous responsiveness to what lies before one, and so to the whole, provides for the very possibility of integrity. Thus, to experience integrity is to experience love for the whole. One who experiences that pleasure will not want to deny others access to it. Literacy is the offering of such access: reading in the best sense seeks to ascribe integrity (a face, a looking outward that is essential yet particular) to what is read. Reading seeks to regard what is read as deeper than an embodiment of specialization: reading reads with a view to uncovering an author. There is, of course, play in such activity since true reading is inventive or constructive. Yet, insofar as this act of "freedom" restores to what is read its integrity, its belonging to the whole, there is learning at the same time. Deeply, the learning that an act of true literacy provides is the (re)experience that the interaction between reader and author—the interaction between the parts—is necessary if integrity is to be achieved. The recognition that it is necessary for the development of integrity, of true characters, is at the same time the recognition of the authority of the whole: action is necessary for the development of character, and yet, since character develops out of action, it does not *create* action. Integrity acknowledges the whole by recognizing itself always as a response.

A toy is different from a book or a record in that it represents the world, it represents an other, and so it poses (and suggests a resolution to) the question of the nature of life in a practical way. In other words, it addresses the question of the nature of life by imposing upon the child the question of the nature of the relationship between the person and what is present (e.g., the nature of the relationship between the child and the toy). The toy's distinctness lies in the fact that it treats these two questions as one: It teaches children about life by inviting them to use the toy, i.e., to live, to *act* in accordance with the nature of life. The toy teaches that to learn is to learn what to do and why. A good toy is one which is moderate, one which, while opening up to the child the open space of playing and learning within which humanity dwells, at the same time introduces the child to the idea that there are natural limits to that space, and therefore limits which are good and which safeguard humanity's dwelling and so provide for well-being. A good toy is one which prepares the child to become happy—to dwell within the limits of what is essentially human—rather than unhappy. Toys which prepare the child to seek complete power or complete denial of power (specialization) fail to encourage the child to regard humanity as *together* with what is not humanity. They fail to encourage the

child to play. By treating knowledge as perfection, the robot toy discourages children from recognizing their connectedness to the imperfect, vital world of experience, emotion, and everydayness; and so the robot toy discourages the child from understanding that life is governed by nature or what is Other than humanity. A life not governed by nature is not responsible to (its) nature but only to itself: the robot toy discourages the child from discovering those responsibilities of our humanity which are inherent in our nature (in our earthliness). And so children fail to recognize that they cannot live by themselves or that they are already involved in a conversation which they are not free to break off.

The robot toy errs by failing to limit freedom. It treats knowledge in abstraction from the world and so uproots the child from the world. The robot toy represents a world of gratification and no desire.[7] To fail to experience desire is to fail to offer anything: the robot (and its mirror-image, the inward-looking specialist) desires nothing because it sees nothing (it has no face). Thus, it does not give pleasure (respond to its desire). It is important to see that illiteracy, which goes hand in hand with modern science, is essentially privacy.

Notes

1. This is not to say that no child can resist such toys. But the child who does resist is just the one who fails to be an ideal user of the toy.
2. This version of modern life as an expression of "subjectivism" is put forward by Heidegger in his essay, "The Age of the World-Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York, 1977). See especially pp. 130-32.
3. Yet if one only respects the *train* as what is powerful, one would not respect oneself either ("I'm only pushing buttons"—or think of the precocious child who knows, technically, why the trains move when he pulls the switch: he grows up to be clever but without the enthusiasm to create anything).
4. Of course, it is also that which we try to insist upon when we want to protect a reputation ("saving face"), i.e., when we want to be judged solely on the level of appearance. Then we discourage the effort to dig below the surface or turn away from the face.
5. *Newsweek,* December 11, 1978, p. 80.
6. *Newsweek,* December 11, 1978, p. 79. Here we assume that a toy that can speak and yet is named 2-XL is no different from one that is named Merlin yet looks like a telephone receiver.
7. Excesses of this kind need not emanate out of a scientific perspective. For example, in his article "Toys," Roland Barthes singles out abstract toys such as blocks as good. For us, the moral instruction offered by blocks is inadequate in that it seems to formulate practice as invention. Man is treated as one who questions, but his questions are not seen as themselves responses to what lies before him. The absence of world means absence of the remembrance of *what* calls man to think, e.g., what calls man to invent. Barthes' article contains a critique of functional toys which is certainly valuable. But he then opposes to this the idea that toys ought to encourage the child to orient to sensuality. Thus Barthes organizes a confrontation between "reality principle" and "pleasure principle." But the idea that use and pleasure—learning and playing—are incompatible, is precisely what provides for the functional toy, and so is what Barthes should want to criticize. (Barthes, *Mythologies,* New York, 1972, pp. 53-55.)