

Albert Camus

ART AND REVOLT

Art, like revolt, is a movement which exalts and denies at the same time. "No artist can tolerate the real," said Nietzsche. This is true; but no artist can do without the real. Creation is a demand for unity and a refusal of the world. But it refuses the world because of what it lacks, and in the name of that which, sometimes, it is. Revolt can be observed in art in its pure state, in its primitive composition, outside history. Art, then, should give us a perspective on the content of revolt.

We must note, however, the hostility to art shown by all revolutionary reformers. Plato is still moderate. He only impugns the deceitful function of language and exiles poets from his republic. For the rest, he placed beauty about the world. But the revolutionary movement of modern times coincides with a process of placing art on trial which is not yet finished. The Reformation chooses morality and exiles beauty. Rousseau denounces art as a corruption added by society to nature. Saint-Just thunders against the theater and, in the excellent program that he drew up for the "Feast of Reason," desires that reason be personified by a figure "virtuous rather than beautiful." The French Revolution did not give birth to any artist; only to a great journalist, Desmoulins, and a clandestine writer, the Marquis de Sade. The one poet of his time [André Chenier] is guillotined by the Revolution. The only great prose writer [Chateaubriand] is exiled to London and pleads for Christianity and the throne. A bit later, the Saint-Simonians will demand an art "socially useful." "Art for progress" is a commonplace which runs through the century and that Hugo took up, though he did not succeed in making it convincing. Only Vallés, in pronouncing a malediction on art, brings to it an imprecatory tone which has an authentic ring.

This is also the tone of the Russian Nihilists. Pisarev proclaims the decadence of aesthetic values in the interest of pragmatic ones. "I would much prefer to be a Russian shoemaker than a Russian Raphael." A pair of shoes is more useful than Shakespeare for Pisarev. The Nihilist Nekrassov, himself a great and unhappy poet, nonetheless affirms that he prefers a bit of cheese to Pushkin. Tolstoy's excommunication of art is famous. Revolutionary Russia finally turned its back on those marble statues of Venus and Apollo, still gilded by the Italian sun, that Peter the Great had bought for his summer garden in St. Petersburg. Misery, sometimes, turns away from painful images of happiness.

The ideology of the Germans is no less severe in its accusations. According to the revolutionary interpreters of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, there will be no art in a just society. Beauty will be lived, no longer imagined. The real, completely rational, will be enough by itself to satisfy all desires. Art is not for all time; on the contrary it is determined by its epoch, and it expresses, Marx will say, the privileged values of the dominant class. There is only one revolutionary art, which is, precisely, art placed in the service of the revolution. By creating beauty outside of history, art obstructs the only effort which is rational: the transformation of history itself into an absolute beauty. The Russian shoemaker, from the moment that he becomes conscious of his revolutionary role, is the creator of final beauty. Raphael has only created a fleeting beauty which will be incomprehensible to the new humanity.

Marx asks himself, it is true, how it is that Greek beauty can still be beautiful for us. He answers that this beauty expresses the naive infancy of a world, and that we have, in the midst of our adult struggles, a nostalgia for that infancy. But the masterpieces of the Renaissance, Rembrandt, Chinese art—how can they all still be beautiful for us? No matter! The condemnation of art has definitely begun, and is followed up today with the embarrassed complicity of artists and intellectuals themselves, dedicated to the calumny of their art and their intelligence. In the battle between Shakespeare and the shoemaker, it is not the shoemaker who execrates Shakespeare and beauty; on the contrary, it is those who continue to read Shakespeare rather than make shoes—who could never make them in any case. The artists of our time resemble the

repentent noblemen of nineteenth-century Russia; their bad conscience is their alibi. But the last thing that an artist ought to experience before his art is repentance. This goes beyond a simple and necessary humility—this pretense at relegating beauty to the end of time, and, while waiting, depriving the world and the shoemaker of that extra nourishment from which one has benefited himself.

This ascetic madness, however, has its reasons which interest us for their own sake. They translate, on the plane of aesthetics, the battle between revolution and revolt. In every revolt there is revealed a metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of possessing this unity, and the fabrication of a replacement. This also defines art. The exigence of revolt, to tell the truth, is in part an aesthetic one. All the thinking inspired by revolt is illuminated by a rhetoric or a closed universe. The rhetoric of ramparts in Lucretius, the convents and bolted castles of Sade, the isle of the romantic cliff, the solitary heights of Nietzsche, the elemental ocean of Lautréamont; the terrifying castles that are reborn among the Surrealists, battered by a storm of flowers; the prison, the nation entrenched within itself, the concentration camp, the domination of slave overseers—all these light up in their fashion the same need of coherence and unity. Within these closed worlds, man can finally know and rule.

This movement is also that of all the arts. The artist remakes the world to his advantage. Nature's symphonies do not know any pauses. The world is never silent; its muteness itself eternally repeats the same notes, according to vibrations that escape us. As for those that we hear, they bring us sounds, rarely an accord, never a melody. Yet music exists, in which symphonies finish and melody gives its form to sounds which, by themselves, have none; where a privileged arrangement of notes, lastly, brings out of natural disorder a unity satisfying the heart and the spirit.

"I believe more and more," writes Van Gogh, "that one should not judge God on the basis of this world. It's a sketch of his that didn't come off." Every artist tries to remake this sketch and to give it the style it lacks. The greatest and most ambitious of all the arts, sculpture, desperately tries to fix the fleeting figure of man in his three dimensions, to organize the disorder of gesture

into the unity of a grand style. Sculpture does not reject imitation, which on the contrary it needs. But it does not primarily seek imitation. What it seeks, in its great periods, is the typical gesture, the expression or look which will recapitulate all the gestures and all the looks in the world. Its purpose is not to imitate but to stylize, and to imprison in a significant expression the passing fury of the body or the infinite pliability of attitudes. Only then does it erect, on the pediment of tumultuous cities, the model, the type, whose immobile perfection will quiet, for a moment, the incessant fever of men. The lover deprived of love will then be able to wander among the Greek Korés and grasp that which, in the body and face of women, survives all degradation.

The principle of painting is also in a choice. "Genius itself," writes Delacroix, "reflecting on its art, is nothing but the gift of generalizing and choosing." The painter isolates his subject, which is the first way of unifying it. Landscapes flit by, disappear from memory or destroy one another. This is why the landscape painter or the painter of still lifes isolates in space and time that which, normally, changes with changing light, loses itself in an infinite perspective or vanishes under the impact of other values. The first step of the landscape painter is to make the various parts of his picture agree with each other. He eliminates as much as he selects. Similarly, the painting of subjects isolates, in time as well as space, an action which normally loses itself in another action. The painter then proceeds to immobilize his subject. The great creators are those who, like Piero della Francesca, give the impression that this fixation has just been accomplished, that the projector has just stopped turning. All their figures then give the impression that, by the miracle of art, they continue to be alive while ceasing to be perishable. Long after his death, Rembrandt's philosopher continues to meditate, between light and shadow, on the same question.

"How empty a thing is painting, which pleases us by its resemblances with objects that cannot please us!" Delacroix, who cites this famous phrase of Pascal, writes "strange" instead of "empty," and with good reason. These objects cannot please us because we do not see them; they are buried and negated in a perpetual becoming. Who looked at the hands of the whipper during the flagellation, or at the olive trees on the way of Calvary?

But there they are: depicted, stolen from the incessant movement of the Passion; and the sorrow of Christ, imprisoned in images of violence and beauty, cries freshly to us every day in the indifferent halls of museums. The style of a painter is a conjunction of nature and history, a presence imposed on that which perpetually passes. Art realizes, with no apparent effort, that reconciliation of the particular and the universal of which Hegel dreamed. Perhaps this is the reason why epochs like our own, enraptured by unity, turn toward the primitive arts where stylization is most intense and unity most exciting. The strongest stylization is always found at the beginning and the end of artistic epochs; this explains the power of negation and transposition that has stirred up all of modern painting in a disorganized impulsion toward being and unity. The admirable lamentation of Van Gogh is the proud and despairing outcry of all artists. "I can very well, in life and in painting also, do without God. But I cannot, suffering creature that I am, do without something greater than myself, something that is my life, the power to create."

But the revolt of the artist against the real—and this makes it suspect to a totalitarian revolution—contains the same affirmation as the spontaneous revolt of the oppressed. The revolutionary spirit, born of total negation, felt instinctively that there was in art a consent as well as a refusal; that contemplation threatened to outweigh action, beauty to outweigh injustice, and that, in certain cases, beauty was in itself an injustice without remedy. Besides, no art can exist on a total refusal. Just as all thought means something, even the thought of no-meaning, so there is no art of nonsense. Man can take on himself the denunciation of the world's total injustice and demand a total justice that he will be alone in creating. But he cannot affirm the total ugliness of the world. To create beauty, he must at the same time refuse the real and exalt certain of its aspects. Art questions the real, but does not shun it. Nietzsche was able to refuse all transcendence, moral or divine, by saying that such transcendence led to a calumny of this world and this life. But there is perhaps a living transcendence, promised us by beauty, which may make us love and prefer to any other our own limited and mortal world. Art thus brings us back to the origins of revolt, in the degree to which it tries to give form to a

value escaping in a perpetual becoming; but which the artist senses and wishes to snatch from history. We can show this even more clearly by reflecting on the art which, precisely, proposes to enter into the flux and give it a style: the novel.

It is possible to separate the literature of consent, which roughly coincides with the centuries of antiquity and classicism, from the literature of dissidence that begins with modern times. In the former, the novel is a rarity. When it exists, with rare exceptions, it is not concerned with history but with fantasy (*Theagena and Charides* or *L'Astrée*). They are tales, not novels. With the second kind of literature, on the contrary, the novel as a genre develops, and it has not ceased enriching and extending itself up to our own day simultaneously with the movement of criticism and revolution. The novel is born at the same time as the spirit of revolt, and it translates the same ambition on the aesthetic plane.

"A make-believe story, written in prose," says Littré of the novel. Is it nothing but that? A Catholic critic, Stanislas Fumet, has nonetheless written: "Art, whatever its aim, enters into a guilty rivalry with God." It is more precise, indeed, to speak of a rivalry with God—so far as the novel is concerned—than to speak of a rivalry with the civil register. Thibaudet expressed a similar idea when he said, apropos of Balzac: "The 'Human Comedy' is an 'Imitation' of God the Father." The effort of great literature seems to be to create closed universes or self-sufficient types. The Occident, in its great creations, does not limit itself to retracing everyday life. Without ceasing, it conjures up great images and throws itself feverishly in their pursuit.

After all, to write and read a novel are unusual actions. It is not inevitable, or necessary, for one to construct a story by a new arrangement of true facts. Even if the vulgar explanation were true, that this gives pleasure to the writer and reader, we should still ask by what necessity the majority of men find pleasure and interest in make-believe stories. Revolutionary criticism condemns the pure novel as the escape of an idle imagination. Ordinary language, in its turn, labels the untruthful recital of a bungling journalist as being "like a novel." Not so long ago, it was customary, against all the laws of probability, to say that young girls were like "those

in novels." By this, one understood that these ideal creatures paid no attention to the realities of existence. Speaking generally, it has always been thought that the world of the novel was separate from that of life, and that the former, in embroidering the latter, also betrayed it. The simplest and most common way of regarding the novel, as a form of expression, thus consists in viewing it as an exercise in escape. Common sense is at one with revolutionary criticism.

But what is one escaping by means of the novel? A reality judged to be too crushing? Happy people also read novels, and it is well known that extreme suffering takes away the taste for reading. On the other hand, the novelistic universe certainly has less weight and presence than that other universe in which beings of flesh assail us unceasingly. By what mystery, however, does Adolphe seem a personage more familiar than Benjamin Constant, and the Count Mosca more familiar than our professional moralists? Balzac, one day, cut short a long conversation on politics and the fate of the world by saying: "And now let's get back to talking about serious things," meaning that he wanted to talk about his novels. The unquestionable gravity of the novelistic world, our obstinacy, indeed, in taking seriously the innumerable myths that the novelistic genius has proposed to us for two centuries, cannot be adequately explained by a taste for escape. Certainly, the activity of writing novels supposes some sort of rejection of the real. But this rejection is not a simple flight. Should one see in it the movement of retreat proper to the tender-minded soul who, according to Hegel, creates for himself, in his disillusion, a factitious world where morality reigns supreme? The edifying novel, however, falls considerably short of being great literature; and the best of the rose-colored novels, *Paul et Virginie*, is a saddening work that offers no consolation.

The contradiction is this: man refuses the world as it is, without consenting to escape it completely. In fact, men stick to the world and, in the immense majority, do not wish to leave it. Far from always wishing to forget it, they suffer, on the contrary, from not possessing it enough: strange citizens of the world exiled in their own country! Except for blazing moments of plenitude, all reality is unfinished for them. Their acts escape them to merge into other acts, return to judge them under unfamiliar guises, flow like

the waters of Tantalus toward a river-mouth yet unknown. To know where the river culminates, to dominate the current, finally to grasp life as destiny—this is the true nostalgia of men, in the very heart of their homeland. But that vision which, in knowledge at least, would finally reconcile them with themselves can only appear—if it appears at all—in the fugitive moment before death: everything finishes there. To be completely in the world for once, it is necessary never to be there again.

Here is the source of that misguided envy that so many men have for the lives of others. Looking at these existences from the outside, one lends them a coherence and a unity which, in truth, they cannot have, but which appears evident to the observer. He sees only the outline of these lives, without taking account of the complicating details. We make art out of these existences. In an elementary way, we novelize them. Everyone, in this sense, seeks to make of his life a work of art. We desire that love shall last and we know that it does not last; and even if, by a miracle, it should last a lifetime, it would still be unfinished. Perhaps, in this insatiable need to continue, we should better understand earthly suffering if we knew it were eternal. It seems, sometimes, that great spirits are less frightened by pain than by the thought that it will not persist. For lack of an indefatigable happiness, a prolonged suffering would at least constitute a destiny. But no: our worst tortures will some day cease. One morning, after so much despair, an irrepressible desire to live will announce to us that all is finished, and that suffering has no more meaning than happiness.

A bent toward possession is merely another form of the desire to endure; this is what causes the impotent delirium. No being, not even the one we love most and who most returns our love, is ever in our possession. In this inhuman world, where lovers sometimes die in solitude and are always divided, the total possession of another being, an absolute communion for the duration of a lifetime, is an impossible demand. And a bent toward possession can be so insatiable that it may survive love itself. To love, then, means to sterilize the beloved. The shameful suffering of the lover is not so much that he is no longer loved as that he knows the other can and will love again. At the extremity, each man devoured

by the distraught desire to endure and to possess wishes, for the beings that he loves, sterility or death. This is the true revolt. Those who have not demanded, at least for one day, the absolute purity of the world and other beings, who have not trembled with nostalgia and impotence before this impossibility, who have not destroyed themselves in a love that continually throws them back on their nostalgia for the absolute—these will never be able to understand the reality of revolt and its fury of destruction. But other beings are always escaping us, and we are escaping them; they are without fixed contours. Life, from this point of view, is without style. It is nothing but a movement unsuccessfully pursuing its form. Man, thus torn apart, seeks in vain for a form to give him limits within which he can be king. Let just one living thing have its form in this world, and he will be reconciled!

There is no being, finally, who, starting from an elementary level of consciousness, does not exhaust himself seeking formulas or attitudes that will give his existence the unity it lacks. Whether in pretending or in acting, the dandy or the revolutionary both require a unity of being, and of being in this world. Like those pathetic and miserable love affairs, which sometimes drag on interminably because one of the partners is waiting to find the word, the gesture, the situation that will make the adventure a thing of the past—ended in just the right way—each one of us creates or gives himself an epigraph. It is not enough to live; one must have a destiny—and without waiting for death. It is thus true to say that man has the idea of a world better than the present one. But better does not mean different; better means unified. That fever which impels the heart beyond our scattered world—a world, however, which it cannot do without—is the fever of unity. It does not finish up as a mediocre escape but as the most obstinate reclamation. Religion or crime, all human effort finally obeys this irrational desire and pretends to give human life a form it does not possess. The same movement that can lead to the adoration of Heaven or the destruction of man can also lead to the creation of novels; and this gives the latter activity its seriousness.

What is a novel, indeed, if not that universe where action finds its form, where the final words are spoken, where beings are given

over totally to other beings, where all life takes on the aspect of destiny?¹ The world of the novel is nothing but the correction of our own world, following man's profound desire. For we are still in the same world; the suffering is the same, the deception and the love. The heroes speak our language; have our weaknesses, our strengths. Their universe is neither more beautiful nor more edifying than ours. But they at least pursue their destiny to its end, and no hero is so overwhelming as the one who follows his passion to its farthest limits: Kirilov and Stavrogin, Mme. Graslin, Julien Sorel or the Prince de Clèves. It is here that we lose their measure, for they finish what we shall never accomplish.

Mme. de Lafayette drew the *Princesse de Cleves* from bitterest experience. She is herself, without doubt, Mme. de Clèves and yet she is not. Where is the difference? The difference is that Mme. de Lafayette did not enter a convent and that nobody in her entourage expired for love. No doubt she knew the agonizing moments of that unequaled love. But it did not have any final point, she outlived and prolonged it by ceasing to live in it; and nobody, not even herself, would have known its shape if she had not given it the naked embodiment of her faultless language. There is no story more "like a novel" and more beautiful than that of Sophie Tonska and Casimir in *Les Pleiades* of Gobineau. Sophie, a beautiful and sensitive woman (who enables one to understand Stendhal's confession that "only women of marked temperament can make me happy"), forces Casimir to reveal his love. Accustomed to being loved, she becomes impatient with Casimir who sees her every day and yet never drops his irritating calm. Casimir avows his love, indeed, but as if he were exposing some legal argument. He has studied Sophie, knows her as well as he knows himself, and is convinced that this love—without which he cannot live—has no future. He has thus decided to inform her, at one and the same time, of his love and its futility, and to make her a present of his fortune—she is wealthy herself, and this gesture is of no importance—on condition that she provide him with a modest pension to enable him to live in the suburbs of a city chosen at random (the city is Vilna),

1. Even if the novel speaks only of nostalgia, despair, the unachieved, it still creates the form and the salvation. To name despair is already to go beyond it. The literature of desperation is a contradiction in terms.

there to await death in poverty. Casimir recognizes, for the rest, that the idea of taking a pension from Sophie is a concession to human weakness, the only concession he will allow himself, with, from time to time, the dispatch of a blank page in an envelope on which will be written the name of Sophie. After being indignant, then disturbed, then melancholy, Sophie finally accepts; everything takes place as Casimir had foreseen. He dies, at Vilna, of his unhappy love. The world of the novel has its own logic. A good story cannot do without the imperturbable continuity which is never in the situations of real life, but that one finds in the elaboration of a reverie that takes reality as its point of departure. If Gobineau had gone to Vilna, he would probably have been bored and left, or he would have managed to make himself comfortable. But Casimir is a stranger to the need for change and to moments of recovery. He goes to the extreme, like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, who wished to go beyond even death and attain Hell itself.

Here is, then, an imaginary world, but a world created by the correction of the one we know; a world where sorrow can, if it wishes, last until death, where passions are never sidetracked, where beings are in the grip of an unchanging idea and are always in each other's thoughts. Man finally gives himself the form and the pacifying limit that he pursues in vain in his natural condition. The novel manufactures destiny to order. This is how it competes with creation and, temporarily, triumphs over death. A detailed analysis of the most famous novels would show that, in differing perspectives, the essence of the novel is in this perpetual correction—always going in the same direction—that the artist gives to his experience. Far from being moral or purely formal, this correction aims first of all at unity and in this way translates a metaphysical need. The novel, at this level, is primarily an exercise of the intelligence in the service of a nostalgic sensibility in revolt. We can study this search for unity in the French novel of analysis, and in Melville, Balzac, Dostoevsky or Tolstoy. But a brief confrontation between the two efforts that are situated at the opposite extremes of the world of the novel—the creation of Proust and the American novel of recent years—will be enough for our purposes.

The American novel² seeks to find its unity in reducing man either to the elementary, or to his external reactions and behavior. It does not choose a feeling or passion of which it will give a privileged image, as in the French classic novels. It rejects analysis and the search for a fundamental psychological lever that will explain and sum up the conduct of a character. This is why the unity of the American novel is nothing but a unity of lighting. Its technique consists in describing men externally in their most unimportant gestures, in reproducing their speech without commentary even to its repetitions,³ in acting as if men were entirely defined by their everyday automatism. At this mechanical level, in truth, men resemble each other; and we can thus explain this curious universe where all the people seem interchangeable, even to the particularities of their physique. This technique is called realist only through a misunderstanding. Aside from the fact that realism in art is an incomprehensible notion, it is clear that the world of the American novel does not aim at the pure and simple reproduction of reality; it aims at the most arbitrary kind of stylization. The unity thus obtained is a degraded unity, a leveling of beings and of the world. It seems that, for these novelists, it is the interior life which deprives human actions of their unity and which alienates beings from each other. In part, this suspicion is well-founded. But the revolt at the source of this art can only find its satisfaction, not by denying the interior life completely, but by constructing a unity that uses the interior life as a starting point. To deny it completely is to have recourse to an imaginary man. The pitch-black novel is also a rose-colored one, and it has the formal pretensions of the latter. It too edifies, after its fashion.⁴ The life of the body, reduced to itself, paradoxically produces an abstract and gratuitous universe, in its turn constantly denied by reality. This novel, purged of inner life, and in which man seems to be observed as if under glass, finishes

2. Naturally, I am dealing with the "tough-guy" novel of the thirties and forties, not with the admirable blossoming of American literature in the nineteenth century.

3. Even in Faulkner, the great writer of this generation, the interior monologue reproduces only the outer covering of thought.

4. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and the Marquis de Sade, in different registers, are the creators of the propaganda novel.

logically by portraying the pathological because it began by taking the so-called average man as its special subject. One can thus explain the considerable number of "innocents" utilized in this universe. The innocent is the ideal subject for such an undertaking since he is completely defined by his behavior. He is the symbol of this despairing universe, where unhappy automatons live in the most mechanical kind of coherence, a universe which the American novelists have raised up as a pathetic—though sterile—protest in the face of the modern world.

With regard to Proust, his effort was to start from reality, stubbornly contemplated, and to create a closed, irreplaceable world that belonged to him alone and would commemorate his victory over the flight of time and death. But his methods are opposite. They consist, above all, in a calculated choice, a meticulous collection of privileged instants that the novelist chooses from his most personal past. Immense dead spaces are thus rejected because they have left no trace in recollection. If the world of the American novel is that of men without memory, the world of Proust is nothing but memory. Only, it is the most difficult and demanding of memories, which refuses the dispersion of the world and draws out of a rediscovered scent the secret of an old—and yet new—universe. Proust chose the interior life, and in the interior life what was most interior, against the forgetfulness of the real; that is, the mechanical, the blindness of the world. But out of this refusal of the real he did not draw its negation. He did not commit the error, parallel to that of the American novel, of suppressing the mechanical. On the contrary, he reunites, in a superior unity, the souvenir of the past and the sensation of the present, the foot which slips and the blissful days of earlier years.

It is difficult to return to the haunts of happiness and of youth. The budding young girls laugh and chatter eternally before the ocean, but he who contemplates them loses, little by little, the right to love them, as those whom he had once loved lose the status of being. This melancholy is that of Proust. It was powerful enough in him to burst forth into a refusal of all being. But a relish for the sun-lit aspects of the world bound him to it at the same time. He did not consent to give up forever the joys of his carefree holidays. He took as his task to re-create them anew, and to show, in

the teeth of death, that the past could be found again at the end of time; in an imperishable present, truer and richer than it had ever been. The psychological analysis of the *Temps Perdu* is thus only a powerful means to an end. Proust's real greatness is to have written the *Temps Retrouvé*, which reorganizes a scattered world and gives it meaning at the very level of anguish itself. His difficult victory, on the eve of death, is to have been able to draw from the incessant flight of time, uniquely by means of memory and intelligence, the rapturous symbols of man's unity. The surest challenge that a work of this kind can fling at creation is to present itself as a whole, a closed and unified world. This defines those works created without flinching.

It has been said that the world of Proust is without God. If this is true, it is not because he never speaks of God but because this world has ambitions to be closed and perfect by itself, and to give to eternity the visage of man. The *Temps Retrouvé*, at least by intention, is an eternity without God. The work of Proust, from this point of view, appears as one of the boldest and most significant attempts of man to overcome his mortal condition. It showed that the art of the novel re-made creation itself, the creation which is both imposed by man and refused by him. In one of its aspects at least, this art consists in choosing the created against the creator. But, more profoundly still, it allies itself to the beauty of the world and its being against the forces of death and oblivion. It is thus that revolt is creative.

(Translated from the French by Joseph Frank)